

Interview

History as Concept

Lasse Lau in
conversation with
Amira Gad

'The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again,' wrote Walter Benjamin on 'On the Concept of History'. Lasse Lau considers this in 2012 work, *Sound from the Hallways*. In the film, the artist revisits history at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, one of the most visually dense and unique museums in the world, and challenges concepts of historicism and museology from the early twentieth century. He starts with a time when history was still seen as universal and man believed in its abundant truth. It moves into times where several histories challenge each other for the semblance of reality. In this interview, Lau expands on the notion of historicity, the fragmented nature of narrating history, and takes us deep into the

Lasse Lau, still from
*Sound from the
Hallways*. Courtesy of
the artist.



references that aspire from his film, widening the scope beyond time and space.

Sound from the Hallways was commissioned for a solo exhibition at Lumiar Cite in Lisbon, where it was first screened (January – April 2012). It was then screened at Bozar in Brussels (June 2012), the Cinemathèque and Darb 1718 in Cairo (July 2012), and CPH:DOX in Copenhagen (November 2012). *Sound from the Hallways* is a co-production between Lasse Lau, Kran Film, and Mostafa Youssef from *Seen Films* in Cairo, and includes an artistic collaboration with sound artist Maurice Louca. It is supported by the Danish Arts Council and DCCD.

Amira Gad: Could you talk about about the context from which this project came about?

Lasse Lau: The Museum was in my neighbourhood in 2008 and was one of my tranquil escapes from the buzz and noise of the sometimes too rich and overwhelming city of Cairo. At the time I was invited to be an artist in residence at Townhouse Gallery. Inside the Museum I was like the kid in the candy store. The grandness of the building – typical for its time – and the thousands upon thousands of stunning and dramatic objects and dusty vitrines made me slow down into a feeling of solitude. It was like being from another world – time had stopped – and the multiplicities of objects absorbed me into their universe, like a ghost. I think anyone who visits the museum for the first time feels a sense of wonder and admiration for an early civilisation built on entrepreneurship. I always knew I would return to this unique space. The plans for a new museum in Giza as well as the ‘Arab Spring’ made this the right time to go.

AG: Space is approached in an interesting way in your film: it has this picturesque attributes (the windows, the light) and its architectural, focusing on the building itself rather than on the museum’s collection. Given your background on museology, how do you justify this choice? Can we speak of monumental history in this case?

LL: Museums are bricks or buildings of collections and we often tend to forget this. To understand the underlying structures, we must think in Brechtian terms and strip the theatre from its techniques

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of meaning. When you are not entertained, so to speak, you start noticing the lighting, the doors that are closed, the paint peeling, the repetitions of objects, even the bathroom. You wonder about the admission fee and so on. In this process of stripping bare, the museum becomes apparent to us and the idea of the museum is easily recognised. Here, when I say 'idea', I mean the initiators, funders, architects and owners et cetera – those who have an agency in the museum. If you are an Egyptologist you would also notice that I filtered away some of the more unique and important objects of gods and pharaohs in the film to make room for some of the less artistic objects that are no less important: ones portraying the soldier, the housewife, the worker and the slave. Like the poem on 'Taj Mahal' by Sahir Ludhianvi, when he writes:

You who take delight in tombs of kings deceased,
Should have seen the hutments dark where you and I did wean.
Countless men in this world must have loved and gone,
Who would say their loves weren't truthful or strong?
But in the name of their loves, no memorial is raised
For they too, like you and me, belonged to the common throng.

Back to your question, the point about giving the walls equal importance for the film is another element, and that is to point toward the world outside the walls: the lived and colloquial.

AG: So in a way, one could argue that you're expanding upon this idea of the 'museum without walls'? Nevertheless, we could also speak of the 'colonial museum' in relation to your work. How do you consider both notions?

LL: This could be a long answer but let me try and make it short. I recently came across a photograph of the main Hall of the Egyptian Museum, which dated from 1927. If you go into the museum today most of the sculptures haven't moved their location. It's like everything looks identical to when the museum was built. Even the more pedagogic mainstream impasse in museums has passed the Egyptian Museum. Why? One explanation is that the distribution and function of the museum building is highly linked to the European Enlightenment. It was a time that promoted scientific reasoning to some of the more superstitious dogmas of the church. It was also a time of the 'exploration' of the new worlds. It was a time where people lived and believed in universal truths. Expeditions were sent out from Denmark to the Arabian Peninsula, to collect rare books, species of plants et cetera, and more importantly to find religious traces of the past that could cast light on the scriptures. Some of these expeditions were more driven by scientific ideas and others by pure trade.

