

In The Memory of a friend

By: Dr. Martina Corgnati



Amal Kenawy was born on October the 6th, like the outstanding surrealist and avant-garde artist Meret Oppenheim, and like me. Of course, Amal, born in 1974, was much younger than Oppenheim but somehow a feeling of “mysterious” affinity seemed to remain between the two and worked as a kind of “predestination” creating an intimacy between that makes confidence and trust in Amal’s work easier and more accessible.

This coincidence was not the first thing that struck me about Amal, in fact, when I first met her at the beginning of the last decade, it was the elegance of her drawing, the visionary nature of her art and the sophisticated melancholy that exuded out of her figure in which every detail, from the robes she wore to the way she smiled, describing her feelings and her projects, which seemed to be part of a complex, original and integrated “work of art” whose centre and focus was herself -her

actual presence- that really drew me to her. She started publicly in 1998 in collaboration with her brother Abdel Ghany Kenawy, a computer engineer, producing together up to eleven projects that included installation, video and performance. Initially, their interest focused on the relationship between science and humans and on the use of nature operated by humans. Their early works, such as *The Transformation* (awarded at the Cairo Biennial in 1998), or *Energy*, show a tendency towards anti-form, a strong sensitivity to the element of time and an interesting use of soft materials, such as fabric, or of cold material, such as metal. They wanted to look beyond the appearance of natural forms to access their organic and functional “truth”. This was an interesting and quite original approach in Egypt where, at that time, technology was only seldom applied in the world of art and the two fields were kept at a respectable distance from the didactic and academic programs on

the two subject areas. At their beginnings, Amal and Abdel already had the perception that “sculpture” and a piece of art is not only concerned with aesthetics but also holds an essential content. From this understanding, she seemed to look instinctively and insistently for, and to research, the “meaningful” essence, the nucleus hidden inside the appearance of things. It is also noticeable that she was attracted to aspects of reality that the vast majority of people find disgusting or at least repulsive: insects, their way of moving, of flying and of behaving; the natural tendency of every living thing to evolve, change, metamorphose; the nature of matter and its symbolic, metaphoric and cultural implications. Probably, the first mature results of this original and independent attitude towards creation were the videos *Frozen memory* (2002) and *The Room* (2003), works that Marcel Duchamp would have efficaciously defined as “a passage from the virgin to the bride”. Those two projects were in fact realized soon after her went back to art following a two years break in which she took care of her new-born son, Yassin. During this time, she told me she dreamed almost continuously, eyes-opened, creating for herself images, sequences and even plots that would feed her later works for years to come.

The Room combined a variety of techniques and media in order to convey the complex narrative that the artist required: she conceived the project as video, installation, performance and soundtrack. All of those elements together gave birth to the project she presented at Townhouse Gallery in 2003 and the one channel video she presented elsewhere cannot fully represent the work. Nonetheless, the power of the most astonishing and hard sequences from the piece, which showed two female hands, elegantly dressed in bridal gloves, busy sewing spangles and other decorations with huge needles on to a real, beating heart that, although moved by an internal mechanism, really looked as if it were alive and cruelly drilled by those elegant and delicate hands, cannot be denied. “I might have a heart that beats and functions regularly but I cannot confirm that I am alive,” Kenawy wrote, “when I search within myself, I perceive a self that has an independent existence and contains a set of laws that rule and govern the body as a physical entity. However, this self does not represent its individuality, hence my continuous research that

defines my relationship with being and nothingness.” The passage she described and somehow represented in the video was very sensitive and symbolic: becoming a bride means becoming purer, more perfect, more beautiful. It is required of the bride to become this way but the more the soul, wishes and will travel towards becoming higher and lighter, the more the body feels lonely, abandoned and trapped in a cage from which no escape is possible. The aim of the artist was to explore a kind of inner space, visionary and often alarming, interpreted as the product of the “collision” between environment and subjectivity, mutually encouraged in a perpetual and sometimes heartbreaking confrontation. Using “recognizable visual symbols like trees, butterflies, mice and mutilated limbs borrowed from dreams and memory Kenawy aimed to communicate people’s struggle within society.” Trying to break into the “truth” that lurks as a “room” beyond the reassuring casing of the physical body, she reveals a metaphorical dimension where dreams, imagination and memory are mixed in a glance to become deeply unsettling and restless. The visitor found they were plunged into a sort of dream-like space in which everything fluttered, soft and threatening at the same time.

