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CIVIC MEDIA

LARA BALADI: VOX POPULI, ARCHIVING A REVOLUTION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Submitted by Katie Arthur on March 31, 2016 - 11:25am

Lara Baladi introduces us to her project "Archiving a Revolution", which documents the story of the Tahrir Squre protests. Developing over several years, Baladi has transformed her visual archive into a several projects, including an art installation.

Baladi introduces her project, "Archiving a Revolution," as crossing disciplinary boundaries. It comes at a poignant time, as the Egyptian revolution begins to be erased. Baladi is a visual artist by trade, and she spends a lot of time curating visual archives as part of her projects though working across disciplines and mediums in her projects. Tahrir square and the revolution is a project that is very close to Baladi's heart, having herself taken part in the protest and seen the power of the grassroots videos that were shared.

She shows us "Tiananmen Courage Cairo", (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwYT_MLlv-g) the first video of the protests to go viral in 2011. After watching the video, Baladi says that she felt at that moment that she knew everything was about to change. She immediately signed up to different social media networks, having before been more interested in working on the streets. Facebook became almost as interesting as the revolution itself to Baladi, and both became the sources for her project. Baladi spoke of how she became aware of her own positioning as a media maker within a dictatorship, as the pace suddenly changed with the break out of the revolution and media makers across Cairo became unleashed in their creativity. Baladi spent time collecting the various media, from grafitti to tweets, that the protestors had been galvanised into making.

After a speech by Jean-Paul Sartre echoed the words she had heard the day before from a protestor in Tahrir, Baladi realised her interest in the relationship between time and space and movements. Where the collecting began as an emotive and impulsive desire to archive, it gradually turned into a more structured process as the protest in Tahrir Square grew and changed.

As soon as the Tahrir protest begun, a media tent was set up in the middle of the mass of tents occupying the square. However, with internet capabilities down, links to the mainstream press were tenuous. Yet, the media tent made efforts to disperse information through global networks, and the documentation through these channels made Baladi think of the protest in terms of a global rather than singularly Egyptian history. Baladi points to the different trends in journalism and media, oscillating between top-down and citizen driven coverage. She notes the Iraq War and 9/11 as pivotal points in the growing documentation from the grassroots, even before social media. In terms of Tahrir, Baladi recalls that the distinction between online and offline worlds seemed to fade, and the digital documentation of the protest became an essential part of the movement.

Baladi's archive aimed to connect the questions that were being raised every day in the midst of the revolution to a global wealth of material. Baladi's first project with her archives was a daily open-air cinema, which gathered activists to share stories and discuss the revolution. The project would give away the archive material to those who gathered to further share with their friends, families and communities. Baladi also made a visual essay which examines the notion of freedom, using Tahrir Square as a way to examine the bigger questions of the human desire for freedom. A clip shows a segment from the Disney animation of *Alice in Wonderland*, the caterpillar blowing smoke rings around Alice as he asks, "Who are you?". On either side are long shots of the square, showing the sheer scale of the protest. The essay blends these images, using footage from the revolution among clips from Charlie Chaplin's *The Dictator,* Slavoj Zizek interviews, and footage of Malcolm X. The combination of images, cultures and languages creates an emotive polemic that positions the protest in the square within a larger trajectory of human struggles for emancipation.

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With an intellectual passion grounded in enthusiasm for real grassroots social change and consciousness-raising, Katie's interests lie in empowerment through discourse and discursive strategies.

After the visual essay, Baladi became fascinated with how her archive functioned as only a fraction of what was being recorded. The act of archiving itself became politically weighted in the context of a regime that was destroyed museums and erasing history. The role of the internet, too, as displacing past materials for the present, encouraged Baladi to create a broader archival project, to preserve, map and trace the documentation that had been produced.

Baladi shows us the map of her interactive art installation, which features a VR sculpture and three periods of film which represent the chronological stages of the revolution. Interspersed are film projects Baladi has made, including one piece on the role of women and their representation within the revolution. The central piece is a metal sculpture of a 17th Century chastity belt, which Baladi recalls she made in Cairo during the Muslim Brotherhood rule. When Baladi first exhibited the belt in Tahrir, the city was taken down by an attack on the protestors by the state.

For the exhibition, Baladi is also creating a scold with VR lenses. The scold is also based on a 17th Century design which was used to keep women quiet. The piece Baladi is building hopes to contrast what you can see through the VR lenses to the mechanism you are in, highlighting the power of freedom of speech. Baladi says the relationship between lo and hi tech is a key part of her work, evoking empathy across identities. The timeline will also be evoked through a layered data visualisation.

Showing us the website which serves as the landing base for the archives several projects, VoxPopuli (http://tahrirarchives.com/), Baladi closes with a video of her project "Notes from El Saniyya," an art installation at the Harvard School of Design in 2015. Using projections, popcorn, coffee, cushions and rugs, the installation recreated the atmosphere of Tahrir square. In many ways, Baladi concludes, it can be seen as a a first iteration of the archive timeline as affect space, and a predecessor to her current project. She hopes to retain the sense of potentiality from the Tahrir Square where, in that moment, utopia really existed as a possibility.

Lara Baladi's work will be exhibited in an open house on 23rd April.

"Lara Baladi is an internationally recognized multi-disciplinary Egyptian-Lebanese artist. As a Fellow at the MIT Open Documentary Lab in the 2014-15 academic year, Baladi conducted research for a transmedia project, Vox Populi, Archiving a Revolution in the Digital Age. As the Ida Ely Rubin Artist in Residence at CAST, she will realize the multi-layered Vox Populi project, which she envisions as an interactive timeline of the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath in the form of an immersive installation. Baladi says the work is 'a tribute to the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its impact on and resonance with the uprisings and sociopolitical movements that followed.'"
-http://arts.mit.edu/artists/lara-baladi/
-http://opendoclab.mit.edu/lara-baladi-vox-populi-archiving-a-revolution-...