

**Gestures of Resistance between the Street and the Theatre:
Documentary Theatre in Egypt and Laila Soliman's *No Time for Art***

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I am walking down a narrow alleyway in downtown Cairo; I often lose my way here. It is dimly lit, quiet, with hardly any passersby. Following the directions given to me to *Rawabet* (Arabic for 'links'), one of few spaces dedicated to the independent performing arts scene in Egypt since 2006, I walk down the narrow rundown streets until they open to reveal a spacious and busy courtyard. I almost miss the entrance to the converted disused warehouse that is absent of any signs, other than the crowd outside, waiting to gain entrance. I find my way to the makeshift box office to purchase a modestly priced ticket, handed to me by Laila Soliman, the director of the performance. The ticket consists of a yellow sticker with the now iconic and ironic image of a bust in a gimp mask, the 'Mask of Freedom', designed by Egyptian visual street artist Ganzeer.¹ I wait outside the venue for a friend to join me at the opening night of *No Time for Art / 3* (2012), the fourth since 2011 in a series of documentary performances addressing police and military violence today in Egypt.²

As I wait, I observe the gathering of familiar and unfamiliar faces: many young performers and artists, and many known to be active participants in the ongoing political struggle. We manage to find two seats in a busy house: an intimate black box space with a few rows of tiered seats. The simple staging consists of a raised platform, a large back screen and two chairs placed side by side in front of the screen and the performance opens with a film showing a young girl. She introduces herself and describes her relationship to Sherif, the absent protagonist of the performance. We learn that he is her uncle. At the end of the short film, two performers are revealed on stage standing in front of the two chairs: they are Sherin Hegazy, dressed in plain blue trousers and top, playing her absent brother, and Ahmed El Gendy, playing himself, in green. '1. Purple,' begins Hegazy, with the line projected on the screen behind her in both Arabic and English. El Gendy responds with, 'I

¹ See <http://www.ganzeer.com/post/61096686642/project-the-mask-of-freedom-date-may-2011> (Accessed 10 November 2014).

² See <http://notimeforart.com> (Accessed 10 November 2014).

realise that regular-looking clouds can just be fucking beautiful!’ which is also projected in the two languages along with ‘#GeishThoughts’.³ A woman’s loud laughter is suddenly heard from the audience. The listing of the disconnected lines continues in the style of what seem like twitter posts, also suggested by the hashtag. As Hegazy arrives at: ‘2. Green,’ El Gendy’s delivery becomes a linear narrative describing the experience of being admitted to military service in Egypt. The woman’s laughter increases in volume and she is hushed by audience members. El Gendy is now describing the dehumanising medical checks he underwent upon entering the service, and now the voice of the woman in the audience erupts with objections to El Gendy’s commentary. When he finishes his story, El Gendy walks off stage and Hegazy reads from a letter. We see the handwritten document projected on the screen. The letter is written to her by her brother Sherif from prison, lamenting his misfortune and the effects that his imprisonment have had on his life and that of his family. Towards the end of the letter, he urges his sister to marry, have children and earn a living. Hegazy faintly embodies her brother’s stance whilst reading.

Moments after finishing the letter, El Gendy walks back on stage and both seated performers tell parallel stories of imprisonment and military service, one from the perspective of Sherif, still in prison at the time of performance, but told here by his sister, and the other the story of El Gendy, told by himself. The two parallel stories seem separate but they intersect at times, and are told with minimal movement or interaction between performers. Sherif, embodied by his sister, describes the rules that govern everyday life inside Egyptian prisons, imposed by the institution and by prisoners themselves. At this point, almost eight minutes into the performance, the woman in the audience heard earlier walks into the performance space, confronting the two performers. In a moment of astonishing theatricality, that in turn blurs the boundary between ‘real’ life and theatre, she questions the performers’ description of imprisonment, declaring that she herself was actually detained and taken to prison by Egyptian State Security. She steps on the platform, faces the

³ ‘Geish’ means ‘army’ in Egyptian dialect. Ahmed El Gendy, who studied graphic design, wrote numbered tweets using this hashtag while serving in the army. He posted these on Facebook when out on leave, giving each block a colour that reflected his feelings during that period of service (Laila Soliman, in conversation with the author, 26 September 2014).

audience and continues, explaining how she was imprisoned because of her rejection of the injustice and subjugation that she witnessed and experienced firsthand. A man approaches to lead her off stage but she gestures him away, and the director allows her to finish. The woman turns to the audience and repeats: 'if you want to claim your rights, claim them with your own hands, with your own hands, with your own hands!' She walks off stage and leaves the venue to roaring applause. The stunned performers pause for a few uneasy moments before starting the performance all over again. According to the makers, this was not planned, and they have no relationship to the woman.

'Theatres of Actuality' and Political Resistance

For Peter Weiss, documentary theatre reveals themes of a 'social or political character' and can work against the 'haphazard' nature of the mass media: 'Documentary Theatre, like the spontaneous open air demonstration with its placards and slogans, represents a reaction against the contemporary situation, and a demand for explanations'.⁴ In his comparison of documentary theatre and political protest, he argues that documentary theatre retains the spontaneity of public demonstrations, but reflects only a segment of the immediate actuality by applying different conditions than those relating to direct political action. As such, documentary theatre cannot compete with a direct political event, even when it dispenses with aesthetic considerations or does not try to be a finished product, for it is still a form of artistic expression, and must remain as such to have any validity.⁵ For Weiss, documentary theatre also takes sides and here he suggests that documentary practitioners may incorporate interruption of story, cross-cutting of reflections, monologues, raw materials, flashbacks and contradictions. These shifts and displacements cause uncertainty but also draw attention to the multifaceted nature of events.

