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Voices on Arab Philanthropy and Civic Engagement

Art for Social Change

"Supporting Art for Community Building, New Philanthropic
Orientations in Egypt"

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Supporting Art for Community Building,
New Philanthropic Orientations in Egypt

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Introduction

Taking stock of recent developments in the field of philanthropy concerning the theme of Art for Social Change, this paper shall analyze the new cultural and artistic trends in civic participation and social engagement in Egypt that take their root well before the revolution and could be further emphasized following the Uprisings. The focus will be on new philanthropic orientations fostering community based cultural expressions rather than 'elitist' art forms or already recognized performing artists (concerts, opera, and blockbuster films).

The past two years have witnessed a considerable number of artists, intellectuals and cultural activists being at the forefront of the protests. Much has been written on the new narratives produced in this period. The revolution's most shared cultural products—from pictures to songs, murals to on-line cartoons or films, poetry or novels—have become a powerful soundtrack of the revolution. Yet, academicians and Arab philanthropists have shown little interest in supporting this new trend.

How can creativity and the free cultural expressions that have been at the core of the Egyptian revolution be channeled into a new and participative public sphere? How can the basin of cultural users be enlarged within Egyptian society? What role should cultural activists play in supporting an open and participative society? What creative projects can be implemented to impact on social change?

Through a comparison on how two private NGOs have shaped a new conception of cultural policy and their stances toward the Egyptian state, my paper intends to contribute to the international discussion related to the effects that art and culture bear on socio-economic transformation and cultures of sustainability, in particular on democratization processes, forms of political participation and social empowerment, political awareness and the forming of public opinion.

The Development of Egypt's Cultural Field

In the two decades prior to the revolution, the public cultural field in Egypt had already discarded the majority of state-owned and controlled cultural institutions sustained ideologically by socialist and Nasserite ideas about cultural management (cultural palaces, national biennales, artists' syndicates) (Winegar, 2006). It had stopped considering art as a tool and proof of Egyptian government secularism and modernism. The mid 90's witnessed a decrease in both state control and public funding. At the beginning of the 21st century, censorship was the main tool of state intervention while the activist sphere was living an important increase of citizen participation. The number of citizen organizations (COs) registered in Egypt reached 16,000 in 1999 (Ashoka, 2009) providing potential space for youth to act. However, about 75 percent of these organizations worked in social care and still remain highly charity-oriented. The new non-profit organization law of 1999 has granted free access to COs to work in other fields while universities have also witnessed a "revival of youth activism whereby conferences and clubs are providing outlets for expression" (Ashoka, 2009).

In the private sector, and particularly after 2001, Egypt has undergone a complete reform of the cultural sector thanks to the massive access to private foundations sustaining culture and arts as a way to support freedom of expression in Egypt. In the last decade, the Ford Foundation and Open Society actively supported structures on the ground (Cornet, 2011). This strategy led eventually to the setting up, in 2003, of the Cultural Resource Organization (Al Mawred al Thaqafy) by the former Ford Foundation Grant Manager, Basma al Husseiny.

In parallel, the commercial sector continued to provide popular entertainment. However, during these years the first artistic controversy around the immoral aspects of Egyptian popular culture (veiled actresses, the rise of purposeful art) peeked out. Within the commercial sector, an alien institution was born under a bridge in Zamalek: Al Sakia by the will of its founder, the entrepreneur and puppeteer Mohamed El Sawy.

In January 2011, Egypt revolutionized all its old paradigms into groundbreaking notions covering economy, politics, religion and, obviously, culture. Much has been said on the cultural revolution that seemingly took place in Tahrir square (hip-hop, graffiti, etc.). However, to the alert eye, the signs of a shy cultural renaissance were already present during the decade preceding the revolution. If artists were to be compared to ‘birds in a coal mine’, it is precisely because in this case they felt long before society at large the urge to breathe and escape the cage of an authoritarian state. Artistic production and cultural philanthropy are therefore crucial to help us understand the breaking of a revolution as well as its successive evolutions.

