

A photograph of four women with dark hair, wearing white button-down shirts, standing in a row against a light, textured background. They are looking directly at the camera with serious expressions. The woman in the center-left is slightly more prominent than the others.

Exhibition in Berlin Challenges Assumptions About the Middle East – Overcoming East meets West clichés to hit on underlying truths.

*by* Rita Selvaggio

HALA ELKOUSSY

On Refrains, Sets and a Backdrop, 2006

Installation of single channel video We're by the sea now, wallpaper, curtains and chairs.

Installation view, Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, 2008

Courtesy: the artist





## ~ cairoscape ~

*The exhibition Cairoscope – Images, Imagination and Imaginary of a Contemporary Mega City took place in Berlin between 30 August and 12 October, hosted by the Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien in the Haus Bethanien. Rita Selvaggio spoke with Marina Sorbello and Antje Weitzel about the exhibition as the six-week project wound-down.*

The West's images of Cairo are as resilient as they are charged. It is a place of camels, pyramids, belly dancers and souq markets, an ancient microcosm cut-off from modernity and wracked by political struggle. Compounding the problem, the size and hectic density of Cairo make it a favorite for only the most adventurous travelers – leaving the illusions intact for the large majority.

Marina Sorbello and Antje Weitzel set out to temper these images with an exhibition of works from and about Cairo in their ambitions project. "As curators we had to deal with two majors problems," explained Antje Weitzel. "First of all, the expectations such a show creates among the local public in a place like Berlin. "We kept the word Cairo in the title but we purposely avoided any reference to the Arab World or Middle East because we were not interested at all in the neo-orientalist fantasies and simplistic approaches (hijab and terrorism) informing the western approach towards the Middle East."

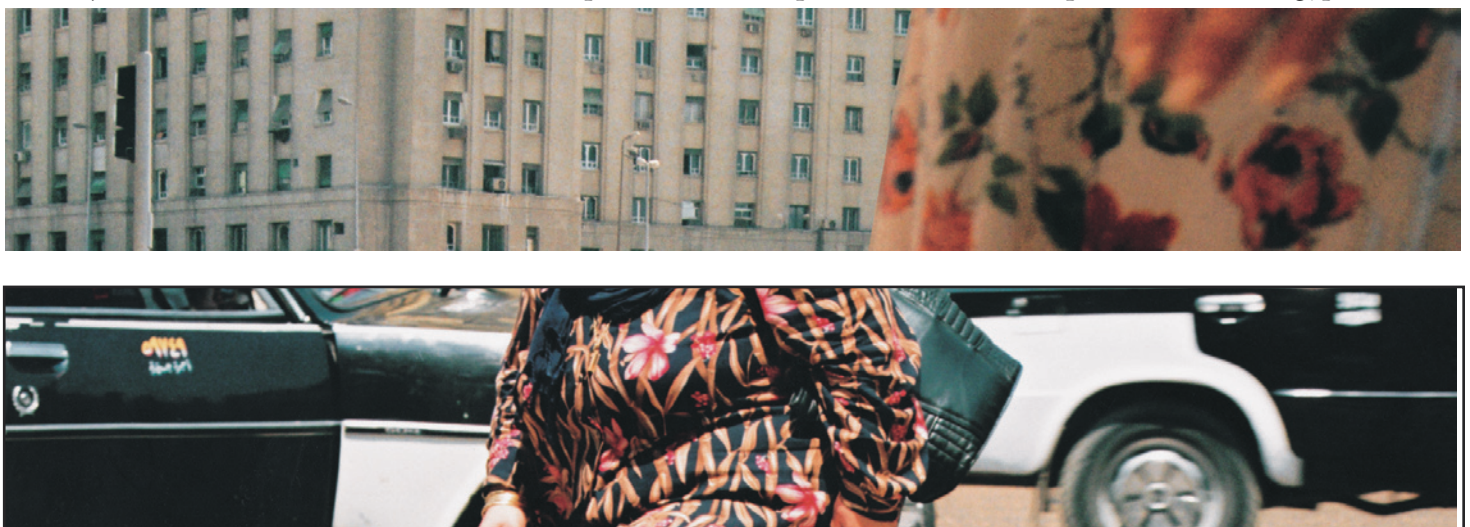
For Germans, like many in the developed West, information about Egypt is filtered through the 'ethnic' marketing of the tourism industry in tourist resorts and news reports, and even those who travel there rarely get the complete picture, "Although a lot of Germans and Europeans go on holiday in Egypt, all they know about this vast country is the tourist and archaeological stuff they see, they never truly encounter the contemporary local culture and actually, they couldn't care less. So we also wanted to provide the public with first hand images of contemporary life in Cairo – fil-