Weiss's conception of documentary theatre raises the issue of the delicate and dialectical relationship between theatre and political resistance, with an investigation of the purpose of theatre in a time of upheaval as one of its underlying questions. Here, I push Weiss's analogy between

⁴ Peter Weiss, 'The Material and the Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', *Theatre Quarterly*, 1:1 (1971), 41-45 (p. 41).

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 42.

documentary theatre and political protest further by looking at a direction in contemporary theatre in Egypt that emerged since the 25 January revolution in 2011 and that employed the immediacy of documentary form as a response to political change, unrest and repression, seeing in documentary theatre a mode of resistance that intervenes in hegemonic discourse. I show how this work attempts to extend the struggle on the street, occupying a liminal position between the performance space and the public space, instituting a particularly dialogic relationship between performance and audience as active co-participants in a community 'in the making.' A binding thread appears between modes of protest from street to stage, which extends Weiss's argument on documentary theatre as an artistic mode that brings a crisis to the fore and hints at an understanding of theatrical strategies that embrace uncertainty: art as 'means' rather than 'end'. As such, documentary form models a constantly shifting and open-ended revolutionary process. In light of Weiss's theatrical model, I focus on Laila Soliman's performance series *No Time for Art* that demonstrates a particular inflection of the documentary mode contemporaneous to the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The series is shaped by a performance aesthetic that seeks a place directly connected to and implicated in the broader events taking place, while disrupting conventional modes of representation and rupturing the tendency to fix and reify events from the revolution. Consciously structured as urgent reportage, the series allows for certain kinds of 'unfinishedness' and disruption which sustain the rawness and openness of the material portrayed. The open and direct mimetic mode offered in this series includes the audience in collective and intimate acts of bearing witness, in ways that extend Weiss's proposed ideal of 'theatre of actuality' and puts forward the practice of theatre itself as a 'gesture' of political resistance.

Theatre as a Gesture Towards a 'New Real'

Walking to the more reflective space of the theatre, in that alternative cultural quarter of the city, triggers a question about the relationship between the theatre and the street, especially in comparison with the more immediate grassroots tools, such as the internet and digital media, that

are directly connected to protesters and activists battling on the streets. As I find my way through Downtown Cairo, I pass by the streets that lead to Tahrir Square and that witnessed some of the most violent clashes in the few years since the start of the revolution in 2011.⁶ I feel a tug in my heart as I pass by Talaat Harb Square and notice the remains of posters and graffiti from past demonstrations on the statue of Harb. Stencil graffiti portraits of martyrs and activists are scattered on buildings' walls along the streets. That part of the city still carries the marks of unrest and politicization, in ways that are evident on its surface as much as in the consciousness of its inhabitants. Rawabet, the city-centre performance venue where my journey ended, is close to where many clashes and upheavals are, at the time of writing, still taking place. Given that location, some audiences arrived at the venue to watch performances straight from protests and sit-ins in the surrounding area, especially in the two years following the start of the revolution.⁷ Since the military takeover of July 2013, mass protests are being quickly suppressed by a government that clamps down heavily on all dissent.⁸ The increasing state control over Tahrir Square and the surrounding area, in addition to the protest law introduced in November 2013, that curtails freedom of assembly and led to thousands of protesters being detained and sentenced to prison, have severely restricted participation in public demonstrations.⁹ This context informs a particular relationship between the theatre and its audience, and between the theatre and the street, while also illuminating the limitations of that relationship in a time of unrest and repression. Independent theatre makers, many of whom are active participants in the revolution, have taken a position that

⁶ For an account of Tahrir Square as a symbolic and material reference point for the revolution see Mohamed Samir El-Khatib, 'Tahrir Square as Spectacle: Some exploratory remarks on place, body and power', *Theatre Research International*, 38:2 (2013), pp. 104-115. (p. 110-11). Also see Nesreen Hussain, 'Cairo: My City, My Revolution' in D.J. Hopkins and Kim Solga (eds.), *Performance and the Global City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 223-244.

⁷ See for example Margaret Litvin's account of attending a performance at Rawabet during a mass protest in Tahrir Square on 18 November 2011 in 'From Tahrir to "Tahrir": Some Theatrical Impulses toward the Egyptian Uprising', *Theatre Research International*, 38:2 (2013), pp. 116-123.

⁸ See Patrick Kingsley and Martin Chulov, 'Mohamed Morsi ousted in Egypt's second revolution in two years', *The Guardian* (4 July 2013) <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/03/mohamed-morsi-egypt-second-revolution> (Accessed 16 October 2014).

