

THE CHANGING ROOM

ARAB REFLECTIONS
ON PRAXIS AND *TIMES*



THE POLITICAL STUDIO

*Amira El Ahl in
conversation with
Khaled Hafez*

AE: Tracey Emin recently exhibited thought-collages in the Hayward Gallery in London. Is the motto here: I think therefore I am an artist?

KH: It is a "Me-too-phenomenon". This discourse of putting your thoughts on paper and exhibiting it, even if it is not really what is traditionally known as a piece of art, is a discourse since the 1920s. It is a discourse since Marcel Duchamp started his urinal and exhibited it. It never stopped, this idea of an artist as just an idea. And it does not need to have a lot of technique or a lot of things. The peak was in the late 1960s with what is known as conceptual art. Conceptual Art is all about the thought provoking statement whether we have something or not, an artwork that is craftily made or perceived or created or not.

AE: So how do you think the role of an artist has changed in the last decades?

KH: In fact roles of artists have changed from the late 19th and early 20th century. Since the 1960s when artists were starting to have political positions and with the creation of the term contemporary art, meaning art that is documenting for our time, more and more artists are getting politically and socially involved. The artist today engages more with the public. If you look at art history --especially painting as practice-- it started in ancient Egypt as art to serve a function and then in the Renaissance it was art for aesthetics, even if it served a tiny function and then as of the late 1950s art became

more engaging. We have seen pop-artists who are contesting and actually revolting against the war in Vietnam. Artists today are much more engaged in their own societies, much more than their "White Cube" predecessors in the early-till-the second-part of the 20th century when being an artist was prestigious.

AE: A society is affected by wars and revolutions - and even by the absence of social transformations, by stagnation. Is involvement beneficial for creativity or does an artist need to create a distance in order to reflect on it and start a creative process?

KH: It is actually both ways. When we demonstrated early January, almost all of us fell into doing paintings and photographs and installations about what we physically saw in Tahrir-Square. This is tricky because usually the result of such early commitment is lousy art. Lousy in terms of there is nothing more than what you would see on TV. One model that never fails is after having assimilated everything, that all those experiences be reflected somehow in an artwork without falling into the trap of the literal, and to actually work on the metaphorical level. This is much more interesting because these propositions in the artwork are witty, intelligent, more-than-aesthetic and at the same time the artwork works on different layers.

AE: Nowadays artists use more and more media tools for expression. They use

tography, video, Internet. So how do you distinguish an artist from a journalist? Where do you draw the lines, how do you define the roles?

KH: Do we need to define? Blogging, the Internet, E-Mails, tweeting – all those are tools and they exist because there is a need for them. We need them to express, we need them to document, we need them to better write history. And art is all that as well. Art has a slight element of documentation, even if it is an abstract painting. What we live is history, what we do is history and among the things we as artist do are artworks, but we also tweet and blog and demonstrate. All those are tools for expression. More and more artists are using digital media as a tool for expression. Indeed because it is a tool of this age. And in the end of the day an artwork is an expression of some sort.

AE: How did artistic video and photography practice change?

KH: I would say that the arsenal of tools increased, multiplied by ten. Its like creating weapons: we have more art-supplies and among them are cameras and the Internet and iPads and iPhones.

AE: Do more people become artists because they can use these media tools for expression and it is closer to their reali-

ties then painting?

KH: Indeed. They have better chances of discovering their own talents, this is one thing, but at the same time the drawback is that you have more and more de-skilled artists, they don't have the skill and the craft of creating an artwork that is skilful. But does that make a difference? At the end of the day we have an art production that manages to stir certain emotions in the viewer.

AE: Lets get back to the idea of documenting. As a journalist I find this very interesting. I use photography for my journalistic work but I do not define myself as an artist. But what distinguishes me from an artist who uses photography and video as a tool of expression?

KH: Only perception. Look at Henry Cartier-Bresson and Irving Penn. The perception of those photographers in the 1950s was not that of artists. Irving Penn was treated like an artist only in the 1980s. But he has always been a photographer. So I think the only problem is perception.

AE: So Henri Cartier-Bresson in his time was a photojournalist. Nowadays we see him as a photojournalist/artist. We said it is only a matter of perception. So if I change the terminology and say I am an

artist, not a journalist, there would be no difference?

KH: If you do a production of photographs that are equally aesthetic and informative, yes of course you are. As a journalist you write, you are a writer. I have a massive problem with boxing. Isn't a writer an artist as well?

AE: This is a good question. I would argue that there is a difference between an artist and a writer. Is a writer an artist for you?

