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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

# **Makings of Imagination in Alternative Cultural Spaces in Cairo**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Psychology, and Egyptology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

In Sociology - Anthropology

By **Mariz Kelada**

Under the supervision of **Dr. Hanan Sabea**

**May/ 2014**

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*For the thoughts yet to come...*

*I've been with the impossible possessed  
Upon the sight of the moon, so high I jumped  
And whether I reach it or not, why should I ever care  
My heart is already with ecstasy drunk ...  
How strange!!  
Salah Jahine*

*For the cigarette-break that made me meet the most inspiring strangers...*

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## Chapter One

### Exploratory Introduction

This thesis is an ethnographic study of two of Cairo's alternative cultural spaces. It explores the dynamic relationships that take place between cultural spaces in Cairo, the subjectivities of their participants, and of the possibilities that might be offered through these relations for a different social imagination that could be manifested in the details of their everydayness. I ask: in which ways and under what conditions can some of the contemporary alternative cultural spaces in Cairo situate their presence and serve as liberating spaces that nurture imaginations capable of reconfiguring the status quo whether intellectual, social or political. To attend to this question I use the lens of everydayness to trace the subtle ways and conditions of these possibilities. This thesis is a contribution to add another dimension to the broader body of anthropological literature on contemporary cultural scene in Egypt. Most of the major literature is mainly premised on a nationalist and postcolonial framework like Winegar 2006 and Karnouk 2005. More recent scholarly work such as Schindler 2012 is focused on visual arts in Cairo's contemporary art scene and attempts to break through the dominant narratives about Egypt's cultural scene by using the lens of everydayness to analyze the experiences of the visual artists in relation to the contingency of the revolution of the 25<sup>th</sup> of Jan, 2011 as well as depicting possibilities of ruptures through the emerging moments. As she inspiringly puts it: "not to map any possible futures, but instead, to recognize the experimental processes and practices through which the interlocutors try to imagine an alternative future."(2012,p.iv).

However, currently the main academic focus is directed at the major events of revolutions in the Arab world since 2011. The dominant narrative reduces cultural activities into arts and shrinks resistance into only political activism. In my opinion, this discourse is a contribution to the fashioning and commodification of a fixed category 'art as resistance' that entraps the much deeper and more implicit happenings in the cultural scene in Cairo in relation to the socio-political events. I will attempt to add a different understanding of the dynamic relations between spaces, subjectivity and imagination, and how they could possibly manifest

into different forms of social, political and intellectual change and transformation. To elaborate on what I mean by social change and transformation in this paper I do not mean the ground breaking victory over a political regime for example, but it the everyday momentary victories that are performed and their performativity is the only grantor for things to continue to be different at least on a personal level. My focus thus is on the incoherent and mundane of everydayness not the grand victories of the dominant narratives. In other sense, in my thesis I do not focus on artists and the artistic and cultural scene. It is about the ordinary people who come to do 'art', it is about a certain moment when art became a possibility to do something different without being an artist. There is something about the moment when people do exceptionally different things and dare to imagine their lives differently; those are the moments of significance in this research.

### **Alternative, Why and How?!**

This thesis focuses on making of imaginations of individuals constituting alternative cultural spaces. Why and how I find the cultural spaces I selected to be alternative has to do mainly with how differently are they constituted compared to the limited spaces that an ordinary person would most likely encounter in Cairo. Essentially they form an alternative to hierarchical disciplining schooling system, nationalist and patriotic political activism, regulatory and moralistic religious discourses or modernist developmentalist civil society. The two spaces I selected are in many ways significant, both constitute very different stances, structures and affiliations which made them available and accessible to ordinary people, opening through that multiple possibilities for art to be beyond artists, for development to be understood differently and for resistance to reach beyond formal politics.

There are numerous collectives that take on culture and art in different forms. Through their configurations and activities they maintain a spirit of creativity and different imagination that provides a strong hope and vision of transformation and change. By transformation and change here I mean essentially how is imagination deployed in these cultural spaces effecting new possibilities for thinking the present and challenging what is accepted by the dominant sectors of society as normal and natural order of the social, the political and certainly the



intellectual. The two spaces I selected, Nahda Association and the Choir Project, are cultural because by definition they produce various forms of arts. However, they are also cultural in how they choose to function and are configured in ways that produce different sociality among the individuals who constitute them, these configurations and relations are in and of themselves also a culture. Art and culture then become ways of looking at daily struggles and resistances which the individuals choose to express and practice though being in these two spaces.

The first space is Nahda Association – Jesuits’ Cultural Center. The Jesuits is a well know Catholic congregation founded in 1540 and is active in 112 countries. In their official website they identify the cogeneration’s activities to be concerned with education, culture, intellectual work, spiritual activities and most importantly enhancing social justice. Perhaps the last component is most evident in the Latin American Jesuits who founded the Liberation Theology and took a huge part in the militant struggle against military rule in the late 80’s. The cogeneration in Egypt started through schools in various cities and neighborhoods one of which is Faggala<sup>1</sup> district which is where the association is located currently. With this background in mind the parallels are evident in how the founder of Nahda who is also a Jesuit priest is influential in how Nahda is constructed and driven. According to the association official vision and mission: “the association focuses on the role of culture in human development, therefore promote the discovery and exploration of energies in each person. The Association works with the marginalized children, local residents and young artists, to develop a thinking critical mind and a compassionate being”. Activities are designed to push individuals to be creative, original and to imagine different realities for their future. The activities and programs help them develop tools and create opportunities that enable them to express themselves freely, and to creatively reach their full potentials. The association provides a space for integration between different forms of art in a way that contributes to the cultural growth of the local community in El Faggala district in Cairo. While working in Nahda for the past three years, I became strongly acquainted with their attempt to implement a non-hierarchical system established mainly by leftist founders who were in constant opposition to the dominant hegemonic system. However, I take a particular interest with the organization as an entity in a larger context, which is the old Faggala district of Cairo, one of the most dynamically transformed neighborhoods of the city. I will particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Faggala is located in central Cairo near by the first train station in Ramsis Square. Faggala is a name associated with *Fegl* which is the Arabic name of radish, and the area got its name because it used to be an area of radish fields.

explore the organization's double positioning as an independent NGO and as Jesuit's cultural center and the complexity this double positionality entails.

The second space is the Choir Project- *Mashrou'a Koral*, which was first held in Egypt under the name of "The Complaints Choir" as the opening night act for 'Invisible Publics', an exhibit curated by the Townhouse Gallery<sup>2</sup> in May 2010. "The complaints Choir", which is a project that two Finnish artists launched in 2005 and spread widely in different cities around the world. The main concept behind this choir is to turn complaints to songs reflecting of their everyday concerns through a creative assemblage of songs. The choir of Cairo decided to go beyond complaining to expand to other issue so the next choir workshops had commercials and proverbs as themes. What the choir does is a collective workshop geared through many exercises to write and compose songs that are performed along previous production of the choir in a public, and usually free performance. Today the Choir Project is a bigger collective with over 200 participants mainly from Cairo and Alexandria, in addition to hundreds more from around the world. The choir has two dimensions in terms of spaces. It has a virtual space, a group for members on Facebook to connect, talk and share thoughts and events or just to socialize. And the second space is a none-place as the choir does not have any stable place to meet, rehearse or perform. The choir as a space is the one that is temporarily created when the group meets for a new workshop, rehearsal or performance. This "placeless-ness" is why I find the choir a unique experimental site for research and for multiple possibilities for an emergent cultural production. Salam Youssry the artistic director of the choir best describes the experience: "suddenly there is a clear and living example that asserts the possibility to organize and be creative without being institutionalized without waiting for funds, permanent place, marketing strategy or advertisement."<sup>3</sup> The choir continued to have open workshops for whoever is interested in joining and it is completely volunteer-based meaning that the founders, musicians nor members are paid. And the humorous significance of attaching the word 'project' to the name is specifically because it is a continuous and always unfinished process of formation and reformation through its members and members to be. The choir's song about the choir that we always sing in the beginning of each performance says it best:

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<sup>2</sup> Townhouse was established in downtown Cairo in 1998 as an independent, non-profit art space with a goal of making contemporary art and culture accessible to all without compromising creative practice.

<sup>3</sup> This description was in an interview I conducted with Youssry in December 2012- Downtown Cairo

“A choir’s project, a choir legitimate... a choir working and isn’t forbidden ... no beautiful voices but heard voices ... you’re not required to pay anything ... because the moment needs your voice and our voices in the matter ”

Nahda and the Choir Project are in my analysis alternative in the way they are openly inventive of how they choose to function and position their potential collectives. The main question remains about the makings of imagination in such spaces? Well, imagination is not made and is certainly not a measured product or a fixed category of analysis. To elaborate, imagination is a continuous process of formations and alterations in subjectivities that are entangled in configurations of space, time, and power relationships and networks. I chose to look at these processes through what manifests in daily struggles and happenings, because it is in the subtle daily and repetitive things that I find a plausible possibility for maintaining change and transformation. To trace such subtleties I use the following methods.

### **Methods, Choices and Maneuvering Techniques**

The main method I use is participant observation, as I wanted to be immersed in the process that constitutes these spaces, experiencing the spaces, their structures and intricate details to be able to reflect on and analyze them through my conceptual framework. Although I was already part of Nahda since September 2010 and The Choir Project since May 2011 before starting my research, this made my presence easier and more familiar during the research but it was however an additional challenge for me to step beyond the familiarity I feel towards the two spaces to be able to make visible what I am already used to seeing and has become completely normal to me and my perspective. I focus on younger in age members because they are in a way ‘less structured’ in how they deal with each other and the organization and with them there is more possibility for reflexive analysis of our common experiences. Areas of inquiry here include: what motivates them to keep working in Nahda, how do they perceive the administration, do they identify with the association’s vision and mission, do they feel they can change anything about the association if they wanted? I will also discuss with them the other larger questions of the research regarding art, what is alternative, creativity, imagination, change etc. For the Choir Project I kept track and spent time with as much participants as I can. I also

followed interactions on the Facebook group as it serves as a virtual space that houses and imposes different group dynamics. I also make a distinction between new participants and the founding group, because I explore the difference of their perception and attitude towards the choir dynamics and how it functions. I also focus on the different age groups and see if their perceptions and thoughts on the choir differ. I include interpretations of the discourse that the songs constitute and how they differ with different temporality and spatiality and the group dynamics involved. In addition to following the sessions where new songs are produced and how the process unfolds.

I conducted interviews after establishing a different presence within the spaces that are used to my position of being there. This was a continuous process of telling different groups about the research and what I was thinking about both spaces and engaging them in thinking with me of possibilities about what the research process could be like. After this phase, I selected key informants to casually spend more time for in-depth interviews. This goes for all two spaces but depending on my interlocutors' position, whether I have known them for long or recently, that determined the depth and the orientation of my interview. The interviews are not limited to participants only but also included the administration or the directors of the spaces.

My research is not necessarily suggesting the idealization of these two spaces as the supposed 'blue-print' for a different imagination. It is mainly exploring possibilities of change in life that may be overlooked by our much trained eyes that see only what is coherently manifested. I am attempting to trace the incoherent, insignificant, everyday details that are missed because we are so used to seeing them. This concept of everyday opens up multiple possibilities of that Lefebvre defines as "a set of functions which connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct" (1987,p.9). Other theorists inspired the importance of using the concept of everydayness for example: Nail's argument on non-representational politics and Zibechi's description of social change as a repetitive movement of the 'spinning top'. These concepts I will explore thoroughly in the next section. Moreover, the key idea that I was keen to maintain in this research is to familiarize my thinking with the uncertainty of knowing what it is that I observe and to see in the incoherence of the discourses of these spaces as a fertile ground of endless possibilities of imagining their worlds otherwise. Theories in this research were adding to my curiosity during field work and were constantly in conversation with each other.

The dynamic layers and dimensions of configuration between the theoretical and the empirical enabled me through this research to say and see something different about a (not the) world.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The four main concepts that form the basis of my analytical reading of this research are: space, subjectivity, imagination and everydayness. The way I could assemble all concepts together to make my topic researchable is sort of a rhizome-like constellation, the milieu where no concept leads necessarily to another whether chronologically or as in a cause/effect relationship. Any attempt to understand relation between space, subjectivity, imagination and everydayness will require “proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing” ( Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 ,P.25). This configuration or state is “composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always middle” (ibid). I will attempt to map how imagination, subjectivity and cultural spaces have a dynamic relation that might, or might not, create or initiate social change and transformation. This allows my question great flexibility and an unrestrained horizon of possibilities to explore. This state is useful because my research is not intended to add to the grand narrative of “arts as resistance” but it is an exploration of the everydayness and the dynamics of space, subjectivities and imagination that might be manifested through them yet are overlooked or go unnoticed. I use several adjectives interchangeably with imagination: creative, capable, liberated, alternative; this entails the multiple possibilities through which imagination can be manifested. That is basically to deconstruct the assumptions about what ‘imagination’ can be, to not deal with it as a separate or independent category of analysis. Rather I attach these several adjectives to imagination to stress that imagination unfolds or manifests differently, to destabilize the rigidity of dealing with imagination as a static or measurable category, I intend to use these different adjectives also to reflect on how imagination is perceived differently by my interlocutors and how it manifests through their daily lives.

## **Space**

For me space took on different understanding as I was introduced to several theories on space. Gupta and Ferguson speak of how space is treated as this neutral grid where ‘cultural

differences, historical memory and societal organization are inscribed' (1992,p.11). They extend the argument to speak of how spaces are imagined and the conceptual process of turning spaces into places which “are always imagined in the context of political-economic determinations that have a logic of their own”(ibid). Although their main argument was about the de/re-territorialisation and the destabilization of the fixity of borders and the “here” and “there,” in a broader sense they offer a new way of thinking about space through connections, and not individuated articulations of space. Massey identifies space as “social relations stretched out” (1999, p.2) She directly relates spatiality to the social and to power. Meaning making around space is deployed in intertwined networks of relations. These relations are not just spatial, but also temporal and they are expressions of political and power relations. Hence space in and of itself is not a mere inconsequential surrounding or container of events and relations. Lefebvre adds another dimension to space and time: “To study everyday life is to examine how and why social time is itself a social product. Like any other product (like space, for instance)” (1999,p.6). Space then is a social product that is both lived and exchanged, meaning everyday intersection with space

## **Subjectivity**

Given this analysis of space, cultural spaces in and of themselves can be a product and a producer of the subjectivity and the subjectivity is a producer and a product of imagination and the spaces themselves. There is no definite sequence in all this, but I am relying here on Althusser's notion of simultaneity being a producer and a product at the same time. In mapping the concept of subjectivity in relation to space, we will have to think of power relations. Cultural spaces, in that sense, are structured. Whether organizational, symbolic or ideological structures, the subjectivities that are formed in this range of options and limits are shaped by them. For example, Nahda Association – Jesuit Cairo as a space is produced by the presence of individuals with their networks, relations, subjectivities and how they imagine Nahda. Then the individuals who come to this space and interact with it are affected and their networks expand and their relations are remade with each other and with the cultural scene, and eventually they may imagine differently how things can be. These individuals live their daily life with a different perception and they act on it so they remake their life and how they remake the space of Nahda

as well. Subjectivities are produced and are producers of their structure. Moreover, Ortner identifies subjectivity as “the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects. But it means as well the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, and thought” (2005,p.31). Ortner does not stop at what constitutes subjectivity, but she is trying to destabilize the concept of subjectivity to make it more dynamic. She does not reject the Freudian and the Bourdieuan insistence on the unconsciousness of the subjects in enacting their desires and fears or their habitus and their inability to fully understand soberly the logic they act upon. However, she asserts that subjectivity is the foundation of ‘agency’, it is an essential part for understanding in what ways people “try to act on the world even as they are acted upon”(2005,p.34). In this sense, I am keen on understanding the makings of subjectivity of the participants in these cultural spaces, but also how their agency is actively capable of changing the space/habitus/desires that they acted upon previously

## **Imagination**

I find a conceptual parallel between this last point and Taylor’s definition of social imagination: “a set of expectations and codes that dictate how individuals live and act and how others should live and act.”(2002, p.98) We can thus conclude that subjectivity is essentially related to, but not a result of, imagination. Both could even be directly proportional if we can think of this relation as the simultaneity of producer/produced. Geertz quotes William James as he debates that “[Man] can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe.” (1973,p.99).The question here becomes what/who/how says or constitutes that chaos is chaos in humans’ conceptions? Is there just one form of chaos? Are all humans with their different subjectivities opposed to the one and same chaos, if there is ever a singular or monolithic chaos? How do we really know what we know? Here John law’s supposition in *After Method* becomes of great use. He explains knowledge production rigidity and constant hunt for certain ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ about what things are. How this leaves out the mess/ chaos that is just as essential to a whole range of possibilities of new knowledge. He asserts that maybe the right metaphor for social sciences is

not “knowing” but “imagining” as key in finding new ways of knowing, to give up “desires for certainty, and for stable conclusions”(2004,p.9) and to reinvent an understanding that takes on the world “in tide, flux and general unpredictability.”(2004,p.7) What I mean here is the similarity between academic knowledge production and how individuals are a product of similar structures that trap them in avoiding ‘chaos’ and ‘unpredictability’. This make individuals think that they know, however they are missing out on what is to be imagined not known for certain. ‘Chaos’ in that sense is not be understood as the normative lack of order or complete destructive randomness, but it is what exceeds pre-constructed perceptions of what and how things are and should be. Instead ‘chaos’, ‘flux’ and ‘messy unpredictability’ become possibilities of potential new knowledge. For example, Rebick describes a liberated imagination in Bolivia with great simplicity; “The Bolivians are making the road while walking”. (2010,p.64)She talks of radical imagination and quotes Paulo Freire: “The radical, committed to human liberation does not become the prisoner of a circle of certainty within which reality is also imprisoned.” (2010,p.63). In that sense what individuals regard as ‘the reality’ is limited and dominated by the structures that construct this assumption. My supposition here is in regards of the cultural spaces as a creator of an alternative set of circumstances and structures that possibly take the individuals’ subjectivities beyond the pre-set assumptions about how and what things are. And perhaps this new kind of knowledge and imagination will enable a different understanding and way of being that people were incapable of imagining before.