tered through the lenses of the artists, and through the program of events, and also an insight of the ideas and themes that are currently debated and researched by artists in Cairo. The other problem was that of the expectations of the artists, who are extremely aware and wary of the fact that there is a growing interest in art from the region. On the one hand, they refuse to be framed as regional artists in 'Middle East' shows, and on the other hand they often rely on these kinds of shows and on international projects in order to get funding to produce new works, as the local market is virtually non-existent. As for *Cairoscope*, we not only showed work by Cairo-based artists but also by artists from elsewhere that have produced works there. The result is a multi-faceted, translocal view on the Egyptian mega city – that puzzled some journalists who admitted to missing the exotic excitement!”

The curators themselves, however, were aware that even they were not immune to preconceptions, and took extensive precautions to curtail them: “For the preparation of the show,” says Weitzel, “we went to Cairo several times to meet artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, critics and other cultural producers. These meetings and the discussions with the practitioners we met were very important for us in putting together the show and to helping to adapt our selection criteria to the Cairene art reality. It is very easy to fall into the trap of your own expectations. For this reason, we decided not to come up with too much of a predefined exhibition theme and invite the artists to respond to it, but instead made an effort to scan what the artists were interested in and what topics they were concerned with.” Curators Marina Sorbello and Antje Weitzel, both based in Berlin, have cooperated on

several projects, and together are also part of the Uqbar Collective, a small institution with international reach based in Wedding, a neighborhood in Mitte, Berlin. Their projects in the past have also tended to incorporate a critical, polemic dimension rooted in intense research.

Italian Marina Sorbello, who has been living in Berlin since the end of the nineties, initiated the *Cairoscope* project. In 2006 Sorbello spent three months in Cairo on a grant, and soon started drafting the project, aiming to encompass various perspectives on contemporary Cairo as an ‘emblematic’ place that shapes narratives and stories. She explains: “With the Arab-African megalopolis as its point of departure, *Cairoscope* proposed a different way of looking at the modern city and at the phenomenon of contemporary urbanization. The phenomena that afflict Cairo – overpopulation, pollution, traffic, social discrimination; flexibility and growth of the informal sector; endemic unemployment, progressive disappearance of the middle class, corruption, insufficient political participation – are also phenomena partially present, in varying degrees and scales, in many contemporary European and Western cities. To put it in the words of Diane Singermann and Paul Amar, editors of *Cairo Cosmopolitan* (AUC, Cairo-New York, 2006), while the Western media focus overwhelmingly on questions of Middle Eastern religiosity and conflicts, in Cairo, as well as in other metropolises of the Arab world, “the future of urban modernity and political globalism is taking shape.” So within *Cairoscope*, the megalopolis Cairo is the starting point to open up possibilities of discussing the world today in terms beyond the ‘Middle East versus West’ paradigm. The exhibition featured artists and practitioners of mixed provenance from Egypt and from



