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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

FILM AND DIGITAL MEDIA

by

IAN ALAN PAUL

June 2016

The Dissertation of Ian Alan Paul is approved:

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Ian Alan Paul

2016

# The Conditions of Possibility

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## Abstract: The Conditions of Possibility

Ian Alan Paul

This research-creation dissertation documents and theorizes the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution of 2011, the July 3<sup>rd</sup> Coup of 2013, and the period of military rule that has followed in Cairo, Egypt. Equal parts critical ethnography, aphoristic reflection, political philosophy, and experimental documentary, the transdisciplinary project is an assemblage of images and texts that examines the political, ontological, and affective conditions of possibility in the city. Based on fieldwork undertaken between 2013 and 2015 in Cairo and drawing upon myriad conversations and pedestrian explorations, the dissertation is divided into three chapters and a conclusion, each reflecting upon a particular historical con/disjuncture while elaborating on concepts that help to orient within their dynamics. The first chapter outlines the experimental methodology of the dissertation and conceptualizes an approach to images that are produced and encountered in their nonlinear possibility. The second chapter examines the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution and theorizes how possibility emerged as a form of power from the assemblies of Midan Tahrir. The third chapter explores the security practices of the military regime that have attempted to extinguish the possibility of the assemblies. The conclusion analyzes how the possibility of the assemblies is preserved in obscure and encrypted practices of remembering. The research-creation version of this project can be found online at: <http://www.conditionsofpossibility.com>.

## Acknowledgements

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Finally, I would like to acknowledge all of the people who participated in or

helped with this project who must remain anonymous because of the repression currently unfolding in Cairo. My time in Egypt was filled with the undeserved generosity and kindness of many, and for this I will forever be grateful. The stamina and persistence of those that continue to struggle is an inspiration for all who hope for better worlds, and their courage and determination helps to proliferate the conditions of possibility within which those better worlds may yet arrive.

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution, a memory that still finds life in the lives of those that carry it with them.

## Preface: In the Milieus

Where can I possibly begin telling the story of a past that is not yet passed? Of a history suffused with remembered futures? I'll begin in the only place I'm able to: in the milieus, in the turbulent and vociferous middle of things, in the noisy conjunctures, emergent constellations, and cascading temporalities of a city.

I arrived in Cairo for the first time in the summer of 2013 to an empty airport terminal. Downtown was filled with assembling bodies calling for the downfall of Mohamed Morsi's regime, a discordant echo of the 2011 revolution. The military had occupied the streets of the city, and multitudinous voices from Midan Tahrir jubilantly chanted for army intervention. American-made apache helicopters coarsely floated above the crowds, dropping miniature Egyptian flags into outstretched hands.

After a brief back and forth with a driver who was hesitant to take me to my destination because of its proximity to the occupied square, we nervously sped along raised freeways above Cairo's proliferous makeshift neighborhoods and eventually stopped at a wall of large concrete blocks stacked three meters high, the graffitied barrier that marked the entrance to my flat. After stepping out of the car into an atmosphere thickly saturated with chants from the square, I climbed several flights of stairs and found my partner waiting. We quickly decided to go to Tahrir to witness the swells of congregating bodies tightly assembled within the midan, and then spent the

rest of the evening back in our flat drinking Egyptian beer, following Twitter, making calls, listening to the booms of fireworks going off in the streets below, and staring up at the military's helicopters that repetitively circled just above our balcony.

We had traveled to Egypt to be part of an ongoing revolution and arrived on the eve of a coup, intimately detoured, adrift and lost in tectonic shifts cacophonously grinding forward and in reverse.

Over the two years that followed that night, I undertook the practice of clandestinely recording photographs, videos, sounds, and conversations in the hopes of making contact with a revolution that persisted in the forms of indeterminacies that it had set into motion years prior. Taking part in transversal movements across and between different milieus, I hoped to encounter the city as well as its emergent possibility.

The possibilities of a city are unknowable in advance, in perpetuity. My life in the city was a possible life, a fragile wave of gestures, relations, and activities. My images of Cairo were possible images, an assembly of perspectives precariously accumulated. Somewhere between infinity and contingency, my body and camera circulated within plural conditions where lives and images differentially emerged from diverse constellations of encounters. This encounter between myself and you that is taking place now, mediated through an assemblage of images and text, is a continuation of this process.

In Cairo, I spent my time talking, meeting, inhabiting, traversing, eating, sleeping, dreaming, all inseparably with other things, bodies, atmospheres, milieus, and architectures. My own thinking was not “on” the city, a removed contemplation from afar, as much as it was “of” the city, intimately tied to, emergent from, and indebted to repeated encounters, affinities, and intimacies with others.

In addition, this project is transdisciplinary in thought and approach and draws from a large and diverse range of philosophers and theorists which typically aren't brought within a singular project. The diversity of thinkers, and of their approaches, would under other circumstances require a kind of reckoning between their genealogical and conceptual differences, but I've chosen to not undertake that form of work here. Instead, what you'll find is a “thinking with” diverse bodies of thought rather than an explicit “thinking about” them, an attempt to experimentally produce conjunctive resonances between distinct fields, disciplinary and otherwise, by favoring inclusion and connection over exclusion or contradiction, the “and” over the “or.” In other words, I mean to practice a maximal amount of generosity and flexibility in my mobilization and deployment of concepts from different traditions, while also recognizing that frictions and dissonances will necessarily persist and remain as part of this transdisciplinary approach.

Since living a political life has become significantly more precarious in Cairo following the coup, I chose to make use of obscure and encrypted approaches in this

project. All of the photographs and videos that you'll encounter were recorded imperceptibly, away from the attention or notice of the regime. I've also chosen to obfuscate and encrypt information that could in any way aid the regime's security forces in their ongoing repressive campaigns against those that remain in Cairo. As a result, the excerpts of conversations that you'll find throughout the project have been anonymized and mixed together and have also had their details additively and subtractively altered, a cryptodocumentary practice that is multitudinous, abstracted, and encrypted in form. Together, all of the materials are drawn into constellations of thought on the forms of life and resistance and memory that endure within the turbulent and rolling wakes of the revolution that continue to linger amidst the swells of the military's coup.

This project is about the indeterminate duration of an uprising that refused and refuses to be extinguished. It's about the conversations I had and the people I met and the spaces and times we shared during my year in Cairo following the coup. It's about the images, sounds, affects, ideas, bodies, architectures, words, memories, and dreams that I assembled and assembled me. It's about the cultivated, contested, defended, obfuscated, hidden, threatened, preserved, undecided, and sometimes forgotten pasts and futures of the revolution that urgently struggle to persist. It's about conditions of possibility that smolder.

## Chapter 1: The Possible Image

Much of my time in Cairo was spent traversing its militarized streets, squares, and alleys. These improvised explorations were an experimental technique I used to become more intimate with what the city was as well as what it could be in the tempests of a coup that had seemingly extinguished any future or past but its own.<sup>1</sup> During these long walks, I clandestinely produced thousands of photographs and gathered them into an archive of my life within and movement through the city's many milieus and ambiances. Midan Tahrir was both destination and departure point for these drifts as I promiscuously circulated through the square again and again, navigating through its intensities, fields, flows, congestions, attractions, frictions, densities, emptinesses, and blockages.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 It's worth noting here at the very start that the use of the term "coup" is controversial, and in a sense its use signals one's political position in relation to current military regime. For example, supporters of Sisi refer to the coup simply as the "Second Revolution." When the coup first began with the military's arrest of Mohamed Morsi and outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood against the backdrop of popular protests in the summer of 2013, the historical consequences of the events that were unfolding were unclear. For a description of these protests as they were unfolding, see Patrick Kingsley's article in the Guardian: "Protesters across Egypt call for Mohamed Morsi to go." After the imprisonment of thousands of revolutionaries, the Rabaa Massacre, and the outlawing of opposition parties and protests, I find it unquestionable that the military purposefully executed a coup and seized state power in response to the popular protests that summer. In particular, the staged/rigged election of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as president should leave no doubt as to whether or not it was a coup.
- 2 A drift is the practice of walking in or exploring a space in the interest of encountering and possibly resisting the forces that organize that space. The practice was first developed and theorized by the Situationists in France in the 1960's. When they first began experimenting with dérives, Guy Debord and the Situationists imagined them challenging "...the built hierarchy of the capitalist city and break down distinctions between private and public, inside and outside, use and function, replacing private space with a 'borderless' public surface." (Weizman 209). Guy Debord originally proposed the dérive as a methodology to be used in these encounters with cities,

In the locus of downtown, Tahrir is lined with barbed wire and metal barricades, layered with graffiti, crowded by booksellers, crossed by speeding taxis, loitered by traffic police, surveilled by plainclothes security agents, lit by neon signs, and connected by paved spokes that extend outward in the form of roads and bridges.<sup>3</sup> The square is a dynamic space whose contours are composed of forces that differentially encourage and discourage flows and movements through it, together creating diverse conditions for assembly and disassembly, proximity and distance,

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mapping them by simultaneously becoming intimate with as well as resisting their forces: “One of the basic situationist practices is the *dérive*, a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances... In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there ... from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones” (“Theory of the *Derive*”). Debord argued that these distributed conditions that affectively shaped movement through cities were often overlooked, but essential to the understanding of urban space: “The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain); the appealing or repelling character of certain places — these phenomena all seem to be neglected” (“Theory of the *Derive*”). Debord’s main insight was that navigating a city necessarily meant being immersed within its organizational and managerial power, and thus processes of navigation, orientation, and movement itself could be forms of complicity or resistance in relation to that power. Interestingly, both modern Paris (where the situationists were walking) and modern Cairo (where I was) were developed along Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s philosophy of urban planning, and thus share particular organizational and spatial features.

- 3 Midan Tahrir (Tahrir square) is in the heart of downtown Cairo. Literally translated as “Liberation Square,” it was home to the assemblies of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution in 2011. Made up of a large roundabout and small plazas, Tahrir is a center of traffic and social activity in the city. Reflecting on the revolution, squares like Tahrir took shape as advantageous places for assemblies as protesters: “(re)learned that ‘the streets of discontent’ need to be large squares and streets in the heart of the capital ... they are places where mobile crowds can rapidly assemble and then easily flee, before security forces disperse them forcefully ... The flexibility of larger places and streets allows protesters to appropriate a maneuverable space where they can easily flee from police through numerous back streets and alleyways, shops and mosques, that can offer sanctuary or respite for protesters” (Soudias 72). The square was first planned and built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Khedive Ismail as part of the modernization of Cairo, which was modeled after the modernization of Paris, and remains a symbolic locus of Egypt’s political life.

intimacy and estrangement, orientation and disorientation, speed and congestion. I found myself roaming into dense markets, down empty passageways, past military checkpoints and secured government buildings, across bridges and freeways, and through the varied interstitial spaces of Wust El-Balad.<sup>4</sup> Encountering manifold bodies, crowds, buildings, streets, blockades, police and military conscripts and their checkpoints, the heat and the shade, I moved within and was moved by the uneven and shifting distributions of the city.

When I began to capture photographs along my walks through the military occupied streets, I did so in a necessarily clandestine manner. My height, piercings, and light skin rendered me as a hypervisible body in all of Cairo, subjecting my movements and actions to varying degrees of curiosity, suspicion and scrutiny. Following Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's consolidation of power after the coup of 2013, it

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4 Wust El-Balad is the name given to downtown Cairo. Literally translated as "the middle of town," The architectural layout and style of Wust El-Balad was designed and built in the mid-19th century and was largely inspired by Haussmann's renovation of Paris earlier in the same century, giving Cairo its nickname: Paris along the Nile. The modernization of downtown Cairo involved tearing down many buildings in order to make space for traffic through the city, creating wider avenues and more open spaces. While Napoleon III had rebuilt Paris largely to allow it to be more easily controlled by military forces following the Paris Commune, his authoritarian design was not entirely translatable to the bustling chaos of the streets of Cairo. Another crucial difference was the survival of Cairo's old city on the periphery of the new downtown, while Paris' had been destroyed. As Janet Abu-Lughod describes: "Thus by the end of the nineteenth century Cairo consisted of two distinct physical communities, divided one from the other by barriers much broader than the little single street that marked their borders. The discontinuity between Egypt's past and future, which appeared as a small crack in the early nineteenth century, had widened into a gaping fissure by the end of that century. The city's physical duality was but a manifestation of the cultural cleavage" (qtd. in Said 128). The urban geography of Wust El-Balad is radically heterogeneous in this way, having large squares and thoroughfares alongside labyrinths of alleys that allow for uneven and unexpected routes through the spaces of the city.

became increasingly difficult to photograph in Cairo at all.<sup>5</sup> An intensifying paranoia promulgated through the city, finding life within security forces and a dispersed vigilantism that made the lens of a camera appear suspicious or even threatening. The military spread rumors that foreign spies were attempting to undermine the Egyptian people, and every gesture, every body, became subject to differing intensities of surveillance and inspection across the spaces of the city. Outside of heavily policed tourist zones, the practice of photography was purposefully rendered escalatingly precarious as a means of regulating and curtailing the production of images that were not preauthorized by the military regime.<sup>6</sup>

In response to these contexts and to avoid drawing attention in the streets, I chose to attach a cellphone camera to the shoulder strap of my bag to take photos instead of using a larger and more conspicuous hand-held camera. In an effort to

5 Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (also referred to as el-Sisi, or just Sisi) was the youngest member of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces during the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution in 2011, and then later was installed as the military's commander in chief by then-president Mohamed Morsi in 2012. During the resurgence of popular protests in 2013, Sisi lead a coup that culminated first in the arrest of Morsi and later on in the Rabaa Massacre a month later. Sisi was elected president in dubious elections in 2014, and continues to remain in power Egypt. For an accurate profile of Sisi, look to "Egypt's New Strongman, Sisi Knows Best."

6 Precarity is a concept I'll use throughout to describe the degree to which a thing is rendered vulnerable. Judith Butler states that: "In our individual vulnerability to precarity, we find that we are social beings, implicated in a set of networks that either sustain us or fail to do so, or do so only intermittently, producing a constant spectre of despair and destitution. Our individual well being depends on whether the social and economic structures that support our mutual dependency can be put into place" ("For and Against Precarity"). Here, Butler establishes precarity as a kind of vulnerability that conditions all of life in the world that also simultaneously is particularized in the lives of individual bodies, a kind of imbrication between the individual and the world. Precarity is the singularized expression of broader systems and structures of vulnerability and fragility that create the conditions for something such as an 'individual' to exist (an individual vulnerable to, and capable of doing harm to, vulnerable others), that simultaneously renders the individual ineradicably social.

preemptively evade state surveillance and repression, I installed a customized operating system and software onto my phone so all of my photographs would be encrypted as soon as they were being captured. My cellphone shot photos on a repeating timer as I walked through the city, producing images between the count of the phone's microprocessor and the embodied poietics of my walks, and over time I developed a repertoire of tactics and techniques that allowed me to imperceptibly navigate and capture photographs in the presence of watchful security forces: repeatedly passing through a security barrier at different times of the day when shifts had changed in order to capture the look on different soldiers' faces; deliberately slowing down my walk in the midst of Cairo's perilous traffic to get multiple shots of the entrance to the ministry of the interior; pretending to talk about grocery shopping in Spanish on my cheap Egyptian cell phone to record images of an armored military vehicle stationed in front of a bank.<sup>7</sup> Becoming imperceptible in this way often didn't

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7 Poiesis (and its poietics) can be simply defined as creation, or production, and can be framed in several different fashions depending on how relation is defined. For example, autopoiesis is used to describe the process of self-production or self-creation, or the making of the self that emerges from the practices and potentialities of the self. Autopoiesis was originally used by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, and defined as: "a network of processes of production (transformation and destruction) of components which: (i) through their interactions and transformations continuously regenerate and realize the network of processes (relations) that produced them; and (ii) constitute it (the machine) as a concrete unity in space in which they (the components) exist by specifying the topological domain of its realization as such a network" (78). Sympoiesis, on the other hand, is a form of collective production or creation, or the forms of production and creation that result from encounters with others. Beth Dempster helpfully defines sympoiesis in this way: "Sympoietic systems recurrently produce a self-similar pattern of relations through continued complex interactions among their many different components. Rather than delineating boundaries, interactions among components and the self-organizing capabilities of a system are recognized as the defining qualities." (4) Making distinctions between auto- and sympoietic systems is a mereological problem, or a problem of scalar relation, and usually the two

depend on withdrawing or hiding as much as it did on performing as something else, a form of gestural and embodied encryption and obfuscation of the self, a practice of differentially dis/appearing in diverse fashions and degrees.<sup>8</sup>

Finding ways to photograph while evading notice soon became part of my everyday life in the city. This entailed becoming intimate with the patterns of movement and sporadic congregations of security forces, becoming familiar with the military architectures of the city that were continuously shuffled around and reassembled, and exploring situations to see what possibilities could be felt resting on the precipice of each passing moment. My pedestrian practice of image-making was a practice of risk-taking, a way of probing the boundaries of passable and possible behavior under a military regime in the spaces and times of the city, a measured yet experimental practice of exploring and documenting the city.

During my tactical explorations of Cairo that took me through checkpoints and over scattered cobblestones, I became drawn to the felt presence of pasts that subtly bled together in the present of the city. The scorched side of a building, a knowing glance, a bomb going off and reverberating across the surface of the Nile, a

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occur conjunctively and simultaneously.

8 I would like to briefly suggest here that this encryption of the self can become manifest in two distinct fashions. In one sense, a self-encryption can occur in a self-coding that makes oneself immediately and obviously recognizable in a particular fashion, while also effectively masking the nuance, complexity, and contradiction that persist despite this coding. In my case, this meant appearing as a wandering tourist, for example. On the other extreme, an encryption of the self can take on the form of a refusal to be coded, becoming something along the lines of a “whatever singularity” that simply fails to align up with codes at all (Agamben 1). This would manifest along the lines of becoming “a body” or “a life” rather than a particular body or life.

vine that has delicately crawled up the side of a telephone pole, a protest gathering and being dispersed in clouds of tear gas: in walking through the streets you always arrive in the melee, in the middle, in the midst, in the milieu of pasts constellating together in the present. The January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution, even if it no longer filled Tahrir with bodies, tents, and fireworks, still manifested as a force on Cairo's streets because of the radical difference of its past that persisted, and in this way the future of the city continues to be interminably bound up with the revolution's past surplus, its past indecision, its past remainder. This concurrence and convergence of pasts in the present composes the conditions of possibility for the city, and Cairo's future is unwritten only because its pasts are unwritten too.

Over time, I became less and less interested in simply documenting the coup and slowly began exploring how diverse temporalities endured on the streets of the city. As I walked through Cairo and photographed bored security forces patrolling an alley, or a taxi dangerously speeding around a corner, or a bread seller leaning against their cart in the cool shade of the late afternoon, my camera captured images that were composed of the meeting of different times, less a gathering of discrete moments and more a concurrence and convergence of multiple durations. The city that I explored was a complex aggregate of the past of the revolution (an unresolved past still in the process of becoming), the present of the coup (a present always-already slipping into the past), and the future (a future produced by the arrival and

return of unresolved and indeterminate pasts in the present). These explorations took shape in my photographing of what I call “Possible Images,” images that emerge from the transversal dis/conjunctions of pasts, presents, and their futures.<sup>9</sup>

“Possible Images” are collapses and crumplings of spaces and times, contingent compressions and folded contortions that plunge the present into the sea of the past. The possibility of the “Possible Image” is the possibility of the past that emerges when it's taken up as memory, or in other words, when the past is taken up in its future tense. “Possible Images” frame the arrival of past memory as being the arrival of future possibility, and in this way when we remember the past we remember the future too. What we call the future is simply the arrival of the past in the present in the form of memory, a return of the difference of the past that unsettles the present and creates room for a radically other present, a present otherwise. “Possible Images” are a form of past difference that have the potential to make a difference in the present, a materialized and actualized expression of a past unlike yet part of the present, and they matter differently depending on how they are called upon, taken up, carried along, and put to use. Depending on how the past is memorialized, different pasts can come to matter differently, and so the present itself is ineradicably a site for

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<sup>9</sup> This relation is tied to Jacques Derrida's writing on the form of the future-anterior (the future past), a “way of thinking that is faithful and attentive to the ineluctable world of the future which proclaims itself at present, beyond the closure of knowledge” (*Of Grammatology* 4). It radically suggests that we think and act in the present as if the presence of future communities that have yet to arrive, a politics of the “to come” that recognizes that imperfection of the present always-already conditions our ability to participate in and move towards or in relation to this future politics.

the differential emergence of past difference.

