

ROUNDTABLE

## How Do You Write about the Cultural Scene When You're Inside it?

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I'm sitting in a café, staring at the blank screen in front of me and the fine black type that blinks at me insistently. Next to me three people, probably students at the school of pharmacy, are talking about a project they have to submit. I'm not sure if they're talking especially loudly, or if the nonsmoking section of the café is just so small there's no way of finding any privacy or peace and quiet. I gave up smoking ten months ago during a serious health scare that almost killed me. Giving up smoking has had various results, apart from improving my health and restoring my sense of smell to the point that I'm now painfully aware all the time of how polluted this city is. Being sensitive to smoke means a near-total withdrawal from social life, and generally from cultural life too, since no gathering of artists or intellectuals takes place without the enveloping protection of a cloud of cigarette smoke. I'm trying to be a good sport, and resign myself to my newfound isolation in the nonsmoking section by telling myself that for twenty years I was one of the most prolific contributors to that smoky cloud of culture. But it's made harder by the marked diminution of public space over recent years: the government has been intent on killing all street life in "Free Downtown," and now there's only a café or two, and a few bars and restaurants, left. We half-jokingly nicknamed it "free" in the early years of the revolution, when it was our playground, when we lived by our own rules there, untroubled by stifling social mores or state control. That's all over now.

If I still had my own studio, these health issues wouldn't force me to isolate myself in the café's reject section with the irritating pharmacy students. But I had to give up my studio and hand back the keys a few months ago, after the institution that provided renewable, subsidized residencies for Egyptian artists closed down. It was the final, predictable episode in a protracted suffocation of the public sphere, which saw numerous art and culture venues close down. Things began five years ago, when cultural institutions began dropping like flies, either for "security" reasons, after venues and offices became the target of persistent raids and harassment by the police, or for financial ones, after income streams were cut off and foreign funders withdrew from Egypt. This was an outcome of the "foreign funding law," which put both funders and beneficiaries at risk of prosecution for "funding terrorism," an offence which at its worst can incur the death penalty.

After a few months of mysterious and alarming maneuverings at the institution that provided my studio, the Egyptian partner—who found himself the sole decision-maker when his foreign partner was deported—informed us that the institution had closed down, and that we would have to leave our studios until a new company was formed, circumstances permitting.

The pair's collaboration began in the mid-1990s with a gallery for contemporary visual art in the heart of Cairo, surrounded by garages and mechanics' shops. Over the next twenty years, under the foreign partner's vision and management, it grew into an institution that also boasted an independent theater, a vast exhibition space, a store selling art, and a number of apartments that were converted into studios and used to host artist residencies. The decline began in 2015, when the venue was raided and closed down by police; it reopened, but was dogged by state harassment until the foreign partner was deported from Egypt in 2018, suddenly and unexpectedly leaving management in the hands of his Egyptian colleague, who had been a silent partner until that point. First they gave up the theater, then the exhibition space, which was the size of a full parking garage; finally, he announced that the company was dissolving, dismissed the employees, and got rid of the resident artists who were renting the studios. We later found

out that the company hadn't actually shut down, but was operating under a new policy; at any rate, the institution as we knew it was gone.

And that's why I'm writing in this isolated nonsmoking section in the company of the annoying pharmacy students. It might be why I'm feeling so irritated about this article. I agreed willingly to write it, but I can't ignore the feeling, whenever I think about it, that the task ahead of me is ridiculous and futile: to write an article about creative expression over the past decade that is to be published later this year, along with other similar articles, to mark the approaching tenth anniversary of Egypt's January revolution. What does it mean that ten years have gone by since the revolution? How is that different to nine years, or eleven? What does it mean, specifically, to the people for whom the revolution and its outcomes are an everyday reality? What does it mean to those who participated in it—other than a realization that time flies, and feelings of nostalgia or bitterness? Is some kind of regular stocktaking of the revolution's impact on artistic outputs to be submitted once per decade? Should I be writing an art manifesto declaring that the revolution goes on? Is this an experiment in comparing my thoughts at the time of the revolution with my thoughts as we near its tenth anniversary? What about the intervening years?

