



MH First thought: how is this storefront representing American soft-power based on twentieth-century credentials? Second thought: this is an interface, too. Third thought: we recently went to the Stedelijk Museum's Günther Förg exhibition with two young kids. Afterwards we went

to the café upstairs for apple juice and macarons. Then one of the kids said, macaroon in hand: "I know what this is called! An emoji!"

MMG I took this photo in the United Kingdom. I think that it's important to mention, because almost everywhere else I've been, which is mostly the global South, the junk food category isn't nearly as fetishized as it is in the UK. The reverence is more hallowed and encased in the UK—literally in the case of this storefront. There's not exactly an "invasion" of United States-based sugary and salty junk food that you see in South America or the Middle East. That stuff is often simply absorbed into industrial food production and you get some local version of Fanta. But there's a whole cabal of YouTube videos in which British people are filmed being introduced to North American candy. There's a soft power here, but not the same as when North Americans consume burritos. It's not *food* migrating back to the old empire as much as a consumer item, like a perfume or weird kitchen gadget.

Metahaven What are artistic methods/politics and aesthetics in a (yet to be more tightly defined) crisis, or under circumstances of urgency? This slightly pompous tagline is to be taken apart/made more precise/thrown away/distorted or deformed in any way necessary/by the participants/all of us.

Philip Rizk There are a few words I avoid using because I find they have lost their meaning due to their being politicized or overused in a sense with which I cannot identify. Crisis and urgency, though, are not among them. I agree with what Jane M. Gaines writes in her text "Political Mimesis": radical aesthetics is most effective in moments of revolt, in moments of urgency.<sup>1</sup> There is a necessity for ranks, for a crowd on the ground. It is then that aesthetics can best play a part in revolt and become a tool to move the spectator. I do not believe in aesthetic work that moves people in periods of stasis, moments of complacency. Rather, I believe that in a time and place of movement, of revolt, in which radical aesthetics plays a role. It is a role just like that of those who tend to the injured, who are imprisoned, who are at the frontlines—all these positions must be filled. Aesthetics can play the role of upping the ante, countering the authorities that demand the status quo, pushing the discourse in order to get more bodies on the street. Because without bodies there is no revolt. Without bodies on the street, radical aesthetics act in a vacuum.

Radical aesthetics don't move a crowd, they may move with the crowd. I don't feel I can answer in a more direct way. I can't tell you *what* the aesthetics are, I can just tell you *about* their spirit.

Jasmina Metwaly If we consider that "behind every work of art is an uncommitted crime,"<sup>2</sup> then I think a more relevant question to pose would be about the perception of art within our collective consciousness. How we see things and cross the boundaries of what we know or take for granted is what constructs the very texture of the political. Art in such a sense is not about committing a crime per se, but about becoming an agent in mobilizing all parties involved, including the onlookers (audiences) and active participants (artists).



Laura Cugusi If radical aesthetics have the power to mobilize all parties involved in a crisis, including the onlookers, it is urgent to experiment with creative strategies and symbolic gestures that complement the necessary presence of the body in the street.

Artistic methods and aesthetics can't rely exclusively on the heroism of those who are left to protest with their bodies, and on the resilience of those who have been unjustly imprisoned. At the same time, we can't blame those who have migrated away from the fulcrum of attention or who are under real threat of retaliation from oppressive governments for not taking to the streets. Forms of protest and creative interventions that are not exclusively centered around the act of taking to the streets (in real life, or in its representation) cross the boundary of what we know and take for granted: that urgency will always manifest in the image of street protests.

Perhaps what it takes to move a crowd is for aesthetics to be radical, to have a radical power by evoking new imagery (that we struggle to find language for) rather than reproducing a familiar image such as that of the crowd of anonymous protesters, easily co-opted by pop culture and advertising.

For example, the protest against the murder of Khaled Saïd in Alexandria's corniche in 2010—where hundreds of people stood in silence reading books—operated a shift in the aesthetics of protests in Egypt at the time. Also, during another peaceful demonstration, in Cairo in October and November 2010, hundreds of workers from rural Egypt camped on the sidewalk, day and night, for at least three weeks. The urgency of that quiet protest manifested in their refusal to leave. It was a form of protest that cleverly managed to bypass the emergency law that prohibited public gatherings of more than six people. Although there were hundreds of protestors, they each sat two or three meters apart. You could only get a sense of the sheer scale of the protest by walking along its string of participants for a few minutes. Or from above.

