



INTERVIEWS

The Personal and the Political All at Once Adham Hafez in conversation with Suzy Halajian

Suzy Halajian

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The idea of recording an interview started when Adham Hafez and I found ourselves in the same room with the hopes of continuing a closer discussion on his more recent works within the Adham Hafez Company and the HaRaKa platform. The interview did not happen then, nor did it take place the next time we both found ourselves in the same city. As is common with my interactions and recent collaboration with Adham, we start with the work and get lost in other places and times, often discussing our personal stories of work and life, all with the consuming energy and humour that he invites.

In December, with Adham in Cairo and I back in Los Angeles, we began an email conversation that led to this text. Once again, this too was interrupted many times as Adham found himself working on a travelling performance in Cairo at a time when censorship, in the form of formidable raids, was taking place at various arts and cultural venues throughout the city. Adham wrote to me saying that perhaps we should add a question on the difficulty of continuing to work when one is stuck in such ridiculous 'fights' with imaginary winds and forces. His note made me consider the possibility that even if such imaginary winds would never depart from specific contexts – and their direction and contours only shifted and manoeuvred in appearance – it would leave Adham and numerous other artists and activists with the indispensable political urge to keep working and moving, and then working some more.

Suzy Halajian: I am drawn to your practice for various reasons, one being that your research-based, cross-disciplinary practice is constantly evolving. It encapsulates a production mode that continuously responds to the urgent conditions you're working both with and under as you fluidly manoeuvre the roles of choreographer, dancer, researcher, activist, writer and curator. To start with, the Adham Hafez Company has been producing dance and performance productions since its founding in Cairo in 2003. In 2006, your company decided to expand and establish HaRaKa – a platform for the research and development of performance and dance in Egypt and the Arabic speaking region, through which you produced the first TransDance festival in 2008. The festival itself situates theory next to practice and was initially created as a response to the lack of alternative



Adham Hafez Company, *FRANKENSTEIN*, 2009. Multimedia dance-based performance and installation. Photo by Ahmed Rouby.
Photo by Ahmed Rouby.

venues in which to present performance work that is not supported by the state. It also aims to open up how choreography is understood in Cairo and Arab countries today. Can you speak about how you navigate these various roles while often making work under challenging social, political and bureaucratic realities?

Adham Hafez: I think the structure of how we work is mainly dependant on how diverse the group of individuals involved is. It is a group that is full of antagonism and I find this necessary. It is also a group of individuals from different fields of interest: translation, political science, video, choreography, and pop culture. Yet all the practices are placed on the same level. They are, in fact, all necessary to one another and all inform the works created. Even though our working structures are set and have been operating for over ten years, there is a lot of fluidity in how we operate. I often invite artists to come together at different time periods where we work intensely, sharing a common practice and constructing a work strategy that changes from time to time and space to space. We have worked within rehabilitated garage spaces, taken over run down flats in Downtown Cairo and transformed them momentarily into work sites, performed at the Cairo Opera House – and evaded censorship! – and presented printed or screened works. I do not believe choreography must always be associated with dance, nor dance always with choreography. I also do not believe that the practices of dance and choreography need flat smooth sprung-wooden floors. If all we have is a lump of sand, let's dance there. If all we have is the space between a sofa and a chair, then let's invite guests and perform there. It is important to continue working.

As for the festival, it was initially created to reflect on the notion of the festival itself, within dire circumstances. What is a festival with a lack of resources and must it celebrate something? Must everything look happy and polished or could it happen in a rundown way, to reflect on rundown things? In the light of these questions it started as a very small edition of only two days. Over the years we have programmed work from leading local and international artists and scholars including Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen, Doa Aly, Abdullah Al-Bayyari, Ramsay Burt, among many others. It continues to operate differently each year. The latest edition in 2014 was faced by recent legal changes that almost criminalize the practice of independent art in its current state. In response to this, we decided to expand the festive as a slow and not very visible edition that took place over six months, including working groups, research, and writing practices, and not merely performances and public events. The festival turned itself as a slow work process, which I believed was a response to urgency.

