Revolution as Aesthetics [PART I] I AHMAD HOSNI

Abstract

The Egyptian revolution will probably remembered as one of the most aestheticized political events in decades. On a more global level, it will remain as a moment of intense liaison between politics and art. The paper puts the notion of ‘aestheticization’ of the political event into question, or rather, the revolution itself as an aesthetic phenomenon. I try to take prefatory steps towards how this moment in art history, or what we might call a ‘political turn,’ could be understood. To this end, I will follow a number of interconnected trajectories. I examine the local Egyptian art scene of the post-revolution but within the frame of metropolitan networkist economy as well as global protest movements of 2011. I argue that revolution on and global protest events of 2011 created a condition of the common onto where multiple forces of inclusion came to operate, and in turn, became the site of contention. I argue that the various political tendencies in contemporary practice could be understood in terms of a conflicting, dialectical, relation between a claim for universalism and a will to internationalism.

I. The theatre of the we

What do I mean that revolution is an aesthetic phenomenon? Let me begin by clarifying what I mean by ‘aesthetics.’ I am not referring to a theory of beauty or ontology of art. The Greek word aethes is in its most basic understanding means ‘sense.’ Aesthetic, it could be said is the relation between sense and
sense: that is the modality that concatenates between sense and making sense of it, between a mode of cogency and the sensual that precedes it and eludes it. It is the relations between ways of doing and the horizon of affect.[1] It is the modality that informs ways of judgment but not judgment as such, nor the fixed codes of it. Taking the definition a step further, it would like to adopt Jacques Rancière’s conception of aesthetics as ‘distribution of the sensible,’ a definition that aesthetics share with politics in the Rancièrean sense. ‘Distribution’ connotes two meanings: to split and share; to separate along lines of division and to share within spheres of socialities. And in both sense aesthetics, being partitioned and shared, is a social process by definition, it operates within, and contours, socialities around the edifice of the sensible, or, for the purpose of my argument, I would say appearance. I would italicize appearance not only as that which refers to the visual—that which comes to the field of vision—but that which presents itself in the purview of perception. All forms of speech acts that enfold shared meaning by sanctioning what is sayable, intelligible and doable. Distribution is a flux of sharing and separation, joining and disjoining, partitioning and repartitioning. It is a dialectical motion across lines of inconstant inclusion and exclusion. In the interstices exists conflict: moments of dis-agreement between sensory presentation and the way of making sense of it.[2] In other words, politics.

Revolution is an aesthetic phenomenon in the sense that it is a phenomenon of appearance in essence: the appearance of a new political body that ruptures the sensorial fabric of the commonplace. It is, in other words, a partition of the sensible. But it is partition that is sudden and singular; a volcanic eruption on the sociopolitical landscape that leaves the topography reconfigured in an irreversible way. The Egyptian revolution of 2011 was a case in point. It was a moment of the birthing of political subjectivities, identities, contoured and accentuated by new modes of visibility that were completely novel to the scene. I find this particularly intriguing as the most persisting aftereffect of the revolution—even more than the ousting of the Mubarak regime after thirty years in power. __The post-revolutionary moment was bristling with new political denominations as a plethora of political groups popped on the scene as if out of nowhere: there were Salafis’ Moslem Brothers, liberals, leftists, socialists and revolutionary socialists and more. There were even neologisms like feloul, which originally denoted to affiliates to the old regime and later came to refer to the secular right, came to register a political entity as such. While the ideological backbones of each group were not untried in the nation’s political history, the denominations themselves were novelties on the political scene that was even looked at with a degree of whimsicality. These modes of visibility that I approach under the rubric of aesthetics. I am interested in
probing the way such modes of visibility operate within groups, how they performed and how socialities were contoured by their means. In other words, the appearance of the multiplicities of the ‘we,’ which is self-maintaining, self-proliferating and which resounds across different tiers of the social, including that sociality we know as art field. What had started as an attempt to conceptualize the rise of politically engaged art practice and pedagogy after the global protest events in 2011 and the question that it begot: was aesthetics being politicized, or was politics being aestheticized? Either question seemed to take the notion of aesthetics not critically enough; to aestheticize the political connoted a reduction to question of stylistics, while to politicize aesthetics implied a delimited field of experience (that is art) being subjected to external influence (that is politics), for better or for worse. What was needed is a reading that sees art as a social formation—a notion that art history has been in averse to—that is commensurate with multiplicity of socialities that transverse perimeters of the academic field (art history) and geographical bounds (local and the global).

