Why has work originating from the Arab world captured much attention in recent years? A plausible answer is that it somehow reflects the events characterizing the Arab Spring. I would argue that some artwork does this better than others, particularly the work of Hassan Khan. His work is often highly abstracted, and does not offer up an easy digestion of its driving concepts, yet this is one of the main reasons it is emblematic of the “transformation of consciousness” which is central to the Arab Spring. I will begin by demonstrating how one of Hassan Khan’s most recent works, *Blind Ambition* (2012), challenges an Orientalist reading by removing any characteristics that can be stereotypically representative of the East/West conflict. I will continue with a discussion of the fundamental characteristics of the Arab Spring as outlined by Hamid Dabashi in his book *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism*, and proceed to explain how this specific film exemplifies these characteristics. Hassan Khan’s work is an anomaly whose unique function lends it incredible potential as a powerful catalyst in the Arab Spring, and it is precisely the context out of which it arises that has made this capacity for change possible. However, I do not intend to search for an underlying meaning or message in Khan’s work, but rather to draw parallels between conventions evident in the work and components of the mentality of the Arab Spring.

Many experimental artist films coming out of the Arab world take on subject matter that deals explicitly with issues arising in that context, for example Basma Al Sharif’s *We Began by Measuring Distance* (2009) Nadia El Fani’s *Neither Allah, Nor Master* (2011) and Reem Ali’s *Foam* (2008). In dealing with themes such as the destruction of war, intolerance of secularism, and emigration – to name a few common topics – the artists
may unintentionally facilitate Orientalist readings of their work. Although this is not to critique them in their entirety – they depict aspects of individual realities to create awareness, or as a means of navigating the selected topic – it can be argued that they do little to challenge the old Orientalist tropes of terrorism versus peace, dictatorships versus democracy, religious fanaticism versus tolerance, East versus West.

How could it be possible for artists to escape the categorical gaze of the West? Samir Kassir begs the same question: "[Y]ou could conceivably overcome, or even simply ignore the Western gaze. But how can you avoid returning it, and measuring yourself against its reflection?"\(^1\) It seems to be, and has been treated until now, as a double bind. This is where Hassan Khan’s work becomes an anomaly. It removes itself from the argument by refusing concrete representations of anything associated with the East/West binary; in particular, his work *Blind Ambition*, which formally deals with quotidian conversation.

Although the film is obviously made in an Arab milieu, this does not automatically subject it to the gaze of the Other. That is to say, it challenges, or even refutes an Orientalist reading. The fact that the scenes shown in *Blind Ambition* so obviously take place in an Arab country (specifically, in Cairo) cannot pose a problem to foreign viewers no more than the fact that many American artists choose to film in the environments they do. Hassan Khan states this about his own work: “It is not about context, because there is, in many cases, an engagement with the conditions under which something is born… under which I am working or living, the world I experience. However, the work is not about describing this, and it is definitely not about explaining it.”\(^2\) *Blind Ambition* very much emblematizes this essential characteristic. Arguably, its primary subject matter is banal conversation, which does not even deal with the usual-suspect themes (discussed above).

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The cultural aspects evident can merely be considered as a fact of production. However, even if an Orientalist reading were applied to *Blind Ambition*, clothing and technology would defy preconceived notions. Much of what the actors are wearing cannot be attributed to any one cultural group – it consists mainly of business and casual wear. Also, the technology present throughout the film – primarily cell phones – is current and commonplace in many cities across the globe. Cell phones intervene in four of the eight conversational scenes, and the footage is shot entirely on a Samsung Galaxy S2 cell phone, which is not immediately obvious when watching the film.³

Presupposed Orientalist reading aside, the film confuses viewer expectations. There is much in the way of content, but little in the way of an obvious, conceptual common thread running across all the shots. All of the conversational scenes shown include some kind of conflict (of varying lengths and detail), and every scene is formally linked by an “interlude” (as labeled in the film credits): two shots taken on some form of transportation within the city, the second being superimposed upon the first in a few seconds of flickering before replacing the initial shot. Overall, an implicit narrative is created, that of the flâneur, although the intimacy of the shots suggests a familiarity with the subjects. A focus on the specificity of the conversations themselves seems to be more engaging. Each of the conversations is particular to whatever (contrived) situation the viewers are being given a snapshot of, yet each scene is an example of the particular becoming general. The conversations shown exemplify elements of shared experience. That is to say, many viewers will be able to identify or associate with one or several of the interactions shown. This is why I would call them everyday, banal conversations, even though we are privy to the intimate details. These details lose their weight once taken out

