IBRAAZ

Interview

Against Interpretation

Hassan Khan in conversation with Omar Kholeif

Hassan Khan is an artist who lives and works in Cairo, Egypt. To coincide with a new selective survey exhibition at SALT in Istanbul, Ibraaz's Senior Editor Omar Kholeif opens up a conversation with Khan about a body of work produced between the late 1990s and the present day. The discussion that follows finds Khan articulating the tension between approaching material that is both autobiographical and historical, explores the artist's interest in monuments, and reveals his ambivalence towards the generic and medium-specific implications that demarcate the broad field of the visual arts.

Hassan Khan, Banque Bannister, 2010, installation view, SALT, Beyoglu, 2012, brass sculpture, 209 x 260 x 22 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photograph by Serkan Taycan.

Omar Kholeif: Can you tell us about your latest body of work on view at SALT Istanbul? What is the theoretical starting point that binds the work in the show and how has it been executed on site?

Hassan Khan, installation view, SALT, Beyoglu, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photograph by Serkan Taycan.

Hassan Khan: The exhibition at SALT is a sort of selective survey that begins with two sentences from 1994 and ends with a sculpture that I have been trying to produce for the past two years called *The Twist*. There is no clear set theoretical premise for the selection of works or how they are presented. The exhibition is however motivated by the desire to produce an 'exhibition' that is able to inhabit the space, to give the visitor a chance to discover an interconnected, a-chronological body of work, and finally to fulfil some of the institution's understanding of its place within its own cultural milieu. It is not really concerned with chronology or the attempt to narrativise a practice, although the latter is I think an unavoidable side-effect. One thing I noticed at the end of the process was that each floor almost functions as an exhibition within itself. This was discovered rather than planned, though. The modulation between different forms of engagement with the visitor as well as within the work was a guiding light, it is an approach that I feel helps produce an experience where the demands of each work are respected while a sense of space where something beyond the mere accumulation of objects and forms of address is possible.

OK: Your artistic work flows from the personal (sometimes the biographical) to much broader historical and cultural references. How do you navigate these stretches? Do you find there are inherent tensions?

HK: I actually do not 'navigate these stretches', as I do not find that I approach my material in these terms, as either biographical or historical. That is because my starting points, my sources, my aims, are always varied and I have never begun with the idea of a thesis, a statement (although there have been works driven by the medium statement, for example *Read Fanon You Fucking Bastards* (2003-onwards)), or a closed effect, so in a sense the work finds

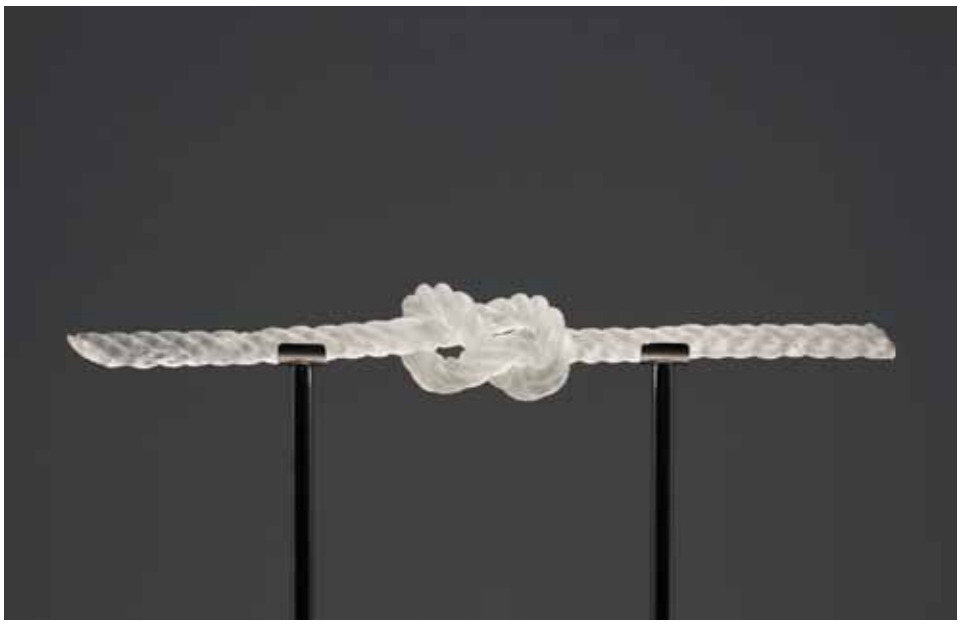
itself. I therefore do not really perceive a tension or a division, even if there is a division between different registers in the work, even if the works engage with both registers. I do not necessarily feel the need to reconcile these poles together. However your description is also accurate, but it's more relevant to how one looks at the work at the end after it's completed rather than when still in process.

