

Provocative Acts and Censorial Revisions

The Many Antagonisms of Amal Kenawy's The Silence of Lambs

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By the time I saw Amal Kenawy's video *The Silence of Lambs* in Queens, New York, at the MOMA PS1 exhibition "Zero Tolerance" (October 26, 2014–April 13, 2015), the work and the performance it documented were already infamous among the artists, art critics, and historians that made up Cairo's contemporary art community. In 2009, Kenawy (1974–2012), an Egyptian artist who frequently worked in performance and video, hired a band of day laborers to take part in what Alfred Gell would have termed an "art-like situation" (Gell 1998:13). During the height of midday traffic in downtown Cairo, the artist directed the workers to crawl on hands and knees across the busy intersection of Champollion Road and Mahmoud Bassiouny Street. In addition to Cairene pedestrians and drivers who happened to be passing the scene at the time of the performance, *The Silence of Lambs* was also viewed and recorded by a crowd of Egyptian and international arts professionals who had come downtown for the event. While the initial reaction to the act was stunned silence, soon a group of bystanders confronted Kenawy and her hired performers, demanding to know why she was humiliating these men and, by extension, Egypt itself before an audience of international elites. The confrontation intensified to the point of violence and eventually the police arrived, arresting Kenawy and a number of her collaborators.

I was not present for the performance, having left Egypt some months before to return to the United States. But the fallout from *The Silence of Lambs* reached me through numerous written

accounts and critical discussions published on the Internet. By the time I returned to Cairo to conduct field research for my dissertation in 2012, the controversy resulting from the initial action had settled into public consciousness as an unfortunate misfire of artistic experimentation that missed its mark of institutional critique and deeply offended the local population of downtown Cairo. However, even if the work had firmly passed into memory, discussions surrounding the ethics of the piece still inspired passionate response from both defenders and critics of Kenawy's intervention. That Kenawy had converted visual documentation of the performance into a video work and presented it at the 2010 Cairo Biennale only exacerbated these retrospective accounts and appraisals of *The Silence of Lambs* (Figs. 1–5). The research that led to this article became part of this collective conversation as I began to piece together firsthand accounts of the performance and its eventual transformation into video. What follows is an attempt, through a compilation of witness recollections and an excavation of the performance's initial critical response, to historicize Kenawy's work as both a performance and a video work. Finally, I explore the slippages and metamorphosis that *The Silence of Lambs* underwent during its shift in artistic medium, examining the strange and often problematic politics that inhere in the re-presentation of performance documentation as art in itself. By engaging with an artwork that passes through traditional medium boundaries while also traveling between local audiences, foreign exhibition settings, and the context of international biennials, I hope to provide a model that could prove useful in analyzing similarly peripatetic African artworks that navigate multiple mediums and presentation formats.

When Kenawy began producing solo work in the early 2000s, she created ingenious combinations of video, performance, and installation, enclosing the viewer in a multimedia ecology of often-conflicting material sensualities. *The Room*, exhibited in 2002 at the Townhouse Gallery, was her first solo work and consisted of a video and a live performance. The video showed a young bride in her wedding dress, ensconced in a white bathtub where she sews textile ornaments into a beating heart. While the video played behind her, projected onto a large screen, Kenawy

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1 Amal Kenawy, still from *The Silence of Lambs* (2010); video work; 8:51 min

The performers cross Mahmoud Basiounny Street in downtown Cairo as observers watch. This image was captured shortly before Amal Kenawy was engaged in argument by a group of male cafe patrons.

mirrored the actions of the bride, sewing beads onto a real heart of an unidentified animal. In her artist statement for the project, Kenawy wrote, “When I searched within myself I began to perceive my self as an independent existence that retains a set of laws that rule the body as a physical being ... Emotions inhabit this human frame and make of it a vessel, a form, a liminal space that lies between the interior and exterior” (Kenawy 2002).

