

CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Ramblings of female Cairene artists

Salma El Tarzi, Sondos Shabayek



Illustration by [Carole Hénaff](#)

Two sad stories

Salma El Tarzi

(1)

Between 2011 and 2013 I shot my first feature length documentary about what was at the time an new genre of underground music emerging from the peripheries of the city, or what the official discourse likes to refer to as *Ashwa2eyat*, the Arabic word for “slums”, which literal translation would be “the chaotics”. During those two years, I have followed one band of musicians, not only all over Cairo, but all the way to Aswan 800 Km to the South and back. I was a woman, alone, moving freely in places I don’t belong to, pointing my camera at everything and everyone without second thought. My only rule was to ask for consent. When I think of this today, it seems like a parallel universe, or a hallucination, because just entertaining the idea of doing this today is a ridiculous joke or a suicidal thought.

The Egyptian State has always required that filmmakers get shooting permits in order to film in public spaces. The complexity and number of approvals needed to release such a permit varies from location. In theory, shooting in a street, requires a permit from the

Ministry of Interior, but if there is a historical Mosque on that said street, you probably need an additional permit from the Ministry of Antiquities, and if there happens to be some building, or facility related to the army (we have plenty of those) then you will definitely need a permission from the Ministry of Defense and probably Intelligence Bureau. And in order to apply for all this permits, you must get your script approved by the Censorship, which you can only do through the Filmmakers Syndicate, which will not give you filming permission unless you are a registered member or pay a substantial fee for a temporary work permit. This intricate bureaucratic labyrinth is the state's strategy to have complete control over the film industry. This coupled with the big companies monopoly over the film distribution market, guarantees that no film will see the light unless it flies under the wing of the "law abiding" mainstream productions.

Yet, up until when I shot my film, we could still get around these crippling restrictions and challenge these laws. We could invent tactics that allow us to get away with shooting in the street, pretending we're students, playing dumb, or simply looking around and making sure no policeman is in sight. And even if we got caught, the worst that would happen to us would be having our material deleted and being interrogated for a couple of hours then released. Things got even better after the 25th of January revolution. We felt more confident, and "owned" the streets. Public spaces were our playground. And as citizen journalism gained popularity and more credibility than conventional and official media, people were generally friendlier towards cameras.

And then came 2013 with a whole new set of game changing rules. This space we occupied started shrinking as we watched, one horrific incident after the other. Every other day someone gets arrested for shooting or filming in the street. Some people got stopped and grilled for taking a picture of a blossoming tree on their mobile phone. They were accused of shooting without a permit! Two filmmakers even got arrested from their house, because they were playing with their camera and taking shots from their own balcony. Their accusations ranged from filming without permits to threatening the security of the state. Public space gained a different meaning, a space where citizens, let alone artists with camera, should act with utmost paranoia and fear, your own balcony and window included. The worst part was that you couldn't tell where the danger is coming, for most of the times people with cameras don't get arrested because a policeman "happened" to see them, but because a policeman has been tipped about their activity by a vigilante, an "honorable citizen" as the state media calls them. An army of self-proclaimed informants that the state has carefully built through propaganda campaigns promoting conspiracy theory and camera phobia.

In 2016 I was a producer of a documentary about comedians. One day, we were filming with a comedy group who did satire musical sketches in the street (those got arrested a few months later, but that's for the second story!). On that day, a man passing by recognized them from their many videos shared online. He wanted autographs and even took selfies with them. 15 minutes later, he comes back with a policeman pointing at us and asking him to arrest us. These are the comedians doing all these satirical sketches that tarnish the reputation of the country. They must be up to something. Only this time, I had all permits issued, this was no longer 2011, and I wasn't going to jeopardize our safety. The

policeman saw the permits and we managed to sweet talk him, but the citizen wasn't going to let it go, he was high on patriotism and sense of duty, and was adamant to go report us to the military police since the regular policeman wasn't going to arrest us. Of course, we had left before he came back, but still, the look in his eyes, his genuine passion, in his mind, he was a hero, a patriot, saving his country from the enemies, he deserves a medal, he deserves a street named after him, a statue in his hometown. On that day, I was very scared, and I knew there is no way I can never again make another film the way I made my feature. I haven't taken a single shot in the street since then.