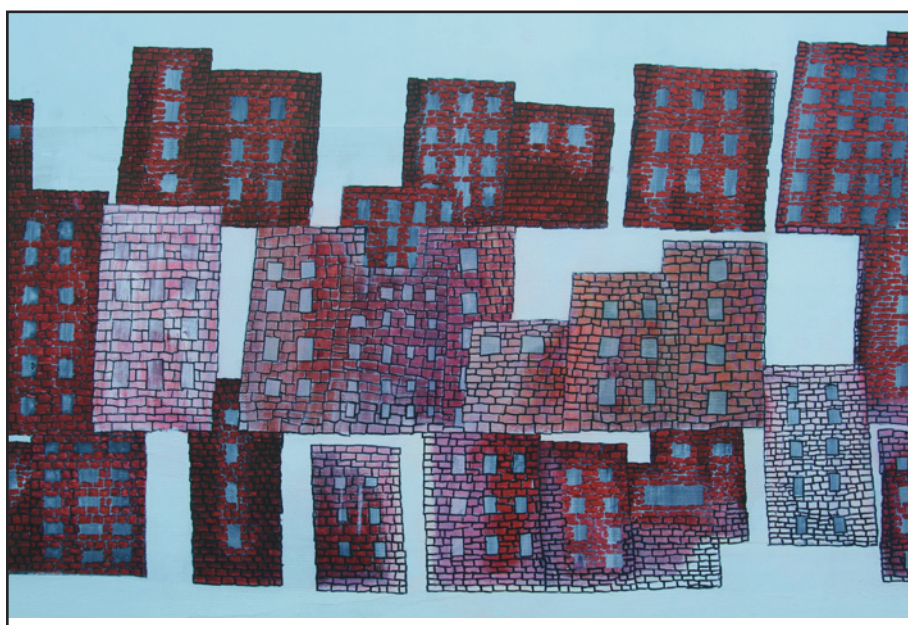
MAHA MAAMOUN , *Cairoscopes*, Untitled #6, 2003 , Photo series , Courtesy: the artist





RANA EL NEMR, *Tableau Vivants*, 2008, Installation made of postcards set, Courtesy: die Künstlerin / the artist

abroad, who in their work reflect a certain contemporary and existential urban condition connected to the city of Cairo, its suggestive power and urban imaginary, allowing the different points of view, ideas and approaches to be juxtaposed. It also reflected cultural production in Cairo today, as the Cairo art and cultural scene is at the moment a very cosmopolitan one, with a constant flow of international artists, curators, intellectuals and scholars researching and working in the city,



NERMINE EL ANSARI, *Constructions 2*, 2007/2008, sound installation, Image courtesy of the artist

interacting with its inhabitants, establishing relationships and exchanging ideas.”

Inside the exhibition, the public was confronted with a slick presentation of artworks produced in Cairo that completely avoided the objectifying motives of exoticism. In the *Cairoscope* catalogue Sonja Hegasy of the Zentrum Moderner Orient highlighted the media summaries of spectator’s main reactions, “‘Cairo, almost like home’ [Kairo, fast wie zu Hause] was the title of an article in the Berlin Tageszeitung showing the width of the abyss that exists today: the impression of Arab societies as substantially different is still – or probably increasingly – part of collective wisdom. What we hear and learn about the Middle East is for the most part a description that corresponds to what we are used to seeing

and hearing as this is convincing for us. In the end it matches neo-orientalizing images. Anything that does not fit this image is conveniently erased as being contrary to the images in our heads. Thus surprises rarely happen in the coverage we receive about the Middle East – or, more often, we are surprised by the ‘normality.’”

Exhibitions that feature artists from Middle East are not entirely alien to Berliners, with some major projects having taken place in the past years in the German capital. The House of World Cultures hosted the monumental project “DisORIENTATION, Contemporary Arab art from the Middle East” in 2003 – maybe the first project in Berlin entirely dedicated to cultural production from the Middle East – and Catherine David organized several projects related to her ongoing research into “Contemporary Arab Representation” while a guest researcher at the prestigious Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin (2005-06), among these the “Iraqi Equation” at Kunst-Werke Berlin, the interdisciplinary events “Middle East News on Culture and Politics” at the theatre Hebbel am Ufer in 2006 and more recently “Di/Visions: Culture and Politics of the Middle East” at the House of World Culture in Berlin (2008).

Yet *Cairoscope* was something different. There was no Arab nor Middle East fo-





RANDA SHAATH, *Under the Same Sky: Rooftops of Cairo*, 2002/2003, Photo series (12 black/white photographs) Image courtesy of the artist

cus, nor was there a focus on political turmoil or war, as in David's projects. The achievement of *Cairoscope* was that it went beyond the stale rhetoric of Middle East cultural dialogue of 'we and the other'. "We tried to avoid art works bearing a neo-orientalizing character or falling into the trap of reproducing the logic of culture wars, lecturing about religion, democratic values, women's rights etc," explains Antje Weitzel. "From the start we did not want to do an 'Egyptian show' reducing works to their provenance. This has for long time been a model of the colonial gaze." The origins of the artists invited was mixed and incidental. The main focus was the mega city of Cairo as a source of different and multilayered narratives; the similarities in the languages of the artists, and in their way of looking at the contemporary city, rather

than the differences."

