02. TIME CAPSULES OF CATASTROPHIC TIMES

MARK R. WESTMORELAND[1]

> I wish we could just forget things, and I wish we could simply not have archives. It's liberating in a way, living with YouTube, as ephemeral records, is liberating.[2]
>
> — Akram Zaatari

> Until we find ourselves in a utopian moment, the archive is going to continually be in play, much like it is today, with varying degrees of urgency or with various targets. To continue to build and assemble out of these moments of recent history is something that, regardless of whether the revolution is completely successful or a complete failure, remains a political and humanistic imperative, something we must do to continue to build and go forward.[3]
>
> — Sherief Gaber

Vis-à-vis

Two figures stand facing the calamities of history. One figure's face is full of wonder and horror, unable to look away from the spectacle of death while backpedaling away from the waste piling up in the wake of progress and power. The other's turns away from our gaze to direct us at his own vision of recurrent catastrophe. The first makes copious notes that desperately document the ruins before they disappear under more rubble. The second quickly sketches the fleeting moments of critical clarity that appear in a flash and then vanish as if they never happened. In the desperation of the moment, the first cannot organize these memos, but anxiously hides them so they won't vanish in the storm of violence as time marches on. Despite the urgency of the situation, the second knows we've seen it all before and are no longer moved, nevertheless remaining steadfast to bear witness and remember the symbolic connections being severed. When trying to escape from the fascists, the first is compelled to take his life knowing already that the alternative would be unbearable. While continuing the resistance in exile, the second is assassinated on the street by a traitor. The first figure is inspired by Walter Benjamin and his writings on

1 This text was written as part of the 'Resistance-by-Recording' project based at the Department of Media Studies (IMS), Stockholm University. The research was made possible by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond Reference No. P14-0562:1.

2 Stuart Comer, 'Uneasy Subject "Interview with Akram Zaatari"', in The Uneasy Subject, Leon, Spain & Mexico City, Mexico: Musac & Muac, 2011, p. 129.

3 Quoted in Alisa Lebow, Filming Revolution, A Stanford Digital Project, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018. See also https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/234/sherief_gaber.

The Angel of History.[4] The second evokes Naji al-Ali and his cartoon character, Hanthala.[5]

Faced with a growing mountain of rubble and ruins, the archive is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's seminal figure – the Angel of History – cast in an epic performance facing an endless storm of destruction called the past. Inspired by Paul Klee's drawing, in which the Angel faces us wide-eyed and open-winged, we as the viewers of this drawing assume a position in reverse of the Angel's perspective. We do not see what the Angel witnesses, but instead register her surprised affect. In effect we are bearing witness to the traumatization of the Angel of History, who in turn is witnessing the catastrophic accumulation of human destruction. While the future void is unknown and unseen, we can be sure that it will soon be filled with the debris of what has come to pass. The ambitions of continual progress will inevitably succumb to the catastrophes of lost causes.

If we recast the Angel of History as Hanthala – the iconic cartoon creation of Naji al-Ali of a Palestinian boy facing an unending series of disasters – we, as the viewers of these comics, steadfastly look over his shoulder to witness what he sees. Unlike Benjamin's engagement with the Angel, Hanthala refuses to face us (the viewer of the image), apparently turning his back on the world in a reflexive gesture meant to critique how the world has turned its back on Palestine. Whereas we can only imagine the violent storm blowing in the face of the Angel of History and feel her frontal affect, Hanthala serves as a guide for onlookers to recognize the destruction of Palestine and the larger Arab world without ever giving us his face.

The Angel of History and Hanthala could in fact be the same figure. Both facing the mounting catastrophe of history, bearing witness to all the calamity unfolding, while the records of these disasters recede on the distant horizon to make room for the next shocking event. And yet, neither the Angel nor Hanthala can face the future, whether merely because the future is unknown and unseeable, or because the past overwhelmingly blinds any other perspective. These two figures of the angel and the boy become emblematic of different theories of witnessing and serve as a reminder of the impossibility of historical equivalence and universal modes of witnessing. Whereas the Klee drawing structures an impossibility of witnessing what the Angel witnesses, but nevertheless assumes the accessibly of traumatic testimony, the Hanthala figure reflexively invites (perhaps beseeches) the viewer to see what he sees while refusing to give us access to his own affective experience. By refusing the conventional testimonial frame of a talking head, which privileges the face as a window to human interiority, Hanthala's refusal challenges the viewer to rethink one's assumptions about the act of witnessing.

What do these contrasting parables tell us – fellow scholars, artists, and activists – about archives in the Arab world? As the billowing pile of past progress becomes the material

4 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', trans. Harry Zohn, in Hannah Arendt (ed.) Illuminations: Essays by Walter Benjamin, New York: Schocken, 1969, pp. 253-67.

