Walking Towards Revolution

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Future City Expedition 1, Bouchra Khalili and Omar Kholeif, 2013.

The space of contemporary revolution is a complex one – complex because it is constantly mediated and (re)mediated. It is intense in its proximity – with online media offering us raw images as opposed to the staid commentary of talking heads – but equally, its automated functionality distances us from the subjects of revolution. We are able to shift rapidly from watching a video of the massacre of Egyptian Copts at Maspero in downtown Cairo, to shopping for underwear or viewing porn on demand. The spectator or end-user in this context is able to flit between different moments in time – engaging with diverse levels of desire, anxiety and elation. This ability to juxtapose a single real place (the conflict zone) with several other spaces (imaginary or constructed online zones) is reminiscent of Michel Foucault's definition of the 'heterotopia'. [1] Foucault uses the term to describe spaces and places that function in non-hegemonic conditions. One can argue that these are 'third' spaces, which are simultaneously cerebral and physical – a moment in time, where layered meanings can develop.

The notion of navigating multiple virtual spaces is also relevant in the revolutionary context for individuals like myself, who possess a geographic or nationalistic sense of duality. I speak here of the duality of being both insider and outsider from the site – the 'square' (the *midan* or *saha*) – where the embers of revolutionary dissidence are first kindled. I experience dual reactions to what is perhaps an artificial sense of historic belonging to the contemporary site of conflict. The context of seeing the site of my youth, Egypt, mediated through the meta-narratives of both mainstream and social media elicits conflicting feelings. Am I relating to the present through a seemingly nostalgic memory of a peaceful Egyptian childhood? Or is my relationship to contemporary images of conflict developed through the manipulation of particular media machinery – machinery that manufactures feelings of euphoria and despair as it narrates the narrative of conflict as if it were a piece of cinema?

Invited by the Liverpool Biennial and Mathaf to develop a project in Liverpool for *Future City* in September 2013, I chose to engage with the urban space I knew well by looking for ways to embody the sense of a collapse in the temporal order that the ongoing Egyptian Revolution had unleashed in me. As a city, Liverpool has multiple personal meanings for me. When I first immigrated to Britain as a very young

child in the early 1980s, I saw Liverpool as a site of racial violence. As I grew older, I looked back at the history of the Toxteth Riots of 1981 with interest. I later lived in Liverpool (on two very different occasions) and both times the decision was a forced act of dislocation from my friends and loved ones. This personal narrative formed a cornerstone of my thinking.

I began by inviting the artist Bouchra Khalili, a Moroccan-French artist whose work I had admired for some time, to collaborate with me on a project exploring dislocation, mediation and what the German filmmaker Douglas Sirk referred to as 'distanctiation'. I was especially interested in how Khalili's subjects embodied speech as a forum for minorities to reclaim a position of power. We began with the proposition of developing an exploration of cultures of protest. We were interested in the form of protest – an aural, physical and embodied development – and in considering how its structure could activate questions about collective memory and consciousness.

Through our conversations it transpired that both Khalili and I were North Africans who had migrated to Europe during the 1980s and had both been in proximity to great social and political change. In Khalili's case, it was the March for Equality and Against Racism often known as Beur's March, which saw Arab immigrants taking to the French streets in 1983, from the port city of Marseilles to Paris. This was the first national anti-racist movement in France and was triggered by a racist climate propagated by right-wing political parties in France at the time. For Khalili, this event seemed especially relevant, since our presentation was to occur only a matter of weeks before the thirtieth anniversary of the march.

During this time, I was going back and forth between my parents' home in Egypt, and had recently cancelled one of these trips during the overthrow of Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi. This begged the question: what does it mean to be 'present' within a political conflict, a moment of uprising. Thinking of Foucalt's heterotopia (and of being in multiple temporal zones) I wondered what might happen if the revolution could be transposed and invoked into or onto a different physical site?

Together, Khalili and I envisioned a performative walk inspired by Liverpool's rich history as a radical city of activism that sought to consider the strategies used by oppressed communities for representation. Given the proliferation of mass media and internet technologies, has the politics of protest – both local and global – been removed from the personal, political and urban context in which it occurs, or is the relationship to the local urban politic still important?

