



Ismail Bahri, Film, film stills, 2011

Courtesy the artiste & Galerie Les Filles du Calvaire, Paris

WAITING FOR CHANGE ?

Ismail Bahri speaks to Barbara Sirieix

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Barbara Sirieix : In your work, you use ordinary familiar objects such as milk, ink, paper, glasses, bowls, pins, strings... Their state is altered and they become minimal achromatic forms, reflecting surfaces, shadow markers, and line tracers. What determinates the choice of these materials and how do you make them work together?

Ismail Bahri : I don't choose the materials for what they are as much as for what operations they enable and their capacity for revealing things. Among the elements you have mentioned, some of them are just receptacles, receiving surfaces. The glasses, the pores of the skin, the sheets of glass or the walls, or on a larger scale, a snowy landscape become appearance surfaces. Various elements like ink, water, string and others are conductors of vibrations, presences or images. For example, with a piece of string I can hold a drop of water along its course (*Coulée Douce*) or reveal the movements made with my hands that are off camera (*Dénouement*). The ink reveals. It can reveal a landscape or the lines of the skin by infusion like in *Sang d'Encre*. I never totally manipulate these materials but try to activate their potential. Once it is dropped into the hollows of the pores, the ink spreads through the lines, the pattern unfolds before my eyes (*Sang d'Encre*). When I tie

knots in *Dénouement*, it's the string stretched towards the camera that reveals and amplifies the movement of my fingers, it acts as an intercessor. The materials used are intercessors in the same way chance was Duchamp's intercessor, his operator of differentials. The materials I use generally amplify a simple action.

B.S.: What do you mean by a simple action?

I.B.: Tying a knot for example, carrying a glass, sticking a pin, or dripping ink. I don't develop any particular technique; it's more about exploring body movements. Simple movements that I try my best to make precise. When I speak of precision, I'm referring to a clearly defined movement, often practiced, varied and perfected over several weeks. This reminds me of what Jean François Lyotard said about Duchamp: "precise, but inaccurate" ¹. That has intrigued me for many years. How do we carry out a precise but inaccurate movement? One has to imagine an abbreviated movement, sharpened to the moment, but as soon as it is executed, outwits the question of technique or measure. It would then be an action carrying incalculability, setting off an unpredictable movement. A bit like the idea of a rumor, that can be very clear, incisive but untrue. And then, what is interesting is seeing how the movement, or a specific action, can influence the body posture the way the body enlists in society. Walking, carrying a glass of ink that the eyes are focused on is an action of great simplicity (*Orientations*). But it took me several days to learn how to walk, only guided by the reflections revealed in the glass, and not be tempted to raise my eyes to see which street I was crossing or the people I walked by. Of course, this type of activity influences the way we interact, with the passers-by, for example. It is all minimal, almost negligible, but there is a certain physical stance quite ambiguous because it attracts attention through its own withdrawal.

B.S.: You have done several ambulant projects in the city of Tunis: first comes to mind Ligne Fantome where you traced the line created by the shadows of the pins you stuck in the walls. In 2010 in Orientations you walked through the streets carrying a glass of ink, focusing the camera on the city's reflection in the opaqueness of the liquid. For Ligne Fantome you talk about meeting others in a context with 'geopoetical' settings. What do these interventions signify for you in the context of the city?

I.B.: Maybe I need to explain what is involved in *Ligne Fantome*. This intervention consisted in the tracing of a shadow line on the walls of the city. This line was embroidered, sewn in a certain sense, because each pin was stuck according to the shadow it would produce. Each pin's shadow would connect to the shadow of the following pin, and so on and so forth, creating a line stretching more than 20 meters. The line was drawn in accordance with sunlight. This activity enabled me to travel the narrow streets on a centimeter scale, alongside the wall with no other horizon than the next pin. So the traced line was so fine that it was practically invisible and yet it could seem monumental because it was several meters long. The paradox was interesting to me then because it was about making this line and my physical presence publicly unnoticeable. A bit like crossing town as a shadow, withdrawn from the vision of the passers-by, fitting myself into the nooks and crannies of the walls and the light. Although it was totally inoffensive, it did generally provoke reactions such as surprise or avoidance. The residents of the walls that were being pinned sometimes asked what I was doing and one young girl threw some water destroying part of it while cleaning the street. These contacts were always brief and shy. Making *Orientations*

