

OVERGADEN.

J&K's exhibition Egyptomaniacs is a complex installation that addresses the West's images and imaginings of Egypt.

ESSAY

Welcome to Egyptomania!

A fantastic, seductive and disturbing universe

By Christian Skovbjerg Jensen

There is something mysterious, seductive and mildly cryptic about J&K's installations, collages and performances. And the exhibition *Egyptomaniacs* is no exception. Visitors to Overgaden start the tour by being funnelled down a dimly lit museum-like corridor featuring lighted diorama boxes, photographs and short text panels. Around each diorama box, a little drama or imaginary scenario is played out, suggestive of the opening of a narrative focused around Egypt. J&K stage and photograph themselves in an array of performative interventions. The people we get to meet include the Missionary, a flock of ninjas and a raft of other fictional characters who appear in real places such as, for instance, a desolate tourist resort and the Pyramids area. Small text panels on the wall announce the introduction of a new world religion and a pact entered into by the Black Witch, the Holy Hiphopper and the local body builders. The viewer is literally swamped with information and cues as s/he progresses through the dark tunnel of the corridor. At the end of it, a vast, three-dimensional scenario presents itself, featuring large, centrally positioned cut-out figures. Since these figures inhibit a full overview, we must pass beyond them to move around and into the installation. Having viewed, read and pondered our way along the museum-like corridor, a space opens up and we step into a gigantic three-dimensional collage, becoming ourselves part of the scenario. All references to familiar places and people are gone and we find ourselves in the midst of a disturbing urban desert scape, a dilapidated Muslim metropolis or some fantastical narrative, brimming with magic, action and supernatural powers – and we struggle to make sense of it.

The installation on display at Overgaden is the result of the artists' two-month long residency in Cairo in the autumn of 2006. Like all other Westerners, J&K arrived in Egypt abrim with romantic notions of archaeological finds, burial chambers, impressive art and architecture, as well as myths and stories from the birth of civilization. Egypt's tourist industry feeds off the country's history and the fascination of the West with the Orient. And while tourists are sequestered in gated resorts, the global economy and potent religious forces take turns in setting the agenda for life outside. The fascination of the Orient, then, collides with the fear of terror and Islamic fundamentalism. This is

the bizarre reality that forms the backdrop to J&K's Egyptomaniac *tour de force*.

Visual records of and references from real places and events are combined with invented characters and scenarios. *Egyptomaniacs* is an assemblage and sampling of impressions, reflections, encounters, performances and images of and from the artists' stay in Egypt. While offering an alternative narrative focused on Egypt, at the same

time *Egyptomaniacs* provides a portrait of two Westerners on an intuitive and exploratory journey through the country's history, religion, mythologies, and popular culture. J&K's gathering and working up of their material is an open-ended process, and it is this transmutation of their own observations and experiences and their quest for telling artistic expressions that marks J&K out from most other artists.



J&K, *Re-enacting the Idea of Liberty* (detail), 2006/2007

The path from photo sessions and performances in Cairo's markets to the ultimate orchestration of the installation in Copenhagen's Christianshavn, where Overgaden is situated, is long and labyrinthine. And the distinctions between performance, documentation, collage, installation and narrative are anything but clear. Figures like the Black Witch and the Holy Hiphopper are continuously being evolved and rethought. And small acts and scenarios are played out spontaneously along the way. The fund of pictures, scenarios, props, and costumes grows steadily. The result is that the visual records of staged interventions at tourist attraction sites, in exclusive hotel resorts and Cairo's teeming streets, in conjunction with a wealth of props and apparel, are ultimately morphed into an absorbingly complex installation that reflects the Western world's images and imaginings of Egypt.

J&K's sojourn in Egypt might be thought of as one long performance, with the whole project cast as a prodigious and wide-ranging process, constantly in flux. Everything interconnects, with each thing leading on to something else. A bazaar-bought mask may find its way into a collage, a performance and a photograph – which again illustrates or relates to something seen or found. J&K act out different roles as, for instance, that of the Prophet or the Missionary – but now and again, roles that are mainly evocative of themselves. For they too are part of the narrative, metamorphosing along the way. Perhaps their interventions are essentially about living out and giving visual expression to their own (and others') deepest imaginings and nightmare fears about Egypt, tourism, terror, religion and globalization. The local context, however, appears curiously oblivious to it all. The Pyramids, testament to a glorious past, tower majestically in a desert landscape, and Cairo's streets teem with life, the populace barely registering J&K wandering around dressed up as the ancient Egyptian gods Anubis and Horus. It's J&K who are caught up in a process of change – not Egypt. And yet... Egypt is transformed in and through J&K's wildly imaginative fictions. As viewers, we see Egypt through their subjective and fictionalized lens, and it is here that glimpses of meaning emerge.