In Shady Abdel Salem's film *The Nights of Counting Years* (1969), the film takes place where the Antiques Service together with the police are trying to put a stop to grave robbery and treasury hunting near Kurna, which, in the nineteenth century, had become very

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systemised through adopting the new developments of excavation techniques. His film attempts to connect a national discourse against the imperial – some of the same founding reasons behind the establishment of the Egyptian Museum, just like the museum in Baghdad and others in the post-colonial world. To stop the great flight from the land of objects. With a national discourse, where treasures of Egypt stays in Egypt, in a time when the majority of collections are found abroad, many disputes officially still exist without much political focus or attention, such as in the cases of the British Museum or the Egyptian Museum of Berlin.

I think the link between autocratic regimes and the colonial past of the museum building in Cairo, built by French architects, with a display frozen in time. It has become a monument. This has also happened to other museums in the post-colonial world, and even the more dubious museums of denial like The African Museum, otherwise known as the Congo Museum, in Brussels, which is supposedly finally going into ‘renovation,’ hopefully for the better. On a more global scale, museums and their archives are in crises and are having problems in redefining their purpose in a reality where there is not any abundant truth to history. The only attempt has been to either ignore or ‘depoliticise’ the museum within the neo-liberal sway of capitalism while avoiding to admit to what Foucault says about history as being discursive. I love when Fred Wilson showed the marginal African American collections in the Baltimore Historical Society in his installation *Mining the Museum* in 1992-93. This example serves as a good reminder as to how discourses always frame any collection.

AG: You’ve mentioned this idea of a ‘frozen display’, the museum building becoming a monument, and in turn, also freezing in time. One of the particularities of the Cairo Museum, like many other museums of its type, is the display philosophy of showing *everything* and not a selection including its most unique and important artefacts, which you actually chose to opt out of your film.

LL: Well the more sympatric feature about displays in museums in the past is that the archive was much more visible and less filtered from the idea of the unique. Today you are, as a viewer, often

denied that understanding. With that I mean the idea of replica and distribution of certain narratives through sculptures. You are right that I didn't emphasise that element in a very obvious way in the film, although there are plenty of moments of repetition and plenty of less unique sculptures in view.

AG: Would you care to comment on the title? It is obvious by watching the film why it would be called as such but I'm more wondering about this emphasis on having sound, actually fill the space and by doing so creating a binary between the negative and the positive space. In a way, I think it could be an interesting association to make with the notion of space, which is very much dealt with in your film.

LL: *Sound from the Hallways* is a very descriptive title. Muntadas actually suggested instead that it be called: 'This is not the British Museum', which is indeed sexier. But I am happy with the one I choose. In the title, I don't conceive the sounds as something neither positive nor negative. Is the sound of rupture always positive? I think when we look at the revolution in Egypt two years later, or to previous ones in history, it has become murkier. With rupture, one history is replaced with another – at least that's the intention – but rupture can also be scaled spatially, from the social to a personal level in one moment in time; like the sound of a car honking. What the sound does in the film is to bring other spaces, other realities and even fictive elements into the grand halls of history. Hallways are, for me, spaces of passage between different ends. Asger Jorn was writing about *triolectics* to complicate the narrative. Like Edward Soja writes about Thirdspace:

I define Thirdspace as an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced triolectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality.

In the film the sound announces with hallways a mood shift, or the possibility for the outside to inform changes on history, or even for the

Lasse Lau, *Sound from the Hallways*, installation shot. Photograph by Arne Kaiser.



objects to come alive. This is then always taken back to the actual sounds of the place, which punctuates how history in museums consumes ruptures and absorbs objects into black holes – stretches of time – by making the eventful eventless.

AG: In a way, sound represents ruptures in history and ruptures in narrating history. Can you tell me more about the collaboration with the sound musician for this film?

LL: With no intention of interpreting myself how ruptures in history might sound like in Egypt, I teamed up, by suggestion of my producer Mostafa Youssef, with composer and musician Maurice Louca. This might sound very postmodern and essentialist, but recognizing a colonial past sets other parameters for engagement in a very national discourse, like what the revolution in Egypt was. And my film is not about the revolution but more about how we perceive history by and large. We talked together about how ruptures have brought meaning, from factory strikes to city noise, and how this can be used to create a more diverse soundscape.

The material we worked with was all from car honking, which if you've ever lived in Cairo, you would know that it is one of the most dominant sounds in the city; then there was windows vibrating, to radio noise from the fifties. Maurice even went with us on location to the Egyptian Museum and recorded sound from the metal fence with contact microphones – which is the low frequency 'boom' sounds in the film – to capture abstract but personal experiences from January 2011, when the museum premises were being used to capture and torture demonstrators. A story like this really brings the museum to another frontline. The composition Louca created was very subtle, beautiful and works well into the film. It indicates, places or moots the viewer without having a literal understanding of the actual events they reference.