The explicit subtitle "Images, Imagination and Imaginary of a Contemporary Mega-City" gives us the coordinates of the exhibition, providing images from Cairo, both documentary images, imaginary – here intended as social imaginary, the system of belief and ideas that inform the perception of a given place – and images from imagination; the reinvention of a place. The design of the exhibition was minimal, invisible, making the most of the labyrinthine structure of the Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, a non-white cube space with several rooms along a large, 'L' shaped corridor, and the positioning of the works in the show followed a loose thematic thread enhancing the correspondences between the works on display.



CHRISTOPH OERTLI, *Cairo*, 2006, Video, 11 mins. Image courtesy of the artist

Maha Maamoun's "Cairosapes" photo series (2003) was documentary in character. The artist went into the street and took pictures showing micro-segments of the city, colorful with floral motifs that the printed patterns from dress fabric. It is a poetic work on the impossibility of the encompassing view, and at the same time an ironic comment on the surrogate presence of nature in the overcrowded and hyper polluted city. "Adopting the panoramic format of cityscapes, 'Cairosapes' are intimate cityscapes of Cairo, eye-level cityscapes, focusing on the quotidian and the fragmentary, rather than on the encompassing overview." The work presented by Maamoun – one of the founding members of the Cairo NGO Contemporary Image Col-





IMAN ISSA, *Making Places*, 2007, Photo series and video, 5.17', Courtesy: the artist

lective – is in direct dialogue with that of Rana El Nemr, Randa Shaath and Christoph Oertli.

El Nemr, like Maamoun, is a photographer, but for Cairo'scape developed her work sculpturally. El Nemr progressed her photographic “Balcony Series” on vernacular architecture and the decorations of balconies in informal areas of Cairo, producing a new installation made of folded postcard sets, mounted as if it were itself an example fragile, informal architecture. Also relating to Cairo's informal architecture, the spectacular installation “Construction 2” (2007-08) by Nermine El Ansari presented an “illusion of a city where we witness the two sides of a schizophrenic entity collide” (El Ansari). On the one side, the red brick ‘ashway’iyat’ settlements, built wildly in the peripheries of the Egyptian capital, on the other the smoggy commercial districts. Randa Shaath's “Under the Same Sky: Rooftops of Cairo” (2002-03) documents life on the rooftops of Downtown Cairo in a series of twelve black and white photographs: from posh terraces and terrace restaurant gardens, to the living conditions of the ‘rooftop dwellers’, another informal community of people who have taken possession of the rooftops to create a parallel, invisible society. Shaath explained, “In the early 1900's, the time the downtown district was built, houses were designed to accommodate one

extended family; rooftops were an area of privacy. Today rooftop dwellers have little privacy as they share the bathrooms and the public areas. The rooftop has become a new kind of community. The people who live on the rooftops are different from the people who live in the buildings themselves; those residents as well as the pedestrians on the street below have no idea what goes on above them.” In an adjacent room of the Kunstraum, Christoph Oertli's video revealed a remarkable Cairo. The video – “Cairo” (2006) – follows a person walking very slowly through the city, along quiet suburbs and on peaceful rooftops. As the districts change, so does the walker who continues his measured pace while observing the world around him without interaction.

Video and photography were the most present media in the exhibition. Contemporary artists in Egypt, particularly the younger generation, seem particularly drawn to new media; much of their work is embedded in the so-called independent scene around NGO institutions such as Townhouse and Contemporary Image Collective. Hala Elkoussy, also a founding member of the CiC, lives in Amsterdam but regularly travels back to Cairo to produce



HANY RASHED, *People of Cairo*, 2006, Installation. Image courtesy of the artist and Mashrabia Gallery (Cairo)





