IBRAAZ

The Non-Located Space

A Conversation between Mahmoud Khaled and Omar Kholeif

Mahmoud Khaled is an artist who lives and works between Alexandria and Beirut. Since studying painting, Khaled has focused on exploring how we use the different spaces in which we live and communicate.

In _Do You Have Work Tomorrow?_ (2012) a newly commissioned project for Ibraaz, the artist captures the ephemeral nature of desire as it manifests against the backdrop of a turbulent and perpetually shifting cityscape. A two-hander, Khaled's work presents a staged conversation using Grindr, the locative mobile phone application designed for gay men. In this discussion, Khaled talks about how software has re-articulated notions of both private and public space and considers how mobile media has affected everything from male representation to pedagogy.

OK: I think the best place for us to start our conversation is to consider your new project for Ibraaz Platform 004: _Do You Have Work Tomorrow?_ How did the project develop and where was its context derived from?

MK: It was stimulated by the set of questions that you presented to me for Ibraaz Platform 004. I started thinking about how territorially rooted the questions proposed were and I thought about how this created tensions. _Do You Have Work Tomorrow_ is not really about a specific event or place, nor does it react to a specific moment. Rather, it is based on a very personal experience between two strangers. The idea for this grew out of struggles that I have been working

through in relation to my own creative practice – questioning the content of the work that I am producing within the reality of a much larger social framework. It was challenging because I started out knowing the kind of content, aesthetics and ideas that I did not want to use, so in a sense the work grew out of a kind of artistic block or dilemma. The resulting project is a celebration of this 'dilemma' – one that I have been contemplating over the last couple of years.

OK: Formally, why did you choose the iPhone as the platform for your subjects and the medium of photography to document it? Also, the scenario that you present between the two men in your narrative could have been expressed in a variety of ways; why did you choose the Grindr iPhone application? **MK:** The iPhone and the application Grindr presented many different entry points for how one could think about the work. When I first considered Ibraaz Platform 004, it became clear that the questions were about very large-scale public concerns. I wanted to enter these public zones from a private entry point. Grindr – the social networking application – allows gay men to connect with each other on the basis of their location. It is a very private sphere, as indeed is the iPhone: the messages inside Grindr are personal documents that require passcodes to be accessed and so forth. I wanted to use this undisclosed material to think about public issues.

Just as challenging was to consider the role of photography. I have for some time been thinking about the possibilities of the medium: what can you do with a camera? It's loaded. And the main problem with it is that photographers in the context of where I am working are always expected to 'record' or 'capture' something – a dramatic political event, for example. I wanted to break this expectation and create something that was staged for the camera, then the staged

conversation on the iPhone would be transferred into images.

OK: Our focus at the moment at Ibraaz is to consider new media's relationship not only to art practice but also to people. Thinking about the 'medium', let's focus specifically on Grindr as a 'soft' space. It is a networking application for gay men to meet, yet also functions as a public forum or shared space. When you sign up you have a publically visible avatar (often an image of one's face). However, interestingly, if you log onto the platform, say in Egypt as opposed to the UK, one will notice that the 'faces' of the participants are often concealed. Instead, men will choose to 'boast' about their physiques, for example. I'm curious about what you think of Grindr as a public space and how it is unique to different contexts?

MK: The iPhone application itself is a privatised public space with its own borders and limits, even financially – let's consider how many people have access to iPhones, and Internet connections, 3G networks and so on. It's also restricted by sexual orientation; you must subscribe to certain categories to occupy this space. It is also a space that is fuelled by desire: the desire for two men to connect, often sexually. For me, desire is very much related to time and space, but what makes it interesting in the context of this project is its rootedness in a very location-based application. Grindr reveals where the person you are talking to is in relation to yourself. I wanted to use this tool to think about a non-located space. The text that forms the staged conversation between the two men was not tied to a particular time or space, but was constructed out of imagined and fragmented stories and personal experiences.

My intent for the viewer was to remove the location. One crucial moment in the conversation between the two men is when one of them discusses getting into his car. Here, the automobile is intended as a symbol for the body. It is the device that enables him mobility and prevents him from being located. It offers him safety because it can be shifted to whatever site or context. All of these different allegories then start to grow out of this – the car as home, the car as a space for love, sex and sociability. This is the most significant element of the work for me: dislocating nature in order to break the border that blurs an individual's stability and mobility.