5 The name Hanthala is commonly transliterated as Handala, signaling the difficulty of appropriately registering the Arabic letter ẓāʾ in Latin script. For more on Hanthala, see Naji Salim al-Ali, A Child in Palestine: Cartoons of Naji Al-Ali, London: Verso, 2009.

remains of the future, how might contemporary archival practices lead us to see both the destruction rising up before them and their shocked expressions at what unfolds? Like al-Ali, we must recognize the importance of witnessing, of unflinchingly being committed to collecting evidence and making records of what's happening. Like Benjamin, we must document and organize these fragments into a unified whole to create a synergetic potential for a future generation. As witnesses to these calamities, we must commit ourselves to be the custodians of the past, carrying these precious remains into a new era without already having clarity of purpose. While the availability and accessibility of these material remains are prerequisites for their later activation, how can an archive be assembled with the potential to be activated again at another time? For image activists in the Arab world where the norms of video authorship and political action continually shift, the burden of archiving recent revolutionary events nevertheless poses many concerns about usage rights, authorship, accountability, and legality, not to mention history and representation.

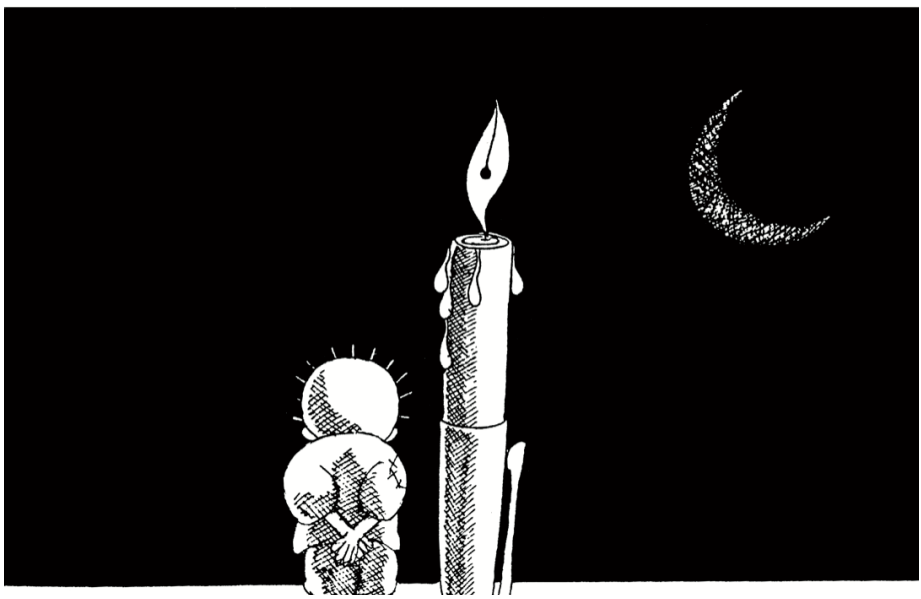

Fig. 1: Cartoon of Hanthala published with permission of Naji Al-Ali family; original publication 13 October 1982, Beirut, As Safir newspaper.

Eight-Hundred-and-Fifty-Eight Hours

The uprisings and downfalls across the Arab world since the end of 2010 have been fertile territory for citizen-journalists and activist-filmmakers to document both the assembling of mass protests and the atrocities of state violence. In Egypt, images played an unprecedented role during the initial uprising – from the frenetic scenes of spectacular violence to the online circulation of vernacular images to the rescreening of protest videos on the streets to the posters that provided English captions for foreign viewers of the events. Most of the people drawn to these street protests with their cameras had been neither politically active nor skilled in news-making beforehand. And yet, the videos they shot and shared provided the main

source of information for people across the globe before the major news outlets arrived on the scene. The dominant narrative in global media quickly became about Revolution 2.0 and the affordances of new mobile, interconnected digital technology to enable an unaffiliated network of filmers to upload their videos for both those only a few blocks away and audiences watching thousands of miles from the scene.[6] Although only a small number of these videos went truly viral, the collective recording of these events, producing thousands of videos from a multiplicity of perspectives, provided momentary glimpses of mass movements from the street.[7]

Although those videos circulating on social media and televized on satellite networks bore witness to the unprecedented events unfolding from a variety of vantage points, the shared exhilaration of these rebellious images circulating online often gave way to fleeting sensationalism. This mediated phenomenon mistakenly decontextualized these images from the spontaneous and improvized practices that created, collected, curated, and continued to care for them in the weeks, months, and years ahead. Despite being largely uncoordinated acts, the process of shooting video and uploading it online is an important context for thinking through the range of filmmaking practices needed to create and sustain an unaffiliated record of the revolution.[8] As Alisa Lebow notes, 'it was crucial not only that there were cameras there to document it but that there was a place where that material would be stored, to be used to contest the government claims'.[9] Disconnecting these practices from celebratory discourses about social media helps bring the mundane features of the archive into focus.

858: An Archive of Resistance, compiled by members of the Mosireen media collective, embodies many of the attributes of the uprisings that enacted new and inspiring modes of collective politics. The origins of the archive lie in the Media Tent during the occupation of Tahrir Square in 2011.[10] Among other forms of collective action mobilized in this liminal moment, the Media Tent became a site to channel the photos and videos being collectively produced in the square (and beyond). Here *the people* could pool their records of witnessing with the ambition of collecting visible evidence for future trials. This emergent archive also provided materials to international media producers absent from some of the most important events.

