

## TRANSCRIPT

# "ART AND CONFLICT IN THE ARAB REGION"

*A Conversation With Lara Baladi and Oussama Rifahi*

*Moderator: Anthony Richter*

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## **ANNOUNCER:**

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## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

The Open Society Foundations have been funding work-- in the art scene in the Arab region for more than a decade. We support the work of organizations like-- the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, (UNINTEL PHRASE) and-- and others, which in turn-- back the work of artists and cultural practitioners who've bolstered critical thinking-- free expression-- in societies of the Arab region-- which benefit very much-- from their activity and creativity.

We do this because-- presenting-- the arts, poetry, physical, film, and performance is critical for the exploration of new ideas, challenging-- clichés, which is at the core of our mission-- supporting open societies. But artists in these societies also play-- a social role, public intellectuals-- they respected-- social and even-- political figures advancing-- free thought, representing change, leading and shaping debate.

So I'm really pleased that we're able to-- welcome-- two-- speakers tonight-- who-- some have known and worked with-- close up and others have just admired from-- afar and-- and-- and no less well. But-- let me introduce the-- the two speakers-- to

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you. And then-- move-- to the program, which is-- going to be-- very rich with-- two I think multimedia presentations.

So-- on my right is Oussama Rifahi, who-- is the-- executive director of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture. I would say the leading independent-- funder of the arts-- in the Arab region today. He has a rich background working-- in the field-- for many years. And-- he has some-- great observations and-- and insights to share with us. I'm delighted he's here.

On my left-- we have Lara Baladi, a international recognized multidisciplinary Egyptian artist, who's currently at the Open Documentary Lab of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And-- and she'll be-- also giving us-- a short presentation after Oussama's. And then we'll move-- to a conversation with the two of them and with you. So without further ado, I think I'm going to hand over to Oussama.

## **OUSSAMA RIFAHI:**

Thank you, Anthony. Thank you, (UNINTEL PHRASE) and for inviting me here to speak to you. There are lots of familiar faces in the audience today. You know, as Anthony has described-- I'm just gonna give you a brief overview of what we do at the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture. And then we talk a bit about the topic of today, art and conflict in today's context.

So the-- the Arab art-- the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture-- was-- kind of founded in 2007. And the context of that time was the lack of-- public support for independent artistic production. And a group of, you know, independent-- practitioners from the region together with some foundation here-- got together to-- you know, to-- (UNINTEL) to-- to start that initiative there.

O.S.F. was one of the main-- element there. And Anthony himself was a key player (UNINTEL). O.S.F. continues to-- to support AFAC-- you know, throughout all of these years there. So-- throughout those seven, eight years, we have-- supported about, you know, more than 700 projects over the last years. And the idea is-- basically that we accept-- open-- you know, we-- we open calls on proposal online. And we accept project that come from all-- the Arab countries in the region, 22-- countries, as well as from Arab artists and practitioners that live-- abroad and live in the Maja (PH) diaspora, the Arab diaspora.

And as you can see on-- on the picture there, we have a heavy concentration of both receiving projects from the Livon (PH), as well as now more and more from the West of the Arab region there. And we're trying to engage-- more and more as now with the Gulf-- the Gulf region there. As you can see there-- there isn't much coming to us from that region there. Although there's lots of projects now that are emerging and-- and benefiting nicely over there.

And you can see that we are also-- engaged with-- the Arab diaspora in Europe, North America. We're trying now to do a bit more in South America. We started-- collaborating with a festival there just to tap into kind of the-- the very large--

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population of the diaspora there. Most of the project that we work with, that we have supported so far do have in certain degree some sort of interaction between people working in the Arab region, as well as outside.

And (UNINTEL) see this very happy vertical flow of exchange and interaction-- between the Arab region and north, you know, Europe and so on. And one of our main objective is not only to sustain that, but also to encourage more kind of-- horizontal flow of work between, you know, the-- the negative and-- and the Maja and the Livon.

Something that's gonna be very relevant to what we're gonna talk about later is the-- the (UNINTEL)-- the big youth bulge in the region that we are experiencing over there. So more than half of the population is less than 25 years of age. It goes all the way between 65% in countries like Yemen and Sudan all the way to 50% as an average in many other countries.

So more than half of the people in that region are less than 25 years of age. So that extrapolates a bit-- to the-- the type of, you know, work that we have to do-- with-- with this young-- kind of population there. Something that-- also that we-- we do that is-- important is that more than half of the grantees of (UNINTEL) people we give funds to do their work-- are emerging artists. That is, they're doing their first or second project.

And this is a big risk that we take. And we're very happy to do that, because (UNINTEL) for launching talent, developing new ideas, especially catering for this very young population there. Most of the work that we fund are in the region there, (UNINTEL) 20% of Arab artists living in Europe that also receive this kind of support.

So we open-- two (UNINTEL) proposal, twice per year, for literature, visual arts, performing arts, music, cinema, and something we call region events, training (?) and archiving. We-- we give a bit of funds to small festivals and workshop and so on. And I'm just gonna-- as-- as well as this-- the general call for proposal, every once in a while we develop-- we open up special programs that cater for a specific need.

So since 2009, we worked on three years with-- the Sundance Documentary Institute on funding documentary projects. Over three years, we gave about 45-- projects-- 15 projects for year. Now we continued this initiative last year with the Ford Foundation on their (UNINTEL) initiative there. So we're continuing-- to fund documentary films, because that's something very important today and-- and-- and what we're doing today.

And I'm very happy also to-- to talk about something that we've launched-- this year-- in partnership with the Magnum-- Foundation, which is a program for documentary photography. So we-- I just came back from Lebanon. We just finished our first workshop. And that was brilliantly exactly as (UNINTEL) as a launch. Susan-- you know, was-- was-- taking part. I'll go quickly through some of the project we fund, before we talk about-- art and conflict. So this is-- it goes all the way from-- helping Mashwalela which is an alternative rock band-- in Beirut and Lebanon-- to visual artists like Sabana, who's doing her Ph.D. in-- Colombia right now.

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Visual artists in Gaza like Hamad Hawaji. A-- rock band on the outskirts of Wehran in Algeria-- performance artist Beirut like Khali Shahrur. And somebody you-- you probably have heard of, Akram Zatari, who has a permanent-- display at the moment. You know, one of his works. This is something that's gonna be screened very soon.

And it addresses all kind of topics like, you know, important thing like-- sexual harassments in Tunis-- and so on. So beyond just giving financial-- grants, we also do some professional support. So basically, we take some of the filmmakers to-- on the sidelines like the International Film Festival, so they-- we-- we go through workshops. And we try to get them to with-- to talk to co-producers and to distributors and so on.

We have taken some Arab composers to work with chamber orchestras, famous violinists in-- in-- in Europe as well. And we've hosted a few workshops on Beirut and Saudi Arabia are talking about film writing and-- and so on. We've launched also a program for creative writing, novel creative writing in-- in Lebanon and so on. What we try to do is we try to-- to go to the peripheries of the art world, so that we are-- we make our-- grants program available-- to places like Yemen-- you know, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria.

So we conduct about one to two field trips per year, where we meet with the local artists. And we try to t-- tell them about what we do, how to offer them (UNINTEL). And this allows us basically to continue-- receive-- to receive more and more from the outskirts, you know, the peripheries of-- of the Arab world. So that's Libya, Tunis-- Yemen, Saudi Arabia. And we just came back this year. We came back from Mauritania with s-- a very interesting cultural scene happening over there.

And we publish-- once per-- once per month, we publish a grantee story and a couple of grantees voices. So basically on-- on the website can download those two pages of very short videos, where the artists talk about their project in their own voices. And it is extremely-- you know, it gives you, you know, an idea of the (UNINTEL) complex that exists everywhere. And that's available over there.

