The power of poetics, the power of politics:
Ali Cherri in conversation with Fawz Kabra

Fawz Kabra: I would like to start with talking about *I Carry My Flame* (2011), the work on view at the Barjeel Art Foundation's exhibition *aide-mémoire*. The same work was also on view at the Barjeel Gallery in December 2014 – February 2015, and I think its purpose in being repeated in two consecutive shows is to develop a collection of narratives and present new ways of seeing the same image twice.

You had made this piece in response to the uprisings that took place in Tunisia and were followed by the uprisings in Egypt, Yemen, and Syria. Can you tell me about the piece?

Ali Cherri: *I Carry My Flame* was initially part of an exhibition from 2011, just a few months after the world witnessed Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation on social media, and protests began throughout the Arab world. The exhibition was called *A fleur de peau*, which can be translated to "skin deep." The exhibition was thinking about the meaning of the gesture of burning oneself in a physical sense, purposefully burning and disfiguring oneself. The whole idea was to expand from the footage found on YouTube. The footage used for *I Carry My Flame* was taken from YouTube, but is not Bouazizi. It is someone else who is walking while being set on fire. It is really striking footage. After seeing the video, I decided that I wanted to take it from a low quality image and turn it into an image on silkscreen.

The process, for me, was very corporeal: shifting it from a pixelated digital image taken from my screen and transferring it to something very physical and that has texture. I redrew the frames and the print for the silk-screen by hand. With this process, I wanted to move it from an image you quickly consume online to something you see as high art or even craft, giving it texture, presence, and turning it into a stain of sorts, thinking of this whole idea of markings, of a stain on your skin or of scars. The image is from the same video but using different stills, to give an effect of watching a stop motion film, so in each frame you see him in a different position. This is the way I saw it in the video. It looked like a kind of stop motion.

FK: That's really interesting. You relate to this specific image as a pattern of pixels on a computer screen in its digital format, or a silkscreen, which is a very tangible and physical process that produces an image. I say this because it is not a fixation with what the image portrays – a series of a figure in mid-stride set on fire. Can you tell me about what "the power of the image" means to you?

AC: One of the questions for me from all these images from the Arab world – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria – all these images arrive at us as though they represent the oppressed versus the oppressor. It is always in this duality of images: demonstrator versus regime, and so on. What I was trying to do was pull these images out from this one truth versus another truth dichotomy, and give them back their power. I wanted them to have a place within imagination, telling stories, as well as aesthetics. To me, the power that an image contains is not the power of its evidence, as a chunk of reality, but the power to put them in a context where they are images that we can project our own truths and narratives. The images have power to amaze us. So here, I was trying to point out the function of images.

FK: But is there a worry in that – a worry of taking an image and projecting one's own truths and narratives on to it?

AC: Well yes, it's exactly this. I don't think these images can tell any truth or give a description of a reality. This is a question that started before the Arab uprisings when the Turkish ship Mavi Marmara was headed to Gaza in May 2010 and the Israeli navy and military attacked the boat and stopped its attempt at providing humanitarian aide to the civilians in Gaza. There was this whole thing about who started shooting first. Did the guns go off first, or did the people on the ship provoke the Israeli raiders? What was interesting to me is that the only documentation for this event were the pictures taken on camera phones by the people on the flotilla, and that the Israeli and Turkish governments used these same pictures to tell their own version of what happened. Both sides claimed that the other had started attacking first. These kinds of images from events of conflict are images without authority. For example, the images we see on YouTube come from unknown sources. They end up being just a continuous flow of images.

So I take these images from unknown sources and use them to tell my own story, as the truth behind them has already been lost. I push this by putting them into a gallery space and quoting them in a way.

FK: You say that you take these images to tell your own story. Is there something in particular that you projected on this image?

AC: The story is mainly something I have lots of sensitivity for. My background is a graphic designer and I have a certain sensitivity towards printing. So it becomes sort of a tactile relationship that I have with these images. They become objects I can touch, cut by hand, and smell (the ink). So my narrative input happens when I recreate these images. I make myself personally part of this production through the printing technique.

FK: So you take an image and project your narrative to it. You are also conscious of the new space it occupies, whether a gallery or other. And even your method of producing or reproducing the image is involved in the construction of this narrative.

AC: Yes. But I am also producing the discourse around this image. The image tells the narrative, but I don't mean literally the image. I am not a good writer. So where words fail me, I produce images instead. I am at ease with making images instead of having to say or write words. When I use the word "image", I mean every sense of that word: from its production, to its creation, its narrative, aesthetics, and discourse.

FK: This brings me to the fetishisation of the image. And in your case the image becoming this object you create through printing.

AC: I think we all fetishise these images. As soon as they go viral, they become fetishised. They are used and reused, posted and reposted. I think we all have this tendency to fetishise. But then it goes away and we find something else to obsess about. Our relation to images is a fetishistic one.

FK: You describe a steady stream of images that are used up to the point that they no longer speak to what they originally were made to depict. This using, reusing, posting, reposting, disposing and bringing in of new images, do you think this is a problem of images on the internet?

AC: I don't see fetishisation as something negative or a fault. I like it. Whenever I'm producing an image, even when I am working with a photographic image, I rework the details pixel by pixel. So it's my relation to images. What the Internet did is create a synchronisation of fetishism. We all fetishise the same image at the same time, which is what viral images are. So most of us are focused on this image and then we start seeing the parody, memes, and different alterations. I see the Internet as being responsible for creating a kind of synchronisation to the fetish of images.