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³ Hassan Khan, *Blind Ambition* (2012; Egypt: Galerie Chantal Crousel, 2012), m4v video file. This aspect of production has an interesting effect. A phone camera can capture unconventional points of view without being obvious to the actors. Take, for example, the interludes, and the final scene where the camera follows a man in a suit, capturing only his arm and lower torso, as well as a glimpse of the city in front of him. Also, the prevalence of phones and filming with them can make those in the public space indifferent to it.
of their surrounding narrative, shifting the focus to the general gist of what is being seen and heard: drama between teenage friends, a group of bored boys playing soccer, colleagues gossiping about co-workers, shenanigans in the workplace, etc. This is primarily how this work by Hassan Khan becomes an anomaly. The discourse is neither specifically Western nor Eastern – it cannot be pinned down to a certain subculture – but comes across as universal.4

A formal problem that arises in the work is the English subtitles. Obviously some form of subtitling needs to be incorporated in order to make the work accessible to non-Arabic speakers. That being said, they are visually very distracting, especially when taking into account the pacing and the speed at which the subtitles need to be displayed alongside the image. At certain points it is impossible to read the subtitling in its allotted interval of time, and this poses a barrier to understanding. I can only assume that the fast-paced Arabic is just as difficult to understand for a native speaker, and that this blockage was intentionally created in order to detract from the nuances of the interactions (even though a certain level of importance is attributed to them, since the dialogue is the only aural component of the video). However, the difficulty encountered when attempting to keep up introduces feelings of exclusivity. This could be intentional, as other examples of Khan’s work present similar barriers where it is impossible for the viewer to focus on all of the elements simultaneously. One such example is *The Hidden Dimension*, where the viewer must choose which of the 4 screens of the video installation they will watch.5 Whether the subtitling of *Blind Ambition* is intentional or not, it still creates a noticeable effect in the visual field, and appears to inadvertently create a decoy.

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4 This is a construct often used for creating effective art, since depiction of the specific is always more intriguing and accurate than attempting to capture a general concept in a work, and the general is more often than not attained by making use of idiosyncratic subject matter.

5 Mohebbi, 91.
Up until this point I have tried to illustrate how *Blind Ambition* refuses to enter into the East/West argument. More importantly it illustrates that escape is possible. Hamid Dabashi and Samir Kassir both envision an end to the Arab malaise. Samir Kassir reaches the conclusion that predicting an end to the Arab malaise, at the time of his writing in 2004, is unrealistic. What would be more likely, he writes, is to awaken the Arab consciousness out of the victim mentality and propagate amongst them a realistic, objective reading of historical events.⁶ Hamid Dabashi, who is writing after the events taking place in Tahrir Square and Tunisia, maintains that this *ouverture d’esprit* is in full swing, and that what has begun amongst the people as revolution will continue within their minds: “The regime of knowledge we have inherited, not just from the colonial world, but even more so from the postcolonial interlude, must be dismantled with the selfsame determination that has ensured that the political regimes are overthrown.”⁷ How is this all connected to the work of Hassan Khan? His work refuses to offer up an easy digestion of inherent concepts simply because it does not contain a craftily hidden commentary – which is what viewers so often expect of an artwork. In the artist’s own words, “[it’s] not reducible to a formula, to an intention that is coded by the artist and then decoded by an audience…. The labor is shared without the disingenuous pathos of claims of ‘communication’ and ‘interactivity.’”⁸ The way in which the viewer must approach this kind of work – with a new way of looking and understanding – reflects the need to transform consciousness both within and beyond the Arab world, to exit the self-perpetuating conflict between entrenched ideologies.

Hamid Dabashi uses the terms “counter-thinking” and “counter-interpreting” – the former being used to describe the trap of the individual’s reactionary nature, and the latter being the solution to the old ways of thinking.⁹ Counter-thinking functions by associating

