



Bring a camera with you: the posthumous collaboration of Ahmed Basiony and Shady El Noshokaty

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***‘Bring a Camera with You’:
The Posthumous Collaboration of
Ahmed Basiony and Shady El Noshokaty***

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I investigate the role of digital technology and its relationship to gesture in the posthumous collaboration of Ahmed Basiony and Shady El Noshokaty, drawing upon the philosophy of Bernard Stiegler. Picking up where Basiony left off, El Noshokaty frames the presentation of two seemingly disconnected videos—documentation of a performance that Basiony was preparing for the 2011 Venice Biennale and his footage from the Tahrir Square protests where he was killed—resulting in *30 Days of Running in the Place*. This fulfillment is possible due to what Stiegler refers to as epiphylogenesis, or the development of new ways of being through technological innovation. Digital technology has introduced new forms of tertiary retentions, or the process of externalising memories beyond the fragility of living beings into the facticity of the non-living, affecting how these are externalized and shared. Stiegler describes how the repetition of tertiary retentions can lead to indifference, as images and sounds are played back over and over again, dulling the senses of human recipients as they are transformed into passive consumers, resulting in symbolic misery, or lost of participation in the symbolic. The development of new forms of participation that attempt to re-develop and re-use these technologies provide platforms for coming together and becoming together. Drawing from Stiegler’s relationship between aesthetics and politics, specifically his understanding that a political community is one that comes together and feels together, I describe how El Noshokaty fulfills Basiony’s gesture while presenting a new means of participation that offers an escape from symbolic misery. In this action of common becoming, the artists present dedication to the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of a better society.

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I.

On January 25, 2011, protests began in the Arab Republic of Egypt that would soon transform the political future of that nation. On January 28, which is now referred to as the “Friday of Rage,” Egyptian artist and activist Ahmed Basiony was killed as the result of police sniper-fire during protests in Tahrir Square. At that time, the artist was preparing a proposal for the Egyptian national pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale. After his death, the in-progress work was presented as *Thirty Days of Running in the Place*. Some of the video in this work, which consists of five-channels of projected video, includes documentation of a performance, originally presented in 2010, where Basiony wore a sensor-fused plastic suit that calculated the levels of sweat produced and the number of steps taken while jogging in place for one hour every day over a period of thirty days. The data was presented as a grid of colored squares that was projected live during the performance for the audience to see. Created using open source programming, in this piece, Basiony focuses on the act of being consumed and the transformation of energy from bodily waste—sweat and heat—to fuelling an aesthetic manifestation as he runs in place. This is also the work he was initially proposing for the Biennale pavilion. Other video presents footage of the Tahrir square uprisings filmed by Basiony just prior to his death. The pairing of these two videos is jagged and confusing. The juxtaposition is intentionally uncoordinated with the interplay of images differing with each viewing: even though each channel plays the same 12-minute looped footage, they play at different times. Both videos were created by the artist, though he did not envision their final presentation. The final version of the work was conceived of posthumously by a friend of the artist and a curator of the Egyptian Pavilion: Shady El Noshokaty.

In this paper, I investigate the role of digital technology and its relationship to gesture in the posthumous collaboration of Basiony and El Noshokaty, drawing upon the philosophy of Bernard Stiegler. Picking up where Basiony left off, El Noshokaty frames the presentation of these two seemingly disconnected videos by relating the span of the artist’s life, thirty-two years, to that of the government of former Egyptian president Muhammad Hosni El Sayed Mubarak. Mubarak served as president from 1981 to 2011 and Basiony died at the age of 32—making him just as old

as Mubarak's regime, which the protests of 2011 helped bring to an end. El Noshokaty describes how the videos juxtapose the energy wasted by a person through the act of jogging in place with the energy wasted by a nation (El Noshokaty, 2012). Basiony initiated the work with his artistic gestures present in the original performance. He then died in the midst of performing gestures of protest. El Noshokaty brings together these aesthetic gestures and political gestures through the final presentation of the Biennale installation. While there have been numerous studies regarding the role of social media in enabling the "Arab Spring" of 2011 (see Castells, 2012; Shahine, 2011; Wolfsfeld et. al, 2013), the significance of *Thirty Days of Running in the Place* emerges from the ability of one artist to carry on the aesthetic and political gestures of another.