## **Everydayness**

I use the concept of everydayness as a lens through which I explore and explain the manifestation of the previous concepts in the lives of my interlocutors. Shukaiitis elaborates the most basic sense the necessity for my use of this concept because: “one curiously encounters a revolution of everyday life. Why revolution, and why everyday life?”(2009,p.15) he follows the philosophies of the Situationists, which are basically a refusal of fetishizing a particular “dramatic, visible moments of transformation.”(ibid) he reassures, and so do I in this research, that this not to consider these ‘visible’ moments or the ‘event of the revolution’ to be insignificant but “rather to avoid the tendency to reduce the entire and much larger process of social transformation to these particular moments.” (2009,p.16) Lefebvre adds another



dimension in grounding the understanding of everydayness that is quintessential in deploying my analysis. He argues that “the concept of everydayness does not designate a system, but rather a denominator common to existing systems including judicial, contractual, pedagogical, fiscal, and police systems.”(1987,p.9) to elaborate using the mathematical meaning of the ‘denominator’, it is used to make sense of the whole that the fraction is part of. For example  $\frac{3}{4}$  in that case the 4 is the sum of all parts which houses what this fraction occupies: only three parts of the sum of four. What this has to do with everydayness makes absolute sense, because if we apply this logic to Lefebvre’s argument the existing systems will be understood as fraction of the whole which is everydayness. This means that the everyday will always exceed and have excess that cannot be part of these systems, it is in that excess of the banal of everyday where the possibilities of ruptures remain conceivable. This excess is the messiness and chaos of the unpredictable, that which fleet the surveillance of hegemonic orders, and to understand everydayness as excess one has to give up “desires for certainty, and for stable conclusions.”(Law,2004,p.9) Lefebvre adds insightfully “Why should the study of the banal itself be banal? Are not the surreal, the extraordinary, the surprising, even the magical, also part of the real? Why wouldn't the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary?” (ibid) Moreover, Stephenson and Papadopoulos pick that idea up and intrigue more curiosity about everydayness, which utterly draws me into taking this research to that realm where everydayness is “the medium through which experience gets under the skin and materializes, affecting selves, others and situations.” (2006,p.xii) These experiences are not just medium of understanding but are in themselves full of potentialities as they are “incommensurable and cannot be assimilated [they] are still integrally involved in altering the social conditions of our everyday existence.”(2006,p.xxi). In later work Papadopoulos et al in revisit and invoke further thinking of everyday experiences though the notion of “escape” they explain how these experiences are ignored in interpretations of social and political transformation and that is perhaps mostly because these experiences do not form a grand narrative or a coherent social movement. However they argue that everyday experiences are “imperceptible moments of social life [that] are the starting point of contemporary forces of change.” (2008,p.xiii) and they invite a new way of tracing social change “in experiences that point towards an exit from a given organization of social life without ever intending to create an event.” (ibid)

## Chapters

In an attempt to avoid making this a comparative study or a claim of idealism to the two cultural spaces I selected, the chapters are based on an intersection of the three main concepts; space, subjectivity, and imagination. Ultimately, concluding with extending conceptual threads to the fourth concept of everydayness and the emergence of the happening.

The following chapter “Makings of Space and Subjectivity” draws ethnographically the actual physical space that the two alternative cultural spaces constitute. I then link their spatial configuration to the subjectivities, which are simultaneously products and producers of the spatiality of these cultural spaces. It highlights a different reading of why and how these cultural spaces are alternative and how they house a possibility for a different social imagination. Further, the chapter discusses the structural configuration of each of the spaces extending the concept of structure beyond administration to include ideology and symbolic capital. In doing so the argument will extend to involve subjectivity in a different dimension which in relation to affect and desire.

In chapter three “The Subjective and The Imaginative”, I explore further the implications of subjectivity in relation to imagination. It provides a scanning of my informants’ perception and views on the current events politically, economically, socially and culturally situating the extent of how they accept or deconstruct the status quo. In addition to how they come to think and imagine different realities either for themselves or in general. I also attempt to make visible the simultaneity of subjectivity formation and altering of social imagination.

Chapter four: “Escapes of Everydayness”, extends the concepts and intertwine them with field observation to emphasize the incoherent every day details that houses and enriches possibility of rupturing the hegemonic order of things either socially, politically, and intellectually. I conclude with an invitation to look for the subtle escapes that potentially might transform multiplicities of rigid stifling realities.

## Chapter Two

### Makings of Space and Subjectivity

#### Configurations of Alternative Cultural Spaces

Through ethnographically drawing the actual physical space that the two alternative cultural spaces constitute and through participant observation, I link their spatial configuration to the subjectivities that are simultaneously products and producers of the spatiality of these cultural spaces. I start with putting the main theoretical framework of space and subjectivity that I previously discussed in conversation with the ethnographic observations further, highlighting through theory a different reading of why and how these cultural spaces are alternative and how they house a possibility for a different social imagination. Next, I discuss further the structural configuration of each of the spaces extending the concept of structure beyond administration to include structures of meaning and desire. Since both of the cultural spaces house creative processes and potentials, they are certainly in a constant negotiation with the mainstream whether that is dominant bureaucratic NGO management structure or be it the ‘capitalist accumulation of creativity’. Locke converses in his “Capital’s Creativity” with Deleuze and Guattari’s explanation of how desire that provokes movements is where subjectivity is connected to the endless possibilities that might not ever be realized. And this desire is also connected to the preconditions and structures where it emerged (2013,p.5) . On the other hand, Papadoulous et al’s notion of ‘escape’, that they mainly identify as moments “where people subvert their existing situations without naming their practice (or having it named) as subversion” (2008,p.xiii) and how these escapes are embedded in the banal and mundane of everyday practices and possibilities as well. Such practices brought about refusal to work in Italy and other northern countries during the late 1960 and 1970’s and how their opting to more fixable or part-time jobs constituted these escapes, which infused a social movement. This social movement as they put it is a trial to “transform everyday life... and to cultivate ways of living in precarious conditions” (2008,p.60). These examples and how they can be read against my analysis of the two cultural spaces illustrate the things that go unnoticed, and where whole other possibilities of change emerge. This rationale is drawn from their argument that states; “The art of escape

appears magical, but it is the mundane, hard and sometimes painful everyday practices that enable people to craft situations that seem unimaginable when viewed through the lens of the constraints of the present.” (ibid). In this chapter I problematize two main aspects of the two cultural spaces, both of these aspects take space and practice as the core concepts. First, how Nahda as an NGO attempts to subvert in their practices the bureaucratic model of management inherited from international developmentalist discourses and state discourses that are perceived as the only valid management to get any project to work properly. That perception is precisely the ones incapable of imagining much beyond the “constraints of the present” (ibid). Second, the Choir Project’s lack of fixed spatiality and how this continuous and almost accidental collective is always formed and reformed and how does this placelessness with its intricate internal dynamics provide an escape from the stagnated imagination of professionalism and the exclusivity of art to artists. Both spaces in their practices are entangled in relations and struggles with capital, dominant social and political discourses, and most importantly constant makings and un-makings of social imaginations through their spaces, practices and subjectivities.

### **Nahda’s Attempt Towards Horizontal Management**

Stepping out of the subway station the busy streets and alleys of *Faggala* swirl with stacks of notebooks, books and stationary going and coming from storehouses to shops. There are huge and fancy stationary shops and humble ones that only have a small wooden rack standing on two old kegs. Further towards Nahda the old architecture with its careful details on buildings or churches reveals always a new detail that I have not seen; it only takes a different turn or angle of vision to make me see totally different details than the ones I thought I already memorized. This is a trip that I have been making for almost the past four years with the same excitement and content of not having a boss in the hierarchical authoritative sense, one of the few jobs I have ever had that is not measured by working hours, and for being part of that constant passion for the artistic and cultural work we do. But this time, it was slightly different. The spirit was fading out for the past few months. Tensions and sudden disappearances of some of the younger staff members because as they put it “we do not know what to do with ourselves here, nobody gives us a job to do” were compounded by a confrontation between the executive committee members that revealed a bureaucratic hierarchy in the administration that I once

described as “organizing without hierarchy” in the earlier stages of my research. This time the excitement is for a meeting to reevaluate our current administrative structures and practices, a sober decision and a brave realization that something is certainly wrong and we need to collectively deal with it. It seemed like those long described ‘moments of realization’ that were poetically framed by James Joyce in my literature studies. Getting closer to Nahda there are colors and paintings in Arabic calligraphy peaking from the walls everywhere, the earlier ones that are now semi covered with dust; they read “my life is Faggala- *Hayati Faggala*”, These fading and new vivid paintings are evidence of certain temporal moments that coincided with different political situations. The dominant logic in Nahda before the 2011 revolution was to focus on activities that consolidate the residents’ relation with their neighborhood, Faggala. In order to create an open, intellectual and cultural sociality that makes a difference on the local level. In my opinion, Nahda’s play on the “neighborhood-ism” is like the worn out use of nationalism; it is basically the creation of a fetish that promotes selflessness in the interest and the name of the abstract greater good. Although there is so much to be proud of if you are from Faggala; the rich history instantly available and recalled vividly if you talk to any one above fifty years old, the endless stories of how Faggala was a tolerant cosmopolitan area housing all sorts of nationalities and religions who lived in utter harmony, in addition to this collective pride in having had the black and white cinema starts in the neighborhood and sometimes in their own houses and coffee shops during “ the good old days of Studio Nassibian”. *Faggala Stories* 2013 is a project carried out by Nahda, a book that captures the oral history of how the residents imagined Faggala, the romantic and the political connotations revealed through memory is as described in the introduction of the book: “Even though most of the stories in the book are inaccurate and possibly completely fictitious, however we (Nahda) preferred to leave the stories as they were told, as an honest expression of what the people of Faggala wanted their presence to be and what they wanted to see as their history” (2013,p.11) . Later on immediately after the revolution in 2011, the dominant themes and ideologies translated also in the direction of Nahda’s activities and certainly on the walls of Faggala. These revolutionary vibes “Dignity and Freedom,” are also fading with the overly complicated, contingent and continuously frustrating political situation. A while after, Nahda resorted back to what it knows best and profoundly believes in; i.e the ultimate essentiality of art, creativity and imagination. This echoed on the recent walls , still vivid in color and spirit “Do not stop your imagination” and “Laugh !”.

The walls of Nahda merge with the very old dented walls of Studio Nasibian, which is one of the very first cinema studios in Egypt. In front of Nahda there is an old building beautiful in detailed ornamentation and standing tall and serene like it has blocked time and trouble out. But a slight look to the left you will see time and trouble's manifestation of victory in the ruins of a similarly magnificent building, where now the mechanic next to it, A'm Shabban, is keeping goats in the remains of the building. . . Walking into Nahda , one comes across a humbly furnished place with some art work on the walls. To the right a door leads to the garage theater, which is a lot owned by the Jesuit's school and most of the area is used as a garage for school buses. Nahda built its theater on a part of it. Stepping from the theater to the garage is like crossing country borders where you need an official agreement (visa) or good friendship with the doorman (smuggler). The offices of staff and coordinators (the directors) are similarly furnished with metal chairs and wooden desks. So in the executive coordinator's office, which is shared by the executive deputy and myself as executive assistant, we intentionally placed an oval shaped table with chairs around it to mitigate the positioning of the coordinator behind the desk and subject others sitting in front of him. Accordingly the office is an instant place for meetings and discussion all the time, humble, welcoming and foremost unintimidating.

Previously I established theoretically that space in and of itself is not a mere inconsequential surrounding or container of events and relations. Meaning making around space is deployed in intertwined networks of relations. In this sense, it is essential to think of the surrounding space that Nahda occupies, as it brings about a complicated power structure and dynamics. Only two hundred meters away is one of the Jesuits' main communities in Cairo, and their private prestigious French speaking high school. Nahda's affiliation is stated clearly as "The Jesuits' Cultural Center in Cairo", the building is owned by the Jesuits, and Nahda as an NGO is just using the space. This affiliation is because of two reasons. First, The Jesuits' donations were the main stable fund that the association relies on. Second, the general director and founder of Nahda, Father William Sidhom, is himself a Jesuit priest with a strong leftist background as he was in his youth part of a communist party. He is also the first Egyptian priest to translate and write intensely about Latin America's theology of liberation in Arabic. He believes that Nahda is more of a movement than a conventional NGO, meaning that all along with the founding group they have always attempted to create collective management practices

and to keep the place as non- hierarchical as possible, in order to reserve the spirit of initiation, creativity, criticism and freedom.

The story of the founding group is known and told by members of Nahda who have been either there or have had the story passed to them through older members, just like a family history is passed to younger generations. Ramez the current executive coordinator of Nahda told me the story, in a meeting which was a sort of an informal orientation for me and Chamaa about the history of Nahda. He elaborates the different managerial strategies that were formulated for Nahda over the years: The first stage was in 1991 when Nahda was not yet officially formed, but it carried out two of its main activities through William Sidhom and a number of the earliest independent cinematic artists; Hanaa Arnest and Ahmed Abdallah. Together, without any official assigned rules or roles, they made independent films and carried on a cinema club and a mobile cinema that toured marginal communities. By the year 2000 Bassem Gerges joined the founding group when he started a library and the Jesuits donated some books. Since then Nahda has been known for a long time locally as “the Library”. In 2003 Sidhom met Mohamed Talaat who organized and built a temporary tent that housed many performances during the festive month of Ramadan. After its huge success in connecting with the neighborhood, an agreement was issued with the Jesuits’ school to build the Nassibian theater in the busses’ garage area under two conditions: Nahda will not own the land and that the theater would be removable. Until this point Nahda was an unstructured space that housed and nurtured independent initiatives. It is evident that whoever joined Nahda was not selected based on their resumes or past professional experience. Rather they were mostly acquaintances who shared the passion for the Nahda experiment and were welcome to initiate and grow while working.

The second stage came with the rise of the developmentalist discourse by NGOs and their practitioners. In 2002 three “developmentalist” individuals joined Nahda through personal connections with Sidhom, who brought to Nahda a huge fund to work on improving education and art for children in schools. The fund was originally a World Bank fund that is distributed to smaller projects of NGOs through a bigger institution. This immediately translated into a managerial system and more staff and for the first time the position of an executive director was articulated. Nahda activities increased and the networks with the other Jesuits’ NGOs in Alexandria and Menia grew and became more influential. By 2005 Nahda has copied Alexandria

attempt in making an independent cinema school which was led by Karim Hanafi and funded by the Ford foundation. In addition, the founding of “Popular Imagination- *Al Khayal al Sha’abi*”, one of the first street theater troupes in Egypt, as well as many other activities resulted in an urgent need for a new way of management. In 2006, Karim Gohar brought about an idea of “Democratizing Nahda’s Management” so for six to nine months all of Nahda’s activities were suspended except for meeting weekly every Wednesday to “build the managerial structure of Nahda”. This entailed intensive discussions that resulted into founding the “Planning and Follow-up Committee” to act as a collective decision making mechanism, besides having elections to choose an executive director and team, who were at this point redefined by the group into ‘executive coordinators or facilitators’ they were not supposed to ‘direct’ but facilitate the execution of what is agreed upon in the “Planning and Follow-up Committee”. The elected executive team could not however handle this experimental way of management and they eventually fell back into sitting behind one sided desks and trying to ‘direct’ the work in Nahda.

Given the characters working at Nahda then, there were immense struggles with that hierarchy, because each one was personally summed into the founding group and their activity was mostly a personal project that is fostered by Nahda. In 2009 the executive team resigned and Youssef Ramez was appointed executive coordinator. He was then in his late twenties which signified a potential for more flexibility and imaginative possibilities of coordinating the activities and their initiators. With the constant growth of Nahda the relations between Nahda and the Jesuits took different turns with the rapidly changing neighborhood of *Faggala*. The neighborhood has turned over the years from a pubs’ and nightclubs’ area inhabited by multiple nationalities and religions into the main area of print and publishing houses in Cairo. Later in the late 1970’s the industry of stationary faded and bathroom equipment took over the majority of the neighborhood with many of the previous residential buildings turned into storage places. In the book *Faggala Stories* 2013 it elaborates how the social structure was fractured after the open-door economic policies that Sadaat implemented in the 1970’s. These industrial changes affected the sociality of the area; “*Faggala* lost once more its cultural weight as it housed the biggest print houses, with the devaluation of thoughts and culture in comparison with the rise of prices of commodities. Books then became an unnecessary production, and the trade took a dramatic shift from printing books to selling ceramic and bathroom utensils.”(*Hakawy El Faggala, 2013, p.6*) With the increase of shops and warehouses the owners, who were mostly not



residents of *Faggala*, imported workers some of whom not from the area. Residents started taking jobs outside the neighborhood, especially after the failure of most of the older trades and the crash of the hotel business in the area. Clusters of closed communities of Christians formed around the three churches in the area and certainly the prestigious school was no different. In my view the fragmentation and estrangement certainly led to tensions, and if not to the extent of contingent tensions, it would cause a cautious interaction that is kept to its absolute minimum. It is worthy of notice that during the three years that followed the revolution, with all the violence and the clashes happening in the area, even when the main orthodox cathedral in A'basya, not very far from Faggla, was violently attacked on April 2013, not once have the Jesuits building and school been attacked. This not because there was heavy police security; as Youssef puts it "not one stone was thrown because the neighbors were protecting them, not because of anything except that they know William who sits on the local coffee shop, and myself and Mostafa and the people they see every day and work with Nahda." Through Nahda's work in the past 16 years, since it was officially founded, the activities interacted with children, mothers and workers from Faggala and from poorer areas around like Sharabia, Bab El Bahr, and Bab el Sha'aria<sup>4</sup>. As evident here Nahda's work does not follow the neoliberal division and fixed marking of 'work/non-work' relation. The creation of new socialites that are not restricted by business or formal relations, made Nahda's presence indirectly and subtly integral and organic in the daily lives of the residents of *Faggala*. How I see this new sociality is for example: parents who bring their children to Nahda's activities where they meet other parents and socialize, or a craftsman who brings his neighbors to do musical workshop using their own work tool, or just an owner of a shop who would notice if I was absent for a while and asks me caringly how I have been. The effect of this sociality on Nahda as space is also of significance, when we meet to plan activities it is very usual to have a member of Nahda refereeing to a suggestion that a resident suggested or recommended we do again. For example; Rita, who was responsible for the periodical workshops, said in one of the organizational meetings that Samah, a resident from the area, is recommending that we do another "cooking day" like we did last year, and another mother suggested we hold "studying workshops" for children. In many ways for Nahda to be integrated in the neighborhood and its sociality, it to root its presence with the everyday life of the people

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<sup>4</sup> Neighborhoods near Faggala - Cairo

of Faggala, and in turn this relation helps Nahda to avoid drifting into being a commercial or elitist cultural center.

