

ON RUPTURE

How artists and curators have responded to upheaval in the Arab world, from 1967 to the present day
by *Kaelen Wilson-Goldie*

Hrair Sarkissian, from the 'Execution Squares' series, 2008, archival inkjet prints, each 1.3 x 1.6 m



By almost any measure, last summer was terrible in Alexandria. For much of its modern history, Egypt's second-largest city had been a breezy seaside refuge and an escape for those who could afford the train or bus fare from the chaos and density of Cairo. But 18 months after the ousting of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's entrenched and autocratic president, the city was a wreck. The streets and public beaches were clogged with rubbish, unemployment anxiety, idle youth and festering anger. Many Cairenes who had vacationed in Alexandria as children, or who had retreated to the city in their adult lives for moments of rest and reprieve, were stunned to find it so agitated and on edge. In the sweltering heat and turbid humidity, amid cloying theories of conspiracy and counter-revolution, it felt like the place was about to explode. With the so-called Arab Spring lurching from euphoria to despair, it seemed pertinent to ask questions related to the writing of a very recent history. What had gone wrong? When had the movement for change in the most populous and politically pivotal country in the Arab world unravelled? What had caused the revolution to crack? And where was the break, the rupture, the tear in the narrative that had been so beautifully woven together on Tahrir Square?

To pose these questions to artists and curators may have seemed eccentric to members of the mainstream Arab media, where cultural production remains niche and a novelty – something wholly sidelined in times of crisis. Yet the answers were almost exactly the same as those of press-friendly pundits, political analysts and popular academics: the moment that darkened the mood of the revolution was surely the massacre in Port Said, when more than 70 football fans were killed, and over 1,000 injured, in a stadium riot that followed a match between the teams Al-Masry and Al-Ahly. The mayhem was allegedly provoked for political reasons – hardcore fans of Al-Ahly had been instrumental in the demonstrations on Tahrir and vocal in their disdain for the military – and the police were said to have stood by and done nothing. A year later, Port Said erupted in violence all over again when a local court handed down death sentences to the 21 fans of Al-Masry (the local team), holding them responsible for the loss of life. The police opened fire on a crowd of protestors, killing 30 people, and then opened fire again on their funeral procession, shooting at the families of those they had just gunned down. This threw Port Said into full revolt. The

government declared a curfew, which was emphatically defied. Residents have now stated their audacious desire to secede from the country and declare themselves an independent state. As such, the massacre may soon be regarded not only as the rupture that mattered in the revolution but also as the first critical fracture, if Egypt now well and truly falls apart. But, what do such ruptures or fractures really *mean*? And how do they play out in and for the field of art, not as historical events or documentary subjects but rather as theoretical concepts influencing both curatorial thought and artistic practice?

I have Alix Rule and David Levine to thank for the knowledge that 'rupture', as a word, has become passé, having hit its peak usage in 'International Art English' – as defined in their astute essay of the same name for the online journal *Triple Canopy* – back in 2011. As an operative idea and an organizing principle, however, rupture still has a stubborn and enduring sense of currency in the Arab world, where the history of so many nation states runs through much of the 20th century in coughs and stutters, from colonial mandates and partition plans to independence eras followed by rounds of coups and civil wars. In the world



Courtesy: the artist and Kalfayan Galleries, Athens, Thessaloniki

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at large – or more precisely in the United States and Europe – art-historical narratives tend to pivot on terms such as ‘postwar’ and dates such as 1945, 1968 or 1989. In the Arab world, the mother of all ruptures is 1967: the year Israel devastated the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria and all but annexed the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. ‘That defeat wrecked the hopes of one generation, and branded a younger one raised in its shadow,’ wrote the Lebanese-born, American writer Fouad Ajami, in 1997, in a brutally honest essay titled ‘The Arab Inheritance’ for the journal *Foreign Affairs*. ‘The universal truth of Arab nationalism – that large idea of a common political inheritance and destiny, that belief that the national boundaries of the Arab world were contrived – had cracked.’ What’s more, he added: ‘That truth had only itself to blame.’

