

DIARY

DOWNTOWN EXPRESS

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Left: Aleya Hamza of Gypsum Gallery. Right: Writer Mai Elwakil of Medrar for Contemporary Art with Jenifer Evans of Nile Sunset Annex and Mada Masr. (All photos: Kaelen Wilson-Goldie)

LAST WEEKEND, I took a walk through downtown Cairo with the writer and novelist Yasmine El Rashidi. In the years I've known it, the neighborhood has always demanded that you move in a particular way: jaunty, quick, cutting across wide avenues into narrow alleyways, angling for a space between cars, garbage, and throngs of other pedestrians, looking for a way through.

This day was no different, but something had changed. We stopped for lunch with Mai Elwakil, part of the resilient little arts institution Medrar for Contemporary Art, and Jenifer Evans, culture editor of the über-critical online newspaper Mada Masr and a cofounder of the great experimental art space, also tiny, known as Nile Sunset Annex.

I was in town for a workshop and the opening of an exhibition I'd found upsetting and disjointed. I wanted to know everything that had been happening in the art scene but it was too much to understand all at once. Five years earlier, Rashidi explained, something had really broken—in the country, the city, and its people. Now, she said, it was as if they were putting their thoughts back together. "Something is starting again."

Earlier in the day, William Wells, who nearly twenty years ago opened the inimitable Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art in an alleyway filled with car mechanics, had told me much the same thing: "People are having conversations again." Wells will hate me for saying so, but it was immensely reassuring to sit with him once more in that alleyway, a cluster of plastic chairs and high metal tea tables, whirling stories with a weathered laugh.



Left: Playwright, Studio Emad Eddin founder, and D-CAF director Ahmed El Attar. Right: Townhouse founder and executive director William Wells.

And yet: "The last year was awful," Aleya Hamza told me one morning, as we were talking in the back room of her gallery, Gypsum, which she opened in 2013 after years of working as a curator, first with Townhouse, then with the Contemporary Image Collective (CIC).

“Funding dried up completely. The government cracked down on everybody. It was really scary. In Cairo today,” she added, “you don’t want to be in the limelight, that’s for sure.”

Given all the upheaval in Egypt since 2011, one might be forgiven for assuming that the art scene—so lively and contentious a decade ago—had simply died somewhere along the way. The euphoria of the revolution that toppled Hosni Mubarak was enough to give several generations of Egyptians a story they’d tell for the rest of their lives. But the disasters that followed only frayed that story to an angry silence, one abetted by the brutal irony that, with Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Egypt had reinstated a military dictatorship even more draconian than Mubarak’s. Mubarak, by the way, was quietly released from prison the Friday before last, a free man for the first time since he was deposed.

There was a time when Cairo’s artists and thinkers were sending out pretty strong signals. Around 2005, there was an actual movement known as the Cairo School of Urban Studies, which was highly critical of globalization and neoliberalism and used the complex enormity of the Egyptian capital to offer the world applicable lessons on radical democracy and municipal reform. The Cairo and Alexandria biennials, as well as a popular annual youth salon, were often terrible but going strong. There was a classic sense of competition pitting the state-sponsored fine-art sector against a crew of scrappy young downtown galleries and projects. Members of the latter camp never took a dime from the regime but often depended on foreign funding. They earned considerable acclaim abroad but were always viewed locally with suspicion. Their work was innovative, often infuriating, subversive, playful, and always argumentative. But over the past few years, the whole scene has gone quiet.



Left: Artist Malak Yacout. Right: Artist Noor Abuarafteh with curator Mohamed Elshahed of the British Museum.

In 2014, Sisi's regime effectively criminalized foreign funding and made it all but impossible for nonprofits to function. At the end of 2015, a handful of Cairo's most interesting, hardest-working arts organizations were raided by government agencies. CIC, founded by a group of artists, photographers, and photojournalists in 2004, was charged with using pirated software in its office. Studio Emad Eddin, a workshop and rehearsal space for performing artists established by the playwright Ahmed El Attar in 2005, was accused of making online videos for the Muslim Brotherhood—a serious claim that was quickly dropped, though it was still taken to court for an expired license. “The environment is not as friendly as it once was,” Attar told me when I stopped by to see him last Sunday. “It was a way of putting everyone on guard.” Townhouse was raided by multiple agencies and closed. Then one of its buildings began to collapse, which led to weeks of yo-yoing between demolition and salvation. The government sent in a team of workers to hammer the place down to the ground, only to call them off and return the badly damaged building to the Townhouse fold.

Was it all over, then? Had the art scene caved to collective depression?

Maybe. Sporadically. Understandably.