What is particularly striking when comparing two major cultural organizations in Egypt, such as Al Mawred Al Thaqafy and Al Sawy Culturewheel and their narratives and actions to support social change through art, is the post-revolution impetus that drove the two very different organizations—on several ideological grounds—to cooperate in the restructuring of the Egyptian cultural sector.

When Mohamed Al Sawy, founder of the Al Sakia cultural center was appointed Minister of Culture in 2011, part of the cultural civil society in Egypt was ready to kick into gear and submit very concrete proposals on cultural policies to the Parliament. The proposal and the dialogue were not successful eventually due to the contingent political instability: the Shafik government sank two months later and the Parliament was dissolved. Yet, this revealed a new agency of cultural organizations and NGOs, which throughout that year had matured new theories on cultural policies. It exposed the increased agency of cultural NGOs in Egypt that were asking a grassroots management of culture rather than the precedent top-down management.

This paper intends to study the dialogue that took place right before and during this revolutionary proposal. This event is deemed as extremely revealing of the new relationship between state actors and cultural actors from the civil society in a post-revolutionary Egypt. The comparison shall contribute to digging into the issues at stake in the Egyptian public sphere

right before and after the revolution on several levels of national cultural narrative.

First it shall help delineate the new borders between Islamic discourse and secularism and acknowledge the overlapping of the two discourses, the points of confrontation and agreement. Second, by comparing and studying the best practices of two major Egyptian cultural organizations the paper intends to argue the importance of 'art for social change'.

Thirdly, by comparing Al Sakia and Al Mawred narratives developed through the years and analyzing in depth their discourse about culture and the democratization of Egyptian culture, this paper will underscore the similarities and differences to understand where the points of contacts are and where the real points of dissent between a mainstream Islamic cultural revival narrative are (See the Wasatiya movement) and a more pan-Arab one.

Finally, the comparison shall focus on the relationship with the State and contribute in delineating the issue at stake in the secularist and Islamist disputes. It might lead to a better understanding of the effects art and culture have on the socio-economic transformation, especially democratization, forms of political participation and social empowerment, political awareness-raising and the forming of public opinion.

Both organizations have been extremely influential in the Egyptian public sphere due to their size, funding capabilities and networks. For this reason, they can also be indicative of the role of culture in the Egyptian public sphere in the decade prior to the revolution and right after it.

I- Two Organizations Directly Linked to their Founders' Personality and Trajectories

a) Mohamed El Sawy

Mohamed El Sawy is the son of Abdel Moneim Al Sawy, a journalist, novelist, and a former Egyptian Minister of Culture in the late 1970s. He did his high school at the German School in Cairo and started to nurture his passion for puppetry at an early age. He is the co-founder and owner of *Alamiya Advertising Agency*, a successful private company. Being an entrepreneur, El Sawy was also involved in charity activities and he organized comprehensive sports and cultural events for children and youth through his agency (Ashoka, 2009)

In 2003, El Sawy decided to turn a garbage dump under a bridge in his company's neighborhood into a public cultural venue and founded El Sawy Culturewheel.

El Sawy is a renowned public figure and has grown in the years to be an important figure of the cultural scene. Apart from the public success of his organization, he has been extensively present in the Egyptian media, through his columns in the Egyptian daily *Al Masry al Youm* and *El Watan*, the Sound of Sakia online radio, *El Sawy* website and web TV.

He also uses social media very actively to disseminate his editorials: (177,514 followers on twitter as of March 8th, 2013) and the Center's narrative and activities. His use of the social media is both very personal and interactive: he, for instance, replies very politely and personally to all the comments.

