"AN IMPULSE THAT KEEPS RETURNING": A CONVERSATION WITH BASEL ABBAS AND RUANNE ABOU-RAHME

Cameron Hu

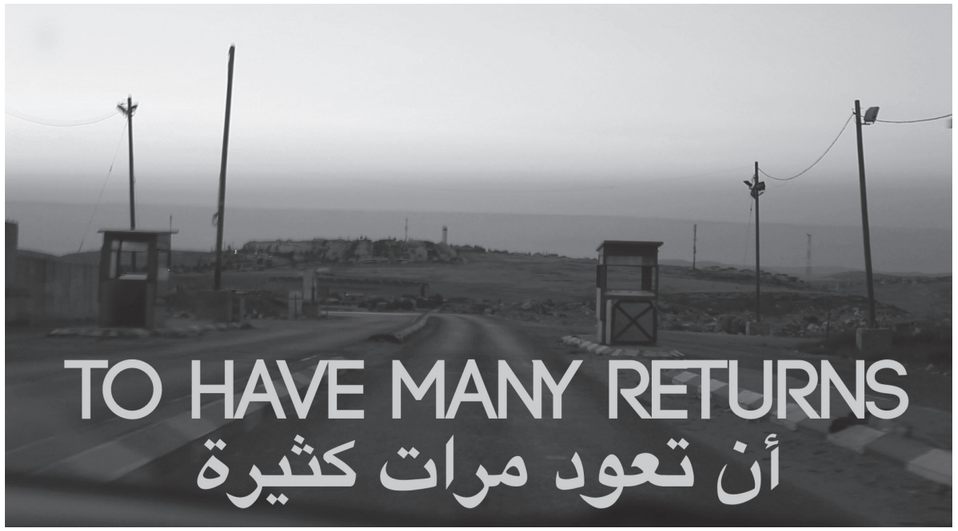
Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's *The Incidental Insurgents* is an ambitious series of installations and videos that probe neglected radical traditions of the twentieth century, in Palestine and elsewhere, and their bearing on a contemporary situation characterized by perpetual crisis and apocalyptic imaginaries. Produced between 2012 and 2015, as the Arab revolutions proceeded from the bliss of new beginnings to the difficulties of composing a world faithful to them, and as U.S. imperial domination was succeeded in Iraq by the rise of the Islamic State, *The Incidental Insurgents* is an affecting exploration of the birth, death, and resurrection of alternative futures.

I encountered one version of the project in March 2015, on the second floor of Philadelphia's Institute for Contemporary Art. Abbas and Abou-Rahme had styled two large rooms as the workplace of an anonymous radical cell. A disorderly archive of leftist printed matter piled up across tables, desks, and couches: the writings of Victor Serge, tracts of Marxian analysis, documents on the life of the "Dillinger of the Desert" Abu Jildeh, studies in the history of Palestinian communism, and printed-out scenes of protest photocopied again and again to the brink of abstraction. The walls were likewise pasted-over with a collection of dozens of maxims and exhortations of eclectic origin. One quote, from the young Roberto Bolaño, leapt out as the cluttered space's animating ethos: "May amnesia never kiss us on the mouth." Indeed, the rooms suggested their tenants were in the midst of some exhaustive effort to recover forgotten origins—perhaps their own.

In a third, darkened room, two videos alternated on opposing walls. In each one a camera follows a pair of actors—always from behind, such that their faces are never seen—as they zoom with manic speed across a Levantine geography emptied of human presence. One watches them looking out from the mouth of a cave, then over an empty valley, then at a shuttered concrete shop, then through the windshield of a car winding down the highway. They are in relentless motion without an obvious destination, and so it seems that a version of the same strenuous search carried among the archives now breaks out into the landscape. Yet there is something equally claustrophobic about these works.

