The Art of Archiving an Uprising

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Abstract: As argued by scholars such as Lina Khatib, Ariella Azoulay and W. J. T. Mitchell, the production and circulation of images recorded by citizens played a crucial role during the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The use of images attracted global attention, mobilized action and actively performed the protests' crucial aims to renegotiate the country's body and image politics. The inherent act of protest in citizen photography and the "war of presence" spilled over into the act of archiving the protests as a form of resistance in itself. Consequently, a large number of online archive projects were launched during the 2011 uprising. What role does this large body of visual material and the online archives that store it play today, eight years after the outbreak of the uprising? With a focus on Egypt, this paper asks whether the dynamics of these archives "died" with the violent crackdown on public protest and the increased censorship imposed on citizens by the current military regime. Through an examination of archive "858: An Archive of Resistance" by *Mosireen Collective*, I propose ways in which digital archives containing images produced by civilians serve as sites on which the "war of presence" can continue to be fought within present-day Egypt.

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Introduction

> [A]rchive fever is not reducible to the claim to study documents. Archive fever is also the claim to revolutionize the archive; the claim to a different understanding of the documents it holds, of its supposed purpose, of the right to see them and to act accordingly; the claim to the forms and ways of categorizing, presenting and using these documents (Azoulay 2015: 202).

The massive popular uprisings that spread across the Middle East and North Africa from 2011 – commonly referred to as the Arab uprisings – generated the production and circulation of enormous numbers of visual documents. Photos and videos made by civilians participating in the protests were circulated on both analog and digital media platforms. As the protests developed, this photographic material took on ever greater political significance. Lina Khatib has argued that the widespread use of citizen photography during the uprisings testifies to a general yearning among civilians to represent their reality in a region where most communication platforms are to an extent controlled by authoritarian regimes (Khatib, 2012). Khatib argues that the struggle to assert an active visual presence within public space in this region, which she calls the "war of presence," was one of the central demands claimed by these revolutionary movements. Scholars such as W. J. T. Mitchell (2012), Lila Abu-Lughod (2012), Ariella Azoulay (2011), Peter Snowdon (2014), Mark Westmoreland (2016) and Donatella Della Ratta (2018) have also argued that struggles over the visual representations of people, places and events were a crucial feature of the Arab uprisings. The underlying argument is that because political agency today crucially involves what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called the "right to look," a natural consequence is that civilians will demand the right to represent their own lives (Mirzoeff 2011). For Emily Keightley, the role played by citizen photography during the uprisings was consolidated by the "living archives" of the online platforms (Keightley, 2012). Here civilians participating in the protests could upload their visual testimonies, minute by minute. The platforms allowed civilians to archive the war of presence instantly, as it unfolded, and thus collectively to experience history in the making. The websites on which the photographic material was archived not only became crucial sites for publicizing day-to-day developments in the region, but they also preserved these actions for the future. The inherent act of protest in citizen photography and the war of presence spilled over into the act of archiving the protests as a form of resistance in its own right. In this sense, the enormous number of online archives created by civilians testifies to the merging of physical and virtual space in the performance and representation of protest during the Arab uprisings[1].

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[1] Since international media and intelligentsia were quick to characterize the Arab Uprisings as "Facebook revolutions," an extensive debate has been taking place in academia since 2011 regarding which impact information-sharing websites had during the uprisings. Without going further into this debate, I rely on work done by scholars such as Nezar Al-Sayyed & Muna Guvenc (2015), Francesca Comunello & Guiseppe Anzera (2012) and Helga Tawil-Souri (2012a), who have shown how it was the constant *exchange* between physical protest performed within public spaces of the Arab cities and the representation and support of these protests online that enabled the immense and intense protest actions that were the Arab uprisings.

What role is played today, eight years after the outbreak of the uprisings, by this large body of visual material and the online archives storing it? In Egypt, where the uprising started on 25 January 2011 with eighteen days of protests across the country, resulting in Mubarak's resignation as president on 11 February, a media tent was immediately established at the central protest site, Tahrir Square in Cairo. Here, volunteers worked to collect, organize and upload all of the material being produced in the streets. Some of the people behind this initiative later went on to form the media collective *Mosireen*. Alongside other platforms such as *Thawra Media* and *#18DaysInEgypt*, *Mosireen* worked exhaustively over the following years to archive the videos and photographs that had been produced by artists, activists and citizens in support of the country's revolutionary forces. As the Egyptian artist and activist Lara Baladi writes, "The more the revolution lost territory, the more vital it became to archive Tahrir and its aftermath" (Baladi, 2016). The present paper, focusing on Egypt, asks whether the dynamics of these living archives "died" with the violent crackdown on public protest and the increased censorship imposed on citizens by the current military regime. To put it another way, I identify how even now, when the "war of presence" is no longer being waged in the physical streets and squares of Egypt's towns and cities, the digital archives of the images that were produced by citizens are still sites on which the "war of presence" can in some sense be fought; despite the experienced loss of faith in the political agency of the images in the aftermath of the uprising.

