Media arts, Space and Politics: Ahmed Basiony and the Transmission of Resonance

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Abstract

This paper explores the idea of resonance, as theorised by Argentinian anthropologist Gaston Gordillo, to understand the work of Egyptian media artist Ahmed Basiony. Gordillo argues that resonance acted as a productive force in the creation and transmission of the uprising in Tahrir Square during the so-called Arab Spring. Following Gordillo, I argue that Basiony's work Thirty Days Running the Place, garners its power from tapping into and conducting resonance to its audience.

Introduction

While journalists and the news media rushed to make *sense* of the uprising in Tahrir Square that ultimately led to the downfall of the Mubarak regime in Eygpt, another kind of sense was being made of these events by artists caught up in the protests. As artists often do, they were tapping into the *feeling* of the events unfolding in Tahrir Square during the protests, as well as the feeling of being Egyptian and watching their world slowly crumble under the oppressive weight of a State out of touch with its people and desperately clinging to power. What artists tap into and, through their work, pass on when they engage with events such as this is *resonance*, described by Argentinean anthropologist Gaston Gordillo as the material-affective force that guides, and gives power to, the event of insurrections. Just as the many forms of media, including social media, relay resonance as a force across space both distributing it and reinforcing it, so too does the work of artists.

This paper will examine how exhibitions of the work of Egyptian artist, Ahmed Basiony, tapped into the resonance that produced and was produced by the Tahrir Square uprising and allowed its force to continue to be distributed and be affective after the crowds had dispersed. Indeed, the power of Basiony's work *Thirty Days Running in The Place*[1] comes, I will argue, from the fact that it acts as a relay for the resonance produced in the Egyptian uprising.

Resonance and revolution

Writing at the time of the uprising in Egypt, Gordillo observed:

> What has coalesced as a powerful, unstoppable force on the streets of Egypt is resonance: the assertive collective empathy created by multitudes fighting for the control of space. Resonance is an intensely bodily, spatial, political affair, materialized in the masses of bodies coming together in the streets of Egyptian cities in the past thirteen days, clashing with the police, temporarily dispersed by tear gas and bullets, and regrouping again like a relentless swarm to reclaim the streets, push the police back, and saturate space with a collective effervescence. Resonance is what gives life to this human rhizome and the source of its power. (Gordillo, 2011,npn.)

Building on the works of Spinoza, Deleuze and Guattari and Jon Beasley-Murray's recent book, *Posthegemony,* Gordillo argues that the events that occurred in Egypt in 2011 are one example of a phenomenon that he describes as 'resonance', which is produced when bodies come together in space and share a common rhythm. Spinoza's view of the body as an outward looking entity tangled with constellations of other bodies, Gordillo argues, challenges the belief that human emotions are inner expressions of an enclosed self. Human emotions are produced, in fact, by the impact that other bodies have on our own.

> Love, fear, envy, jealousy, or anger are just different ways in which our bodies are affected by other bodies. Affects, in other words, do not emerge from the inside out but are "incoming": the product of relations with other bodies. Affect for Spinoza is affectation: a confirmation that bodies exist only in constellations and that societies are spatially grounded attempts to structure these constellations. (Gordillo, 2011, npn.)

Resonance is 'intensified affectation' which, 'unlike affect, does not simply exist as a given feature of social interactions' but is

produced when bodies come together to control space: 'bodies and space, modulated by the same temporal pulsation' (Gordillo, 2011). Resonance, Gordillo argues, 'reaches political dimensions when the capacity to affect other bodies acquires a higher intensity and an oppositional, critical tone, a negativity that is simultaneously guided by an affirmative will-to-power' (2011). In the case of Tahrir Square, its occupation by demonstrators, bodies in space, was critical to the production of resonance. However, according to Gordillo, the conditions that produced the resonance in Tahrir Square had their origins elsewhere:

> The Egyptian Revolution was in fact triggered by the arrival on Egyptian space of prior resonances created by the multitude in the streets of Tunisia, which then blended with localized grievances and patterns of unrest. In turn, the resonance that led to the Tunisian uprising can be traced back farther to the wave of massive anti-elite protests and riots that shook Europe in 2010, which created anti-establishment resonances that have now spilled over across the Mediterranean and onto the shores of Africa and the Middle-East (Gordillo, 2011, npn.)

The critical question is how does resonance travel across space to affect other bodies in space and thus produce events like the Tahrir Square uprising. Gordillo observes that it is 'channeled through a planetary network of instant communications that has reached a density, spatial reach, speed, and sophistication unparalleled in world history' (2011). However, he is quick to note that it is a mistake to over-emphasise the role of social media in this exchange:

> The emancipatory potential of the internet does not mean that Facebook, Google, and Twitter are the main weapons of the 21st century democratic rebellions, as the media often simplistically claims. These are important channels, crucial at points, for the dissemination of resonances produced in the streets by bodies that for the most part do not tweet (Gordillo, 2011, npn.).

What this dissemination of resonance produces is an increase in the spread of 'affective empathies' particularly when it is accompanied by media images of the attempted oppression of an unarmed, peaceful multitude by the State through violent means, as was the case during the Egyptian uprising. The creation of 'affective empathies' is critical to an understanding of how Ahmed Basiony's *Thirty Days Running in the Place* works to transmit resonance through art.

Ahmed Basiony and the dissemination of resonance

Ahmed Basiony, Self portrait with mobile phone, Tahrir Square, 2011.

Ahmed Basiony was shot by a sniper with a bullet to the head on January 28, 2011, whilst protesting in Tahrir Square. Following his death, his image became ubiquitous in Egypt and the Arab world. Photos of Basiony were used on posters within the square, in public graffiti, as well as newspapers and magazines internationally, and on numerous Facebook profiles as individuals turned their 'profile' photos on Facebook into the popular image of Basiony. As an early casualty of the struggle, Basiony quickly became a martyr figure. Although only one casualty out of an estimated 840 dead and 6,000 injured, Basiony's death was more widely recognised and felt both during and after the event because of his work as an artist.