As the videos loop, the protagonists increasingly appear caught within an interminable closed circuit of frustrated desire. Fragments of text flash across the screen in tempo with a hectic electronic soundtrack, and one in particular seemed to encapsulate the project: "The

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, still from *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 2: Unforgiving Years*. **2014. Video and sound. 6:20**



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, still from *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 2: Unforgiving Years*. **2014. Video and sound. 6:20**

impotence of action and the search for poetic act."

Placing the depopulated and inscrutable landscape beside the superabundant archive, Abbas and Abou-Rahme stage a crucial drama of inheritance. How, *The Incidental Insurgents* asks, can the revolutionary energies of a bygone moment re-animate politics in the present? How might one locate the weak but persistent signals of past futures in the contemporary terrain—in the soil, or in ruined buildings, or concealed beneath the surfaces of ordinary life? How could we discover the potential for another world that saturates this one?

Cameron Hu *The Incidental Insurgents* series cites quite a lot of work—for example, Bolaño's *Savage Detectives*—organized by a narrative of failure. A kind of manic drive or energy, in both cases attached to an image of youth, appears obstructed or misspent, and ultimately achieves very little. And this process of failure seems to generate both the comic and tragic lines of these works. One could arguably approach *The Incidental Insurgents* similarly, as a forensic account of the passing of a certain radical politics, in Palestine and elsewhere. But the series has also been interpreted quite optimistically, as an earnest resurrection of revolutionary figures and images of the twentieth century.

Ruanne Abou-Rahme I think we're somewhere in between. Our generation of Palestinians grew up at a moment when the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 1970s had, in various ways, failed. And then they were reborn as state-building projects, projects that quickly became part of the colonial landscape. So there was a great deal of disillusion, and no obvious recourse. You are caught up in the mythology of these revolutionary movements, but you are also aware that those movements are now impotent—their mythology has already been dispelled. Yet we're also wary of being captured by a sense of their failure. We want to suspend the narrative of failure.

Basel Abbas Absolutely. Especially after the Arab revolutions of the last few years, and the tendency to regard them as failures. Of course, at some point, we also saw them as failures rather than as a process that remains dynamic, that is still ongoing and which could continue to resonate across space and time.

R *The Incidental Insurgents* project emerged in relation to a few different situations. In Palestine nothing was happening, really. Meanwhile the various uprisings were taking off in the Arab world. And it seemed that, while ordinary people were ready to go to the furthest limits, there was no political language yet to address the question of "what will you do the day after?" It was unclear then, and it's still unclear to us. At the same time we were also feeling totally overwhelmed by a widespread apocalyptic imaginary that is just growing stronger and stronger; a sense of there being no future, no possibility, but instead a perpetual crisis that is being constantly stage-managed. ISIS—which we approach as a kind of counter-attack or counterinsurgency in the Arab world—is in truth just the latest apocalyptic scenario.

So the project works on these different levels. We're trying to critically confront the mythology around these past revolutionary movements, and we're also confronting the production of a stunted imagination where nothing, so to speak, is possible, and that we are simply meant to move from one crisis to the next.

The project rests between these points, between revolutionary mythology and perpetual crisis. *The Incidental Insurgents* tries to recover figures who seem really insignificant, who really aren't so important, or who have been written out of...

B They're very much on the fringes—

R ... Out of the revolutionary narrative. But we are interested in them to the extent that they continue to expose contemporary gaps and absences. They show us what's missing. We didn't want to romanticize them, to say, "You know, now let's become a bunch of anarchist bandits." The work is about discovering moments we might reflect on, and perhaps reactivate in some sense.

B In the videos the two protagonists could

stand in for any of the historical figures in the installation—Victor Serge, Abu Jildeh, etc.—and they could stand in for us.

R But they don't get anywhere.

B They never arrive.

R Especially in the first of the three parts, they arrive at a series of dead ends. The search that arrives at impossibilities is expressed really strongly in one of the sampled texts by Bolaño: "The impotence of action and the search for the poetic act." We are focused on that kind of feeling—you are searching for a different way of being in the given world, or a way to break out from it, but you are coming up against the limits of possibility.

