

# ART AND REVOLUTION

Lauren Mele and Alfredo Cramerotti, Author, *Aesthetic Journalism*.



Image: © Ashraf Foda.

THE MOMENTUM OF instantaneous and mass communication is forever intensifying. Upon the advent of any violent occurrence or political conflict, there is almost an immediate reaction: camera phones are pulled out and events are streamed, uninhibited, live on the Internet. On 28 January 2011, the Egyptian artist Ahmed Basyony was shot and killed by a sniper in Tahrir Square, making him one of over 800 people killed in the revolutionary uprising. On the day before his death he wrote on his Facebook page, before making his way to Tahrir Square to participate in the fight for revolution, 'Bring a camera with you and don't be afraid or weak' (El Noshokaty 2011).

Art can be a powerful productive force and instrumental in sparking change or critical thinking, with the advent of recent uprisings and events in the Middle East and Asia we are reminded of this capability. However, art as a tool for mobilizing thought and action is not new; in fact, history has seen this happen time and time again. Kazimir Malevich, one of the leaders of the Russian avant-garde movement (post the October Revolution in 1917) and the father of suprematism, believed that pure form and positive change were transcended through abstraction. Art for Malevich was

tradition and in the status of art in bourgeoisie society. The futurists were motivated by the belief that formal innovative thinking could provoke much-needed changes in the social and aesthetic order of society (Bowler 1991); indeed art and social and political life cannot be separated when looking at the Italian futurists' motivations.

History clearly has a habit of repeating itself; Kazimir Malevich was not the first artist to push for social and political change through art, and Ahmed Basyony will not be the last artist to challenge the 'normal' and fight for freedom – inside the studio and out. Basyony's work is now being exhibited at the Egyptian pavilion at the 54<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. In *30 Days of Running in the Place* (2010), Basyony does exactly what the title describes: he films himself running every day for 30 days, whilst wearing a body suit that visually shows the changes in his body temperature and vitals. The work demonstrates the frustration of 'running and getting nowhere', perhaps reflecting his feelings about the general progress of political change in Egypt. Although he did not survive to see the change he had been yearning for during his life, his piece echoes the fight.

## ART IS A REACTIONARY DISCIPLINE AND DOES NOT EXIST IN A VACUUM.

a tool capable of imposing a new social order, though this could not be done without difficulty; Soviet authorities confiscated his paintings for not portraying social realities during a retrospective of his work in the 1920s (Kramer 1990).

Sadly this type of discrimination by governments has not ceased. Political censorship of information, visual and textual, has always been present in recorded history; there has never been a point in time where certain information or images were not taboo or illegal. The detention of Ai Weiwei in March 2011 suggests how powerful, influential and potentially threatening the Chinese government regard his artwork. In an interview conducted five days before his disappearance he said, 'I no longer exist in the eyes of official China. If you enter my name in an online search machine, there appears a notice of failure... but at least I still have 70,000 followers on Twitter... I comment on problems of society, so people can see the flame is still burning' (Weiwei 2011).

In a sense, art can express a view, an emotion or opinion during a time of censorship and political unrest, and it can make a difference. This is not to say that artists are revolutionaries themselves, but the presence of thoughtful acknowledgment of conflict can provoke change. Ai Weiwei's disappearance inspired global frustration about the lack of freedom of expression in twenty-first century China. Art is not and cannot be separated from contemporary life, as Weiwei's case proves; it is a reactionary discipline and does not exist in a vacuum.

The motivation for revolutionary beliefs and endeavours, however, does not necessarily stem solely from politics, but from everyday life. The Italian futurist movement of the beginning of the twentieth century was inspired, in part, by artists' need for a change in

With the ever-growing presence of social networking and the instantaneous spread of information, art and the socio-political cannot be separated. Visual narratives are increasingly powerful and – to some parties – threatening modes of communication. 2011 has seen artistic ventures and projects rub shoulders with major political issues and ruffle the feathers of many individuals in public positions of power. Post the Wikileaks dilemma, information is becoming close to impossible to harness and conceal. One single event encourages a domino effect of reactionary events. Art will never cease to thrive and triumph in times of struggle and will always remain an important visual and theoretical counterpart to the everyday.

### REFERENCES

- Bowler, Anne (1991), 'Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism', *Theory and Society*, 20:6, pp. 763-794.
- El Noshokaty, Shady (2011), 'Ahmed Basyony: At the Frontline of the Arts and Revolution', *Nafas Art Magazine*, 1 March, available at: [http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2011/ahmed\\_basyony](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2011/ahmed_basyony). Accessed 8 July 2011.
- Kramer, Hilton (1990), 'Art, Revolution, and Kazimir Malevich', *The New Criterion*, 1 November, available at: <http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Art--revolution--and-Kazimir-Malevich-5230>. Accessed 8 July 2011.
- Weiwei, Ai (2011), 'The Age of Crazyness', interview by William Oliver, *Dazed and Confused*, June: 74.

### READ ON...

- Alfredo Cramerotti | Curator  
Author: *Aesthetic Journalism*, ISBN 9781841502687  
Lauren Mele | Independent scholar