Through exploring the *Mosireen* collective's archive practices and placing them in the context of the shifting realities of Egyptian image politics before, during and since the uprising, I show how *Mosireen*'s work claims and reclaims the citizens" "right to look" in public space. I argue that the collective's 2018 online archive, "858: An Archive of Resistance," exemplifies how artists and activists continue to negotiate the political agency of citizen images, despite the devastating crackdown on image politics that followed the uprising. They do this by continuing to produce archives that present civilians' perspectives on the events that formed the Egyptian uprising. In so doing they are trying to liberate the images of these events from retroactive claims to ownership of the history of the uprising, chiefly by the state's machinery of counter-revolutionary propaganda, but also by the forces of global commodification. Finally, I suggest that it is precisely through its insistence on archiving such "citizen visions" and "free images" that *Mosireen*'s practices continue to serve as sites for the "war of presence" in Egypt, both now and in the future.

Section one of this paper elaborates on Lina Khatib's notion of the "war of presence" and its democratic potential in the context of the Egyptian uprising. I explore this idea in connection with writings on image politics, visuality, countervisuality and the concept of the archive in order to identify more precisely the ways in which the media collective *Mosireen* actively worked to support citizens' rights "to look" and to be visible within public space during the uprising. Section two focuses on the realities of image politics in Egypt since the uprising. I analyze *Mosireen*'s project "858: An Archive of Resistance" as an attempt to reactivate the political agency of

images, despite the current situation in the country, in the service of a more democratic and liberated future for image politics in the country.

Seeing through the uprising

Sensible ordering and systems of visuality

In his now seminal work "The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible" (2004), Jacques Rancière elaborates on the interactions between politics, aesthetics and what he refers to as "the distribution of the sensible". Rancière's term "the sensible" is the field of what can be perceived and thus, in the political realm, what is visible or invisible to the community. For Rancière, the distribution of the sensible is the ruling visual order. In Rancière's terminology, aesthetics comes into being through this distribution of the sensible, understood as an implicit and self-evident system that governs the ruling visual order of any given community or society. This system of sensible ordering establishes a common space by producing modes of perception and ways of being, doing and making that further define which experiences can be made visible to and by the community. According to Rancière, any community always strives toward unification through this specific aesthetic ordering. There will of course always be subjects or groups living under any such order whose experiences are not made visible or sayable, and those subjects and groups may at a certain point demand a redistribution of the sensible. This process of unification through aesthetic ordering and subsequent challenge is termed "dissensus" and they are understood as moments when certain subjects challenge the natural order of sensible experience, thereby separating themselves from society (Rancière, 2004: p. 60). Dissensus is followed by negotiations over the maintenance or redistribution of the sensible order. In Rancière's terminology, politics ultimately consists of this redistribution of the sensible order.

By proposing this terminology, Rancière shows how the potential for citizens to participate actively in the configuration of their society is closely linked to their visibility or invisibility within the society's established aesthetic regime. In this sense, politics centers around what and who is seen and who has the opportunity to see and to speak about what they see. When Lina Khatib points to the connections between political agency, the ability to be seen, and the "war of presence" in the context of the contemporary Middle East (Khatib, 2012), Rancière's work is an underlying point of reference. Nicholas Mirzoeff's writings on the intersections between visuality, invisibility and the political systems that citizens live in offer further perspective to Khatib's notion of the "war of presence." In his book "The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality" (2011), Mirzoeff develops the concepts of visuality and countervisuality in the context of the historic rise of the nation state. Visuality is understood as a historically rooted system with the authority to organize hierarchies of the visible and sayable within communities or societies. Authority is a key term in Mirzoeff's work, since it is precisely the modern nation state's claim to exert authority

as its right (which he traces back in history) that requires it to establish visuality as a means of making its power appear self-evident. In Mirzoeff's words, visuality is "a discursive practice for rendering and regulating the real that has material effects, like Foucault's panopticism, the gaze, or perspective" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 3). Asserted in opposition to the self-maintaining, discursive system of visuality is what Mirzoeff calls the "right to look." This is understood as the right of subjects who have been excluded from and by the sensible order to participate in hierarchically organizing properties of space and time. Mirzoeff gives as an example of such a claim the black seamstress Rosa Park's refusal to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. Park's refusal to follow the state policy, which required African Americans to sit at the back of public buses, represented a dispute over what and who was to be visible within an established sensible order. Claiming, as Parks did, the right to be visible within an aesthetically organized public space generates an immediate countervisuality by proposing a concrete redistribution of the sensible. Countervisuality is thus a direct claim to autonomy within a system of authority. It is: "[...] not a right for declarations of human rights, or advocacy, but a claim of the right to the real as the key to a democratic politics" (Mirzoeff, 2011, p. 4).