OK: For me personally, I feel that there is an interest in monuments in your work – not pure monumentality, but deconstructing them or mutilating objects, sites or constructs that are monumental. Could you perhaps explain this?

Hassan Khan, The Twist, 2012, installation view, SALT, Beyoglu, 2012, iron sculpture coated with Stainless Steel, 322 cm long, widest part 13.5 cm, stem 3 cm and twist sections 1.5 cm each as they open out of the stem. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Photograph by Serkan Taycan.

HK: There is definitely an interest in monuments but I am not sure that this interest is in either 'deconstructing' or 'mutilating' monuments as such. Actually it's a long and complex relationship. For example in early works like *Do you want to fight?* (1997) (shown at SALT for the first time since its premiere in Cairo in 1997), *this is THE political film* (1998), the more documentary works like *Cosmetic Surgery* (2000), or *Transitions* (2002), the 'monumental' is understood to be the latent and implicit set of values and relationships constructed and represented by the dominant media in a set time and place. In these examples Maspero (the Egyptian TV building used as a short-hand to signify Egyptian state media) becomes that monument (especially in the 90s, before satellite channels really took off and changed the media landscape). My relationship to this monument was first based on an acknowledgement of its presence and power while attempting to use its expectations – what people expect that monument to be and how they should be within it, for example a specific relationship to the video camera, the way subjects answer questions. I played upon this web of representation and expectation in some of my video work from the mid to late 90s. The idea was to in a way also make the 'monument' irrelevant and to thus discover something else. Even then there was no interest in parody or irony but rather an acknowledgment of the medium as raw material with cultural, social, political and historical resonance and the ability to engage that – to discover something else through that.

There is another different understanding of the monumental proposed by a work like *17 and in AUC* (2003). Here, a constructed one-way mirrored room acts as a sort of monumental cipher that is powered by my own sweat and tears, which are triggered by alcohol and by the heavy baggage of time and remembrance. Through the act of self-delineation, I generate the situation of the work. When activated – that is, when the isolated subject sits inside the room and begins 'remembering', when the lights inside the room are switched on and the lights outside switched off, the space is transparent and the audience can look into it and see the subject inside trapped in a spectacle they have no ultimate control over. However, when the lights are turned off, that transparent room suddenly becomes a glass-mirrored cube: a silent monumental object with density sitting in the middle of the room, a charged space of potential. That architectural monument is also a technology of communication used to activate a history (of the self, of the institution), which then becomes the referent of the work. Another latent monumental construction within the human subject, the subject's own sense of self, is in a sense the hidden monument under investigation here.



Hassan Khan, The Knot, 2012, commissioned by dOCUMENTA (13), produced by Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, co-produced by the Young Arab Theater Fund (YATF), glass Sculpture 70 cm long x 3 cm thickness x 6.5 cm width in the middle of the knot. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photograph by Anders Sune Berg.

A third approach is linked to sculptural objects such as *Brass Column* (2007), *Banque Bannister* (2010), *44 unique and repetitious markers of value* (2010), *The Knot* (2012) and *The Twist* (2012). What all these sculptural objects share is an interest in the thin line dividing the architectural from the sculptural, as well as an investigation of a highly mysterious and undefinable sense of presence. It is not an accident that the first of those works, *Brass Column* (2007), began as a way of utilising an architectural detail in the space of the exhibition and thus transforming the space itself. By covering an existing column with brass rings, the functional nature of the column was negated, while the physicality of a specific, highly formalised mass 'eating' up a volume of the space, as well as the associations since antiquity with power and spectacle that the shiny golden hues of a metal like brass, were suggested. What such a work wants to do is reframe the relationship of the viewer to the space they are in, while at the same time refusing to resolve the experience into any

one aspect; pure figuration, abstraction or architecture.

