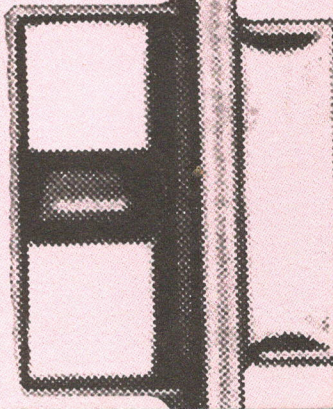
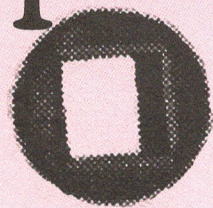


These
are the
tools
of the
present



Colophon

These are the tools of the present Beirut Cairo

The interviews in this publication are commissioned research by Mophradat, and took place between February 2016 and February 2017.

Interviews

Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Mounira Al Solh, Andeel, Maurice Louca, Jasmina Metwaly, Joe Namy, Nile Sunset Annex, Roy Samaha, Sharif Sehnaoui, and Rania Stephan, conducted by Christophe Wavelet

Doa Aly, Haig Aivazian, Mirene Arsanios, Malak Helmy, and Mahmoud Khaled, conducted by Lauren Wetmore

Iman Issa, conducted by November Paynter

Editors

Mai Abu ElDahab (commissioner), Marnie Slater (editor), and November Paynter (associate editor)

Assistant editor

Lauren Wetmore

Copyediting

Jenifer Evans

Transcription

Clare Noonan

Translation of Sharif Sehnaoui interview

Simon M. Benedict

Design

Julie Peeters

Design assistance

Ferre Marnef

Copublishers

*Mophradat
Rue Guillaume Tell 57
Brussels 1060
Belgium
www.mophradat.org*

*Sternberg Press
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Interview
with

Nile Sunset Annex

Cairo,

June 2016

You both have
distinct practices
individual artists
and together as
Nile Sunset Annex

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Jenifer,
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You both have two
distinct practices:
individual artistic practices
and together as
Nile Sunset Annex.

Jenifer Evans:

We've also got third practices, each of us: tractors and editing.

Taha Belal:

Acto Trade is my father's company. They import agricultural machinery, like tractors, small flour-making machines, animal feed, and tillers, the things that you attach to tractors. I spend three days a week in the office there, and I rotate the job with my sister. We both recently got involved. I don't know if I've learned so much, but I've certainly observed a lot of very interesting things.

Jenifer,
how did you
start editing?

J:

I think it was about seven years ago when I moved to Egypt and I didn't have a job. I was just kind of doing anything I could and one of the things was babysitting and another was proofreading, and proofreading led to copy editing, and then Lina Attalah offered me a job at the newspaper *Egypt Independent* in 2010, and she's still my boss now at [the culture and news site] *Mada Masr*.

How did you start
Nile Sunset Annex
and where does
the name come from?

J:

I'd done a pop-up exhibition—I guess you can call it that—with Hady Aboukamar, an American-Egyptian artist from New Jersey, on the roof of the building where Taha lived with Hady. It was just up during the hours of sunset, when the sun went down you couldn't see it anymore, and we took it down. It's quite a nice roof overlooking the Nile, so we called it the Nile Sunset Gallery. When we started talking about setting up a space, like a spare room where we could invite people to put up work for a bit, we were thinking of it being fairly informal, and Taha suggested we call

it Nile Sunset Annex after that show. We opened our first show in January 2013, and the three of us worked together for maybe eight or nine months.

How did you meet each other?

J:

Through Hady, the third Nile Sunset Annex person who's not part of it anymore. He was traveling quite a bit and moved away the year after we started Nile Sunset Annex, he went to London to study in order to become a counselor. At Nile Sunset Annex there are these three big sheets of glass that are painted. They are from a show that he did with us, but during that show he decided he no longer wanted to be an artist, he was more interested in creating spaces than forms.

T:

It was a fascinating show to watch in a way because he transformed it ten or twelve times ...

J:

... to try and see if it could work better in a different way, and by the end he was like, "No, none of it works."