During the eighteen days of occupation of Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011, a friend of mine, who was conscripted into the army at the time, was asked to film the crowd on Tahrir Square from a helicopter. He told me he tried to hide his tears as he feared the consequences of higher ranking men noticing that he was

"with the people" in spirit. I anticipated seeing those images one day, but they still have not been released. The aerial footage of the June 30, 2013 protests instead has been made public: perfectly edited like a Hollywood movie.<sup>3</sup> The military junta had plenty of time to learn about the power of protest imagery and stage it in high quality so everybody would "feel" "something": the illusion of togetherness, the illusion of a "we, the people."

Writer and artist Johanna Hedva's Sick Woman Theory questions forms of political participation exclusively based on physical presence in public space. The author's chronic illness and vulnerability prevents her from going out and protesting with the crowd, but she refuses to surrender to invisibility.<sup>4</sup>



**PR** This statement is not so much about spreading guilt, it's rather about describing what I have seen. I am not saying that the only way to be "political" is to be a body on the street; I am saying that without bodies on the street there is no revolt. There is a big difference here. If there is a will, a desire, an intention to oppose police brutality but there are no people there to fight—whether those people are sick, imprisoned, or elsewhere—the brutality will go on. That is not to say that all those absent are guilty of doing nothing. That judgement is not for me to pass.

**LC** Those who are inclined to take to the streets perhaps do not even need a symbolic image to be moved to action. Rather, they need it to identify themselves as belonging to the collective narrative of the event after it has taken place, as being part of something bigger.

As writer Negar Azimi wrote: "a great deal of recent political art is affirmative; it affirms what we know (the wars of George W. Bush are bad; men are misogynists; gays are people too, etc.), it affirms that participation is necessary, and finally, it affirms that you—as the consumer of art—are, in fact, part of a community of like-minded peers."<sup>5</sup> In this sense, as Philip mentioned earlier, "radical aesthetics don't move a crowd, they move with the crowd" and they are vital. But an aestheticized struggle feels mediated, digested, not raw, less urgent.

**PR** I agree with you here. I don't know if I will be filming much next time.

**LC** I think filming was and is important. It is a need not always necessarily connected to the diffusion of the testimony. When filming a protest, your presence and movements are "legitimized" to an extent. But you can also become a target as your proximity to the action could seem threatening to governments that attempt to control the "official" narrative. Not only does documentation of protests serve a purpose, but also catching people in the act of filming validates the act—if what is happening is relevant, someone should document it.

I am talking about perception of involvement. I am not judging the level of involvement. The aestheticization of the footage can intensify the urgency that was already present for some, or dim it for others, depending on the level of their emotional investment and their proximity to the direct sources of information.

I think Philip's 2014 essay "2011 is not 1968: An Open Letter to an Onlooker on the Day of Rage," on activism and radical images, is still very relevant today.<sup>6</sup>



previous

**MH** Here's a quote from that text:

The Internet helped create the aura that all this [protests on the streets in Egypt in 2010/2011] was familiar. By channeling the outrage on the streets through a medium that you recognized, the narrative presented on news channels diluted the mystery within the events and chained your imagination to what is familiar. The layers of interpretation painted over the images diminished your fear of the unknown. "This is only an act against dictatorship." "This is the individual cry for freedom." "This is a demonstration for democracy." "This revolution is nonviolent." The Internet replaced the Kalashnikov. These discourses silenced the structural dimensions of injustice and concealed the role of neoliberal policies promoted by the likes of the IMF, the EU, and the USA in deepening the stratification between poor and rich. They made you forget that it is out of these structures of injustice that the desire for social justice is born in the first place. These dominating narratives—the narratives of domination—localized the problematic, for instance, to that of a homegrown dictatorship. By isolating the crime, and highlighting the corruption of individuals, these accounts helped set the neo-colonial stage for the now empty shells of the old regime to be replaced by another that maintains the same logic of governance. [...] The images taken by the cameras of the BBC, CNN, or Al Jazeera become the private property of these institutions that then use them to tell their narratives, to celebrate what they desire to promote and silence what they want to suppress.

