VISUAL FRICCTIONS

*Mish mabsoota: on teaching with a camera in revolutionary Cairo†

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Abstract

Made in the wake of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, *Inti Mabsoota?* is an experimental pedagogical video project that draws upon the emerging mobile esthetics of cell phone filmmaking and public encounters with revolutionary spontaneity. Inspired by the landmark cinéma-vérité film, *Chronique d’un été* (1960), in which participants ask people on the streets of Paris if they are happy, several of my students at the American University in Cairo became mobile film units, asking people the same innocuous question, “Inta mabsoot?/Inti mabsoota?”—Are you happy? Are you content? This seemingly benign exercise belies a variety of conceptual and methodological frictions, which offered productive pedagogical possibilities. Drawing upon the emergent revolutionary visual culture, this student project complicated both the reductive assessments of the “Arab Spring” as a manifestation of digital democracy and the heavy-handed way that western journalism has tended to address the “Arab Street” as a volatile mob. Using an embodied visual approach allowed students to apprehend modes of lived experience that might not register as political in more normative models, but which nonetheless form the basis of how people live and experience political life. Highlighting the non-representational aspects of the encounter also foregrounds the corporeal and visceral dimensions of the students’ experience. Accordingly, the critical video methods employed elucidate the kinds of affective knowledge produced for those on screen, behind the camera, and viewing from a distance.

Keywords: Egypt; enactment; pedagogy; visual culture; political affect; Arab Uprisings; ethnographic encounter; non-representational theory; visual methodologies; cinéma-vérité

This paper is part of the Special Issue: Visual Frictions. More papers from this issue can be found at www.aestheticsandculture.net

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†Mish Mabsoota means “I am/you are/she is unhappy” in the feminine form, which I default to since most of my students were women and to acknowledge a recursive gender politics on Cairo’s streets.

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Citation: Journal of Aesthetics & Culture, Vol. 7, 2015 http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/jac.v7.28253
It felt like people were fighting the images that had betrayed them for so long—with their own images. The fear of cameras had disappeared completely and they were now the instrument to learn what was going on … Even if a lot of this footage will remain unseen, it was the source of understanding—of our condition, of our life, of what we want and of who we are.—Narrator in CROP (2013, 49 m, dirs. Marouan Omara and Johanna Domke)

Such acts of image-making reveal important generative dimensions of visuality available during revolutionary flux. Rather than passively documenting the conditions of political upheaval, ordinary citizens armed with perhaps nothing more than a simple camera-phone harnessed the mobility and ubiquity of these devices to produce new forms of political agency. Images of mass protests that arose in Tunisia in December 2010 and then Egypt in January 2011 ricocheted across the region with unexpected scenes of street politics, seemingly deflating lumbering state behemoths and shocking viewers around the globe with unprecedented possibilities for political change. In Cairo, the occupation of urban space not only shook President Hosni Mubarak from office but also enabled Cairenes to reclaim the city. While the ultimate political outcome of the uprisings was (and perhaps still is) uncertain, Samia Mehrez argues that the “newfound power of ownership of one’s space, one’s body, and one’s language is, in and of itself, a revolution.” Perhaps, following the epigraph above, Egyptians also claimed a new sense of ownership of their image.

At the outset of these uprisings, thousands, if not millions, utilized the proliferation of cell phone cameras to record these political events and then perhaps upload and share them. The ubiquitous presence of these mobile cameras also indicated an emergent vernacular esthetics of cell phone filmmaking, in which the embodiment of the spectator shifted from the eye to the end of an arm, indicative of watching a screen or choosing to record without watching. Along with the ubiquity of cell phone cameras and the emergence of mobile aesthetics, the mass protests “triggered a new visual culture.” In this state of revolutionary flux, new understandings of public culture took shape, in which the street offered new and different kinds of encounters. Tahrir Square “became the spot to film and to be filmed, as well as being a space to see others and to be seen.”

These examples also demonstrate how the experiences of this period were profoundly felt on visceral, physical, and affective levels. These inchoate affective states “can shake people out of deeply grooved patterns of thinking and feeling and allow for new imaginings.” Indeed, revolutionary political processes do not principally take shape on the discursive level, but become enacted through the body. The enactment of revolutionary politics requires bodies assembling in mass, sharing moments of collective action, and reaching states of hopeful excitement, not to mention suffering physical harm and sorrow. Occupying the streets day in and day out radically shifts one’s spatial and temporal experience.