With these early performances, Kenawy demonstrated a keen interest in the interplay of bodies and environments and in how bodies function as sites of encounter and intimacy. Her 2007

installation work *Non-STOP Conversation*, exhibited at the Eighth Sharjah Biennial, wrapped the decaying ruins of a dilapidated stone building with a new skin of soft, pink quilting (see Huleileh 2007). The artist sewed the quilting onto the structure herself, transforming the installation into a performance piece as she continued to clean and maintain the disused historical site through the course of the exhibition. Her care for the building, and her bestowment of bodily sensuality to its skeletal remains, touched on the same themes of embodied history, decay, and rebirth that permeate the rest of her work.

While Kenawy was familiar with the mechanics of performance, spatial intervention, and video work, it was not until late in her career that she brought these practices into the unpredictable realm of the street. The artist began planning *Silence* as part of a series of performances, all of which were intended to encourage the audience to directly participate in the realization of the works. She had planned at least two other performances, including one in which she would walk through the streets of Cairo alongside a donkey burdened with a sound system that would blast the call to prayer to the surrounding neighborhoods.¹ As a result of the eventually contentious reception of *Silence*, these other projects were never realized, and *Silence* was the only time Kenawy engaged directly with an audience outside the confines of a gallery space.²

During the planning phase of the project, Kenawy’s preliminary

ideas for *Silence* came to the attention of Nikki Columbus, the Townhouse Gallery's project manager and curator. At that time, Columbus was planning an exhibition to be titled "Assume the Position," and she thought that Kenawy's gestating project was a perfect fit for the theme of the show. "Assume the Position," which showed at the gallery from December 13, 2009, to January 17, 2010, explored issues of spectatorship, distraction, and ideological control through the works of seven international artists. Columbus's idea for the exhibition's title stemmed from the dual meaning of "assuming the position" found throughout the show's works, both that of assuming the position of a spectator and the other, more rebarbative implication of assuming a position of subservience under a dominant, policing power. In either scenario, to use Columbus's words, "You're the person who is not in control."³

Kenawy's original idea for *Silence* was to direct a small group of volunteer participants in a short performance in downtown Cairo. The volunteers, undergraduates from the American University in Cairo's fine arts program, were to crawl on hands and knees through a busy downtown intersection. The planned project, with its strange spectacle of urban distraction with the potential to temporarily halt the disinterested flux of people and cars of downtown, appealed to Columbus.

After a series of conversations between Kenawy, Columbus, and William Wells, the director of the Townhouse, it was decided that the gallery would commission *Silence* and offer logistical support. Wells had reservations concerning the project, especially regarding whether the participants would understand and knowledgeably consent to their role in the performance. Kenawy

assured him this would be the case, and preparations went forward. The artist and Mido Sadek, the manager of Townhouse's technical staff, approached shopkeepers in the surrounding neighborhood to notify them of the performance and receive their approval. According to Wells, the neighborhood's endorsement of Kenawy's performance came easily at this early juncture.⁴

Wells's concern for the participants proved sensible as the performance date of December 14, 2009, approached (Elwakil 2011). Through further preliminary meetings and discussion, it became clear that Kenawy had not notified her volunteers of the exact nature of their impending performance. When the AUC students finally discovered what they were being called upon to do, they all backed out, leaving the artist without a cast to execute

2 Amal Kenawy, still from *The Silence of Lambs* (2010); video work; 8:51 min

A closer view of performers crossing Mahmoud Basiouny Street.





3 Amal Kenawy, still from *The Silence of Lambs* (2010); video work; 8:51 min

Amal Kenawy, standing mid-photograph and wearing large sunglasses, directs her performers as the crawl down the sidewalk of Champollion Road.

her project.⁵ The performance and Columbus's exhibition were occurring at the same time as the 25th Alexandria Biennale as well as an international curating workshop, organized by the Tate Modern and held at Townhouse (Thompson 2012:175). As a result, there were cadres of foreign press, curators, and artists in Egypt to cover and participate in those events. Word of Kenawy's imminent performance quickly spread among these visitors, and the artist continued to promote the project even as it seemed to be hopelessly gridlocked. Kenawy raised the possibility of hiring Egyptian day laborers from the streets of Cairo to perform in the project, though Wells quickly dismissed the idea. In his opinion,

the laborers would have no understanding of the performance or their participation in it, and this lack of mutual comprehension between artist and cast could give rise to charges of Kenawy exploiting of the workers. Due to the director's concerns, the idea was temporarily put to rest.⁶