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⁶ Kassir, 91-92.
⁹ Dabashi, 79.
what is witnessed with what is already known. “The actual thinking we do, to understand or explain events is in fact counter-thinking; it further conceals what we intend to reveal.”\textsuperscript{10} This is what an artwork that says “yes” to certain posited interpretations does; it propagates the acquisition of false knowledge that is in direct competition with its binary, and in so doing, reaffirms what it opposes. In the context of the Arab world, this explains how the reactions of certain political or religious factions to the categorical gaze of the West serve to confirm the definitions conferred upon them by this gaze. Hamid Dabashi postulates that a viable method in order to shrug off the gaze (and change the world) is counter-interpreting. It is labeled as such because it does not subscribe to the colonial construct of interpreting; rather it encapsulates a new way of reading reality that draws attention to the old \textit{regime du savoir}.\textsuperscript{11} It can be said that counter-interpreting is achieved through a certain register of language, a register that departs from the argument of the status quo. This register is evident in the revolutions, but also in the realm of art and literature: “how to think and write about the events in a manner that transcends the very designation of which you speak is no easy task.”\textsuperscript{12}

Much of Hassan Khan’s work makes use of this register. Some of the ways in which \textit{Blind Ambition} does this have already been discussed – it does not lend itself to typical methods of analysis, or decoding. It also uses the decoy of language. Being the sole aural component of the work, literal language serves as a decoy. According to Hassan Khan, “The film reflects a documentary sensibility, but there’s another language happening. And this subtle language has to be hidden for it to work. If you make it obvious, it doesn’t work. That’s why it has to follow this system of the decoy.”\textsuperscript{13} Creating a decoy functions to further abstract the initial premise of the artwork. What I mean here by

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{10}] Idem.
\item[\textsuperscript{11}] Idem.
\item[\textsuperscript{12}] Ibid., 82.
\end{itemize}
premise is the informing concept that motivated the work at the outset. If this central thought is made obvious, the work loses its resonance, no longer provoking reflection. A final technique used to conceal the central language of the work is process. Processes serve as parameters for the concept, creating a formally cohesive product. It is evident in Hassan Khan’s video work that he uses storyboarding as a defining process. In the case of *Blind Ambition*, this constitutes conversational scenarios divided by interludes all depicting some form of communal city transportation. The possible continuity of the process is usurped by the final scenario showing the supposed flâneur walking through the city.

Arguably, the effect of process becomes more important than what one can infer from context. In an interview with Sohrab Mohebbi, Hassan Khan describes an artist talk that he gave, in which he set parameters for himself: “I worked with a script, which consisted of lots of texts that were taken from notes, previously published essays, things I had intentionally written for the talk, as well as the time code running down the script.”¹⁴ In this case, the parameters turned the talk into a sort of performance where the artist is putting himself through an exercise in summarizing and improvising. Bringing an underlying structure to the forefront of a work detracts from the importance of the content and context, or at least confuses the viewership. These are the primary techniques used in the art of Hassan Khan that exemplify how it makes use of the counter-interpretive register of language.

All of this is to show how art is a viable option as a vehicle for the Arab Spring. It should be clear by this point that this is accomplished when artists challenge the categorical gaze of the West by reducing the weight of context while increasing that of form and content. More importantly, art must remove itself from a distinctly Eastern or Western discourse while drawing attention to the discourse itself. This is the only means by which one can avoid reaffirming the judgments of the opposition. Hamid Dabashi

¹⁴ Mohebbi, *Shifter 18*, 83.
believes that the Arab Spring will be an ongoing process, exemplified by the open-ended revolution, whose main participants will be young people, as they are the generation with the most to lose.\textsuperscript{15} However, these revolutions will face severe opposition from all those who feel threatened by the changes they would initiate: the political and religious powers of the Arab world, Israel and possibly even the West itself. Hamid Dabashi maintains that there will always be corruption amongst those in power and that is why these revolutions must remain open-ended – to keep the ruling authorities accountable.\textsuperscript{16} Counter-interpretive art fills just as important a role as the revolutions, as the transmission of these ideas can spread out towards many other countries without running the risk of being mitigated by the media. Art and literature also often pose less of an overt threat to the opposition, and thus do not run the same risk of being violently quelled – although art is probably not as accessible across all demographics as is a revolution. Hamid Dabashi himself argues that “we Arabs and non-Arabs have to fight for the Arab Spring in the realm of ideas with the same vigor and determination as we do in the squares and streets.”\textsuperscript{17} It is precisely for this reason that Hassan Khan’s work plays such an important role, regardless of the context in which it is shown: it challenges viewers to alter their habitual modes of thinking, and hopefully this will eventually filter into areas outside of the realm of art. This is not to say that art and literature that embody the new ways of thinking are necessarily more or less effective than social revolution, but essentially complementary to the revolutionary forces. One cannot help but imagine what the effects such art could be in the long-term if it all lived up to this potential.

\textsuperscript{15} Dabashi, The Arab Spring, 238. \\
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 240. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 235.
Bibliography


