

Interview

Workshopping the Future

Shady El Noshokaty
in conversation with
Omar Kholeif

Shady El Noshokaty is an artist and educator based in Cairo, Egypt. For over a decade, he has pioneered a number of independent experimental media art workshops in Cairo, fostering a critical dialogue between patriarchal higher educational institutions in Egypt and peer-assisted learning groups.

In the following interview, El Noshokaty sits down with Ibraaz's Senior Editor, Omar Kholeif, to discuss the role that new media art practices play in contemporary Egyptian culture, as well as his

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hopes for its future development. At the core of their discussion is a desire to critique conservative approaches to arts education and to open up a space for the critical discussion of contemporary new media art practices.

Omar Kholeif: The theme of Ibraaz's fourth platform is anchored in the study of new media. What do you think the definition of new media art practice is today?

Shady El Noshokaty: Do you want my definition or a general one?

OK: Perhaps what I am trying to ask you and what I am curious about is if there is a localised definition of new media art in Egypt? I was organising a seminar recently on new media when I was in Egypt, and it transpired that our notions and definitions (me vs. the students) was very different. For them, new media art was merely a transposition of the old (their craft-based practice), but with new technologies, such as digital or graphic painting.

SEN: No, graphic painting is not <new media> art. What they are doing is merely finding a different way of executing the same artwork. New media art in my opinion develops from a very different process and it is something that I don't believe we have in Egypt. The definition that we often read about in western critical texts, about a media-based practice that is produced out of a social impetus, is something we have yet to fully develop. It's so exceptionally rare. New media here in Egypt is lumped into something like game art, for example. Audiences, educators and students get confused and will assume that anything medium-based other than painting and sculpture, such as video, photography or sound, constitutes <new media>.

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But this is not the only pure construction of this art-historical term. Internet art, game art, coding with open source technology and creating interactive networks for other users, which allow individuals

to understand contemporary people's relationships in society, is what new media art is about.

OK: Which western theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari refer to.

SEN: Yes. But what I want to get at here is that these practices – it's not that we aren't executing them here locally. We were experimenting with these ideas in the media art workshop that I founded here in Egypt, titled 'The Experimental Media Art Workshop' (from 2000-2011) and again in a series of four more advanced workshops from 2008 to 2011. We achieved this by developing different relationships with the likes of institutions such as Hangar in Barcelona and young organisations such as Medrar in Cairo. We started hosting residencies here in Egypt around technology for two to four weeks at a time, on subjects such as pure data (a visual programming language for creating music and multimedia work), as well as various open source programmes that allow users to manipulate software and hardware. In the later workshops, we extended it to explorations of how we could recycle old technology; we played with Arduino sensors, with an aim to teach participants

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how they envision an installation.

OK: What was unique in these later workshops in terms of the way that the participants engaged or reacted?

SEN: What was curious was how things seemed to be propelled not by the actual possibility of technology itself or its aesthetics, but by ideas, which the participants wanted to execute. But they weren't purely philosophical or social ideas; rather it was about how you could present existing ideas differently. Ahmed Basiony, on the other hand, would use technology as an allegorical force. You and I have already talked at great length about how he continued to take different trajectories, measuring wasted energy and patterns of self-destruction by using sensors that would be visualised using software.

Audiences, however, constantly challenged him. Why are you doing this Ahmed? they would ask. People were confused about why he was trying to pursue something that was purely physiological as opposed to dealing with something personal, religious or aesthetic.

OK: How then have Basyony's works differed from earlier conceptions of new media art in Egypt?

SEN: Well before then it was photography and video and much of it, in Egypt anyway, was focused on documentation of the street, the poetic use of a visual language to relay a narrative of the everyday. Media offered tools to open up a new kind of visual language, but it was very different from the conception of new media that we are

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trying to pioneer in the more recent experimental workshops that I have been working on.

OK: Is there anyone else who is a part of this community, and who else is working in this way? Is it enough to be a movement?

SEN: There are far too few institutions and individuals to make this any form of movement, at least right now. At the German University in Cairo (GUC) there is a New Media and Design department, where you can learn skills and programmes such as Max MSP (which new media artists in the west sometimes use for augmented reality performance), as well as other forms of interactive digitality. But it is very different. It's all rather much more industrial and commercial within this context, where new media is relegated to a sub-module of computer science or computer design. It's not taught using the framework or language of contemporary visual art. Having said that, some of the ideas and the outputs can seem very similar.

