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.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

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 persists 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 subtexts of existent ones are being altered through varying media. At this point, we do not aim to present a finite archive of imagery 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.

[handwritten margin notes] How do we write a history that is itself in the writing? How can we capture something that is continuously and dynamically changing in a format as finite as a book? How to stay plural— How to stay open? How do we deal with the possible reversal of the process we are honoring?

[handwritten] http://imageatlas.org/ type search terms "Egypt + Revolution"

Dried Rhizome of Calophyllum thalictroides
Fig. 165.

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 an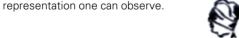d protestors' awareness of *becoming image* are also evident as demonstrators stage themselves with self-made English-language posters, and so provide their own image-captions for foreign media.

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 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.

I SHARE THIS Question

Did this make the events more real to us or did it increase our distance? —M

the dominance of the candidate's poster conquers the space even before the votes are cast; he has managed to visually demarcate the area as belonging to him // he has sufficient resources to make himself seen ch·

The cityscape was extended with a democratic architecture by the interlinked masses of election posters that in their multitude created actual physical spaces one could enter

Yesterday passing through downtown observing the traces of writing on walls, tents, banners, bodies, merchandise – the dirt on the ground Moving through a piece of unfinished writing

palimpsest →

META IMAGE TAHRIR: INTRODUCTION

[1] Mona El-Ghobashy *The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution* published in the Middle East Research and Information Project MER258 2011

[2] In April 2008 the violent dispersal of a planned general strike for minimum wages and against corruption and police brutality brought about the formation of the April 6 Youth Group, which would be a central player in the organization of January 25

[3] Compare Mona El-Ghobashy (2011)

[4] Annelle Sheline *Egyptian Revolution In The American Media* Midan Masr 2012

[5] See also Rebecca Suzanne Fox *Media Darlings: The Egyptian Revolution and American Media Coverage* MA Thesis AUC 2012

[6] Susan Sontag *On Photography* published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York 1977 and Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* published by Hill and Wang New York 1981

[7] Compare Laura Gribbon and Sarah Hawas in *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* AUC Press 2012

In January and February of 2011 demonstrations of civil dissent against the autocratic rule of Hosni Mubarak peaked as millions took to the street chanting and eventually effectuating 'the downfall of the regime' that had effectively rendered Egypt a police-state. January 25, 2011 was not an overnight phenomena; it was years in the coming. Years in which public spaces such as workplaces, coffee houses, theaters, art galleries, and mosques offered the setting for a 'parliament of the street' [1]. This parliament eventually took to the streets and conquered them, as Mohamed Elshahed describes in his essay *Tahrir Square: Social Media, Public Space, and Revolution in Egypt.*

The events of 2011 built on the experiences of the proceeding decade, notably 2008 [2], when different sections of Egyptian society, bound together by workplace, neighborhood, religious or ideological affiliations, had called for change. The success of 2011 derived from uniting these disparate segments into one powerful – if temporary – movement [3]. It is not the aim of this volume to map out the complex sociopolitical structures that generated the revolutionary momentum. Our attention is directed towards the image-politics at play in the reciprocal relationship between the political process and its visual representation.

The Egyptian revolution has been called "the most televised revolution ever"[4], nicknamed after various social media, and connected to the former Eastern Bloc uprisings and the ongoing Occupy movement as expressing a global cry for democracy. It remains questionable whether this mirroring in popular protest movements of the Western hemisphere is fruitful, as Phillip Rizk points out in his "Letter to an Onlooker." Equally questionable is the description of web related media as being the central motor for the revolutionary process rather than one applied tool among others [5]; 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 a potential opportunity for constructing and manifesting our social identity and, as the case be, our political stand.

In the context of violent oppression, each camera is also a potential witness representing a theoretically unlimited number of onlookers 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 crowds at Midan 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.[6] The allegorical proximity between the two devices is becoming increasingly evident, as the cases of Syrian rebels who 'duel' sharpshooting snipers with their camera phones and, in Egypt, the targeted shooting of the eyes of citizen journalists by 'eye-snipers' illustrate.

Egyptian protestors transferred the record-making of their bearing witness to their cameras, a circuit which was recognized and reversed by military personnel, who targeted the biological 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 supported by 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 the present as a moment of revolution consciously or unconsciously consult this image-gallery in their outwards communication and collective performance? 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 martyr-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 cheeringly display live-streams from Tahrir on their laptops: Sharing footage of the event of which they are themselves, in the very moment of broadcast, active participants in.