

On Farouk Wahba's atelier: Chronicle of a mentor and his students | | Mada Masr

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Alexandria suits artists: it's a place where they can work on developing an artistic process, away from the noisiness of Cairo. In a city that has no major artistic milieus nor a large art market, artists can work in almost total isolation. The downside, however, is that — with the exception of a few iconic names — Alexandria seems absent from recorded art history, even though there were periods in which its art scene flourished, and the city was a starting point for several emerging movements and new artistic approaches.

In the 20th century, these initiatives usually began within a civil society and community framework, separate from the state and public educational

institutions. That was the case when Hassan Kamel initiated the Night School of Fine Arts — later the National Association of Fine Arts — with the help of the painter Mahmoud Said in 1929. Italian artist Antonio Becci also taught students in his Alexandria studio from 1930 to 1935. Seif Wanly — who studied at Kamel and Becci's schools along with his brother Adham, and later Mahmoud Moussa, the sculptor — took over Becci's studio after his departure, and continued its teaching activities. Meanwhile, in 1934, artist Mohamed Naji [established an atelier](#) for writers and artists, which is still open today.

It is that establishment in particular, known as the Alexandria Atelier, that is the subject of this piece, which tries to chart how, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Alexandrian artist Farouk Wahba used the space to create a contemporary art movement which still echoes today, through many conversations with Wahba and several of his students.



Facade of the Alexandria Atelier

The Beginning

Seif Wanly taught painting and modern art history. His teaching methods were said to be direct, articulate and rigorous, and he likely acquired them during travels to Europe and through the art books he picked up there. He continued teaching in his studio and at the Faculty of Fine Arts until his death in 1979, which arguably returned Alexandrian art practice to its quiet isolation.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, according to students, artists and practitioners who were active on the scene back then, those interested in acquiring art skills in Alexandria had the following choices:

- Go to the Ministry of Culture-funded “culture palaces,” which by then were submerged in bureaucracy and laziness — specifically the Tahrir Culture Palace (now the Center for Innovation) or Al-Anfoushi Culture Palace, which offered no training or access to modern or contemporary art forms. These spaces only offered an artistic advisor, usually a graduate of the Fine Arts Faculty who had purchased some old art books about European Renaissance paintings. The student could imitate these old paintings and refine their imitations indefinitely. No exhibitions were organized, and there were no experienced artists to contact or learn from.
- Befriend artist Ali Ashour (born 1946), a student of Seif Wanly, who painted portraits at Crystal Café (now demolished) every morning. Ashour sat there with intellectual, artist and theater friends, painting and talking, but the cafe was not a space for proper learning.
- Join the coterie of Sarwat al-Bahr (born 1944), who practiced in the

studio of the Goethe Institut, along with a small group of artists including Amro Hayba (born 1962) and Ibrahim al-Tunboli (born 1954). This group seems to have had little dynamic interaction, and their learning methods were regarded as relatively traditional.

- Study at the Faculty of Fine Arts, which had entered a comatose state and was split into two opposing camps. One was conservative and opposed innovation: they did not have the energy or ability to discuss postmodern and contemporary visual arts, dismissing them as gibberish. (Artist Hamid Aweys, for example, remained an advocate of socialist realism until the 1990s.) The other was centered around the art market, and its proponents did not have time to teach or engage in discussion. They did have time to hold teaching positions, however, and tended to quarrel with one another in between producing paintings and murals for villas and palaces in the Gulf, as well as for lobbies, hotels, hospitals and tourist resorts, which were new to Egypt at the time.

In 1988, however, Farouk Wahba (born 1942) returned to Alexandria from Germany, where he had been studying with German artist Gotthard Graubner at the Düsseldorf Academy of Arts. Before Düsseldorf, Wahba had received his doctorate, with a thesis titled “The Role of Raw Materials in Art Photography”, in 1967, and planned to devote his life to art — either producing art or attending exhibitions — in order to be part of the discourse. His goal had been put off for seven years, however, while he served in the army in the wake of Egypt’s 1967 defeat.