HERMANN HUBER, *Tiring*, 2006/2007, Photo series and video, 25 mins. Image courtesy of the artist

new works. The centerpiece of Elkoussy's installation "On Refrains, Sets and a Backdrop" (2006) is a 42-minute film – "We're by the sea now" – that moves between dreams, visions, poetry and history. For the one of the rooms at the Kunstraum was transformed into an improvised, fictive cinema with curtains covering the walls and a backdrop depicting a twilight a panorama of Cairo, crowded with buildings the color of the sand. Assorted chairs were provided for the temporary space. An insightful mix of fact and fiction, Elkoussy's was a key work in the exhibition, providing viewers with a complex view on the thoughts, ideas, preoccupations and imaginary of the inhabitants of Cairo through sixteen story

fragments that made up the film. Elkoussy works on a double track, blending fiction and documentary her suggestive film ensembles, telling 'marginal' stories from unusual perspective. She elaborates, "What appear to be banal actions, obvious choices and clear directions mandated by everyday necessities, unveil more central questions: how can and is the topography of a megalopolis navigated? How does one mark its permeable history? And most crucially, how does one negotiate a position within the masses, under the overbearing pressures of consumerism, social norms and political apathy?"

These same questions connect other works in Cairo-



SHERIF EL AZMA, *The Psycho-Geography of Loose Associations*, 2007/2008, Text-photo-installation (drawings: Nermine El Ansari, photos: Graham Waite) Courtesy: the artist





KATARINA SEVIC, News From Nowhere.

scape. Iman Issa's series of photos and videos "Making Places" (2007) shows the artist implementing minimal, isolated performative gestures in a city, which in this case was New York, but that could be any large city. Hani Rashed, arranged miniature paper cut-out figures on the floor, tiny and two dimensional, but otherwise faithful portraits of the various and dense human landscape that one could encounter around Medan Tahrir (Liberty Square in the heart of downtown Cairo) or in Cairo suburbs, absorbed in their various activities ("People of Cairo", 2006). Sherif El Azma, Katarina Šević and Hermann Huber, sharing the larger room of the Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, look at Cairo in different ways. Huber's work "Tiring" (2006-07) is an intense, tableau vivant like portrait of a building in Downtown Cairo and its current occupants. Formerly a fancy department store sell-



SUSANNE KRIEMANN, Ramses Files, 2006, 4 Channel slides installation, Courtesy: the artist and gallery Wilfried Lentz, Rotterdam

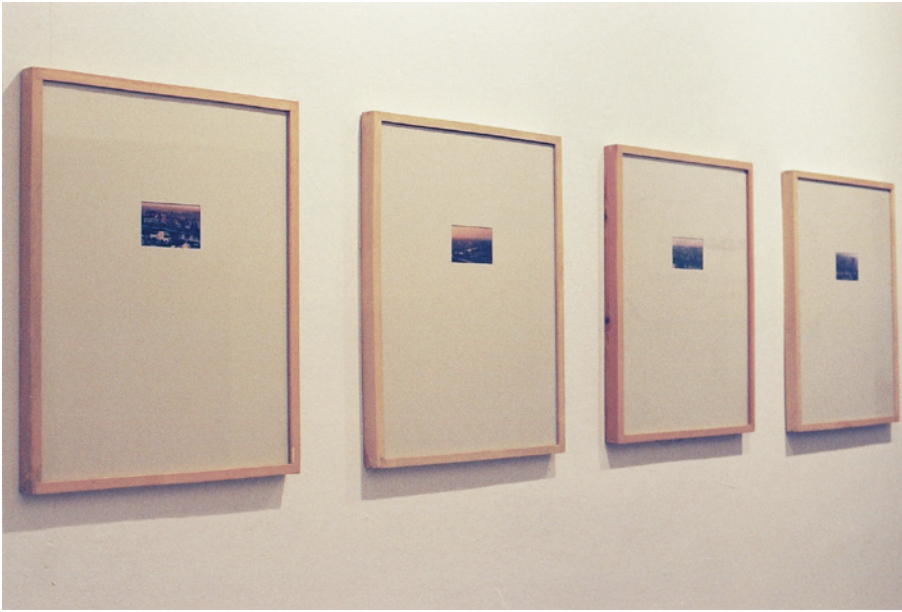
ing expensive colonial goods in the twenties, the Tiring Building at Attaba Square is today a crumbling relic that only hints at its glorious past. Now, the most diverse business are found there, one selling cups of tea, another Chinese clothing, another sewing in a sweatshop and plenty of people just idling away the time smoking or looking for someone to talk to. The twenty-minute film takes the public inside the building, and photographs provide close-ups of details of the decoration. Huber's film is a counter-portrait of globalization, portraying the downside. "Ultimately," notes Thomas Miessgang in a text about this work, "'Tiring' is a story about the tension between center and periphery and of the impossibility of making any sense of life beyond bare

survival in expanding urban deserts." Sherif El Azma's piece, "The Psychogeography of Loose Associations", produced for Cairoscope, was based on the idea of psychogeographical investigation – an idea for emo-

tional investigation of the city developed by Guy Debord and the Situationists in the 50s. El Azma's work revolves around a lone psychogeographer named 'W' for whom selected districts of the city triggered a frenzy of thought and feeling, reality and fantasy. The work underlines the impossibility of representing a given place outside the very human restrictions of subjectivity.

