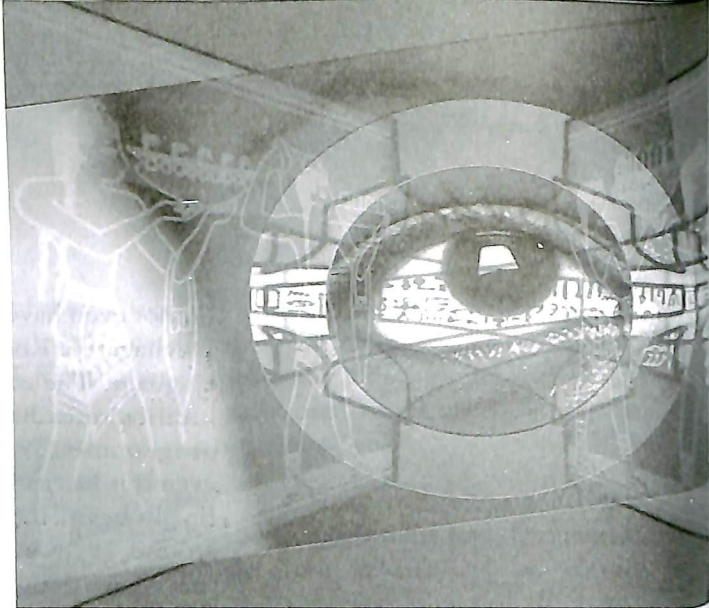
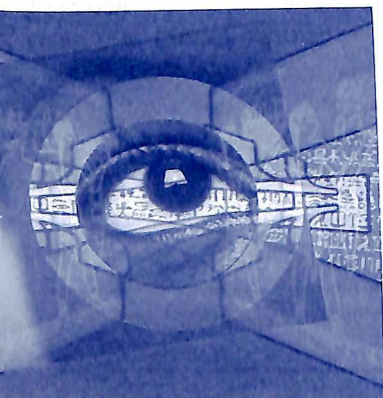


# Defining the Zone

by Samirah Alkasim



I am a professor of film studies at the American University in Cairo (AUC), and a maker of experimental and documentary films. My work floats above the categories of film/art, and documentary/experimental film, rather than falling into their imagined cracks belonging to an “other” category of critical and artistic production.

I have never found that I have a niche, creatively or culturally, not while studying filmmaking in the quasi-bohemian environment of San Francisco, nor while working in the corporate world of Singapore. But during the past 4 years in Cairo, my acquaintance with some of the local installation and film artists about whom I have also written and who also belong somewhere on the “other” continuum has given me a sense of belonging in part, to a “community” of “accented” (in the Nafician sense) artists, for whom the economic reality is that we are alone together, making work for small audiences inside, while trying to be known outside.

Although I have lived abroad half of my life, some part of which was spent in Saudi Arabia as a child, and Singapore

as an adult, I found Cairo to be a completely “other” experience—with its economic, governmental, “developmental” and social issues, and its histories, especially the political dimensions of its more recent history. It is a place where chaos rules the day and where every foreigner’s experience requires going through a dissolution of self, in order for the self to be reconstituted in a way that is better equipped to deal with this environment. It can be argued that there are benefits to going through such a process, and that one becomes adaptable to change and its unpredictabilities, such that comfort zones seem like trivialities and flighty notions in relation to greater “realities” that also have their unreal aspects. My time here has been out of this zone, but I have found that I am comfortable outside of it and my sense of the world has shifted dramatically in ways perceptible mostly when I travel out of Egypt.