Rancière and Mirzoeff show how the exercise of power by authoritarian nation states, both historically and today, is highly dependent upon the state's control over visuality and the writing of history. This explains why demands for a redistribution of the sensible always crystallize around citizens' "right to look" and to be visible within the aesthetically organized public order. As Khatib writes, the importance of the visual in connection to political struggle in the Middle East has radically increased during the last two decades, culminating in "the extraordinary visual rush that was the Arab Spring" (Khatib, 2012, p. 2). According to Khatib, the region's authoritarian states have increasingly incorporated strategies to control visuality in their ruling method. Up until the uprisings in 2011, regimes such as those in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria were centralized and personified in the figure of the leader, who embodied the state and affirmed his authority through a system of visuality that presented him as a well-developed persona whose fatherly but watchful gaze was ever-present in the everyday life of the citizen – whether indirectly through surveillance, symbolically through the presence of his image on posters in all public and private spaces, or directly through forcing civilians to perform in staged, pro-regime spectacles. As Helle Malmvig points out, prior to 2011, the state apparatus in Syria relied on a visible order in which a central organizing principle was the relentless instilling in its citizens of the fear of being seen or of losing the right to invisibility (Malmvig 2016, p. 258). Helga Tawil-Souri shows how this was to a lesser extent practiced by the Mubarak regime in Egypt through a number of rules and regulations, such as the Emergency Law of 1981, which prohibited public gatherings and the distribution of posters in the streets (Tawil-Souri, 2012b, p. 88). Consequently, as Dalia Halib Linssen shows, practices of citizen photography in Egypt pre-2011 were regarded either as suspect or as posing a direct threat to public security (Halib Linssen, 2018).

In the context of this authoritarian system of visuality, Mohammed Bouazizi's act of self-immolation on 17 December in front of the governor's office in Sidi Bouzid can be characterized as an act of countervisuality[2]. Bouazizi's public action signaled a claim to the right to be seen within the specific aesthetic ordering of public space in Tunisia and Sidi Bouzid. It called for the right to be visible, as a citizen whose life is considered important – if not before, then, paradoxically, in the "about to die moment" (Zelizer, 2004, p. 158). This at least was the photographic legacy bequeathed by the widely distributed grainy images of Mohamed Bouazizi's burning body in front of the Sidi Bouzid governor's office during the days, weeks and months that followed the incident, a legacy that was re-enacted in streets and squares all over the region. Civilians eager to document the protests as they unfolded raised their mobile phones as a form of visual interjection, directly confronting the fear of being seen described above. As Malmvig puts it, they, together with Bouazizi and millions of other civilians, were making themselves visible as dissenting political subjects who demanded to be assigned dignity and agency as citizens, despite the possible consequences (Malmvig, 2016, p. 259). In this sense, the act of photographing themselves carried out by thousands of protesters in Egypt during public protests directly challenged the ruling visual order and the status of the citizen within the public space. It also assigned direct political agency to the images being produced, as did the extensive defacement of Hosni Mubarak's image on public posters, the massive presence of images of "martyrs" of the uprising, and the emergence of a vibrant street art environment that symbolically conquered the public space, one wall after another, in cities all over Egypt. These visual practices produced concrete acts of countervisuality: civilians present in front of or behind a camera, or with a spray can in their hand, were claiming the right to represent their reality and to legitimize these representations without fear of the leader's governing gaze.

Mosireen: Collecting countervision

A number of initiatives implemented on the ground during the Egyptian protests in 2011 reinforced these citizen struggles over the rights "to look" and to representation. The media tent established in Tahrir Square led to the formation of one of the most radical groups involved in the "war of presence" in Egypt, the *Mosireen Collective*. *Mosireen*, which means "we are determined/we insist" in Arabic, is a non-profit organization of media activists and artists who took part in the 2011 uprising. While participating in the ongoing protests, the collective worked to produce and publish short documentary videos on *YouTube* covering events from the civilians'

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[2] The literature discussing the political agenda – or lack of such – behind Bouazizi's suicide is quite extensive. Where scholars such as D. Fassin (2011) have pointed to Bouazizi's self-immolation as being a deliberate and conscious political gesture directed towards the Tunisian system of governance, scholars such as H. De Soto (2011) have questioned whether Bouazizi's act is rather to be understood as that of an apolitical family man, whose small-scale business was attacked by corrupt, local authorities, and who therefore felt that his future livelihood was under attack. It is not in my interest to assess the intentions behind Bouazizi's suicide here, but rather to suggest that whether it was intended or not, Bouazizi's action and especially the way it was documented and distributed afterward resulted in a claim to countervisuality and to the "right to look"; a claim that gained more and more emphasis as the Arab uprisings developed.