My photographs, as “Possible Images,” captured a city not only haunted by the past memories of the revolution, but the images themselves were also always-already memories for futures that were yet to come.<sup>10</sup> Just as a sand dune is the accumulated material expression of the force of wind in the desert, or a river like the Nile is the accumulated material expression of the force of rain and water carving out the ground beneath it, a photograph is the accumulated material expression of the forces that it emerges from. In a city like Cairo, a photograph is shaped by the forces exerted on it by the city's streets and buildings, by the security forces and architectures that block various forms of movement, by the sun that floods the lens with light, and by the crowds that fill the city with movement, each of which in some way condition the possibility of different images materializing. In sum, a photograph is simply a visual condensation and collapse of these historical forces within the formal and material space of its image. A “Possible Image” in this context is simply a way of exploring how a photograph can allow for a past to have life even though the exact historical forces that produced it no longer are present, a way of allowing a particular contingency of the past to become entangled with the contingencies of the

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10 A lot could be written on the “to come” of the future, an approach to the future that draws upon the French “l'avenir.” For Jacques Derrida, it was fundamentally justice that perpetually remained on the impossible-to-reach precipice of the future, a kind of horizon that could be walked towards but never reached. For the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, it was a people that were “yet to come,” a future community that perhaps could be capable of reaching that justice.

present.

The possible image can be thought of in relation to other theoretical approaches to images, but is not reducible to them. For example, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, the philosopher Jacques Rancière develops the concept of the “Pensive Image” that:

“...contains unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which has an effect on the person who views it without her linking it to a determinate object. Pensiveness thus refers to a condition that is indeterminately between the active and the passive. This indeterminacy problematizes the gap that I have tried to signal elsewhere between two ideas of the image: the common notion of the image as duplicate of a thing and the image conceived as artistic operation. To speak of the pensive image is to signal the existence of a zone of indeterminacy between these two types of image” (107).

Here, Rancière emphasizes the indeterminacy that exists between a reader of the image and the image itself that manifests as a form of pensiveness, or, as he says, “unthought thought.” This understanding of the image and its potentiality is incredibly generative, and allows for a novel possibility of the image to emerge. The limits of this approach to images, however, are that it potentially reduces images and

curtails their possibility in several ways. First, it restricts their indeterminate capacity to “thought,” without considering the affective or nonthought/nonconceptual (chaotic) potentials. Second, it relies on a form of qualitative distinction between readers and images that I think is ontologically and epistemologically unsound. While his move towards indeterminacy helpfully troubles the relation between an image and its reader, he stops short of theorizing images to the full extent of their possibility that radically exceeds the process of thought in important ways.

Another concept that could be related to the possible image is the “Poor Image” that is described by Hito Steyerl in her text “In Defense of the Poor Image” as a low-quality image, as a poor “copy in motion.” This reading of images is also generative in that it allows us to approach images in their capacity for circulation in networks and their economies, or in other words, in both their exchange and use value as images in infrastructural systems, but again this concept is particular to specific image sets and not images in general. A key insight that Steyerl picks up on however, is how an image's circulation impacts the ontological status of the image, remaining attentive to its conditionality as being constitutive of the image itself. This attentiveness to not only the production of an image but also the life that is taken up by and image in its circulation and reception is incredibly useful and allows for a broader reading of images and their capacities.

Perhaps it's also important to clarify that I don't think that concepts are objectively "true" or "false" in relation to the world, but rather are only ever useful for us or not in their capacity to organize and disorganize the world itself. In other words, concepts aggregate and disaggregate, conjoin and disjoin, draw order from chaos and draw chaos into order, not in any sort of objective sense but rather always speculatively and contingently, and as such the question of whether something finds duration or not is a separate matter not necessarily tied to the objectivity of concepts. When offering the "Possible Image" as a concept, I want a tool and weapon capable of doing many things, not one confined to specific curtailed operations. As such, I don't think there are "possible" images and "impossible" images, but rather only images that we can choose to approach, or not, with different kinds of concepts.<sup>11</sup>

To approach an image as a possible image is to explore the relation between the past and the present, and in so doing to explore the immanent futurity of the past itself as expressed in the indeterminacies and contingencies of present situations. Importantly, you cannot approach a situation without also becoming entangled with it:

to photograph, to sense, to study, to perceive, to survey, to have a perspective at all, is

<sup>11</sup> This approach to concepts is indebted to Elizabeth Grosz' text "Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth," where she writes that: "If philosophy, through the plane of immanence or consistency, gives life to concepts that live independent of the philosopher who created them, yet participate in, cut across, and attest to the chaos from which they are drawn, so too art, through the plane of composition it throws over chaos, gives life to sensation that, disconnected from its origins or any destination or reception, maintains its connections with the infinite it expresses and from which it is drawn. Twin rafts over chaos, philosophy and art, along with their more serious sibling, the sciences, enframe chaos, each in its own way, in order to extract something consistent, composed, immanent, which it uses for its own ordering (and also deranging) resources" (8).

to become involved. Circulating in the tides of pasts and futures that actively unfold in the present, “Possible Images” are less correspondent reflections of what is on the other side of the lens than they are persistent manifestations of the remainder, the undecided, the excess, that which troubles the present with the possibility of the past.

If the possible image is an image that in some sense carries its past conditions of possibility along with it, it's perhaps worth reflecting on what I mean by the “conditions of possibility.” The German philosopher Immanuel Kant famously defined the conditions of possibility as being the a priori conditions of possible experience. I agree with Kant but also find it important to elaborate by arguing that a priori conditions are historically contingent and are themselves a form of multiplicity. A complementary rephrasing might simply be “The Contingencies of Possibility,” which create a form of scalar or mereological relation between possibilities and their conditions. For the philosopher Gilles Deleuze on the other hand, the conditions of possibility were understood not as the conditions of possibility for existence as such (as a kind of logical problem of noncontradiction), but rather were the conditions of becoming, for poiesis and genesis. Reflecting on the work of Kant, Deleuze remarks that: “The ground is a condition. The condition is that which renders possible ... The classical problem of possibility completely changes sense. The possibility is the condition of possibility.” (What is Grounding 31) Here, there is no distinction between condition and possibility, or rather, in a classically Deleuzian fashion,

conditions and possibilities should be thought of as having an immanent relation to one another rather than a transcendental one.

In one of his lectures on Kant, Deleuze elaborates on this point further: “It's when I say that every apparition refers to the conditions of the appearing of the apparition, in this very statement I am saying that these conditions belong to the being to whom the apparition appears, in other words the subject is constitutive ... the subject is constitutive not of the apparition, it is not constitutive of what appears, but it is constitutive of the conditions under what appears to it appears to it” (Cours Vincennes : Synthesis and Time - 14/03/1978). For Deleuze, the conditions of possibility for appearance and production constitute the conditions of possible relations between the produced and appeared as well as the subject that encounters them. There is no transcendental reference frame that conditionally renders relational appearance possible in this way, but rather the frame of reference for relation emerges from the encounter between the related themselves.

On my walks, I explored a Cairo that was located in the imminent slippages between plural pasts, a city constituted by plural and contested temporalities and spatialities that flowed over one another like rivers that sweep into oceans; even when walking alone, I remained awash in the conditions of possibility of the city. I desired to investigate the ways in which the pasts of the revolution had endured in the

present, navigating through intensive forces that folded over and across one another.<sup>12</sup> Cairo, Al Qahira, a city swept up in the past of a revolution and present of a coup and the environment of my walks, is a complex and contradictory aggregate of architectures, traffic, peoples, birds, fields, unstable electricity grids, dust, sunlight, bridges, squares, alleys, police, and markets that together compose sets of possibilities, never entirely present but always potentially realizable given specific arrangements of circumstances, configurations, and relations. In spaces and times crisscrossed by riot police, wild assemblies, emptinesses, profound chaos and devoted calm, my camera collected images and the conditions that shaped their production in each opening of its shutter.

In the multitude of “Possible Images,” there exists a certain kind of photograph: the shot, a heavy bullet of indexicality. Its determinacy is discrete, a scene composed of figures neatly arranged within the indexical truth of the frame. However, there’s also another kind of photograph, a fog that saturates time and space rather than a projectile that flies through them. While the projectile is aimed and has a target, the fog inhabits, roams, reveals and hides, responds to subtle imperceptible forces, and finally returns as condensation when the conditions for its duration are no

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<sup>12</sup> Intensive forces operate as forms of topology and conditionality that constitute ranges or spectra of possible action. The classic example of an intensive condition would be the relation between a high and low pressure system, that establishes forces between them. An intensive force is the becoming possible of a particular actualization. For more on this, look to footnote number four on the relation between the actual and virtual.

longer there to support it.<sup>13</sup> It's not so much a question of what the image is in an ontological sense, but rather what its production, circulation and reception does: Is it a bullet or a fog? The bullet finds its target, while the fog forces you to search. The bullet is predictable in its trajectory, but the fog is full of surprises. The bullet draws a neat line, while the fog appears only in the way that it diffractively blurs. As manifest in "Possible Images," a past can be materialized and expressed as a bullet or a fog, both having the potential to unsettle the present in different fashions.

When a camera takes a photograph, whether something is in focus or out of focus, under or over exposed, in the frame or outside of it, increases or decreases the degree of determinacy of various figures within the formal space of the image. The data of the world can be sharply rendered or can be a fleeting blur, can be perfectly exposed in all of its detail or can be entirely subsumed and obscured within it. Walking in the shade of the street at one moment will adjust the camera's settings and open the aperture in the hopes of capturing a range light in the lower spectrum of intensity, while one further step into the sunlight of the street causes the aperture to close itself and the lower spectra of brightness becomes emptied of information and escape into the shadows. Walking quickly past a security checkpoint can cause still things in the frame to be blurred as the camera's lens swings over the scene but bodies

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13 For more on the ontology, politics, and ethics of endurance, see the conversation between Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Povinelli published in E-Flux: "*Holding Up the World, Part III: In the Event of Precarity ... A Conversation.*"

passing alongside you can remain entirely in focus as they remain still relative to the lens of the camera. These processes, among many others in the city, set into motion the “becoming-determinate” or “becoming-indeterminate” of different aspects of the world in the photographing it.

Forms of indeterminacy and indecision persist in relation to determinacies and forms of decision in the city in this way. The degree to which a thing is determinate is the degree to which it is delimited spatially and temporally. Greater degrees of determinacy are correlated with greater degrees of predictability and order, and nothing is ever entirely determinate, but rather is manifest as more or less intensely determinate given its relations. Indeterminacy, on the hand, is the degree to which a thing is chaotic and distributed spatially and temporally. Greater degrees of indeterminacy are correlated with greater degrees of unpredictability and disorder. Nothing is ever entirely indeterminate, but rather is manifest as more or less intensely so given its relations.

The philosopher Karen Barad suggests that we have reason to be suspicious of worldviews that rely on deterministic relations as the base of their understanding. As she notes about the physicist Niels Bohr: “Crucially, in a stunning reversal of his intellectual forefather’s schema, Bohr rejects the atomistic metaphysics that takes ‘things’ as ontologically basic entities. For Bohr, things do not have inherently

determinate boundaries or properties, and words do not have inherently determinate meanings. Bohr also calls into question the related Cartesian belief in the inherent distinction between subject and object, and knower and known” (“Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter” 813). For Barad, the process of encounter and relation itself is ultimately productive of the related, which necessarily implies degrees of indeterminacy. Furthermore, when determinacy emerges, it only ever takes shape in specific arrangements of matter and so are not inherently determinate but rather are only ever contingently so. These historical arrangements shape practices that take place within them, including the practice of photography.

What's important to reemphasize here is that images themselves are never simply determinate or indeterminate, but rather images always maintain both forms of determinacy and indeterminacy, actuality and virtuality, contingency and possibility. No total resolution is ever possible in this regard. Instead, an image is always haunted by a coexistence and con/disjunctive juxtaposition that emerges from the entanglements of its past, present, and future. A camera, just like any other apparatus, renders the world simultaneously determinate and indeterminate, what Karen Barad calls a “cutting together-apart.” My method of walking and photographing was a way of investigating and critically taking notes on the coup and was manifest in the traversal of diverse spaces of determinacy and indeterminacy in the city. The

conditions of possibility of the city were themselves entangled with the conditions of possibility of the photograph, formally, and with myself as a photographer, methodologically.

My practice of producing “Possible Images” was always met by the militant controls of the regime that were expressed in various security architectures and forms of policing. Following the coup in the summer of 2013, Sisi’s military erected towering steel gates at the main entrances to Tahrir and deployed military vehicles and barricades whenever demonstrations were anticipated. In the streets around the Midan, large concrete blocks were piled on top of one another sealing off the major thoroughfares that lead to Tahrir, cutting neighborhoods off from one another in the process. What had long been a popular meeting place was kept sparse by unpredictable military movements and the permanent security closure of the Sadat metro station. Despite this, an everydayness of the streets remained: people busily rush to work, men with graying beards sip tea in smoke-filled cafés, school children patiently wait for crowded buses, a family of Syrian refugees asked for spare pounds, a faded portrait of one of the revolution’s many martyrs peels on the wall, missing bricks from the sidewalk, having been thrown through the air at security forces on some previous occasion, reveal sand and stone beneath. All of this was persistently overshadowed by young military conscripts that were stationed at most intersections,

large automatic rifles hanging from their small frames.

These incongruencies push and pull upon all who inhabit and pass through Cairo, a charged historical field within which all gestures and movements take place, unresolved and undecided pasts that persist as intensive forces on life in the city. Many months after the coup, when emergency measures were marginally lessened, I could begin to move through the space of downtown with greater degrees of mobility, either passing as a tourist or appearing in an official capacity as a professor at the American University in Cairo (AUC), presumably visiting the walled-off university campus on the east side of Midan Tahrir. My walking and clandestine image-making were tactical modes I adopted of relating to as well as evading the dispersed hostility of the regime.<sup>14</sup>

While I was in the country, the precarity implicit in the production of images was rendered clear in repetition: ██████████, a close friend, was seriously injured by demonstrators while photographing at a protest; ██████████, a student from one of the courses I was teaching, was arrested while taking photos and brought to the Mukhabarat (the Egyptian Intelligence Agency) where they were questioned for more

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<sup>14</sup> The American University in Cairo is an English language liberal arts university in Cairo that was founded in 1919 that I taught at while I was conducting my fieldwork in Egypt. Its main campus was historically located on the East side of Tahrir square, but most of the campus has since been relocated to a new location in New Cairo, a wealthy city located in the deserts to the East of Cairo. Following the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution, the university hosted a wave of events, discussions, and conferences that examined and reflected upon the uprising, although these have largely ceased following the coup as the university has become more cautious and conservative.

than 10 hours; an American photojournalist was stabbed to death while taking photos in Alexandria; [REDACTED], an Egyptian friend, was surrounded by a crowd of men and reported to the police because they were shooting photographs in the early morning in their neighborhood.<sup>15</sup> For all of these reasons, my walks were unavoidably immersed in the affective atmospherics of the regime's capacity for violence. An army conscript's gaze, a group of men carrying sticks, a plainclothes police officer standing nearby: in Cairo it is violence's unpredictable, dispersed and chaotic organization that deeply shapes life under the coup.

Under Sisi's regime, artists, journalists, and documentarians are required to obtain permits and permissions from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information in order to work in Egypt, and even those who have obtained them for their projects often face institutional harassment and censorship regardless. Several prominent journalists from Al Jazeera English were arrested in their hotel room and charged with 'aiding a terrorist organization' for their reporting on the coup, accused of being sympathetic with the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>16</sup> Doctor Tarek Loubani and artist

<sup>15</sup> Throughout this text I've included black blocks like this "[REDACTED]" to make obvious where I have removed information. I've chosen to render places and people anonymous and abstract because of the forms of repression currently unfolding in Cairo that I do not want to be enacted against these places and people. In addition to blocking out names, I've also remixed and altered identifying details about the persons I've interviewed for this project, and have also removed any reference to gender or age. As a result, the project contains multitudinous and encrypted voices, speaking from positions of collective obscurity rather than from individualized recognizability, and is why I've classified this project a "cryptodocumentary" (a hidden form of documentary). You will be able to find a longer conceptual elaboration on this decision in the conclusion of this dissertation.

<sup>16</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood is the Islamist group that was elected into power in Egypt's first democratic elections following the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution. While under the rule of the former

John Greyson were arrested following the coup and jailed for weeks because they had filmed part of the violent dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood's Rabaa sit-in.<sup>17</sup> More recently, the regime made it illegal to circulate accounts of terrorist and/or military activities that differed from official state narratives and as a result several foreign journalists were later detained for showing up to report on a car bombing in the city.<sup>18</sup> To produce media in Cairo in a legitimized and official capacity requires subjecting your work to state approval and censorship while also potentially exposing yourself to violent repression. In this context, I had to refuse the permission and oversight of the regime if I wanted to encounter presents and pasts of the city that diverged from the ones that the military desired to impose.

While in some parts of the world security forces produce power and control through overwhelming displays of force, in Egypt the relative incompetence and disorganization of the state means that the deployment and behavior of security forces are sporadic and difficult to predict. The regime leverages this to its advantage, using

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dictator Hosni Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood was Egypt's oldest and largest resistance movement, and has support across Egypt estimated in the millions. After the coup, the Muslim Brotherhood continued to organize protests and claimed that Mohamed Morsi remained the legitimate leader of Egypt.

17 Midan Rabaa is a square a few kilometers to the North-East of Tahrir that contains several street markets and a mosque. Following the coup, members of the Muslim Brotherhood staged a large sit-in in the square to protest the removal and arrest of Mohamed Morsi, which was later dispersed by regime security forces. Over 1000 were killed in the square in what is now known as the Rabaa massacre. You can read about the massacre and its political fallout in the Omar Ashour's Al Jazeera article "Rabaa's massacre: The political impact" and a more elaborate analysis of this event can be found later in Chapter 3.

18 For more information on the repression unfolding against journalists in Egypt, see Jack Shenker's article "State repression in Egypt worst in decades, says activist" published in the Guardian.

the unpredictable and seemingly random emergence of their widespread violence as part of a more general repressive strategy: one doesn't respond only to the presence or actions of security forces but also to their ever possible manifestation. As I became more familiar with Cairo, I also became more sensitive to the affective waves of the security forces, feeling their presence in the movements of people in the streets while I was photographing. Although I mostly was able to avoid contact with them, I also inevitably found myself enveloped within the chaotic articulation of their movement.

One afternoon following Friday prayers, while wandering near one of Cairo's busiest street markets in Midan Ataba, I became caught in the midst of a group of plainclothes police and baltagiya carrying automatic weapons on their way to disperse a crowd outside of a nearby mosque.<sup>19</sup> Another afternoon I was stuck for several hours on one of Cairo's islands when the military unexpectedly blocked off the surrounding bridges with armored personnel carriers. Once I was pursued by an officer after I had been loitering next to a military staging area in order to photograph them with my phone. In the most familiar of senses, the street my partner and I lived on was regularly used as a deployment zone for various security forces, meaning that simply going out for a tea or coffee often required navigating around concrete road

<sup>19</sup> Midan Ataba is one of Cairo's main squares to the east of Midan Tahrir. The square contains a large mosque, one of Cairo's largest street markets, and a police station. Midan Ataba was a gathering places for protesters during the revolution. The term baltagiya (thugs) is used to describe the groups of men which are at times hired by security forces to attack demonstrations. Their informality and lack of official ties allows them to operate outside of the law and contributes to the confusion of street battles. Some believe that the baltagiya have also been involved in organized sexual assaults against women in the assemblies of Tahrir.

blocks and trucks filled with riot police.

Cairo's spatio-temporal organizations and distributions and the embodied relations that find life within them constitute the plural and contingent conditions of possibility for the city. Cities can only be understood, even if only ever partially, in an active sensation and exploration that literally brings you into contact with them. Cities are nothing more than wild assemblies of many entangled perspectives, aggregating together and dispersing, pushing against one another in untamed conflict and fleeting affinity. You can only come to know a city and its possibility by also taking part in differentially (re)producing it.

