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Re-territorialization: escaping the frame

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Re-territorialization: escaping the frame

by

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A THESIS

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Abstract

In this paper I will introduce the theories and motivations that contextualize my practice during the course of my 2-year MFA degree. I will start off with an introduction; a brief summary of the events that took place in my country—Egypt, and that instigated my research. In the first chapter, I will investigate the issue of social confinement, and its psychological effect on individuals and groups. The second chapter is an explanation of my visual interpretation of psychological confinement and a closer examination of my artistic work. The third chapter is an analysis and discussion of the conceptual aspects of my use of the term ‘frame,’ in reference to ancient Egyptian mythology and the contemporary term territorialization. The fourth and last chapter is a further application of the notion of territorialization as a critique of street art, as well as a conceptual tool for the investigation of my own practice. I will try to convey the ideological and visual battles that take place between the public and the institution through examples of Egyptian street art and my work.

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Introduction

My Artistic work over the past two years has been evolving and reshaping itself in parallel to the transformation of the political events that are taking place in my home country 'Egypt.' I have been both physically and non-physically attendant in the still escalating situation. I had the chance to play a very small role in the events that are restructuring and reshaping my whole generation. In the mean time my artistic work was turning more and more towards the ongoing struggle. Whether I was aware of it or not or whether I was present in my own country or in the conservative city of Calgary, my mind and my work were still in the streets of Cairo fighting the system, claiming the streets and breaking through imposed restrictions.

Everybody who was watching the events in Cairo that night on the 25th of January 2011 was amazed by the images of the masses of people that were flowing into "El-Tahrir" square (the heart of the revolution). No body had seen this coming; even the people who called for the demonstrations themselves did NOT see this coming. For decades my people have favored stability and security over freedom, but one thing that had tormented us through the years is how great a civilization we were at one time in relation to our current and now chronic degradation. For the first time in a long time my people actually decided to take the risk and choose freedom and dignity over confinement that is fed to them as stability. One of the central foci of this uprising has to do with the issues of confinement, limitation and the feeling of entrapment at all levels of the social fabric. My work is a metaphor for these concerns.

1.PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFINEMENT

The feelings associated with living in between clusters of limitations, social, gender, religious and political, that constantly surround you, leaves you barely room to breathe. In trying to move some of those clusters around, you attempt to reorganize them. The situation is getting tighter and tighter. In endeavoring to visualize the situation limitations become a barrier; you can't see anything beyond them. You feel imprisoned in a room full of darkness with all your hidden desires of freedom inside you. Your thinking gets distorted and you have to challenge all those frameworks that you are living within to maintain both your sanity and your humanity.

The other may seem invincible; those borders in which you are living within may seem impenetrable. You try to make amends with your peripheral limitations by accepting the here and now. You learn to kill time by mentally visiting and revisiting times, situations or places either from your memory or your imagination. However, the moment you realize the 'other's' weaknesses, the moment you realize that those peripheries are in fact fragile, you start to question your existence. In his book *The Stranger*, Albert Camus investigates monsieur Meursault's questioning of the 'arrogant certainty' of the verdict of his death,

The fact that the sentence had been read at eight o'clock at night and not at five o'clock, the fact that it could have been an entirely different one, the fact that it had been decided by men who change their underwear, the fact that it had been handed down in the name of some vague notion called the French (or German, or Chinese) people—all of it seemed to detract from the seriousness of the decision. I was forced to admit, however, that from the moment it had been passed its consequences became as real and as serious as the wall against which I pressed the length of my body. (1)

In my early work, my interest was in the depiction of the psychological aspect of situations. I began to investigate how a confined person would respond psychologically to his/her dictated limits. How would he/she react to severe confinement, exile, or estrangement? I situated myself in a closed room and imagined that there were no doors or windows, and asked myself what would I do then.? What would my intuitive reaction be? And how would I feel? I approached my friends and provided them with this psychological image. However, I figured, I did not have to imagine or fabricate this feeling of captivation as I was already entrapped. For a long time I was haunted by this feeling of being tied to a horse mill, going round and round in endless circles, not able to stop or reach the end of line. As far as I remember, I have suffered from an ongoing dissatisfaction and a lingering sense of unfulfillment that makes me take on a defensive position and ready to resist. As an artist I started to unintentionally subject this sense of discontentment to my work. Continuous resistance characterizes the subject of my work. However, Camus acknowledges, although the images denote absence of hope, yet they should not be mistaken for despair, and that dissatisfaction does not necessarily mean renunciation. If you keep pushing a person's limits, what you are doing is in fact, forcing him/her to question your own limits. In this case, fighting back becomes the only remaining choice for him/her in order to maintain his/her sanity. Thus, the person in question then becomes in the position of rebelling against his/her own being.

Once revolution is established there is no way to stop it. It becomes an endless chain reaction, a series of infinite attempts of trial and error. The question arises then, is the subject in my work still striving for liberation? Or has negation in itself become her desire? Her obsession? Albert Camus in his book *The Myth Of Sisyphus* indicates that, "A man is always a prey to his

truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them. One has to pay something.” (2) Does this mean then that struggle in itself has replaced the subject’s original target, which was absolute freedom? Or to put it in Camus’ terms, has negation become a “God” for the subject matter in my work?

Habitual confinement and fear of change come into play as well. It is not just the other that is keeping you from achieving liberation anymore, as you yourself have become the other ‘other’ and fighting with oneself becomes as crucial as fighting with the other. Thus, in my work I have become both, the confined that is struggling for his/her freedom and the ‘warden’ that is guarding his/her cell. I have become the Sufi that yearns for transcendence and his/her weight that is pulling him/her down towards this disturbing world, or as Camus puts it, “A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world.” (3) The subject then becomes part of this world she hates so much yet is eager to escape, and living within its borders is an irrationality, which takes plain absurdity in order to confront it.

In penitentiary institutions, the person in charge performs an objectification process on the prisoner by giving him/her a number or a nickname other than their own to eliminate their individuality. The goal is to instigate a feeling of habituation within the prisoner towards the institution he/she is now living within. The prisoner then becomes part of the structure and becomes less attached to his/her original life outside the prison walls. Objectifying the incarcerated is also an attempt by the guardian to eliminate any remaining sympathy he/she has left for the prisoner. My practice addresses the psychological state of feelings associated with being a captive prisoner within an institution. Although the subject used in my work is myself, yet I address her as a stranger, an unmemorable, non-unique entity that acts like a human being.

In my later pieces, I attempt to alienate myself even more from my own subjectivity, and substitute it with a physical trivial object, a paper boat...

2. MY WORK AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SPACE

In politics, minorities and certain ethnicities are often driven to isolation; they break off from the main stream and build up their own comfort zone. They are the ‘Marginalized’ groups that lie outside the map of happenings, the map of life. These people cannot afford means of a normal life, whether financially or socially. Thus, they favor alienation, and any attempt by the government—which represents the mainstream—to mold these people, never succeeds. Furthermore, marginalized people end up breaking rules, norms and borders that they can never live up to, and re-contextualize themselves within their own traditions that are usually more flexible and alterable. As a result, they become a counter power; they build up an alternative space parallel to the main one, with a substitute life and substitute standards, a space that has an interchanging power. Thus, in my work, it is this powerful space that my marginalized subject is striving for, where the marginalized is not marginalized, a space that she obtains and controls.

