Cairo Images of Enactment:
A Review Essay of Cairo: Images of Transition

Mikala Hyldig Dal, ed., *Cairo: Images of Transition–Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011-2013*, Transcript-Verlag, 2013, 286 pp., $35.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9783837626155.

After years of commentary about Arab "exceptionalism"—the idea that people of the region languish in despotic traditionalism due to an inherently flawed mentality or identity[1]—the magnitude and speed in which popular protests ousted longstanding dictators proved truly exceptional. The images made by activists, citizen journalists, and ordinary citizens of public protests and police brutality also played an extraordinary role in countering derogatory framings of the Arab Street,[2] sending shockwaves across the region and enrapturing spectators around the globe. In the rush to explain these events many commentators among the popular press, think tanks, and academic institutions alike have perpetuated over-simplistic discourses about the politics of protests, the emancipatory role of technology, and the transparency of images. While these events make certain claims seem self-evident, like "Politics in the Middle East is now seen,"[3] it is imperative to look closely at the forms that images take, the practices that mobilize them, and the organizational aspects that connect them in order to understand these radically new forms of political agency, subjectivity, and collectivity. This means accounting for both their politically transformative potential as well as their historically fleeting manifestation. Answering this clarion call, *Cairo: Images of Transition–Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011-2013* provides an innovative and nuanced account of the significance of images during this exceptional period.[4]

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[1] See Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Bahgat Korany and Rabab El-Mahdi, *Arab Spring in Egypt: Revolution and Beyond* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012).

[2] See Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Second Edition. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[3] Lina Khatib, *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

[4] All essays in this book are also available in Arabic at: <www.cairoimages.blogspot.com>.

Part 1: The Art of Preservation

While personally motivated by a desire "to capture the immense energy and the visual diversity" of this period (279), the contributors to *Cairo: Images of Transition* assembled by editor Mikala Hyldig Dal largely avoid the simplistic celebratory rhetoric expressed in many of the picture books documenting Egypt's revolutionary graffiti and protest slogans. Rather than a simplification, many of the authors provide nuanced perspectives even while capturing a sense of complexity in this dramatic period of flux. Alongside the rich collection of images that offer both a visual record and improvised reworkings of revolutionary visuality, the book includes a series of written texts that expand on the work of these images with sharp critical analysis of "the image-politics at play in the reciprocal relationship between the political process and its visual representation" (16).

Composed of three core chapters, each including images and texts by dozens of authors and artists, the book provides a multimodal perspective on a wide range of revolutionary phenomena from the iconic centrality of Midan al-Tahrir (Liberation Square) during the initial protests, to the imagery of the subsequent electoral process, to the vernacular writing of constitutional demands within the fabric of the revolutionary cityscape. The first two chronologically situated chapters comprise the bulk of the book, each around a hundred pages in length, followed by a much shorter thematically oriented third chapter.

The first chapter, "Meta-Image Tahrir," focuses on the initial period of the revolution, the 18 days that culminated in the ousting of President Hosni Mubarak, and the iconization of mass protests. Although not intent on mapping "out the complex sociopolitical structures that generated the revolutionary momentum" (16), this chapter provides some key texts by scholars and activists that effectively trace these structures. In particular, whereas architectural scholar Mohamed Elshahed offers a critical history of city planning under the Mubarak regime, Philip Rizk, a core member of the Mosireen activist media collective, challenges the way the Western media produced the revolution according to preconceived notions of heroic individualism embodied by the young, western-educated, and technologically-savvy activist rather than the masses of urban poor. For instance, many of the images in the book depict the iconicity of the martyrs of the revolution, who mostly came from the less privileged sectors of Egyptian society, proliferated in vibrant graffiti murals along the walls and buildings extending from Tahrir Square.

