

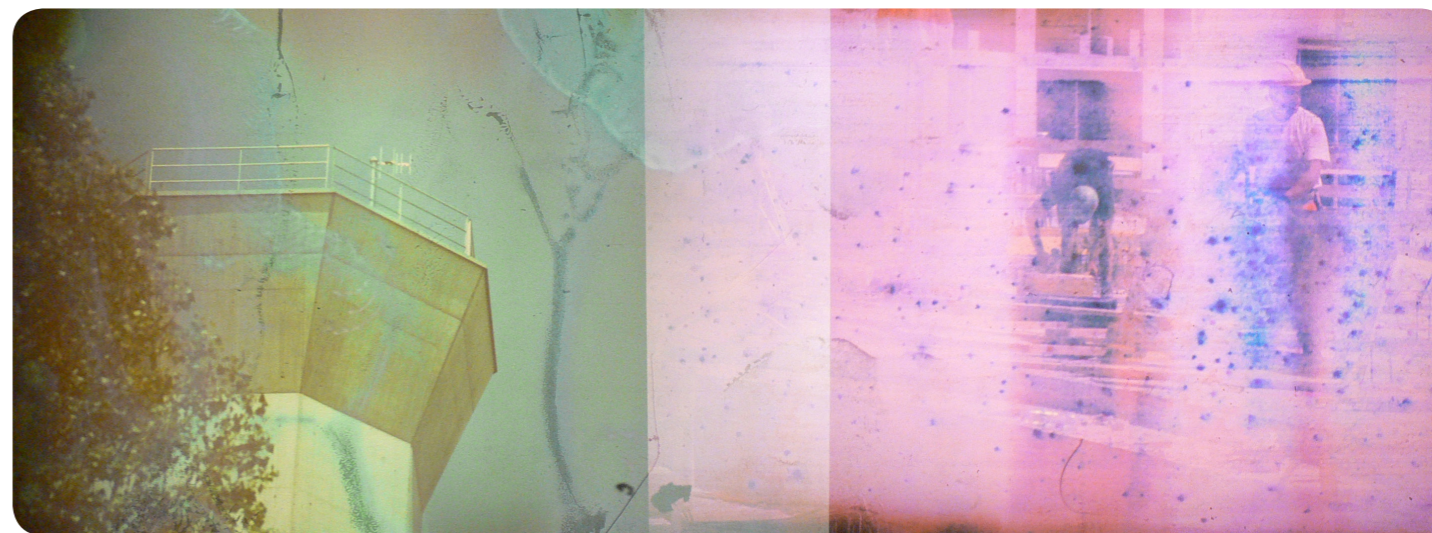
Anne Barlow is Director of Art in General, New York, where she most recently curated projects with Shezad Dawood, Meriç Algün Ringborg, Anetta Mona Chişa and Lucia Tkáčová. Barlow was formerly Curator of Education and Media Programs at the New Museum, where she organized numerous exhibitions, and initiated and developed its Digital Culture Programs and Museum as Hub. Barlow is Co-Curator of the Latvian Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, and was Curator of Bucharest Biennale 5, Bucharest, Romania, in 2012.

- 1 Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, New York 1988
- 2 Basim Magdy, Audrey Mascina, 'Staged Reality', Jerome Sans (ed.), *In the Arab World... Now*, Paris 2008
- 3 'On Science Fiction: Basim Magdy talks to Omar Kholeif', *Ibraaz Talks*, 29 March 2013, <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/64> accessed 2 July 2013

TATE FILM

BASIM MAGDY

Friday 5 July 2013, 19.00, Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium



Basim Magdy, *A 240 Second Analysis of Failure and Hopefulness* 2012. Courtesy the artist and Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York

BASIM MAGDY
Friday 5 July 2013, 19.00
Tate Modern, Starr Auditorium
£5, concessions available

The work of Egyptian artist Basim Magdy uses video, painting, slide projection and installation to examine war, information systems, scientific theories and the visual vocabulary of mass media. Positioning notions of progress within systems of humour and doubt, his work is marked by paradox and shifts between demolition and renewal, ruins and reconstruction.