But when I landed in Cairo almost a fortnight ago, I found an awful lot happening on the ground. Townhouse, for one, had stealthily reopened in the former paper factory next

door. There, beside a makeshift library, some whacky vintage furniture, colorful palettes, and a staff of energetic youngsters all pounding away on their laptops and smartphones, the artist Malak Yacout was showing a roomful of austere, nearly mathematical concrete sculptures exploring time in relation to the patterns of Qur'anic text. Gypsum's exhibition of Daniele Genadry's paintings made her work look more luminous than ever. The Sixth Annual Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival, cutely known as D-CAF and controversial for its partnership with the real-estate developer Al Ismaelia, a company explicitly on a mission to gentrify downtown, had opened a week earlier with an interactive remake of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater*. I soon had in hand a list of newish galleries to visit—including Ubuntu Gallery (founded 2014), Gallery Misr (founded 2011), and Art Talks Egypt (founded 2009)—as well as word that older galleries such as Karim Francis and Mashrabia, so pivotal to the downtown scene in the 1990s, were still alive, if only haphazardly active.



Four of the six performers in Manuel Pelmüş's *Museum of Contemporary Art*, part of the visual arts program for D-CAF.

To my chagrin, I arrived just as the sixth edition of Photo Cairo, a downtown arts festival that CIC inherited more than a decade ago from Townhouse, was winding down. For five weeks, two exhibitions and a string of performances, screenings, and discussions had taken place in six venues under the title “Shadows of the Imperceptible.” Organized by CIC’s current artistic director Andrea Thal and the curator Nour El Safoury, it was based almost entirely on workshops that had been ongoing for ten months. As CIC was packing up, I headed to the opening of D-CAF’s visual-arts program, which was organized this year by the German curator Berit Schuck. Schuck is now heading into her second term as the program director for MASS Alexandria, an experimental art school founded by the artist Wael Shawky. Her D-CAF program is essentially a three-artist show called “CaMoCA” (there is some other programming, too), an exercise in asking people to imagine a Museum of Contemporary Art in Cairo. CaMoCA occupies a thread of rehabilitated downtown spaces, including an apartment on Hoda Shaarawi Street and a pair of storefronts lining the old Kodak passageway, which was cleaned up and beautified three years ago by the Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research, better known as CLUSTER. (All these spaces are owned by Al Ismaelia.) I tried to make sense of the rooms on Hoda Shaarawi, which were painted black and half-filled with an installation made jointly by Brad Butler and Noor Afshan Mirza, an artist I’d formerly known as Karen. There were silks hanging from the ceiling, videos of a dancer breathing hard, and a room filled with text related to a vague but captivating story about a car crash in Turkey.

Next door to their installation, a team of writers-in-residence was meant to be working away, responding to the show as part of a project called Saout and Sura (“sound” and “image” in Arabic), but the space was empty. Adelita Husni-Bey, showing a video about American high-school athletes in the Kodak passageway, wasn’t around. Manuel Pelmüş, whose three-hour-long *Museum of Contemporary Art* required six performers to enact a series of works, manifestos, and encounters from the history of Egyptian art, was leaving the next day. Before exiting the apartment, I noticed an Audre Lorde quotation stuck to the wall: “As women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge.”

Distrust, disclosure: I have to say I saw all of this through a privileged lens. I was in Cairo for the second installment in a six-month-long writing workshop organized by Townhouse. This meant I had four long and intense days with sixteen participants, including young artists, established journalists, screenwriters, researchers, pop-culture junkies, a Goldsmiths grad, a self-professed feminist, and an undergrad who writes fragmented, sci-fi inflected fiction. They were by turns shy, thoughtful, bombastic, and brassy, all highly critical in their thinking and seriously opinionated. D-CAF's visual-arts program was our case study, and it gave us a wealth of problems to unpack, not only about gentrification, the festival's inevitable albatross, but also about race, class, feminism, nationalism, the history of art in material objects versus immaterial gestures, language, translation, accessibility, arrogance, condescension, and a bit of neo-orientalism as well.



Left: Curator Reem Fadda. Right: Curator Maxa Zoller with artist Magdalena Kallenberger and Berit Schuck, program director at MASS Alexandria and curator of D-CAF's visual arts program.

Collectively perplexed by the opening, we returned en masse to the Kodak passageway on Friday night for a talk with Reem Fadda, who spoke about her experiences as a curator for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, a museum that also does not exist but occupies a rather different mental terrain than Schuck's fantasy Cairo museum. Fadda gave an admirable lecture, in Arabic, about how she pieced together a history of modern and contemporary Arab art in a context totally ignorant of artists or artworks from this part of the world. But the rhetorical question—who cares about the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi?—hung heavy.

