On any given evening – a second view.
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Texts by (in no particular order) Peter Schjeldahl, Fred Ritchin, Alfredo Cramerotti, Jack Shenker, Khaled Fahmy.[i]

On any given evening Cairo's Tahrir Square creaks under the weight of its own recent history: trinket-sellers flog martyrs' pendants, veterans of the uprising hold up spent police bullets recovered from the ground, and an *ad hoc* street cinema screens YouTube compilations of demonstrators and security forces clashing under clouds of teargas. This is collective memory by the people, for the people – with no state functionaries around to curate what is remembered or forgotten.

"Egyptians are highly sensitive about official attempts to write history and create state-sponsored narratives about historical events," says Khaled Fahmy, one of the country's known historians. "When Hosni Mubarak was vice-president in the 1970s he was himself on a government committee tasked with writing – or rather rewriting – the history of the 1952 revolution to suit the political purposes of the elite at that time. That's exactly the kind of thing we want to avoid."

As visual regimes, both the journalistic/historic and the artistic/documentary make claims for the truth, albeit of a different kind. The former is a coded system that speaks *for* the truth (or so it claims), the latter a set of activities that questions itself at every step (or so it claims), thus *making* truth. Throughout modern times, it has been of vital importance for journalists and historians that their reports are taken to be truthful: true images, correct facts and impartial wording. For the artist it has been more important that s/he was true and *authentic*. Because it is increasingly difficult to look at something and safely identify it as art, the figure of the artist must appear as truthful and real as possible.

Whereas journalism traditionally provides a view on the world "out there," as it "really" is, art often presents a view on the view, positing truth through critical acts of (self) reflection and auto-critique of how information is produced, and what it says. It is useful to examine both activities as types of truth production, as systems of information that define truth in terms of the visible: producing not only what can be seen, but also what can be imagined, and thus imaged.

Khaled Fahmy knows only too well about the inherent tension between acts of mass popular participation and official attempts to catalogue and record them. Less than a week after the fall of Mubarak, the professor received a phone call from the head of Egypt's national archives asking him to oversee a unique new project that would document the country's dramatic political and social upheaval this year and make it available for generations of Egyptians to come.

"I was initially very reluctant," says Fahmy. "I didn't want people to think we were producing one definitive narrative of the revolution. But then I started thinking about the possibilities, and suddenly I got excited." Albert Einstein reportedly stated that we cannot solve our problems at the same level of thinking that generated them. If we open up and re-think our conception of traditional information formats, allowing imagination and open-endedness, we might perceive things in ways we remain unaware of. In aesthetically approaching events in contemporary life, what appears to be real, true or verifiable cannot be detached from the system of representation adopted.

This means, we start to get closer to the core of reality itself when we make *our* reality not a given, irreversible fact, but a possibility among many others. There are always stories to tell and many ways to tell them. But what is important is how *we* partake in this narration of the real, and not just leave it to others. We do not only consume images and ideas, but also criticise them, and in turn, maybe make some of our own. The production of truth is a shared undertaking, with vast political and social ramifications.

A question at this point – Is a witness account – which involves time and participation – a viable substitute for a reporting position? A witnessing experience is centred on the issue of time. The fundamental difference between a journalistic work that "reports" and one that "witnesses", is in the approach of the producer to the mode of revelation that exposes and represents facts without anesthetizing them. This makes evident the paradox of mainstream journalism covering complex issues with twenty-second soundbites, in order to make them digestible for an audience. The same goes for the act of history making.

And so the Committee to Document the 25th January Revolution was born. Staffed by volunteers and drawing on everything from official records and insurrectionary pamphlets to multimedia footage and updates on Twitter and Facebook, the project aims, in Fahmy's words, "to gather as much primary data on the revolution as possible and deposit it in the archives so that Egyptians now and in the future can construct their own narratives about this pivotal period." The project will also collect hundreds of hours of recorded testimony from those involved in the struggle to bring down Mubarak – whether they supported the revolution or not.

Here, it is not the simultaneity with the real that is important, nor its speed rate, but the development of an "essence" of reality that works at the level of imagination. It constitutes the idea of participation of the user in the production of meaning.

Is it possible to work with aesthetics *and* informatics, to be both reflective and precise? To both employ documentary techniques and journalistic methods while remaining self-reflecting and critical on those means?

Many have adopted the "journal" part of –journalism– as a personal vehicle – what happened in my/your day, what do I/you think or what the old journalism industry is telling us, etc. Part of this trend is due to the powerlessness that comes with being a rather passive recipient of news that one cannot do much about. A blog gives at least the illusion of impact, and is usually less institutional and remote.

It is an exercise fraught with difficulties, particularly at a time when the question of who gets to speak for the revolution is being bitterly contested on the streets of Cairo and elsewhere. "Documenting the revolution sounded like an easy thing, but what is the revolution?" asks Fahmy. "When did it start? When did it end? Has it ended? What constitutes participation in the revolution – is it only those who went down to Tahrir, or is it also the doctors who worked extra-long hours in their hospitals to treat the wounded? What about a police officer who fought the protesters – is he a part of the revolution or not?"

There is nothing academic or theoretical about those questions. Over the past year the former ruling military junta has sought to limit the scope of the revolution both rhetorically and legally, applying the term strictly to the 18 days of street demonstrations that led to Mubarak's resignation and contrasting those "selfless" protests with the "disruptive" and "self-interested" strikes and sit-ins held subsequently by workers and other groups demanding political change. A few months ago we have seen tens of thousands of protesters reoccupying Tahrir and other city centres around the country, arguing that the revolution has been hijacked by conservative forces and offering a powerful rejoinder to the army's claim that grassroots political struggle has now come to an end.