So, you know, we-- we were asked to-- to talk a bit-- about art and conflict today in the region. How does it affect-- cultural production? What are things that we notice in-- around us and so on? And-- and before we-- we talk about this, it's very important to put things in context, you know? There are lots of unknowns, you know, when-- (UNINTEL) in the region as we hear about all the political turmoil and so on.

But there are some givens that we can tell you about. One-- one of them-- the first one is that this is-- an extraordinary moment in time in our-- region there. And arts and culture is playing an extremely important role-- over there. That's-- that's one of the givens that we have. Second, this is a very fluid and transitional-- period. And everything we-- we will talk about today is just one snapshot of what's happening today in the region there.

So-- you know, the changing political situation we are living is (COUGH) changing the rules of engagement of artists every day. So there's-- whatever we talk about

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today is gonna-- gonna become obsolete next week, next month, and so on. So we're looking at a series of snapshots of what's happening there. Thirdly, which is also very important is that we are talking about (UNINTEL) different variety of-- of contexts.

So what goes-- what-- explains things in Egypt is not the same in Libya or in Yemen or Saudi Arabia. So that's a very huge diversity of context and communities, sectarian diversity, and-- and-- and political systems and so on. But what we know is that after, you know, the-- the-- the euphoria that we experienced two years ago-- three years ago with-- with the Arab Spring-- we're seeing now experiencing a very strong backlash, you know, on-- on-- on that kind of spontaneous outburst that happened three years ago.

And people-- you probably read about it in *The New York Times*. People say, "This is a different-- you know, what's happening right now is I-S-I-S and S-I-S-I." I-S-I-S is-- is, you know, the Islamic State-- which is kind of one side of the total extremism that we are-- we're seeing there. And on the other-- side of the (UNINTEL) you have the S-I-S-I, the Sisi type of phenomenon in Egypt. Where we have the-- you know, dictatorial regimes and authorita-- authoritarian regime that capture, again, the situation (UNINTEL).

So that's what-- something that artists are struggling with are those two bipolar worlds, which is in most of the cases very sim-- you know, an oversimplification of what-- what actually happens there. So, you know, one of the phenomenons is that after, you know, those-- all of those years of repression and-- and what happened-- you know, in the 40 years before the Arab Spring, where, you know, all of the regime have crushed kind of the-- you know, the-- the-- the sensibilities and destroy the spirits of people for so many-- period of time there.

Well, actually this backlash is doing exactly the same thing. So we can expect that, you know, whatever we-- we've seen in 2011, we're gonna see some of that stuff happening again in-- in the future there. And you can see that into the type of cultural production that's happening in the documentaries and the-- the narratives that you are-- you see in all (UNINTEL) places (UNINTEL).

So, you know, one of the things that we-- we char-- to characterize the situation today is what we call a state of permanent-- permanent war. You know, basically-- it's-- it's-- it's a condition of conflict, but it doesn't have a geographical or a temporal limit to it. It's really all over the place. And it can-- it's happening everywhere and every time.

And beyond this immediate effect of fear, of-- of-- of violence and destruction of human life, you know, there's a new phenomenon that's (UNINTEL), which is basically that the phenomena of the refugees. This is something that is now critical. It's happening in many different places. The Arab region there you have huge amounts of people that just basically have been displaced and are living economical misery as well as political.

Because (UNINTEL) they don't have, you know, any, you know, basic safety, humanitarian safety requirements are not there. And-- artists, you're gonna see lots

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of things coming out that we are seeing (UNINTEL) that talks about all of these things there. So how-- how does this affect, you know, the type of cultural production as we see today? So I've put it into five-- five bullet points there.

One-- one of that is that-- artistic production is allowing us to see-- you know, the conflict in a bit in an unusual way and in complex way. And this is-- you know, that's refreshing compared to the oversimplification that you see in the mass media-- over the news and so on. That gives us kind of different perspective and allowing-- allowing us to just see a bit more of the subtleties-- between what's happening there.

So it's not only the ISIS or the Sisi, it's-- it's much more, you know-- different nuances there. The second thing is that this representation of (UNINTEL) refugees and-- even geographies-- is becoming an urgent and omnipresent representation by (UNINTEL). You're gonna see lots of that coming out-- at the moment, right?

And-- another third phenomena that we see also in-- in art is that because of all of these disjunctions and all of these issue there, many artists have tried-- is now blurring, you know, fact with reality. So you see lots of these production, where you don't really know if this is something real or unreal, something imagined or something-- that has been lived and so on.

And-- a fourth element there, which is-- talks a bit, you know, the idea of documentary (UNINTEL) condition there is artists are becoming more involved into kind of documenting what they call "real life." You know, the sense that, they're-- they avoid-- kind of the assumption of neutrality or the one of objectivity or simple transmission of facts. You know, they cannot be just seeing that on a distance. They-- they-- they have to live this. And they have to express a personal subjective view of that statement.

And-- these-- and-- and all of these things are kind of have a background-- of-- you know, (COUGH) generation that has looking at-- in all the themes of identity and power conflicts usually see a lot about father and son, about-- the ruler and the ruled, about government and citizens and so on. So that reflects a lot into the cultural question (UNINTEL). Now-- here and there, the overall overlying background to all this is a very strong sense of bitterness and disillusion. (UNINTEL) also disappointing that it's coming out of-- of this period of time-- after the-- you know, again, euphoria that we have seen there. So what I'm gonna do, I'm just gonna-- show you three things right now.

I'm gonna show you a short trailer by young Yemeni filmmakers that talks about kind of the revolution in Yemen and how this created a mini-revolution in her own family there. Then I'm going to-- talk to you about a documentary photography project by a Syrian young artist, that has a series of pictures that he calls-- he calls them "Syrialism" (?). You know, Syria, Syrialism situation there.

And we're just kind of basically-- funding him now for a project and this new-- program-- which talks about love-- in times of conflict. He talks about, you know, kind of how is the conflict affecting the relationship of couples and refugees-- Syrian refugees-- in Lebanon-- as well in Jordan and so on.

And third but not (UNINTEL) least-- we're gonna show you some-- I'm gonna show you some-- the first exhibition by a young Lebanese-- (UNINTEL) artist called Atona Tivani, which has a very-- kind of ironical way of looking at some of the contradiction that we see in Lebanon and elsewhere in the Gulf and so on.

(VIDEO NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## OUSSAMA RIFAH:

It's a very short excerpt. And this is the project by Ahmad Iman-- 35 years old Syrian photographer. And that's kind of (UNINTEL) project. So the first (UNINTEL) is about what we talked about, the Syrialism there. And we're gonna just let the pictures speak for themselves. And this is a series that he's kind of planning on doing kind of-- love in times of conflict. And D-- Dona is-- is also a young-- artist there.

She has kind of-- kind of a critical perspective about, you know, what's happening around her in-- in Lebanon and Syria and the Gulf countries and so on. So she-- she did her first-- she comes from a different-- totally different background. She's not a visual artist. And that is something that is-- she decided recently. And-- you know, one of-- one of her critiques is about the demonizations of refugees in Lebanon-- basically by, you know, this capturing by the commercial art market that actually takes those pictures and put them in galleries. I'm gonna speak about that tomorrow.

And-- basically-- and just kind of take-- takes out all of these human aspect from-- from there. Another interesting one (UNINTEL) is about the clash of power between different sects-- in Lebanon and, you know, in the Arab region in general there. And, you know, she's making-- poking a bit fun at how these, you know, face looks a bit more-- likes a bit-- looks a bit like-- you know, a ballet (?)-- kind of-- engagement between those different things.

And this one is-- a contrast between the-- the denial of-- you know, the (UNINTEL PHRASE) of Palestinians in their own countries with the law of return in Israel for some of the people that are coming back there. This one about kind of the-- the theme of, you know, very (UNINTEL) very familiar in New York, but kind of-- work-- con-- the conditions of migrant workers in-- the Gulf countries.