When I say that one becomes differentially tied to the city in the "knowing" of it, I mean to describe the mobile and dynamic relation that emerges when bodies and/or things encounter one another in difference. Differentials are mutually transforming relations, or in other terms, are differences that are entangled together in conjunctive and relative motion. In a sense my use can be likened to its use in engineering which describes a gear that allows parts moving at different speeds to combine their motion together. Differential in this sense is about the forms of practice and production (in this case, of motion) that arise from the meeting of difference.

In relation to mathematics, the "differential" of differential calculus emphasizes not change but instead the rate of change, or what we could call the speed of change. This is a shift from the study of extensivity to intensity, or in other words,

from being to becoming. Gottfried Leibniz, one of the inventors of differential calculus, notes of difference in general that: "...there are never in nature two beings, which are precisely alike, and in which it is not possible to find an internal difference...I take it also for granted that all created beings...are subject to change, and even that this change is continuous in each" (118). Borrowing from Leibniz, my use of differential is also meant to imply this entanglement between difference and change in their radical continuity, emphasizing the connectedness of things over their possible rupture.

My walks through Cairo were heavily affected by the infinite nuances and contradictions of its composition that had arisen following both the revolution and the coup. The months after the first days of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution were defined by the disappearance of the police and military from the streets, creating a milieu for social and political experimentation that was unprecedented in Egyptian history.<sup>20</sup> The coup on the other hand was most clearly expressed in the reappearance and mass redeployment of these forces and security architectures across Cairo, hoping to

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<sup>20</sup> When I say "January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution" I meant to specifically cite the revolution that took place in 2011 over 18 days that removed Egypt's dictator Hosni Mubarak from power. Originally sparked by protests organized for National Police Day, it was also spurred on by the police murder of 28-year-old Khaled Said while he was in custody, photos of which sparked widespread national outrage. The revolution is considered as a central part of the wider Arab Spring, a global sequence of uprisings which started in Tunisia and cascaded across different countries in North Africa and the Middle East. While the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution lasted 18 days, I argue that the revolutionary period of Egypt extends formally from January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, to the coup of July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013. For an excellent and extensive timeline of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution, see PBS' "Day-to-Day Timeline - Jan. 25 - Revolution in Cairo" published online.

eradicate forms of unstructured and informal relations that couldn't be assimilated under the control of the regime, leaving emptinesses and absences behind.

While life under the coup is suffused with repressive violence, it's also necessary to pause and stress that there is an ineradicable love that persists on the streets of Cairo despite the militarized atmosphere that seeks to extinguish it. The forms of conviviality and hospitality that can be found in expected and unexpected places and times, over coffees and in crumbling buildings, before and after demonstrations where too many have been crushed or disappeared, all maintain spaces for affinity and poiesis that are irreducible to and stand apart from any singular sovereign logic or order imposed from above. During my time in Cairo, and especially so in the more vulnerable and precarious moments, these tiny gestures enacted in repetition made life livable and worth living, and perhaps more importantly, preserved the conditions that make other kinds of living possible. These undermine the military's totalizing logic, and in the end were what rendered my walks through the streets of the city walkable.

Some of the more important spaces in this regard are the cafés, bars and restaurants scattered around Wust El-Balad that manifest as anomalies to the imposed controls of the police and military. [REDACTED], one of Cairo's many famous cafés and bars, continues to be a place where intellectuals, artists and writers that were involved in the revolution congregate and socialize together. Considered off-limits to

the police because of its cultural status, [REDACTED] helps to shelter the memories and forms of collectivity that were forged in the uprising. When a women's protest in downtown was planned in response to the regime's murder of Shaimaa Al-Sabbagh, a socialist from Alexandria that was shot in downtown Cairo on January 24th, 2015 while taking part in a march memorializing the 4th anniversary of the revolution, the nearby [REDACTED] became a sanctuary for activists and lawyers who were there to support the demonstration.<sup>21</sup> Unsanctioned protests in Cairo had long been banned, and the women that took the streets that day risked detention, harassment, violence, and death. While sitting inside of [REDACTED] with my partner, people nervously shuffled in and out of the space as the protest across the street escalated. The owners and employees stood guard at the entrance, ready to close the gates if shots were fired, while shifting sequences of small gatherings and cell phone conversations floated around tables and chairs. These are just some of many spaces in Cairo that complicate and introduce turbulence into the military's ordered calm.

To walk and capture images in this experimental fashion was to take back, however subtly, a small part of the possibility of the city from the military that attempted to entirely determine the activity and relations of the city itself. The success

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<sup>21</sup> Shaimaa Al-Sabbagh was a young socialist who was publicly murdered by police in downtown Cairo in the days leading up to the 4th anniversary of the revolution, causing international outcry. While carrying a wreath of flowers to Midan Tahrir to commemorate the revolution, the small march she was part of was attacked by security forces with birdshot and tear gas that ended up killing her. For an account of her murder, read "Coming to Mourn Tahrir Square's Dead, and Joining Them Instead" by David Kirkpatrick in the New York Times.

of a walk depended on passing as well as trespassing, both inhabiting and resisting the present while also encountering the past. To move, congregate, assemble and circulate with others is to enter into situations that have unpredictable outcomes by virtue of the differences involved. While the military controls the streets and squares of Wust El-Balad, to deviate away from those controls and produce images was to trespass onto and repurpose the regime's territory.

After having departed Egypt with thousands of photographs from my dozens of walks through the city, I began the process of reflecting on them as a form of indeterminate archive of the present and past of the revolution and the coup. A past inherited in the form of possible images, my task was not to try to hold onto a past in its entirety or totality because something like "the past" in the singular doesn't exist. Rather, I began the process of speculatively drawing constellations within the collection of images itself, between resonances and dissonances, conjunctures and disjunctures, determinacies and indeterminacies that emerged as I sorted through them. In the process of constellating, of aggregating and assembling and drawing past moments together into the present, I engaged in a productive and creative process in relation with the irreducible multiplicity of the past itself.

This process and practice of drawing connections between past events in a nonlinear fashion isn't meant to "represent" or "capture" an objective past in a narrative or archival fashion or to even suggest any kind of resolution is even

possible, but rather to explicitly and purposefully partake in the political and ethical project of making particular pasts matter, literally, in the present. Over the duration of this constellational process, I reduced the images from a collection of thousands to an archive of hundreds, and finally ended with 250 images that have been included in the project.<sup>22</sup>

In the formal editing of the photographs I chose to present them in black and white, a choice that allows for the contrast between forms in the photograph to be increased while also emphasizing the zones of resolutional indeterminacy within the images themselves. Thematically, the black and white treatment of the images suggests a historicity of the images, a form of “pastness” of the context being documented and of the documents themselves. My political and ontological understanding of the present is that it is in some way always-already past in the sense that the present we experience is always simultaneously receding and arriving, a slippage between pasts and futures, a space of differential indecision. In this way, the use of black and white is meant suggest that possibility is always bound up with

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<sup>22</sup> The constellation as an image of history was first suggested by Walter Benjamin in the prologue of “The Origin of the German Tragic Drama” where he describes it as a subdivision and a redemption of the past. What is interesting about the figure of the constellation in general is it's emphasis on the creativity of our relation to history and past as well as it's ontological haunting of the present. In any present moment, we are rained down upon by the historical light of manifold stars. If someone were to have looked up at the night sky in Cairo on the eve of the January 25th Revolution in 2011, in between the bursts of fireworks they may have been able to spot the 109 year old light from the star Alhena and the 490 year old light from the star Hassaleh, although Hassaleh would have appeared twice as bright. This continuous yet varied arrival of the past, the emergent inheritance of multiple pasts, constitutes not only what we could call the conditions of possibility for a present dis/conjuncture that radically precedes us, but also for a creative orientation towards the future in constellational form that radically exceeds those dis/conjunctures.

memory. The act of remembering is the act of constellating, of drawing things together into encounter and relation and in sense taking part in the continuous reformation and reorganization of the conditions of possibility. If memory, and history, are always to some degree indeterminate, then the way that we frame (exclude) and constellate (bring into relation) different pasts in acts of remembering is one of the ways that poiesis and action occur in the space of a durational present. The choice to use black and white, then, is largely meant to emphasize the presence and “present-ness” of the past, of the radical entanglement and coexistence of pasts, presents, and futures, of their constant arrival in nonlinear, nonchronological and constellational fashions.

The use of black and white is also meant to suggest a connection, aesthetic and otherwise, between the images of the coup in Egypt that are included in my project and other documentary images of political turmoil and revolt, including for example the famous photographs of the anticolonial struggles in North Africa, the Situationist photography of Paris as well as the global uprisings of 1968 more generally, the Paris Commune or even the Spanish Civil War. In the thick of the security forces' crackdowns, the images are meant to draw upon multivalent historical, social, political, and material assemblages from diverse geographical and temporal contexts that constitute it. This isn't to suggest an unnuanced similarity between these histories, but rather their continuity, their shared place in the history of

a global revolutionary project that is ongoing and unfinished and their potential to reemerge together, in constellational forms, in the present. The possible image is a form of durational indecision, a relation with pasts and futures that are not settled but remain animated and productive of the present situation. The “Possible Image” is always-already past, but the past of the “Possible Image” is not what has been or even what could have been, but rather, what could still have been anew.

This approach can be thought of as drawing upon a history of artists/theorists that are interested in experimental and critical approaches to realist documentary, or what I've taken to simply calling “critical realism.” A critical realism is meant to connote an attentiveness to a form of historical materialism and to the more varied contingencies of history more generally, while also taking on an explicit “critical” approach to them which suggests a politics or ethics that informs the process of investigation itself. What's important to emphasize here is not that a “critical realism” diverges from an “objective realism” in any way, but rather that it has an explicit (rather than implicit) position in relation to its resistant politics or ethics in a form of opposition or counter gesture to projects that operate within normative “objective” approaches (approaches whose politics or ethics that go unrecognized in their normative expression). This is one reason why I consider this project to be partisan in relation to its subject matter: this political and ethical relation to processes of documenting, or knowing, or thinking are integral to them. In other words, the formal

approach is tied to the formal expression of the content, and so the approach always-already prefigures a particular form of ethical and political relation to the content.

The work of the artist/theorist Allan Sekula can be situated within a critical realist frame in the sense that his work approaches a subject not only to explicate it but also to fundamentally intervene within it through the process of the documentation itself. His multi-year project “Fish Story” (1995), which includes photography, essays, and sculptures, most clearly performs this kind of critical-realist work. In extensively documenting the proliferation of the shipping container (and the containerization of global trade more generally) through photography undertaken on ships, in ports and their docks, and in port cities, Sekula's work on the one hand performs a cartography of this infrastructure of the global economy while also suggesting a potential site of intervention for the left more generally. This form of critical realism, a way of describing and documenting in an explicitly political and ethical mode, means to approach reality as it actually is, both politically and materially: a historical dis/conjuncture of material, economic, environmental, and social forces that together constitute a shared history. In a sense, Sekula's work doesn't describe a particular politics but rather enacts a politics in its production.

Another artist that can be productively framed within a critical realist tradition is the Swiss artist and theorist Ursula Biemann. Her work on different subjects across a variety of video essays and installations reflects more explicitly and critically on the

question of form in relation to realism. In thinking about the world as being intimately tied to its visuality across technological, environmental, and economic histories, Biemann offers an approach to realism which is fundamentally concerned with the “realism” inherent in the enactment of the approach itself. Her video essay “Remote Sensing” (2003), which documents the global sex trade in relation to the global visualities, including but not limited to satellite photography, the global positioning system, and other sensors, not only attempts to depict a particular phenomena but also reflects on the material conditions of its appearance and visuality itself, both in the general sense and also within the formal concerns of the project. Biemann goes a step further than Sekula in the sense that her work is concerned with the political, economic, and infrastructural conditions that produce her subject matter but also produces the conditions of possibility for her own project.

A third person that we might be interested in including in a “critical realist” tradition is the artist and theorist Harun Farocki, who explored diverse subjects in his video and film essays. Critical realist concerns could be clearly articulated in relation to most of his projects, but perhaps not more clearly than in relation to “Videograms of a Revolution” (1992), his film that uses found footage to examine the unfolding of the Romanian revolution of 1989. For Farocki, adopting a critical realist approach meant approaching the revolution as being always-already mediated, and paying attention to how the revolution's reality was conditioned by these media, including his

own reediting of it. The criticality of this project was present in refusing the separate or draw a neat distinction between a particular historical event, and its representation or appearance, or in other words, between a particular historical event and the more manifold and expansive conditions of its possibility that it takes place within.

In reflecting on my own approach to Cairo, the revolution and the coup from within a critical realist tradition, I meant to both document the situation that was unfolding historically in the city while also reflecting on the conditions of documentation and reflection themselves, and to understand these as being necessarily tied to one another. This has taken shape in the cryptographic formal approaches that have been made use of throughout areas of the project that mean to express the situation in the ways that it actively hides, and also considers the kinds of political relationships that this kind of formal and documentary approach prefigures. In my use of the “Possible Image,” I mean to explicitly think about the conditionality of the city itself, and how any representation of the city is always-already entangled in those same conditions. This is meant to not only express an inseparability and interminability of the relation, but also to suggest that this conditions of possibility are themselves constitutive of the reality being documented. In this sense, to be critically realist for me means to be as attentive to the possibility as well as the actuality of a particular contingent organization of Cairo itself, and to think of memory and its possibility as being tied to the operation of the city.

We're caught in the momentum of histories that radically precede and exceed us, yet in walking we find in the world and in others tiny deviations that irresistibly manifest as otherwise. All of the wild potentials that were born during the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution continue to take shape in the arrival of unexpected pasts in the present that create the conditions for novel futurities. If the revolution continues to persist under the military regime, it does so in minute detours that generate possibilities for new proximities and paths to take shape that point elsewhere, towards worlds that are yet to be traversed. Possible Images, in their preservation and propagation of past indeterminacy, can possibly help us begin encountering, experiencing, and cultivating the difference of possibility that irrepressibly offers radically other ways of navigating the ongoing histories we find ourselves walking within.

## Chapter 2: The Possible as Power

In the years following the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution, Midan Tahrir has been variably filled with jubilant protesters, military tanks, gridlocked traffic, riot police, charging camels, wandering tourists, gliding bullets, makeshift cinemas, armored personnel carriers, raging bonfires, and improvised tents, among many other things. At times, revolutions have emerged there. At others, the military has emptied it of life. In the rhythm of the square, al-midan, in the assembly and disassembly of bodies beneath glowing fireworks and in thick clouds of teargas alike, novel forms of life and expressions of power have become manifest.

I moved to Cairo two and a half years after the assemblies of Tahrir had toppled Hosni Mubarak's regime in 2011, arriving on the literal eve of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's coup.<sup>23</sup> As they rose to power, Sisi's regime sought to silence the turbulence of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution that could still be vibrantly felt on the streets and squares of the city. In the following months and years, in scattered meetings and between sips of tea and beer, suffused with the oppressive atmospherics and emptinesses of a military regime that continued to violently consolidate its power,

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23 Hosni Mubarak was the dictator that ruled Egypt for 40 years between 1981 and 2011. Before becoming the fourth president of Egypt, Mubarak had served in the Egyptian military in several positions. Following the coup, Mubarak was cleared of almost all charges related to the repression of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution. Mubarak currently remains in prison, but will likely be released soon having already served the time he was sentenced to.

I sought to encounter the uprisings as they persisted in those who had shaped and continued to be shaped by them. What follows is a constellational tracing out of the resonances that emerged between many conversations, a delicate method of aggregating and gathering and collecting pasts in the hopes of cultivating present and future milieus.

In my encounters with revolutionaries, activists, academics, lawyers, filmmakers, artists, human rights workers, and writers, I was less interested in nostalgically recalling the 18 days of revolt than I was in exploring what concepts and memories could be salvaged from the uprisings that would potentially enrich the conditions for present and future struggles. One of the concepts that repeatedly emerged from these conversations was that the ground of revolt in Tahrir was constituted by an entanglement between the present and the possible, both real in the sense of having force, and conjunctively reorganizing the conditions of possibility for living and struggling. The reorganization and refashioning of possibility in Tahrir manifested as a form of power, a power that emerged from differentials between present situations and the possible situations that incessantly demand to exist in relation to them in the assembly and affinity of bodies in the Midan.

An affinity between bodies can be thought of as being the affective attraction and solidarity that emerges between two or more things or bodies in assembly. This affective relation is precognitive and is an ontological phenomenon. The philosopher

Baruch Spinoza describes affective relations as being intimately connected to the power of bodies: “By affect I understand affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections.” For Spinoza, affect was a relation that emerges when two or more bodies come into contact with one another sensually. Interestingly, when one becomes more affectively powerful in the world, in a Spinozist framework one also becomes more part of the world and more vulnerable to it. The philosopher Simon O’Sullivan elaborates on this point: “Affect then, for Deleuze–Spinoza, names the risings and fallings – the becomings – of my own body, especially when it encounters another body. It follows that different encounters will have different characters, and indeed that certain encounters will be more productive, others less so” (41). In relation to Spinoza’s affects, we can understand affinity as the form of collective empowerment that emerges from encounters between bodies.

The philosopher Brian Massumi frames affect as being an active relation between the actual and the virtual: “What is being termed affect ... is precisely this two-sidedness, the simultaneous participation of the virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual, as one arises from and returns to the other. Affect is this two-sidedness as seen from the side of the actual thing, as couched in its perceptions and cognitions. Affect is the virtual as point of view, provided the visual metaphor is used guardedly” (*Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* 14). Here, affect is

manifest in the experience of literally being affected by the world, of being unsettled and living the potentiality of difference and becoming by virtue of that affect. Affinity, as an affective relation, emerges from the plural proximity of bodies in assembly, and gives rise to new forms of virtuality through that affective encounter.

When bodies find each other in the noisy and varied assemblies of a city, as they did in Tahrir, during marches that snaked through downtown, in street cafés, at mosques, in crowded markets, at school, or in bed, they generate power and create the conditions for novel practices of living simply by virtue of their assembling together, differentially. In shared yet uneven relations, in the coherence and decoherence of differences, in the affinities, densities, proximities, and promiscuities of bodies, a power finds life in a transversal play between the present and the possible, between pasts and futures, in assemblings and assemblies that are the locus of what I call a possible power.<sup>24</sup>

We should have an understanding of three distinct forms of possibility in order to grasp how the possible manifested as a form of power in Tahrir. The first form of possibility is indeterminate and infinite (not finite). Another name for this form of

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<sup>24</sup> In order to be clear, I define 'possible power' as the power that emerges from the management, extinguishment, and/or production of possibility. Power, in the general sense of the term, always implies an excess of possibility: both an ability of those wielding power to do otherwise and an ability of those subject to power to do otherwise. Without this excess, there is no power, but rather there is simply raw causation and determinism. Possible power should be differentiated from power in the general sense because it takes on a more radical expression in its concern with the conditions of possibility as such, rather than simply inhabiting the spaces and times of already-existing possible systems.

possibility is chaos, or multiplicity. The second form of possibility is determinate, a particular historical and contingent set of possible moves, gestures, relations, and configurations, a finite and bounded set of present potential actions. We have a tactical relation to this form of possibility in the sense that we can try to optimize our actions within the limits of its formal space. The third form of possibility has a differential relation between the previous two forms and emerges from possible shifts between them, transversal slides back and forth between the indeterminate and the determinate, the infinite and finite. If the first form of possibility is timeless in the sense of its infinitude, and the second form is captured within the finitude of discrete moments, then the third form is durational, or is manifest in the intensive slippages between pasts and futures, the present and the possible. This third form of possibility I call differential possibility.

The determinate and indeterminate can be mapped onto the actual and the virtual as concepts. The actual is a concept used to describe a contingent state of a system, whereas the virtual is the infinite set of possible states which potentially can become manifest as actual. Actualities can be thought of as being historical groupings of virtual states that have reached temporary equilibriums, or historical groupings of possibilities temporarily realized. The actual is not expressive of any predetermined order but rather is ordered by the intensive virtual forces that constitute the conditions for its emergence. For the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, the actual was understood as a

form of attractor or possible extensive resting point within a complex intensive system, or a balance of intensive states. As the scholars Mark Bonta and John Protevi note: “...one of the key theses of Deleuze's philosophy is that the extensive properties of actual substances hide the intensive nature of the morphogenetic processes that give rise to them. Actual or 'stratified' substances are the result of the 'congealing' of intensive far-from-equilibrium processes as they reach equilibrium, a steady state, or stability” (16). Any manifestation of the actual can be thought of as a kind of singular unfolding of a virtual plane, and in this way the actual is immanently related to the virtual. In other words, the virtual and the actual aren't opposed, but rather are folds of one another.