I like to believe that the subject of my work along the journey transgresses from trying to get rid of any contexts, to realizing that as a human being you have to live within contexts, to getting rid of pre-designed social contexts, claiming the space and then making up her own flexible context. The psychological space that I am referring to in my work is the socially molded one, where human beings are fed the idea that boundaries and rules are for their own good, that alterations of their lives are not really plausible, that life is not livable without such limitations. Accordingly, my struggle becomes a psychological struggle on top of it being social and political.

In the process of establishing a restricted atmosphere for the subject in my work, I realized that the space that incubates her is to appear both timeless as well as location-less. It needs to be deprived of privacy and particularity, a space that is clearly outlined and uncomfortable to the subject. In other words, I situate my subject in this not so imaginary physical space where I perceive myself.

A series of five-attempts

My early work in the program comprise of a series of five paintings of a human figure metaphorically trapped by the borders and edges of the canvas [Fig 1]. The dark brown frame in contrast to the bright yellow paintings asserts the strength of the borderline. The yellow background is visually disturbing and annoying, which reflects the discomfoting atmosphere that surrounds my subject. Yellow is an unsubtle, destabilizing color that pressures the subject to the extent that there is no choice but to escape. The rectangular proportions of the paintings represent my visual understanding of the world. The subject imagines that this represented world ends where her vision comes to an end, and what lies beyond is only a speculation. Thinking that the unseen has to be better than the visible, yet her fear of the unseen together with habitual confinement prevents her from addressing the hidden. Foucault in a discussion about Bentham's Panopticon¹, in the book *Discipline And Punish*, observes that,

Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his

¹ A design for an institutional building by English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. The design was to be utilized by schools, asylums, and other institutional purposes. The concept of the design is to allow a watchman to observe all inmates of the institution through an inspection house at the center of the building, without them being able to tell whether or not they are being watched.

companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication (4)

The frame in my paintings becomes a metaphorical sidewall that limits the subject's view. Experimenting with these notions from a spiritual perspective, we can find in Sufism the following notion, the frame is the 'veil' that prevents the Sufi from reaching his/her God. It prevents him/her from liberation and the absolute. Thus the confined is continuously suspicious and starts noticing himself/herself through the eyes of the warden.

The relationship between the viewer and the subject of the work in this series is that of power and control by the former over the latter—whether because the represented figure is half-life size or because the viewer sees what is hidden from the subject. The viewer is more aware of what lies beyond the frame and that this manufactured world seeps through. He/she is also aware of a 3rd dimension that is never acknowledged by the subject. When I exposed these 5 pieces to an audience I was seldom asked whether the subject would actually be able to escape this world in a future work? And whether she will be aware of a 3rd dimension that is in need of being addressed? Which in return leaves me with a question. Does the audience really desire the subject's exit? And if so, is it out of sympathy or is it because it reminds them of their own confinement?

The body movements and gestures of the figures, in relation to the depicted space takes on an ethos of absurdity, naivety and instinctiveness. How is it possible for a human to escape her own being? How is it possible for a painted figure to escape its own representation? At the time of working on this series I was intrigued by the naïve body gestures of Norman Rockwell's

figures. It is the absurdity of the American Dream that appeared in his figures' movements that I wanted to convey through my subject's gestures. The compositions of the figurative series convey the repetitive struggle between a subject that yearns for transcendence and its own shadow—or what I refer to as the other 'other.' The shadow in my work is a metaphor for the inside voice that is holding the subject back from achieving liberation. The other 'other' is everything that the subject despises in herself; it is her habitual confinement, fear of change, and fear of the unknown (in my work the Unknown is the unseen,) it is the inner bond that is tying her to this world. My notion of the shadow is the opposite of Carl Jung's; In reference to the shadow Anthony Ubelhor investigates Jung's notion of the shadow, "It is composed of the dark elements of the personality, having an emotional and primitive nature that resists moral control." The shadow in my work is the moral control, or rather the conservative, restrictive side of the subject matter, without a shadow we are no longer part of this world. The struggle varies from simple confrontations and attempts to reason with the shadow to acts of physical violence. The intensity of the color in some areas stresses which side has the upper hand, but by all means this painterly world never changes. In other words, in this series of work the subject is in a struggle with her own self to achieve freedom from an outsider's imposed confines. Does this mean then that the subject is in a state of realization or denial?

"Where do I end when at the beginning of an end you are?" (5)

My following project in the program was a 6.9x2.34 meter mural titled "*Where do I end when at the beginning of an end you are?*" [Fig 2] While assembling this piece I made sure that it was the same size as the wall on which it was exhibited, and that it was hung flat on the wall, touching the floor. The composition of the painting encompasses 28 drawn human figures and 11 shadows—all generated from the same model, which is myself. Within the boundaries of the

painting I have depicted a frame which functions symbolically in the same way as the frames in my previous yellow paintings. The technique used in the painting consists of variable thin layers of oil paint that establish diversification in the smudging and dripping effects, which in return results in the disappearance of all compositional aspects into one another. Each of the figures and shadows constitute a thought either on its own or in relation to one another. To combine those thoughts together, I drew around 300 outlines of figures and shadows on tracing paper; I started combining them consciously and carefully but after some time, the accumulation of tracing paper resulted in a non-translucent effect, which in return resulted in a haphazard stream of thoughts and an uncoordinated fabric of work. The selection of the body movements and gestures vary from Sufi and Zar² transcendental dance movements, gestures of doubt and reminisce, instinctive movements to escape confinement, attempts to gain the sympathy of the other ‘other,’ moments of despair and physical violence—some of which were seen in my previous works. The work does not obtain the classical perspective, yet it contains a braided layering that resembles perspective in some areas.

The Mural is a metaphor for what lies beyond the frame. On the one hand, the subject has managed to infiltrate the borders of a world she was once trapped in, on the other hand she has become part of a wall that is part of a room that is part of a building and so on...The subject’s dreams and hopes for liberation have only led her to a larger confinement, where the borders are still erected, yet are further away.

² Sufi and Zar involve spiritual dance traditions in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia. The aim of the Sufi dancer is to unite with God, while the aim of the Zar dancer is to cleanse himself/herself from diseases and possessions.

The subject matter is living in between the walls of a ‘house of certainty.’ Foucault defines Bentham’s Panopticon as a psychological prison that captivates the mind before the body. He explains, “The heaviness of the old ‘houses of security’, with their fortress-like architecture, could be replaced by the simple, economic geometry of a ‘house of certainty’.”(6) To be more specific, the person in control of the prison believes in his/her own capability to maintain the imprisoned’s faith in the security of this rather psychological structure, but what happens if the prisoner starts to doubt his/her faith?

In my investigation of the objectification process, I have discovered Bruno Latour’s theory on the world as a network of actors and actants. Latour’s notion proclaims all actors and actants as of equal importance, whether humans, artificial objects or natural ones, all have an equal right to exist. There is no hierarchy in Latour’s theory; all subject matter and sometimes aspects that we know of, earn their right to concreteness through being active in the network of forces. As for my work, at this stage I was much more aware of myself—embodied in the subject—becoming several people at once. The obvious separation that was in my preceding work, between the subject’s eagerness to transcend, her habitual confinement and fear of change has now disappeared. In this mural, all subjects and shadows have acquired the same importance; they are all the same size and color. They constitute a network of actors and actants in the fabric of one thought at a specific time, or as Graham Harman refers in his book *Prince of Networks* to Bruno Latour’s notion, “All features of an object belong to it; everything happens only once, at one time, in one place.” (7) To be more accurate, I perceive this painting, as one thought that constitutes of several thoughts of equal weight, and what gives each one of them its concreteness is its capability to react with one another.

