Khaled Hafez

Interviews

Filmmaking and Cheeseburger Stories

Text and interview by Simone Toellner for the artist video installation *Mirror Sonata in Eight Animated Movements*, 2014.

Introduction
Khaled Hafez is one of the renowned video artists in the Near East. Born in Cairo in 1963, he studied medicine and worked as a physician until the early 1990s, when he decided to devote himself entirely to a career in the arts. In his work he addresses the way in which Egyptians relate to modernism and assimilate cultural values from the West. Seeking to define the idiom that typifies his native country, Hafez explores a wide range of expressive modes in the telling of his stories. It is well worth taking a closer look at the medium of film, at the moving images in which one can best trace the visions that motivate this artist's oeuvre. His first "known" video, *Idlers' Logic* (2003) was followed by *Revolution* (2006), *Visions of a Contaminated Memory* (2007), *The Third Vision: Around 1pm* (2008), *The A77a Project: on Presidents and Superheroes* (2009) and *The Video Diaries* (2011), the series of video works "On Noise, Sound and Silence" (2011-2013), the second of which (*On Noise, Sound & Silence: The Venice Composite, 2013*) was part of his video installation for the 55th Venice Biennale, 2013.
While talking with Hafez during his solo exhibition "Handling Memories" at AB Gallery, Lucerne, Switzerland (October 2013), the artist politely corrected me when I referred to his films as video art. He said, "*I am more of a filmmaker than a video artist, I many times disdain video art.*"

ST: Why do you see yourself as a filmmaker?
KH: In my case film is linked to my painting. I'm neither an abstract painter nor a video artist because I like to tell stories. For me it is not about creating states of mind or producing certain reactions on the part of the viewer. I just like to tell stories, regardless of what the viewer feels. I script a lot, take time to massacre the script and rebuild it, then edit a lot, and change a lot of what was written to create a final narrative, that may or may not be exactly as the initial idea. It is exactly like painting, or creating a three-dimensional installation.

ST: What is the difference from video art?
KH: Filmmaking makes a statement. Video art is more about trying to get the audience to feel, to see or to perceive. You might say I'm selfish, because all I want to do is tell a story. The great majority of video art is torture for me. Very few video installations have touched me and I remember only a few times when I've been surprised. For the most part it is very boring to sit and watch videos that are not narrative. Unless the video work are super-intelligent and has an immediate kidnapping effect by the image and the sound, I think the whole thing fails pathetically. Perhaps I am mean there, but this is how I see this very sophisticated medium. It is democratic medium but it is risky, as failure is much more than success. Ever since I was a child I was programmed on film, starting with Egyptian cinema, later international cinema. And I must say some of my major inspirations concerning experimental films are the works of Stanley Kubrick, Bernardo Bertolucci, Paul Virhofen, and the closest to my heart is the body of work of Claude Lelouche and Sergio Leone. They are established filmmakers but they cover a wide spectrum of activities. *Hafez spreads his arms wide.*

ST: When did you get the idea to make films?
KH: The wish to do film was always there. I was 29 years old when I saw two films by the French filmmaker Claude Lelouche. I saw them three to four days apart and I said to myself I absolutely have to try out the film format.

ST: Which films are you talking about?
KH: Itiniraire d'un enfant gate (*Itinerary of a Spoiled Child*, 1989) and La Belle Histoire (*The Beautiful Story*, 1992). Both movies deal with the motion of memory, nostalgia and lost identity. When I saw them, I thought that's the medium for me. But then it took me eight years to be able to do my first video entitled *Visions of a Cheeseburger Memory* (2000).

ST: Funny title. Where does it come from?
KH: Actually, it comes from the expression "cheesy" that is always used to describe American action movies. In 1995 I made a project combining collage and painting. It was called *Visions of a Rusty Memory* and I used a lot of film images in this work. Five years later I was thinking of this video as a sequel or as part of this project, it was a video collage, hence the name. In 2007, seven years after *Visions of a Cheeseburger Memory*, I did another video collage that is linked to the two previous

projects: *Visions of a Contaminated Memory*. The "contamination" is the television and press programming I was subjected to in Egypt, the Goebbels-like propaganda sanctifying leaders, presidents, and imposed leaders.

ST: Why did it take you eight years to start?
KH: It took me so long because I knew nothing about the medium of film. In 1998 and 1999 I took my first private classes at the public institution *Palace of Film,* a department of the Ministry of Egyptian Culture. My first scripts were hard to write. I have always been self-financed, and the timing is linked to my capacity to produce this first experimental visual collage piece.