Back to the meeting at Nahda. There were most of the activities' coordinators (theater, visual arts, workshops, educational program, and performance arts), the young in age staff who are usually most likely to "feel lost" in the hierarchies of Nahda, and general coordinator of the association. We started conversing about why we were here and what we think is causing the discomfort and dissatisfaction. The most visible directions of identifying the issue came from the activities' coordinators who mostly rooted their issue to "the irrational and the unsystematic financial processes", as they articulated it, that delay and complicate their work. This reasoning is mainly because the financial director is an ex-military officer who is the Jesuit's school representative, and he is also the one who deals with the government's official papers and reports. He is supposedly responsible for finance; however for some authoritative tendencies he would ask for technical and administrative reports which if not presented he would withhold the employees' salary. For example when I was responsible for a project where our street theatrical trainers create street theater groups in small marginal communities in Cairo and Luxor, he used to satirically comment on how much they are paid for training theater and that is not real development and all this is a joke. In my analysis; his notions of what constitutes development and how to do it are part of the larger "norm" or power dynamic in which Nahda is situated and which people at Nahda have to deal with. Here I am keen on highlighting the different subjectivity that result into such attitude. Subjectivity here is not limited to him only, but as I mentioned above may be more widespread and that is part of structure of affect and meaning that has been engraved for years in the developmentalist and bureaucratic mentality and discourse. Thus, my concern here is how the configuration of the association and the Jesuits' institution in which he functions allows, if not contributes, to such attitude to thrive and be forcefully accepted while managing to disregard a collective resentment of all of the association's employees for over two years. Moreover, the young staff members echoed the same concern with the financial management. But they were more concerned that even the direct administration is not comprehensible to them, and how the lack of structure and clear job description and regularly assigned direct tasks, is affecting the spirit of work and frustrating them which eventually results into lack of motivation. Further thinking about how they identified their issue brings forth the particular assumption about 'work' and how it should look like according to their social

imaginary. This issue was certainly one of the reasons I wanted to quit my job in Nahda back in 2010 after only few months of joining, because this for me then was ‘unprofessional’ and is not ‘a proper career’. Later I realized it is only unconventional to not be told what to do. This brings a valid question: do people in Nahda think of themselves as employees? And does their engagement with Nahda define the creation of a system that is premised on fixed boundaries between work and non-work? In my experience and analysis this boundary is blurred, if not completely illuminated. The issue of productivity, rhythm of work and its routine are founded on very different motifs than those of capital or neoliberal developmentalist NGOs. I identify members of Nahda as ‘employees’ only for the sake of problematizing their relations and position with the bureaucratic side of the association. Along with this comes the question of estrangement and commodification of a relationship. This problematic I explore in the following part through two examples that expose diverse experiences of ‘employees’: Chamaa the deputy executive coordinator and Mariam the receptionist.

Weeks contends that “Work produces not just economic goods and services but also social and political subjects. In other words, the wage relation generates not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members.” (2011,p.8). Weeks speaks of the makings of a subject in a capitalist work environment. How does Nahda practice work is a question that I decided to pursue. In Nahda there is a different configuration of work. In an informal Interview with Chamaa over a cup of coffee, he started telling me about his morning in “On the Run” a coffee shop and mini market attached to big gas stations. He explained how he stood there for 30- 40 minutes drinking his coffee, watching people and feeling liberated in the early morning of that Sunday. “People seem to be driven by a cruel force to keep spinning in the machine, they are edgy, grumpy, and on the verge of competitiveness even for the line to the cashier... running and hurrying to work.” Given that “On the Run” is not the cheapest coffee place, these jobs are probably big corporate ones. He adds “they seemed like the walking dead... I knew how that feels exactly because I was like them few years ago”. Chamaa is a mechanical engineer and worked for five years after his graduation in multinational corporates, then he left and came to work in Nahda as deputy for the executive director, he played the guitar and during university was a trainee in the Modern Dance School. The years spent in companies have left their toll on him, from forgetting the guitar to heavy smoking. I asked him why he felt liberated watching them. He explained that “the system

which you're molded into everyday in a company sort of sucks your soul out. Everything is business and the hierarchy and the bossing are designed just to make you feel meaningless if not achieving the required productivity." He elaborates that leaving this job has caused him financial insecurity but somehow doing what he believes in made him feel more liberated and unable to do anything he is not convinced of. This configuration of 'work' clashes certainly with our pre-structured subjectivity that makes of work a 'natural' order and way of being. It takes time, experience and serious unpacking of preconceptions to make a different sense of what is work and what it does to an individual's life. 'Work' in Nahda can hardly be made sense of compared to corporate or governmental jobs. The majority of the staff has one or two other jobs besides their part-time job in Nahda. It could hardly be identified as a space of work as much as a space where individuals get to do what they are passionate about. The other example is Mariam, the receptionist who is 21 years old and also the youngest of age among the staff members. She told me when I asked her why do you work in Nahda, she said "I study accounting and when I worked in an accounting office the director and everyone else were belittling my ability to do anything, if I'm young in age, then my mind is not capable of anything. Here in Nahda it feels like a family, I enjoy my time here and I get to do different things and our decisions are taken collectively, I, as an individual am cared for by my colleagues and if I need help I will find it. I know for sure that I will not find this environment elsewhere." In my analysis, Mariam's version of the work status in Nahda is indicative of how most of us (Nahda staff) feel and even the volunteers who come to help sometimes. The sociality created is unique and refreshing especially to those who had previous corporate jobs. Momtaz for example, who is a volunteer in the recent project of the animation school, studied graphic design and has for the past years worked in advertisement cooperates that as he says "sucked all the creativity I had and turned me into an Adobe Photoshop technician." Joining the school, he got to lecture and attend various workshops with armatures and professionals from different background, and again he says "I feel like I have a life now, being in Nahda makes up for the misery I endure at work, it is liberating and my creativity is revived somehow." Experiences like these either in a paid job or through volunteering sets Nahda apart as an attempt of escape from the hegemonic forms that work imposes, with many difficulties in practicality but with immense possibilities for a different everydayness.

A regular day of work in Nahda starts at two or three in the afternoon and usually extends till ten in the evening, which means a person will most likely spend their evening at 'work'. But let me illustrate this 'work' and how it is different. I will take you through this in the best way I can express, a fragmented scenario that needs your imagination: "Walking in either utterly exhausted of the weather or traffic... greeting everyone then into the office, coffee and more coffee then how is every one doing... now refreshed let's work! ... Oh have you seen this film, its conceptually and aesthetically exceptional ... yea! Listen to this Sufi song... Wow what archive have you been hanging out in! ... Now let's work ... Saad enters: the animation school has made a new short film, come see it ... Ok we're back, new project then! What do we need: concept paper, list of activities, budgets – how much do we hate budgeting?! But the activities need to be more directed to engage the neighborhood, yes but we shouldn't dismiss the importance of other groups, look at the essentiality of the cinema and social theater school! Okay then let's meet tomorrow to discuss further to see how to balance our priorities, No Chamaa has to be in the Social theater school session. Ok the day after, early for breakfast then we get this done... when is the deadline again! Fathi comes in, we need Ramez's signature for the children's book club material new ... can you believe the cinema club have been working for over ten years and the only extra expenses are for new speakers and a projector ! Mariam comes in: there is someone who wants to meet to discuss a new project to do with Nahda. Yea let him in! Khalil comes in: we need translation for this subtitle for one of the cinema school films, Okay send them to me and I'll do them by the end of the week... (if I was filming: voices will swirls with loud laughter at Wafi's joke, lens clouding when we started smoking while the scene faded)." The normality of such a day at 'work' as light hearted or mundane or messy as it may seem, houses in it the intricate nuances that expose bigger conflicts and tensions. For example: the dilemma of choosing to do a project that will become popular faster as it works with individuals already exposed and interested in doing art and culture, or doing a project that would be more troublesome such as coordinating with a governmental school in the area to have activities with the children, which is very complicated in terms of governmental formalities. Furthermore, the chain of financial command if disturbed, in case Ramez or Chamaa are not present, the children's book club will not have the money immediately for their material. The immediate solution is for Sheren, the activity coordinator, to just buy them herself. This is not a catastrophic situation but it could be in more complicated instances. Another point this exposes is the lack of

necessity for professional division of labor, for example: I myself am supposed to write projects and look for funds, but I translate whatever is needed and if I am not available Reem or Chamaa do it, which in instances create extra load of effort and commitment but we keep on doing that willingly. Work in Nahda does not feel like obligation or antagonistic relation where one needs to protect their boundaries and their leisure time. And I think that has its down sides too of being overloaded to the extent of not functioning at all. For example if someone is overload with multiple activities, complicated and bureaucratic financial procedures at the end of the rush time it is almost common that this person would take time off/disappear for few weeks. But what balances these instances is the understanding, support and flexibility the rest of the members offer. Another example is that I have not been to 'work' in Nahda for the past month or so to write my thesis and I have not been fired yet and I am still paid my part-time salary. This instance also signifies how my personal academic growth is as valuable to the association as much as my 'work', it is not only about "capacity building" but in a way it means that my passions are part of this collective's passion as well. Work in that sense does not become about productivity and execution, but is also where we nurture and encourage each other intellectually, socially and spiritually. We shuffle and reshuffle our roles and accommodate every one's conditions and that is where I find an alternative more humane way of laboring not 'working' in the modernist sense.

Although, the conversations at the meeting were intense, some of us tried avoiding turning the meeting into a complaint session. We introduced suggestions that could help ease the tension of the issues that were brought up. Suggestions were to reform the official financial system to limit the financial director's authority to the finance and to not have any direct interaction with him, for the direct financial coordinator to be the mediator of the process gradually to disentangle the symbolic authority of the financial director and that will take huge pressure off the employees. Another suggestion was to help integrate new / young staff members into the philosophy and spirit of work in the association by having organized activities that inspire different ways of thinking, spending more time together as staff members to train on, and possibly create, new techniques of management and communication, and also new potentialities of work and its organization.

This was a meeting of fifteen people with diverse backgrounds, personalities, age and experience. Each with their specific issues and imagination of how work in the association should be, but deciding that the administration of the association's work is not a director's responsibility alone and to implement what we claim of horizontal management. Horizontalism, is a translation that misses the sense of the word, to elaborate "*horizontalidad* is used to express the Argentinian new movements, it does not just imply a flat plane for organizing, or non-hierarchical relationships in which people no longer make decisions for others. It is a positive word that implies the use of direct democracy and the striving for consensus, processes in which everyone is heard and new relationships are created." (Sitrin,2006,p.VI)

In hindsight, it is a possibility that the configurations of both the physical space and the attempts to reform administrative structure and implementing different ideology and spirit are contributing to making available new possibilities of both working in a cultural space and being in the world. Weeks also quotes C. Wright Mills' insightful observation to contribute to this argument ; "we tend to focus more on the problems with this or that job, or on their absence, than on work as a requirement, work as a system, work as a way of life."(2011, p.3) I believe that making such breakthroughs on the scale of the association, and with previous manifestations of staff members' experiences it is possibly this desire and emotions involved in the making of a different sociality away from the stagnating configurations of corporate work. This creates a sociality that each one participates in its configuration regardless of age and position and creating this possibility of a different social imaginary. This sociality is understood by everyone and is appreciated because it does not reach an 'ideal' state or endpoint, but is always a continuous process of reshaping how to live and work together.

Taylor elaborates that social imaginary is constantly complex as it integrates "the normal expectations we have of one another" and through this understanding it becomes possible to do collective practices that creates different social life. (2002,p.106). This reading is visible in Nahda's configuration between the subjectivities and how they constitute the space and its sociality, Taylor's elaboration is still valid in reading the second cultural space; The Choir project. Through this next section I explicate the managerial and social structures of the choir and how the subjectivities are reconfigured with in the sociality the choir creates.

## The Choir Project of Cairo: Placeless Voices

“It’s one of the exhausting days of fasting in Ramadan, a Friday ... I knew during my story writing workshop about the choir’s workshop... I thought, what would I do there, sing! I can’t possibly sing - I’m not going. Yet what would I do staying home except argue with my parents! so I decided reluctantly to go just out of curiosity. I got lost trying to find the place, and when I arrived I felt a great comfort walking into that garage space that has somehow transformed into a bulk of joy and energy... amazed by how many people of all ages are there, sitting, listening, smiling at me the complete stranger, was just fascinating. Breath taking like you want to step backwards to grasp the intensity of the situation. How all the diversity blended and it was so compelling to be part of it ... Instructions came to write a sentence ... I wrote , now let’s compose a beat or tone for it, and I did ... no one made fun of me and strangely they listened to all suggestion. Since then I just could not stop coming to the choir ... It was sort of magical”

This was Sheren’s, 38 years old single mother, first undirected answer when I asked her what in her opinion constitutes the choir. I conversed with various choir members about how the choir’s construction and management is seen and regarded and how the group’s dynamics influence or alter the space formation and transformation. Nessrien is in her 30’s, a dentist, she says rather impulsively “organization is chaotic, big number of people from completely different backgrounds certainly their dynamics and background dominate the workshop’s content and product”. She describes the first workshop she attended; “Tight and Spacious”; it was calm and focused it talked of conceptual and abstract ideas of being stifled within a space or tradition or social standard and the spacious freedom of breaking away from all that. Worthy of notice that this workshop was almost a year after the revolution of January 25th, 2011 but because of the ‘type of people’ who formed the majority the workshop it was not the least attentive to a direct political narrative or discourse. I have attended that workshop as well and even the word “revolution” was not part of any of the lyrics that the group came up with, instead things that address intolerance and existential questions and daily social situations was the highlight of the workshop production. For example:

“ I don’t accept you, I Know what is best for you... you have to walk , like I walk, you have to dress as I dress , and you will listen to me and I won’t”

“ I’m wearing what I like, and I like how I look.. I’ll wear a full hijab or a micro skirt and I will be wherever I please”

“I had the universe with all its space and I cornered/trapped myself into an ideology, religion and color”



Recalling this workshop which was the first for me as well, it was in Nahda's garage/ Nassibian theater, it was then only separated from the garage with black semi-torn curtains, the yellow lights made the atmosphere hotter than it already in May 2011. The space was familiar to me already because I have worked in Nahda for almost a year then. But the seats were made into a huge circle where everyone was seated randomly. I could notice immediately formations of clusters; the members who have been in the choir for long, their friends who joined later, talking socializing and their sense of responsibility shows as they try to get the group to sit still or be silent for some one to talk. There was also the first-timers who know someone from the older group, which was my status as well, cautious but backed up with the sense of familiarity that friends bring, like it is their way into the choir social configuration. For me I had another safety net; they were on my ground (Nahda where I work) so whenever I encountered these awkward moments when new members did not know whom to sit with or talk to, I had a way out, go back to the office and pass the time with my friends in Nahda. Then there was the complete alien first-timers who do not know anybody, silent and suspicious and full of curiosity. This initial configuration was broken gradually after several games, one of which was extremely interesting and it was suggested by one of the old members of the choir. This game had the group seated in two rows facing each other, without introductions each person had to guess the name, age and something about the character of the person seated in front of them. The results were fun and entertaining, but for me it unpacked and faced all of the group with our preconceptions and judgment strategies. I do not know if this was intentional conceptually with this particular workshop that was entitled "Its Either you or myself, *Yana Yanta*" and for me it exposed the unspoken social animosity between different groups antagonised either by class, political affiliation or just mere personal differences.

Nevine continues the comparison with the recent production of the latter workshops and she says that the group now has much younger participants so the content turned into "more spontaneous, and lighter and simpler" compositions. This refers to a number of songs that commented sarcastically on issues that were pressing during the year of 2012 like electricity cuts and the constitution referendums and even violent dispersal of sit-ins and demonstrations. Obviously the topics were not trivial but the way the songs came out were extremely sarcastic which in my view is the effect of utter cynicism due to how the political situation in Egypt seemed deadened at that time. With the constant vigorous change and action politically, the

choir's latter productions were heavily dominated by political commentary, even though there were attempts to not write and sing about politics. But somehow it was "unavoidable" as she puts it. For example "What is going on!" is a song composed post Maspero Massacre in October 2011, where Coptic demonstrations were dispersed using live ammunition and ran over by army tanks. In the news the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, who were in power before presidential elections, declared that the tanks were stolen from soldiers:

"where is the tank, who stole it, who ran us over, what is going on?"

What is the revolution, who made it, who runs the media, what is going on?"

Who is putting us in military a trial, who is calling us thugs, what is going on?"

Worthy of mentioning here, that few weeks after that song was recorded and uploaded on Youtube and social media we found a video featuring two guys in "V for Vandenta" masks who sprayed the lyrics of the song on a street wall in black and adding to it at the end "The Supreme Council of Armed Forces" in red as the answer for all the questions of the song, while the audio of our performance is playing in the background.