Perhaps the clearest relation between the actual and the virtual comes from Gilles Deleuze himself when he notes: “Every actual surrounds itself with a cloud of virtual images. This cloud is composed of a series of more or less extensive coexisting circuits, along which the virtual images are distributed, and around which they run. These virtuals vary in kind as well as in their degree of proximity from the actual particles by which they are both emitted and absorbed” (Dialogues II 148). An example of an actualized state might be a sand storm, where individual grains of sand become dispersed and move through the air due to intensive conditions in atmospheric pressure and temperature, without necessarily containing ‘information’ or ‘knowledge’ of the storm in any singular sand particle. The virtual, as expressed in

intensive changes in atmospheric pressure between two zones, manifests in the actual movement of the sandstorm. We can go on to say that there is something like a topology that exists between the actual and the virtual that allows for differential and poietic folding.

For example, the Deleuzian philosopher Brian Massumi argues that: “The potential of a situation exceeds its actuality ... the virtual is not contained in any actual form assumed by things or states of things. It runs in the transitions from one form to another” (“Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible” 2). Massumi suggests that the virtual acts as a kind of plane from which actual situations emerge and transform: the actual conditions the virtual, and vice versa, in a form of differential and relation. Massumi also describes the virtual as: “...the pressing crowd of incipencies and tendencies, is a realm of potential. In potential is where futurity combines, unmediated, with pastness, where outsides are infolded and sadness is happy ... The virtual is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect; where what cannot be experienced cannot but be felt” (“Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible” 30). The differentials between the extensivities of the actual and the intensities of the virtual constitute what we can simply call the conditions of possibility for forms of relation, organization and duration. In other word, the virtual constitutes the sets of conditions for the poiesis and becoming of the actual.

One of the people I spent considerable time with in Cairo was the revolutionary activist [REDACTED]. We met every so often in various cafés, bars and apartments to reflect together on the history of the uprising as well as on the present conditions of life under the coup. [REDACTED] had participated in the revolution as part of the collective [REDACTED], and now was active organizing projects with [REDACTED]. We first met by chance in one of Cairo's many rooftop bars following an event that was held at the popular [REDACTED], and later got to know one another better while doing readings together. In one of the conversations that we recorded, [REDACTED] described the first days of revolt as a time defined by unfolding and unforeseen possibilities:

“Even in the very early days, in the eighteen days and so on, you constantly saw things that before had a particular use take on a new life, for example a barricade that was being used by the police turning into a barricade that was being used to push the police out. It was a method of controlling but now it is becoming something else. The space, everything was changing meaning, was changing potential, we were experiencing and then in turn investigating potentials that were dormant, or at least potentials that we didn't know were there. And that in itself creates stuff, it creates all of these new relationships. I mean, the very simple thing of the space of the square, and not just the square, but the conversations that you end up having with people you would have never met otherwise. Everyone talks about those days and how it was a space - I don't think it was right to describe it as classless - but it was a meeting ground of so many different people and different backgrounds and different

relationships and reasons for why they were coming and all of those kinds of things. That experience in itself was an experience that we were not allowed to have prior to the revolution, and that creates something in everyone. They touch something that they otherwise wouldn't have touched.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

██████████ suggested that the assemblies of Tahrir produced new forms of possibility when they became “a meeting ground of so many different people and different backgrounds and different relationships.” When bodies encountered one another in the Midan, and encountered the things of/in it, they became part of assemblages and assemblies that generated new forms of possibility through the conjunctive proximity of their manifold differences.<sup>25</sup> Diverse assemblings of bodies,

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25 An assemblage can be defined as any contingent set of heterogeneous parts that maintain forms of relation over time. Sometimes these parts are made up of material things, such as bodies, forests, cars, cities, bacteria, sand, telephone lines, insects, or the atmosphere. At other times these parts can be expressive things, such as ideas, colors, chants, utterances, or music. Thinking with assemblages is useful because it allows us to distance ourselves from habitual and normative ways of evaluating situations, and instead allows us to approach each case in its radical specificity. In the case of politics, it means we don't have to start with categories like 'the party,' 'the people,' or 'the state,' or at least not in the unitary fashion that we're accustomed to thinking about them in, and instead can try to draw upon less normative, but equally substantial, connections or dynamics. We can think of assemblies, for example, as being forms of assemblage. The philosopher Manuel Delanda writes that: "...once historical processes are used to explain the synthesis of inorganic, organic and social assemblages there is no need for essentialism to account for their enduring identities. This allows assemblage theory to avoid one of the main shortcomings of other forms of social realism: an ontological commitment to the existence of essences" (4). Assemblage theory allows us to focus on the metaphysics of production, duration, and decomposition rather than the metaphysics of presence or essence. This framework allows for a turn away from essences and essentialisms, and an emphasis on the contingency and specificity of relations and compositions. Assemblages are composed of several dimensions and dynamics that define their contours. First, we can say that assemblages have external milieus that constitute the conditions for their possibility, and the entangled environmental and intensive dynamics of these milieus shape the contingency of assemblages. Second, assemblages have internal milieus, defined the speed, intensity and direction of the relations between their various parts. It's critical to note that assemblages are always doubly entangled with milieus in this way, each shaping their durational actualization. This double-entanglement of the assemblage is meant to describe the differential

things, environments, ideas, and expressions transform the conditions of possibility for all involved because of the differential possibility that arises from them, the forms of indecision and indeterminacy that are produced in complex and chaotic encounters and affinities.

While the concept of the assembly has often been used as a term to describe the particular meeting or decision making spaces of social movements, I will be using assembly throughout in the broader sense of the term, better described as the dynamic affinities, densities, proximities, and promiscuities that take place between bodies and their environments when they congregate together in milieus, regardless of scale. Judith Butler recently wrote her own account of assemblies in *Notes Towards A Performative Theory of Assembly*, largely drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and structuring the concept around her previous writing on performativity and precarity. Her turn towards the potentials opened up simply by the convergence and gathering of bodies is particularly useful in helping us to grasp the potentials of bodies that congregate together: "...prior to any group starting to debate that language, there is a coming together of bodies that speaks, as it were, in another way. Assemblies assert and enact themselves by speech or silence, by action or steady inaction, by gesture, by gathering together as a group of bodies in public space, organized as an infrastructure - visible, audibly, tangible, exposed in ways both deliberate and unwilled,

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relations between the interiorities and exteriorities that it is entangled with. Myself (the author), this text, and you (the reader), can be thought of as being a form of assemblage.

interdependent in forms both organized and spontaneous.” (*Notes Towards A Performative Theory of Assembly* 156) This form of political performativity that is remarkably ontological in its character is striking, and we can benefit from her thinking on vulnerability as a potential starting point for coalition, alliance and assemblies.

In the case of Cairo, we can certainly look to Tahrir Square as historically being some thing in particular, manifesting its own effects and forces as a kind of singularity, but we would be mistaken to think of it only in these terms. Instead, we can begin by thinking of the assemblies of Tahrir as a chimeric and unresolved aggregation in the form of an assemblage. Judith Butler’s earlier writing on Tahrir can also be particularly helpful here when we attempt to grasp assemblies in their multiplicity as assemblages: “So when we think about what it means to assemble in a crowd ... we see some way that bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action. In the same way, when trucks or tanks suddenly become platforms for speakers, then the material environment is actively reconfigured and re-functioned, to use the Brechtian term. And our ideas of action then, need to be rethought” (“For and Against Precarity”). In Butler’s articulation, ‘the public’ is produced by bodies and their material supports, or

the ‘matter of material environments.’ Action is not reducible to the agency of any singular body or group of bodies here, but rather emerges from the ‘reconfiguring’ and ‘refunctioning’ of the relations that manifest in the process of assembling itself: ‘The public’ is a shifting assemblage of complex and dissimilar parts.

In contrast to Butler’s understanding of the concept which relies heavily on the notion of the public (which comes from the work of Arendt), I would instead like to suggest that we can think of assembly as a relational process that emerges from proximity and encounter regardless of the forms of publicity involved.<sup>26</sup> This means that assemblies can occur in open squares like Tahrir, but also in cafes, bedrooms, or even in mediated spaces like chat rooms. The question that is important for us is not wondering what number of bodies constitute an assembly or what spaces provide supports for them, but rather what processes are set into motion when bodies do find one another in proximity and promiscuity.

When the Midan became a milieu where bodies encountered other bodies that they “would have never met,” it allowed for differential processes to unfold, mutually transforming all involved to varying intensities. In this way, assemblies are less forms of cohabitation, or forms of being together, than they are forms of transhabitation, a

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<sup>26</sup> My own thinking is heavily indebted to extended engagements with Judith Butler's work, and although I've chosen to not deal with its specificity it's worth noting that I find her approach to assemblies complementary to my own. There are particular differences however, that I find irreconcilable, particularly her position on nonviolence. Her work on vulnerability, however, as a basis for coalition and alliance, is much needed and worth spending time with, particularly in relation to notions of possibility and its required supports.

being-through one another that calls into question the separability or autonomy of any single body in their sympoietic becoming. Importantly, encountering difference means encountering indeterminacy as well as all of the possibilities that inseparably accompany it. Each body in an assembly undergoes a process of translation, a transversal passage that allows assembled bodies to “touch something that they otherwise wouldn't have touched.” This encounter “creates something in everyone” in the sense that new possibilities are produced within and across the difference of the assembled bodies themselves.

Assembled bodies encounter one another in the milieu, a space that is uncoded and unbound, or in other words, is deterritorialized. A milieu is etymologically a ‘middle’ place, a space-time in the middle or in the midst, contourless and without clear limits, edges, or boundaries. To be among rather than apart from. Milieus take shape from the indeterminate, chaotic, and open. As the philosophers Mark Bonta and John Protevi describe: “A milieu is the 'soup' or the coded medium of particles-flows and the strata that gives birth to or at least supports a rhizomatic assemblage: a living being, a symbiont, or an ecosystem, for example. Milieus are drawn, with rhythms, from chaos” (13).

Milieus become territories, and vice versa, through the emergence or disappearance of expressive rhythms that repetitively express differences that define the boundaries of territories. A territory is determinate space that has defined

boundaries and relations, or in other words, are determined, ordered, and closed. Territories become milieus, and vice versa, through the emergence or disappearance of expressive rhythms that repetitively express differences that define the boundaries of territories. While a territory decoheres into a milieu through repeated internal and external aesthetic relations, a milieu also coheres through the introduction of new kinds of expression that have the potential to establish or reinforce those relations in the form of reterritorialization. Later, Bonta and Protevi go on to describe Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's understanding of milieus in this way: "Deleuze and Guattari mention markets and forests as milieus, where diverse territorialities are jumbled together; the rain forest is a milieu serving as the plane of consistency of myriad territorialities that draw from it and each other" (114). While a milieu coheres into a territory through repeated internal and external aesthetic relations, a territory also decoheres through the introduction of new kinds of expression that have the potential to undo or unsettle those relations in the form of deterritorialization.

When ██████████ said that "everything was changing meaning, was changing potential" in a way that led to the creation of "all of these new relationships" in Tahrir, they make clear how differential encounters render possible new forms of affinity, proximity, and promiscuity, or in other words, new forms of assembly and milieu. It is in this way that difference is ultimately productive, not only in the sense that differences themselves are produced but in how novel forms of

production are made possible in the transhabitation of differences. When bodies assembled together in the Midan, they created the plural conditions for “experiencing and then in turn investigating a potential,” a way of moving between the present and the possible and experimenting in that differential movement.

When bodies encounter one another in assembly, they find that they can produce and practice differently than they could alone. Because it’s impossible for a body to fully know itself or another, remaining variably shrouded in the noise of unknowability and indeterminacy that is ineradicably part of difference, the potentialities or limits of an assembly’s collective production or practice cannot be anticipated in advance.<sup>27</sup> In other words, assemblies produce forms of possibility that don’t exist in any singular body prior to its encounter with others. Rather, these possibilities only come forth as bodies start to become something else, together. This transition from a state of being something in particular into a state of becoming something else is key for understanding how forms of possible power emerged in the square. Every differential encounter in an assembly is a kind of speculative and

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<sup>27</sup> This form of temporal relation is elaborated upon by Gilles Deleuze when he writes of a “people yet to come,” responding to Jacques Derrida's writing on “a justice yet to come.” This indeterminable deferral to the future of both justice, and a people capable of achieving that justice, means to make clear the ways in which the consequences of present actions cannot ever be entirely anticipated for three reasons. The first reason is that the differences that compose present relations are fundamentally indeterminate, and in this sense are to some degree unknowable. The second reason is that the imperfections of the present that we would hope to correct with the enactment of justice always-already in some way compromise the effort to achieve that justice. The third reason is the the difference between a present world and a future just world is a qualitative difference, and so any sense of judgment we have in the present is inadequate for judging the arrival of that qualitatively different future.

experimental play with what becomes possible when assembled, a transversality and turbulence that emerges from proximities and affinities with variably different and distant others.

This understanding of difference frames it as being an immanent relation, or a relation that contains itself. This form of differences-as-immanence is integral to Gilles Deleuze's and Baruch Spinoza's nondialectical and nonbinary monism. Immanence, as a concept that expresses a certain continuity or connectedness between all things, is opposed to transcendence that relies on the existence of a definitive outside. Gilles Deleuze writes that: "A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is sheer power, utter beatitude ... an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers back to a being but ceaselessly posits itself in a life ... A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects" (*Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* 27). This radical singularity of immanence, along with the creativity, morphogenesis, and poesis it implies, suggests a form of difference that topologically ties together rather than ruptures apart.

When confronted with the assemblies and their possibility, those in power were pushed into a conflict without known rules or grammars, a conflict immersed in thick fogs of indeterminacy. Security forces not only had to tactically respond to the

assemblies' durational presence in the heart of the city, but were also haunted by the specters of what the assemblies could become and what they could call into being. In this way, the assemblies virtually multiplied themselves and their power by producing forms of differential possibility, potentially expressed in novel forms of conflict or novel forms of assembly always on the precipice of the present. Even though the assemblies could have been eradicated in a direct military confrontation with the regime, they produced diverse conditions for victory in their production of the undecidable without requiring a final climactic confrontation. The possible manifested as a form of power in Tahrir in the sense that the regime not only had to contend with the assemblies, but also with their unbounded and nonlinear indeterminacy<sup>28</sup>.

About half way through my time in Egypt, I was introduced to the writer and

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28 A nonlinear system is where the dynamics of an environment have intensified to such a degree that it becomes increasingly impossible to predict in advance what will come to be. A nonlinear system does not have evenly corresponding relations between various intensive or extensive changes to the system. A clear example of a nonlinear relation can be seen when one throws a paper airplane when standing still as opposed to when one throws it while in motion. If you were to throw the paper airplane from the a window of the Mogamma administrative building that overlooks Tahrir square, for example, the path of the plane may be fairly predictable in a linear fashion as it glides down to the square below. However, if you were to throw it from a speeding motorbike in the square itself, its path would become radically unpredictable, where minute changes in the gesture of the throw would have dramatic consequences for the fate of the plane. Another clear nonlinear relation can be seen in matter state changes, for example when a glass of liquid water turns into steam or ice. Given certain delimited conditions, for example a planet that never goes above 100 or below 0 degrees celsius and shared Earth's atmospheric pressure, the glass of water would forever remain in liquid form. However, if you add or subtract enough energy, radically different qualities emerge that you would not have predictable in advance of these changes. In this example, steam, water, and ice exist as possible virtual states, but only are ever actualized given specific conditions and/or speeds. This relation is as true of bodies and other materialities as it is for the paper plane or glass of water, and so with certain changes in the relations between these bodies and materialities, emergent possibilities may also actualize, or at least threaten to, in a nonlinear fashion.

historian ██████████ by mutual friends and was able to meet with them several times in cramped cafés that provided an escape from Cairo’s hot sun. Their insights concerning the importance of encounters in the Midan helped me to think further about the possibility and difference of the assemblies:

“The revolution was this incredible moment of a real breaking down of barriers somehow. Because you are physically in the same space, whether by choice or just passing by or you were there because you have a certain grievance or whatever your motivations or your political position or orientation, you’re forced to be with and around other people, and you’re forced to talk to them. And I think that is the moment where people got to think ‘Oh, this is interesting, what is this? How can we talk to each other?’ And through these repeated encounters, you really have a breakdown of barriers. You saw new initiatives that couldn’t have opened before. You saw new cultural spaces, new cafés even. It was a changing face of downtown as a space of gathering. It densified and diversified in ways where there were a lot more people that were involved. It was the appearance of ad-hoc assemblages in the urban environment.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

In our conversations, ██████████ described how the assemblies that emerged in Tahrir allowed fragmented social and cultural formations to become less fixed. When ██████████ says that from “repeated encounters, you really have a breakdown of barriers,” they help us understand how assemblies disrupt established forms and processes of differentiation, creating opportunities for poiesis that fail to conform to

the ways that difference has been historically inscribed in bodies. Importantly, these encounters must be repeated in order to create rhythms, durations that set into motion the production of new forms of difference and the formation of “ad-hoc assemblages.” The assemblies of Tahrir in some sense resembled a practice of dreaming together, a collective technique of producing novel forms of space and time where meaning and difference become less secure and more dynamic, less fixed and more fluid.

In opposition to these forms of relational indeterminacy, states have historically engaged in the strategic maintenance and management of various forms of difference, predominantly along the strata of class, gender, citizenship, religion, ability, age, and sexuality.<sup>29</sup> The active regulation of these forms of difference by security forces and other organizations is meant to suffocate forms of indeterminacy that, if allowed to spread and have duration, can otherwise loosen the rigid ordering and hierarchy of embodied differences and unsettle the state’s regulatory power. Importantly, people fail to be different in the ways that they’re ordered to by the state and by others, escaping and at times going so far as to subvert or sabotage difference, and this failure constitutes a form of noise that is a ground for possibility.<sup>30</sup> Bodies manifest as being more or less different in different ways, conforming at times and

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29 For an elaboration on this point, see James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State*.

30 Different takes on failure as a form of possibility and resistance can be found in Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and Judith Butler's *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*.

deviating at others, and this more or less of difference is a space of experimentation and speculation that is an opening for revolt. Assemblies become important in the way that they can help create the conditions for these failures and deviations to proliferate, intensify, and find duration.

A short while after my conversation with [REDACTED], they introduced me to their close friend [REDACTED], a long time resident of [REDACTED] and known for their prolific work as a [REDACTED] artist. I met with them on several occasions in their flat to talk about their creative practice as well as their experience in the assemblies. Like [REDACTED], [REDACTED] suggested that the assembling of bodies across difference was a crucially important aspect of the revolution:

“Most important was the Midan. You know, I’ve never been in a long protest like that. And it wasn’t just the 18 days because I think that there was at least a year and a half after that where I continued to go to a lot of protests. And perhaps the health problems that I have are from all of the tear gas that I inhaled, or one of the reasons, anyway. The Tahrir protests were important because for the first time I felt that there was this sense of community between the participants and it really didn’t make a difference from which class, religious background, gender, age, it was amazing. It was euphoric, I think people were addicted, we needed to go to feel that feeling. And it was the first time that we felt that we owned public space. I think this was so different because previously the police were the ones who owned public space. And you know, of course, that after several days of protest, the police disappeared and vanished completely from the streets. So like, wow! You know? It’s ours,

the streets were ours. And graffiti started immediately. And it was important because it wasn't just a creative impulse on the part of the young people who did it, but it was as if it was registering the events every day that were happening between the authorities and the people, that community of large numbers of people. The square also was not just a feeling of community but a sharing of amazing creative events." (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

One of ██████████'s important insights is how the absence of the police allowed for these forms of creative exchange and expression to take place. It was only when the state was forced to retreat, when the police lost control after a series of prolonged battles on the main thoroughfares of downtown Cairo, when the "police disappeared and vanished completely from the streets," that bodies could find one another and assemble together in the euphoria and affinity of the Midan and begin speculating and experimenting and participating in "amazing creative events" together.