These dynamics become further complicated when specific forms are being represented; for example, *Banque Bannister* (2010), my replica of the Banque Misr (the main branch on Mohamed Farid Street downtown Cairo) banister. Every time I passed this object on the street I was struck by a strange feeling that I could not resolve into any specific set understanding of the object. The design of the banister borders on being dysfunctional (which might also say something about the nature of Egyptian public architecture), however, even if it is possible to easily analyse the object in terms of ideology and semiotics, that is, in terms of what an institution like a bank is expected to communicate via its public presence, as well as its function within the economic system as a repository of wealth and guarantor of value. Yet, I suspect that this form of analysis is not sufficient to really explain what the source of the presence that I am discussing is, and therefore enough to explain how the work functions in relation to its source. A more profound question for me seems to be how it is possible for us to discern meaning out of objects in the first place. How are we able to read the world around us, to communicate with it, to discern intentions and to answer them back? What I am calling charged objects make that dynamic perceivable (if not completely comprehensible) and hence my strange reaction to the golden banister as I pass it on the street in my daily life. Now, what I did to that object is to replicate it perfectly, while abstracting it from its function. The object becomes irrational, it defies gravity, the perfection of the replica also means that a sort of idealised form of the existing banister is presented here (the replica is of the form, not of the object, that is, all defaults, stains, imperfections have been removed). The object is literally removed from its history, to allow for a possibility to encounter its a priori assumptions, to engage with its constitutive assumptions, to in a sense, sense its being in this world.

Hassan Khan, Banque Bannister, 2010, installation view, SALT, Beyoglu, 2012, brass sculpture, 209 x 260 x 22 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photograph by Serkan Taycan.

In works like *The Knot* and *The Twist,* a sense of presence is being engaged in a slightly different fashion. The very origin of civilisation or the gesture behind the act of civilisation is central to both works.

The act of marking, the original gesture of ornamentation, is the moment where identity, property, and differentiation are all born – where an object is identified as belonging to someone, where the self begins to mark its territory. That original and basic gesture is central to the understanding of both pieces, where a complex relationship between metaphor and metonym is at play. In *The Twist*, the act of formalisation is made metaphorical through the form of the twist itself; we witness a form that begins and ends at very clear points, we witness pure material (the straight steel rod) splitting into four strands forming a twist and then returning to its basic form. *The Knot* is a glass replica of a rope knotted into a figure eight, one of the oldest and most common rope knots. It is a highly functional act that transforms its material (the rope) into a functionalised entity that possesses use-value, however here it is being replicated in a medium that renders it dysfunctional. The figure eight of the knot is in a sense being iconicised, transformed into an emblem; however, that is being done without the usual reductive stylisation associated with the transactions of capital, but rather through its opposite – an excess of photographic accuracy. Therefore the act of stylisation is here operating on the level of the medium rather than on the level of form, but what does that imply? In a sense, the glass replica is a fantasised relic, a left-over of a fictional civilisation that never existed. Can that be a sublimation of our very own projections? Is it possible to imagine the self as a place where civilisations that never materially exist, yet are mysteriously twinned to our material reality, are born and die every day? That an invisible gap lies behind all we know?

Hassan Khan, still from Blind Ambition, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

OK: Some of your recent film and video work was developed through a workshop process. How does this working process come about? Why did you start working in this way? Is there a historical predecessor in film or visual arts you take inspiration from?

HK: Actually, I think the film you are referring to is *Blind Ambition* (2012). I usually work with actors over an extended period of time, and every time I tailor the process of work to the actors I am working with and to what I am trying to achieve in the work through the figure of the actor. My experiences as the music director of Ahmed El Attar's

theatre workshop in the early to mid-90s first exposed me to the idea of the actor as a subject in his or herself, with their own inherited sets of gestures and codes. Now what you do with this is very open – you can utilise it, quote it, break it down and build another set of codes. But in all cases I find it important to be aware of what the actor brings and then to see what one can do with that. In *Blind Ambition*, I was interested in immediacy, an ease of conversation, a lack of self-consciousness in front of the camera as well as a conviction in the gestures and words uttered by the actors, motivated by fears and ambitions hidden in each character that are still communicable. I wanted to draw upon the actors' experiences of friendship, enmity, competition, pride and humiliation – basically, the experience of living with the other and to connect them to daily banal situations. *Blind Ambition* is a film that revolves around the social order and wants to touch on how that social order exists within, through, and in-between people.

Hassan Khan, The Knot, 2012, commissioned by dOCUMENTA (13), produced by Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, co-produced by the Young Arab Theater Fund (YATF), glass Sculpture 70 cm long x 3 cm thickness x 6.5 cm width in the middle of the knot. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photograph by Anders Sune Berg.