OK: Would you call Grindr a form of social media that can be appropriated or hijacked? Though it is a space for the manifestation of desire, do you think it can be mechanised or instrumentallised differently?

MK: It's interesting what you are talking about, but to be frank, when I conceived the project I was imagining the moment when these two guys were talking to each other. In the background, it was a politically charged emergency state and I considered how this non-located background would affect their conversation. For a start, I didn't want them to end up having sex at the end of the dialogue. So even though their dalliance was driven by desire, the two ended up digressing into politics. All of a sudden, one of them realises that they are misusing the platform – Grindr – and that in fact they should

not discuss politics within this forum. Yet, the truth for them is evident – everything is politicised. This was important to put into the work.

On the other hand, I'm not particularly concerned with social media activism, although of course I understand it. I am more interested in how digital technology can alter our lives on a daily basis and in the private sphere. In the case of Grindr, it undoubtedly changed the mechanisms of desire and the aesthetics of self-representation.

Mahmoud Khaled, from the project Do You Have Work Tomorrow? (2012). Courtesy of the artist.

OK: Do you think it could hypothetically become a space for a gay rights movement in Egypt or in the region?

MK: The gay rights movement is not something I want to comment on. However, if you are talking about the notion of gay rights in the western context, then you are discussing the idea of 'coming out'. Grindr actually provides that: you basically are coming out to someone even if it happens within a very specific community. But it's worth mentioning that it's also about power dynamics.

OK: Yes, indeed. My research has shown that you are often asked about sexual orientation and to choose how you 'define' yourself. It's markedly different than the chatrooms that we used to engage with in the late 90s, for example, on a big desktop computer, because Grindr operates on an intimate portable device you hold close to you. But it's also complicated by the fact that, by being in a particular location, people start to make particular assumptions about you.

MK: There's also class connotations involved: you only interact with people from your own social class or zone because of your location. What actually makes the machine interesting for me is

how intimacy can be channelled into these very different locations and how you can be connected to this mechanism 24 hours a day, wherever you are. Now you have access to these most private and intimate scenarios while on the street, in a café and so forth.

OK: We're talking about it and we're looking at it [the iPhone] right now; the apparatus is always there. Thinking about this omnipresent apparatus of technology, how do you think it has shifted art practice? Media art (i.e. video) and New Media (i.e. technology) philosophically possess a 'socialising' impetus. Yet in Egypt, for instance, it is more commonly associated with the middle and upper classes. With these complications in mind, how has technology shifted your approach to producing?

MK: Again, I find it hard to touch on these topics in generic or holistic ways. I don't see my work in relation to medium specificity. Instead, the work is simulated by the daily use of technology, which stimulates new feelings and ideas. That's my relationship. I've been concerned with these technological relationships from the outset of my career. The question for me, however, is how does this technology change my life? And then the artwork grows out of how my life is changed.

OK: I understand. It's a conduit for you; we have spoken before about the invasion of politics into these personal spheres. In this sense, with the continued focus on art within North Africa and the Middle East, do you ever feel that your work is being instrumentalised as a political tool?

MK: This has always been a challenge since I started working professionally. I have struggled against this idea when different

