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Glitch: Art & Technology: Processing media matter
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The political upheavals, topological disruptions, and perpetual fragmentations of present and future lives in the Middle East and North Africa have resurfaced in a novel aesthetic of crisis in the art worlds and digital infrastructures of the region. Glitch: Art & Technology (https://www.facebook.com/events/auc-tahrir-cultural-center/glitch/170253620939407/) is a timely exhibition curated by Los Angeles-based scholar and art curator Shiva Balaghi that focuses on the concept of technical errata and their evidentiary aesthetics in artistic transformations. Across three new galleries on the former campus of the American University in Cairo, on Tahrir Square, the exhibition comprises 13 artists from a variety of disciplines. Balaghi opens her curatorial outline with a nod to German artist Hito Steyerl, emphasising the organic, vulnerable arrangement of our cooperatively and collectively networked lives: 'In today's increasingly fluid media space, images and sounds morph across different bodies and carriers, acquiring more and more glitches and bruises along the way.'[1]

Through the figure of the glitch, the curator references the bond between technical devices, our bodies, the material worlds we inhabit, and assorted, mostly digital, artistic practices. As a system-inherent dysfunctionality or an intentional, aesthetic 'post-procedural flow'[2], glitch interrelates myriad cultural and contextual spaces, electronic operations, social systems, and corporate commodities. 'Glitch' as electronic failure, an erroneous synchronic coupling of a signal in time, space, and different electronic channels, implies a performative event of crisis, an other aesthetic narrative, a digital allegory of random or intentional imperfection. The artworks in the exhibition cover a wide range of artistic practices and media, thereby configuring a complex

understanding of what "glitch" reveals in the here and now of a perennial geopolitical hotspot – the Middle East.

One of the central artists of this exhibition is Laila Shereen Sakr, who works under the moniker VJ Um Amel. The idea of the exhibition's theme and its title came to Shiva Balaghi when she first saw Sakr's photograph *Black Birds*. Printed on canvas, the altered image shows birds flying over a refugee boat in Libya. It depicts a steely atmosphere in which an apparently infinite sky interrupted by the glitched wings of black birds as they are pulled and stretched until they resemble black iron.

Fig. 1: VJ Um Amel, Birds (2015), ink jets on canvas and metal. Courtesy of the artist.

Sakr's work addresses the notion of crisis as both a technocultural materialisation and a geopolitical and subjective process. Her work creates digital interfaces that intersperse the surface structure of visualised data and the matter of images by disclosing a speculative realm between intentionality and forms of interference and technological contingency. The latter interrupts

the flow of streaming fluidity in the realm of digital lives and the hyperaestheticism and often reassuring suture which 'the technically savvy 21st-century human' is so familiar with. Here is 'the distortion and diffusion that we have to navigate when we work our way through data'.[3] The global refugee crisis of the contemporary world we inhabit, so manifest in the representations of refugeeism in times of political, social, and cultural disintegration, is albeit one event that works conceptually in and through what she calls 'glitch resistance'.[4]

Sakr's operation of glitch is one of approaching 'the soul of the machine by expressing the idea that computer malfunctions expose something for which you were not prepared'.[5] Glitch as a kind of interruption and intentional remolding of a given set of data and codes through processing is a materially immanent and affective way to create technospheres through numerical operabilities. Primarily conveyed in the abstraction of glitch form, this dissonance is nothing less than a reconfiguration of the dynamic process of technological rendering, memory cultures, and visual newness. This 'newness' is extended to the mobile digital archive and data collection *R-Shief Portal* (2020) in which Sakr visualises collected data from social media platforms, such as Twitter feeds, on iPads that are hung on the wall. It is an interactive artwork that reconceptualises memory in rhizomatic meanings and forms, the intersubjective memories of political upheavals across the region as much as various other data material that the artist has collected over the last years. Similarly, *Cyborg Montage* (2017–2019) displays the digital alterations and fragments of a self-portrait of the artist, and *Triangular Series* (2015-2017) shift the virtual space of multiple simultaneous frames and forms to the physical surface of a printed image on canvas and paper.

