

Kodak Passageway: An entry point on the work of Hassan Khan

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by Yasmine Nazmy

photos from selected works by Hassan Khan

I first met Hassan Khan 11 years ago when I was a student at AUC. At the time, he was recruiting university students to help him transcribe one of his first performance installation pieces, 17 and at AUC. In the piece, he sat in a soundproof, one-way mirrored glass and drank beer for four hours a day for 14 consecutive nights, and reflected on his experiences as a student at university. The result was 56 hours of material, which he planned to turn into a book.

I was just one of three people hired to transcribe the piece, but for one whole summer, I spent hours sitting in front of the computer listening to Khan's voice on my headphones, attempting to capture every word, every pause, and every detail. I did not know Hassan Khan when I took on the project; for me, it was an opportunity to make some extra money over the summer and to explore something different. But as I transcribed hour after hour, I came to know him in a strange way, and what started out sounding like a drunken rant quickly revealed itself as a very personal recollection on his time as a student. I was surprised at his willingness to expose himself to an audience unknown to him in a way that is unheard of in our society. It was unsettling to meet him again for the first time after I had finished the first batch of transcriptions. I felt that I knew him intimately by virtue of hearing his voice in my head as I listened to him recount his memories for hours, when in reality, I had only met him twice.

It was only much later, when I got the chance to experience his work with sound, video, and installation, that I realized the magnitude of his work as an artist. Today, Khan is an internationally recognized artist, musician and writer, and exhibits his work regularly at prominent galleries across Europe.

This year, when I heard that Khan was invited to do a solo exhibition at D-CAF, I took the opportunity to re-visit him and his work. Before our interview, Khan walked me through his exhibition as it was being set up in a passageway across from the synagogue on Adly Street downtown. D-CAF and CLUSTER's preparations for the exhibition had transformed the deserted shops in the passageway from piles of rubble into four unique exhibition spaces. Walls were re-painted, electricity was re-wired and gipson boards were installed in places to re-size the spaces, seamlessly merging with the surrounding concrete walls.

Curated by Beth Stryker, Kodak Passageway is Hassan Khan's first survey-exhibition of his work in Egypt. As we walk through the different rooms, he discusses the pieces on display, the concept for the exhibition, and the themes that run through the different rooms. The survey features selections from Khan's different works, and includes texts in English and

Arabic, photography, music and video, and sculptures; it demonstrates Khan's diversity as an artist, but also highlights his interest in form.

"The exhibition is not comprehensive in any way, and it is not even an overview, because I have a lot of work, and a lot of different types of work. But it is an angle, an entry point and it is big enough to give a sense of the practice," says Khan.

Although limited, the preview left a number of impressions on me, the most striking of which is the immense body of art that he draws on for an exhibition of this scale. Below is an edited transcript of our conversation.

[The passageway is a public space, but it is not totally public. Have you ever exhibited in a space like this?](#)

I have done work in public spaces before. My last piece was a composition for a public park, which is the Parc du Belleville in Paris, and it was large-scale music, text and light piece. Although a park has a private aspect to it, it is also a public space, so it is comparable in the sense that this is a public space. The passageway is owned by the city, it is not owned by the buildings, and it used to be an actual street in the past before it was pedestrianized, so it is spot on public.

[Have you ever done such a large-scale survey of your work elsewhere?](#)

Yes, I've done several. The first time I showed several works from different times together was for my show at Galerie Chantal Crousel at the beginning of 2011. Before that, I used to produce a new body of work every time I did a solo show, and that was the first time that I combined different works from different time periods. It was then that I felt that I was ready to start stringing things together from different periods to look at them.

And then, in 2012, I had a much larger show at SALT in Istanbul, and that was the biggest show that I have done to date. I had the whole three floors of the institution to myself. That was a survey also, but it was different in the sense that this show is a survey, but it has a specific focus. In SALT, the focus was much wider. This is neither better nor worse, they are different approaches.

Because I haven't been exhibiting so regularly in Cairo, and because people experience my work here bit by bit, I think it's an opportunity to enter the practice, in a way, and I think it may be surprising for some people because they maybe know certain aspects of my work more than others. In this show, some of the aspects that they don't know so well are more highlighted.

