IBRAAZ

Interview

Image Politics

ismaël in conversation with Wafa Gabsi

ismaël, *Computers visions*, 2008-ongoing, photographs taken by a webcam. © ismaël.

Tunisian artist ismaël lives and works in Tunis, where he was born in 1981. ismaël's work explores the social and political functions of the image as mediated via contemporary modes of dissemination, from television to the Internet. Moving fluidly between writing, blogging, producing video art, documentary filmmaking and curating, recent exhibitions include *Breath of Freedom*, a virtual group show presenting work by Tunisian artists created before and

after the revolution, curated by Mohamed Ben Soltanein 2011, and *Politiques/Politics* at the National Center for Living Art in Tunis in 2012, organised by ismaël alongside artists Nidhal Chamekh, Ymene Chetouane, Fakhri El Ghazel, Maher Gnaoui, Malek Gnaoui, Atef Maatallah and Ibrahim Màtouss. In conversation with Wafa Gabsi, ismaël considers the influences and uses of new media in art and society.

WG: The use of new media in art is characterised by practices that utilise new technologies in both creative processes and creative formats. What is it about new technologies that could be of interest to artists?

i: The artist thinks in forms, a bit like a philosopher who thinks in concepts – in the Deleuzien sense and not in the advertising sense. It is completely normal that we are exploring this area. Baudelaire said, more or less, that there is nothing of interest to a philosopher. And artists are in the same position. The artist does not just explore new technologies: he explores the whole world with all its stars and hidden corners. And, if he is a genius, he will explore a little more than the whole world. This is the order of things. An artist is an explorer, an inventor; he discovers a continent or a fabulous machine. From here, he will always find someone to colonise the territory, to annex it for his own needs and interests. But the artist stops being an artist when he participates in the colonisation of the territory that he has discovered. Like sharks, if artists stop swimming, they die. It must be said that with new technologies, it is easier to make a gadget than a piece of art, given that we are experiencing the tyranny of systemic entertainment. New technologies are like knives: some people use them to share bread and others, to assassinate. In art, some create and others play.

WG: Video never ceases to create different typologies in art, encapsulating the aesthetic tendencies of art movements from

ismaël, *Computers visions*, 2008-ongoing, photographs taken by a webcam. © ismaël.
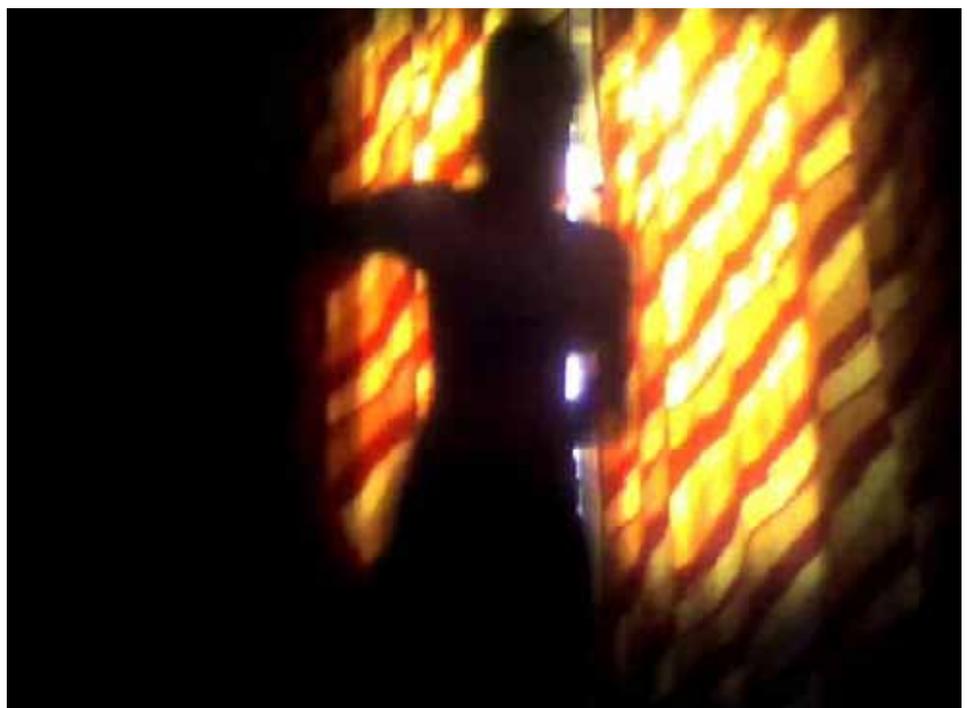
Fluxus and the video explorations of the 1960s to the interactive art of the 1990s and, more recently, Net art and its associated performances. This art also explores the social game presented by such new technologies, namely, social networking and video exchange platforms. How do you explain this in terms of your practice as a video artist?