This initial archive of collective action served as the seed for the so-called Mosireen archive. Omar Hamilton recounts, 'The first mission was to collect and preserve of [sic] as much digital memory of the initial 18 Days as possible'.[11] But following the glorified 18 days that culminated in the ousting of entrenched President Hosni Mubarak, the regime continued to violently

6 Wael Ghonim, Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People Is Greater than the People in Power: A Memoir, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

7 Mark R. Westmoreland, 'Street Scenes: The Politics of Revolutionary Video in Egypt', Visual Anthropology 29, no. 3, 26 May 2016: 243-62, https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2016.1154420.

8 Mark R. Westmoreland, 'Documentary Film Making', in Mona Baker, Bolette B. Blaagaard, and Luis Pérez González (eds) The Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media, New York: Routledge, in press.

9 Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/226/mosireen.

10 Nina Grønlykke Mollerup and Sherief Gaber, 'Making Media Public: On Revolutionary Street Screenings in Egypt', International Journal of Communication 9 (2015): 2903-2921; Lebow, Filming Revolution.

11 Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Mosireen Video Timeline', Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/169.

suppress dissent. Soon those who had connected in the Media Tent, like Hamilton, realized that if the continuing revolution was going to be documented it would have to be done by the people participating in it.[12] Many activists gained resolve in the turbulent months that followed with varying efforts to reoccupy the streets that ebbed and flowed with both celebratory and crushing force.[13] On the scene during the army's horrifying massacre outside the Maspero state television headquarters, Mosireen's first edited film uploaded to YouTube 'The Maspero Massacre' crystallizes their imperative.[14] Brought together around a shared belief in the basic tenants of the revolution – 'bread, freedom, and social justice' – and 'that media should always be confrontational toward power', around fifteen core members within a larger network of contributors and supporters constitute the media collective.[15] Among a variety of citizen-journalist efforts and activist collectives, Mosireen (meaning 'determined ones', but also a play on the Arabic word for Egyptians, *ma riyyīn*) proved to be one of the more significant for their well-organized, multifaceted, and coordinated efforts. More importantly, the Mosireen media collective provided a key example of media activism committed to radically new political formations. Devoted to horizontal structures of non-hierarchical authorship and management, they refused outside funding or sponsorship, and found local support to offer training and equipment to anyone interested in contributing to the demand for camera-mediated activism. Their vision of social change remained resolutely revolutionary as they focused on documenting street protests, worker strikes, and mass sit-ins. From their crowdsourced material, the collective produced dozens of short videos covering different issues and events specifically from the perspective of the street, many of which featured in mainstream news. By January 2012, Mosireen briefly became the most viewed nonprofit YouTube channel in the world.[16] That said, they emphatically placed their emphasis on addressing the local population – *the street* – holding impromptu public screenings in Tahrir Square and elsewhere.[17] Out of the ephemeral cloud of social media and back down on the streets, another member of Mosireen, Philip Rizk, notes that they 'also disseminated [their] images through flash drives, CDs and Bluetooth connections in an attempt to use new methods to get our images into different spaces: living rooms, coffee shops, university dorms, or further street screenings'.[18] The impromptu and spontaneous nature of these images, combined with their shared assembly and collective identity, added to the potentiality that anything was possible.

Online attention and public outreach led to an exponential growth in their donations and the initial collection from the Tahrir Media Tent quickly grew by several terabyte, spread over a series of hard drives. With only a small portion of the archive materials available in their

12 Khalid Abdalla, 'The Advent of Mosireen 25 February 2011', in Lebow Filming Revolution. https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/37/the_advent_of_mosireen_25_february_2011.

13 Abdalla, 'The Advent of Mosireen'.

14 The Mosireen Collective, The Maspero Massacre 9/10/11, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00t-0NEwc3E&feature=youtu.be.; Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: The Maspero Massacre: October 2011', Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/170.

15 Sherief Gaber, 'The Mosireen Collective', in Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/79/the_mosireen_collective.

16 Bel Trew, 'Egyptian Citizen Journalism "Mosireen" Tops YouTube', Bel Trew: Freelance Journalist (blog), 20 January 2012, http://beltrew.com/2012/01/20/egyptian-citizen-journalism-mosireen-tops-youtube/.