The subject matter is now entangled between accumulations of contradicting feelings. The movement, repetitiveness and rendering of the subject and its shadow along the wall and a little bit in depth, engage the viewer in what seems like an endless struggle. The domineering grayish purple in the painting is my understanding of vastness and compactness at the same time. When I visualize my mind in colors, I envision a color that echoes nothingness and density simultaneously. There are lingering traces of the yellow color that was once before a metaphor for the subject's undesirable world in this painting. Remnants of what was once a domineering world, are accompanying the shadow outside the metaphorical drawn frame, and images from previous works are relocated and reenacted to signify the coexisting baggage.

The intertwined thoughts are indicated through different surfaces that are braided together along with the technique of dripping. The resulting image is then transparent, which reflects the subject's uncertainty towards her own thoughts, some more than others. The only certainty that the viewers are left with then is the frame of the subject's body moving horizontally along with them. The outline of the body is the only sure thing; the fact that the body carries those desires within itself is clear, but what exactly is it that the subject wants, or what should the viewers expect from her? As an observant you become confused and disoriented; you become lost between the lines, the surfaces and the technique. Even, I as an observer of my own work have fallen into this confusion. I have come to realize the irony that lies between the subject's certainty of the imprisonment subjected upon her and between the uncertainty towards her own desires. In other words, she is not sure of what she wants yet she is aware of how secure her confines are, and still decides to challenge those confines. When I told my supervisor, professor Paul Woodrow that I was done working on this mural; he said that it

looks unfinished, or rather like a ‘work in progress.’ And that was how I saw this piece back then and it is still how I view it right now, a work that echoes my own uncertainty and hesitancy towards my very own desires, it is an unresolved space...

The dance

The relationship between the subject and the space in my following piece is rather private and more restricted. [Fig 3] This project constitutes a canvas stretched around a square frame, where the work itself extends to cover the sides of the borders. This time the subject is not on a quest to overthrow the boundaries, she is already overcoming them; this time the frame is acknowledged and dealt with. The figures are now captured from different angles and nothing is controlling them anymore. They have got rid of their colors and have become hollow objects that are enveloped by their background. The subject has finally territorialized the space. The shadows are not part of this work, and here arises the question, has the other ‘other’ disappeared? Has the inner restrictive, hesitant self of the subject disappeared? And my answer is NO, the other ‘other’ is only taking on another façade, it has reintroduced itself in a different garment. I will get back to this point later, but let me first explain the body language behind the subject’s movements and gestures.

My visualization of transcendence is conceived through cultural influences in terms of the Sufi and Zar traditions that I am well acquainted with through my own culture. In those traditions, the performer’s target varies from a pursuit to unite with the Divine to curing the performer’s body from a possession and/or a disease. The visual outcome then is a physical act that tackles a spiritual aspect. Sufism specifically was once perceived as a rebellious act against the tangible. At this stage of my work I was very much aware of the fact that my interest in Sufi

poetry and traditions is in fact a metaphor for my craving for social and political salvation. My work has become a visual interpretation of a Sufi poetic phenomenon, which Jamal Assadi and Mahmud Na'amneh in *The road To Self-revival* explain,

In the wake of the deteriorating social, financial and political circumstances under which the modern Arab poet lived, it was obligatory for him to opt for the Sufi figure which rebelled against the confines of the old Arab society. The essence of the relationship between poetry and Sufism lies in the fact that the latter has lent the modern Arabic poet power to achieve new meanings. Thanks to the Sufi masks employed in the Arabic poetry, the poet grew better able to express his feelings and ideas regarding society-related issues and the concerns of both writing and poetry. (8)

In the beginnings of the Sufi tradition some centuries ago, Sufism was considered a revolutionary movement, whether in poetry or in real life. It was a way to break the rules, to defy and penetrate the boundaries that exist between the Sufi and his God. In this provocative process a lot of Sufi figures were either exiled or executed. Unfortunately now politics has infiltrated the different sects of Sufism, the idea of a non-systematic revolutionary belief has transgressed in what they refer to now as a surrender to whatever God has bestowed upon them, and in this case it is the corrupted regimes that are bestowed upon them by the Devine—for a greater good, of course—and that it is not for a human being to object or fight ‘God’s plan’.

The other ‘other’ has become the written thought that is piercing through the serenity of the subject’s visual transcendence, agonizing feelings that disturb the subject’s peacefulness, and establish yet another obstacle in the subject’s journey to liberation. Those thoughts arise from

personal, political and cultural inconveniences and from readings that aggravate the subject's harmony. The result is then, an invasion in the placidity and wordlessness of my work. Yet, maybe the metaphor of the Sufi realization was what enabled me to get through to those thoughts, or maybe those thoughts are revelations in themselves. By all means, the mere fact that I have come to engage in all this writing instead of expressing my ideas through visual forms was unappealing to me at the time.

My written thoughts varied from political thoughts about my own country as well as the Capitalist culture of North America, in which I currently reside, to questioning my eagerness to transcend. Here is an example of the writing I included in my piece, "Capitalism affects everything: their thunder is over-interpreted, it's too loud, their ice cream is too sweet, their landscape is too spaced-out their sun is too harsh, and it's too damn cold!!!" Using English and Arabic calligraphy together is my way to insinuate the unsettling hybridity that my work was undergoing at the time. The grey Paint is obscuring the writing in some areas, and the horizontality of the inscriptions together with the verticality of the dripping, create a web that imprisons the subject.

El-Oda (the room)

My last piece completed in the program is the most ambitious project I have done so far, [Fig 4] in which I built an unprimed wooden 8x8x12 feet room, composed of 17 mahogany panels. The whole room—including the floor is covered in thick transparent Arabic script. As a viewer, you are asked to remove your shoes before you enter. The handwriting contains a manifestation of my own thoughts, and readings that infiltrated my thinking—mostly poetry. There are 20-traced shadows from my own body, projected on the surface of the interior walls,

ceiling and floor. The shadows are drawn in double lines that overlap in some parts. From the ceiling, 20 paper boats are suspended with fish wire. The boats have text inscribed on their surfaces and are arranged arbitrarily, at different heights, and in different positions. On the outside of the room, there are 13 light boxes attached to the walls and the ceiling, projecting light inside through random shaped openings. The light openings are positioned in the negative space between the writing and outside the contours of the drawn shadows. The process of building is not hidden by any means and the construction work along with the wiring are accessible to the viewer's eye. The title of the piece '*El-Oda*,' is Egyptian slang for the word 'the room,' a rather generalized title that is not given to any specific connotation. Directions are not dictated to the viewer when entering the space.

El-Oda is an experiential work and I figured that it would be best to locate myself inside of it while writing about it. However, my experience is one that can be considered heterogeneous as it involves both, the building of the conscious experience and its viewing. Accordingly, I will examine the work as well as interplay between the two aspects mentioned above.