And this one is-- the condition of domestic workers in-- also in the Arab region there. You know, how people are treated-- basically and how they are-- and that's-- sums it up a bit. This one she did kind of like-- about a month ago. And this is before (UNINTEL). And she just basically-- she talks-- I don't know if you know the-- the-- the *Smurfs*, (UNINTEL). But this is kind of the Gargamel character of (UNINTEL) that is kind of the very bad person there.

And, you know, she talks a bit on how we-- also we put stuff on-- on the screens. It becomes a bit like-- a comedy (UNINTEL). So, you know, I-- I-- I will leave, you know, the disc-- you know, we'll leave it to the discussion to talk about those artists and many others. But we-- that gives you a bit-- kind of three different types of reaction of very young people that are kind of reacting to the conditions today. Lara,

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all yours.

## LARA BALADI:

Thank you. That was very nice. So my talk will be very-- hopefully very brief. And-- and I'll try to run through-- how as an artist I dealt with-- the last couple of years-- a little bit before the revolution un-- until now. And how-- being in Egypt and having worked there for the last 20 years as an artist, how-- suddenly the-- the revolution sort of-- changed-- changed things and forced-- forced me to-- rethink my position and to work in similar ways, yet in different ways.

So-- just to give a little bit of-- a rewind. Before 2011-- I was part of-- a community of artists that was sort of benefiting from a critical mass on the art world. And-- and-- showing in lots of places. And-- one of the last works I did before the revolution, but not the last one, but one of the last one I did in Egypt was during (UNINTEL) in-- 2008.

The one before the last-- before the revolution, the last one, was 2010. And-- I built, basically-- I built a tower, which was-- inspired by the slums of Cairo, the informal architecture in-- cities around Cairo-- which got the first prize of the (UNINTEL), because, of course, it was based on the military-- it was built on a military base and the opera (?) grounds.

And it created a lot of-- you know, very dynamic response. I suddenly-- when the revolution started-- I found myself much more-- sort of frozen, in a way. I mean, as a citizen, I participated immediately in Tahrir. But as an artist, I felt very much that there was a sort of pose and that suddenly everything I believed in or everything I thought-- was, you know, for me worked, in terms of strategies, suddenly were being questioned and were being-- challenged.

And I-- my first reaction was to-- of course, to be a citizen, not to participate. But I started to observe what was happening around me and how the creative flow and freedom of speech and this sort of band and broke and let-- loose-- every voice possible-- amongst the random citizen to the artist. Suddenly-- gave way to a really impulsive and incredible spontaneous amount of-- of-- works of arts that are a lot of (UNINTEL), but a lot of them were using strategies of immediate response and immediate reaction.

And so I met people in-- in the square and very spontaneously also, because I wasn't really thinking of art as I normally did. I participated in projects that were much more connective and-- that were completely-- in-- improvised. And so the first one was (UNINTEL) Tahrir, which was one of the free-- only and-- first-- one of the first-- free online radios, which didn't last very long as a project, but was about fun and was part of this little period of time where we all were debating politics.

So the Tahrir was an agora for, you know, how to-- how to-- engage with a new-- you-- you know, the new political landscape and how to bring democracy to the square. So this was a little bit of-- how Tahrir-- website looked like. And the (UNINTEL)

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Tahrir looked like. And then a few months later-- I did this project with-- with-- other-- people that are involved in media-- Mosarin (PH), which turned out to be Mosarin, because they were still in the making, at the time.

So I worked with Halidan Dendar, who's a filmmaker and-- and founder of Mosarin. I worked with-- two, three other people that are also-- that were, at some point, part of Mosarin. And some of them are not anymore. And-- we founded Tahrir Cinema. That was during the July sit-in, which was the second important sit-in after-- the first 18 days.

There was two others. It's-- (UNINTEL) how many sit-ins there's been since 18 days, but this is the second biggest one, where there was-- a long period of sitting in the square. And, of course, I'm a visual artist. And so-- I was really aware that we were going to be a long time in the square. And I felt that my-- role as an artist was to bring images or to work with images directly-- in the square. And I was very aware too that everybody was calling this the Facebook revolution and the Twitter revolution and so on and so forth.

And that, in fact, Cairo and Egypt is not-- you know, the-- the majority of people who participated in the revolution were not actually connected to the internet and were not on Facebook. We're just very simple people who are asking for a better life. And so I decided to-- to bring the projection-- to bring a screen to the square and to-- and to show-- footage of what had actually happened since February.

So we were in July. And it was a few months now the revolution. And this was the real first break of-- the sort of turning point of the revolution, where we-- were-- sort of starting to be divided in terms of, you know, what was the role of the army? And how is this going to develop? And who was for the army? And who didn't want the army? And so on.

And so it was an amazing time. I mean, you can see here there was-- approximately 200 people in average, every day, sitting around the screen. The screen was about maybe as big as the one you have. So, you know, we were all sitting together, on plastic paper-- plastic rolls on the floor. And-- you know, had-- it was an extraordinary atmosphere, because you had the guy with the popcorn. You had (LAUGH) somebody who had made-- you know, sort of (UNINTEL) next to the screen and served tea every night.

And-- and so you had all kinds of activities around-- the cinema, which was-- really very touching and very human. And people would stand up in the middle of the project and talk their story and what happened to them in this or that demonstration, how their friend got killed, or how they felt they didn't agree with someone who was saying something.

And so it became like a kind of place for debate. Why? Also it kind of calms people down, because there was a lot of anger. And there was a lot of-- anxiety going on about where was all this going? So this was-- a way of engaging with the revolution from (UNINTEL) as-- as a visual artist. We started building an (UNINTEL) on this alone, also-- since the first few days, as I was really fascinated with this visual

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production that was going on by so many people across the world.

And-- Tahrir Cinema participated to building an archive on videos on the revolution. So from professional footage to amateur footage from very high-tech cameras to iPhone cameras. And this was done-- and-- and much more focalized much later on by Mosarin as a sort of media platform that was also later on training people on the how to use their cameras and how to use their phones and how to edit small films and upload them on internet and so on.

And-- following Tahrir Cinema, I-- I was filled with-- felt like a lot of us I was filled with thousand of images and thousands of videos and, you know, information that was just-- I didn't know what to do with it anymore. I mean, I was just, like, "This is so extraordinary and-- and-- and so fascinating." And at the same time, I-- I felt that there was for sure some sort of strength that could flow between a link all this production and all this, you know-- (UNINTEL) production.

And so I-- I-- I did research that was while I-- compiled an archive of-- footage that was about the chronology of the revolution. As things were unfolding, I also compiled footage and documents that I found on the internet that was historical, philosophical, political speeches-- excerpts from films-- even-- songs, you know, all kinds of material. Art and of articles from the-- from the-- news articles. And-- images and so on.

And I sort of built a parallel archive that was using-- or looking at resonance in history with what was happening in the square. So you would have the-- you know, the-- you know, the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.-- Fela Kuti in-- Nigeria, and a lot of other-- material that-- I started to-- work together with the footage from Tahrir and-- the square in general.

So this is a still from the (UNINTEL) installation. And this is another one. And, of course, I fell in YouTube as others fell in a hole (?). And for two and a half years, I-- from the 2011 to maybe end of 2013, I was almost-- it was me and my computer. And so it was really the time of my life, where I'm really-- sort of created a connection with my computer in a way I had never before.

And-- it's really changed my whole relationship to internet and changed my whole relationship to-- to also our understanding of our rights as U.S. citizens, in terms of using internet, in terms of being in the world, in terms of all those things. And, of course, this whole social media around it was also very big dynamics in the-- in the revolution. That was very new for me.

So I-- you know, all of this was very-- exciting. And-- my friends left Egypt, a lot of people left Egypt. So my life was really-- sort of my focus between Tahrir and internet. And so it gave results to this, which was sort of a healthy thing to do. Because it made me kind of, like, clear my head for all this stuff, while also-- being able to kind of move on to the next stage.