This atmosphere, mysteriously related to autobiographical fragments and a very “feminine” sensitivity, did not disappear when, around 2005, Amal discovered a new medium of expression in order to explore the convoluted process of transformation that, in her opinion, characterizes human existence: animation. Drawing, watercolour painting and filming the images at the very moment when they are taking shape, the artist created motion effects of remarkable expressive and dramatic power. In *Purple Artificial Forest* (2005), she created graphic and mental paths in which semi-human entities devoured each other in an attempt to be reached by each other and to integrate each other; and animal bodies feed plant parasites that at some point escaped out from their ulcerated skin to grow as trees from the earth. Everywhere, creatures are born, give birth and die in a continuous stream of terrible sensitivity, creatures which are all, in a sense, still “female” as the work is dedicated to the story of the pregnancy and the process of life. Clear, but unintentional, I think is the relationship with certain

surrealist visions made especially by women artists (I am thinking of Meret Oppenheim or of Frida Kahlo, *mutatis mutandis*) with regard to the content, while, at the same time, her personal, graphic articulation remained original and intense.

“The obsession with displacement led me two years later to create *The Purple Artificial Forest*, based on a dream where the word purple artificial forest was repeated several times” she explained. The distortion of her images and the abnormality of some of her less human characters perfectly constitute a dreamy setting in which the viewer is easily lost. But, thanks to her trail of rational visual clues, the viewer is guided into safety, which is the end of the video installation. “In a final climax scene both protagonist and entity devour each other in reciprocal apocalypse,” she continued.

Seemingly more realistic, but in reality no less visionary, *Booby Trapped Heaven* (2006) is a series of shots (photomontage) that portray a mature and a little doddering woman’s body on the background of a desert landscape, marked by pylons of the electricity grid. An empty and absurd landscape, without clear boundaries or definitions, which contrasts with the naked and massive torso (always seen from the back - her identity remains hidden), is the home of a toy plane that runs through the huge back leaving intricate traces, after all, without any direction.

More explicitly autobiographical and somehow monumental, *You will be killed* is a video projected onto large drawings and paintings, all representing the artist’s head turned down with half-closed eyes, that function as a backdrop for a complicated plot of graphic events based, once again, on monsters, animals, creatures and nightmares of degradation that await the body after death, but also on memories visiting the consciousness at the very last moment. It is almost unavoidable to look at this art project as a kind of foreseeing of Amal Kenawy’s early end. She could not have been more explicit than in using her own body on stage in the extreme moment of life or in that impenetrable “afterwards”. The outstanding Japanese curator and critic Fumio Nanjo, when came to Egypt in order to work with me, as his co-working curator, in the selection of artists for the First Biennale of Singapore (*Belief*, October 2006), was struck by how

Amal’s work creates a kind of graphic persistence made of superimposing and continually transforming signs to develop a very personal “language”. For example, when Fumio and I went out of Amal’s studio, he told me “definitely, she does not see what we, you and I, do. She is somewhere else. She sees something else”.

Fumio did not speak a lot, but he agreed immediately to invite Amal to Singapore and it was for that occasion that she conceived *You will be killed*. The work was exhibited in a cold, concrete barrack in Tanglin Camp on large drawings that she, as previously stated, made specifically as support for the video. A visual strategy that made the atmosphere even more magic, creating a subtle and ambiguous play of real images and virtual ones—of textures and colours, of movement and of stability—her artwork was able to saturate the whole environment and the whole space, recreating it completely.