Posthumous collaboration can simply be defined as when a living artist completes the work of a dead artist. For example, after an extensive collaborative practice while alive, German-French Dadaist Hans Arp continued to collaborate with his wife, Sophie Taeuber, after her death in 1943. According to Renée Riese Hupert, Arp tore drawings they created together, forming collages that function as "ways of denying the spouse's death. There she remained a living force and her work served as an inspiration" (Hubert, 1993, p. 26). More recently, artists Civia Rosenberg and May Stevens created *Crossings*, in which both women made art from the photographs of their deceased sons. In response to these works, Andrea Liss states: "[k]eeping the departed one close yet not completely absorbing his spirit into that of the living is an apt and poignant metaphor for incomplete incorporation of the other and 'impossible' mourning" (Liss, 2009, p. 144). Referring to Jacques Derrida, Liss describes how impossible mourning "refuses Sigmund Freud's concept of complete incorporation of the other for a less overwhelming concept of one's embrace of the other's leaving" (Liss, 2009, p. 144). This process allows for the deceased to remain as other, permitting him to remain external through death. It is a respectful acknowledgement both of the other as other, but also of his passing. Art of this nature, according to Liss, can function as an intersubjective space that invites mourning and healing. As these examples show, posthumous collaboration is not novel—there are various instances of artists, writers, and composers completing the works of others after death. However, the circumstances surrounding the untimely death of Basiony are what make

this particular partnership notable.

El Noshokaty's ability to collaborate post-humously and subsequently carry on Basiony's aesthetic and political gestures is possible due to what Bernard Stiegler refers to as epiphylogenesis, or technical evolution (Stiegler, 1998). Inspired by the anthropological work of André Leroi-Gourhan regarding the relationship between gesture and technology, Stiegler argues that humanity and technology are not autonomous. Rather, they have co-evolved as memories are systemized by means of technology into inheritable communities and cultures. Epiphylogenesis is produced by tertiary retentions, or the process of externalizing memories beyond the fragility of living beings into the facticity of technics, which includes writing, physical objects, sound recordings, photographic imagery, and video. Stiegler states:

Epiphylogenesis, time spaced and space temporalized, is the sedimentary store of events among which we live without knowing it. It is memory that is transmitted down the generations (which haunt and *spiritualize* each other). Being spatialized it is exteriorized and retained *in the facticity of the non-living* — protected from the *fragility* of the living (Stiegler, 2014, p. 33).

When defining tertiary retentions, Stiegler builds upon Edmund Husserl's distinction between perception and imagination. To clarify, primary retention, or perception, is a person's retention of memories as experiences unfold. For example, when having a conversation, primary retention occurs when the meaning of each word informs the meaning of proceeding words. It exists as a passing present. Secondary retention, or imagination, is the retention of memories that belong to the past as the memories that each individual develops. It occurs when I am able to recall a conversation from my memories using my imagination. Stiegler adds the notion of tertiary retention to this model, treating technology as "a prosthesis, memory externalized" (Stiegler, 2014, p. 34). Tertiary retention occurs when memories are externalized through technology. If I recorded a conversation and play back the recording, then that is an example of tertiary retention.