And so the next stage is also a different stage in the revolution. And it's a stage where suddenly we have-- Morsi and-- Muslim Brotherhood-- leading-- Egypt and-- a lot of things start to happen, in terms of-- security, in terms of-- in terms of division of the

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people in Egypt, which was never-- something we never experienced.

I mean, Egypt was one of the one-- you know, one of maybe the-- I would say maybe the only country in the Arab world, where we really had a sense of identity and unity that was maybe fake on a certain level, but however maintained for a very long time. And-- suddenly, you had, like, all this-- these voices that didn't agree and wanted something different out of the revolution.

And, of course, everybody-- imaged it as a cake and you-- everyone wanted the biggest part of the cake or the whole cake. And so the Muslim Brotherhood was just like everybody else. And what came out during the-- that period was that a lot of-- which is-- which is-- a problem in society to begin with. But which sort of surfaced even more and in a much stronger way and not just as a social issue, but as a political tool, sexual harassment.

And so we watched-- I'm trying to remember the correct numbers. I think the second year of the anniversary of the revolution, there was, in one night-- more than 25 sexual harassment slash rapes and gang rapes in Tahrir. So that was quite outrageous. And through a whole year there was more than 100, 200, and I can't count them. But it's become like it was almost like-- an or-- it was an organized-- you know, there was some-- there was something clearly-- organized. There was a sense of-- people were taking advantage of the situation.

But also using it to kind of bring women back to the-- back home and-- and so on and so forth. So there was a lot of issues there that were quite-- aggressive. And walking in the street, I mean, I was never scared to walk in Cairo street, but I was not scared either during the Muslim Brotherhood. But I was quite disgusted. I mean, there was no police. There was no military. There was no-- there was no-- there was-- there-- there-- there was no-- it was a very strange space. There was no control. There was no sense of where are we. There was no definition of what was really going on, except a kind of-- very cheap anarchy going on.

So it was a very uncomfortable-- time and very depressing time. Because from the euphoria, this was really the first break from-- believing or saying, "Okay, let's give the Brotherhood a chance." And then suddenly you realize that, you know, they're do-- they have no idea what they're doing. And not only that, but they have an absolutely horrible way of perceiving the world.

And so, of course, everybody was very-- it was a very dark time. And so I made this culture that was, for me also, out of the archive that I had built-- and which was bringing us this notion of bringing-- being brought back to the medieval times. So I made a chastity belt, a giant chastity belt. Which then people told me that, you know, was on top of Egypt's head. So this was how we felt, generally speaking.

So the weird thing about this object is that it's-- while it's very erotic, it's-- and it can also, you know-- historically, it was also seen as a kind of proof of love for the one who left to-- to the crusades and he would-- you know, you would give him the key. And the woman would stay at home with the chastity belt as a proof of her-- faithfulness towards the man.

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But at the same time, there is this-- of course, there is this prison. And this prison, for me, was very complex. But it wasn't just about man putting-- women in a cage. But it was about-- it was putting myself in a cage. It was realizing and-- and being very disturbed by the fact that I was in my own country, but I felt for the first time that in such a way that I have to almost put that prison onto myself, so that I would feel more comfortable again. And this was really, really problematic.

And then I did a work that was almost dealing with the same thing, but in a very opposite way, which was-- weirdly-- it was a weird situation, because while all this was going on, I got commissioned by Christian Dior to do-- a work for an exhibition called Miss Dior. Miss Dior was inspired by his sister who was an activist and-- and who was actually a resistant during the second world war. So interestingly, she spent three years in jail. And then she was released after the war.

And when she came out, he created this perfume for her inspired by fireflies and the landscapes of the South of France. And so I made this video exhibition, which-- you can see maybe a little bit better here. Which this is a still. And-- which is a surround sound installation. And it-- it's basically a landscape of fireflies. And every firefly is a woman. And is a woman from-- the early 20th century and late 19th century cinema.

But it's-- it's-- references and it's only-- taking the sort of image of women who really have contributed to change the art field in which they worked or have contributed to something in-- in the world. And also in the sense of how fragile we are as-- not just as women, but as human beings. And how also ephemeral we are. And so it was a sort of response to, you know, how dark those times were after the revolution. And how dark, in fact, the times were in France after the war. And when the German left, it was-- it's said to be the worst times and how-- that time was, in fact, a very difficult economic time.

So I made this correlation between the two and-- and-- and-- and sort of a tribute to women who, you know, rather than focus on, like with the chastity belt, on the oppression, I focused on, you know, how amazing it is to continue to fight and to believe in-- in woman d-- was-- what one does. And so since 2013, back to military regime. So we have Sisi, the-- the lion, which means also the strong in Arabic.

So it has that double sort of notion. And it's very difficult to work as an artist in this time. It's a very strange time. It's-- I think it's a little bit of-- again, another, in the process, a moment of posing and of reflecting and of sort of asking oneself, "Where are we?" Because I'm not really sure where we are.

And-- in a way, what I'm watching around me and what I've also involved myself in is to continue work with this archive that I've built since 2011. And-- taking this archiving as really-- as the possible act of resistance today. Archiving here. I'm not sure how clear this is. Oh, it's pretty good. It's a very low-resolution image, but-- this sense of-- in this moment today where we cannot go to the streets. We cannot really fight in the same ways that we could.

And, in fact, as artists in the art scene in Egypt and having worked for 20 years now in that environment, I also think that it's a very poor time. And it's a very-- it's a very

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difficult time. Because we do not have the same critical mass that we had ten years ago. And we do not have the structures that, for example, Lebanon benefits from.

We do not have-- a very united-- art scene also. And so there are a lot of projects, but they're not that connected to each other and sadly not enough. And-- and-- and I think people are very fragile right now. And so are artists. And-- this time, not just in the art world, but also in general-- in terms of who's participated in the revolution, the different initiatives, and-- the media platforms such as Mosarin and others, the American University in Cairo and so on and so forth (I could list a hundred) are archiving the revolution.

Because there are so many issues-- connected to that. And-- one of them is, of course, the new government is trying to delete anything that's happened that has to do with that time, with Tahrir. So at the moment, we are in the middle of-- trying to release political prisoners from the prison. So I don't know if you follow, but (UNINTEL PHRASE) just got released. It's probably a political-- you know-- manipulation.

But-- there is-- there-- there is all this-- time where we're sort of stuck. And I'm watching a lot of people leave the country. So it's another-- wave of people deserting Egypt. And when I say people, I say-- I'm only looking at the (UNINTEL). And so I watch a lot of-- the filmmakers, a lot of young people, a lot of people who are more or less in the middle of their careers, who really are not willing to be patient for another 30 years or ten years and do not want to waste another ten years of their life hoping for something they feel will not happen.

So I'm part also of this-- of this-- group of people who are really-- concerned with archiving the revolution and also disturbed by it, this whole-- project. Because it is a very complicated question. And it has a lot of ef-- it has a lot of-- aspects to it. There is the aspect that-- of course, number one, is to keep trace of that moment. Because I don't believe it's over.

I believe we're just in a process. And processes are always-- about-- two steps back and three steps forward and one step back and two steps forward. So that's okay. But I think something has started. And we have to believe that it has. And we have to believe that it has to continue. And that it will stop only if we stop.

And then the other thing is that-- as-- symptomatic, I think Tahrir Square-- when it was very sexy, everybody looked at it. But, of course, now it's not anymore. So people are-- you know, have moved on a little bit. However, it is an event that has been the most documented so far in the 21st century, in the digital age. And it's probably the one even that has the most information circulating around the internet and around all kinds of computers-- loose or not loose around the world.

And I think that's a very fascinating question too. And that's where I am now-- I just came from Boston, because I've just started a fellowship at M.I.T., spying on-- technologists and transmedia technologists to try and figure out where are we today in terms of archiving? And how could I do as an artist a piece that would-- combine art-- documentary and interactive-- archiving-- tools? I'm done for now.

