



# Invisible Presence

By Jenifer Evans

In the old Mawlawi complex in Islamic Cairo, *Invisible Presence* was an offsite project by Mashrabia Gallery. The premise was that the body is ignored in Egyptian discourse, and its study in a local context would create a discursive platform, through commissioned works by 25 prominent and emerging artists.

It was difficult to tell if the artists agreed with this premise or not, but the most fruitful works were those that conceived of the body as inseparable from a wider context and the city, and sought not to fix meaning, but to confuse things.

One of these was a video from Shady El Noshokaty's collaborative project *Stammer*. He frantically draws a pseudo-scientific diagram on a chalkboard, fails to read theory, repeatedly screams and plays harmonica wearing washing-up gloves. In a short voiceover a man vomits ice in Tahrir Square, dissolving ranks of riot police. It speaks of futility, art's failure to communicate or affect change or dissolve police: while authoritatively enacting familiar tropes (eg. the Beuysian chalk diagram) it pokes fun at them and the inscrutability and self-dramatisation it relishes. Stammering, screaming, giving up and resorting to mournful harmonica music, all suggest the information he's attempting to communicate is either pointless or incomprehensible – but the grave precision of the piece counters its frustration.

In another piece by El Noshokaty, *Virtual*, a large sculpture suspended itself, like an oversized light fixture

Malak Helmy, *Keyword Searches for Dust*, 2010  
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo

made out of sports equipment, holding six loudspeakers, each fluorescent yellow inside with yellow padded rims. It had the same air of melancholic seriousness mixed with humour, but was more exuberant. One arm held up a glass sphere at waist height, holding a neat clump of braided black hair, a few strands escaping. The speakers made muffled urgent intercom announcements and requiem-like speaker noise. It was trying hard yet muted. The hair was sealed off like a dangerous object, or perhaps remains held out as a warning by the panicky object?

Ambiguity and a science-fiction feel also characterised Malak Helmy's *Keyword Searches for Dust*. Like a few other works in the exhibition, it used internet material: found images and clips became a video with a nonsensical voiceover. Using recycled words, it spoke of an exhibition, a building, smell, a mannequin turning into pink dust, disease and fireflies. It was concise and confidently experimental, the themes were of decay and loss: "chunks of her are moving away, going somewhere else grain by grain."

Hala Elkoussy's fragmented epic video *We're by the Sea Now* explored survival tactics in relation to other city-dwellers, against traffic noise. Possibly fictional, youthful characters tell stories that might not be their own. "I was harassing a young girl... so I got beaten up," says one. "Yesterday I was in Paris" lies a boy on a Cairo roof holding a balloon. A psychologist discusses helplessness in a big city, a lecture that sounds personal: "when I try to vent you don't give me a chance".

Mohamed Nabil showed two lists: force, duty, power, history, horror, largest, blue, etc. In small photos, twenty lone young men stood to attention for full-length portraits, diverse bodies and not-so-diverse underwear exposed. Measured against each other they have a certain awkwardness and defiance, young manhood with army rhetoric, set off by unlikely underwear: Armani, Puma, Prada, Versace.

Magdi Mostafa's piece, under the circular dance floor of the Samaakhana itself, engaged with the loaded setting. The layered, dusty spaces of the building, with its red



Shady El Nohokaty, *Stammer*  
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo

rubber dancing carpet, were empty apart from traces of the exhibition's art performances (which I did not see). The work's drips, creaks, rattles, rumbles, silences and sections of singing heavy with reverb echoed precisely the building's laid back mystique. Sound samples from recent events complimented its exposed workings: tiny white lights illuminated wet bricks, a PC on the ground, wires, an ancient well.

There was energy in the adolescent fantasies in the works of both Ahmed Sabri and Nermine El Ansary. Sabri laid black painterly computer strokes onto a 3 minute clip of *The Choice* by Youssef Chahine. In a psychologically charged scene between a man and a woman in an ornate interior, Sabri gave him a beard and her a niqab, slippery and rough additions: prurient vandalism, a split-second of nudity as the woman sits at her mirror. El Ansary's work was unashamedly obvious. Video-game music in a dark room, a life-sized clumsy plaster woman in fighting pose, wearing only boxing gloves and shoes. Behind her in UV paint big wings on the walls, and around the room more crudely painted visions, no doubt representing a nightmarish society: cityscapes, people, toothy monsters attacking (possibly) a large disintegrating brain.

In contrast Amr el Kafrawy's eight ink portraits, fragments of paper glued onto panels, hung outside. Modest, but outside they looked resilient, even provocative.