The first work the viewer encounters in the exhibition is Haytham Nawar's vector-based graphic installation *Aish Baladi* – Arabic for 'Egyptian local bread'. This is a very analog reference, a political and cultural icon of hunger and crisis in Egypt, which has been haunted by the transformations of its cultural and geopolitical history since the Pharaonic era. Using Amazon's MTurk, a crowdsourced job-marketplace, Nawar solicited dozens of manual drawings from around the world, then transformed these into graphic representations. These are displayed as black vector drawings, which signify the collective relevance of bread as an organic signifier of hunger and precarity.

Nawar's installation is based on the artist's experiments in relating human and machinic intelligence with creative forms of cultural design ethnographies. According to Nawar, the Collective Bread Project intersects cultural

ethnography and identity formation in a design context that is embedded in human-machine collaborations and provides 'infinite possibilities of collective intelligence'.[6] The project makes visible the worldwide collaboration of users from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, a user-generated creative archive that is employed for artistic and other contributions via crowdsourcing platforms and so-called 'microtasks'. Thus, in a reference to the role of the machine as a universal medium for creating figures and forms, the exhibition expands on the concept and aesthetics of glitch as a contemporary ‚boundary object' by correlating it to different media techniques, digital practices, and, above all, new forms of futurist techno-interaction.

Continuing the structural momentum of post-digital artistic practices, and the extraction of images from their restrictively framed re-presentation in often hybrid meshes, the exhibition features a multitude of glitch ontologies in artistic practices and research. Petra Cortright's digital painting *IRA javaplateset_ LANdesk marche floriste* (2018), a reframed still -life, references intermedial practices of images that are created through layers of software-produced visuals and online images – found footage, so to speak – that are appropriated and altered to create more multi-dimensional objects on a physical medium, in a wooden frame, on linen, paper, aluminium, or on material representing the traditional ground of analog paintings.

Cortright's digital paintings and images appear fully framed and are iconically exhibited on the gallery's walls, while originally being created and produced on computer displays and through computer programmes and graphic software. Seen in the context of her prominent YouTube videos, the impressionist still life of a vase here becomes a digitally futurist canvas with layered traces from web archives. The digital modifications that are displayed as paintings bear methodological analogies to Shahzia Sikander's technical remodelling of Indo-Persion traditions of miniature paintings. Sikander's animated video *The Last Post* (2010) is a digital embodiment of the colonial trade politics of the English East India company and China during the Opium War.

Fig. 2: Shahzia Sikander, The Last Post (2010), animated video, courtesy of the artist.

Glitch thus references the social, aesthetic, medial, and digitally situated structural analogy to crisis politics – not least in times of invisible contagion, biopolitics, and the algorithmic practices of agentive machines. The electronic malfunction that displays abstraction in its aestheticised material form(at) resembles the omnipresence of data fields and hence 'scripted digital realities'. Such performative layers and immanent alterations of images are also part of Jonathon Hexner's landscape photography, which uses the technique of 'overpainting' in analog as well as digital ways. The artist emphasises the processual nature of his work and thereby its poetic impact:

> My work is process. Process is my work. Process if poetry. Poetry is process.[7]

Here, Hexner references the infinite performativity of photography beyond its capacity to witness and to document. The transformation of analogue photography's landscape tradition into a digital art form bears the traces and pitfalls of representation and politics. The civic contract of the medium,[8] here showcased in the inscription of digital post-production, becomes significant in the visibility of the stateless and fugitive citizens of this earth. In Hexner's painting *Black Bird on a White Wire 3* (2013) exhibited in Glitch, the artist displays black birds against 'overpainted' or whiteout barbed wire. The image forms a network of possibilities around vanishing points in a white grid and paints the limits of the sky in a geopolitical world, whilst embodying the infinite possibilities of painterly transformations of digital photography.