Nevine asserts that the only stable pillar of the choir's existence and continuation is Salam Youssry the artistic director, she among others I have interviewed had the same remark. Salam "knows what he is doing and the final call is his, but he does not make us feel like he is dictating what we should do". This contrasts with the fact that most of the interlocutors later when asked about what is compelling and enjoyable in being in the choir, they answered; "we feel free, it is not a paid job where you have to do things". As I pushed the question further, explaining that if they think the final decision is up to the director at the end, this would make it just like a company where you do not have a say as well. How would the choir claim collective work and position itself as independent and alternative art form, while it still applies main stream hierarchy? Their answers varied. Some said that it works that way and it is not a place for competition over authority, they also did not feel pushed or bossed around but the direction happens indirectly and with unspoken consensus. Another opinion stated clearly that "the choir is solo management by Salam, and that is ok as long as it works (meaning that the workshop would run smoothly and enjoyably as well as making songs), when we got bored of not having a workshop and attempted to organize without him, some people refused because they were afraid

that Salam would be offended”, that is even though Salam have made it clear several times that it is absolutely fine to do so. Here is precisely where I question the symbolic capital acquired by Salam and reinforced by the choir’s participants. As I tried to further question why is that status accepted, some highlighted that this acceptance of Salam’s leadership is due to his charisma and that he knows better because of his professional experience in directing theatrical production for long. Another opinion revealed that its people’s personal admiration and love of Salam that motivates them to go along with his suggestions. For them the questioning left them baffled as if it never occurred to them, some even resorted to explaining that it is just “a natural chemistry, and the if it was someone else they could possibly not feel the same way”. I argue that their reasons for what essentially constitutes the choir and its power, are misplaced. In my analysis I find that the politics of affect is a better way of understanding this configuration. Badiou finds and identifies the essence of the political through this question: “what are individuals capable of when they meet, organize, think and take decisions?” (2009,p.53) So is that not what the choir precisely and quintessentially does, but what these individuals can do together is not merely singing. That is why I consider the choir political but is even more dangerous and influential type of politics, that is politics of affect. Ruddick problematizes this ‘togetherness’ by depicting the concept of “difference as alterity - as otherness- [that] is frequently acknowledged as a site of fear or ungrounding.”(2010,p.22) She roots this back to Spinoza’s philosophy around the work ‘fear’ and ‘joy’ do in activating political subjects. She asks the pressing question: “How do we fashion a new political imaginary from fragmentary, diffuse and often antagonistic subjects...” (ibid) In the beginning of this section most of the choir members’ descriptions were focused on how different and diverse the members are, how they felt joy as they all worked together, had fun and composed songs that spoke their minds. The choir is different because unlike other attempts of collectives, its members sense and actively understand what they are there for: joy. Ruddick explains that “Affect, constituted passively, does not comprehend its cause adequately and ultimately limits the capacity to act.” (2010,p.29) That comprehension is materialized through the workshop activities, composed songs in performances and extends even to the lives and friendships outside of both.

On the other hand, Salam explains also that the space created through the workshop becomes a free zone. Some of the participants are managers in big companies, others are high school students, some are leftist some are moderate; the group usually houses a wide variety of

professions and classes. But at the workshop everyone “takes off” their professional title and status and inhabit this collective community that we build through exercises and activity and ultimately songs. This echoes the participants’ views as they mention diversity upfront as essential and unique feature of the choir as a space. On the contrary, Yousry emphasizes that the workshop is not institutionally organized; there is neither assignment of roles nor a requirement for specialization; this openness gives the participants the freedom to take whatever role depending on their discovery and exploration of the moment away from their own professions. To use his own words “creates an alternative community full of positive energy.

Nevine explains how she was mostly raised in UAE with a very conservative religious upbringing. She says: “ the choir experience certainly changed my personality... before I made friends with only the people who were of my class and religious background, I was somewhat classist ... the idea of coexisting with so many different people was unthinkable to me. When I first came to the choir, I felt like I have been very wrong in avoiding everyone who is different, the space was very welcoming and felt safe to mingle and know everyone ... now I have friends who are way younger than me, from different religions and classes , they don’t bite.... I also could never ever think that I would take the underground metro or public transportation but with the group and the openness they inspired in me, now I make it intentional to at least walk the streets around the workshop place.”

Mario shares a similar opinion, as he is originally from Sohag, a city in Upper Egypt with very little alternative social and cultural activity due to the centralization of the cultural scene in Cairo and Alexandria, so what is left is state sponsored stagnated terrain. He explained how the choir was safe space for all opinions and gave him confidence and openness to new people. Same goes for Shimaa who thought she will not ‘fit-in’ because of her hijab, but she was surprised that this meant nothing at all in a “Judgment-free” environment.

But another recurrent experience echoed also in the conversations with them relates to performance and how much it breaks barriers and boosts self-confidence. Being able to be on a stage, singing out loud, they feel awkward at first, but then they feel shielded and supported by the many other voices. I could explain that this is because the choir is not professional; they do not feel intimidated by an aim of perfection. Shimaa puts it very nicely; “it is not a one-man-

show, all what the audience see and perceive is a bulk of energy, 100 head, bouncing with the beat”.

The space of the choir is simultaneously configured by the actual physicality whether a theater used for the workshop or the actual performance on a stage. The space could be divided in the workshop to four or five corners where each group working on a theme of the song sit or play to make something out of it, each corner then is turned into a mini stage where the group presents/performs what they came up with. The same space is turned into a big circle of discussion to go around, allowing opinions and suggestions to process in the collective. Some times it feels like these groups in Spain that a friend told me about, where the whole village sits in a circle and discuss their issues and they use signs by hands to show consensus or objections, which is what we do in the choir; thumbs up agreeing, thumbs down disagreeing. It is sort of primitive of course but I see it as a way of getting every one to actually look at each other and communicate.

Once more Taylor highlights the subtleties that speak of “ordinary people”(2002,p.106) and their imaginaries of their socialites, they are expressed through “images, stories, and legends” (ibid). Through the interviews and observations I noted these images and stories some time embodied in a feeling or a spontaneous expression; things like “natural chemistry, welcoming, openness, confidence, safe-place, judgment-free, shielded and supported, heard” indicate not necessarily the perfection of the choir’s sociality, but just like Faggala’s residents, is an essential consideration of just how they imagine and envision these conditions to be, and accordingly acting persistently according to this imagination.

### **Making Sense of the Alternative**

I attempted previously to describe the selected cultural spaces as ‘emergent’ and always in a process of becoming. Raymond Williams explains that ‘emergent’ means “that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships ... are continually being created. But it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture]..[and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it.” (1977,p.123). To identify what is dominant and what is emergent on the level of these cultural

spaces as containers of creativity, it is essential to read Williams definition in relation to Lockes' elaboration in a recent article on the commodification of creativity. Explaining how the "members of the 'creative class',... are granted a space in which their creativity can be put to work. It is no longer simply creative outputs that the market requires, it is no longer only objects and products that can be bought and sold, but rather it is people's most intimate subjective processes, their desires, that are put to the service of capital. Capital no longer deals only in exchangeable objects made equivalent through money, but draws upon intimate subjective, creative processes."(2013,p.9). To clarify, the dominant culture is that of capital, it becomes hard to distinguish then the 'emergent, oppositional and alternative' as capital is constantly capturing and turning them or reintegrating the emergent relations, values , meanings and practices into its consuming system and hegemonic power and economy.

This argument explains how and why these cultural spaces are still emergent and alternative through multiple details of these spaces' process of emergence. As formerly elaborated Nahda was relatively protected from the capitalist extensions into the NGO's by depending majorly on the financial donation of the Jesuits, this gave them relative freedom of choosing their activities. This facilitated and secured Nahda's independence and in a way protected it from being drawn into what Maha Abdel Rahman called "new aid 'industry'" (2004,p.2) as most of NGOs around the world have been formatted into the typical developmental agenda of "empowerment and democratization"(ibid). On the other hand, during various interviews with some of the members of the choir I asked them what is in their opinion "an independent or alternative art" and mostly, almost automatically, the first characteristic was "we take no money from anyone, accordingly we are free to say and do whatever we want". Although with further conversing other interesting opinions were made. For example Abdalla, 20 years old University student says; "independent or alternative art is not only about financial independence or about the places they are performed, for example not everything that is shown in downtown is automatically alternative, sometime it is about the ideas and the practices". Mario another 20 years old university student elaborates that "what we write and sing has message to society, if someone famous sings it, people will not believe it is truthful, but coming from us, people who look like everyone else, they will be able to identify with us and this allows their thoughts to be provoked about the issues we tackle." But this 'message to society' is not a

dictation of morality or solutions but are merely expressions of other hopeful possibilities or a cynical commentary that alert critical engagement with daily lives and struggles.

### **Concluding observations about Space and Subjectivity**

In my introduction I have used Lefebvre's argument to conceptualize how space is a social production (1999,p.6). This sociality and how it deploys spatiality, is again not a simple cause/effect relation. I have also established that spaces are essentially imagined using Gupta and Ferguson's argument about the conceptual processes of turning spaces into places and how they "are always imagined in the context of political-economic determinations that have a logic of their own"(1992,p.11). Here, I'm keen on dismissing evaluative observations and keener on admitting to the complexity of those relations, whether Nahda's struggle with bureaucracy and developmentalist discourses or be it the Choir Project's strife for a collective independent voice. Both spaces influence and are being influenced by the individuals who constitute them through continuous processes and practices that are constitutive of the collective and the subject. How both spaces are linked in how the subjectivities that dwell in them are constantly reconfiguring their sociality, subjectivity and potentialities for a social imagination capable of believing that their worlds can always be otherwise.

## Chapter Three

### Configurations of Subjectivities and Imaginations

#### Experiential Commonality

In the previous chapter we have established that as much as spaces are constituted and configured by relations, they are also in a way imagined. Since spaces are imagined and while we could understand different spaces through their relations and interconnectedness; Nahda and The Choir Project can be then juxtaposed in the sense that there are multiple parallels of experiences and relations that can be noticed and analyzed and thus they become indicators of their collective / common experience of different imaginations. This chapter explores and traces how these relations unfold and are in many ways manifestations of makings and un-makings of social imagination and simultaneously of multi-configurations of subjectivities. Papadopoulos et al indicate that to focus on events is to “foreground particular moments when a set of material, social and imaginary ruptures come together and produce a break in the flow of history – a new truth”(2008,p.xii). In other words, the transformative events in a society are in fact multi dispersed ruptures of different natures that happened to coincide at a certain temporal moment. I previously also established that social relations are not only stretched out into spatial dimension but also within a temporal dimension. So with different temporal moments that have been very diverse and radically shifting in Egypt since 2011, possibilities of imagination were wide open for experimentations and the individuals constituting various spaces have sensed a newly acquired capability to perceive of social change as a process that they make and are being made through it not an awaited emancipation. Social transformation “is not about cultivating faith in the change to come, it is about honing our senses so that we can perceive the processes which create change in ordinary life.”(Papadopoulos et al 2008,p.iix).

Although the temporal moments of momentous political events is the main backdrop of the happenings I discuss, however the concern is certainly with the change in ordinary life of those who constitute The Choir Project and Nahda. In the first part of the chapter I explore the most recent choir workshop that celebrated the third year of the choir initiation. The workshop



expanded for four days and was held in Nahda's Nassibian/ Garage Theater. I closely analyze the temporality of the span of the choir's years and how they have changed perceptions and expectation, and also how participants reflect on them. On the other hand I analyze how the temporality of the political situation in Egypt is reflected and grabbed with in the lives and subjectivities of the choir participants through the narratives they produced recently and their daily interactions. In the second part, I analyze the changes that took place in Nahda's activities as a continuation of the restructuring meeting explored in chapter one. I explore and connect two main activities that represent the oldest and most recent: The independent cinema school that started in 2008 and the animation school that started late 2013. Each school deploys different ways of managerial structures which I will analyze in relation to the imaginations about educational processes and what that might mean to the subjectivities that constitute them in current temporal moment. In dealing with the choir and Nahda, I highlight the potentialities of different imaginations manifested through the members who constitute the spaces and their ordinary narratives and expressions where their relations to the spaces and to the events unravel.

### **The Choir's Virtual Coup**

The workshop was long awaited for by all members of the choir since the last workshop that was in January 2012 and the last performance that was in March 2013. People complained and asked Salam, the artistic director of the choir, repetitively for a new workshop or a performance. Serious messages at times, sarcastic at other times, and this kept evolving to the extent to calling for a virtual rebellion on the Facebook group of the choir members. Giving warning and claiming a parallel choir as well, following the same scenario of the 25<sup>th</sup> of Jan. revolution in 2011, when activist claimed to create a parallel government. To my amusement, Salam with the same sarcasm ignored and ridiculed the coupe that some of the choir members initiated on the group. Like Mubarak's famous response, in October 2011 two months before the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution, on the parallel government that the opposition claimed: "let them amuse themselves", Salam commented on one of the threats to remove him from power of the choir: "keep on playing." The Coup leaders had assigned rules for negotiation and popular demands of the choir people. And there were Salam supporters as well. It was an intentional farcical reenactment of the political struggle since 2011. However this time it was in demand of

music and fun. What baffles me indeed is if the choir people are that keen on gathering and singing why not have a workshop why do they have to have Salam lead it, specially that it is not a paid-job. Salam's centrality to the choir as artistic director is understandable in even merely though his title, but there is much more into that which I will explore and elaborate in the next section.

Although some of the members gathered and made outings to meet up and have a good time, yet the demand for the workshops was always sort of unspeakably conditioned by Salam's presence and leadership. Interestingly, Maya, one of the most enthusiastic people in the choir, initiated through a Facebook group an "online / electronic workshop - *Warsha Electoronia*" late July 2013. Maya explained the reason for creating this group in the following way: "because we are unable to gather, the musicians are busy or traveling, and we have not seen or sang with the people of Alexandria choir for a while. So we decided to gather virtually and pick a theme and title for the workshop, write sentences about it here and then meet for couple days to finish up the songs." The idea was met with much enthusiasm from many members of the choir, a hundred thirty eight member joined and the process started "democratically" as Maya put it by voting on the themes suggested. It was difficult however to continue and execute the idea fully. Partially due to the practical difficulty of gathering people virtually at the same time, also I think the lack of actual concentrated presence in the same physical space was a factor. Worthy of noticing though is that in August 2013 after the armed forces removed the ex-president Mohamed Morsi from power after mass demonstrations for that demand, and also after the violent dispersal of Morsi's supporters, and the multiple clashes that happened after, the transitional government implemented a curfew for three months. For the first few weeks it was prohibited for anyone to be on the street past seven o'clock in the evening, which made it even more difficult for any sort of activity to take place. One of the choir members thought the virtual workshop was very suitable to take everyone away from the boredom of being home at seven every day. There was not much activity for a while on the group after the sever violence that daunted on every possibility at that time. But initially the idea was progressive and hopeful of maneuvering circumstances to do something different.

Two weeks before the workshop in December 2013, Salam asked the members to write a short story on something that happened to them during the past three years, it didn't have to be about the choir or the revolution, and it could be about anything. The number was less than usual, this workshop there were only 50 members, while in the past two workshops and performances we were about 70, the usual warm-up is Salam and the musicians making a random beat or tempo and the group would one by one improvise a sentence to compose a melody or a variation of the beat they started. Afterwards, we went through the stories submitted and we found that we can group them in themes; Revolution, transportations, the choir and random street situations. And we split into smaller working groups according to theme to try and formulate a song out of our stories or to combine them to form a narrative of any sort, and then each group will present to the rest what they came up with.

The mini performances were full of sarcasm and joy and some were at the verge of absurdity and dark sarcasm. For example a group came up with this line: "Corpses... Corpses... the sky is raining corpses". Usually whenever and where ever there are presentations of any sort, you would sense a vibe of competition that was completely absent in the choir's case, the group was attentive to each other attempts and genuinely entertained by the different performances. This could be a reflection of how different configurations invokes and allows different relations and ways of being and working together. Salam was squatting on the ground up front, taking notes and recording the performances with extreme attentiveness as if we were the royal ballet company. As far as my experience goes in Cairo's cultural scene, it is very rare that someone would take amateurs that seriously.

During the workshop while the group with Salam tried to edit and extract plot line for the performance from the randomly written stories he emphasized and elaborated how to catch the details of everydayness in each story. For example a story talked about being stuck in the train for 10 hours. He said it doesn't matter how you waited and if you were bored or wondered where to eat but it is what conversations were around you what do they tell of life, without preaching a morale but to capture what is usually overlooked and ignored as mundane and ordinary." He added that "Stories should not be just statements of what did and did not happen but a lively

capture of the understated details that enrich our experiences.” The stories also were not of a heroic nature they were ordinary moments embodying insights in the everyday resistance.

A very intricate insight on how the choir has been an embodiment of a longed for resistance, is Hana’s story that she remembers one of the choir members writing on Facebook on the 28<sup>th</sup> of Jan 2011, at the peak of violence attacks of protestors. She said “Can you imagine that the choir could possibly sing on the street!” At that time the choir only performed on one of the few independent theater affordable, either Rawabet or Nahda’s Garage theater. The idea of singing in an open street, like many other things, was certainly unthinkable before the revolution. However right after the ousting of Mubark by a month, the choir was singing inside the government’s opera house, afterwards there was a collective street festival, “Fan Midan- Art is Square” initiated by some independent artists and some cultural foundations in one of the biggest squares downtown Cairo that is located in front of one of the government palaces; “Abdeen Palace.” The festival was diverse and included many performances of alternative arts and held art workshops for children and it lasted many months after the revolution but eventually security took over the area for some time but again they managed to maintain the festival. Zeina reflected on her first experience of performing on the street and I will not edit much from her narrative, because she brings analytical insights that are significant in her spontaneous narration, which I think if I analyze meticulously with distort its powerfullness:

“I don't remember the performance itself the first time - I think it was the first Fan Midan. But I remember how free the space felt like, performing out doors and having this whole space to yourself. It was probably filled with this energy after Feb 11<sup>th</sup>. A month later we performed again. I remember this distinctly. It was very moving for me to perform for the people at night in the open air. There was space... there was so much of it. It felt that our songs were out there. Our voices were there touching the sky. It felt that there were no boundaries. I mean we were singing in the street. And I remember this day more than the first one, perhaps because it felt more rooted in something bigger. The energy of the day perhaps was different because we were relaxed and not silly excited like we always are. The number wasn't very big. I think I felt a great gratitude as well to the women singing with me. The audience was definitely very different. They were all the people who would not go to Rawabet for instance. People from Abdeen which is really interesting because they're so close to where all the independent art happens and they have nothing to do with it! I think the difference between the first month and the second month was that we were feeling ownership of the space and a connection with the people. It was a relationship rather than I'm performing for you and leaving. It was a bond maybe, some agreement that we're doing this together with each other. I remember how moved I was. The

weather, the light breeze, the women singing with me, Carol, Dina, Wiaam, Youssra, Hala, the ones who I sang with the first time I joined the choir. Also the energy that flowed from us to the people. I remember we were going down these insanely dangerous looking steps made of wood and I hugged Salam so hard then. I felt that I was grateful for these moments. The third time is also one I remember. Because then there were the people who staged a sit-in because the government didn't give them their housing after being evicted. That day they sang with us. They all came to the front of the stage and danced and clapped and sang along and did all that they could. Suddenly one of them started chanting “ sixty-seventy-to the tents we are not going back –  
*Seteen- Saba'een- a'ala el kheyam mesh rag'aïen*”  
I didn't understand the chant but we all went along. We chanted it with them in our microphones and Salam and the musicians played a beat for them and there was this moment of realization that this is what we should be doing. Connecting with those people. It was a moment where there was also no division between performer and audience. They were performing and we watched them till we got what they were saying and said it along.”

