Art Feature

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Diary of the Future

Vodka–Chamomile
cocktail for a revolution

Cairo 2011

When night fell on the "Day of Wrath" in Tahrir Square, the area was bathed in sand, pollution, and tear gas. Egypt's state security apparatus had fallen, the army had joined the people: everything had changed in twenty-four hours. Slowly, the violence of the day shifted to a new mode. The evening brought quiet, but also *baltageya*—looters. People everywhere organized themselves to protect their homes and neighborhoods.

I couldn't get back home that night—nor did I want to. I stayed in one of the artist apartments at the Townhouse Gallery downtown, trying to sleep for a couple of hours with my clothes on, on a bed without sheets. But the tsunami of the day—the adrenaline, the tear gas I was still inhaling—kept me awake. It was a surreal pleasure to watch the NDP building, once a stronghold of Mubarak's presidency, burn away. Around the Egyptian Museum nine floors below me, people in the streets had taken it upon themselves to guard the antiquities. I spent hours on the balcony, a dozen cigarettes for companions, witnessing History taking shape.

At six a.m. I walked through the hangover of Tahrir. A few others were wandering around. Some were asleep on makeshift beds. The carcass of an army tank lay smoldering in the early morning fog. I crossed Kasr El Nil, Nile Bridge, on my way home—this now-desolate stretch of pavement had been a battlefield less than ten hours before.

I looked out on Bulaq from my kitchen. Across the Nile, the Arcadia Mall was also on fire. For the first time in decades, the city had woken up and we, the people, had reconnected with one another. The walls of my apartment had been shrinking in on me over the last couple of years—that day they became transparent. There were no boundaries anymore. Inside, outside. We were free.

Beirut–Cairo 1975

In 1975, when I was six, my mother and her sisters, with all of their children, moved from Beirut to Cairo, where my great grandparents had immigrated at the end of the nineteenth century, escaping the great famine in Syria. We were taking refuge, supposedly for ten days, from the beginnings of war. I returned to Lebanon nineteen years later.

The "little Dokki apartment" we called the studio below my grandparents' large flat. They'd bought the four-story building in the late forties from Jewish friends who, like many others in those days sensing the revolution that was about to dethrone King Farouk, fled Egypt.

My cousins and I invented a world of wild adventures behind the building: we killed invisible lions, built mud walls, protected ourselves from all sorts of dangers. Nothing existed outside of this splendid garden filled with *manga* trees. This was it. We even peed between the plants. There were no toilets in the jungle.

But these were hard, depressing times for our mothers—especially mine, who resented being back in Cairo after having left during the 1950s revolution. No one ever explained anything to us children. We were oblivious to the war that had led us here.

New York 1989

In college I had no idea what an art gallery was. My father had decided I would study business. So one summer when I found myself at an exhibition in Chelsea, I didn't know how to understand what I was seeing. The elevator doors opened, right on a massive print hanging on the wall. I was attracted like a magnet to the center of it. The print was spectacularly perfect—the grain fine, every line sharp, yet soft and sensual. As soon as I realized what I was looking at, I scanned the room to see if anyone else was looking, but I was alone with this. *It* was twenty centimeters long and at my eye level. Provocatively drenched like a fruit, the penis stuck out majestically from the raincoat of the man in the photograph, its light brown skin smooth like the grain of the print, the blood pumping in its veins. It was full and

vigorous, almost erect, just enough to hold the viewer in a state of desire as if waiting to see it grow even firmer and bigger.

My life changed in the instant of that improbable encounter. I was standing in front of work by one of the most important and controversial photographers of the twentieth century, Robert Mapplethorpe. It put me under a spell. In that moment, overwhelmed by the perfection of the image—and undoubtedly of the penis—I was initiated into photography, unaware that I was preparing my vows for a life of making art.

Paris, London, Cairo

After a year in Cairo, my mother, sister, and I moved to Paris, while my father, forced to reinvent his career, began a mysterious new life in Saudi Arabia. We'd been living in France for a few months when my elementary school teacher punished a French boy by shoving him under her desk, at her feet. She looked at all of us and said, "That's what happens when you behave like a dirty Arab." Hearing this, I shut down. I refused to continue with private lessons in Arabic, and gradually I lost the ability to speak it. What's more, at college in London I forgot how to write French also. Without realizing it at the time, I was leaving myself without words.

