

**Speak,
Memory**

**on archives
and other
strategies of
(re)activation
of cultural
memory**

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

“The Prestige of Terror”: A conversation with Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin

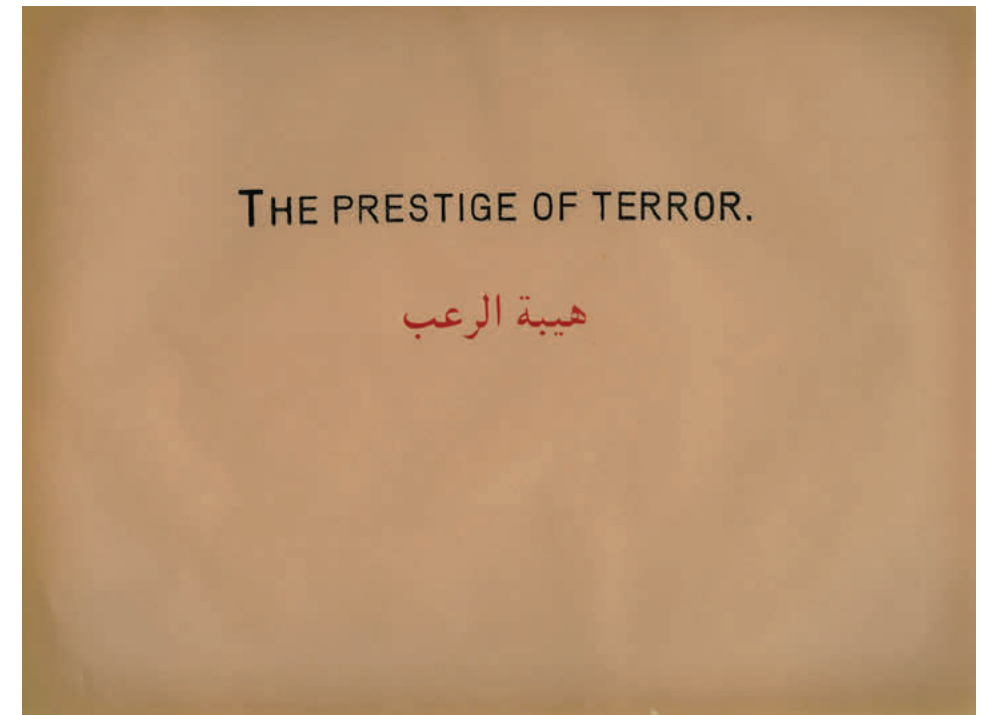
Speak, Memory (SM): I would like to start by talking about one of your recent projects, “The Prestige of Terror.” How does a South African-born, London-based artist duo start working on a project on the Egyptian surrealist group?

Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin (AB and OC): All of these questions have a new level of urgency and relevance with what we are watching going on in the streets of Cairo right now. In the first few days of our residency at the Townhouse Gallery, the exhibition that was due to open the following week on the first-floor gallery had been effectively censored by the Egyptian Ministry of Health. The show, which was to feature slightly doctored documentary images of a local psychiatric hospital, was apparently deemed too provocative in its depiction of hospital conditions.

Townhouse Director William Wells offered us the vacant space. We suggested a show on censorship, which didn’t go down too well. It was probably that same day that we read a short paragraph in Maria Golia’s remarkable *Photography and Egypt* about a local surrealist movement. We were both surprised that we had never heard of the group or their founder, George Henein, who had been a close friend of André Breton. The few images of the group that appeared in her book were intriguing. We therefore accepted William’s offer and the show opened two weeks later with an empty gallery and a simple text inviting others to come forward with any information about the group or its collaborators. We were interested in any information about a movement that had seemingly been written out of Egyptian history. Over the coming month we used the gallery space as a receptacle for everything that we found.

SM: What was it that particularly intrigued you about this group of artists?

AB and OC: That there was so little information about them and everything that we did find seemed to oversimplify their story. According to all the official Ministry of Culture documentation, they were largely a Francophile, libertarian movement producing mostly derivative work that was of no relevance to contemporary Egyptian culture. Their manifesto, written in 1938 and titled “Long Live Degenerate Art” (after the famous Nazi traveling exhibition) was translated in the official literature as “Long Live Bad Art.” This was a sure sign that something fishy was going on. We suspected that the movement was more politically provocative than it had been made out to be.



