

### **Analysis (5.1.3.)**

#### **Note**

'Silent Stand' was done twice. The first version, done at 'Samtalekøkkenet' in Copenhagen, was quite unsatisfying and had a variety of unfortunate features. 'Samtalekøkkenet' is a regular forum for performance. Each month, an evening is organized with 3 or 4 performances, each followed by a discussion. In the first season, the program attracted large audiences, and the discussions were always lively and serious. I thought this the perfect platform for presenting a 'research-performance' like 'Silent Stand'. It was done only a few months after the occupation of Tahrir Square, and I was working filled with fascination and enthusiasm for the, at that point, very recent events. I was also keen to explore the possibilities of the voice-over to the full. The result was a very long performance with a very long narrative by the voice-over, dominating and controlling the action. I tried to tell the whole story of the Egyptian revolution with as many details as possible. This gave the 7 scenes a character of illustration, and the interaction with the audience was closer to manipulation than to participation.

The discussion following the performance was interesting, though. I was criticized up front for some of the problems I just mentioned, especially for manipulating the audience. Also, the fact that I chose not to go to Cairo, but did my research on the internet instead was debated at full length. The main part of the discussion, though, turned into a discussion of art-research in general, and whether the format I was using was performance at all. It had more to do with theatre, it was argued.

If the performance was somehow a failure, the discussion gave some very important clues for the next series of performances. To have a discussion following each performance on the basis of the sense-event the audience had just been a part of, could be a tool for attaining the reactions of the audience, and discussing the themes inherent in each performance on the basis of my 'thinking with the senses'; Another realization was that if I wanted a discussion of the content and of the way in which this content was thematized in the sense-event, I might have to go beyond the art-scene and try to connect to audiences much closer to the themes of each performance. This led me to the long meandering search described in the commentary 'Searching for an Audience' (3.3.4.1.)

The unresolved, unsatisfactory state of 'Silent Stand' urged me to redo it in another setting. This became possible 7 months later in January 2012 at Islands Brygge Kulturhus by the harbourfront in Copenhagen.

#### **Analysis**

In 'Silent Stand' (second version) a fundamental aspect of this project as a whole is put to the test as collaborative performance. The possibility of creating images as collective performances.

It is one of the strongest features in the Egyptian uprising – here, the scattered crowds came together and through the performance of collective acts of disobedience, they created strong critical images. By participating in these actions, the scattered crowds became 'the people'. There is a parallel, if not quite identical, process here. As the participants act, they are creating an image. This image is becoming. At the same time, the participants are becoming 'the people'. So either it

is a double becoming, or it is simply the same thing. Becoming image and a collective subject, simultaneously.

This was what we wanted to test with this version of 'Silent Stand'. Simple, physical presence and participation are crucial here. By being present and part of the group, one contributes to the performance of the image.

The audience is asked to participate in 3 different scenes:

- 1: The re-enactment of the original Silent Stand, by standing in a line with 5 meters between each person, facing the water, out on the harbourfront, outside of Kulturhuset.
- 2: The poetic translation of Tahrir Square into a floating carpet with belly-dancers, where the audience is gathered around the fabric lifting it up and down as the dancers move in slow ornamental figures.
- 3: Sitting together on the fabric as a group listening to the sad post-script. Also, here it is a representation of Tahrir Square, but in another more naturalistic manner.

In between these collective acts are interspersed sections with the artist/researcher explaining, with music and a small illustrative part, where a rough image of a pool of blood is formed out of the fabric.

The first action works well. The meditative effect of standing silent looking at the water for a while creates a serious attentiveness that is felt all through the rest of the performance. Standing in the line also separates the participants from other people strolling along the harbourfront, and one immediately feels like performing an image for others to see. Even from afar, this image is a simple, but marked presence in the harbour landscape.

In a constructed re-enactment like this, far far away from the tense context of the uprising in Egypt, the 'revolutionary becoming' is not possible to test. It is a collective body emerging under extreme pressure, and it would be pathetic to attempt imitating such a becoming in a safe situation as this. The distance involved is, on the contrary, included in the performance, as a layer of 'kitsch'.

The inclusion of 5 belly-dancers marks a touristic distance. Here in the West, the belly-dancer is one of the absolutely kitsch icons of Arab culture. Using this figure as an illustration of 'revolutionary youth', moreover represented by 5 Danish women, creates a kind of silly situation contrasting the quite heavy content of the performance. By this I hope to give the audience a chance to both think about the social forces at stake in the real uprising and at the same time to take part in a playful recreation of some of the inherent aspects. The belly-dancers are not dressed in their usual dance-gear, but are also in black, and they are improvising a dance to a completely different kind of music. This combined with the fabric floating in the air around them create a poetic dreamlike atmosphere. Of course, it's not possible to create 'revolutionary becoming' as a staged emotion, but by playing with the thought, it might be possible to give a hint of what it would be like.

In the discussion following the first version of Silent Stand at 'Samtalekøkkenet' in Copenhagen, one of the topics was my position in relation to the revolution in Egypt: Had I been travelling there? Had I been in Tahrir Square myself? As I stated, I cancelled my trip to Cairo at the last minute and decided to stay at a distance, looking at events from afar. Trying to make this distance a part of my inquiries and of my analysis. Even if I had been there on Tahrir in the mids of events, I would still have been a tourist; the distance isn't geographical, it's a cultural distance. First of all it's a distance in urgency. There is an urgency in the Egyptian uprising that we as Westerners can sympathize with, but we can never identify with it.