The next chapter, "Politics of Representation," moves on to the parliamentary elections that unfolded in late 2011 and subsequent presidential elections in mid-2012, both of which generated a prolific amount of campaign imagery across the city. In addition to reproducing a broad spectrum of political publicity as well as urban scenes filled with candidates' posters and banners, this chapter also offers in-depth accounts of the political process, a personal account by a female candidate, and analyses of visual communication strategies. Highlights here include Fred Meier-Menzel's critical analysis of campaign imagery as well as visual approaches to critically assessing the expansive, sometimes arbitrary, sometimes bizarre pictographs assigned to each candidate. Also, Sarah Borger and Bogdan Vasili's account of their experience volunteering to design the campaign poster for a prominent civil rights lawyer offers a particularly illuminating perspective on the process of shaping politically significant representations. Likewise, the creative projects by artists and design students in this chapter give a textured sense of the recurrent tensions of this period as demonstrated by Abla Mohamed, who photographed her finger everyday for two months after voting, revealing both the resilience of the purple voting-ink and "the very slow, circular process, which one cannot witness on daily bases" of political change (184-185).

After these two monumental chapters, the brevity of the third chapter, "Urban Transformations," both calls for expansion and begs for clarity. As the entire book has presented a series of transformative occurrences in the city, this chapter promises a more focused treatment of these phenomena. And while it does provide important essays and images on graffiti and wall murals, the critical thrust of this chapter comes more so from its discussion of "the body as canvas." This is meant in the most literal sense of people using their clothing as a medium for political slogans during protests, but is powerfully evoked in the relayed circuit through the woman's body as a medium for political expression—from being the receptor in acts of violence (and violation), to its sardonic iconization in acts of resistance, to its symbolic erasure in acts of moralization. These themes are powerfully addressed in Mona Abaza's chapter, but ricochets through many of the contributions.

Perhaps, the sense of incompleteness combined with the subtext of violence can be read in hindsight as indicative of a revolution interrupted. Indeed, Hyldig Dal concludes her epilogue, "Cairo, June 2013," just days before the military would co-opt the images of mass protest to justify its brutal coup d'état. Indeed, during the final months of 2012 and the first half of 2013, many felt exhausted if not burdened by the long tail of the revolution. The hope and excitement of the initial success in deposing Mubarak uneasily faced the reality of an unending battle to actualize the more fundamental demands for "bread, freedom, and social justice." Faced with an awkward dilemma of periodization, many documentary projects in film and book form seemed to prematurely conclude their final chapters before the revolutionary moment was abruptly disrupted by a second mass-supported presidential ouster. Without this scene of amputation appended to this book's series of reflections on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, its absent presence looms in the shadows of this text. This is less a critique of the book than a reflection on the question Hyldig Dal reiterates in the epilogue, "How do we write a history that is still in the writing?" (279). If this history is now closed—as it seems to be—then perhaps a response to this closure is to not write it as a finished history, but as a still open and unresolved process of transformation.

Part 2: The Politics of Generativity

Rather than a chronological engagement that privileges an evidentiary approach in order to preserve the historical record, I propose a traversal approach to reading *Cairo: Images of Transition* in hope of offering a more generative perspective. While my copy of the text had a layout error that placed a twenty-page spread from the second chapter within the middle of the first chapter, which meant for a confusing reading experience, I'm proposing a more radical repagination—not to the random extent of William S. Burroughs's 'cut-up' technique—that nonetheless re-privileges themes over chronology. As such, below I (re)enact the text based on newly proposed chapter clusters of "City Scened," "Becoming Image," and "Bodies Enacted."

Chapter 1: City Scened. While this book is ostensibly about revolutionary political flux, it is purportedly also about a city in transition. Thus this chapter would compile a series of writings and images that place the revolutionary momentum within a history of urban transformation. Although Cairo is definitively the focus of this book (despite at least one foray in Alexandria), the fetishistic iconization of Midan al-Tahrir easily gives the impression that the revolution only occurred within a small radius of the capital city. Uprisings and counter-revolutionary violence occurred in many parts of the country, but the experience

