

Moving Gods Aside

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Midan Ramses is the name of the large square fronting Cairo's main railway station 'Ramses Station/Mahattat Ramses' and the district of streets and neighbourhoods surrounding it. It is located immediately north of the city centre, Midan Tahrir, the square that became the heart of the Egyptian revolution some months ago. Ramses Square is not considered the most attractive part of modern Cairo, as it is a core point of Cairo's transportation system, notorious for swirling traffic and massive crowds at peak hours. Ramses Station was first built in 1856 but was reconstructed in 1892 to incorporate a more traditional Arabic style of architecture. In 1955 the facade was refurbished in the same style and it was during this time that an antique statue of Ramses II¹ was placed in the esplanade near the train station. The red granite statue of Ramses II had been found in 1882, broken into six pieces, at the Great Temple of Ptah at Mit-Rahina (ancient Memphis). At the time of the discovery, there were restoration attempts to re-erect the statue, however, all of these attempts failed and it remained as it was until February 1955 when the minister Abdel-Latif El-Boghdadi, decided to move it to Bab Al-Hadid, now named 'Ramses Square'. Only then was it restored and reassembled by inserting iron bars inside the body of the sculpture. Standing on a three-meter-high base specially built to hold it, it rested on the edge of a rectangular fountain. The statue soon became a famous Cairo landmark, appearing on postcards, tourist maps and guidebooks. For Egypt's then president Gamal Abdel Nasser the Ramses II statue, placed in the centre of Cairo symbolized the roots of the Egyptian nation.

During and after a residency in Cairo in 2006, German artist Susanne Kriemann (°1972) collaborated with Cairo based designers File Club, creating a fake newspaper entitled The Future – Ramses Files. It collects newspaper articles from 1997–2006, mixed with historic photographs. Kriemann began by collecting articles about the subject in both English and Arabic and then started to collect pictures, dating as far back as the 1950s. Zahi Hawass, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, introduced her to

¹ Ramses II was the third king of the 19th dynasty and ruled Egypt from 1304 to 1237 BC. He presided over an era of great military expansion, erecting statues and temples all over Egypt. He is traditionally believed to be the pharaoh mentioned in the biblical story of Moses, though more recent studies have cast doubt on that tradition. He was buried in the Valley of the Kings, in KV7, but his mummy was later moved to the mummy cache at Deir al-Bahari. It was found in 1881 and placed in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo five years later, where it is still exhibited.

the people that would be useful. She compiled pictures from the Al Ahram archive, Leinet Landrock Cairo, and the archive of Mohammed Wishani. The texts collected in her paper trace the flurry of excitement about the plans of yet another move of the sculpture: from Cairo's Central Station Square to the New Egyptian Museum. In the end, this move did not take place until the summer of 2007. The images she selected for her fake newspaper are also at the basis of a slide-show installation called Ramses Files. In the 4-channel-slide-installation Kriemann shows the transformations of the megalopolis Cairo through a collection of archival images mixed with recent images of the statue of Ramses II and its surroundings, from the 1950s till today. The slideshow features a picture of two elegant women wearing dresses and high heels walking in front of the statue in 1961. The picture shows how beautiful the area was at the time, with the gorgeous fountain that once shone in the centre of the square along with the statue. Lisa Puyplat aptly describes all the elements that belong to the subtext Susanne Kriemann conveys with her project on the enormous statue's wandering: "The national pride of Egypt as a new Mediterranean power, the exponential growth of the capital city Cairo from four million in the 1950s to twenty million inhabitants today as a result of global economic conditions, the resulting traffic explosion and pollution that destroys the city like some sort of osteoporosis, a dissolution from within; the shift in meaning that the object of art experiences through its circulation..."² In Kriemann's work, the statue represents a sort of paradigm that has remained immutable over the years, in contrast to the ever-changing city and its inhabitants. The word 'future' in the title plays an important role, albeit suggesting a certain fatalism in relation to the scenarios developed for the move of the statue. Kriemann discovered that at least for the fifteen years leading up to the actual move in 2007, the statue was permanently prophesized a 'brighter' future in a better place by newspaper articles.

A God Passing (2007) a recent film by French artist David Gheron Tretiakoff (°1970), documents the remarkable picture that unfolded in the streets of Cairo when the huge granite statue of the ancient Egyptian pharaoh finally was moved overnight from its base in downtown Cairo to the location of the new Egyptian museum, near the great pyramids. To be converted into a part of the tourist industry³, no longer powerfully enthroned and overlooking

² "The Reality of Fiction – The Fiction of Fact", in: Hans DICKEL & Lisa PUYPLATT (eds.), *Reading Susanne Kriemann*, Sternberg Press, 2011, p. 90

