

SCRUTINISING *HISTORY*

WAEEL SHAWKY



Reflective and challenging, Wael Shawky's works throw history and the present into a state of potential disarray. **Dorothea Schoene** meets the artist and finds out how the art of language often counts for more than actual events.

It was a rainy start to this year's dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel. One of the heavy showers drove visitors into the lower floor of the Neue Galerie, where Egyptian artist Wael Shawky had installed his work, *Cabaret Crusades*. Stepping down the staircase and entering the shaded space in which his video was being shown, one almost felt as if one were entering an entirely different time and place. The artwork is an installation of an epic marionette-animation film as its main focus and an adjunct space with cut-out paper figures and architectural models resembling the old city of Cairo. It is probably Shawky's best-known piece to date, illustrating most comprehensively both his main thematic interests and his formal approaches to art-making.

ON THE ROAD

Shawky came to Kassel to see the show himself, then travelled to the second dOCUMENTA site in Kabul and from there back to Egypt to give a seminar about the show. I caught up with him amidst this intense summer travelling schedule. Despite the tiring intensity of his diary, he was quite happy with both his work and the exhibition overall. "I thought it was really great," he said. "I believe it is gorgeous. I was very happy with how my work was shown and I am usually very critical," he admitted.

Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File (2010) consists of four parts (of which one was shown), retelling the story of the religiously sanctioned military expeditions of Western Christians against Jerusalem. Partially inspired by Amin Maalouf's 1983 book, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, it not only re-narrates the actual history as told by the author but also highlights the way in which history is written and perceived. Depending on the emphasis placed on various parts of the narrative, history can be seen in different lights, yet the artist refrains from interpreting the plot: "I find it much more beautiful when



you invest your energy in the language or the translation. I create all the details myself, using a lot of material for the various scenarios. It is more rewarding to put my creative energy into the translation; it means I don't have to concentrate on what my opinion might be – if it is good or bad. I don't care. I try not to judge. I find it more important to search for a creative language."

To succumb to the temptation of limiting his piece as simply an illustration of the script would be to overlook the function of works such as *Cabaret Crusades* not so much undermining the habits, rules and regulations of traditional history-writing as engaging with a new and radically temporalised re-narration of the same plot. This interrupts the reverberating circuits of cultural history. "I find it fascinating to analyse how we write history and

the way we perceive a historical event," Shawky observes. "In the case of *Cabaret Crusades*, I read Maalouf's book, which I consider to be very important. I don't believe in history but in the power of interpretation. So I offer an analysis of how we write history."

BLISSFUL IGNORANCE

In Kabul, Shawky showed *Telematch Sadat*, a series he worked on from 2007-09, based on a German television show from the 1970s that became popular in Egypt and Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. In this series, residents of two cities compete in various games against each other, challenged by gigantic costumes which they are obliged to wear. The concept of the show is simple: two

Opening spread: Two video stills from *Al-Aqsa Park*. 2006. Video animation. 10 minutes.

Below: Video stills from *Cabaret Crusades, The Horror Show File*. 2010. Single channel high-definition film in colour with sound. Approximately 32 minutes.

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parties compete, which ought to entertain and amuse a third party. Shawky reinterprets this basic concept in order to examine complex political, religious or gender-related structures and interactions. For this piece, the artist cast children to play out the script “because neither children nor puppets have dramatic memories. Children don’t know the events. Like in the case of *Telematch* – they don’t know who Sadat is, so I can instruct them to do this or that. This is important in my work. I wouldn’t like it if it depended on the actors’ skill. Another thing that matters to me is finding ways to escape the gender complexity. It is a very complicated topic to identify male or female and I do not want to go into this. I find nomadism

and urbanism complicated enough, so I do not want to go into gender issues as well.”

