



Adresse Fossveien 24
0551 Oslo
Norge

Telefon (+47) 22 99 55 00

Post Postboks 6853
St. Olavs plass
N-0130

Faktura Postboks 386
Alnabru
0614 Oslo

Org.no. 977027233
Giro 8276 0100265

Ahmad Ghossein
The Birth and Death of the Image
In three Scenarios During Disaster

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KHIODA
Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo,
Digitalt Arkiv

www.khioda.no
khioda@khio.no

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*The Birth and Death of the Image
In three scenarios during disaster*

by
Ahmad Ghossein

2011

In this thesis I will address the Arab revolutions in general and the Syrian revolution in particular in relation to the use of image. Furthermore, I will use the VG stand that broke as a result of the terrorist attacks in Oslo on the 22nd of July as a basis of my thesis that relates to my other works that I have been doing as a result of and after the war 2006 in Lebanon. I will use this as a base to discuss, pose questions to or try to deal with what is the meaning of doing art work after and during a big collective disaster.

The Syrian revolution which is trying to topple Bashar al Assad's dictatorship is still going on. Reporters are not allowed to report or film freely. The only high quality images from Syria reaching the world, are those broadcast by the national Syrian TV, which is controlled by Assad's regime and working in its favor.

The activists, protesting against the regime, have long since ceased trusting the national news channels and understand that this national channel is playing a big part in creating a propagandistic image against them. Therefore, the protesters began filming their demonstrations with the use of their mobile phones which has resulted in thousands of youtube clips (and other channels, Facebook, twitter...) that are available to anyone with internet access. These shaky and pixelated clips now function as the main source of documentation and dissemination of the daily actions and protests happening in Syria around the world.

The stable image captured from a camera on the fixed tripod, has lost its authority. In its stead, the low resolution footage previously considered unreliable and poor in quality, has now received legitimacy as highly relevant and credible documentation of the daily actions in Syria.

The media is swept away by these kinds of images. This change or revolt of our relationship to the pixelated image; an image revolution so to speak, is what the Lebanese artist Rabia Mroue has called: The Pixilation Revolution (see Rabih Mroue, *Kalamon* Culture Magazine, fifth issue)

The power of this "low resolution image" is that no one can control it, it knows no limits, can be uploaded and watched by millions by the minute

and can also be attacked and deleted. There are no limits for images such as these swimming in this virtual world, and so we meet them half downloaded, interrupted and distorted. In other words, this world of the pixelated image is a universal that has rituals of its own, an underground universe. A global audience sits and watch this universe for hours, paying to heed to the source or date. These clips filmed by the revolutionaries themselves, images that can be erased and disappear, images that can commit suicide, have become the prime and authoritative media image. In time, these images have taken the place of power in the Syrian revolution.

What does it mean, that the protesters are filming their own death?

Scenario 1 (The Protestor)

The camera is behind a building, we know that a protester is filming from his mobile phone, soldiers are walking in the street, sound of "allah uakbar" and some men behind and in the front of the camera are shouting, the camera is shaking all the time, the soldiers are looking toward the protesters, toward the camera, a soldier is holding a gun. The soldier raises the gun, points it toward the protester, toward the camera, the camera, the mobile camera is shaking, we hear a shooting sound, people running, and the sound of heavy breathing, we see the camera fall down and the image turn from white to black color, probably the color of the road. We continue viewing the image of the camera face down on the street. We hear soldiers coming closer and their steps disappearing from the frame. The camera, the eye of the protester, is black. We will never know if the man who was filming with his mobile phone in a demonstration in Syria is now dead or not. We do not know if this image of a mobile camera that fell down with the image frozen in the street, and only captures images feet and sounds of people shouting, will stand up again or not.

In his paper "The Blood of the Victim: Revolution in Syria and the Birth of the Image-Event" the writer Jon Rich named this "a form of suicide against the camera that spares no one". In Syria, the filmmaker is the protester, and the role of the victim and the hero is blurred. We see a demonstration where all the protesters holding their mobiles in front of their faces, they are simultaneously filming and watching how they are protesting and then watching their own death.

We sit at the computer watching them, while they watch their killers. Through this small screen in the phone, we can watch them and their killers, we can feel them very close to us, we can hear their breath and nearly feel their bodies. The monitor is too small for a big event.

Scenario 2 (The Soldier)

Watching a video filmed by a soldier. A video on youtube showing soldiers slapping protesters and beating them, the soldier who is filming asks the other soldier to keep beating the protester and harder. Even the killer has become a journalist or filmmaker. Those soldiers are not afraid that this image will be used as proof against them one day. All they care for is to act as the protesters do, in using the same tool- the " phone camera", only to prove the opposite- that they are in control. The image created by this soldier has become more important than his actions. The image created by the protestor is dueled by the image created by the soldier. The question of authority is fought through the image.