B Of course in the second video they're also seen standing by a fire. We're interested in the question of what you can reclaim from the ashes of revolutionary and/or artistic movements that seem exhausted, what you can reclaim from the wreckage.

R Our next project is trying to confront the apocalyptic imaginary quite explicitly. The apocalyptic is a feeling that really does have a hold on us now. In the Arab world it's ISIS, in the U.S. perhaps it's a cocktail of fatal infectious diseases, catastrophic weather, and "terrorism." There's a constant production of anxiety, of a feeling that everything is about to end, and so you may as well just grab what you can and stay comfortable. So how do we think about this anxiety, and the kinds of action that it seems to rule out? These are important questions for us.

C If you can't simply wrap yourself in revolutionary mythology, what is the specific attraction to "anarchist bandits"?

B The Palestinian bandit Abu Jildeh was an interesting character for us to re-introduce into the present moment. Abu Jildeh was at one point very well known in Palestine, but the PLO decided to sort of abandon the image of the peasant. The "Palestinian" became an urbanite, you could say. That's the figure they preferred to project. Furthermore, the Palestinian elite did not really take much of a liking to Abu Jildeh. He stole and fought the settlers and the British occupation, but he also stole from rich Palestinians (whom he saw as direct collaborators with the British) and gave to the poor. So Abu Jildeh came to be written off as a mere criminal by many. For us, he reveals the important intersection of colonialism with capitalism. And this seems relevant for us today when we think of the state, the aspiration to a Palestinian state by the Palestinian Authority, its collaboration with the Israeli colonial regime. Abu Jildeh's anarchism suggests a different trajectory.

R We're deeply anti-state. We're not interested in people who belong to parties in any way. We're not interested in the official parties.

B In the second part of the project, "Unforgiving Years," we sample Ruanne's father saying: "I was part of the communist party for a while, but I found it tiring and boring."

R All the figures we work with are in some way anarchic figures.

B Although not necessarily members of the anarchist movement in a specific sense.

R We are certainly reacting to an absolute obsession with the state, with the idea of a state. Clearly, power can operate outside of the confines of the state. And yet there is always a return to the idea of the state. So the anarchic runs through our whole work, and we're trying to make connections between different spaces and times.

B What really connects these different figures and moments is the anarchic impulse, an impulse that never seems to die and is always returning.

R Very often, artists who are Palestinians are framed by their "Palestinianess."

B You're always a Palestinian artist first. So much of our practice has been about refusing that, and refusing the ghettoization of Palestine in the sense of a singular experience, which is completely absurd to us. If you look back to the 1970s, Palestine was tied into a network of struggles going on across the global South, there was a sense of people working together beyond the borders of the nation, and there were notions of common struggle. But suddenly we're totally isolated.

R This is a big, big topic for us. We've been very conscious and very wary of being Palestinian artists, of being Arab artists. It's an easy category to fall into because of the entire Palestine Industry.

B Of course, and there's a Middle-Eastern equivalent, and an Arab one as well.

R You have to show up and play the part of the Palestinian, which means producing certain kinds of aesthetic forms and certain kinds of representations. We're hyper-aware of it, not just in the arts but as a political phenomenon as well. We come from a different kind of tradition. Obviously I'm with the liberation struggle. But I'm not with the liberation struggle in the sense of building a nation-state. We've seen Palestine reduced to the mere idea of a state. It has gone from an idea of a nation to the idea of a state. And even before the nation it was much more about a homeland.

As artists, it was really important for us to not reproduce "Palestine" and "Palestinian Art" as such. But then how can you confront it? We grew up in Palestine, but left when we were seventeen. And when we went back, for the longest time it felt impossible to pick up a camera there, to shoot anything, precisely for the reason that there were so many images circulating of Palestine, all of which seemed banal. It was important for us to think of Palestine as a laboratory for things happening elsewhere. That's how we think about Palestine, and when we film it's far less about it being truly a "representation" of Palestine than as a cipher for something else: in part, to refuse the singularity of Palestine, the approach to Palestine as an exceptional set of circumstances.