The prominent futurist aesthetic of Egyptian-American artist Basim Magdy's installation *Someone Tried to Lock up Time (Generation S)* (2018) invoke the playful sci-fi surfaces of what William Gibson calls 'this newfound state of No Future'[9], a phrase that rejects any notion of a utopian idealism or salvation to come. Magdy's work operates at the intersection of personal memory, political histories, and dystopian future. The walls in Magdy's exhibition corner have been painted in colours of blue, violet, and pink, creating a flashy out-of-space experience in which the artworks are hung as multi-pictorial, framed images-within-images, incorporating different parts, fabrics, and media. The colours of Magdy's installation hint at time's transience and astronomic measurement through different coloured gradations on the wall: the passage of time seen and calculated through the solar system, sunrise, and sunset, as a rite of passage in the age of narcissistic acceleration.

Fig. 3: Basim Magdy, Someone Tried to Lock up Time (Generation S), 2018 – ongoing 4 C-Prints from chemically-altered slides on Fujiflex Metallic material; 45 x 67 cm / 45 x 45 cm, each, overall dimensions 94 x 116 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Gypsum Gallery, Cairo.

The notion of crisis informs not just the surface structure of visualised data, but also the organic material of film in Magdy's work. The chemical alterations of material media, and thus the focus on the matter of images, make visible the relationship between technology and temporal modes of reality.

Magdy 'pickles' the film material by soaking it in acidic household chemicals, thereby receiving, depending on the technological company that produces the film roll, different tinted chromaticity as effects of an organic synthesising of both materials. Thus, Magdy's method of 'film pickling' evokes Deleuze's notion of the 'time-image', and the way the actual and the virtual image, their specific temporality, converge in material ways in order to generate a differently synthesised image.[10] In this way, Magdy's work is one of a number of examples in the exhibition that extends the meaning of glitch to include conceptual, allegedly non-digital artworks, invoking what Michael Betancourt describes as 'the interruptive capacities of art [to] produce an inherent criticism of capitalism that necessarily denies ambivalence by ratifying the audience as passive'.[11]

Extending glitch further into organic and ecological realms, Shady El Noshokaty's *Colony – Rainbow Map* (2019-2020) is the third installment in the extensive multi-episodic artistic research project *Colony* (2013-present). In this mixed-media installation, life and its various ecosystems are narrated as an analogue system that operates as a living ecology and is set up in a large microcosmic glass cabinet. In it, the machinic systems of analog and digital organisms and structural networks unfold as a thermodynamic display case.

El Noshokaty emphasises the idea of movement and radiation in creating whole power systems of energy and physics. Generating light, gravity, and sound and liquid elements, and showcasing the reciprocity of such elements in producing the power engines of our technological and social infrastructures, simulation and its mimetic technique are at the centre of this project. However, El Noshokaty underlays his installation with myriad research approaches and ideas: the shape of his blown-glass sculptures plays a significant role in interrelating metaphysical, mythological, anthropological, and technological networks with one another. The colours of the rainbow, of the so-called 'rainbow map', denote levels of thermodynamics, power, and visual graphics of wave functions and their equation. At the heart of this installation is the idea and virtual form of amplitude in, among other things, light, power, and water. Through different colour schemes of the rainbow-image, we develop an affective and at the same time speculative relation to an analogue Gestell of steel and glass, electricity, and natural elements that represents, according to the artist, digital power structures as well as the anthropological momentum of religious and mythical magic.