The occupation of Midan Tahrir during the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution is one of the clearest examples of the experimental processes that refashioned the conditions of possibility for struggle by virtue of the novel possibilities that it rendered actualizable. In the years before the revolution, protest movements had been fiercely struggling to hold small demonstrations in different areas of Cairo. Organizing against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, or against the corruption and repression of Hosni Mubarak's regime, or against worsening economic conditions that followed the

enactment of neoliberal policies, small assemblies regularly attempted to gather in different spaces of the city only to be routinely contained and dispersed by security forces.<sup>31</sup> It was only later on, during protests against the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, that activists found that Tahrir could be more easily held and defended against the repressive attacks of the state because of its expansive size and many connecting alleyways and streets. This becoming-possible of the midan as a space of assembly, the experimental realization of a particular possibility that took years to enact, was perhaps the single discovery which enabled the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution to take shape at all. The experimental processes that emerge between bodies, things and environments unsettle established conditions in unpredictable fashions and offer the chance to discover and invent new practices of living, becoming, and revolting.

In a late night conversation with the theorist and activist [REDACTED] who was involved with [REDACTED], they talked with me about their experience of the particular spatiality of the revolution. In one section of our conversation, they echoed and elaborated upon the insight that it was the absence of the police that created the grounds for new forms of assembly:

“I think that it is a question of the conditions of possibility. Part of what the revolution gave was not necessarily the overthrow of the state and the state apparatus but a clearing of ground wherein, whether or not the answers were

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<sup>31</sup> An useful account of the sequence of protests leading up to the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution can be found in Dimitris Soudias' book *Negotiating Space: The Evolution of the Egyptian Street, 2000-2011*.

present they could begin to be discussed, to where alternate futures had room to grow and flourish. The sheer number of new organizations that came up and new types of political organizations and cultural organizations are kind of testament to that. I think it is very spatial. I think it was about: once you push the police out, there is this kind of ground that you have to start experimenting.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

As ██████████ makes clear, assemblies not only emerge from the relations between bodies, but also from the relations between bodies and the spaces that they inhabit. Assemblies take place in the sense that they happen spatially but also in the way that they take up spaces and are taken by them. The architectures, objects, and infrastructures of spaces become part of the assemblies when they are taken up as the “ground that you have to start experimenting.” Torn down street signs accumulated into barricades, paving stones used as projectiles against security forces, subway station entrances refashioned into screens for projecting films: once there is a “clearing of ground,” the ground itself can take part in forms of experimentation and revolt that “push the police out” and make room for something otherwise to take hold.

These experimental processes take shape historically in the oscillating differential movement that occurs between spaces of being and spaces of becoming. A space of being is a space in which things are made to be something in particular, in the sense of having coded and recognizable differences and relations that are reproduced in a process of articulation, apprehension, and capture. The most obvious

repressive manifestation of this process in Cairo is the police and young military conscripts that are deployed and stationed at most intersections, ensuring that things are kept as expected and repressing anything that fails to appear as such. These various forms of policing help to continuously shore up territories where things must be stable and recognizable. A space of becoming, on the other hand, is a space where things aren't stuck in any particular form of being but rather are marked by the speed in which they are becoming something else, in an indeterminate fashion.<sup>32</sup> A space of becoming acts not as a territory, but as a milieu where already-existent relations and differences begin to transversally and differentially become undone. Within milieus, waves of experimentation find duration, actuating processes of differentiation just as they disrupt others, reorganizing the conditions of possibility for assembly and assembled becoming.

In spaces of becoming, things enter a process of becoming different from themselves over time. This term is borrowed from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who define becoming as an immanent process where different parts of an assemblage change the speed or direction of their relations and thus change the assemblage. This can happen Auto- and Sympoietically. Being, on the other hand, is the state of having stable properties and relations in equilibrium. It is the state of being unchanging and stratified, of being defined by the extensive rather than

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<sup>32</sup> The speed of becoming is a notion borrowed from the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and is meant to connote the intensive and differential nature of change that is infinite (not finite) nor discrete.

intensive. Being is disrupted by becomings that arise from the encounters between things in the world that set into motion forms of transformation. It can also take shape when something enters or exits an assemblage, refiguring their actual and virtual relations.

Becoming is a state of existence defined by its status as a verb, or as a process or activity. In other words, it is a doing rather than a being. The doing that is becoming gives rise to new forms of possibility and potentiality. As Mark Bonta and John Protevi describe: “In complexity theory terms, the new assemblage, the symbiosis, is marked by emergent properties above and beyond the sum of the parts. It is also important to remember that a becoming is a combination of heterogeneous parts; it is an alliance rather than a filiation, an 'unnatural participation', a 'marriage against nature', a 'transversal communication’” (59). Becoming is in some way always an experimental process because of the emergent properties and potentials that cannot be reduced to the additions of its parts.

Becoming is immanently tied to being in the sense that they exist in differential and folded relation with one another. As the Deleuzian artist and scholar Simon O'Sullivan suggests: “There is no Being, or at least no Being which is separate from the processes of becoming. Our world consists of moments of becoming, the mingling of bodies, the meeting of forces, a constant interpenetration and interconnection of all phenomena. There is no beginning or end to this process. As

Deleuze and Guattari remark: ‘We are not in the world, we become with the world’” (56). In this way, being and becoming, the actual and the virtual, together constitute the multiple diverse conditions of any present.

The manifold conditions of possibility of a situation are composed of complex relations between bodies, spaces, architectures, affects, environments, and atmospheres, in one instance composing something actual in the world as particular conditions align and in another instance decomposing that thing as those alignments shift. In the weeks, months, and years following the first 18 days of revolt, the Midan was occupied by bodies and cleared by security forces in ebbs and flows, fluctuating between territory and milieu while creating and extinguishing the conditions for assembly in each cycle of the Midan’s rhythm. Much of the longer revolutionary period leading up to the coup was spent materially defending the Midan from state-organized attacks that were meant to reimpose order, one of the most famous of which were the battles of Mohamed Mahmoud street to the east of Midan Tahrir. Possibility, and its conditions, are always fragile and contingent in this way, in need of cultivation, care, preservation, and at times militant defense.<sup>33</sup> This back and forth between determinacy and indeterminacy, order and assembly, was a principle terrain

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33 Mohamed Mahmoud street leads away from Midan Tahrir to the East towards Midan Falaki, and was the site of the most intense and prolonged street battles between protesters and security forces during and following the 18 days of revolution. Later, the street was almost entirely covered in murals and graffiti commemorating the martyrs of the revolution. Following the coup, many of the murals have been defaced or are entirely painted over.

of struggle and contestation.

In addition to the regime's security forces, another fundamental restriction on the possibility of the assemblies was the more pervasive regulation of gender. Gendered difference, as expressed historically in the patriarchal division and regulation of bodies, is one of the principal forms of difference that the state manages and maintains to (re)produce its power, a power predicated on determinacy and order. Any process of differential becoming, of assembling new forms of proximity, promiscuity and affinity that open the way for queer becomings, emerge in unavoidable conflict with historically stratified differentiations.<sup>34</sup> Women took part in the revolution in large numbers, but always did so in relation to ongoing histories of sexual violence and harassment on the same streets that their bodies filled during the uprisings. In the assemblies that took shape in the months and years of the

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34 I use queer here as a concept to describe that which drifts away from normativity or hegemony, rendering other less recognized forms of life and practices of living more possible. Judith Butler suggests that "...we remember that the term queer does not designate identity, but alliance, and it is a good term to invoke as we make uneasy and unpredictable alliances in the struggle for social, political, and economic justice" (*Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* 70) while Sara Ahmed writes that: "We have hope because what is behind us is also what allows other ways of gathering in time and space, of making lines that do not reproduce what we follow, but instead create new textures on the ground. It is interesting to note that in landscape architecture the term desire lines is used to describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow. Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. Such lines are indeed traces of desire, where people have taken different routes to get to this point or that point. It is certainly desire that helps generate a queer landscape, shaped by the paths that we follow in deviating from the straight line" (570). Jose Munoz perhaps provides the best definition for the purposes of this project when he writes that: "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1).

revolutionary period, gendered and sexualized forms of violence perpetrated by the military as well as groups of men repeatedly took place within and around the Midan, reproducing and reinforcing the gendered hierarchies and divisions that the state relies upon.

Near the end of my time in Egypt, I was able to meet with [REDACTED] to talk about their experience organizing against forms of sexualized violence in Cairo. [REDACTED] works with [REDACTED], an organization that assists survivors of violence and documents their experiences. Days before we met, a repressive law had been passed in Egypt that placed large numbers of harsh restrictions on non-governmental organizations, which meant that any organizations that continued to operate did so precariously. This context deeply curtailed the possible range of our conversation, but we were able to discuss the role that sexual violence played during the revolutionary period:

“Working with survivors of sexual violence in Tahrir Square was a huge moment for me. I was traumatized, that’s another thing, but it was very significant for me to see how it’s very hard for the environment we live within to accept women participating in a public space. Another significant thing, that I can’t talk about specifically with you but I can talk about it in general, was when I realized that the life of a woman is very complex, that we cannot say that a certain form of violence is a turning point in a woman’s life but rather generally is a part of her experience. We realized that maybe if we started working on issues of sexual violence within the private space, for

example, we would understand better what's been happening for the past few years in public space as well." (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

Women's mass participation in protest movements in Egypt was not historically unprecedented, but their involvement in the many assemblies of Tahrir took place in intimate relation to the risk of harassment and assault, as well as much longer histories of gendered and sexualized forms of violence that take place in diverse spaces across the city.<sup>35</sup> Women's presence in public is something that persistently has to be defended, and the assemblies of Tahrir were no exception.

When ██████████ says "we cannot say that a certain form of violence is a turning point in a woman's life," they make clear how women's lives are broadly framed by the suffuse potential for violence that was not exclusive to the spaces of assembly. This historical condition shaped women's participation in the uprisings, shaping the forms of proximity and affinity that were practiced. Following the intensification of public sexual violence in the assemblies, activist groups rapidly emerged to counter these forms of violence, most notably ██████████ that organized mix-gender intervention teams to defend the assemblies from these sexual assaults.<sup>36</sup> The possibility of new forms of affinity becoming manifest hinged on these

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35 For an overview of the forms of sexual harassment and violence that have occurred in Cairo, as well as the emergence of activist responses to them, see Jadaliyya's article "Women As Fair Game in the Public Sphere: A Critical Introduction for Understanding Sexual Violence and Methods of Resistance" by Hind Ahmad Zaki and Dalia Abd Alhamid.

36 For an overview of some of these intervention organizations, read "Hands off: Initiatives grow fighting sexual harassment in Tahrir and elsewhere" by Jano Charbel in Egypt Independent.

groups' ability to conjunctively struggle against and disrupt the forms of violence that are enacted across already existing stratifications of difference.

During one of my conversations with [REDACTED], who worked with the human rights organization [REDACTED] and took part in the intervention teams, they recalled that seeing friends interrupting sexual assaults in the midan was one of the most inspiring aspects of the assemblies:

“We knew that these sexual attacks that were happening in Tahrir Square were political acts. It was organized. I don't know who was actually organizing them or was actually doing it or wanted it to happen, but it had been happening for years and no one was doing anything about it. It changed the way we thought of what was happening. There were these inspiring moments. There were hundreds of volunteers that would risk getting beaten or attacked, just to secure the square against these attacks. There were those stories of extraordinary bravery of people, men and women in the square that would go and get girls out of the mob circles. These days were very sad, and the situation was always crazy around these attacks, but you could find inspiration in these stories when you saw your colleagues and friends just going into the square, and the stories about how they helped these girls and how they got them out of the mobs, and how they would send away the perpetrators. There were moments of inspiration all the time, and I was always fascinated that we in ourselves, as nobodies, could do something against this. And to a certain extent we succeeded. We saw the possibility of doing things differently. And this they cannot take from us. We witnessed the potentiality of something different.” ([REDACTED], Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

These interventions were meant to both produce and defend a milieu in the Midan, an assembly where women could revolt as well as men, where new kinds of affinity across gender could be enacted and practiced in opposition to patriarchal forces that seek to only intensify gendered divisions, exclusions, and hierarchies.

The assemblies of Tahrir took shape in opposition to the limits imposed upon them by the order of the state, as expressed in the distribution and regulation of difference. The practice of combating violence “as nobodies” was not a liberal project of trying to create a form of equality between differences, but rather was about disrupting the processes of differentiation as such. This form of combat was at the heart of the process of becoming in the milieus of the assemblies, of queerly dismantling forms of difference while producing the differential possibility of taking part in “the potentiality of something different.” The affinities, densities, proximities, and promiscuities of the assembled acted against the state's processes of differentiation and the rigid distribution of difference, creating the conditions for indeterminately becoming something else, something otherwise.

The act of assembling together in the streets threatens to reorganize limits and bring forth novel practices and relations. As much as the historical divisions in Egypt seem to foreclose the potential for complex coalitions, affinities, and alliances, what must be stressed is that positionalities are never entirely resolved nor fixed, but rather are incessantly reproduced and reconfigured in encounters between bodies. To

assemble is to be with, think with, act with, endure with, and become with people and engage in the production of differential possibility that cannot be fully anticipated in advance. This indeterminate noise, the noise of difference and becoming, is the requisite condition of possibility for resistance, an opening to speculate about and experiment with what is possible.<sup>37</sup> Scattered and transversal movements in the chaotic aggregation and disaggregation of bodies in assembly produce plural futures that overcome the difference of the present with the difference of becoming. This differential nature of bodies means that they are never entirely resolved or fixed, as bodies themselves poietically emerge from vast complex networks of relation that exceed any singular body or group of bodies. The relational indeterminacy that arises from assemblies ensures that new practices of living and forms of becoming remain perpetually possible.<sup>38</sup>

Here it may be helpful to briefly pause and reflect on two different forms of difference that find expression in bodies. The first form of difference is the one that we're perhaps most accustomed to thinking about, and is the difference of being. This

<sup>37</sup> The presence of noise, as a form of chaos, allows one to speculate and experiment with possible moves, gestures, and relations that can produce opportunities to grasp various forms of advantage and leverage that strictly deterministic systems do not provide. In other words, the unpredictability of indeterminate noisy systems is an opening for speculative resistance and nonlinear combat. To read more about the complexities of noise, chaos, and speculation, see Nassim Taleb's *The Black Swan: The Impact of the highly Improbable* and Elie Ayache's corresponding critique *The Blank Swan: The End of Probability*.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the ineradicable nature of indeterminacy, look to Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* where she states: "Exclusions are constitutive elements of the dynamic interplay (intra-play) of determinacy and indeterminacy. Indeterminacy is never resolved once and for all. Exclusions constitute an open space of agency; they are the changing conditions of possibility of changing possibilities" (179).

difference is what we can call a form of stratification, where bodies and things are coded, articulated, and organized along historically reproduced differentiations. An example of this form of difference is religious identification, materially and durationally reproduced in certain kinds of dress, architectures, or the habit of prayer, for example. Another example might be a strand of DNA that codes for the production of a specific protein, literally writing its difference into the flesh of bodies across generations. The stratified differences that accompany being are always (re)produced historically and manifest as a kind of positive difference in the sense that they are not binary oppositions (this, not that) but rather are newly produced and expressed again and again, in repetition (this, this, this).

Stratified difference is contrasted with a second form of difference that for our purposes is more substantial. This difference is the difference of becoming, the difference that emerges between a thing and itself, or in other words, the difference of possibility. This form of difference emerges autopoietically (coming from an internal change in relation or intensity) and sympoietically (coming from a differential encounter between things, a kind of transtital production of difference). The difference of becoming is manifest as a modulation in the repetition of difference, a detour from its stratified course (this, this, that). These two forms of difference making are often in conflict with one another, in the sense that the latter has the potential to unsettle the stratification of the former.

What is key to understand is that difference emerges from relations between various forms of difference that are extensively or intensively expressed. The philosopher Elizabeth Grosz argues that: “Difference is the 'principle of identity' for all identities to the extent that no entity is self-producing or self identical, with each entity and relation a product of the encounter of differences of different things and different orders. If difference is what emerges through all forms of life, then difference must also suffuse the inorganic conditions that enable the eruption of life from non-life” (4). For Grosz, difference is expressive of the relation dynamism that is part of matter itself, expressed as it is in durational processes of being and becoming.

Near the end of one of my conversations with [REDACTED] on a sand-covered rooftop, we reflected on the past of the revolution in relation to the present repressive emptiness of Sisi’s post-coup Egypt. [REDACTED] found it important that the struggles of Tahrir often took the form of trying to preserve possibility itself:

“It’s very important to me, and has been very important to me to always try to find that space where, despite these huge and literally violent differences, the door can remain just about open enough for an alternative possibility to be enabled. Which requires a very warm trust. This is despite the fact that you may hold opinions that I find offensive to the point of extreme violence, racism, or whatever any of those other things are. I guess this comes to the heart of it. I don’t know if it’s right or wrong, but it’s my way of living

anyway, that somehow there is that little space of warmth that I might just open or try to keep open to allow that other possibility to grow.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

For ██████████, the differential possibilities that could potentially emerge from an assembly were at the heart of the revolution’s struggle against the “violent differences” that constitute and constrain the practices and relations of bodies. The “little space of warmth” that ██████████ describes makes possible forms of differential becoming that ultimately opened the way for the inception of the possible power of the uprisings.

It would be a fundamental mistake to think of the assemblies of Tahrir as being something singular, discrete, or resolved. Instead, we should try to think of them as being chimeric, a form of multiplicity. Power is not reducible to the agency of any singular body or group of bodies, but rather emerges from the relational process of assembling itself at diverse scales and speeds. It is ultimately a failure of our imagination to curtail ourselves to what already is or was present, without also attending to what is, was or could become possible. We have to find ways of actively responding to and having responsibilities to what could be and what could have come to be, a speculative and precarious endeavor, but nonetheless an urgently necessary one. Almost always, possibility remains elusive. Only within rare situations, most often imperceptibly, do novel things appear as possible at all. The differential

possibilities produced in the becomings of the assembled constitute a field of struggle that has the potential to radically reorganize and reshape the conditions within which bodies live, learn, love, become, fight, imagine, dream, are born, and die. Hope remains in the milieus of past and future assemblies that maintain spaces and times for the otherwise.

### Chapter 3: Security Against Possibility

At the end of 2014, a large hole sat in the center of Midan Tahrir. The stone memorial to security forces in the square, having been repeatedly vandalized and graffitied by activists, was being dug up by government workers without any official mention of what would replace it. Instead, bulldozers and barriers sat scattered on top of uneven mounds of sand and debris, and the space that had so often been the dynamic milieu for bodies, tents, stages, and banners over the previous years was refashioned into a construction site in perpetual disarray, inversely framed by the literal hole in its center.

Following Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's coup, when I would take taxis through Tahrir on my way to meet with friends, teach, or run errands, I was always struck by the improvised choreography of the construction equipment, mesh fencing, and security forces that every so often rearranged themselves as if they were caught in the gravity of the square's emptiness. The Midan was kept in this state of disarray for months, a form of spatial and temporal emptying of what had been set into motion during the 18 days of revolt in 2011. As Sisi's regime built various monuments to itself, tore them down, and replaced them in a kind of rhythm, I was often left questioning what remained of the revolution. Had everything been extinguished? Exhausted? Smothered by the military regime?

In the years following the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution, the manifold and diverse assemblies of Tahrir had become powerful through their production of differential possibilities, the indeterminate wakes of diverse assemblings, proximities, and affinities. Following Sisi's coup, the military responded with the strategic production of emptiness, vacating the conditions of possibility for assembly through a securitization of spaces that literally emptied them of bodies. During one of our conversations in the courtyard of a gallery, the revolutionary activist [REDACTED] reflected on how spaces of assembly transformed following the return of military rule:

“That kind of space was a space of opening and opportunity and collecting. People, because they had met, could go on and do other things. Later, it became much more a space which was pointing towards who you should round up. The space collapsed and its values changed and shifted.”

( [REDACTED], Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The coup took shape largely in its attempt to eradicate and empty spaces “of opening and opportunity” where people found one another and assembled and subsequently could “go on and do other things” together. After Sisi seized state power, anyone who tried to maintain or defend these spaces risked being “round(ed) up” by security forces, arrested, killed, or disappeared.<sup>39</sup> Mass military deployments to the streets and

skies of Cairo intended to empty the spaces of assembly as a means of emptying the

<sup>39</sup> For a description of the latest wave of disappearances that coincided with the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the revolution in 2016, see “Hundreds Vanishing in Egypt as Crackdown Widens, Activists Say” by Amina Ismail and Declan Walsh in the New York Times.

indeterminate futurities that accompanied them.