Another significant performance was one that was unled and unorganized. During the Copts' sit-in in the Maspero area near downtown early October, 2011. The sit-in was a reaction to several violent sectarian incidents in Aswan in upper Egypt. Security forces tried to disperse the sit-in for a few days but the sit-in continued. During these days the choir had a performance downtown and some members decided to go to the sit-in and sing in solidarity. The choir did not officially go, but those who wanted to go did. Kamel went with other members of the choir. He recalls that when they walked into the area and stood together they immediately caught the attention of everyone because they “moved together and had girls with them.” He continues to describe how they all at first stood awkwardly, looking at each other and no one started to sing, he explains “I do not know if it was shyness or fear”. Then he continues as if recalling a very pleasant memory: “some guys with us started singing the choir song, and all of us burst in singing so powerfully and forcefully as if we will die if we do not sing” then people started gathering around them more and more and they interacted enthusiastically. Kamel says beautifully that “singing turned into chanting as if in a demonstration ... it was one of the few times I've cracked my voice with choir from how intense and exciting the singing was”. I continued our conversation and asked him how did that group of the choir decide to go sing in the sit-in. He said “it was random many people said they want to go, but we were dispersed but all the sudden Safia decided to chant in the street and we chanted and followed her until we arrived at Maspero... I'm with the choir whatever we do, sing, chant, even throw rocks at the police ... it didn't matter”. Kamel asked me precisely to write this sentence in my research: “ the choir compensated to us many things we lack in this country... things I didn't know I lacked

until I experienced them ‘*westena*’ among us – the choir”. What are these things that the choir compensates? He gave a disclaimer to his answer for that question: “it might seem like redundant poetic talk but they are true to me”. He spoke of how the choir got him to know “the other” from all sorts of classes, backgrounds and ages, then took all these segregations and throw them away and all what was left was a unique “*sawa* - togetherness”. How it showed him what is it to love without waiting benefits or payback as he puts it “ to be happy that Ahmed passed his exams or that Mai got engaged as I would be happy for myself and my own brothers and sisters”. There is something exceptional about this feeling of ‘togetherness’ which Kamel calls “ ‘*Ezawa*” which is word mainly associated with the support and solidarity that one has from a big numbers of individuals who are extended family. He adds to this that he feels that the greatest feeling about the choir is “despite extreme differences of the choir members, they looked for something common to gather them, and they gathered”. In his opinion also the choir is the most successful project he has ever joined simply because “its capital is zero, and its profits are endless”. These first breaks into the public space became usual. The choir was invited to the state organized book fair, where we sang and the audience chanted against SCAF, we were invited to Cairo University to celebrate the universities’ independence day, we sang by the gates of the central library when suddenly the Ultras (an organized fandom group for soccer) gathered and chanted with us against SCAF condemning them for the Port Said Massacre, where 74 of the group were murdered in a match in a city by the Suez canal after several attacks and clashes with the SCAF security forces. Those were very powerful and intense moments when I personally sensed our sarcasm is going beyond just laughter and joy, it was about a performativity that embodied in its cynical , absurd and sometimes inappropriate language and melodies a break from the hegemony and subverted the dominant conditions whether politically or socially or even artistically. A line from one of the songs that is most popular and most influential as it pretty much applies to every formal political situation and even everyday situations was produced late 2010 in the popular proverb workshop that was intended to remake some of the common proverbs: “You Pharos, what made you a tyrant! he says: I didn’t find any one to control/ restrain me ‘*yelemeni*’ which is equivalent in Arabic to teach good manners. The song continues to through criticism subtly at political reform and referendums for constitutional alterations: “ what would patching fix in an already worn out robe – we stepped into an undesirable land , we kissed an underserving hand, we neither got gold or copper – those who don’t own their food , their opinions are not from their

minds". The three groups came up with a dynamic variety of performances; the revolution group called themselves "the non-revolution – *Al la sawrah* " distorting the original spelling of the Arabic word to a sarcastic tone. They told funny situations that happened in very intense revolutionary moments, how for example on the 28th of January 2011 when people were chased in the streets with rubber shots and gas bombs, Dalia took all the onions they had in the house to throw to the people from the balcony, while her sisters was yelling at her saying " what are you doing dummy, how will we cook now without onions." Another story of a teaching assistant in Cairo University who during the police attacks on the university with gas bombs , she started cursing and swearing out loud and all the sudden she started looking around to see if any of her students are around , in order to preserve her hard-earned prestige as a teacher. The choir group wrote about their first experiences in the choir and in other situations they named themselves: "The first time – *Awel Marah*" and it was short passages all starting with these three words " the first time ..." stories varied between the amazement of the choir's energy when they first joined, the nervousness of the first performance, the first time a girl beat up someone who harassed her. Worthy of notice that none of the choir members have a strong or a professional artistic background , but this group has choreographed and creatively has made a quite impressive performance out of working together for about an hour and a half, and without any rehearsals. As for the transportation group, some of the stories spoke of the unexpectedly kind things random people do in public transportation, while they were suspicious and cautious, others spoke of how the political conversations unfold with complete strangers in transportations.

Another exercise is the play on voice and improvisation of melodies with completely meaningless words and sounds that at first made us laugh so hard that we could not sing , supposedly it's an exercises that stress the vowels and consonants and the articulation of letters in Arabic , which caused hilarious facial expression in the process. We (the choir members present) kept singing these meaningless sentence in different pitches and levels, some with sharper voices, some with stronger ones, some would repeat one part of the sentence and others would harmonize between sentences, it was a completely un-orchestrated but it was an epitome of energy and noisy harmony that in theory is not expected or supposed to sound any good. It was extremely powerful and completely unserious, groups started dancing and making a 'popular' version of it with the oriental drum, some started singing sentences on their own, some clapped

and some yelled. We synchronized at moments and were absolute noise at others without any directions or words except the energy and the collective togetherness of the group. It was a beautiful therapeutic mess. (you can listen to : <https://soundcloud.com/wassim-gamal/montlesd2cje>)

We toned the improvisation down and Salam asked for whoever has a sentence or an idea from the stories to try and sing it with the undertone that the group is making , he stressed that we should not dismiss each other's attempts and to let each one “find their own rhythm.” After several attempts that did not work very well, and the group was starting to argue that the stories collected are no good for singing, so Salam explained that theatrical creation needs hard choices, and that we need to attempt all given ideas, even though we are trying to build a relative coherent narrative or plot but it is not important what would the product turns out to be like.

The choir and its process are essentially joyful and that is the first thing participants always say, may be the dominant perception of joy is not at all too far from its political connotations. Laughter is perceived as letting some of the pressures out, and joy is the good part that keeps one going through the tough times. In a way “The laughter and joy of those who partake in the world defies seriousness, disperses fear, liberates the word and the body and reveals a truth escaping the injustices of the present. This laughter is the prime mover of escape. Escape is joyful.” (Papadopoulos et al,2008,p.xx)

### **Between the Collective and Authority**

In both spaces, Nahda and Choir, it is evident to find a central figure who sort of acts as the glue that holds the collective together. Between analyzing this centrality as authority acquired either by institutionalization and having inspirational vision as in Sidhom's case or by charismatic appeal, inventiveness and experience in Youssry's case, or by the symbolic and social capital in both cases. There is another dimension that opens up an understanding of the dynamics of the individuals constituting the two spaces. I more attentively look beyond Salam and Sidhom's centrality, I could then see that William was a different to the Jesuits congregation because he in many ways has rebelled from their hegemonic structure and managed to fight his way to practice his passions for art and cinema and to attempt to genuinely form an alternative way of management in Nahda. Which contrast with other NGOs affiliated with the Jesuits that



are extremely hierarchal and bureaucratic and in a sense doing what is assumed to be the 'normal' and 'successful' method of organization and management. As he elaborates some times, "they could move me anywhere, whenever they like- I always make trouble." His position is always on the verge of being precarious. In Papadopoulos et al words "sustaining the capacity to work in insecure and highly precarious conditions by developing informal social networks on which one can rely" (2008.pxii) Similarly, Salam was appointed to teach in the faculty of fine arts, Helwan University, immediately after graduating. That is a position that many compete for, however he quit shortly after he was appointed and tried different jobs in design and video art and film making, but since then some would say "he never had a real stable job" and that choice is also alternated with a wide reliable social network that indeed is providing a sustainable living that is not tied or condemned by the formal division of work time and leisure time. It all becomes a self-owned time for creativity.

Nahda started off, as explained in chapter one, through personal friendships and it has been argued among the staff of Nahda in several incidents that this type of configuration have created centralized separate authorities in Nahda's activities, as some put it "each one became the owner of their own kiosk." I think the importance of the personalized relations in Nahda is essential, otherwise it becomes just like any other job, where a person is easily replaced by another. I have also mentioned that Nahda's staff is not hired based on their professional career resumes, and that their belief in Nahda's spirit is more essential. And thus before hiring any new staff members, they have to volunteer for few months until they are fully incorporated with the rest of the members and their social and personal relations develop before their professional relations do. Another asset that comes with the 'personal' in this regard is how the Jesuits did only care for art because there were few figures who were interested in cinema and culture and due to their influences and continuous activities and attempts only then the general director of the Jesuits advocated the importance of the visual culture and how that is part of the social dimension of the cogeneration's involvement and mission. In another informal interview I have asked Sidhom, the general coordinator, Ramez the executive coordinator and Chamaa, his deputy. I asked them bluntly; has what was claimed of democratized management of Nahda been successful, did the intentional horizontalism pay off its worth, or we're just stuck now in a structurless institution spinning in a void? Victor answered rather reluctantly that, this was a

choice that we knew has no blue print to follow. This structure is based on very complex human relations now that you cannot easily disentangle and put an institutionalized structure instead. He said also that “it is progressing, very slowly and it is finding its way in micro steps, but we are willing to go somewhere we cannot yet fully imagine”.

With variation, Salam centrality in the choir is also out of friendship, most of the very first participants of the choir were in one way or another friends. Salam since 2002 has founded Tamye theater troupe (one of the very first independent theater groups, it recites revolutionary poetry of the 60’s and the 70’s then they turned to personal storytelling and composing their own songs ) with his friends in the faculty of fine arts, Helwan University, and other young talents. Two of the key musicians of the choir; Yara , accordion player and Shadi on the piano, were part of that troupe years before the choir started. As Salam says; “if not for their commitment and dedication, the choir would have not lasted”. Shadi describes the Choir project as “a theatrical production” and that theater needs a kind of seeing that is enhanced by the senses, “ to see everything and hear every sound in the background without deliberately focusing on them, it is sensing the configuration of the space and as a whole.” Shadi also speaks of how Salam’s centrality was an issue discussed among earlier groups of the choir; some were arguing that he should distribute the roles needed to keep the choir working. He also stresses that Salam never minded other people holding workshops instead of him. And from experience I held an experimental workshop without him and it was quite enjoyable like any other choir workshop, however my perception has shifted towards what moderating such an activity means. Although this experimental workshop had only ten to twelve participants which is a very small number compared to the usual numbers in the recent choir workshops. The moderation demanded a very spontaneous creative reaction to what comes out of the group. I have noticed that during most of the discussions their conversation is always directed to me. While I intentionally refused to take any authoritative gestures like standing to talk or discuss, we were seated in a circle all the time. The smaller number I think allowed an intimacy to develop in the sense that a big number shared their real first experiences in the choir; “ fear, shyness, not fitting”, not knowing how to find a way into the configuration of the choir’s friendships, how some people in the choir seemed too uptight to talk to , other seemed more like their type or just kind enough to socialize with complete strangers, other instances someone did not know who is running the workshop until

Salam signaled a silence sign. I have also shared with them my escapes to my friends in Nahda to avoid awkward moments of socializing for the first time. After the workshop I was overwhelmed with thanks from the people who attended some were genuinely happy and some of other sort were sort of uncomfortably flattering, I somehow sense that this type admiration is not because of the work we did in the workshop or the good time we had but is about my being “the leader” for this workshop, I sensed the aquisition of a certain capital just because I researched some games and interestedly listened and played with the group, when in my opinion they could have just as easily done that without me and still enjoyed their time and produced songs. Indeed then it seemed to me that there is no way out of having a ‘leader’ for the choir workshops, however reflecting back on it and regardless of the naming, I find that within the group emerges other leaderships or individuals capable of organizing, harmonizing and listening to those on their group, pulling or pushing the strings of thought to collectively mean something. In another sense, my or Salam’s centrality is defused in the times the groups is dispersed into smaller groups.

### **Nahda’s Independent Schools: Challenges of independence**

In the previous chapter I have brought forward Nahda’s structural issues, whether through its rationality to the Jesuits or battling bureaucracy as an NGO stating that they strive to operate more like a social movement. In this chapter I delve into more specific activities which reflect and help analyze how the managerial structure of Nahda influences and shapes its activities and more importantly how the activity coordinators in different ways embody and reiterate the attempt of horizontalism and in other ways revoke Sidhom’s centrality by their own centrality. The two activities are the oldest and the most recent projects Nahda had: Independent Cinema School which was founded in 2008 and the Animation School that has been working for less than a year since late 2013. Both projects are training/teaching based and both produce films.

Hanafy tells the story that sums up why an independent cinema school was needed. Although the following is not a precise historical account of the cinema industry in Egypt, however I am keen of how this reflects on his own subjectivity and perception of the industry and that will help analyze and understand the positioning of the independent cinema school that

he intended and nurtured. explained that working for the state means that you apply their discourse and ideology, this includes working in filmmaking, since Abdel Nasser's time, when a Cinema Council was founded that had a nationalist agenda of artistic production was dominant. Afterwards and with Sadat's era and the open market policy, filmmakers were left without a backup from the government and that was a crisis. "The government is no longer the caring mother for the cinema industry." With the commodification of everything, came also cinema and production companies only concerned with making the highest revenue, art and aesthetic of the cinema industry deteriorated. So with the withdrawal of the state from supporting the film industry and almost everything else, in addition to merging the cinema syndicate with the media syndicate with much larger in numbers, this resulted in an underrepresentation of the cinema industry in legal representation. Accordingly the free spaces were closing down on those who were interested in cinema but were not able to break through the monopoly of the private producers who also owned most of the screening houses and dismissed any attempts of creativity and innovation as they did not produce enough profit. He adds that civil society as always steps in where the state withdraws. Same for the Cinema especially with the emergence of the digital cameras and how it facilitated for individuals in civil society to open up chances for emerging filmmakers who could and did not want to be part of the commercial stream of cinema. According to him, in 2005 there were only three places that he could go to, after not being able to study in the national cinema institute, and to say the least these three places were the only which had digital cameras; a Swedish institution, which was very closed and only utilized the camera for their own workshops and productions, and an NGO that had very long lists of booking for the camera in the sense that he could possibly wait three years to get the camera for his own film. And then there was Sidhom, who had a digital camera and was for long known for his interest and passion for cinema. To make a long story short Hanafy says: "there was a societal need for an alternative route for cinema, the national council for cinema would require you to be a graduate of the national cinema institute so it is exclusive to a certain class, and there wasn't much choices. The Jesuits' attention to visual culture happened to coincide with a time when the technology was emerging and the societal demand and need yearned for another way out". Sidhom had no money to offer to a film production but had a camera and an editing unite. By that time the idea of a zero-budget film has been heard internationally. He threw away all his previous scripts and choose a script that did not require a budget but only available tools, and the

story for him was not very convincing and not as artistic as he would have liked it to be but for him it was a much needed statement that films can be made without funds and extraordinary budgets. As he says “I had to prove it is possible, if you do not have a first film no one will help you make a second”. He continues to elaborate that he started to realize that the issue was about compilation of the experience of making independent films that reflected the passions and ideas of their makers not of the commercial producers’, or the state’s agenda. An independent film maker would struggle to find tools and funds to make a film, and then go through a whole process again with a huge gap of time in between, so the production and the influence is dispersed but along the process a filmmaker establishes a network of this editor, or that camera man or those actors and as he explains “their chemistry works well together, and independent cinema like any other industry you will have to work with those who you get along with”. He happened to know of the unique experience of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, a German film maker who is most prolific in the New German Cinema. He emerged in 1970’s and died in 1983. In a little over fifteen years he produced over forty feature-length film and a substantial work in theater as well. Watson elaborates that the films were intellectually, emotionally and aesthetically challenging but many of his films were ranked most important in the post-war cinema internationally, he also depended and incorporated much of his personal private life reflexively in his films as well all the political and social aspects of his world at the time. Fassbinder’s cinema entangled with reflexivity and a different understanding of the self and other through filmmaking. Mitchell reflects on Fassbinder’s films saying they “give the lie to this assumption through a sustained assault on any attempt to exist for oneself or one’s own or to get one’s way. We are ourselves insofar as those selves are already emptied out into the world and striated through a multitude of relationships” (Philips,2008,p.135) This analysis of one of the ideas that Fassbinder brings is essential in creating an alternative stream in Egyptian cinema in the way it consciously realizes the complexity of a subject’s existence, and the inevitable sociality that creates the self. Students were encouraged to use that self-realization into their films and their stories, to speak visually of how this sociality and its contingency, and precarity unfold in minute details usually overlooked by the grand narrative mainstream cinema creates. And that was the technique and methodology that Karim took, he also refers back to Marxist theory saying that “every quantitative accumulation leads to a qualitative difference”. The idea behind the independent cinema school is to have ten or fifteen film maker graduate every year