[You haven't had a large-scale exhibition in Cairo since you did 17 and at AUC 11 years ago. How is the experience of exhibiting again in Cairo for the first time after so many years different than exhibiting in Istanbul or Paris?](#)

It does feel different of course, the relationship is deeper and more personal because it is my city, and I never left Cairo. I work in many places, but I have always lived here, so I don't feel that I am coming back. I feel that it is the natural progression of things. I would have liked to show my works here more regularly, but it was not possible. There are so many other works that are not being shown in this exhibition, so maybe in the future I will do a different exhibition on a similar scale, with a different approach and different works. I think that might also be an interesting thing for the audience here.

[Has the audience changed in the interim?](#)

The audience has changed; definitely, I think that's absolutely true. And it has changed for many reasons, but one of them is a process of accumulation. Artists have been working during this time and throwing out propositions, and the audience has been exposed to all these different propositions and started developing an understating of them that is different than the first time that happens. So, of course, there is accumulation, experience and expectation, a different kind of situation.

For example, if we take 17 and at AUC as the last solo show, my memory is that it had an impact at the time. The performance was visited, it was talked about – there was an audience that built around it. Of course it's a different scale, and it is a totally different type of work. I am just saying this to point out that the idea that there was no context then was not true, of course there was context.

But I can jump back to 1995, which was my first public appearance, when I showed Lungfan, which was a collaborative work with Amr Hosny at the Atelier De Caire (The Cairo Atelier). At the time, the film was met with aggression and hostility. The audience was not sympathetic at all, which is fine, actually, but they weren't critical either. It was an angry

audience, which is a bit different to a critical audience. And I think that this is much less now. I'm not just talking about how my work is received; I'm talking in general. It still exists of course, but I guess the idea of what art is has expanded. So people are willing to accept anything. They might like it or not like it, or be critical of it or not, but they don't question that it is work or art or say what is this shit. They might hate it, but that's different. During that first public appearance, the reaction was aggressive, and they asked: what are you trying to do, are you trying to brainwash us, are you an agent of Israel, etc.

What is Lungfan?

It was a slide show with sound, and now it only exists as a video. The slides were lost years ago, but we had digitized it by then. It's not taboo breaking, there is no pornography or blasphemy, there's none of that – its just formally different, its intense, the images are sharp, the differences are formal and in sensibility. It's a little bit like an abrasive work somehow. There is nothing you can catch about it; it's just a sense. And the audience then responded to the atmosphere, which they did not know or did not recognize or did not accept, with absolute rejection and aggression and accusation. And I think that that's different now.

Will you screen Lungfan again as part of the survey?

I think that I will show Lungfan at my artist talk at the Atelier De Caire on the 9th.

You said at the beginning of our interview that this is not a comprehensive exhibition, but that it has an angle or an entry point. What do you mean by that?

This is more the curatorial side – this is about Beth's vision. In the beginning she said this first room is a reading room, and the reading room does not just mean reading words, it is reading things. It is an intimate kind of relationship between the audience and the work. This is slightly different than the second space, where things are on a different scale – where things are more monumental in a way. Then you move from these spaces to works like 'Dom Tak' and 'Jewel,' which are more immersive. I think the entry point is part of Beth's framing or reading of my work.

What is interesting for me is that these two rooms have a sort of local resonance. Works like 'Mahmoud El Ansary,' or 'Mystery' are texts, and these pages give the audience a certain key to some of the concerns that run through the work in other formats. Because language is recognizable, and because they talk about people and social situated-ness in a way that is graspable, you can move from this to things that function on a different level like 'The Knot' or 'The Twist,' which are in the same space. Seeing this works together, you start to look at things differently. It starts to be not just about aesthetics, and it shows that there is a lot going on, and I think that makes it a good entry point. One of many, but it is a good entry point.

Kodak Passageway will be open daily from the 31st of March the 26 of April, 12PM-8PM. Khan will give an artist's talk titled 'Footnotes to Hassan Khan exhibition' at the Cairo Atelier on April 9th at 6PM. Nida Ghouse will give a talk on Khan's work, titled "The Artist as a portrait of a young man" at AUC's Oriental Hall on April 22nd at 6PM. Khan will also have a music performance titled 'Taraban' at the Falaki Theater on April 26th at 8PM.