perspective, in stark contrast to the state-run and corporate media. From 2011 to 2013, the collective published more than 250 videos. With over 6.5 million views on its *YouTube* channel, it now holds the record for most views of any Egyptian non-profit organization (Cummings, 2013). *Mosireen* also provided protesters with the skills, equipment and knowhow to produce their own documentation of the protests. As a result, collecting and organizing the visual material created by civilians became a considerable part of the collective's work. Along with the curation of an online platform and blog where such videos were uploaded and distributed globally to reach international publics, *Mosireen* cultivated a local audience through projects such as the "Tahrir cinema" (2011), an improvised cinema set up in the middle of Tahrir Square, displaying the collected footage and videos. *Mosireen* also arranged workshops and dialog meetings within their rented workspace in downtown Cairo (Dickinson, 2018, p. 117).

Working simultaneously as protesters, facilitators, producers, distributors and archivists, *Mosireen Collective* thus played a central role in the struggle to claim civilians' "right to look" during the uprising in Egypt. The collective was straightforward about their political convictions. They stated clearly that they did not see themselves as neutral observers, but as actors within the uprising's wider struggle over image politics and the right of civilians to represent their own lives and perspectives. As the collective states in its manifesto, "Revolution Triptych," written in 2013:

> Images are a trap. And yet we use them. We too seek to distort reality. [...] The body politics is riddled with disease, but the people are fighting it at every turn. So too must we – all of us – attack the vacuum of recycled meaning that is the image creation (Dickinson, 2018, p. 121).

As expressed here, the collective considered their practices of image-making and distribution to be a challenge directed at the politically motivated system of visuality in Egypt. Their activities can be characterized as horizontal, self-organized, leaderless, based on open-source strategies, and dispersed, which is why media scholar Kay Dickenson describes *Mosireen*'s practices as exemplary of the tactics that informed the uprising on a more general level (Dickinson, 2018, p. 109). According to Dickinson, the period of the uprising following the eighteen days of protests and Mubarak's resignation was distinguished by a large number of citizen experiments attempting to maintain, preserve and extend the revolutionary tactics and objectives for the future (Dickinson, 2018, p. 112). As a consequence, the archival organizing of all the citizen images and videos produced throughout the legendary eighteen days became the key objective in *Mosireen*'s practice. Artist, activist and member of *Mosireen* Lara Baladi writes: "The fear that the vision born in Tahrir would die soon after the 18 days may have been the reason why [...] archiving took on a new meaning and urgency" (Baladi, 2016). In response, Baladi created the digital archive "Vox Populi: Archiving a Revolution in the Digital Age" herself, and *Mosireen* as a collective initiated a platform solely for the purpose of archiving and organizing images from the uprising.

In her text "Archiving a Revolution in the Digital Age, Archiving as an Act of Resistance" (2016), Baladi reflects on the idea of the archive. She refers to Jacques Derrida (1998) and Michel Foucault (1972), both of whom point out that the word "archive" comes from the Greek *arkheion* and refers to "a house, a domicile, the residence of the superior magistrates" (Derrida, 1998, p. 2). The archive is thus intrinsically connected with the ruling authority and serves as an instrument for maintaining political power. Both Derrida and Foucault elaborate on how governing authorities throughout history have used archives to normalize action, produce knowledge and impose order by organizing the history and collective memories of particular groups and events. Derrida and Foucault's deconstructive approaches, along with those of other theorists writing on the subject, have generated a shift in the understanding of the archive from a natural and objective collection of documents to a site of contestation where struggles over memory and history take place. As Hoda Elsadda writes, the archive can be understood "as technologies of rule that do not just describe but that also create social realities" (Elsadda, 2015, p. 151). Our understanding of the idea of the archive has been further developed in the light of the recent "memory boom," a term that can be traced back to Pierre Nora's 2002 article on "the worldwide upsurge in memory" (Nora, 2011, p. 437). Peter Burke elaborates on the current preoccupation with memory by pointing out that remembrance and representation of the past are no longer considered as that they are innocent, but as actively – both consciously and unconsciously – producing realities in the present (Burke, 2011). Accordingly, the writing of history, understood as the process of organizing the collective memories of certain groups and events, is today considered not only to serve the function of commemorating the past, but also to consolidate events by creating particular visions of the past, in the present, for the future.