**JM** When thinking about people's movements I think about author Elias Canetti's open and closed crowds. He defines open crowds through their temporality and space, with entries and exits creating some kind of inclusion that lasts as long as there's agency, as long as there's growth. The capacity for crowds to move, expand, and disintegrate makes them politically unpredictable. Open crowds constitute themselves freely, outside the constraints of what one signifies as secure, outside the constraints of fear of the other, of touch. It starts small and grows only



**MMG** Humans kill 100 million sharks each year. It is one of those facts that is never too early to memorize. What is actually newsworthy here? Almost nothing. There are sharks in the water, so the ones in its pathway are in danger. That might be worthy of explicit comment if it weren't so blandly obvious. But the ring of enthusiastic alarm here is of course implicit: the only thing that could make a hurricane worse is a shark-filled hurricane. This spuriousness based on fear and falsity is quite literally fake news. A few months after this there are of course other headlines, including these from *The Guardian*: "Trump Is 'Obsessed' and 'Terrified' of Sharks—But His Fears Are Excessive" and "Reality Bites: Trump's Fear of Sharks Leads to a Surge in Charity Donations." It's wonderful that overnight people can be converted to show concern about animal welfare. But on what grounds? The president's galeophobia—an enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend move—is boring.

when in flux, spontaneously swallowing more bodies. Its shape cannot be determined as it has no single entry point, as it grows indefinitely. I think that the aesthetics of a crowd in such a sense lies in its capacity to be "open everywhere" and to move "in any direction." "The open crowd exists so long as it grows: it disintegrates as soon as it stops growing."<sup>7</sup> It needs to fear that moment of disintegration at all times. That is its only constraint: the fear of disappearance of its political action.

I remember the first time I filmed a crowd of people. It was on a Friday, January 28, 2011, also known as the Friday of Anger. Nobody knew what exactly was going to happen as everyone was to a certain extent secretive about the plan for security reasons. Some people gathered in front of the mosque in Imbaba that day. I was there and had a small camcorder. It made me feel secure somehow, the fact that between me and the rest was a mediating device. There was a certain fear, anxiety that came with participation in something that felt so much larger than any one of us. It was a relatively small group and it took a while for it to move. The march started eventually, and it was only a matter of time before it grew into a nonconforming geometry, with no beginning or end, with entry points, always in flux. There were few cameras that day and the internet was down.

**LC** I don't remember many particular clips of footage of protests in Egypt in 2011, but I remember a video by Jasmina very vividly. She presented it during the Alternative News Agency program at the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo. It was a "left-over" image (a clip that was probably cut out of a more "relevant/newsworthy" one for the Mosireen archive).<sup>8</sup> In it were just dark silhouettes moving around in a back alley near the front lines. It did not show much "evidence" in the traditional sense, but it had the power to trigger my imagination and an urge to find out what happened before and after. It was then that I realized the gap of perception between those who experienced the uprising firsthand and those who didn't. I recognized the impossibility of representation and the incommunicability of mediated information.

Laura Cugusi • Jasmina Metwaly • Philip Rizk • MH

**LC** This quote from your interview with scholar and art historian Angela Harutyunyan is also on point:

I am interested in the difference in reaction between when one looks at the reality itself and when one looks at its representation. I think that both documentary and art could create a similar response or feeling to image, but the line gets thicker when the image is taken to a different context. I can afford the work in the context of the gallery, but through my documentary practice, I want to produce a direct applied message without ambiguity, a message to reach as many people as possible.<sup>9</sup>



next

**JM** The fear of touching the image. I remember the Gaza War between 2008 and 2009. I was still living in London at the time. I came back in late 2009. The ceasefire was in January of that year. I remember watching the war in its different forms of representation, on a television screen mainly, but also in newspapers, printed material—material you could touch somehow. That was my only connection. I remember counting the casualties every day for six months. Operation Cast Lead. I still don't know what that means, but it sounds disgusting. The information coming from Gaza was very overwhelming, but it was also very terse. Fast-paced and effective shots creating information available for consumption by the general public: entertaining, overwhelming, entertaining. A lot of these images were shot from afar, overlooking the struggle without seeing the actual humans, just rocket strikes and explosions, like fireworks. Rafah, Gaza, and Khan Yunis are very densely populated areas, so you can imagine how difficult it is to actually see anything, to understand anything without actually being on the ground. It is always in splinters, formulated in bits and pieces of information, the representation of the very few.

I think this was the first time I thought about quitting painting. In that moment making pictures was irrelevant. Painting to me is very much about flattening the image to only its information is visible, flattening representation so only its surface is left, a bit like how bombs leave spaces emptied out of their histories. The process of flattening the image to only its surface can be painful because of our selective memory: our bodies protect themselves from overwhelming flashes of information. Our minds can only carry so much. These histories, these left-overs from an event, the second-hand experience of an event, the fear of touching information, leads to forgetting. As in painting, information gets flattened.

I forgot about Gaza and remembered it again with this image: a group of Israelis sitting with their backs to their settlement drinking Coca-Cola and watching the spectacle of bombs drop from the sky like fireworks. This is 2014. Israel launched Operation Protective Edge during which they did something called carpet bombing, which means that these bombs were unguided, random. Meaning they can kill more people at random but concentrated in a street, a house, a school. They killed 1,492 humans in seven weeks.