17 Mollerup and Gaber, 'Making Media Public'; Westmoreland, 'Street Scenes'.

18 Philip Rizk, interview by Shuruq Harb, 20 May 2013, http://www.artterritories.net/?page_id=2997.

online videos, the ambition to make the archive fully accessible online emerged early in its formation. But the magnitude of the collection, combined with a host of complicated ethical issues, saddled Mosireen with a monumental burden. Inexperienced with managing large data collections and facing a continual influx of new material, Mosireen struggled to implement the best practices in data management after the fact. Initially, a simple date and author folder structure enabled some level of organization, but these efforts had to be completed piecemeal as they were constantly responding to an unstable and dynamic political context. When editing their own videos or trying to provide content upon request, they had to rely on the distributed memory of the collective to identify the correct hard drive and file. Furthermore, they were not simply depositing material into an archive, but relying upon it 'as a tool in the struggle' to understand the events within a broader context of rapidly shifting political conditions.[19] While committed to tagging and indexing the materials, they recognized the messiness as integral to the conditions of this archive and sought ways to 'preserve the disorderliness'.[20]

In a similar vein, Mosireen did not want the archive to serve simplistic purposes. One of the affordances of having such a massive collection was the ability to imagine different kinds of engagements. If queried in a generative manner – 'How to get people in the rabbit hole?' – the archive could help rethink the problems of the present. Sherief Gabr, who served as one of the main custodians of the archive, imagined a way of beginning with specificity, rather than grandiose ideas. Start with the extremely granular then pull back to see what emerges. Pick concrete variables that can be traced through the archive irrespective of conventional organizational schemes. A particular site examined from different positions in ways that displace the typical subject. This analytical approach to the archive enacts a 'cybernetic storyteller' as a generator of narratives and arguments, new political situations and analytical agencies, without prefigured connections.[21] This is not what YouTube offers. As articulated by artist Lara Baladi, who with Mosireen initiated the street screenings of protest footage known as Tahrir Cinema:

> the problematic nature of relying on the internet itself as an archive, given the algorithmic logic that drives Google and other search engines, which organizes material in ways that prioritize the new and the sensational, making it difficult if not impossible to find artifacts from the past, even the recent past.[22]

Ethical dilemmas presented similar conceptual challenges. Unlike a repository hidden in the stacks where documents collect dust, Mosireen's ideal for the archive required open access. This demonstrated their activist commitment to deliver stories and images entrusted to them by the people of the street. Mosireen felt burdened by their collection of images and the magnitude of their responsibility to give the images back to the people, not specific individuals, but a more collective sense of those revolutionaries who took to the streets to fight

19 Sherief Gaber, "The Archive," in Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/80/the_archive.
20 Sherief Gaber, "Organising the Archive," in Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/81/organising_the_archive_.
21 Sherief Gaber, Beanos, Zamalek, interview by Mark R. Westmoreland, March 2015.
22 Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/theme/75/archive.

for justice, many losing life or limb. Access also presents infrastructural challenges to address the demands of delivering thirty days of footage to the servers in an organized manner, not to mention designing an interface to facilitate jumping down the euphemistic rabbit holes. The pernicious and multifaceted issues with access remain at the core of this and other archives of the Arab uprisings.

One of the risks of giving the archival footage an online Creative Commons license means that it can be freely appropriated for counter-revolutionary purposes. Access by nefarious parties can expose people to persecution. In fact, the viability of the archive required hiding it from authorities, making duplicates to be stored in different locations, and restricting access 'on the basis of networks of trust that seem [. . .] to be frail and unreliable'.[23] As Alisa Lebow has argued in her *Filming Revolution* project, the various unofficial efforts to produce 'a "people's archive" of the revolution' present the same dilemma on an official level.[24] This is evident even in the effort to create an official archive of the revolution, headed by historian Khaled Fahmy. While imagined to be an archive for the people, it became clear that the information gathered therein would likely be used by the state against those who participated in the revolution.[25] 'To gain access to any official state archive in Egypt, to this day, requires that the researcher get permission from state security'.[26]

This question on how to balance their commitment to free access with the protection of people's identities grew increasingly difficult. Now that years had passed and different regimes moved through power, the notion of consent presented another problematic issue to address. Nothing has remained static or stable. Someone's politics at the time of donating footage may have radically shifted. This is even more challenging when considering those imaged in the footage. For Mosireen, there is a recognition that these issues cannot be completely resolved. While the footage may reveal compromising evidence, it was commonly understood that everything was being recorded at the time. Furthermore, as Gaber relays to Lebow, 'the state in Egypt does not seem to need hard evidence in order to detain or imprison those it deems dangerous, and thus it might not make much sense to worry about providing them with such evidence'.[27] Since asking for permission can be taken too far, Mosireen places the burden on others to contact them with requests for removal. That said, part of the arduous process of preparing the footage for public accessibility meant culling through it and withholding material that would clearly put people at risk.

Already exhausted and losing focus, the up swell of popular support for the army to remove the Muslim Brotherhood left those critical of both without a defensible position to protest. Though

23 Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/234/sherief_gaber.

24 Lebow's meta-documentary is an archival project in itself that combines textual commentary with interviews about the creative process of filmmaking in Egypt during the Arab uprisings. Lebow uses a non-linear structural framework that makes it possible to trace different constellations of relations and to move through themes and topics in an organic manner or by following prescribed curated conversations.

25 Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/theme/75/archive.

26 Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/article/226/mosireen.