In the light of the historically privileged relationship of the archive with the ruling power and its way of imposing order, the "memory boom" has established the necessity of producing alternative archival technologies that can represent diverging citizen visions of the past, the present and the future. As advocated by Wolfgang Ernst (2012), digital archives offer such technologies. Whereas the traditional archive, according to Ernst, strives toward an aesthetic of fixed order, the digital archive emphasizes the regeneration of knowledge, co-produced by online users. Archival order is thus replaced by the dynamics of the archival field, which renders the archive into something that can be permanently transformed and updated by civilians. In this sense, the digital archive serves as a paradigmatic technology to rely on as we attempt to inscribe, maintain and represent events tied to citizen acts of countervisuality. Like the Egyptian uprising, it is horizontal, leaderless, and open-source, as described above. Dalia Habib Linsson highlights how the digitally inflected nature of the huge number of citizen images produced during the Egyptian uprising meant that most of the archive projects working to preserve the "vision of Tahrir," as Baladi termed it, were solely initiated online (Halib Linsson, 2018). Linsson further problematized how the state's distinction between official archive projects (such as the

Committee to Document the January 25 Revolution, produced by the *Egyptian National Archives*), and citizen recollections (such as those of *Mosireen*) were contested by citizens in the aftermath of the uprising. Also, the vulnerabilities inherent within digital archives have become more and more problematic in the context of archiving the uprising's citizen claim "to look" and to the representation. As memory scholar Astrid Erll has formulated it: "The digital revolution confronts us with the paradoxical connection of unprecedented medial storage capabilities and the looming danger of cultural amnesia" (Erll, 2011, p. 4). As I will show in the next section, this is definitely the case with the Egyptian uprising, in the light of developments since 2011.

"Looking" since the uprising

The visuality of post-revolution

In this section, I will draw attention to the current realities of image politics in Egypt. In this context I will analyze the ways in which *Mosireen*'s archive project "858: An Archive of Resistance" continues to negotiate the political agency of images within the present-day post-revolutionary system of visuality. As established above, the widespread use of citizen photography during the 2011 Egyptian uprising – alongside other forms of public visual productions such as posters and graffiti – gave form and body to negotiations over visuality, countervisuality and civilians' "right to look". These ways of actively performing image politics during the uprising were further consolidated by a range of online archive practices such as *Mosireen*'s, which aimed to safely record the "war of presence" going on in the streets before it could somehow vanish or be stopped by force. The increasing urgency of the archiving endeavor as described by Lara Baladi and reflected in much of *Mosireen*'s work after the resignation of Mubarak was generated by the desire to safeguard the afterlife of these active image politics and the vivid production of citizen visions that derived from it, once actual protests were no longer present within the public space and the system of visuality that had triggered the production of countervisuality in the first place had been reinstalled and the status quo restored.

After Mubarak's resignation in February 2011, the *Supreme Council of the Armed Forces* controlled the government until 30 June 2012, when Mohamed Morsi, the candidate of the *Muslim Brotherhood*, was elected president in a reportedly free and fair presidential election. Despite this, Morsi only held office for one year, since growing discontent with him and his government resulted in another round of massive public protests in the summer of 2013, culminating in Morsi's removal by the military in July. Afterwards the high-ranking officer Abdelfattah Al-Sisi installed himself as the new leader, cracking down massively on any opposition and finally winning the May 2014 presidential election with 97 percent of the votes (El-Nawawy & El-Masry, 2016, p. 2276). As Mohammed El-Nawawy and Mohamad Hamas El-

Masry show, Al-Sisi's enormous popularity was to some degree a result of the military's well-planned strategy of reinstalling the authoritarian system of visuality that had been established in the years before 2011 (El-Nawawy & El-Masry, 2016, p. 2276). This was complemented by the successful establishment of what El-Nawawy and El-Masry call "the Al-Sisi cult." The Al-Sisi cult was fabricated through numerous billboards and public posters bearing Al-Sisi's image, through excessive positive attention in state-run media, and free handouts of Al-Sisi chocolate bars, jewelry and sandwiches. This almost absurd claim to the control of public space through the far-reaching system of visuality launched by Al-Sisi and his government has become ever more insistent up until today. The obverse of the old system of visuality – the comprehensive fear of being seen in public space, reinforced by mass arrests, mass death sentences and mass killings, as documented by *Human Rights Watch* – was also re-established. As various scholars such as Snowdon (2014), Elsadda (2015), Downey (2016), Westmoreland (2016) and Dickinson (2018) conclude, Egyptian citizens are currently subject to much heavier surveillance, threats, draconian protests laws, censorship and imprisonment than they were before the uprising of 2011.

A number of these scholars further elaborate on how the 2011 uprising and its aftermath throughout Al-Sisi's tenure have been coopted by counter-revolutionary narratives with various agendas. One of the most compulsive counter-narratives tries to define Al-Sisi as a revolutionary figure whose way of governing is in direct response to the demands made during the public protests in 2011 (Westmoreland, 2016, p. 244). Additionally, numerous archive platforms containing visual material produced by citizens during the uprising have been censored or deactivated, or have had their activity slowed down or discontinued (Baladi, 2016). For Egyptian activists, archivists and artists, this lesson about the inherent vulnerabilities of relying on digital archives and the internet as carriers of history and memory was learned the hard way. It almost appears as a dark realization of a concern expressed already in 2013 by *Mosireen* in "Revolution Triptych":

> The moment becomes history with the "save" button, but does not stop there. It gets a second life through counter propaganda montage. The same footage on the side of the enemy becomes a dangerous weapon that needs to be turned back at them (Dickinson, 2018, p. 123).