**LC** A Reuters article on the war in Syria noted:

War crimes investigators and activists have amassed an “overwhelming volume” of testimony, images and videos documenting atrocities committed by all sides during Syria’s war, a U.N. quasi-prosecutorial body said in its first report.

[...]

“The volume of videos and other images—as well as the role played by social media—is unprecedented in any other accountability process with respect to international crimes to date,” said the report. . . . “It is not possible to prosecute all of the crimes committed, given their vast number,” it added.<sup>10</sup>

On March 26, 2018, a UN spokesperson admitted that it’s technically impossible to pursue all the war crimes and atrocities committed in Syria because the evidence is overwhelming. A few days later, the United States and the United Kingdom launched an attack on Syrian soil triggered by the diffusion of images of Syrian civilians gassed to death with “unauthorized chemical weapons.” After seven years of horrific and unprecedentedly documented war in Syria—after there isn’t much left to destroy—a series of clips (showing several men, women, and children with apparent signs of exposure to toxic chemical agents) half the world believes are staged, others consider long-awaited and unequivocal proof justifying foreign intervention. A threshold has been crossed. The red line is always the latest most outrageous, most shared and most commented upon video. Seven years of non-stop slaughter were not enough. A stronger image emerged and was skimmed like oil off the surface of an ocean of evidence.

Footage of crowds of migrants at Europe’s borders triggers outrage and compassion in some and hysterical fear in others. The image is as thin as the border between adjacent filter bubbles.

Many claim that one image circulated widely years ago “shifted the perspective” on the migrant crisis and became a symbol: three-year-old Alan Kurdi. If anything, the image of his lifeless body washed up on a Turkish shore in 2015 made us even more numb to the death of refugee children. Now we need an even stronger, more cruel, more gruesome image to excite the same level of outrage. That image will drown in a sea of images.

I recently overheard a humanitarian worker talking about fundraising for 3D camera drones to report the migrant crisis more vividly. I have doubts about the impact of a generic “more” (more images, more pixels, more angles) as the human capacity to be moved is not infinite. It’s like watching an ambulance with the siren on getting repeatedly stuck between cars in the traffic. It is an unbearable sight. At some point, unless you know how to clear the road, a defense mechanism kicks in and you turn away.

**MH** Alan Kurdi, a refugee who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea after his family had entered an inflatable boat that had capsized, lay on that beach, lifeless, himself and his clothes wet, but seemingly asleep. The power of the image was in its proximity to intimacy itself. Not only in the death of a child—a boundless tragedy—but also in its peacefulness, stillness, a slight but essential recall of a parent’s experience of seeing their child asleep and caring for it endlessly; the exhibition of the sweetness and vulnerability of a Child, any Child, frozen in time and space. Therefore, as spectators we are drawn into a very difficult and perverse loop by remembering this child only for the image of his death. Would we have cared as much for him had he remained alive and been thrown against the fences of Hungary, endured the ordeals of Calais, or been captured by a lens in any other hellish place inside the EU? Our perverse privilege to declare him the Sacred Child as opposed to Vermin Scum is based on where and when images are taken, and whether they do or do not become flashes of proximity.

We lose track of the geopolitical trajectories that have made this Child’s death a reality. With one hand we wipe away our tears at the sight of the pixels that represent Alan Kurdi, with the other we turn a blind eye to our government striking a deal with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey—both a covert ISIS



**MH** The Catalan independence referendum of 2017. Had we lived in times of less turmoil, this would, on its own, have dominated headlines for years to come. But how different does a national independence movement look in times of insurgent nationalism? An independent Catalonia, right now, would be just another little nation-state on an increasingly fragmented European map.

That map is already starting to resemble a patchwork of rival fiefdoms, orchestrated by skillful populist demagoguery on social media. Somehow it is surprising that activists are looking at the nation-state as if it were the solution. There is a YouTube video from June 28, 2016 of then UKIP leader Nigel Farage addressing the European Parliament after the Brexit vote. He literally says, “the little people... want our borders back.”

Maybe this belief in borders is more deeply connected to life with digital screens than to immigration issues: a user’s desire for a reality that is as clearly addressable as an interface, where a border is a clear black line on a screen instead of a porous, clunky, textured negotiation.

I think this was the first time I thought about quitting painting

collaborator and a NATO member.