⁹ See 'Egypt: New protest law gives security forces free rein', *Amnesty International* (25 November 2013) <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/egypt-new-protest-law-gives-security-forces-free-rein-2013-11-25> (Accessed 16 October 2014). Also see 'Egyptian activists go on hunger strike in solidarity with political detainees', *Press TV* (11 September 2014) <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2014/09/11/378367/egyptian-activists-go-on-hunger-strike-in-solidarity-with-political-detainees/> (Accessed 7 November 2014).

lies in what Judith Butler calls a ‘threshold zone’ that crosses the boundaries between the public and the private, or between two connected spaces, which is particularly important when access to public space is suppressed, when there is no square or street to protest in.¹⁰ Some of the productions at Rawabet and other alternative venues, in their attempt to respond to the urgency of events, and to express in theatrical form, in real time, a process of sociopolitical change that is ongoing and fluctuating, engage with documentation as a means to re-enact collected stories, testimonies, memorialisations or autobiographies that capture the rawness, energy and immediacy of their surrounding context. Egyptian theatre critic and scholar, Nehad Selaiha, explains,

The first phase of the revolution yielded a rich crop of performances that sought to salvage, document and store in the collective memory the stories of the people in Tahrir Square, both living and dead, through narration and first or second-hand live testimonies. Suddenly there was a powerful upsurge of a new branch of documentary theatre that has been absent from the Egyptian theatre scene – namely: verbatim theatre.¹¹

Selaiha believes that in this early wave of post-revolution performances ‘the most moving were the ones that documented this historical event through the testimonies of people [...] who actually took part in the Tahrir demonstrations, told real stories of other demonstrators, and paid homage to the Tahrir martyrs’.¹² Monologue-based productions such as *Tahrir Monologues* (2011), an ongoing project directed by Sondos Shabayek, and *Tahrir Stories* (2011), directed by Dalia Basiouny, as well as her one-woman performance *Solitaire* (2011), are based on testimonies and experiences of participants in the early days of the revolution (commonly dubbed ‘the eighteen days’). In the first, Shabayek’s impulse was to ‘preserve and protect the memories of the Eighteen Days’,¹³ while Basiouny attempted in *Tahrir Stories* to ‘register the history of the revolution as it was unfolding’.¹⁴ In *Solitaire*, she ‘documents dramatically and visually some of the experiences of Arabs and Arab Americans post 9/11 [...]’. It also records some of the events of the 25 January

¹⁰ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013), p. 153.

¹¹ Nehad Selaiha, ‘A Year of Revolutionary Theatre’ *Al-Ahram Weekly* (29 Dec 2011 – 4 Jan 2012). [Http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1078/cu1.htm](http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1078/cu1.htm) (Accessed 21 July 2014).

¹² Nehad Selaiha ‘Tahrir Tales’, *Al-Ahram Weekly* (7-13 Apr 2011) <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2011/1042/cu1.htm> (Accessed 21 July 2014).

¹³ Litvin, ‘From Tahrir to “Tahrir”’, p. 119.

¹⁴ Dalia Basiouny, ‘Performance through the Egyptian Revolution: Stories from Tahrir’, in Eyad Houssami (ed.) *Doomed by Hope: Essays on Arab Theatre* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), pp. 42-53 (p. 44).

Revolution in Egypt through the eyes of an Egyptian woman'.¹⁵ In different ways, all three performances, like other productions from that upsurge of artistic and cultural expression, demonstrate the urge to “register”, “save up” or “bring back” the events and emotions of the Egyptian uprising’,¹⁶ to mourn and honour those who fell in the process and to document what were seen as the most effective and affective moments in the lives of Egyptians. The artists wished to capture those collective memories and experiences as reservoirs against cynicism and as a reference that might preserve something of the early ‘spirit’ of Tahrir. Selaiha gives an overview of this wave of documentary performances, referring to Basiouny’s *Tahrir Stories* among others as examples:

Delivered in person or by proxy, the testimonies there had the authentic ring of truth; they were simply phrased and candidly delivered, had no trace of empty rhetoric or hollow sounding heroics; they intimately dwelt on what going to Tahrir Square had been like and what it had meant and done to the testifiers. In all, one major theme was ‘breaking the barrier of fear and feeling empowered’. Another was recovering a sense of belonging to something called Egypt and taking pride in the fact, together with a sense of dignity and personal worth.¹⁷

These theatrical re-enactments bring an embodied aspect to the documented experiences, and keep alive intense moments from the revolution that many can relate to. One of the early performances of *Tahrir Monologues* in 2011 ended with the audience breaking into the chant ‘raise your head up high, you are Egyptian!’ which is one of the iconic chants of the revolution.¹⁸ A direct link is extended between the theatre space in the present and the public space from the past, and the line between the two gets blurred in moments of affective engagement. By implication, the line blurs between audience and performer, as Basiouny puts it, ‘as both have become enlivened in a society awakening to a new wave of activism’.¹⁹ One of *Tahrir Monologues*’ trailers ends with the following statement: ‘We used to tell stories to celebrate, but now, we tell stories to resist.’²⁰ Telling stories becomes both a conscious act of documentation and a conscious gesture of

¹⁵ Basiouny, quoted in Khalid Amine, ‘Re-enacting Revolution and the New Public Sphere in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco’, *Theatre Research International*, 38:2 (2013), pp.87-103 (p92).

¹⁶ Litvin, ‘From Tahrir to “Tahrir”’, p119.

¹⁷ Nehad Selaiha, ‘Tahrir Tales’.

¹⁸ This moment is captured in this short clip: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-SnwJcoIrF8> (Accessed 20 Jul 2014). Breaking into political chants in the midst of performances and popular song concerts is not uncommon in Egypt today.

¹⁹ Basiouny, ‘Performance through the Egyptian Revolution’, p.52.

²⁰ The trailer can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLXYYyivCM8> (Accessed 20 Jul 2014).

resistance, insisting on claiming authorship by taking part in the narration of history and challenging erasure. In these ‘spaces’ of resistance, the medium of theatre becomes a tool for intervention and dissent that gestures toward a ‘new real.’