This struggle over the historical representation of the 2011 uprising reflects a deeper struggle within Egyptian society centering on citizen claims "to look" and the political agency of images in the aftermath of the enormous "visual rush," to use Khatib's expression, of the uprising. A number of prominent activists, artists and culture workers involved in the protests have retrospectively expressed doubt as they look back whether their comprehensive image production and circulation actually worked *for* or *against* the objectives of the uprising. They seem to ask whether the enormous effort to document and visually testify to the uprising through images and artworks somehow contributed to turning the massive and multifaceted protests into a spectacle. As Omar Robert Hamilton, filmmaker, author and member of Mosireen, puts it, the protests became transformed "[…] into something easily comprehensible, a commodity, something controllable, something in the past" (Hamilton,

2015, p. 243). As Westmoreland has shown, images of the 2011 uprising were rapidly appropriated and commodified. Local television, advertising campaigns and music videos recycled the iconic images of the protests in ways that privileged superficial patriotic nostalgia over the unanswered claims of the protesters that echoed in the background of the images (Westmoreland, 2016, p. 244). Dickinson further traces how the images of the uprising offered by mainstream media in and beyond Egypt foregrounded landmarks and events, by turning them into sensations with a clear-cut beginning and end, rather than the continuities that shaped the uprising. The same accusations can, in Dickinson's understanding, be leveled against the "image-garnering machinery" of the national non-profit sector, the international art scene and academia. Individual artists were typecast as "revolutionary spokespersons." The collective, horizontal and leaderless principles that informed both the "war of presence" in particular and the uprising in general were played down (Dickinson, 2018, p. 124).

858: An archive of resistance

Following the military coup in 2013, *Mosireen*'s production came to an abrupt end. This was a consequence not only of the re-establishment of the abstract and author-itarian system of visuality enforced by Al-Sisi and his military government, but also of systematic and nationwide crackdown on all forms of dissent. Civilians were tried in military courts, journalists were imprisoned on trivial charges, and any protest not approved by the security forces was banned (Marks, 2015, p. 5). As the collective itself put it, they needed to comprehend this radical feeling of defeat and to "[...] find a way to work within the new political reality" (Mosireen, 2018, n.pag.). They remained silent for a couple of years, until January 2018, when the open-source website "858: An Archive of Resistance" was launched. This platform contains the most extensive archive of video footage produced by civilians (mainly in Cairo) during the 2011 uprising. The website took its name from the 858 hours of material that it contained at the time of the launch. At the time of writing, the archive now contains 873 hours of material. In the following, I analyze the interface used by the archive and its organizing and labeling of the material and thus its sanctioning of the knowledge produced within the archive. In focusing on these factors, I will argue that "858" endeavors to achieve two political aims: to reclaim citizens' "right to look" within the current political regulation of visuality in Egypt, and to reactivate the political agency of images and digital archives despite the widespread post-revolutionary loss of faith in images that I have described. Methodologically, I approach the archive not as a static site of storage, but rather as a practice: as an aesthetic ordering of the real that produces a specific type of knowledge. I am inspired by Ann Stoler's idea of the archive as a social phenomenon (Stoler, 2010). As Sune Haugbølle writes:

> The archive is both a corpus of writing and images, and a force field that animates political energies and expertise. Archives order the world by repelling and refusing certain ways of knowing. It is never just what is in an archive that matters, but rather the form it takes, the sensibilities it animates, and the imaginations it promotes (Haugbølle, 2020, p. 7).

The archive "858" is easy to access. Logging on is not necessary, and the interface is very straightforward, mimicking search systems such as *Finder* on a Mac computer or the control panel on a PC. The archive material is organized in folders under "Topic," "Places," "Month," "Date" and "Keywords," with subfolders such as "Friday of Rage" (Topic), "Qasr al-Nil Bridge, Cairo" (Places) or "Tear Gas" (Keywords) (Mosireen, 2018, n.pag.). Besides the numerous folders containing videos, a sub-page of the archive functions as a working tool for users to upload, edit and organize their own material. Visitors have to choose one of the subfields on the main page. This means that material cannot be accessed unless it has been contextualized by topics or keywords added by the often unidentified (or pseudonymous) users who uploaded the video. In this way, authorship is downplayed, although the choices made by those who upload material with regard to labeling and adding symbolic meaning to the material are essential to the experience of it. Of course, the users' pseudonyms serve to protect the safety of those who are uploading material within the current environment of harsh censorship. But somehow, all these pseudonyms also strengthen the impression that the archive is telling a collective story. It seems to belong to everyone and no one, and this serves to accentuate the *Mosireen Collective*'s claim at the height of its activity to being a horizontal, decentralized, citizen way of looking at and creating history. Dickinson notes how the patchwork of pseudonyms works to confirm the ethos of "858," deepening the impression that this is the people's footage and that the many visions and events encapsulated in the archive were created by the uprising as a collective body and mind (Dickinson, 2018, p. 126).