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(APPLAUSE)

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

Thanks both. For those of you who are standing, there are still some seats up front. (UNINTEL) please-- (UNINTEL) sit down. I-- you know, I wanted to-- (UNINTEL PHRASE) question to Oussama, because you talked a little bit-- and-- it-- it connects a little bit with what I-- I heard-- also from Lara about the present situation in-- in Egypt. You talked-- about, you know, outreach in the periphery.

And I know you've been traveling to Saudi Arabia. And, you know, the arts in a situation of very strict control can play-- a very disruptive-- function, play a disruptive role. And, you know, when you think about-- and you said that you weren't getting a lot of proposals from Saudi Ara-- from-- from the Gulf, but-- but you've been going a number of times to Saudi Arabia.

And-- I wonder-- because, of course, the situation's changed very dramatically in a place like Egypt and where it was-- hugely permissive and, you know, you found it even disturbingly chaotic. There was-- a permissiveness and-- a freedom. And-- now they find themselves in-- in a very different-- reality-- in Egypt. And I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what-- AFAC is finding, what you're seeing about the art scene in-- in Saudi Arabia and the-- the function that-- the arts are playing-- there.

## **OUSSAMA RIFAH:**

You know, initially, when-- when we went to Saudi Arabia about two years ago-- it was-- the first impulse was one of fundraising. You know, there's lots of money there (UNINTEL) number of millionaires. And why shouldn't they be kind of taking care of-- the situation and doing a great job like AFAC was doing?

And then, you know, when I did my-- my first trip there-- I started by-- you know, I-- you know, I went around. And I started looking at some of the artists and the type of work they were doing there. And I met with-- a group of young filmmakers-- you know, we call them now "The YouTubers." I don't know whether-- if you're aware of this phenomenon, YouTube was there.

But Saudi Arabia has the highest-- penetration in terms of use of multimedia, in terms of, you know-- traffic on Twitter and Facebook in the world. You know, it's kind of the highest number there. So I went to the office of those-- young guys. And it looked like a bit like a Google office, you know? They had, like, those large IMAX. They had-- art hanging from the-- from the walls and things like this.

And they were doing series of-- short films on YouTube that were having-- you know, hits in the order of millions. So basically, those guys were by themselves without-- the structure of their-- no movie theaters. No-- not one movie theater in-- in-- in Saudi Arabia. It's forbidden to have movie theaters there. They basically invented an

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industry for themselves, where they were communicating with a very large audience, you know?

We're talking about five million, seven millions of hits for each of these things. About social issues. In very clever and disguised ways. They were talking about sexuality, about love before marriage. They were talking about many-- things there. But they were all very subtle with it. And we-- we discovered that, you know, there's something interesting there in-- in a place where there's little freedom and kind of it's the least kind of expected thing.

Actually, there was this landscape of people producing, communicating with an audience, and talking about issues. And-- and we-- we talked to those guys. And, you know, they said basically, "We don't need your money, AFAC. But can you maybe help us a bit by providing some training about, you know, creative documentaries and stuff like that?"

And we're running now a series of-- creative writing workshops for filmmakers. We've done a couple of them in-- in (UNINTEL) in Saudi Arabia there. And we're bringing, you know, kind of a mixture of Arab specialists as well as foreigners. And we're interfacing with (UNINTEL). And there's some interesting-- stuff that is coming out of those things.

At the same time, in visual arts, there has been a movement of-- kind of producing works that deal with-- issues of religion of-- you know, kind of taboos. And always, you know, something you never really know if it's-- if they are critical of-- of the regime or not or they have issue there-- you know? One-- one-- one famous-- you know, something I like was a photography-- showing-- the original-- royal family, of the Saud, you know? You know, the-- the initial-- you know, the guy who started the-- you know, the Wahhabi in-- in-- in Saudi Arabia.

And there's a picture of him-- sitting on a table with a Jedi from *Star Wars*. (LAUGH) And this one was hanging in the-- in the wall of his office there. And I was really, you know, scared for him (UNINTEL) like what happens if somebody comes in and sees that? He said, "There's no problem at all. I'm putting, basically, the wisest guy of *Star Wars* with the wisest person of our-- of our (LAUGH) (UNINTEL) there."

So-- and I don't know whether you've seen *No Woman, No Drive*. Anybody? So basically, if you haven't seen it, you should. *No Woman, No Drive* had a million hits. There-- after this became very public and went over six million s-- hits and so on, there were kind of three classes of people in Saudi Arabia. Some of them were kind of the-- the-- the-- very conservative. They were saying that this video was done by those young guys to convince woman that it's not good to drive.

And another third were saying, you know, that it's kind of making fun, poking fun at-- at-- all this closed system. And the other third didn't have a clue what these guys were doing. So again-- all of these guys play with that. So they-- they see-- lots of-- expression-- trying to poke out within the limits of what they do. And it is creating-- some impact a bit on (UNINTEL).

Now how does this relate to a political system that is now immune to change and

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stuff like that? I think, you know, we're in for a very long run. But definitely those expressions-- through visual arts, through cinema, through documentaries are having a very big audience. At some point in time, you know, probably, this is gonna translate into some sort of a change, social change in the structure of the country.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

Thank you, Oussama. So Lara, the-- Lara, the-- obviously, the period of the past few years has been one of extraordinary creativity-- and productivity for you as an artist. And you-- and responding-- to the-- you know, the situation in Egypt, you really-- seeking to go out and engage with the audience. The installation in Tahrir, I mean, is-- is a real-- a sense of you-- being there with your public performing, screening-- on an ongoing basis.

And what a great-- idea that was. So you must have kind of had-- a sense of audience, of public kind of what they-- what they wanted. And they-- there must be some, because-- articulation that you can give us about what you felt that it-- they were expecting of you as an artist in that space, in that moment. And-- and-- and, you know, how-- how you felt-- you could respond to that. And-- and how that's changed now. Because the atmosphere in the country has changed along with it and the leadership didn't just appear-- out of nowhere. There was a res-- that leadership is also responding to-- an audience. And-- and they're giving a performance.

## **LARA BALADI:**

A very different audience.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

That's right. But-- but-- but-- they were all present there over these years. But they're also kind of per-- giving a performance, a spectacle-- for-- for the public's consumption. How is the-- your kind of relationship with that Egyptian public changed that sense of the audience's expectations over the past few years?

## **LARA BALADI:**

I mean, T-- Tahrir Cinema was very-- it was really impulsive. It was-- it was-- it was really the sp-- for me, it was really the spirit of Tahrir. That was-- I think that's what was beautiful about it. That was that-- that moment where you're not thinking of who you are, what you're doing, or, you know, what other people are gonna think or-- you know, you're-- it's so intense. And what is happening is so-- radical-- that it's-- it's extremely instinctive and-- intuitive.

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And-- and for me, the response was that-- and suddenly, everything works out, because it feels right. And so the-- I wake up in the morning and I-- and I am thinking-- you know, I want to bring images to the square. But, you know, it's a very vague thing to think. And then two minutes later, I open Twitter. And I see somebody saying, "We should project films in Tahrir."

And then five minutes later, I tweet something and say, you know, "Can someone-- is someone interested in doing this with me?" And then next thing I know is that same night we have a screen. And it's made of pieces of wood and plastic banner and just, like, junk, basically. And the response is immediate. And this was quite-- amazing.

And this is when-- for me, that was sort of clear. But it wasn't necessarily something I was-- you know, I had time to sit and think about, because we were responding so fast. But somehow, for me, it was obvious that not everybody was watching-- those incredible stuff that was circulating on the internet. Because nobody is-- no-- because still most people were following TV and-- and-- and-- local, national TV.