27 Lebow, Filming Revolution, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/theme/75/archive.

many of the Mosireen members may not have known it at the time, inertia had already sealed their fate.[28] After the Rabaa massacre in August 2013, where hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood supporters were murdered on live television, Omar Hamilton recounts:

> We had no response. We were not there, we had not risked our lives to film it. We had fallen out of the equation of power in the stand-off between the Army and the Brotherhood. We were powerless and yet we felt complicit. We were racked by a confusion and guilt and impotence. We sat stunned in our office day after day, smoking, silenced.[29]

While committed to radically new political formations, the collective had to change tactics under the new Abdel Fattah el-Sisi regime. As the revolutionary period collapsed, Mosireen became even more burdened by the custodial responsibility of what had become ostensibly the largest video archive of the revolution, particularly for its now silenced perspective from the street protests.

Another and ultimately more abstract question that confronted the collective turned on defining the archive. Despite the common idiomatic reference to the 'Mosireen archive', its members did not want to impose their claim to it. If it is an archive of the revolution, then it belongs to the street.[30] Whether the street can access online platforms is another matter. But if the revolution is framed in nationalistic terms as the Egyptian Revolution, then it reproduces the framework of the nation-state, which goes against the widespread spirit of revolution emboldened across the Arab world and part of the global phenomenon of public protests. The hopes and dreams of these borderless revolutions and unifying uprisings in most instances became crushed.

In the subsequent years, Mosireen struggled to maintain momentum. All their strategies up until then lost traction. Energy in the collective dissipated. Reflection mixed with pessimism, the exhilaration of witnessing something truly emancipatory with real potential for change confronted sentimental nostalgia and they began asking themselves if 'what happened meant anything at all'?[31] And yet, researchers and journalists continue to laud Mosireen for its achievements as a success story, while the group tried to reconcile its 'post mortem' state vis-à-vis a failed revolution. Following the publication of its final video in February 2015,[32] Omar Hamilton laments its weaknesses, 'This video feels, to me, like little more than a symptom of a moment of desperation as we became lost in the endless swamp of the judiciary's counter-revolution'.[33] Filming on the streets was no longer viable and releasing new videos

28 Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Coup or a Continuation of the Revolution?', Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/173.

29 Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: Prayer of Fear', Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/174.

30 Westmoreland, 'Street Scenes'.

31 Sherief Gaber, Mosireen and the Battle for Political Memory (1/4), AUC New Cairo, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRo0cgaHoR8.

32 The Mosireen Collective, قضية الشوري: سنة وشهرين من العبث A Brief History of the Shura Council Trial so Far, Cairo, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UzXqfeA6lQ&feature=youtu.be.

33 Omar Robert Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Brief History of the Shoura Council So Far',

in social media became senseless. The burden of delivering the archive to the people of the street in many waysepitomized the larger sense of failure. Procrastination and neglect became understandable responses to tedious tasks of organizing and viewing thousands of videos of people and events that no longer remained, not to mention having to relive horrific scenes of violence. But these circumstances did not absolve Mosireen from their promise to make the archive accessible based on a shared expectation that the archive with all its parts is not merely a repository, but an 'arsenal' that must be activated.[34] In those hopeless years, the fate of their archive, now 12TB in size with over thirty days of footage, provided a faint beacon of purpose. Hamilton ends his depressing summary of their last YouTube video with optimism for the potential of the archive, 'soon the full archive, the raw, unedited archive will be online and open for anyone, for everyone, to step in and make the next [film]'.[35]

The story of the Mosireen archive may ultimately be a testament to the perseverance of noble ideals and the hope for political reactivation. While the idea of publishing the Mosireen archive languished, progressing slowly in fits and spurts for another five years, becoming an endurance test for a small set of members who could muster the dedication needed, a half dozen or so members organized archiving retreats in 2016 and 2017 to oblige themselves to sit down and work through the materials. With technical support provided by members of the Pad.ma open source video archive, they designed front and backend elements of an archival platform to actualize their long-awaited goals.

After struggling seven years to make the archive accessible, the collective launched *858: An Archive of Resistance* online featuring 858 hours of footage completely indexed and tagged with an interface that encourages crowdsourced annotation (https://858.ma). The platform encourages multivariate journeys through 'thousands of histories of revolt told from hundreds of perspectives'.[36] The platform also allows further submissions, indeed encourages it. The 858 aspires 'to make public all the footage shot and collected since 2011'.[37] Now that the archive has finally been released online, how does its absence in the streets reconcile the critiques of Revolution 2.0 over-emphasizing technology at the expense of on-the-ground work? The fate of this archive remains uncertain. It is unlikely that these documents will be used to incriminate leaders guilty of human rights abuses, nor will it compel protesters to return to the streets, but they may serve as an important resource for future revolutionaries. In more modest prose, 858 flags its inevitable limitations:

> 858 is, of course, just one archive of the revolution. It is not, and can never be, the archive. It is one collection of memories, one set of tools we can all use to fight the narratives of the counter-revolution, to pry loose the state's grip on history, to keep building new histories for the future.[38]

Ibraaz, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/175.