and through that an alternative stream could be accumulated. What was different about Nahda and William as he puts it “he had no intention or desire for controlling or censoring the production, there was a sincere belief in the project and the space and equipment needed, and the selflessness needed to give all of that for free. Nahda offered legitimacy and credibility to the project and offered funds as well. There was a struggle to assign the project of the cinema school to Hanafy, the young filmmaker who is not a graduate of the official academia of the cinema institution. However it was intentional not to redeploy the academic strictness of the official cinema institution and to experiment with different schools and methodologies. He elaborates that he had to break some taboos about the film making like the need for advanced equipment, budgets all other technicalities and that is why his experience of a zero-budget film was the proof that it is possible and that all the great film makers that they study worked with much less advanced equipment and technology. “The problem is how our minds function not the lack or abundance of equipment ... and through this importunes the project went on” The idea is to twist conditions and preconceptions to make prove and pave a way for experimentalist methodology of expression. This claiming of new means of expression although with minimal budget and minimal equipment and technology it has rooted an existence of something different, this belief that within five years or so better technology will be available and affordable, and that is what happened nowadays in 2014 people make films using their mobile cameras, Karim says: “that a mobile camera now is better quality than the digital camera I used for my first film in 2005.” For him in his own words this movement is “an historical inevitability” the conditions, the needs, the historical and political temporal moments have all coincided to produce this project. To go back to Papadopoulos et al to re-invoke how I see the school as possible escape route, because “It usually begins with an initial refusal to subscribe to some aspects of the social order that seem to be inescapable and indispensable for governing the practicalities of life”(2008,p.xii) and that refusal to subscribe to the dominant and hegemonic order of filmmaking academically or commercially is just another way of identifying the escape that subverts social conditions without being named as such. The main methodology deployed in the school was a rejection of both academic expertise because that sort of knowledge production is divided to produce alienated experts who work separately for the benefit of capital, also working away from commercial popularity of story and plot. The participants of the school were encouraged to be personal and reflexive to own up to their expression and not deviate to what the

audience would want to see which indicates adopting the dominant discourses and reproducing it necessarily, to speak and express their own ideas and class and worries, this diversion brought about a radical edge to the independent cinema and with no censorship or attempts of control that production, it has become a platform of cooperation and free expression.

The independent cinema school is an outcome of certain ruptures in the socio-historical, economic and certainly political configurations. These configurations have in many ways influenced how the school is structured in ideology, in skills and practices. In my analysis it is because the school was one of the very first long term projects Nahda implemented, thus it sort of replicated the immediate centrality that was configured around Sidhom. However, I do not regard this centrality as intentional authoritative configuration of structure because his centrality is systematically defused into the various activities that have complete autonomy over how they run and construct their activities. So that centrality could be understood better in terms of mentorship that inspires ideological guidance not supervision and control. The next example of the animation school will validated my analysis in terms of their autonomy in choosing and configuring a different way of management and structure than the cinema school and any of Nahda's activities for that matter. Also in how a different temporality and coincidence with different formal and informal political events have brought to the animation school's attention a new necessity and possibility of new creative ways of constructing and running the school.

The Animation school in Nahda is closer to an artistic collective than an actual school. Saad the visual arts coordinator initiated the project as he finds a visible lack in the independent animation production in Egypt. Like the cinema school independence means a different content and technique outside the hegemony of the government and the market. It is also a form of free expression and social involvement within a less restrained experimental environment while maintaining aesthetic inventiveness as they use different tools and material in animation films , like sand , paintings and clay sculptures. Animation in Egyptian cinema markets is none-existent, the animation films consumed in Egyptian cinemas are either Pixar or Disney's productions. As for local production it is limited to children series that usually government produces through the television and media ministry. The school official statement in the project documents states that it is an independent school that works of all animation related skills and arts: characters, photography and filming, lightening, scenario writing , sound track, art history, criticism ,

interior design and all techniques of animation : Two dimensional , three dimensional , stop motion and motion graphic. This sort of organized training is very difficult to find outside the departments of fine arts universities and the cinema institute, although there are some courses offered in some of these fields yet they are usually unaffordable for a fresh graduate or a student. More significantly the school defines itself as: “a humanistic and artistic experience where it offers ways of subject formation to reach its fullest potentials and be useful to others in their societies. The school is a series of connected workshops based on experimentation and opening possibilities of making animation films.” Through attending some of the school’s workshops and while following the process and dynamics of the experience with some of the students, Saad and I became acquainted with what is more significant than the official narrative of the school. The school started by inviting a group of youth some are students or graduates of arts faculties and some are middle aged residents of Faggala, where Nahda is located, who are interested in arts. Saad intended to find ways to involve the school participants more profoundly than just being recipients of trainings run by professional trainers. So the idea was to find those who have knowledge and skill to teach different topics from the participants and have them teach their own session to the group. This approach helps in many ways to develop the skills of those who teach through practicing and at the same time contributes to a more horizontal and collective spirit among the group. Moreover, after attracting more participants of different ages and backgrounds two more schools sprang out: Young youth animation school for High school students from the area aged twelve to seventeen, and children’s animation school from six to eleven. The program, curriculum and methodologies used for these two schools are fully prepared and implemented by the original animation school participants. Saad says that they do that without being paid as volunteers, because they were taught for free so it is continuation of the process to train younger generation for free as well. He adds that this way develops a sense of responsibility, belonging and giving back within the participants. And they are as much developing their skills as trainers and teachers and are encouraged to freely engage and attempt experimental methods. This, in my analysis, is a space that many youth strive to be in, because it is unlike being bossed around and limited by order and structure whether in governmental academia or commercial jobs or even professional trainings offered by cultural organizations. It is worth noting here that the animation school has no preset curriculum. The space and possibilities created in the school are stimulating and encouraging for exploration, creativity and



new imaginations. A ‘commune-like’ environment is what it is like in the school, with humor and hard work they envision and embody a place where as many of them put it: “enjoy each other’s company and are happy to be here”. The group decided that there will be no more smoking in the workshop room, but if somebody does s/he will pay one pound. The money that is collected, because most of the groups are smokers, is reallocated to buying coffee and tea for everyone in the school. When they needed a new computer screen, every one shared an amount of money depending on their capacity and together they bought one. Those who have knowledge and capacity share with the group with nothing in return except fulfillment of their sharing. In over eight months of work and production of over twenty short animation films the school spent about five thousand Egyptian pounds equivalent to something like seven hundred US dollars, which in reality are one month salary of any project director of any funded project in any other cultural institution. Such small things, which are done without the slightest authoritativeness, are an attempt to configure new social relations. Relations that are not premised on division of roles or hierarchies or money, but are steeped into mutual dedication and enjoyment.

In this chapter I attempted to draw on the makings and manifestation of my interlocutor’s subjectivities and how in their seemingly spontaneous actions and relations and narrative explicate a different imagination of how things, work and enjoyment can be. Through these cases, I find plausible that a new way of imagining and attempting to do things differently is very much possible, but it is not necessarily an act of radical revolution or didactic inspirationally glazed products. It is in the internalized process that slowly works within the people that lead them to rediscover and interrogate their perception and imagination of themselves and the world. This is a complex process because it is not just about the individual, but it is interwoven within communities, spaces and times. This process is an essential factor of forming social imagination which “can never be adequately expressed in the form of explicit doctrines because of its very unlimited and indefinite nature. That is another reason for speaking here of an imaginary, not a theory.” (Taylor, 2002, p.107). This puts us well into the argument of the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

### Escapes of Everydayness

The processes of forming social imaginaries is the focus of this chapter where I argue that these process resonate with what Zibechi defines as “the internal dynamic of social struggle” which intertwines social relations between social groups, as ways of guaranteeing survival “both materially and spiritually.” (2010,p.4) Ethnographically I follow the practices of the members of the two cultural spaces: Nahda and The Choir Project which I consider alternative to the hegemony of most of the institutions an ordinary individual would go through in Cairo. I analyze what their practices entail in terms of resistance and transformation. Zibechi elaborates that by the time the dominant system declines, a new world grows. This growth is what I trace in the incoherent details of parts of their lives that houses and enriches possibility of rupturing the hegemonic order of things either socially, politically, and intellectually. I use another theoretical argument that Thomas Nail explicates through the philosophy of Deleuze, Guattari and Zapatistas. I focus on the third fold of his argument that is focused on “the body politic and the process of participation”. This argument emphasizes ways in which non-representational resistance or revolution functions. He raises these key questions “Is there a new type of body politic that would no longer be predicated on the party-body of the nation-state, the market-body of capital, or the territorial-body of the vanguard? Under what conditions would such a political body operate?” (2012,p.110). I hypothetically consider the conditions in these two cultural spaces as a possibility where such nonconventional political bodies emerge. As he further argues “that in order to understand the structure and function of participation in this revolutionary body politic we need to understand the unique relationship it articulates between three different dimensions of its political body: its conditions, elements and kinds of subjects” (2012,p.111). Thus those three elements would be what I manifest in exploring these cultural spaces. The chapter concludes that even though the resistances of the subjects in these cultural spaces seem removed of the Zapatistas for example, however the point here is not to draw comparisons but to look at similar processes of resistance and organization. A sort that Zibechi would call “the most revolutionary thing we can do” (2010,p.4) which is to struggle to create innovative social relationships “that are born of the struggle, and are maintained and expanded by it.” (ibid)

## Outside Institutionalization

Nahda's cinema school is an entity with conflicting opinions and visions around the impact of institutionalization on itself remains debatable. In some practical aspects Karim's opinion remains valid in thinking of how this project could optimize its possibilities and potentials. And Nahda's management is still rightfully concerned with its attempt of horizontal management while negotiating the pressing bureaucracy of its structure. And for me the argument remains that getting projects to 'just work' is a rather idle way of being, but to invest in 'how' projects could work is much challenging a direction to take. Falling into patterns of ultimate production and bare-minimum productivity is equally comfortable. And that comfort of being on either side of this polarization is a place where no struggle happens, where resistance is subsumed into reproduction of either status-quo. Thus in this section I step outside of the institution to explore the experiences of the graduates of the cinema school and what has shifted for them outside this space.

Magdy has graduated from the cinema school the 2<sup>nd</sup> group in 2009. He is the first and only graduate to make a long feature film until now. I spoke with Magdy to understand better what was the experience of the school for him and what has it done to him in his life and work. His first response was;

“what makes the school unique is not just what is taught but the selection of the students that reflect the spirit of the person who chooses them, they have a spirit of a well-rounded team. The team is put under tests and challenges, for example; technically, artistically and even philosophically on different levels. What the students get as methodology is very limited but alternative. There is no specific curriculum that Karim implemented, and there were very few actual films in Egypt that have been done with the same methodology that we learned in the school.”

In my analysis, I find that the lack of a model for making alternative films was liberating in the sense that they did not have a grid to measure up to and the experimentality of the methodology deployed in the school is in a way liberating filmmakers from expectations and from the path and standards already paved and scripted by commercial cinema. However, Magdy elaborates that “not having a model is not reassuring for a new student/filmmaker, which was a fundamental issue”. With this unease of not knowing for sure if films will work or not that way the cinema school started building the methodology and the model simultaneously. Magdy's lack

of assurance in not having a model is best explained through Taylor's argument about social imaginaries and how individuals' subjectivities are consumed into the "normal and right. That the feet are below the head is how it *should* be." (My italics, 2002, p.96). But step by step the rupture of this 'should' happens. Each month the students had a practical assignment to apply the discussed method and sometimes these exercises produced short films, so with accumulation of new tools and skills and confidence they would produce their low or zero budget graduation film, he adds that "these mini models were making a way that hopefully someone would someday make a long feature film and set an alternative model for filmmakers. Indeed, seven years later there are two model films implementing the same methodology, Hanafy's and now mine". What is this methodology then? And how different is it from other methodologies.

Magdy said he did not talk about this issue before, he elaborated that the methodology is based on several axes the first thing is ,to use his own wording, that a film is "a one man unit" meaning the filmmaker is responsible for all aspects of the film, its idea, artistic vision, script, visual aesthetics etc. In a way this is to become fully immersed and to own up to the film, not treat it as an external entity handled by experts. The second component is that there is no supervisor what so ever, no guidance or censorship or hierarchical order, there are no imposed restrictions whether on production or ideology. That brings forth the third component which is the way the filmmakers organize. Magdy's words were "team work", as overrated as that word is I think it's a lingual diversion from what he described. He described it as everyone who joins the crew of the film has to believe in the film and its project, they are usually small in number and of the same age more or less, they bond over developing the different aspects of the film together not through their professional expertise but through expressing themselves in the group and creating a way to work together. I pushed this further and asked him, if the filmmaker/director is working with the team according to his own vision and perception of the film, would not that be a supervision or control of the team or does the director make these decisions collectively with the team? He answered rather challengingly with long pauses and intensity in formulating his experience in actual words that "of course decisions are not collective all the time, at the end its someone's film, someone's vision". In other words for me it meant that the team does not construct that vision with the director, this is a personal and reflexive process that the filmmaker goes through. He also added that "the team believes that this person has to express his vision and they facilitate that and when it is someone else's film s/he would do the same." I find in this

description many possibilities, the team that is formed around experiences not expertise grows to find their own terms of being and working together. With each believing in the necessity of expressing one's self, they in turn create a supportive and empowering network to enable that expression to happen through the film and its makings. And at the core of that is friendship, which is different from "chemistries" because it is built because of going through the same exercises and challenges and foremost their belief in the experimentality of the experience and the unspoken solidarity that backs up their independence. These are the sort of innovative relations that Zibechi describes the dispersed power of resistance and how it overrides state power, and in the independent cinema's case these relations and networks maneuver state and capital's dominance on the industry and cautiously breaking a per-imagined way of working together and making films that speak reflexively of their own subjectivities. However, Magdy's take on this group formation problematizes the idea more, he said that "the group or team is chosen by someone who has a spirit, so the ones who are chosen he must have seen that they are suitable, willing and ready to go through this experience, so it is not necessary that the fifteen students will be or remain friends, but at least they would always have something in common from this experience". His experience is certainly different from the experiences of later iterations, because in 2009 the school was still new and there were still very few opportunities and spaces but most importantly the first groups in my analysis were in a contingent situation, they were starting from scratch and that brought a sense of urgency to their relationships, because they used to be few who basically had nothing but each other's talent and support, these are the relations "that are born of the struggle, and are maintained and expanded by it." (Zibechi,2010,p.4) . The following iteration had different dynamics as Magdy elaborate: "The model was established and gaining strength and exposure after the 4<sup>th</sup> iteration, the school's films were screened in international festivals and acquiring attention and audience... the impossible became doable". This means that the relative reassurance of the validity of this type of cinema has impacted in many ways the dynamics of relation between older and newer independent filmmakers. In the way that a wider variety of personalities makes it inevitable for clicks to form between different groups. These clicks for Magdy are "unpredictable and uncontrollable". To go back to this reassurance of the independent cinema, I asked him was the aim of the school to reach the international film festivals or to create an alternative stream all together from the commercial cinema? He said rather insightfully that "the school was creating a space for the independent cinema to exist". In

hindsight I think within the given cultural circumstances, it is always necessary to gain such validations by participating in international films and so on to be accepted and known more widely, which is in some aspects essential for both recreating the experience and maintaining a profile that would survive the competition for very limited funds, building this profile about the school also helps the graduates to find other opportunities outside the institution. A concern remains valid, is Nahda training filmmakers for skills to end up exporting them into the mainstream cinema, and how is it possible to avoid mainstreaming the alternative? And in the midst of these conflicting intentions, what becomes of the livelihood of these filmmakers? Possibly as he said: “ the school produced fights , films, failures, strong believers in independence ,success , festival awards, those who left the industry all together and those who worked in commercial cinema... at the end what it produces is not controllable or definite”. What to do about the indefinite outcome of the school? That is a major question for Nahda as an institution. Certainty, predictability and accountability are required by funders to sustain this project. However I find that that this indefinite outcomes again fertile spaces of potentials, because not having a standardized graduate of the school basically makes the school less like a machine or a factory and more like an *imaginarium*, a place devoted for imagination.