AG: The film goes back and forth between the sound of people and to some quieter shots where we almost hear the wind, or even the sound outside. Why is there this fragmentation throughout that appears on different layers (sound, shots, etc.)?

LL: The film is composed like a music piece or like a mosaic picture. I play with the viewer's expectations for sounds to appear and reappear at certain moments. Some of the transitions in the sounds are used to disrupt loudness and silence. Formerly, the floating images produced by the steady-cam are focused on the objects and the fixed shots are on the transitory spaces like the entrance, hallway, stairway, window, skylight or door. You might accept for a moment the iris of the camera as your own – like most films do – but the intention is to not to let you rest with this perception. This attempt was to create a flow that goes in-between realities; sometimes the images are seen in perspective of the objects and this plays with an unexpected agency; other times the perspective is seen by the camera team that you recognise in the reflection of the vitrines. The objects that pass can only be recognised for short moment of time. I also break with the narrative of the pictures, since we start at the

Lasse Lau, *Sound from the Hallways*, installation shot. Photograph by Arne Kaiser.



entrance hall but don't end with the exit door. The last image in the film is of one of the curator's door.

AG: The film style is almost like a phantom roaming through the space of the museum. Can you talk some more about this and your stylistic film choices?

LL: I am happy this feeling of the phantom came across to you. By playing with the perspective of the objects and bringing in the sounds by Maurice Louca that have a nostalgic feeling to them, like wind blowing or the repeat of a female voice singing, the attempt was to almost make the visitors feel like intruders to the 'peace' of the museum, which is not unlike my own experience when I visited the museum the first time.

AG: How are concepts of historicism challenged in the film in a 'formal' way?

LL: It is a philosophic question. Most museums makes us believe that history goes from A to Z without any ruptures or ends; that there is a grand narrative and national history always connected to the development of a civilisation; and therefore there is no space for devaluation or backwardness or fragmentations.

AG: And this would refer back to the idea of 'disruption' and narrating history, also in relation to the display presentation of the museum, which we were discussing...

LL: This kind of historical view post-World War II is deeply problematic and seen as rather totalitarian. We acknowledge today the many parallel histories and isms. When Foucault talks about history as discursive – more than events on a string – he wants us to acknowledge that there is always agency in history writing. The problem is that museums don't acknowledge this, or know how to conform to these postwar ideas of history. They have often simply covered up with audiovisual spectacles of displays, drawers that the visitor can pull in, and a sea of descriptive explanations without any ideas for the future. Fundamentally, museums are still in the grand narrative of history and timeline, but the visitors are leaving. I think most museums are scared of the consequences if they do display history differently. What would it mean not to hide behind something that was believed to be objective? It would shake their mission, but their survival is on the line if they don't start changing. The Egyptian Museum hasn't changed its display dramatically since it was built and this highlights the ideas of the museum, making the dynamics more visible and recognisable than from other museums. In *Sound from the Hallways*, the idea is that *realities* are intruding on the museum from the transitory spaces between an inside and an outside, but that weight of the objects absorbs everything from the outside into emptiness.

AG: Can you comment on this quote, which accompanies the description of your film: 'The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again.' (From Walter Benjamin 'On the Concept of history')

LL: The text 'On the Concept of History' is one of my favorites by Walter Benjamin. I hope that most art historians actually read this text and have it in mind in their (future) work. For me, the quote connects, like the image attached in the beginning of Klee's *Angelus Novus*, so much history as to art and vice versa. It may be rather daunting reading for some since it questions, like the film does, some fundamental values. The way I read Benjamin's quote is that the image is only recognized by the presence and the image that doesn't do this might become irretrievable and lost. Often there are several perspectives to his writing and my interpretation may fail, but it makes associations for me to others, such as the psychology of Jung, and the connection to memory and dreams and the archaic

Lasse Lau, *Sound from the Hallways*, installation shot. Photograph by Arne Kaiser.



memories of the body. The interesting point with Jung is that the image for him is so central to the understanding of our self.

AG: Some of your inspirations were *Before the Throne* by Naguib Mahfouz, *The Concept of History* by Walter Benjamin, Ibn Khaldun on history as life spans, and Michel Foucault's writings on history as discourse. Can you tell me some more about these sources of inspirations and how they are reflected in your film, expanding upon your practice in general?

