

“BASICALLY YOUR MENTALITY IS THE MENTALITY OF SERVANTS”

HASSAN KHAN

H6 MASTERS

WHAT IS CRONYISM? Cronyism is two old friends in a room, smoking, drinking coffee, and arguing with themselves over and over. Where is corruption? Corruption is in the dark office with a man behind a desk laughing maniacally. What does disenfranchisement look like? A young woman holding her head in her hands. What are the benefits of globalization? Swedish furnishings and ethical double standards. How do you imagine nihilism? Picture two men flailing ecstatically.

Look at ourselves; in Hassan Khan's videos we are pitiable, miserable, and laughable only on occasion. Since the late 1990s, the Cairo-based artist—he's also an electronic musician, curator and a forceful writer with contrarian tendencies—has produced bleak portrayals of psyches disfigured by a despotic, dysfunctional and amoral economic and political system. The backdrop for Khan's narrative works is not only modern Cairo and the Egyptian regime of former president Hosni Mubarak—even when it is—but the ideological vacuum of post-Cold War societies that neither won nor lost the conflict: a pessimistic period of popularly elected undemocratic governments, authoritarian-sanctioned capitalism, messianic liberation movements and their supposed antidote of state-subsidized mass consumerism.

Correspondingly, the moods of the dispossessed—rage, cynicism and fear—run deep in Khan's videos from his earliest pieces. The heavily condensed, rapid-fire footage comprising the one-minute-long *this is THE political film* (1998) shows a gun pointing at a television screen, the entrance of a crowded mosque, men lifting a TV set showing pornography, a shadowy figure at a desk, the distorted image of a deranged-looking man, a digital timer counting off the minute, and a slab of pounded meat into which someone nails an Egyptian one-pound note. Near the video's end, the figure at the desk throws up his hands, yelling (in Arabic) “This is the political film!”, followed by a crazed laugh whose sinister, darkly ironic tone suggests only regressive destruction.

Embodying this lack of political agency is the figure of the young man—the primary protagonist of Khan's videos from the late 1990s—who veers between romanticizing his existential struggle and flat-out resignation. Of the former tendency is *the eye struck me and the lord of the throne saved me* (1997), which captures the desperate spirit of the street. A voiceover speaking in cryptic, mythical rhetoric relates a story about a mother and son's struggle to survive (“a life of pain is fated for him / he awaits salvation from one moment to the other”). Khan pairs this allegorical tale with images of a gray cityscape, a crowded shopping road, excerpts of TV commercials, before ending with the inspection of a humble cemetery.

Whereas the probing, narrating voice in *the eye struck me* [...] finds himself caught up in morbid poetic reflections, in other early works by Khan the male protagonist's brimming anger inhibits perception. *Fuck this film* (1998) opens with another eye, this time distorted by a lens, accompanied by the sound of laughing and a voice slowly saying in Arabic “nothing . . . NO thing . . . nothing.”



The eye struck me and the lord of the throne saved me, 1997
Color video transferred to DVD, sound
3 min 50
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Khan then cuts to a filmmaker raging through his apartment, banging and pushing aside objects, complaining out loud about his contrived premise: "What should I do with this film? It's not a bad idea. A camel living in a paradise, but who is unhappy." He contemplates other subjects including documenting kids in Heliopolis getting high on cough syrup ("the real nightmare"), an idea he then rejects before dismissing filmmaking at large ("narrative and dramas are just ways of manipulating images / to allow the audience to feel safe"), his own thoughts ("what the fuck is this bullshit that I am saying??") and finally, after a few beers with a friend, the project itself ("Fuck this film").

Speaking about his own artistic practice, Khan has never romanticized the potential of the individual as a self-styled political radical or avant-garde formalist. In a recent interview with curator Mayssa Fattouh, published by the web-based project Art Territories, he lays out his objections to these approaches: "Artists pick a model [tormented romantic, activist, nationalist, trend-setter, avant-gardist] that best suits their sensibility and they work through it only to be left with a work whose sole function is to notate this idea. It basically means that it's completely narcissistic; we end up with an image of the artist as a hero."

This refusal to be a specific kind of artist, even against charges of being reactionary or politically detached, has allowed Khan to reinvent himself. By the early 2000s, the frustration and stymied ambition of the characters in his early videos yielded to more expressly empathetic, humanistic endeavors. *100 Portraits* (2001) opens with a view of large apartment blocks on top of which are superimposed short, one-second-long portraits of men and women of all ages, with a voice reading their names. This same concern for a citizenry recurs in *tabla dub no. 9* (2002), which shows a concrete tunnel overlaid with footage of people from the street including a man carrying a cardboard box and a woman selling objects, accompanied by Khan's fusion of electronica and popular Egyptian music.