Visibility is central here. Appearance of the group is the crux of politics and the abomination of authority. It is worth noting that the Egyptian authorities were relatively tolerant—or rather, indifferent—to voices of criticism as long as they did not coalesce into bigger groups or manifest, as groups, in the public space. The act of aggregation of bodies, and the potentiality of effecting further aggregation, was regarded with extreme suspicion and swiftly reacted against; undone, the community dispersed or rounded up and its appearance erased. I use the word ‘manifest’ advisedly here, manifest, in the sense of what is made visible, and ‘manifest’ in the sense used in Romance languages (Spanish manifestar or French manifester, for example) to denote taking part in public demonstration as a manifestation of dissent. The word stems from the Latin legal term manifestus, meaning caught, or rather seen, in ‘illicit’ action. The revolution is the phenomenon of manifestus in both its theoretical conception as well as its actual political development on the ground; the time when a new political culture of manifestations came into being. According to Rancière, politics takes place when a group demands a new distribution of roles and functions by means of speech acts that make the group visible vis-à-vis other group(s). He would differentiate another type of politics: the police. This does not simply connote an institution in charge of maintaining law and order, nor an apparatus of condensation of power. Instead, police is a set of inclusion/exclusion coordinates on the social landscape that allocates roles and capacities among members or groups. Politics proper, on the other hand, takes place only when such coordinates are interrupted by manifest speech acts. Against the etymological backdrop of the word, what manifested, qua
‘seen in (illicit) action,’ on virtual space and later translated onto the ontic space of Tahrir Square, was the very speech-act that enfolded such a community around the image. The image is that of the people itself; of the people and by the people. That famous bird’s-eye view of people filling Tahrir Square. It is as if encountered its image in mirror for the first time. A moment when it came to the people’s awareness that they can exist as a community, in common, and concert. This is the moment that the political body entered the sphere of appearance.

I trace this moment of manifestus to the moment of the creation of the then-anonymous page *We are all Khaled Said* in the spring of 2010. The page was dedicated to Khaled Saïd, a youth in his mid-twenties who was brutally beaten to death on the streets of his Alexandrian neighborhood by two low-ranking police officers. Soon after the incident, a portrait of a clean-cut young man was juxtaposed with a photograph showing a deformed, bloodstained head with signs of multiple injuries. This was coupled with graphic witness accounts, describing how the two police officers beat Khaled in the vestibule of an apartment building, repeatedly pounding his head against the marble stairs as he begged for mercy until a yellowish fluid gushed from his nostrils—a sign of a fractured skull base and hence, imminent death.

That was an image, an image not only in its portrayal of reality in a visible form but also in its operation between a visible and a sayable. The factographic nature of the image is not limited to the constative nature of the photograph in relation to past event(s), but due to the way the image functions in a set of operations where the visual form (the photograph) stands, metonymically, in place of another image (or text). The image becomes a compound of enunciations, images, and texts, linked by a nexus of operations. Beyond their signifying function, as an epitomization of the police state and brutality, the images (as concatenation of photographs and textual information) functioned as a site of consensus—a site where a growing community was being contoured around an agreement on the significance of the relation between the images and the associated text, or between the seeable and the sayable.