Fiction and reality were blurred too in Katarina Šević's installation "News From Nowhere". Combining images and objects made by the artist during a Cairo residency in 2008 with excerpts from the visionary novel "News from Nowhere" (1893) by British artist, designer and writer William Morris, the work followed





KHALED HAFEZ, *Cairo Xtreme*, 1999/2001, Photo series (4 color photographs), Courtesy: the artist and Le Violon Blue Gallery, London

the logic of an 'associative storyboard', addressing utopian thinking in relation to the social reality of a contemporary mega city such as Cairo. The piece 'documents' a future-Cairo – maybe. Šević explains that "News From Nowhere" is a work in progress: "The work is inspired by Cairo, but also playing around the fact that this city reminds me of (some) other cities, in different times, and different countries. I plan to expand the material (images, objects), with 'documents' from other cities. I plan to develop more objects and 'document' more fake-real situations. Since it consists of non-linear layers of associations the material can be than installed in different ways, forming different stories."

Explicitly documentary works enhance the grass-



MAIA GUSBERTI, *Travel.agencies*, 2007, Photo series, Courtesy: the artist

roots authenticity of the project. In her four-channel slides installation "The Ramses Files" (2006) Susanne Kriemann reveals the transformations of the megalopolis through an archival photograph collection of the pharaonic statue of Ramses II and its surroundings from the 50s to the present. Set in front of Cairo's central station until 2006, the statue had been progressively surrounded by highways and increasingly traffic, eating away the public space.

Khaled Hafez's "Cairo Xtreme" (1999-2001) photo series was shot by the artist as he returned to Egypt after years spent in Europe in the nineties. The photos, he explains, were an attempt to approach his place of origin, a place that had changed dramatically during his time away. The images, shot with expired films in extreme light condition at sunset or sun-

down, show the megalopolis immersed in a foggy, estranged light have a disturbingly surreal character. Maia Gusberti's images are sensitive portraits of several travel agencies in Downtown Cairo, part of ongoing research by the artist on images and icons connected with travel as a leisure activity ("travel.agencies", 2008). What is peculiar of these travel agencies in Cairo is that they do not show images of foreign monuments or palm beaches, but only ancient world maps. Gusberti's work raises the issue of traveling, for most Egyptians a dream impossible to fulfill for lack of money and the difficulty of obtaining visas. Also Swiss artist Gilles Aubry in his sound installation "Outside of the Plane" (2008) touches





on this issue, interviewing a young Egyptian man talk about his dream of traveling.

Identity issues and contemporary identity construction processes are woven into the fabric of the Cairoscope project. Doa Aly's "Chinese Sweet, Chinese Pretty" (2006) is a delicate depiction of another invisible community in Cairo, that of the Chinese female migrants selling cheap clothes and underwear door-to-door, who arrive in Egypt on tourist visas and work illegally. The work provides a subtle perspective on issues of globalization, and portrays Cairo as recipient of migratory movements, as seen from the perspective of the Chinese women.

Shady El Noshokaty's video "Stammer – A Lecture in Theory" (2007-08) explores abstract topics related to the mental structural systems and other systems that are of a sensual nature and come directly out of the private drawers of the life and dreams of the artist in a spontaneous way. Ahmed Khaled's film "Fish Eye" (2007) deals with identity as denied identity, portraying the insomniac life and the nightmares of a middle class young man, unemployed, who can't find his place in the contemporary Egyptian society, endemically lacking of opportunities and jobs for its young people. The work deals also with the decay of the middle class and was a sort of mirror to the Berlin public – as Berlin, in a different measure of course, is also a place struggling with social decay and high unemployment rates.