By the morning of December 14, *Silence* was dead. Word had gotten to Wells by phone that no one was available to perform and that the project was canceled. "To be perfectly honest, I thought it would never happen," he told me.⁷ His concerns over the ethical ramifications of hiring performers, and his fears of how *Silence* would have been received by the surrounding neighborhood, had never abated. The project's demise came as an abeyance of sorts, allowing time to work out the possible conceptual landmines lying dormant in Kenawy's plan.

The reprieve proved short-lived, however. After arriving at the Townhouse later in the afternoon, Wells received word that the performance was back on, and it would begin in fifteen minutes a short distance from the gallery at the intersection of Champollion Road and Mahmoud Bassiouny Street. Wells and his staff locked the doors of the gallery and ran down to the junction, which was glutted with traffic since the city's public schools had let out only minutes before. They arrived to see Kenawy, dressed glamorously with ostentatious wrap-around sunglasses, directing a procession of men and women as they crawled out of an apartment



building on their hands and knees (Figs. 1–2). Sarah Rifky, one of the Townhouse’s curators, had agreed to take part in the performance, and she led the column of performers as the first out of the doors. Behind her, a group of around fifteen people, mostly day laborers whom Kenawy had hired earlier that day, inched ponderously along. The cast was filled out by two children under the age of ten.

Wells remembered this moment with sharp-edged clarity when we discussed the performance in 2013:

The thing that struck me the most was when they very slowly came out into the street, there wasn’t this cacophony [of] sound and abuse and everyone wanting to get these people off the street. There was a huge curiosity. People in the buses being held up, the cars. Everybody came out. There was a crowd that gathered instantaneously. No one clearly understood what was going on, except that people were crossing the street on their hands and knees. It was amazing. It was a very unusual moment for a busy intersection in Cairo, to have this silence.⁸

His description is similar to Kaelen Wilson-Goldie’s for *Artforum*: “It was a moment I will never forget. When Cairo stood still, and silence fell over the street” (Wilson-Goldie 2013). Both describe the moment as one in which the natural and social laws that dictated the inner movements of Cairo’s urban machine had been suspended for a fleeting instant. The onlookers seemed deflated, somehow, as if the strangeness of the scene had lulled them into a complacent stance of awed observation.

The pocket of tranquility did not last for long, however, bursting seconds later as the performers moved southward along Champollion (Fig. 3). Wells described the project’s descent into bitter conflict as a quickly unfolding crisis, a sense of impending calamity that was apparent to many of the performance’s observers:

4 Amal Kenawy, still from *The Silence of Lambs* (2010); video work; 8:51 min

This still is taken from late in the video. It shows Amal Kenawy arguing fiercely with a group of men who were incensed by her performance and what they viewed as the humiliation of a group of Egyptian men for the pleasure of foreign onlookers.

By the time the group had crossed the street ... By that moment in time, if Amal had stopped the performance, we wouldn’t be having this conversation today. She would have had the film, and it would have been a different piece altogether. But she continued to walk down the street. I was told beforehand that the performance would only go for about a hundred meters down the street. So very short. But it would never enter into the territory of the shops that had been discussed months before. But as she led the group down Champollion, more and more people showed up, more people taking pictures. One knew, and could easily anticipate, that there would be a problem. Everyone was praying that it would stop before.⁹