Before coming to Cairo in August 2001, I spent 2 years living in the San Francisco Bay Area, recovering from an intense but much less spiritually fulfilling experience teaching at a film school factory in Singapore (Ngee Ann Polytechnic). Two

weeks into my new job at the American University in Cairo, the attacks on the World Trade Center happened. At that time I was grateful to be in Cairo rather than in any part of the United States to be spared direct contact with the virulent waves of racism, religious intolerance and nauseatingly blind patriotism that radically altered (if only by becoming

I harbour no fantasies about saving the world, but I do have a strong sense of the importance of doing “meaningful” work as an artist and an educator.

manifest from latency) the American cultural topography. Since then I have watched, from here, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as the ongoing Palestinian intifada against the apparatus of Israeli oppression, which is enhanced by the complicity of neighboring Arab countries. All of these political and historical happenings have powerfully touched my ideas of what I am doing with my life and made me question the subject of career, which is a question I am frequently brought to in my experiences, inside and outside of academia. I harbour no fantasies about saving the world, but I do have a strong sense of the importance of doing “meaningful” work as an artist and an educator. There is a basic bottoming out to a level of comparative pessimism that is part of living in this environment (the Arab world) and understanding more deeply the complexities of culture that are not learned in classrooms. I had to experience this first-hand, and this

necessary vision from closer range is directly related to a review of my own history.

My personal experience here has involved “dispelling” the inheritance of my father’s cultural displacement. My father’s background (Jordanian/Palestinian) is Muslim and my mother’s is Catholic (American), but I was raised without any formal religious presence in the house or social communities. Only in my late twenties, while in film school where I made experimental films that frequently invoked some aspect (usually visual details) of Arabic culture or history while responding to political events, did I learn that my family is originally Palestinian. Oddly enough, although my father could not relate to my work, it has been through film that our relationship became more open and communicative. During that time, I learned more about some of the historical/political events compelling my father to direct his life in certain ways, and I came to understand how I had absorbed the psychic effects and symptoms of his displacement during childhood uniquely shared by my siblings. These experiences have indelibly shaped my approach to film and my sense of cultural belonging. I believe I have always belonged to an “other” category, which has mostly been a rich zone to inhabit.

However, there is a literality in the general Arab mentality, even though we cannot say it is a homogenous mentality. This literality, ever present in Cairo, disallows or mis-recognises “otherness” outside of what is held to be the norm. This is why gays, communists, feminists, and so on (these identities that have been defined or defined themselves elsewhere

in the world), are not socially accepted to varying degrees, and why to varying degrees this is reflected in their legal status. Cairo is a place of seemingly intransigent distinctions between things normal/abnormal, right/wrong, masculine/feminine, national/foreign, East/West, etc., such that the concept of difference and identities that are diversified beyond religion, family lineage, and regional ethnicities, does not have much social value. I found this difficult to grasp until I had lived here long enough to see that besides the “alternative” people whose real differences are to varying degrees, necessarily camouflaged, even those who spout this intransigent rhetoric embody multiple differences, and that difference has many guises and can be embedded in apparently homogenous groups. Furthermore, although I have previously eschewed “personal” filmmaking (there are many bad personal experimental films), it seems vital for some in this particular cultural environment, to connect their alteration (for those who feel/experience it) to creative production.

Others frequently tell me that it would be better to work on projects that are more “accessible” to wider audiences, in

order to gain (greater) visibility. But I am also stubborn in refusing to view the field of art (film, etc.) as one which should be burdened by the demands of the marketplace, and I feel it is important to stand ground in holding this view. There is little audience even in the West for an intellectual experimental cinema from here (films have to be “representative”). Those who have shown their work in the small circuits for the “experimental” Arab avant-garde abroad, outside the Middle East, have been part of a close network ushered along by curators and film scholars. They realise the market value of these circuits (the festivals, institutional programmes and biennales), although they may not feel affinities with their categories. Since I have traveled so much after leaving graduate school I neglected to insert myself into this network, and as an American who is gleaning her cultural roots, I mistakenly felt that I was not Arab enough to belong to the cadre of the Arab avant-garde even though it is somewhat of an artificial construct. Yet when I look at my exhibition record, it is evident that I was always there, showing at some of the same important international venues and programs as other more known artists. This again perhaps had to be learned by living in Cairo—that I am Arab enough and experimental enough to be part of this group, and that it is my work to insert myself more prominently into it, should I wish.