KH: Yes, definitely, a creator is a creator. Look at artists, in the beginning they were painters and sculptors, but now with the installation artist who might play with nothing else but rubble, he is also an artist. So eventually a writer is. And a photographer is. The only problem here is with this democratisation with titles, labels or descriptions. Democracy comes with its drawbacks, its mistakes.

AE: Which are?

KH: That everybody is equal. So you have the good artist and the less good artist but he is still a practitioner, and still an artist.

AE: So you think that this democratisation comes with a de-valuation of art?

KH: No, it comes with openness. If you allow more and more practitioners it is exactly like football. The swimmer deals with the watch, this is the criteria you cannot cheat. But for football, you have two exceptional players and the rest are good players. But how good are they? You cannot measure it. In music, on a piano for example, a note is a note and the criteria are there. But then there is no criteria in visual art today.

AE: So the borders get more fluid. Thinking it from the other side it means that an artist who uses media tools is also a journalist or a media propagator as much as I could be an artist using photography?

KH: We started our dialogue with Tracey Emin. Eventually she is a social propagator, a media propagator and ever since her first work that she got recognised with, this was her intention. Her artwork is about intervention and about thought provocation more than visual aesthetics. We can allow that now. Artists like Tracey Emin would not have gotten into the club 100 years ago. Tools of expression then were either painting or sculpture or anything in between, drawing and print-making.

AE: What is the difference to today then, why do we need other tools for expres-

sion?

KH: Need is defined by society. They need alternative tools of expression because the problems are different then 100 years ago. They are more complex.

AE: So now we have a movement of visual artists who use video and photography. There is a need for it and it is being answered.

KH: There is a need for it for one reason: Because it is the new language. The way I was educated at school is not the same you were educated or my son is educated. To me there was nothing called a 'computer,' but somebody who is 18 had a physical computer at his desk in school.

AE: Would you say artists and art expression change when society changes or do artists change society?

KH: No, I don't believe that. This is the massive myth. Artists participate with their own roles by just expressing what they think or what they do. Me in my studio I have a certain circle of influence. Among my viewers, with my gallerists and with the students I teach, all this becomes my circle of influence. This is the extent of how I can change society full stop.

AE: How do you see the artistic movement in Egypt and the Arab World – considering the social and political upheavals of this year – changing?

KH: I will speak about certain samples of artists I have known and people I belong to. Younger artists, I know a bunch of them who come to my studio, who actually spend two weeks out of the three sleeping in Tahrir Square, aka the field – or the Midan. I know of other older artists who were also there, or were not there but they were and are helping with the coalitions that were forming afterwards, or by being part of committees and writing projects for cultural policy reforms – like Adel Siwi, Mohammed Abla or myself. These artists are part of coalitions; I am part with Huda Lutfi and Adel Siwi and Basma el Hussein in a coalition to submit a model for cultural policies as part of the next constitution. This is a type of contribution as well. And there are people who decided to watch everything from outside before they contribute. And I am sure they are contributing with something or the other. And you have others who are against it totally. It works. The world is big enough to tolerate everybody.

AE: So will this change artistic expression?

KH: There is a certain circle of influence that those people are exerting in their entourage that will help, among zillions of efforts of other groups in other fields to move society forwards.

AE: So the artist plays a different role during such times? He is not anymore artist but he becomes a role model?

KH: A role model as an artist, a citizen and a demonstrator or a public worker. A citizen who votes and reforms, because with all those committees the principal objective is to reform something. So this is not just sheer citizenship, but trying to reform by putting your expertise as an artist into public use.

AE: Do you see that during this period artistic work is less important and being a citizen and working on a social and political level is much more important?

KH: All of them are equal. Ever since the revolution my studio became a political platform where there is a massive exchange of ideas. Someone proposed the name "political Studio" and it became the name for my studio. My studio serves a different function now. Plus I am still doing my art. It will be catastrophic if you stop doing your job simply to be in the street. That is what we are all renouncing. The most important thing is to be in

the street and to also produce and not to stop production.

AE: So both is possible at the same time?

KH: All is possible at the same time and it has to be that way. And this is the only way to be influential and a role model and have a wider circle of influence.

AE: So all these roles that we play – the socially engaged citizen, the artist, blogger, tweeter – you are all at the same time on the same level. And it influences each other?

KH: They feed into each other. Let me give you an example of the younger generation of artists who are born in the digital media. For the past four years I have been encountering many of them in my studio. Those people are at the same time members of the 6th of April movement and the Baradei movement and the "We are all Khaled Said" movement. Those people were artists before the revolution and they were socially engaged before the revolution. They arranged for these demonstrations, they were there from day one.