was far from even.[5] Avoiding the calamity of Cairo's urban experience may also be the rationale for the recent announcement that a new capital city is being built from scratch near the Red Sea coast. Despite recurrent efforts by the Egyptian state to turn its back on "the mother of the world" (Umm al-Dunya is one of Cairo's many names), this sprawling city cupped within the wide Nile Valley is unquestionably worthy of scholarly attention. This megapolis built within and on top of its ancient remains is a contested city, in a constant state of emergency between the unbridled growth of "informal areas" (*ashwayat*) and the oppressive city planning enacted "through the harsh lens of state security" (21). As eloquently and concisely argued by Mohamed Elshahed, since the Mubarak regime systematically eliminated open spaces in fear of its people, the occupation of urban space in January 2011, while crucial for the success of ousting Mubarak, was also an act of reclaiming the city and in doing so creating "a dynamic and resourceful community of citizens brought together by the shared goal of bringing true democracy to Egypt" (22).

It is doubtful whether the demands for "bread, justice, and social freedom" are compatible with electoral democracy, since a candidate's popularity seemed to depend less on one's platform (see Mona El Prince, 188-191) and more on claiming "the visual space of the urban landscape" (Borger and Vasili, 195). As Fred Meier-Menzel notes, "Posters, digitally printed vinyl banners, flags, and cotton rags…literally spread overnight on the city's walls" (154). Eventually, the walls of the city 'swallowed' this political iconography either through organic processes of decay and wear or more intentional forms of defacement. Rather than visibility, Matteo Valenza argues that erasure itself becomes a form of political discourse. While this may "show a new form of freedom of expression, [in which] people felt entitled to destroy and even ridicule leaders and ideals" (224), the urban "palimpsest of political messages" accentuated the continued contestation over both the city's political iconography and public accessibility (Hyldig Dal, 9). After the military placed a series of concrete block walls around the downtown area to limit the mobility of protesters, activists with the No Walls Project aimed to symbolically reclaim urban spaces by painting murals on these walls that "make visible the depth of the space behind the barriers" (Andreas Sicklinger, 242). As demonstrated by both Mona Abaza and Eliane Ursula Ettmueller, graffiti became a prominent mode of dissent, often "motoring political discussion and communication among citizens on a street level" (Ettmueller, 268). Efforts by both the state and oppositional groups to paint over revolutionary graffiti only point to one mode of erasure enacted during this period of transition. As Kaya Behkalam argues in his essay, the imposition of a curfew indicates "the desperate attempt to regain control over the visual regime of the city" (27). As such, his filming of unpopulated streets both documents "the image that had been produced to not be seen" and subverts the authority to do so (27).

Having said that, contributors also challenge the assumptions about the inherent benefits of political visibility. For instance, as one contributor wrote in the margin, "What about the right to remain invisible?" (The inclusion of these revision notes enacts an innovative effort to include a dialogic dimension to the collaboration, literally showing people speaking from the margins.) This issue of invisibility is not a matter of merely showing or not showing, but also the way images blind us to other images in ways that may not always be apparent (especially to those watching from afar). In his "Open Letter to an Onlooker," Philip Rizk expresses this voyeuristic tension: "You gazed at the spectacle developing before your eyes, on your TV screens, across various international news channels. A fixation, an intrigue

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[5] This point is superbly evoked in Mukhtar Saad Shehata and Samuli Schielke's film, *The Secret Capital* (28 minutes, 2013), in a Nile Delta town.

emerged toward the images projected particularly from one site: Midan al-Tahrir—the Square of Liberation" (42). Despite the unprecedented number of non-professionals recording these events from within the crowd, a Google search for "Tahrir" (as reproduced in the book) reveals iconic images taken from a "bird's-eye view of a roaring square" (Hyldig Dal, 16). Indeed, this observational aerial stance imagines a vision of street politics incompatible with political participation. So it is not without a sense of irony that Monika Weiss proposes "Shrouds II (Cairo)" as a site-specific "poetic enactment of ancient rituals of lamentation" in which the "performance will be filmed from an airplane circling above for several hours" (92). Rather than an innocuous bird's perspective, this is more evocative of the voyeuristic gaze of a 'dispassionate' news media, or perhaps the scopic regime of circling military helicopters, or perhaps that of the 'eye-snipers' responsible for blinding many activists. This performance naively imagines an impossible scenario, because the skies above Tahrir were not reclaimed the way the streets below were.