The exterior of the room is surrounded by darkness as if it was lying helpless, in the middle of nowhere, except for some light sneaking out of the cracks in the gaps between the panels, and the light coming from the slightly opened door. I take my shoes off, go inside, and lock the door behind me. There are no signs that require the viewer to close the door, yet the application of the lock denotes that it is a requirement. Once I step into the room, and rest my feet on the floor, I feel my flesh filling in the negative space between the undulating texts. The rectangularity of the room gives the illusion of freedom to move around, an illusion that is by no means supported by the shape of the cube; imagine that you are sitting in the middle of a space

where you are at an equal distance from four sides. The positions of the paper boats seem to act as a guide or pathway when navigating the space. I shut the door behind me and it disappears into the wall. However, the feeling of incarceration hasn't hit me yet; in fact, it is a very calming and peaceful space. The first feeling that comes to me though, is that once I close the door behind me, I am detached from the outside world. I need to make sure I have everything necessary in order. Thus, I start checking, I have my laptop for writing and I have my phone in case somebody calls; I start wondering if I should have paid one more visit to the washroom. Although I built this structure myself, and I am much aware of its weak points, yet it still seems impenetrable. Foucault describes the psychological effect of the Panopticon, "without any physical instrument other than architecture and geometry, it acts directly on individuals; it gives 'power of mind over mind'." (9) Accordingly, I ask myself, which mind am I then in this piece?

I sit down, and I start contemplating the light sparkling on the writing. And I think about other non-Arabic speaking participators, as they often wonder what it is like to be able to read the written language. On the one hand, as a non-Arabic speaker, maybe even as a non-Egyptian, you would view it as a pattern, or a texture, and relate to it aesthetically and through the sense of touch. On the other hand, if you are able to read the language, you will manage to comprehend a few sentences here and there, but you will never be able to track down a story or a context. Whatever language you know of or speak, it is this excessiveness and obsessiveness that I, the artist, wanted to deliver to you, the viewer; the excessiveness of thought, and obsessing about its registration. The writing has no single story behind it; neither does it possess a specific order. Each thought evokes and creates new thoughts and realizations. Varying between revolt, sarcasm, sadness and memories, the transparent thoughts establish a presence. In their virtuality,

they are there but not really there. Thoughts that I might not want people to know about, or maybe they would not agree with, yet they would have to acknowledge their actuality. Nobody knows where each line begins and the next one ends even me, can't tell the reader at this moment where or when I wrote this or that. The writing in this piece is not better experienced through reading and understanding; it is experienced through feelings. The variation of the bulging under your skin intrudes your privacy. It breaks up the flatness of the surface, invades the quietness of the confining structure, and creates a stronger physical connection between you, the viewer and the space. An Egyptian friend of mine came and sat with me in the room for some time and after a while I asked her about the language. Apparently she didn't feel like she needed to read the text, but when I mentioned it, she started to look for words that she could recognize.

In the process of working, I made it a goal to write everything on the panels after they were positioned in their places. I wanted each word to be written where it belongs. Accordingly, the cuboid structure acts like a sphere. It feels like an endless loop, or a bubble. You stand in the space, and you lose your bearing. The ceiling, the walls and the floor are all treated the same way, either with the writing, the drawn shadows, or the boats that are pointing everywhere and nowhere. The room then becomes a continuum. You don't know if it is all one specific moment or is it a lifetime of thinking. You lose track of time, or as Camus' Meursault describes his incarceration, "I hadn't understood how days could be both long and short at the same time: long to live through, maybe, but so drawn out that they ended up flowing into one another. They lost their names. Only the words "yesterday" and "tomorrow" still had any meaning for me." (10) Time passes, and you start to look deeper in the space for more; you see further details and shapes become clearer to you. You start to notice every crack in the wood, the variation in color

and the pattern of the grain. There is more to be explored; the light on the paper boats, the small drawings inside of them, their casted shadows all around, and the light reflections on the fish wire.

I look around and I see the Light escaping inside the room through the openings; I could almost smell the darkness, if it wasn't for these irregular luminous shapes. The paper boats move subtly in circles, there seems to be a breeze sneaking in that causes this movement. Now, I am seeing enough and getting overwhelmed with the details. The space feels like an intensification of everything, I am starting to sense the relentless struggle between materials, layers, surfaces, lines, objects and thoughts. I can see the drawn shadows struggling with the borders. I can see them pulling and pushing with one another. I can see some reaching up for the transcendent boats, I can see others avoiding the boats. I can see the paper boats chasing the drawn shadows with their own casted shadows. The walls sometimes feel like they are too close and sometimes they don't. I am feeling the lack of air every now and then, but I still don't feel like I want to break out, I am becoming part of the space, like any of these shadows or those boats.

The paper boats possess historic significance for me, in the way that they relate to my earlier work preceding my residence in the MFA program. The reason that I have reintroduced them in this piece requires an explanation. My earlier work represented my belief in the notion of the transcendence of the body. I had an interest in the traditions of Sufism and its gestures. I saw Sufism as the way to escape the world. However, the social constrains in my part of the world, kept getting more claustrophobic. As a result, I started to question my beliefs, and I felt the obligation to negate myself though irony. I replaced my transcendental human figures with paper boats, trivial, childish, and easy-to-make objects. Nowadays, with all the insanity that is taking

place in my country, irony keeps pushing itself even more into my practice. Absurdity helps me maintain my sanity. I wrote my thoughts and desires on paper and instead of making it into a plane or a bird, I made it into a boat. The quality that interests me is that boats are objects that are held down by their own weight whilst at the same time being suspended on water. However in my work just like the figures on the walls, they are trying to escape their own being or in this case, their purpose. Like in ancient Egyptian mythology, the boats are the vessels that carry the soul (Ka) to the other world—the myth of the boat of the sun. However, I am very aware of the fact that they are suspended in a wooden room that I built myself. Again, I am being sarcastic and ironic, criticizing my own desires. Nonetheless, I am not sure if this means that I am being down-to-earth and facing reality by negating my dreams of freedom or am I actually afraid of being free... And I can't tell if there is a difference between either in the first place...

The boats are made out of white printing paper, the paper that I often use to write notes and do quick sketches and doodle on. On the journey of constructing the piece, I was always walking around carrying a pen and a piece of paper, writing thoughts that occur to me, and then I would fold them and make them into boats. Thus, the boats have this imperfect, wrinkled, careless look about them, and if you glance closely at them, some have addresses and phone numbers. The whole appearance of the paper boats doesn't quite blend in the space; they stand as a contrast against the carefully knitted writing and figures. They don't belong in there, and that's exactly why some viewers are not comfortable with the aesthetic intrusion of the paper boats. However, each aspect of this piece carries within some sort of a nuisance factor to some viewers. Sometimes it is the writing that hurts their feet. Other times, they can't make themselves walk on it because they believe that writing is a convention that ought to be respected. Other times the

figures are visually disturbing, with all their pushing and pulling gestures. Having said that, this piece is a closed 8x8x12 ft wooden box, why would a person want to feel comfortable in such a restrictive space? Why do human beings adjust themselves within confines and start looking for little things that bother them within? The only things that viewers objected to were the things that destroy the serenity of the space. They question everything that contaminates the calmness, but do they ever question the confining boundaries?

