



BRILL

Dissenting Bodies

The Performance Art of Adham Hafez

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Abstract

This article explores the art of Adham Hafez, an Egypt-based performer, choreographer and music composer, in relation to the political and social turmoil in Egypt leading up to and following the 2011 uprising. Hafez's work through and on the body highlights how the uprisings themselves were a rejection of various assaults on the body rendered by the Egyptian state, colonialism and global capitalism. By focusing on the ways that Hafez's performances reconfigure the senses, and relations between the body and language, this article shows how performance can be a site of dissensus that creates potentially transformative resonance between bodies—in Tahrir Square and beyond.

Keywords

art – Egypt – revolution – body – senses – Arab Spring

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Solidarity is each one of us opening a wound in their body and sharing its open space with another.

ADHAM HAFEZ

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1 Introduction

The eighteen days of demonstrations in Egypt that led to the overthrow of Mubarak in 2011 were, first and foremost, an uprising of bodies. The sensory norms governing the movements of and between bodies in public space were disrupted. The politics of places like Tahrir Square were fundamentally of the body, in part because the oppressive regime that protestors were fighting was one that targeted bodies—for incarceration (both literal and figurative), for abuse, neglect and death. Living in Egypt in the Mubarak era created multiple bodily wounds. Millions had dismal health due to skyrocketing pollutants, poverty that resulted in poor nutrition, and a crumbling healthcare system. The poor infrastructure and lack of enforcement of traffic laws led to thousands of road injuries and deaths each year—Egypt had among the world's highest numbers of both. State imprisonment without a modicum of due process—and physical abuse endemic to the education, police, security and military apparatuses—punctured, bruised, broke and killed bodies in the hundreds of thousands. The psychological wounds of living in a society without basic freedoms, dignity and mutual respect for difference were no less deep. When Egyptians revolted in January and February 2011, they produced a rare moment of solidarity, a corporal politics that rejected this wounding and incarceration.

Corporal politics might best be expressed as a resonance. Writing at the time of the 2011 uprising, Gastón Gordillo described this resonance 'as a physical, affective, political force made up of living bodies', and a 'collective empathy so overwhelming and bodily that it defies representation' (Gordillo 2011). It pushed against the regime that, as Abdullah al-Bayyari (2014) wrote, 'regulate[s] the public space'. 'For this to be regulated', he says, 'the individual bodies and their belongings are controlled, monitored and excluded throughout and from different spaces managed or affected by the power'.¹ In 2011, protestors opened their wounds to one another, and this mass reconfiguration of what can be made visible (as choreographer and performance artist Adham Hafez's words above suggest) produced solidarity.

In its focus on working with and through these wounded bodies, performance art was a critical site for creating resonance, for burrowing through the regime's controlling, monitoring and regulation. Like some of the work being done in other artistic genres, performance was a laboratory for what would occur in Tahrir, for what Judith Butler (2011) called an opening up of 'time and

1 Julia Elyachar also remarked that 'theft'—broadly construed—'by the Mubarak regime was experienced as a violent attack on the ... body' (2014: 458).

space outside and against the temporality and established architecture of the regime' and what Hanan Sabea (2013) called a 'time out of time'. In contrast to many journalistic reports, such creative dissent did not begin with the so-called Arab Spring.² Artists like Hafez worked inside and outside the so-called Middle East for decades, continuously pushing the boundaries of the thinkable and sayable, keeping kernels of dissent alive and circulating. This dissent occurred in various intensities across all artistic genres (graffiti is the most internationally known), but art writers have not sufficiently attended to the emergent politics being forged through performance.

Performance could be deeply political precisely because it created dissensus—both of the bodily senses and, relatedly, in what Jacques Rancière terms 'a division inserted in "common sense," a dispute over what is given and the frame within which we see something as given' (2010: 69). Like the resonance among bodies in Tahrir, performance reworked bodily relations and sensory norms—visual, oral, aural, temporal and haptic. It thus often interjected in the sensory apparatus that upholds 'common sense', thereby opening paths for imagining different ways of being in a wounded society.