So even more important. So even more important to show them what the whole world said that we were actually exposed to we were not. So-- for me, it was obvious that I had to bring the internet to the streets. And-- and I got not criticized, but I was a bit questioned by other artists and by people in the-- who came to Tahrir Cinema the first two, three days, and asked me, like, "Why are you showing this? Everybody saw this already."

And I'm like, "I don't think so." And it was right. It was-- very interesting to see that suddenly when I'm putting-- animation parodies of Mubarak and-- and-- (UNINTEL PHRASE) for example, who are-- sort of political satire-- animation political satire online and all kinds of other stuff that came up at that-- in that period. Suddenly, you have all these people who come from-- Upper Egypt, who come from (UNINTEL), which is more or less Middle Egypt, who come from different villages and come from Suez, Alexandria, and all kinds of other places.

You know, come and say, "Wow, when did that happen? You know, I didn't see that." And then also-- they didn't see the Battle of the (UNINTEL) Bridge, which is an iconic moment in-- on the 28th of January, which is when the-- if your when the demonstrators stopped and started to pray in front of the police barrage. I mean, we thought the world whole saw that.

But, in fact, a lot of people in the square hadn't seen those things. Because they were still watching-- the national media. And, of course, the national media didn't show that. And so suddenly it was, like, they were actually living the revolution suddenly again six months later in a very different way. And so their expectations was to see more and to talk more and to share more.

And so they started to bring their footage. And so the next days, I had people from villages in Upper Egypt that had been there, like, in the last few days, that came back to me and said, "This is my USB, you know, can you take this? And can you give me what you showed me yesterday?" And this is what the platform became.

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I mean, it was-- that was one of the-- the reasons why we did Tahrir Cinema. But it wasn't, like, we had a plan and we programmed and-- you know, it was not at all like-- something we organized in advance or knew it was gonna happen during the next year. No, it was like, "Let's do it now." And then, you know, do it as we do it. I love that. I think we think so-- too much about things most of the time.

And I think it's very important to just do things. And-- you know, and then you make it-- you market it or you do whatever with it. But a lot of people create the con-- the container before the content. But-- it w-- it was really (UNINTEL). So I wasn't there. I was an artist. I didn't present myself as such.

I-- you know, it wasn't important. That was not what was important. And what was really important was-- to give people the possibility of expressing themselves. And so what was amazing was that every day we had a very different scenario. And by the end of Tahrir Cinema, we had very extraordinary moment. Because it was, like, a day of, like, one of those days where 100 million things happened.

And it was a Friday. And we knew it was probably the last one. Because two, three days later it was gonna be Ramadan. And probably the military was going to dismantle (UNINTEL) just before. And so the last Friday, which was the day where people came really to Tahrir, was announced that the Salafis would come to Tahrir. So it was like (MAKES NOISE) the Salafis are coming.

So on Thursday night, we're doing Tahrir Cinema. And then-- it's amazing. And it's-- you know, it creates a lot of discussions. And people cry and love and fight and argue. I was actually the one-- I don't know why it was me. But I ended up being the one who was, like, the arbitrary person saying, you know, like, "Let's not fight." And so I was sort of controlling the crowd in a way.

And-- and so that night, from 2:00 in the morning onwards, we started watching those buses of Salafis coming from all over Egypt and arriving in Tahrir with a guide. So it was really, like, tourists, you know? They came with a flag. And they had, like, ten-- ten, 15 people following them. And each guide with a flag was coming down from a bus with, like, ten, 15 people. And they just took Tahrir. And by the next day, it was, like, this invasion of Salafis. And-- it was really completely extraordinary. And we spent the whole day-- a lot-- lot of us spend the whole day there. A lot of us left, got a little bit, like, scared of it. It was not exactly very nice. And-- I got kind of caught in the middle of it, the next day, in the middle of the prayer. And it was a very strange moment.

And-- I spent the whole day watching the sort of, you know, movement in and then movement out. So, you know, by the end of the afternoon, they all go back into their buses. And they go back home. And-- and we have to clean it up. And the-- and the-- we put Tahrir Cinema up that night. And, of course, it was a very intense day. And so we showed a lot of things. And we discussed a lot of what had happened during the day.

And then two hours later, somebody came to me and said, you know, "I'm Libyan. And I'm here with five other Libyans and-- from Benghazi. And my tent (?) is here.

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You know, I want to be in Tahrir, because it's so amazing what Tahrir did. Can you show my film?" And so we had this completely weird film from Libya, which was a mix of footage on Gaddafi from the '70s, '80s to-- 2011 with, you know, YouTube and all kinds of material that was mixed.

And it was a very surreal film. But it was also extraordinary to watch these Libyans come and-- and sort of declare what they felt about what Egypt had allowed them to do. So this was a very specific moment in time. And the people needed to have a sense of-- of space, of freedom, you know? At the time, Tahrir was just a public space really. I mean, I think-- I think what we-- over-- see is that this revolution for a moment gives public space to people.

And Tahrir was actually a place for people to come and bring their kids and walk around and feel a little bit free, you know? So what we take for granted in the West, which is to walk in the street is not-- that obvious in-- cities like Cairo. Now what do audiences want? I mean, I'll just-- most-- today, most of-- you know, the majority of Egyptian, who are with Sisi are the sort of average Egyptian who want peace and want security and have very little means, but have just enough means and just-- have just managed to kind of come out of the water.

So their head is out of the water. And they just want their kids to have an okay life. And so these people don't want to hear about any criticism against the military. And they just-- they just don't-- you know, they're just focalized on one idea. And that's it. And so it's a very difficult and weird moment. Because you have almost, like-- a counter-trauma situation, where, you know, you're facing people who have, like, this fixed sense of what they want and what it is. And they're not gonna change.

And, in fact, most of us are not gonna change. I mean, most of us are, like, seeing something. And we're not gonna change the way we see. So the problem is not really to-- I think what's important today, in terms of audiences is to think of-- to jump a generation and to respond to generations that are coming. And, in fact, what was criticized about-- during the-- the regime of Mubarak and all the other dictat-- dictator's regimes was that the work wasn't done.

So the social work wasn't done. The sort of-- the work on the ground wasn't done. And so there was no education. There was no NGOs communicating. There was no-- there was all kinds of things missing. So it's really now that we need to do that. Because if we don't do this. And if we don't learn from what happened, then we're just-- we're just preparing for the next situation to be exactly the same. And again, to now be ready to respond to it. So yes, we were not ready to respond to Tahrir. But we need now to prepare the next generation to respond to Tahrir, to the next Tahrir.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

And-- and your archive, your kind of memory project in a way is--

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**LARA BALADI:**

It's very pretentious. (LAUGH) I feel.

**ANTHONY RICHTER:**

No, but I--

**LARA BALADI:**

But I'm trying to make it less pretentious, because I have an image in my head that is to create a kind of *Guernica* of the 21st century. So a sort of imprint or an image that will sort of fix Tahrir or-- you know, and it's a personal image. It's not at all meant to be that is history. No, it's not. It's my interpretation of a moment that I lived. And that meant a lot to me.

And I'm trying to do something that while it's a tribute to that moment and it will fix it in time, I hope, in a contemporary way. So it's not actually a fixed image. But it's a kind of mobile image, a changing image. And it's a not film either. Is also-- could-- could also be used in its architectural frame for other conflicts, whether in the art world or elsewhere. And so really it's a larger question of dealing with digital information and digital documentation of conflict today.

**OUSSAMA RIFAHI:**

Difficult.

**ANTHONY RICHTER:**

No, it's-- it's-- I just-- I'm-- if I'm looking a little-- dazed, I just landed from Afghanistan last night. And (UNINTEL) week in Afghanistan and-- and Pakistan. I'm thinking about what you're saying in-- in those contexts. For me, it's very interesting. But I want to keep the focus in the room on-- on the speakers and on the-- the-- the theme of the evening. So I'm gonna open-- to you all if you'd like to-- have questions for our speakers, we have a microphone there. And just if you-- I-- I want to remind-- folks that we're recording the event this evening and-- for subsequent posting for eternity (LAUGH) on-- on our website and-- and-- and the internet. So that you're-- when you speak, it means you agree to-- participate in that phenomenon. So-- so if anybody-- would like to raise a hand and just identify yourself and-- address the speakers.