Using re-narration and decontextualisation as an artistic means of expression is something that Shawky has worked with previously in his piece, *The Cave* (2005). Rather than incorporating puppets or children as ‘neutral players’, the artist himself is the protagonist here. Following the visual aesthetics of a news broadcast, Shawky is seen walking through the aisles of a Hamburg supermarket talking in an uninterrupted flow of words – reciting a Qur’anic *sura* which tells the story of the martyrs of Ephesus, who were punished for their beliefs but who found protection in a cave. According to Muslim and Christian

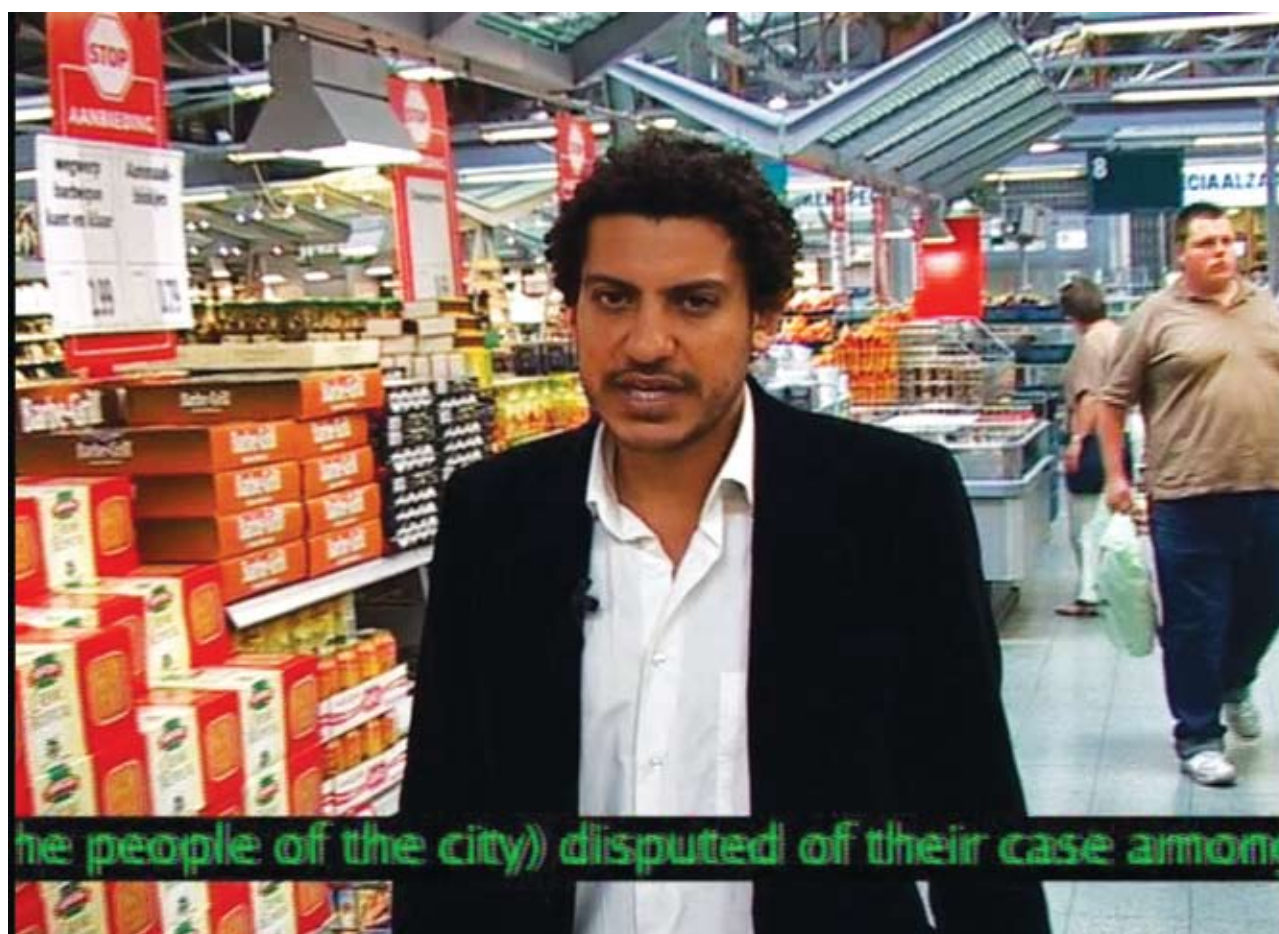
legend, the martyrs awoke after 309 years to a world dominated by Christianity. In this self-portrait, Shawky juxtaposes and questions the relation of religion and capitalism; acting like a news anchor, he counters the visual dominance of media with religious language.