(2)

In 2013, after the Muslim brotherhood were toppled, and the army took over. It was clear that roaming the streets with a camera was no longer an option. Any romantic ideas of doing street screenings in different neighborhoods had also evaporated. But we still had the internet. It quickly became our alternative public space, where we can share work and ideas... and because real life was getting so limited and constricted, the space social media was taking in our lives was getting bigger and bigger. On the internet, we could build audiences, and reach more people, and like many other fellow artists, I started sharing my work publicly. This time they were paintings, colorful naked fat women with pubic hair and asymmetrical breasts. I even posted a short animation of one of my women masturbating until an orgasm that turns her into a thousand fluttering butterflies. These topics, were daring and provocative and would have gotten me real heat in real life, a couple of galleries refused to show this work because of they were too scared of the backlash they would receive for showing nudity. But this was the internet, I was safe, I could show my work for thousands of people, without getting more than a few angry comments, right? This was also still 2013.

Soon after that the state issued a new internet law that aims to "regulate" citizen usage of this "dangerous public space", they would later go as far as calling the internet "our cyber border that needs to be guarded". According to this law, any individual with more than 5 thousand followers on any given social media platform, is held accountable before the law for what they post as a media & press institution and not as an individual. Soon after, people were getting arrested left and right for things they post or share on the internet. The comedians I have mentioned earlier, made a sarcastic sketch criticizing the state for giving up to islands to Saudi Arabia, they were soon chased down, arrested and imprisoned for almost a year. The list of crimes they were accused of committing included, spreading rumors and false news over the internet, troubling the peace, serving the purposes of a terrorist group, and inciting people against the state. These accusations will quickly become the default combo for any new arrest. Artists, performers, and bloggers were getting arrested left and right for things they post on social media; a cartoonist, an amateur filmmaker who miraculously managed to shoot his film and post it on YouTube, a writer, a poet, a musician, etc. Every day we hear of someone being arrested for making their work public. And if it isn't state surveying over social media that will get people exposed and arrested, it will be vigilantes and "honorable citizens" fulfilling their patriotic duty protecting the nation. If that wasn't bad enough, a new wave of arrests over content

shared on the internet started earlier this year with mass arrests of female Tik Tok influencers performing dances on their accounts, as well as a Youtuber and her adult daughter who make comedy videos. These women all received sentences ranging from one to three years in prison. They were charged with debauchery, using their accounts to perform sexual acts in return for money, and a new ridiculous accusation according to some new law; THREATENING FAMILY VALUES. This last accusation and new “crime” means that any work that deals with any form of sexuality, especially female, can get you arrested and charged. If I hadn’t posted those paintings back then, posting them today would have been a great risk, along with all the projects I’ve been working on since 2017 on the representation female sexuality and sexual violence. How am I going to publish my work, will I get away with it, should I try to publish it abroad? Will I still get in trouble for it? I have no idea. Fear and anxiety have become a normal part of my life, where I have to live with the fact that every day that passes without getting arrested is just another lucky day, another exception to the rule.

In search for ‘Space’

Sondos Shabayek

I started thinking about this article on a late afternoon during a weekday, somewhere in one of Cairo’s most congested neighborhoods, as I tried to park my very small car in a very small spot between two other cars, when the irony of the moment hit me; I’m always trying to ‘fit in’.