SH: Unavoidably, many editions of TransDance have been produced under duress and political unrest in Cairo, particularly since 2011, which in turn has led the organizers to reconsider its operation within the city. For example, the 2012 edition integrated panel discussions tackling pertinent issues over visas and borders, as well as the role of embassies, into its programme. In 2013, the festival decided to focus on an exclusively Arab edition after many international guests cancelled given the political situation in Egypt. How has your practice been able to respond and shift according to the socio-political conditions of Egypt and the larger Arab world? How do you remain flexible in your working mode without compromising the project's content or intention over time?

AH: The editions of 2012 and 2013 were taking place within incredibly unsettling conditions. Between the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood and emergency laws and military trials, it was impossible to operate with pre-planned strategies and programmes. Several artists were denied entry to Egypt, such as Tunisian choreographer Amira Chebli and Lebanese performance artist Rima Najdi. In response to the situation, the artists decided to continue working collaboratively with us, the organizers, and we developed formats where their work could still be present. Rima Najdi created a radio-choreography that was performed by the audience and Amira Chebli turned her dance solo into a film. Our graphic designer, Ahmad Aiyad, responded by using performative strategies in constructing the festival's posters. By publicly displaying kissing actors, they reflected on the work of Lana Al Sennawy, which dealt with censorship and the politicization of performing bodies in Egypt over the past six decades.

With a context so dense it almost becomes content, becomes co-author, and it would be ridiculous not to pay attention to this. One must learn how to allow change to create work, and to constantly work with artists on finding ways to make their work possible when everything else is suggesting the work is not going to take place. I am fine with smaller, reduced editions, and I am happy with small focussed audiences. I much prefer this to the cancellation of a production. If Amira Chebli could only dance on a small screen in Cairo now, then so be it and let us make sure it happens. If Lana's work takes the form of posters before its public screening, then let us take Lana's work into the streets.

I feel that catastrophe is very forming/informing within contemporary curatorial practices. In a way, it brings you to face mercantile tendencies very quickly and to locate networks of partnerships that are worth investing in. There should always be a way to produce and present clandestine artistic practices that challenge normative

formats and frames – and normative not only in content, but also in form. One should not only invest in non-normative practices of the artists but also invite the curatorial process to operate in a non-normative, non-hegemonic way, if we are to truly invest in an artistic practice that aims at challenging and questioning different regimes of power. It's much easier to start by pointing fingers at external politics but what about politics within the arts? What about funding policies? What about the preconceptions of how 'good' art should look? It is in this sense that I consider catastrophe (slow, fast, visible, or not yet visible) very formative/forming and why I believe that curatorial practice should make itself porous in ways that could take it outside of mercantile obligations and capitalist aesthetics. One can only deal with such big claims by taking them seriously and trying things out. Failure is as necessary as success. So much information and knowledge is latent within failed attempts that are thrown out altogether before looking at what information could be there within.

SH: Continuing the discussion on producing work during unsettling times, in 2011 you and many others watched the burning of the Institut d'Egypte. Witnessing the malicious burning of documents and books, the impetus to build an archive for contemporary dance in Egypt became even more emphasized for you. From this moment ARCH.IVE was born, with the aim to build a database and to collect and commission texts through multilingual editions of the Cairography platform that you have described as 'writings from Cairo, and through Cairo'. How have you reconsidered the function of such an archive in Egypt, which not only struggles with state-wide and institutional barriers for collecting and disseminating contemporary performance and dance, but also faces larger concerns around language and the translation of contemporary texts into Arabic?



ARC.HIVE for Contemporary Arab Performing Arts, international partners meeting and panel preparations for the Dusseldorf Tanzkongress 2013.
Photo by Nurah Farahat.

AH: The burning of the Institut d'Egypte was a horrific sight that reminded us all of the 1971 burning of the Cairo Opera House (the Khedivial Opera House). The fire that took place on 17 December 2011 left us immobilized. In retrospect, I think many important questions about national heritage, memory and architecture were raised at that time that I find very informative now. At HaRaKa, we immediately decided to revive the ARC.HIVE project that we had been working to establish. There is a great lack of archival projects within the region that focus on documenting contemporary Arab performance. It was there, at the site of the burning building and its contents, that a small action group was formed called Save the Books, which I was involved with. Later on many discussions about other archives were continued with artists, colleagues, and activists, and it was clear that there was a need for new archival projects as a means of political resistance and intellectual posterity.

