

Künstlerische Dialoge

Artistic Dialogues

Solmaz Shahbazi

Dreamland
11.02.–1.04.

English

DREAMLAND

Interview with Solmaz Shahbazi and Sarah Rifky

Adnan Yildiz: When did you find yourself in the process of filmmaking? How did your relationship with contemporary art start? How would you elaborate on that your background in architecture contributes to your filmic language?

Solmaz Shahbazi: I have been interested in images for a long time. While studying architecture at the Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design, I increasingly began to present my works together with photographic installations. My first video work was a short-term project, which was part of my main course. The work was about perception processes. A series of discussions on modernist architecture in Tehran and the city as such encouraged me to produce my first filmic work. Shortly after my graduation I suggested to Tirdad Zolghadr with whom I had been leading the just mentioned conversations to join me in making a film about Tehran. We were aware of the fact that the point of view from which we would see the city would raise many questions and challenge perspectives which up to that point in time had not been as well-known as they are now. Tirdad mainly grew up abroad and studied in Switzerland. I had come to Germany when I was fourteen and had studied architecture in Stuttgart. We were both interested in Tehran's architecture, its development and transformations in the wake of political changes in Iranian society. We were also following the political fabric in the country and its presentation and representation both abroad and within Iran, and we were very well acquainted with the images generated by the media back then, both as insiders and outsiders. So, we had great fun leaving out all of the images of Tehran that are well-known abroad and challenging the prefabricated imaginations of viewers. I still try to follow this concept today. Shortly after the film was completed, a curator who had been on a research trip to Tehran and was interested in contemporary female Iranian filmmakers contacted me. She wanted to work with me even though I told her that I was an architect who had produced only one film, that I lived in Germany, and for a number of other reasons was not the right person for the job. We eventually met and I presented the film at an art fair, after which I found myself in the art world. I can't say for sure that architecture has an influence on my filmic language; it certainly has an influence on the topics I choose.

AY: Can you briefly define the artistic idea behind the film project "Persepolis"? When

did you decide to make the film, what was the production process like, and what kind of responses did you get during the years?

SS: After my first film "Tehran 1380" (2001) I immediately got the opportunity to shoot a second one and I decided to continue working with the video camera to enhance my knowledge. The topic as was demanded by the producer back then was again Tehran, of course. Exotic and sexy enough to make sure the investment would pay. I used the exotism and instrumentalized it for my own sake to advance my work. "Persepolis", the third film in my Tehran trilogy, was the first work that I was able to officially produce as an artwork; the first piece of work the partial funding of which had been made possible by an art institution. It was Vasif Kortun who encouraged me to apply for a residency in Istanbul. That's how I got to know him and November



"Untitled" (from the series Dreamland Cairo), 2010, C - Print, 70cm x 100cm, Edition 5+1 AP

Paynter, both of whom enabled me to shoot and complete the third part of the trilogy, "Persepolis", over the course of various collaborations. I wanted to make a personal film in order to question my position as a representative. I, myself, also have to ask other people if I want to know something about Tehran. I did this by asking the neighbors of the house in which I lived at the time in Tehran, to tell me about their memories of the city and the changes over the years from the days of the revolution until today. You don't see the places in the film though, nor the narrators. What you see are still life shots of the living rooms of the persons you hear talking. The viewers and this goes against their normal viewing habits have to imagine both the narrator, based on the voice and the individual setting of the room, and the work's main topic: the city, of which the viewer has already seen so many pictures in the media. I think that this approach introduces a new level to the work: each individual's own imagination. So far, there have been many positive reactions to the work. It is being exhibited frequently. I think the

way the work is done enables it to be shown in a variety of different contexts. If my guess is right, I might as well claim that the work has escaped its niche.

AY: Your recent work "Dreamland Cairo" plays key role in your solo presentation at Künstlerhaus Stuttgart. As places of exhibiting exoticism, zoos are very problematic, and the questions around their institutional legacy is very interesting for me, especially in terms of the history of modernity. Tell me more about your artistic motivations behind the project.

SS: The zoo project is part of a larger work that includes a series of photographs and texts which I produced in Cairo. The concept follows a piece of work I showed at the 9th Istanbul Biennale. It revolves around urban and social utopias and new forms that enable groups to define themselves and to also distinguish themselves from others.

In "Perfectly Suited for You", which was realized in Istanbul, I explore the concept and development underlying gated communities. This business idea also flourishes in a mega city such as Cairo, of course. "Dreamland Cairo" is the continuation of my Istanbul project. I found the origins of the idea of social classes dissociating themselves in cities in the middle of the 19th century by using the example of today's Giza Zoo. In this sense, the zoo as such does not form the center-piece of my work. The focus rather lies on the social function the zoo had to fulfill back then and on how this function underwent a shift following the revolution in 1952 and Gamal Abd al Nasser's accession to power. One text on the subject forms the key part of the photo series that can be seen in the exhibition.

AY: We together have decided to include your works in progress into this solo project aiming to show how you work with photographic image and film language. You have decided to present two works that you are still working on. How would you position them in the show in terms of considering artistic research in filmmaking?

SS: Both works are a continuation and further development of older pieces aimed at advancing and changing my way of working, which also implies advancing and changing the production method. The structure of the Berlin project with the working title "Haus 17" is similar to "Persepolis". I was interested in the process of how images each of us conceives differently undergo a transformation when we listen to memories about Tehran or Berlin. You also invited me to produce another film that translates the experience of "Persepolis" into a new piece about Berlin...