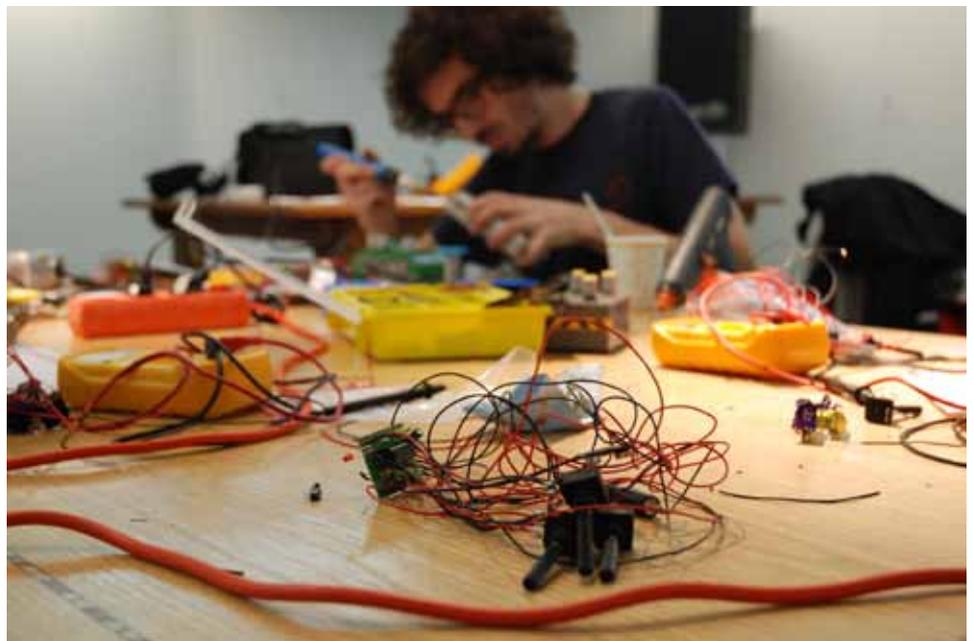
OK: So then how do you bridge the gap between those students and participants who develop their skills in this context and those who develop them in a fine art department?

SEN: Look, the later experimental media workshops that I co-organised were very fluid and open. It was bureaucratic institutional tensions that propelled me to launch these kinds of programmes (rigid curriculums). What I would do is invite different students, all with different kinds of technical skills, such as someone who is fixing mobile phones in a shop who had these self-taught attributes, alongside someone who was studying in a craft-based creative higher education programme, so that they could meet each other and develop a forum for peer-assisted collaboration.

OK: What's the outcome been like?

SEN: You get a sense of my frustration here. No one continues with it – new media art, that is. It never becomes core to anyone's work. Students come in and relay all different sorts of excuses. Either they say that they have to go and continue their education abroad (if they want to pursue such interests), or they argue that they do not have

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or cannot afford the technical equipment to sustain such a practice. Really I think it's also about many of them not having enough faith to work so differently; it's a fear of articulating it to others.

OK: Does this make you pessimistic?

SEN: No, because I consider all the work that has been done thus far as small experiments towards a larger narrative or cultural shift, maybe. I keep on seeing demand to put on different workshops. Open Source workshops are the most popular. I will continue to do these now that my new media education centre ASCII has opened, and in collaboration with the young Cairo-based organisation, Medrar. They have been great at securing technical resources, and having these resources will enable them all sorts of collaborations. I hope that they, like ASCII, are able to build new forms of collaboration that encourage a dialogue around different techniques, and which enable artists to think beyond trend-based approaches of subject and form.

OK: So you are optimistic?

SEN: No, I didn't say that. It's taken me over ten years leading new media art workshops in and outside of institutions (such as the annual workshop I led from 2001 to 2011) and still universities and

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degree-granting organisations remain very traditional. They even attack video art, something that we assume has become completely commonplace in the canon of visual arts, as something that is altogether of a lesser value than a more craft-based forms.

OK: So it's obvious there are many contradictions here. There is a will from participants to be involved in these conversations, but not enough energy to change institutional infrastructure in the national art schools or forums. Tell me, why are conventional approaches still in place?

SEN: Heritage is one of the issues here. We want to be proud. Painting and drawing dominate. But let's also not forget that visual culture has for a very long time been considered secondary to a literary history and tradition. The state-run arts schools in Egypt, for many, aren't really about learning about the fine arts, but rather, you study for five years so that you can boast a physical skill – a craft! You can leave and «make» things – it's also tied into a history of physical labour.

OK: I find this frustrating. I have also found in my limited teaching experience in Egypt that fine art programmes at universities and colleges do not encourage critical writing or reading of any sort for their students.

SEN: Most people don't read in art school here! And why should they? The texts they read are poorly-translated stock texts, from another language into Arabic. Little if anything makes sense or is

unpacked. All they are presented with is a collage of numerous pieces of critical theory, nothing is concrete in the hierarchical establishments we have here. It is no wonder things are the way that they are.