The second evolution in Khan's work is a move to explicit humor. *Conspiracy: dialogue/diatribes* (2006/2010) features two middle-aged men sitting and talking in an archetypal middle-class living room. It quickly becomes evident that they are not actually speaking with one another and that Khan has spliced together footage of two separate diatribes in which each man spouts abuse, flatters the other, reminisces, gossips, and criticizes the furniture and the other's career. This motif of two men sharing a space yet not actually communicating with one another recurs in *Jewel* (2010). The video opens with a series of flashing lights in the dark and then zooms out to reveal luminescent anglerfish in a suspended box, around which an older and younger man are flailing hysterically to Khan's rhythmic soundtrack.

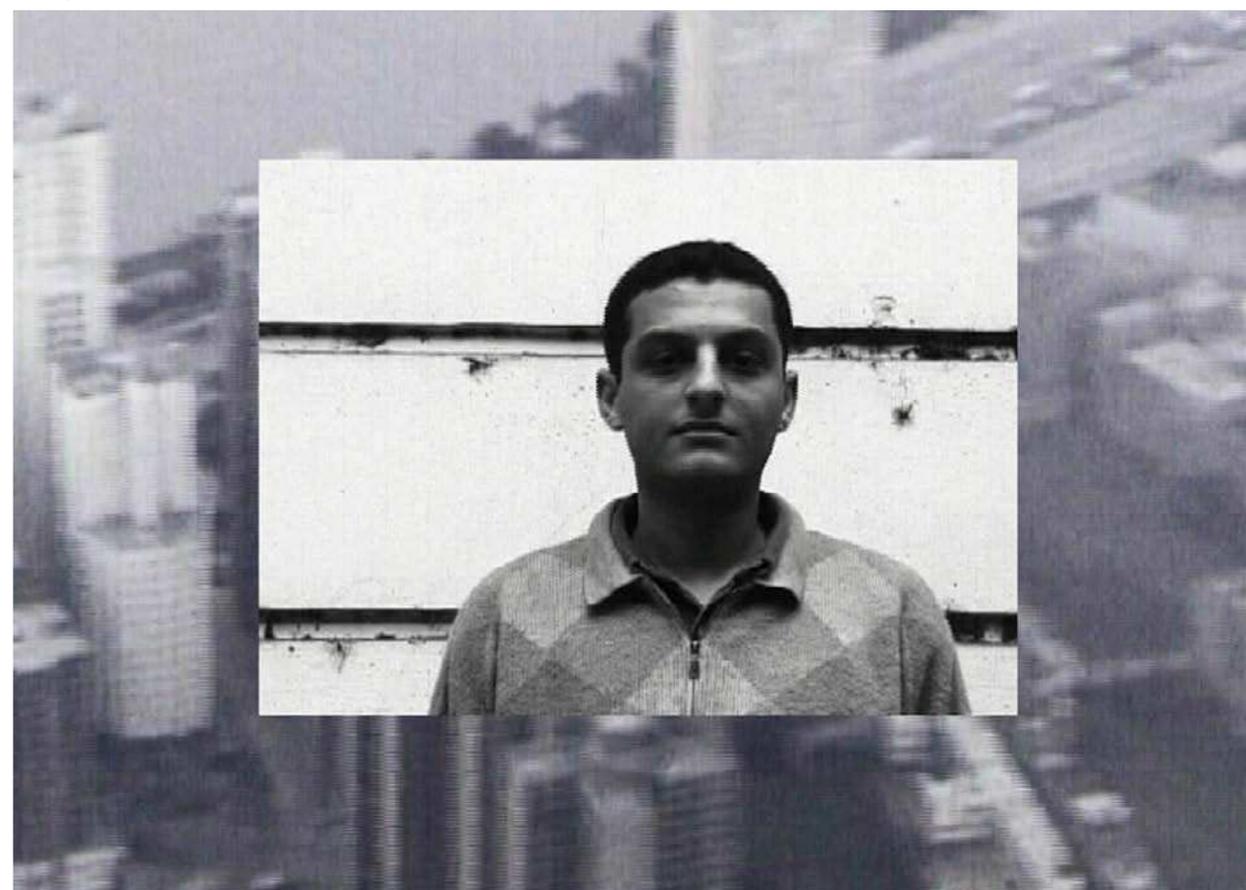
However absurdist and laughable, the solipsism in both works is pure pessimism. Even if you can get two men to dance simultaneously around a talismanic flashing coffer, can you say that they share their reasons or the experience? Khan has written in his 2010 essay *In Defense of the Corrupt Intellectual*, published in *e-flux journal* #18: "The crowd is where a seething mass with a unified understanding of its own presence is born, a conglomeration of frictions and tensions that manages to resolve itself into an identifiable entity." But two remains one short of a crowd.