Recently, the Rojava-based independence movement released files that feature identity documents, allegedly found in Syria, belonging to people allowed transit through Turkey to join ISIS; the files also include pictures retrieved from a smartphone in which a future ISIS fighter—with Kalashnikovs and flags—is initially clad in a Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirt. Our eyes are trained to judge Hilfiger wearers as unremarkable, middle of the road, *normal*, or normcore. Spike Jonze’s 2005 TV commercial for the Gap plays on this perception. In it, a Gap store gets completely and violently destroyed by its clientele in a way that resembles a war zone. This tangent links us back to Hilfiger worn by an ISIS member; what was normal becomes normcore becomes actual violence.

The perception is about images—not about people. What Philip was talking about recurs throughout this conversation: it is about immediate and intrinsic actions, positions needing to be filled, and radical aesthetics as something moving with that.



**Urgency**

**MH** **LC** We met for the first time in 2010 in Spain, when you and Nida Ghouse were, together with Lina Attalah, working as the Take to the Sea collective, focusing on migration and memory in the Mediterranean space. As you recall, our American counterparts at the time seemed focused on unmasking the hypocrisy of the art world. Maybe at the heart of the confrontation, documented in an extensive, multi-camera video piece by Ergin Çavuşoğlu titled *Backbench* (2010) set in a cool gray stage design by Markus Miessen, was an uncommon idea about art—uncommon as in not shared, and therefore an unarticulated central problem.

**LC** At Manifesta 8, the fellow artists taking part in *Backbench* exposed their disillusionment at our seeming distance from the urgent matters they raised about the conditions of production, the corruption of biennials, and the pleas of the host communities. We recalled Luc Boltanski’s *Distant Suffering* (1999), in which he argues that feeling guilty is not enough to move on to action and it won’t make one change the world.<sup>11</sup>

Performing outrage and critiquing a space doesn’t exempt one from the responsibility of being part of it and legitimizing its language

Artists and activists invest personally, financially, and emotionally in trying to make change—no matter how small—within and outside of institutions. But I think we cannot afford to romanticize this and keep reproducing the same practices without acknowledging the failures of political participation and socially engaged art.



**MH** “Crisis” has become a word thrown around by armchair critics. Is “urgency” going down the same path?

**LC** When did the crisis begin (to begin with)? And who does it belong to? Who are the agents of change if they have nothing to lose from the status quo? Where is the threshold when we no longer accept the flow of events, as we accept turbulent unexpected changes in the weather?

Once I imagined designing a “concern-meter” (or “urgencymeter”) for events and phenomena that are perceived as a permanent crisis within this historical moment (such as forced migration or climate change or other long-term phenomena that the UN and various NGO leaders “urge” undefined audiences to take action upon, while expressing “concern” or “strong condemnation” and for which nobody can be held accountable). Once the threshold of collective outrage is crossed and all the angriest of the emojis have been used, the concernmeter would explode, splattering blood and emoji splinters all over the screen.



**MH** In response to that, what do you think about Ethan Zuckerman’s Cute Cat Theory of political activism,<sup>12</sup> which posits that the mundane nature of most digital traffic through large platforms also guarantees political activists access to and use of these larger platforms for their ends?

**LC** The internet and social media are the platforms that can host the virtual “open crowds” that Jasmina mentions in reference to Canetti, where meaning can go in every direction and be shaped in a nonconforming geometry. I agree that, “If the government chooses to shut down such generic platforms, it will hurt people’s ability to ‘look at cute cats online’, spreading dissent and encouraging the activists’ cause.”<sup>13</sup>

**MH** Emojis may represent the turn of everyday written communication to a single, pan-alphabetic, Unicode ideography, a kind of Esperanto-style universalism of the written image. Emojis are the ultimate form of trans-nationalist design—border-crossing communication standards and conventions. They appear exactly now, when the threshold that separates action from complacency becomes crucial—amplified by the idea of emojis exploding (reminiscent of yet another Jonze ad, for Sprite, in which a three-dimensional smiling sun jumps off a soft drink bottle and starts attacking people).

**LC** The compulsive diffusion of sensational images ceases to be a radical act when embedded in the cycle of consumption of information. The overload of visual content affects our emotional perception, making it almost impossible to decode it as relevant within the “noise” created by redundant and simplified

40

41

information, as we have a limited capacity for empathy in relation to time.

Images of conflicts are produced and disseminated by different actors conscious of the power dynamics of the attention economy. The ambivalent meaning and loss of symbolic power of images, allow the same images to simultaneously serve audiences with opposing belief systems; they will read opposite narratives in the same image.

Urgency is an armchair word because it is a permanent state right now. Without reaction it is hollow. All the energy is wasted in fear—waiting for the next imminent catastrophe. It dissipates when the catastrophe actually happens. There is no energy left to try to move those who do not care, and those who have the power to demand real change.

