From:

Mikala Hyldig Dal (ed.)

Cairo: Images of Transition
Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011-2013


The Egyptian revolution of 2011 has significantly changed the relationship between citizens, public space, and visual expression. »Cairo: Images of Transition« traces these developments and their effects on political communication, urban space, and cultural production. The book is the first publication to offer a deep view on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the wake of the Egyptian revolution 2011. Renowned Egyptian and international writers, artists and activists trace the shifting status of the image as a communicative tool, a witness to history, and an active agent for change.

Mikala Hyldig Dal teaches at the Applied Arts Faculty of the German University in Cairo. In numerous artistic and research oriented projects she has examined the relationship between visual imagery, artistic practice and political processes, most recently in Germany, Iran, Syria and Egypt.

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Desire Virtue Elnimerue,
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394 This is why we are all Egyptians
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CAIRO: IMAGES OF TRANSITION is an in-process study of the relationship between aesthetics and politics in Egypt’s current transitional period. Using the methodological toolsets of art and academic research, this volume examines the visual transformation of Cairo’s public space after the demanded ouster of President Hosni Mubarak on January 25, 2011. With an emphasis on the visual communication of political parties and activist groups, we map the images that shaped the political processes and follow their transmutations through shifting media and modes of representation.

The process of overthrowing Mubarak’s regime and the resistance to a military coup brought forth Egypt’s first democratic elections in November 2011. Image politics and visual expression play a central role in all stages of this development. Outdoor photo galleries erected by image-activists display documentation of events as they unfold. An ongoing narrative of graffiti and other street art forms integrate symbols, messages, and icons of common reference into the urban landscape and transform the surfaces of the city in an all-encompassing editing process. During the elections, visual ephemera promoting candidates and parties exploded throughout streets and strata of Cairo. The communication of political content via imagery persisted to the present day, as protestors faced with deficient parliamentary representation and continuing human rights violations, struggle to reclaim the revolution.

In a collective effort of more than 40 Cairo-based artists and writers, Cairo: Images of Transition – Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011-2013 traces the shifting status of the image in revolutionary Egypt as a communicative tool, a witness to history, and an active agent for change. We examine the realm of image-politics during and after the crucial 18 days of January and February 2011. Which semiotic references prevail? Which aesthetic structures, representational codes, and conventions are followed? Which are broken? How is democracy envisioned? How did January 25 change the relationship between citizens, visual communication, and public space? Which politics are at play when history manifests as an image?

A central conception of this volume is that the history we are attempting to embrace is still in the writing, and dynamically so. New icons are being produced while the subjects of existent ones are being altered through varying media. At this point we do not aim to present a finite archive of images produced by Egypt’s revolutionary cycles; rather this publication should be seen as an attempt to generate a deep perspective on the images that shape Egypt today, and to offer a temporary record of their history.

Methodology
The interdisciplinary field of contributors to this book embraces several distinct perspectives: The established Egyptian professional who has been reflecting on developments in the region for decades; the Egyptian student for whom January 25 brought about the first significant opportunity to reflect on his or her work politically; and representatives of a well travelled international community of artists and writers in permanently impermanent residence in various cultural spheres. With a plurality of voices a multi-linear field of thoughts on our subject matter is rendered accessible, informed by subjective frames of reference and individual modes of expression.
The aesthetic concept of the book reflects the nature of this discourse; our editing process has included meetings among contributors to discuss entries and exchange mutual critique. Before it went to print a preliminary copy of the book was subjected to handwritten notes and comments in public editing sessions. The writing generated in this process has been integrated into the book, to offer additional references to its primary contents, while leaving space for ambiguity and allowing for doubt.

An extensive image archive of photographs taken during the revolution and subsequent uprisings, visual election material and photo-documentation of the 2011-2012 election campaigns, and records of street-art interventions and various types of propaganda material constitute an important part of the fieldwork for this book.

Image content, methods of display, and specific icons and symbols that have gained new meanings and subtexts through the January 25 revolution are examined, as is the integration of revolutionary imagery into the iconographic gallery of the election processes and subsequent protest movements. We trace the iconographic representation of mass-protest in its current function of mobilizing further action against what many activists describe as a hijacking of the revolution by conservative forces.

Works of a visual character intertwine with text-based contributions to create a multifaceted reading experience in which topical content and formal approaches overlap and integrate fluidly. However the main themes of the book are framed by three areas of attention:

**Meta-Image Tahrir**

“Meta-Image Tahrir,” understood as the iconization (Ikonisierung) of the revolution, serves as an introduction to the general topic of imagery in the context of Egypt’s transitional period. Modes of production, distribution, and instrumentalization of images concerned with representing the revolutionary movements and which ultimately manifest Tahrir as an icon of common reference in the global imaginary, are addressed.

Cinema Tahrir, organized by media activists such as the Mosireen Video Collective, enabled protestors to watch themselves in real time through live broadcasts. The workings of such media circuits and protestors’ awareness of becoming image-subjects is evident as demonstrators stage themselves with self-made English-language posters, and so provide their own image-captions for foreign media.