i: First, I want to specify that I consider myself neither an artist nor a video artist. ‹Artist› is too big a word. I believe we are not born artists but we become artists: each person creates their own path. The one I have chosen reflects my nature. It is tortuous, indirect, chaotic, and has many shadows. Along this path, several practices follow each other at different times and sometimes in parallel: there is writing, cinema, performance, photography, installation and also video, which has had an important role, especially in the last few years. But in the end, these all constitute a single path. The fascinating and exciting thing about video today is that it is, to use Roland Barthes›s term describing the power of language, ‹fascist›. On the one hand, everyone has the power to work with and acquire images from the same tools. On the other, authorities often take control to dilute and retrieve images from these tools. But if the director, camera man, journalist, advertiser and member of the public all have the same cameras, programmes and screens, what difference is there today between the images of the artist, the propagandist, or the amateur? The question is here. The issue for me as a practitioner of the image is to subvert this order: to use the same tools as everyone else so as to radically confront these ‹fascist› images.

WG: What are the ethical limits of new technologies and their use within the creative sphere?

i: None. There are no limits, but there are ethics. Ethics are not a limit; they are the practical application of liberty, while art is the practical invention of liberty. Art precedes ethics and even encompasses it. From here it is not a unified mass – fixed and rigid – with precise delimitations: it is relative, individual and above all, in perpetual motion and evolution. The point for the artist is to constantly interrogate, analyse and deconstruct. We live in a time where all powers (economic, theocratic, political and media) come together to serve the individual. These powers don›t hesitate to create wars, underpay workers, or send innocents to prison and I›m leaving out the worst. These powers, particularly the supra-absolute powers of economy and theocracy, have no limits: they do not hesitate to kill - directly and indirectly - tens, hundreds or thousands of individuals. It is an injustice to constantly question and impose, in some cases, limits on artists and thinkers.

WG: Do you see certain constants forming in art with the introduction of new media?

i: To my mind, the constant today is that there is no longer a constant. If we look at video, for example, we see the explosive nature of the medium. This is no longer a case of postmodern fragmentation; this is something else entirely. This explosion is even more impressive

when one considers that it occurs within the medium, within the work and within the objects of transmission. One must not forget that the digital image, in contrast with all other images, is an image made up of a certain number of pixels. Although silver-based, analogue film gives the impression of movement, it is composed of a certain number of fixed images: the ‹24 truths a second› Jean Luc Godard referred to. Today, digital imagery gives the impression of being one and indivisible, when it is in fact composed of many images. In this sense, where is the truth? Surely not in the pixels making up the image: they are simply a suite of 0s and 1s. So where?

Cinema, which was the art of the image *par excellence* in the twentieth century, is, of course, the first and most deeply affected by new technologies. The entire industrial chain – from preparation to projection in the cinema – will be entirely digital within the next few years. The added bonus of DVDs is how one can work directly with film and modify the meanings of the work: different versions, cut scenes, alternative endings and framing, for example. DVD players, digital cameras, webcams, downloading, video streaming, video exchange platforms, mobile phone video services et cetera, all these elements constitute new modes of creation, diffusion, and perception of the cinematographic image. The screen is now shrinking, and the films themselves are transportable and transported. Support becomes increasingly irrelevant, the material increasingly ethereal, volatile and abstract.