The performance did not stop, however, and it soon encountered a public that was far less receptive. A group of men approached Kenawy and her crawling entourage, accusing them all of humiliating themselves and Egypt for the pleasure of a foreign audience (Fig. 4). As the invective from outside parties grew more incensed, the artist engaged a few of the angry bystanders in a heated debate. Their conversation was caught on camera,

and most of it can be viewed in the video work that emerged from the performance. The confrontation intensified until the hired day laborers entered the fray and demanded more money in recompense for their humiliation. Wilson-Goldie described some of the more alarming moments of the conflict: “The shouting match grew into a jostling mob that followed the performers as they turned down a sidestreet, still on their hands and knees. One person called Kenawy a whore and another suggested the whole thing was evidence of a cruel international plot to tarnish the image of Egypt” (Wilson-Goldie 2011). The livid bystanders

did not identify Kenawy as Egyptian, instead labeling her as a foreign interloper who had brought her friends to document the degradation of Egyptian lower-class men (Fig. 5). This misapprehension only worsened matters, inflaming the perception that the artist’s performance was a foreign-originating ruse.¹⁰ Punches were thrown, and the artist Osama Dawod, who was present to photograph the event, was struck and his glasses broken. The police soon arrived to break up the altercation. Those documenting *Silence* rushed back to Townhouse and secreted their cameras away in the gallery’s offices to avoid police confiscation. Kenawy and the workers were quickly arrested and brought to the nearest police station, where arguments between her and the hired participants continued through the night and into the following day. They were all eventually released when the Townhouse met the day laborers’ demands and paid them more for their participation.¹¹

In the weeks that followed the calamitous performance, numerous discussions occurred in the Cairo fine arts community revolving around *Silence*, its artistic merits, and its ethical repercussions. At that time, Kenawy felt as if the Townhouse had not supported her after the performance had fell apart, leaving her to languish in the police station to argue with the officers and her own performers. The workers, who had not been informed of their role in the performance beforehand and had no way

5 Amal Kenawy, still from *The Silence of Lambs* (2010); video work; 8:51 min

One of the onlookers furiously interrogates Kenawy, asking how her performance could be considered art.



to understand its conceptual underpinnings, felt betrayed and disgraced, humiliated by an upper-class artist and her foreign friends. The shopkeepers along Champollion who originally signed off on Kenawy's project were also incensed at both the artist and Townhouse, because they were not informed as to the changes *Silence* underwent before its execution. Even those who knew of the alterations were embittered by its outcome. Sarah Rifky, who supported *Silence* through its planning and performed in the event itself, insisted on a purge of all imagery directly linking her to the event, a demand that went unheeded by Kenawy when she produced the video work documenting the performance.

Other debates percolated amongst those without direct connection to *Silence*, including observers and those who had only heard about the project afterwards. Ursula Lindsey, a freelance arts and culture reporter who was present for most of the performance, condensed the nature and content of these discussions:

Almost every Egyptian artist I spoke to about it was negative in their response. First, who was the audience for this piece? There's a sense this was done for foreigners, and not for an Egyptian public. It puts Egyptians in a demeaning position for foreigners. Also, she chose to pay menial workers to participate in the piece who weren't in the position to understand or explain why they were doing this. If the piece is about Egyptians losing their dignity, or following blindly, her own class assumption, that she can just pay lower-class people to be in the piece that won't understand and just be extras for her, is actually part of the thing she's critiquing.¹²

The critical literature that emerged as a result of the performance mirrored Lindsey's concerns, questioning the exploitation of paid workers who were ignorant about the elaborate fine art conceptual vocabulary necessary to justify and the understand *Silence* as an artwork. Mai Elwakil wrote about the eventual video rendition of *Silence for Egypt Independent*, interrogating the work's purpose and Kenawy's motivations: "The deep engagement of the public—the fight—which Kenawy highlights in the video piece supports her work's argument. But a problem remains: since the public's reaction was predictable from the very beginning, what, if anything, was Kenawy actually exposing?" (Elwakil 2011). In her historical retrospective of both the performance and the video written for *Frieze Magazine*, Wilson-Goldie also emphasized the work's obvious social message:

As a none-too-subtle commentary on poverty, powerlessness, and the ills of an authoritarian system, *Silence of Lambs* made even the most sympathetic of spectators uncomfortable. But for many of the people who witnessed *Silence of Lambs* or who heard about it or found themselves involved in heated debates, the performance risked too much to say too little (Wilson-Goldie 2011).