As Egyptians (and foreigners) negotiated their newfound image rights, they had to contend with the highly charged nature of this new visuality, which could either enact public ownership of the city or may provoke suspicion if not hostility. While these events offered an expanded latitude of visual agency, the public production of images requires operating on multiple registers. For instance, graffiti artists, who helped situate visual practices within an emergent field of urban public culture during the revolution, had to constantly negotiate space and confront hostilities to sustain these possibilities. Indeed, the widespread depiction of an eyepatch became a prominent symbol against the practice of eye snipers intentionally blinding protestors, thus enacting a critique of the brutal measures taken against acts of witnessing. Under these circumstances, filming on the streets of Cairo became inherently political.

While the iconography of the region had suddenly (if momentarily) shifted from more entrenched scenes of conflicts between belligerents, these seemingly supple images of civil politics may have too quickly become brittle and shattered under the reassertion of regimental power. After two and a half years in revolutionary flux, the military definitively reclaimed political power and reasserted control over the public visual culture. So as the ubiquitous mobile figure bearing a digital camera (phone) opened new possibilities for enacting public political subjectivity, so too have the evolving political circumstances presented frictional conditions that necessitate adjusting the forms and practices that these encounters take.

In this context, I initiated a class project intent on critically assessing the dominant representational...
frameworks used to understand the experience of political change and thus explore a series of related questions. How does the fluidity and friction of this evolving visual culture help us understand the way people live and experience day-to-day political realities? How might social inquiries utilize the camera to enact compelling and committed accounts of political experience? And how might such public encounters convey this experience on unconventional and unanticipated registers than those usually assigned to political discourse? And yet, when the street is no longer a site of generative possibilities, how might this emergent visual culture find alternative sites for creativity? As such, under the rubric of “thinking with a camera during revolutionary times,” this pedagogical intervention aimed to position students as active producers of representational knowledge within the still unfolding Arab Uprisings by engaging in visually based research practices.

THINKING WITH A CAMERA DURING REVOLUTIONARY TIMES

As a visual anthropologist based at the American University in Cairo (AUC) between 2008 and 2013, my intellectual agenda became tightly enveloped within the everyday realities of a protracted political revolution. Wrestling with the generativity and restrictivity of image practices in this moment, I aspired to teach my students to both critically think about the flood of images circulating in revolutionary Egypt and engage with a visual methodology attuned to these volatile dynamics. Committed to a project on the production of alternative visualities in the contemporary Middle East and how local image practices mediate emergent cultural imaginaries, subvert the geopolitical gaze, and envision the region anew, I began to prepare an MA seminar around a beguilingly simple question: How to do visual anthropology at this moment in Egypt?

The answer to this question is far from self-evident and could not be arrived at only conceptually. As the now ubiquitous mobile camera claimed new potentiality for public modes of witnessing and political participation, I knew that students should embody the methodological possibilities that this historic precedent afforded by publicly engaging people on the streets with a modest video camera. Due to the perpetually shifting image politics during these tumultuous times, my pedagogical objectives required an experimental approach to doing ethnography with a camera. Even under the most stable circumstances, Sarah Pink warns, “It is impossible to predict, and mistaken to prescribe, precise methods for ethnographic research,” but uncertain times also demand uncertain methods, open to discovering unclaimed feelings and sensitive to the affective intensity of instability. This does not mean proceeding blindly. Indeed, this required attunement to the shifting tensions that inform the local visual culture oscillating between moments of generative exception and the recurrent reification of entrenched norms. As such, Pink also heeds deploying appropriate visual methods based on the conventions of local visual cultural and “an ethnographic appreciation of how visual knowledge is interpreted in a cross-cultural context.”