After having been pushed out of power in the coup, members of the Muslim Brotherhood organized several anticoup sit-ins across Cairo, the largest of which gathered away from the center of Wust El-Balad in Midan Rabaa al-Adawiya, a few kilometers to the northeast of Midan Tahrir.<sup>40</sup> Thousands of protesters assembled to demand an end to the coup and the reinstatement of Mohamed Morsi as president, setting up tents and stages that echoed the form and spatial organization of the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution.<sup>41</sup> In an effort to secure power, Sisi publicly demanded that demonstrators leave the square and began preparing for their eviction. On August 14th, 2013, a little over a month after the coup had begun, armored vehicles, helicopters, snipers, tear gas, and troops were used to disperse the sit-in over the course of several hours.<sup>42</sup> In the process of clearing the square, the military killed

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40 The term “anticoup” is used as a way to describe the various groups that emerged to contest General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s military coup in the summer of 2013. While these groups were predominantly composed of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and others sympathetic to them, there were also other groups involved. The regime has framed anticoup forces as consisting of entirely the Muslim Brotherhood in their rhetoric, but in reality it’s much more diverse and complex. Most notably, the “3rd Camp” which was composed of liberals, students, and other leftist groups, declared themselves to be against both Sisi’s military regime and the Muslim Brotherhood leadership.

41 Mohamed Morsi is a member of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood and was elected as president in 2012 in Egypt’s first democratic elections following the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution in 2011. Morsi was heavily criticized during his presidency because of perceived attempts to impose aspects of Islamic law. During popular protests against his administration in the summer of 2013, he was arrested during a coup orchestrated by the military’s commander in chief Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and currently remains in prison. (“Army Ousts Egypt’s President; Morsi is Taken into Military Custody”)

42 A longer description of the Rabaa massacre can be found in the article “Blood, death and flames: memories of Egypt’s Rabaa massacre” by Nadine Hadda.

nearly a thousand people and injured several thousand more in what has come to be known as the Rabaa massacre, the deadliest day in Egypt since the first fires of the revolution had been lit.

In the weeks between the beginning of Sisi's coup and the Rabaa massacre, I spent most of my time confined inside of my apartment with my partner, writing articles online about the coup as it unfolded in the streets below, all while trying to survive the extreme heat of the Egyptian summer. Anticoup marches regularly poured into the streets, fighting with security forces or with pro-Sisi groups in long, drawn-out battles which included fireworks, tear gas, paving stones, barricades, birdshot, and bullets. These protests were juxtaposed with periods of tense calm that had taken hold during Ramadan, Islam's holy month of fasting that slows Cairo's normally kinetic and chaotic pace. Going out to run errands meant unavoidably being swept up in crowds that gathered in various neighborhoods, as well as by sporadic and dispersed military mobilizations which unpredictably and dynamically appeared and vanished across the territories of the city like sparks burning and vanishing in the night. Slowly, the wild milieus of the assemblies were replaced by fractal territories of security.

Sisi's regime is heterogeneous, inconsistent, and fragmented, both multiple and singular in its external action and internal movement. Different sections of the regime undermine one another, various organizations and factions of security forces are often in conflict (at times fighting with one another in the streets), and even within

the military itself there have been internal coup attempts.<sup>43</sup> The regime has compensated for these potentially debilitating inconsistencies and fragmentations by multiplying security checkpoints in universities and on roads, ordering myriad helicopter patrols over the Nile, installing numerous concrete-block walls that cut off neighborhoods from one another, occupying Wust El-Balad with swarms of armored vehicles and young military conscripts that await deployment orders in alleys and in the back of trucks, and finally emptying spaces that cannot be regulated or policed via the previous means. Together, these culminate into a fractalized security regime that operates at diverse scales and speeds: a security against possibility that conditions all life in the city.

It's not so much particularized instances of violence, but rather the possibility of violence, that affectively shapes how one moves, acts, thinks, relates, and lives in Cairo after the coup. Counterintuitively, it is the indeterminate quality of the security forces, their unpredictable and dispersed practices flickering in and out of existence at plural scales, that produces varied forms of order and determinacy. In response to the wild indeterminacy of the assemblies, the regime produces its own indeterminacy in diffuse and distributed forms of violence that emerge in dynamic intensities across the entirety of Cairo. Furthermore, it's not only stark violence but also the proliferation of possible violence that defines the regime's security against the possibility of the

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<sup>43</sup> For an account of the internal coup attempt within Egypt's military, read Hossam Baghat's "A coup busted?" in Mada Masr.

assemblies.

The regime's strategy has taken on different tactical expressions since Sisi took power. The massacre in Rabaa was followed by the imposition of a month-long city-wide curfew that prevented the return of protests or sit-ins. Downtown Cairo, usually bustling with people in the warm evenings, remained desolate and empty in the evenings over this period. Months after the curfew ended, police officials cleared the Borsa, the famously dense string of street cafés in Wust El-Balad, seemingly in an attempt to eradicate the informal socialities that had established a life there.<sup>44</sup> The repeated military closure of Midan Tahrir is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the military regime's attempt to empty spaces and impose order in Cairo in the interest of its own survival. In more muted fashions, police officers increased identification checks, harassed bystanders, or confiscated property to help empty spaces. Any hint of possible unrest has prompted widespread military mobilizations that have included the stationing of troops and vehicles on the peripheries of Tahrir and a closure of the large steel gates on its south entrance that were installed after the coup.

The regime's strategies have, over time and through their repetition, imposed a

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<sup>44</sup> The Borsa, named after the Egyptian stock exchange which neighbors it, is a popular outdoor street café district in downtown Cairo that was cleared by police in 2014. While it still existed, the Borsa was a popular place for people to meet and congregate late into the evenings to drink tea, smoke shisha, watch soccer matches, and listen to music in its dense constellation of tables, chairs and televisions.

fragile order onto the streets of Cairo. In a conversation with the academic theorist ██████████ in a smoke-filled library study room, they described the regime's spatial practices following the coup:

“It seems at times as though it's a very singular logic. The largest most spectacular events, the biggest visits by the governor and all of this kind of stuff, is really an attempt to show that they have control over the state and they do that by showing that they have control over the visual appearance and the orderliness of the street. There's a weird determinism inherent in that. But there's also a rather disheartening logic because it really strips away everyday spaces of gathering and collectivity and hanging out. Egypt has very little if not its cafés. Cairo is not the most beautiful city. It's not a clean city. It's not an orderly city. It's a city that's always to me been marked by this kind of madness that at times is euphoric and is open ended. As frustrating as it can be and as frustrating as any encounter with bureaucracy and the heavy handedness of it is, it is the place where there is always a gathering of people and you stay up late with your friends and your colleagues and your acquaintances and there's a liveliness to the street that's always been the lifeblood of the city that I think is very clearly under attack by this government.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The banning of marches, the clearing of street vendors from main thoroughfares, the emptying of the Borsa, the attacks on “everyday spaces of gathering and collectivity”: what is striking about the regime's repression is not that it seeks out groups that are recognized as being political, but also extends its repression to every form of assembly or gathering that doesn't strictly conform to the regime's managerial logic.

This includes spaces of conviviality, sociality, romance, and fun, any place where affinities and desires and intimacies and pleasures can unexpectedly be generated in encounters between bodies in unscripted fashions. Sisi's regime depends on the (re)enactment of controls to (re)produce their power, attempting to eradicate the generative forms of assembly that flourish in these informal spaces.

After the military returned to power following the coup, mixtures of Egyptian police, soldiers, and baltagiya have incessantly attacked any kind of protest that has managed to manifest against them in the streets. Those who are lucky manage to slip away from these attacks with only the sharp burning of tear gas in their lungs, either escaping into open restaurants, quickly catching one of Cairo's many taxis, or disappearing into the bustle of a nearby metro station, all while evading the plethora of plainclothes police that roam the area before, during, and after demonstrations. Others are hit with scattered birdshot from the regime's shotguns, beaten in the streets, detained and sentenced to years in jail, or killed. These highly visible forms of repression that are enacted in the open occur against a backdrop of pervasive torture, imprisonment, and hundreds of disappearances that happen out of view but also affectively condition the diverse practices of living and forms of possible life on Cairo's streets. Sisi's emptiness must be continuously (re)produced, and its order incessantly (re)imposed: even the slightest anomaly is felt as an existential threat to the regime.

The scattered protests that have tried to take the streets and establish new kinds of assembly following the coup have done so under the threat of extinction, as Sisi's regime has not only consistently dispersed protests when they have appeared but has also attempted to eradicate the conditions of possibility from within which resistance and revolution are rendered possible in the first place. To these ends, Sisi's regime has made use of fractal techniques to produce an affective fear that permeates all spaces of the city regardless of whether security forces are present. Unfolding across Cairo, the regime's repression and the emptiness it produces has symmetry across all of its different scales: it is systematic yet unpredictable, diffuse yet particularized, atmospheric yet localized. In other words, the emptiness of the regime is a structured form of emptiness that has both extensive and intensive dimensions and means to be totalizing in its fractalized operation. It's impossible to discern where the security of the regime properly begins or ends, whether one is entering or retreating from the battlefields of the coup, or if the situation will collapse and implode or accelerate and explode. Both actual and virtual, macro and micro, repeating and differentiating, a thousand security practices percolate through the possibility of the city.

During my regular walks, I unavoidably encountered Sisi's security forces in the streets and squares of the city. Armored personal carriers are stationed around government buildings, their metal shells towering over the pedestrians that walk

beside them. Large groups of soldiers, loitering around their large trucks, produce affective black holes across the bustling city as people avoid being near. Secret police, making no effort to disguise themselves, sit in the back rows of theater performances and academic lectures. Following the coup, life in Cairo has been immersed in the emptiness of the security forces, and the forms of community and intimacy I took part in were perpetually haunted by their deeply felt contingency and possible disappearance.<sup>45</sup>

In Sisi's Cairo, security is fundamentally oriented against possibility. Establishing order at any cost, the regime desires to shape, determine, police, and manage all practices of living in the city as a means of constraining and curtailing the conditions of possibility for radically other practices of living that incessantly threaten to become manifest. The security practices of the regime respond to the ineradicable multiplicity of Cairo by attempting to manage that which is wild and desiring to tame that which is untamable. Lives are pushed and shoved into static configurations of relation, exchange, orientation and recognition that inscribe them

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<sup>45</sup> Contingency is a state of existing as an actuality that is possible, but not necessary. A contingent state can be thought of as a particular historical organization or formation that comes into the world, has a duration or life, and eventually leaves it. However, rather than simply propose that there are contingent and noncontingent (necessary) things in the world, we can follow Louis Althusser's insight that: "Instead of thinking of contingency as a modality of necessity, or an exception to it, we must think necessity as the becoming-necessary of the encounter of contingencies" (6). In establishing an immanent relation between the contingent and the necessary, Althusser helps us to understand the radical contingency at the heart of all matter. Like the processes that create states of being and becoming, different forces, folds, fields constitute the conditions for the stability and duration of various forms, as well as being contingent themselves. The "becoming-necessary" that Althusser describes is another way of describing the process of actualization, which is always a contingent and historical process.

with stratified expressions of difference. One function of these security practices is to make bodies apprehendable, and to limit relations between bodies to relations of apprehension.

Bodies can be encountered and apprehended, and the difference between these two forms of relation has political and ethical consequences. An encounter is a mutually transforming meeting between two things or bodies. Gilles Deleuze defined encounter as the relational process that manifests as: "...something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter." (Difference and Repetition 176) Those caught in an encounter in the world become involved in unpredictable and indeterminate relations in the way that it: "...forces it to pose a problem: as though the object of encounter, the sign, were the bearer of a problem - as though it were a problem" (Difference and Repetition 176).

In contrast to an encounter, to apprehend is to understand, but also to arrest. To apprehend a body is to understand and recognize it in its already established forms of difference (as a gendered body, as a raced body, etc.), and to help to reproduce that difference in the process of apprehension itself. When something is apprehended, it is (re)cognized in the literal sense of the word: it is thought, again. Gilles Deleuze described the process of recognition in this way: "In recognition, the sensible is not at all that which can only be sensed, but that which bears directly upon the senses in an object which can be recalled, imagined or conceived" (Difference and Repetition

176). Experiencing the world as something that can be ‘recalled, imagined or conceived’ is to experience the world as it already can be thought. The artist and philosopher Simon O’Sullivan elaborates on this point from Deleuze: “...our knowledges, beliefs and values are reconfirmed. We, and the world we inhabit, are reconfirmed as that which we already understood our world and ourselves to be. An object of recognition is then precisely a representation of something always already in place. With such a non-encounter our habitual way of being and acting in the world is reaffirmed and reinforced, and as a consequence no thought takes place. Indeed, we might say that representation precisely stymies thought” (1).

This non-thought can be framed as a form of determinacy, where things are their meanings are positioned in indexical relation to one another in an experience of the world. This epistemological process isn’t detached from the world in some form of impossibly distant and removed perception, but also has material consequences in the sense that it materially contributes to the reproduction of the world in its already-thought form. In the process of apprehension, one arrests with and is also arrested by the thought concept. Importantly, our sense of the world exceeds any apprehension and forces us into processes and relations of encounter. The complexity and indeterminacy of the world is irreducible to any singular thought or concept, and so apprehension can never entirely capture or arrest that which necessarily escapes it.

Almost always, when we encounter other bodies we apprehend them in their

difference. When we apprehend a body, we recognize it as being resolved and fixed in its normative particularity (as a gendered body, or as a raced body, for example). To apprehend is also to arrest, in essence to capture a body in its apprehended difference and to help materially reproduce those differences in bodies themselves.<sup>46</sup> To assemble with bodies on the other hand is to encounter them in their irreducible complexity and indeterminacy without necessarily recognizing them: you don't need to apprehend a body in order to assemble with it. On the contrary, apprehension only hinders possible assembly because of the established and repetitive relations to the other's body that it implies. Security measures mean to produce the conditions for apprehension within which stratified relations are reproduced and reinscribed while denying opportunities to reorganize or refashion those relations in the differential possibilities of the assemblies.

Through emptying spaces of assembly where indeterminacies proliferate, the spaces where repeated encounters have the potential to both cohere and decohere difference itself, the regime hopes to limit bodies to relating to one another within the already-existing organization and distribution of the city: in the home with family, at work with coworkers and managers, in places of worship with others of faith, at

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46 A complementary take on this notion of apprehended or arrested difference can be found in Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* in his concept of the distribution of the sensible, which he describes as: "...the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (12).

school with students and teachers. These are spaces where bodies are made to be more determinate, predictable, and recognizable in their roles in relations, spaces where bodies are apprehended as being bodies in particular, spaces where most often difference is simply reproduced and reinscribed, foreclosing upon experimental practices of living and becoming that flourish in assemblies.

Sisi's systematic yet unpredictable repression of queers, political dissidents, students, and artists suffocate the conditions of possibility for assembly that have the potential to reorganize forms of difference and practices of living in the city.<sup>47</sup> These forms of repression function in tactically distinct yet strategically interconnected ways. First, the regime renders already existing social formations more precarious as a means of affectively regulating them. By heightening the felt vulnerability of communities through the virtual multiplication of the regime's possible violence, the regime pushes groups to become cautious, afraid and isolated, trying to foreclose upon forms of affinity that could otherwise take shape. Second, the regime extinguishes and empties spaces where bodies can possibly encounter and assemble with one another against the logic of the regime. This strategy is manifest in the military's regular closure of Tahrir, but also in attacks on other spaces of indeterminate assembly across the city such as galleries, mosques, cafés, classrooms, theaters, and soccer stadiums. This dual motion of the regime's security practices, the

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<sup>47</sup> While elsewhere I have used queer in its sense as a concept, I also use it in its identitarian sense to broadly describe communities composed of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Trans\* people.

production of possible violence and the foreclosure of the possibility for assembly, is the dynamic technique Sisi uses to reproduce his power.

In an exchange with the activist [REDACTED] in a university cafe, they described the security force's recent attacks against informal and indeterminate spaces of assembly as being an attempt to dissolve the conditions within which unstructured behaviors can possibly take place:

“To my mind I think what frightens them the most is people gathering in ways that they can't directly control and predict. It doesn't have to be political. When it's political of course there's an extra level of scrutiny and aggression directed against it. And yes, there have been tens of thousands of arrests and there are thousands in prison now, for expressly political crimes of conscience, or what have you. But, at the same time when you look at the operating logic of the government and the apparatus and the state, their priorities have been on this notion of a very superficial but a very rigid formal sense of ordering. Bringing order back to the city. 'Enough Chaos' they say, 'Enough Disorder.' So, we've had enormous campaigns of eviction against street vendors that started in August of 2014. Only a couple of weeks ago they evicted the vendors. That was in downtown, and only recently they did the same in Ramses square. Similarly, the cafés in downtown and elsewhere have been targeted by the police supposedly for licensing and other kinds of sidewalk violations. The impact if not the intended effect is a tamping down on the everyday hanging out that people do and the discussions they have. I was talking to a business owner in downtown who, that on his authority, says he was talking to one of the people that was in charge of the policing and

utilities, who said they explicitly cleared out the cafés in downtown because the government felt that this is where activists hang out. And so, to deal with that problem, the easiest solution is to basically eliminate the spaces and the arenas where those unstructured behaviors take place.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The “very rigid formal sense of ordering” that ██████████ says is meant to “eliminate the spaces and the arenas where those unstructured behaviors take place” produces varying intensities of emptiness and order across the city. The regime’s security practices aren’t intended to suffocate every particular instance of assembly in this sense, but instead are concerned with policing the conditions of possibility for assembly as such. When the regime says “enough chaos” and “enough disorder,” it desires to produce a city where bodies are constrained to living lives that conform to the regime’s organization. Security forces attempt to abolish “unstructured behaviors” and foreclose upon what ██████████ describes as “people gathering in ways that they can’t directly control and predict.”

Sisi’s military regime is not simply the sum of its police officers, army conscripts, vast bureaucracies, armed thugs, and security architectures, although it surely includes them. To properly understand the regime, it must also be seen as a regime of space and time itself, a complex and dispersed assemblage that both produces and forecloses upon space-times as a form of ontological, social and political power. This strategy culminates in the fractalized structuring of emptiness,

the diverse distribution, maintenance, and regulation of emptiness at different scales as a means of vacating the city of any possibility other than the static continuity of the regime itself.

Minoritarian communities that have taken part in experimental and resistant forms of assembly, intimacy, and affinity have been the most sought after targets for the regime. Among these groups, queer communities composed of homosexuals, trans\*, bisexuals, sex workers and others intentionally try to become obscure in order to evade state violence. Under Sisi, security forces have raided bathhouses in Cairo, arresting men en masse and charging them with ‘inciting debauchery’ after allowing for them to be filmed by media, half dressed, being dragged into the backs of police trucks. Several clubs and bars have also been closed for hosting ‘debaucherous parties’ where queer practices allegedly take place. Cell phone applications that queers have used to find one another are also regularly infiltrated by security forces who send invitations to meet and then arrest whoever arrives. Queer communities continue to find life in various spaces across Cairo, but do so deeply conditioned by the felt possibility of these forms of violence.<sup>48</sup> The forms of assembly practiced by queer communities threaten the regime because of the way that they potentially reorganize social and political difference, and open up forms of indeterminacy, affinity and intimacy that jeopardize the regime’s control over bodies, and so the

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<sup>48</sup> For more background on these forms of repression that have been enacted queer communities, read Patrick Kingsley's article "Egypt's gay community fears government crackdown" in the Guardian.

regime produces possible violence to foreclose upon the conditions of possibility for the communities themselves.

The securitization of universities is yet another tactic that Sisi's regime has used to impose its apprehensive order upon the city. Universities in Cairo have long been homes for resistance movements and more general forms of political organizing, and students were very involved in the revolution and have been active in the protests against the coup. Universities often manifest as spaces of assembly because of the forms of proximity and density that emerge on campuses despite disciplinary and security structures. Following the Rabaa massacre, the regime installed private security at the entrances to Cairo's public universities, forcing students to present identification, have their bags searched, and pass through metal detectors in order to enter campus.<sup>49</sup> Student political organizations have been banned, and faculty that have expressed political opinions have been fired. Beyond these measures, security forces have also conducted sporadic raids of various dormitories and student buildings, searching rooms and arresting those they suspect of taking part in protests. These raids, through their chaotic and unpredictable enactment, produce power more through the production of the possible raid than through any singular raid itself, seeking to diminish the forms of proximity and affinity that have otherwise taken

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<sup>49</sup> Students at Cairo's public universities have revolted against the imposition of these controls at the entrances to their universities, at times even rioting and destroying the metal detectors of the private security company Falcon that was contracted to staff the checkpoints. For an overview of these protests, see "The Falcons on campus" by Reem Khorshid in Mada Masr.

hold in these spaces while reinscribing their role as students and nothing more.