Ahmed Basiony was a media artist who worked with video, sound and live performance. An assistant professor at the American University in Cairo, his work was not overtly political but instead was focused on the use of digital technologies and open source software to create works that were interactive in the public sphere. Following his death in Tahrir Square, a reconfigured version of his installation *Thirty Days Running in The Place* was chosen to represent Egypt at the prestigious Venice Benniale in late 2011. Since that time, Basiony's work has been exhibited at a variety of international venues including the Abandon Normal Devices Festival at FACT in Liverpool (2011) and at exUrban Screens in Melbourne (2012).

Ahmed Basiony, *Thirty Days of Running in Place,* Installation Documentation, 2010.

The original version of *Thirty Days of Running in Place* was presented at the 'Why Not?' exhibition in Cairo in 2010. [1] For thirty days, in a room enclosed in transparent plastic outside the Cairo Opera House and Palace of Arts, Basiony jogged for an hour wearing a plastic suit fitted with digital sensors that gathered and wirelessly transmitted data on his movements and other physiological parameters. The information gathered was then processed and projected onto a large screen as an ever-changing visual and aesthetic reflection of the artist's physical state. Described by curator Omar Koleif as 'evidence of the artist's belief in art functioning as a primal mechanisation of the self", *Thirty Days Running in the Place* is an 'abstract portrait of a body not just in motion, but changing physiologically under the influence of exercise' (Kolief, 2011).

Following his death, Basiony's friend and fellow media artist Shady El Noshokaty discovered two files on Basiony's laptop. One was called 'the performance 2010' and the second was titled 'the performance Tahrir 2011'. El Noshokaty believed Basiony was planning a new version of *Thirty Days Running in the Place* incorporating images taken in Tahrir Square during the uprisings. As Senior Curator of Egyptian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, El Noshokaty resurrected the work and exhibited it as a five-channel installation. The recording of the original installation was projected alongside videos recorded by Basiony during his participation in the January revolution. According to El Noshokaty,

> [B]y presenting performances in two different locations in complete opposition, the work became about exploring human energy in environments. One measured the inner self 's wasted energy (the first version), and the latter presented the positively utilized energy of the collective revolutionaries, through their sounds and movements during the 25th and 26th of January 2011 (Kolief, 2012: 76)

The rapid dissemination of Basiony's image and its use on social networks on the ground and online during the Tahrir Square protests led to his identification as a publicly recognisable martyr to the Egyptian cause. It was this notoriety that in part led to the inclusion of his work in the Venice Biennale, a gesture that has had significant flow on effects for the media arts community in Egypt. As Omar Kholeif has noted,

> exhibitions of 'Arab' art outside of the Arab world often tend to emphasise and fetishize the 'Arabesque' qualities often associated with the Islamic tradition, such as calligraphy, painting and craft based arts. Media or digital art conversely has endured its own history – a history that is arguably defined by predominantly American and European lenses. Basiony's death, however, instigated the most potent validation of new media art practice within Egyptian history (Koleif, 2012: 75).

El Noshokaty has also noted that he has leveraged the public interest in Basiony to initiate numerous free media workshops, creating a generative forum for individuals to use open source and interactive software, which he hopes will change the contours of the contemporary Egyptian art scene. El Noshokaty has said, 'I believe that it [Basiony's legacy] can make a parallel cultural revolution in our country [Egypt] very soon' (Kolief, 2012: 76).

The question relevant to this argument is how the exhibition of Basiony's posthumous work is able to transmit the resonance of the Egyptian uprising. El Noshokaty alludes to it above when he says that the work 'presented the positively utilized energy of the collective revolutionaries' (Koleif, 2012: 76). It may be more cogent to argue that the work does more than present the energy of the revolution – rather, it works to transmit resonance, which both created and was created by the Tahrir Square uprising by engaging the audience through affective empathy. The juxtaposition of the images of a young, healthy Basiony jogging in place alongside the images of bodies and spaces tangled in a vortex of movement, whirlwinds, and flows that characterised the Egyptian uprising produces affective empathy in the audience not only for Basiony but for all of those people who gathered together at that time in that space to try and force change. We are asked to meditate on the once live Basiony's body while simultaneously being reminded of the scene of his death. Our recognition of the fragility of one body intensifies our perception of the power of many bodies working together in space. The images and sounds from Tahrir Square, even when experienced in the quietness of a gallery space, still resonate strongly partly because of the way in which they were captured, via a hand held mobile phone, but also because of the knowledge that we are experiencing Basiony's experience of the uprising. We are as close as we can get to inhabiting his now dead body as it was made alive by the resonance around him.

Conclusion

Gaston Gordillo's exploration of resonance as a force that fuels and is fuelled by conglomerates of human bodies acting together in space is useful for understanding how uprisings in the Arab world in the past twelve to eighteen months have arisen and spread. In his words, '[R]esonance, in short, forces us to look at wider, complex, ever shifting and fluid topographies of unrest that connect and affect distant and seemingly disconnected geographies' (2012). While all forms of media play a role in spreading resonance through the creation of affective empathy in those not directly involved in uprisings like those in Egypt and elsewhere, I have argued, using the case of Ahmed Basiony's *Thirty Days of Running in the Place* as evidence, that the work of artists can also act as a relay of resonance through the creation of affective empathy in those who experience the work.

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Notes

1. Rough documentation of *Thirty Days Running in the Place* can be viewed at YouTube http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdZbt_wMqMs

About the Author

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