Already Head of the Culture and Media Committee, El Sawy was appointed Minister of Culture in February 2011 in Ahmed Shafik's cabinet before the cabinet resigned two weeks later as a result of public pressure. After this experience he founded the Al Hadara political party, which ran for elections, at the Center.

b) Basma al Hussein

Basma Al Hussein is the daughter of Mustapha al Hussein, renowned journalist coming from a socialist, communist background from which she says she draws constant inspiration. She started her career in the artistic world working in experimental theater in poor areas. During the summer of her fourth year of university she met the theater troupe of Lebanese *avant-garde* theater Director Roger Assaf in Beirut. She then founded her own theater troupe in Lebanon (with writer Raouf Mossaad). The experience involved living with Egyptians in a refugee camp in Lebanon for 6 months.

After small jobs, she became for 10 years (1988-1998) the British Council Arts Manager to then move on in 1998 to Ford Foundation Arts and Culture as Program Consultant. After some years in the Ford Foundation world she decided to create Al Mawred al Thaqafy in 2003 thanks to a Ford Foundation grant. Today, she is still the Managing Director of the organization. Aside from this, she is also a UNESCO expert in cultural governance, board member and founder of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (funded by Ford and Open Society) and of several other cultural networks in Africa and the Mediterranean. She can be defined with no doubt as a dynamic cultural activist in Egypt and the region: she is a member of the Advisory Board of the Center for Cultural Policy and Management, Bilgi University, Istanbul, Turkey; She was until October 2011 a member of the Advisory Board of the Rawafed Program, Syria Trust for Development. She is also Egypt's representative of the Arterial Network, Africa's largest cultural network.

II- The Two Organizations

a) El Sawy Culturewheel (Sakiat al Sawy)

Located beneath the 15th May Bridge in Zamalek on Gezira Island, the site was originally a garbage dump and a shelter for homeless people and drug addicts near the headquarters of El-Sawy private company. El Sawy

Culturewheel was launched in 2003 by Mohamed El Sawy who named it in honor of his father's—Abdel Moneim El-Sawy, five-part novel series: 'El-Sakia' (The Wheel). It may be considered one of the most important cultural venues in Egypt.

The center now boasts some 500,000 visitors per year and serves 25,000 members; it holds 1,000 events per year and offers a vast repertoire of debates, workshops, concerts, plays, movie screenings, and shows.

The Sakia has followed a financially sustainable business model since its inception (Ashoka, 2009).

Every year, it selects a main theme for most of its events (for instance in 2009 the theme was "dignity", through which it aims to abolish some social phenomena, such as begging). The center has organized hundreds of concerts and musical events, including those for oud, jazz, musical theatre, children's choir and performances for several Egyptian and Arab bands, singers and entertainers. It also hosts several seminars, workshops, art exhibitions, book fairs and movie shows.

Being the first non-government controlled private cultural center in Egypt, it is widely recognized in Cairo's cultural scene as having more freedom and higher quality than government-controlled centers. It has launched an impressive number of events covering a wide range of themes: 'Sakia animated film festival', 'El Sawy Culturewheel Festival for Documentaries', 'El Sakia Conference for Arabic Language and Poet Laureate Ahmed Shawqi', among others.

El Sakia also includes several sections for arts and music training and a number of libraries, including a music library and children's library and it offers art classes in painting, sculpture, piano and violin for children and youth.

During interviews aimed at mapping the independent Egyptian cultural scene (Cornet, 2013), Sakia is certainly the most quoted place by cultural

actors that are active in the independent scene of these years. There is a real consensus in the Egyptian cultural sphere to recognize the fact that it has allowed the burgeoning of an independent cultural scene, and contributed to making it come to light and find a proper stage.

In recent years, and certainly because of El Sawy's political stances, critics emerged around his allegedly conservative censorship. The accusations ranged from a female singer claiming that she had to change dress to sing on El Sawy's request to accusations of his close relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood.

b) Al Mawred al Thaqafy

Al Mawred al Thaqafy, on the other hand, is strictly connected intellectually because of her social ties, to the Ford Foundation spirit. Basma al Husseiny, the founder of the organization served as Ford Foundation Arts and Culture Program Officer until September 2003.