Given the large body of material, the content is quite heterogeneous. Some videos are shot with a hand-held camera at street level, depicting civilians talking, praying, discussing, running from or resisting the brutality of police and military forces. Many also show protest actions as seen from above the ground – from balconies or rooftops – offering a wider but also more distant perspective on the actions taking place. Looking through the archive, the viewer continually asks herself who is filming, who is being filmed, and what is actually happening in the videos, apart from hints given by the keywords, which range from the very concrete (such as "protesters arguing with police") to the abstract (such as "blur" or "screens"). The constant shifts in the material from experience in close up at street level to a far-away bird's-eye view, combined with the uncontrolled camera movements and constant uncertainty about what the viewer is looking at apart from a lot of faces, bodies, places and running feet, together produces a very particular way of looking at the material. The sheer diversity of the perspectives seems to be an important point in its own right. This echoes the collective ambition behind *Mosireen*'s work, and it reinforces the impression that not every image or video is necessarily reliable; they may be taken out of context, commodified, turned around or against their own initial meaning or substance. Rather, it is the sum of the images and videos that is the point here – the abundance of experiences, all related to the uprising, the overwhelming impression for anyone browsing through the archive that these are citizens protesting and doc-

umenting their protests. This is the actual reliance of "858: An Archive of Resistance." In this way, "858" manages to reclaim the civil "right to look" *since* the uprising –understood both in terms of the right of citizens to assert their history of the uprising and their "right to look" after the spectacle that was the uprising. Most importantly, the fact that the archive is still up and running shows that "858" is still asserting these citizen claims to look even *within* the limitations imposed by current Egyptian image politics.

Over and above establishing a citizen "way of looking" *since* the uprising, Mosireen's archive works to establish the status of images as historical documents. The degree of uncertainty attached to the authorship of the images, the slightly random labeling and organization and the multitude of perspectives and experiences presented in the material all point to the inherent unreliability of images in the context of writing history. This unreliability of the archive material itself can be seen as silently bearing witness to the post-revolutionary loss of faith in the political agency of images, but it also suggests a liberation of the images from the uprising. The comprehensive ambiguity presented in the material functions as a direct challenge to the iconic catalog of images of the uprising that was circulated so consistently during and after the protests in Egypt and beyond. As Dickinson writes, "858" advocates for the *independent* life of the image. It is an attempt to "give back the image with all its vitality and continued commitment to breaking through the confines of profit and corruption" (Dickinson, 2018, p. 129). As the aftermath of the Egyptian uprising has shown, there are inherent problems in the use of images as historical documents. They inevitably risk being commodified, taken out of context or coopted by authoritarian systems of visuality such as that operating today in present-day Egypt. Rather than mourning this property of historical indeterminacy inherent in visual documents, "858" seems to be using the vulnerability of images in its own favor. The constant threat of distortion of the archive's images and their histories seems in a sense to be the objective of the archive. In this sense, the archive itself bears the marks of the claim to countervisuality that helped to ignite the 2011 uprising in the first place.

Much like Ernst's writings on the nature of digital archives, "858: An Archive of Resistance" presents itself as being partial, in a constant state of transformation, and as being produced and co-produced by civilians over and over again. The archive's organization and presentation of its material raises more questions about the 2011 uprising than it answers. "858: An Archive of Resistance" is an archive in the sense that it stores and organizes historical documents in order to create visions of the past in the present; but the organization of the material by opaque topics and keywords chosen by anonymous civilians works to puncture the idea of an objective archival order, replaces it with the dynamics of the archival field. As described, this unsystematic handling of the material is productive: it serves to reactivate acts of countervisuality initiated during the 2011 uprising. The archive introduced by *Mosireen* presents no coherent narrative and offers no beginning or end: polyvocal, unreliable and vulnerable, it contains no promise of an aesthetic ordering of the real.

"858" continuously points to the partiality and inconsistency inherent not only in an archive but in any system or apparatus trying to impose visuality as a means of establishing power. In this sense, this archive is in itself an act of countervisuality. It is an ongoing citizen writing of history, engaged in constant negotiation with state-run, counter-revolutionary efforts which aim to silence the multitude of citizen visions that saw the light of day during the protests and to co-opt the images and narrative of the uprising. In the archive, these citizen visions are memorized and actualized, in spite of the interactions that result as users continue to upload material to the archive, by anyone browsing through it and trying to make sense of the multiple stories being told and untold in the images, by the images, perhaps even *in between* the images. The "war of presence" here is still alive and active. The political agency of images and their ability to claim citizens' "right to look" is still being renegotiated – even if the quieted streets and squares of Egypt's cities tell another story.