B So in our videos even the landscape is not necessarily recognizable as Palestine, though the work was conceived from the urgency of the present Palestinian moment.

R But it could be other places. And that has become a crucial part of our practice—that it could be Palestine, it could be anywhere.

B There are Palestinian artists—it's a serious political problem—who can't move beyond these overexposed symbols. In this way they're just like the political parties. Young people sometimes re-adopt them, because these symbols actually have a real meaning to people and once upon a time they had their potency. But the repetition is really problematic. If you and the official state parties are using the same images and the same symbols, then you're already co-opted. You saw this in Egypt: the revolutionaries and the military were all speaking in the same idioms at a certain moment. Even the military could take up revolutionary language, although if you now look at the military discourse it's totally anti-revolutionary, of course. But it was easy for them to take up all the right symbols. This dynamic is visible every day in Palestine. And it affects our practice and the images we can produce.

R That's perhaps why so much of our practice is somehow "archival" in the most expanded sense (for us archives are constantly being constituted and include everything from online video clips and images produced today, to tweets, films, found footage, and documentary photos). We're trying to look at the present and its possibilities from new and different vantage points. This is the attraction of finding overlaps and intersections between moments that at first seem totally disconnected. Palestine has been represented as a singular set of circumstances, and this is obviously connected to the stunting and stagnation of a wider political imagination. For us, existing materials that speak of a multiplicity and overlap of experience present a resource for confronting the dominant forms of representation.

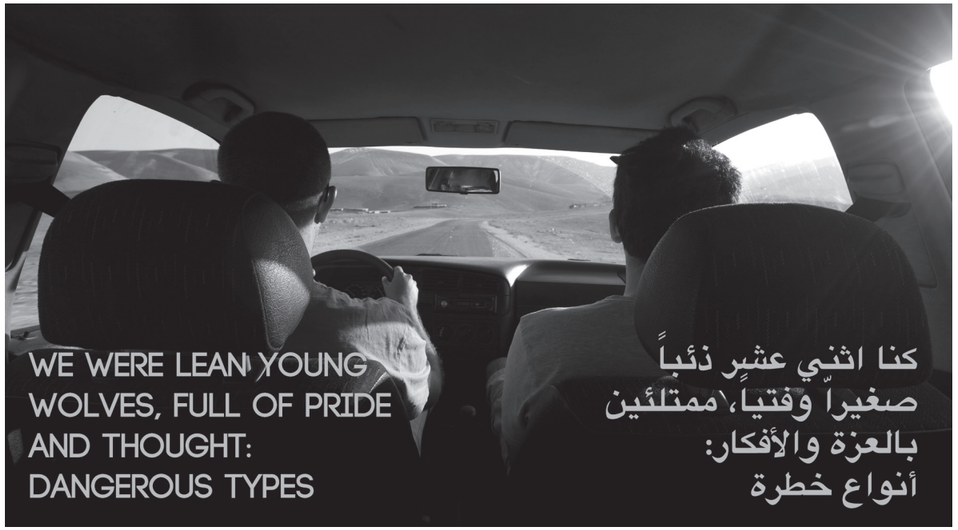
What's difficult, however, is that there remains a strange ethnographic relation between curators from Europe and America, and other parts of the world. If they're going to include one or two Palestinian artists in their show, they need the Palestinian artists to really satisfy their expectations about what Palestine is.

B Or what their twenty-four-hour experience of Palestine has been.