The spiritual power of the cultural and religious vernacular in El Noshokaty's installation is materialised in the technique of blowing glass, which, according to the artist, offers a glimpse of transcendental creation and religious mythologies of vitality, birth, and liveliness by referencing instances of blowing and conception in Islam. The artist creates a networked system and deep machinic belly of the transformation of nature, the ecosphere, and the different elements in their interaction; biological strata that envision 'the mathematical/digital world' and 'a parallel virtual universe'. El Noshokaty reconfigures glitch as the effect of a signal and structural disruption that still recreates new and different beginnings that resemble the 'the total collapse and disintegration of the natural structure'.[12]
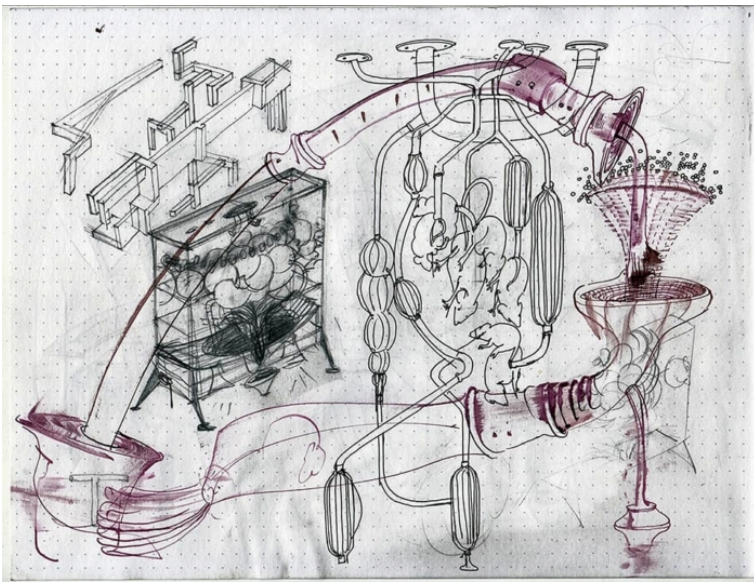

Fig. 4: Shady El Noshokaty, Colony – Rainbow Map (2019-2020), mixed-media installation and drawing. Courtesy of the artist.

Mounir Fatmi's *Circles 02* (2011) seems like a sculptural form comprising cables and fabric, but these materials also suggest the delicate structuring of distance and nearness, interconnectivity and interrupted signals. The arrangement of the work's coaxial antenna cable, staples on plywood, and plexi-case, also reference Descartes' circle formula of tangential lines, their radius and complementary/kissing tangent. Fatmi's sculptural fabric resembles analogue or material extensions of glitch moments of the digital space,

the machine, the planet, and its networked wires of connectivity. It is the entire world in a microcosmic artistic space, the exhibition, that is connected and perforated with cable networks and infrastructures of communication and thus creates the echochamber of glitch.

Fig. 5: Mounir Fatmi, Circles 02, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

Enter VJ Um Amel's *Rosetta Archive* through the archway of the future gallery, one of the venues of the exhibition, and you see the ephemeral, yet iconically visualised representations of data of social media content during the political standoffs in Egypt and the Arab world circa 2011–2012.

In a nod to the excavation of the Rosetta stone in Rashid (Rosette), Egypt, at the end of the 18th century, and the colonial tug of war between the British and French emperors, VJ Um Amel's *Rosetta Archive* playfully suggests that the traces of digital data content and movements are the new hieroglyphs of contemporary knowledge and memory. Through the labyrinth of data fields

and digital escapologist images, the tangled forms of knowledge display a lab-yrinth of thick matter and infinite information.
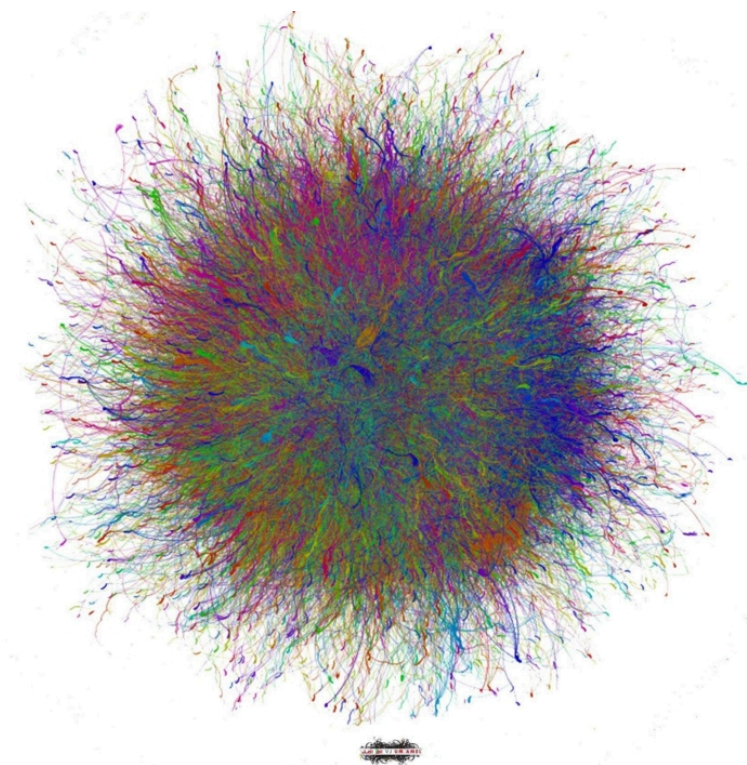