Hafez's performance pieces, both prior to and since the uprisings, have created dissensus, first and foremost, by creating time out of time. Following Sabea, they 'excis[e] a slice of time out of the rhythm of the familiar (the ordinary and the known) and, through that rupture ... mak[e] it possible to imagine other modalities of being' (2013). His piece *KoRpus*, performed in Cairo and Alexandria in 2008, interrupted conventional frameworks for viewing and experiencing the body in time—especially, but not exclusively, in Egypt, as indicated by the emphasis on the R when he uses a dual English/Arabic title for the piece *KoRpus/Jisssm*. The work, a movement study and performance, intervened in what is visible and what is invisible. It also assaulted the dominant sensory hierarchy that places vision above sound, movement and touch. He separated the senses and pushed the audience to use one sense to imagine

2 This term is problematic because it ignores the significant contributions of non-Arab ethnic minorities in uprisings across the region. It also implies that people in the region were in a state of dormant winter hibernation before the mass protests, when in fact the roots of the uprisings can be found in the decade prior—in persistent labor protests, youth movements, artistic practices and critical media, to give just a few examples. Hafez himself opined: 'This term [Arab Spring] is incredibly orientalist and insulting. People were being beaten, dragged, raped, mass-raped, kidnapped, set on fire, thrown in prisons, with media narratives that lie and lie. This is a full-bodied revolution, or series of revolutions. It is incredibly naive to use terms such as Spring and paint a pastel colored version of "Le Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe" image of something that is vibrant, living, bloody and embodied. A revolution is closer to war than to a Spring picnic. We are at war' (quoted in Philipp 2015).

another. And while, outside the theater, bodies were being wounded and torn apart (literally and figuratively), Hafez gathered people in one place to witness a sensory disaggregation.

In *KoRpus*, Hafez rendered his (not conventionally masculine) body discernible by dancing naked on a stage, but, because the stage was mostly dark, his unusual public nudity had to be conveyed in a non-visual way. At times, a projected text described the artist's movements or emotional state, but the pull of the darkness and the knowledge that there was a naked body onstage in Egypt challenged the usual primacy of the text. Judith Butler wrote that the occupation of space in Tahrir

pos[ed] the challenge in corporeal terms, which means that when the body 'speaks' politically, it is not only in vocal or written language. The persistence of the body calls that legitimacy [of the state] into question, and does so precisely through a performativity of the body that crosses language without ever quite reducing to language.

BUTLER 2011

When the text in *KoRpus* announced 'I will move my feet' or 'It's possible to hear the sound of my feet on the floor', the hierarchy of the senses was jumbled. Struggling to see or hear the feet when one thinks one knows one could hear the feet because the text says so called attention to the veracity of certain claims—an act that resonated with the broader political context of the time. The text mirrored the dominant regime in pulling apart the body, yet it also claimed ownership of it: 'My foot. My leg. My pelvis.' But then the text also encouraged listeners to imagine connections between the different parts of the performer's body (despite its invisibility), revealing that moving one part of the body creates movement in another, 'as if there are invisible threads connecting elbows to my pelvis'.

Suddenly, as the text announced, 'This is how this choreography makes me see', sound clearly emanated from the speakers, playing the haunting yet triumphant pathos of the allegretto from Beethoven's Symphony no. 7 (fig. 1). Now, the audience saw the lit, yet claustrophobic, room through a video projection from a camera placed from the perspective of the dancer's eyes. The viewers now saw the setting as if they were the performer's body, but they did not see the body itself.

At the same time, however, the body was self-objectified. The piece was what Hafez calls a 'study' and an 'anatomy session'. The artist ended the work by lying on what can only be described as a morgue table under a white fluorescent clinic light, loose sheets draped over him (figs. 2–3). Has the regime killed him?



FIGURE 1 Adham Hafez, video still from *KoRpus*, 2008

Is he only completely visible in death? Hafez says that he ‘offered his naked body to questions on frames’—an act of solidarity, an act of inquiring—three years before he, his audience and millions of others offered their bodies in the squares of Egypt.

Frankenstein, a multimedia choreographic work from 2009, similarly unsettled the common-sense relationships among the body, time and language, but it did so in a different way. Specifically, it called attention to the monstrosity of the bodily regimes produced by capitalism. In Hafez’s introduction to the piece, he wrote,

Over the last decade in Egypt, we have witnessed a growth in markets that regulate new corporalities through ever more sophisticated mechanisms. Digital media has become a space of representation that brutally validates the forms of control that intervene in the production of our subjectivities ... The FRANKENSTEIN project ... critically explore[s] the processes of representation and performativity of the body developed by the fashion, cosmetic and pornography industries, among others. These industries have converted the body into a product that’s totally integrated within the capitalist system.



