



Art is the highest form of hope

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'NEW SOCIAL RELATIONS', an image by Karim Hayawan [somethingelse-off.com]

When we turn our thoughts to contemporary art from Egypt, the first images that come to mind are political graffiti and militant posters. Our idea of Egyptian art is attached strongly to concepts such as uprising, revolution and the Arab Spring. In the past few years the international art world has sought this out. Egyptian artists have been invited abroad to showcase the fierce spirit of Arab artists and their fight for freedom.

Every revolution has an aftermath, though, and while the contemporary art world rushes on to the next country, the next issue, the next movement, Egyptian artists and art operators are left to clear the table and make plans for tomorrow's lunch.

This challenge has been taken up by artist and cultural activist Moataz Nasr, founder of the pivotal art space Darb 1718. Moataz was dissatisfied with the official, government-initiated Biennale, which he felt was rather backward-thinking and not at all coherent with the spirit of the times. In response, he decided to create his own counter-biennale.

"We chose *Something Else* as the theme for this first edition of the 'Off Biennale Cairo', because we wanted to present an alternative to the official Cairo Biennale. We wanted something different, new, fresh," explains Off Biennale Cairo's project manager, Dana Alawneh. "We looked at Italy a few decades ago for inspiration. Back then events parallel to the state-supported Venice Biennale were popping up all around the city. Eventually the independent events started collaborating with the Biennale, which was the best method of renewal."

Moataz's plan for an event to be held simultaneously with the official Biennale was challenged when he saw that a new edition of the Cairo Biennale was not on the radar. "We waited and waited and nothing was happening. In the end we decided to do our Off Biennale anyway, with or without the official one. It needs to be done."

The title *Something Else* also refers to the aforementioned label attached to Egyptian artists; that they are solely political artists. Dana Alawneh acknowledges that most art from Egypt has indeed been political. "Inevitably, artists express the context they are living in, and the past few years have been a vibrant time for the arts." Today, though, she reckons things are not as open. "We are all living in a kind of despair and we really need something else. It's

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about escaping the frustration as well as showing that another kind of art exists in Egypt, beyond the context of the revolution."

With the Off Biennale the hope is to open up a new channel for discussion. "Many of the works will still be socio-political, but without that direct connection. We still want to talk about politics and uprising, but our focus will be on mediated approaches to this concept and how to translate revolutionary ideas into art."

With this in mind, it is important not only to connect with the Arab region and the neighbouring countries – with which, in terms of art, Egypt already has close ties – but also to establish long-lasting cultural relationships with the international art world beyond short-lived news media attention. This was the reason for involving a range of foreign curators in the project, working with both local and international artists. The head of this curatorial team is Simon Njami, the celebrated writer, lecturer and art critic, and the co-founder of *Revue Noire*, a journal on contemporary African and non-Western art.

Project manager Olfa Feki explains that engaging international curators will give breadth to the local art scene, allowing unexpected collaborations: "Not all Egyptian artists have the chance to work with such diverse figures in the art world. Additionally, from the point of view of the curators, it will be an opportunity to discover the local art scene in Cairo."

The curators will bring to the table a variety of backgrounds and specific tools with which to interpret the social and the political. In this way, art can re-imagine a future for Egypt. Art can also help analyse current issues within a different framework. An example of this is the project by Italian curator Valentina Gioia Levy entitled *Liquid Lead*. The name of the project refers to the '70s, a decade known in Italy as the "Anni di Piombo" ("Years of Lead"). This was a time of social demands, marked by conflict and terrorism carried out by both right- and left-wing paramilitary groups

"All the three artists I have chosen for *Liquid Lead* were born at the end of this period, and they all work on different aspects of the concept of revolt," explains the curator. "Ludovica Gioscia subverts the conventions of consumerist culture and fashion. Paolo Cirio is an artist-hacktivist who operates in the fields of copyright, privacy, finance and cyber-security. Adalberto Abbate reconfigures the meaning of old images depicting revolution by working on their symbology."

The concept behind her project for the Off Biennale Cairo, she explains, refers to Bauman's "liquid modernity". "I imagined this lead - reminiscent of the Years of Lead - melting down through the years." Though the Italy of the '70s was clearly different from the Egypt of today, Levy is interested in drawing parallels and spurring reflections.

Despite its name, Moataz Nasr and his team are planning to make the Off Biennale Cairo a yearly event as an ongoing experiment. Being an independent venture, it is all privately funded. "Government money also brings constraints," explains Olfa Feki. "Even though for this first edition there have been difficulties in terms of money and budget, we were adamant about our independence and rejecting the burden of government administration."

This has resulted in some curators participating actively in the funding, and most of the team are working almost for free. "We decided not to think about the money but rather to find a way to make this Off Biennale work," Olfa explains. "We really believe in this project and we are convinced it's going to be a great success."

Dana Alawneh is also confident that the art scene in Cairo will be refreshed by this event: "We want to discover new talents among the emerging artists in Egypt; in fact, there was an open call for artists. We are interested in seeing what *Something Else* looks like to them." In times of despair, she adds, art helps people to make other people happy. "Along with the senses it also stimulates new responses. In this regard I agree with the artist Gerhard Richter, who once said that art is the highest form of hope." If nothing else, hope is something of which Egypt needs a lot these days.

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