These can take explicitly mnemonic forms, such as video and writing, but also, non-mnemonic forms. For example, again referring to Leroi-

Gourhan, Stiegler describes how certain tools, such as those created from flint, were vital to the early development of humanity. These tools are artificial organs; contributing to the functionality of the human body. At the same time, the tools hold a record of human manufacture, as they rely upon certain operational sequences and gestures that are passed down through their creation and use (Stiegler, 1998). Therefore, according to Stiegler, there is a connection between tools and gestures, technics and language, that make tertiary retentions possible: “cortex and tools are differentiated together, in one and the same movement” (Stiegler, 1998, p. 176). Digital technology introduces new forms of tertiary retention, as it revolutionizes how memories are retained and shared. Words, images, and other traces are now codified through micro-electronic structures that are subject to the algorithms of search engines “that automate reading and writing, and that index, ‘tag’ and categorize the new metalanguages [...] — the totality of which results in generalized traceability and trackability” (Stiegler, 2015a, pg. 7). Thus, digital technology introduces new kinds of *hypomnēmata*, or external memory supports, where new conditions for repetition become possible (Stiegler, 2015b).

In his original performance, Basiony uses digital technology customized for this particular purpose using open source programming as a means of translating his kinaesthetic actions into visual data. His physical entropy is externalised and presented visually as a grid of colors. He also uses video to document this performance; just like, he utilizes video in order to capture the Tahrir Square protests. Basiony’s body is both his artistic tool and means of protest; however, his gestures do not cease upon his death. Instead, because his actions are externalised as tertiary retentions, they are deferred and inherited by El Noshokaty. Even though El Noshokaty was not present at the Tahrir Square protests, tertiary retentions allow him to collaborate posthumously. He shares Basiony’s final moments with us along with his aesthetic and political desires. The footage becomes the impetus for collective action as these memories are transmitted to the audience. The phrase “bring a camera with you” is taken from one of Basiony’s final Facebook posts, in which he describes how people can prepare for the protests in Tahrir Square:

It is necessary to be fully equipped while participating in the revolu-

tion: a bottle of vinegar to overcome the tear gas, protective masks and tissues to inhale vinegar, self-defense sprays, athletic shoes, Pradoral tablets, food and drinks... It is prohibited to use violence against security agents and to insult them. Vandalism is also forbidden for this is our country. Bring a camera with you and don't be afraid or weak. January 27 at 12:09 am (Basiony 2011).

Mixed within this list of bodily protection and safety measures is the mention of a camera: what can be an artistic tool, a means of capturing joyful life moments, or in this instance, an opportunity to make history concrete and share it with others. This statement emphasizes the importance that Basiony placed on documenting these events, and is itself also a tertiary retention. Tertiary retentions preserve memories, but also political and aesthetic gestures.

Through tertiary retentions, epiphylogenesis provides conditions for collectivity—the constitution of a *we* (Stiegler, 2014). Tertiary retentions also make it possible to have identical repetition of the same temporal object (such as video). However, this repetition can have different impacts. On the one hand, Stiegler describes how the same temporal object can produce different temporal phenomena, which means that the primary retention, or perception, of this phenomenon, may vary. Each time a recording is played, the perception of it can differ, which in turn impacts how the imagination recalls the recording. Every iteration holds the potential for difference. On the other hand, the repetition of tertiary retentions can lead to indifference, as images and sounds are played back over and over again, dulling the senses of human recipients as they are transformed into passive consumers:

[T]emporal recordings that have become tertiary, which is to say recorded [...], are time materialized and they organize the relationship between primary and secondary retentions in general, allowing for their control. And difference can be annulled by tertiary retentions just as much as it can be intensified by them: repetition can lead to indifference (Stiegler, 2014, p. 34-5).

Specifically, during the twentieth century, technological development encouraged its users to behave as consumers, especially when deployed

through marketing. Stiegler states: “[t]he audiovisual techniques of marketing lead, moreover, to a situation where, through the images I see and the sounds I hear, my past tends to become the same as my neighbor’s” (Stiegler, 2014, p. 6). Pasts become less differentiated as individuals lose their singularity, resulting in what Stiegler refers to as symbolic misery, or “the loss of individuation which results from the *loss of participation* in the *production of symbols*. Symbols here being as much the fruits of intellectual life (concepts, ideas, theorems, knowledge) as of sensible life (arts, know-how, mores)” (Stiegler, 2014, p. 10).