Another dimension of Magdy’s experience outside the institution is making his feature film. When I asked him was it easy for him to finds ways, opportunities, resources and supportive networks to produce his film, and whether Nahda could have provided a needed support beyond the school duration. He explained that Nahda provided a useful space that moves in the direction of the making alternative independent cinema existent, and that on its own is enough. Rather insightfully he elaborated that if we are to think of the cinema school from a capitalist perspective, and see it as a project that has to grow and progress and produce more, then certainly the project has more potential than what it endures now. However, he adds that is precisely against what the school is about, it is an artistic process that has its own pace, and I add also that it should not be restrained into what modernist production demands. Meanwhile more entities and filmmakers are contributing to the field of independent filmmaking as well, however there is nothing that organizes all the efforts. I asked Magdy if the, more or less ,random contributions will be enough, would what he called “natural flow” lead to something , can he possibly imagine a way of organizing these efforts to be intentional on the collective level not

just to fulfill personal achievement. He agreed that these efforts and contributions are not organized, but all of these independent filmmakers are basically expressing something of themselves, and that 'something' is changeable and not fixed all the time and it has its own rhythm. He added that the knowledge acquired or configured through the process is not static and accordingly "what will organize this chaotic formations of independent cinema, is its own spontaneity, what these people have is a strong belief in expression, and that's the common destination, but over-organizing will draw one path for expression, and this spontaneity will protect it from being co-opted, in other words that is what protects it from capital." I found his idea of what organizing can be very inspiring and is reflective of an imagination unoccupied by the hegemony of "what and how should be done". However to get more into what all these implications mean to the daily livelihood of the cinema school graduates, I told him that still, needing money and being part of capital is inevitable if not to make a film, it would be to buy a camera or to live somewhere and the usual day to day expenses. He answered rather passionately: "we have to twist the arm of capital to make a living without compromising our beliefs". I asked again how does this arm-twisting mechanism work? He talked about how the compilation of small successes of independent cinema has sort of proved "appealing and welcomed by a larger audience than before". But reality remains as he describes it: "independent cinema remains a commodity and capital does not leave a chance to make profit, even if this profit is minor. So capitalists decided to enter this game and welcome it or at least not fight it as much as before". Hardt and Negri's *Empire* resonates with Magdy's understanding of these condition. Basically as they put it "there is no outside to the world market, the entire globe is its domain" (2009,p.190) Magdy's acute awareness of the 'game' and the continuous luring into empire's capital is indeed stunning. Especially because of what Hardt and Negri describe as the 'smooth space' of imperial sovereignty that which smudges out the boundaries and striation of modern boundaries, so the space where it practices its power becomes literally "everywhere and nowhere" (ibid). This is precisely why this could lead to ways in which capital could co-opt the filmmakers' independence and reincorporate them back into its system. I asked him what are the mechanisms and strategies independent filmmakers deploy to preserve their independence in that sense. For Magdy the increasing entities, either NGOs or Arab and international cultural institutions or even individual producers, which support independent cinema, are providing a way out of the capitalist hegemony over the industry. I point out that even these entities

especially institutions also get the money from bigger entities and do demand something in return for supporting filmmakers. He agrees but says, with rather a romantic belief, that what they demand in return is “our own presence as independent filmmakers, what they get in return is the presence of such content and the presence of us in and of itself”.

What is independent cinema then and how does he identify with it? That was the basic pressing question that is needed to fundamentally understand this configuration of relation and why is it worth the everyday struggle. As I asked Magdy this question he was slightly offended that I have in a way identified him as independent filmmaker. He strictly said: “I do not identify myself as independent filmmaker certainly, I identify my films as independent films.” I was honestly confused because in his spontaneous language and use of words as it is evident here he does speak of himself as independent filmmaker, so what is the difference? He elaborates that “independent filmmakers oppose the market and go nowhere near it and perceive capital as the absolute evil, as for me if I could ever find a production company that would let me work my way even if it is capitalist I would do that, I want to have more capital to work on my own and make a living out of my films, however when I say my film is independent it means that it does not have a huge capital or money, I do the film myself with all its details as described before”. This dichotomy is of a confusing sort, it seems that I have built up the expectations that independent cinema is resisting and now it sounds like it is co-opted into capitalism. To clarify, Magdy is one example, and what he elaborated latter is making a low budget film and making profit, or as he conceives of it as capital, will allow this extra money to produce two films not one later on.

The other example is two other graduates of the school who have started a production company with two other filmmakers and they do not want to grow in capital just for profit as much as to grow in resources to support and produce more independent films. They are also partners in producing Magdy’s first film. The compromise is always evident, like many artists who do a job they do not entirely agree with artistically or ideologically to make some money to facilitate their living or to save to start their own projects. This is understandable in my opinion but to Magdy this is a deviation: “my belief is that I will make a way that it will not compromise my belief through my own steps, my film being artistic and not commercial does not mean that the audience would not like it or that It will not communicate with them, when my first film is in the cinemas, I bet on how much it will reach and communicate with the audience and that it will



succeed and make money to make other films”. However, this issue comes down to basic understanding of commodity and capital. To elaborate I use Marx’s analysis that it is dangerous to have money not circulating, if it stagnates it has no value. “Commodity – Money – Commodity” in both cases, whether Magdy or those who he criticizes for doing work only for the money, it is basically producing commodities which are basically their labor power (making independent films, montage hours for a TV channel, shooting commercials) to sell them, to accumulate money then transform it again into commodities (new independent films, equipment and cameras, living necessities and so on). The other fold in Marx’s concept is from the capitalist side, that which is known as “Money – Commodity – Money”. This applies also in either case of commercial cinema or the cultural institutions that fund filmmakers. For commercial cinema Magdy explained it best that a capitalist does not leave a chance to make profit even if marginal. They give money to produce a commodity (film), in the process a production company would certainly compromise the content and aesthetics of the film so that when it is screened it would appeal to most of the audience and make more money. What is slightly less obvious is how this process works for the cultural institution. What they get in return is not only the independent filmmakers’ mere ‘presence’ as Magdy thinks, but what this ‘presence’ entails is what is precisely commoditized and turned into money again. Usually and from exposure to the funding world pouring into Cairo’s cultural scene, most of the cultural institutions get funds from major institution like (the European Union cultural grant schemas, USAID, the British council, etc.) then the institutions make smaller grants for artists and filmmakers, the very foundation of these cultural institution existence and operation, precisely their jobs and capital, is premised on the existence of these artists and filmmakers. To give a sense of what sort of films this configuration of relations and circumstances produce can, I will briefly designate Magdy graduation film from the school in 2009. The film is a ten minutes short feature film, called “Cream Cake- *Kieka bel krema*”. The film opens on huge garbage dump in Cairo, the camera takes us slowly through the spaces while we hear a single female joyful voice singing a slow intriguing folkloric song about the feast and making cookies and dressing in new cloths. The camera is embodying a vision of someone walking into the space without having any panoptic angles of vision. A girl is setting on the ground making a big necklace out of empty plastic bottles; a guy comes near to her they chat very minimally in words but their emotions bursts through the limited script. She then gives him few plastic bottles which he takes and

climbs up to the street from the dumb. He meets a guy on a semi- wrecked carriage and gives him the bottles in exchange for money then notices that the carriage driver has some whipped cream on his face, so he tells him and the carriage driver removes it with his sleeve and show him the cream cake he found and using his hand slices a piece and gives it to the garbage collector. He takes it back to the girl, they eat it very pleasantly in the midst of the garbage as if sitting in a garden, he then asks her if she got her period... she answers carelessly and sarcastically “ it will come whenever, where will it go!” then she changes the subject lightly and asks him: “ didn’t he have any cookies... I love cookies.” The story could be very normative heterogeneous drama and fetish of the struggle and hardship of the poor. In fact many commercial films have dealt with ‘poverty and illegitimate pregnancy’ in way that is poorly melodramatic or extremely sexist or moralistically condemning. What Magdy did is focusing on the subtleness of human experiences, of simple joys and how almost the entire film is focused on what they do and what that entails: the singing, the plastic bottle necklace, the cake. All these visual vocabularies enable a more intricate perception to unravel with the film without being dictated or disciplined into pre-set categories and expectations of how the poor are like. This in my analysis is what makes his film independent because it breaks away from dominant cinematic engagements that end up reducing the social into fetish commodities. What is also significant is that Magdy’s narrative does not claim a representation of the poor, it actually maneuvers this entrapment through many aspects, like: the extremely short script that leaves space and possibility for one to think and contemplate of the visuality of the film without being shoved with statements from the characters, also not agonizing the characters through pushing upfront their issues like in a manifesto. On the contrary even when a ‘crisis’ arises through a potential unwanted pregnancy it is in a sense pushed off the characters shoulder to invoke the focus again on the mundane conversation and the excitement about the cake to carve out a moment of joy and content in very cruel and contingent circumstances.

In my understanding, when I asked Magdy what is social imagination to him he said that “the social and humanistic crisis is basically the dichotomy between right and wrong, that I always need to control myself to do the right thing all the time, in my opinion this dichotomy is a trick. I do not think there is a path a person makes to choose between two pre-set paths of right and wrong.” So then what he meant and admitted that when filmmakers do something for the money is a deviation, he actually was saying that “doing what you do not believe in will not get

you to do what you do believe in” and he adds that “nobody is completely truthful, no matter how much we try to be something there is a part of us that we avoid, this choices we are stuck in between are a social mind trick.” In many ways Madgy was an example that embodied many of the challenges that an independent filmmaker would face outside Nahda. What is significant is the personal dilemma of making a living and making their films and the creative ways they use to maneuver. What is even more significant is the networks of relationships and the unspoken solidarity that was subtly implied in his narratives, whether the crew who are friends and also filmmakers or producers, the support and belief in each other’s visions and expressions. So this recognition that there is no “out” of the hegemony unless continuously carving out new ways is where I find resistance, change and revolution. This is where imagination of other worlds is manifested. I define this as process of continuous ruptures which are defined best by Zizek: “a revolutionary process is not gradual process but a repetitive movement, a movement of repeating the beginning, again and again” (2009,p.45). In the next part many aspects of this kind of resistance will manifest through the Choir Project as well, in a way they bring new ways of looking and finding potentials of revolutions without actual revolution in the details of what would seem ordinary and normalized.

### **Experimental Workshop**

The choir experimental workshop was the first to be conducted without Salam leadership or any of the key musicians with previous choir members. Although Yara, the accordionist had made choir workshops for youth through NGOs activities in different cities, but that experimental workshop was differently constructed . I conducted this workshop in February 2013 specifically for finding ways of discussing the theories I use in this research with my interlocutors in the choir. The workshop was entitled: “What Are They Saying ?!” refereeing to what the people of the choir are saying in the narratives of their songs and in their being in the choir. I did the usual for any choir workshop, booked a room, made a poster with the information of the workshop and the only difference is that it was not open to public as I only invited the choir members on our Facebook page. Ten members participated three of them had not attended any choir events since 2012. I started by a movement exercise just to energize the group and ignite anticipation. Then we played a theatrical game called “The jungle of sounds” which is to pair every two participants, one will shut their eyes and follow the distinct sound the other one

makes, move around the room and try to follow the sound. As playful the game was, it also helped surface a lot of feelings for the participants, myself included. What these exercises in general, and that last one in particular “The jungle of sounds”, is basically sort of a push to experience feelings through the body first, which open the individual and the group to the feeling that are not invoked mentally. For example Zaina when she shut her eyes to follow the sound I made for her to follow alone without the group, she said she felt very scared like “the walls of the room has disappeared and that one could fall off in any step” But after few minutes of playing and pumping into other people and hearing the surrounding voices and the laughter, she said she felt that “ it is ok, even if there are no walls, this crowded togetherness will protect me from falling, I felt safe”. Mai also said that she was worried about finding the voice or tripping and falling but, just like her first time in the choir, she felt that she has to keep trying to reach the voice that pulls her whether internal or external. These feelings and experiences were shared sitting in circle together, which bring us ultimately to the everyday and sharing the frustrations of the everyday, and how in our everyday we conceal our tension and not speak about these frustrations to power, we whisper or make noise and we do underground art. We sat in a circle after the game and I have asked the group to write, in twenty seconds, the first thing that came to their minds when I said a word. The first word was ‘Happiness’, and I choose this concept because many of my interlocutors in the choir have reasoned their presence in the choir with being happy among the group so I wanted to understand how they identify happiness and also this raises thoughts regarding affect politics and the issue of joy. The groups immediate responses were read without discussion one after the other, so the result was an extended phrase of immediate articulations. ‘ Happiness’ to the group is “ an endless treasure; drinking tea with milk on a sunny morning preferably if it’s a day off work; when there is a new choir workshop, when it is sunny but slightly cool and I’m about to see someone special; my friends; happiness is the essence of life; happiness is the rare feeling we only find among those who we love; my family and my friends and the choir workshops; happiness is music; happiness is sleeping and my puppies around me; happiness is a pill in the ‘land of hypocrisy’<sup>5</sup>. The Second word was ‘ Imagination’, which is basically my attempt to figure out how they think of imagination and how does that coincide or diverge from my theoretical framework of that concept, there responses

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<sup>5</sup> “ Land of Hypocrisy” is an old Egyptian Film where there was a magician who had pills that brought up certain morals in people when they took them, pills for honesty , courage, happiness, etc.

were: “imagination is to do anything without limitations or forced rules, it is perceiving things from a different dimension, keep imagining till it becomes a reality, imagination is a simulator, imagination is something spacious and unlimited and ungraspable, it is when I play with my son and I have to always imagine and improvise, my imagination is limited, my imagination is extremely open -“fashiekh” because I make scenarios in my head and live it in my imagination I sometimes feel that I’m not normal. The girl who said the last sentence then apologized for the word “fashiekh” because it is a slightly improper word in Arabic, equivalent to ‘fucking awesome’ in a sense, a guy next to her in his turn said his first impulse was “imagination, we fucking ruined it – Fashakhnah”. We laughed about the irony of their responses and someone said; “there isn’t a more expressive word.” However, Maged the documenter of the workshop who is not a member of the choir asked a very intriguing question: “is it something about our imagination of what is appropriate and inappropriate, why is it fine to say improper words while singing in the choir and performing, but apologizing for using them in your daily ordinary language!”. That was very insightful observation; it made me think of what sort of ruptures the choir creates? On many levels the ruptures break a supposed way of doing things. For example: the nonconventional construction of the songs, the fact that the voices are not trained or beautiful, and the freedom of expression that does not shy away from being inappropriate when the group chooses that. This brings us to the next word the group reacted to: “What is supposed- El mafroud” the word in Arabic has more significant connotation it extends from the word “Fard” which is equivalent to ‘must’ and also ‘duty’ but it also carries connotations of ‘Yafred’ which is equivalent to ‘impose’ and ‘Yaftared’ which is to ‘assume’. With a word that complex in what it really means their responses came diverse but all burdened with resentment of what it means to them. “El mafroud is the word I hate most because I like doing what I like and everyone tells me you’re not supposed to do that what will the people say about you, but I do not give a damn”, the next sentence Karam said “el mafroud is the tool or the excuse of any dictator or tyrant, whether in politics, at work, in the street or at home”, Amer a student in his early twenties said “*el mafroud* I’d do the things I love without rules or limitations.” Hady who is slightly overweight said “what is supposed is that I lose weight, lose weight, and lose weight” he did repeat it and it sounded cynically more dramatic in Arabic. He then laughed and everyone warmly laughed with him. Zaina said “we’re supposed to fucking destroy those who invented ‘el mafroud’ and I am supposed to punish myself when I catch myself saying ‘el

mafroud'. Maya who has a child said "I hate the word and I resented it all my life, but unfortunately I have to use it sometimes because I'm a mother now, but I know I shouldn't". Hassan is in his twenties and sarcastically said an old joke or catch phrase that "el mafroud is at the drycleaner's" by changing the last letter in Arabic with another 'el mafroud' would mean 'straightened' or 'ironed' which is used for clothes for example and the joke implies that what someone is trying to enforce on me is not valid or nonexistent. Sheren a single mother in her thirties said "el mafroud has taken its toll on us, we refuse to be humiliated by it". In many ways their responses are bringing forth a sense of constant struggle and friction with what is imposed either by social restriction or their circumstances. In their language, reactions, and sarcasm there is a visible urge of rupturing this hegemony. Maya the recent mother is the ultimate example for restrictive social imposition on personality, the dichotomy because what one personally believe that they should have to do anything they do not want, yet when 'motherhood' for example is enforced on their existence then they easily fall into their assigned responsibility for teaching morals and disciplining their children. In a sense in our everyday 'normal' life we conceal our frustrations and anger with the hegemony enforced on our very lives, we become 'good citizens' 'responsible mothers' and to speak 'properly' and as popularly understood in Egypt to "walk by the wall" not take any risks or burst in any sense. Thus the vulgarity that all of a sudden becomes unapologetically doable in the choir becomes an embodied rupture of the hegemony, even if it is temporary and brief. For Maya though she is aware of the imposition of that role on her by society and by her own very structures of subjectivity, yet through that awareness she makes attempts of not practicing that disciplining on her child. This brings us to the next word which is also a concept in this research "subjectivity", first the word has no immediate translation into Arabic but the closest possible meaningful translation was equivalent to 'character'- 'el shakhseyaa', most of the responses were far from relevant to how I construct the concept in this research because they mostly referred to a character of a person they like or admire or a role model, except for Hassan who said that whatever people make of him as a character is their own construction but it is not really who he is, in other words what people assume about someone is superficial and what a person really is, is what he believes himself/herself to be. The last word that I asked for their reactions about was "work", Maisa in her twenties said "work can't be done except if I'm in a good mood", Sheren said "work is only for the money", Hassan also said "work is to make money, but if I have money I don't want or need to work", Zaina a teaching

assistant in Cairo university said: “ work started again !” and enacted a crying voice that we have in one of the choir songs because it was February and the winter break was over. Hady said “whenever I look for work all I can find is to be an agent in call center” which is the most common job for undergraduates and fresh graduates in Cairo, usually extremely exhausting and overly demanding but youth go for it just to make a decent income with no qualification or experience except speaking and understanding English, which I have done myself when I first graduated. Amer also a student said “I keep looking for it”, Asmaa a high school student said “work is life, you can’t live without work, you can’t get married without work, you can’t even go out with friends if you don’t work” and I think work here is synonymous with money in her understanding. Michel who works in textile factory said “work is gloom, being bothered, gossip... lots of it , and backstabbing” , Amin a fresh graduate said “work is supposed and imposed on us to make money”, Karam said “ work is ...” and emulated the sound of a beep that t.v channels usually use to sensor curses in t.v shows. Heba who worked for many years as project manager for NGO projects said “I quit all my three jobs and decided to take a year off to figure out what I want”. Even though I find great deal of significance in what my interlocutors displayed, yet this sharing houses within it its own concealments, either that is steeped deep down that It is not even questioned by them, and there are their own biases towards they want to present of themselves to the group. However a little breakthrough might lead to a greater rupture in the order of things in the choir, and for my research it was satisfying and hopeful to enthusiastically see these cracks appearing and manifesting.