The archive project was born as a collaboration between HaRaKa and the Lincoln Centre's Public Library for the Performing Arts in New York, among other partners internationally. The struggle is not only to document and protect what is already a fragile practice – that of performance – but to also contextualize the practices and to allow the artistic voices to be recorded and revisited. The project involves documentation but also includes numerous recorded interviews, publications, commissions, and public events. It is another slow and impossible project that perhaps lies somewhere between poetry and cultural production, or poetic political actions.

Cairography has been a dream project since 2007 and many researchers and authors were included in the process of developing it. The main aim behind it was to translate texts from Arabic to English, and vice versa, and make them available to audiences outside of their original place of publication (whether in the West or the Arab world). It was intended to be an ongoing discursive bridge to look at gaps and to write together and build joint readerships. So far, we have translated works by Ramsay Burt, Aylin Kalem, Andre Lepecki, among others, into Arabic. By partnering with the Belgian critical and discursive platform SARMA, we hope to continue disseminating many of the coming texts, and also translating a large part of their text archive into Arabic, to make them available to readers within more than 20 countries.

SH: Research and collaboration take on an imperative role in your work both as a choreographer in the Adham Hafez Company and as a researcher of contemporary Arab dance within the academic environment and for HaRaKa. Your performance practice feeds back into research and your research feeds back into the dance and performance productions. I am curious about this exchange, which leads me to ask how collaboration functions within your company and also with other arts and cultural institutions in Egypt and elsewhere. I am interested in how knowledge production becomes a shared political agenda.

AH: I have a background in research beyond my artistic practice. I used to work in laboratories within the scientific practices of pharmacy, where the words research and experimentation meant something different altogether. Having had the pleasure to play within such circumstances, I took a lot from these exchanges when I decided to work strictly within the arts. Research is essential to my practice and I cannot conceive of a production without it. The artists who work with me in the productions take over research tasks. Those who compose the sound score or who translate the libretto must all work together within a larger research process, where we believe that even if some of it only goes on stage (or in the gallery or on pages) the rest of it stands

دعوة لكل من يعتبر نفسه ينتمى لمجتمع الرقص فى
القاهرة باى صفة او صورة - كراقص او متفرج - ليكون فى صورة
جماعية 12-12-2006 فى مركز الصورة المعاصرة الساعة الثالثة
تحت تنظيم ميريام فان ايمسكوت من مؤسسة سارما البلجيكية و ح ر ك
بالقاهرة للتنمية و البحث فى مجال الرقص

مركز الصورة المعاصرة:
20 شارع صفية زغلول متفرع من شارع القصر العيني
تليفون 7941686



Poster of HaRaKa's first event, Cairo Dance Community Photoshoot, a research project by Myriam Van Imschoot of the Brussels-based platform SARMA. The event took place in Cairo in December 2006 at CIC.
Poster by Myriam Van Imschoot.

there in support of our every gesture, action or voice utterance. Invisible labour is an indispensable aspect of our work together, perhaps not only for the social dynamic that takes us – even if momentarily – outside of a commodity-driven process, but also for how it becomes a shared language within a temporary community. HaRaKa was born out of this context, as a mode of operating where we could organize our research practice and bring others into it, while keeping the production process in operation.

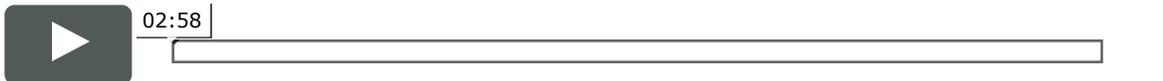
The collaboration is both between individuals and between structures. A research subject that occupies us at HaRaKa may very well build us a reader for our next production and our productions have commissioned and supported new texts and translations that were published to publicly disseminate the research findings to a larger audience. There were many times where the dramaturgic structure of a production was the result of a

research laboratory. For example, ARC.HIVE, which is currently one of HaRaKa's main projects, is the accumulation of years of collaborations between us and other institutions and artists. Knowledge production doesn't become a political agenda but rather a political necessity set within an amnesiac reality. With how rapidly history was written and re-written during the past few years since 2011, the individual artist-citizen realizes the urgent need for a sustained artistic research process. To decide, and to insist, on one research subject over a two-year period of tumultuous historical ruptures is both impossible and necessary. To invest in looking back rather than to respond to the here and now in its immediacy is to insist on the importance of seeing events outside of their spectacularity and to attempt to situate them in a larger movement.