It is a conflict over ownership of the process of revolutionary change, one that has already brought violence back to Egypt's streets – and which Fahmy's project is wading straight into the middle of.

Speaking the truth also means self-reflection, and the willingness to disclose the position from where one is speaking, and through which means and methods one is constructing the speaking (of the truth). To speak the truth is also to speak the truth about oneself and one's acts of speaking, thus exposing subject and object of the speech equally. In this light, I find it highly timely, and pertinent, to reflect the journalistic in the aesthetic, and the aesthetic in the journalistic.

We probably need a kind of knowledge looking beyond what is immediately visible, a latency, so to speak, an imaginative reading of what is not accessible to the senses. We could "use" the passage of time by applying an attentive eye to current and manifest aspects of the matter analysed, but also to the historical background that produced it, to what is concealed, and to its possible or imaginary development.

To pursue an aesthetic approach in a journalistic, documentary or historical representation can reveal aspects of reality otherwise buried beneath real-time coverage of occurrences. It takes time to assess what could be true or false, right or wrong, and ultimately to decide where one – as a viewer, reader or "user" of information – stands in relation to ethical and aesthetics issues.

On the day Fahmy met the Guardian, one of the committee's working groups had just decided to alter the "start date" of their enquiries – moving it from 14 January (2011), the day the Tunisian president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was forced from office, back to June 2010 when the Alexandrian youth Khaled Said was killed in broad daylight by two police officers, an incident that mobilised many Egyptians against the Mubarak regime. The "finish date" of their project – the moment the committee formally considers the revolution to have ended – remains the most controversial of all, and is still up in the air.

"All the committee members, who range from activists to bloggers to academics, are politically conscious, and we're aware that making these sorts of decisions is problematic," insists Fahmy. "My own feeling is that the revolution is very much incomplete, and this second stage – which requires overcoming the army – may prove even more difficult than the battle to topple Mubarak."

It is a matter of adding knowledge, linking what we already know with what we do not know and putting the new in sequence with other knowledge. Sharpening the existing ways of production and distribution of information. Generating relations of mutual influence with other systems that govern or facilitate our life, like mass media, science, law, architecture or other study and planning activities. Two aspects are equally

important: for the authors not to be forced to adapt to the speed of the news industry (which subsequently tends to "speed up" the history-making process), and for the users not to be required to accept of refuse the information on the spot. Be irreverent to the format of the reproduction of things – all these opportunities must be kept alive to eventually expand back into journalism, documentary, archives and history-making.

But aside from reflecting the contested nature of post-Mubarak Egypt, Fahmy believes his historical committee has another, more subversive purpose. In common with most Arab countries, public access to official information in Egypt is almost nonexistent, with state archives buried beneath a musty web of security restrictions and a deeply entrenched government culture of destroying or hiding any records that could prove awkward. But Fahmy hopes this latest initiative could herald a fundamental change in the way Egyptians view their relationship with state information – and by extension, their relationship with the state itself.

"It is people who make history, not generals or leaders," says Fahmy. "But if it is the people who make history, then they should be the ones who write it and read it as well." From the very beginning he has insisted that all material collated by his committee must be publicly accessible to anyone on the internet. That decision breaks a mould of state secrecy that has prevailed for decades; today, anybody wishing to research, say 18th century Egyptian ports, must still submit themselves first for interrogation at the ministry of defence.

Fahmy's committee is not the only group attempting to pry open a long-held tradition of official concealment. Within a few weeks of Mubarak's fall, protesters had ransacked the headquarters of Egypt's notorious state security service, looting thousands of classified documents and placing many of them online. A few months ago the country's first freedom of information law was drawn up, though, as far as I'm aware, there is no guarantee it will make it on to the statute books.

What counts is the position of perennial re-work, research and reading of things, avoiding what we could call "the statement of reality"; it requires us to suspend our notion of "the experienced" as something fixed and immutable. This attitude does not create fiction, but changes the modes of reading facts.

"The question of access to information and archives is political, because reading history is interpreting history, and interpreting history is one way of making it," adds Fahmy. "Closing people off from the sources of their own history is an inherently political gesture, and equally opening that up is a political – even revolutionary – act."

What we are is attributed by others; what we see, by ourselves. To ground the idea of "reality" in its reception rather than its representation is one way to retain the ability to build our own "truth claim" for what is represented, instead of the material making such claims for itself.

But despite all the institutional obstacles, Fahmy is certain that the size and nature of last year's revolt means there can be no going back to the days when Egyptians were severed from the deliberations and documents of those ruling in their name.
"This was a leaderless revolution, and one which came about through mass participation," he explains. "The way we write history now has to be part of the same process, and so does the way we access that history. That for me is as much a part of the revolution as anything else."

By combining documents and imagination, the necessity of the former with the desire of the latter, we create almost an antidote to the often senseless accumulation of information. This would counter the attempt to be objective at all cost, and would not discard creativity in favour of neutrality. It does not mean telling fancy stories; it means undoing the connections between things, signs and images which constitute what we intend as reality – sharpen and rendering more persistent our curiosity, and more visible the contours of the environment where we live.

It should furnish life with something more and better than we expect from life without it.

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[i] Alfredo Cramerotti is responsible for editing them together, so look no further. If you have any question, you can contact him directly and he will be happy to answer. www.alcramer.net