This time, the concept also developed from the stories of people that live in the same building where I'm currently based in Berlin. The Strausberger Platz square is part of a socialist residential building complex, which had emerged from a town-planning competition in 1951 and was built in the neo-classicist style in what used to be East Berlin. During its construction, the Strausberger Platz was one of the locations from where the strike against the increase of the work quotas in the German Democratic Republic took off on June 16, 1953, which eventually led to the uprising of 1953 on June 17. Today, the buildings that line the square are inhabited mainly by newcomers. The majority of former inhabitants left after the German reunification. The few people that still live there are moving into retirement homes or they are no longer there from one day to the next. The second work-in-progress shows the composition of the images, the individual parts as well as research material which will form the basis for the film "Rebecca". The final piece will combine the story of Rebecca Levy who has been living in East London for almost all her life and died two years ago aged 98 with stories from selected interviews with contemporary Londoners. Here one will listen to Rebecca's voice describing her life in Spitalfields in a short interview that was done before she died. The tape gives a short and private insight into how it can be like to live in a place that has been transforming so rapidly in the past years from a worker's into a financial district of London. Not only as a gesture that states that cities exist in cities without any common history but through similar narrative imagination... We were also interested in the idea of transforming the exhibition process into a production unit.

AY: This exhibition at Künstlerhaus aims to give a comprehensive outline of your recent research and production. On the other hand, it is your first solo exhibition in your hometown. What do you think about the form of exhibition and screening from a filmmaker perspective? Can you talk about the idea behind inviting Sarah Rifky into your exhibition process?

SS: "Giza Zoo" was produced as part of a work that consists mainly of photographs with the intention to look at film from a photographic point of view. During and after the work's production in Cairo, Sarah Rifky and I talked a great deal about my works and this work in particular. Then, some time later I received an invitation from her and Maha Maamoun who wanted to show the video work as part of a film program. So, once again the

work was to be shown as part of a film screening, detached from its actual context. It was interesting to see this inversion and how the work functioned in that particular setting. This certainly had to do with how Rifky and Maamoun selected and conceptualized the works for their program "State of Fluidity". That's how I came to invite Sarah in order to talk about the concept and the decision to show the film as part of the program.

AY: Here, I want to include Sarah Rifky into our conversation. Sarah will show a screening program, and give a talk as part of the exhibition at Künstlerhaus. As a cultural producer based in Cairo, and witness of the last year, how would you imagine "Dreamland" once again after so many political discussion and public space movement in Egypt?

Sarah Rifky: I have to think about the relationship of art and capital. Cairo as a city that is historically imagined and dreamt of is one that is shaped by new dreams that are seeded elsewhere, perhaps it starts in America, travels to the Gulf, and suddenly the fashion of the city outskirts, in urban terms, changes. "Dreamland" is part of that new dream, and appropriately named as such. Think of the American Dream, no? Shahbazi's capture of "Dreamland" transcends the documentary frame and the local specificity of her subject. "Dreamland" is both suggestive of a particular social desire for a particular type of city, a mass personalized socio-economic aspiration and so on.

AY: Where do art practices and market stand in relation to the collapse of so many institutions, at this moment of political climax considering the Arab Spring or the Occupy movement?

SR: Because of its retreat from the center (both literally and figuratively), Dreamland, as one of several compounds on the edge of the city, is more prone to crime and sporadic violence, especially in the orchestrated absence of security during periods of insurgency and uprising. I am pondering the symbolic twist, that leads people to the center, a heart of the city, inwards, and back from the new far-flung secluded compounds of Cairo's new cities. Dreamland — as a work — kindles a conversation that is very much still in flux.

EXHIBITION CALENDAR

Friday, February 17, 2012, 6-9pm
LINIE WEST No. 6
tour through the galleries Hauff, Friese, and Parrotta as well as Künstlerhaus Stuttgart. www.liniewest.de

Thursday, February 23, 2012, 6pm
curatorial tour through the exhibition with Adnan Yildiz

Saturday, March 17, 2012, 7pm-2am
LANGE NACHT DER MUSEEN
exhibition and workshops will be open

Wednesday, March 28, 2012, 7pm
screening program „State of Fluidity“

As part of the solo project „Dreamland“, Cairo based curator and participant of dOCUMENTA 13 Sarah Rifky will present a screening program, "State of Fluidity". The audience will then be invited to question how the reading and reception of film changes from standing alone as a work in an exhibition to becoming part of a screening program.

A State of Fluidity / Film Screening Program
curated by Maha Maamoun & Sarah Rifky Total duration: ~ 60'

1. Rice City, Sherif El Azma, 2010, 19'
2. Tomorrow Everything will be Alright, Akram Zaatari, 2010, 12'
3. Tarahi II, Haris Epaminonda, 2006, 3'4
4. Giza Zoo, Solmaz Shahbazi, 2010, 6'
5. Short Wave/ Long Wave, Vartan Avakian, 2009, 7'15
6. My Father Looks for an Honest City, Basim Magdy, 2010, 5'28
7. Images of a Center, Iman Issa, 2005, 5'
8. 80 Million, Eslam Zeen El Abedeen and Mohamed Zayan, 2009, 3'41

www.kuenstlerhaus.de

Reuchlinstr. 4b
70178 Stuttgart

Öffnungszeiten:
Mi – So 15.00 – 19.00
Exhibition hours:
Wed – Sun 3 – 7 pm

Künstlerische Leitung/
Artistic Director:
Adnan Yildiz
Design:
Fabian Schewe