The arrangement of the boats and liveliness of the writing on the walls and the figures all reduce the stability and rigidness of the room. They look like some sort of a poof of life, a proof of existence and a proof that the person who was in here, though incarcerated yet is not silenced. As if this person needs to keep track of her own thinking, but why? Does she not trust herself or does she not trust other people? And in both cases, why would the writing be transparent? If she already broke all the taboos and inflicted limitations, what is she still afraid of?

El-Oda is an extension of my concerns about social restrictions, and by moving these concerns into a 3D space; I introduce a more engaging experience to the viewer. By controlling the viewer and surrounding him/her with concerns that are suffocating me, I induce those concerns and fears to the viewer himself/herself. Some people say that this piece feels like a sanctuary or a prayer room, some say that it feels like an Egyptian tomb (based on their knowledge of me being Egyptian,) others say that it feels like they are inside my head. However, I see it as an unidentified space that is shaped by all my fears, objections and questioning. A space that once I put out there for the viewers, even though they don't understand the language, they acquire the burden. Confinement affects people in the strangest ways possible, it is scary how the controller believes that he/she earned and deserved the power and even scarier how the

controlled believes that he/she has no control over aspects in his/her own life. I tried to familiarize myself with *El-Oda*, I tried to make it more comfortable, more livable, less harsh; I tried to make amends with my confines, and it didn't work. I still can't seem to digest how is it possible to be controlled either by an outsider or an insider, either by the other, or the other 'other'. And, again I ask myself, should I just keep fighting? Is this what I am supposed to do, Keep fighting? Keep thinking? Keep talking? Then escaping becomes only the means and fighting becomes the way.

3. THE FRAME AS A CONCEPTUAL DEVICE

When my work was first reviewed in the program, fellow students assumed that the frame functioned as a formal conventional device; they did not understand why I was over theorizing the frame/image relationship in my work. Framing my work was a conceptual departure from what I had been doing previously. I always felt that the use of the frame was unnecessarily suffocating. Thus, by adding a contrasting rigid structure around the already geometric restricting form, I was establishing a self subjected constraint and an ironic gesture by myself unto myself. Prior to the frame stage, my practice had involved a series of transcendental Sufi and Zar paintings whether in the form of figures or objects. Nonetheless, I thought to myself, this is never going to happen. However much I tried to get rid of my body, as long as I am alive and as long as gravity exists, I will never succeed. Thus, I was only left with one thing, to acknowledge my captivity, incarcerate my own work, and seek a way out. The more I worked with and around the frame the more I dug into the roots of its referentiality. I have come to realize that the frame is deeply rooted in my culture or is rather molding my culture. In order to get rid of this mold-like structure and hold on to my unrestrained roots, I needed to de-territorialize and re-territorialize my mind as well as my whole existence. In other words, get rid of social control over the mind and body, and replace it with my own subjectivity. I will explain later the notion of de-territorialization and re-territorialization.

The frame in Ancient Egypt

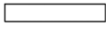
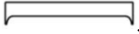


I now want to examine the symbolic function of the frame as it occurs in my culture past. My notion of the frame as the borderline that incubates a world inside of it stems from the ancient Egyptian cosmogony. [Fig 5] The Egyptian myth of creation says that the earth and the

sky were originally one, and in the processes of their unity and separation, the world was created.

R.T. Rundle Clark refers to the recitation of the myth in his book *Myth And Symbol In Ancient Egypt*,

(Words to be spoken by Geb): ‘O Nut! You became a spirit, you waxed mighty in the belly of your mother Tefnut before you were born. How mighty is your heart! You stirred in the belly of your mother in your name of Nut, you are indeed a daughter more powerful than her mother... O Great one who has become the sky! You have the mastery, you have filled every place with your beauty, the whole earth lies beneath you, you have taken possession thereof, you have enclosed the whole earth and everything therein within your arms... As Geb shall I impregnate you in your name of sky, I shall join the whole earth to you in every place. O high above the earth! You are supported upon your father Shu, but you have power over him, he so loved you that he placed himself—and all things beside—beneath you so that you took up into you every god with his heavenly barque, and as “a thousand souls is she” did you teach them that they should not leave you—as the stars.’(11)

The Sky (Nut) and the earth (Geb) were in a total sexual union, and when the sky descends upon the earth every day, Geb impregnates Nut. Her father Shu (the air) came and separated them, held her up with his arms, and Nut gave birth to the stars. This story is told visually over and over on the walls of the tombs. Thus, ancient Egyptian representation is seldom depicted as a world that is complete and separate from the actual world. Each of their images is a closed entity, a picture of the world as they knew it and not as they saw it. In the book, *Principles Of Egyptian Art*, Heinrich Schaefer states that images were used to construct metaphorical frameworks in ancient Egypt, “Egyptians of the historical period... imagined the earth to be a huge dish, but in

general it is written with the sign  (a masculine word), which is used as the opposite of the sky (a feminine word), also denoting 'land' as against water, and as a defined area of the earth's surface."(11) Schaefer goes on to explain that the sky normally is presented as the traditional form , which is depicted as an upturned shallow chest whose sides terminate in points at the corners. He concludes that the roof rested on four supports , which are eventually transformed into art by signs  that function astrologically. This suggests that these images of the sky, the earth and supports were not just used to indicate the borders of the ancient Egyptian world, but each of these images was a word, which when translated and combined altogether formed the ancient Egyptian perception and understanding of the world. Furthermore, Schaefer observes that: "the points of the roof are placed on the mountains at the edge of the 'dish' of the earth."(12) The base line of the four-sided frame was illustrated sometimes as the Nile, the desert or fertile land. The sky could either evoke a sunny morning, a starry night, or even a representation of 'Nut' herself. The depicted eternal 'world' changed according to the theme of the image. In terms of today's perception, Egyptians present us with images surrounded by a geometric framing device that comprises of four sides: the sky, the land, and two pillars. The other two pillars are not shown, as the image is normally a frontal view.

Ancient Egyptians did not only borrow from nature to create expressive images that intensify and transform living bodies, but also borrowed from their surrounding environment to create architectural forms that became the window to their world. In these cases, the ground is the fundamental component of the frame, and is normally depicted as a black line, which can be transformed into water or desert. Schaefer narrates the depicted myth of creation as follows: "the sky goddess lays coupled on top of the earth god. But then a being came between them—perhaps

originally their son, and raised up the goddess's body, with the result that only the extremities of her four limbs touch the ground"(13). These limbs and sometimes mountains and other times a very simple pillar shape, are the walls, which carry the ceiling of that edifice. Furthermore, we must bear in mind that architecture is by far the most influential man-made attempt to territorialize the world and constrain certain desirable spaces, which contain desirable objects within their limits. Architecture and its spaces construct the way the body is represented.

Frame structures in later ancient Egyptian imagery were mostly unified. As Shaefer explains: "All the ceiling pictures in the halls of the royal tombs of the New Kingdom are rectangular, so it is fair to assume that the actual world was imagined in this form; this would fit in well with the shape of the land around the Nile, which stretches far to north and south and adjoins the near East and Crete in the North, and the Sudan in the South."(14) The rectangularity of the depicted frames is suggested and supported by gravity and the earthly arrangement of space.