Janelle Reinelt comments on theatre’s capacity for creating ‘a new real’ by arguing that theatrical tropes and dramaturgical structures help organize and clarify reality. For her, ‘artistic performances can remake and shape the raw materials of public events to imagine something new and at the same time to anchor the new vision in concrete material reality,’ and this is exemplified in the practice of theatre makers working in Egypt today.²¹ Their practice shows, in different ways, that while theatre may not directly effect social and political change by itself, it provides means to subvert mechanisms of control and to extend street struggle. Here, the relation between theatre and the public sphere lies within a dialectical oscillation between ‘the inside and the outside,’ where theatre reveals its special capacity to implicate its audiences and negotiate the differing relationships among its participants.²² In such a process, ‘[theatre] reformulates social legitimation and plays its part in the public sphere “beyond state control and moral censure”’.²³ The role of spectators in this process as active participants is essential, both during the experience of performance and outside the theatre as contributors to the wider political and social debates.

Modes of documentary theatre that aim to ‘chronicle’ or celebrate the past, however, may run the risk of reifying that past during a quickly shifting time. As Margaret Litvin cautions, many artists making work during the Egyptian revolution wish to avoid indulging in self-glorification or nostalgia that may disrupt a process of critically strategizing the next steps: ‘To praise a revolutionary uprising – to tell its story, as though it were already over – *is* to bury it’.²⁴ This view sees slower-moving genres, such as film and scripted theatre, as potentially fixing the very movement they aim to advance in a fast-changing revolutionary process, suggesting that only

²¹ Janelle Reinelt, ‘Toward a Poetics of Theatre and Public Events: In the Case of Stephen Lawrence’, in Carol Martin (ed.) *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 27-44 (p.41).

²² I am drawing here on Khalid Amine’s examination of the ‘inside and outside’, which in turn is based on Christopher Balme’s understanding of ‘the internal dynamics of exchange between stage and auditorium, performer and spectator, and the more difficult interconnections between the generally closed realm of performance and the wider dynamics of political and social debate’ (Balme qtd. in Amine ‘Reenacting revolution’, p.87).

²³ Ibid, p.89.

²⁴ Litvin, ‘From Tahrir to “Tahrir”’, p. 117.

improvisation can work in this case, as it is more akin to agile, impermanent and immediate forms such as graffiti and slogans. Litvin though is skeptical about this, acknowledging that theatre and performance in such waves of uprising have an important role to play, which is a view that I share. Artists like Laila Soliman, for example, use the documentary performance form in ways that go beyond the fixity of retrograde reminiscence, exposing ongoing violations of the military and the police rather than reifying the early days of the revolution as a closed narrative. The ironic title *No Time for Art*, reflects the skepticism shared by contemporary artists and theatre makers towards premature attempts to express in art a process of political change that is ongoing, multidirectional and unpredictable. This also problematises attempts to produce art as an end in itself during a time of crisis, while at the same time uses art as a vehicle for intervention and dissent, inseparable from the political crisis and the dynamics of resistance it instigates. The title signifies for Soliman that '[i]t is time for art used as a tool,' not for formal experimentation or for artistic self-expression as an end in itself.²⁵ This signification evolves, in response to the development of the work and its shifting political context, from being a clear statement into becoming more of a question and then a provocation.²⁶ Soliman's ongoing series of performances are crafted to intervene in a state-supported narrative that tries to ignore or deny the realities of the victims of the brutality of disciplinary institutions: the prison and the army camp.

In the following part, I focus on Soliman's *No Time for Art*, particularly the last of the series to date. The ongoing project started in Cairo in March 2011, joining the documentary and verbatim productions that emerged in response to the revolution, and it demonstrated a 'raw' quality and a direct, unfinished theatricality in its engagement with disquieting events. The 'rawness' of the material presented, similar to the productions mentioned above, is negotiated within a performance aesthetic committed to the broader life events it is grounded on, opening up an opportunity to intervene in the process of 'writing' the dominant narrative of history. The performance destabilizes

²⁵ Laila Soliman 'It's Time for Art as a Tool.' Interview by Florian Malzacher and Joanna Warsza. *How to Change the World – Or At Least Fight for It*, 26 Nov 2011. <http://truthisconcrete.org/interviews/it-is-time-for-art-used-as-a-tool/#more-109> (Accessed 21 July 2014).

²⁶ Laila Soliman, in conversation with the author, 26 September 2014.

conventional modes of dramatic representation by the way the testimonies are enacted and framed theatrically, which gives the performance a degree of openness and invites the audience to be present and active in moments of ‘revelation.’ It does not show a direct reaction to the revolution in the way it has been commonly and stereotypically portrayed or celebrated. Rather the project seems to be looking for alternative ways to carry the struggle forward, ‘since we can no longer go on the streets as we did before,’ and to give voice to the victims of state violence.²⁷ The sophisticated theatrical strategies adopted in this series bear very little reference to ‘the eighteen days,’ and hardly make any explicit representation of violence. Rather, the series of performances offers a particular mode of mimesis that gestures to the broader struggle while presenting that gesture as an open question, without resolution or catharsis.