J&K have consciously chosen to work with kaleidoscopic systems of meanings, topics and strategies. Through changing identities, inscrutable processes and hidden intentions, they conjure up an up-to-the-minute Babylonian scenario of linguistic misunderstandings and cultural confusion, but also a world of endless possibilities and connections. J&K are interested in the mechanisms around which the cultural values and codes that govern our lives are based. Indeed,

their overarching project could also be described as an attempt to uncover the structures underlying the most everyday forms of life and values. Not so much in order to start a debate as, perhaps, to add something new – alternative perspectives, reflections and a spot of magic. More than anything else, it is the persona of the jester that is deployed by J&K in their performative approach to art. Full of self-irony, energy, critical distance, magic, and yet without ever pointing fingers at anyone, J&K expose the preconceptions, set ways of life, and the sheer lack of imagination that prevails not least in Western contexts, which are shot through by rationality, materialism and science. As *jesters*, they can range freely, exploiting ambiguities as they deal with humour and seriousness, doubt and belief, hope and fear. J&K touch on a number of current topics but their intentions or critical thrusts are merely implied. So it's left to us to pick up on their critical perspectives and run with them.

The most fundamental question may well concern what we are capable of imagining – about others, the world, our lives and ourselves. The imaginary scenarios should not be conceived of as real alternatives to the realities that we know and in which we are embedded. Rather their potential lies in their power to open up new ideas and scenarios for the future. When J&K contemplate the idea of a new religion and world order, they are inspired not so much by the belief that it would solve all the problems of the world, as by its potential as a creative and entertaining thought experiment. *Egyptomaniacs* offers both a bewildering and an uplifting experience. It is ultimately about changing the world, and about creating new images of it and throwing interestingly different perspectives on it. If we can imagine scenarios other than those to which we are accustomed, we are also capable of changing and impacting on our currently prevailing values and modes of living – of reconceiving them. Offhand, it might seem a tall order, but that is how the world is changed. We're not at the end of history: it mutates and is continually being displaced and challenged. With their zany conceptions of the mutability of all things, J&K help keep the wheels turning. New perspectives, identities, scenarios and misrepresentations are constantly being produces. That the exhibition is capable of challenging the visitor's perceptions of Egypt is not in doubt. Of greater interest is the question of whether we can even begin to imagine the consequences that would ensue should Egyptomaniac magic and absurdity get to impinge upon and transform life beyond the confines of Overgaden.

Christian Skovbjerg Jensen is a freelance curator and writer.



J&K, *Horus and Anubis in Islamic Cairo*, 2006/2007

EGYPTOPEDIA

By J&K

The Burning Bush: According to the Book of Exodus, it was from a burning bush on Mount Horeb in the Sinai Desert that God appeared to Moses and revealed to him his God-given calling.

(Charter) tourism: The late twentieth century saw Egypt expand to become one of the key destinations for international charter tourism, which is today one of the main pillars of the country's economy. Egypt's dependency on the tourist industry has made it an attractive target for terror attacks, whose aim it is to put pressure on both the government and global post-colonial power structures in general. As a result, tourism is increasingly conducted within its own circumscribed high security world of exclusive resorts and air-conditioned coaches, and is viewed by the locals as a totally alien element.

Cradle of civilization: Egypt is one of the oldest civilizations in the world. Agriculture, architecture, trading, and art can be traced as far back as the 6th-10th millennium BC. The Cheops Pyramid (completed in 2560 BC) is the only one of the Seven Wonders of Antiquity that still exists.

Egyptomania: The Western fascination with and cultural appropriation of ancient Egyptian culture and history. *Egyptomania* flourished during the nineteenth century in the wake of Napoleon's "Egyptian Campaign" (1798-1801). *Egyptomania*, one of the faces of Orientalism, is the result of cultural projections and tells us more about Western colonialism's attraction to and fear of the unknown than about the ancient Egyptian culture itself.