34 Gaber, Beanos, Zamalek, Interview by Mark R. Westmoreland, March 2015.

35 Hamilton, 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Brief History of the Shoura Council So Far'.

36 '858: An Archive of Resistance', https://858.ma/.

37 '858: An Archive of Resistance', https://858.ma/.

38 '858: An Archive of Resistance', https://858.ma/.

The archive is now available, accessible to whomever would like to utilize it. And yet, it may still be too soon. The undertow of crushed hope has yet to dissipate. In the present moment, nobody may possess the ability to activate these images with revolutionary potential. If the images of the Egyptian revolution have become bankrupt, lifeless, or otherwise inaccessible, what hope can we anticipate for them in the future?

Archival Foundations

Elsewhere in the region, at an earlier time, others were also imagining an archive of images made by the people across the Arab world. The Arab Image Foundation was established in 1997 by a generation of artists, photographers, intellectuals, and otherwise members of a Lebanese post-war creative class. Establishing the AIF enacted an urgent and critical response to a series of issues facing the image cultures of Lebanon, if not the entire region. On the one hand, photographic archives of the Middle East were principally produced by outsiders to the region, taken back home, and now located in European and North American capitals. On the other hand, photographic collections within the region were at risk of destruction either from passive forms of neglect or more active threats under conditions of war and political instability. In the context of Lebanon, many of the earliest studios in Beirut lost their collections during bombings, fires, and looting (often only for the silver content of the negatives). For those displaced from their homes in war-torn areas within Lebanon and beyond, family collections were often abandoned, looted, or destroyed. Elsewhere, well-meaning institutions often disposed of their photographs after haphazard scanning processes intent to only salvage the content of the image. The results of this situation also meant a loss of photographic heritage and a lack of access to local visual cultures. Accordingly, one of the aims in creating this collection was to safeguard the photographic heritage of their region in the face of ongoing political violence and institutional neglect.

In the absence of a distinctly Arab photographic archive, the AIF provided a mandate for its members to collect thousands of historical photos and negatives from countries across the region. The members of AIF endeavored to create a collection that could enable them to write a different history or even multiple histories of photography in the Arab region. Recounting his reasons for co-founding AIF, Akram Zaatari says, 'I was eager to discover what was out there that had been inaccessible to me'.[39] Through a process of conducting research, collecting materials, and producing art projects, Zaatari was 'guided by the possibility of discovery'.[40] This generative approach resisted the idea of the archive as a preconstituted source, opting instead for a notion of actively assembling it as an outcome of various research projects. These projects became key sites for writing personal histories and addressing the way broad historical trends became 'translated into the micro, into people's day to day'.[41]

39 Mark Westmoreland and Akram Zaatari, 'Akram Zaatari: Against Photography Conversation with Mark Westmoreland', Aperture 210 (Spring, 2013): 62-3.

40 Westmoreland and Zaatari, 'Akram Zaatari'..

41 Eva Respini, Ana Janevski, and Akram Zaatari, 'Projects 100: Akram Zaatari', MoMA The Elaine Dannheisser Projects Series (blog), April 2013, https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/projects/akram-zaatari/.

In the context of an emergent critical art scene in Beirut, which has intensely problematized the representation of war and trauma in the region, the archive has served as a master symbol of evidentiary knowledge politics and the precarity of historically determined futures. As an infrastructural platform to build upon and an ideological edifice to push against, the AIF stands at the center of a key dilemma – the desire to preserve is easily corrupted into regimes of speculative value, while at the same time the physicality of the architecture remains vulnerable to the same fate as the nearby ruins of yesteryear. Discursively, the archive echoes the warnings of official history and traces of erasure, but creatively it has nourished artists and intellectuals seeking inspiration in the material forms of evidence. As such, Zaatari insists that the AIF is not a photographic archive, but rather an archive of research practices, which 'has decontextualized a lot of the original images – taken them out of their social and political economy and moved them into perhaps more of an archival/market economy'.[42] According to Zaatari, the problem with framing the AIF as a photographic archive is that these items have been displaced from their original context, but are nonetheless assumed to speak definitively about their origin as if undisturbed. This sort of direct access to history that many documentary forms assume typically relies on erasing the context of the artifact's current existence in an archive. The appropriation of thousands of photographic records and documents of research to the foundation's vaults also presents an ethical responsibility to care for the vast quantities of other people's images. The burden of this obligation has only revealed itself in hindsight, from which Zaatari has recounted his own uncritical enactment of an archival impulse.

Burdened by an unending custodial responsibility to these complicated objects, Zaatari has rhetorically offered a radical reversal to the archival impulse by suggesting that the AIF return the photographs to whence they came. We should not interpret this as a naive nostalgia as if things once displaced can ever return to their original status. On the one hand, his intent emphasizes a political act of repatriation, in which 'we would be most likely able to have new encounters with new people, get in touch with new ideas, new questions regarding the function of photography in people's lives now'.[43] On the other hand, this signals Zaatari's anxiety that the archive will eventually fail as a source for critical intervention, thus anticipating its potential for symbolic exhaustion. In the parlance of Jalal Toufiq, the traditions inscribed in these photographs may disintegrate in one's hands, falling into the abyss of radical closure in which all threads of connection to their origin are lost. As such, this transfer may serve as a rescue mission to prevent the archive from becoming a dead-end. Zaatari thus proposes a radically different idea of preservation – one that is less concerned with an image's material support than its symbolic potential.