Art as a Tool of Resistance in *No Time for Art*

Described as ‘one of Egypt’s most outspoken and revolutionary dramatists’, Soliman has been deeply committed to a politically conscious form of independent fringe theatre focusing on issues of social justice since her formative years in Cairo.²⁸ She is ‘interested in an independent, socially and politically aware theatre, and also in the role of art as a tool that can empower the individual and bring out modes of expression that are neglected and otherwise stifled.’²⁹ Soliman studied theatre at the American University in Cairo and later at Dasarts in Amsterdam, and has either written or directed numerous plays that have been showcased in Egypt and internationally since 2004. These include *The Retreating World* (2004), *Ghorba: Images of Alienation* (2006), *At Your Service* (2009), *Spring Awakening in the Tuktuk* (2010), *Lessons in Revolting* (2011), *Blue Bra Day* (2011), *No Time for Art* (2011) and *Whims of Freedom* (2014). In 2008, the Royal Court Theatre in London granted her a residency for emerging playwrights, and in the same year Soliman worked as a

²⁷ Laila Soliman, ‘Vomit – Until the Revolution Comes.’ Interview by Hans-Christoph Zimmermann. *Qantara* (18 Nov 2011) <http://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-the-egyptian-theatre-director-laila-soliman-vomit-until-the-revolution-comes> (Accessed 21 July 2014).

²⁸ Brinda J. Mehta, *Dissident Writings of Arab Women: Voices Against Violence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p.218.

²⁹ Laila Soliman, from her blog - <https://www.blogger.com/profile/03121952168388692897> (Accessed 20 July 2014).

dramaturge on the documentary theatre piece *Radio Muezzin* by Swiss director Stefan Kaegi of Rimini Protokoll. The plays she wrote since 2011 have been largely inspired by the Egyptian revolution or the history of institutional violence in Egypt. The stated aim of the series *No Time for Art* is:

to confront Egyptian and other audiences with the realities of living under a brutal military junta, that has reigned Egypt for more than 30 years. Its main focus lies on the current ongoing violence that the Egyptian Military and Police commit upon its citizens, before and after the Revolution that started on the 25th of January 2011. The different parts of the series are often performed together, although in different constellations, but each part can also be viewed as a performance on its own. They have one thing in common though, they are all 'bare to the bone' and raw artistic reactions that aim at preventing history to be rewritten by those who are rewriting it at the moment. It doesn't pretend to be art, because these times don't need art, or do they?³⁰

The ongoing project is primarily seen as a tool for dissemination of testimonies, thus the turn to documentary performance: 'My tools are the tools of the theatre,' states Soliman. 'It might reach less people but it can have a much more piercing, more direct effect than a YouTube video'.³¹ At the outset, Soliman found the testimony of an actor friend who had been detained for a week in March 2011. He posted the note on his Facebook page straight after his release, documenting in detail his experience of imprisonment and torture. According to Soliman, the evocative testimony revealed the abuses of the Egyptian army, which provoked her to collect more testimonies and initiate the series of documentary performances in an instant response. This was during the early months of the revolution at a time when military trials of civilians were systematically taking place accompanying the deployment of army troupes in Egyptian cities starting from 28 January.³² At the same time, most criticism of the abuses of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was

³⁰ <http://notimeforart.com> (Accessed 20 Dec 2011).

³¹ Soliman, 'It's Time'.

³² See 'The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies and the No to Military Trials of Civilians Group joint written intervention to the 20th session of the UN Human Rights Council', *Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies* (18 June 2012) <http://www.cihrs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Military-Trials-of-Civilians-in-Egypt-since-the-January-25-Revolution.pdf> (Accessed 7 November 2014). It shows that according to official numbers obtained in September 2011, around 12,000 civilians have been tried in military courts since the beginning of the revolution in Egypt until the time of writing the report, including minors that have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment served in highly guarded adult prisons, in addition to 18 defendants who received death sentences.

either censored or moderated.³³ The blackout censorship surrounding the injustices and abuses of the SCAF and the army motivated Soliman to report on what the media manipulates or ignores. Thus one of the aims of her latest project is ‘to create an alternative version of history with the means of theatre. Especially now, where one can already see how the official history is being written’.³⁴ *Lessons in Revolting* (2011), Soliman’s second work since the start of the revolution followed the first performance of *No Time for Art* and was co-directed with Ruud Gielens in collaboration with a diverse group of singers, dancers, filmmakers, activists, a choreographer, an actor, a musician, a clown, a street artist and a poet. Instead of directly reenacting memories or telling stories, the performance presented physical and visual self-reflexive responses to the makers’ experiences as active participants in the first few months of the revolution, using documentary filmmaking as well as physical performance, acting, song and poetry. The responses expressed the makers’ evaluation of their roles within the historic events, challenging the dominant narrative that portrays the revolution as a triumph, drawing attention to ignored or unknown, often dark, aspects of the revolution and documenting events and experiences that have been forgotten, emphasising the necessity to continue the resistance. The project was approached as an ongoing reflexive and adaptable response to an ongoing and changing revolution. The reference to ‘revolting’ in the title is not only meant in terms of the conventional understanding of ‘revolution,’ but also in the sense of the response of vomiting, again disrupting the romantic image associated with revolution.³⁵

While processing the experiences of the makers themselves was the point of departure in *Lessons in Revolting*, *No Time for Art* takes the testimonies of the victims of abuses as its main focus. The series opened with *No Time for Art / 0*, an interactive performance that finds ways to commemorate the martyrs of the Egyptian revolution by inviting the audience to make an appeal to the International Criminal Court in the Hague to put on trial those responsible for the killings. The second part of the series negotiates and intercuts three firsthand testimonies, taken from personal accounts, exposing police and military brutality before and after the revolution. Following on from

³³ Soliman, ‘It’s Time’.