also involved going through the city myopically, because I was only focusing on the ink's surface that worked kind of like an obscure compass. I was seeking to perceive the city through this black hole, this keyhole revealing a landscape. The moments when the camera managed to catch a piece of the scenery in the glass were captivating because it opened a new view of the city. Suddenly I was seeing something different in a familiar city where I was born: fragmented, upside-down, erratic and sometimes nearly diluted. It's about the appearing image, with the ink acting as a photosensitive solution. And what interested me was to make the glass a receptacle for fragments of scenery, making it possible to capture images of the city and carry them away. The contact with the city and its scenery happens through a diverted representation.

B.S.: In your description of Orientations you evoke a myopic meandering, whereas the reactions of the passers-by suggests a decoding of reality: "Yes... yes... the ink shows the perimeter, you lower the glass, it enlarges it and shows you the opposite of what you usually see. " If this is a deciphering what does Orientations reveal about the streets of Tunis ?

I.B.: It appears to me that the two "visions" are not contradictory. Myopia is already in way decoding the world, an altered form, and a way of seeing without a horizon, somewhat like navigating by sight. The passer-by pronounced this sentence just when the glass shows us a fragment of the tree. This particularly curious man really wanted to find out what interested me so much in that glass. And then he was very surprised to see differently the street he lived on. That moment is very important because the image captured by the glass became a vehicle for encounter and in fact one doesn't often discuss images with people met on the street. It's the glass and the image that operate the contact. The exchange with the passer-by was made through this optical intercessor.

B.S.: It is interesting how Nicole Brenez approaches political stakes when she refers to your work: "What (Ismael Bahri) conveys is that 'the downfall of writing can speak of voicelessness, the loss of words, but also a resistance to loss'. In other words, far from the autotelic inwardness of the individualist subject, from his intimate sensitivity he invents unlimited processes of connections to phenomena, passing through all sorts of psychic and material channels, through porosity, capillarity, fluidity and not only through identifiable entities or logical processes"². How can you consider these issues in your work ?

I.B.: What is certain is that traces of politics are difficult to detect in my work. What's more, I don't look to maintain a clear and directly identifiable connection to politics. A trace sometimes reappears from behind, or fragments rise to the surface, without my wanting or seeing it. And most of the time, it's others who make the connection, often because they need to define artists and locate their work amidst current events, their origin and whatnot, without taking the time to look at their work for what it is. They look for the means to interpret social references. And curiously, since the Tunisian revolution, more and more people are detecting connections between my work and politics, while frankly they are minimal. But all things said, these lines by Nicole Brenez seem relevant. If there is a relation to politics, it is minimal, between the lines, through movements, links created through micro-phenomena that at first glance seem insignificant. It's delicate matter, producing connections with multiple resonances, without ever falling into the trap of discourse or the temptation of communication. I am wary of these types of approaches. This is why I often refer to murmurs or rumors, meaning these horizontal and

unpredictable propagations of contiguities. What moved me so much in what they call the Tunisian Revolution, is to have recognized there this type of dissemination. The population's uprising was propagated by contiguity, from one to another, no hierarchy or discourse. What is troubling now, is to see discourses emerging and icons of the martyrs worshipped, risking paralysis to the movement. It's inevitable and probably necessary, but I think we should be careful about it.

B.S.: What is your view of Tunisia ?

I.B.: My outlook on Tunisia is intimately distant. I mean that I'm very concerned by what is happening there, but I'm physically far away. Certainly what is coming to Tunisia will be much more difficult to deal with than last December and January's uprising. The revolution of the streets quickly grew because it was inventing, discovering and developing itself simultaneously. Today everything must be invented, and we already begin to see identifiable political discourses coming from all sides within a context of fear of a suffering economy and the war reaching their borders. No one can predict the outcome, and here again, we are myopic. On the other hand I don't see dictatorship emerging from the present situation.