As nearly everyone had become enraptured by the processes of political change, so too had most of my MA students at AUC begun to do research on some aspect of the revolution in Egypt. Preparing them for doing ethnographic research with visual tools meant pragmatically addressing the particular but shifting set of challenges that this socio-political situation included, while also inspiring them to see the promise of such a venture. While drawing upon the long traditions of ethnographic and documentary cinema regarding issues of representation, authorship, and reflexivity, I had students also engage recent critical ideas about the relationship between esthetics and politics in non-fiction video. We critically assessed the recent proliferation of visual (and sensory) techniques in both social science research and human rights/activists agendas. And thus by questioning the underlying assumptions about the efficacy of visual methods, this course aimed to develop a refined epistemological toolkit able to critically traverse the production and consumption of images circulating in politically volatile times. As such, the course intentionally brought together materials and discourses from a variety of sources that would help students think through issues of visuality at this moment in Egypt.

This meant understanding and situating ourselves within an emergent political economy. While the “Arab Spring” had seemed to become a commercial event sponsored by Google, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, a revolutionary industry quickly followed in which “the revolution” was being (re)produced for different markets. It seemed
that everyone was clambering to get a piece of the gold rush. Academics, filmmakers, and journalists, among others, would parachute in for an adventure tour, while often bypassing the local perspectives most encumbered by the political events. For a visual anthropology of contemporary Egypt, this meant trying to remain true to the more spontaneous acts of self-expression, while also attune to the renewed investment in political visibility, the proliferation of new visual approaches, and the integration of amateur documentarians as key agents of the mass political spectacle.\textsuperscript{13}

Thinking about how to do visual anthropology in Egypt also meant addressing a serious prohibitive dimension of public image-making. In a context in which filmmakers and photographers commonly face aggressive challenges from bystanders, if not authorities, would require preparing students to negotiate the public policing of images that typically accused documentarians for showing the “negative side of Egypt.”\textsuperscript{14} While the enactment of mobile filming would resonate with the politics of mass street protests, the revolution was nevertheless a highly contentious event. Although the role of cameras during the uprisings had made public image-making more common, the xenophobic discourse about infiltrators intending to “destroy Egypt” ensured that filmmaking on the streets would remain a highly charged and suspicious act.

In other words, to put these ideas into practice meant both actively engaging in the emergent potentials and responding to the recurrent swath of challenges. Thus, by choosing to enter into this hyper-mediated fold intent to produce yet more images required solid methodological and theoretical grounding. This meant negotiating the tension between the important dynamics of “street politics” for the success of these mass uprisings\textsuperscript{15} and the heavy-handed way that western journalism has tended to address the so-called Arab Street as “the worst kind of barbarous urban mob, threatening local and global orders ...”\textsuperscript{16} While critical of biased approaches, our aim would not be based on critiques of mainstream media coverage. And while inspired by citizen journalism, a visual anthropology of contemporary Egypt would not be satisfied with passively documenting visible evidence. Furthermore, we had to avoid engaging subjects with predetermined frameworks, such as interview questions about social protests, political parties, national sentiments, and so on. Instead, I aimed to shift attention to more open-ended interactions that would engage people in more speculative approaches and ideally reveal an emergent political subjectivity embedded within mundane personal experience—that is, the affective registers of the everyday—which often becomes obscured by more didactic approaches. By fostering both generative and provocative encounters, I followed David MacDougall’s ambition to provoke new forms of knowledge in the act of producing a film by “creating the circumstances in which new knowledge can take us by surprise.”\textsuperscript{17}

So, in effect, my course on “Thinking with a Camera during Revolutionary Times” initiated an experimental pedagogical video project intent to reconceptualize a framework supple enough for doing visual anthropology at that moment in Egypt.\textsuperscript{18} In order to both capture the potential of the political moment and navigate these thorny issues of political representation an innovative approach would have to be taken. Drawing upon the emerging mobile esthetics of cell phone filmmaking and public encounters with revolutionary spontaneity, the project aimed to show students that the use of visual ethnography would provide them with ways to think critically about images of social unrest, offer them new perspectives on the experience of political change occurring on the human scale, and resituate the production of knowledge in the ethnographic encounter itself.