The kitsch gaze that the figure of the belly-dancers introduces is an attempt at formulating the distance from which I am looking at Tahrir Square.

Here, in the second version with a smaller audience, where everyone in the room could take part in lifting the fabric up and down, a much more intense feeling of being together, collaborating, evolved. That everyone was gathered around the fabric, around the dancers, looking at each other, over the fabric, under the fabric, created a playful atmosphere of doing this together. Everyone were participants, and no one – apart from the two cameramen - were watching the situation from the outside.

The performance took place a Sunday afternoon, and several members of the audience had brought their children. This added to the relaxed atmosphere, and especially the dance-section was fun because the children also took part in lifting the fabric up and down.

This playfulness was an important part of the experience. It dissolved the often sceptical criticism in an art audience that sometimes makes participatory art frustrating. Here, the relaxed atmosphere made everyone participate on equal terms. When scripting these 3 situations, it was important to create situations that would be open for participation in an easy and friendly way – this was the lesson I learned from the first version, where this obviously didn't work.

As Joen Vedel, an artist/activist, commented in the discussion afterwards:

"This clearly shows one of the most important aspects of activism. It is only by physically taking part a person contributes to the struggle. What we did here was to do 3 things together. Being there. Together."<sup>1</sup>

Being there is crucial; and this is such a simple gesture that it is open for everyone to do. By being there one becomes part of the action, and one becomes part of the collective body.

Here, on this relaxed Sunday afternoon, there is of course no risk involved at all. This is an exercise, organized for contemplation and reflection. In Egypt, being there was an enormous risk. By being there, the participants risked being beaten up, arrested, even tortured and killed. As we saw in 'On Water', civil disobedience – breaking the law - radicalizes an action. The engagement becomes serious to a degree that makes it an argument in itself. In the Egyptian examples we are dealing with in this performance, the risks taken can be fatal. In Northern Europe, the frequent reference to martyrdom and the pathos connected with the 'wall of martyrs' for instance, can be hard to grasp. Seen as a consequence of the immense risk taken by the fearless

crowds of activists, the concept of martyrdom becomes an integral part of Direct Action.<sup>2</sup>

The post-script section is where the emotional aspects of the Egyptian uprisings are addressed most directly. An interesting thing about the mobilization of the Egyptian people was that it was done by very simple political demands, but with maximum emotional impact. Many of the actions leading up to the occupation of Tahrir Square were organized as platforms for emotional expression. The sadness expressed in the Silent Stands, the anger expressed on Anger Day.<sup>3</sup> Here, the last scene becomes a stark contrast to the joyous celebration of the dance scene. The artist/researcher sits down on the fabric, and takes on a pathos and a sincere direct tone, different from the first part. This tone is matched by the fact that everyone is now sitting together on the fabric, creating an intimate social space. Again, everyone sat down and took part in creating this last image.

It is important to note that this was not an image in the sense of a composition of people to be looked upon from the outside. It was rather an emotional state that everyone participated in performing, simply by sitting there together, in mutual sincerity, listening to the artist/researcher. This kind of image is seen, or rather experienced, from within. The same goes for the dance-scene; in this second version it became a situation to be experienced from within. This is performed quite literally – by gathering around the fabric, a ring is established, and the action can only be fully perceived from inside this ring. In the video documentation, one can see how the audience turn their back to the camera and to the rest of the room. From the outside position, one would only see the line of backs.

The first scene, the re-enactment of the Silent Stand, works as an image seen from the outside as well, as does the iconic image of the Egyptian people occupying Tahrir Square. Also, here it is important to note that these images have an urgency and intensity as they are being performed. They can be reproduced, on video, photo or television, but the moment that really matters is when they are being performed. Again, it is the crucial risk taken by the anonymous activists by being present, performing their protest physically, for real, that makes all the difference.

Paradoxically, this relaxed, loose, second version of 'Silent Stand' came much closer to the emotional re-enactment of collective commitment that was my intention. It was obviously a decisive factor that everyone in the audience was able to, and actually did, participate. The intended collectivity became real – even if only lasting for a short while.

## **Discussion**

The ensuing discussion was agitated and took us for long stretches to Egypt in a debate on Egyptian classes and their abilities and interests in engaging in the uprising and the following reforms of society. Of direct interest to my project was when the Egyptian activist, Amany Turk, reported on how she had felt an emotional rush by participating in the direct confrontations with the Egyptian police. How in these situations she forgot her normal role as a mother and her other duties and took risks in the confrontations that she would never have imagined herself taking. This corresponds with the idea of 'apotheosis of revolt' we discussed in 'Revolution By Night'. Also, Jon Vedel's statement as quoted above connected to this – it is by the direct presence of the body, in the performance of various collective gestures, or even collective emotions, that politics are produced.

Researching into the Egyptian uprising has been an emotional experience. In a relaxed and quiet manner, this second version of 'Silent Stand' and the discussion afterwards became a moving emotional experience too.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Joen Vedel in the discussion following 'Silent Stand'

<sup>2</sup> see also Commentary 5.1.4.1: 'Martyrs'

<sup>3</sup> There is a scene in the first version of the script devoted to Anger Day – but it became difficult to include in the toned-down second version. The first script is included here as Appendix 3.1.5.3.