B.S.: What do you think about the 'Jasmine Revolution' and the media's mythologizing it ?

I.B.: I can't add more to what we've already heard. The media inflated the issue while the revolution was brewing in Tunis, but typically lost interest in what is happening now, because it is critical now and tomorrow it may be at risk. Another more general observation, I'm afraid that this spontaneous movement is becoming a kind of brand. People always try to detect the perpetual post-orientalistic clichés in Tunisian art and film. Journalists, artists and specially curators must ensure that the people's movement not become another easily identifiable brand, a recognizable marketing source. When there is interest for Tunisian and Arab artists, it is seldom for the right reasons: another classical phenomena. Reference to the revolution does not suffice to be artistically relevant. I get the impression that the revolution is sometimes used like a passkey to anything. I think the best thing for Arab art in general is to be demanding and rigorous with it.

B.S.: Have you been back to Tunisia since December 2010 ?

I.B.: Yes, several times. My last visit was in January 2011, three or four days after Ben Ali's departure. I landed in a country that was completely transformed. This is when we witnessed the emergence of speakers in Bourguiba Avenue. Anyone could just stop and make a speech. We could see crowds suddenly gather, demonstrations improvise themselves. This was amazing when you knew how speech had been inhibited for so many years. The voices had been silenced and thoughts denied. Seeing all these anonymous orators brought to mind the work of Michel François *Speaker's Corner*. Here we see anonymous orators delivering their speeches on large blocks of ice that are placed under them by the artist, until their pedestals completely disappeared. We imagine the orator descending to the level of his audience, at the pace of the melting ice. The general euphoria and the inflation of words and images were unbelievable. I asked myself, what more can be done, or said? What image can be made of this commotion and

excitement? Now we are witnessing the aftermath. It is a time for reflection and opening the intricacies of dialogue.

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I.B.: Before we begin, let me say that it's a good idea to have this discussion in two stages because it contributes to the approach in a perspective. I have just reread the June interview and a lot of what was said is still 'topical' as one would put it, even if I don't really know what the word means. I found there again the idea of the 'simple action' which is still in me, but also my puzzlement with regards to current events, especially in Arab countries. Things happen fast and I still feel myopic facing current issues that are impossible to grasp. Also over the last seven months the *Working for Change* project has given us time to think about these issues and begin a dialogue through exchanging mails, images and videos.

B.S.: To follow up on this first interview is also a way to chart out what has been covered. A first project has been started through your stay in Venice in June during Working for Change. You worked in a space with the material that you found there. What were your prerogatives in this improvised 'in situ' intervention ?

I.B.: What I did in Venice was experimental, a quick and impressionistic draft. Those two days there were a time of guessing and trying to be aware of what was happening optically and sensorially. I took a look around the place and found a roll of scotch tape, which I began to work with. Soon I was using the roll to make several strips across the doorway separating the space from the garden. What began as just the repeated action of slowly emptying a roll of tape turned into an attempt to create a mirage. You may recall, we observed that while reflecting the garden and vibrating with the breeze, the tape brought about confusion between the indoor and outdoor spaces.

B.S.: The continual transition from the darkness of the space to the bright luxuriance of the garden outside produced ghost images on the retina. The idea of a mirage became clearer and clearer. After that I could not stop associating the blurred image of the garden with the screen inside the space where Al Jazeera TV channel was on continuous broadcast. The radical difference in content between the Arabic and Anglo Saxon versions was remarkable within the context of the revolutions, as an expression of ideological dichotomy, and a testimony to the stalemate of journalistic objectiveness. And again mentioning myopia, it is no wonder we are out of focus. We experience again a blurred and deformed vision, a difficulty to decipher images when we look at over-pixelated amateur footage massively used by the TV channel for coverage.

I.B.: Your parallel between the mirage and the television images concerns me. What is certain is that the mirage questions the very notion of the screen. The screen is by definition out of focus, it "enables to see" and blinds, shields our vision.