The Prestige of Terror, Print, Limited Edition, 2010.

SM: What were you able to find out about the Art and Freedom group?

AB and OC: Over the course of their short and sweet life, the Art and Freedom group, as they were initially known, prepared just five exhibitions and published two editions of a magazine, *La Part du Sable*. It is difficult to say what led to their premature end. What we do know is that the Egyptian surrealists spent much of this short period eloquently describing their own demise. Still, on December 22, 1938, when this group of precocious painters, poets, journalists, and lawyers published their manifesto, “Vive l’Art Dégénéré,” they were brimming with optimism. With their stand against order, beauty and logic, the Art and Bread group, as they later became known, shook up a community steeped in academicism and the picturesque with their particular version of modernism. Herein was a remarkable moment when surrealism in an odd alliance with Marxism met the orient.

SM: What was your working process? How did you go about gathering information and what were your sources?

AB and OC: Mostly we spoke to people and dug up the little research available on the internet. We found one man, Don LaCoss, who lived in Wisconsin and who dedicated most of his life to the study of the movement. We owe most of what we found out to him and a handful of other academics. Don died recently and suddenly at a young age, which is tragic. We have published all of Don’s writing as well as the other bits and pieces we have found on a website we built called egyptiansurrealism.com. One of the most moving moments during our residency was meeting Henein’s translator Bashir in his tiny apartment in downtown Cairo. Bashir is still a committed Trotskyite and we spent hours talking about the movement, about Henein and the revolution. It became clearer and clearer to us speaking to Bashir that the Egyptian surrealists were a strong political force, committed to social and political change, and that instead of having quietly collapsed they were systematically closed down by a state in the grips of Arab Nationalism. The resonance with contemporary Egypt and its paranoia became increasingly apparent to us.

SM: What does the title of your project, “The Prestige of Terror,” refer to?

AB and OC: “The Prestige of Terror” is the title of a pamphlet written by George Henein and published in Cairo, in French, several days after the dropping of the atomic bomb. It was not a thesis as much as a manifesto, in which he reaffirms his distaste for fascism, describes this moment in history as the worst day in the career of humanity, in which the allies have come to resemble their antagonists. Henein despised the politics of compromise, “The Lesser Evil” as he called it. The “Prestige of Terror” was a rejection of racism and murder as a justification to win a democratic war. We have had it translated into English for the first time. Its relevance today is still harrowing.

SM: In your description of the project, you talk of an “exhumation” of the

Egyptian surrealist movement. Could you elaborate a bit more on this term and how it relates to the specific artistic strategy you adopted?

AB and OC: We were acting less as archaeologists or archivists (we’re not academics) and more just trying to reenact or exhume the spirit of the movement. It was playful and provocative and we wanted the project to reflect that attitude as well as to highlight the historical relevance of the movement.

SM: As you probably have noticed, there is a sad lack of documentation and scholarship on Egypt’s modern art history. What is your take on the situation and what role do you think artists can play in revisiting and shedding light on neglected areas of art history?

AB and OC: It’s a question that came up a lot during the “Speak, Memory” symposium. What is the responsibility of the artists as archivist, historian, chronicler, interloper? On the one hand there is clearly a great imperative to build functioning archives in Egypt and the Middle East more generally. Some artists are certainly suited to this role. In our case we are not aiming at building something completist, or even accurate. We are interested in the way history coagulates around certain images, themes and texts, while others get discarded. We see our role more like the wind that comes in through the window to disturb the archive in ways that are accidental and chaotic. For example, early on in our research we wanted to hold a séance in the Townhouse Gallery in order to contact the deceased members of the Egyptian surrealists. We even approached leading surrealist scholars including Hal Foster at Harvard University and Simon Baker at Tate Modern, to provide us with questions for the clairvoyant. But the séance never took place—sorcery is illegal in Egypt apparently.

SM: How did people react to your project in Cairo and in the broader Middle East? I know that many people welcomed your project as a kind of wake-up call, an invitation to document the country’s modern art history before it disappears or before some of its key protagonists pass away. But other people considered your exploration too superficial. Because of the scarcity of information available on the Art and Freedom group—and many other modern art movements in Egypt and the region for that matter—did you feel a certain responsibility to work as archivists or historians, going beyond the role you normally take on as artists?