This is where the interaction between work done through HaRaKa and the Adham Hafez Company becomes productive. Sometimes it is the same people involved in both metaphoric spaces, and it becomes an act of live role-play as a way to produce knowledge and organize an alternative work process that is beyond common institutionalization.

Another strategy we have used is to produce the larger works within the Adham Hafez Company. But then, individual questions and quests that remained pending for certain members turn into research projects that may or may not end up on stage. Mona Gamil's *Safe Art Practice*, which is a fictitious guide to practicing safe and commercially successful art, is the result of a research commission from HaRaKa and was meant for a showcase of Arab performance makers at the German dance fair Internationale Tanzmesse NRW in Dusseldorf. Often, individual makers go back into a larger working group with their developed individual questions, which then feed into the larger discussions.

SH: The Adham Hafez Company's latest production, *2065 BC*, premiered at Hebbel Am Ufer Theatre in Berlin in March 2015 after two years of research in Cairo, Berlin and New York. It was conceived as a futuristic international conference as it re-enacted the 1884 Berlin Conference devised under the leadership of Bismarck. It imagined a moment when the world is coming to an end following a third world war that leads countries bankrupt and decimated due to violence and nuclear waste. Set in the year 2065, the performance itself urgently calls for countries to redistribute political powers during a new Berlin Conference composed of African scientists, politicians, and diplomats who gather to announce the new world order. How was the research for this undertaken and what reference points did you start with to develop the aesthetics and production of the work?



**Adham Hafez Company and HaRaKa platform
2065 BC, 2015.**

AH: When I have free time, I sit and reorganize historical events and displace them as a way of daydreaming other possibilities and catastrophes. One of them was rethinking the colonialist history in the future, where the 'victim' of the colony is the colonizer and the relations of power are reversed. Being white is ugly, dangerous and animalistic. Being dark (and we left the category open to contain within it many possibilities that are non-white and non-normative) would mean beauty, power and hegemony. The texts that I developed were then taken over by Lamia Gouda, our principal researcher, who went on – through several trips to Africa – to further develop the research. The question of aesthetics became an urgent one. Can we critique a history of colonialist violence whilst having to reside within a Euro-American aesthetic and philosophical canon? What about other aesthetics? The decision was to invent a new physical language, through which a choreographic writing takes place. This self-contained choreographic language is communicative and yet is exclusive. It is consciously foreign and is not pretty. It is tight, decisive and economic in its energy expenditure, and sits somewhere between being gestural and abstracted.

Language was instrumentally used in the creation of conflict within Africa and several Arab countries. Some groups would be taught the language of the masters and others would not, creating an inside and an outside within the very same, small tribe. We wanted to generate this within a theatre experience – an experience of inequality that is staged as eloquence. *2065 BC*, like many of our productions, is not set in stone. The scores are mobile; they adapt every time another research step is taken. In this sense, the languages move and keep morphing the choreography as we continue to experiment with different systems of communication, eloquence and exclusions.

SH: I'd like to expand on the idea of references that feed into your research process. Many of the personal experiences and impediments you face readily enter your projects and are often utilized to explore issues of translation, borders, state control, and institutional hegemonies, as well as the construction of subjectivities through the body and body-based movement. How does the personal function as a tool to reveal and complicate a set of certain truths, or realities, in the spaces you are producing in?