Appearance is the introduction of a new visible into a field of experience that then modifies the sphere of the visible. It is not opposed to reality as illusion but enters it and reconfigures it as doable. It creates new intensities, manifesting virtual subjects in the virtual space, and moves to the actual space as bodies manifest in their convergence on the streets. The agreement that first appeared on Facebook persisted in later moments in the history of the event (manifestus), also around the image but later it was not the vicarious image of the people undergirding the collective meaning of shared image on
Facebook but the image of the *people* as such in public space introduced into reality of the everyday. An image in its basic idea, or *eidos*, in Aristotelian terms. (What we have here was) the foundation of the constitution of the ‘we’ as an operative political body on the political landscape. The whole thing that started with the case of Khaled Saïd as the first manifestation of the ‘we’, in its *eidos*, and later came to proliferate as a plethora of *we*’s.[5] Rancière puts this question of the framing of the ‘we’ as a pivot of the relation between what he regards the ‘aesthetics of politics’ and the ‘politics of aesthetics.’ It would be worth to quote him in detail:

If there is such thing as ‘aesthetics of politics’, it lies in the a re-configuration of the distribution of the common through political processes of subjectivation ... [T]he re-configuration of the sensible carried out by politics is an effect of forms of subjectivation. Such re-configurations are brought about by collectives of enunciation and demonstration (*manifestation*). The ‘aesthetics of politics’ consists above all in the framing of the *we*, a collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts, an element that I call the part of those who have no part—not the wretched, but the anonymous. The ‘politics of aesthetics’, as for it, frames new forms of individuality and new haecceities. It does not give a collective voice to the anonymous. Instead, it re-frames the world of common experience as the world of shared impersonal experience. This intertwining frames a new fabric common experience, a new scenery of the visible and a new dramaturgy of the intelligible.[6]

This notion of ‘dramaturgy of the intelligible’ with its allusions to the theatre entails a dichotomy between the on-stage and the off-stage, with an emphasis on the on-stage— the theatre of politics. It suggests that politics is an artifice of manifestations. It suggests an intentionality of performance vis-à-vis the audience in the arrangement of actors and entities and in other words, an agency of sorts. Some would call it the agency of the ‘people,’ but I would attribute it to that performer on stage of history—a stage that is as global as local—the *eidos*.

This model eschews any super-structural idea of causality of politics since what matters is how the dramaturgy operates at any specific cross-section of space and time. The political is always in-flux. And not just politics but the notion of ‘the people’ itself is only a temporal notion that ceases to exist in its current form beyond the moment of fracture, which means that the concept of the ‘people’ that we by convention put up as the agent of revolution is far from being a supernumerary entity but the product of the staging of the *we*: the *we* that can, at moments, convoke a cohesive image of the people but might also
appear at times in a more partitioned molecular chaotic plurality. It is the we that stages the people. In this model, politics does not exist prior to the birth of the we and there is no idea of people preceding the lines of division amongst social parts.

In a police system social parts are either muffled or allocated their places that secure the subjects’ position within a particular hierarchy, Rancière remarks. Counting/un-counting/miscounting of community’s parts is the birthplace of politics; naming strategies reflect new codes of identification and new ways of counting of society’s parts. It is the haecceity of the act of naming that identifies parts in their particularities. On the political landscape there was a vitrine of political parts. And this was new: not only that people were openly identifying with different political tendencies but also they could recognize different groups in their outward appearance, or in other words, their eidos.

The birth of political groups was not limited to the realm of political parties and ideologies. It was manifest on a broader span of the political, the thing that in turn gives a broader meaning of the political. Take for example the phenomenal eruption of football fan groups, the Ultras. These groups have a recent history in Egypt going back to 2005. However it was during and after the revolution that these groups (in particular Ultras Ahlawy, a fan group belonging to Al-Ahly club) got markedly politicized and became one of the main revolutionary forces on the scene. Notwithstanding, the group does not reflect an ideological stance in terms of the coordinates of right, left, secular or religious. Its political substance is articulated in terms of sheer opposition, naturally in terms of its rivalry towards other fan groups and after the revolution towards any instantiation of authority and of its manifestus. Much of this political identity is articulated in terms of appearance... image-operations, and dramaturgies, with their matos, écharpes, baches, cortèges.... The Ultras is a political and an aesthetic group par excellence. Its proliferation is both sign, and result, of a political landscape where people are getting increasingly politicized; that is increasingly identifying themselves and others in terms of group fellowship. It is a landscape that is fractured and divided by means of dramaturgies of intelligibility and increasingly theatrical. In this theatrical model of politics the ‘people’ is the generic name for processes of subjectivation, or a ‘dissensual visibility of the common.’