She actually decided to start Mawred in 2002, which was eventually launched in 2003, thanks to a Ford Foundation grant.

Based in Cairo, Al Mawred al Thaqafy is a regional non-profit organization that seeks to support artistic creativity in the Arab region and to encourage cultural exchanges within this region and with the developing world. It works "in film, music, theater, dance, visual arts and literature". It also fosters artistic experiments that attempt to cross over artistic fields. (Al Mawred al Thaqafy, 2009).

Its main goals are the following: "To nurture a new generation of artists and writers in the Arab region; to encourage Arab business to support the independent cultural sector; to promote cooperation among Arab artists and writers and between them and their counterparts in the developing world" (Al Mawred al Thaqafy, 2009).

Al Mawred al Thaqafy offers small grants to artists from the Arab world in order to pursue their projects, travel or training. The setting up of Al Mawred has brought very revolutionary standards to the management of foreign foundation grants: the application forms are in Arabic only (which is being criticized by non-Arabic speakers), the selection process is open (with a call for applications twice a year and an independent jury from the artistic world to judge) and is quite easy to compile compared to many other organizations (such as the European Union grants application for cultural activities).

Al Mawred has also during the past years set up a series of festivals (Spring Festival, Circus Festival) in different venues of Cairo and Egypt and has set up its own theater, 'Al Genaina Theater', within the park created by the Aga Khan Foundation.

It also offers "production awards" through an open application process and seeks to introduce and showcase works produced by young and new creators in the Arab region and other regions of the developing world. The organization offers training programs that are tailored to address common needs of young artists and writers and new cultural groups, such as arts management training programs. Interestingly, the dialogue approach is seeking to strike a balance with other "regions of the developing world", "especially sub-Saharan Africa" (Al Mawred al Thaqafy, 2009). This interest in exchange with the African continent is all the more interesting that during the decade prior to the Revolution the word 'dialogue' was synonymous with "dialogue between the Arab World and the West" or with "religious dialogue between Christianity and Islam".

The structure of the organization is strikingly more transparent than many NGOs in the region: it is constituted of a 27-member assembly coming from the entire Middle East (stretching from Iraq to Morocco, with the exception of the Gulf countries and the Emirates, only Bahrain is actually represented); 7 members for the artistic board and 17 staff members based in Cairo. The executive management is formed by Director Basma Al Hussein, Deputy Manager Marwa Helmy, 2 program managers, 4

program coordinators and one social media coordinator. As for most of the organizations of that type funded by the Ford Foundation, Al Mawred al Thaqafy is registered as having its main office in Brussels and regional office in Rodha, Cairo but there are no real offices in Brussels.

Over the years, the organization became more involved in cultural policy issues. In 2008, it launched an ambitious research action on cultural policies in the Middle East and North Africa. The final report was presented in 2009 in Beirut. It may be considered today as one of the landmarks of the new cultural policy narrative prior to the revolution.

III – Comparison between the Organizations’ Narratives and Rationales

a) Equal Opportunities for All

Mohamed Abdallah, Al Mawred’s Program Manager explains in the promotional film realized by the organization in 2010 that he always receives more applications: “at least 120-150 applications every year from all Arab countries and the number is increasing every year” (Al Mawred al Thaqafy, 2009). “The quality of applications are, also, improving every year”, adds Menna Al Batrawy, Egyptian theater critic for *Al Ahram* newspaper and jury member. She also explains that she is happy that the “quality of proposed projects is improving” because “before knowing how to express themselves in theater, artists should learn how to express themselves in the application itself”.

In El Sawy Culturewheel there are no limitations for styles to perform. The space is open to all and the ethics advocated by Mohamed El Sawy as an institutional discourse or a personal approach to life expressed in his op-eds, are of complete tolerance and acceptance of others’ differences.