The permanent latency of citizen visions and free images

As my analysis of "858: An Archive of Resistance" suggests, this archive functions both as a reproduction and an alteration of the image strategies that were so central during the 2011 uprising in Egypt. Even though the material came into being to document protests against the former Mubarak regime, in presenting a multitude of citizen visions of the uprising and insisting on the liberation of this image material, the archive is asserting a direct act of countervisuality against the current politically regulated system of visuality in Egypt. It is important to stress that "858" is not the only archive project in current-day Egypt attempting to recollect and reactivate citizen documents and narratives of the 2011 uprising. The app "augmented [archive]," the work of the artist Kaya Behkalam, is a site-specific digital video archive in which visual material uploaded by users is connected to specific places and sites in cities all over Egypt. The result is to create an interactive map of events that have unfolded since 2011 (augmented [archive] 2018, n.pag.). As mentioned earlier, Lara Baladi's "Vox Populi: Archiving a Revolution in the Digital Age" (2011) is a web-based platform on which Baladi archives videos, photographs, articles and other sorts of data related to the 2011 uprising and its aftermath. It also collects material about major events anywhere in the world that take place "in resonance with" the Egyptian uprising (Baladi, 2016, p. 3). "Vox Populi" *also* features an open-source timeline of the 2011 uprising and a portal with references to other web-based archive projects in Egypt. In this sense, "Vox Populi" can be considered a meta-archive, organizing information on archives in their own right and reflecting on the status of the archive in the context of history writing more generally. In her artistic practice, Baladi makes use of the extensive material featured in her archive to create installations, collages, tapestry, and sculptures. The "Archive of Women's Oral History," created by the *Women and Memory Forum*, is another ambitious archive project working to collect and archive histories experienced and recounted by Egyptian women about the period from 2011 onwards (Women and Memory Forum, 2011, n.pag.).

While these initiatives share several aspects with the "858" archive's ongoing nego-tiation of aspects of history writing and image politics in the aftermath of the Egyp-tian uprising, I believe it is extremely important to acknowledge and carefully assess the difference between these archives, their practices and their modus operandi. In this paper I have focused on "858" mainly because of the comprehensive material available it presents and the strongly citizen-defined character of the visions it rep-resents.

This paper has presented a tentative reading of "858: An Archive of Resistance." My analysis has assigned a high degree of political agency to this archive without com-menting on the fact that no records are currently available revealing how many peo-ple actually use the archive, whether browsing through it or uploading material to it. In this paper I will not engage in a direct discussion of whether images possess a magical or privileged capacity in relation to regime change. Nor will I elaborate fur-ther here on the possible flaws of archive projects like "858." These, I believe, have been expressly highlighted by the *Mosireen Collective* themselves. I will, however, make clear here, as Tawil-Souri also emphasizes, that any claim to countervisuality asserted by civilians cannot be fully realized without *being in place*. Citizens need to congregate in real places in order to interact, stage political demands, perform their citizen visions of change, and be seen and heard (Tawil-Souri, 2012b, p. 89). As Asef Bayat also writes:

> The active use of public space by subjects who, in the modern states, are allowed to use it only passively – through walking, driving, watching – or in other ways that the state dictates, are in itself the most powerful act of image politics civilians can make (Bayat, 2010, p. 11).

Taking this into account, this paper has suggested that images, their circulation and their archival afterlife *matter* – especially in a context of such heightened image pol-itics as the Egyptian uprising and its aftermath. The citizen visions and free images brought to life within "858: An Archive of Resistance" make a difference simply by the fact of their presence. They hold within themselves a permanent latency, both because they represent the protests as they were seen and experienced by civilians, and in their inherent reactivation of alternative ways of looking and being that can serve as useful inspiration for future generations in Egypt. Projects like "858" stage the apparently harmless, yet insistent claim that nothing is forgotten, nothing is for-given, and nothing – no system or vision – lasts forever. As Judith Butler highlights, the failure to fully defeat authoritarian political systems is an inherent part of every uprising; otherwise, they would retrospectively be called revolutions (Butler, 2016). In Butler's understanding, this aftermath of defeat, in which the uprising "becomes narratable," is also the time in which large protest movements begin to articulate new ideas and new narratives to act upon, for those who will at some point rise up again. As Butler concludes:

> Those exhilarated by uprisings often find themselves left with a terrible disappointment and feeling of loss. In hindsight, we can ask whether that failure has a history – and a future (Butler, 2016, p. 36).

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