

Interviews

Lingering in Vicinity

Maha Maamoun in
conversation with Aleya
Hamza

Maha Maamoun's videos and photographs address the form and function of images that are found in mainstream culture. Her work acts as a lens through which we see familiar images in novel and insightful ways. She does so by making subtle interventions in photographic material that she captures on camera or borrows from various sources. Through an unusual crop, a seamless edit, an odd juxtaposition, an incongruent photomontage, or a staged remake, Maamoun shakes up our expectations and toys with our perception. With a keen eye for the absurd and a dark sense of humor, Maamoun keeps a balance between what is studied and what is intuitive, leaving room for the incidental to play itself out. She freely mines the public domain for high and low brow images, respectively making videos that have consisted of YouTube footage of material

shot live on mobile phone cameras during the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution, excerpts from bootleg copies of popular Egyptian films from the 1950s to the present, and a remake of a single iconic image lifted from an experimental French film dubbed with a futuristic account of a different place.



Maha Maamoun, *Domestic Tourism II*, 2008. Single channel video, 60 min. Video still.

Image courtesy the artist.

Aleya Hamza: The last three videos you have made, despite being stylistically different, all share a number of common threads. For example, the three videos use recycled material. *Night Visitor* (2011) stitches together YouTube footage of the break into the state security building in the wake of the 25 January 2011 protests; *Domestic Tourism II* (2009) is composed entirely of clips of mainstream Egyptian movies; *2026* (2010) overlaps a remake of the memorable image of the time traveller in Chris Marker's *La Jetee* (1962) with an excerpt from a contemporary Egyptian novel. When did this fascination with archival material begin?

Maha Maamoun: Funnily enough, I do not feel like I have a fascination with archival material – nor with the pyramids for that matter. But I don't always feel the need to produce new images. Also, in these projects a main point of interest lies in how others have constructed particular images, for example how the pyramids and what they should signify have been choreographed in Egyptian cinema across time. In *2026*, images, whether visual or literary, are recycled, tired and have reached a dead-end. The inability to produce new images is a main concern in this film. In *Night Visitor*, again, I am captivated by what others have chosen to look at, as they are prying into this forbidden place, especially when they look away from the overtly 'hot' political stuff: the shredded documents, the torture machines, and instead look at chandeliers, catalogue car models, seize belly-dancing suits, step on pictures of the fallen big-shots, and so on.

AH: *Night Visitor* stands apart because it is based on documentary material, rather than fiction. Do you think about these distinctions when you are working?

MM: Yes of course. These are different kinds of images and have different origins, meanings and purposes, which is part of why I want to work with them.

AH: *Night Visitor* has a subtitle, *The Night of Counting the Years*, which is a reference to the title of a classic 1969 film by Shadi Abdel Salam (also known as *The Mummy*), which is considered by many to be one of the greatest Egyptian films. It is also a historical film that is based on a true story about a clash of loyalties, between the tribal and the national. What inspired this connection?

MM: I didn't start with this connection. I remembered the title, *The Night of Counting the Years*, a title I have always liked, while editing

this film. Looking through all this footage of people digging through layers and layers, years over years, of personal and collective history: documents, pictures, objects strewn all over these state security buildings, made this title, this line, more poignant. There were many scenes of people sitting on piles of paper and reading. Or entering cells and recounting dates and durations of time spent there. There was also the feeling of breaking into a cache, and trying to gather, recover, make sense of, decipher, salvage. Interestingly, amongst the things found, in one of the state security cars parked there, were ancient Egyptian statues (stolen or found and kept), making it feel more and more like an archeological dig and extending the timeline further and further back. I then re-watched the film and saw the other more obvious connections: a 'nation' recovering itself and its history from the hands of swindlers, reading the markings left behind at a defining historical juncture between two eras and so on. These were interesting and relevant connections too, but were not the connections that I initially set out to make. I mean they are relevant but secondary.



Maha Maamoun, *Shooting Stars Remind me of Eavesdroppers*, 2013. Single channel video, 5.41min. Video still.
Image courtesy the artist.

AH: How did you start thinking about *Night Visitor*?

MM: Well, it was 2011. Like everyone else here in Egypt, I was looking at little other than the news in every shape and form. It felt physically impossible to see or work with other images. When these videos came out on YouTube, I was more interested in the live commentary than the images themselves. What people were saying whilst they were filming the break-in on their mobile phones was what attracted me most. The mix of humor, anger, amazement, sarcasm, envy, vindictiveness, alertness, awe – this is what drew me to these videos. But in the end I chose to mute almost all of the sound, it became too much and too limiting, while the images contained these sentiments in a less literal way.

AH: Many of your works explore the relationship of the present to the past. This is noteworthy because the work delves into the tension between informal and official histories, and who has the power to write (or rewrite) them. The state security building, which is the main 'character' in *Night Visitor*, held one of the biggest archives holding classified information about citizens in the Mubarak era while the footage you used is shot by revolutionaries that broke into this once impenetrable place. How does this transpire in *Night Visitor*?