FIGURE 2 Adham Hafez, *KoRpus*, 2008
PHOTO BY IKON CHIBA



FIGURE 3 Adham Hafez, *KoRpus*, 2008
PHOTO BY IKON CHIBA

While *KoRpus* deconstructed and disaggregated the sensory apparatus and its hierarchies, *Frankenstein* laid bare (pun intended) the ways in which capitalism separates body parts, and bodies, in spectacular productions of these ‘new corporalities.’ It did so by decontextualizing the various sounds, texts and images of this system. In this sense, the work revealed the enmeshing of the economic and the visual in constructions of the sensible.

As the audience filed into a space arranged like a fashion show, complete with catwalk, they saw image after image of posed bodies flashing on a screen in the back, facing them as they entered, and in the front, facing them as they found seats on the ground. On a side wall, another screen projected text being written on an overhead projector that communicated, in Arabic, ideas about art and the body. Then, the room darkened, and dramatic fashion show-like music piped out of the speakers; this gave way to the sound of a woman’s voice welcoming the viewers in the format, words and timbre of a program on Egyptian state radio. She invited the audience to relax and play a game, to think about their bodies and others’ bodies. She asked if there was something they wanted to change—their nose or chest, perhaps?—and invited them to consider others’ bodies and whether or not they were attractive. When she finished,



FIGURE 4 Adham Hafez, *Frankenstein*, 2009
PHOTO BY AHMED ROUBY

a slightly altered script was repeated in English by another woman, with lines such as, ‘Do you wish you had a tighter ass?’

The rest of the performance was divided into segments that explored different modes of bodily objectification and partitioning (Rancière 2010). First, two men and two women stood on the stage in a series of different formations. As names of body parts were spoken by a disembodied voice—‘mouth, eyes, leg’—they moved these parts in response to the commands. Then, they laid silently on boards situated in the middle of the audience, and each made jerking movements with isolated body parts. Later, the gendered objectifications of fashion shows were highlighted by two women repeatedly walking up and down the catwalk in the middle of the audience, to runway music—one awkwardly, the other smoothly—in order to emphasize the bodily regime of the fashion industry. On each turn up the runway, the more ‘practiced’ model shouted at the audience, asking them whether they liked this or that body part, bringing a sense of hostility to the objectification that occurs in that bodily regime. Meanwhile, on the overhead projector a woman was writing, in English, on the practices of concealment (fig. 4). In another segment, a male performer imitated bodybuilding practice videos in front of a screen onto which the body

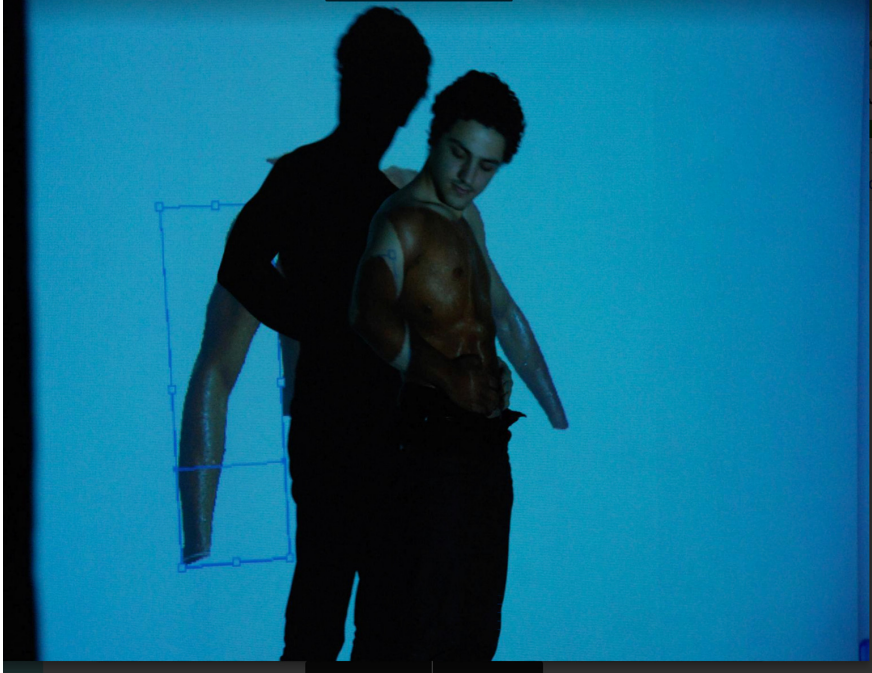


FIGURE 5 Adham Hafez, *Frankenstein*, 2009
PHOTO BY AHMED ROUBY

parts of wooden male models were projected, visually meshing with the live performer's body (fig. 5).