Drawing upon the canons of documentary studies and visual anthropology alike, I appropriated the work of Jean Rouch for inspiration. The landmark \emph{cinéma-vérité} film \emph{Chronique d’un été}/\emph{Chronicle of a Summer} (Jean Rouch & Edgar Morin, 1961) provided a solution to the dilemmas outlined above. In other words, by responding to both the technological development of 16-mm sync sound filmmaking and the political burden of the French colonial wars, \emph{Chronique d’un été} similarly suggested an answer on how to do visual anthropology at that moment in France. The collaboration between Rouch and Morin also provided an experimental approach to doing ethnographic research. By engaging in spontaneous interactions and employing open-ended provocations, they thus distanced themselves from more didactic approaches. But given the significant difference between the two contexts, I had no intention of doing a remake of \emph{Chronique d’un été}. Instead, inspired by the opening scene, in which participants ask people on the streets of Paris
if they are happy, my students in Cairo similarly solicited a spontaneous response from people to a single question, Inta Mabsoot?/Inti Mabsoota?—Are you happy?

AREN’T YOU HAPPY?

The vox populi interviews conducted by my students captured spontaneous responses and gave fresh perspective to the different moods and opinions among participants in this post-revolutionary moment (fall 2012). The uncertainty and frustration of political turmoil weighed on Cairenes in idiosyncratic ways from the lack of work and money reiterated by street vendors to the more bourgeois interests in wealth, good food, and romantic relationships. The emotional intimacy of the question and the public anonymity of the context produced a generative juxtaposition. This dialectic quality of the encounter helps to disrupt assumptions of passively collecting data about “happiness.” While collecting responses in Cairo’s different districts revealed distinct differences in people’s concerns, the corporeal and visceral aspects of these sensibilities also elucidate the uneven experience of the revolution on an affective register. As one student commented:

While we were watching other classmates projects, it was striking to see how different geographical areas even within greater Cairo reflected different views on happiness and misery. People in Zamalek, an upper-class neighborhood, tended to be happier and more willing to attribute their emotional status to personal reasons. On the other hand, street vendors in local areas were relating their unhappiness to the country’s shaky economic and political status. In our project, the presence of the revolution was strong due to the proximity of Tahrir Square and most people expressed their feelings toward the revolution’s success or failure.¹⁹

This seemingly benign exercise of asking Inti mabsoota? belies a variety of conceptual and methodological frictions that have rubbed people the wrong way. On almost every occasion that I have presented this work, someone takes issue with the question. Most often this is expressed as a matter of translational precision, never mind that this is already a cross-cultural translation from the French “êtes-vous heureux?” Indeed, strictly speaking, mabsoot is better translated as “satisfied” or "content." And while Inti mabsoota? is used idiomatically like, “how are you?” this phrasing was developed in collaboration with the native speakers of Arabic in the project.

The next most common critique suggests that we have not asked the “right question.” Baring the assumptions about the inauthenticity of the translated question, there may be other ways to consider the potential inappropriateness of Inti mabsoota? For instance, despite the success of ousting President Hosni Mubarak from office, for many the optimism from those initial days had begun to wane by the time of our project.²⁰ This meant that the project had a clearly ironic strategy at its core. While humor could offer a subversive aspect to these interviews, for others the absurdity of the question could be offensive. Consider these two initial reflections from students:

I am already starting to find an absurdity in the project. We did not feel as though we could actually ask someone in earnest if they

Video 1. Geographies of class. Zamalek: http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/public/journals/7/multimedia/Video1-Zamalek.mov.
The videos in this article have been optimized for play within Adobe Acrobat Reader, however, the videos can also be played in a browser by clicking directly on the URL.

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Video 2. Geographies of class. Saad Zaghloul: http://www.aestheticsandculture.net/public/journals/7/multimedia/Video2-SaadZaghloul.mov.
were happy in the middle of what would become weeks of clashes in the square and later in front of the Presidential Palace.\textsuperscript{21} I grew mixed feelings towards the project. It was paradoxical experience asking people about happiness and there are injured and dead people and raped women meters ways.\textsuperscript{22}

These responses not only reflect the initial ambivalence of some of the students but also suggest that a more politically direct question may be deemed appropriate for engaging these confused and saddened Cairenes.\textsuperscript{23} While this project was inspired by *Chronique d’un été*, I also showed my students an important rejoinder to this film made only one year later. Like *Chronique d’un été*, Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme’s *Le Joli Mai* is also a “portrait of everyday Paris” and Marker suggested that he was also interested in the issue of happiness.\textsuperscript{24} But, in the hands of Chris Marker, the “seemingly innocent ‘Are you happy?’ implies the silent and subversive accusation, ‘How can you possibly be happy?’”\textsuperscript{25}