In the same season when Egypt’s once-glamorous port city was rank and smouldering, the American University of Beirut (AUB) was hosting a conference of art historians titled ‘The Longevity of Rupture: 1967 in Art and Its Histories’. Organized by the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World, Iran and Turkey (AMCA), the conference sought to challenge the notion that the Six-Day War changed everything, not only the status, standing and institution of art but also the social, aesthetic and political sensibilities of artists in the Arab world. A line-up of by-now locally well-known doctoral candidates – including Saleem al-Bahloly, Clare Davies, Holiday Powers and Annela Lenssen – presented their research on episodes in Iraq, Egypt, Morocco and Syria. Then Angela Harutyunyan, AUB’s first dedicated

professor of contemporary art history and theory and a specialist in the post-Soviet period (whose formative research focuses on 1989 rather than on 1967), raised an obvious point: ‘In historiography in general and art historiography in particular, the desire to revisit, re-conceptualize and re-historicize certain periods as epochal shifts and ruptures, and to find ideological, formal and stylistic continuities, often arises from the needs of the present.’

What was most depressing about the events of the past year in Port Said was the realization that Egypt was still ruled by fear, rumours, plots and intrigues. This kept security panic high and the need for a strong state firm – the logic being that authoritarianism was bearable while total chaos was not. Painfully, this also made the revolution effectively false, not a rupture but its opposite: the continuity of the Mubarak regime’s tactics and strategies, minus the man. Likewise, the speakers for AMCA’s conference emphasized the things that did not change; the intellectual debates, trade union disputes and repressive regimes that were present in the region before and after 1967. They also disputed the notion that the war and its staggering defeat had shattered solidarity among Arab artists, because artists’ syndicates and a series of pan-Arab biennials came later.

And yet, it might not be enough to merely disprove a thesis, to assert that 1967 was not a rupture but a continuity, or to argue that a rupture within a revolution in 2011 also exposed it as a situation unchanged. To quote Harutyunyan again: ‘Must art-historical moments always be traumatic or can they also be affirmative?’ If the writing of history is neither innocent nor objective, then perhaps we should not just disassemble the old histories that have already been written, but figure out what we are trying to do, and what we want from the new histories that we can’t help but posit, formulate and test out all over again. Harutyunyan’s point should not be missed. A conference on 1967 in 2012 was surely a means of raising questions about 2011, the year when rupture was most popular in art speak and also, given the rolling tumult of Arab uprisings, the most present on the ground. At least one panel considered artistic practices that began in the 1990s rather than the 1960s, but it would be interesting to think at greater length about how the rupture of 1967, and the idea of historical breaks more generally, is playing out now in specific art works made in and of the region.

Perhaps the most far-reaching example of this is Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s project *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2011–12), which takes 1967 as nothing less



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Céline Condorelli, *First Movement: Il n’y a plus rien (There is Nothing Left)*, 2010, in the publication *Terrain Vague, Persistent Images*, 2012, with Uriel Orlov (Alexandria Contemporary Image Forum and Oslo Kunstforening)

2
Lebanese stamps representing the Cedar IV Rocket issued in 1964 to celebrate the space programme, part of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, 2011–12

than the death of the Arab world’s political imagination and capacity for dreaming. Through videos, installations, archival photographs and films, a documentary feature, two carpets and two sculptures playing with the ambiguities between missiles for war and rockets for study, the project delves into the story of a group of students in a science club at an Armenian university in Beirut, who inadvertently started a national space programme and entered Lebanon into the space race, only to have the programme militarized and quietly shut down. To return to this moment now is to try and revive a time when the advancements of science, technology and education had not yet been thrown under the bus of bad politics and debilitating ideologies. It is an act of great urgency and, like Maha Maamoun’s film *Domestic Tourism II* (2008–09), which wonders what became of an entire genre of Arab science fiction films, it orchestrates the slimmest of suggestions that all of those versions of progress might again be possible.

Without the obligations of an academic discipline, artists and curators have a greater tendency to be irreverent, playful and productively irresponsible in their revisiting of past ruptures. They are also freed from the orthodoxies of how history is understood within a field. When curator Rasha Salti was organizing the three-part film programme ‘Mapping Subjectivity: Experimentation in Arab Cinema from the 1960s to Now’ (2010–12) with Jytte Jensen of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she said: ‘I was operating with this notion that there was a rupture in the 1990s. I thought people started experimenting in film and video only in the 1990s. We all operated under this idea. But it’s not true. Nobody in the region is supposed to have watched Maya Deren’s films when they came out, but they did. The first post-independent films in Algeria? So radical. The first post-independent films

in Morocco? Crazy. There was obviously a tremendous amount of cultural transmission moving through the cine-clubs of the Arab world in the 1980s. There’s a whole world that’s waiting to be discovered. I think the way we write art history has to change [...] Curators can make wild speculations, so why not use curatorial practice to explore the these of art history?’¹