Wahba’s ambition centered on creating a new generation of art students who would go on to pursue art as a career and who would in turn contribute to founding a visual arts movement that would revive the Alexandrian art scene. He believed in postmodern, contemporary and conceptual art.

While teaching at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Wahba joined the board of the

Alexandria Atelier and helped restart its activities, which ranged from film screenings to literary events and creative writing and art workshops. Largely dormant since 1956 in the aftermath of the Suez Canal crisis, the atelier reopened with five members in the summer of 1988. Membership soon rose to 30 people, and they were divided by age: children from six to nine years old and youth ages 10 to 15, who participated in activities in the atelier's lobby, and adults from 20 to 25 years of age, who took part in workshops and events held in the atelier's garden. Those interested in art as a career — students mentored by Wahba himself — worked in the basement.

Because Wahba was chairperson of the board and an artist himself, most of the atelier's resources and activities focused on visual arts. By the time Wahba left the atelier in 1995, the number of participants studying pottery, sculpture and painting had grown to more than 400 people.



Children painting in the garden

After returning from Düsseldorf, Wahba soon became one of the most important figures in contemporary visual art, in Alexandria and in all of Egypt. In addition to his role in creating a new generation of contemporary artists through the atelier, he was one of the first to speak about and work with installation as an art medium in Egypt. He participated in the Venice Biennale in 1990 with an installation mixing ideas and imagery from ancient Egypt with technology and television screens. He was also interested in working with performance art, which was still relatively uncharted territory in the Egyptian arts scene back then.

The students

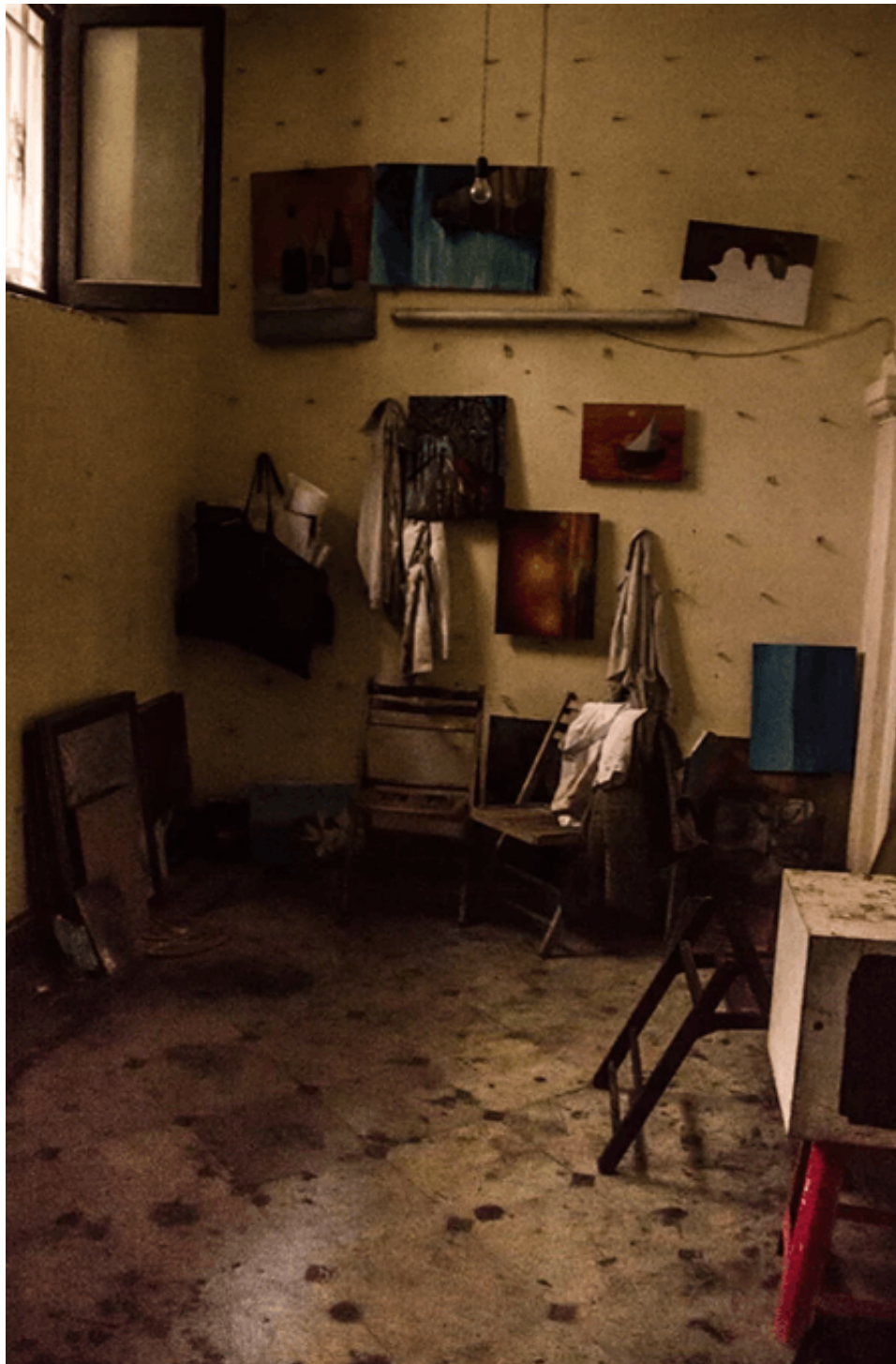
A core group studied directly with Wahba in the atelier between 1988 and 1995. Oil and turpentine odors were said to continually permeate the place during those seven years as a result of all their hard work, even reaching nearby Fouad Al-Kabir Street. Some have become the most influential artists in Egypt's contemporary visual art scene today, and garnering international reputations. Others diverted from their art practice for various reasons.