Global market: Capitalistic consumer values are becoming increasingly visible in Egyptian culture. Western style can be traced in high street fashion, and appropriations of designer labels are combined with traditional garments. Globalization reaches every street corner: mobile phones from Nokia and Chinese-made discount goods flood the local markets.

Monotheism: From the Greek *μόνος* "one" and *θεός* "god". The Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep IV introduced the first known monotheistic belief system. Today monotheism is primarily associated with the three Abrahamic religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - each of which claims that its God is the one true God. Christianity and Islam trace their origins back to Judaism and all three religions have their geographical roots in the Middle East. Judaism was influenced early on by ancient Egyptian religions and culture, as for example the story of Moses indicates.

Pharaonic fatigue: State of mind afflicting the cultural tourist in Egypt as a result of experience overload in the face of the many ancient sites and artefacts.

(Current) political situation: The Arab Republic of Egypt claims to have a democratic system. Yet the executive power rests almost exclusively in the hands of President Mubarak, who has been in office since 1981. Since 1979, Egypt has been one of the top recipients of U.S. foreign aid. Recent years have seen a growing Islamist movement in the country, a development that the authorities attempt to counter by, among other things, arresting young bearded men on the streets.

Tourist licence: Egyptians may not associate with foreigners unless in possession of a licence to work as a tourist guide. This law was introduced to protect tourists.

Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic deities: Gods that exhibit animal or human features. Some are shown as hybrid forms or as morphing from one stage to another. For instance, the ancient god Horus has a human figure and a hawk's head.

Overgaden. Institute of Contemporary Art, Overgaden Neden Vandet 17, DK - 1414 Copenhagen K, + 45 3257-7273, info@overgaden.org, www.overgaden.org. Tuesday-Sunday: 1-5pm, Thursday: 1-8pm

Design: Anni's (annis.dk)

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

J&K, *Egyptomaniacs*, 2006/2007

Egyptomaniacs consists of five groups of works working together as whole.

CORRIDOR

Deserted Beach Camp, Nuweiba (photograph)

Guarding Sharm El Sheik or How The Missionary lost the plot in a tourist resort in the time of terror and security. (three-dimensional collage)

Mövenpick Resort, Sharm El Sheik (photograph)

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Objects purchased during the peak of global consumerism in Kahn el-Khalili bazaar in Cairo: Pharaonic statue (plaster cast, produced in The Pharaonic Village, Cairo, Egypt), Beads used during Muslim prayer (wooden beads, thread, length 1.50m), Donkey whip (horse hair, wood, leather, Nubia/Upper Egypt), American sports jacket (vintage, produced in Taiwan), Ancient bust (original, excavated in Karnak 1868, re-imported via the European black market), Dumbbells (Hulk Gym, Cairo), Clay pots and figures (North Africa), Abibas galabeya (synthetic velvet, made in China) (three-dimensional collage)

Horus and Anubis in Islamic Cairo (photograph)

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The Giza Pact: Cairo's infamous Body Builders, The Black Witch from Inner Africa and the Holy Hip-Hopper join forces over a new tribal uprising. Meanwhile a group of UFOlogists rent the Cheops Pyramid for an hour of meditation (three-dimensional collage)

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Receiving the word of (the only) God, The Prophet founds the 4th big monotheistic religion at the foot of Mount Moses in Sinai Desert. Billions of followers cause the collapse of established global power relations. A battle with the growing tribal movement is inescapable. It is the dawn of a new world order... (three-dimensional collage)

Picnic Area, Valley of the Kings (photograph)

Entrance to the Tomb of Ramses IX, Valley of the Kings (photograph)

THE REAR SPACE

Re-enacting The Idea Of Liberty (3 collagefigures)

The Ninjas (9 photofigures)

Anubis (photofigure)

The Star (collagefigure)

Unidentifiable Divinities (collagefigure)

Predictions Of A New World Order (collagewallpaper)

CV - J&K

Janne Schäfer (b. 1976) and Kristine Agergaard (b. 1976) both studied at Chelsea College of Art and Design, London (1998-2001). