

RESISTANCE[S] – a collection of experimental film and video art from the Middle East and North Africa

by *Silke Schmickl*



Khaled Hafez, *Revolution*, Egypte, 2006

RESISTANCE[S] is an editorial research project initiated by the Paris-based film label Lowave in 2005. It was sparked by the discovery of a growing number of outstanding video works and experimental films made by artists and filmmakers from, or with roots in, the Middle East and North Africa. At that time only a few French distributors and festivals (such as *Heure Exquise* or *Les Instants Vidéo*) carried these works and we became interested in learning more about this emerging video art scene and its blooming creativity.

Expérimentations dans les avant-gardes arabes

(Experimentations in the Arab avant-garde), a film survey organized by Nicole Brenez and Michèle Hadria-Cohen for the French Cinemathèque in 2005, constituted one of the first major film events dedicated to the region and served as a starting point for our research. A number of artists presented on this occasion, such as Jayce Salloum, Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Mounir Fatmi and Taysir Batniji, whose works were subsequently included in our first DVD released in 2006. This significant event depicted an active film scene that had no explicit experimental film tradition despite a rich local

film history. The lack of historic references and associated visual imprints gave the artists total freedom to develop their own visual language. In the RESISTANCE[S] collection we observed numerous references to other art forms specific to the Arab visual tradition, such as the suggestion of calligraphy captured by the skillful and playful use of embedded text in Waël Noureddine's *Ça sera beau*. From Beirut with Love, Mounir Fatmi's *May God forgive me*, Basma Al Sharif's *We began by measuring distance* and Ismaïl Bahri's *Resonances*, or the use of abstract Islamic patterns in Usama Alshaibi's *Allahu Akbar*. Other films, such as *K3*, *Les femmes* by Frédérique Devaux, *Nouba* by Katia Kameli (both shot in super-8), and Bouchra Khalili's *Straight Stories: Part 2*, make use of the film/video material itself by distorting recorded reality. Filmmakers Danielle Arbid and Al Fadhil manipulate found footage material, such as an anonymous super-8 reel found in a flea market in Beirut (in the

case of Danielle Arbid's *This smell of sex*), or TV images (used in Al Fadhil's *Iraqi Brothers*. Amer & Nasser). Works by Mireille and Fabian Astore (*3494 Houses +1 Fence*) or Waheeda Mallulah (*Colored photograph*) are based on photography and innovative animation. The videos by Zineb Sedira (*Don't do to her what you did to me*) and Lamya Gargash (*Wet tiles*) were inspired by traditional rituals and create an emblematic atmosphere, as does Nesrine Khodr's short video haiku *I swam in the sea last week*. Larissa Sansour's *Run Lara Run*, Halida Boughriet's *Les illumines*, and Zoulika Bouabdellah's *Dansons* stage the artists themselves in captivating performances shot in Palestine and Paris respectively. A political engagement can be found in Jayce Salloum's *Untitled Part 3b: (As If) Beauty Never Ends...*, Taysir Batniji's *Transit*, Jalal Toufic's *Saving Face*, or Khaled Hafez' *Revolution*, where political issues are discussed with a more direct



Pauline M-Barek,
*Géographie
imaginaire2*,
Tunisia/Germany, 2005

and documentary style. The collection features a strong selection of documentaries by Nassim Amaouche (*A few crumbs for the birds*), Pauline M'Barek (*Géographie imaginaire*), Nazim Dejmaï (*La parade de Taos*) and Joude Gorani (*Before vanishing*), which are characterized by their unorthodox storytelling and very personal approaches towards cultural, social, political and ecological subjects.

Poetry can be found in many of the selected films. As Cédric Vincent wrote in his critical analysis accompanying the second volume of the RESISTANCE[S] collection, "the importance of the acoustic, visual and textual treatment that characterizes the works in the collection evokes an analogy between contemporary film and video art and literature movements." During the beginning of the 20th century, poets and novelists were among the more radical critics within the Arab world and many of them took an active role in the emerging socialist and feminist political movements. As video has become more and more accessible it has effectively acquired many of the qualities of pen and paper - a handy medium, portable and, if necessary, disposable,

that has the ability to condense and express political situations in a personal manner.

RESISTANCE[S] does not pretend to constitute a complete archive of Arab experimental film productions. Given the current explosion in creative energy and art production, we know that recounting the entire history of moving images is no longer possible unless we renounce once and for all the principle of acknowledging the entire corpus of filmmaking (cf. *Good Vibrations* by Nicole Brenez, in *Springerin*, January 2010). Many important names are missing in the three programs we released between 2006 and 2010. Thus, the collection will continue to grow in order to follow the emergence of new trends and talent and to pay homage to the major actors in this genre. Our curatorial choices for the RESISTANCE[S] collection are personal and based on an intuitive approach that emerges during the long and intense viewing and selection process.

However, our hope is that this film collection will contribute to better understanding and visibility for these works and artists, and that it will underscore the importance and originality



Whaeeda Mallulah, *Colored photograph*, Kingdom of Bahrain, 2009



Zoulikha Bouabdellah, *Dansons*, Algeria/France, 2003

of cinematography within contemporary art from the Arab world. Created by emerging and established artists from a variety of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, all of these intimate, poetic and documentary works are witness to the region's complexity, vitality and the diversity of creative energies found there. Distanced from the usual stereotypes, the artists aim to explore

the existential, political and aesthetic issues of our time, while being open to new narrative perspectives that break with our media's monotonous and repetitive imagery.

The film programs were conceived from the beginning as a coherent collection, and analogies and echoes can be found across the three DVDs. The chronology of the different volumes allows the viewer to observe changes that have occurred in video art productions over the last five years. If the first volume attacks political and social situations in the countries of origin in a very direct and sometimes provocative or rebellious way (for instance in the works of Wael Nouredine's or Mounir Fatmi), the third volume is characterized by a more subtle and poetic approach. One can feel in the later works that the art scene has become more established and that the artists are more comfortably positioned on the international art scene. The large number of exhibitions and publications dedicated to contemporary artists from Arabic countries are further evidence of this phenomenon. The strong development of video documentaries, analyzed for example



Taysir Batniji, *Transit*, Palestine, 2004

in Khaled Ramadan's article *Contemporary audiovisual tendencies in the Middle East and North Africa* (Contemporary practices, Vol. IV, 2009) is another aspect that can be observed in the different RESISTANCE[S] programs. Films like *A few crumbs for the birds*, *Before Vanishing* or *La parade de Taos* illustrate a new liberty and inventiveness adopted by the filmmakers which can be described as a new film genre - the creative documentary - where the traditional form and storytelling is challenged and revived. The originality of the RESISTANCE[S] project has also found an echo in the distribution of the films. The different volumes (individually or selections from the three DVDs) have been shown publicly in numerous international art venues, film institutes and festivals. Screenings have been held at the British Film Institute in London, the Pompidou Center in Paris, the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, the Museet for Samtidskunst in Roskilde, Det Danske Filminstitut in Copenhagen, the Cinemathek in Oslo, the 3rd Guangzhou Triennial, the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen and Les Instants Vidéo in Marseille, to mention just a few examples. These public events also offered the possibility to meet the artists and hold roundtable discussions with curators, such as Catherine David, and film critics. In this sense, RESISTANCE[S] is more than a DVD collection or a video archive and has tried to stimulate an ongoing artistic and intellectual exchange among the artists, curators, writers, critics and an international and engaged audience. It has also led to the upcoming production of new video works by Lowave: *Ma mère*, *David et moi* by Taysir Batniji and *Nuits blanches* (working title) by Pauline M'Barek. Other projects linked to the collection are currently in preparation and are expected to culminate in an exhibition in 2011.

The collection's title was inspired by a text written by Gilles Deleuze in 1972, *Pourparler*. There he says: "Creating is not communicating, but resisting [...] art is what resists: it resists against death, servitude, infamy, shame." We felt that this vision of art and resistance was perceptible in all of the RESISTANCE[S] videos and summed up the artists' commitments whether political, social or purely visual. The pluralistic notion of resistance with an "s" thus became the leitmotif of the collection.

RESISTANCE[S] is developed and curated by Lowave art director Silke Schmickl and Lebanese musician Christine Sehnaoui. Each volume is subtitled in English, French and German and enriched with biographies, commentary by the filmmakers and texts written by French critics Cédric Vincent and Olivier Hadouchi, as well as the curators.

Lowave is an independent film label founded in 2002 to promote experimental film and contemporary video art and make them accessible beyond the film festival and gallery circuit. Lowave explores ideas around artists' moving image practice through publishing, distribution, exhibition and research. The catalogue features around 150 artists with varied backgrounds working with different techniques and multiple modes of expression. Alongside historic figures such as Marguerite Duras, Maurice Lemaître and Takahiko Iimura, Lowave has put forward some of the most important young artists from around the world.

More information is available at www.lowave.com.

Pauline M-Barek, *Géographie imaginaire*, Tunisia/Germany, 2005