The lack of dialogue between the figures in *Conspiracy* and *Jewel* is in stark contrast to the over-inscribed discourse of the art context where these videos are shown—where it is commonplace to speak about neoliberalism and postpolitical democracy as matter-of-fact abstractions, to accompany every image with an annotated text, to conclude presentations with Q&A sessions that evolve into commentary forums. Khan himself contributes his share of editorializing to such public conversations. As a writer,



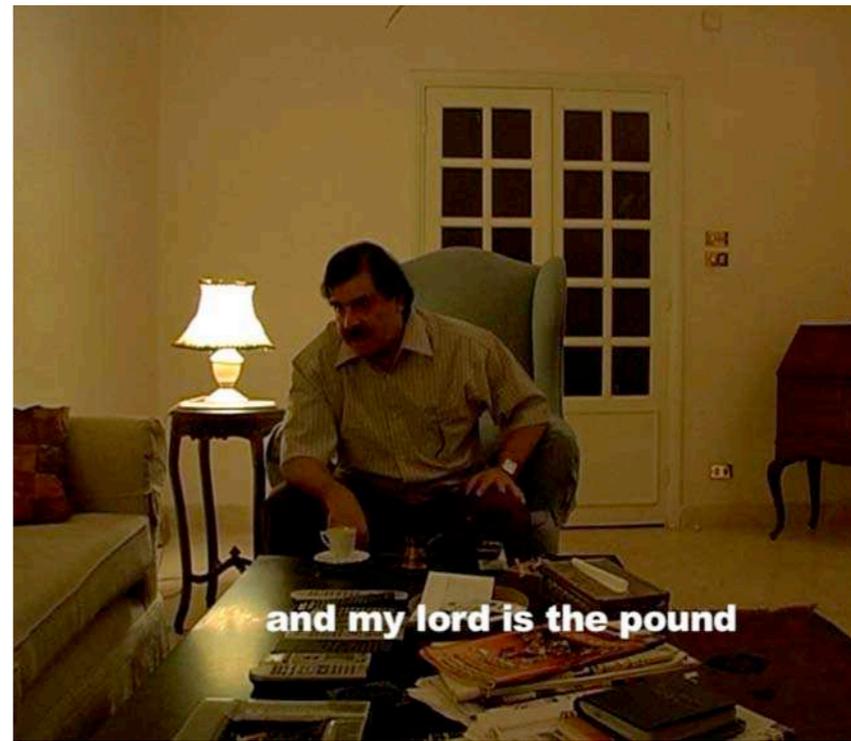
This is *THE political film*, 1998
Color video transferred to DVD, sound
1 min
Courtesy of the artist and
Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

100 portraits, 2001
Color video transferred to DVD, sound
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris





Jewel, 2010
 35MM Film transferred to FULL HD Video, Original Music by the artist, Suspended
 Screen, Projector, Audio System, Room painted according to certain specifications
 6 min 30
 Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris



Conspiracy, 2006-2010
 Color video transferred to DVD, sound
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris



Fuck this Film, 1998
 Color video transferred to DVD, sound
 4 min
 Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris



tabla dubb n°9, 2002
 Color video transferred to DVD, sound
 3 min 40
 Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

he exhibits an almost neurotic self-consciousness to the compromised position of the artist who, from arrogance, attempts to speak on behalf of the masses or to promote others' ideologies. His denial of "artist as ____" is a choice not to traffic in pirated discourse or easily appropriated, regime-friendly avant-gardism.

As a skeptic rather than a partisan, Khan, in his own artworks, constantly returns to representing the individual's experience, which no matter how limited in its vocabulary provides testimony to larger systemic and societal deprivations while remaining intrinsically resistant to co-optation. *Rant* (2008), for example, is a largely wordless portrayal of a young woman's despair. The video depicts her seated at a white desk in a white space, with only her despondent gestures and body language, facial expressions and a few muttered words ("I'm fed up" or "So what should I do now?") to betray her thoughts on subjects that remain unknown to us. During the video's almost seven minutes, Khan's soundtrack of ambient tones is occasionally punctured by the woman's laconic phrases or discreet notes on a piano. Metaphorically, Khan's music describes the steady formlessness of emotions broken by a rare utterance that in its rudimentariness could not be appropriated for any other use. *Rant* doesn't deny the potential for communication, but it does acknowledge the infrequency and simplicity of most human exchange. That worldview, neither condescending nor idealistic, makes Khan a realist. It can be an undesirable role when others expect you to perform critically and speak revolutionarily, and you refuse to be the next dictator of others' experience.

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Big Picture

(Orte/Projektionen)

19.03. – 14.08.2011



Jason Rhoades, Mark Lewis, Rodney Graham, Shirin Neshat, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Corinna Schnitt, Natacha Nisic, Paul Pfeiffer, Steve McQueen, Kimsooja, Thomas Steffl, Richard T. Walker.

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Rodney Graham: Phonokinetoscope, 2001 (Detail), Film-Installation, 16-mm-Film, Farbe, Ton, Schallplattenspieler mit Vinylschallplatte, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, © Rodney Graham, 2010