ismaël, *Contorsion (404) & bleu sourd (monochrome d'yves klein),* 2008, diptych, photographs taken by a mobile phone. © ismaël.
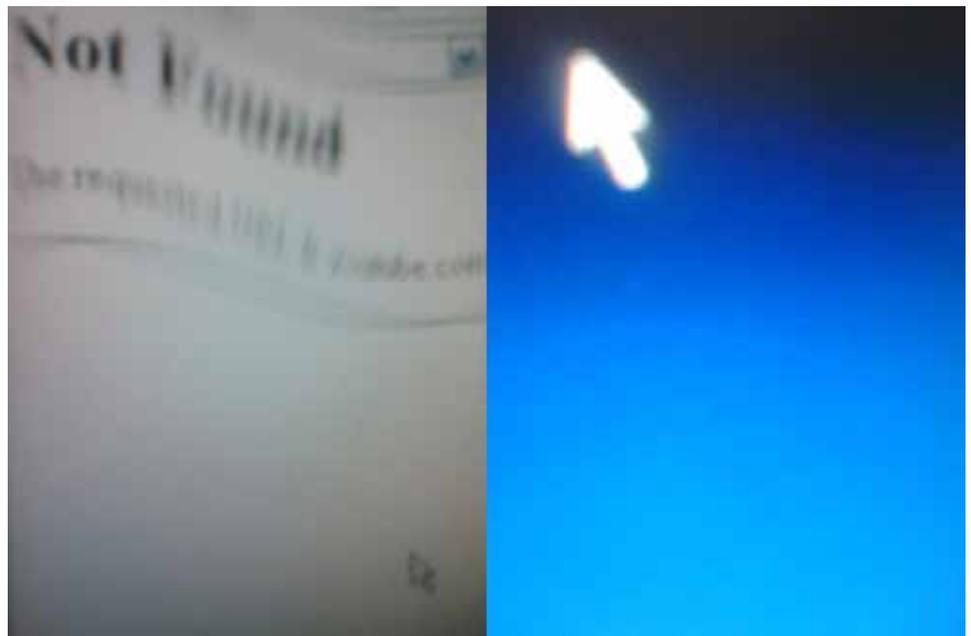
WG: How will digital technologies change the image of society and what, in your opinion, best describes reality as transposed to video?

i: The work of the video artist is to transpose, to use your word, visions from video to the world. Reality exists only in the credulity of the person who believes in it, a bit like with god. For the artist, the power of a social or political proposition is to reverse objectivity and shatter reality, therefore creating a thousand realities. Art is not an image of the world: it is just one of its faces.

The work of the sculptor is the best metaphor to describe the work of the artist. Faced with an ensemble of materials, or a single primary material, he shapes, assembles, cuts, melts, burns, sticks and reconstructs. The sculpted work is not the primary material just as video is not an image, but sculpted imagery. In this sense, the material itself is what is filmed: the filmmaker sculpts his material into visions that he sends out into the world. The artist sculpts the world›s material into an infinite number of forms and these forms invent, from this world, an archipelago of other worlds.

WG: To what extent is video a way of dialoguing with the other?

i: I like the idea that considers art or thought as a meeting. The person who creates covers half the journey towards the other as the other completes the remaining half of the journey. We find ourselves at an unknown point; authors of an aesthetic or an idea. Afterwards, anything can happen: speaking or looking at each other in silence, being in agreement or in dispute, making love or war.

ismaël, Still from the video *porn01*, 2010. © ismaël.

WG: What does a film manifesto mean to you? I refer to Godard›s work, which became progressively deconstructed and that blended social and revolutionary themes. Does your work resemble Godard›s themes?

i: A manifesto had a purpose in the 1970s. Today, there is none: manifestos finished with ideologues. Not Godard, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Jean-Pierre Gorin nor Phillipe Garrel made Ciné-Tracts their whole lives. I try to develop, theoretically and practically, through writing and through visual art, the idea that art has a responsibility to think up new freedoms. Individuals share ideas, but it is up to art to share aesthetics, invent both political and formal concrete and abstract forms and to represent new ideas. This was also the theme of the exhibition *Politiques/Politics*, conceived by a collective of eight artists including myself. The pieces exhibited in *Politiques/Politics* transcended the here and now; the starting point of work on show moving towards aesthetic propositions that redefine

the politics of Tunisian creativity and the role of art in relation to the city. The exhibition presented work that questioned the established aesthetic order so as to further question the established political, social or moral order. 'Engagement' is redefined here not as the statement of a politicised discourse or the edification of a myth of contestation, but rather as the multiple deconstructions of discourses and constructions of form.

