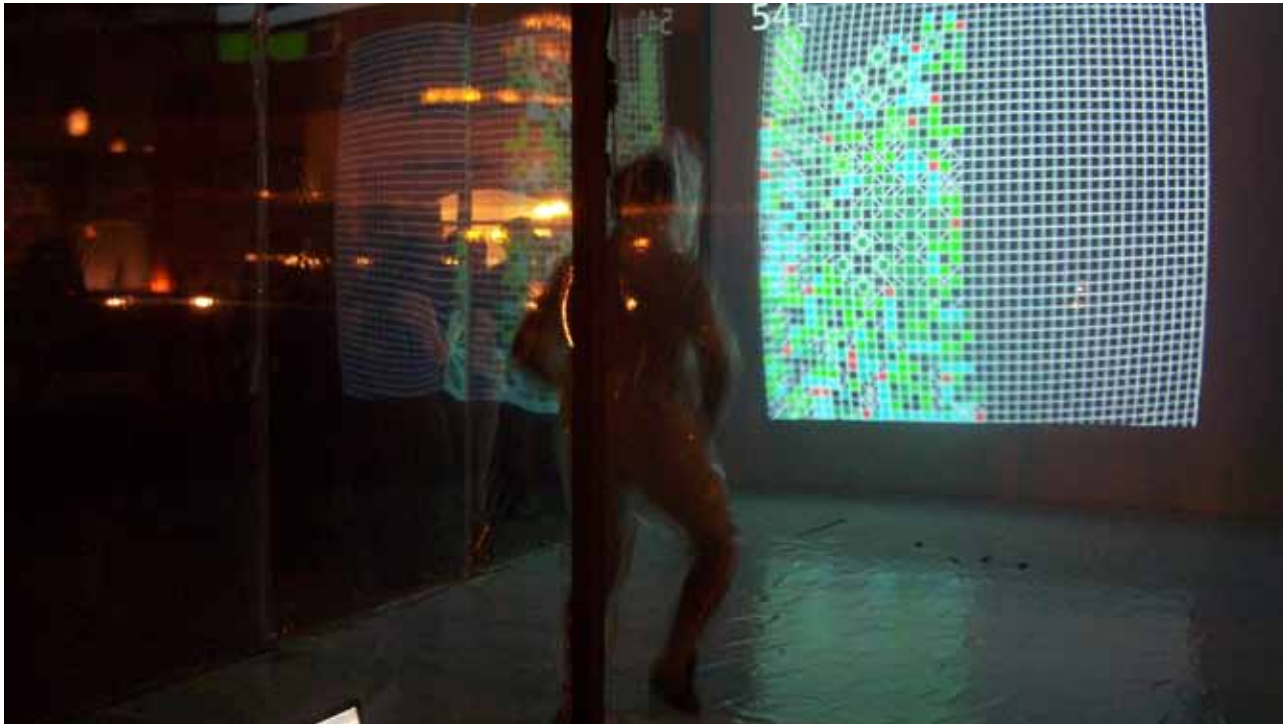# The Case for Egyptian Media Art
Ahmed Basiony: Media Artist or Martyr?
By Omar Kholeif

30 Days of Running

When I returned to Cairo in the summer of 2011, the first time since the public revolution that swept Egypt in January of that year, my first inclination was to make my way to Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo. It was the site where my family, like many other Egyptians, had protested in the hope of ridding their nation of despotic rule. Before my visit, I had seen dozens of personal photos. Everyone, from my elderly grandparents to my cousins, was appropriating images for posters that they designed and carried proudly during each Friday march. They gathered photographs, from Nelson Mandela to Ghandi, which they blew up and emblazoned across sheaths of linoleum and laminated cardboard – coupled with quotes and pleas for freedom. In retrospect, this creative example of appropriation, it seems, has become one of the defining characteristics of the revolutionary movement in Egypt, and perhaps even the wider Arab world. Certainly, image control has been paramount to

both sides of the power struggle. The dominant mass media that was allied to state interests has continued to perpetuate an illusion of stability, while, social media activists (and ultimately) international news media have been catching on and disseminating 'humanised' image accounts of dissidence. Of these, a selected number of portraits were utilised by the pro-revolutionary movement; namely, photographs of martyred youth. From these, one of the most popular and widely circulated on social media was that of the murdered Egyptian new media artist, Ahmed Basiony. A photograph of the young man smiling was re-purposed and annotated in news stories with emotionally gripping information about his young widow and child, who were left behind.