MM: For me, the main character in *Night Visitor* is the night visitor: the person scanning the place with his/her mobile phone camera and then uploading it on the net. The archive here is a scattered mess of leftovers. So it's not really the archive. It's like floating debris. And the subjects who stormed in will not really own these archives and rewrite their history. I remember in one of the videos, a group of men looking through boxes and documents, and then one of them finally said something like: 'The bastards. They took everything. They didn't leave anything. This is all rubbish.' And then of course there were all the clips of people handing over the documents they found to the army personnel there, so that they would be in safe hands...

AH: The term 'Night Visitor' also refers to a common practice of police arresting political activists from their homes in the middle of the night. The video is a record of flipping this practice on its head, with the revolutionaries breaking into the state head quarters. This sense of irony is used as a device in many of your works.

MM: I am losing my sense of irony. Really. It's been bulldozed. So I cannot talk about this strategy at the moment. But concerning the title of *Night Visitor*, yes it's a simple reversal. A return of the visit. The visited of old are now the visitors.



Maha Maamoun, *Domestic Tourism I, Beach*, c-print, 100x70cm.

Image courtesy the artist.

AH: One of your earliest works, *Cairoscapes* (2003), is a photo-based series in which you shot female pedestrians dressed in floral dresses and blew up and cropped the image to introduce nature (which is very rare especially in a city like Cairo) in an ultra urban landscape. In *Domestic Tourism I* (2005), you appropriate four generic visual representations of the city used on postcards and make subtle digital manipulations that disrupt their idealization of the landscape. I think this is what I meant about irony in your work: the

idea or impulse for creating a psychologically, emotionally and intellectually charged experience (often of the city) that is based on incongruency or contrast.

MM: I think what is common in these two works is the impulse to dwell on fissures in a closed system of representation, and to make the most out of them – make them more visible, make them wider, linger in their vicinity. Doing that brings the bigger picture into question. So in *Cairoscapes*, the impulse was to find the most accessible nature in the city, which I decided was mostly the floral prints of people's clothes, and to find them in our daily routes without going out of our way. There was also the impulse to reposition our perspective of the city and our cityscapes. To have a series of cityscapes that correspond better to my needs and view of the city. We mostly experience this city up close, eye-level, and in fragments, rather than the more classical birds eye view of cityscapes.

In *Domestic Tourism*, I start with generic and idealized images of Egypt, whether promotional touristic images or in Egyptian cinema, and either manipulate them myself or see how others have manipulated them. The impulse was not to be ironical or to point out contrasts between the idealized image and reality. Maybe these are an outcome. The impulse may simply be to 'chew the scenery',^[1] a brilliant technical term that I came across through Andrea Thaal. To chew (on) the scenery or the images handed down to us, of our place, our history, and ourselves.

AH: You have just finished working on a new publication entitled *Kayfa Takhtafi* (How to Disappear) in collaboration with Amman-based artist Ala Younis and Haytham El-Wardany. This book started from another publication called *The Middle East* that you co-edited for the 10th Sharjah Biennial in 2011. Can you tell its story and are you planning on turning this into a series?

MM: *Kayfa ta* (How to) is the name of a publishing initiative started by Ala Younis and myself. It's a series of monographs that follow loosely the 'how to' format. We are interested in what a range of producers – artists and non-artists – wants to communicate to a wider audience through this form. Indirectly, the project aims to bring forth lateral, associative and creative subjects and modes of thinking and knowledge. We hope to publish these manuals in Arabic and, when invited, in other languages, and to offer them at cost at accessible places like newsstands.

The first monograph just came out: *How to Disappear* by Egyptian writer Haytham El-Wardany. Haytham and I had previously collaborated, as co-editors on *The Middle Ear*, one of a set of books commissioned by Rasha Salti for the 10th Sharjah Biennial. Haytham had himself contributed a text in *The Middle Ear* that now 'reappears' as one of the two texts in *How to Disappear*.



Maha Maamoun, 2026, 2010. Single channel video. 9min. Video still.

Image courtesy the artist.

AH: *How to Disappear* is quite a whimsical title. Can you elaborate on the subject of this particular monograph?

MM: *How to Disappear* designs a set of aural exercises that shows the readers how to disappear, reappear, join a group, leave a group, and other necessary skills. Through these exercises, El-Wardany invites the reader to redefine his/her relationship to the collective, to internal and external soundscapes, and shows the effect this has – whether real or fictional – on one's mental and social space. The publication includes an annex, which is a lexicon of some of the sounds that reside in or are banished from the middle class household: the desired, the dreaded, the tolerated and the forbidden sounds.[\[2\]](#)

AH: What did you find compelling about the 'how to' format?