Chapter 2: Becoming Image. Images played an unprecedented role during the initial uprising from the frenetic scenes of spectacular violence to the online circulation of vernacular images to the rescreening of protest videos on the streets to the posters that provided English captions for the events. Accordingly, the second proposed chapter traces the way the effluence of revolutionary images marked a radical shift in the politics of public image-making. As the fictitious photojournalist in Johanna Domke and Marouan Omara's film *CROP* recounts (in the excerpted script included in Hyldig Dal's book), "If you see the same images in the newspaper every day over years and decades of a president opening roads and bridges in nice-looking ceremonies, you believe that everything is fine…and it will always be like this. These images had taken over people's minds" (112). The prohibition of image-making, bolstered by a xenophobic anxiety about showing the country in a negative way, has posed a reoccurring issue for documentary filmmakers and street photographers in Egypt. A finite range of permissible topics came to officially represent Egypt, including ancient ruins, pristine landscapes, and authentic cultural expressions for the tourists, and elite enclaves and gated communities for the inhabitants. As *CROP*'s narrator elaborates, "It felt like people were fighting the images that had betrayed them for so long—with their own images. The fear of cameras had disappeared completely and they were now the instrument to learn what was going on…. Even if a lot of this footage will remain unseen, it was the source of understanding—of our condition, of our life, of what we want and of who we are" (113).

But as reputedly "the most televised revolution ever" (16),[6] in which the revolution both produced images and images produced the revolution, there is a precarious slippage from reclaiming the image and being claimed by the image. Hyldig Dal asks a series of important questions about this dynamic that situates images of protests in Tahrir in relationship with other events as part of a revolutionary repertoire. In the frenzy to celebrate the so-called naturally democratic potential of social media, Hyldig Dal reminds us that this "quasi-universal iconographic gallery" also becomes established according to the algorithmic logic of Google search functions (17). Despite the worldwide excitement with the empowerment of Egyptians, Jane Jin Kaisen and Guston Sondin-Kung reflexively remind us of the problems inherent in this spectatorship. On the one hand, they suggest that this reproduces an Orientalist fantasy of Egyptians awakening from a tomb, and on the other hand, they speculate that Egypt's protests figured more on international television than other Arab protests because of its role as a key ally in "America's geopolitical stakes" (95).

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[6] Citing Annelle Sheline, "Egyptian Revolution In The American Media," Midan Masr, 2012.

Following the eighteen days of protest, becoming image took on new significance, first, as the revolution became reified as a series of superficial images of patriotic sentimentality and, then, during the election campaigns, the iconography shifted to more didactic sloganeering surrounding head-shots of candidates. For the Salafi female candidates (mandated of every party) prohibited from revealing their faces, this compelled more symbolic self-representations. In contrast to the text-heavy styles among most campaign posters, the poster Sarah Borger and Bogdan Vasili designed for Khaled Ali aimed to visually depict his stance as a civil rights lawyer; but ultimately they realized that plastering the city with posters carried more visual influence than the poster's design. Perhaps the campaign strategy of regime remnant Ahmed Shafiq was most effective at combining both real estate and design elements, by claiming large billboards across the city with the simple phrase, "The President," written across a solid blue background, which aimed to build suspense before revealing his name alongside the title shortly before the election. Without campaign funds for posters and refusing to scrutinize her personal image as a progressive woman, Mona El Prince's tale of "an Implausible Female Candidate for Presidency" demonstrates that political 'vision' is not enough. Within the balloting process itself, the arbitrary allocation and manipulation of election symbols, "ranging from fruits and vegetables to military equipment," could have had a significant influence on one's prospects for success (127). Furthermore, *Cairo: Images of Transition* also traces the recurrent use of symbols during this period, from icons of patriotism to sardonic critiques of military rule, and thus continues to highlight the subversive role images played. Artistic experiments among the book's contributors gesture to the possibilities of reframing political content from the re-visualization of tanks and armored vehicles in arabesque designs to the remnants of newspaper cutouts as a form of *mashrabiya* (traditional window screens). This transformative feature of images also bears significance on the way bodies became enacted within political performance of this period.