Whilst in other wars, people can watch the war in there areas like south of lebanon through the media as any one sitting in any place in the world, they are watching their houses being bombs in a TV in an area that they run away to, (one million refuge during the 2006 war in south of lebanon). in syria "those who are watching CNN are survivors, while those who don't are either dead or potentially dead" Jon Rich.

Political action or an Art work:

"Every action and artifact has at least a minimal "political" component." direct action as a reaction of political event or a revolution,

One morning in October 2011, the Syrian people in Damascus awake to find the water in the public fountains colored red. On another day, sounds of revolutionary songs are heard inside a governmental institution, from an unknown source. The employees search to find where these sounds are coming, and discover that they are being emitted from speakers that have secretly been placed inside trash cans.

Clearly, this political action done by the protesters is meant to send a political message, in reaction to the violence done against them by the

government. What does this action mean? Can it be categorized as political art? Are these protestors aware of the methods and historical precedence of just actions in contemporary art?

I assume not. For theoreticians and artists who take interest the shared field of action between art and politics, such as Jumana Manna, these actions have been a source of recent discussion. In her study *The Arab Spring and the Vienna Actionists*, Manna critiques this recent tendency of theoreticians who seek to give art credit for inspiring political action. For Manna, these theoreticians are happy to see these actions manifested in the streets of Damascus, as proof that art has influenced revolutionary movements, and that the notion of public action stems out of a long heritage of artistic imagination.

Hypothetically speaking, the red foundations and secret speakers could have been the work of a group of artists who decided to search for a creative alternative way to join the protest movements. If this was the case, do we categorize this action as a political statement or as an art work?

Most likely, this action was done by a protestor (unconsciously artist) who took this action cares foremost about fronting his message against the government/regime and less about the question of its artistic validity. What we can say for sure from a far, is these actions were a direct reaction, with both political and artistic potency done by a protesters/artist. The borders are blurred again: between the protestor and the artist.

Jump Cut and *Faces Applauding Alone* are two videos that I made after the 2006 war in South of Lebanon. I shot the footage of these two films only few days after the ceasefire. That day, my mother and I went to check my childhood home that had recently been destroyed.

I was filming the first reaction of my mother. I was nearly unable to film-it was a moment for sadness. Nevertheless, I picked up my camera and began filming. The result was a 4 min video, which I titled, "A Letter For my Mother, Jump Cut". In this video I show an image/interview that I took it for her few months before the war, from a documentary about the

south of lebanon, and she was standing in the front of the house . The house is in the background of the frame, talking about her experience of the israeli occupation of Lebanon in 1982, and the diaries she kept. Thereafter, in a similar frame, my mother stands, with the house in the background- but this time the house destroyed and ruin . I repeat the same question I posed in 82'. Rather than answering, my mother stands still and turns to look to whats left of the house, but says nothing.

The title, "jump cut", refers to the filmatic edit in which there is one scene filmed from two slightly different angles which creates a false continuity in the sequence.

when the war happened, it was impossible to continue this documentary that I was filming before the war, since the house was no more there.

but in order to continue it, or Imagining that I will continue this work I have to wait for rebuilding the house again. the current time cause the gap in timing between the past and the future, or a cut in the experience. but filming the house in the future when it is done will not be the same also, at least it will not be the same house, the same place.

In "jump cut" the sound was repeated, I am asking the same question in different image for the same place. and in the future when we finish building the house , I am planning to film again, with the same voice with the same question " where was you, when the war took a place in south of lebanon" .

may be the same voice, will fill this gap between the past and the future, and may be the voice is kind of insisting in continue the experience and to compensate the lack of an image that been amputated in and by this disaster.

I can say now that this video was a direct reaction, I tried to give a concept and a meaning to this video after I filmed it, but in a quick way. may be quick reaction on express your feelings only make a good statement.

The opposite happened when I was making "Faces Applauding Alone" (2008). The footage was shot in 2006, but it took me nearly two years to edit it in order to not repeat the reaction and hasty work that I did in "Jump Cut."

I felt that doing a work that been shot during the war, needed time to be

developed as to go beyond the shock of the war and to fathom the effects and meaning the war had upon me and my surroundings.

The question that emerged was how to deal with an image that you did not create- but that was created by the war. What I had filmed was a man driving in the South, amongst the villages that been completely destroyed. The man driving kept his gaze straight ahead, preferring to avoid looking at the rubble. Later, he is seen walking in a funeral but in the opposite direction of the people, with his back turned to them. The audio was love letters, recorded on cassettes, that had been sent between a couple living in the south before the war, in which they are talking about their dreams of building a house.