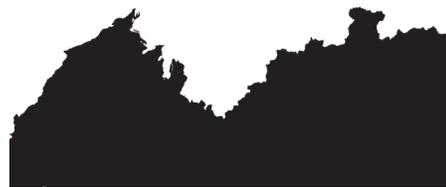
Urgency is a synonym for compulsivity: the urgency to react immediately to an event, to document and share the image as soon as possible. 4K sky-diving GoPro videos and shaky images of violent protests are consumed next to each other, putting our emotions through a spin cycle. As Doa Aly says: “on the Internet, as we rapidly process the stream of images, we are all witnesses to something that is impossible to testify to.”<sup>14</sup>

**MH** This conversation *aspires to be* about “intimacy with an urgency”—about ways in which we *can't* be separated from what is urgent and immediate, ways in which urgency chooses us and forces us.

**LC** Urgency chooses us when we are directly or indirectly affected by an event.

Some events generate a sense of urgency in some people and leave others completely unaffected. For some groups of people an issue becomes urgent when it's already too late.

But the constant and accelerating exposure to aestheticized suffering makes it harder to be touched by images “deeply enough” to be moved to action. Everything is urgent in the news. So we live under the illusion that we'll only see war and melting icebergs in artsy documentaries. Urgency forces itself upon us when the consequences of information materialize in our lived experience.



**MH** It also aspires to be about “software and sovereignty,” following design theorist Benjamin H. Bratton. In what ways is the artistic communication of urgency connected to the uses of certain technologies—regulated and controlled resources like software, technological stacks, YouTube, etc.—and even how we presuppose things like electrical grids as part of this apparatus? That is, hardware and sovereignty. The time that YouTube and Facebook were believably portrayed as harbingers of democratic revolution is behind us. How have our views on this technological stack developed?

**PR** In 2011, protesters in Egypt lost access to the net for some days. In a way it was crucial because—despite sounding rather obsessive, I will say it again—what really mattered were bodies on the street. There were phases of the uprising during which an obsession developed around the image, around being seen, around the television's eye. I wonder if we would have been better off for the entire period of 2011 and 2012 being offline. But that is hard to say because clearly it also served our communication. With the collective Mosireen that we were a part of, we always tried to push our information off the internet because for us, who it reached there was insufficient. We began screening footage and videos in Tahrir Cinema in the square. We distributed our videos on free CDs and via Bluetooth, the latter of which proved quite futile. We wanted our images to be free for everybody. It was around 2012–2013 that better phones became accessible. We wanted to bypass the centralization of the internet to share these videos. I was in touch with some researcher in the Netherlands who was doing work on large-scale Bluetooth dissemination, but he was still early on in his work. We didn't get very far, or maybe he didn't want to share his findings. Then another member of the group purchased some software that promised to disperse files via Bluetooth from a laptop to fifty recipients. It never worked and we had to give up on the idea.

In general, I think in the “urgency” of 2011, we didn't theorize too much about electricity or

even deeply about Facebook and YouTube. In the rush of things we just wanted “our” images, our narrative out there no matter the means, the more the better because we were up against a massive propaganda infrastructure on both the state and private levels. We were aware that YouTube might shut down our channel at some point, and always had physical backups. We also started to place our material elsewhere online. The tools we used were a crutch. We realized that, but we found no solutions to these issues.

When we had those screenings in the square, sometimes we would organize for an electrician to be there to help us access some power from a lamp post. Sometimes we couldn't, and someone would always just happen to show up and help us get power. I think at that point as middle-class types, we learned to connect with people on the margins who take what they don't get. And space on the street—and the electricity to go along with it—are two of those things. So we found a lot of solidarity and comradeship there.

The screenings at Tahrir Cinema eventually emerged into a much more powerful campaign called *Kazeboon* (Liars), where activists all over the country started setting up screenings to show images, particularly of military violence against civilians that were censored on TV and in mainstream media. Of course this required someone somewhere to have access to a laptop and a projector, so it was dependent on the software and the hardware and the know-how that went along with that—but it played a part. Months later the generals that ruled during that transitional period were removed by widespread popular consent.

**LC** In terms of technology, urgency happens when the infrastructure becomes evident in its violent interruption, or by an overload that makes it temporarily inaccessible—for instance, when underwater submarine internet cables are cut leaving entire regions in the dark. The limits of technology appear when Syrian children burn tires, making the sky turn grey, so drones cannot hit them.

Tahrir Cinema and *Kazeboon* were powerful artistic/activist actions (practices?) that could be imitated and reenacted elsewhere, in the future, or by different actors as a symbolic strategy.