Claiming public space

The idea of the frame in my work is a manifestation of the ancient Egyptian mythology and art, while the social constraints that restrain my mind and my existence have triggered my feelings of incarceration. However, in addition to this, I am transgressing my artistic limits parallel to the growing rebellion in the Egyptian art of the revolution. In other words, contemporary Egyptian art has been trespassing social and political boundaries.

The fact that dictators have ruled Egypt for centuries led us—Egyptians, to believe that this is the way we are meant to live. With a grudge in our hearts and the dream of escaping the country, we accommodate the subjected censorship. We reconcile with our reality and adjust to

living within the borders created by an observer (the notion of Foucault's panopticon). Aside from a few condemned rebels here and there, we had already become familiar with our context and adapted to the given space, which we are not to question its limitations or nature. However, two things altered this consistency; the authorities were greedy enough to seize all the space so that we were left with no room to breathe. They confiscated everything, good education, a humane standard of living, freedom of expression and we were left with almost nothing. One thing that an authority needs to make sure of is maintenance of the illusion of freedom for the imprisoned. As far as Egypt is concerned, by providing an adequate surrounding space, the confined is under the impression that there is enough room for him/her to move around, which the overthrown regime failed to do. The other thing was the Tunisian uprising; Tunisia is a neighboring country that has experienced quite similar political circumstances. However, as far as we knew, Tunisia was in far better condition than we were, educational and financial wise.

Territories that had been established and accumulated along the ages had to be torn down; or rather the idea that Egyptians were to be controlled and directed needed to be challenged. It was about time for us to reclaim our space and our stature. In the mean time, art was a vital force in bringing events to a boiling point, whether street art in the form of graffiti or interventions, or even works inside the gallery space. The target was not to escape the authoritative confines, but to recoup public space. Noah Feldman in his article titled *Taking It To The Street*, compares situation between the current revolutionary art in the middle east especially Egypt and Tunisia and between the authoritatively driven art of the Gulf countries. He states, "The Gulf may remain the preserve of starchitects and glossy art fairs, but the Arab Spring artists have shown us what it means to make art that isn't just outside the box, but turns the box upside down." (15) My

generation's art is not just in search for freedom from authority and any other sort of confines, we are claiming the space, flipping the norms and turning the wrong side up. We are on a journey to break all sorts of taboos and preexisting social structures. We are determined to de-territorialize and re-territorialize public space.

The de-territorialization/ re-territorialization process simply means getting rid of an already existing territory and replacing it both literally and metaphorically with a critical context. To understand how this takes place we need to understand what territorialization means in the first place. In my following passages, I will investigate two different notions of territorialization. Further, I will use these definitions to explain what has been taking place in contemporary revolutionary Egyptian art and lastly my own work.

Deleuze and territoriality

Territorialization has been defined and interpreted in different ways. One of them is territorialization as an instinct. The instinctive way of claiming and marking a territory can be found in both humans and animals. In the case of animals, birds sing and dogs pee to mark their territories, while human beings build houses. Deleuze and Guattari investigate the instinctual approach. They use the term 'refrain' as the 'rhythmic pattern' that marks out a territory. Ronald Bogue in his book *Deleuze On Music, Painting, And The Arts*, lists aspects of the refrain as stated by Deleuze and Guattari, "A point of stability, a circle of property, and an opening to the outside." (16) Bogue goes on to explain the effect of each of these aspects; the first aspect creates a mass of 'directional components,' which in return creates security amid confusion. He provided an example of a child afraid of the dark, singing to herself for assurance, and by that she establishes a point of stability. The second aspect generates 'dimensional components,' like

in the case of cats and dogs spraying the corners of a certain area to demarcate their territory. The third aspect produces a mass with components of ‘passage or flight,’ in which a bird sings at the break of the day to open its territory to the surrounding environment and the world. The refrain in this case becomes the frame that creates order amidst chaos. In *Chaos, Territory, Art*, Elizabeth Grosz analyzes Deleuze’s theory of the frame, which addresses the power of the frame over nature,

Framing and deframing become art’s modes of territorialization and de-territorialization through sensation; framing becomes the means by which the plane of composition composes, deframing its modes of upheaval and transformation;(17)

In this case a frame is seen as a ‘taming’ object. And the territory as a make believe world that is made out of earthly components, where life is in order and makes sense— this formulation bears a striking resemblance to the ideas found in early Egyptian art. The territory becomes then an idealized world in the heart of this chaos we are living within. Grosz explains, “Art takes a bit of chaos in a frame in order to form a composed chaos that becomes sensory, or from which it extracts a chaoid sensation as variety.”(18) However, if territorialization is an instinctive orderly approach, then every human being and animal on earth ought to create his/her own order. But in reality this never happens, only a few beings get to decide on the order that others have to live within. In my piece—‘*El-Oda*,’ I created this territory, and viewers who enter are to abide by all the rules that I set. They are as free as much as I allow them to be!

Human territoriality

The second notion of territorialization is closer to my understanding of territoriality; it is human territoriality. According to Robert David Sack, human territoriality is not biologically

rooted, but rather socially and geographically motivated. It is an exercise of power by an individual or a group of people unto others, which is not necessarily aggressive, as in the case of a parent marginalizing a certain space for his/her kid to not trespass for his/her own good. Sack in his book *Human Territoriality* gives a general definition of the term territorialization, “the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting and asserting control over a geographic area.” (19) Sack eliminates the notion of instinct as a driving force for the process of territorialization, and instead attributes it all to a political and social agenda. On another point, I believe that the instinctive notion is a mere justification of such agendas.

Human Territorialization has a variety of characteristics and strategies that enforce its efficiency. Implementing restriction over access to the space in question and to things inside of it is a requirement, in order to maintain a degree of access to people, phenomena, and relationships. A non-territorial strategy is always needed to back up the original territorial limitation, and in case the former doesn't work then the latter comes to action and someone or something has to interfere, which probably is in the form of a punishment. Territories are alterable, movable, and take place in degrees, which help making relationships impersonal, and provide a hierarchy, just by area classification. Territory requires one form of a sign to insinuate its strength and fortify the area's contours. A territory establishes a coordinated and rhythmic pattern such as the refrain notion of Deleuze and Guattari, its mere presence actualizes one's understanding of 'order.' Sack then concludes, “Territoriality can be used to displace attention from the relationship between controller and controlled to the territory.” (20) A territory becomes then an abstract sign for power and a mold of what ever takes place inside of it.

4. AESTHETIC TERRITORIALIZATION

The visual and aesthetic revolutionary territorialization in Egypt now is taking place in two different axis of equal importance. The first one is street art in its different forms and the second is art in museums and galleries. The first one instigates an instantaneous effect on the minds and hearts of the day-to-day people, and thus provokes a social territorialization in addition to the regular spatial territorialization by claiming a certain vital area. The second one takes a longer time to function; it works on dismantling the authoritarian structure in institutionalized art. Both methods feed on each other and help shake the social, political and religious foundations. This is what Asef Bayat in his book *Life As Politics* refers to as ‘the art of presence.’ Bayat explains his notion of the art of presence as,

The most crucial element for democratic reform is an active citizenry: a sustained presence of individuals, groups, and movements in every available social space, whether institutional or informal, collective or individual, where they assert their rights and fulfill their responsibilities. For it is precisely in such spaces that alternative ideas, norms, practices, and politics are produced. (21)

In authoritative states, citizenry is what reassures your presence and impudence is what gives you power. Performing revolutionary art in the streets helps reaching citizens with their ordinary practices, and stimulates a ‘collective sentiment.’ While breaking institutional pre-existing structures, instigates instability from within and breaks down the rigid art contexts. Thus, de-territorializing the authoritarian arrangement by penetrating it from the inside and the outside, and re-territorializing the metaphorical space by reshaping state institutions into the public’s sensibilities.