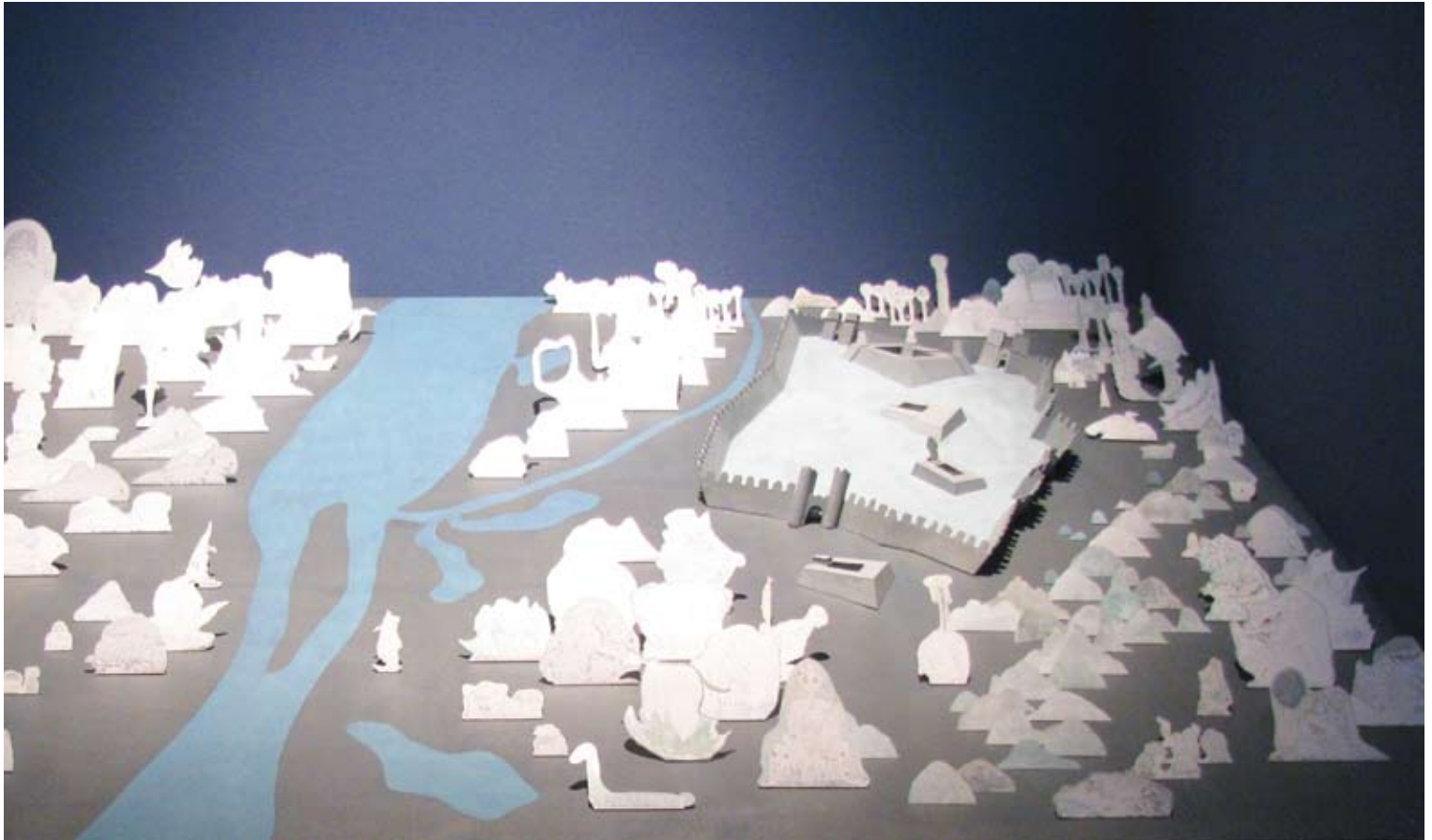
Religion and its role within society is a recurrent theme in Shawky's work. In *Al-Aqsa Park* (2006), he turned the architectural emblem of one of the most sacred sites of Muslim faith – the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem – into a merry-go-round which has come off its rails. In the piece, the site, sacred to the world's three major religions, remains a religious symbol, yet it is placed within the realm of the entertainment industry. While the artist tackles the complex, often contradictory, clashing relations between faith and desires, he does not like to share his own personal opinions on this often uncomfortable theme. Shawky instead prefers to focus on "putting my creative energy on the 'translation of themes' into visual forms".