However, Stiegler does not believe that we need to resign ourselves to this fate: “It is certainly not a matter of condemning the industrial and technological fate of humanity. Rather, it is a case of reinventing this fate” (Stiegler, 2014, p. 6). The development of new forms of participation that attempt to re-develop and re-use these technologies provide platforms for coming together and becoming together. I propose that the posthumous collaboration of Basiony and El Noshokaty involves these new kinds of participation. The work is the result collective production that serves different functions for each of the artists, allowing them to come together intersubjectively. The work carries traces of Basiony’s aesthetic and political intentions through the performance video and the protest videos. Notably, the work remains under the name of Ahmed Basiony, and by placing the dates of his birth and death under his name, it is clear that he is deceased. These details are also reinforced in curatorial statements. Basiony is explicitly presented as the primary artist.

However, El Noshokaty submitted the proposal and work in place of Basiony. As such, the videos have different meanings for the two artists, with neither being lost in the presentation of the work. The performance video was Basiony’s initial prototype for the Biennale exhibition while the protest video was the documentation of history in the making — two distinctive pieces of footage that are both significant to Basiony, though not originally envisioned to appear in tandem. El Noshokaty brings these two together, merging Basiony’s artistic vision with his activist practice — his artistic and political gestures. At the same time, this work functions as a memorial for Basiony: a way to honor his memory by fulfilling his desire to present in the Venice Biennale while preventing his death from becoming lost in the official history of the Tahrir Square uprisings.

For Stiegler, aesthetics and politics are interconnected: “the question of politics is a question of aesthetics and, vice versa, the question of aesthetics is a question of politics” (Stiegler, 2014, p. 1). Notably, his understanding of aesthetics emerges from an expanded notion of *aesthēsis*, or sensory perception, which means aesthetics is defined as “that of feeling and sensibility in general” (Stiegler, 2014, p. 1). However, as Noel Fitzpatrick emphasizes in his reading of Stiegler, the “political calling of the aesthetic should not, however, be confused with a simple question of politically engaged art” (Fitzpatrick, 2014, p. 120). Instead, the politics of art emerges from its shared sensibility and the participation of the other. As Stiegler states:

The question of politics is essentially that of the relation to the other in a feeling-together or *sympathy*. The problem of politics is one of knowing how to be together, to live together, to stand each other and stand together, across and starting from our singularities (much more profound than our ‘differences’) and beyond our conflicts of interest. Politics is the art of securing the unity of the state in its *desire* for a common future, in its in-dividuation, its singularity as becoming-one. Such a desire assumes a common aesthetic ground: being together is feeling together (Stiegler, 2014, p. 10-11).

With *Thirty Days of Running in the Place*, the political content of the work is significant, though the conditions of feeling together involved in its production are vital. This piece, born out of the death of an artist and a governmental regime, attempts to contextualize a historical moment while preserving the intentions and gestures of an individual. It is a piece of passion, of hope, and of impossible mourning; an explosion of art and emotion that grapples with history as it unfolds. In *Thirty Days of Running in the Place*, El Noshokaty carries Basiony’s aesthetic and political gestures. It also functions as an opportunity for El Noshokaty to mourn a friend while capturing the zeitgeist of current events in Egypt, sharing these experiences with the Biennale audience. In this action of common becoming, the artists present dedication to the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of a better society.

2.

Up to this point, I have restricted my discussion in relation to the work of art, *Thirty Days of Running in the Place*. However, there are some questions that emerge from this research that are beyond the scope of this particular paper, though I believe require further analysis. Particularly, *Thirty Days of Running in the Place* was originally presented at the Venice Biennale, a major contemporary art event that is loaded with political and financial implications through its institutional power structures. As this is far from being a neutral platform for the presentation of art, the question emerges: how does this context affect the political reception of the work? In other words, can art presented at the Venice Biennale fulfill Stiegler's criteria for new forms of participation, as the institutional context potentially reinforces the conditions for symbolic misery, specifically patterns of consumer behavior that occur (and can be encouraged) at this event?

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