Arabism, Islamism and Local Culture

In the Al Mawred al Thaqafy institutional discourse, the Arab World cultural heritage is understood as “historical cultural references that

accumulated throughout centuries as a result of linguistic, religious, environmental and geographical affinities". The common points, however, are largely negative and "share a history of colonization and military occupation and its consequent cultural, social and economic ailments" that eventually brought in some positive aspects such as "potentials for wide distribution of cultural products within the Arab region as well as opportunities for joint work and shared learning amongst Arab creators" (Husseiny, 2009)

The problem faced by Arab artists is another strong common point: "Arab creators generally face common challenges imposed on them by restrictive social and political environments. Among these challenges are restrictions on freedom of expression, lack of opportunities for serious cultural dialogue and weakness of the economic infrastructure that supports culture" (Husseiny, 2009). In this context, if the current divisions between countries contribute to isolating Arab artists, working regionally would help them break the censorship barriers.

During the 'Start of the Game' workshop, a theater platform involving Director Ezzedine Gannoun at the Shams Theater in Beirut and co-organized by Al Mawred al Thaqafy, young actor Nagla Younes says she got immensely inspired by Lebanese Theater Director Roger Assaf's intervention: "Assaf explained that theater has often the same organization than society: a director, scenography director, etc. Traditional actors often look like the critical mass that waits to be told what to do" (Al Mawred al Thaqafy, 2009). During the workshop, however, Nagla understood that actors should be empowered as citizens in their society. Nagla was also particularly struck by linguistics: "At the beginning, we did not understand our dialects, on the last day, we could not speak our original dialect. This is the beauty of the experience". Meeting other Arab artists and understanding the common ground (through the understanding of dialects here) is one of the main issues at stake for Al Mawred al Thaqafy's regional activities.

In that sense, Al Mawred al Thaqafy is one of the most powerful agents of the Arab Renaissance paradigm during this period: the narrative is centered around the fact that “an appreciation of the value of Arab cultural heritage and an awareness of the need for a new Arab creativity liberates the imagination and stimulates progress” (Al Mawred al Thaqafy, 2009).

For Peter Fares, Program Manager of the organization, this clear cultural pan-Arabism in cultural projects is largely due to the cultural activities of the Palestinian diaspora: “the Palestinian Diaspora increased the common history and Arabism. Since Palestinians are everywhere in the Arab region, if they have to create a project with someone, they do it and call another Palestinian” (P. Fares, private interview, March 2011).

Arabism is considered as the main common point and a question of openness. When questioned about minorities in the region, Basma Al Hussein is adamantly clear: “What Europe means today? Is it against Roma minorities? Does being European today mean to exclude the minorities? The Arab World is inclusive exactly like Europe today. It is a contemporary identity”. Speaking of an “Islamic world would be closing identity on the contrary”. In that sense, to her, a “Kurd or a Berber is part of the Arab World and that's it” (B. Hussein, private interview, March 2011).

The Relationship with the State

The relationship with the state is not openly confrontational. Cultural operators from Al Mawred just work in absentia of the State. Basma Al Hussein is also co-author of the first statement of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture that sees the “slow decrease in state control over cultural activities” as an opportunity:

“The Arab world is witnessing a slow decrease in full state control over cultural activities. Economic liberalization policies coupled with the emergence of a few semi-independent TV satellite channels, have produced a relatively free atmosphere for cultural expression” (AFAC, 2009).

Working in absentia of the State leads to another set of questions. A central interrogation during the rule of the authoritarian regime was the question of the source of authority (Sulta): Who has the authority to speak about cultural policies today in the Arab World? Governments? The representatives of the central Islamic discourse? Foreign Foundations? These questions were among the important queries addressed during the 1st Conference on Cultural Policies (Beirut, 7-8 June 2010) co-organized by Al Mawred. It has to be registered as one of the principal achievements of the cultural organization as it represents a real landmark in the history of cultural policies in the Middle East.