### **Connecting the Choir Project and Nahda: None Representational Politics and Resistance**

Nail brings forth an important aspect of anti-representational body politic in the way it “avoids the static character of the representational subject who can never change the nature of its ‘self’, but only by diffusing the self into an endless multiplicity of impersonal drives: a self in perpetual transformation. But without a pre-given unity of subjectivity.”(2012, p.15) In many aspects the Choir Project is a possible manifestation of such politics and resistance. Thus, let me dissect Nail’s point. First: avoiding a static character that positions itself as ‘the representative’ subject, one that claims an authority and legitimacy to ‘speak for and of’ a certain group. The choir ever since it started in 2010 has not had a singular group per se to represent, because the

groups constituting the choir over the years, are formed randomly through an open call on social media and through friendships and contacts with previous choir members, in addition to audience who liked the performance and decided to join in the following workshops. The process is very random. For example: Ahmed Tat , who is a web developer, was sitting on a coffee shop next to Rawabet Theater downtown where one the choir workshops was held. It was for only one day unlike other workshops. Tat saw the call for participation poster hanging on the wall in the area, he thought “ well that is right here, I’ll go in and see what happens”, he goes on telling the story :

“ I went in it’s a garage like space and nobody is asking me where am I going or stopping me , I went in and there were about a hundred people, jamming of music and there is a long queue lining behind the microphone to suggestively sing a tone for the new song – What is going on?, I sneaked into the queue and all the sudden I was in front of the microphone , I sang the words in my own melody and every one repeated after me. I was stunned it’s the first time I ever sing and I could not imagine that such a huge number of people would sing and repeat after me, a complete stranger.”

That is really how spontaneous and random the formation of the choir members is, Tat in the latest choir performance in December 2012 “Three Years” has become one of the funniest performers in the choir to the extent that for me singing standing next to him is sort of a magnified experience of the joy and fun of being in the choir. Yet this randomness is also not so random in terms of the networks of association that already exist. Indeed there is an unspoken practice of selection that takes place by virtue of the social geography of people and their networks of association. But there will always be a complete stranger like Tat who would just walk in without previous calculations or associations and his/her presence will remake the dynamics of the choir as well.

To link this process of formation to Nahda , although in Nahda it is not as random as in the choir but the members as I mentioned usually start as volunteers and they might remain so and their becoming a staff member is not condition by their level of expertise or professional capabilities as much as by how well they perceive the spirit of the place and form good relations with the rest of the members. So in both cases, whether random or selective, different way the point here remain about breaking the routine of practice that is expected from both spaces. An NGO would look at your resume and experience not your friendship and potential. A choir would choose the talented musician and beautiful voices. But as apparent this is not the case for both Nahda and the choir.



Over all the groups of the choir are not formed through a selection process, accordingly there is no 'self' to be maintained and represented in that sense. In each group that is formed in each workshop randomly, even the 'selves' that constitute the group are diffused into a collective multiplicities of energies. In other words, each 'self' of the group comes in with its social status, professional, ideological, political and religious background and subjectivity. However, in the various processes, infusion of ideas, collective playing, singing and laughter those 'selves' ease away from being a representational body enduring all these aspects of their subjectivities. It is needed to clarify here that I do not mean that they completely abandon their subjective selves, but this division is one that I believe from personal experience is based on a sort consensus that is triggered through the joyful process the group goes through. The mere fact that this decision of coming to the choir's workshop is an act of escape from the strictness of the job or the social traditions or just the usual routine of life. This act implies a willingness to step out of the self into the collective multiple bursts of energies. Second: that the 'self' is in continuous transformation without being prescribed into "a pre-given unity of subjectivity", the choir project's 'self' as an entity is continuously transformed through the changing groups who constitute it as an entity and they also constitute that narrative the choir produces in its songs in every workshop. Moreover, the choir as a space and a process that houses and enables multiplicities does not assume or push for a unity of subjectivities of its members, what it does in a way is best explained in the language of a multitude, on a smaller scale of course, a multitude that does not reduce difference into sameness or even assume or suppose their similarity in the first place. Noha, a fellow researcher and a recent audience member describes the choir's performance as "coherent multiplicity of different flavors."

Another aspect Nail brings forth is how anti-representational political bodies alter the representational politics that is based on assuming an unchanged identity. Instead anti-representational political bodies "leave the political domain radically open to potential political transformations and peoples yet 'to come' (2012,p.114). I use this understanding to elaborate on the positionality of the choir as a project that is always open to re-makings and transformation of the 'peoples' who constitute it as entity and as a narrative. The most evident example for such openness is that of the situation that arose in the last workshop "Three Years". The situation was

that previously and directly after the 25th of January revolution in 2011, the choir produced a song called “The life of the Square” which was basically a compilation of the chants and slogans of the revolution. Understandably, these came out of an urge of the participants to document and commemorate the struggle and the demands of the revolution. For example: “ tell the ruler in his palace, you’re a thieves who exploit Egypt”, “in the parliament there are businessmen who exploited the workers’ rights”, “ change, freedom and social justice”, “the prices soared till we sold out furniture” . For me when I first listened to the song I thought it is to keep alive what it was all about, and act as a reminder. But among these chants there was one that said “they taught us in schools that our Egyptian Army is the protector – They taught you in the military to protect the people and freedom”. Throughout the past 3 years since 2011 and when SCAF ruled Egypt who violently dispersed sit-ins and attacked demonstration, huge number of killings, and arrests of activists, that almost became a daily experience. It became challenging for a considerable number of the choir members to keep singing that line. In the workshop those who opposed singing that line, including myself, shared their objection, some of the participants agreed, some were neutral and some opposed. What Salam did was rather insightful to how the choir houses so many differences. He told us that a narrative is open to interpretations, singing that line does not necessarily mean glorifying the army or forgetting what this institution did, it could be understood as farce speaking of illusions about the army or a supposition of what armies should do. In hindsight, I thought the song was a sincere narrative that came out of the members who made it at that time and under certain circumstances temporally and politically. In the end we decided to sing the song as it is and let the audience make up their own mind about it, especially that the song comes with other songs that have different political positions like “ where is the tank, who killed us” and “ No to long live the president and we will not go down without a fight”. “The ‘peoples’ yet to come” of the choir might have something different to say in the narratives they will produce, thus even if the choir’s narrative is viewed as a representation, it will only be a result of certain configurations of time, space and events, which are forever changing and so are the ‘peoples’ .

The question now becomes how to make sense of both spaces and what are the links that I see in my analysis to keep juxtaposing them in this chapter. Nail again brings a new way of making sense of these political bodies, he explains that “Participatory political body [is] a set of

political practices constitutive of a social order that incorporates a maximal degree of mutual and conflictual transformation. A participatory body politic is a social order that both transforms the subjects and objects that constitute it and is equally transformed by them.” (2012,p.116) Again let me break down the points and relate them to both the Choir Project and Nahda. The first point Nail makes is basically a practice of politics that is participatory and combines the optimum extent of both “mutual and conflictual transformations”. These practices are evident also in Nahda, in the way each coordinator chose to run or moderate in their activity differently, some would deploy an informal centrality or hierarchy as in the cinema school and the theater case, some position themselves as one among the group and adopt collective management as in the Animation school. In other words, Nahda as an institution does not force or presuppose an ideal way of coordinating and managing the activities, some coordinators strongly oppose the others’ way of coordination, some think collective management is a myth, and some think that centrality hinders the potential of the activities’ growth because it relies on a single person. In my analysis, each discourse of these has its own advantages and limitations but the most significant thing is that no one is forced or instructed to do other than what they see fit for their activities, and in this multiplicity lies its very strength and revolutionary stance as non-hegemonic, as well as non-homogenous yet is housed again in a multitude like configuration despite disagreements. As for the choir’s case, the same point is apparent especially in the previous example of conflicting narratives and their transformation, what is more in this example appears if we take Nail’s concept further. He adds that these practices of participatory politics form “a social order that both transforms the subjects and objects that constitute it and is equally transformed by them.”(2012,p.116) It becomes necessary here to draw the parallel between this concept and Althusser’s notion of simultaneity that I introduced very early on in my conceptual framework. This essentially why I consider the Choir Project and Nahda , alternative. Alternative to most of the institution that an ordinary individual would most likely go through in their lives in Cairo: hierarchical disciplining schooling system, regulatory and moralistic religious discourses, nationalist and patriotic political activism, or modernist developmentalist civil society which are in one way or the other remain is the array of representational politics .

These two spaces are continuously open to transform the individuals who constitute them and be transformed endlessly by the changing flow of these individuals. Nahda and the Choir Project are consistently transformative and transforming. Nail insightfully explains:

“consistency is not just another word for static predictability, it is precisely the opposite. A revolutionary body politic is consistent insofar as it sustains a constructive rupture or break from the intersection of representational processes... is continually transformed by the various elements and agents that compose it.” (2012,p.116)

## **Chapter Five**

### **An Attempt Towards Conclusions**

#### **The Issue of Repetition**

Throughout this research i manifested in each chapter aspects of Nahda and The Choir Project presence through four different and intersecting concepts which are basically: Space and subjectivity, subjectivity and imagination, imagination and everydayness. The idea behind such framing of the research is to avoid mere comparison or evaluation between the two spaces and to rather explore their different configurations that make visible a potentially different imagination of how the world can be otherwise. Moreover and most importantly this framing and use of concepts are not intended in any sense to claim an ordered or cause/effect relations, yet again they remain a rhizome like assemblage that intersects and deviates and disperses, producing and reproducing each other. These assemblages are configuring, reconfiguring and transfiguring their own limitations and abstractions through the understanding of the processes of these two spaces. How both are not outside hegemonic systems of neoliberal economy and structure, yet in a sense their processes are best described by Turner's analysis of ruptures and liminal phases.

In Turner's argument the liminal phases goes back to order to constitute its own hegemony or get co-opted back into the previous order. The reiteration of 'Order- Disorder- Order' seems to be the dominant pattern and how the liminal phase and ruptures are normalized back into order seems to be always the case. Some may see this repetition as running in circles as an endless utopic quest. Repetition then becomes the issue, will alternative ever remain alternative without being co-opted and normalized back into the hegemony of the dominant social, intellectual and political schemas. The concept of repetition is most discussed through the philosophy of Derrida, which is often contrasted with Deleuze's concept of repetition. First, let me unpack the arguments theoretically then elucidate how they manifest in the choir's and Nahda's case. Derrida's 'the eternal return to the same' is dissected in Bearn's essay Differentiating Derrida and Deleuze. Basically what Deleuze differentiates is that what is

repeated may be apparently similar or identical that if a thing is repeated then it is fundamentally different from the other thing that it repeats. Ultimately there is always slight difference in repetition. In the Choir's case the repetition of its repertoire may seem a similar iteration of songs that carries certain narratives and discourses and even aesthetics. For example: Since 2010 each workshop would produce a new song or two. When it comes to performance everyone who is new would have to learn the old songs that they have not composed or contributed to their construction. The Choir's repertoire throughout the years has increased and with the favorite songs that continued to be chosen and sang there were other songs that are left out. The repetition of the choir's repertoire makes it essential to understand the concept of repetition. What triggered this thought are the produced songs of the experimental workshop I held without any of the founding members. In many ways the songs although slightly different in content and ideas, are in the way they are musically and performativity composed very similar almost identical to previous choir songs. However, in the light of Deleuze's argument, every time throughout the three years when a song is performed it would be different in meaning and impact due to the different subjects who sing and perform it and also due to the different spatiality and temporality. Meaning that when a song is sang in theater it carries different connotations than when it is sung in an open street festival. When the song of revolutionary chants is iterated during the SCAF's rule 2011 it is different than when iterated during Muslim Brotherhood rule 2012, and is currently reiterated with another complexity given that the previous Egyptian army chief General is now running for presidency 2014. Audiences perceive the songs differently and performers iterate them differently. So the repetition is in a way possibly creating sort of internal discourse for future productions, yet it remains different every time the repertoire is articulated. As for Nahda the repetition is in its institutionalization, the way it is a continuous and repetitive process every year or so: to look for funds, write projects and follow the bureaucratic financial system. Even the repetition of the same project whether the cinema school that is starting its 8<sup>th</sup> round, the social theater school that will start its second group, or the cultural program that was made every year for seven years. Within this repetition things remain different, every time there is a new input, there is a new strategy and most importantly the individuals that join these activities are different subjectivities that refresh and reconfigure the activities and the processes that might appear similar.

The philosophy of repetition invites another dimension that is quite insightful in understanding this thesis and what it is about in its intensity and simplicity. This other dimension is that of 'presence' and 'absence'. Derrida explains 'meaning' is constructed through 'conscious thought' that must be present in the observer's mind, while the 'meaning' that is given to something by someone is absent in the sense that it does not exist until processed by interpretation and reading into it to construct its meaning. I realize this is getting complicated because Derrida's point is mainly about the text but in my analysis it will make sense beyond literature. So let me detour to another argument that will disentangle this complexity yet adds another dimension to it. Presence and absence are in the same sense also a constitutive aspect of potentiality as a concept. Agamben asks the question bluntly "But how can absence be presence ... ?" (1999,p.103) The philosophy he articulates in thinking of potentiality starts by the acute distinction between 'potentiality' and 'actuality', even though the philosophy originates in Aristotle who fundamentally criticized the locus of the Megarians, a philosophical school of the pupils of Socrates, "who maintain that all potentiality exists only in actuality." (1999,p.104). Why I bring in ancient philosophy here is because this remains the dilemma up to our generation of scholars, activists, intellectuals as well as ordinary individuals. Conversations about hegemony, neoliberalism or capital, also about change and transformation, imagination and possibilities always end up in the realm of what can be done in 'actuality'. Simply and sometime passionately "how can we make things change? ". For me this 'actuality' is a burden of limitedness that stifles 'potentiality'. Despite my deepest respect to the seriousness of the quests to find out how to practically turn 'potentiality' to 'actuality', I still invite you through this thesis to humbly take the detours of what is not necessarily an 'actual' 'practical' way of changing realities, yet is potentially capable of doing so. Let us further explore how Agamben later elaborates on the relation between 'capability' and 'potentiality'. He elaborates that "For everyone a moment comes in which she or he must utter this "I can," [capability] which does not refer to any certainty or specific capacity but is, nevertheless, absolutely demanding." (1999,p.103) In a sense this "I can" carries both possibilities of doing and not doing, a power of choice if you wish. Doing or not doing means that the necessity to achieve or not achieve 'actuality' is rendered equally powerful in their potentiality. As insightful as Agamben puts it "To be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity." The realization and awareness that our 'lacks or incapacities' in practicality or actuality, are still

potentialities of our capabilities. This gives power and meaning to the seemingly similar repetitions or failures to change things in *actuality*.

### **Possibly the Most Revolutionary Thing We Can Do**

Repetition is about revisiting and reiterating different moments with a sober consciousness and cautiousness. Zibechi eloquently argues for the essentiality of repetition and movement: “The spinning top of social change is dancing for itself. We do not know for how long or to where. The temptation to give it a push in order to speed up its rhythm can bring it to a halt, despite the good will of those trying to “help”” (2012,p.9) Even the repetition of failure and co-option back into hegemony is different in every time. This repetition of failing again and again and failing better is really the most revolutionary thing we can do. Because it makes absolute sense to always begin from the beginning. For me the slight and continuous accumulation of difference can actually make a difference.

So speaking of beginning from the beginning, what is it about this ‘social’ that puts this research in the realm of sociology and anthropology? Latour explicates this issue by problematizing the word and the concept of the ‘social’ as it means two different things: “first, a movement during a process of assembling; and second, a specific type of ingredient that is supposed to differ from other materials.” (2005,p.1) The main concern of his argument is to “redefine the notion of social by going back to its original meaning and making it able to trace connections again.” (ibid) These connections are what constitute the assemblages of the social, the intricate details that make sense of how possibilities of change and transformation happen within everyday life, not in the grandiose of formal political victories of overthrowing a government, passing a law or forming a union. The assemblages and connections also and more importantly are not a quick fix to be attached to other domains to explain the unexplainable about people’s livelihood that does not fit into their discourses or analytical tools. Latour reiterates that fiercely: “[the] ‘social’ is not some glue that could fix everything including what the other glues cannot fix; it is what is glued together by many other types of connectors.” (2005,p.5) That is why this thesis is not about the social implications of the revolution on the cultural scene in Cairo. The usual normative route to go is to use the ‘social’ as a fixed category of analysis to get



at what politics or culture economies are like during a certain temporality. This is what Latour exemplifies arguing that to do this is to confuse what should be explained with the explanation. This is to “begin with society or other social aggregates, whereas one should end with them.” (2005,p.8) I intended to tackle and analyze the social in and of itself as potential. In this thesis I furthermore draw on Agamben’s insights on living and of life. He states that “a life —human life — in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power (*potenza*).” (1995,p151) I considered and saw in Nahda and the Choir project those possibilities of life that are powerful if their attempts to constantly create moments of rupture that make living go beyond its material facts and limits.

Potentialities, possibilities, *potenza*. The power of living in a constant *becoming* not being one identity and not the other. To give up “desires for certainty, and for stable conclusions”(Law,2004,p.9) and to reinvent an understanding that takes on the world “in tide, flux and general unpredictability”(Law,2004,p.7) “.” Perhaps the best way to promote it is to imagine that we ourselves are part of the zumbayllu—spinning, dancing, all and sundry. To be a part of it, without any control over the final destination.” (2012,p.9) This becomes living and knowing that there will be few days every once in while where individuals escape their demanding jobs, the comfort of their own families and friends and constrains of their economic, political or religious backgrounds, and dwell in an alternative world. Writing and singing without having the skill or the talent, laughing and enjoying without having every troubling issue of their lives solved, becoming what they imagine: powerfully, forcefully and against all odds happy for a while in a space/time that is carved out from the hegemony of their conditions and circumstances. Living knowing that going to any other workplace will never be tolerable, thinkable or imaginable, that relations and friendships are not premised or conditioned by profit or benefit but are relationships that are born out of struggle for a different living and are maintained by constant struggle of making the “impossible doable” and to imagine the unimaginable. Ultimately, a living that finds and creates its *potenza*/power in the very possibility that actual is not more significant than what is yet endowed by mere potentiality and uncertainty.

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