³⁴ Soliman, ‘Vomit’.

³⁵ Ibid.

this, the third part focuses on the imprisonment and prosecution of minors as part of military trials. Through firsthand accounts, it tells the stories of the many homeless children and minors who were subject to arrest and torture by the military and the police in the aftermath of the ousting of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011.³⁶ The fourth and last part to date (the performance described above), presents two intercutting narratives of confinement and state subjugation concerning two young men around the same age: Ahmed El Gendy, a soldier playing himself, doing his mandatory military service as the country erupts into mass protests, and Sherif, a prisoner played by his sister Sherin, sentenced to 25 years of imprisonment on false charges, awaiting his retrial.

The revolution erupts and the ‘eighteen days’ takes place while El Gendy is in the military camp with very little access to the outside world. Alongside his fellow recruits, he tries to piece the events together from the fragments of information that filter through. Their fearful response towards the momentous, and to them hazy, events are influenced by the fact that they are in the army, with the potential of an extended military service during a time of instability. Sherif is a victim of a brutal and unjust apparatus: first by being imprisoned on false charges, sentenced to 25 years at the age of 19, and again by being forced at gunpoint to ‘escape’ prison during the early days of the revolution.³⁷ Sherif’s forced escape eventually takes him back to prison with a jeopardized retrial and a time in prison longer than what it may originally have been. His testimony provides glimpses of life after prison derived from his moments outside following the escape, including commentary on the privilege of freedom as well as on social exclusion, the struggle to find work and to engage in a stable love relationship. He bears the burdens and marks of a prisoner heavily, expressing feelings of fear and anxiety about limited future prospects, which are heightened by his sense of responsibility towards his family. He, therefore, shifts his hopes and dreams onto his sister, Sherin, and his strong bond with her is revealed in his affectionate reference to her in one of his letters as

³⁶ See: <http://notimeforart.com> (Accessed 20 Dec 2011).

³⁷ On 28 January 2011, Egypt’s ‘Day of Rage,’ and on the days that followed, thousands of inmates escaped from prisons across the country in circumstances that remain ambiguous. Rania Abouzeid reports that the jailbreaks were allegedly orchestrated by Mubarak’s regime to destabilize the country and remind the citizens that it was either Mubarak or chaos. Many prisoners who attempted to escape were shot (Rania Abouzeid, ‘Did Prison Breakout Reveal a Plan to Sow Chaos in Egypt?’ *Time* (16 March 2011). <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2059301,00.html> (Accessed 3 June 2014).

‘my backbone, my support and my confidant’,³⁸ and in his statement that he has no one but her, assigning her with the responsibility of filling his absence among their family. It is no surprise that Sherin fills her brother’s absence in the two performances where he is featured. The two stories of the soldier and the prisoner are brought together and reveal how the two lives, in different ways, are shaped by hierarchical structures, discipline, confinement and the threat of violence. The performance sees the military and the prison as different parts of a broader system that has historically allowed for, and continues to adopt, systematic violence as part of its dynamics of control.³⁹ Against this bleak picture, false state rhetoric and deliberate blackout, Soliman and the makers of *No Time for Art* try to trigger an intervention, instigating an alternative narrative, and opening up a space for silenced and oppressed voices to claim their part in ‘narrating’ history.

The material that formed the basis of some of the performances in the series was collected from Egyptian human rights organisations that have been actively engaged in legal battles against the abuses of the military regime towards civilians. Soliman also worked closely with lawyers and activists, attended press conferences and collected interviews.⁴⁰ The material for *No Time for Art / 3* partly preexisted and partly was generated specifically for the project. Sherif Hegazy (the imprisoned brother) featured in the second part of the series (*NTfA / 1*), also represented by his sister, with a testimony based on a recording she made in an attempt to engage human rights organisations in his case.⁴¹ In the latest performance (*NTfA / 3*), Ahmed El Gendy’s account of his experience in the military service is based on his writing and his Facebook notes, which Soliman supplemented with interviews with him. Sherif’s testimonies from prison consist of a series of letters written to both his sister and Soliman, seen projected during the performance. The makers of the production then smuggled into prison additional questions to Sherif, and his responses were

³⁸ Translation from Arabic my own.

³⁹ A report published by Middle East Watch in 1993 reveals the scale of human rights’ violations by the prisons’ administration against detainees in Egypt. See ‘Prison Conditions in Egypt: A Filthy System’, A Middle East Watch and Prison Project Report (New York, Washington, Los Angeles and London: Human Rights Watch, 1993), and Michael Georgy and Tom Perry, ‘Secular Egyptian Detainees Complain of Police Torture.’ *Reuters* (11 Feb 2014) <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/11/us-egypt-torture-idUSBREA1A0O220140211> (Accessed 2 June 2014). Egypt’s state media hardly, if ever, reports on the torture or abuses taking place inside prisons.

⁴⁰ Soliman, ‘It’s Time’.

⁴¹ In that part of the series, the makers could not reveal the identity of Sherif Hegazy for security as well as personal reasons. Soliman, in conversation with the author (26 September 2014).

smuggled out and added to his other testimonies.⁴² All four performances in the series were, in the main part, presented as a direct address to the audience. The staging was often sparse and also directed outwards, towards the audience, and there was minimal interaction between performers and characters as well as minimal dramatic action. There was a simple use of multimedia to project texts, show short segments of film footage or news items. All elements contributed to the overall unfinished quality of the performances, which were negotiated as an ongoing work in the making: an open-ended ‘action’ that highlights state violence. As a performance gesture, its value does not necessarily lie in its status as a finished art product, but in how it is shaped in ways that provide an extension of the ongoing resistance, repositioned within a frame of performance that is ambiguous, fluid and changeable, embodying the changeable nature of an ongoing revolution.