FK: I am wondering how you describe or interpret your practice? You use various media in your work, but there remains some kind of a connection between them.

AC: I think of myself as an image-maker. Creating images in the broad sense of the word, whether they are moving images, in print, or objects. Even when I am working on a video installation I always start from a 2-D form. My mind functions this way because of my background in graphic design. I am most comfortable with video and making moving images.

My work is always political, even if it's not with a capital "P". Whatever the political act is – even if it's a civil gesture in a sense the way you would say "civil duties" – my work is always engaged in whatever is happening around us.

But I want my artistic projects to bring the poetic into the political. Poetics are hard to see in today's politics. This is something that I am always thinking about. So yeah, that's how I would frame the things I do.

FK: Your work varies from piece to piece, and as you say, it always remains political. I am curious about how this functions in your current work. Can you tell me about what you are working on now?

AC: I have recently begun working on a project about archaeology, which started with the grant I received earlier in 2014 from the Sharjah Art Foundation. I shot a lot of film in the UAE, mainly Sharjah and Abu Dhabi. I visited archaeological sites and 5000-year-old tombs. I also got a residency with the French National Institute for Preventative Archaeological Research. It is a European program for artists working on art and archaeology. At the same time I get to work with a German institute in Berlin, joining archaeologists wherever they are working around the world.

I am interested in areas between Central and South Asia, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. I am interested with this whole notion of the founding myth of nations through archaeology. While I have filmed so far in relation of the Gulf and Emirates, I am also expanding to other countries that are considered archaic societies. I am looking at how archaeology brings out those archaic histories. There are two things that are happening at the same time in my work: there is what archaeology is looking for, and what is happening in that country at the same time.

I have only just started this project, so there is more to develop. I also have two shows coming up in Paris and another in Amsterdam that also relate to art and archaeology, which will help me figure things out a little more; I will be able to tell you more in a year.

FK: This makes me want to ask you, without thinking about any limitations, is there an unrealised project that you wish to work on?

AC: I've always been trying to do this crazy interactive installation with censors and mechanics, but I still haven't found technical solutions to make it or produce it. It is a vision of a semi-robotic semi-human thing. But this is still just a vague idea that I want to do one day.

I really love mechanics and figuring out how things work. If I have a tape recorder, for example, I dismantle it and put it back together. So I really like working with mechanical objects and especially now with all the possibilities with 3-D printing, censors, and engines, a lot can be done!

It is a big mess in my head right now… things reacting to other things, the potentiality of the technology of today, and so on. But I still don't know what this thing would look like. I'm just fantasising about the object itself.

FK: I want to backtrack a little. You made a great video titled *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil* in 2005. You describe the work as "a cyclical video from dark to light that reflects on growing up in Beirut during the Civil War years, and how to adapt to the "post war" life; accepting the body that is in ruin, and learning to live in the city that is always already in ruin." The images are of post-war Beirut in ruins. It is a different archaeology that you are revealing here. The downward pan of the video reminds me of a simultaneous digging and revealing of another time. Can you tell me about the work?

AC: *Un Cercle Autour du Soleil* was the first video I made. I was doing my MA at DasArts in Amsterdam. It was actually the first time I physically left Beirut. Because of this, I wanted to think about the relationship that my generation has with Beirut. I was born at the beginning of the Civil War and when it ended I was 16. So a major part of my life was spent growing up in a war zone and never really leaving. So in a way, my generation, we have this affectionate relationship to the war. It is part of our childhood memories. We even have nostalgic feeling towards the war. I was also disappointed when the war ended because I did not feel responsible towards it. It's a horrible statement, but when you understand this from a child's point of you it's a totally different perspective.

While making the video, I wanted to think about this relationship versus other artists such as Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, who were older and have a very different responsibility towards this war. I also wanted to explore this idea of memory, of being in a city that is constantly destroying itself, its relationship to darkness because of no electricity and hiding in the basement. Also, living as a kid during war, we played in the basements a lot, imagining what the city looked like on the outside.

So I went out to see the actual city in ruins and had a moment with this blinding light. It felt like I reconciled with the sun after all those days without electricity, playing games in the basement. The sun can erase things and it also has the

power to destroy. It blinds things and wears them out. I used to like the darkness because things can disappear and I can project my own thoughts and images on to the city. But I found that with the sun, due to it's blinding light, I can once again project my imagined city.

I made the downward scrolling of the video with a montage of different shots that I put together. Again, my obsession with images! I worked on this for three months, using different shots of the city, and putting them together seamlessly. It was a total of a six-minute pan that started from the sky and worked its way downwards to the darkest parts of the city. I wanted the video to be made in a circular way where you start with darkness and move on to shots of the sun and down into the abyss of the city.

People in Beirut couldn't really figure out the montage right away. They all knew that the images and places looked familiar, but could not make out how it was done. I like this deception of images. You see something that you think is familiar but cannot place it.

FK: We even managed to bring this conversation around full circle. What you just said brings us back to the power of images, their poetics, and their politics. Images can do a lot, especially be deceptive. Thank you so much, Ali.

AC: Thank you.