AH: I believe that the personal and the political intertwine in ways that state politics do not wish to acknowledge, but only continue to instrumentalize in times of panic. What mobilized many citizens to join the masses in Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011 was the political being perceived and articulated as the personal. This often occurred when a family or neighbourhood lost a protester in the attacks, rendering the political visceral and familial, or merely by a change of language describing a protest or sit-in. The same takes place when one deals with the personal and the political in the arts. An example of this can be seen in the fact that the Adham Hafez Company is commissioned by one of Germany's highest cultural authorities and yet all of our members are treated as dubious subjects by German embassy officials in Egypt. This complicates and almost disables the entire visa process, becoming an issue that must be dealt with. We cannot fly to Berlin and speak of borders and inequality when we are not even admitted free mobility within international space, given that the Arab subject is seen as a threat to many authorities. The subject is politicized, yet again, at such moments when borders shut before they even open. This highly policed and politicized body – that of the Arab performer – in one's own country and internationally becomes a constitutive reality that limits and choreographs one's own life. This is the personal, and the political, all at once. This is not a condition to be transcended; this is a reality from which we produce work.

The issue of translation often appears in my work given that we operate between different languages here in Cairo. I don't only mean working between choreography, performance, sound, and writing, but also between English, Arabic, Egyptian dialect, French, and German (to name but a few of the languages). The scope of our research lately is vast and I believe that arguments are built differently in different languages, hence the necessity of mobilizing our thought between different etymologies. This becomes both personal and political. The Arab subject that grew up within a postcolonial reality acknowledges differences and multiplicities. This becomes political when one works with artists or institutions from other cultures that have not been colonized and who still see their 'lands' as the centre and a mythical 'Arabia' as the exotic periphery – the wilderness, the stretches of sand out there. The importance of working with translation is to problematize lacunas in western European and North American art discourses and, eventually, curatorial practices. It is also equally important to stage foreignness to oneself as to the 'other', in order to be able to challenge normative frames and architectures of thought and knowledge production in performance or choreography.

How can we dance postcoloniality when I must build philosophic arguments within the genealogy of continental philosophy? How can we dance colonialism's scars when the international institution expects it to look like contemporary dance from Brussels or New York? How does Lamia Gouda or Alaa Abdullateef from the Adham Hafez Company perform their subjectivities when so much of this material does not stand well within a gaze-terrain that only informs itself on Arab-ness through the news of wars and oil?

SH: Humour also works to unravel a set of politically charged questions and assertions in your performances, specifically in works such as *2065 BC* and *FRANKENSTEIN* (2009). To give some context, the transdisciplinary project *FRANKENSTEIN* researched the aesthetic, desired body through the images of icons and choreographed gender roles circulated through the media and advertising industry. By absurdly deconstructing the performances of such bodies, it contemplated the term 'monstrous' through semiotic and etymological perspectives, and as such analysed the mechanisms that support such bodies in specific geopolitical and cultural contexts.



Adham Hafez Company and HaRaKa platform, *2065 BC*, 2015. Multimedia performance and installation.
Photo by Nurah Farahat.

AH: One of my professors of performance studies in Cairo years ago told me if the audience laughs they listen better. I took her words into my experiments as a possibility to test ideas. It is not cynicism or sarcasm; it is really an invitation to laugh together about things or selves that may be our very own. In *FRANKENSTEIN*, I was interested in disengaging machines that generate simulacra in the formation of identities within the contemporary Egyptian society. This vast focus boiled down to looking at body politics from the perspectives of beauty and ugliness, which opened back doors into looking again at colonialist histories and capitalism.

The deconstruction process took place thanks to a team of collaborators including Ikon Chiba, who migrated from fashion to contemporary visual arts; Montse Romani, who is typically a curator but worked within the production as a dramaturge displacing and displaying bodies within space; and Sawsan Gad, who worked as a demographer looking at larger choreographies of metaphoric bodies, among others. We refused to work within one single stage and cut the stage into many smaller parts, physically opening it up as we opened up and

deconstructed several performances of perfection, race, grace, and monstrosity. We even ended up building a fictitious fashion magazine that lives as a performance in and of itself, on paper. We also worked on making these deconstructed and disengaged machines open to a public. By inviting the audience to use them, you could be photographed, Photoshopped, and instantly turned into a cover star for a quasi-erotic magazine cover, or you could sit at the writing station and write live critiques of what you experienced.