When asked from where he draws his inspirations and interests, Shawky points to his childhood. Born in Alexandria in 1971, he spent much of his early years in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, spending the summers in Alexandria. "I went back and forth and this had a great impact on me; all of my work relates to this time, particularly the religious aspects. Part of my work is very religious because I lived very near the Holy Ka'aba," he adds. "Much of my work deals with the ideas and dichotomies of nomadism and modernity; these were the ideas I felt strongly about as a kid. Mecca has a very nomadic, tribal, Bedouin society, but it is unlike the rest of Saudi Arabia. It is a very kind and friendly place." Upon his return to Egypt, Shawky graduated with a BFA in 1994 from Alexandria University and then received his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 2001. While the curriculum and faculty in Pennsylvania were interesting and diverse, Shawky connected little with campus life. He was already well-committed to numerous projects, working on a number of art pieces during his stay.

Facing page: Two video stills from *Telematch Sadat*, 2007. Video installation in colour with sound. Approximately 10 minutes.

Below: A video still from *The Cave*, 2006. Video installation in colour with sound. Approximately 13 minutes.





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WORLDS WITHIN A WORLD

These days, Shawky is based in Alexandria, where he also hosted a dOCUMENTA seminar at MASS, the first independent studio programme for young artists, which he founded in 2012 in response to the precarious situation of the art scene in his hometown. As a graduate of Alexandria University, Shawky stresses the institution’s “close-mindedness”, citing its intense emphasis on academia. “Every year, over 500 people graduate from there. This has been happening for years now. But there is no art scene in Alexandria. So, every year there are 500 graduates who do not make art afterwards,” he explains. “I found that I had a lot of contacts which I decided to use. So when I was invited to an exhibition, I asked those contacts in return to come and teach and give talks. We had eight students in the first year, 10 in the next. This year was special because I asked to have my students invited to dOCUMENTA to assist in the exhibition process, so this year I have 23 students.”

Over the years, Shawky has developed a rather unique way of presenting his work: he often installs his films within a larger installation or together with components of entirely different media, sometimes presented with drawings. “In general, I love drawing. I draw a lot,” he stresses. In the case of the Kassel exhibition, he has turned this interest into yet another dimension of his work: from the



gawky movements of the marionettes in his film, the visitor walks into an adjunct space; mounted on an aslope base is an installation of cut-out paper drawings and small-scale, slightly off-perspective building-models of Cairo. The glitter on the drawings, the pointed light within the semi-dark space and the Potemkin-style balcony far up on the right hand side of the wall, take the visitor into a different world. It's one way of leading the viewer from one chapter of *Cabaret Crusades* to another – the *Path to Cairo* – giving the drawings their very own part in the narrative. “The installation is based on the plan of Cairo that dates from the 12th century. It refers to the new production called *Cabaret Crusades*. But in the installation of *The Path to Cairo*, you don't actually see Cairo; you see the locations of where political powers were located back then. In the third part of *Cabaret Crusades*, you will see how all the political powers move to Cairo. The balcony reflects the idea of the authority, as well as paralleling a scene in the film. It also relates to the power of the sheikh – a

figure who is always high up and commanding. The piece is made out of crystal, so it is very fragile and precious,” he explains. By working with three-dimensional components and drawings as part of his installations, Shawky “takes the drawing out from being limited to just being paper. It is a mixture of history and my own imagination.”

Shawky's work is characterised by complex analysis and reflections on culture, religion and politics. The artist's most prevalent interest is to question how we can involve the writing of history in art and the reality of this history – do we believe in it or not, and what is there to believe in? It is a debate over historical validity, inter-subjectivity and divergences of meaning within history. Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of various moments in history, yet what underlies these turning moments in time is an ambiguous logic – one that can be read and questioned from multiple angles. ©

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Facing page: (Detail) *Cabaret Crusades: Stage*. 2012. Installation of wood, paper, graphite, oil, ink and crystal. Commissioned by dOCUMENTA (13). Photography by Matthias Grobe. Image courtesy the artist.

This page, from left to right: *Cabaret Crusades*, Drawing 67. 2010. Ink, pencil and pigment on paper. 42 x 30 cm; *Cabaret Crusades*, Drawing 52. 2010. Ink, pencil and pigment on paper. 30 x 23 cm.

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