The attempts of erasing protesters’ visual agency is expressed in its most direct sense in the calculated targeting of demonstrators’ eyes by police ‘eye-snipers.’ The notion of blindness becomes a metaphor for the intense power struggle over visual representation one can observe.

**Politics of Representation**

The second part of the book presents an overview of the visual communication applied by political parties in the 2011-2012 campaigns for parliament and presidency. We document the stylistic features of political posters and observe how gender, secular or religious affiliations, and socioeconomic segmentation were central divides by which the representation of contesters was informed. Informal interventions produced by artists open up a parallel discourse concerned with examining, commenting on or re-thinking the practice of the democratic process.

**Urban Transformations**

The last section of the book documents the palimpsest of political messages on a street level as layers upon layers of campaign posters, street art, and graffiti accumulated to form a tangible second skin on the city. The ecological environment of the heavily commuted city and public interventions in the form of adding handwritten comments to, removing, or blinding unpopular candidates, slowly transformed these visual materials. In the structure of an ongoing public editing process a new form of urban writing is transforming Cairo’s public space on architectural, symbolic, and unconscious levels.

Mikala Hyldig Dal

Mikala Hyldig Dal is a visual artist and independent curator. She holds an MFA from the University of Arts in Berlin; in 2011 she was appointed lecturer at the Faculty of Applied Sciences and Arts, German University in Cairo. Together with students she initiated a research project on political campaigning in Cairo, which this book is a subsequent result of.
In January and February of 2011 demonstrations of civil resistance against the authoritarian rule of Hosni Mubarak peaked as millions took to the street chanting and expressing a global cry for democracy. It remains questionable if the images the revolution generated and was, as one might argue, in part generated by, are media as being the central motor for the revolutionary process rather than one applied tool among others [8], as we know, the mass of protestors swelled rather than decreased during the six days of Internet lockdown from January 28 – February 5, 2011. What is beyond doubt at the present moment in time, more than two years after the general uprising and amid the wake of the continuous protest cycles it sparked, is the immense impact of the powerful images the revolution generated and was, as one might argue, in part generated by.

A number of factors play a role in this reciprocal process, several of which are indeed connected to technological advancements. One is the integration of image-recording technologies into a wide range of mobile communication devices obtainable at a variety of price ranges. In large parts of the world, including Egypt, the prevalence and wide accessibility of image-technologies has affected our sensory perception on direct levels and our social behavior on indirect levels. Each moment is a potential picture and each picture becomes image; history manifested as an icon. This process has inscribed itself into the global iconography of revolution.

In the context of violent oppression, each camera is also a potential witness representing a theoretically unlimited number of instokers and potentially proactive sympathizers once the footage is made accessible online, a step which is being executed with increasing proximity to the moment of recording. A field of camera phones rose from the crowd at Tahrir and other places of public gathering, multiplying the collective body of protestors in as many fragments and perspectives as posed by the number of its single members.

Image-philosophers Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes both made analogies between the photo-camera and the loaded gun [8]. The allegorical proximity between the two devices is becoming increasingly evident, as the cases of Syrian rebels who ‘duel’ snapping snipers with their camera phones and, in Egypt, the frontal shooting of the eyes of citizen journalists by snipers’ flashes, illustrate. Egyptian protestors transformed the record making of their bearing witness to their cameras, a circuit which was recognized and reversed by military personnel, who targeted the technology rather than the mechanical eyes of their opponents. The measures taken to prevent Tahrir from becoming an image of global significance were, as we know, in vain. The bird’s-eye view of a roaring square, joined in collective action against an oppressive regime, has inscribed itself into the global iconography of revolution.

The unfolding events were condensed in this image, history manifested as an icon. This process established Tahrir simultaneously as a physical place and an abstract, symbolic, imaginary space [7].

Which politics are at play when history becomes image? And which roles do the images of other, similar histories play in the construction of such an image? Might the icons of past events that fit the formal category of ‘revolution’ construct a quasi-universal iconographic gallery informing the representation of new events in the same category? If so, the process would be reminiscent of a semi-standardized image-search functions of Internet search engines like Google, that promote the dominance of an image as soon as its relative relevance has been (mathematically) established – said image will be the first one we see, after that: a cascade of ontological copies.

Do individuals who have an interest in manifesting their present as a moment of revolution consciously or unconsciously consult this image-gallery in their outward communication and collective performances? When protestors kneel down in the face of superior police forces, displaying their potential sacrifice with open chests and outstretched arms, can we read into this image an appropriation of past gestures by many-revolutionaries from biblical David to Jesus of Nazareth to homo-sacer prisoners at Guantanamo Bay? In this gesture, can we trace a consciousness about becoming image, a knowledge about the gesture in which one encapsulates one’s body, rendering it a medium for a message beyond itself and beyond the present? A consciousness that sometimes expresses itself as an euphoria, as in the cases where protestors in Tahrir cheerfully display live-streams from Tahrir on their laptops: Sharing footage of Nazareth to Guantánamo Bay?

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