Mohamed Elshahed asked it, with attitude, in the Q&A that followed. Museums in Latin America, for example, had done excellent work on their own art histories for decades, he said, precisely “by not giving a shit about the West” or what the West thought of their work. Elshahed’s point? Who cares about some ill-fated foreign institution in the UAE—a place for which very few Egyptians can even get a visa—when there is so much material, so many museums, so much work to do here and throughout Cairo. I was impressed. I figured he was an artist. But I laughed out loud when I asked him what he did and he told me: “I’m a curator for the British Museum.” A contradiction? Indeed. But his argument holds.

On Saturday, we returned for a tour with Schuck. This did not go smoothly. Pelmuş is an extremely interesting artist. I loved his work in the Romanian pavilion for the Venice Biennale four years ago. But the trope of enacting existing artworks from an unfamiliar history, in an unfamiliar place, wasn’t translating well, most blatantly because the performance script was in English while most of the work’s audience and all but one of its performers spoke Arabic. (The other spoke Greek.) According to Schuck, there was no time for translation, but at least one of the works cited—Inji Efflatoun’s *We Egyptian Women*, to use the most obvious example—was written in Arabic and is widely available in its original form. Also, the choices: a bit of Egyptian surrealism, a painting by Abdel Hadi El Gazzar, a photocollage by Huda Lutfi, who, incidentally, lost her studio in the partial demolition of the Townhouse building. Fine. But what was the connection to Marcel Duchamp, Henri Matisse’s red dancers, Martine Syms’s “Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto,” a quotation from John Berger, some useless patter about the lamentable television series *Homeland*, a throwaway reference to a show at the Prada Foundation, and Mladen Stilinović’s *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist*, delivered without any detectable irony?



Left: Artist, curator, and CLUSTER cofounder Beth Stryker. Right: Saout and Sura writer-in-residence Yasmine Zohdy with Sandra Edward of the Contemporary Image Collective.

In the summer of 2012, I had seen a roomful of visiting artists and curators coil around a group of Egyptian art students like a python hungry for insight. That was at MASS Alexandria, the school where Schuck now works. In that toxic season, the students had wilted. Now, I was watching a group older and wiser, several of them MASS graduates too. They heard Schuck make a number of wild assertions, and they weren't having any of it. They pushed back, hard. When Schuck proposed that there was no adequate word in Arabic for feminism, they told her she was wrong (and according to Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, editors of an important anthology of Arab feminist writing, there's been a consensus on *niswiyya* since the early 1990s). When Schuck said one does not see black or brown bodies in the contemporary art that is typically shown in downtown Cairo, and that her show was an act of representation, they were flabbergasted and told her this was false.

If Schuck's curatorial premise seemed disconnected from its context, even disconnected from the works she had chosen to show, this may have been symptomatic of a larger issue, that the visual-arts program is disconnected from its own festival. On Saturday evening, I went to *Cloture de l'amour*, one of the performances that were part of D-CAF's main program, starring the popular television actor Mohamed Hatem. The contrast was striking in terms of audience, professionalism, and accessibility. It made the visual-arts program look like an afterthought. When I asked Ahmed El Attar, the festival's artistic director,

about this, he told me visual art is “absolutely not my field.” Attar is a doer. He isn’t mediocre. His partnership with Al Ismaelia is debatable, but it’s also extremely important in posing the private-sector potential as a third way, dependent on neither the state nor foreign funders. Aleya Hamza, who curated the visual-arts program last year, told me it has always had a problematic relationship with the rest of the festival. Mai Abu ElDahab, who organized the program two years ago, said the issue wasn’t that it was an afterthought but that it was the only part of the festival that required real production, and so it fell apart. Another problem: In six years, Attar has rotated through six curators. Going forward, the program might need a steadier hand, or a longer-term partnership, to be on par with D-CAF proper.



Karim El Moselhi, Sarah Bahgat, and Mariam Elnozahy of Townhouse.

Because there is talk of Al Ismaelia opening its own downtown museum, the current edition of D-CAF added to an already simmering debate. To imagine a nonexistent museum seemed almost foolishly complicit in clearing away inconvenient history. This had also been an issue late last year, when the state sponsored an exhibition of Egyptian surrealism, focusing on a movement (Art and Liberty) that had previously been written out of the nationalist art history (for being expressly antinationalist). Two of the workshop participants spelled this out for me. “For the government to sponsor a show of Egyptian surrealism now makes total sense. They want to make the revolution a dream, something we think we imagined but didn’t experience because it wasn’t real.”

Shadows and dreams. An art scene under the radar and out of the limelight. Imagination as ignorance, the trap of a police state. Imagination as breakthrough, the only means necessary to change the world, but at a terrible price. These two positions sat side by side. I was troubled by their proximity. But more so, I was mesmerized, and grateful, for the sharp thinking of those who showed me how they were navigating a path between them, looking for a way not just through but forward.

— Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Left: Artist Ash Moniz with Townhouse program manager Mariam Elnozahy. Right: Artist Huda Lutfi.

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