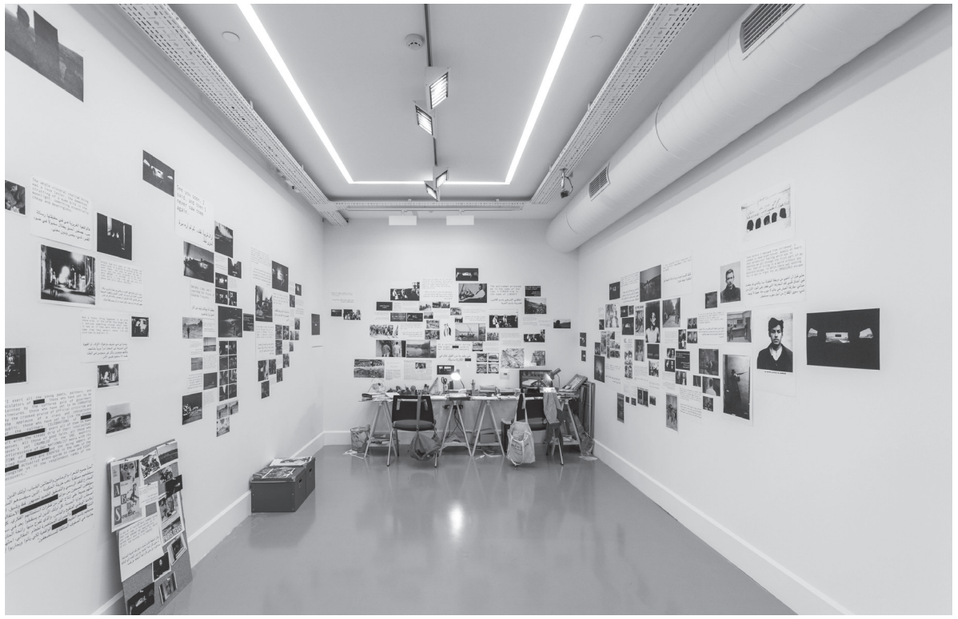
R They tend to parachute in. So ours has been a difficult route, but an absolutely necessary one.

B We've had people ask us questions like, "Why isn't the first Intifada included in the project?"

R Stupid things, stupid things. So we are



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, still from *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 1: The Part About The Bandits*. **2013. Video. 6 min.**



Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, still from *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 1: The Part About The Bandits*. **2013. Installation view at 13th Istanbul Biennial © IKSV Biennial**

Cameron Hu / Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou–Rahme

interested in what kinds of new connections can be made. About how the work *cannot* fulfill that kind of orientalist demand. Our work is very much about how to resist such setups. We ultimately don't want to be involved in a reproduction of a very colonial relationship to the Arab world, you know: "These artists are Arab artists, they're not just artists. Only white male artists are artists."

C **Everyone else is marked in some way.**

R **You are art's others, and we're going to create a show—**

B **Just for you guys. I think that there are artists that have also played a role in this dynamic, in fulfilling a certain set of expectations. Even in the basic visual forms they produce, so not just politically and discursively, but also formally. Of course, at the same time there are a large number of artists from the Arab world and all over that have successfully moved beyond that and continue to break outside of these representations.**

C **You spoke earlier about the particular "urgency" of the present moment, but also about your suspicion of a dominant atmosphere of constant "crisis," which by contrast seems somehow staged or dramatized.**

R **It's a strange thing: you're responding critically to the production of crisis and urgency, and at the same time you can't help but be sympathetic. You are in the grip of this urgency—it's what calls you to work on these issues—and you can't easily get out of them.**

B **And you start questioning your practice, and what it means to be an artist, especially in these moments. Who cares about what you're doing? This was especially true when the Arab revolutions began. In Palestine we were physically distant from Tunisia and Egypt. But we were online all day; we were totally intoxicated by it. So you start to ask questions like, "What if it arrives here?" or "What would you do if you were in Egypt, if you were in Tunis?" Who cares about being an artist in those circumstances? And today a similar urgency comes from the total collapse of communities in Iraq and Syria. The crisis is clearly *produced*, and you want to remain skeptical of so much crisis discourse, yet you can't escape it entirely.**