LL: In brief, I would say that the benefit about being artist is that you can be more eclectic in your research, and don't have the same academic rules to follow. The research is for me is always like a tree that grows into many branches and you don't necessarily have to bring it all back to one coherent understanding. Ibn Khaldun is one of the fathers of historiography and was interesting to me because he talks about history as lifespans. If you look at the recent century in Egypt you can't but recognize certain parallels. Now history as 'circular' is not the perspective that many people subscribe to today, but you can't help but recognize some resonance. For me, Naguib Mahfouz's book *Before the Throne* was a far more interesting subject of inspiration. For those who have not read his book, it's a story about the rulers of Egypt who get summoned to the court of Osiris, which decides their afterlife. It is basically Mahfouz delivering his own historical judgment through the dialogue with the Egyptian gods. There is an important fictive element when he stages the story of 'Abnum', a revolutionary leader of the common between the Old Kingdom and the Middle kingdom. Although there is no historical account of any figure named 'Abnum' in history, the representation of an undocumented historical figure could well be real and therefore cannot be discarded. Mahfouz's own reply to his stories was simply: 'It's history.' Parallel to Mahfouz I was reading *Arabia Felix: The Danish Expedition of 1761-1767* by Thorkild Hansen, who equally and intentionally fictionalized historical documents for the benefit of good storytelling. The problems are more that historians believe they think they don't paint history. Probably artists have always been

the better and more accurate historians from the beginning: from cave paintings to contemporary work.

Other films I was taken by was *Two Faces in The Landscape* directed by Samir Ouf, where his contemporary life is seen from the perspective of the historical ruins and treasures of earlier civilisations. Stylistically, I was looking to Pierre Thoretton's latest film *L'amour fou* on Yves Saint-Laurent. There are some wonderful shots from Majorelle Garden in Marrakesh that made me think about how to approach the objects in the Egyptian Museum.

AG: Benjamin states: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.' (Thesis VI). In closing, would you say that your film embodies Benjamin's understanding of historical materialism for which the true task is to save the past?

LL: In Thesis IV Benjamin writes, 'As flowers turn towards the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward the sun which is rising in the sky of history.' In other words, history is most likely written by the winners, the affluent and the upper class. I have no problem to subscribe to Benjamin's alternative and what he also defined as historical materialism, or for that matter to Foucault and his questioning of power by looking at the margins. I think *Sound from the Hallways* exactly wants to question this kind of concept of history and even go one step further to a more subjective place, where the body of the camera, the animation of the objects and the spectators will interfere.

Sound from the Hallways will be screened at the British Museum on 22nd November 2013.

Lasse Lau (Sønderborg Denmark, 1974) is a filmmaker and video artist who lives and works in Brussels and Copenhagen. His films deal with socio-economic issues, the negotiation of conflicts and the notion of space through the language of film. Lau seeks to utilize aesthetics as a framework that can open dialogical paths. He has exhibited in a wide range of museums and galleries including Westfälischer Kunstverein (Münster, Germany), Hamburger Bahnhof (Berlin, Germany), Aarhus Art Museum (Aarhus, Denmark), Brandts Klædefabrik (Odense, Denmark), Museum of Contemporary Art (Zagreb, Croatia), the Turin Biennial of Contemporary Art (Turin, Italy), Contemporary Museum (Baltimore, USA) and MoMA PS1 (New York, USA). Lau is the co-founder and long time board member of Kran Film Collective and was a member of the Editorial Selection Board at the Danish Film Institute Video Workshop 2001-02. He studied at the Media Art Department at Funen Art Academy (Odense, Denmark), at the Hochschule der Künste (Berlin, Germany) and at the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program (New York, USA).

About the author

Amira Gad is Associate Curator at Witte de With, Rotterdam, where she has worked since 2009. She received a Masters in Contemporary Art from Sotheby's Institute of Art, London and a Bachelor of Liberal Arts & Sciences from the University College Utrecht. She recently co-curated *Short Big Drama*, a solo exhibition of Angela Bulloch at Witte de With and was assistant curator for *All about us*, a solo exhibition of Miki Kratsman at Ursula Blickle Foundation, Kraichtal. Gad was a jury member for *Been Out (vol. 1)*, an exhibition lab for young contemporary art organised by Bohème Précaire in cooperation with 2010LAB.TV and *You All For My Act*, an exhibition organised by the Rookies MA at Showroom MAMA, Rotterdam. Gad has been involved in the production of several publications on contemporary art including the artist book *One Day* by Susanne Kriemann, *Rotterdam – Sensitive Times* by Lidwien van de Ven, the catalogue *All about us*, and contributed to the publication *Source Book 8: Edith Dekyndt* and *Source Book 10: Angela Bulloch*.