T:

Hady had a piece in the Nile Sunset Annex space and others on the roof. On the opening night it was very extravagant or very complicated technically, and some of it worked and some of it didn't. The next weekend he shifted it to make one big installation, kind of in a central space, and then the weekend after he sent e-mails to specific people inviting them to come and have a drink on the roof in front of this one thing.

How did Nile Sunset Annex come about?

J:

We, especially Taha and I, were talking about artist-run spaces that we'd seen in the cities that we'd been living in previously; I had been living in London and Taha had been living in San Francisco. We were both connected in an informal way to artist-run spaces in those places. We talked a lot about things that we were dissatisfied with in art exhibitions here, and, as a response, we wanted to fill a niche that we felt wasn't being filled. We wanted to have a focus on objects because we felt like there weren't many exhibitions showing physical art, that would like block your way, you

How did you select the different shows you put

know. The focus was on digital video and photography; stuff that could be sent as a file basically.

T:

I think we should mention the funding aspect. One of the first things we talked about was not wanting to waste time on grant applications and then after the exhibition filling out reports, or dealing with politics and administrative work.

J:

And we also felt that funding would produce specific kind of productions and we were less interested in political and social issues—I mean it's not that we're not interested in those things, but we wanted to have more of an emphasis on form.

How do you fund Nile Sunset Annex?

J:

Through our other jobs. We are quite fortunate in that we live in a relatively large apartment, so we have the space, and we have jobs, I mean obviously we're not rich, but we're wealthy enough that we can manage to do it. We also keep costs down a lot, either by fabricating artworks ourselves for the artists, or we have quite good relationships with a few craftspeople who have made stuff for us.

There's been a couple of things that we had to spend a lot of money on unexpectedly, but it kind of worked out. We try and split the cost with the artist three ways: the artist and me and Taha. But sometimes the artist doesn't have any money, so, you know, we help out. For one show, with Mahmoud Khaled in June 2013, Aleya Hamza (founder of Gypsum Gallery) contributed an iPod because that was part of the work. Now she's got the work in her gallery. Some shows are totally free, or at least to us, because if someone's got a painting practice that they've been working on, then they just bring some paintings.

How did you select the different shows you put on?

T:

In the very beginning we sent e-mails to people whose work we liked, including Doa Aly for example, and Maha Maamoun. We were just trying because it was also short notice. I think we started sending out e-mails in December and we wanted to start in January. I don't remember

114 how Faten El Disouky's work came up, but we saw it at an exhibition at MASS Alexandria the year before and she responded to our e-mail. That was great because the original exhibition was only a week or two long and it was in Alexandria. She was happy with the idea of showing it in Cairo, so that was our first show in January 2013.

For other shows, it was a mix between us hearing about somebody or seeing somebody's work or being recommended somebody's work and then somebody coming to us with a project or something that they wanted to do that we were also excited about. Because we wanted to do exhibitions quite regularly we also had to come up with exhibition ideas of our own for a couple of shows, like the drawing show and the embroidery show.

J:

For the second show we did, "What Are You Doing, Drawing?," we invited fifteen artists to make a drawing, but in the widest sense of the term, and the results were really varied. Some of them were not really very interesting at all, but because it was the first time we had invited people to do anything like that, we hadn't realized that we should have asked people to propose something rather than submit something, because we had to show everything that we got. In the end we had to make the show itself into an artwork about that. It was quite a weird-looking show and it was really crowded as well because there were all these things. There were a couple of works that were actually really good and in retrospect it would've been exciting just to show those really great works [laughter], but I think we dealt with that kind of OK.

T:

There was also a show the month before in the art space Beirut [that existed in Cairo from 2012–15]. It was called "What Does a Drawing Do?"

J:

So we kind of responded to that.

Was Beirut also an artist-run space?

J:

It was run by people who did not have an artistic practice, they weren't really makers of things. I think it does make a space quite different because one of the things about us doing this, is that we're not very interested in theory, we just don't have that background. So there is often like a theoretical void in what where doing [laughter]. It's true and some

How do you work together when you have an exhibition?

Where did "The Embroidery Show" come from?

people find it really annoying and problematic. But we are much better at making stuff, fabricating work, and helping the artist do those things.