**MH > JM** Your 2012 film *About the Donkey that Wanted to Become a Painting*, shows a dead donkey beside a dusty road, cars passing by. The handheld camera remains focused on the donkey as subtitles narrate the story of Nietzsche encountering a horse being beaten. Please tell us more about this piece. Does it reference Béla Tarr's *The Turin Horse* made that same year?

**JM** Nietzsche's eternal return. The inability to show, metaphorically speaking, is a condition when one's heart stops and there is a flat line on the cardiographic scan. The dead donkey is flattened to the surface of the ground. As in painting the process of the making, the gesture, slowly disappears under every new surface of meanings. The process of the making, the attempt to represent, will eventually die with the making. The last sentence is a quote from Nietzsche, “Mother I am dumb,” which he spoke soon after throwing himself around a horse's neck to protect it from the blows of its owner. We don't know what happened to the donkey. The animal remains in a frozen image, looped in time. The body of the decomposing donkey and the narrative (the subtitled story) alternate without providing any further explanation. The image of the decomposed donkey,

seemingly frozen, appears to be flattened to the surface of the ground. The last words, “Mother I am dumb,” are flattened so only their meaning remains, and then everything starts again, collecting dust. I like Tarr. I like the fact that he said, “this is my last film,” more than once.

**MH > LC** Describe the pathways that have led you from there to here, from then to now. Please—having always pursued such profound ways in engaging with people, reality, and art—describe your innermost urgency.

**LC** There used to be a phase for questions. Now those questions have been exhausted, saturated, after reshuffling the archive over and over. The need to justify motives for making art in times or geographies of crisis is problematic as much as it is problematic that to deserve freedom of movement you should pursue a noble cause.

According to this rhetoric, a migrant deserves freedom only when escaping war, but is not as deserving to compete in the labor market as a citizen with equal rights and a work permit.

An artist belonging to X group makes important work and is acknowledged internationally when the work is about issues perceived as urgent in a specific context.

The blackmail of gratitude: answers are predetermined and curiosities exterminated.

There is no path from there to here. I've been floating adrift. There is no romanticism in this. I had privileges, choices, and alternatives. I haven't been able to choose a medium or a language with enough conviction. There has been weather. Dead calm. High waves. A tsunami. Multiple shipwrecks. One thing I know now about where I am now is that “art is what you can do about not being able to do anything.”<sup>15</sup>

I am too slow at reacting while the pace of everything else is accelerating—including people's ability to forget. My innermost urgency is to be able to escape the pressure to produce and consume information. To find the freedom and the energy to react, in case it's really urgent. In the imminent future we will use VR headsets just to see reality in slow motion, to slow down the present.



**MMG** There's a North Korean movie from 2003 called *Our Fragrance* that's about a fashion show in Pyongyang, whose subtext is about the marital prospects of a young couple. Why would a spring fashion show—essentially a design competition—be the basis of a major film in North Korea? Because it is a perfect premise for a superimposition of nationalism and love—the inherent superiority of the former with the externalized radiance of the latter. The national spring dress is Yohji Yamamoto meets maternity wear with brightly colored bows. The film contains an extraordinary montage of a “before and after” transformation. Nations, like people, can aspire to getting facelifts. There's singing, synchronized dance, and people carrying flowers, more indexes of a wedding than a fashion show. The movie's subtext is to show off the skillfulness of a young couple who work diligently alongside each other, as much platonically co-workers as future newlyweds. The allusion to wedded bliss is summed up in one line: “The most beautiful fragrance of the young people comes from valuing things of the nation's own.” National prospects rest on good—no, superior—design.

1  
Jane M. Gaines, “Political Mimesis,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, ed. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 92–98, [http://www.columbia.edu/itc/film/gaines/documentary\\_tradition/Gaines\\_PoliticalMimesis.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/itc/film/gaines/documentary_tradition/Gaines_PoliticalMimesis.pdf). Last accessed on August 13, 2018.

2  
See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* [1951], trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, London: Verso, 1974.

3  
Mido Tiger, “33 Million Protesters in Egypt—30 June 2013,” video, 5:17, July 2, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLnD\\_8nbM1c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dLnD_8nbM1c). Last accessed on August 30, 2018.

4  
“Sick Woman Theory” by Johanna Hedva is adapted from her lecture “My Body Is a Prison of Pain so I Want to Leave It Like a Mystic But I Also Love It & Want It to Matter Politically,” sponsored by the Women's Center for Creative Work, Human Resources, Los Angeles, October 7, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/144782433>. Last accessed on August 13, 2018.