MM: The 'how to' format is a simple and popular form that is recognizable to a broad spectrum of readers. It is a form that we felt would allow us, in a series, to bring together different kinds of writings, writers and readers that do not always meet. It is also a form that allows us to explore what writers and readers deem necessary to show and to learn now.

AH: Your new project, a new commission for Meeting Points 7, is somehow also born out of *The Middle Ear* and is a book that mixes theoretical, historical, personal, poetic and fictive registers to ruminate on the act of listening. This project is still in the making, but can you describe the direction that it is taking?

MM: It is taking a direction that is a bit different from my previous works but that draws laterally on texts and images that I have dwelled on before. This new work is a video called *Shooting Stars Remind Me of Eavesdroppers*. Like *The Middle Ear*, it starts from a sporadic interest in listeners.

Watch *Night Visitor* in the Ibraaz project space, [here](#).

Maha Maamoun is an artist living and working in Cairo. Her work was shown in exhibitions and biennials including: *Meeting Points 7*, curated by What, How & for Whom / WHW; *Objects in Mirror are Closer than they Appear*, Tate Modern, London, curated by Aleya Hamza and Kasia Redzisz, 2013; Ninth Gwangju Biennale, curated by Nancy Adajania, Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Mami Kataoka, Sunjung Kim, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Alia Swastika; *Momentarily Learning from Mega Events*, Makan, Amman, curated by Ala Younis, 2012; *Second World: Where is Progress Progressing*, Steirischer Herbst, Graz, curated by What, How & for Whom / WHW; *The End of Money*, Witte de With, Rotterdam, curated by Juan A. Gaitán, 2011; Sharjah Biennial 10 curated by Suzanne Cotter, Rasha Salti and Haig Aivazian, 2009-2010; *Mapping Subjectivity: Experimental Cinema in The Arab World*, MoMA, New York, curated by Jytte Jensen and Rasha Salti; *Live Cinema*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, curated by November Paynter; *Ground Floor America*, Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, curated by What, How & for Whom / WHW; *The Future of Tradition/The Tradition of Future*, Haus Der Kunst, Munich, curated by Chris Dercon, 2010. In addition to her art practice, Maamoun has curated or partook in the curating of *PhotoCairo 3* (visual arts exhibition, 2005), *Meeting Points 5* (itinerant contemporary arts festival, 2007-2008), *Covering Ones Back* (exhibition of photography and photo-based works, 2013), *Spinal Cord* (2013), *A State of Fluidity* (2011), *To Tell or Not to Tell* (video programs, 2013), and *The Middle Ear* (book project, 2011). Maamoun is a founding board member of the Contemporary Image Collective (CiC) - an independent non-profit space for art and culture founded in Cairo in 2004 - www.ciccairo.com.

[1] *Chewing the Scenery* is the title of the exhibition curated by Swiss curator Andrea Thaal for the 54th International Art Exhibition – la Biennale di Venezia. Thaal writes: '*Chewing the Scenery* – a term dating back to the nineteenth century – is a description of a way of acting that suggests that the actor is excessively overacting. With its manifold meanings it also implies the capacity of the scenery chewer to destabilize the fine dividing line between proper and not-proper, between virtuosity and embarrassing ineptitude. Thoughts come to mind of the actress who doesn't know when to stop, lingering on stage far longer than the role demands, willfully and self-indulgently creating mayhem in the timing and content of the script. At the same time, "chewing" also suggests something languorous, the possibility of being caught up in a gluey mass of viscous motion. As such, it describes something of the circumstances needed for the close, sensitive scrutiny and the (in)voluntary prolongation of that situation. So "chewing" is also about repetition, the constant contrary motion that arises from a non-linear concept of temporality, since it posits different times and states as both concurrent and interconnected. It's even tempting to use "chewing" (over) to describe a person's ambivalent response to a particular configuration, such as a nation, for instance. And in the context of a project that is part of a wider scenario of national displays, where creative artists "represent" nations, "chewing" is also about worrying away at something.'

<http://www.chewingthescenery.net/scenario>

[2] For more information see: http://kayfa-ta.com/htd_e.html

About the author

[Aleya Hamza](#)

Aleya Hamza is an independent curator based in Cairo. Since completing her MA in History of Art at Goldsmiths College in 2001, she has lectured in contemporary art at the American University in

Cairo, and worked as a curator at Townhouse Gallery and the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo. Her projects and exhibitions have been featured internationally in Alexandria, Amsterdam, Beirut, Berlin, Bonn, Budapest, Cairo, London, Odense and Rabat. She co-curated the third and fourth editions of PhotoCairo, and her most recent exhibition *Objects in Mirror are Closer than they Appear* (2013) was on show at the Tate Modern in London and the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo in 2012-2013. She is the founder and director of Gypsum, a new international contemporary art gallery established in Cairo in 2013 – www.gypsumgallery.com.