The stairs leading to the basement where artists worked

Mona Marzouk (born 1968): Marzouk, a student at the Faculty of Commerce, visited the Alexandria Atelier in the summer of 1988 to find Wahba sitting at the entrance. When she asked him about art lessons, he replied, “Here they are, welcome.” And so she began learning from Wahba,

acquiring both professionalism and craft and design skills. Marzouk was a top student and became Wahba's only art assistant, entering his private studio space in the atelier and helping him make several of his artworks.



Mona Marzouk's workspace at the atelier

Aliaa Algreedy (born 1968): A student at the Faculty of Literature's Department of History at the University of Alexandria, Algreedy came from a middle-class family who appreciated art. Her uncle was the artist Said Haddyah, but she says she preferred to introduce herself to the field independently, rather than rely on him. Algreedy tried to enroll in the Faculty of Fine Arts, but — unexpectedly — failed the practical exam. She then enrolled at the Faculty of Literature, but didn't really find herself there, so she visited the Alexandria Atelier in 1989 and met Wahba, whom she had never heard of before. Wahba asked to see her work, and she showed him a sketch. He said it wasn't bad, and instructed her to paint the late-nineteenth-century death mask known as *The Unknown Woman of the Seine*. He thought the result was promising and asked her to join the artists' atelier in the basement. She assisted him in teaching painting to adults.

Amina Mansour (born 1972): Coming from a wealthy family, Mansour had private art lessons from Wahba at her family home until she joined the atelier in 1989 when she was 17.

Reem Hassan (born 1971): As soon as she was accepted to the Faculty of Fine Arts in the summer of 1990, Hassan went to the atelier to start her practice ahead of her studies. Wahba taught her at both the atelier and the faculty. Hassan went on to become a teacher at the faculty and a board member at the atelier.

Mohamed Idris (born 1970): Idris was a top student of Wahba's at the Faculty of Fine Arts in the early 1990s, but according to Reem Hassan he turned to religion and left the studio after falling out with Wahba. (Several attempts were made to contact him, but they were unsuccessful.)



Mohamed Idris's workspace at the atelier

Khaled al-Barki (born 1968): Barki was studying nuclear engineering at Alexandria's Engineering Faculty, and came to the atelier to learn art. His peers say he seemed to have a natural inclination for it, but always had doubts about his work and later gave it up.

Wael Shawky (born 1971): Shawky was top of his class at both the faculty and the atelier. Wahba gave him the best grade on his graduation project.