A similar dynamic is at work in some of the narrative sections of *The Hidden Location* (2004). For example in the section with the insurance salesman (played by the actor Sayyed Ragab), I relied upon reading selected passages of *The Abortion of Freedom*, a book of rants and fantasies by 'outsider' writer Mahmoud Abd El Razeq Affifi (known by his moniker 'Adeeb El Shabbab', 'the writer of the youth') with Ragab. We analysed these sections and formalised them into behavioural formulas, sets of relationships and expectations that organised his behaviour; I then connected these formulas to incidents in the actor's experiences. The formulas became guides for conversation and behavioural patterns, after we had worked these patterns down to their subtle details; we took it down to the streets and rehearsed in live situations (Ragab wore a wireless microphone so I could listen in on his interactions and give him notes on his performance later on). This allowed us to develop a character – the way they speak, walk and talk in any situation without having to produce a fictionalised fantasy of what that character could be, where he would live and what he would do. We relied upon the cold logic of behavioural patterns to generate situations that could happen to

an insurance salesman walking through the city throughout the day and shot the whole sequence in one day as if it were a documentary.

OK: Many will know that 'shaabi', or pop culture, plays a vital role in quite a few of your projects. What do you think is the importance of pop culture in articulating a shared or singular social history?

HK: I would draw an important distinction between pop culture and 'shaabi'. What is known as 'shaabi' is usually in reference to a specific urban musical genre. However, I would like to expand this understanding a little bit and to try to see it as the collective forming a replica of itself that is not completely closed off or defined by any one function. It is a place of decoys and sublimation, where a wedding celebration is a message and a shop opening a battle. This is the place where 'contradiction' is not seen as a contradiction. So if I consider 'shaabi' as the sum total of the collective as it finds forms that are partially unregulated to constitute itself, it is also a place where I myself exist (as a member of the social order) and, in addition, an extra-ethical space where 'ideology' is contradicted, where it cannot be seen as merely the production of empire – even if the work contains ideology as message. What I mean here is that if this form of popular cultural production in its very form subverts the assumptions of the ruling social order, even its own moral address, then the work is not merely the completely functionalised production of what is known as 'empire'. We are somewhere else, a place that is not easily reducible.

Hassan Khan, DOM TAK TAK DOM TAK, 2005, installation view, SALT, Beyoglu, 2012, music produced by the artist, computer program controlling lights and music, lights, speakers, wall text, minimum dimensions of the room 340 x 1470 x 570 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photograph by Serkan Taycan.

‹Pop› is on the other hand where ideology realises itself, it is the address, it is the definition, and it is what uses category to validate its very presence. If ‹shaabi› is the automated moment of civilisation, itself brutal and cruel, and beautiful, then pop is its cynical other. It is where the search for profit is masked as entertainment while actually functioning as a placating form of regulation for the social order. ‹Shaabi› is what escapes the performer, the uncontrolled tic, the spit, the curse, the hoarse and broken voice; it is where paranoia can discover itself, where neurosis is unashamed and

unembarrassed, where crime is rewarded and not punished, where sexuality remains dangerous rather than glossed over, and where obscenity and sanctity can coexist in an intense contradiction that is not contradictory. I am also incredibly inspired by a certain type of Egyptian comedy. I have hesitated for years to tap into it in my work – however I can sense the edges of something that might happen soon, because it taps into this space. I thus trust my ignorance and instinct as much as my knowledge and calculations.

OK: Following on from the above: how do you feel about the propensity of visual artists to sample, or appropriate from more mainstream culture?

HK: Terrible! This attitude creates a situation where 'visual arts' is seen as a space with its own codex, its own set of inherited generic gestures that is closed and that can only relate to other spaces or languages at a distance through a ritual of quotation. Moreover, these generic gestures and their references are seen as what validates the work and gives it its identity as visual art. The distinction is false – and moreover it is a distinction that creates a situation where a closed set of references is mistaken for a language. This is a situation that I personally want to avoid at all costs. There is a distinction of course, a distinction of economy, dissemination, and language – specificity to the field. However, it is a specificity related to how value is produced through an unfixed standard – what this implies is that if 'art' has a specificity, it is its ability to be undefined, to be anything, to discover new languages, to question definitions, all challenges to the generic gesture.

I personally have never seen or experienced my work through appropriation. This is because whatever I come across, consume or see, I assume is mine, is part of my experience rather than something that I am appropriating. Therefore if we are to relate this to what is called ‹mainstream› culture, I can then speak about discovering where that culture exists within my own interior landscape and to use that out of a real engaged interest. For example, my usage of the figure of the anthropomorphic pig in *stuffedpigfollies* (2007) is not an attempt at appropriating the figure from (for example) Disney, but rather a discovery of where such a figure lies within my own experiences and using the figure from that starting point. I speak the figure in my own language rather than trying to reference something else, because that figure is mine in the first place. Hence my consistent critique of irony, which is actually (I am beginning to discover) not a critique of irony itself, but rather of how irony has become codified. The ironic in my understanding is something that is discovered by accident, almost as a side-effect, through a process rather than a set effect that one goes out and aims to achieve.