When I moved back to Cairo in 1997, my father warned me I would never speak perfect Arabic: the language was too difficult. His saying so made it true. I attempted a few classes, but I couldn't seem to relearn the script.

Then came the #Jan25 revolution. Overnight, it broke Egyptians' fear of authority. Egyptian male youth—who had for so long been treated as children until marriage—gained a new social status. They were now respected young men.

Among the many new friends I made during those eighteen days of revolution, an actress I met in Tahrir "performed" the letters of the Arabic alphabet for me. In less than three hours, watching her dance across my living room, I was able to read again. The next day I could already decipher tweets and banners in the square. I too had liberated myself from the patriarchy.

New York 1999

In the early days of virtual messaging, I emailed Duane Michals before another trip to the U.S. My work was to be shown in New York for the first time, and I wanted to meet one of my favorite photographers. He wrote back: he could see me at his house. That week, I remember, it was snowing. I enjoyed the squeaking of my boots on the soft white layer on the sidewalks. When I arrived at his Soho building, I found a note pasted to the front door: "Lara, I will be back at 2:15. Duane." Already this was a thrill. I could recognize the handwriting from works I knew by him.

A few minutes later, he and his partner showed up in a yellow cab. They greeted me with laughter and warmth, and seemingly right away I was following Duane Michals into the basement, where he emptied the dryer and I took lousy photos of him folding red long johns.

Uncle Duane—as he called himself later in his career (funnily enough, Egyptians use "uncle" as a term of respect for elderly men)—handed me the little book he'd made after only ten days spent in Egypt. His photography was so playful, yet so in touch with the fleetingness of our lives. On page one, he holds up a piece of paper on which he's written the time: 8:49. He'd just landed in Cairo.

This man, in a single photograph, could synthesize the essence of his experience. Meanwhile, my own journey with art and photography, and with Egypt, was only beginning. I was taking hundreds of photographs a day, and had yet to embrace this excess as an integral part of my visual language.

"Egypt is Time," Uncle Duane said to me that night.

I missed taking the photo that mattered most, the best portrait of all: a close-up of the note he'd pinned on the door.

Cairo 2007

The ritual of coffee is a ritual of time. Where I come from, coffee *is* time. Time stops in the dregs and can be "seen" by those who know how to read the stories there. Just as a photograph represents the death of a moment, the grounds at the bottom of a cup mark an instant in the drinker's life.

The Arab tradition of drawing portents from the residue assumed great significance for me when my father was dying.

In 2007, after fifty years of absence, my parents returned to Egypt. I didn't want to recognize it at first, but my father was choosing to die where he was born. Once again the little Dokki apartment served its purpose, welcoming the family back. Less than a year later, my father died there.

In the preceding months, every person who visited him was offered a Turkish coffee and unwittingly became part of an elaborate ceremony, with no clear beginning or middle but a determined end—my father's eventual passing. Each visitor followed my instructions religiously: Drink, turn the cup upside down, turn it around three times in the saucer, and tap the top twice, then label with the date and your name.

Black veins—rivulets—interlaced at the bottom and all around the insides of the cups, each line telling a story to those who knew how to decipher the secret language. This tradition is so anchored in our culture that turning the cup upside down, even if no one around can read it, has become part of the coffee-drinking ritual. Alone, or together, we automatically look into the bottom, hoping to find answers to the questions our soul is asking.

Every day, I carried the tray with the used and labeled cups outside to the table in that garden of my childhood. There, I photographed the inside of each cup—and the labels, at first, to keep track of whose each one was. But my eyes were so close to my subject, I fell into a kind of timelessness. I followed the ants walking on the saucers, became obsessed with the tiniest details, how the wet coffee dregs made patterns on the labels or how some of these labels were cut from my grandmother's stack of hieroglyph-printed stationery, the same that she'd used for as long as I could remember. These photographs chart a period of great intimacy with my family and friends and the nurses and doctors who looked after my father. Assembling these fragmented moments into large-scale digital montages was like sewing, repairing life's losses with the invisible thread that connects all things.