In their own ways, both *KoRpus* and *Frankenstein* revealed and contested the dominant politics of the body in Egypt during the Mubarak era, shaped as they were by global forces and trends. Performed for audiences whose members became, in 2011, active protestors and organizers, these pieces laid critical groundwork for the protests. They also anticipated the radical opening up of bodies that would occur in Tahrir and other squares that January and February.

Several years later, with the exception of that brief moment of solidarity in 2011, the body politic is wounded and incarcerated still, especially in this period of intensifying counter-revolution. Hafez continues to make pieces that rework the sensory apparatus, but the wounds deepen with each inch of retreat from the so-called revolution's promise, threatening his bodily relations and integrity ... quite literally.

Our work together for this essay was deeply impacted by these fractures. When writing this piece, Hafez and I wanted to resist a certain imperative. Faced by art writers, as well as by Hafez and his artistic colleagues in Egypt, this is the imperative: to focus on Revolutionary Art, to make Political Art.

This decree comes from many precincts, most notably from funding and curatorial regimes. It contains specific ideas of what is considered revolutionary and political, both in terms of genre (e.g., graffiti art) and content (e.g., words and imagery explicitly directed against the police, or for women's rights). What about the artists whose practice is differently oriented? What about all of those who felt paralyzed in the wake of the uprising, unable to (yet) create art in the wake of such overwhelming events? What about those who did not want to be forced into externally imposed frameworks? An inability to make art has been a serious problem for Egyptian artists.

Over the years we tried to connect with each other, both in Egypt and virtually, between the United States and Egypt, to work on this essay. But so often the imperative, its effects, and the even more powerful and grotesque system of inflicting bodily wounds impeded our sensory attachments. Meetings in Egypt were delayed by the tearful breakdown of Hafez's close friend, who required his touch and care, as well as by our exhaustion from dealing with the depression, frustration, and infrastructural breakdown of post-revolutionary Cairo. Internet outages due to a spate of never-ending electricity cuts in Egypt interrupted Hafez's online communication with me, as did his frequent travel to European festivals attended by many who wanted Hafez to fulfill their imperative.

Over the years, the military regime doubled down, imprisoning tens of thousands of political dissidents, bringing back Mubarak-era policies and politicians, surveilling and censoring the political, NGO and art scenes to the point of suppressing them almost entirely. The government stood silently by as Israel launched attacks on Gaza, killing thousands in the summer of 2014. Just as disturbing was the fact that large numbers of Egyptians supported these moves, whether out of exhaustion from instability, racism against other Arabs, or a deep, often middle class-based conservatism. Many progressives were paralyzed by feelings of utter despair as they watched the hopes of the revolution dissolve into what can only be called proto-fascism.

Al-Bayyari wrote,

During the rule of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) in Egypt since the eruption of the Egyptian revolution, there have been other confrontations at moments of revolt and of spatial manifestations that reveal the significance of the body and its reaction to ruling power relations over space and bodily existence ... In this sense one wonders how or why the body of an artist could be separated from such a reality. One also wonders how the body organizes itself, choreographs itself and responds to movement within such conditions.

AL-BAYYARI 2014



FIGURE 6 Adham Hafez, *2065 BC*, 2015
PHOTO BY RANA ELNEMR

For many, including Hafez, this reentrenchment of a dominant sensory order frizzled out and shut down bodily systems (just as it has the entire infrastructure of the country). When Hafez was not rehearsing and performing, or recovering from a multitude of bodily breakdowns, he tried to turn feelings and thoughts into words, into another kind of performance, through small notes here and there, on Facebook, in emails. In this way, he fought the external forces shutting down the body and called attention to the ongoing pulling apart of bodies, the ultimate attack on bodily integrity.

Adham (Van Den Ommak)³ Hafez Facebook page (fig. 6)
16 July 2014

I scroll down through facebook and there is nothing but photos of dismembered children in Gaza, or mass murdered women in Iraq, or tortured and killed citizens in Egyptian prisons. And then I scroll down to read the news that lies and says this never happened.