Civil society organizations in Egypt that have been critical of the regime, most often human rights groups, have also been increasingly repressed. In 2014, an announcement was made that all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Egypt needed to officially register with the state, remain open to surprise inspection, and have all foreign funds pre-approved. When I sat down to talk with [REDACTED] who works at the [REDACTED], they explained how groups were destabilized by these measures:

“The point of these policies was to create that hysterical atmosphere among the activists of the NGOs so to corner them, in a sense. And actually that was the case over the last months. I mean, we spent almost 50% of our work thinking about our own survival. And so we weren't able to fully mobilize our own limited capacity, to do our own work that's on our own agendas, trying to appear in the media, trying to even outreach to the authorities, etc.. That's why, from that point of view, their plan actually worked out. They cornered the NGOs. They kept them under constant pressure using at their disposal a set of very ambiguous and ambivalent legal tools, and creating an aura in the media that those guys are actually kind of colored, kind of marked, and then also trying to work on that social and political stigma by saying that you're receiving foreign funding, and by the way, the Egyptian political sphere is quite paranoid towards these issues. Or thinking about something like phantasmatic connections between the Muslim Brotherhood and the human rights groups and something like that. This is the aim of that campaign. So the

aim and the objective is not to eradicate the human rights groups. The aim is to corner them and put them under constant pressure and create an aura around them that actually blocks their own communication with the communities they are trying to work with.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

As ██████████ notes, the regime attempts to create “an aura in the media that those guys are actually kind of colored, kind of marked” in order to diminish the capacity of NGOs to engage with communities in Egypt. These regime strategies mean to keep people in their proper place by not allowing encounters between bodies or communities that could lead to the manifestation of novel collective practices as well as rendering them precarious, forcing them to focus on the question of their “own survival” and little else.<sup>50</sup>

During the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution, Ultras soccer fans played a big role in the street fights that regularly took place with security forces. Because they had been organizing as fans for years and had confronted the police repeatedly outside of stadiums, they had much more experience in street fights than others and thus were able to more effectively defend spaces of assembly from the attacks of security forces. Following the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took power, and then more intensely under the coup, the regime

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<sup>50</sup> Recently, Sisi's regime has gone to the extreme of simply trying to shutter NGOs that speak out against their policies. For an account of one of these instances, read about the El Nadeem center's resistance to these attempts in “Health Ministry attempts closure of Al-Nadeem, center remains open” in Mada Masr.

repressed Ultras groups by closing soccer stadiums to fans and outlawing their organizations by labeling them as terrorist groups.<sup>51</sup> In one of my conversations with [REDACTED] who had witnessed the Ultras' participation in the revolution, they described what the regime found so threatening about them:

“They really imagine living their life in a different way and I think this is also something that scares the state. The state does not understand what these people are about, why they are that organized. ‘Is this only about supporting their teams?’ This is something Asef Bayat talked about, about the state’s animosity to fun. And how the state can’t really perceive or understand fun as something that people would come together to do collectively. We shouldn’t blame them if they don’t see their battle as political, but we should blame the political parties who can’t see this as a political battle. This also would tell us how we see fun, and how we see pleasure as something insignificant or something that is not worth fighting for. And they are really a pleasure-oriented group. They want to chant. They want to dance. This is something very different than something most Egyptians are thinking of. Not only because of the binary of work and fun, that we should actually value work and despise fun, but also about the way we think of and the way we live our life. It’s a different thing. If you attend a match with them, there’s that point where they ignite so many flares, and they go shirtless, and they start to throw water on each other, and everybody is wet, and there’s colored smoke and it’s a very carnivalesque moment and it’s a whole different experience.” ([REDACTED],

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51 The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (also simply referred to as the SCAF) is a group of military officials that convene during times of national emergency. They briefly took power following the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution in what was called a transition period to democracy, and later took part in helping to orchestrate the coup.

Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The regime's "animosity to fun" and inability to "perceive or understand fun as something that people would come together to do collectively" are intimately tied to its fear of spaces of assembly that it cannot control. The "carnavalesque moment" that is "a whole different experience" and is literally fought over in the streets is one manifestation of indeterminate and collective assembly that the regime has attempted to eradicate because of the possibility that the participants could "imagine living their life in a different way."

In addition to repressing Ultras groups the regime has also targeted moulids, the religious festivals in Egypt that honor various figures in the Muslim and Christian faiths. These are spaces where people gather together to dance and eat and enjoy themselves, or in other words, where people assemble. Many media organizations in Egypt have functionally become part of the regime and help to justify the repression of these festivals as well as other activities and practices that are deemed morally questionable. While in Cairo, I was able to converse with [REDACTED] several times in their studio and at cafés in downtown. During one of our exchanges, [REDACTED] described the attacks on the moulids that followed the coup:

"Last week there was a moulid in Sidi Ahmad al-Rifa'i, and I mean for hundreds and hundreds of years this is the way Egyptian people have been celebrating the moulid. And it included music and it included singing, but suddenly you open the newspaper and you find that there is a campaign in the

newspaper and they are against the people of the moulid making music inside of the mosque. Because of this campaign, the state got afraid and went and closed the moulid. There have been three moulids this year that the state hasn't given permission for, and this is happening after the media campaigns against moulids because they are against music inside the mosque.”

(██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

Later on in the same conversation, ██████████ described another instance where the state and the media cooperated to limit and curtail forms of intimacy:

“The media's role is not to watch the state, but instead they are trying to watch the people. And by trying to watch the people, they always comment and they campaign against how the people should or are supposed to live their life. They don't discuss it, but they make campaigns about people. There was even a campaign against a boy and a girl that were found kissing in a library. And there was a campaign against that because, why? This is not the role of the media. For example you open the newspaper and you find a fucking shitty guy who took a picture of a boy and a girl who are kissing in the corner. And this is getting published. And they are making a fucking campaign about it. Because of the pressure and because of the combination and marriage between the businessmen who own this media and the state. The media are not watching the state. They are watching the people.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The regime and media organizations cooperate to repress instances of assembly, either in the moulids or in intimate encounters that take place outside of marriage, because they don't conform to the logic of apprehensive security and instead have the

potential to make possible novel forms of relation. The regime means to not only control the streets of the city, but also the desire, attraction and pleasure of its inhabitants.

Most recently, Sisi's security forces have resorted to shutting down cultural and intellectual spaces. At the end of 2015, several spaces in downtown Cairo were unexpectedly raided by regime security forces. These raids were part of a larger wave of repression unfolding in the days leading up to the revolution's 5th anniversary, which included detaining prominent members of the April 6<sup>th</sup> Movement as well as several researchers and journalists.<sup>52</sup> Of these raided spaces, I was able to attend many events at [REDACTED] while I was still living in Cairo, and remember it as being home to a vibrant and diverse cultural and intellectual milieu in the heart of the city. [REDACTED] is one of many spaces that have acted as shelters for the revolution and its memory, a place where people could still gather, converse and imagine together in a city where doing so in public has been made increasingly impossible by the regime's violence. Undoubtedly, Sisi's security forces raided [REDACTED] because they were afraid of what could potentially find life within its walls, the unwieldy forms of creativity and warmth that are impossible for the regime to fully manage or control.

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<sup>52</sup> The April 6<sup>th</sup> Movement was a political organization that had a large role in agitating towards the protests that lead to the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution. The group was later outlawed and many members have jailed, although it continues to operate as an underground resistance movement under the coup.

While the regime makes maximal use of its security forces in repressing instances of assembly wherever they appear possible, it's worth noting that even the regime knows that they can never entirely impose the forms of order they desire in Cairo. As a failsafe, Sisi has engaged in planning and seeking investment for the construction of an entirely new capital in the deserts east of Cairo. Tentatively called "Capital Cairo," there are plans to begin construction and eventually Sisi hopes to move all government administration and offices to the new city, far from Midan Tahrir and its history of wild assemblies. In a conversation with the activist [REDACTED] in my living room, they described this escapist fantasy of the regime:

"There is this project to create a new capital city, which was brought up a couple of months ago by Sisi's regime. Some 60 billion dollar pharaonic fantasy out in the desert with glitzy buildings to rival Dubai, and the UAE was supposed to pay for the whole thing. And that was clearly a counter-revolutionary project. The idea pure and simple was to build a city that the revolutionaries couldn't reach. There is this teeming Cairo population that every regime has always been afraid of. They've always been afraid of Cairo rising against them, and particularly of the workers and the intellectual leftists joining together. That's been the terror of every regime. If you create a new capital that doesn't have any workers, or that doesn't have any mass population, you feel safe. Part of the fantasy of this regime is this hygienic modernism. To create a space for itself that is immune to diseases of the Egyptian body politic that took down Mubarak and could still bring it down."

( [REDACTED], Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

This desire to leave Cairo behind and start anew is perhaps the clearest articulation of the logic of Sisi's regime. Rather than inheriting and working within the complex and contradictory histories of the city, Sisi instead hopes to make a new city appear as if out of thin air, to start over again in a place where the bodies of the revolutionaries and the people more generally cannot reach the regime, where assemblies themselves will not be possible by virtue of the built space of the new city itself, where Cairo is incapable of "rising against them."

Multiplicity and indeterminacy are the targets of security practices because they constitute the terrain of struggle within which security can be undone. The subtle deviations away from the official route, the imperceptible becomings, the imagination that sees a life different from the one being lived, the memory of a past divergent from the military's, all open up new kinds of undecidability and indeterminacy that cannot be entirely foreclosed upon in advance. The recent history of Egypt can be thought of as being caught in wide swings between security and possibility, between fixity and futurity, between apprehended difference and becoming. The enactment of security practices initiates forms of conflict that have no end, but instead relentlessly recreate the same conditions that require the regime's incessant resecuring.

It's crucially important that we understand that the military cannot ever manage to entirely foreclose upon that which it attempts to eradicate. As much as Sisi desires an orderly city, life in Cairo remains anything but. As the regime attempts to

tighten its grip and erase the potential for any other way of life but its own, the living know better. The collective activities that life requires, the cooking, the music, the conversation, the performance, the art, the improvisation, the imagination, the love, the sex, are together the locus of what we could call the wild and the untamed, the productive and poetic forces that cannot help but emerge from our encounters with others and with the world. These forms of conjunctive encounters necessarily persist even under the harshest security measures, enabling those assembled to continue to investigate and experiment with possibilities that refuse to be tamed. Given enough time or intensity, the anomalies of possibility become inevitabilities, and bodies discover that they can find one another in assembly again.

## Conclusion: The Memory of Possibility

General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's coup in the summer of 2013 left behind vast swaths of emptiness in its wake. Like a pause between breaths that stretches on for too long, or a river so dark that even reflections sink into it, one can't help but feel the presence of all that remains missing. The mass assemblies that had so spectacularly filled Tahrir are now absent, forms of affinity that had emerged now falter, the fires of the barricades have been reduced to fumes, and too many bodies have been disappeared, vanishing into the dark recesses of the regime's prisons or into the voids of unmarked graves in the shifting sands of the Sahara desert. The battlefield of the coup is the battlefield of memory, a surface that extends across the dimension of time rather than space, filled as much with rich complex landscapes as with gaping trenches.<sup>53</sup> Security forces hunt after those who dare to recall and revive the

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<sup>53</sup> Memory, rather than being curtailed to past, is the lived differential between pasts and futures in the present. As a form of mediation, memory is carried and (re)produced in the present in the form of diverse practices and relations. Memory is active in this sense, and acts as part of assemblages. Henri Bergson writes that memory "...no longer represents our past to us, it acts it; and if it still deserves the name memory, it is not because it conserves bygone images, but because it prolongs their useful effect into the present moment" (93). This simultaneous relation between conservation and action of the past is what I would like to emphasize here. While remembering exists in forms of space and time, memories aren't necessarily curtailed to forms of space and time that are delimited in various fashions. As the philosopher Adrian Parr notes: "Memory is dynamic and its movement is largely ungraspable. It can open new linguistic, economic, historical, and energetic combinations that either normalize or reinvent how the social field organizes itself. Yet the movement of memory cannot be clearly situated within space and time. Memory, unlike remembrance itself, is not in space and time, although it can be said to produce space-times. Memory does not happen to a body, it subsists throughout it. A body doesn't remember a defined slice of time, for memory is in excess of the chronological compartmentalizing of discrete temporal units" (1). This radical excess of memory, its ability and tendency to spill over into the

indeterminacies of the assemblies, and yet, like the information that manages to escape from the swallowing gravity of black holes, the memory of the assemblies persists and radiates.

Since I left Egypt in the summer of 2015, the repression of the regime has intensified to such a degree that I've chosen to anonymize the people that I spent time with and conversed with because I feared that they would be targeted for repression for participating in my project. As a form of cryptodocumentary, I've chosen to engage with the memory of the revolution in the same way that memory manages to survive in Cairo: in encryption and obscurity and in the way it evades particular forms of documentation. This happens on a conceptual level in my abstraction, transformation and obfuscation of various details and materials, but also in the technical production of the project itself. While I was still living in Cairo, I not only had to capture images and record videos and conversations clandestinely, but also had to diligently encrypt my digital files so they could not be read by the regime if they were seized. In addition, it was necessary to use various techniques to encrypt and anonymize my internet connection and email conversations after it became clear that the regime was performing extensive monitoring of network traffic. This project, and your reception of it, is one way of proliferating as well as preserving the memory of the assemblies in encrypted and abstracted form, hoping to create the conditions

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present in indeterminate forms, is what ensures the open ongoing possibility of novelty and futurity, as well as novel expressions of the past itself.

where one day such encryption will no longer be necessary.

Following Sisi's rise to power, the emptiness of his regime has taken on temporal dimensions, attempting to retroactively empty the past of the revolution by destroying its memory that persists in the present. This has taken form in the renaming of the coup as the 'Second Revolution,' as if it was the historical corrective to the first uprising. Acquitting former dictator Hosni Mubarak of almost every criminal charge against him, jailing revolutionaries indefinitely, erasing the graffiti of the martyrs, and banning all marches or demonstrations that memorialize the revolution all mean to vacate historical time of everything that had found life within the manifold assemblies of Tahrir. Beyond the past, Sisi desires to empty the future itself of its ineradicable and wild multiplicity. The regime is fueled by fantasies of a securitized present that is infinite in its duration, yet empty of the deviations and dynamisms that necessarily accompany the passage of time itself.

Submerged in the emptiness of the regime, scattered memories still litter the streets from years of revolt. Walking through alleys and streets, I stumbled upon the debris of the uprisings: A discarded riot shield, sitting in a gutter caked with layers of thick dust from the sandstorms that occasionally rumble through the city. A black and white poster denouncing military rule, now partially covered over with election advertisements adorning stern faces and bright colors. A mural depicting martyrs of the revolution, defaced with thick brushstrokes of black paint. Where downtown

meets the Nile, the National Democratic Party Headquarters, which had been set alight during the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution, continued to tower above the corniche, its scorched interior home to large flocks of migrating birds until its eventual demolition by Sisi's regime.<sup>54</sup>

I think it's clear now that the revolution in Egypt was less a rupture in the previous order than it was an opening of new continuities that are still in the process of becoming actual. It initiated a polysynchronous conflict made up of a diversity of tempos, speeds, and intensities of struggle. Emerging and vanishing, blinking in and out of existence faster than perception or moving so slowly that they appear entirely still, it is easy to lose track of the various durations of the revolution that bleed together in the present like storm systems that converge in the sky.

Even if the revolutionary period seemed to be in the process of withdrawing into the depths of Sisi's emptiness, the ineradicable excess of its memory nonetheless continue to endure in various durations in the present. During an afternoon tea with the filmmaker [REDACTED], they described the affective waves of the revolution that could still be felt:

“There's a presumption that because we've had this good time together that we will be able to survive rougher times, and that's been proved not to be the

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<sup>54</sup> The National Democratic Party (NDP) is the political party that ruled Egypt for 33 years before Hosni Mubarak was overthrown in 2011. Founded by Anwar El-Sadat, the party ruled as an authoritarian regime and orchestrated mass state repression. During the 18 days of protest, the Nation Democratic Party headquarters on the periphery of Midan Tahrir were set on fire and looted.

case. There are key differences that find a meeting ground in certain points, and people are able to get on well together, and later on they diverge. Which makes you at the same time want to search out why, because again, you've had that experience of something that was frankly extraordinarily beautiful.”

(██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The desire to hold on to the experience of “something that was frankly extraordinarily beautiful” in the “rougher times” of the coup takes on different forms. What all of these forms share in common is their reliance on the production and cultivation of obscurity. Subtly, sometimes imperceptibly even, memory finds duration in the ways that it escapes notice.

If the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution survived the coup, it survived through the enactment of practices that resist the regime through maintaining forms of indeterminacy and imperceptibility. These small and fragile resistances additively and subtractively carve out and reproduce the conditions for obscurity within which bodies can again find one another and remember together away from the perception of the regime. You could say there’s an entire obscure repertoire at work, composed of different weapons, tools, gestures and practices: Evasion, avoidance, encryption, translation, obfuscation, deception, confusion, concealment, and escape.

Obscurity is the form of escape that emerges from the acts of obfuscation. This can take on different forms, including but not limited to evasion, camouflage, escape, encryption, disguise, or distraction. Obscurity can take on the form of fog, or

in other words, obscurity can be an environment. The collective Tiqqun goes as far to argue that “Fog is the privileged vector of revolt ... Fog makes revolt possible.” The artist and theorist Zach Blas writes of obscurity through the lens of opacity, emphasizing its tactical variability: “Ultimately, it is the late Martinique thinker Édouard Glissant’s aesthetico-ethical philosophy of opacity that is paradigmatic: his claim that ‘a person has the right to be opaque’ does not concern legislative rights but is rather an ontological position that lets exist as such that which is immeasurable, nonidentifiable, and unintelligible in things. Glissant’s opacity is an ethical mandate to maintain obscurity, to not impose rubrics of categorization and measurement, which always enact a politics of reduction and exclusion. While opacity in Glissant’s writings is not tactical, an opaque tactics, now more than ever, must be wielded to insist on opacity as a crucial ethics--because capture annihilates opacity.” This collective refusal of categorization and measurement is at the center of obscure practices.

Memories can be more or less fixed, either organized in historical chains of apparent causation or persisting in diffuse fogs of indeterminacy. At times, memory constrains and delimits forms of life in the present by virtue of the bounded historical conditions that it preserves. At others, memory disturbs, emerging as a form of deviation, turbulence, indeterminacy, swerve, wildness, that is fundamentally noncausal and nonlinear, producing novel conditions of possibility that cannot be

anticipated in advance. This second form of memory is what I call the memory of possibility. As a result of this possibility of memory, situations are never entirely reducible to their causal relations, and the potential effects and affects of the past can never be entirely exhausted. Rather, pasts persist in their ineradicable potential to indeterminately matter in the present, an excess that sets into motion the production of new histories and futurities.<sup>55</sup>

The memory of the assemblies is not just of the various sequences of revolt, but rather it is the memory of possibility itself. This memory, wherever it persists, gives duration to the assemblies by preserving the conditions of their indeterminacy. In this way, the memory of possibility is not relegated to the past but rather is a lived differential experience in the present between pasts and futures. In other words, memory is a form of mediation. Memories, and the conditions of possibility they carry with them, are contingent in the sense that they are never a given, but must be cared for, defended, and at times even encrypted or hidden away. The political conflicts following the coup have been defined by their struggle to remember the assemblies, to preserve what they set into motion and cultivate their indeterminacy, tactically and necessarily in the fog of obscurity.

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55 The past of the present is explored by Henri Bergson throughout his book “Matter and Memory,” perhaps most clearly when he states: “...in truth, every perception is already memory. Practically, we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future” (167). This imbrication between pasts and futures that composes what we could call the present ensures that a temporal undecidability and unresolvability remains at play.