Wael Shawky's workspace at the atelier

Rehab El-Sadek (born 1972): Sadek was a student of fine arts with an interest in exhibitions and art publications. Her father, an art history professor at the University of Alexandria, translated texts about visual arts published in English-language periodicals for her. She participated in an exhibition at the atelier with a collage made under the supervision of Abdel Salam Eid in 1991, and thus learned about Wahba and the studio, where she soon began working. Particularly skilled in drawing, she helped Wahba teach children.

Sameh al-Halawani (born 1967): Halawani gave up his studies at the Faculty of Social Service in favor of his passion for art. Until the summer of 1991, he had a succession of day jobs, coming to the atelier only at night. Halawani started as an amateur but became adept at landscape painting, and moved to the basement studio with the artists.



Sameh al-Halawani's corner at the atelier

Moataz al-Safty and Ahmed Abdul Aziz (born 1969): Both studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts, but not under Wahba. As they didn't learn anything of use in the faculty, they say, they joined the atelier in parallel. "We used to go (to the faculty) and play cricket," explains Safty. Perhaps Wahba did not want to create conflict with the deans and other professors at the faculty, so he only gave them a small space in the atelier as a complement to their faculty work, and they did not spend as much time there as the other students. Their participation at the atelier reflected on their work at the faculty, however, and their graduation projects used raw materials such as wood in unconventional ways.

There were several other students who studied between the faculty and the atelier, such as Huwaida Sibai and Jihan Soliman, who helped Wahba teach children; both now teach at the faculty. Others included Yasser Nada, Iman

Jado and Riham Rasim.

The curriculum

Wahba's teaching was based around working groups. Lessons started with drawing, painting and photography workshops. He believed in teaching basic methods for using charcoal, pencil and oil paint, then moved on to painting landscapes and models. Students used to take turns as models, so they would all get to learn live drawing. Wahba was interested in anatomy, and gave the same exercise to draw a hand many times until the student mastered it.

Wahba sought his students' proficiency in drawing and painting first as a foundation on which to experiment with visual arts. His idea was that one needed to master basic skills in order to be able to destroy the image and play with the medium — that is, to make postmodern and contemporary art. One should also be familiar with the achievements of various schools of modern art, Wahba believed.

Wahba took art history seriously and delivered it as a story. He discussed artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Paul Cezanne, Mark Rothko, Giorgio Morandi, Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt and Lucian Freud. He enjoyed talking about the painter Francis Bacon, and how he used to mock American artist Jackson Pollock. He talked also of Anselm Kiefer and Gerhard Richter. Wahba was inspired by the work of Joseph Beuys and used to talk about it in depth, former students say.

Like many of his generation, Wahba often talked about the importance of the book *How to Understand Modern Art* (1952) by George Alexander Flanagan, translated into Arabic by Kamal el-Mallakh. Then Amina Mansour came — possibly after one of her many visits to the US with her American mother — with Robert Atkins' *ArtSpeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements,*

and Buzzwords, 1945 to the Present (1990), and it quickly became the most important book for the group. Wahba encouraged his students to visit libraries and exhibitions at Alexandria's foreign cultural centers, especially the German and French ones, to see art and read art books.

Many students mimicked Wahba's style at first, but problems emerged when some of them continued to do so. He would often argue with students whom he sensed were imitating his style and tried to steer their practice in a different direction, though he did not always succeed.



Interior view of the atelier

Workshops

Through Wahba's relationship with the Goethe Institut Alexandria, they invited German artist Fred Helm Klein, a professor at the Academy of Fine

Arts in Munich, to lead art workshops for artists at the atelier, as well as for members of the Goethe Institut studio working under the supervision of artist Sarwat al-Bahr.

Workshops were a new methodology for teaching art in Alexandria at the time, and many professors and students at the Faculty of Fine Arts were unfamiliar with the format. Under Wahba's supervision, Klein conducted three workshops over three years at the Goethe Institut. He led a workshop on "the part and the whole" in 1992, a workshop on "light and shade" in 1993, and finally one on "stillness and movement" in 1994. There was also a "paper paste" workshop with a Belgian artist named Giorgio Salcedo in 1994 .