Mahmoud Khaled, from the project Do You Have Work Tomorrow? (2012). Courtesy of the artist.
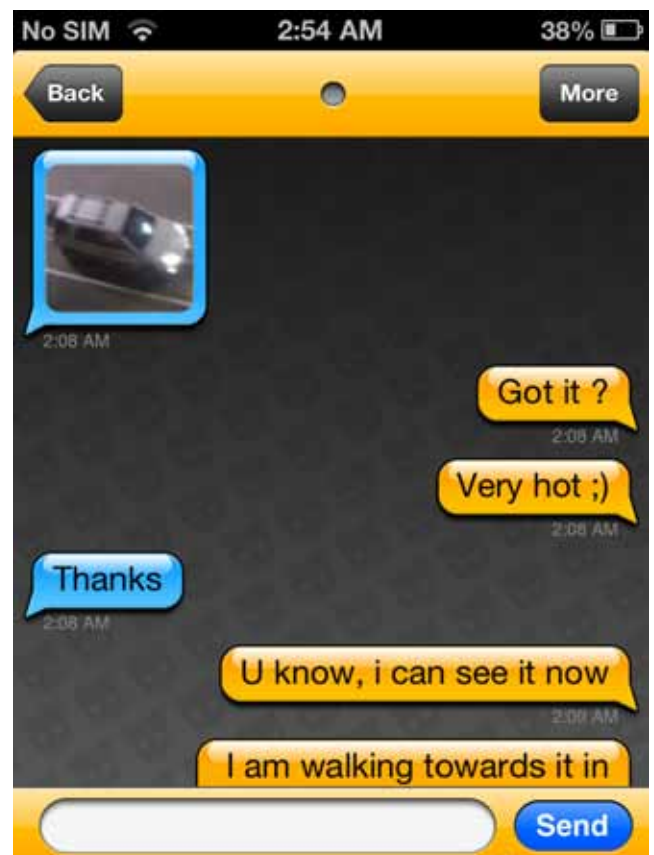
curators try to put you in specific zones. However, now I see this challenge as part of the job. As an artist, one is constantly producing different meanings. Part of the job is then to struggle with how this meaning is put into the world and how people perceive it. When I started working, I did not perceive my work as political. I attempted to theme it differently and I always attempted to park politics to one side. With time, I have nevertheless realised that everything is a political act. Whether I am producing a video or an abstract painting, these are all political gestures. Every artwork has its own set of self-referential political contexts. As artists, I believe our responsibility is to be aware of the context in which we are producing and the attachments that are associated with the meaning we produce. This awareness is crucial: both in the contexts of the history in which we are producing and the present in which we are exhibiting.

OK: On this idea of political misappropriation, how do artists, curators and cultural organisers help delineate the boundary between art that is inherently politicised by a particular context and art that is literally produced to function as a political agent?

MK: I think everything we do is political. Of course, there are more politically charged places than others. But you cannot say with authority that a Palestinian artist's work is always going to be more political than a Canadian artist's work. Artists as cultural producers create interventions into the way we rethink the world. With this in mind, everything we do is bound by context-specific politics. Once I realised this fact, I was able to escape this idea of making work that was rooted to a specific location. Because I hold an Egyptian passport, for example, does not mean I have to merely make work about Egypt. In fact, I don't even live and work in Egypt that much, to be honest, because of the professional nature of our lives.

Mobility is a crucial part of my profession, as it is for any other artist, curator or cultural practitioner. Yet still, international curators and writers will fetishise the specific location of my origin in order to influence how people 'read' the work. The same can be said of many artists living in similar national contexts – even those artists who do not live or work in that place. I think this is very frustrating for the artists who are consciously aware of the way they want to present themselves and their work to the world. My work relates to me – how I struggle, conceive, construct and order things around me. It is not related so much to a specific location.

I must say; your question is very pertinent to the way the art world is at the moment. Everyone is grappling with these generic concerns – how to make the local universal. Personally, I'm not concerned with that. I feel more comfortable taking my work away from the tension between the idea of locality and the universality.

OK: Still, despite choosing to disavow location, you still worked with Bassam El Baroni and Mona Marzouk on the <u>Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum (ACAF)</u>, a project undoubtedly rooted in that specific city, Egypt…

MK: It is interesting because after seven years of running ACAF, we

started rethinking our relationship to it and recalled why we opened it. The decision was based on very personal and professional reasons. We were three professionals working in the contemporary art world and living in a city that had nothing to do with contemporary art at all. We wanted to be there and build our own professional community and felt a personal responsibility to ourselves as professionals and to the city we were living in. We dreamed of seeing new names; young artists coming from different models of education than those we studied in Alexandria. We were aware of the problems of the existing system and wanted to clear our history and reshape our relationship to the present. In the end, I can say that it didn't work, although, we managed to realize many different, interesting and successful projects and engaged with some very interesting processes. It also helped us develop knowledge of funding bodies and cultural policies, which helped us better understand the context in which we were producing and showing work.