While only rhetorical, we can see the same logic at work in another one of Zaatari's artistic gestures. Indeed, Zaatari's oeuvre has shown a synergy between archival collection practices and archaeological excavation practices. Both involve a process of extraction. In a parallel inversion, returning the photographs is coupled with the gesture of burying them in a

42 Anthony Downey and Akram Zaatari, 'Photography as Apparatus: Akram Zaatari in Conversation With', Ibraaz 006, 28 January 2014, http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/113/.

43 Respini, Janevski, and Zaatari, 'Projects 100: Akram Zaatari'.

time capsule. Time capsules represent the principle of the archive to save something for posterity, to bury a treasure of knowledge, something taken from the present that is perhaps unremarkable in its ordinariness or overburdened by its potentiality, with the anticipation that one day in the future it will offer a surprise to those that opened it. Zaatari's contribution at documenta 13, entitled 'Time Capsule', performed the burial of a set of images for the future. If someone were to unearth this time capsule in the future, they would only find tiles painted in various shades of blue dedicated to a photographer losing his sight. He imagines this performance as a script for radical preservation, which 'recognize[s] the necessity of timely withdrawal [. . .] of documents and artifacts in times of risk'.[44]

In catastrophic conditions, in which time does not unfold in a linear progression, what does the posterity of an archive mean for future generations? Zaatari's gesture suggests not only that future generations may have a use for the archive, but also that we in the present are not ready to engage these images. The mandate to create an archive for posterity implies that it is being saved for a time when it is needed. Central here is the idea that we are not making this for ourselves in our time, but are hopeful that conditions (whether in our making or otherwise) will enable those who follow to harvest this material. Put another way, perhaps these images are not for us in this moment at all. While such photographs and footage have had an impact, in their contemporaneity their effects are ephemeral and fleeting, if not also unpredictable. The images from Egypt may definitively reveal responsibility for war crimes and human rights abuses, which may flatly contradict the claims by these regimes, but we cannot know if, how, and when such documents will come to be used for such purposes. Indeed, what will future generations make of these archives? Will they appreciate the content for the reasons that we assume are self-evident now? Or will they be able to see something in the material that most of us nowadays can't see?

Hindsight / Foresight

The photographic heritage of the region may not seem immediately comparable to the circumstance of image production in contemporary media activism. The challenges facing the Arab Image Foundation serve as conceptual models for thinking about some of the latest iterations of catastrophic violence faced by Mosireen. Conceptually, this is important as it helps place the material traces of the recent uprisings within a larger context of social precarity and political activism in the Arab world. The juxtaposition of different archives helps nuance the crucial set of concerns around collecting, organizing, and sharing images as a political act in its own right. The lessons of the archive by intellectuals, artists, and activists working in the Arab world remind us once again of the revolutionary imperative to enact modes of witnessing that account for the longue durée of recurrent catastrophe. This day, like any ordinary day, is full of images and image practices that continually reshuffle, remix, and remediate scenes of catastrophe.[45] In a way, the archive makes this recursive historiography possible.

44 Westmoreland and Zaatari, 'Akram Zaatari', p. 64.

45 This Day / Al-Yaoum, (dir. Akram Zaatari, 2003); Mark R. Westmoreland, 'Making Sense: Affective Research in Postwar Lebanese Art', Critical Arts 27, no. 6 (November, 2013): 717-36, https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2013.867593.

The temporal and spatial shifts afforded by the mediation and assemblage of these scenes from the Arab revolution challenges the spectacle of event-based witnessing and the fragmentation of linear historical time with its subsequent periodization. Like the detritus amassing before our Angel of History, the particularity of these events inevitably is flattened into a landscape of ongoing political violence and abuse. This is not to conflate them and disregard their historical particularity, but aims to redress the myopia generated during the Arab Uprisings and place the temporality of the archive within a context of recurrent catastrophe. While seemingly exceptional at the peak of the Arab uprisings in 2010-2011, the world has lost interest in these struggles. In the intervening years the production of video activism has had to shift concerns and strategies, taking solace in Hanthala's steadfast commitment to face perpetual injustice. The juxtaposition of these cases helps to resituate the exceptionalism of the Arab Uprisings, while retaining the revolutionary affect of these images to hold open the potential for unrealized outcomes.