OK: This system, how did this come to be? It is curricular neglect? Or fear?

SEN: Fear of change. But that is not to say that it is a blanket approach to education. A few intuitions attempt or pretend to be «modern». The art college where I used to work (and indeed where I studied) before I moved to the American University in Cairo was the umbrella organisation that held within it many of the fine art schools in Egypt. Their approach, which to be honest is not uncommon, was to produce teachers, not artists.

Theory and art history were delivered however, and this was arguably better than the artisan approaches I had seen prior to that. They even adopted my New Media Workshop for a time and worked

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with the likes of Basiony and Youssef Ragheb, important figures because they buried themselves in research as well as in producing new work. Very few people produce research in this field, let alone in Arabic.

OK: So you don't think there will be a New Media Art department at, say, Helwan or Cairo University any time soon?

SEN: Who will teach it? There actually is ambition for such departments to exist in Egypt, but no one has the knowledge, the aptitude, the skill set. Administrators and university principals want to imitate foreign counterparts nevertheless – to suggest that they are on a par with them, even if they don't have the faculty.

OK: What about them trying to mobilise and bring in talent from

across the region?

SEN: That wouldn't happen because university bureaucrats, from my experience, pretend to know everything. When I started doing new media workshops a decade ago, they were angry and I was accused of working against the system. But it's the very same individuals who now profess to be moving art education forward. That's why I needed to develop workshops independently from academic institutions, now they will be a part of the ASCII Foundation.

OK: The ASCII Foundation is also going to build a new media art archive in Arabic I believe. Why has it taken so long for such initiative to develop?

SEN: No one cared at first to take these technological approaches seriously or to tackle it from an academic or theoretical standpoint. The limited number of people who have undertaken or who are indeed currently working towards PhDs in the subject at present reflects that. But we are going to build it. Without it we are in a dangerous place. Social media creates a kind of vacuum, whereby you believe that the archive is constantly available, live, and accessible, but

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there is no one truly critically historicising these issues relating to new media art and society. But that's not the only problem: there are also gross misunderstandings still in Egyptian society about what can constitute art, to name but one example of an existing tension.

OK: How do we address these issues?

SEN: It's complicated. It seems like there are endless workshops, residencies and experiments happening in Cairo alone. Lots of really interesting international artists producing very diverse work do come to Egypt, and they share and dialogue with local participants. But these moments are very protracted. They are often led by foreigners who fly in, sometimes ones who have no formal experience or teaching, deliver workshops and then they fly back out again.

OK: Is this why you created ASCII? Why are you doing this? It's very generous and you have literally achieved this with your own bare hands, will and finances.

SEN: I have hope. I feel like I have waited a long time for an organisation such as this to emerge, but nothing transpired. I felt inspired from my residencies, in places like LABoral in Spain, where I saw collaboration around technology create new openings for artists. I want there to be that possibility for us here, and in Arabic.

OK: What's your ambition for the foundation?

SEN: I have many. Above all, I am doing this because I no longer want to fight with the administration, to work against it. In my own annual workshop that I was running, the administration would shut off the electricity on us at times because they did not approve of its ethos or merit. My ambition I guess is that this place (ASCII), through openness, by being free and accessible, could have the potential to create history.

OK: Have these pedagogical questions influenced your artistic practice, would you say?

SEN: Most definitely. I believe that my role as a teacher is one long performance, and all of these different elements come together to form one creative practice.

OK: What do you need now for ASCII to develop?

SEN: We need help with translation resources. We need someone to help us develop a funding strategy. We have no funding at present, and that is mainly because there is such little time, as I am doing this all by myself. I could not wait, which is why I opened the space in Ard El Lewa. Still, whatever happens, I will not compromise until I have achieved what I am here to do.

Shady El Noshokaty is a contemporary Egyptian artist, born in Damietta city (1971). He studied at Helwan University in the Faculty of Art Education, graduating in 1994. He then became a teacher of drawing, painting and media arts in the same university and at the Visual Arts department in the American University in Cairo. He received his PhD in philosophy of art education with a thesis titled «Media arts and expressing the cultural identity of the contemporary Egyptian society» in 2007 from Helwan University. His projects have been exhibited internationally, and he worked as an executive curator for the late Ahmed Basyony's project *30 days running in the place* for the Egyptian pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale. Shady El Noshokaty has worked as a teacher of visual art and organises the empirical workshop in Media Art and Creativity, which has been held in July every year since 2000. He has since established the foundation ASCII foundation for contemporary art education, which is dedicated to the teaching of new and alternative media practices.