As a woman and an artist, I have always felt that I am struggling to make space for myself in Cairo. Whether it’s space to walk on the streets safely – and I’m speaking of both physical and emotional safety – or a space to express myself as an artist in a theater piece, or a film or even an online article. I spent most of my teenage and adult life ‘fighting’ for my right to exist, to take space. Sometimes I would try to shrink myself, perhaps if I’m driving a smaller car, I will be able to do so safely, perhaps if I perform in a small theater, I can escape censorship. Other times I would try to hide myself; I would cover up and make sure I look ‘flat’ front and back in my clothes before taking to the streets. Both strategies never amounted to much, no matter how small of a space I asked for, I always felt like a pressure cooker.

I grew up in Alexandria, Egypt’s so called second capital city, but unlike Cairo, quite small, conservative and set in its ways. But like many other girls of my generation in different parts of Egypt, I had my share of the struggle against society and patriarchy. It doesn’t take a rebel, regardless of what you say or do, if you are a woman in Egypt and intending to have a life different than that of your coffee table, you will most evidently and certainly clash with society at one point or the other.

At the age of 17 I moved to Cairo to study broadcasting journalism, and after few years of working in the media and the disappointments of the early twenties I found my way to theater. In 2007, I joined the BuSSy project; a performing arts project that documents

gender-based stories of women and men through closed storytelling workshops, and organizes public storytelling performances where women and men step on stage and share their own stories. The project's focus was to offer a voice to the untold stories of women and men in Egypt, and that involved a very big pool of taboo topics harassment being on the top list. That pool of taboo topics also included gender-based violence, sex, marital rape, circumcision, abortion, incest, early marriage, child abuse ... and so on. Finding and joining BuSSy felt like finally finding my mother ship. I was always passionate about women's stories, and always felt a deep urge to share the stories I've personally been through that were haunting me and weighing me down with guilt and shame. For over 10 years I felt BuSSy provided me with the artistic form I longed for and needed. BuSSy provided me with a coping mechanism, a space where I can be and speak my truth. But as the project started growing and expanding, similar to the journey of a young girl hitting puberty and facing the reactions of people on the street as they watch her body change into that of a woman, the project started going through what felt like wall punching. Outside the walls of the small rooms, we used for our storytelling workshops, it was always very difficult to find space.

In 2012 during the euphoric aftermath of the revolution in 2011, we organized a short performance with another cultural organization in the women's only subway carriages.

This was as close as I ever got to street performances and accessing public spaces. Together with another dear friend and storyteller in the project, we would ride the metro do a joint storytelling performance then leave and take another metro and so on. We were performing a collection of women's stories about harassment, discrimination, gender-based violence, marriage and motherhood. We would first introduce ourselves and our project and take permission to share. But even at a time as open and euphoric as that time was, it was still very difficult. We decided we would only perform in the women's carriage to avoid the controversy of "it's improper to talk about those things in front of men". And to make use of the intimacy and sense of some safety that the women only carriages provided, after all we knew about the endless harassment stories that took place in those mixed gender carriages.

During the performances, some women were moved and started sharing their own stories after we were done, some encouraged us, and some were quite physical in their expression of disapproval. After the second performance a woman decided to call us traitors and pull our hair and drag us to the police. We managed to escape the beating because our partner organization had insisted, we move with two hired male bodyguards, so once we took off the metro, they were there to protect us. But what I remember as more difficult and painful, were the hurtful remarks from some women. I remember vividly the face of a woman who shouted, "stop this shit you make me want to puke", when I was halfway through a story that was actually my very own, about harassment.

At the end of many performances, we noticed that a young girl, around 14 or 15 had been following us. I went to her and asked her if she had a question or needed anything, she then started sharing her story of how she ran away from her home because her parents were beating her up badly, and that she is unable to return now because she's no longer 'a girl' (she lost her virginity), and if they find out they'll kill her. We offered to money, we offered to take her number and connect her with someone who can help her, but she refused both,

all she needed was to be heard she said, and left. Every woman is looking for a space to exist, and be heard, regardless of who we are and where we come from, this deep and urgent need always seemed to connect us somehow.