I get angrier and angrier as I write. It's a complicated kind of anger. I know that the task of writing isn't the sole reason for this outpouring, but it's definitely woken the slumbering beast. Will the world ever see us for who we are, just for once, without the cocktail of identities and issues that I have to push if I want to get the attention of funders, exhibitors, curators, journalists, critics, or just about anyone? Revolution, feminism, oppression, repression, queerness, queer Arab identity, Islamic feminism, atheism in the Arab World, revolution, postrevolution, the revolution ten years on, creative expression ten years after the revolution. . . . Blah, blah, blah.

Another day. I'm back in the same café, writing. I agreed to write this. Nobody made me. Right? So why all this anger? Is it because I want to forget? Is it because this assignment sends me back to a moment it's taken nine years to get over, and get my head around?

A few days ago I celebrated the launch of my book. I'd been working on the project, on and off, since 2013, and then continuously since 2018; at least, I can say so today, but in 2013 I didn't know I was working on the project. I just knew I was in a state of paralysis, that there was a gap in my memory that had swallowed up most of the years of my adult life so that all that remained were my recollections of childhood, and then of the revolution between 2011 and 2013—memories that were urgent, dominating and brightly colored. Everything between those two periods had disappeared like it never existed. I somehow felt that to understand and absorb what happened in those early years of the revolution, which have occupied my consciousness so fully, maybe I'd have to go further back, to a past that was suddenly tugging at my memory. Maybe I'd have to go back over everything.

So, I made a book about my mother. Among other things. A friend, who is a fiction writer and critic, wrote: "I want to congratulate you on your book: the writing hurts, like it was written with a sharp blade that doesn't leave a mark. I won't deny that I was alarmed by how the book looked to begin with, but when I finished it, I realized that the drawings and the design were an integral part of the work of art." I thanked him, feeling grateful that he gave the book, and himself, a chance despite his first impressions. I know exactly what he means, obviously, because the book has had some skeptical and dismissive reactions from the literary crowd. I'm not a writer or a literature person, I'm an artist—and even that confuses some people, who know me better as a documentary filmmaker. Where does this obsession with dividing lines come from, I wonder? Even I have had difficulty accepting the multiplicity inside me, as if by working in a different medium I am committing some transgression.

Another day. I get a call from the new management informing me that my old studio is still empty, if I'm interested in renting it again. I reply diplomatically that I'll think about it, but I know I'm not going to.

It's clear to me that the problem of diversity, alongside the obsession with demarcations and molds that define a given identity, is mightily important to a lot of people, and not only in arts and culture circles. It certainly keeps the state up at night. The state-controlled Artists' Syndicate—not content with being the sole legal entity empowered to authorize work in the field of art—today released a diabolical statement which effectively wrote contemporary art out of existence, recognizing only visual art with its traditional "divisions" (sculpture, ceramics, painting, etc.).

But the scariest thing about the statement is the new restrictions it places on the art field. In this it's only the last in a long litany of similar developments. The Filmmakers' Syndicate recently tightened its already dictatorial regulations, which impose eye-watering fees and debilitating criteria on work permit applications (or fines if you don't have one) for anybody who wants to make a film—without one, you can't get authorization from the censors, and without that you can't get a permit to film from the Ministry of the Interior, and without *that* your entire crew and production team might get arrested, either while they're working or after the film comes out. The Actors' Syndicate, meanwhile, has sought legal powers to raid filming locations and arrest any actors working without a permit. And the Musicians' Syndicate has decided to ban popular electronic *mahraganat* music and declared it will “take measures” against anyone found participating in its dissemination.

Since it sets the tone for the period of repression that lies ahead, I think the statement of the Artists' Syndicate makes a fitting conclusion to this article:

The General Syndicate of Visual Artists affirms that pursuant to Syndicate Law no. 83 of 1976, amended by Law no. 122 of 1983, it is the legal and rightful collective representative of visual artists in the Arab Republic of Egypt and that, therefore, no other entity may collectively represent visual artists.

Hence, pursuant to the Syndicate Law and amendments thereto, no artist, businessman or body, official or otherwise, may administer any gathering, exhibition, symposium, educational institution, or workshop relating to works of art (including painting, sculpture, interior design, graphics, ceramics) without first obtaining the necessary licenses and permits on behalf of the organizing entity and paying the advertised dues and stamp fees.

Likewise, no artist, Egyptian or foreign, may participate who is not registered with the Syndicate, unless they have obtained a license to practice the profession and paid the legally advertised dues and stamp fees.

Furthermore, in case of noncompliance, the Syndicate will take all legal measures against those responsible, in accordance with the Syndicate Law and the constitution of the Syndicate.

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