In an apartment looking out over green gardens and walled embassies, I met with the human rights advocate [REDACTED] to talk with them about their perspective on the revolution and the coup. One of the things they emphasized was the long and varied durations of the uprisings that exceed our ability to fully map out or predict their future consequences:

“I like talking to historians who see history in a very long arc and keep reminding us that we’re still in the middle of it, in the middle of that first bit. We don’t really know what impact this idea that you can actually overthrow a dictatorial president will have. We also don’t know what will happen with this generation of kids who were at the age of 17 or 18 when 2011 happened. And that’s their introduction to politics. And that’s their understanding of what people power is and what the state is. We don’t know what they’re going to be like in 10 years time. Or what their expectations of politics are as well.”

( [REDACTED], Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The long arc that [REDACTED] refers to, this longer sweep of history that is arced by the memory of possibility, bends away from any linear trajectory and towards the formation of radically different conditions for life as such. To think of history and memory in this way is to think of them as emerging from relations that are shaped by complex vulnerabilities and contingencies, relations that are poetically manifest in diverse practices which give them duration in time. For [REDACTED], the uncertainty of not knowing what the youth are “going to be like in 10 years time” is one form of lingering indeterminacy that allows for the revolution to not only have a

past, but a future too.

The memory of possibility, the survival and duration of a past and future otherwise, is something that has persisted despite the deep intensities of state repression. Organizing to produce obscure and opaque milieus within which memories endure has manifested as a form of resistance against a military that means to totalize its control over and regulation of the practice of remembering. Remembering is revolutionary in this context not only in the ways that memories and those that remember survive the violence of the regime, but importantly in the encounters, exchanges and proximities that necessarily arise from the practices of remembering themselves, practices that also come to produce novel conditions of possibility for living, surviving, assembling, and revolting. Remembering is a form of resistance that both precedes the power of the regime and exceeds the regime's organization, moving us to consider not only the way new practices of living become possible within the fleeting periods of turbulent riots and wild assemblies, but also within the prolonged revolutionary forms of remembering that forcefully carry unresolved pasts into the present.

In one of my conversations with the artist [REDACTED] on one of the many dusty balconies of Wust El-Balad, they suggested that the revolution had not entirely vanished, but rather was undergoing a process of translation as a means of surviving the violence of the regime:

“I think this has to do with the fact that at a certain point in time, we had public space, we had that freedom. But now it’s being translated, in this period where we no longer feel that we have it. It’s being translated into establishing small spaces and projects. Of course, you have the other people who are depressed, you know. And that’s normal. That’s their character. Others have left. And others are saying ‘I don’t want to have anything to do with this, I’m stopping everything.’ I don’t think that it’s right to say the conditions of the revolution no longer exist. I think it actually continues because of the presence of this repressive regime and I think it will continue. There are ways of doing more subtle works.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

In the desperation of post-coup Cairo, the process of the assemblies “being translated” into smaller spaces and projects has also emerged as a survival strategy. These subtle translations allow for the practices and relations of the assemblies to continue in obscurity and escape the policing practices of the regime. Translation, which implies both movement in space and between formal registers, is also a means of encryption and evasion. The transversal movements that have taken place between the Midan and the café, between the café and the home, between the home and the university, between one body and another, allows for the memory of possibility to adopt different forms as it moves, subversively populating the emptiness of the regime with its indeterminacy in the form of “more subtle works.”

One of the crucial ways that the revolution found continuity was by occupying zones of indeterminacy, the spaces of undecidability and indecision that preserve the

fragile conditions of survival for memories, relationships, and imaginations that can no longer survive as legible or out in the open and instead find refuge in obscurity. Techniques of translation, encryption, obfuscation, abstraction, evasion, and camouflage are used as means of sheltering pasts that haunt in the way that they are not yet entirely passed.<sup>56</sup> My life in Cairo was focused on tracing the haunting noise of these surviving possibilities that failed to conform to the militarized present through their preservation of the undecided. Preserving forms of indeterminacy is a survival strategy under the coup, a way of giving duration to memories in material, affective, and relational forms.

Because the regime is currently in the process of repressing these spaces of memory when they find them, I've chosen not to address them in their specificity in this project in order to not draw the security forces' attention to them. Nonetheless, I can still approach them in less descriptive and more general manner. Cafés, bars and restaurants, cultural spaces, apartments, and universities all provide fragile shelters for the memory of possibility. Circulating through these constellations of milieus, bodies are still able to assemble together and encounter one another in the shared practice of remembering. Partially encrypted away from the regime and from the emptiness that now fills Midan Tahrir, bodies assemble at intimate scales, carrying

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<sup>56</sup> For more on this haunting, look to Jacques Derrida's writing on hauntology in *Spectres of Marx*, where he elaborates on the relation between haunting and ontology as a form of con/disjunctive presence, a form of time that is out of joint and forces us to not just deal with historical time but also with its "virtualization" (117).

forward the relations of the revolution in translated forms. Continuing to assemble in this translated way is a practice of remembering, of refusing to let the past and the future be rendered absent and empty. These milieus are where practices of care, cultivation, and preservation give duration to the memory of possibility.

Another important obscure technique that has emerged as important is the production of various forms of noise within which memory can hide and survive. During one of my conversations with [REDACTED], who works with survivors of torture in Egypt, they mentioned that they don't make use of the literal testimony of survivors of torture because it could lead to further regime violence being directed at them:

“Almost all the testimonies are anonymous, but that's not enough. We also need to change the story and make sure that the survivor is removed from the context, and that their perpetrator cannot go back and seek revenge. A lot of the testimonies resulted in us being approached by the government. So we need to be very careful about this. And we need to consider that a story is not only about an incident, it's not flat. It takes time and is a process. It does not start at the time of the incident and it does not end there. So we try to take this into consideration when we write these stories. We know that having names linked to stories is much stronger, but we can't do this because it puts them in danger. So we need to accept the fact that we need to make stories that are anonymous and change a lot of details in the stories. We really want to ensure the safety of our clients. So we change a lot of details.” ([REDACTED], Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The tactic of changing details in testimonies as a means of anonymization has been one of the effective ways of preserving memory under Sisi's regime. Altering details in this way resembles introducing noise into a signal, making it harder to individualize or identify survivors while still allowing their memory to circulate and resonate. ██████████'s emphasis on these testimonies not being "flat" and instead being something that "takes time and is a process" suggests that memory itself is something that must be practiced over durations in order for it to be present.

Later on in an activist café along the Nile I was able to meet with ██████████, who has participated for years with ██████████, a group that collects personal stories of sexual harassment and violence in workshops and then later presents them to the public. In addition to changing details of the narratives, they also take an additional step and mix stories together into collective stories, making it impossible to separate out any individual contribution. In a sense, in order to protect the memory of sexual harassment and violence in Egypt, the testimonies and identities of survivors are obfuscated into collective abstractions, multitudinous voices that testify while refusing identification. This strategy obscures the temporal and spatial specificity of particular instances of sexual harassment and violence in order to both preserve and express the memory of sexual harassment and violence in collective fashions.

In a city where Sisi's regime desires for everything to be apprehendable and

surveyable, to be ready for inspection and subject to approval, finding ways for memory to be encrypted within forms of noise and abstraction has become an urgent task. The practice of producing noise and abstraction weaponizes memories by making them public while stripping them of their capacity to be used to justify future repression. Here it's important to again make clear that memories never exist on their own but rather are materially created, reproduced, supported, and at times extinguished. Memories can take on forms that allow them to be shared by some while remaining illegible or invisible to others. They can be transformed or reshaped, encoded or translated, hidden or revealed, magnified or diminished. Some memories have entire governments that support them, while others are kept alive by one person alone. This is what renders memory irrevocably political: their diverse formal possibility and radical historical contingency.

The emptiness of Sisi's regime and the obscure practices of resistant communities should not be mistakenly considered analogous, even if considered in only their formal terms. The regime's practice of emptying spaces of assembly or of possible assembly takes on the form of a spatial and temporal blockage and asphyxiation, a form of clearing and erasure of activity that means to not only eradicate assemblies but also the forms of memory that they carry along with them. As such, the regime's practices can perhaps be best described as being oriented towards negation.

Practices of obscurity, of tactical redaction, or of collective abstraction, on the hand, operate in a different fashion. Rather than simply emptying or overwriting memory as such, these resistant practices operate differentially in relation to the communities that they come into contact with. Obscurity, redaction, and abstraction all have a “to whom” that they operate in relation to, in the sense that they don't erase or eradicate absolutely but rather delimit the audience of different kinds of information. And so, rather than simply being present or absent, visible or erased, obscurity is precisely about managing and navigating the spectra in between those extremes, or carving out partial or differential forms of remembering that shift in terms of the degree of their legibility and visibility. In short, obscure practices of remembering are meant to preserve in the way they hide, while the regimes practices mean to eradicate memory as such.

It's perhaps worth noting that this opaque dynamic is generalizable to all practices. No body is ever entirely transparent or hidden, but rather always goes through processes of different aspects becoming-perceptible or becoming-imperceptible. Just as I walked around the city perceptible as a pedestrian and as a foreigner but imperceptible as a photographer, every other body that I encountered in the streets of Cairo also was somewhere between perceptibly and imperceptibility, showing and hiding various aspects of themselves in their movement through and lives within the city.

This project takes on a cryptodocumentary approach not in the way that it simply erases or hides, but rather in the way that it obscures in order to show. In the mixing of different testimonies, removal of information, and the addition and subtraction of various descriptive information, the project expresses in a form of opacity that counter-intuitively reveals more about the situation than it hides away. Etymologically, a “crypto” (hidden) “document” (lesson/evidence) is a form of hiding that instructs, or that is evidence that doesn't rely on being “unhidden” but rather emerges from techniques of hiding or obscuring themselves.

The cyptodocumentary approach that the project takes on is in a sense shared by the activist communities that it documents. Several people of that were interviewed for this project are now in Egyptian jails, and the others all remain at risk of being jailed. My own project mans to hide away the information formally and literally as a means to allowing their experience and insight to have expression without putting them at greater risk, just as revolutionary communities continue to find ways to endure together by obscuring their relations in various fashions in forms of cryptographic or obscure collectivities. These collectivities aren't what we could call “positive collectivities” in the sense of being built up around forms of positive identification, but also interestingly are a form of “negative collectivity” that are defined by forms of exclusion that do not rely on forms of identification but instead on affinity and intimacy. In this way, cryptographic an obscure documentary

approaches also walk a line between positive and negative forms of representation and documentation.

In many cultural and art spaces in Cairo, people continue to gather to reflect upon the events and experiences of these last years, drawing upon memories that have taken form as photographs, plays, sculptures, drawings, installations, and videos.<sup>57</sup> In these spaces, history and futurity are often difficult to distinguish because of the degree to which they're entangled with one another: past events have a tendency to stir up desires for new ones, just as new events transform our relation to what is past. During one of my conversations with [REDACTED], who has extensively worked in Cairo's cultural centers that have acted as spaces of memory following the coup, they reflected on how these spaces have helped to preserve the possibilities of the revolution:

“Of course spaces of memory are important because otherwise we don't have a way to capture what's happening. What's happening is going to be a second or a moment without any traces. Those traces are what we need in order to be able to reflect. If we don't have those traces we don't have anything to reflect upon. So the practices of those spaces are actually the translation of what's happening, a kind of production that can be criticized. And by criticized I don't mean evaluate, I mean to see what's beyond. To see how can we move

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<sup>57</sup> It's perhaps worth reiterating here that what I'm calling memory is formally heterogeneous and is not reserved just for the practice of human remembering. I want to be able to think about memory as manifesting across radically diverse spatial and temporal scales, both actually and virtually, and to be able to think about memory as being and as taking part in forms of assemblage that necessarily adopt different materialities.

from here: ‘What is here?’ Here for me is actually only read through this kind of production. Otherwise, it’s a moment that ends. Those traces are the only thing that keeps this historicity alive in a way and lets us get back to those moments and try to figure out what happened and why we are here. We need to know how we got here and see how we can move from here. We need to understand how we got here because obviously we’re not happy and obviously we want to get out of here. But, how we got here becomes a very important question.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

The forms of indeterminacy that emerged from the assemblies are preserved in this material memory of them, creating the possibility for them to take part in the future “translation of what’s happening.” What’s of significance here is that memory is a differential that lets us see the actuality of the present situation as well as “what’s beyond it” in the past and future in order to “see how we can move from here,” a mediated process of collective orientation. While Sisi’s coup has managed to impose security measures that disaggregated and dispersed the assemblies of the squares, the memories of those assemblies persist in forms that continue to preserve the conditions for the assemblies themselves.

Memories find life and duration through the embodied practices of individuals and communities, but also include materialities and milieus that are far more complex and queer than what we would simply call bodies. The monuments built of stone, the photographs, videos, sounds and texts circulated and distributed in pulses through networked fiber optic cables, the scars, the chants that cut through the air and echo off

of the sides of buildings, the still-wet spray paint dripping down the surface of a police barrier, the used tear gas canister laying in the gutter: all of these constitute forms of memory, ripples and wrinkles of what is past but not yet fully passed, forms of matter that may possibly still come to matter.

Some memories emerge very rapidly and vanish just as fast: when a gun is fired at a demonstration, the initial sound causes everyone to rush and find cover while groups of dogs start barking without hesitation, echoing through their cries the sound of the initial gunshot and carrying it forward through time. Other memories have longer and less immediate durations: when walking through Cairo you inevitably meet people with missing or glass eyes, a memory literally carried in the bodies of many who took part in the street fights of the revolution when cannons mounted on trucks blasted high pressure water onto the faces of the crowds and police routinely targeted the faces of revolutionaries with their guns and clubs.<sup>58</sup> The present situation of Cairo and the people that live within it are conditioned by these memories that constitute the conditions of possibility for the city itself.

While above ground formal organizations and public figures have faced increasing forms of harassment, scrutiny and violence from the regime's security forces after the coup, including searches, raids, and closures, the informal networks

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<sup>58</sup> Many of Cairo's murals feature faces with eye patches as a way to memorialize this particular kind of wound that many experienced during the uprisings. For a longer description of Cairo's many murals, including those that feature eyepatches, read "Revolutionary Graffiti in Egypt" by James D. Hoff.

and groups that emerged following the revolution have managed to largely evade them. While talking with the lawyer ██████████ outside in a sun-filled courtyard, they reflected on the role that informal groups have played following the coup:

“But that's the interesting thing and that's the hard thing because these kind of groups that have been emerging in the past few years, I think part of why they're strong is because they're not a formal entity, they're not an organization, and they don't have to justify their kind of work that they're doing to the state, or be very careful with what they do and what they don't do, so this is why they're strong.” (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

This informality, the ability to assemble but not appear to the regime as an assembly, manifests as a form of obscure technique that helps groups to survive. Because they don't have to “justify the kind of work that they're doing” to the regime, they can engage in practices that would otherwise not be tolerated, and can even experiment in ways that would not be possible otherwise. The decision to become collectively opaque is predicated on the notion that the memory of the assemblies can be preserved in forms of social organization themselves.

It's worth making clear that despite the regime's repression, some people have chosen to perform their work visibly in the open in what are unquestionably performative acts of resistance. This includes people whose work requires them to be public in some way, such as lawyers who must interact with courts and bureaucracies,

reporters that feel they must be accountable to their readership, or non-governmental organization's staff that interact with international human rights groups. It also includes artists, filmmakers, actors, and writers that choose to make themselves and their work open to public. Their visibility puts them at risk and places them under the regime's scrutiny, but it also helps more obscure practices stay that way by drawing the attention of the regime away. Perhaps more importantly, it should be made clear that lives are never lived entirely invisibly or visibly, but rather only in varying degrees of opacity that spectrally shift across different spaces and times; whether something should be visible or invisible in a given context is less an ethical question than it is a tactical one.

There have also been forms of assembly that take shape in the seclusion of private spaces. Dance parties, dinner gatherings, afternoon teas, or even reading groups that are organized in people's flats across Cairo become spaces where the possibilities and memories of the assemblies continue to unfold. The activist and writer ██████████, who I first met at one of these parties in a mutual friend's backyard, thought that these intimate assemblies in private spaces could constitute a ground for the continuation of the revolution's processes:

“All of those micro areas of autonomy like the Borsa are disappearing, one by one. There is this loss of those spaces where people could meet, where different identities and kinds of action could meet, and people could talk to

one another or even just see each other. People turn back into their flats and apartments, relying more on intimate friendships and family and less on strangers. I don't think it's impossible for politics to emerge here. People feel the public sphere is comprehensively unsafe, so they turn towards other more private spaces to meet and have conversations and establish new kinds of spaces. Out of what is coded as private life, you can still have forms of political resistance building up. I think for it to happen again in the open, it will take some time." (██████████, Anonymized Conversation, Cairo, 2015)

In the dispersed yet interconnected constellation of milieus that have taken hold across Cairo, memories still find ways of being circulated and at times even celebrated.<sup>59</sup> These microassemblies, small gatherings that manage to elude notice, can be repositories where there can still be “forms of political resistance building up” even when political resistance in the streets feels impossible.

Lives are framed by the plural and ongoing histories that they arise from and have inherited in the form of memory, and are also framed by the futures that they help to call into being. Each act is figured by, as well as prefigurative of, complex differential relations all unfolding across the present of the coup, the past of the

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<sup>59</sup> My use of “constellation” throughout this project is meant to refer to Walter Benjamin's use of the same term in his unfinished *Arcades Project*. In one of the fragments, Benjamin writes that “It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill” (462). For Benjamin, constellations were a light of the past and present, a form of drawing together images and connections between what is past yet is arriving. This formulation suggests a view of history that is nonlinear and non-teleological, and instead is full of incongruencies and even creative dialectical openings.

revolution, and the future of Egypt. In the manifold practices that remember the assemblies, we can glimpse how heterogeneous and unresolved pasts are enmeshed with the plural futures of the city's diverse inhabitants, each vibrantly modulating the conditions of possibility for novel forms of life and practices of living to be fashioned within.

Memory is political not in the way it simply preserves the past but rather in how it comes to produce and transform the past, present and future in the act of remembering in repetition. Everything said again - repeated - is saying something anew. To repeat a demand, a question, a dream, a memory, is not to simply reproduce a past expression in the present, but rather to say it as if for the first time. The uniqueness and singularity of every passing moment ensures that any repetition of the past manifests as having a different presence in the present, and so repetition also ineradicably carries a radical difference along with it. To repeat is to again set into motion unfinished, undetermined and unresolved pasts into the present, the effects of which are often less of a reprisal and more of a surprise. The life of a memory repeated is a life of novelty, anomaly, and creativity.

Sisi's regime desires quiet, calm, stillness, security, a city that is entirely absent of life, history, and futurity. Yet the revolution persists in the lives of those who endure and carry the indeterminate memory of the revolution forward in fragile collective practices. The possibility of memory is intimately tied to the question of

survival itself, and only manages to persist through profound interdependence and struggle. The many lives that continue to be lost to the violence and destruction of Sisi's security forces live on in the practices that remember them and call those lives to matter. Memories are never merely present in this way, but are always situated in tides of reproduction, circulation, and exchange that make porous the boundaries that both separate and tie together in assemblies that remember.

In Sisi's Cairo, to survive the violence of the regime is itself an act of resistance. One of the most simple and important ways that the memory of the assemblies persists is in the endurance and survival of those that took part in them, allowing for their relations and memories to continue to circulate across and through the milieus of the city. When bodies have organized spaces that exist as forms of exception to the emptiness of the regime, spaces where bodies can assemble together, care for one another, and remember together, they add to constellations of subtle acts in fogs of obscurity that are part of much more prolonged and distributed forms of solidarity and care that people lend each other over spans of years or even entire lives, an aggregate that not only preserves the manifold possibilities of life but also preserves the memory of possibility itself.

The regime's violence means to make it impossible to remember the assemblies, or the wild possibilities and indeterminacies that were manifest within them. Ultimately, the regime desires to eradicate the memory of assemblies entirely

by annihilating the lives of those who insist on remembering, as well as emptying spaces where memories are reproduced and defended. Situating memory as the grounds of revolutionary resistance means remaining open to the ways in which memory comes to affect the world in ways that we cannot anticipate. It means helping to create the conditions for the preservation, cultivation, translation, obfuscation, encryption, and proliferation of memory itself. The memory of possibility endures in the lives of those who remember, together.

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