This screening presents videos and slide works alongside discussion about Magdy's fascination with the future and the anxious imaginary with which we construct it. Following the screening, Basim Magdy

will be joined in conversation with Regine Basha, Omar Kholeif and Stuart Comer.

Basim Magdy was born in 1977 in Assiut, Egypt. He lives and works in Basel, Switzerland and Cairo. Magdy studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Helwan University, Cairo 1996 – 2000. He is a winner of the Abraaj Group Art Prize 2014 and has participated in numerous international group exhibitions including the forthcoming 13th Istanbul Biennial (2013), Sharjah Biennial 11 (2013), Future Generation Art Prize, Venice (2013), *Homeworks*, Askhal Alwan, Beirut (2013), La Triennale, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2012), *Transmediale*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2012), *One Day We Will Shine Like the Stars*, Kunsthalle Wien (2011) and *Rencontres Internationales*, Centre Pompidou, Paris

(2011). Recent solo shows include *A Steady Progress of Nothingness*, Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York (2013), *Confronting the Monster in a Monster Costume*, Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris (2013), and *On A Better Day than This*, Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art, Cairo (2008).

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Thoughts, comments, reviews?

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Tate Film is supported by Maja Hoffmann / LUMA Foundation

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PROGRAMME

A 240 SECOND ANALYSIS OF FAILURE AND HOPEFULNESS (WITH COKE, VINEGAR AND OTHER TEAR GAS REMEDIES)
Egypt / Switzerland 2012
160 colour slides and 2 synchronised Kodak slide carousel projectors
240 sec

TIME LAUGHS BACK AT YOU LIKE A SUNKEN SHIP
Egypt / Switzerland 2012
Super 8 film transferred to HD video
9 min 31 sec

13 ESSENTIAL RULES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE WORLD
Egypt / Switzerland 2011
Super 8 film transferred to HD video
5 min 16 sec

A FILM ABOUT THE WAY THINGS ARE
Egypt / Switzerland 2010
Super 8 film transferred to video
11 min 07 sec

MY FATHER LOOKS FOR AN HONEST CITY
Egypt / Switzerland 2010
Super 8 film transferred to HD video
5 min 28 sec

TURTLES ALL THE WAY DOWN
Egypt / Switzerland 2009
Super 8 film and DV on DVD
10 min 09 sec

Programme duration 47 min



Basim Magdy *13 Essential Rules for Understanding the World* 2011. Courtesy the artist and Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York



Basim Magdy *Turtles All The Way Down* 2009. Courtesy the artist and Newman Popiashvili Gallery, New York

BASIM MAGDY: FICTIONS OF THE REAL By Anne Barlow

In *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking refers to the story of an astronomer, who when lecturing on the orbiting patterns of the sun and earth, was challenged by an old lady who stated that he was wrong: the world was really a flat plate on the back of a giant tortoise. When asked what the tortoise was standing on, she replied, 'It's turtles all the way down!'¹ Essentially a reference to 'infinite regress', a series of propositions where the validity of one depends on the validity of the one that precedes it, potentially ad infinitum, this idea had its roots in ancient philosophy and has since been debated for hundreds of years.

In *Turtles All The Way Down* 2009, the film's narrator (in this case Magdy) refers to a constantly expanding universe that goes into territories beyond the capacity of human understanding: the unknown beyond the known, what we don't know compared to what we do (or think we do). Posing the ultimate question of 'what is the unknown?' the narrator refers to the search for knowledge, the importance of discoveries in helping us – temporarily at least – to understand the world, as with each discovery or scientific advance, what was formerly thought to be true is often replaced with a newer, or at times even opposing, perspective. The idea of progress itself, and the myths that are built around it, is a key preoccupation for Magdy. In this film, the narrator mentions a newspaper report by the *New York Sun* in 1835 of the discovery of life on the moon, a story that began circulation in the United States but that was later revealed to be a hoax, while the fiction of the 'real' was still spreading across continents.