5  
Negar Azimi, “Good Intentions,” *frieze*, March 1, 2011, <https://frieze.com/article/good-intentions>. Last accessed on August 13, 2018.

6  
See Philip Rizk, “2011 is not 1968: An Open Letter to an Onlooker on the Day of Rage,” *Mada*, January 28, 2014, <https://www.madamas.com/en/2014/01/28/opinion/u/2011-is-not-1968-an-open-letter-to-an-onlooker-on-the-day-of-rage/>. Last accessed on August 14, 2018.

7  
See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, New York: The Viking Press, 1962.

8  
Mosireen is a non-profit media collective born out of the explosion of citizen journalism and cultural activism in Egypt during the revolution. From 2011 to 2014 it held a space in downtown Cairo that was a revolutionary activist hub dedicated to supporting and producing citizen media of all kinds—including publishing videos, providing training, technical support, campaign support, equipment, screenings, and events, alongside hosting an extensive archive of footage from the revolution. At its height, Mosireen's YouTube channel was the most watched nonprofit channel in the world. It remains the most watched nonprofit channel in Egypt. Campaigns and initiatives Mosireen supported include No To Military Trials for Civilians, *Kazeboon*, Operation Anti-Sexual Harassment, Freedom for the Brave, and Tahrir Cinema among others. Alongside their personal work, the preparation of 858.ma, a major video archive of material from the revolution, for public use is the current focus of the collective's work together. It was launched in January 2018, <https://858.ma/>. Last accessed on August 30, 2018.

9  
See Angela Harutyunyan, “Active Interventions/Intervening Actions: Jasmina Metwaly in Conversation with Angela Harutyunyan,” *Ibraaz*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/17>. Last accessed on August 13, 2018.

10  
Stephanie Nebheay, “War Crimes Evidence in Syria ‘overwhelming’, Not All Can Be Pursued—U.N.,” *Reuters*, March 26, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-warcrimes/war-crimes-evidence-in-syria-overwhelming-not-all-can-be-pursued-u-n-idUKKBN1H22GL>. Last accessed on August 14, 2018.

11  
See Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

12  
Ethan Zuckerman, “Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression,” draft essay for *Youth, New Media and Political Participation*, ed. Danielle Allen, Jennifer Light, and Ellen Middaugh, Oakland, CA: Youth and Participatory Politics Research Network, 2014, <http://ethanzuckerman.com/papers/cutecats2013.pdf>. Last accessed on August 13, 2018.

13  
“Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism,” *Wikipedia*, last modified August 27, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cute\\_cat\\_theory\\_of\\_digital\\_activism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cute_cat_theory_of_digital_activism). Last accessed on August 30, 2018.

14  
Doa Aly, “The Image(s) Between Us,” *Ibraaz*, November 30, 2015, <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/138>. Last accessed on August 13, 2018.

15  
Metahaven, Twitter post, June 29, 2016, 7:26am, <https://twitter.com/mthvn/status/748160830978527232>. Last accessed on August 30, 2018.

**Laura Cugusi**  
Laura Cugusi is an artist, researcher, photographer, filmmaker, and writer based in London. Cugusi studied media, sociology, and political science at the University of Bologna and in Santiago de Compostela. Her research focuses on migration and human rights narratives, artistic practices involving incomplete archives and collective memory, and informal urban practices in Egypt. Her work was included in the Tunisia pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017 and she is a member of artist collective Take to the Sea, with whom she has exhibited in the contexts of Nile Sunset Annex, Cairo, 2013; Biennale Jogja XII, Yogyakarta, 2013; *Hydrarchy*, Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo, 2012; and *Manifesta 8*, Murcia, 2010–2011.

**Jasmina Metwaly**  
Jasmina Metwaly is an artist and filmmaker based in Berlin and Cairo. Metwaly studied painting in Poznan where she focused on time-based works with strong correlations to painting. Rooted in performance and theater, her film and video work is focused on process-based practices that have a social function generating tension between participants and audiences. Metwaly's work has been exhibited at international art venues and festivals. Recent works include *We Are Not Worried in the Least* (2018); *Out on the Street* (2015), and *From Behind of the Monument* (2013). Just like Rizk, Metwaly is a member of non-profit media collective Mosireen.

**Philip Rizk**  
Philip Rizk is a filmmaker and writer based in Cairo. With Jasmina Metwaly he directed the feature film *Out on the Street*, which premiered at the Berlinale in 2015 and was featured in the German pavilion of the 56th Venice Biennale later that year. He is a member of the non-profit media collective Mosireen. Rizk is currently working on an essay-travel film.



42