I am uncertain as to why Basiony's character was so prominent during these moments, but I believe that some of it may be attributed to the fact that in

Egypt, artists are 'elevated' from ordinary 'human' to a kind of otherworldly bourgeoisie. Basiony's ability to simultaneously symbolise artistry and the everyman protestor made him a ubiquitously accessible figure. My realisation of this fact occurred to me when both my parents, neither of whom would have in any way been attuned to new media art in Egypt or beyond, contacted me in tears because 'one of Egypt's great artists had died'. This statement was especially potent, as it has not only affirmed Basiony's artistic repertoire, but also the credibility of new media art practice in Egypt -- a nation, like many in the region, which has historically been tied to a reductive colonial paradigm. Indeed, exhibitions of 'Arab' art outside of the Arab world often tend to emphasise and fetishize the 'Arabesque' qualities often associated with the Islamic tradition, such as calligraphy, painting and craft-based practices. Media or digital art conversely has endured its own history

– a history that is arguably defined by predominantly American and European lenses.

Basiony's death, however, instigated the most potent validation of new media art practice within Egyptian history when the Egyptian pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale was posthumously dedicated and composed of fragments from Ahmed Basiony's compositions. Notably, the pavilion, which rumours had previously suggested would be cancelled due to its poor funding outlook, was resurrected, with the exhibition Ahmed Basiony: Thirty Days Running in the Place (2011). The project was overseen by Egyptian artist and teacher, Shady El Noshokaty, a friend of the late artist and a visionary in his own right, funded by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, and a catalogue published by the American University in Cairo Press.

The work in the pavilion itself was fashioned from documentation of a performance by the artist from

2010, the original Thirty Days Running in the Place, which was performed publically in front of the grand Cairo Opera House. The routine involved Basiony running in the same spot daily for one hour over thirty days. Throughout, the artist donned a costume in the style of a hermetically sealed space suit, with two body sensors attached. These monitored his physiological rhythms and were simultaneously projected onto a visible screen. In March 2011, nearly one month after the artist's death, Shady El Noshokaty says that the conceptual thinking behind the project begun to inspire him. In a personal interview, El Noshokaty informed me that Ahmed was experimenting with a second version of the performance, which he had started preparing during the first day of the Egyptian revolution on the 25th of January 2011.

El Noshokaty found data on Basiony's computer and two files saved on his desktop. One was called 'the performance 2010' and the second was titled 'the performance Tahrir 2011'. El Noshokaty also found recent collections of images and other data, which Basiony was supposedly preparing for upcoming performance and sound projects in the forthcoming year. El Noshokaty informs me that the new performance he was planning involved him wearing a cloth he had worn in his final performance, Symmetrical Systems, during December 2010. El Noshkaty's idea for the Egyptian pavilion was then to combine those 2 performances – the documentation of one and the fragmented imaginings of the latter – as both works at the core were about the processes of measuring physical energy. The executive curator states that 'by presenting performances in two different locations in complete opposition, the work became about exploring human energy in environments. One measured the inner self's wasted energy (the first version), and the latter presented the positively utilized energy of the collective revolutionaries, through their sounds and movements during the 25th and 26th of January 2011."

In Venice, the work was physically presented on 5 large parallel screens, with different image loops, which juxtaposed documentation from the original performance and the footage from Tahrir square. Subsequently, it was presented as part of the Abandon Normal Devices (AND) Festival in Liverpool at FACT, Foundation for Art and Creative Technology. In an exhibition curated by CEO Mike Stubbs (and in partnership with Shady El Noshokaty and myself), Thirty Days Running in the Place (2011) was re-positioned in an exhibition that looked at the subversion of belief systems by exploring the collective language of mass media documentation and representation. The piece was exhibited here as a two-screen installation on opposing screens, and diagonally placed across from each other. Both screens were sectioned into twelve-minute audio and sound loops – again, one of Tahrir and the other of the original performance.

In the second presentation, the work was positioned so that one screen was always in the peripheral vision of the viewer while watching the other. As such, despite the viewer's attempts, it becomes impossible for her or him to absorb the works as parallel representations. Indeed, the work is neither representational or representative, in so much as one can argue that it does not function as either a work of documentary nor as an indication of the trajectory of which Basiony's work might have taken. Instead, one can argue that the posthumous presentations of the work are re-imaginings of Basiony's intentions. As far as curatorial or artistic interventions go, it was a bold move, which has been greeted positively by the international art and culture press. El Noshokaty informs me however that much of the art press in Egypt has reacted negatively. This, he states, is partly because the writers believed that the act of collating both materials together was tantamount to creating a new work, which was not authored by Basiony. El Noshokaty disagrees with this, arguing that the practice of exhibition making involves a range of subjective decisions. Moreover, he asserts, 'it was both Ahmed's and our dream to one day see his work in the Venice Biennale'.

