

The RAMI 14.0

MOULTAQAYAT ALEXANDRIA

Multaqayat RAMI 8 June 2014
Day 4

June 8

"About video art in XXIst" with :

Marc Mercier, artistic director of Instants Vidéo/Marseille

Mena El Shazly, Cairo Video Festival coordinator.

Marc and Mena will present their respective festivals, about video art in Egypt and others Arabic countries, and finally open a discussion about the idea of federating video art festivals around the Mediterranean Sea

٨ يونيو:

حول فن الفيديو في القرن الواحد والعشرين مع

مارك مرسيه ، مدير Instants video / Marseille

منة الشاذلي ، منسقة Cairo Video Festival

أي مستقبل وأي رؤية لهذا الفن بعد بدايته سنة ١٩٦٣ ؟

Reflections (4)

Today's conference was about the future of video art in the 21st Century. The panel was headed by Marc Mercier, Artistic Director of Instants Vidéo/Marseille and Menna El Shazly the Coordinator of Cairo Video Festival. The panel took the form of alternated input from Menna and Marc regarding the history of video art, the relationship of each to the medium, its meaning in the context of Egypt and the Arab world and finally its importance as a method of resistance.

<http://ramimed.com/Moultaqayat-RAMI-14-0-Alexandria.html>

The discussion started with each of the panelists introducing themselves. Marc Mercier is the Artistic Director of Instant Video/ Marseilles that was founded in 1988 and that is specific to city of Marseilles, he also helped co-found the video art festival in Casablanca in 1993 as well as collaboration with other countries such Argentine, Palestine, Syria and Egypt (Alexandria).

www.instantsvideo.com

Menna El Shazly is the coordinator of the Cairo Video Festival organised by Medrar, as well as being involved in the archiving the different works that have been submitted to the festival since 2005.

<http://www.medrar.org/projects/cairo-video-festival/>

Marc then gave an overview of the history of video art since its inception in 1963 by the Fluxus movement, who themselves were heavily influenced by avant-garde American musician John Cage, whose forays into new ways to interact and deal with instruments inspired the members of the Fluxus group to follow in his foot steps (he taught many of the members of the Fluxus group through his experimental composition classes at the New School for Social Research in the late 1950s). Cage's famous prepared piano was an attempt to transform its sound and to invite the public to develop a new sensibility, according to Marc. The avant-garde ways were not just confined to music but to extended to theater as well breaking with theater conventions of text-base predetermined plays, into something more immediate and improvised, that is in direct contact with the audience.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fluxus>

Marc then continues to highlight the role of Nam June Paik, the Korean-American artist, in pioneering video art. Originally trained as a classical pianist, he too was inspired by John Cage, and wanted to find ways to revolutionize music and to utilise new ways to make art. However, his attention was turned to TV, as an object of mass culture and which was not necessarily conceived as an artistic tool. He debuted his first exhibition, "Exposition of Music - Electronic Television", in Wuppertal, Germany 1963. Where together with the help of two Japanese engineers he managed to create the first video synthesizer to distort the electrons in TV images. By 1965 Sony invented the first portable video camera, Portapak, which can be mobile, in contrast to TV cameras at the time which were largely unmovable. Paik would take one of the cameras and film his journey from his house to a famous cafe in New York (Gogo), accidentally filming Pope John Paul II (who happens to be there by chance), earning the moniker, "the Pope of Video Art".
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nam_June_Paik

According to Marc video art was the product of the WWII generation, but now it is the contemporary form for the Arab Spring. He goes to question, what do we mean when we say "contemporary", in that sense what are we contemporary to? The art form, video art, was developed in rich and industrialised countries, it would be considered dead if it is unable to respond to and find a new role to play in the realities and transformations taking place in the Arab world and the Middle East. Marc concludes his remark, by quoting his Palestinian colleague who described video art as "an artistic tool of mass creation", a response to George Bush's "weapons of mass destruction".

Menna, on the other hand, questioned dwelling on the history of video art too much and emphasized that what is important is that video art separated from film art, creating its own conventions, style, concerns. She goes on to explain that what would be interesting is if we compare the history of video art in the West to Arab region and see if there are any parallels or forms that emerged (or did not emerge) and why. To her what matter is, that video art is a democratic form of artistic practice that can be used in context like Egypt or the Arab world. Although her experience working in the Cairo Video Festival has showed that a clear understanding of what video art is, did not take hold yet within the artistic community. Most artists see it as a stepping stone to mainstream, commercial filmmaking, a chance to get recognised and hence given opportunity for more established filmmaking circles. It is a problem that the festival faces since the moment of its inception in 2005.

