

PARANOID CITY

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Cairo is a city that invites paranoia in its inhabitants. The city is divided between a central system highly believed to benefit those who are responsible for its maintenance, and a set of individual practices that compensate for the failures and lack of this central system. These individual practices manifest themselves not only in the numerous informal housing blocks that punctuate the urban landscape, but also seep into every aspect of the city's life and activity, from parking cars to signing contracts. These practices are as fluid as they are a constant attempt to deal with an unstable system that they themselves continually change.

Because these practices are set outside of a central or juridical system, not only are they unable to look to that system for protection, but its ghost becomes a constant threat to all. At any moment, that central or juridical system could attempt to reclaim or alter those practices that emerged in its place. The government will demolish informal housing at random or outsource or formalize activities such as garbage collecting—all of which threaten the livelihoods of entire communities. In short, what is a rule in Cairo one day—a practiced custom—could the next day be shifted by a new factor, forcing a new loophole to be found in an already punctured system. This means that no form of interaction is set in stone, no contract is 100 percent binding and there is always a possibility of a hidden agenda, no matter how small or high the stakes are—and sometimes they are really high.

One could say that there is a constant need to define things in a city like this. You are always looking for the means with which to mark your position, and who or what you need to mark it against. You search for telltale signs of their position, the extent of their power, and most importantly how they view you, which means that in Cairo you are constantly coming face to face with your own image. Due to this constant repositioning, as an inhabitant of the city you become extremely sensitive to the tiniest discordance between what you are familiar with

and what you are confronted with at any given moment. You become paranoid; you inhabit a space of constant doubt.

This doubt could be the result of the intentional or accidental convergence of discordant forms, like the moment a statement made by a person transforms a perception of him/her from a certain type of politician, salesman, or next-door neighbor to something else completely, or the moment we realize that the details (color, gesture, location), or presence of a certain monument or statue fail to align with a given historical narrative. One also encounters doubt when a certain form does not correspond with its stated function, like when a program on television presented as entertainment is viewed as political propaganda, or when a store sign or decorative element is believed to be used to mark a certain territory against possible intruders.

In a paranoid state, we infer a hidden intention behind all forms, but in doing so, do we not also change those very forms? The possibility of hidden agendas places everything around us under suspicion. When one doubts the manner by which a billboard is constructed, its location, what is placed on it, or the choice to build certain buildings and not others, where, and why, or the decision to erect certain monuments, and how they are presented, does this not change the way one sees and hears? Does it not change the very appearance of forms? For it might be that, through doubting the use of forms, we permanently mark them—we alter the way they are seen and the manner by which they are understood. Here, as opposed to a building, we might only see a façade, instead of map, a collection of lines.

In terms of living conditions, paranoia is certainly unhealthy. It makes for hyper self-conscious subjects and a somewhat difficult life, but is it possible to learn something from the space of doubt it offers? For although in a state of paranoia, we imagine seeing things where they might not exist, can this actually furnish a tool for a different kind of clarity altogether?

Doubt limits one's ability to instantly judge. It produces a space in which the process of definition is prolonged; that is, we are unable to immediately locate an element or scenario using a familiar vocabulary. In a state of doubt, references are no

longer fixed but float, while associations are made and unmade. Surely this is an uncomfortable space to inhabit, but it could also be a space that provides a possibility for established forms and conditions to be redefined. When we doubt the motivation for how a map was drawn a certain way or a monument was moved or replaced, do we not simultaneously redefine for ourselves what we believe to be the function, use and character of a map or a monument? In this sense, the spaces produced by this constant doubt can allow one to question the most basic structural parameters of forms that might otherwise have been taken for granted. It can actually furnish a space for knowledge.

In a state of doubt, we are also constantly looking for the external means by which to verify our conclusions, and in certain cases we might be able to locate those means. For example, as we tentatively ascribe value to an object, a building, that is later proven to lack that value—as we read intention into what later proves to be accidental, or vice versa—do we not then encounter the material space of a rift between a newly acquired fact and a prior judgment? That is, don't we run the very productive risk of coming face to face with ourselves?

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