The workshops combined theoretical knowledge, studio practice and fieldwork. Participants would often go to the crowded, blue-collar neighborhoods surrounding the atelier, where Sameh al-Halawani — who was exceptionally street smart, according to his colleagues — often played the tour guide. He coordinated visits with communities in those areas, who allowed participants to sit and talk with local residents. During the first workshop, the group visited the Kom al-Daka neighborhood near the atelier on Fouad Street, and boat construction sites in Anfoushi.

Each workshop resulted in an exhibition around its theme. During preparations for the first exhibition under Klein's supervision in 1992, *The Part and the Whole*, conflict emerged between artists who could afford to buy raw materials and others who looked in the garbage, on streets and in ports for materials to make their work.



Sign at the door to the artists' studio

Preparing for the show in the cellar of the Goethe Institut, Halawani didn't have a solid idea to work on. But then the glass of a basement window, which was Halawani's size, fell and shattered on the ground. He decided that the accident was his response to the theme, and the shattered window was his artwork. Klein welcomed the proposition, which apparently took Wahba by surprise.

Alalready was interested in body and movement, physical expression and performance, but she had not found an idea she wanted to work on either. Wahba kept asking her, and she kept answering "not yet" — until the group visited the Anfoushi boatyards looking for raw material. There, Alalready saw the wooden scaffolding of the boats under construction, and started improvising movements on the structures, with the idea that her body was the part and the structure was the whole. When she proposed her idea to

Wahba, he liked it a lot, but asked: “How will you transport the scaffolding to the atelier?” She thought about it and decided to use a study table at the Goethe Institut, and so the piece became *Al-Tarabizah* (The Table). She asked Marzouk to carry the table while she performed movements. Wahba was impressed by the performance, and Klein is said to have responded: “This is what performance means!”

The beginnings of performance art in Egypt

When the Goethe Institut in Alexandria planned to organize a workshop and performance as a collaboration between Germany and Egypt in 1994, they approached artist Ahmed Fouad Selim (born 1936) and his assistant, art critic Fatima Ismail. The two decided to involve two of Farouk Wahba’s students at the Alexandria Atelier, Reem Hassan and Aliaa Alalready.

The idea was to present two performances, one Egyptian and the other German, each a result of a collaboration between an art critic and artists around the concept of “the unity between artist and artist-critic in the creative work.”

The Germans selected critic Kurt Petz and artist Verena Kraft, both from Munich. These two worked on a piece titled *Discovering Heat*, which used research and performance to learn about and experiment with the first tools humans used to create fire. During the performance they repeatedly hit two stones together, waiting for a spark to light a pile of tree leaves, until finally they created fire. This kind of performance was new to the largely traditional Egyptian visual artists in attendance, however, who apparently became bored waiting for the fire.

Ismail, Hassan, and Alalready presented a performance based on the idea of transforming abstract ideas into visible material and written language, under

the title *Creative Mentality in the Frame of Readymade Form*. They presented large glass containers and filled them with differently colored waters to reflect on the idea of readymade templates. They also collaborated on a soundtrack with Moataz El Safty, who used a microphone and mixer to create sound from the flow of water in a nearby bathroom. The use of sound was a reflection on the vitality of creativity as juxtaposed with readymade templates.

The performance premiered at the Akhenaten Gallery in the Zamalek Art Center, and they presented it at the Alexandria Atelier later that year.

Performance

وحدة الفنان والناقد في العمل الإبداعي
**THE UNITY BETWEEN
 ARTIST AND ART CRITIC**

العقلية الإبداعية في إطار القوالب الجاهزة
**CREATIVE MENTALITY IN THE FRAME OF
 THE READY MADE FORMS**

Fatma Ismail Art Critic فاطمة اسماعيل - ناقدة فنية
 Aliaa El-Greedy Artist عليا - المردي - فنانة تشكيلية
 Reem Hassen Artist ريم حسن - فنانة تشكيلية

الكشف عن الحرارة
**THE INVENTION OF
 THE TEMPERATURE**

Karl Petz Artist, Art Critic كارل بيتز - فنان ونقاد فني
 Verena Kraft Artist إيرينا كرافت - فنانة
 (Munich) (ألمانيا)