Yet, as time passed following the initial uproar, critical attitudes towards *Silence* changed, first subtly, then demonstrably when the work was transformed into a video piece at the 2010 Cairo Biennale. Kenawy's performance instigated a critical debate concerning Egyptian self-representation and the foreign gaze. While many of the mostly male crowd denouncing *Silence* on Champollion emphasized the poor treatment of the laborers as the cause of their outrage, they must have been aware that these workers and millions more like them suffer similar inequities on a daily basis throughout Egypt. The country is riddled with

poverty and, with the defunding of many social programs under Presidents Sadat and Mubarak, there remains scant evidence of the economic safety net imperfectly realized under the Nasser regime. Penniless Upper Egyptians travel to Cairo searching for work, where they are often exploited and always underpaid for their labor.

In light of this historical and socioeconomic context, the apoplectic reaction to *Silence* and its exploitation of poor laborers rings hollow. Rather, the performance's undeniably public visibility, its assumed foreign audience, and its orchestration at the hands of a courageous and undaunted woman all seem like more likely targets of the male onlookers' ire. As Kenawy told Elwakil, "The public was offended by the *Silence of the Sheep* performance, although it basically mirrors what people discuss on a daily basis" (Elwakil 2011).¹³ The social realities critiqued by *Silence* were not new or shocking to its immediate audience on Champollion. The unabashed visibility of these realities afforded by *Silence* was new, however, and made more disconcerting by the presence of foreign observers who saw and documented what was unveiled. While one cannot see within the minds of those who protested most vehemently during the performance, their repeated accusations that Kenawy and the workers were humiliating Egypt in front of a foreign audience indicate a certain sensitivity to aesthetic gestures that even hint at associating poverty and suffering with any projection of national self-image.

These debates were rekindled in December 2010, when video documentation of *Silence* debuted at the 12th International Cairo Biennale as part of a relational installation work produced by Kenawy for the event. The project's transformation and reintroduction to public life came as a surprise to Wells and the other participants. In the project's new iteration, an eight-minute video consisting of performance documentation was projected on a screen adjacent to an elaborately designed kiosk from which Kenawy and her son served food to the Biennale's patrons. The critical reception of *Silence* at the event was diametrically opposed to the bitter public rancor inspired by the initial performance. The installation won the Cairo Biennale's Grand Prize while also garnering the attention and the acclaim of the international press and curators from numerous international institutions. In public statements and meetings with curators, Kenawy situated the performance and the later video installation as victories in the war against a censorious and domineering patriarchal society in Egypt. While the work was certainly a pointed critique of Egypt's traditionally male-dominated society, the nation's willful ignorance of its disenfranchised citizens, and the Mubarak regime's longstanding practices of violent censorship, the artist's successful rebranding of *Silence* elided some of its more troubling and exploitative aspects. Wells described his surprise at the work's reappearance and its belated acclaim:

That changed everything. The international recognition of the piece. All the arguments beforehand, all gone. All of a sudden, one was focused on this young woman fighting a social and political battle. The narrative that was being framed was very clean, very precise. Pretty powerful in terms of its political message. There was no discussion of the workers or the people involved. It was all about a statement against the state, and her relationship with that statement. As an artistic practice against a particular stance. It was very impressive, I have to say. I had no idea this narrative had been created so well.¹⁴

The video begins with a shot of the intersection of Champollion Road and Mahmoud Bassiouny, two typically busy downtown Cairo streets. Cars and buses slowly crawl to their various destinations. Taken from the second or third floor of an adjacent apartment building, the image provides an aerial view of the entire intersection. Quickly thereafter, the image is replaced by text that reads, “I’ve created a live performance in the middle of Cairo town.” Then the image of the two streets returns, although this time a procession of men is crawling on hands and knees out of the Awlad Saeed El-Maghrby apartment building on one of the intersection’s corners. They deliberately clamber from the doorway of the building toward the street, eventually squirming between two parked cars to breach the concrete of the intersection. A crowd begins to gather to watch the strange sight. The text returns, continuing the original statement: “and called it ... Silence of sheep.”