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**NEIL FELDMAN:**

Okay-- my name is Neil Feldman. And I'm the former Middle East specialist-- trained in the School of Foreign Studies at Georgetown. Now I'm an arts journalist, not working in politics at all. But I'm still aware of politics. And in that sense, in terms of the archive project you were talking about in Tahrir Square-- have you thought about including in the archive-- a document that may perhaps be relevant, if not necessarily artistic. Field Marshal and now President Sisi-- came to America for training-- advanced training-- in about 2005 and wrote some type of thesis about democracy-- the role of democracy in our world. And I-- I'm not making this up. And-- and--

**LARA BALADI:**

Email it to me. (LAUGH)

**NEIL FELDMAN:**

And-- and-- and-- and-- and this document is, in fact, publicly available. And it might be really interesting to get it downloaded and put it on your archive, evaluate it, and take it from there.

**LARA BALADI:**

Sure, thank you for the information. I didn't know that. But I did start a kind of retroactive archiving. So when I started the archive, I also-- I mean, at the very first few days of the revolution, I tried to figure out who was doing what? And to map the activists and to understand where this was coming from and figure out-- I mean, we really were doing this and trying to understand where did that start. And so in the archive, there's sort of anchors in time that leads to that year. So that could be one. Thank you.

**NEIL FELDMAN:**

It's not that old.

**LARA BALADI:**

No, (UNINTEL). But I'm not going that far, either. (LAUGH)

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**SUSAN:**

I think this is sort of a segue, in a way--  
(OVERTALK)

**ANTHONY RICHTER:**

Just introduce yourself.

**SUSAN:**

Oh, sorry, Susan (UNINTEL). Talking about your personal experience as an artist and then moving towards a more collaborative role in Tahrir Square, et cetera. And now thinking that you're collecting, you're archiving history, and exactly following your point-- what do you imagine-- one thing is the shaping of it with subjectivity, but what about the collecting of it? And have you envisioned the collaborative participation, crowd-sourced, without being fully overwhelmed? Just aggregating and then dissecting both and making sense of it, which is a different--  
(OVERTALK)

**SUSAN:**

--different stage. So I'm interested in those two stages, if you're considering  
(UNINTEL).

**LARA BALADI:**

So-- so, I mean, this was very much, like, a project that started very intuitively and very sort of as a reaction to what was happening. It wasn't at all-- like, I wasn't planning to make an archive, but suddenly I found myself, like, with this load of information that I had started to archive. And it became an archive.

And then it became a much more-- sort of active-- what do you call it? Sort of-- you know, it became much more focused as, "Okay, this is what I'm doing. So now I'm going to actually do it even more consciously and more-- or in a more organized manner. And there's been stages of the project. So-- first it was really a way of dealing with the situation. It was very much my own way of dealing with the situation.

And-- it was almost like keeping myself sane. And then it became suddenly a big archive. And then it grew and grew. And it became completely overwhelming. So suddenly, it was really like, "Okay, what do I do with this? And when do I stop? When do I start? What do I include? What do I not?" You know, obviously, this is

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my choice of information. And it's going to be zero point I don't know what of what actually exists out there.

If it still does, because a lot of it is gone. In the bottom pit of the algorithm of Google. So-- no, it's true. It's-- you know, events like Tahrir live about two years on the internet. So in average. So a lot of it is already gone. So then at another stage of the project, I realize-- I come out of my hole. And I start looking around again. And seeing that, in fact, the big question is, "Okay, I've done this little archive," because I do think it's a little archive.

There's so many people and institutions and-- initiatives and groups and-- and-- and who have built archives, whether in Egypt-- and I can-- I'm only taking Egypt. I mean, if we go out and go to Syria and Tunis and all these other places, we're, like, facing, like, massive amounts of people institutions and collectives that have been building archives on different conflicts and revolutions and so on.

So then part of my project is at the second stage or third stage or first stage. I'm just not sure yet is mapping archives, rather than try to say, "This is my archive. And I have-- I own the meaning of the revolution." No, I don't. And nobody does. And so really the subjectivity is a very important part of the project, because I do not pretend to know what exactly happened and to-- and to have gathered very-- academic-- in a very academic way this archive.

It was very-- you know, it's a personal choice. So it was very-- it's a very private sort of relationship. It's almost like a love affair with the-- with the revolution. So-- this sense of archiving history becomes-- there's a bigger question that comes in, which is, "How do we connect these archives together?" Because today we don't have museums that will connect these digital archives.

We don't have big enough machines. We don't have a decentralized system that allows us to navigate these different ar-- archives. And so the real question is what is gonna happen to-- in this digital-- these digital files? And how are we going to access my archive, the American University of Cairo's archive? While the Mosarin archive is being organized, while I don't know who has an archive of just slogans or jokes of the revolution and so on and so forth. So really these are-- I think these are fascinating questions. And they don't just apply to Egypt. They really apply to the world we live in in general. And I'm excited about this at the moment.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

Great. We'll take a couple of questions at a time now. (UNINTEL PHRASE) thanks.

## **HAZAR HABASH:**

My name is Hazar Habash. I'm a professor of computer science at NYU Abu Dhabi. And I'm interested in art. So I'm glad you're here. A quick actually comment to Lara. There's something called the Web Archive. (NOISE) It's a huge project. You may

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want to (UNINTEL PHRASE) amazing work.

But my question about (UNINTEL). In the context of this evening about conflict and art, I was curious about-- work that's done inside Israel or the West Bank by-- Palestinian artists, who are, you know-- Palestinian citizens-- I'm sorry, Israeli citizens (UNINTEL) Palestinians or Palestinians in the West Bank. And how they're using art to-- make sense of the situation there. Thank you.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

(UNINTEL), why don't you just pass the mic back to her. I'll take two questions at once.

## **KAREN YAGER:**

Thank you. Karen Yager. And also on the same topic, I mean, the concept of an archive as an act of resistance is an extraordinary one. And many of us-- most of us have used archives, have dealt with the question of how you collect archives, how you preserve them. Should they be preserved digitally? Should they be preserved in paper format, as well? Will they be preserved by universities, by-- by libraries, who knows what?

But what they-- what it does is create parallel histories in time, which is so extraordinary. Because historians, of course, look through archives and often find materials from any era that have never been seen before and immediately change the concept of history or go off in parallel directions. So what you're doing is doing that-- you're-- you're creating lateral histories and parallel histories. And you have the opportunity just with this concept and this terminology to reform everybody's understanding of making history.

## **LARA BALADI:**

That's a pretty scary situation.

## **KAREN YAGER:**

But it's extraordinary. It's absolutely extraordinary. And talking about archives has-- it's been going on for a really long time already, you know? At the beginning of the digital age when everybody became frightened about how quickly archive-- digitized materials would disappear, for instance. You-- how would you prevent that from happening? And how do you prevent a glut of materials from stopping the process of continuing to collect?

But the other thing is I wonder in creating your archive or in gathering this material

or in crea-- creating the materials, what is the influence that people feel-- people that you know and have interacted with feel about their creating and recording for local populations versus the world? And-- and what is the mediation? H-- you know, is there one level-- of objectivity that comes into your or other people's, as you might define it-- gathering of material.

Is it purely for your own or with your own understanding and need and connection? Or do you already mediate and see it as something that communicates with the local populations or with the world at large? And-- and do those things there-- are they generated to record or to influence and change other people's attitudes, as well, locally and internationally, let's say?