During a movement workshop facilitated by my friend Shaymaa Shoukry, a brilliant dancer, choreographer and movement coach, with one of the groups of women we were working with on a performance, Shaymaa asked the women to walk across the room like the normally walked on the streets. Then she stopped and said, we walk with our shoulders hunched over, trying to hide the breasts we were born with, and shrinking our bodies, why?

This is when it really hit me how we aren't just struggling for spaces for our voices, but for our own bodies as well.

Egypt has always had very strict and limiting censorship on all forms of artistic expression. Since forever, we've had censorship entities that have the power to authorize publications, music, films and theaters. And without their authorization the artist is like a runaway bandit every time he or she produces any work and tries to show it somewhere in public. And most of the theaters and cinema places are under strict supervision by the state. So, for what we call 'underground artists' the options are very limited. In the past couple of years, the underground scene started shrinking because many independent spaces either shut down or succumbed to state laws in reaction to pressure and threats from the state, or out of fear of ending up behind bars because of a song or an exhibition. It is a very difficult time for performing arts in Egypt.

I've organized in BuSSy over 60 performances since I joined in 2007, in Cairo and other Cities around Egypt. We've performed in theater spaces and spaces that we turned into theater spaces; gardens, libraries, classrooms, garage, flats ... We tried to make our way into state owned spaces and got kicked out several times, and very few other times made it into a couple. But overall, we were able to perform, we were able to find a space for the stories we were carrying to the audience. Even if we ended up at times performing to an audience as little as 20 people, but we were performing and we had an audience. Today I'm not sure I can say this is still possible. There aren't many spaces left, and the risks are very high, before, during and after the performance. Unless we submit to the state laws and value system and censor the personal stories, we had vowed to their owners never to censor.

Reflecting on the past 10 years of working in theater I've come to realize that may be the old strategies me and other women out there have been using; to hide or shrink ourselves ... aren't really the way to go. Now when I drive or walk the streets of Cairo, I focus on doing the exact opposite. I look in the mirror before I go down and I remind myself to walk with my back straight, my head held and my arms not hiding any part of me. I remind myself to walk with precision and intent to take space. I will not ask or beg for space or walk defensively anticipating the next attack like a soldier in a war zone. I will walk knowing this is my space, this is my right to exist, and to express. If what it takes is going back to what sounds like a 1950's struggle, so be it.

**Salma El Tarzi**

Salma El Tarzi is a Cairo-based filmmaker, visual artist and essayist. Her independent directorial debut, *Do You Know Why?* (2004), won the Rotterdam Arab Film Festival Silver Award. In 2013, she directed her first feature-length documentary, *Underground/On The Surface*, which explores the local subculture of electro-shaabi music (also known as *mahraganat*) and won the 2013 Dubai International Film Festival award for best directing. That year, she returned to painting and drawing after a 14-year-long hiatus, culminating in the completion of a co-authored nonfiction graphic novel on institutional and societal gender-based violence during the first years of the 2011 uprising in Egypt to be released in 2021. Since then, she has authored another autobiographical artist book that was launched in February 2020, in parallel to an ongoing research project about the representation of desire and normalization of rape culture in mainstream Egyptian cinema: *Yataman Wa Honna El Raghebat* (*They refuse but they want*).

**Sondos Shabayek**

Sondos Shabayek is a writer, filmmaker, scriptwriter and director. She worked as the Director of The BuSSy project, a performing arts project that documents gender based stories and presents them on stage. She has over 10 years of experience in facilitating storytelling workshops, documenting personal narratives and directing public performances. She is also the Founder & Director of Tahrir Monologues, a performance of true stories from Egypt's revolution. She wrote and directed award winning *Girl*, a short film about harassment in Cairo. She also wrote *The night before*, a short film about Female genital mutilation (FGM). Prior to her work in theater and film, she studied Mass communication and broadcasting and she worked for more than 6 years as journalist and editor. Her journalistic work focused on exploring, exposing and discussing social taboos in Egyptian society.