ST: How did this come about and what makes so specific, *Visions of a Cheeseburger Memory*?
KH: I did this video collage in the year 2000, using a lot of takes/scenes from action movies. I used the explosion scenes or the gun scenes and removed the sound to make them silent. At the same time I started to act in my studio with a plastic gun imitating the movements of the screen protagonists. Luckily I knew a whole lot of James Bond films with Pierce Brosnan and Sean Connery, and more cheesy action blockbusters with Mel Gibson, Sylvester Stallone and others. But the lead and guiding, and you can say "most important" scene came from *Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick), though by comparison to the explosions in other movies I used, there is no violence in *Clockwork Orange*. I took the sequence where the actor Malcom McDowell is driving his beetle and all we see is a close-up of his determined face. I used this scene between each chapter in *Visions of a Cheeseburger Memory*. I made the chapters separating explosion and gun scenes, and separated them with text frames.

ST: Text frames!!
KH: Yes, like Quentin Tarantino did in *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill*, and like old silent movies from the golden silent years. Mind you, my films are not directly inspired by any of those. When I made my first video I had not seen Tarantino´s films. So when I did see *Pulp Fiction*, I thought this is really weird. *Pulp Fiction* was done five years earlier than the time I touched the film medium, and my work looked like it directly inspired from Pulp Fiction. Over the years I developed great liking to Tarantino's body of work, and his unique formulation of a personal narrative you could identify immediately even if you enter at any moment of the film without knowing who made it. I think I can do that also with Claude Lelouche, with all respect and difference between the film practices of both makers. But anyway this first video, *Visions of a Cheeseburger Memory* was problematic…

ST: What made it that?
KH: Because of the length and the sound. A 30-minute silent film / video; quite a torture to unaware audience. The film was shown in a few screening festivals in Cairo and I found out that people fell asleep after five minutes because there was no sound. Quite an embarrassment for an ambitious debuting filmmaker who dreams of being in festivals and biennales. So I decided to edit it again, then again, and again, and each time I get some free time, I edit it again, now it is only less than 10 minutes.

ST: You did the editing?
KH: Well, I trained and acquired my editing skills on that workJ. At that time, that is at the very beginning, I insisted on editing with VHS although there was already digital technology, with an editor who was a wedding VHS cameraman; the result was phenomenally cheesy and kitschy as the kitsch book dictates. Working with a guy who did editing for weddings was in fact a weird choice that I cannot even remember why I came to such a decisionJ. I did it that way because I wanted it to look really kitschy with overflows and super-imposed images. In 2003 I worked with the filmmaker Emad Ernest who advised me, generously digitised the work, and reduced the length of the video to a good half, 15 minutes. In 2005 I had acquired digital editing skills myself, so I ran the second edit that put the length to 11 minutes.

ST: You always worked with editors?
KH: Apart from Mokhtar, the wedding editor who did my first attempts on VHS editing, I worked with some editors once, like Salma Radwan for Idler's Logic, then three times with Mohamed Sharkawy, three times with Ahmed el Shaer in animation and film, and I edited three works, and made front screen editing sound and video adaptation to three works. I worked with editors, then I started to do my own editing and later I worked with editors again. Sometimes I had to take a step back because I fell in love with what I was shooting and doing. So I needed input from a professional, a young professional born in the digital age, not bored and didn't fall asleep when working on the video. I owe the success of many of my videos to those editors, and to sound designers like Ahmed Saleh who made the sound of the works attractive and meaningful.

ST: Back to your first video *Visions of a Cheeseburger Memory* -- you said you re-edited it.
KH: Yes, I cut it down to 15 minutes, and later found it still much too long. Two years later, when I started doing my own editing, I cut it down to nine minutes and finally I killed it. But maybe I'll come back to it one day. I will certainly do.

ST: After *Visions of a Cheeseburger Memory*, you immediately shot your next video?
KH: Right. *Idler´s Logic* in 2003. It's the longest film/video I've ever made. 24 minutes. It subtly touches on three taboos: sex, religion and politics.

ST: Did you write the script?
KH: Yes, the whole thing, and for the first time I had a director of photography. I decided to work

with a DOP because in this video everything was acted except for a few collages from TV series. The DOP was the Great Ahmed EL Morsy who later went to have a golden film career and worked with giant Egyptian feature filmmakers. I had a producer but he only paid for the editing and gave us the use of a camera for only 24 hours. So I made a lot of tests in advance moving around with my mini DV. In the end, my director of photography told me that, for this kind of script, it would be best to have a fixed camera and let the actors move. So the whole video was made with one still camera. One great gift for that project is that I had a production manager as well, Mohamed Tohamy, who managed the 24 hours in perfect management.