R **Invariably our work assumes a distance at certain points. What we are trying to do with our process is to shift our gaze on events. Or to shift the way we're thinking through events. There's some proximity and some distance at the same time. We can't work on anything we don't feel strongly about ourselves. We don't have an abstract interest in politics. For us the political is really about how we carry out our lives.**

B **It's about the ability to reproduce our daily life.**

R **And so, the very daily things that politicize people, that cause them to act.**

C **Is this sense of urgency and involvement reflected in work that you make, or in the venues and situations where you show that work?**

B **We're aware that there's no outside, as in you're very rarely operating outside the structures of power, especially if you want to survive and make a living from your artistic practice. On a day-to-day basis, and even in everyday life, we're constantly picking our battles. For example, in Ramallah, we have found that at this point the format of the "exhibition" is pointless. The same people from the same institutions attend the show, you know all of them, and you could have invited them to your living room and showed the work on a better projector and speakers. At the same time, the feeling is that for the most part, most institutions don't seem interested in actually engaging with the public via exhibitions. Perhaps they prefer to engage with the public in other forms, but then why would I want to exhibit? I have been to shows in Ramallah where the text was in English and French, because the French consulate had organized it. It's free admission, but the majority of the people can't really engage with the material if it's only in English and French.**

In Jerusalem, for example, it's a very different situation for art spaces. They're outside the rubric of the Palestinian Authority, and Western donors don't fund them in the same way they fund spaces in the West Bank. Mainly because you have to fall in line with their political agenda, which is one that most Palestinians refuse. The political agenda being to empty Jerusalem out of Palestinians, so that Ramallah replaces Jerusalem as the capital/centre for Palestinians.

So it becomes important to maintain a Palestinian presence in Jerusalem. Naturally it's a very different atmosphere than in Ramallah, a much larger part of the community does actually come to the shows, and there's a level of engagement happening. Actually, we first showed *The Incidental Insurgents: The Part About The Bandits* at Al Ma'mal in Jerusalem for their annual Jerusalem show. For example, at the opening there were former political prisoners taking photos of some of the sampled Victor Serge text in the work.

We're also engaged in other practices in Palestine and not always as "artists." We found these forms to be much more potent for the context of Ramallah and other areas in the West Bank. These are actions or interventions that happen in the community, outside of any "art" context, but that we prefer to not speak of publicly because then that would defeat the anonymity. At the same time, I find it superficial to parachute into another community and try to replicate something like that. Of course, we're not under any illusions that (for the most part) when exhibiting an artwork we're somehow operating outside of the structures of power. We're constantly seeking ways for the work, and the ideas from the work, to leak beyond their function within a show. That's why so much of our work is about activating/reactivating "materials" that make previously inoperative readings open to possibilities for new uses and imaginaries.

R In the case of my father, I think he was actually less compromised. There were far fewer contradictions between what he believed in and his actual practice. But now things are more conflated and more compromised. The actual forms that we're working with are important in themselves and the only places that we can show these kinds of forms are in traditional exhibition settings.

C What was your father's practice? And how does it intersect with the *Incidental Insurgents* project?

R So if the first part of *The Incidental Insurgents* concerns the figure of bandit, then the second is about what happens to people whose lives do not end in spectacular, mythic deaths. And because the Palestinian bandit Abu Jildeh was killed, we started tracing the later resonances of his life and actions. The communist party in Palestine had adopted him as a hero for a while. But we didn't want to follow the communist party. It turns out his son was part of the PFLP as well, and was killed by the Israelis, but we didn't want to pick up the story of his son, either. And through a series of conversations with my father, who created a vanguard publishing house/meeting space in Jerusalem—actually, he was the one who originally told us about Abu Jildeh—it felt like that's where an interesting resonance of Abu Jildeh was, in a completely different form. And yet the impulse was imprinted in this vanguard meeting space run by a bunch of leftist communist friends who refused to be part of the communist party; it was totally self-financed. Actually, it started as a meeting space, people from all the political factions and outside the factions would meet there, which is incredible, and soon after started the publishing house.