So I go play Candy Crush and such, to numb down more braincells.
It's all hysterical and unreal.

3 This invented moniker is a mixture of Dutch naming practices (Van Den) and the Arabic phrase 'your mother's religion' (Den Ommak); the latter glosses as 'screw you'.

20 July 2014

You're pointing with your finger at the corpse of a murdered child and saying: It is your fault.

That's exactly what you are doing, and that's exactly who you are, because it is not a white child.

As bombs and beheadings multiplied, Hafez woke from the droning sensory suppression of video games to point a finger at those pointing fingers, highlighting the racialization of bodies in the process of dismemberment.

30 July 2014

The deaths in Gaza, the unjustified hate of Arabs, the wars on Iraq, the war in Syria, the rise of the Gulf, the injustice in Egypt, the borders, the position of an Arab in producing knowledge, the position of an Arab artist in discourse, the bodies of Arabs threatened at borders when they dare travel, are all the products of the same system, and they are its ecology.

As summer moved into fall, Egypt's Sisi regime continued to side with the Israeli narrative and began to demolish the entire city of Rafah, on the border with Israel, ostensibly to create a buffer zone with so-called Gaza terrorists. The military and security apparatus started destroying hundreds of homes and lives, with the aim of wiping an entire city off the map. Hafez posted this status:

8 October 2014

I cannot heal anything with art, not even myself. We can only but rupture and sever with art the times and places that are ours now.

Here, Hafez articulated a counter-rupture that attempted to sever the temporal and spatial regime that was not only reemerging but also digging in its brute heels. Hope was dissipating quickly, however:

29 October 2014

I think all Egyptians died and went to inferno, perpetually.
For this can't be life.

Then, he developed a fever during preparations for a performance festival in Europe. The government started to implement a draconian NGO law, shutting down institutions across the country in an attempt to suppress freedom of expression, speech and especially critique. The law divided Egyptians, the body politic, once again.

6 November 2015

I am enraged not only because of the possibility of shutting down cultural organizations and civic work offices. I am enraged because of the cultural workers who are ready to join the State and its violent propagandist machine in order to survive, in order to hide from prosecution inside the arms of prosecution itself.

And, my rage obviously goes to the State, not to those individuals. A State that insists on dividing us against one another, and bring [sic] out the worst in every single Egyptian citizen. One by one, in every single stratum.

This post, like his other performance work, points out the ways in which the system divides and punctures bodies to bring out the worst, enveloping people within it.

25 November 2014

A universe born from a primordial uber-galactic bang, and you ask me to play it safe??

A universe born from a primordial uber-galactic bang, and you ask me to play it safe??

Then, he suffered a torn cornea. He could not see; his visual sense was literally disrupted.

27 December 2014

Each time I remember all the threads of the Egyptian social fabric that were/are being forced to leave, I can't help but think that the country is being evacuated for it to become the terrain of something monstrous and unnamable.⁴

A field of operations, a playground of something larger than what we may conceive of now.

Hafez became caught in this field of operations as he was harassed and racially profiled in airports on his way to perform in New York in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks.

4 Remember his piece *Frankenstein* here.

January 7, 2015

I am incredibly sorry for the loss Paris witnessed today of more than ten people murdered by dark forces that defy life.

I would like to remind the world also that the very same day over 35 people were massacred in a suicide bombing in Yemen, also by dark forces that defy life.

I wish Paris freedom of expression while carefully wishing it not to turn to a general anti-Arab anti-Muslim sentiment. Arabs and Muslims have been murdered the same day by dark forces that defy life.

Let's mourn the loss, let's actively seek freedom together, and let's carefully see who the enemy is and who the victims are of such attacks.

Where do his words go? Do they go into an Internet ether, recirculated by like-minded comrades on Facebook? Dominant forces keep intact the conceptual and physical binary between Arab/Muslim and non-Arab/Muslim bodies—as well as between so-called 'good' and 'bad' Arabs/Muslims. The palindrome of ISIS (Islamic State) and SIS1 (Egypt's president) continues to incarcerate, maim, torture and kill—even though so many see them as opposites.

At New York's PS1, on the fourth anniversary of the beginning of the mass demonstrations in Egypt, Hafez performed a piece called *This Is the End* (fig. 7). Like *KoRpus*, it involved lying on the floor. But rather than perform dismembered, isolated bodily twitches, this time the performer—Hafez himself—laid on the floor as if dead, next to books, which will mean nothing at the end of time.