WG: These days, war is as much a media construction as it is a political one. Harun Farocki decodes these constructions through the medium of video by examining the relationships between audiovisual culture, politics, technology and war. What is your view of Farocki›s work and how would you define it?

i: Digital technology – computers, the Internet, DVDs, and tomorrow, Blu Ray – have irrevocably changed the world. But they have also changed the image of the world in a way that has not been seen since the invention of perspective. If the Vietnam War was the TV war and the Gulf War the video game war, the war in Iraq prior to the Arab revolution was the Internet war, particularly when you look at the images that have come from it: exploded, fluid and intimated. Icons put to the test of 2.0 blogs, social media, virtual media, and platforms of exchange. Here, videos become currency. Wars have always been accompanied by an artistic and philosophical shift. It›s like theatre. After the climax - and war is a climax - changes happen. What we can note today is that war and digital imagery are alike, as we cannot separate what is an image of which. War and digital imagery are both fragmented, unconventional.

ismaël, *Portraits* series, 2008, digital photographs. © ismaël.

WG: What do you think of the term ‹artist activist›?

i: I think it is a pleonasm like ‹white snow›. By essence, an artist is an activist. It reminds me of what Nietzsche says in *The Birth of Tragedy* about the Dionysian man who is like Hamlet. Both have, at

some point, looked deep into the essence of things. Both have seen and both will forever be disgusted by action. It's because their action can change nothing of the immutable nature of things and they find it ridiculous or degrading to be asked to clean up a world that has come off its hinges. Knowledge kills action because action requires us to hide beneath illusion. This is where art comes from. Art alone can submit to this disgust for the horror and absurdity of existence. But what Nietzsche seems to forget is that art is action, just as blood is the spirit. The artist acts and his work acts, too.

ismaël, *Là-bas Babylone* series, 2011, photographs taken by a Mini DV camera. © Exit Productions.

WG: How does thinking about politics in relation to art modify your perception of reality? Can you explain this basing your answer on the visible/invisible relationship alluded to in your text «Les films documentaries Tunisiens: Entre manipulation télévisuelle et justesse cinématographique» (Tunisian Documentary Film: Between televisual manipulation and cinematographic accuracy) and your video works *tv01 (2010)* and *tv02 (work in progress) (2012)*?

i: It is true that both a filmmaker and a photographer are essentially

trying to resolve a paradox: bringing to view something that cannot be seen. The text you mention, which dates from 2008, begins with this paragraph:

In essence, cinema does not replicate reality. On the contrary, it blurs the porous and moving boundaries between the real and unreal. Each cinematic shot (be it fiction, documentary, animation or experimental) is a staging of reality by the gaze. A cinematic image is a piece of a glance in a piece of reality.

Today, we are experiencing the tyranny of the visible, the comprehensible: of information and communication. Power puts people in situations of utmost vulnerability and distress so they stop questioning or looking for answers. All that matters is comfort and security. The audiovisual tool is used by the media and in advertising to strike at truths that can be summarised as: ‹believe in the visual we have created.›

Television shows, cinema and video art deconstruct and reconstruct the gaze. Media discourse, in particular regarding television, is double sided: that of what is apparent and that of what is pronounced. That these two constituents appear to be in constant harmony is what the totalitarian nature of the media is all about. What all forms of power have in common is the production and establishment - by means of what is clear - the smooth, the compact and the uniform (in the double sense of the term); whereas the artist proposes turmoil. The videos *Tv01* and *Tv02 (work in progress)*, exhibited in *Politiques/Politics*, interrogate media imagery and, in particular, the status of the image more generally. The work is on digital film in low resolution, captured from a television screen, which moves the images away from standardised imagery. The work is doubled-sided in both videos: simultaneously static and reflexive in terms of what we see.

WG: As an artist living and working in Tunisia, how has your work been received by Tunisians?

ismaël, *The man with the digital camera*, 2008, triptych, digital photographs. © ismaël.

i: I cannot really answer this question as I haven›t had the chance to exhibit enough of my work here. Having said this, I have a feeling that there are two dominant reactions on the rare occasions I show videos or installations: incomprehension, often, and curiosity, sometimes. Contrary to what one might think, these are actually complimentary sentiments with a common cause in terms of the the lack of opportunities we have to encounter a wider view of art here. In Tunisia, we talk a lot about ‹Contemporary art›. Artists, gallerists and institutions revel in this term, which made sense in the west post-Second World War. But it does not make much sense in Tunisia today; not historically, philosophically, aesthetically or politically. Today, a majority of Tunisian artists consider themselves ‹Contemporary›, but the only thing contemporary about them is that they are practicing. Yet many figures, and I experience this all the time, do not consider video, installation, performance, electronic music, digital art and so on, to be art.