Her need to include, “to possess” and to transform space and the actual circumstances of her intervention did not disappear in later works, for instance, in 2007, when she wrapped completely an old, abandoned building in a pink soft quilt (*Conversation No-Stop*, award-winning), as if it were a nipper (child), something that required care. Paradoxically as it may seem, this artwork did not show a strong reference to the environmental “wrapping” projects of Christo. On the contrary, in my opinion, Amal’s work had to do with the need of physical contact, with continuity, with touch. This idea of tenderness was not afraid of seeming “kitschy” and conveyed for the first time a concern towards society, memory and valuable things spread out in the outer world. This art work is an act of relation, of putting together “inside” and “outside”, of turning inside-out internal care and using it as a wrap for an external object. Amal showed here stronger signs of interest towards social context and environment—what was around her—, instead of “herself”, her inner self; an interest which was also quite evident in the installation *God Speak* (2009). In this work she “approached the same topic by juxtaposing the word “Allah” (God) written with bee lights against a blue background, with a sermon discussing the true role of the intellectual based on the writings of 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche playing as a sound piece in the background.” Even more explicit was the video-performance *The*

Silence of the Sheep, held in Champollion Street, Cairo, in 2009, in which she led a group of casual labourers and artists who crawled across the busy street, stopping traffic. Submissiveness to local living conditions and cultural norms was, of course, tackled by such an action. At first, the act offended the Egyptian public “although” Amal said, “it basically mirrored what people discuss on a daily basis”. The community accused her of humiliating Egyptians and challenged her decision to perform on the street rather than in a gallery or theatre. But of course it was necessary to do the “real thing” in order to hit society where it hurts, otherwise her gesture would have only had the impact of whatever other “aesthetic” or conceptual action it was seen alongside: in other words, nothing.

Humiliation was not Amal’s intent, as it was not earlier this year when, at the 17th Sydney Biennale, she exhibited her latest project, *My Lord is Eating his Tail*, a video piece tackling social stagnation brought about by miscommunication or, perhaps better put, lack of communication. The two protagonists of the story, written by Amal herself fail to communicate because one is colour-blind and the other deaf. “After living in a house for years, they both set off to experience the world for the first time, yet they fail to communicate their experiences of the world to one another. Working with two contemporary actors and dancers, the artist translated the narrative into pure physical expression”; as she has always used to do.

Word was made flesh, says the Gospel. Kenawy has always plunged words into flesh and narratives into forms of some physical consistency in order to let them acquire some kind of pregnancy, of reality. This connection contributed to the fact that absolutely nobody between her and her “public” could remain indifferent to her work. One could love Amal’s work, or hate it. Nothing in between. She was completely honest as an artist and convey in her pieces something that she has experienced and “lived” herself, and that she experimented with directly and physically. Therefore, her work was not intellectual, it was conceptual but saturated with humour, feelings and matters. It was “bodily”, it was there. She left her art work behind herself, leaving the beautiful path she was walking on for the sorrow, impotence and astonishment of all of her



friends and lovers of her art.

It is customary to say that geniuses die at 37; geniuses like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Caravaggio, Raffaello. She disappeared only one year later. But, her art will remain there for the consideration, comprehension, critical understanding and emotions of all who, now and forward, will praise the efforts made by a brave woman artist and artistic results she achieved in such a short life-time, among the most outstanding in the whole Arab world.

About the Writer

Dr. Martina Corgnati is a Milan-based art historian, curator and critic. She holds the chair of History of Contemporary Art at Albertina Academy, Turin, Italy. Her curatorial practice included contemporary practices and artists from the Middle East in the past decade. She curated Gates of the Mediterranean, Rivoli, Turin, 2008, Arab and Italian Artists around the Mediterranean, Italian Cultural Institutes of Damascus, Beirut and Cairo, 2008, South-East: Mediterranean Encounters, Horcynus Orca Foundation, Messina, Italy, 2005. Martina Corgnati is author of over 20 books and 200 artists' catalogues essays.