Other works tended to lack exuberance, humour or complexity: coy but accompanied to their disadvantage by artists' statements making grand claims. There was little attempt to engage the viewer's own body; works kept to themselves like a series of solo shows. The exhibition presented the body as under attack, unsurprising since in Cairo bodies are perpetually assaulted, judged: besieged by pollution, noise and traffic, covered, over-medicated, malnourished, signifiers of social position. Egyptian contemporary art is particularly figurative; this exhibition could have celebrated and explored that with more gusto.



**Mohamed Nabil**  
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo



**Magdi Mostafa**  
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo

*Jenifer Evans is a British artist living and working in Cairo who has been involved in making installation, painting, sculpture, video, books and various collaborative projects, both fictional and non-fictional, as well as having a writing practice. She completed her masters in Painting at the Royal College of Art in London in 2007 and has shown in the UK, North America, Portugal and New Zealand.*

**Amr Elkafrawy**  
Image courtesy of The Mashrabia Gallery, Cairo



## Why Not Have a Generation-less Exhibition?

By Dominique Ellis



The exhibition *Why Not?*, which opened last month at the Palace of Arts on the grounds of Cairo's Opera House, raises many more questions than perhaps it intended to. Most notably, those of the curatorial choices of the Director of the Palace, also the curator of the show: How he chose both the pieces and the artists, why he used the space in the way he did, and what the link is between one piece and another?

*Why Not?*, sponsored by Egypt's Ministry of Culture and featuring 44 Egyptian artists, set its starting point as breaking bounds. Curated by the Director of the Palace of Arts, Mohamed Talaat, his one objective was "individual artistic investigation" by exploring one's voice in different mediums than normal. The second objective was the ability to have an exhibition, fusing the older and younger Egyptian generations together - something not the norm in Ministry of Culture spaces. The challenge was great, as Talaat attempted to curate not based on an artist's age or status in society - as is the norm in Egyptian art circles - but rather based on the content of one's artwork.

To those unfamiliar with Talaat, the youngest director/curator of the Palace of Arts, he is a charismatic and eager curator who wants to shake off the dust of previous

decades of curatorial practice at the Palace of Arts. His call, or statement, for change began with the exhibition, *What's Happening Now?* in 2007 at the same venue, where he first introduced his approach to curating within a government gallery space by incorporating multi-generational artists. His statement was also one made in the use of a rhetorical exhibition title, like *What's Happening Now?*, and more recently, *Why Not?* - noteworthy as a method of creating dialogue in a culture where the dialogue of debate is not the norm. So, *Why Not?*

For the artist Adel El-Siwi, why not push is his artistic repertoire into new forays? Well, thanks to Talaat, he did - using ceramic vessels as a new surface to paint on. The personal dialogue and response to surface was challenged by working in a new medium. The piece both responds to an individual pursuit and the curatorial question posed. Surely, a measure of success on Talaat's part? There are, however, still certainly more questions than answers resulting from this exhibition, but perhaps that is the point. What *Why Not?* alludes to or how this open-ended question manifested itself visually and conceptually is subjective. However, in a contemporary dialogue, it is essential to ask questions like, why not have an exhibition rooted in individual exploration? or why not have generation-less exhibitions? Yet, asking the question is not enough. Although this exhibition pushes the boundaries of who is included or excluded, does it matter what generation the artist is from? In a generation-less exhibition, emerging and established artists are held to the same standard of criteria for evaluation of the content of their work. And *Why Not?*

*Dominique Ellis is a visual artist and researcher. She was awarded a U.S. Fulbright student scholarship for Egypt from 2009-2010 and is based in Cairo, Egypt. Dominique is conducting research on "The Relationship between Printmaking and Arabic Calligraphy." As a practicing printmaker, she is currently teaching a SAWA monoprinting workshop called, "Printing without a Press," in the Townhouse Gallery factory space. She earned her BFA, at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, with a dual-emphasis in ceramics and printmaking. Prior to arrival in Cairo, she served as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco, from 2006-2008, working for the Moroccan Ministry of Handicrafts.*

## Residencies and Exchange: Beyond Practice Pro Helvetia's Artist-in-Residence

By *Lina Attalah*

Closing the year and following *Where Are You?*, an exhibition by artists-in-residence partaking in the Swiss Arts Council exchange program, Pro Helvetia held a gathering, through which its residencies' programme came under meticulous scrutiny.

The Swiss Arts Council – Pro Helvetia in Cairo is one of the oldest institutions in Egypt and the Middle East catering to studio and research residencies, with traffic going both ways between Egypt and Switzerland. While this traffic continues to move throughout time, the contexts surrounding it keep changing, be it the closer context of contemporary art practice across nations, or the larger socio-political and economic contexts of transnational mobility.