Art as intervention

Street art is a responsive, political form of art that demarcates a territory whether in itself—as a form of art— or in the message it delivers. Ethel Seno, Carl McCormick, Mark and Sara Schiller in their book *Trespass*, explain the idea of graffiti, “Yes, something needed to be with such urgency or spontaneity that the author felt compelled to disfigure and vandalize property—but ultimately the greatest taboo violated is the psychological dimension of space.” (22) In the case of repressive regimes, occupied countries or areas controlled by gangs, both conflicting sides utilize street art to symbolically mark a specific area as restricted, liberated or rightly owned by a certain group, belief or ethnicity. Thus the conflict between both groups—in the case of my country, the state and the revolutionaries—takes the form of de-territorialization/ re-territorialization. The process takes the shape of action and reaction, and each side becomes defiant. Even though the State possesses far more power than those groups, yet the State’s fear of freedom is sublimated in the form of oppression towards individual and group expression. The Street is then personalized and the boundary between public and private space is infiltrated. Its rightful owners are reclaiming public buildings, streets, and even the air, and both, the artist and the viewer perform the territorialization process in this case.

Examples of Egyptian street art that defied the inflicted boundaries and influenced my work

In downtown Cairo, when the military had taken over after ex-president Mubarak stepped down, the authorities built a concrete wall that blocks the street which leads to the ministry of internal affairs to protect it from the protestors. The reaction was, a gigantic group trompe l’oeil painting of the closed street as if it were already opened. [Fig 6] This piece is one of many others, which were covered and replaced over and over. Feldman claims that, “These giant

unsigned works, produced collectively, may have marked the first time in Arab history that the visual arts had a major impact on public consciousness.” The people marked their objection clearly and loudly on the bricks, our imagination surpasses your boundaries.

One of the walls that stand as a great example for the de-territorialization/ re-territorialization process is a wall in Zamalek neighborhood. [Fig 7] I have seen phases from the transformation of this wall myself. However, Bahia Shehab, an artist herself kept track of changes that take over the wall and recorded them. Painted on the wall, a life size tank and in front of it a man on a bicycle with a breadbasket on his head can be seen. After an act of violence another artist comes and paints protesters being run over by the tank, other demonstrators along the wall and a message that read, “starting tomorrow I wear the new face, the face of every martyr. I exist.”(23) Later on authorities come and paint images of the protesters under the wheels of the tank leaving the rest of the image yet adding the message, “army and people one hand, Egypt for Egyptians.”(24) Another artist comes and paints a military subject as a monster eating a girl in front of the tank. The authorities come again, paint the figures, leave the tank, throw some paint to cover the face of the monster and the girl, and leave the rest of the monster’s body in the military suit and the tank. Later on Bahia herself comes and covers the remainder of the image in stencils that say no to everything the demonstrations called against. I have no idea what happened to this wall after Bahia’s graffiti, but what I do know is that this wall is an example of an ongoing ideological war, and a clear example of de-territorialization and re-territorialization.

Other examples of the war of ideologies are the installations executed with empty gas canisters, rubber bullets, bullet blanks and pieces of rocks from the clashes with the police and/or

the military. Again, the people are taking things that are supposed to scare them off and stop them from pursuing their dreams, stripping them from their scary context and transforming them into public artistic expressive works that reflect their own hopes.

Street theatre and performance have been powerful tools in the de-territorialization/ re-territorialization process in Egypt. One of many street theatre groups is a group called ‘Hala,’ which means a state or a condition. Hala is not a professional theatre group, and other than the founder, all the performers are people who don’t have any experience prior to working with ‘Hala’, yet, they have something to say and believe that they will be heard and understood best in the streets. One of their most influential performances that put them under the spotlights in 2005 is called ‘Article 76.’ The amendment of article 76 in the constitution in 2005 made it utterly impossible for anybody to run for presidency against Mubarak. This issue was a great deal at that time and Hala’s performance was deemed as an official gesture by the opposition, which led them to put the performance to an end. The reason why they said they called off the act was that they didn’t want to be taken as a political movement and that they just want to do art. One of their later displays after the revolution is called ‘Nashaz’ which means off-key. Part of the event was a video of a song filmed in front of one of brick walls that function as blocking device in downtown Cairo. The song is about the constitution and the fact that current authorities stole it along with our rights to live, our freedom, and our future. [Fig 8] While ‘Hala’ claims that they are just doing art independent of any political activism, they are in fact withdrawing their activities from any institutional contextualization and placing them in the hands of the public.

At this time the newly formed government, however chose a different method of terrorizing the opposition. It presented itself as a religious façade that captures and prosecutes

opposition figures on account of insulting religion and religious figures. There came a time after the appraisal when religious movements that supported the government came and covered the statue of the renown singer Om Kolthoum with a 'burka.' It is the authoritarian method of injecting fear in the minds of the liberal opposition and giving them a hint of how the future will look like. They are presenting yet another space to be territorialized, it is now a territorialization of belief. Om Kolthoum's covered face is a very simple and straightforward terrorizing message, and strangely enough, although done by people that are against art and self-expression, this gesture can be deemed as a successful minimal expressive installation piece. [Fig 9]

One of the most important criteria of street art is location and during the 2012 demonstrations against the now 2nd ex-regime since the 2011 appraisal, the alleged elected president 'Mohammed Morsi.' Exorbitant amounts of graffiti had been established on the walls of the presidential palace. Among those images was a painting of the president's head portrayed as the head of an octopus. [Fig 10]

Conclusion: My work, institutional art and street art

There exists what lies outside the confines of the institution and what lies inside of it. The institution in this sense is the social and political refrain that delimits people who live inside of it as well as the marginalized who live outside of its contours. A strongly outlined space is one that leaves no room for trespassers from both sides. As I explained before, this resulting rigid framing social and psychological structure is best to be tackled from both sides. Thus, the de-territorialization/ re-territorialization process is to take place by claiming public space on the outside and by publicizing the space within the foundation. Right now as I am writing this, I am following the news of the Cairo opera house protests in Egypt. The curtains of the famous Opera Aida opened to a fully costumed crew holding up signs that announce the suspension of their show till further notice. Students of the school of contemporary dance in the opera house performed a piece in protest of the arbitrary measures towards dancing in specific and the arts in Egypt in general. They received the supports of other artists as well as the opera house employees; sending a strong message to the fascist government, that the institution will once again return to the public domain.

