

*We're by the sea now*, 2006  
digital video, 42 mins

*We're by the sea now*, 2006 is of and about the city, a subject that is inextricably linked to the work of Hala Elkoussy. Yet, centre stage is given over to the inhabiting citizen through the presentation of an array of seemingly disparate anecdotal events, personal accounts, tales and hearsay. The piece makes no attempts at producing mega narratives. The fragmented structure in the form of vignette-like chapters (13 in total) further disrupts the production of a unilateral stable meaning.

In the chapter entitled "Well done, Bravo!" a young man sits on top of a typical Cairene roof littered with large satellite dishes. A modest bright blue sheet of paper partially blocks the background. He wears a tee shirt bearing in red the word "BRAVO" and holds a yellow helium-filled balloon. His accoutrements stand in sharp contrast with his almost monochrome surroundings. He candidly addresses the camera and speaks of the difficulties he encounters "down there" that push him to regularly seek refuge on the roof. The simplified world he has created for himself stands for any place he can possibly imagine. In his reverie, he travels to America, then a hotel lobby in Paris, to Italy and Pakistan... At a certain moment, he reports pointing to the blue sheet of paper: "We're by the sea now!"; his excited voice not managing to quite drown the noises of the bustling city in the background.

The words of the escapist young man: "We're by the sea now!" lend the piece its title. His actions hover precariously between reality and fiction. While his performance is obviously unscripted, his position is a hybrid between the spontaneous and the artificial. This serves to highlight the city as a backdrop, on which millions of different stories unfold on a daily basis.

Curtains appear in two more chapters: "the chapter before last: for a better future" and "definitions: space" to further highlight the performative aspect of the everyday. The economic, social and psychological pressures that are exercised by communal living lead the individual through an endless cycle of (re)formulating positions, developing and breaking-down defense mechanisms, selective remembrance and forgetting...

What appear to be banal actions, obvious choices and clear directions mandated by everyday necessities, unveil more central questions: How can and is the topography of a megalopolis navigated? How does one mark its permeable history? And most crucially, how does one negotiate a position within the masses, under the overbearing pressures of consumerism, social norms and political apathy?

In the chapter entitled "the chapter before last: for a better future", a high school student gives a speech in laboured classical Arabic about his dreams of the future. In 2020, Cairo will be permeated by lush greenery. There will be no air or noise pollution. The housing problems will be solved and unemployment will be eradicated. 2020 appears to be far enough ahead for all these dreams to come true, but only to the youth: optimism becomes a mechanism to manage pressure. Is his optimism real or is it no more than an official version of the future promulgated through the rigid education system?

In the chapter entitled "footnote: and those people crying", a psychiatrist laments the decline in human compassion in comparison to 20 years ago and attributes to it the growing feelings of alienation and despair experienced by individuals today. "Today, when people cry, they are actually expressing impotence. They don't do it to ease their pain and move forward."

Overall, the piece delves into intimate, seemingly banal and overlooked sides of communal living. Fact and fiction mix with no marked boundaries and filmic forms are exploited with liberty: What presents itself as documentary is in some instances fiction and vice-versa. And not unlike Elkoussy's previous video works, the end result offers

disorientation as a means of producing knowledge without authority. there is an overriding feeling that real value lies between the gaps and in what is omitted.