GILLES AUBRY, *Outside of the Plane*, 2008, Sound installation, 12' loop. Courtesy of the artist

Cairoscope goes against the images and imaginary of a modern Arab society oriented towards the North – be it through



DOA ALY, *Chinese Sweet, Chinese Pretty*, 2006, Video, 12.30', Courtesy: the artist and gallery Kamel Mennour, Paris







SHADY EL NOSHOKATY, *Stammer: A Lecture in Theory*, 2007/2008, Video, 12', Courtesy: the artist

the Chinese migrant workers in Cairo in the film of Doa Aly, the “mini-people” drawn by Hany Rashed in urban settings or the insomnia and sexual fantasies of Ahmed Khaled’s main character. In *Cairoscope*, the curators go to great lengths to focus on Cairo as a translocal place, simultaneously recipient and origin of a set of cultural influences and ideas floating in the region, and a privileged observation point that as such may disclose unexpected yet familiar scenarios. The idea of translocality, Sorbello explains, was borrowed from the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), a scientific partner throughout the process of ideating, fundraising and the making of *Cairoscope*, “Translocality differs from globalization in substantial ways. If the globalization means a transnational flow of global capital, translocality means rather putting the local issues in the global context and making it widely accessible.” The idea of translocality owes a lot to the

cyberspace, with several nodes, or centres, that interact with each other in a non hierarchic way.” Sonja Hegasy goes further in her catalogue essay of the exhibition, “The ZMO uses translocality both as an overarching research perspective as well as a specific. Thus, it regards translocality as a phenomenon resulting from circulation and transfer. As a perspective, translocality emphasizes the interaction between places, institutions, actors and concepts across real and imaginary boundaries taking place in a variety of different contexts. *Cairoscope* visualizes this ‘social interspace’ – or ‘junk space’ as it is called in architecture. With *Cairoscope* we have to bid farewell to the idea that the whole Middle East is a ‘black hole of globalization.’” The exhibition successfully underlines the familiar and prosaic with sensitivity, without rejecting the obvious differences experienced by residents of Cairo and other cities on a day-to-day basis. Downplaying the ‘oth-



AHMED KHALED, *Fish Eye*, 2007, Video, 22', Courtesy: the artist



erness' and exoticisms, *Cairoscope* reveals universals by focusing on particulars.

(All the text excerpts courtesy the artists and the authors. Editing: Janet Leyton Grant)

### *Cairoscope*

*Images, Imagination and Imaginary of a Contemporary Mega City*

A project curated by Marina Sorbello and Antje Weitzel

30/08-12/10/2008 Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, Berlin, and other venues

### Artists:

Doa Aly (Cairo), Gilles Aubry (Berlin), Nermine El Ansari (Cairo), Sherif El Azma (Cairo), Hala Elkoussy (Cairo/Amsterdam), Rana El Nemr (Cairo), Shady El Noshokaty (Cairo), Maia Gusberti (Vienna/Bern), Khaled Hafez (Cairo), Hermann Huber (Vienna), Iman Issa (Cairo/New York), Ahmed Khaled (Cairo), Susanne Kriemann (Rotterdam/Berlin), Maha Maamoun (Cairo), Christoph Oertli (Basel/Brussels), Hany Rashed (Cairo), Katari-na Šević (Budapest), Randa Shaath (Cairo)

### Off-Site Projects

Hassan Khan (Cairo), *Lust*, solo exhibition at uqbar projectspace, Berlin, 26/08 – 18/10/2008, <http://projectspace.uqbar-ev.de>  
eps51 (Berlin) & Ganzeer (Cairo), Poster projects in public space, Berlin, 29/08–12/10/2008

### Programme of Events Including

Mona Abaza (Cairo), Claudia Basrawi (Berlin), Haytham El Wardany (Berlin/Cairo), Khaled El Hagar (Cairo), Gerd Jan Hobjin (NL/Berlin), Nadja Kamel (Cairo), Edit Molnar (Cairo), Mahmoud Refat/100copies (Cairo), Samuli Schielke (Leiden/Joensuu), Steffen Strohmenger (Cairo/Berlin), William Wells (Cairo), Nora Younis (Cairo)

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### EPS51 AND GANZEER

Billboards project for *Cairoscope*, public space, Berlin, 2008

Courtesy: the artists



HASSAN KHAN, detail from *The Lust* photo series, 2007-onwards.  
Image courtesy of the artist

