

Navigating Value and Recognition within the International Arts Field: Between Self-Definition and Assigned Identities
Case study of Egyptian artists residing in Europe

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Artists biographies tend to focus on training background, professional cooperation and partnerships, highlighting recognition through prizes. These elements differ from how, for instance, Mahmoud El Haddad, an Egyptian performer based in France, introduces himself in the presentation of his new creation 'self-entitlement', in which the artist rather appears through his positionality and internal feelings towards his settlement in a new country. These different focuses highlight the tension that appears when trying to put down (or reduce) in words someone's life and they illustrate the various emphasis and format that biographies can take depending on the purpose they aim to serve and the context where they are produced. Do the artists adjust their life stories to write biographies to fit with the expectations of art institutions? Or do they strategize what they want to portray? How does this adaptation/strategy process happen?

In this research project, I explore life trajectories of Egyptian artists who (re)settled in Europe following the counter revolutionary unfolding of the 2011 uprising. The Egyptian revolutionary moment contributed to provoke an impulse in creativity and spaces for artists that took place not only through the embodiment of politics in artistic work and exploration of new aesthetics but also creating spaces for new autodidact artists. For these reasons, the revolution appears as a life-altering experience in artists' biographical narratives, highlighting new sociabilities and new subjectivities. However, these new spaces for artistic expressions gradually closed or were pressured by the successive political shifts. In this context, this paper explores the life trajectories of Egyptian artists who (re)settled in Europe as a consequence of these closures and constraints.

Life trajectories are understood at the intersection between different forms of biographical accounts from Egyptian artists residing in Europe. I combine analysis of three types of data: biographical interviews, analysis of publications, interviews and articles published online, and discussion on their artworks. Discussing the production history of these artworks sheds light on the power dynamics at stake between the artists and the institutions that validate and legitimize the artistic creation and therefore the position of the artist in their host society.

This research project proposes to explore three hypothetical trends of thought. First, it looks at how the revolutionary moment in Egypt was a life-altering experience for many Egyptian artists involved in the independent art scene. Secondly, it explores how the experience of exile and/or migration is rather presented by artists as a biographical continuity, refusing the stigmatizing label of exile. Finally, it interrogates how their new positionalities and sometimes labelled identities in Europe as 'Arab migrant artists' contributes to the conversion of their political engagement.

Short Biography: Ophélie Mercier is a PhD Student at Ghent University and associated with the Centre Marc Bloch (Berlin where she is currently based). She graduated from SOAS where she conducted research exploring theatre as a form of resistance in Palestine. She worked in Cairo from 2013-16 as a street clown performer and social theatre practitioner with the collective Outa Hamra. Back in France, she coordinated the organisation Caravan, an international network for youth and social circus. In her PhD, she is exploring the life trajectories of Egyptian artists residing in Europe, focusing on the reconfigurations of their artistic practices and looking at the transnational dynamics of the production and distribution of their art works.