Egyptian Performance
 Tuesday, 29/03/1994 at 7 p.m.
 الثلاثاء ٢٩ / ٣ / ١٩٩٤ الساعة ٧ مساءً
 Akhnaton Gallery - Center of Arts - Zamalek

German Performance
 Monday, 28/03/1994 at 7 p.m.
 الاثنين ٢٨ / ٣ / ١٩٩٤ الساعة ٧ مساءً
 بجامعة أخناتون - مجمع الفنون بالزمالك

Workshop of Egyptian and German artists and critics
 30 - 31/04/1994 at Faculty of Applied Arts of Helwan University
 ورشة عمل مشتركة - كلية الفنون التطبيقية بجامعة حلوان بالجيزة
 أيام ٣٠ و ٣١ مارس ١٩٩٤ من الساعة ١٠ صباحاً إلى ٥ مساءً

كلية الفنون التطبيقية
 Goethe-Insitut معهد جوته
 مجمع الفنون
 قاعة أخناتون
 Center of Arts
 Akhnaton Gallery

Promotional poster from Hassan and Algreedy's performance in 1994. Courtesy: Reem Hassan -
 Courtesy: Reem Hassan



Hassan and Algeady prepare for their performance. Courtesy: Reem Hassan - Courtesy: Reem Hassan

Outside the atelier

Nazir al-Tanbouli (born 1971) was passionate about art and repulsed by leading or controlling influences and limiting, paternalistic hierarchies. He positioned himself on the margins of Alexandria's art-education groups, including the Faculty of Fine Arts.

He had, and still has, ambitions to immortalize his name in the history of art through painting and photography. "I won't get in your way, I am the one who'll continue to use paintbrushes," Tanbouli told fellow artist Wael Shawky in 1992. Shawky had advised him to use art forms from the post-modern, contemporary and conceptual traditions, arguing that it would allow him to produce the large-scale installations that were fashionable in the art world at

the time.

Tanbouli opposed those approaches, and did not consider them a form of visual and fine arts, and therefore felt they did not match his aspirations. He believed in the vitality that resides in painting and photography and in their potential for contemporary expression. He wanted to produce works of the same value as those by famous painters and photographers in art history books. In spite of the popular media narrative at the time — which Tanbouli considered misleading—that propagated the idea that the world had become too complicated for painting or photography, he continued to work on evolving his photography and painting processes to express such complexities.

Tanbouli was not a student of Farouk Wahba; he studied in the department of interior design at the Fine Arts Faculty. His position as an artist — working separately from the atelier while also being provoked by the work Wahba and his students were producing — acted as the catalyst for his creative energy, enabling him to develop tools and artistic projects in painting and photography to express more abstract and complex ideas.

Despite his position, however, Tanbouli appreciated Wahba as a professor and artist. Once, Tanbouli went to Al-Aliya, a cafe Wahba frequented, and invited him home to show him two large paintings. Impressed, Wahba invited Tanbouli to join the atelier and become part of the group, but Tanbouli declined. He decided to forget about those two paintings and work on others instead.

Amm Saad

According to Wahba and former students of the Alexandria Atelier, the custodian of the atelier, known as Amm Saad, used to be a street thug in his

younger days, during the Nasser era. Security forces used him to spy on the writers and artists of the atelier. He was the center of power and authority within the space — no one dared to challenge him. He didn't provide any service until he was paid, and due to his criminal past, he knew where to look for any raw materials stolen from the atelier.

If Wahba got frustrated with someone and expelled them from the atelier, Amm Saad barred them entry unless they had permission from Wahba himself. His most important role was assisting Wahba in installing artworks in the atelier's gallery. Artists were to deliver their work for exhibition to Amm Saad, but only Wahba had the authority to decide how to present the work in the space.

Relationships: Life, love, and friendship

Farouk Wahba created a space of freedom for movement, experimentation, and artistic liberation, unlike the Faculty of Fine Arts, which — according to students who worked both in the faculty and with Wahba — offered narrow, traditional methods for art practice.