ST: I've noticed that the number three plays a certain role in your videos. For example three screens, three actors, three parts…
**KH: **Three years after *Idler´s Logic* I made my third film / video, entitled *Revolution*. The work was commissioned for the first Singapore Biennale curated by Fumio Nanjo, and advised by Martina Corgnati. I worked with the same actor who worked with me in Idlers' Logic, Bassem Wadie, and another director of photography, Haysam Hosny. *Revolution* was not much of a hit in the few times it was screened in Egypt at that time. Its' local success would come much later after 2011. The work was my own critique of the 1952 revolution and since you mention the number three, this revolution came with three promises: social equality, liberty and unity. I wanted to show that 60 years after those big promises were made, all that is left is the social equality of the gun, the unity of chopping off heads and the deceptive liberty of a multinational, transcontinental economy based on slave wages. This film / video was an immediate international success, now in the acquisition of four museums, and has been shown at the Singapore Biennale (2006) and the Mercosul Biennale (2011).

ST: Two of your later videos *The Third Vision: Around 1pm*, 2008, and *The A77a Project*, 2009, are very personal. Are you dealing with your past?
**KH: **Ultimately my own memories are the things that have shaped me. I can´t deny that I´m a product of what my parents put in me. You can see me, them and me as a little child in *The Third Vision*. The video reflects my own memory of a country that I loved and I still love, but has over the years transformed itself into a totally different "space" from the one I spent my childhood and early adulthood in, the country who has actually made me who I am now. The work is about my memory of a city where mango trees grew and birds sang, a city that no longer exists -- and maybe will never become as it were in my childhood. Memories are the only things that survive, and memories are the only things that can save such a city from the oblivion of forgetfulness. Memories are always chic, nice and proper. My videos work with nostalgia and memory and, at the same time, they question what happened and why.

ST: And do you have an answer? Or let me put it in another way: do you seek or provide answers in your work?
**KH: **Maybe you can find answers by looking at the cultural anthropological context and the sequence of events that led up to what the city is like today. In my opinion it started in the fifties and sixties when Nasser imprisoned the Muslim Brotherhood for attempting to assassinate him. He illegally imprisoned around twenty-two thousand people, which was a mistake. Then Sadat released them because they were illegally imprisoned, which was also a mistake, as you do not release fanatics. It was one of his first acts as president and eight years later they killed him. In a sense, he helped his own assassination as he moved during his eleven years of reign towards attracting the sentiment of religion inside Egyptians. You also have to remember that in 1975 Sadat transformed the country from a Soviet model of socialism into an open market economy, which made rich people richer and poor people poorer. In the end around six million Egyptians moved into the petro-dollar Arab Gulf and acquired values that were not Egyptian and nor compatible with the cultural specificity of Egyptians, nor with the Egyptian type of Islam. But this is only one of the anthropological consequences. Such developments are not one-sided; a tree can't grow without soil. My role as artist is not to provide answers but to propose problematic and ask questions, lots of them.

ST: You already asked questions in your videos, but you also show a lot of humour in addition to your political concerns. Where does this humour come from?
**KH: **Oh God, that's me, it comes from my childhood. And that's me being Egyptian as well as my connection to the Egyptian cinema. We've had censorship ever since cinema was introduced in the 1920s. Egyptian filmmakers and film professionals always skirted around censorship by using codes and symbols and, of course, humour. I learnt from that, and grew up with such approaches, and as a young professional mastered the skill of touching taboos without provoking mass outrage. I learnt how to address sexual or religious issues without being taken to court. It was the only way for Egyptian film professionals to survive and it still applies today. There is a distinctively Egyptian brand of humour. Egyptians stand to make a joke out of everything literally.

ST: Your videos play an important role in your artistic work. Do you always present at least one of your videos besides other media in your exhibitions?
**KH: **Since I work in several mediums, I like them to be represented in my exhibitions. I rarely show only two things, like paintings and drawings. I really liked the presentation of my works in Berlin and my solo exhibition at AB Gallery in Lucerne. Both shows encompassed several practices. They presented drawing, painting and video. Even the painting was shown in the form of an installation. The gallery teams, and I tried to make an exhibition that is outside the norm that is not predictable – you need the surprise element. This need arise from the fact that the medium dictates the content of the artwork, and the content many times call for the one particular medium. In order to explore any one concept from

different aspects, it would be wise to allow the diversity of mediums to operate one beside the other. I never dictate it though, and I never make it as a mandatory to be represented in all practices within one single show.

ST: What video / film is next?
KH: At the moment I´m working on a three-part video: *Revolution Disco, Brotherhood Disco* and *Salafi Disco*. Salafi are fundamentalists, and I'm flashing their fanatic phrases in the tempo of a discotheque and the visuals are an ironic composite between the loose discotheque and the dogmatic brainless fanaticism. I am working on the three videos together and I want to make each one like a three-minute solo. If assembled linear in a film program one after the other, you get a nine-minute presentation, and if presented alone, the three installations follow different rules. I have chosen a context of the kind you would expect from a cheesy industrial video clip that you get bombarded with in cafes and shopping malls.