In Magdy's work, the topic of aspiration as it relates to progress – with the associated actions of attempts, successes and failures – is often reflected in references to such historical events or stories, or in questions about what the future holds, and how we might negotiate it. *13 Essential Rules for Understanding the World* 2011, presents thirteen 'rules' that collectively project onto the viewer feelings of lost hope, isolation, self-deception, and insignificance. The tone of these messages is defeatist, yet at times almost humorous in their dead-pan negativity: images of tulips with faces drawn upon their petals announce each rule, while in-between, Magdy inserts apparently unrelated scenes or seemingly

futile acts, set against the constant whirring sound of the Super 8 mechanism. Here, the idea of human advancement is discouraged. In rule 6, for example, the narrator states: 'Never let yourself fall asleep. You'll dream,' or in rule 9, 'Never invent or produce anything. Others will use it and complicate things more.' The only rules that are more 'affirmative' in tone ask that we think of death and the dead every day (in order to be more prepared for death than others), and of the uncertainty of life itself: '13. Life is a tangled web of unexpected events. Never claim or believe that anything is certain.'

Interested in the power of mass media, information systems, and scientific theories – and the relationship between what is real and fiction in such domains – Magdy uses a combination of images, events and words in his films to construct narratives that can be at once humorous, reflective, and disquieting. While the title of *A Film About The Way Things Are* 2010, might seem to suggest something 'absolute', its fractured content is both confrontational and reflective, moving from scenes of a miniature town, to images of masked men parading through streets, to the Ku Klux Klan, or figures dressed in ways that hark back to historical episodes of religious inquisition. Here one cannot help but think of the 'truths' communicated through the propaganda of various groups throughout history, the power of the message masking embedded bigotry, persecution, or implicit violence. In contrast, the lone figure of a man by the sea contemplates the passing of time in a slightly surreal, regretful monologue in which he describes having a 'journal of the future' that he has always maintained. His words complement the images in ways that do not always seem to make sense, introducing an inherent ambiguity in terms of what we see and hear.

Magdy often uses absurdity and confusion as a means of subversion, citing the importance of Jean Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco as literary influences in his teenage years.² In *My Father Looks For An Honest City* 2010, Magdy's father walks through an urban landscape on the edge of Cairo, flashlight in hand, searching for the 'honest city' in a deliberate re-enactment of the story of Diogenes of Sinope who supposedly carried a lamp in daylight to find an 'honest man'. There is a subtle absurdity to this action within what is evidently an ongoing cycle of urban destruction and construction. *A 240 Second Analysis of Failure and Hopefulness (With Coke, Vinegar and Other Tear Gas*

Remedies) 2012, that comprises 160 colour slides shown on two synchronized slide carousel projectors, also refers to this cycle in showing the process of a demolition site slowly becoming one of construction. In this case, Magdy manipulates and experiments with the physical medium of film – a medium that is soon to be obsolete – by exposing it to vinegar, soda and household chemicals that have been recently used in the Middle East as home remedies for tear-gas, and that result in an incredible range of colours and effects within this ongoing slide loop.

Magdy's fascination with time and concepts of the future also draws on the genre of science fiction. In a recent interview on the subject, Magdy talks about the importance of the Egyptian literary figure, Ragy Enayat, in terms of shaping his thinking about the relationship between reality and fiction, particularly in terms of their proximity. 'You realise how close reality and fiction are... what is being presented as reality may in fact be more obvious as fiction.' He also refers to Enayat's apparent response to a journalist's question of what was science fiction, with his answer being that it was essentially 'taking a scientific fact and stretching it either forwards or backwards.'³

In some ways, this makes one think of the complex mixing of references to both future and past in Magdy's work, within narratives that are almost never linear but rather reflect the constant push-pull of advance and failure, projection and reflection, that serve to blur our understanding of what is seen. Within certain films there are tiny moments where gestures go backwards, like the erasure of the stars in *Turtles All The Way Down*, or where time and movement are complicated by the use of mirrored surfaces as a device in *Time Laughs Back at You Like a Sunken Ship* 2012. Here, a man walks around the interior of a biodome, holding an armature with three painted panels on the front, with holes cut out in the central one for eyes. The back of the panels are mirrored, showing not only the face of the man from three different perspectives, but also what is behind and around him as he simultaneously walks forward. Interspersed with images of ruins, the theatre in Alexandria, and images of the sea that confuse perceptions of what is internal and external, this 'performance' presents an ambivalent sense of time that is at once futuristic and reflective of times past, whether real or imagined.