To El Sawy, the vision of the state is very similar to the critics formulated by Al Mawred. In his *Ashoka* presentation, El Sawy considers that the “Ministry of Culture, the self-acclaimed guardian of arts and culture” is far way too “bureaucratic”. To the Ministry, a cultural project equals to the setting up of “cultural palaces” in the region but they can do little to support local and independent artists. Large public cultural institutions as the Cairo Opera House, are “unappealing to youth” and as long as international artists remain their focus, they do not represent an opportunity for local artists, although the Hanagar Arts Center and the National Museum for Contemporary Art temporarily serve as spaces for local artists”. As for private galleries “their scope of influence seems to be limited as are their audience”. Despite all the efforts, these establishments do not “fulfill youth’s need for self-expression and acknowledgment. In addition, they remain exclusive spaces that are not conducive to youth-led initiatives or innovative changes” (Ashoka, 2009). The democratization of the cultural sphere for artists and the public alike is an urgent issue for both organizations.

Denial of Elitism

Both organizations have a very clear stance vis-à-vis ‘high’ versus ‘low culture’ dichotomy. Art as a social necessity and a social category is largely emphasized in their presentations: “Culture Resource (Al Mawred al Thaqaify) also believes that artistic and literary activities are a social

necessity that demands moral and material support by all active powers in the society” (Al Mawred al Thaqafy, 2009).

Among all the Ford funded activities, the Mawred al Thaqafy is definitively the actor that supports *engagé* art. During our interview, Basma al Hussein was annoyed by critics that “focus on art as something that has to last in eternity”. She asks quite provocatively: “What’s wrong in supporting what is important now? It will be important for 3 years, and then in 20 years it will be historical”. She was actually referring to a special call launched by Al Mawred to sustain artistic expression born from the revolution. If “people criticized it, saying it was demagogical”, to her, “good art must be in touch with social change. The assumption that artistic expressions have to be eternal is all wrong. It can also be important for a short period of time”.

The link with society is not put into doubt at all: “Art is all about society even if it has nothing to do with society. Even in the last elitist art” (B. Hussein, private interview, March 2011).

Marwa al Helmy, Deputy Director of Mawred, shares this view: “the independent sector is essentially constituted of young artists. I can say that it is a great place to express oneself. If there are not many talents, there are a lot of expressions, and that is what is important” (M. Helmy, private interview, March 2011).

Within the organization not all stakeholders agree on the issue of *engagé* art. Peter Fares, cultural operator from Alexandria, and founder of the Arab Foundation for Cultural Expressions, does not share the enthusiasm for freedom of expression through the arts: “Some funders were first interested in development and then moved to culture, because culture is more in touch with the social scene and is less political. Now everybody is more interested in the arts of the Revolution” (P. Fares, personal interview, March 2011). Some other stakeholders criticize this approach and deplore the fact that the quality of the texts was really bad.

To these critics, Basma Al Hussein replies that the sole criteria are quality and the jury's rulings: the only criteria should be "well produced and badly produced". She adds: "I do not believe in 'low art-high art'" (B. Hussein, personal interview, March 2011).

Former Press Officer of Al Mawred and symbol of the young revolutionary generation, Salma Said shares this preference for grassroots projects whereby art is considered as a means of development. When asked about her favorite program supported by Al Mawred, she mentions the Ahmar School Project because it "starts from the beginning", teaching children circus art and music. As for the best events, she chooses Circairo because it "brought back alive something that nobody has experienced before, it invaded the public space, people's space" (S. Said, personal interview, July 2011).

Although within the organization, not all the staff fully agree with funding revolutionary expression, they unanimously believe in the revolutionary nature of cultural expressions.