As the video progresses, it becomes clear that there are around thirty men in total, loosely organized in a plodding column about ten figures long and two to three men wide at any given point. Close-up shots show them continuing down the south sidewalk of Mahmoud Bassiouny and onto Champollion Road. They are wearing white canvas worker’s gloves, and they look up from time to time cautiously to see what lies ahead of them. Kenawy is briefly visible at the head of the absurd cavalcade, gesticulating wildly as she directs the performance and clears the way.

A title card appears, reading, “Fight No. 1.” A man is heard, yelling angrily in Arabic, though he does not yet appear. He calls out, “Stand up everybody! Did you say that they will be sheep?!” When the image returns, a group of men stands in a tightly knit circle. One man in a blue blazer asks another, “What visual art? Making people walk like animals is visual art?” Soon, Kenawy appears in the frame, and she is arguing with another physically imposing man. He is taller and much larger than the diminutive artist, and he towers in the foreground as he interrogates her. The rest of the men crowd around this encounter, and Kenawy’s face peeks out of the gaggle. The argument continues as Kenawy walks away from the throng. The video concludes before the street side altercation descends into a violent brawl, and there is no footage of the workers castigating Kenawy for exploiting them. Their demands for more money as reparation for their humiliation are also left out of the final cut, which only presents the confrontation as beginning and ending with the protestations of a group of recalcitrant male café dwellers.

Kenawy’s explanation of her work demonstrates a theoretical debt to Nicolas Bourriaud, whose 2002 conceptual explication of relational artworks, *Relational Aesthetics*, attended to a growing body of artists who were attempting to directly engage with their audiences through practices that produced social relationships rather than simply representing them. Defining art as a “state of encounter,” Bourriaud attempted to show how relational artworks engaged with the social interstice between art object and viewer, encouraging audience participation and endeavoring to give rise to spontaneous and unexpected social formations outside the institutional realm of fine art proper (Bourriaud 2001:18). He conceived of relational artwork as imbricated in a set of relations that were necessarily exterior to the normative field of art as it is traditionally characterized in Western culture. Taking “meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality” (Bourriaud

2002:28) as the material and the form of relational artworks, Bourriaud described a newly emergent art practice that sought to create heterogeneous micro-utopias by appropriating the institutional framework of contemporary fine art culture. Claire Bishop (2004), in her critical engagement with Bourriaud’s text, defines relational practice as the obverse of the Greenbergian modernist artwork. In Bishop’s formulation, relational art eschews the autonomous artwork in favor of a contingent, always-shifting set of social interactions that then become, in their very performativity and intersectionality, the artwork itself.

The initial public response to Kenawy’s performance reveals the limits of relational discourse as Bourriaud conceptualizes them. For most relational artists, the institutionalized boundaries between exhibition space and the exterior social world remain intact. When globally famous relational artist Rirkrit Tiravanija prepared and served Asian green curry to his audience at the Carnegie Museum of Art in 1995, the new social formations that emerged from the art project were still indebted to the ineluctable presence of the museum as an infrastructural ordering device (Bishop 2004:54). It can be argued Tiravanija’s work did not so much produce a prismatic and shifting set of alternative utopian worlds as much as play to the expectations of an audience already well versed in the vocabulary of minimalist, postminimalist, and conceptual critiques of contemporary art infrastructure and discourse. Bishop critiques Tiravanija in much the same way: “Tiravanija’s microtopia gives up on the idea of transformation in public culture and reduces its scope to the pleasures of a private group who identify with one another as gallery-goers” (Bishop 2004:69).