Asking this question—“How can you possibly be happy?”—would surely have produced more confrontational responses, but I would argue in spite of the prompt that neither *Chronique d’un été* nor *Mabsoota?* were necessarily about happiness. Instead, this project, like *Chronique d’un été*, envisioned the juxtaposition between the public anonymity of the street with the superficial intimacy of a presumptuous question as the primary crux of the experiment. In other words, rather than assessing happiness on a psychological level, the project operationalized the concept within the tenuous but mundane political climate of a protracted revolution in order to enact affective responses in the ethnographic encounter by both interviewees and interviewers as well as others present at the time. As indicated above, the affective particularities of these responses often revealed more about the context than the individual’s emotional state.

With these critiques noted, I argue that it is precisely within the context of these challenges that pedagogical possibilities emerge from the affective intensity of these mediated encounters.\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, the ambivalence about the question reflects a deeper tension between representational and non-representational aspects of the project. If taken as a representational project, then a viewer privileges the subjects in front of the camera being inter-viewed and the kinds of things they say in response to the question. As such, this model literally foregrounds the speech act—both the question asked and the answers offered—and the particularities of the responses invariably come to represent a generalizable Egyptian mood. This reflects a hermeneutic short circuit that privileges language over other sensory registers as if a transcript of the verbal exchange would suffice.

Furthermore, while nearly everyone initially responded to the question with, *alhamdullilaah* (“thanks to God”), the religiosity of this phrase belies its mundane ubiquity. As with many idiomatic phrases in Egyptian Arabic borrowed from the Quran, “[s]o much are these phrases a part of the language that one need not be a believer nor even a Muslim necessarily in order to use at least some of them.”\textsuperscript{27} Whereas religion became expressed on different registers from one’s comportment to one’s convictions about President Morsi, people’s initial perfunctory response to the interview prompt indicates instead how the question seemed unremarkable. People were unaccustomed to giving this question much significance, but the context disrupts this expectation. As reflected in the following student reflections, its unassuming qualities meant that the meaning of the question is something that often times had to be negotiated in the moment—“What do you mean by *mabsoot*?”

In the beginning of the conversation where both researcher and interviewee are trying to reach a common understanding for the question.\textsuperscript{28} This topic of happiness is something that we might mention every day and think about but rarely does one stop and talk about it and need to really think through what such a concept means. I felt like the reactions to the questions were very interesting.\textsuperscript{29}

As such, if we instead consider the non-representational aspects of the project, then “the question is really beside the point,” as one of my students exclaimed to me.\textsuperscript{30} Another student echoed this sentiment and expanded, “it was more a matter of where that question was taking us; what are the doors that are being opened through it.”\textsuperscript{31} Indeed, the encounter presented a generative opportunity for many participants with an audiovisual amanuensis, in which the camera afforded them the chance to address an unknown public.\textsuperscript{32}
While invariably bound to a lexical encounter, a non-representational framework nonetheless opens itself to the students behind the camera as well as those off-screen. The visual brings a great deal of experiential knowledge to the situation, from facial expressions, gestures, interpersonal reactions, stirrings in the background, personal dress, forms of comportment, one’s relationship to the street, but also one’s relation to the camera and to the interviewers. By locating the production of knowledge through corporeal processes of looking and being rather than discursively communicating it in thoughts and descriptions, students tested an embodied visual approach in order to apprehend modes of lived experience that might not register as political in more normative models, but which nonetheless form the basis of how people live and experience political life.

So rather than gathering survey data to be crunched, the question provoked an encounter capable of taking us by surprise. The prompt got students talking to people on the street, who they may otherwise never meet, about how they relate to the political situation in the country without presupposing a political stance. If we thus emphasize the encounter that the question provides, then the question itself opens up to more dynamic readings. But this also revealed an unnerving, if not violent, dimension of being encountered with this question, as evoked by this student response:

Some of those who refused offered justifications or alternatives. During our second day of filming, an antique shop owner insisted to give a reason for his refusal to be interviewed saying he is an old man with a short nerve that hardly enables him going through the day and he cannot be subjected to any emotional imbalance the interview could put him through.

As students of the AUC, they were invariably marked as privileged citizens. According to our informed consent protocol, students had to identify themselves and their research intent before recording peoples’ replies. Not only did this situate the students in very particular ways with the participants, it subverted the spontaneous punch of the question. And yet, the presence of young, cosmopolitan, and mostly female university students on the streets of Cairo with camera phones, if not DSLRs, and audio recorders, would not immediately be read within a research context.

Given the ubiquity of journalists since the uprisings began, they would more likely be read in this capacity. While generally considered innocuous, particularly given the more open status of visual culture, xenophobic rhetoric meant that the possible threat of public policing of image-making always lurked in every encounter. While uncommon during our project, this issue did manifest itself for some students.

The hostility mostly came from upper middle class individuals who were highly suspicious of our identity and insisted that we’re filming the negative aspects of Egypt to cause more trouble and mutate Egypt’s image abroad. This reflects significantly the kinds of concerns that are projected by the national media. The systematic vilifying of any one with a camera, who might show us things we don’t want to see. Having a camera instantly put us in a political position and attracted judgmental responses.

Furthermore, the impact of these encounters also deeply affected the students. While the students who initially felt ambivalent changed their perspectives through the project, some students spoke of profoundly haunting experiences and the violent dimensions of confronting strangers with personal questions.

“Turning back the anthropological gaze” was manifested through the fact that many of them turned back the question to me after I finish filming them. Each time I was asked back the question, I was not prepared and it frightened me. But, this worked as a good reminder of the violence in asking the question and that made me more attentive to what people share and appreciating that they share the same feelings.

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And while some students initially felt that this exercise would not benefit the people interviewed, several noted the mutually transformative potential. Suggesting that the encounter offered people an opportunity to break from their daily routine, one student said, “the street feels different to me so maybe it felt different to this man.” Several others mentioned the way people thrived on the opportunity, perhaps out of loneliness or more particularly “as if we had come down from the skies and were her therapy.” For one student, the camera-mediated encounters produced a heightened sensitivity and she has become more hesitant about filming and photographing people in public.

While the non-representational notion of encounter helps to situate the street as a space of ethnographic engagement, the role of the camera and microphone (audio recorder) helps to push this into the more generative domain of enactment. Although the project does not aspire to re-enacting Chronique d’un été in a conventional sense, the creative appropriation of the opening scene reenacts the film’s provocative gesture. Despite the long-standing assumptions about the passive objectivity of photography, Scott McQuire reminds us that the agency of the camera actually ruptures realist paradigms. As such, the camera as the mediating agent in these encounters enacts the emergent visual-political paradigms as well as the recursive image politics. Rather than the fly-on-the-wall stance of Direct Cinema, Inti Mabsoota enacts Jean Rouch’s methodological sensibilities that harness the camera’s agential abilities to engender cinematic realizations. Whereas the technological innovations of 16-mm film cameras with sync sound in the 1960s helped produce the untethered esthetic qualities of cinéma-vérité in Chronique d’un été, the emerging mobile esthetics of cell phone filmmaking accentuate the technological particularities of the historic moment in this project. While avoiding a technologically deterministic explanation of the Arab Uprisings and acknowledging the various forms of grassroots face-to-face politics that foreground these events, the role of video in these encounters nevertheless echoes the way politics became enacted in relation to these communicative technologies.

Following Peter Snowdon’s argument that these videos advanced an “aesthetic revolution” based on the kind of politics anticipated by the Arab Uprisings, we could say that the notion of “thinking with a camera during revolutionary times” also aimed to become attune to both the political possibilities nestled within the emergent image-making practices of the region and their concomitant frictions. In the context of mentoring students in the embodied methodologies of visual anthropology, this meant aligning our understanding of the way the camera lens radically situates the body of the filmmaker in relation to the ethnographic encounter alongside the body genre of “political mimesis” in which acts of filmmaking during street protests and subsequent viewings evoke feelings of sensuous politics. And yet, despite the playful enactment of Rouch’s camera gesture, as the political dynamics shifted in Egypt, so did the visual possibilities for public provocations.