Making films (videos) that are marginal by their very nature, in a place where the experimental has a highly ambiguous status, seems very important. If I have any mission in this context, it is to

---

But I am also stubborn in refusing to view the field of art (film, etc.) as one which should be burdened by the demands of the marketplace...





cultivate and enhance the spectatorship of a critical cinema in Cairo or wherever I may live in the Arab world. However, this cannot be done alone through teaching. In my current job, I am the only full-time faculty teaching film studies in a department of performing and visual arts, and I wear many hats as administrator, professor and film programmer. Since the film unit in which I teach offers only a minor, my students usually take film classes as electives and are usually not serious in their study of cinema. So this mission is mostly relegated to the organisation and hosting of large-scale film screening events, for which I also seek funding. I began this last year with a retrospective and visit of Syrian film director Mohamed Malas to AUC in 2004 (this first time was financed by the university); and I repeated this recently with a selected retrospective of Lebanese video-makers Akram Zaatari and Mohamed Soueid at three venues

(financed by a small foundation grant): Semat, a company for independent production and distribution; AUC; and the Townhouse gallery of contemporary art. Zaatari and Soueid are important with regard to my “mission” because of the enormous efforts they have exerted towards building and supporting the independent and experimental film/video network in Beirut. Incidentally, neither of them is comfortable with the category of “experimental” film. Of additional import is the nature of some of their work, which deals often with taboo subjects in the Arab world, such as homosexual relations and transvestites.

As an independent “experimental” filmmaker in this environment, it has felt lonely and at the same time liberating because the absence of references in front of me. It was difficult to focus on the distribution work once my last film was completed and I have lost most of the initial 2-year life span a new film has in the international film festivals. I have been discouraged by the numerous rejections of what I feel is a very strong work that is perhaps too subtle in its analysis and too deceptively simple in its premise for those who are hungry for representative or educational films from Cairo. This film, *From Here to There*, began as a curiosity about technology in Cairo, but I quickly became interested in the role war has played in the collective imaginary. I saw a connection between the structure of an idea and the imaginary structure of a nation and how these intersect in a different sense of technology the ideological apparatus of the nation state with all its bullet holes and rusted hinges. Ultimately, the film is

It was necessary to work with this Egyptian, Muslim man because Egyptians would be more comfortable answering such questions coming from him than myself, whom they would only be able to perceive as a foreign woman.

---

not at all about technology but about being in a moment in Cairo. While I presented a young boy's narration of his space shuttle (also imaginary—he guides us through drawings placed behind the faucet in his bathroom, posing as an alter-ego to myself the filmmaker), I was also shooting pro-Palestinian and anti-war demonstrations in the city, flea markets in cemeteries, a *masbrabeja* factory, a rich housing development in the desert, and interviews with people in the streets. This last part required a male assistant to accompany me into the downtown streets with camera and microphone in hand. We posed as an informal satellite television crew, asking people what they recalled of the 1967 and 1973 wars (between Egypt and Israel), and the 1991 and 2003 Gulf Wars. It was necessary to work with this Egyptian, Muslim man because Egyptians would be more comfortable answering such questions coming from him than myself, whom they would only be able to perceive as a foreign woman. At the same time, I believe my presence helped to prevent the usual hassling by

police (above and under cover) that Egyptians often encounter when they present a video camera in certain public places, although this situation has tightened considerably since the recent war and I doubt that now we would be as successful with this approach.