AE: A filmmaker I talked to told me that he was not able to go down to the square during the revolution and film. He needed to be there not as a filmmaker but as a

citizen fighting for his rights.

KH: I agree. I had two cameras on me all the time but the first time I started using my camera was on the morning of the day Mubarak stepped down.

AE: Why do you think that is?

KH: Because I was there as a citizen and it was meaningless to shoot pictures, meaningless to shoot bad pictures. I would have used the camera if I had a photojournalistic approach, like Ahmed Basiony. Somebody got sniped beside him and he used his camera and this is probably how he got shotgun bullets in his face – he used his camera to trace one of the snipers and then suddenly someone else shot him. The idea is, Ahmed Basiony was documenting from day one; he was taking sounds with his camera beside the act of documenting with his video.

AE: It does not seem as if it is the artist who is there but the citizen who documents as a citizen journalist what he is seeing.

KH: There is proof for that. In his last comment on Facebook he said: Go down to the street tomorrow, take cameras with you, shoot and do not be afraid. This was his role.

AE: So roles are shifting. During the revolution artists turned into citizen journalists because they used cameras to document, not to create an art piece. Everybody became a journalist. We were there as journalists documenting and reporting and the citizens were there documenting too. And we as journalists were also relying on the reports of citizens who were documenting the events during this time. So it is all intertwined.

Roles are shifting, art is changing, journalists become artists and artists become journalists...

KH...mediators. I never knew this value until I had this political studio. In the Cairo Biennial last December, I showed snipers and a few military images and exactly six weeks after the opening the revolution happened. And someone created the best term I heard so far about the work: premonition pieces. 2006 I made a video called Revolution and 2007 I made one talking about four presidents and 2008 and 2009 about elections and democracy - so the word "premonition" makes sense. And I think many artists, especially younger artists, were doing premonition projects too. In literature many people wrote things that would be premonition. And I think the "Yacoubian Building" of Alaa Al-Aswany was one of those in which he was probably documenting through fiction the last five min-

utes before the revolution. And so many works were about that. They were mentioning the Security Police, police treatment of citizens and other social abuses.

AE: ...look at Yousef Chahins film "Heya Fawda".

KH: ...exactly. There were a lot of premonition pieces like that. People could feel the last five minutes – metaphoric last five minutes. Literature, film, video-art, painting and I am sure several other mediums were speaking about the same things. About treatment of police, demonstrations, students, religion, presidents, elections, corrupt Parliaments. I mean this is not a coincidence.

AE: It reminds me of the name of this project – The Changing Room. This kind of subtle realisation that something is changing, it is not yet done and when exactly the change will happen is not clear. And then there is also the changing rooms we talked about in roles, the way roles are shifting.

KH: What I like about this Changing Room title is that it reflects something I have lived in this society in the past few years. In which there was this wish from certain people to arrange their own rooms, to arrange their house. And this I have seen in so many fields and sectors.

Seeing all those artists documenting the last five minutes before the explosion I think it had to happen now. And I think it only succeeded because this was the time for it to succeed. No system could stand in front of it.

AE: You are being very optimistic here. The "changing rooms" have yet not succeeded in Egypt. We are in a process and we have no idea what clothes we will come out with.

KH: Absolutely. What I like about this show as a project is that only two kids, two adults, two countries changed their rooms. We still have 20 family members who may or may not decide to change something. Some of them have their rooms arranged more than others. We know nothing about that, we are right in the middle of it. I would like to see this particular project five years from now and to see what happened in those five years with other countries, other family members. Maybe we arranged the room in a way that may need that we explode it later. Maybe we changed furniture or the whole house. That is the beauty of it, having all those energies of people who are living between one step inside the older environment and one step towards what they want to be.

AE: What does The Changing Room,



what does this project mean to you?

KH: What I like about it is that many of the artists in the changing room project met and exhibited in the past together - in the last five minutes before the explosion. We witnessed the explosion together. It would have been predictable had we met after the explosion. But then to meet in the last five minutes before the explosion - and I am sure each one of us probably participated with a nanogram of effort in having those changes made - I think it means a lot. It gives a different meaning, it gives legitimacy. I would like to see *The Changing Room* as a project happening in five years from now and see what is happening then - the legitimacy here is double. First because we had met

before and then we had witnessed during and then we are changing together afterwards. I think this is the interesting thing about it now.

AE: You said you would change together. How do you mean that?

KH: I mean it in the metaphorical sense. Because still I believe that it is a myth that an artist can stand alone and develop an idea and the world changes. This does not happen, never happened and will never happen. No matter how good the artist is. At one point in time it will be mentioned that we met at this time, that we did this together and the whole thing was part of a bigger, significant, popular, social movement.