How do you work together when you produce an exhibition?

J:

I think it varies a bit, right?

T:

Yeah.

J:

I think one of the things is that Taha is really nice, as you've probably noticed. So that means he's very good at just being nice about things. I think that's a really important part of how we've worked together because it means that if I make a really annoying suggestion, Taha doesn't say, "That suggestion is really annoying," he just tries to kind of work with it and figure out how to make it better!

T:

We've shared certain situations now, and I understand that Jenifer is both very determined but also very open. When we started, I didn't really know Jenifer well at that point and the three of us hadn't really worked together before. The first show, the one with Faten, was really simple for us as producers because it was a matter of bringing the work, putting it there, deciding whether to show two or three works. The drawing show on the other hand was quite a challenge because we had to make our own decisions and make it into an artwork, or curate as artists. We'd each invited different people that we knew and we all had preferences as to which work should be in a more prominent place, so it was an interesting negotiation.

Where did the idea for "The Embroidery Show" come from?

J:

Well my partner Andeel, his grandmother was a seamstress during the Nasserist period of the late 1950s and 1960s. She was an illiterate woman from the lower working class and she married a lawyer, but he was communist so he was put in prison. They already had a few children at that point, so she

had to support the family. She started, I guess she knew how to sew, so she started sewing for other people who would see a film in the cinema and they'd want a specific outfit from the film, and so she'd try and recreate it. I don't know why I thought it would be good to show those works though?

T:

I think you'd seen them not so long before and had liked them. At that time we were really keen on doing shows regularly, no matter what.

J:

We thought that existing institutions in Cairo had quite irregular shows, you could go a month without seeing a new show quite easily—or at least in the institutions that we would go to, like the Contemporary Image Collective or Townhouse Gallery. Mashrabia Gallery was more regular but there were fewer shows that we were really into. And even then, there were a lot of gaps generally because of the political situation—Mashrabia is also just off Tahrir Square.

We were also really interested in what could be.

Can it be something that you wouldn't necessarily think of being art? So we showed these embroidery works, and we paired each one with a chair, which is why we ended up making copies of chairs by Lina Bo Bardi, Mary Heilmann, Richard Artschwager, Etienne Bossut, Martino Gamper, which is made out of a bicycle. What else?

T:

We did the bench by Leah Rosenberg.

J:

There was also a David Hammons, he had done a project in Alexandria which involved a chair being chained up.

T:

We've been interested in copies ever since we started. I think there is a thrill in remaking something and kind of pretending that it is by an artist even though it is obviously a copy.

J:

Then we could say, "We're having this very exciting show with all these big names, and it just happens to have some embroidery in it too."

Would you say that part of Nile Sunset Annex in the beginning was fueled by the energy that came as a result of the Revolution?

Did you have an average duration for each show?

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How do you fund the publication?

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J:

We opened almost exactly two years after, I think we opened on January 19. I think it is so difficult to tell because our lives are so bound up with what's going on in the country, but then there's also all these other things which are kind of independent from that, like where we are in our own artistic practices, who we're friends with at a certain time, what place we want to be in, so I'm not sure ... In retrospect I would say that, compared to now, it was such an energized moment because there was a lot more hope in the country and in us. But then it's difficult, maybe we would've done it anyway, even if the Revolution hadn't happened.

Did you have an average duration for each show?

J:

