

Revolution! Revolution!

By Angelle Siyang Le



James Clar, *The World Keeps Turning*, 2011.

‘An artist is affected by their environment and the issues around them. That’s their job, to intake all the information around, reprocess it, and output it into some creative form’, says James Clar, an artist who was based in the Middle East for a number of years in which time the evolving environment greatly influenced his works of art. The impact of such a complex environment on the development of contemporary art has been a controversial subject both locally and internationally. History has shown that socio-political chaos can at times be the motivation to break boundaries; it simultaneously encourages avant-garde movements that are ‘opposed to mainstream cultural values and often has a trenchant social or political edge’. The ongoing

socio-political revolution in the middle-eastern region is having an inevitable influence on locally produced contemporary art creations, and has become for some artists a source of inspiration to numerous contemporary practices. Artists may or may not be activists, but they certainly reflect a state of societal phenomenon. No matter whether the artistic outcomes are triggering insurrections or vice versa, we cannot neglect the significant changes of today’s contemporary art practices in certain regions. In other words, the accelerated avant-garde movement in the Middle East is likely to be a combined consequence of all individuals’ socio-political and behavioral contributions. In this article, I am going to curate a series of political voices that are illustrated by



James Clar, *The Difference Between Me and You*, 2010.

artworks, works executed by those who frequently try to break out of silence within a restricted environment and by those who perhaps share a similar belief and social responsibility as an artist. As a matter of fact, the word 'politics' appears regularly in the following essay because, 'any relationship amongst humans, or between humans and other entities - such as "the environment" - can be said to have a politics'.

Some artists are interested in the factors of a changing environment that an evolving world has given us, and some are interested in the cause of it. *The World Keeps Turning* by James Clar, is an installation overlaying two complete opposite worlds on top of each other – the art world, and that of the mastermind terrorist. Alternatively, the work can also be understood as an entity that separates the world into two layers which

run simultaneously. This installation, set up inside a gallery space, uses movie theater lights to outline a one-to-one architectural replica of Osama Bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad on the ground. Visitors are invited to walk around 'his house'. A reconstruction of a desk and a television set can be found in one of the 'rooms' where Bin Laden reviewed the tape recordings of himself on media channels such as the BBC. The reconstruction unveils Bin Laden's 'media station' in the real world while, at the same time, it references a process of information communication that is interpreted by an edited loop of himself Bin Laden watching television on the television in this room. Clar therefore says, 'in essence, while we live in our world – visiting galleries, seeing art and socializing. The terrorist also lives in his own world. Good guys are good guys, bad guys are bad



Hesam Rahmanian, *Butcher and Swan*, 2011-2012.

guys, and the world keeps turning'. The work meanwhile questions the factual significance behinds the recent political events, as the 'media station' generates and controls the 'truth' up to a certain level despite the fact that 'the world keeps turning'. We are possibly being trapped inside a world that is reconstructed by the media while it coincides with the real world. As a result, 'overlapping these two worlds makes us aware of this'. The *Difference Between Me and You*, is another work of Clar's that also separates one entity into layers. A double-screened television plays Fox News and Al Jazeera concurrently. The double screens, made of acrylic, are fused into one, hence the sounds of the two channels are mixed together. Although light shines through the acrylic screens, no images are shown as the screens are sealed into a box. As an American artist recently living



Hesam Rahmanian, *Detaining the Guardian*, 2010-2011.

in the Middle East, Clar, like many others, notices the difference between various cultures.

However, Clar believes that the differences originate from the information that we are given by the media according to the region it is produced in.

He therefore combines the two representatives into a physical artifact, and the shimmering light demonstrates a common hope – a coherence of the global political and social agenda. Clar addresses socio-political issues in his artworks; he believes that one of the social responsibilities of an artist is to raise awareness of the surroundings publicly and aesthetically. As the artist would say, 'for decades the Middle East has been a highly politicized region, so it's hard for an artist who is from there, or lives there, to deal with subject matter outside of that'.



Lantian Xie, Al Sarab Cafeteria, 2012.

Hesham Rahmanian is an artist who was raised in Iran and later informed by the country due to the social discourse of his art making. He believes that 'artists have always been the greater voice of their society by commenting and criticising the political and social movements through art. Also, partially, it is the nature of art to be political!'. As an artist, Rahmanian insists that his responsibility is to investigate the vision of his nation while raising a voice for mankind. The current political and social circumstances in the Middle East, as well as Iran, have therefore inspired him further in the establishment of a significant ideology behind his works. Butcher and Swan simply consists of a struggling swan being held in a butcher's grip while the floor is covered in blood. Rahmanian was not hesitant to use exaggerated colors – the cadmium red seems so bright that it reflects from the cobalt teal tiles. This symbolic painting describes a metaphor of tension as having two parts: the butcher and the swan, under a staged circumstance – the innocence is being murdered by the dictatorial power. Detaining the Guardian, on the other hand, illustrates a straightforward event,

that of a detainment being performed during some sort of insurrection. However, the viewer is required to examine the truth behind the event, as the artist withholds the identities of the 'guardian'. Rahmanian encourages social discourse through the imaginative space within his art – the gaps he leaves in his works in order to generate further discussion. Rahmanian once said to the journalist Christopher Lord, 'when I arrived in Dubai in 2009, the uprisings in Iran over the election results - the Green Revolution - were just taking place. I found that I was painting political things; painting for a particular audience'. Yet he also admits that, 'for a while I was following the news closely and hoping the violence would end. After a while, I realized that when the violence ends in one location, [it] starts in another. Same repression. Same tragedy. Only the names would change. Only the geographical locations would differ. Whether the violence is about the riots in London or the mass killing in Syria...'