OK: How much of your work do you believe is imbued with the cultural specificity of the context of where you live, Cairo? *Jewel* (2012), for example for me, is without a doubt one of my top three favourite works by an artist that I have seen this year. In the installation, two men move slowly in space, their bodies building in a rhythmic trance around a set of speakers that bristles with a pulsing beat. You

have said that this experience was one influenced by an event that you witnessed in real life, on a Cairo street. You take this context as a starting point however, and you shift it into something that I believe boasts universal concerns. Can you tell me about the process of this work, and how you constructed its various 'meanings'?

Hassan Khan, Jewel, 2010, 35mm film transferred to full HD video and original music composed by the artist, 6' 30". Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

HK: A few years ago (maybe 2006), I caught for a few seconds out of the corner of my eye two men dancing around a home-made speaker with a flashing lightbulb attached to it as the taxi I was in turned a corner on my way home. This moment (maybe it was the flashes of the lightbulb) initiated a sort of reverie or daydream in the taxi, where I imagined the whole piece as an artwork in one go. I remembered the piece when I got back home and noted it down. However, to achieve the piece I had to abandon the idea of replicating that daydream and to rediscover from scratch where this 'moment' could be found. What that means is that although I had a very clear idea of what I wanted, how the actors looked, what they were wearing, what the music was like, what the set was and how it was all shot, I had to go through the process of building everything from scratch as if I didn't know anything to be able to produce the work in a manner that made sense. I began by auditioning around 70 actors till I found the two I felt convinced I could work with. I then proceeded to work with each one separately; my technique was based upon developing with each of them (before they ever met each other) a gestural, physical language, where hand and body movements meant something to each of them and to make them comfortable enough with this language to be able to have a conversation with it. However – and this is quite important – this semi-language was never fixed into a set of correlations between words and gestures; I was interested in keeping things a bit fluid. At the same time I began introducing the music to the actors, layer by layer. I would take my laptop with the multi-tracked sessions on it and work with the actors on different instruments, break the music down and build it back up again so that they could become fluent and develop an intimacy with the music. Finally, when I felt both of them were ready, I introduced them to each other and began 'sculpting' their conversation together. Both actors used the language we had developed while I gave notes, whispered suggestions, literally changed things, and allowed them

to bring their own input into the 'conversation' taking place. In the end the piece was choreographed.

However, what was not communicated to the actors were both the sources of these gestures, the meanings of the clothes they were wearing. Some of the gestures were taken from street dances, others from fights, and others from ways of greeting and yet others were completely made up either from me or from them. What was important was that these gestures were always anchored to a sense of communication, that they were haunted by the world around them even if they were not completely of that world. The way the actors were dressed was very important because it implied a specific position within contemporary Egyptian history: the older, heavier man in a brown leather jacket is the epitome of 80s street machismo – he is someone who maybe at that time made some money, smoked imported cigarettes, but is definitely lost nowadays. While the younger man dressed in a cheap approximation of office clothes is a university graduate probably from a small village and whose parents in some way (maybe unknown to even themselves) still subscribe to the ‹decent› dreams of the 60s Nasserite state. The staged moment of communication between these two ‹avatars of history› (if you will) rearticulates the present in a way that possesses depth without trying to fix any one point. In the end, both of them are members of the crowd and the crowd is always many.

OK: Here at Ibraaz, we are very interested in both practice and form. Your work can be classified as 'new media' by some, inasmuch as it forms part of a historical canon of work that is made possible by the use of technology. Would you be able to tell me what your definition of new media art is?

HK: Honestly, I find the definition of genres a side-effect of professionalisation. In my experience, one of the most positive things I experienced when first showing my work in Cairo in the mid-90s was the lack of this professionalised lens in the perception of the work. There was (and still is, even if to a much lesser extent) a lot of anger from certain (mostly older) audiences when it comes to the reception of the work. However, this anger accurately reflects a cultural history; it is in my opinion a productive anger that speaks of the work's effectiveness and its resonance. The work is not easily packaged and consumed, it has to be dealt with and therefore for some (and trying to discuss who that is and 'why' is a whole other issue) is something to be attacked. Personally, I do not find medium-specific categories relevant anymore.