While Hanthala and the Angel remain fixated on unfolding histories of violence,

Zaatari's proposal for a future perspective on these images lingers in my mind: What if we buried the archive of the Arab Uprisings in a time capsule for another era? By relinquishing the right to the present, this act of altruistic posterity poses important questions for the role of the Arab Archive and whether it should be accessed in the present or carefully packaged for another time. Unlike in the case of family albums and studio photographs, the prospect for repatriating the images may be more complicated but remains at the center of key concerns and debates among media activists in the Arab world. Efforts to relinquish the burden of the archive by making it available to their creators rely on sustaining the egalitarian notions evoked at the time of the uprisings like *the people* and *the street*. But how then do we imagine our posterior audience? How do we imagine the *future* modes of witnessing within these archives? What sort of symbolic power will these materials have when unearthed and activated in unforeseen ways using the latest technological modalities?

References

'858: An Archive of Resistance', https://858.ma/.

Abdalla, Khalid. 'The Advent of Mosireen 25 February 2011'. In Alisa Lebow (ed) *Filming Revolution,* A Stanford Digital Project, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018. https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/37/the_advent_of_mosireen_25_february_2011.

Ali, Naji Salim al-. *A Child in Palestine: Cartoons of Naji Al-Ali*. London: Verso, 2009.

Benjamin, Walter. 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. trans. Harry Zohn, in Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations: Essays by Walter Benjamin*, New York: Schocken, 1969.

Comer, Stuart. 'Uneasy Subject "Interview with Akram Zaatari"', in *The Uneasy Subject*, Leon, Spain & Mexico City, Mexico: Musac & Muac, 2011.

Downey, Anthony, and Akram Zaatari. 'Photography as Apparatus: Akram Zaatari in Conversation With'. *Ibraaz* 006 28 January 2014, http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/113/.

Gaber, Sherief, Beanos, Zamalek. Interview by Mark R. Westmoreland, March 2015.

Gaber, Sherief. *Mosireen and the Battle for Political Memory (1/4)*, AUC New Cairo, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRo0cgaHoR8.

_____. 'Organising the Archive', in Alisa Lebow (ed.) *Filming Revolution*, A Stanford Digital Project, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/81/organising_the_archive_.

_____. 'The Archive', in Alisa Lebow (ed.) *Filming Revolution*, A Stanford Digital Project, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/80/the_archive.

_____. 'The Mosireen Collective', in Alisa Lebow (ed.) *Filming Revolution*, A Stanford Digital Project, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018, https://filmingrevolution.supdigital.org/clip/79/the_mosireen_collective.

Ghonim, Wael. *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People Is Greater than the People in Power: A Memoir*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

Hamilton, Omar Robert. 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Brief History of the Shoura Council So Far', *Ibraaz*, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/175.

_____. 'Six Moments from a Revolution:A Coup or a Continuation of the Revolution'? *Ibraaz*, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/173.

_____. 'Six Moments from a Revolution: Prayer of Fear', *Ibraaz*, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/174.

_____. 'Six Moments from a Revolution: The Maspero Massacre: October 2011'. *Ibraaz*, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/170.

_____. 'Six Moments from a Revolution: A Mosireen Video Timeline', *Ibraaz*, 4 July 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/channel/169.

Lebow, Alisa. *Filming Revolution*, A Stanford Digital Project, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018, http://www.filmingrevolution.org/.

Mollerup, Nina Grønlykke, and Sherief Gaber. 'Making Media Public: On Revolutionary Street Screenings in Egypt', *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 2903-2921.

Mosireen Collective. *The Maspero Massacre 9/10/11*, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/

watch?v=00t-0NEwc3E&feature=youtu.be.

_____. *A Brief History of the Shura Council Trial so Far*, Cairo, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4UzXqfeA6lQ&feature=youtu.be.

Respini, Eva, Ana Janevski, and Akram Zaatari. 'Projects 100: Akram Zaatari', *MoMA The Elaine Dannheisser Projects Series* (blog), April 2013, https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/projects/akram-zaatari/.

Rizk, Philip. Interview by Shuruq Harb, 20 May 2013, http://www.artterritories.net/?page_id=2997.

This Day / Al-Yaoum, (dir. Akram Zaatari,) 2003.

Trew, Bel. 'Egyptian Citizen Journalism "Mosireen" Tops YouTube', *Bel Trew: Freelance Journalist* (blog), 20 January 2012, http://beltrew.com/2012/01/20/egyptian-citizen-journalism-mosireen-tops-youtube/.

Westmoreland, Mark R. 'Documentary Film Making', in Mona Baker, Bolette B. Blaagaard, and Luis Pérez-González (eds) *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Citizen Media,* New York: Routledge, in press.

_____. 'Making Sense: Affective Research in Postwar Lebanese Art', *Critical Arts* 27 no. 6 (November, 2013): 717-36, https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2013.867593.

_____. 'Street Scenes: The Politics of Revolutionary Video in Egypt', *Visual Anthropology* 29 no. 3 (May 26, 2016): 243-62, https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2016.1154420.

Westmoreland, Mark, and Akram Zaatari. 'Akram Zaatari: Against Photography Conversation with Mark Westmoreland', *Aperture* 210 (Spring, 2013): 60-65.