Therefore, I prefer to answer this question in terms of what we could consider the ‹artistic elite›, for lack of another term, instead of in terms of the wider public. The Tunisian art world is viscerally bourgeois: lacking in talent, cowardly, attached to the safety of its own security and unlikely to lean towards innovation, audacity or radicalism. The perfect image of an annihilated, consumerist and nihilist society.

WG: You have made critical work as a direct result of the revolutionary movement in Tunisia. Did the revolutionary movement influence the use of new media in your work?

i: What interests me – more so than the people who experience the revolution through new media – are the people who carried out the revolution through new media. The absence of images didn›t create a need for memory but rather a need for more images. Shared online and via satellite channels, these images acquired not only a symbolic power, but they became a force unto themselves. An original void gave birth to an overflow of images. Despite there

not being any images of Bouazizi›s immolation, for example, the protest at Sidi Bouzid and the insurrection that followed were filmed and diffused in real time by the same people taking part. These revolutionaries were filming and diffusing in one gesture, carrying out the revolution in addition to creating the revolution. It is the first ‹revolution-spectacle› in the primary sense of the term: the ensemble of actions and gestures presented for view. A sort of action within an action, where the filmed is also the filmmaker and the spectator, at the same time.

In terms of new media within my practice, I must say that I, like everyone in my generation, have been in contact with information technology from a young age, from the computer game Atari and other consoles to the computer itself and the Internet. For me, new media is not really new because we are the same age; their different uses are natural to me. In terms of writing, I have had a censored blog since 2004, when I started writing at the heart of cyber dissidence. In terms of video and photography, I have been publishing online since 2007. The critique I am pursuing was not born with the revolution.

ismaël, Still from the video *tv01*, 2010. © ismaël.

WG: Is the contingency between revolution and creation beneficial to you?

i: The relationship between art and politics has always interested me. A large part of my work indirectly questions this relationship. When it comes to the contingency between revolution and creation, I have been thinking about it for a long time with my texts, such as «Le Cithare de l›Aube*"* (2005) or "Formes Résistantes*"* (2012). The transformation of society is an illusion only if those who constitute society do not make the effort to question reality's falsehoods. By blurring reality, artistic creation can have a social influence. The contingency between revolution and creation is not historic, but rather, ontological. Work must be autonomous from its primary material and acquire its own temporality. What revolution and creation have in common, ontologically, is the possibility of otherness.

WG: Along with Alaeddine Slim and Youssef Chebbi, you made the documentary film *Babylon* (2012), which was awarded the Grand Prix in the International Competition at the Marseille International

Documentary Film Festival (FID) in July 2012. Exploring a refugee camp based on the borders between Libya and Tunisia during the Arab Revolutions, *Babylon* was viewed by some critics as 'a radical alternative to the television treatment of the Arab revolutions.' How do you respond to this critique?

i: From February 2011, when the fighting in Libya intensified, Tunisia opened its borders and discovered in parallel both the first revolution in its history and the first refugee camps on its territory. The moment was doubly historic. But what profoundly interested us wasn›t the temporal problematic in terms of the history that led up to these events, but rather the spatial and geographical issues. We were attracted to a refugee camp that emerged in the middle of nature between two territories – Libya and Tunisia – in revolution. This marginal town became a ‹no-revolution land›.

ismaël, Still from the documentary *Babylon*, 2012. © Exit Productions.

There is a certain coherence that exists between the nature of what is filmed and the way it is filmed. The choice of placing ourselves in a process of demonstration rather than narration stems from the singularity of this contemporary *Babylon*: we give very little information, but neither is our point of view based on pure observation. This is primarily because we do not believe in the myth of objectivity. As *Babylon* is a mise-en-scène, in that a single point of view is put across via formal construction, at no point did we intervene. We never gave any direction to the people we filmed, something that occurs more frequently in documentary filmmaking and a practice inherited from TV reportage.

In post production, we wanted to keep a raw element to the images and sounds, hence the impression in the film of being in an unknown territory. In cinema, the exile owes it to himself to be, above all, cinematic. This proposition is the polar opposite of media imagery and this delights us. Faced with a uniform world and films aligning themselves with commercial expectations, cinema has no place if it does not invent unknowns.