Chapter 3: Bodies Enacted. Whereas the first chapter focuses on the contestation around the city as a constructed political landscape and the second chapter highlights the fraught relationship between political empowerment and representational conventions, the third proposed chapter reconsiders human form and action within these dynamic spaces of political contestation as "Bodies Enacted." The most memorable iteration of bodily enactment surely ties back to these iconic images of a "roaring square," that is, the sensuous mimesis of individuals euphorically performing collectivity in an act of street politics. But the revolutionary process both became enacted by people *and* acted on those people in a variety of ways. While graffiti art features heavily in Hyldig Dal's book, there is only a fleeting glimpse of the artists in practice. Nevertheless, scening the city and the emergence of alternative visual representations depends absolutely on artists performing their practice in public, and thus confronting hostilities and negotiating space and content with each other in unprecedented ways.

Hyldig Dal's attention to the "body as canvas," in which people would paint their faces, scrawl slogans on their clothing, and hoist signs above the crowd, also points to the bodily performance of dissent. And in the context of translating to the outside world, Samia Mehrez characterizes those serving as translators of the revolution as migrant travelers moving between locations, moving between visibility and invisibility, and thus implicated in both "an ethics of selection" and "the politics of translation" (40). But as noted by Philip Rizk, by enacting middle class, Internet-savvy, young, English-speaking activists as international spokespersons, "we became the translators of a collective uprising we were far from representative of…. This process drowned out the voices of the majority" (42).

The enactment of bodies took on different forms during the election process as the pace of revolution shifted, sometimes to rather mundane tempos, as demonstrated above by Abla Mohamed's photographic study of her electorally inked finger. In the iconography of political posters, Meier-Menzel notes the veritable absence of women's bodies, either appearing in portrait format or, in the case of the Salafi Nour Party, replaced by icons such as the rose. The erasure and silencing of women in the election process found a harrowing counterpoint in the vivid misogyny directed at female street protesters. Despite the significant thread of nonviolent resistance, violence played a significant role on both sides of the barricades, which means that the retribution of the state also happens by punishing the dissenting body. Given the mutilation of young bodies, particularly targeting women's bodies, Mona Abaza declares, "Few will disagree that growing tensions in gender relations are of central significance for the future of the incomplete Arab revolutions" (249). In her piece on gender representations in revolutionary graffiti, Abaza shows how street artists have created spaces for subverting "the rigid and moralistic discourse on women" (249). The confluence of these various discourses became enacted through one particular woman's body in what came to be known as the blue bra incident, in which several soldiers assaulted a young veiled woman at a street protest and exposed her undergarments as they stomped on her. A video of the incident went viral, from which protest posters were made, and then graffiti stencils, making the blue bra a ubiquitous symbol that "simultaneously signifies police brutality and feminist resistance" (Hyldig Dal, 233).

The book also illustrates the brutalization of bodies sacrificed in the confrontations with the state from various depictions of martyrs, x-rays of buckshot embedded next to bones, and the intentional blinding of protesters' eyes. The eyepatch became a prominent symbol enacting a critique of the brutal measures taken against acts of witnessing. As Hyldig Dal notes, embodied symbols like these "illustrate the proximity between the day-to-day events and their translation into visual signs, and the distribution and transformation of these signs by varying media" (233). These examples also demonstrate how the experiences of this period were profoundly felt on visceral, physical, and affective levels. Indeed, revolutionary political processes do not principally take shape on the discursive level, but become enacted on a bodily level.

While the revolution in Egypt may have ultimately only succeeded in rotating different regimes, Samia Mehrez points to a different facet of the revolution, namely, the "newfound power of ownership of one's space, one's body, and one's language is, in and of itself, a revolution" (39). Perhaps, we should add to this list, "one's image." Indeed, the image of Egypt has been undeniably expanded. Rather than a monument to a past moment, *Cairo: Images of Transition* should be seen as an effort to sustain this revolutionary opening in its various iterations, thus harnessing the generativity of these exceptional events.

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