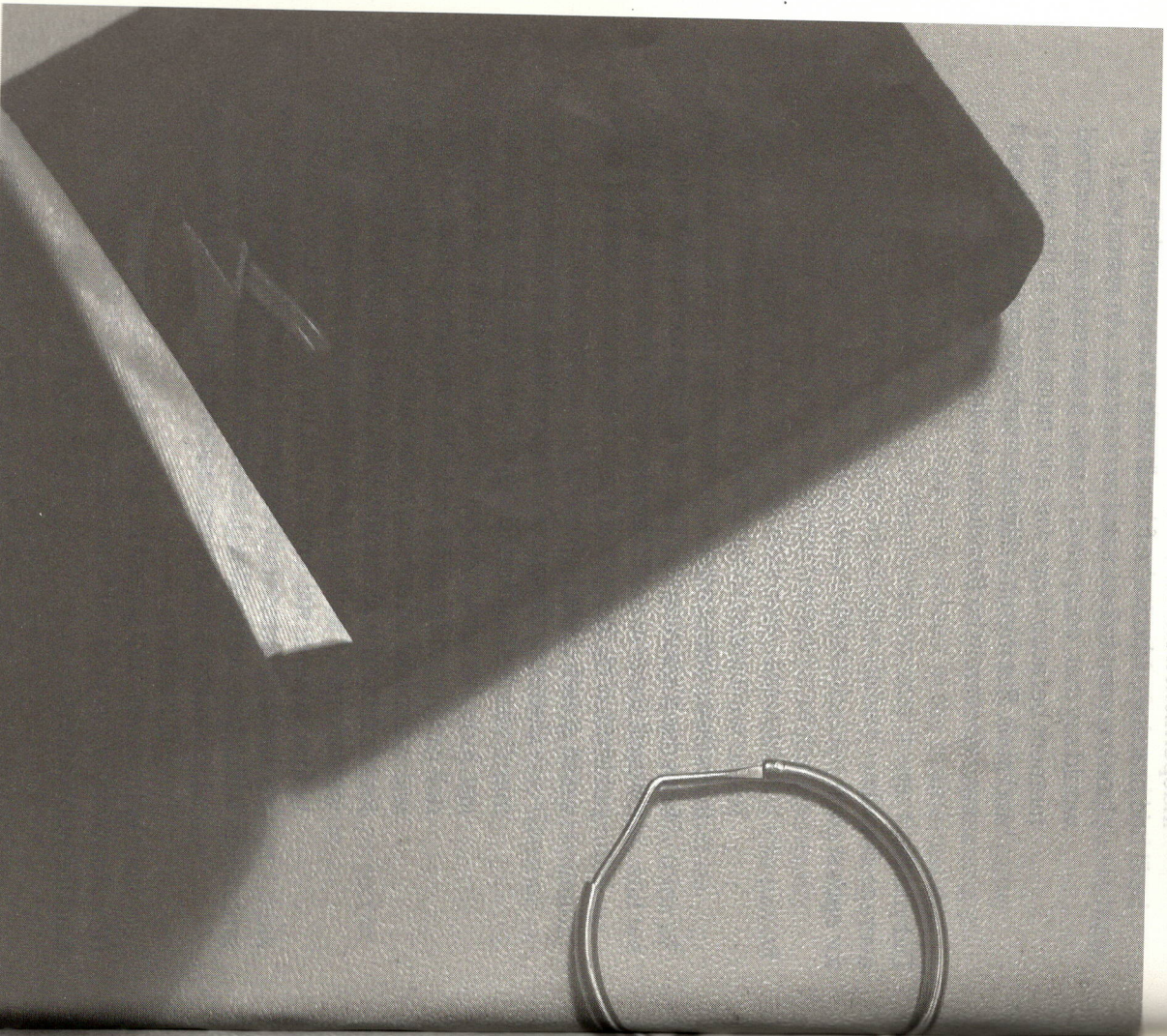
Yes, so we wanted to have every show for a month, every five weeks, with a week in between for the install. And right from the beginning we wanted to produce a publication for each show as well. The idea originally was to launch the publication by the end of the corresponding show, but now we've gotten really behind on the publications.

Currently we are working on three publications. One of them is for Paul Simon Richards, who's an artist we showed last June, his show was called "Voices" and it was a huge soft doll lying on the ground and a libretto of frog noises. Paul wants to make an earring as the publication. And then Taha, for his show this May, called "I'm Not Obligated to Do This," wants to make a pop-up book. But we've never done that before so we're still working out the technicalities of it. For my show, "Worms and Passports: Let the Floodgates Open?," which was also in May, I am writing a little book as well, which is a collage of found and original texts, and it's going to have illustrations.

How do you fund the publications?