Sustaining the Arab Spring Paradigm through Renaissance/Revival

Both organizations are pivotal in the Cairo scene for their narrative, long before the Revolution, centered on the need of a cultural renaissance in the arts in Egypt. Interestingly, the narrative is translated into different words: "Revival" for Sawy is taking stock in a more Islamic cultural background, "renaissance" for Al Hussein and its secular background. El Sawy explains in the following terms the need to ignite change: "Recognizing the absence of a driving force for social change, Mohamed El Sawy established his Sakia to use culture as a tool to restore youth to their natural rights. The wheel's ongoing activities result in widespread revival of youth autonomy and restore culture and art as a mainstream interest" (Ashoka, 2009). While speaking of work in absentia of the State, Basma al Hussein sees a shy renaissance coming up: "This opening inspired a kind of Arab cultural renaissance with the establishment of independent theater and performing arts companies, music groups, publishing houses, galleries, cultural organizations and research centers; all of which share a

common desire to venture into the realm of experimentation and innovation.” (AFAC, 2009) .

Be it the Opera House, the private galleries of the wealthy Zamalek neighborhood, or the cultural palaces, both independent organizations share the same feeling: art should be taken back to a “mainstream” public, says Sawy, to the “community grassroot organizations”, says Al Hussein.

Art as the Only Tool to Change Values

As a real art warrior, Basma al Hussein is convinced that to “change the society that produced the Mubarak regime you should change the values, and the only way is culture”. Art is not only seen as one of the tools, it is absolutely crucial: she asks “How would you do it without art?” (B. Hussein, personal interview, March 2012).

El Sawy shares this discourse on elitism when attacking the private sector galleries who do not care about audiences: “Several private establishments, such as galleries, have also been part of the Egyptian cultural scene. Their scope of influence seems as limited as their audience. Despite all the efforts, these establishments do not fulfill youths” (Ashoka, 2009). The same objective of “democratization” is pursued in the field of social activism considered according to El Sawy, as too elitist by Egyptian society. The refusal of elitism is one of the major points raised by Salma Said. Salma has grown professionally within Al Mawred al Thaqafy, starting from scratch and growing to become the Press Officer.

She became sadly famous later on for being seriously wounded during the revolution (she received more than 200 bird shots in her body). She is a socialist and revolutionary activist. Although Salma is a political antagonist to Sawy today, she shares his objective of “bringing culture back to the people” and recognizes that his center has greatly contributed to a renaissance by giving voice to an important underground scene:

“Music groups from the underground such as Wast al balad from 2005 became who they are today because they got the opportunity to show their works there” (S. Said, personal interview, July 2011).

De facto, two music groups are testimonies of the rise of an underground scene helped by the El Sawy Cutlurewheel: Wast al Balad, which has revolutionized the Egyptian soft rock style ever since their debut in 2005, and Eskanderella. The story of Eskanderella is inspiring: they chose their group name when asked about their exact title on their debut performance in Al Sakia. They had tried to perform at the Cairo Opera House before but they “had to show the texts of the poems beforehand and got censored” they explained (Montasser, 2010). Eskanderella will eventually become one of the most prominent groups during the revolutionary days. The groups adapt the lyrics of renowned Egyptian poets Salah Jaheen and Fouad Haddad, both being pillars of Egyptian colloquial poetry, as well as Ahmed Fouad Negm’s and Amin Haddad’s poetry, advocates of issues related to poverty and Cairo’s small people. Without a free space of expression, both groups would never have reached such a large public. Their successive agency during the revolution also has greatly benefited from this experience.

Art vis-à-vis Religion

To Basma Al Hussein, the battlefield is very clear, only art and culture can challenge religion since “the two things that may challenge politics are art and religion. Yet, religion divides people while Art underlines our common feelings” (B. Al Hussein, personal interview, March 2011). The confrontation with religion is not feared “Let’s clash. We will find ways to negotiate”. To her, in human history there has always been a “big competition between art and religion” and she also believes that “art is much more dynamic and is also much faster than religion. It moves from dynamic to static. Hence the clashes” (B. Al Hussein, personal interview, March 2012).