In my earlier work in the program I began my research by addressing freedom from restrains from the inside only, and I was set on a search for absolute liberation. Liberation from rules, social standards, imposed control, self-restriction of thought and above all, freedom from the body. However, in the course of my research and writing this paper, I realized two major detours in my approach. The first is that there is an outside space that needs to be tackled, and without realizing I was growing more and more attached to the street art movements that are taking place in the streets of Egypt. For by acknowledging the power of street art you are

denouncing the power of institutionalized art and thus authorities from their control over you. Accordingly, I grew into perceiving my work, amongst other similar works as an internal extension to the outside revolution.

The second revelation in my work was that of accepting the fact that the notion of escaping frames whatever form it takes, is impossible. A frame is a context, and as a human being you are in a constant need to live within contexts. However, living in confinement is escapable, disposing of social restrictions and taboos is plausible, but in order to do that you need to make public space first and foremost public, and to strip the institution of its institution-ness. The space needs to be de-contextualized and re-contextualized, as well as de-territorialized and re-territorialized.

In reflection we must consider the vital relationship between the personal and the political in my artistic practice. If my work over the 2-year course of the program is an attempt at recouping physical and psychological space, then placing it inside the gallery space and the fact that it is influenced by personal thoughts—as some would perceive—delimits its effect. Therefore, I ask myself, how do I see a piece such as El-Oda that is a closed space located inside yet another closed space, reaching through the physical borders for the public? I have thought about moving this piece as a whole back to Egypt, and I thought about documenting it and leaving the physical piece behind where it was first constructed. I have even thought about exhibiting it amidst a public high traffic space in Cairo. However, whatever I decide to do with it will not change what this piece really stands for. I have come to perceive El-Oda as an in between, a mediator or a transitory stage. El-Oda represents—what I would like to believe—my very own psychological fight for freedom from social restrains. So, let us think of the

transformatory quality in my work through the 2-year program not as myself changing the world through my work, but rather as my work freeing me from my restraints so that I can make a difference in the world. Furthermore, as an actant in a society, your freedom as an individual is directly dependent on the freedom of that same society and this is exactly why the personal and the social should become one.

It is scary how peoples' behaviors change when they acquire power. Watching videos of the Stanford prison experiment³, I was disturbed by the behavior of the guards, even though they knew that this was only an experiment, yet they believed this set up and accepted their bestowed power. Meanwhile, the prisoners went from protesting the way they were treated to surrendering and thus the experiment was put to an end. However, in reality surrendering gives the opponent more power; this equation of power verses submission is always a linear way to fascism. The authority figure needs all the space to practice his/her powers and the controlled is granted a minimum space for survival. As the restrained, you are stripped off your autonomy as a citizen and later on as a human being. You become the authority's property; you belong to them. You have to conform to a particular pattern that they designed themselves. You are yet another knot in their fabricated world. Nonetheless, art that destabilizes social confines grants you the power. You occupy space and impose your ideology, an ideology that calls for freedom from canned

³ A study led by psychology professor Philip Zimbardo, which investigates the psychological effects of becoming a prisoner and a prison guard. The experiment was conducted at Stanford University from august 14 to august 20, 1971.

ideologies. You need to confront yourself then, you need to out throw your internal psychological constraints and re-territorialize your body. You need to become a constant actant.

Images

Fig 1

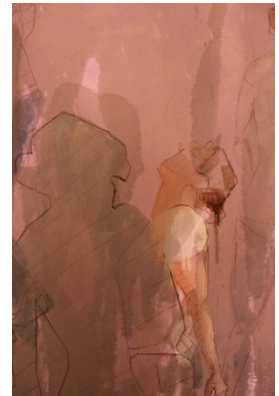


A series of five-attempts. 0.9x1.3 m each. Oil on Canvas. 2011

Fig 2



“Where do I end when at the beginning of an end you are?”
6.9x2.34 m. Mixed media. 2012.

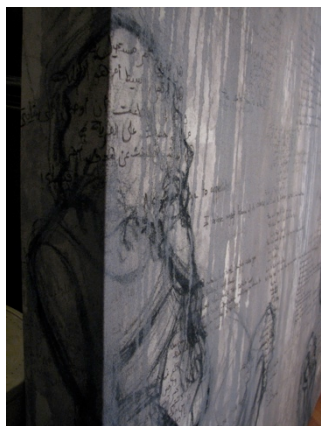


Details from fig 2

Fig 3

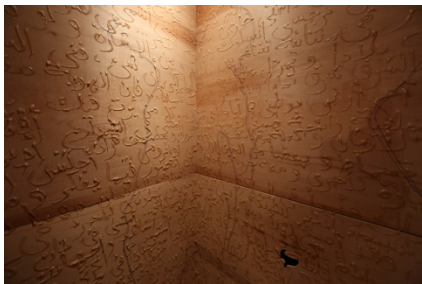


The dance.1.5x1.5 m. Oil, charcoal and markers on canvas 2012



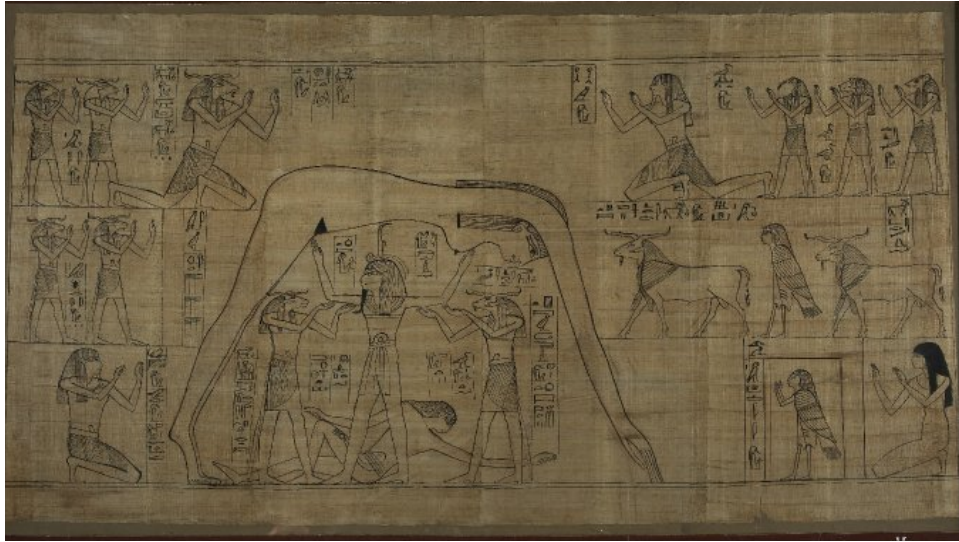
Details from fig 3

Fig 4



El-Oda. 3.6x2.4x2.4. Gel medium,
wood, paper, acrylic and graphite.
2013

Fig 5



Detail from the Greenfield Papyrus (the Book of the Dead of Nesitanebtashru). It depicts the air god Shu, assisted by the ram-headed Heh deities, supporting the sky goddess Nut as the earth god Geb reclines beneath. Work created 950 BCE, British museum.

Fig 6



Trompe l'oeil of an open street, Downtown Cairo, 2012

Fig 7



Graffiti, Zamalek district, Cairo, 2011

Fig 8



Nashaz performance by 'Hala,' Downtown Cairo, 2012

Fig 9



Om kolthoum statue covered in burka, Zamalek, Cairo. 2013.

Fig 10



Mohamed Morsi's head portrayed as the head of an octopus,
Heliopolis, Cairo, 2012

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