Most of Wahba's students in the basement studio of the atelier were women. He behaved like a father figure for the 1960s generation. He was loving and gentle, an advisor who was too paternal at times. He would often comment on his students' clothes or behavior, but he warmed to those who challenged him and objected to such comments. Wahba was afraid there would be gossip about the atelier and the studio in particular, since many women worked there and people might see it as a space where they could be approached, befriended or hit on. Such was the way he saw things back then, which might seem a bit patriarchal now, but those who studied with him insist that it came from a place of love and genuine concern.

Mostly, however, Wahba valued seriousness, commitment and

meticulousness in the atelier and did not care what happened beyond its walls. He allowed the artists to make decisions, including playing the music they liked while working, which ranged from Wagner to Metallica. He used to organize lunch and dinner parties for them, and they would go on trips together and play football at the Qaitbay Citadel. He sat in Al-Aliya or at the October 6 café in the Bahari area, and several artists from the atelier would join him. Smaller groups and friendships among artists emerged and, significantly, overcame differences in social and class backgrounds.



Wahba with a group of his student artists on a trip to Alamein. Courtesy: Reem Hassan - Courtesy: Riham Rasim

The atelier's studios were also a space for love stories — generally serious ones that led to marriage, such as Amina Mansour's relationship with Wael Shawky, Aliaa Algrady's with Sameh al-Halawani, and Reem Hassan's with Moataz El Safty. There were many others too, some enduring and others short lived.

Wahba's relationship advice was successful sometimes, and other times it was

disappointing. Some students regretted not taking his advice, but sometimes a rage would overtake him, and he would order a student not to come back to the atelier until she'd broken up with a boyfriend he saw as unsuitable.

Grants, the Youth Salon, and the Cairo Biennale

Capitalizing on good relations with the Goethe Institut in Alexandria, Wahba managed to turn language studies grants into art ones. Alalready won a grant and traveled for a full year in Germany, where she visited galleries, art institutions, and academies. This helped her get another grant to study at the Egyptian Academy of Arts in Rome. Reem Hassan also won a scholarship and traveled in 1993 to study art with Professor Fred Klein at the Munich Art Academy. Wahba helped Mona Marzouk enroll in a “Meisterschuler” diploma, which he himself had acquired at the Düsseldorf Academy of Arts in 1995.

Through his good relationship with then-Minister of Culture Farouk Hosni, and with basic financial support from the Mansour family and businesswoman Hasna Rashid, Wahba was able to create a salon for the Alexandria Atelier artists, in the form of an annual competition for young artists with a modest prize. In a way, Wahba headed a new contemporary generation that came out of the atelier to invade Cairo and eventually to win most of the prizes at a different salon — the national yearly Youth Salon, founded by Hosni in 1989.

At the first edition of the Youth Salon, Jihan Soliman won the encouragement prize, which was given to newer artists, in photography. In 1990, Khaled al-Barki won a scholarship to study at the Egyptian Academy of Arts in Rome, and Soliman got first prize in photography. In 1991, Wael Shawky won the encouragement prize for installation. In 1992, Mohammed Idris got the encouragement prize in photography, and Alalready and Barki won the

encouragement prize for installation art. In 1993, Idris won first prize in photography, Algreedy won second prize in installation, and Yassir al-Nada won the salon's top honor, the Grand Akhenaten Award. But 1994 was the golden year for the atelier artists: they collected the thirteen most notable awards at the Youth Salon. Sameh al-Halawani won the judges' prize, Reem Hassan earned second prize for her installation work, and Shawky won the Grand Akhenaten Award. In 1996, upon her return from Germany, Mona Marzouk was awarded second prize for her installation artwork. Reem Hassan won third prize, and Howayda Sibai second prize in photography.

The atelier students also garnered awards at the Cairo International Biennale. In 1994, Wahba received the Grand Nile Award, and Algreedy won second prize in the youth division for her installation work. Wahba convinced Hosni to lower the age of eligibility for the Biennale from 40 years old to 25. As a result, Tanbouli and Shawky were able to participate in the 1996 event, where Shawky won the Grand Nile Award.