In contrast to Tiravanija’s gallery-bound social experiment, Kenawy’s *Silence of Lambs* broke from the confines of the white cube and brought the performance to the outside world. As recorded by the video, her attempts to explain the artwork in relational terms fell on deaf ears. “We are moving the artwork into the streets!” she told the angry men, so she and her work could better “interact with people.” When her protestations did not find purchase, Kenawy attempted to relate the contemporary art vocabulary of relational practices to the popular Egyptian art form *aragooz*, a tradition of Egyptian street performance that utilizes puppets in comical, garishly theatrical displays. A single person performs most *aragooz* shows with a portable shadow-box theater set that can be moved from street to street at will. Audience participation is encouraged, with performers often breaking the fourth wall and directly engaging their viewers. By evoking *aragooz*, Kenawy was attempting to situate the alienating discourse of relational aesthetic in a syntax of popular and well-known Egyptian culture. That she resorted to drawing a comparison between her work and that of a popular artistic tradition outside the codified realm of fine art perhaps unintentionally revealed a troubling element of her relationship with this particular public. Kenawy’s argument strategy suggested that the fine-art critical discourse informing *Silence of Lambs* could not be readily understood by a public that had suddenly turned against her. By marshaling the vocabulary of a popular artistic tradition to explain and defend her decidedly high art practice, she inadvertently revealed the very real social, economic, and cultural divisions between Cairo’s fine art community and the broader populace of downtown, a populace that was ill equipped to appreciate *Silence of Lambs* or even acknowledge it as an artwork.

For while Kenawy falls back on the critical language of the

global art world to heatedly explain her work, the throng of angry Egyptians interpreted *Silence of Lambs* through a completely different lens. To the impromptu audience that gathered at the intersection of Champollion and Mahmoud Bassiouny, cultural narratives of Egyptian masculinity, exploited labor, and nationalism came to the fore. These were the narratives that Kenawy's work explicitly critiqued, and the outrage that resulted from the initial performance only served to throw those critiques into high relief, intensifying their significance and validating their gravity and timeliness. However, as Lindsey pointed out during our interview, the artist failed to acknowledge her own culpability in the structures of power she sought to artistically dismantle. As an at least comparatively wealthy artist paying day laborers to perform her artwork, Kenawy was no different from those who hire the workers on any other day. She made no attempt to explain to them the nature of her work or the target of her critique. There were no gestures of inclusion during the planning stages, and the laborers were never given the opportunity to implement ideas of their own or to include elements of their own personal experience in any meaningful way. Once they were paid off by the gallery, they went their separate ways, their names unattached to the project, their work uncredited, their humiliation explained away as a necessary evil or, worse yet, simply forgotten in the newly forged narrative of critical acclaim and critique of state censorship.

The employment of hired nonprofessional performers in lieu of trained collaborators has a short but geographically widespread history in artistic practice. In her article "Delegating Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," Claire Bishop (2012) provides an account of practices similar to Kenawy's. In delegated performances, artists engage members of a certain kind of community, ostensibly recruiting them to represent that community through performative action. Claiming that people themselves are the medium of delegated performances, Bishop described the various uses this practice:

Artists choose to use people as a medium for many reasons: to challenge traditional artistic criteria by reconfiguring everyday actions as performance; to give visibility to certain social constituencies and render them more complex, immediate, and physically present; to introduce aesthetic effects of chance and risk; to problematize the binaries of live and mediated, spontaneous and staged, authentic and contrived; to examine the construction of collective identity and the extent to which people always exceed these categories (Bishop 2012:112).

By hiring day laborers as participants in her delegated performance, Kenawy sought to fulfill each of the above criteria, only failing at the final and, to the workers themselves, probably most important one. By not including them as individuals with valuable insights into her project's execution, the artist instead hastily paid them to play a part without explaining the role's significance to the project or to society as a whole. As we have seen, this failure of inclusion led to calamitous, though illuminating, results.