Why not use artistic practice, too, given that wild speculations have fuelled fine exhibitions but better art works? Céline Condorelli’s mesmerizing series of installations and performances bundled under the title ‘Il n’y a plus rien (There Is Nothing Left)’ (2010–11) complicate our understanding of what happened to the polyglot, multinational milieu of Alexandria after the Free Officer’s Coup of 1952 and the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Egyptian president who promulgated the quasi-socialist ideology of Arab nationalism. Hewing close to the history of Alexandria’s cotton industry, unrivalled in the world for a time, Condorelli then jumps from one fascinating anecdote and figure to another – for example, from the Marxist historian Mahmoud Hussein, a pen name for the writing partnership of Bahgat El Nadi and Adel Raf’at (the great-grandson of a Sephardic rabbi from Aleppo), to the renegade publisher François Maspero and his grandfather, Gaston Maspero, a leading Egyptologist. In the 2008 installation *Nefertiti*, the artist Ala Younis ruffles a similar history by studying the manufacture of a domestic Egyptian sewing machine.

Another curious art work concerning rupture – which was exhibited alongside Condorelli’s project at the now sadly closed Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum – is Uriel Orlov’s *The Short and the Long of It* (2010–11). Based on a forgotten scrap of history, Orlov’s material tells the story of how 14 international cargo ships had been passing through the Suez Canal when the Six-Day War erupted. Staggeringly, they were stranded there for eight years until the canal re-opened in 1975. The crew members, caught in an absurd situation and bored out of their collective skulls, invented an island nation, issued their own stamps and played out an alternate version of the Olympics while Mexico City hosted the real games in 1968. The Swiss-born Orlov’s installations play with the codes of high-minded documentary and resolutely formalist geometric abstraction to invest a forgotten interlude with meaning.

It’s worth noting that, among the artists who did start experimenting with film and video in 1990s, Jalal Toufic has probably done more than any other thinker in the Middle East in terms of theorizing rupture as two key principles, radical closure and the withdrawal of tradition following

3
Uriel Orlov
Yellow Limbo, part of installation
‘The Short and the Long of It’,
2010–11, video still

4
Ala Younis, *Nefertiti* (detail),
2008, installation view at
PhotoCairo 4



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a surpassing disaster, which necessitates the resurrection of art and culture but warns of being fooled by doubles and fakes. Was 1967 a surpassing disaster? Has the Arab world after the Arab Spring found itself in a state of radical closure? Works such as Hrair Sarkissian’s ‘Execution Squares’ (2008) and ‘Istory’ (2010) suggest – through a series of evocative images depicting public execution sites in Syria (presaging the civil war there) and library archives on Armenian history in Istanbul – that the latter has been the long-standing condition of the region. The space of ruptures, disasters and radical closures appears in certain art works like an interlude that is dangerously still yet eerily productive. (Witness the short lifespan of the Egyptian Surrealism movement, explored at length in ‘Tea With Nefertiti’ (2012), curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath at Mathaf, Doha, which started to crack in the 1940s and then broke apart completely with the expulsion of foreigners and minorities after 1952.) This raises the unsettling question of what it means for horrific moments in history to instigate great works of art.

However, for all the alternative histories and latent continuities, the philosophy scholar Elizabeth Kassab argued at the end of the AUB

conference that 1967 was and must be viewed as a critical turn. ‘It was the regimes that came in reaction to 1967 more than the war itself that devastated our lives,’ she said. But it was also an event that provoked ‘a radicalization of critique, of inward examination, of self-examination. And by critique I mean becoming more busy with raising questions than readymade answers.’ In the aftermath of 1967, the dominant question among Arab intellectuals, Kassab explained, had been this: why, in the face of 20th-century modernity, had attempts to revive the *nahda*, the Arab renaissance of the 19th century, failed? Before the advent of the Arab Spring, the question had become: ‘Why have we failed, period, without hope? In the early 2000s, there was a sense of total incapacity and total despair.’ Protestors on the streets in 2011 may have restored hope to the region’s vocabulary. Artists in their studios in 2013 might have to take up the hard work of reinvigorating that notion of radical critique to keep it going. ♣

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¹ Author’s interview with Rasha Salti in Beirut, 24 October 2012



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1 courtesy: the artist; 2 courtesy: the artist, Galerie In Situ, Fatieme Leclerc, Paris, CRG Gallery, New York, and The Third Line, Dubai; photograph, Alfredo Rubio; 3 courtesy: Campaigne Première, Berlin, and Blancpain Art Contemporain, Geneva; 4 courtesy: the artist