B.S.: Before coming to the experiment on the mirage, you had another project working with capillary origami and newspaper, which you took up again in Tunis during the elections. It developed alongside

the events, using the newspaper editions of that period. You had temporarily put it aside to clarify the position the images and text would occupy in it. How did you finally work that out ?

I.B.: During the elections, Abdellah Karroum asked me to send some images from Tunis, and that's when I developed the capillary origami project. I then began working with pieces of newspaper that I would cut, roll and then set on a liquid surface. The roll would slowly open on contact with the water's surface, setting off an elementary mechanical movement, a simple metamorphosis. These experiments turned into a series of one to two-minute videos where we see the rolls unfold. The camera situated on the water's surface films the coil unrolling into the body of water. The picture is full frontal. In this situation, we never actually can grasp the content of the newspaper text, the perception is furtive, the same way news images dissolve as soon as they appear, before we can grasp or decipher them. About the status of text and image in this project: the omnipresence of the writing was problematic because I didn't want to offer something to be read or understood. The accent is on the paper's fiber, the textures, the colors, in short: the foam of the wave rolling towards us. It's about indicating, in other words, the fragment open to interpretation. The "indications of topicality" recorded on the roll of newspaper keep disappearing. What is important to me here is the movement: the kinematic of paper. This unrolling becomes a sort of mini-cinema, a hydraulic mechanism that reveals and veils images and clues.

***B.S.:** This rotating mechanism of coverage relates to the process of appearance of the character in printing and the rolls of the press, with it the idea that in this process there is a re-producing of meaning by recomposing it into indications. What is the position of the indications and topicality within these "indications of topicality" ?*

I.B.: The newspaper is the only reference to the election context, as for most of the videos I used daily papers published on those dates. But I handled these elements of the current events as materials, the same way any material is transformed. The more they were altered, the more they gained their autonomy and freedom from their original context. I don't know much about semiotics, but I prefer to speak in terms of indication rather than symbol because the indication activates a potential. It refers to a hypothetical event, and implies having distance. The term "indications of topicality" evacuates the precipitated referral to a fact or a particular event. The images I use are often shown in their dynamic of 'appearing' because I feel less comfortable with images that *state* a fact or recount a *fact*. Using movement is a way to outwit the authority of such an image. Furthermore, what interests me in the 'appearing' is that it always introduces a distancing, a latency period or delay that forestalls immediate contact with the image.

***B.S.:** Your work on the mirage, the capillary origami, and Orientations use movement and play upon the alteration of visibility or visual signs to enable a vision. These projects are experiments taking place in a context, and they are linked to "stories". What role do these stories play for you ?*

I.B.: Yes, most of the time, all these projects, all this handling, fit into a particular context, be it in a particular space or a current event as we have just seen. And as you pointed out, it's often this context that activates the impulse to explore. It can be rolling newspapers and watching them unroll, or like the other day, observing in the context of relocating, unwinding a roll of scotch tape hanging in midair. All these activities carry with them a "story", but this "story" is sometimes

relegated to the rank of the anecdote because it's not always there in the final rendering. With the exception of *Orientations*, where the spatio-temporal context of its creation is integrated into the setup, it's often the simplified action that remains, outliving the rest. I privilege the phenomena over the story.

B.S.: Beyond the idea of breaking down the function of the newspaper there, the information is processed. Because they are seen as potentials and not as data, the "indications of topicality" escape the ephemeral nature of news and have more to do with history. The indications remind me of Walter Benjamin's flowers : "As flowers turn toward the sun, by dint of a secret heliotropism the past strives to turn toward that sun which is rising in the sky of history. (...) (One) must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations 3

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *Les TRANSformateurs DUchamp*, Paris, Edition Galilée, 1977, p. 74.

2. Nicole Brenez, "Prima delle Rivoluzioni, Avant-gardes arabes des années 2000", *Art Press 2, Cinémas Contemporains*, Quarterly n°21, May-June-July 2011.

3. Walter Benjamin, *Sur le concept d'histoire, Ecrits français*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 435.