When comparing Kenawy's later video work to the accounts of those who witnessed the initial performance, it becomes clear that the artist left out many significant aspects of the confrontation that erupted among her, her audience, and her erstwhile collaborators. While this may be due to the fact that many of the video documenters fled the scene to avoid the ensuing imbroglio with the police, there were also almost certainly a number

of careful editing decisions on the artist's part to present the altercation in a certain light. Gone from the final video are the vocal condemnations of Kenawy on the part of the hired workers for deceiving, betraying, and humiliating them. There is also no trace of the laborer's demands for more money.¹⁵

These omissions further reinforced Kenawy's self-representation as a progressive artist battling the violent and censorious impulses of a retrograde and exploitative society, while also disavowing her own culpability in the very mechanics of exploitation she was so vehemently critiquing. Unfortunately, as an upper-class artist hiring workers to ostensibly debase themselves in front of an unprepared and unsympathetic audience, she found herself embodying the role of the moneyed exploiter, holding her class power and her greater cultural knowledge over a naïve and desperate group of individuals. By leaving these elements out of the video, Kenawy scrubs it of one of the original performance's key antagonisms, that between the artist and her hired cast.

Drawing on the sociopolitical theories of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Bishop defines antagonism as the very basis of democratic society, as the space of conflict that opens between different social identities and conceptions of the social good preconditions the very emergence of a multivalent, pluralistic, and intrinsically democratic polis. Given that Baurriaud defined relational aesthetics as an inherently democratic topos, antagonism, as defined by Laclau and Mouffe, is enmeshed the practice's ontological fabric. To Bishop, it is this social antagonism that is the medium of relational—or, to use her terminology, participatory—artworks, and by self-reflexively unveiling this conflict, these works may access the kind of modernist recursivity defined by Rosalind Krauss (Gillick and Bishop 2006:107). In other words, by using the social antagonism that is opened up by the work as *the very material of that work*, relational artworks have the power to self-reflexively critique the very social, economic, and materialist foundations of the social world from which they arise.

Paradoxically, the original performance of *Silence* unveiled a tinderbox of social antagonisms: those between the artist and her audience, artist and supporting institution, artist and state and, principally, artist and delegated performers. Almost by accident, *Silence* staged an authentic confrontation between the exploited day laborers and their erstwhile exploiter, Kenawy herself. Through this inadvertent and unexpected expression of contingent antagonism, the framework of exploitation at the heart of Kenawy's performative practice was laid bare to critique, by both her delegated performers and her audience. It took the work's transformation into a video installation to deaden and dismiss some of the initial performance's most piercing critiques—if unintentionally so. The resulting work, carefully edited and presented within the safe institutional confines of Cairo's National Culture Center, emerges from the social animus of its original form as a well-produced piece of sleek video propaganda, one that presents a conscientiously manicured portrait of Kenawy as a fearless artist crusading against the wickedness of a censorious public. The potential to be something more, a representation of social antagonism as it unfolds from performative relational art practice, was lost in the transition. In the end, Kenawy herself proved to be her own most aggressive censor, shrewdly pruning her performance of all the prickly reminders of her own complicit participation in the systems she damned.

Notes

- 1 Ursula Lindsey, interview with the author. Digital recording. Cairo, Egypt. November 12, 2012.
- 2 Kenawy was no stranger to performance works, though with the exception of *The Silence of Lambs*, her other projects all took place within the institutional and spatial confines of fine art galleries.
- 3 Nikki Columbus, interview with the author. Digital recording. Cairo, Egypt. October 11, 2012.
- 4 William Wells, interview with the author. Digital recording. Cairo, Egypt. April 22, 2013.
- 5 Wells, interview, 2013.
- 6 Columbus, interview, 2012.
- 7 Wells, interview, 2013.
- 8 Wells, interview, 2013.
- 9 Wells, interview, 2013.
- 10 Lindsey, interview, 2012.
- 11 Wells, interview, 2013.
- 12 Lindsey, interview, 2012.
- 13 The title of Kenawy's work has been translated

from Arabic as both *The Silence of Lambs* and *Silence of the Sheep*.

14 Wells, interview, 2013.

15 Nikki Columbus, Ursula Lindsey, and William Wells all provided identical accounts of this moment of the performance's breakdown.

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