It is difficult to avoid the effect of the revolutions, not only in the Middle Eastern region but across the world. The revolutionised atmosphere envelops the



Ahmed Bouholaigah, *The Fridge Project*, 2011.

communities; from Facebook 'likes', faintly discernible graffiti in countries like the UAE, to those 'cutting-edge' socio-political artworks in either institutional or commercial galleries. Artists express their concerns through artistic creations and the market is keen to show its patronage and support. Together, this process becomes an even greater power of encouragement – we all motivate each other on this revolutionary road.

Lantian Xie is an emerging artist based between New York and Dubai. As a foreigner growing up in the Middle East, Xie considers his relationship with this region as especially sensitive. Al Sarab Cafeteria is

an interactive video installation comprising texts and images appropriated from a cafeteria restaurant menu in the UAE. The video includes items such as myriad sandwiches and colorful beverages, which can be activated when the present viewer makes a sound. 'Food' becomes the essential ingredient that represents the tradition and territory of a habitat. When describing Al Sarab Cafeteria, the artist mentioned that, 'Food is often thought of as respite from hegemony. In the least, we hope that it is one of culture's least hegemonic consequences. Perhaps it is simply its most frequent agent. Eating becomes a vehicle with which we endeavor to legitimize and qualify our imagined selves as we seek out new culture to colonize our senses'. In addition, 'food' can be seen as the cause of violence when the lack of certain 'needs' becomes dominant. Xie admits that political and social conditions apply to his practice as they apply to most practices. Although the artist stated, 'there is a palpable difference between making work that is political and making work about politics'; he believes all art is implicitly political as is the act of viewing.

Ahmed Bouholaigah, who has also spent most of his time between the Middle East and the west, commented on the revolutionized creative field in this region from a different aspect. Whilst contemporary art hits the Middle Eastern region at light speed, Bouholaigah compares art with pop music, 'many Middle-Eastern rappers and rap collectives in places such as Bahrain, Egypt, Tunis, and Libya saw their music being distributed and chanted throughout the Middle East because of their revolutionary connotations. Unlike these artist, who were motivated by notions such as patriotism and freedom, there were many visual artists in countries that have not seen any rebellion who capitalized on the opportunity to create works of art that comment on the situation in other countries that they have little or no association with. Other than that, common people had a chance to dabble with creating protest signs, which is an excellent form of non-commercial art. To a certain extent, the commercial art market is an inescapable driving force behind the artistic 'trend', which highlights what is popular and patronages the 'needs'. However, Bouholaigah does not believe in such 'needs' when it comes to art. Instead of speaking

to the audience directly through a particular medium, most of his electronic installations interact with the audience from a diverse angle. The Fridge Project interprets an anti-social gesture within a socializing atmosphere by demotivating the audience to participate with such interactive artwork. The work consists of a refrigerator containing a single dead fish and sweet candies and perched on a small mound of sand dune. The refrigerator will only be powered for sixty seconds each time someone steps onto the sand dune and opens the door – therefore, the more participation in opening the refrigerator, the longer it [the refrigerator] will continue to stay powered. A sensor is installed inside the refrigerator, which is connected to a timer that is digitally displayed above the refrigerator and counts down the time that the refrigerator will remain turned on. Free candy is rewarded to visitors who engage with the interactive installation – after experiencing the disturbing scene of the dead fish. However, the effort of clambering up the mound of sand prevents all but the most inquisitive public participants from visiting the artwork. As a result, the refrigerator automatically switches off after the remaining time runs out; speeding up the decaying processing of the dead fish and producing a foul odor which spreads through the gallery space. This progress is understood as the anti-social influence interfering with a social community. The artist schemes this subtle interaction in order to demonstrate a socio-political message through the psychological actions of the audience. From the perspective of an outsider (the artist considers himself to have ‘little or no association with’ the current uprisings in the Middle Eastern region), Bouholaigah implicitly embodies his observations through the artworks without touching the sensitive political topics.

Whether an artwork is being created to associate with the current revolutions in the Middle East directly or it obliquely becomes part of a movement, it is undeniable that many artists are influenced by the recent circumstances in the region. Under the contemporary context, art practices diversify themselves from institutional rules. This dislocation from traditional hierarchies provides greater freedom to tackle social and political issues. Artists are therefore adapting various

strategies to perform new artistic purposes, especially in an unusual ‘environment’ such as the Middle East. Young and emerging artists are appearing more frequently both ‘underground’ and ‘overground’; hence the art market is also observing a larger generational shift alongside socio-political movement. “In the 1980s, when people started to feel uncomfortable with the word avant-gard, they adopted the euphemism cutting-edge. Now, with emergent art, anticipation of market potential replaces vanguard experiment” . The aesthetic outcome without doubt has an impact on civil communities. For example, as Ahmed Bouholaigah mentioned, protest signs could be seen as a form of non-commercial art, as could the ‘sharings’ on various social networks. Thus, the creation of art is happening through more and more diverse approaches within the Middle East and artists are now seeking previously forbidden areas as a means to create their own shining lights of hope.

About the writer

Angelle Siyang-Le (MA, BSc) is a Dubai-Hong Kong based art practitioner who has received an academic education in Curatorial Modern and Contemporary Art. She has a background in Urbanism and Art History and she is passionate about contributing to a variety of cultural development domains. Previously working with a number of art organizations and art professionals, from art fairs, art institutions and foundations, to individual artists, collectors and curators; she strongly believes that it is essential to expand on emerging art platforms in many regions across the world. Following her theory that ‘contemporary art must serve at all levels’, Siyang-Le is currently focusing on gathering emerging artists and supporting art projects while working for a non-profit art organization in Dubai. At the same time, she is also carrying out her own artistic practices in order to encourage the participation of the general public in contemporary art communities.