REVOLUTIONARY ENACTMENT WITH A CAMERA DURING COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY TIMES

During the following year (2013), discontentment with President Mohamed Morsi’s heavy-handed favoritism for Islamist interests, on the one hand, and a pervasive rhetoric for “stability” in the country, on the other, led to both his removal by the military junta and a ruthless criminalization of his Muslim Brotherhood followers. More significantly, the incredibly violent coup and mass suppression of dissent radically altered the context that had enabled the vibrant urban public culture. With a divided opposition, this renewed authoritarian brutality also allowed the regime to reestablish a prohibition over public image-making. In November 2013, some of the students and I discussed heading back out to the streets to ask the same question one year later and possibly finding some of the same individuals to reflect on their earlier responses in relation to the current situation, but with the increasing criminalization of protestors and journalists the risks seemed too high and I called off the plan.

In order to answer the question about how to do visual anthropology at this moment in Egypt meant recognizing that the moment had changed. Despite the instability of the revolutionary period, the revolutionary flux had afforded a great deal of creative agency. The generative potentiality made vibrantly possible from January 25, 2011 ostensibly ending on June 30, 2013, at least for re-enacting the mobile esthetics of revolutionary cell phone
filmmaking. In spite of the bloodshed, instability, and power-grabs of this era, perhaps we had taken for granted the opportunities that this revolutionary visual culture had provided. Whereas the visual became part of a collective promise, this oath had now become criminalized as a lie for some and as lost hope for others. Instead of repeating this *vox populi* exercise that would likely produce predictable results, the situation called for yet a different tactic.

As the experience behind the camera had proven just as significant as that in front of it (as evidenced in the students’ reflections), I opted to interview students about their experiences with the project in order to highlight a dialogic or parallax dimension. I asked them to reflect on their encounters with random people on the street, the process of negotiating the meaning of *mabsoot*, and the perpetually shifting political/social landscape. In order to accentuate the friction between the claustrophobic circumstances of the present political moment and the central significance of the public space of the street, I created an aesthetic device that could accommodate this tension—I filmed them indoors in a rooftop studio in front of a blue sheet that could be digitally replaced with street images in postproduction. With the sounds of the city in the background, I had them face the blank sheet and imagine themselves on the street. Turning toward the camera, I asked about their experience being a woman on the street doing this project and then prompted them with the question, *Inti mabsoota?* Here four of the women offer their reflections, some facing the imagined street and some with street images in the background.

While we could no longer deploy the camera publicly to enact an ethnographic encounter, this created an opportunity to draw upon the street’s generative energy in radically different ways, which nevertheless evoked its affective potential looming just out of reach. Moving beyond notions of representational realism that characterized the project’s public encounters with people on the street, the enactment of the street through this layered montage foregrounds the way esthetic and narrative devices transform actuality footage into compelling and committed accounts of political experience. While prompted by a series of reflective questions, it is the combination of camera, screen, and the digital effects that shift this exercise from producing representational knowledge to the enactment of affective knowledge. Perhaps, in a feeble way, the effort to do visual anthropology at that moment in Egypt both on and off the streets through the conceptual gesture of “thinking with a camera during revolutionary times” helped to elucidate the way images of rebellious actions cultivate new forms of political agency, subjectivity, and collectivity.44