This audio can function as either something from the past, or as something yet to come- from the future- thereby rupturing the certainty of time.

Despite the discrepancy of the image and sound, one can imagine a linkage between them- the sound does belong to this place- but from a different time.

The question was, how to film a surpassing disaster. In his paper *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, the Lebanese thinker, Jalal Toufic would explain this as a gap in the historical time, that creates a discontinuity of ones experience. It reveals the withdrawal of what we believe is still there. Withdrawal of photography in Alan Renais' «Hiroshima my love» (1964), when the images reveals the disaster in Hiroshima says the sound, at the same time, «You do not see anything in Hiroshima»

Since Lebanon has been subjected to a series of catastrophes during the successive wars, we find the frequencies of the concept of compromise in the work of Lebanese intellectuals and artists. It comes to the beauty of latency, absence, disappearance, (see Ghada Sayegh, Kalamon Culture magazine, fifth issue).

VG

The project that I am planning to do for the graduating show, is based on an object that is still standing outside the Norwegian newspaper, VG's headquarters. The newspaper, in the front of the governmental building

where the first of the two terrorist attacks took a place on the 22 of July.

This object is a panel that VG used to put the daily news for passer bus to read. The pages of the daily news from the 22nd of July have remained inside this panel. The panel was not completely destroyed, but the glass was shattered, and remains standing like this today. For some reason the news paper did not remove it and did not fix it. After my inquiry, I was told by VG that they were uncertain of what do with it.

I see this panel as a ready made art work that stands near the location of the bombing. Many passerby's stop to read the news as if it were the news of today. and by asking them if they are aware that this is not the news of the day that they are reading, a chuck and a new body language appear and specially when they recognize that this is the news of the day of the bombing, a freeze time for the news of the day of the bombing which is the news of the day before this bombing, normal news, for a day that the whole news and- we do not know for how long- changes completely, the news of the morning of that day about a normal daily news, will remain there and the people will not come to check and to read what this newspaper wrote about the bombing.

We cannot say that this too is a "surpassing disaster". There was no war in Oslo that erased all masses of buildings, museums and libraries, but rather a smaller scale disaster for the history of Norway. By not replacing the news of the following day (the news paper of the 23rd of July) in the panel, a time gap has been has created giving a different perspective. The panel itself replaces the printed matter as the news. As it stands now, it remains a witness, of the gap between past and future, before and after the disaster.

Searching youtube, one finds clips of a person running toward the building toward the bomb, to film and trying to catch the moment of the bombing, running toward the sound. This clip is a familiar a clip- one same kind of clip that belongs to different events of disaster.

As I read once, on September 11th, the first plane came to hit the building so that we could have the chance to film and capture the second plane. Also in Syria, people run to film their friends that are getting killed, and buildings getting bombed, moment before another bomb will come to kill or hit them; these camera men holding the iPhone. The man filming the clip in Oslo however, did not worry about there being a second bomb.

I was told, that in some other part of Oslo, a man was filming his kids, and was able to capture and record the sound of the bombing. By adding the two videos together, maybe we come closer to having a fuller documentation of the disaster. I think from now on it will be almost impossible for any disaster to occur in the world without it being documented.

Back to the VG panel. Is this a ready made? What will happen if we move this object from its current location to another place in Oslo, remove it from its context and from being in the place of the bombing. Isn't it weird that the people standing right now reading what they believe to be the news of today, despite the broken glass. It is as if the people want to move on and want to see the news of the future, rather than dwelling in the past. I believe, by moving the panel from one place to another in which it will stand alone, is a way of giving it more value. I am wondering how the people will look at this out of place object, and moreover, what perspective this object will take if we put in other city.

Can this object be the memorial of this event? Can many copies of this object placed in different locations in Norway, function as the memorial that people pass by- and they do not have to go to a special place to see a piece of art as a memorial? Or if we moved this object to a gallery or a museum- how will the perspective of this object change? In my opinion, the VG panel functions best in public space, in a square standing alone, with the broken glass, and the symbolism and meaning that arises from this broken glass.

I stood holding my camera, asking people who are reading the news off this panel, if they are aware of what they are reading. As they discovered that this is the news of the day of the bombing, I asked them again if they want VG or a project should take place in order to keep this object and save it. Asking them if they want this as a memorial and if they want to keep this gap between the past news in the panel and the future- (which is back to the same routine news)?

I am also asking myself here, shall i give a life for this object, shall we keep it and reserve it, or we should not involve into this and just let it go when the time comes. For me, the most interesting aspect of this project is not only the object itself, but rather the photos, video and discussion that I am building around it, and also the research and documentation of moving this object from one place to another- following how this object will end and what will happen to it.