When Nina, one of my mother's friends, visited us, I recorded her reading the cups. Invariably, she saw my mother's sadness, my sister's anxiety, our despair. The cups mapped a psychological portrait

of five women about to lose the most important man in their lives. In the blackness of the dregs, the pain and vulnerability, softness and innocence of life were what remained.

Cairo 2011

I live in a space shaped like a half moon. The window of my kitchen looks out onto the Nile. The other views echo the purple paintings of a friend: roofs on which satellite dishes stand out against a night background. Media connections with the rest of the universe.

Jerome was rolling a joint. We were drinking coffee in my kitchen. It was about ten a.m. He'd just come back from spending the night on the 6th of October Bridge. Since the Day of Wrath, he and others had been guarding, day and night, the entrances to the island of Zamalek, where I live.

Hashish—the opium of the Egyptian people—had suddenly been banned the year before. Tons of it were stopped from entering the country at Suez. The small amount still available on the market was cut with so many chemicals it was poisonous. The joke goes that Egyptians went to the streets less than a year later because without the numbing effects of hashish, they woke up. Enough was enough. Within a few days of the #Jan25 revolution, with the police retreating and the army staying neutral, the borders opened and, among other illegal things, hashish returned in abundance. It had the taste of freedom.

I hadn't smoked for a while and was excited to pull a drag. I was holding the cone between my fingers, reading an avalanche of tweets on my computer—all about the current status of the revolution. And the room swayed. I looked at Jerome and laughed. "Is this the effect of the joint? Are you feeling it too?" The wall I was leaning against undulated, and all I could think was how thin it was. On a whim I googled "earthquake Egypt." The epicenter was seventy-seven kilometers under Crete—part of the ripple effect, I believe, from the quake that set off the tsunami in Japan a week earlier.

Cairo 2013

I woke up as usual in the middle of the night. I was anxious, but that feeling was the norm now. I could hear, as I had every night since the revolution began and the police withdrew, two nightclubs in stereo, the walkie-talkies of the various embassies and hotels under my house echoing each other, and the doorman smoking and discussing politics with several other men around a fire while guarding the crossing beneath my window. I picked up my phone automatically and started reading tweets. Tahrir was under attack. It was four a.m. for God's sake! The most absurd messages poured through my Twitter feed. People with swords, people with knives, people running, people hurt, Molotov cocktails, fights, and nonsense. Hardly awake, I was watching a medieval battle unfold. The corners of my room looked as if they were going to collapse. A chunk of the ceiling had already fallen a couple of weeks earlier, large enough to kill. I didn't pick up the pieces for days I was so shocked. Every night for one year until it happened, I had looked up and said to myself, "This is going to fall," and instead of getting it fixed, I just watched and waited. And then it fell.

The summer preceding that night, Morsi had won the elections. And from that moment on, walking in the street became unbearable. Misogyny was on constant display. Many of my friends, and I myself, were sexually assaulted in Tahrir or on the streets. All men grew a beard. Salafis and the Brotherhood were coming out. Everyone removed their masks and exposed their true selves. Even young revolutionaries grew beards. They could finally walk in the street without being harassed by the police for having facial hair. For women it was a different story. Men confused freedom with getting their way in everything.

In bed with my phone I was having my first panic attack, and I had no idea what to do. The walls of the room were crumbling down, opening like curtains onto a theater, revealing a vision of apocalypse. Cairo five, ten years from now, maybe more: a lawless city where the sun does not shine through, hungry enraged people, the sound of their feet squashing cockroaches. All of it was closer to reality than I could tolerate, a waking nightmare set to the sound of disco music.

Boston 2016

Writing used to petrify me. Making images allowed me to speak the things I did not dare to express in words. I always thought (wrongly) that words were too specific: they could reveal too much, although they showed nothing, while images showed everything, sometimes crudely, yet stayed mute.

As time goes on, what I most desperately seek is the silence between thoughts, where I can root and grow.

Cairo 2013

Remedy for a revolution:

> Fill a large round glass with one shot of vodka. *Stolichnaya*, available at Egyptair's duty-free—or the most unctuous you can find.
> Add a double dose of very hot chamomile.
> Drop a big ice cube into the glass and top off with a fresh mint leaf.
> Drink while it's still hot. Calm down.

The revolution is a work in progress.