B They lived communally above the space as well.

R It was a totally self-financed project. They refused any affiliation with the existing factions. They worked other jobs to earn money to publish their books. The space and the publishing house had a huge impact at the time. They had a wide circulation of these independent books, because they were taking them out to different villages and towns. It was a very interesting experiment for us to reflect on. Practices of writing and publishing became very significant to us, especially for the second part of the trilogy. Victor Serge, you know, is in prison, where he nearly dies, and...

B He decides to write as a reason to go on. Writing as bearing witness becomes his reason for living.

R In those conversations we had with my father, we felt there was a lot more integrity between his ideas and his practice. He didn't compromise. And when he couldn't continue without compromise, he closed the space.

C How did it end?

B The only way that he could go on was to get funding from outside, basically.

R Well yes, but also he had...

B He had her.

R It ended in 1983, which is the year that I was born. He had a family, and the political landscape had very much changed by the 1980s. Fatah was heading to talks in Madrid, and the whole two-state discourse had already been introduced. Whatever opened up during that critical moment in the 1970s seemed to have closed. The space that they were in—which was more or less donated to them—was no longer available. The owner was forced to lease it out and so they had to move. And then they reached a kind of crossroads where if they were going to continue, they would have to take money from certain individuals and for my Dad that meant taking on their agendas. He fell out with some of the others because they were willing to continue that way, and he was not. They closed the space. I really respect that. It was an experiment that maintained its integrity in a way that seems impossible now.

B We intend to create an archive of the publishing house—we have almost all the books that he published—to make them into PDFs, and to create an online archive for the publishing house.

C There's a repeated gesture in your work toward the possibility that these lapsed projects—the publishing house is a great example—could reanimate contemporary politics in unexpected ways. I wonder if this remains at the level of the hypothetical (i.e. these historical resources are presented as a suggestion that one should go sifting through the past for something that would transform thought and action), or if you actually feel yourselves to have been, in the everyday way you've discussed, already transformed, animated, and radicalized by these particular resources?

R These materials absolutely strongly affect me. In the process of making this work, I literally fell ill! There's such a strong connection between what we're researching, and what we're going through at this moment in history, and we feel it on our skin. So it's not as if "oh, you know, I want to explore this objective phenomenon." I really want to deal with something that's very much connected to me but is also much larger than myself. We started the project in one moment and finished it amidst very different times. When we started this project, we felt that the ruptures we'd been waiting for were beginning to appear—I am thinking specifically of the mobilizations in Egypt and Tunis. By the time we finished the project that particular sense of possibility that we had felt across the Arab world was not so present; it was almost overturned.

The project really required us to think about time differently—to have a different perspective of time. It seemed like the only way we could continue amidst such violence was to not think just about "our own" time, but to think about the density of time. To think of time as something that is constantly folding and unfolding between what was, what is, and what could be. And in all that to begin to see how these characters we were following were somehow figures that kept returning in different forms and in different moments, in the sense that their impulse towards a different way of being in the world did not die but gets picked up again. We were taken by the returns of these figures, the details no longer mattered, and that's why we wrote the text "to be anonymous, to reappear as another figure, to have many returns."

What became important for us was to *not* look at all of this material as a history of failure. But to see how we can shift our perspective, to see that all of the failures express an impulse that keeps returning—that this is an impulse that cannot be fully repressed, that as much as power, in its different forms, attempts to crush it, it keeps returning. As I said, we're the generation that arrived amidst revolutionary failure. Palestine is still colonized and was not liberated. So it's important for us to say, "I want to look at these histories differently now. I don't want to just look at them as a history of failed attempts." And that has become significant for us with regard to Egypt and Tunis. We find it incredibly short-sighted that these moments of insurgency are already declared dead. They were declared dead very, very quickly. And this is what counterinsurgency is always trying to do. It tries to make you feel that your experiment has not worked.