OK: You mentioned art education: educating a community, bringing them into the narrative. In recent years we have seen the rise of what may at first seem like independent art educational platforms that are in fact art institutions. For example, we have seen the Photo School at the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo, Artellewa and ASCII Foundation in Ard El Lewa, MASS in Alexandria and so forth. What do you think of this pedagogical turn? Do you believe these initiatives to be sincerely motivated or is it merely a strategy to leverage international funding?

MK: We as ACAF started thinking about educational projects in 2006 and then we realised after a while that it was problematic. While I am sure everyone doing it in Egypt and in the region has good intentions in the wider sense, the issue is that one can find her or himself becoming a charity or social developer. Funding becomes tied to political interests in the region and artistic professionalism is forgotten. Instead, we should be asking the questions: how can we produce strong work locally? How can we produce curatorially rigorous exhibitions and publications in Egypt?

A historic problem is that philanthropists have always chosen to support artists in the region, but never critics, writers or curators. There seems to be a naivety within the art scene, with all of the local institutions now focusing on artist education. But rarely do I see these people questioning how we learn about art. Let's question its methodology: do we even need arts education and how does this relate to developing a professional scene? There are barely any places in Egypt to show work. No critics. No one thinks about outreach beyond children's workshops; but what about students at university, reaching out and solving these problems? It is disillusioning. I am not sure what has made the Egyptian art scene so troubled; whether it is the current political distraction or something else. When I started working, there used to be the governmental art scene and the independent art scene. Now, I cannot differentiate them. Moreover, we rarely ever seem to be celebrating our successes – internationally recognised artists cannot, for example, find a budget to do a professional solo show in Egypt. What does this say? There

is no budget for the scene to nurture its talent?

OK: I think there's a lot of truth in what you are saying. Whenever I have entered into pedagogical environments in Egypt, I have often noticed that there is a true disconnect between the research questions that are being asked and the interests of the participants or students involved.

MK: This is partly because there has historically been no specific educational model for *contemporary* practice in Egypt. All the historically established models or structures are only dedicated to traditional fine arts so there is always this enigmatic relationship between contemporary art and educational environments. The alternative educational structures that appeared as a solution to this situation have been generally built on the basis of different power positions, with Egypt's artists often imposing his or her own personal ideas of what contemporary art is. I'm sorry if this sounds like a cliché, but this is a very western idea – that you can import or export education and its models. When we worked on ACAF, we were very aware of avoiding this – we knew that we did not want to be a school. Still, we wanted to contribute to knowledge production and to create a platform for information and criticality, rather than operating a school. Honestly, we were more interested in questioning the school as an institution and it's functionality in relation to our own practices.

OK: Having said all that, you recently took part in <u>Homeworks</u>, an independent study programme in Beirut during its inaugural year. It is already regarded as a landmark project. What was that experience like?

MK: <u>Homeworks</u>, I believe, was operating on a more professional and sustainable level than many other educational models in the region. It mainly involves artists practicing and some of whom are leaders in their field. As such, it doesn't attempt to shape or mould the participants but allows them to see things differently through a shared experience and also by questioning their own forms of practice. Of course, it wasn't without its problems, especially as it was the first year of the project. It was a big learning experience for everyone involved. But at the heart of it all was a genuine desire to question an art school's function: how it could operate in the current moment and how it can fit, accommodate and feed the new languages of artistic production and the heterogeneous nature of contemporary art.

Mahmoud Khaled was born in 1982, Alexandria, and lives and works between Alexandria and Beirut. In 2004, Khaled received a BFA in painting from Alexandria University, and recently finished the Home Workspace Program in Beirut. His work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions across Europe and the Arab World, including BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead; Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA); Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn; UKS, Oslo; Townhouse Gallery and Contemporary Image Collective/CiC, Cairo; Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg; Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut; AAS/SM, Izmir, Turkey, and Art Dubai 2010. His works have

been featured in several international biennials such as Manifesta 8: European Biennial for Contemporary Art; Biacs 3, Seville Biennial, Spain and the first Canary Islands Biennial, Spain. He is the winner of this year's Videobrasil em Contexto Prize.

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