Without a doubt, the profile that this has offered Basiony and media art from Egypt has been unquestionably positive in that it has offered a forum for the discussion and debate of digital art practices that originate from outside the conventional or ideological American or European axis. Still, it does proffer thorny questions, of which it is difficult to draw many conclusions. The first of these is 'why' the Egyptian press was so disgruntled with Basiony's work in the Egyptian pavilion? Some

"أرجوك يا أب ويا أم ويا شباب ويا فتنة ويا طلاب ويا مواطن ويا وطنان
أن دي اخر فرصة لكرامتنا كلنا لتغير نظام استمر ٣٠ عام حتى لتغير التغير انزل الشارع
واعتصم وجيب اكلك ولبسك وميلة معاك وكمامات وشماس وفق وزجاجات خل صنقوش
فاضل خطوة صغيره جدا"

آخر كلمات احمد بسيوني في صفحته على الفيس بوك   ٢٦ يناير ١١ م

'Please, O Father, O Mother, O Youth, O Student, O Citizen, O
Senior, and O more. You know this is our last chance for our
dignity, the last chance to change the regime that has lasted the
past 30 years. Go down to the streets, and revolt, bring your
food, your clothes, your water, masks and tissues, and a vinegar
bottle, and believe me, there is but one very small step left... If
they want war, we want peace, and I will practice proper restraint
until the end, to regain my nation's dignity.'

Ahmed Basiony's last statement on Facebook   January 26th

ثلاثون يوم جري في المكان
أحمد بسيوني

AHMED BASIONY
1978 - 2011

could argue that it was the fact that the pavilion was going to be cancelled, and some were suspicious of the exhibition being used as a form of positive PR by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. Conversely, it could be argued that the publication of the exhibition's catalogue by the American University in Cairo (AUC) Press was sadly ironic. Firstly, because of the imperial connotations associated with the U.S. supported Mubarak regime and the American University, and figuratively, because it was from the roofs of the old AUC campus that many snipers positioned themselves to shoot civilians, of which Basiony was one.

 At the same time, I also wonder if we should question the manner that Thirty Days Running in the Place has been appropriated as a political comment on the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Basiony's practice for the last three years preceding his death had become increasingly focused on the use of digital technologies and open source software to create works that were interactive in the public sphere (which is rather unusual in a region where 'art' audiences are far more restricted by class boundaries). While his work also bore many conceptual and metaphoric references, which El Noshokaty states 'could have been political', on the surface of things, Ahmed Basiony's work was never overtly political nor was it necessarily a documentary practice that aimed to reflect a current social or political condition. As such, I am curious as to the longevity that this public interest will hold. One hopes that it will deepen research into Basiony's body of work, and indeed encourage writers and curators from Egypt and beyond to consider the vigor (if there is any) of media art practices currently burgeoning within the Arab world.

The socio-political context in which Basiony's work has been appropriated, however, I believe is neither a malicious act nor is it a strategic one. Rather, it has been an act of what I would like to term 'emotional curating' – a form of responsive curatorial practice that is fuelled by a curator's personal desire to present an artist's work against significant odds. This is a

meaningful act, but unfortunately, has at times, been re-interpreted by headline-hungry writers and PR teams as a form to capitalize on. Indeed, El Noshokaty's emotive and personally infused statements on the late artist have been used to bookend the curatorial narrative of the work, which has propagated some of the criticism, which has surrounded it thus far. However, if we look beyond the politics of martyrdom and the emotional narrative surrounding Basiony's death, and focus instead on his approach to digital art making, then the effects are resoundingly positive. El Noshokaty believes that Basiony was the only artist in Egypt who was able to crystallize ideas of multimedia arts practices, encouraging his students to collaborate with scientists and architects, and bred a culture that was as interdisciplinary as it was trans-disciplinary. El Noshokaty himself, who is soon to found his own media art foundation, believes that this will bring about

a shift, which could form a parallel artistic and cultural revolution in the country. This, I believe, is something stimulating and is urgently required.

The broad canon, which has at different points been coined 'media art' or 'electronic art', and even the 'creative industries', has largely been dominated by an isolated community of Western practitioners whose access to technological resources, and subsequently to exhibition and dissemination platforms, has allowed them ubiquity within their field. Conversely, in Egypt, such practices have been held back by a post-colonial tendency to emphasize 'traditional arts', and also, due to a delayed introduction of technological and/ or more precisely the cost barrier, which has until recently prevented the democratization of technological resources. The death of Ahmed Basiony is a poignant and despairing affair. However, there is a simultaneous flow of energy which has surfaced since his passing

