



**MAHA
MAAMOUN**



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**THE NIGHT
OF COUNTING
THE YEARS**



Maha Maamoun
The Night of Counting the Years

Maha Maamoun's first institutional solo exhibition focuses on her films, with which she trawls through the cultural imaginary in search of historiographical framing in which to set the present. This is also reflected in the exhibition title, which stems from the cinema classic by Shadi Abdel Salam. Maamoun's works indicate that the question of whether art can step out of the symbolic circle in order to have an effect in the lifeworld is posed incorrectly: it's all about the how. Art is opening out almost of its own accord when Maamoun takes seriously symbolic representations and has them clash with one another. In this process ruptures are caused in the representations, enabling the painful points of current questions to be intuited.

Curated by Nina Tabassomi

MAHA MAAMOUN lives and works in Cairo. Her work has been presented in many institutions and biennials worldwide. In 2009, her film *Domestic Tourism II* was awarded a Biennial Jury Prize at Sharjah Biennial 9. In addition to her art practice, Maamoun has co-curated several exhibitions and is a founding board member of the Contemporary Image Collective (CIC) in Cairo.

Domestic Tourism II, 2008

Video, colour, sound, set of postcards, 61'22"

In *Domestic Tourism II*, Maha Maamoun joins together film sequences from the history of Egyptian film since the 1950s in which the Pyramids of Giza appear as a stage backdrop. Contrary to the chronology of the film material, she compiles the excerpts themselves in the form of an inverted pyramid—from the noughties back to 1959, and from there up to the year 2006.

Like a catalyst for emotions, this ancient Wonder of the World seems to come into play in mainstream film whenever there arise such crucial emotional questions as the nature of national identity, the conflict between individual freedom and social determination, the relationship between past, present, and future, or between love and society. In merging these melodramatic apogees seamlessly with each other, Maamoun exhausts cinema as a "matrix of emotions" (Hermann Kappelhoff). In *Domestic Tourism II*, cinematic collage thereby becomes a matrix of history, which brings into focus the historically diverse functionalization of the cultural heritage.

2026, 2010

Video, black and white, sound, 9'02"

We view the filmic succession of black-and-white photographs of a man lying on a hammock in a subterranean space. His eyes are hidden by a sleeping mask to which wires are attached, and which resembles an apparatus for recording his thoughts. The depiction of a time traveller from the experimental science fiction film *La Jetée* (1962) is reenacted in these images. Analogously to the iconic film by Chris Marker, we see a series of stills accompanied by the voice-over of a male narrator. The soundtrack presents us with an excerpt from the contemporary science fiction novel *The Revolution of 2053: The Beginning* by Mahmoud Osman (2007). In the dystopian vision of his protagonist, the Giza Plateau and hence the cultural heritage of Egypt is taken over by a new elite which drives the country into social decline.

In Marker's film, past and future constitute a circle instead of proceeding in a linear sequence. And the images as well stand still instead of moving. The vision of the protagonist in the excerpt from Osman's novel registers contemporary anxieties and translates them into a simple future scenario. In 2026 this literal time travel by the artist to a visual and a textual source from two different eras overlaps with the journeys through time narrated within the fictional representations. Hope dwindles with regard to the potential of imagination for envisioning new spaces. One year before the revolution in Egypt, this film asks whether we have any possibility at all of conceiving of the future in terms which lie outside the close-knit constraints of the ideologies of the present.

Night Visitor:
The Night of Counting the Years, 2011
Multi-channel video installation, 8'00"

In this multi-channel video installation, Maamoun works her way through documentary material, not fictional representations. She combs through blurry YouTube videos made with mobile phones to record the storming of the state security buildings in Cairo and Damanhur two months after the overthrowing of Mubarak. Sequences are extracted from the material, reassembled, partly deprived of their sound, and then installed in a mutual spatial relationship. Maamoun's excavation and revision of pieces found in the contemporary archive that is the Internet evinces correspondences with the demonstrators' emotional ransacking of the items left behind by the State Security. The cameras are focused on direct telephone lines to the President, wall inscriptions by the prisoners, and documents. The images show vivid traces of dazed emotion. The title of Maamoun's work alludes to a reversal of state power and their opponents. Whereas political activists were formerly seized in their apartments at night by the secret police, these so-called "Night Visitors" are now the trespassing demonstrators. Maamoun frames this situation as a historical caesura with a reference to the classic film of Shadi Abdel Salam, *The Mummy: The Night of Counting the Years* (1969), which, on the basis of a real occurrence, describes the rivalries between tribal and national interests in Egypt shortly before the country's colonization by the British.

Shooting Stars Remind Me
of Eavesdroppers, 2013
Video, colour, sound, 4'45"

The camera draws us into the verdant greenery of the Al-Azhar Park. We see leaves and shrubbery swaying in the wind, a cattle egret, gorgeous plants, children at play, and various romantic couples immersed in conversation. The notion of the park as a peaceful zone of freedom is spelled out visually. These situations, however, were not staged, but instead found and recorded. Conversational exchanges between the regular parkgoers were recorded as well, orchestrated along with a scripted conversation about eavesdropping, truth, and trust: A pair of lovers measures out the space between proof of love and violation of trust. Is it legitimate to wish to listen to the words of a beloved person when they are not intended for one's own ears? Is the eavesdropper closer to the truth? Or is this desire a vice which is punished by Heaven, and which distorts what is heard? Koranic imagery is subtly interwoven here and there into the poetic conversation. The tone is mostly tender, sometimes heated. The themes touched upon by the couple collide ambiguously with Maamoun's procedure in this film, which affectionately overhears and presents something that was not intended to be recorded.

Colophon

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Maha Maamoun

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