On an autumnal afternoon in Liverpool, we met at Pier Head, a historic site that evinces Liverpool's history as a port city, and its part in the slave trade. We walked through the streets of the city centre, stopping in front of historic sites of power, but we did not speak of these. We marched in the street led by Egyptian-British actor Adam El Hagar – the mediating voice that Bouchra and I had chosen to embody our narrative of other cities, other protests.

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The narrative was a two-part documentary-fiction called *On the Culture of Protest* (2013). The first half, written by Khalili, was pieced together out of numerous media and archival accounts of the historic 1983 March des Beurs that culminated in Paris. The second half, which I had written, was developed as an 'out of sync' recollection of the Egyptian Revolution, which began in 2011 and which arguably continues to the present day. I interspersed personal anecdotes – the death of my grandfather during the uprisings, the exaltation of the Egyptian artist Ahmed Basiony, and my grandmother's nervous breakdown, alongside raw newsreel footage, literary excerpts and de-contexualised messages from social media. These were the mediated voices of the revolutionary struggle – disembodied from their original sites of struggle and violence.

On the Culture of Protest (2013) was a combined attempt to re-embody the spirit of different struggles through the act of walking and listening. Nearly fifty people, who collectively resembled a small

marching group, attended the walk. Individuals were required to 'keep up' with the fragmented narrative and the pace of the walk. This pace was developed through two days' worth of on-site rehearsals. The pacing was choreographed so that it would be nearly impossible for people's attention to drift outside the space that we had created. The language was constructed in spurts, the narration traversed quiet and loud intervals, the speed varied – abrupt speed quickly slowed down, jumping from narrations told in both formal and colloquial tongues. The audience's true presence was required.

So much political failure, I believe, has to do with the inability to be 'present' within the context of one's own struggle. The mediation of media has created a Ballardian fracturing of the collective narrative, where feelings, beliefs and attitudes are abstracted from the object that imbues them with meaning. Struggle and political belief become public affectations formed out of 'trending' fads that occupy numerous RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds. Indeed, the proliferation of social media continually brokers and fosters relationships on the basis of constructed algorithms, which many of us will perhaps naively assume are the products of happenstance.

Social media has accelerated our relationships to each other. During the first eighteen days of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, I found myself becoming increasingly confessional online to certain individuals, attempting to form bridges with acquaintances. I felt that a border had been eroded and that I could assess through individual Facebook feeds which of my contacts would be appropriate to engage with. I was geographically dislocated from the site in Cairo where most of my family were living and as a result I was hungrily searching for attention online – a support network. Could a collective memory, a consciousness, be formed online, or is the physical sweat and heat of bodies in proximity essential to bind us in struggle, to enable us to engage with the nuanced complexity of the ongoing political situation?

The reaction from audience members to our project in Liverpool suggested to me that the physical space of protest is a markedly different one from the virtual. One participant informed me that the space of physical protest was much more discursive. At first I was confused, but I think I have come to understand what she meant. Indeed, the space of the social-media platform, despite its seeming circular nature, can be purely one-directional. Status updates, tweets and video blogs in moments of conflict function as catalytic calls rallying for or against violence, antagonism, surrender, protection and so forth. Rarely do such forums enable a nuancing to the conversation or a space for one to ask innocent or naïve questions. Certainly, one would not care to seem naïve on social media, which for many of us is also the most public and permanent of forums. Moreover, if such forums become antagonistic, they often end up resulting in battles between individuals with polar political views. The power of being present in space, as opposed to being abstracted and anonymous, enables a different kind of relationship to one another. Although I do not wish to propagate a romantic view of physical protest, I do believe that In Real Life (IRL) we are able to be vulnerable and negotiate our proximity in a way that enables us to better understand what it is that we are fighting for.

1. *Of Other Spaces* (1984) in Diacritics vol. 16. No.1 spring 1986. PP.22-27.

Bouchra Khalili: Bouchra Khalili is an artist who investigates the experiences of identity, immigration and transience. Working primarily in film and video, she reflects the nomadic and often transnational state that defines life for many people throughout the world. She has participated in numerous exhibitions, including the 18th Sydney Biennale *all our relations* (2012); *Mapping Subjectivity* at MoMA (New York, 2011); the 10th Sharjah Biennial (2011); *You Have Been There* at Marian Goodman Gallery (New York and Paris, 2011)*; Meeting Points* (2011); and Surveillé(e) s (2011). In 2012 she was the recipient of the DAAD-Artist in Berlin Award.

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