Notes
1. As cited in Marouan Omara and Johanna Domke, “Crop,” in *Cairo: Images of Transition: Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011–2013*, ed. Mikala Hyldig Dal (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2013), 113.
2. Mohamed Elshahed, “Tahrir Square: Social Media, Public Space,” in *Cairo: Images of Transition: Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011–2013*, ed. Mikala Hyldig Dal (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2013), 20–5.
3. Samia Mehrez, “The Language of Tahrir—Working Together on Translating Egypt’s Revolution,” in *Cairo: Images of Transition: Perspectives on Visuality in Egypt 2011–2013*, ed. Mikala Hyldig Dal (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2013), 39.
4. Peter Snowdon, “The Revolution Will Be Uploaded: Vernacular Video and the Arab Spring,” *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research* 6 (April 17, 2014): 401–29.
5. Mona Abaza, “Post January Revolution Cairo: Urban Wars and the Reshaping of Public Space,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 7–8 (December 1, 2014): 171.
6. Ibid., 171.
7. Deborah Gould, “On Affect and Protest,” in *Political Emotions: New Agendas in Communication*, eds. Janet Staiger et al. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 32.
8. While I encouraged students to use something like a cellphone camera or Flip Video camera, some opted for a DSLR or such.
9. Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2007), 40.
This endeavor started as a pilot project in Spring 2012 as I began to experiment with ways to engage the situation in Cairo with the toolkit of a visual anthropologist. I had approached three of my best undergraduate students (Mariam Abou Ghazi, Nada El-Kouny, and Sarah Hawas) about conducting short interviews with people on the streets of Cairo in order to ascertain how people would personally express themselves within the context of a heavy political backdrop. Based on the initial success of this pilot, I formalized this project in fall 2012 in an MA seminar on Visual Anthropology, taught to 15 MA students (In addition to Mariam and Nada from the pilot project, Brice Woodcock, Claire Forster, Dalia Ibrahim, Dana Alawneh, Derek Ludovici, Ewelina Trzpis, Manar Hazzaa, Mariz Kelada, Marwa Abed El Fattah, Nadia Dropkin, Noha Khattab, Nouran El-Hawy, and Omnia Khalil). The students formed seven groups of—two to three students and all but one included a native Arabic speaker. Collectively, they recorded over 5 hours of footage. During our final course meeting, I hosted a screening of sections of from all of these projects that generated a lively discussion. After the screening, the students submitted Reflection Essays about the project, which I draw heavily upon here.

When preparing to do this project in my MA seminar, the mood had significantly shifted from the spring pilot project. And when we started filming interviews in late November 2012 at the time of the anniversary of the Mohamed Mahmoud Street clashes, political violence again escalated on the street and this was followed by protests at the presidential palace opposing President Mohamed Morsi’s constitutional declarations. These events heavily impacted the mood of both my students and most of the interviewees.

Although not elaborated here, another critique suggested that modeling the project on Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s experiment imposes a colonial framework that undermines its credibility. Furthermore, as a course assignment designed by an American academic, there is an unavoidable dimension of pedagogical imposition. These tensions notwithstanding, many of the students have offered unsolicited endorsements of the project, often noting its participatory and collaborative dimensions.

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41. Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, *Observational Cinema: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Social Life* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009).

42. Jane M. Gaines, “Political Mimesis,” in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 84–102; and Maple John Razsa, “Beyond ‘Riot Porn’: Protest Video and the Production of Unruly Subjects,” *Ethnos* 79 (April 8, 2013): 496–524.

43. At the end of the course, several of the students expressed interest in continuing the project and perhaps producing a film from the interviews. While some students planned to conduct more interviews, the cumbersome challenges of the political context and the general demands of personal obligations disrupted the flow of our project. I did manage to record a dinner discussion with some of the students modeled on the discussions in *Chronique d’un été*, in May 2013, but then I depart from Egypt in the summer of 2013 and could not actively facilitate participation. After revisiting several of the students in November 2013, I decided a new tactic was needed. During another visit in April 2014, I conducted these follow-up, “blue screen” interviews with six of the students and in August Claire Forster (one of the students) conducted an interview with another student. I am presently compiling all this footage into a stand-alone project.

44. I’d like to acknowledge a variety of people who contributed to this project in either large or small measures. First, Mariam Abou Ghazi, Nada El-Kouny, and Sarah Hawas who agreed to pilot this project and who proved that the idea was viable. Among the students in the course, Claire Forster deserves special thanks for remaining dedicated to the project and working to continue it in my absence. Dalia Ibrahim, Mariz Kelada, Noha Khattab, Omnia Khalil, Manar Hazzaa, and Nouran El-Hawary also supported the project after the semester ended. Philip Rizk participated in various aspects of the project, giving both material support and critical feedback. During the various iterations of this project in seminars and conferences, I received a great deal of encouragement and feedback. I would like to particularly recognize Karin Becker, Malin Wahlberg, Kari Anden-Papadopoulos, Alisa Lebow, Paula Uimonen, Paul Frosh, Maria Malmström, Hanan Sabea, Helen Rizzo, Kristina Riegert, Dan Gilman, and Diana Allan.