OK: How much of this definition do you think is a part of a recent western art-historical construct?

HK: The discussion around the canon is a very complicated one. The problem is that the canon not only defines, it actually lays down the horizons upon which definitions are made. These definitions still control, to a large extent, how value is produced within the current historical period.

OK: But arguably the act of curation (which you are privy to) is 'formative' of a canon. Without a canon, we have little direction, few references or jumping-off points to found an educational basis. I'm intrigued: do you have an alternative solution? Canon formation of course works across the board, for example, You Tube is now adopting a 'curatorial strategy' because the sea of cultural expression is so over-saturated.

HK: The problem is not the existence of a canon. It is the relationship one has to that canon. Let us assume that a canon gets formed out of a level of consensus within a discursive field. This consensus of course partially reflects dominant ideological orders as well as the *unfixed unknown quality.* My argument is that art practice can never be 100 percent compromised because its success in relation to the dominant order demands a level of *unknowability*. That means that the canon has to remain open, and that our relationship to it has to remain fluid. Mannerism is the product of educational systems, and a closed relationship to the canon. I would like to propose the canon not as a repository or references but rather as a more complicated thing than that.

Hassan Khan, The Agreement, 2011, installation view, SALT, Beyoglu, 2012, five narrative texts authored by the artist, 10 objects, wooden shelf. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photograph by Serkan Taycan.

OK: In an essay that I penned in Ibraaz Platform 003 entitled 'The Social Impulse', I begin by quoting an article that you wrote a few months after the Egyptian uprisings. I sensed from your writing that you were frustrated by this presupposition from audiences that the open-ended act of a revolution would/could/should influence your artistic practice. I was wondering, how have your thoughts developed since that period? Do you feel that writers, curators and audiences have started to move away from trying to evoke these 'politicised' readings, or are there different complications that exist at present?

HK: Well, on a positive note, I think that less people within the local context of the Egyptian art scene have responded to this kind of easy commodification of history and the social than I thought was going to happen. I believe that this is partially because a

fair percentage of practitioners, especially younger ones, have participated and continue to profoundly engage in the revolutionary actions and events that continue to this day. However, that tendency and curiosity is still of course there, at least in some audiences and curators. It is maybe only when things visibly shake everywhere, when we all realise that we actually share the same conditions, and that revolution is an absolute necessity yet a completely non-ethical amoral endeavour (even if some of the actions produced under these conditions are at an almost unprecedented ethical standard). When the idea of revolution loses its romanticism, when it is not idealised, when it is understood as a place where the space of the unknown within the self is opened up because social and material conditions have been engaged with in a violent fashion. And that the unknown is exactly that, and therefore is not implicitly positive or good. When concrete decisions have been made, and sacrifices given, blood spilled: maybe that will be the moment of re-articulation.

OK: My final question is a personal one. Many do not know that your father Mohamed Khan has produced some landmark Egyptian cinema. How have you negotiated your father's presence as a figure? Do you feel influenced?

HK: When I first began working, I very consciously distanced myself from my father. This was in part because I was not interested in the sycophantic, hypocritical attitude that comes with that kind of situation. Cinema is a powerful field that has a wide-reaching impact on the social history of a place, especially in places where the industry was as large as it was in Egypt. There is also a long tradition of nepotism – I (as well as my parents) also had no interest in that. However, I know that the influence of both of my parents in different ways was crucial to my awareness of different possibilities relating to theradical understanding of the self and the production of forms. I am deeply indebted to my mother in understanding that social class is formative, that this is a city wounded by humiliation and that people, all of them, constantly play games. I am indebted to my father, for exposing me to cinema as a medium and an industry. I saw films being made, I learnt that the actor is a human being, I witnessed a world being constructed first on sets and then in the editing suite, understood that the producer's interests are maybe different to the director's, witnessed a commitment to one's work that is deep and profound. Experiencing the materiality of celluloid (seeing cut-out rushes being dumped in huge bins in the old 'Montage' suites of Cairo's 'Madinet El Senima', or 'Cinema City'); wandering through the fake set of the alley, which was a permanent fixture of 'Madinet El Senima', must have helped me become aware at an early age of the idea of artifice as a presupposed condition of cultural production. Still, I constantly argue with both of my parents (and they with me), with their cultural and political presuppositions (they with mine), but that in itself is an education.

Hassan Khan is an artist, musician, and writer. He lives and works in Cairo, Egypt.