When she founded Mawred, Basma wanted a “courageous institution that took risks”. Her fight against religious conservatism is clear and assumed,

and became even stronger after 9/11: “I was seeing our societies getting more and more conservative”. The international community, including the Ford Foundation at the time, “invested in social changes the way Islamic private foundations were investing money in social change”. This reflection was developed in the midst of the 2011 crisis of foreign funding in Egypt. The context of the interview explains the particular openness of the debates. In Egypt at that time, defenders of American funding were asking the same transparency for Islamic charities as the one requested for American funding.

Peter Fares, Program Coordinator of Al Mawred al Thaqafy is of Coptic origin and declaredly laic: “People who were against the revolution were speaking of girls smoking in the streets, bad manners linked to artists. Artists are not well seen by society. They just can be excused if they become famous like Alaa Al Aswany” (P. Fares, personal interview, March 2012).

On the ethical issues and the role of art in that context, both organizations differ drastically. For Al Sakia, art and culture contribute in helping the youth morally: “Al Sakia is a pioneer in raising social awareness and instilling behavioral changes that encourage the community to become more conscientious and adopt ethical values” (Ashoka, 2009). The cultural message here should address the moral decadence of the Egyptian youth: “Negative consequences of youths’ social and participatory deprivation include an increase in dropouts, adolescent pregnancies, and ultimately, youth migration. Coupled with troubled economic situations, the overall atmosphere has become a burden that prevents freedom of expression and has led disaffected youth to become no more than a reservoir of untapped potential” (Ashoka, 2009).

IV - A New Agency for Cultural NGOs in Egypt Art for Social Change

Both organizations inscribe themselves in a global trend of these years in the world of philanthropy.

De facto, the paradigm of art for social change is one the most important credos shared by American and European foundations alike. In her opening speech at the Radius of Art Conference in Berlin (8-9 February 2012), Barbara Unmüßig, President of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, is adamantly clear: culture is “the fourth dimension related to the emergence of cultures of sustainability (...) We need to understand that alongside the social, economic, and ecological pillars, culture is the fourth dimension related to the emergence of cultures of sustainability” (Unmüßig, 2012).

For Basma El Hussein, creativity is empowering at the individual level and is actually “contagious”: “We strongly believe that art is not just a means or a medium. Art has an immense potential for social transformation and empowerment within communities. It can support the active process of helping to understand and displaying interdependences between different dimensions of human crisis that lead us on the search for pathways to a post-fossil fuel age, and on to a new era of human development based on aesthetics of sustainability” (El Hussein, 2012).

For Al Sawy, the history of Egypt testifies the importance of artists in the discussion of the State and their agency has actually been very important in the past but went lost in the past 20 years:

“Egypt’s rich culture and heritage have been a major driving force behind social change in the Egyptian community, most notably the 1970s student movement. The leaders of the movement were artists who conveyed the voices of the downtrodden and advocated a number of causes through their talents. Their impact resonated in society, mobilizing public opinion and guiding society to embrace progressive stands. Unfortunately, a period of stagnation engulfed the cultural scene. It declined to become just entertainment and recreation for the general public, largely due to the great amount of censorship in the 1990s. Due to this limitation, youth do not have the means for self-expression that preceding generations had” (Ashoka, 2009).

V- Recommendations

Taking stock of the above partial comparison of two major cultural institutions funded a decade prior to the Revolution, this paper suggests some brief recommendations to support culture in Egypt today:

1) Apply the 'recipe' developed by the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. It was approved by the UNESCO General Assembly in October of 2005. The Convention emphasizes the need to incorporate culture as a strategic element in national and international development policies, as well as in international development cooperation (Unmüssig, 2012).

2) Capitalize on the amazing role that artists have had in the public sphere in the last two years to build a cultural sphere more participative, sustain grassroots projects etc.

3) Start with Children

One of the core recommendations registered during this comparison is that art can have the best impact on social change when it is directed to children.

4) Freedom of Expression

Artistic expression needs, above all unconditional funding and freedom of expression to be able to strike a real change. Philanthropists shall not be afraid of artistic freedom which is, as we have seen previously, one of the major engines of social change.

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