AB and OC: It’s not surprising that some members of the Egyptian art scene might feel uncomfortable with two South African, London-based, Jewish men, popping into downtown Cairo, taking an interest in a particularly exotic form of Arab modernism, claiming to resurrect the movement and even worse, commodifying the results. Some say the surrealists were anarchists who rejected the commodification of art, and perhaps our meagre output—a series of posters, a web site, invitations to give talks—feels like a corruption of those ideals. But that’s way too naive. You just have to read Don LaCoss, who adds complexity to this over simplified tale. We may have just skimmed



A PLEASURE CRUISE AWAY
FROM MODERN SUFFERING.

رحلة للمتعة بعيداً عن المعاناة الحديثة

the surface, scratched a surrealist itch. But we are not scholars making a historical survey of the Egyptian surrealists. We parachuted in, which is the nature of artist residencies. But that's a whole other conversation.

One of the nicest things to come out of the project was our relationship with Germaine Paschalis, the elderly lady who runs the printing press off Champollion Street. Germaine came to Egypt at the age of 14 from Italy, married a Greek man, Kyros, who claimed to introduce scuba diving to Egypt in 1952, and ended up running his family printing business. She still refuses to speak Arabic. All of our posters were produced on their Heidelberg Press, which would have been the same type of machine that the surrealists used to print their pamphlets and manifestos.

To make these posters we first produced a metal printing block called a cliché. Germaine kept referring to these clichés and we wondered which came first, the word or the metal block? Indeed the word “cliché” comes from the French term *cliché-verre* or “stereotype,” a metal printing block taken from a wooden original. When cast, these blocks made a “click” sound; the noun cliché comes from a French verb meaning “to click”. The word cliché as metaphor was first applied to photography, a form that is eternally reproducible. Germaine convinced us to print a set of posters on paper that she said dated from the late 1930s—around the time that George Henein published the Egyptian surrealist manifesto. The paper was extremely thin and fragile. Later, in London, we showed this to a friend who works with old paper stocks, and he was suspicious. He is pretty convinced this is actually fax paper. The only question remaining however, and it's a crucial one, is if this is fax paper from the 1970s or 1980s. The earlier variety would have been a wet process, rather than heat sensitive, and is therefore more stable. The drawing department at MoMA has agreed to have the paper stock tested in the museum laboratory, so we should have an answer soon.

SM: The act of collecting images seems to be a recurrent strategy in your practice. How does this project relate to your previous work?

AB and OC: Our book *Fig* explores the connection between photography and the act of collecting. And our new book *People in Trouble Laughing Pushed to the Ground* takes another collection of photographs as its focus: the Belfast Exposed Archive, which contains over 14,000 black-and-white contact sheets documenting the period known as “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland from a local perspective and as a response to the careful control of images depicting British military activity. The photographs were taken by professional photojournalists and amateur photographers, chronicling protests, political funerals and acts of violence, along with the more ordinary stuff of life—drinking tea, kissing girls, watching trains.

Left page: *The Prestige of Terror*, Wall Poster, 2010.

Following page: From *People in Trouble*, 42/Sheet3, c-type, 2011.





Above: From *People in Trouble*, *Circles*, 8x10 inch, 2011.

Left page: From *People in Trouble*, 2011.

The marks on the surface of the contact sheets over the image itself allude to the presence of many visitors. These include successive archivists, who have ordered, catalogued and re-catalogued this jumble of images. Whenever an image in this archive was chosen, approved or selected, a colored dot was placed on the surface of the contact sheet as a marker. The position of the dots provided us with a code; a set of instructions for how to frame the photographs here. Each of the circular photographs shown on the previous pages reveals the area beneath these circular stickers; the part of each image that has been obscured from view the moment it was selected. Each of these fragments—composed by the random gesture of the archivist—offers up a self-contained universe all of its own: a small moment of desire or frustration or thwarted communication that is reanimated here after many years in darkness. For many years the archive was also made available to members of the public, and at times, people would deface or otherwise manipulate their own image with a marker pen, ink or scissors. So, in addition to the marks made by generations of archivists, photo editors, legal advisors and activists, the traces of these very personal obliterations are also visible. They are the gestures of those who wished to remain anonymous. This book focuses on the layers of marking, scratches and obliterations made by successive generations of archivists and the public on the images and upsets the index nature of the archive. Instead, a fragmented narrative emerges that resists traditional empirical categorizations and sequences.

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Opening up the Archives