Tahrir Square, 25th of January, 2011 – 2:31 PM
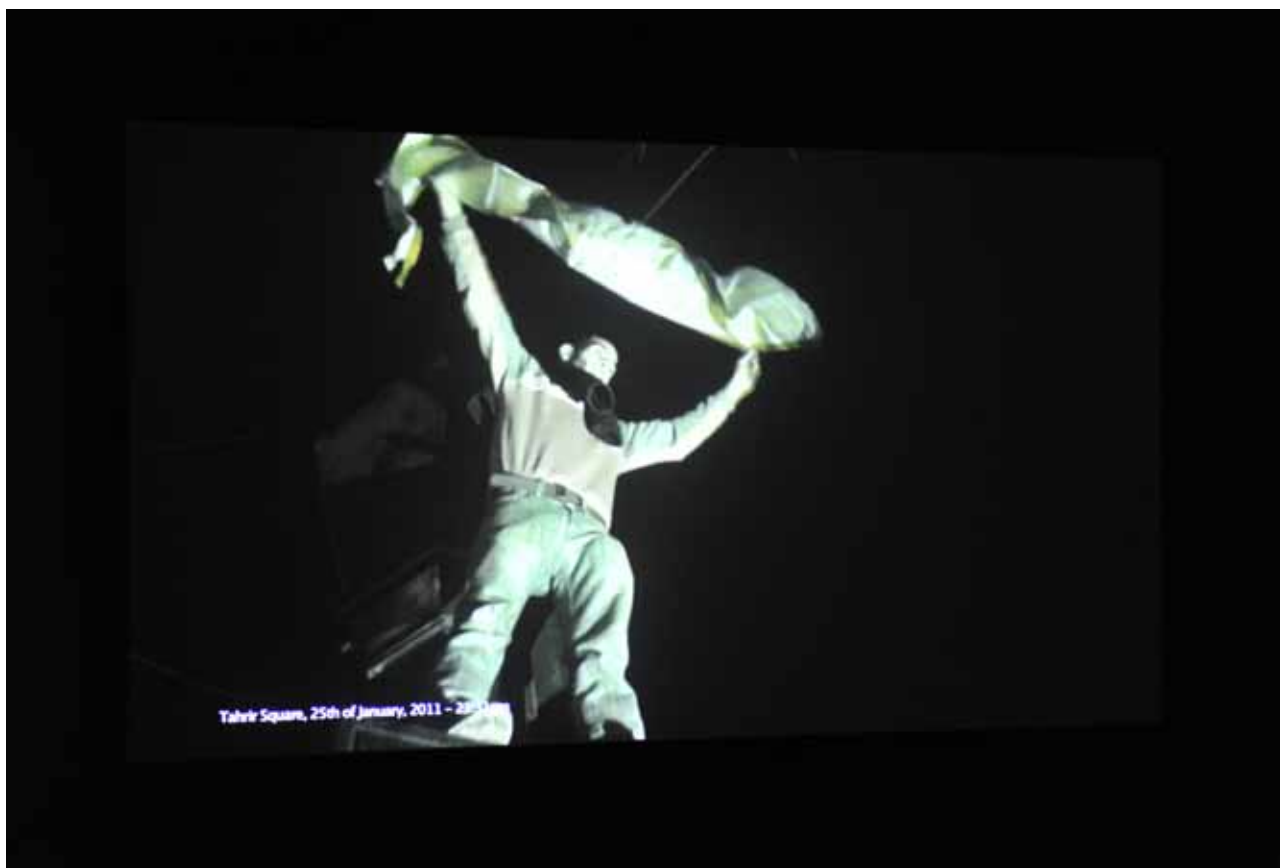
that has encouraged interest both within and outside of Egypt to study, question, and possibly embrace an inter-disciplinary digital artistic practice alongside more historically acceptable fine art media and techniques. This shift could potentially alter the landscape not only for media art within Egypt or the Arab world but also within the greater canon. If artists from within the region are encouraged to produce and disseminate such practices meaningfully, then it may turn out that Basiony was not only a martyr for the Egyptian revolutionary movement but also a man whose martyrdom instigated a change to the canon of media art history.

About the Writer:

Omar Kholeif is an Egyptian-born, UK-based writer and curator. He is currently Curator at FACT, Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Liverpool (www.fact.co.uk), the UK's leading centre for the support, commission and exhibition of work by artists working with film, video and new media. He is also a visiting Curator at Cornerhouse, (www.cornerhouse. org), Greater Manchester's international visual arts and film organisation, and an Associate Curator at the Arab British Centre in London. He is the founder of the Arabic Film Festival in the UK and the Arab Fringe and co-founder of the Centre of Cultural Confusion. His writing appears in Art Monthly, Film International, The Guardian, Frieze, and Scope to name but a few, and he is a founding editor of Portal 9, the Arab world's first bi-lingual cultural journal, which is published in Beirut. Omar is a graduate of the University of Glasgow, Screen Academy Scotland, and The Royal College of Art, London. He is a Churchill Fellow and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. He recently co-edited the reader Vision, Memory and Media (Liverpool University Press 2010) with Andreas Broegger.