No Time for Art / 1, Berlin, Germany, May 2011. Photographer: Gunnar Lüsich

Resisting Representation, Provoking Participation

In its attempt to tell the stories of the absent, the performance series problematises conventional modes of representation as potentially undermining the—already undermined—voices. In a self-reflexive gesture, the title of the series cleverly calls its own device into question, reflecting the

⁴² Naira Antoun, ‘The Prisoner and the Soldier Speak in *No Time For Art / 3*’. *Egypt Independent* (7 Jan 2013) <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/prisoner-and-soldier-speak-no-time-art-3> (Accessed 20 Feb 2013).

ambiguity surrounding its theatrical form. The title, the artists' statements, and the particular mode of theatricality developed by the performance, betray a suspicion of representational modes that create a fictional world enfolded in a developed and polished narrative and complex dramatic action, recalling and extending Weiss's argument regarding the potential of naturalism to shift the focus away from the changing historical forces at play in certain situations. The impulse to produce work that is 'bare to the bone' largely stems from a desire to remain faithful to the subject matter by avoiding, as far as possible, adapting it in dramatic form in recognition of the power of individuals' stories to challenge the dominant discourses of history. Soliman's priority in *No Time for Art / 3*, as in all the other performances in the series, was the content. She avoided rewriting or rephrasing any of the original material and testimonies she gathered, making minimal changes in order to stage them, including playing with the order of texts or presenting the texts with limited movement or gestural support from the performers in order to make the performance 'compelling to watch,' relying on a stripped back theatricality.⁴³ In this mode of performance, representation is seen by Soliman partly as an act of 'standing for' the absent and speaking on their behalf.⁴⁴

The emphasis in this kind of performance work, following Weiss, is on the 'critique of concealment,' 'critique of distortion' and 'critique of lies' generated by mass media and governments.⁴⁵ Here, the material becomes the protagonist and the emphasis shifts to presentational delivery rather than imitative characterisation. Choosing Sherin Hegazy as a representative, or a surrogate, of her imprisoned brother—in addition to reflecting the nature of their close relationship and fulfilling a functional need—draws attention to the complexity and multiplicity of his story, challenging a one-dimensional reading of characters and highlighting the weight of his absence even further. Swapping gender roles is a common stylistic element in much of Soliman's previous work, as in her staging of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* with a female cast. Also keeping Sherif absent, replaced by his sister even after his release from prison, became a conscious decision,

⁴³ Soliman qtd. in Antoun, 'The prisoner and the soldier'.

⁴⁴ Soliman, in conversation with the author, 26 September 2014.

⁴⁵ Weiss, 'The material and the models', p. 41.

as it was seen as a theatrically stronger choice.⁴⁶ Liz Tomlin explains that many artists working with verbatim strategies seek to resist psychological characterization or ‘docu-fictional’ representations to disable ‘the potential for the audience to capture and objectify the testifiers within a dramatic frame that reflects an already ideological real.’⁴⁷ This impulse can be identified in how Sherif is represented, but also in how the performance does not dramatize the events surrounding his imprisonment or El Gendy’s position in the army. The performance does not explicitly represent many details of violence or abuse, nor does it engage in ideological rhetoric, but focuses on the more ‘mundane’ day-to-day rituals of admission, of getting by and becoming accustomed to the regulations, the discipline, the time and the institutional hierarchy. Through non-linear, juxtaposed narratives about ‘mundane’ activities we get glimpses of experiences on an intimate, personal level. This highlights the common aspects in the two experiences and facilitates empathic modes of identification for audiences who might share such experiences.

The performance’s sparse spatial construction, with Hegazy in plain blue ordinary dress (the colour of prison uniforms) and El Gendy in plain ordinary green (the colour of military uniforms) combined with minimal physical movement or interaction between performers and the presentational delivery that is devoid of stylization or imitation (as El Gendy played himself), all work to challenge easy interpretations. Sherif and El Gendy’s stories are presented in long, isolated stretches of verbatim readings from letters, testimonies or personal accounts. The delivered text is given focus, left to occupy the performance space and include the audience as witnesses. Implicating the audience was a strategy common to the two performances I experienced live, approached differently in each instance. In *No Time for Art / 0*, each audience member is directly invited to adopt the position of an appellant by individually reading out—with the aid of a microphone—a letter that declares their demands to put on trial those responsible for the killing of martyrs by an abusive regime, with each martyr identified by name, age, occupation, the location and the method by which he/she was killed. Less directly, in *No Time for Art / 3*, reading and

⁴⁶ Soliman, in conversation with the author, 26 September 2014.