Such contexts elucidate the need for a closer look at exchange programmes beyond their usual and mechanical practice, to capture nuanced perspectives of the concept and perhaps review practices in this light.

Intercultural exchange lies at the heart of any institutional literature of art residencies, since travel is naturally tied to a certain openness to a different cultural experience. But with the politicization of “culture”, especially in post-colonial studies chronicling perceptive hierarchies to culture, calls for cultural exchange cease to be a plain philanthropic activity. In this context, Pro Helvetia asks at its gathering of artists, curators and institutions' representatives: What does inter-cultural exchange actually mean? What conceptions do artists and art institutions have for it and are those conceptions necessarily the same or can they be contradicting? Does the concept need to be further tweaked in order

to create a state of satisfaction amongst different stakeholders in an exchange programme?

Discussions around those questions bring to the front some interesting ideas. They might have been said elsewhere, but to consistently make those references becomes important in understanding the function of art residencies beyond the fixation of cultural exchange. One idea is that for many artists, residencies are platforms where the self is thoroughly experienced, outside the confines of a social, cultural and political context that condition its behavior to some extent. Being primarily an individual experience, residencies do not necessarily imply any proactive responsibility to “represent” other than oneself (rather than his/her “culture”). The act of exchange occurs naturally in as much as any communicative endeavor involves exchange.

But while the art world strives to think progressively and transcend prevalent geographic and cultural binaries, there are predominant features that mark the traffic of residencies. For one, there's a curiosity or a certain gaze that accompany some artists' application to visit the South or the Middle East; a genuine interest in exploring that other at a time when the media has buzzed about it enough to raise artistic curiosities. By the same token, some artists head to the West with the practical aim to benefit from the institutional development of the art apparatus in comparison with home, with well-built institutions being a face of modernity, which can facilitate the production process. In both cases, a geographic and cultural binary prevails, even if there's a general interest in resisting it.

The theme of cultural exchange is key in opening up an analytical discussion of residency programmes, especially when conducting an autopsy of policies and objectives involved. After a day of intellectual discussions about cultural exchange, Pro Helvetia asks the practical questions of: the difference between the artist's career trajectory and the residency's trajectory. Will a self-designed residency submitted by an artist suffice to suit the need of host and funding organizations? Or does the work of designing a residency that resonates with a generic series of objectives and policies need to be done by the hosts and funders?

An organically-generated agenda for residency programmes, the gathering says, should be the outcome of collaborative discussions between artists, hosts and funders. On one hand, the agenda setting cannot be solely determined by an artist, which would reduce the role of the funder and perhaps the host to being travel agents. But also, the process of writing personal statements and motivation letters should be key in determining the path that the offered residency will take, a matter that is in the hands of hosts to a large extent. And while providing the background support for the artists-in-residence, hosts can be actively engaged in the work of the artist on curatorial/advisory levels on one hand and/or on educational levels on the other (through many formats, artists can expound on their practice in a way that can inform the local art scene and expose them to novel ideas.)

Questions of whether a certain project should be pitched within a residency programme to demarcate its features are asked and challenged on the basis that residencies should remain flexible platforms for learning and exploration, free from the pressures of production.

But all scenarios are supportive of a thorough and transparent conversation ahead of a residency programme, between the host, the funder and the artist, whereby expectations are clearly relayed from the beginning. Furthermore, making sense out of a residency programme and informing its development through its previous practices calls on extensive evaluation processes that involve constant communication between

different stakeholders. Media involvement in covering events related to residencies is also raised as an external means of evaluation of exchange programmes. But else than playing the role of the impartial arbiter, the media can also play a dynamic role in connecting an artist-in-residence with his/her host community, bringing about the compound benefit of giving networks to the artist, and informing the public about his/her practice.

The abovementioned highlights of Pro Helvetia's winter workshop on artists-in-residence illuminate the complexity of residency programmes as both spaces of the private and the public. While, in essence, they cater to the professional development of individuals and their practice is a highly personalized experience, there's always an extension from this private space to the public. This extension strives to add attributes of education, collaboration and contribution to a certain artistic infrastructure in a somewhat give-and-take setting. The movement between the two notions is not always fluid, but the consciousness of the possibility of this movement becomes a poignant marker in designing exchange programmes.

*Lina Attalah is a Cairo-based print journalist and audio-producer who covers the political scene with particular interests in border areas, where human geography issues of conflict and desire are rampant. She is involved in the cultural scene as a project manager for a number of research-based initiatives with multi-media outputs around the themes of space, mobility, and intellectual history.*