Farouk Wahba's winning installation at the 1994 Cairo International Biennale. Source: Middle East Online

There is often talk in art circles in Cairo and Alexandria that Wahba only put up his favorite students or members of his own close group to receive grants and awards, but that doesn't seem accurate. For example, Wahba supported Mohamed Idris despite disagreements between them, before Idris eventually left art altogether. He also supported Tanbouli in the 1996 Cairo Biennale,

though he wasn't one of his students and had actually declined his offer to join the atelier.

Endings, new beginnings

In the first half of the 1990s, Wahba was in control of all the atelier's activities, not just the painting studios. With the support of artist Naima al-Sheshiny on the atelier's board of directors, no one did anything, from film screenings to literary seminars, without his approval, and no one used the atelier unless they had a specific task. This strict atmosphere was possibly suffocating for those interested in other arts, and those who were not students and artists of the atelier, as proven in the next round of elections for the atelier's board and administration, which was held in 1995.

Neither Sheshiny or Wahba were elected, and the atelier eventually came under the control of Mohammad Wafik Khalil, a renowned cardiologist, and a coalition consisting of the atelier's cinema group headed by Mohamed Fayed on the one hand, and visual artists who were opposed to Wahba on the other. The basement studios and Wahba's own studio were all closed. Artworks by Wahba's students were burned on the street. Some board directors allegedly took artworks to decorate the walls of their houses.



Interior view of the atelier

Wahba became depressed. He spent his time at his favorite cafes, Al-Aliya and October 6, sometimes meeting his atelier students there. In 1997, he traveled to Austria as a cultural advisor for Egypt and in 2000 he became the director of the Egyptian Academy of Fine Arts in Rome.

Alia Alalready had traveled to the Egyptian Academy of Arts in Rome and Mona Marzouk to the Düsseldorf Academy of Art. Reem Hassan, Moataz El Safty, Sameh al-Halawani and possibly others used to meet at the Malek Cafe in the Mansheya neighborhood of Alexandria. Hassan and El Safty were

nominated by Wahba, with the support of Farouk Hosni, for cultural manager positions at the Ministry of Culture. They got married and later worked at Al-Tazawouk Cultural Palace, where they initiated many projects. Then Hassan, again with Wahba's support, continued her career in academia and completed a doctorate in fine arts.

Mohamed Idris traveled to Saudi Arabia and worked as a calligrapher of banners and placards. Some of his former colleagues say he supervised the decoration and designs for the Quba Mosque, and later became responsible for the interior designs of the palaces of the Saudi royal family. But he did not forget his dream to convert Wahba to the righteous path: He sent him flight tickets to Saudi Arabia to perform pilgrimage duties of Hajj, but these were firmly rejected.

Khaled al-Barki traveled to Saudi Arabia to work and practice art but, not seeing much success, returned to his hometown of Kafr al-Sheikh to work in carpentry.

In 1997, Wael Shawky, Amina Mansour, Mona Marzouk and Nazir al-Tanbouli had several meetings in Shawky's home to discuss ways to create a contemporary art scene independent of the Ministry of Culture in Egypt. These meetings did not produce results. Tanbouli moved to the UK and did not return to Egypt until 2013. Shawky and Mansour were married for a few years and moved to the US. Shawky completed an MFA at the University of Pennsylvania in 2001 and has now achieved an international reputation through his contemporary art practice.

The dream of reviving the atelier as a space for art and arts education

In 2010, Wael Shawky established MASS Alexandria as a space for

contemporary art practice, research and education, and three cohorts have graduated from the program. Frustrated in Alexandria after Wahba left for Austria, Sameh al-Halawani traveled to Cairo and married Alia Alalready, and they continued to work together even after their divorce. Both worked on developmental arts initiatives with various institutions in Cairo and Minya, focusing on children and young people. By 2000 they had returned to Alexandria and started working in the fishing village al-Max, founding the Gudran Association for Art and Development. The association ceased its activities in 2018, but it is survived by [Wekalet Behna](#), an alternative arts space in Alexandria. Both MASS and Gudran were an attempt to restore a dream — the energizing, ephemeral experience of the atelier.

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