The metaphorical and literal relationship of that piece to many people's feelings about the revolutionary process in Egypt became too much to bear. Hafez passed out on the platform at Penn Station after the performance, his body giving out on him after four years of trauma, of bodily pushing against the trauma. In an email to me on 6 February 2015, he wrote,

Jessica, that moment at Penn Station in New York City almost finished me off. But fainting anonymously in a public transport station was not as violent as being in Paris and being pulled out of a line crossing a border and just [to] be subjected to racial profiling and violent insults, where I was asked:

'Et, ca, c'est quoi?'

'C'est des gâteaux'

'Non, c'est pas des gâteaux, c'est des gâteaux Arabes'

'And this, is what?'

'Sweets'



FIGURE 7 Adham Hafez, *2065 BC*, 2015
PHOTO BY NURAH FARAHAT

'No, these are not sweets, these are Arab sweets'
 This is not Art, this is Arab art
 This is not theory, this is an Arab rambling
 These are not sweets, these are Baklavas
 This is not text, this is poetry
 This is not philosophy, this is an oral narrative
 This is not thinking, this is feeling
 This is not theory, this is an Arab rambling

Racialized vision, text, speech, taste, sound, feeling—Hafez poked at each of these sensorial elements and emphasized that they can be used to both perpetrate and exceed incarceration. In his next work, entitled *2065 BC*, performed in the spring of 2015, he deliberately forced time into this equation. This work was performed in Berlin, as a parody and remake of the infamous 1884 Berlin conference that divided the African continent among European colonial powers. Hafez describes this piece as a 'displaced and revisited' reenactment of the conference. It plays with the designation 'BC' to signal both a time before the dominant 'Christian era' and 'Berlin conference'. Yet the work takes place in 2065, after the world has essentially been destroyed by a third world war and nuclear waste. During this conference, African powers gather to divide and conquer the world, to 'reset the world order and save us'⁵—and the new powers

5 Hafez, personal communication, 26 March 2015.



FIGURE 8 Adham Hafez, *2065 BC*, 2015
PHOTO BY RANA EL NEMR

are led by African queens, not old white men (fig. 7). However, the queens' decadence indicates that it is not clear that this simple reversal of continental relations will solve the body-killing problems of violence and corruption.

Indeed, the performance both disrupts linear time and demonstrates the persistence of structures of power. It does so by interweaving texts from the original Berlin conference and its era (e.g., articles from the general act of the conference, a piece of Flaubert's text about his encounter with an Egyptian dancer/prostitute) and contemporary texts written by the performers. It also interweaves contemporary images (often drawn from fashion photography) with images from the late nineteenth century that racialized black bodies, especially those of women (e.g., the infamous image of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman put in 'freak shows' as the 'Hottentot Venus') (fig. 8).

By interweaving these texts and images, and through the constant repetition of events and ideas, the performance disrupts linear time but also demonstrates the persistence of geographical, gendered and racialized structures of power. By peering into a future that may or may not come to pass, but often feels as if it is coming, the work asks, 'what should art look like at times of historical ruptures, and which canon of aesthetics does it wish to align itself

with? Are we still bound by a Eurocentric vision of the world, at the End of Times?'⁶

He keeps the question open, and that is the most important part of Hafez's work, and performance art in Egypt more generally. The regime's targeting of bodies feels even more painful now because it seems sometimes that the wounds have scarred over without having been cleaned. But keeping the questions open means keeping these wounds open for all to witness and confront, to share with one another in resonance and solidarity. As al-Bayyari reminds us, 'It is the body that is the basis of sustaining all confrontations' (2014). Even when hanging on by a proverbial thread, Hafez and other courageous artists keep the body and its multisensory potentialities open to transformative resonance.

2 Artist's Biography

Adham Hafez is a performer, choreographer, music composer and cultural producer. He is the founder of HaRaKa, Egypt's first dance research, development and archive project; TransDance, a series of transdisciplinary festivals of art and performance; and Adham Hafez Company, which has produced works in the fields of dance, music and installation since 2003. He has received numerous awards in Egypt and abroad for his work.

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6 See the description of the work at Hebbel am Ufer: <http://english.hebbel-am-ufer.de/programme/schedule/hafez-2065-bc/>.

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