Fig. 6: VJ Um Amel, Rosetta Archive, detail (2011–2012), Courtesy of the artist

An example of an artist developing the concept of 'glitch' in other topogra-phies and medial spaces is Bahian Shehab. Shehab has come to prominence in recent years for her street art during the uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa, in which she developed her most famous project *No. A Thousand Times No* (2010). She began to research the many forms and shapes of the Arabic typography of the word 'لا' (meaning 'No' in Arabic) in Islamic museum archives, books, and buildings, and she developed a seven-meter-high plexiglass curtain with the typescripts she garnered from those archives of time and places across the region. The relationality between graphic de-sign, the letter / language as a material medium, and the imaginary horizon of poetry in times of crisis, war, occupation, and trauma has remained her practice-based way of processing the current global and regional crises. The

transitory quality of street graffiti that is prone to weather conditions, heat and cold, destruction, erasure, dust, and dirt is seen as a dynamic process of making artworks in public spaces. According to the artist, 'The sun, the rain, the wind – they are all markers of time that also play a big role in the life of a painted work of art on the street.'[13]

Fig. 7: Bahia Shehab, We Love Life, HD video still, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Shehab has chosen to take the social media presence of her graffiti projects a step further by presenting her new work *Corner of Dream* (2019) as a digital video installation. Spatiotemporal horizons and the critical and aesthetic resonances of her murals in different world cities such as Beirut, New York, Marrakesh, as well as on the Greek island of Cephalonia, are revisited in her films. Shehab weaves together the themes of exile, nomadism, and belonging against the background of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish's writings while staging the documentary scenes in framed images on a white sheet.

Glitch: Art and Technology showcases the converging aesthetics, networks, and infrastructures of the common ground of technological and artistic media. According to Laura Marks, 'glitch reminds us of the analog roots of digital information, in the disorderly behavior of electrons'.[14] In the social and political realm, computational glitch as a technologically induced

phenomenon finds an analogy with the crises and states of emergency in different global spheres, in their infrastructures, systems, and information channels. The exhibition thus subtly foregrounds glitch as a cultural and political evocation of crisis in critical aesthetic practice. It thus references the awakening civil dissent in the Middle East and North Africa almost ten years ago as a dynamic (digital) subtext of critical dissonant practices, embodied in/as glitch, as forms and strategies of material transformation.

Digital platforms and infrastructures, artistic collectives, contemporary media art, and (trans-) cultural networks have shaped 'new modes of existence' as well as epistemologies of connectivity. It is this allegedly new public sphere in the Arab-speaking world that 'Glitch' implicitly references by alluding to the human and nonhuman actors of materialist media and the performative dimension of 'glitch' as a critical practice of crisis and the fissures of cultural and political histories in the Global South. Glitch as an aesthetic of technical errata embodies affective media states as layered historicised forms and data.

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Notes

[1] Balaghi 2020.

[2] Menkman 2011, p. 34.

[3] VJ Um Amel 2020.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Nawar 2019, p. 6.

[7] Hexner in Balaghi 2020.

[8] Azoulay 2008

[9] Gibson 2010, p. 62.

[10] Deleuze 1989, p. 69.

[11] Betancourt 2017, n.p.

[12] El Noshokaty 2020.

[13] Shehab 2020.

[14] Marks.