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

Thank you. Oussam, you want to take your question first and then (INAUDIBLE PHRASE).

## **OUSSAMA RIFAHI:**

You know, I think-- archiving is probably the topic of the day-- (LAUGH) tonight. Actually, that will answer a bit some of your question in a way. We thought-- when we talk about the archiving the Egyptian revolution the last three years, there's that much material. When you go to-- to Palestine and you think about 70 years of history, there's even more.

So there has been a lot of-- similar project have been done by Palestinian artists. There's a radio in Jerusalem-- project. There's-- you know, there's a radio in Beirut (UNINTEL PHRASE). So people have been-- this-- this was one form of resistance, if you like, to grasp the-- the past and try to kind of-- comfort (?) ones identity or to-- to feel that-- you know, that-- that not everything has been lost.

There is in Palestine, we-- we support many projects within the West Bank, as well, you know, and in Gaza. People who are kind of working in a more provoc-- provocative ways, you know, they (UNINTEL) more activist what-- what they do and-- and how things-- so you-- you have the whole gamut of-- of project that you see there. There's not-- you know, you cannot define it in one (UNINTEL) operation there.

There are lots of project that deal with capacity buildings, you know, trying to (UNINTEL)-- trying to kind of give-- art and culture as an alternative-- basically, to-- to feel that there's an identity. There's life that continues beyond occupation and-- and the current-- situation there. So there's not a simple answer to that. There is all-- everything.

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## LARA BALADI:

An answer from a very personal-- place to your question. I-- I mean, I think each of us has a role or tries to have a role. And-- you know, I don't-- I don't think I'm going to-- embrace every role that needs to be performed-- today to change things. So I try to find in the last three years-- and actually, you say it was a very productive time. But for me, the first year-- although, you know, went to Tahrir. Tahrir's (UNINTEL) this.

It was actually a very painful time and-- as an artist. Because I really felt blocked, you know? In fact, for me, you know, I don't see Tahrir Cinema as an art piece. I see it as-- as an action, as-- as a participation. I would never call it an art piece. It would be an insult to-- to-- (LAUGH) to what it was and to what was going on. But-- and I really felt lost, you know, as-- as a voice.

I felt-- where do I fit in all this, you know? Like-- during Mubarak era, without really-- you know, without-- without really thinking about it in that way, I was very lucky to be very exposed as an artist, internationally and nationally. I realized the first days of the revolution that the way I worked and the strategies I-- I used were benefiting from the fact that the regime was stagnant.

And we're using that stagnancy of the regime as-- part of my strategies. So what I built and what I showed you was this tower that took nine months to be built and to be destroyed and so on. And-- and suddenly I didn't know how to work. Because I'm not of the generation that just, like, produces a video piece in two minutes-- 'cause I-- you know, I don't just sit on my computer and (MAKES NOISE). That's it.

You know, I-- and, you know, I don't like it anyway. It's not my thing, you know? So-- so it was a very disturbing time. And-- and also, I'm of Lebanese origin. I've lived in France. I've studied in London. I went back to Egypt. My parents had already moved from Egypt, had left the revolution in the '50s, had been traumatized by it. I'd been brought up in this trauma of the '50s revolution, you know?

So going back to Egypt already was, like, a big no-no from my family sides. And I've always sort of lived as a kind of free electron around Egypt. So I'm Egyptian. But I'm not. But I am. But I'm a Lebanese. But I'm not. But I'm a French. But I have an accent. But this and that. So-- so my position has always been a little bit funny.

And-- and for me, this-- this project of archiving is-- and also always my-- my sort of coming back to a more traditional way or to my own traditional way of making art after years of doing Tahrir Cinema and so on-- is really about, you know, I think things come from-- you reconnect with yourself. And then you try to bring something out.

So-- so I think the interesting thing for me in this project is to challenge-- the-- the place from where creativity comes with an impact with your society, but in a different way than an art piece does or-- or the artworks that I've done so far, I do or did. And-- and so I don't intend-- I don't think I will touch the whole world, you know? You never do. (BACKGROUND VOICE) Or sometimes you do, but maybe, you know, I

don't know. But that's not my goal in terms of-- you know, that's not how I'm thinking of it.

I'm interested in-- and also I've collected (UNINTEL) English-- a lot of Arabic videos, but a lot of English text. So I know already that from my position, I cannot be objective. I mean, as a human being you're not objective. But-- but also from my permission and how I belong in the kind of landscape of identities of Egypt, I'm not gonna be objective. You know? I do not belong to the mass. I don't.

So-- so-- so my int-- and I'm always aware that if I'm gonna deal with technologies, I'm obviously not going to touch the people today who are illiterate, which are about 60% of the population in my country. So, you know, I'm very aware of that. But somebody got to do something. And if this is what I know how to do or what I will try to do, then I hope I will do it well.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

Okay, we have time, I think, just for maybe one more--

## **DIANE:**

One more. I'll make it quick. My name's Diane (UNINTEL). And I'm-- a journalist in (UNINTEL). I just think it's-- this-- this is fascinating. But I'm-- I'm-- I'm conscious of it being a h-- very hot button issue in-- in Egypt for-- for some people. Because archives aren't about-- always about art and history, about politics and the future.

And I should think you'd run head to head with trouble. And if not, why not? In this country we have so many competing-- voices for image. We have the president himself. We have the government. We have the P.R. spin machine. We have-- a slew of journalists, many, many more than used to be. So do you-- come to this problem-- do people actually come to you from officialdom in some way and in a threatening way? If not (UNINTEL) journalist, (UNINTEL) artist-- contingent-- contingencies?

## **LARA BALADI:**

In-- in a way-- this question is also part of suddenly the questions that are being raised when I'm developing this project. And-- what I'm now looking at is-- the possibility of creating-- an architectural frame that will hold archives. So that, you know, I will not respond to one question. But a lot of p-- people can respond to different questions and-- and give different images of a similar event.

Again, because of my situation as a weird free electron somewhere, somehow, I-- and also because of the position of artists, in general (and I would like to say a word about-- word about that)-- somehow I feel invisible. So so far so good. So I've always

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managed to navigate-- politics and the political landscape in an invisible way.

First, because I don't think art is that important in Egypt. And maybe in other Arab countries either. I don't see it. I mean, I don't-- I'm not saying it's not important as we shouldn't do it or it's not something that actually says something. I'm saying it's not important in the-- in the-- in the-- it's not important for the government.

They're not really that interested in us. We're not that interesting, because we're not that (UNINTEL). So (MAKES NOISE), you know, right now artists, no artists, you know? It's more important to stop-- to censor films. It's more important to censor political activists. First, it was the-- the Brotherhood. Now it's the activists. You know, soon it will be our turn, but we don't know when.

And I've been censored in Egypt. It's not that I haven't. I've been censored a couple of times in the (UNINTEL) and in Egypt. But-- most of the strategies I developed during the Mubarak era and also because of my personality or whatever, I also feel that, you know-- I can be very provocative as a person. But as an artist, I don't feel that provocation is necessarily the way to bring across your message.

So it's really also about how you say things and how you bring your message forward, which I think art is very good for that. Because it's-- I mean, already as a container, art is very good for that. Because it's-- in art you can put anywhere. So everything is art. So-- in a way, you can hide in art. Because I'm not a journalist. So I'm not supposed to be objective. So I'm not a historian. So I'm not supposed to tell you what history was really like. So I'm an artist. I can do what I want. I'm free. So-- you know, I'm-- (LAUGH)

## **DIANE:**

(UNINTEL) you were quite a beacon of hope for people. And I think you're being very self-deprecatory here. Thank you.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

Great. Unfortunately, we've reached the end of our time together. But there's, I think, some good food left here. And why don't you stay awhile, enjoy each other's company, talk with our speakers? But-- let's give them a sign of (UNINTEL). (APPLAUSE)

\* \* \*END OF TRANSCRIPT\* \* \*