SH: We were recently in Stockholm together where you presented the lecture-performance, *Limited Entry – The Museum and The Quarantine* (2015) at c.off. The provocative presentation made the case for a politically incorrect nuancing of the term 'human', by questioning the way different bodies (for example, a body born in an Arab country and one born in an EU country) are weighed at borders. You therefore performed how certain bodies in fact suspend or readily access borders, by analysing the etymology of specific terms, while considering histories of latent violence and terrorism. How have you adopted this format in your practice and how did this particular work evolve?

AH: This particular performance is very much the product of the reality in which my colleagues and I live. So many times we have arrived collectively at one border with French or German colleagues and been left stuck behind the border whilst for the European partner the border is penetrable, softened, or doesn't even exist. This constant physical reminder of our bodies and how they are politicized beyond our agency produced this string of thoughts that I eventually developed into the lecture-performance. But I must say that it has been a latent project that I have constantly delayed. As for lecture-performances, I very often work with different kinds of texts and consider the various ways of delivering them. We have worked with medical reports, legal documents, opera libretti, and magical incantations. I am interested in speech acts and the modes of delivering a speech as they shift around texts – a constant migration of one text through distinct bodies/voices, or different texts through one voice. For *The Museum and the Quarantine*, I was trying to deal with a history of systematic violence that has to do with how the term human is defined and practiced. To problematize this, I needed to shift between voices that bring with them different authorities and possibilities for agencies.

SH: And what projects are you currently working on?

AH: I am continuing to work on constructing lands and times that do not exist and create performances from there. Our next production is a revisiting of the communist and socialist waves within the Arabic speaking region, seen through a futuristic propagandist celebration of a land that never existed. At the same time, we are currently working on the next phase of a long-term collaboration with ccap, an independent site for production of choreography, and Cristina Caprioli, among others, on a choreographic project that nuances choreography as politics, as it looks at the notion of nations and peoples with a disenchanting body of literature and scores. But meanwhile, several members back in Cairo with me are in the process of writing new national anthems to lands that never existed and celebrating eternal dictatorships.

Adham Hafez is an Egyptian artist working in the fields of choreography, sound, text and performance. Awarded First Prize for Choreography by the Cairo Opera House, his company toured its work extensively in

the European-Mediterranean and the Arabic speaking region for over ten years. Hafez studied contemporary dance, opera, and literary theory at Cairo Opera House and Ain Shams University, and holds an MA in Choreography from Amsterdam Theatre School and an MA in Political Science and Artistic Experimentation from SciencePo, Paris, where he studied with renowned philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour. He is a PhD candidate at New York University, completing a twelve-year research programme on Arab performance studies. Founder of the ARC.HIVE of Contemporary Arab Performing Arts based at the Lincoln Centew, New York, and German Dance Archives, Cologne, Hafez also founded Egypt's first performance studies platform HaRaKa, the publication Cairography, and is director of the TransDance Festival in Egypt. He continues to stage transdisciplinary performances between Cairo and Europe. Engaged internationally as a guest lecturer and researcher, his work has been presented within acclaimed venues including UNESCO Dance Research Congress, Athens; Damascus Opera House, Damascus; Impulstanz, Vienna; MoMA PS1, New York; Hebbel Am Ufer, Berlin; and Silahtaraga, Istanbul.

TAGS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Suzy Halajian is a curator and writer currently based in Los Angeles. Recent projects include: *The Closer I Get To The End The More I Rewrite The Beginning*, Human Resources, Los Angeles (2015); *Drowning and swallowing this text*, LACE, Los Angeles (2014); *Nothing is forgotten, some things considered*, UKS, Oslo; *Maybe it's the light that has to change and not much else*, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York; *Impeded Time*, Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna (all 2012); *We Should Be You: A Study of Physical Markings*, Zico House, Beirut (2011). Halajian is a 2014 recipient of the Andy Warhol Foundation's Curatorial Travel/Research Fellowship. In 2013 she worked on the Home Works 6 Forum with Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, and from 2007-10, she co-founded and directed Eighteen Thirty Collaborations, an experimental performance arts space in Los Angeles. She holds an MA from the Centre for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, New York, and a BA from UCLA in Economics and International Relations.

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