Dissensus is the core of political activity, pace the singular moment of totality associated with the uprising. Rancières’s most eloquent definition of dissensus goes as follows: “an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality behind appearance nor a single regime of organization and presentation of the given imposing its obviousness on it. It means that every situation could be cracked open from the inside reconfigured in different regime of perception and signification.”
II. The global agency of the image

Any observer of the Egyptian revolution cannot fail to note the globalist dimension it has assumed in its after-life (that is the post-revolution times). The bird’s eye image of Tahrir Square packed with people became an epitome for revolution. Protesters around the world would commonly paint placards saying: “this is Tahrir Square!” The question that presents itself here is, despite all ideological difference (if not even opposition) how is it possible for the event to be transduced from geopolitical context to completely different contexts? And how is it possible for it to assume that global status? What makes it possible agent not the people or for that matter the image of it. Its agent is the multitude. The force of the One—the élan vital of politics. Politics that exists prior to appearance, for a Catalan leftists in Barcelona to appear as if on the same boat with Egyptian radical Islamists in Cairo? What are the conditions of understanding that create a common constituency for different protest movements? How could the revolution assume such a state of hegemony? And what undergirds the globalist understanding of the event? Within leftist circles in art and academy the answer could be summed up in one word: empire. The concept that has its conceptual grounds in Negri and Hardt’s eponymous theorization of our contemporary networkist global capitalist condition. Its and prior to the existence of the we and all forms of subjectivation. It is in that sense both on-stage and (always) off-stage. It is not the politics of eruption but the politics of premise of equality, unity and universality. It is the permanent force of the multiple as opposed to the intermittent count of the people(s). More importantly is the multitude’s integration within the productive forces of empire, the thing that renders the notion of revolution an eruption from within (rather that a rupture), which is by default global in nature. It also frames revolution in terms of teleological necessity. This makes it possible to see every act of dissent as resistance against empire rather than as the singularity of (re)counting the socialities. This divergence is significant because it sets an arena for a claim for universality, for any staging of the people, any demand for democracy, any enactment of equality becomes an instantiation of the universal One, in its multiplicity, against Empire. It would be the global indentation in the global body. Each struggle, though firmly rooted in local conditions, leaps immediately to the global level and attacks the imperial constitution in its generality.[11] There is a tendency, according to this view, to downplay trans-local communicability of political struggles for the immanence of the universal polity. In more vernacular parlance any manifestations of struggle will be read as anti-globalization, anti-capitalist.
This is probably the major theoretical backbone that subtend most critical pedagogy and activist art initiatives of the late such as the 7th Berlin Biennale and its celebrated globality of revolution. Universality not of the communicability between loci of struggle but a more essential universalism. I prefer not to take this universalism at face value and instead underscore the communicability and the translatability of protest amongst geopolitical contests. I like to posit the opposite hypothesis of Empire: that global protest is not a sign of the sharing of common conditions (of empire) but comes as a result of developing a global common sense and the capacities for sharing. I would like to stress the communicability of struggle as the driving force behind global protests and indeed universalism itself; to probe the enrolment of extended global community along lines of flight that at times achieve a degree of hegemony where universality becomes precisely a manifestation for such hegemony. Hegemony is defined here in terms of capacity of the signifier to assume the totality of representation along incommensurable demands and when the one difference without ceasing to be particular assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. It is the capacity to assume totality of a differential ensemble of different disagreements and for that matter different we’s and them’s. I like to think of the role of the image of Tahrir Square, packed with crowds, as operating in terms similar to Khalid Saïd’s photograph on Facebook: it becomes the center for the hegemonic function of discourse. It was not Tahrir Square as representational of Egyptian revolution, instead it was the representation of attainability of the people coming together in public spaces and its validity as a mode of resistance. Not the demands but the conglomeration of people for which Tahrir became an epitome. It was the commensurability of the image that overweighed the incommensurability of ideologies, demands or political contexts. And it was the image that created a plane of equivalence among Mubarak, the economic crisis, austerity measures, capitalism, empire, etc. The apparent globality of the phenomenon is hinting towards a universality, yet one constituted purely as a matter of articulation. In Laclau’s terms it is an empty signifier. It becomes a matter of contingency rather than an underling structure (empire, conditions of globalization etc.) It is about the particular being able to hegemonize a frame of universality and universality becomes nothing but the struggle for universality itself. In other words, it is really all about the local because that is all that there is.

