

Delayed review but necessary
“The Video Museum”

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Photo courtesy of Ahmed Shawky Hassan

Time is one of the main elements in the contemporary art movement. It adds new dimensions to the art and the artists' practices. In the moving image specifically, time is the event, the context, and many times the concept too; you can even meet the time in various categories in a human's life and interests. In video art, time is expressed as actual, implied, linear, and circular. Actual time in video art consists of works of art that take up certain amounts of time, such as media, while implied time in art consists of an illusion that time has passed or a specific captured moment.

Contemporary experiments in the Middle East in general and in Egypt in particular have always been consumed by time, just like most other parts of our lives, without any attempt to analyse or document them in a way that would help us fully understand them and their contribution to our intellectual scene.

Video art, like the majority of contemporary art practices, takes time to transfer to Egypt, and "The Video Museum," the book I discuss here, depicts a portion of video art's journey to Egypt. Artist and author Ahmed Shawky Hassan creates a great plot for a docufiction film with his cinematic writing style. If you have just begun to read the first sentence, you cannot stop reading fluently; you must continue, such as by watching a movie in a movie theater.

With time variables and event order throughout the chapters of the book, Shawky successfully portrayed his story in a film-like format, with the documentation and archive serving as the film's star. We can figure this out from the order of events, just like in flashbacks with well-drawn scenes, by making you a character who saw or took part in the event through words and context.

Despite his frustrations while searching for references and information, such as the death of Swiss curator Ursula Rondelles, Shawky incorporates this information at the perfect time and place in the reading context to keep you up to date on events and makes you his partner in this journey to discover the truth of one line in an Egyptian art scene that was overlooked as a victim in a dramatic story.

Is the archive a luxury?

During my meeting with Ahmed Shawky Hassan, he stops both of us with a question: "Is the archive a luxury?" This question prompts me to reflect on my readings about noncitizen archives and how official archives of nation-states control narratives about events and capabilities in our countries, as well as how nation-states have worked tirelessly throughout history to preserve and keep their narrative safe and accurate in the face of citizen narratives.

In the intellectual scene, the situation is the same, because for many years after the 1952 coup, the culture and art movements became part of the nation-state mission, and the authorities worked hard to safeguard the patriotic system it created to control the ways of thinking and filter each innovative idea and spike in art that came to the Egyptian scene.

The artists who become established in this environment take this authority by proxy, even after the regime changes and the new authorities do not give the same attention to the intellectual scene. But the generation of artists and thinkers who came from the womb of the regime completed the mission, even in an unconscious way.

We can see this through the Egyptian artists involved in the workshop and how they treat video art as a foreign issue unrelated to art, and how archiving this new experiment has become the main victim of this behavior.

Conclusion

The video museum is a particular experiment in which the book context represents a form of remediation for the noncitizen narrative through writing composed of dramatic docufiction scenes that provide the reader with a unique moving image experience.

This filming situation keeps your role as an event participant and, at times, a witness to what writer and researcher Ahmed Shawky Hassan goes through on his journey. Even though I am a visual artist with most of my career connected to the moving image between video art and Machinima filmmaking, this journey that stretched between Egypt and Switzerland surprised me by introducing me to Egyptian characters who established a movement of video art in Switzerland, not in Egypt, and returned to their homeland in the hope of giving artists and the art scene a chance to experiment with something different.

Did they succeed or not?

The response to this question is critical. So, the author, Ahmed Shawky Hassan, left you with an open ending, like how movies show open cases with different points of view. There is no clear answer, and even in the last part of the book, the references and names of groups of people he met and interviewed with their biographies came like a cinematic end sequence, showing that the author was able to create a cinematic context from the first sentence to the last word.

"The Video Museum" is more than just a book; it reveals how the artist and researcher Ahmed Shawky Hassan's experience with moving images influenced his writing style by inviting you into his private world through words.