⁴⁷ Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the Real in Performance Practice and Theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 135.

projecting the letters exchanged between Sherif and his sister make private correspondences public, an intimate gesture that involves the audience. The first letter that Hegazy reads, projected behind her, opens with her brother stressing that, ‘no one should see or read those words apart from you; I don’t trust a single human being in the whole world outside but you!’⁴⁸ The audience—by means of this subtle, ironic gesture—is placed in a privileged position of hearing an intimate testimony from a familial relation. Describing the use of letters exchanged between detainees and their family members in the documentary play *Guantánamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom’* (2004), Wendy S. Hesford proposes that

performance of the testimonial letters might be considered a technique of traumatic realism. But the play attempts to create an imaginative zone in which the humanitarian appeal can be made without reproducing the spectacle: we’re witnesses to the inner lives of some of the prisoners, rather than witnesses to their physical suffering.⁴⁹

Similarly, using testimonial letters and focusing on ‘ordinary’ personal accounts of everyday life inside the prison or the military camp in *No Time for Art / 3* works to mobilise the audience’s empathy, fostering a collective sense of witnessing as well as humanizing the subjects, bringing them closer to each other and closer to the audience. Soliman made a conscious decision to avoid the display of outright violence and state abuse, which took place particularly in the case of Sherif. It was not mentioned, for instance, that he was tortured to sign a confession.⁵⁰ ‘It is not about the violence of the extreme, it’s the violence of the non-extreme,’ explains Soliman, ‘[w]e wanted to tone down the really violent aspects, to bring out the commonalities’.⁵¹

The capacity of the performance to establish a particular relationship with the audience and summon public response through its engagement with and presentation of ‘real life’ stories was incidentally displayed in the unstaged moment of intervention from an audience member sharing her experience of struggle and imprisonment, described in the opening of this article. *No Time for*

⁴⁸ Translation my own.

⁴⁹ Wendy S. Hesford, ‘Staging Terror’, in Carol Martin (ed.) *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 45-60 (p. 53).

⁵⁰ Eliminating explicit references to violence was also necessary to negotiate censorship and security risks and to respect the testifiers’ privacy. Soliman, in conversation with the author - 26 September 2014.

⁵¹ Soliman qtd. in Antoun, ‘The prisoner and the soldier’.

Art / 0 had previously triggered various forms of audience intervention, which, according to Soliman, varied from breaking into political chants against military rule, to moments of emotional and cathartic responses.⁵² The brief confrontation I witnessed gave a material dimension to the reality inferred by the latest performance, extending its narrative. In that sense, it can be argued that this piece of ‘documentary theatre’ is ‘performative of a public sphere’ as Reinelt puts it, since it ‘calls the public sphere into being by presupposing it exists, and constructs its audience to be part of a temporary sociality to attend to the matters portrayed.’⁵³

The performance’s affective power is also triggered by, to draw again on Reinelt’s words, the ‘embodied negotiated relationship of discrete subjects to the performance and its materials [which] allows for collective experiences of grief or mourning, experiences of social solidarity or hilarity’.⁵⁴ The work was not divorced from ‘life’; ‘life’ found its moment within the performance and was allowed to express itself there. The performance space became a porous and receptive vessel that pulled a marginal voice centre stage and the stripped down theatricality provided a space for closeness and connection. The fluid framework conditioned the written text itself, which changed throughout the series to reflect the makers’ responses to changing events, including contexts of imprisonment, in Egypt. The performers’ engagement with their roles and social lives were also affected by the surrounding circumstances, showing that repetition or fixity in dramatic representation, when ‘real life’ itself is shifting, becomes a hindrance.⁵⁵ The blurring of boundaries between performer and audience and the openness of the performance’s formal structure contributed to the formation of a (non-violent) public realm within a wider context of uncertainty and violence. Both are invited to be present and active in a moment of revelation that also involves a direct encounter with experiences of loss and anger.

⁵² Soliman, in conversation with the author, 26 September 2014.

⁵³ Janelle Reinelt, ‘The Promise of Documentary’, in Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (eds.) *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 6-23 (p. 11-12).

⁵⁴ Ibid p. 12.

⁵⁵ Soliman, in conversation with the author, 26 September 2014.

Soliman does not know if it is time for art, or not: ‘but there is a necessity to get things known and to talk about them.’ She continues: ‘maybe the tools of theatre aren’t as good as other tools. But they are the tools I have’.⁵⁶

Back to the Street

After the performance, outside the theatre, the surrounding area is becoming livelier. My friend and I find our way through the crowd to a nearby coffee house located in a quieter alleyway and sit in one empty corner, order tea with mint, and contemplate the performance we just watched. I speak about being overwhelmed by the density and length of the texts delivered and how I found it challenging to identify, at first view, the nuances and contexts of the two stories. It took me a while to find my way into the performance. My mind was frantically working as I watched, trying to identify the threads and hold the keys to the narrative I was being confronted with, until the two interlocking narratives started to slowly unfold. It was not ‘easy’ or pleasurable viewing. At the same time, I was moved by the intimate personal details articulated by the protagonists, particularly the prisoner, whose ordeal was evidently more trying than the soldier’s. As ‘ordinary’ as those details seemed at first glance, the fact that they were told from the perspective of an (absent) prisoner, given voice by his sister, and a soldier playing himself gave the details an unsettling dimension and an evocative quality. Their presence brought the realities of the events closer to my own. Those seemingly mundane details embedded in exceptional circumstances, rather than explicitly revealing those circumstances, open up fissures through which we get hints of the violence, abuse and subjugation underlying them. Would direct representation of violence potentially undermine harrowing experience? Here, perhaps, the invisible was more revealing than the visible. As we walk away from the coffee house, I think about how the performance is situated in that particular part of the city, where thousands of demonstrators have been detained or killed.

⁵⁶ Soliman, ‘It’s Time’.

The world of the performance was embedded in the world of the 'real' struggle, powerfully capturing a segment of that broader reality.