The conversation then turned to Marc's involvement in co-founding the International Video Art Festival of Casablanca (1993). He was invited to a workshop at the University of King Hassan II for documentary practices, unaware of his engagement in video art. He then created a program of video art works and realised the overwhelming response it had. One of the attendants explained that despite the fact that she saw video art works at a festival for video art about human rights (from everywhere except Morocco), she wasn't exposed to that kind of work before. A further even more interesting impact of this exposure, was the encounter Marc had with a young man who made video art and who gave him three of his films, that were screened in an afternoon program. That young man later became the famous multimedia artist Mounir Fatmi. Marc points out to the many challenges faced as to how that very first workshop ended up in founding the first video art festival in Morocco. For example when workshop participants want with their cameras to shoot on the streets, they were stopped by the police eight times, despite having a filming permit from the university and the government. Yet, in spite being a form not very familiar and despite the issues of censorship, the festival just celebrated its 20th year anniversary last year.
<http://www.fiav.ma/>

In explaining the emancipatory potential of video art in the region, Marc points out to the fact that when asked to curate a program for Japan Media Arts Festival from the Arab world, out of the ten artists he selected, the ten were women.
<Http://www.instantsvideo.com/blog/en/archives/272>

For Menna, the Cairo Video Festival was the product of the attempt of a group of artists to create the opportunity and the space to show their work. After getting together and creating this framework to show work, they decided to open the process for national and international submission. At this point one of the audience members asked Marc the inevitable question, what does he think of video art in Egypt, to which he tactfully replied that he doesn't have an extensive knowledge of the scene in Egypt and only knows a few artists whose work is familiar to him. He particularly highlighted the work of artist Samar Elbarawy, whose work he described as rooted in her regional context and yet has a universal preoccupation with the human condition. Furthermore, when her work was screened in France, the audience immediately identified with the issues in the work that resonated with their own personal experience.

<http://ramimed.com/In-between-by-Samar-Elbarawy-Aix.html>

In the same vein, another audience member asked the question what are the criteria for defining video art. Menna answered that she cannot think of “affirmative” definition, she rather can define it by negation, by saying what is it not: it is not commercial, it is not documentary, it is rather about how about the tools used and how the artist develops his/her individual artistic language. On the other hand, Marc said that it was easy to define what video art maybe twenty years ago, but it is no longer clear anymore. He points out to the fact that he has seen images that are extraordinarily constructed using the most advanced technology, yet he found empty because there was no human thought or input in them. He then went on to give an analogy, if anyone is given a pencil and a paper, and they are able to write words, does this make them writers or poets?

Claudine Dussollier raised the pertinent question of whether video art and multimedia practices are supposed to be used to subvert or resist a hegemonic regime. Marc answered that all mass communication devices were originally invented to serve military purposes, be it internet, mobile phones,...etc. The use of such instruments of mass manipulation by artists is a way to subvert this political/power order. In this act of artistic appropriation there is something human, which according to Marc, can be called, “beautiful”. He then gives the example of artists who use CCTV cameras to produce their work, especially that these cameras are made for surveillance purposes, this can be seen as resistance. This cynical gesture is a form of subversion and resistance. He goes to explain, that to him, he used to think that a true artist is the artist who is a true revolutionary and who breaks with established modes and ways of thinking and being, but now, he is inclined to believe that a true artist is one that uses what is already there, the everyday to make us rethink what we know and how and why we do in the way that we do. He gives the example of the sense of time acceleration we are living, we are constantly pushed to do things faster and faster, even with artworks and artistic practices as well. Artists who invite us to reconsider our relationship to time and the temporality of our experiences are then “revolutionary” in that sense. To him, an ideal representative to that is American artist Bill Viola, whose retrospect is currently on exhibit at the Grand Palais in France. Marc explains how Viola's use of a slow paced imagery, and video work that can be twenty minutes or more is a proposition that invites to rethink our relationship to time and what we see.

<http://www.grandpalais.fr/en/event/bill-viola>

<http://www.billviola.com>

The Grand Palais retrospect released a DVD which was screened (Bill Viola Expérience de l'infini (52' – 2014) by Jean-Paul Fargier) , followed by one last question addressed to Marc, by Karim Shaaban, if video art is an alternative form of telling stories or narratives. To this Marc said, if one could borrow the analogy of literary forms, filmmaking would be similar to writing a novel, while making video art would be tantamount to writing poetry. It is a form that is largely poetic.

Ismail Fayed

Alexandria June 2014

<http://ramimed.com/Moultaqayat-RAMI-14-0-Alexandrie.html>