When I screened this film at the Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art, which is probably the most important art venue in Cairo, I was accused of making Egyptians look bad, to which I replied that all I did was take the camera into public places and shoot in a documentary verite style, of which there is a long and important history. I was not surprised by this type of question since people here are prone to criticise what is unfamiliar to them rather than engage in a serious and/or critical discussion about form and content. The same questioner asked me why I did not make a “post-modern” film, again revealing his lack of knowledge about art and modernities. I replied that his question reveals that he knows nothing about the postmodern and rather reveals his own “modernist” desire for a totalising experience, which my film does not provide, and that I do not entertain thoughts about theoretical hierarchies when I make something. There were no other questions from the small audience that was a mixture of Egyptians and foreigners. This silence is typical of discussions after screenings and lectures, especially when the language of speaking is primarily English. It is truly as if people do not know how to discuss things they do not already have opinions or feelings about. If discussions about art and film suffer from shallowness, this

only contributes to the sense of invisibility and loneliness of the artists.

As with all circles that have a social face, the art and film worlds in Cairo are largely masculinist, although with closer scrutiny one sees women figuring prominently as producers, directors, programmers, critics and artists, not to mention assistants, spectators, students, and important friends. Although there are a few famous women who have publicly articulated feminist positions in Egypt (Nawaal el Saadawi, Hoda Sha'arawi, Ateyat el Abnoudi, among other known and unknown women) the term feminist is generally dismissed, because of connotations of a perceived kind of opportunistic militancy and exhibitionism the word to them implies, as well as a general distancing from Western feminism. Both of these, among other potential reasons, fold into a quasi-political positioning, which is often not a clearly conceived or articulated one, amongst the majority of young women active in the art world today. This is not to say there are no women artists claiming a feminist position; there are a few. Among them are Muslim feminist groups, feminist

literary groups such as "The Writing Project" and human rights activists. The majority of women working towards women's rights in Egypt work within the fields of reproductive health, legal rights, education and literacy (i.e., NGOs which are often worlds away in Cairo from the art world).

Last year at the 2004 Ismailiya Documentary Film Festival in Egypt, the official category of experimental film came into being for the first time (for a film festival in Egypt), based on the strength of a submission by the artist Amal Kenawy, entitled "The Room," for which she received an award. Kenawy is another artist who refuses to claim her work as feminist in content, yet the content of several of her video installations focuses on reflections on marriage and the loss of (her) identity, without there ever being a literal persona inflection. Her work is personal and she is often the woman in the image, but there is also something de-naturalised about her form. Abstracted images of Kenawy in a wedding dress, pinned to a bed by stakes around which are woven threads in an animated sequence, or burned in a glass of water, or glued together painstakingly in a live performance, are but a few images that seem grounded in a basic feminist history and discourse. Mostly self-taught, she, like a few other prominent artists here, prefers to work without references, without knowing that her work relates to a history of personal film/video and feminist art. To be something without knowing the references and without conscious discursive deployment is

---

The majority of women working towards women's rights in Egypt work within the fields of reproductive health, legal rights, education and literacy...



indicative of the larger disconnect that has prevailed between art institutions, academic institutions, and networks in Cairo.

Nevertheless there are some interesting independent arts initiatives that have recently cropped up in Cairo: Semat, the company for independent film production and distribution began 2 years ago; the Townhouse Gallery has been around for about 8 years; the Center for the Contemporary Image was just established to further non-academic study of photography and the photographic arts. These are not cultural organisations directly connected to national structures or ministries. They are initiatives taken by local Egyptian artists of one sort or another (an exception is William Wells who is of Canadian origin but has lived in the Middle East for over 20 years, mostly in Cairo), and this appears to be a moment of change where everything is an

experiment and the experiment is the experience.

In spite of the easy complaint that there is no culture because of government corruption, these are people taking initiatives to begin something new, take a leap of faith, live with insecurity, try to make something happen, and support and facilitate the growth of the contemporary art world. Whether this or my own efforts have a lasting impact remains to be seen, but as we are so rarely certain of long-term success it seems worthy enough to try. That is the spirit of doing progressive things without guarantees, that had to rise up from the ashes of pessimism—all of it part of the highly dynamic process of making art for art's sake.

---

*Samirah Alkasim is Assistant Professor and Film /Unit Head at the Department of Performing & Visual Arts, American University in Cairo.*

---