We can just part with the concept of the global altogether. This is precisely the approach that actor-network theory (ANT) takes where the globality is nothing but the nexus of local actors. There are no signifiers in this view (empty or otherwise) and there is no sense of a horizon as such. No us and them, nor
we. What matters is the network itself where an entity is deployed as the sum of its network relations. There is no force or system or player that could be described as global per se. No sense of empire of course. The global realm is approached, pragmatically, as relations between actors. The size of the actor is determined by a conduit of networks, and other actors, that it can ally itself to. What makes an actor global is its capacity to affect a large number of other widely spaced actors, a trajectory onto which actors could be examined, traced, in their curriculum vitae; that is to trace the pathway of an object across the network of other objects and alliances. Entities become not isolated points in time and space but things that ensure through lines of flight across a network as actor interacts with other actors and gets transformed, or translated, into other entities, or actants. Actant is an entity that is capable to act on other actors and transform them. This is probably one of the most novel contributions of ANT to any study of relations: actant is an effect-relation that is bound to one instance in space-time. That is to say it occurs only once, because every time it acts upon other entities or gets translated or moves from on location in a network it becomes something else: another entity, another actant. That is because actant, unlike substance, is not distinct from its qualities, accidents and relations, says Latour. So a person using a mobile phone is not the same actant as the same person without the phone; or the same person in a different place; or even with a different t-shirt.

In this view anything could be considered an actant: a person, an animal, an object, a whole country, etc. And we can also think of the revolution as an actor: Tahrir Square too (or the image of it). Or it could just be a tent in Tahrir. And as actors travel across networks, think also of the way Tahrir travels along the global network of alliances: political activists, artists, communication and social media groups... Every time it travels it encounters a new condition: austerity measures in Spain, credit crisis in the US, and so on. It encounters different peoples, different ‘we’s, different conflicts. It encounters different urgencies. As actant, it gets translated with every encounter as an instantiation of a new event and becomes a new entity. The notion of translation here is different from the Saussurian concept where while the signifier changes the concept is still the same. The Latourian translation on the other hand involves the creation of a new meaning every time entities are transferred from one medium to the other and every time they come in contact with other entities Tahrir becomes a new object with every translation: it circulates and reappears again on the original scene but not as the same entity it left. Tahrir, as an image, is not the same entity during the globalist post-revolutionary period as that space which was performed as part of the uprising. It has been translated again and again with every interaction with global actors.
To go back to the original question of revolution and aesthetics: Why the revolution seems to have turned into a popular motif, why it has been? The political turn in art, academy and cultural production needs to be understood not in terms an unavoidable ethical response by cogitating agents is not sufficient because it entail a Manichaeism between the good (intelligentsia) and bad (forces of neoliberalism). Nor is excessive cynicism much productive on that score either; people do not jump onto the revolutionary bandwagon out of mere opportunism. Instead, it is the operations of globalization that are being contended here. But their epistemic spaces are not the preserve of materialists forces of late capitalism, nor of ideology for that matter. Notwithstanding, the political turn should be read in terms of networkist terms: the politics of aesthetics that contours socialities along planes of intelligibility and the conflictual is neither purely global nor local; the whole aesthetic landscape extended beyond the vanishing point on any single context; a multi-site field where a flux of morphologies and dramaturgies flows back and forth. Like Tahrir, it becomes a point of origin as well as point of reception of events, and with each event it is the articulator in the theatre of dissensual relations. Tahrir became, for want of a better word, a ‘global’ entity. After its global sojourn, it reenacts onto a local scene to the local scene that is fractured and way less monopolized than that of the early days of the revolution. There is no hope of hegemonization here but the articulatory operations of the image carry on.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Latour pulls an existentialist coquetry on this aspect of the theory: it is not just for humans that existence precedes essence but also for objects. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, tr. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, 1993, p.86.

(http://interartive.org/2014/01/revolution-as-aesthetics-part-i/)