J:

The same way that we have been funding the shows. We always work with the same printer, who is not the cheapest but is very reliable and we're always very last-minute and they manage to deal with that. The first one we produced



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Paul Simon Richards' publica-
tion for Nile Sunset Annex, 2016.
gold-plated brass earring, edition
five, handmade in the workshop
Zeinab Khalifa. Photo: Taha Bejal
Courtesy Nile Sunset Annex.

was a short untitled story by Motaz Attalla, who's a comedian and education researcher who now lives in California. He writes these really beautiful, very short stories, kind of like flash fiction. We translated it and made it into the shape of a slide because one of the main works in that first show was a huge slide coming out of the wall. The paper was quite heavy paper, so it became a kind of object. The second publication was more expensive because it was a record. We asked artists and musicians to respond with a one-minute track to one of the works in the drawing show, and then we recorded a dub-plate at 100Copies, which is a music space in downtown.

T:

And then another publication, *It's Never Too Late to Talk About Love* with Mahmoud Khaled, again was a more expensive one. We were not sure how many copies to make, which is a conversation we have each time. But then sometimes we manage to sell a few, like with Mahmoud's we had a launch event where we sold ...

J:

But we never sell enough to make our money back. We always have very high hopes. We think, "Oh, this one's so desirable and people are gonna love it!" And then we ...

T:

... sell about twenty.

J:

We don't really distribute at all [*laughter*]. We just hope that people will come by, but people will not come by anymore because we're not going to have the space exist for a while. We have this idea that we want to focus more on publishing now, and we've got a couple of collaborations that we want to do. I think we want to get a bit more serious about distribution.

How do you see the changes for Nile Sunset Annex, especially since you decided recently to stop having a space for a while?

J:

One thing we can say is that our focus on objects has become less relevant since the gallery Gypsum started up, for example. Also, a lot of people have left since we started, and that's had some sort of impact on us because I think our core

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audience has dispersed. And a lot of the artists that we've shown aren't here anymore. Most of them.

What's the relationship between what you are doing here in Cairo and when you show elsewhere?

J:

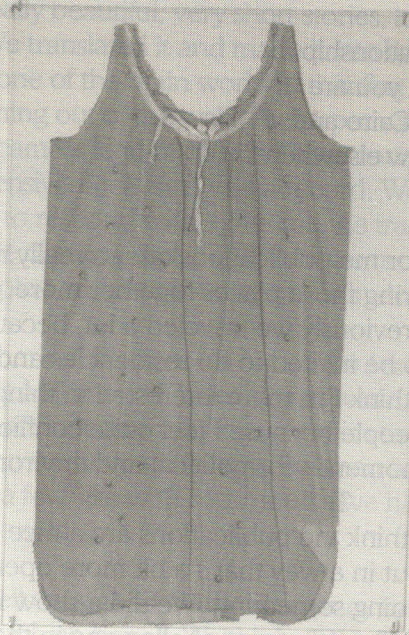
For me publications offer a really nice way to potentially bring those places together more, which is kind of cool. Previously we traveled a lot, because we were very lucky to be invited to do residencies and partake in meetings, but I think I'm more interested in things moving rather than people because I feel quite conflicted about travel at the moment—for political and environmental reasons.

T:

I think the publications are a nice way of getting the word out in a way that's a bit more open than us traveling and doing something. We did a show in San Francisco at Haines Gallery that was challenging in that sense. The expectations—our expectations and their expectations—were quite different. In the end we did something that I think we liked, but it was also in hindsight something that we would do differently if we did it again.

J:

Sometimes, because you're coming from a particular place then you can also be seen as representative of that art scene. In San Francisco this was something that we were trying really hard to avoid. But some guy wrote a review about the exhibition we did that was about the politics in Egypt and the noise in Cairo, and, you know, it was extremely simple and Orientalist, and he hadn't really looked at the work at all. We thought the show was very formal, and that it was all about doubles and copies, but he didn't even notice that they were doubles or copies or anything! *[laughs]* It was kind of amazing! It was a bit of a shock that despite all our efforts it could be totally hijacked *[laughs]*.



"The Embroidery Show," 2013,
detail showing embroidery by
Samira Ahmed Salim and chair by
Lina Bo Bardi. Photo: Jo Hempel.
Courtesy Nile Sunset Annex.