³ In relation to the creation of Gruto Park in Lithuania, which collects and displays dismantled Soviet era sculptures, or the razing of Tibetan monuments by the Chinese combined with the proliferation of Buddhist theme parks in Lhasa, Slavoj Žižek considers this strategy the more effective method in order to get rid of the

the city centre, the gigantic sculpture was moved with a stately pace on two flatbed trucks. Tens of thousands of people came out to watch it go by, in a goodbye mood to the God-like Pharaoh sculpture that used to be an evident part of their urbanity. The head of Ramses, protruding from protective steel to hold the statue steady, was wrapped in plastic and thick padding, but its face was visible to the crowds lining the streets. There were people chanting 'Allahu Akbar' and others waving V-signs in a victorious gesture. There clearly was jubilation in the air. The people sensed that they were participating in something more than an event. But there was discussion about the possible significance of said event. In the by-and-large Muslim country some denounced fiercely the excitement for the Sanam (false idol), while others reacted with as much inflammation, chanting that the pharaoh is part of their heritage and thus cannot be a false idol. Initially careful but then more and more overtly they were denouncing their actual leaders (the event happened in 2007, when Mubarak was still in power) as the 'real' false idols.

In this context it is interesting to remember that the initial motivation in the 1950s to bring the statue to Cairo's city centre was to remind the Egyptians of their pharaonic past, after the demise of a British backed monarch by Gamal Abdel Nasser and his "Free Officers" in 1952. Apparently, Nasser proudly likened himself to the great pharaoh (even physical likeness was reported). The placement of the giant Ramses II statue in front of the railway station thus became a very effective representation of power. It was not the "re-presentation" of the actual leader, but it helped to install the idea that those leaders were the contemporary (republican) pharaohs. The German word *Darstellung* has multiple translations that better suggest the type of power monuments or cult objects can summon for rulers and ideologies. Possible translations are "exposition", "demonstration", and "embodiment" and suggest this performative aspect in the representation. The type of agency we deal with then does not create real material power, based on the military and institutional networks of dependencies, but refers amongst other things to earlier meanings that are regenerated time and again. The representation of and by power constitutes an important generator of itself for its continuation and stabilization. To represent power means to make it "take place", to unfold it gradually, and to make it believable in a physical and mental way. The

past than the actual destruction of monuments, see: "Afterword: Lenin's choice", in: V. I. Lenin, *Revolution at the Gates: A Selection of Writings from February to October 1917*, ed. and with an Introduction and Afterword by Slavoj Žižek, London and New York, Verso, 2002, p. 327, Footnote 134.

significance that the representation “carries” has to become evident in a scenic way, as an element in a ritual. Only then do we deal with significance in action, so that the meaning “appears”, “materialises” and “actualises”.

In his film, David Gheron Tretiakoff is the first hand witness to another moment in relation to this power ritual: a moment of liberation from the association to contemporary rulers, and the claiming of the statue as an artwork, a historical artefact that belongs to the community rather than that it becomes a tourist fetish. Tretiakoff combines his own images with footage taken from Egyptian television, subtly shifting between official reporting and ‘creative participation’⁴: the camera heightens the natural sense for drama of some of the protagonists in the street, but at the same time Tretiakoff himself goes with the flow and becomes a medium of the multiplicity, of the agencies that cross him. What is important in the event though is that Ramses, the statue, the image, releases a hallucinatory mode of public perception. For ancient Egyptian culture statues took the place of the divinity and were considered animated. The famous Ka of the Egyptians was the soul of the statue in the form of its shadow. The statue is moved at night (obviously the time with the least traffic), which in ancient belief would provoke a ‘nocturnal shadow’, differentiating itself from the natural way things go, in opposition to a shadow in daylight.⁵ Although the crowd should know better - the statue does not really move but is pulled forward - the viewers negotiate an ancient belief that images of gods might become imbued with divine force and acquire movement, which could be considered an unpardonable sin in a monotheistic Muslim environment. Moreover, the fact that the statue is moved, pulled, and does not move by itself, animates the gigantic stone object but at the same moment reduces it to an image, an object that one can manipulate. There is no divine placement for the pharaoh, the supposedly God-like ruler on earth providing the world with meaning - and thus certainly not for an autocratic president. It is exactly in this excited negotiation on the streets of Cairo that we find its critical crux. Maybe the gathering around Ramses’ procession can be read as a spontaneous critical happening. It is probably too far off to say that this happening predicted the more recent events on the streets of Cairo, but Tretiakoff’s film documents the suggestion of new productions of subjectivity and the articulation of collective agency. Though being looked at

⁴ ‘Creative participation’ is a term used in social sciences to describe the position of the observer towards the observed. Originally a Lucien Levy-Bruhl term from the 1920s for the analysis of social relations of cultural groupings, creative participation rewrites the traditional participant-observer-approach in which dynamic movements can be captured by means of feelings.

⁵ See: Victor I. STOICHITA, *Brève Histoire de l’Ombre*, Geneva, Librairie Droz, 2000, p. 20

in the West with suspicion and fear for fundamentalism, the Arab Spring might hold the promise of a new Enlightenment. In *A God Passing* we see a hesitating challenge to the impossible claim of monotheism and an early animation of a long petrified opposition to real political leaders.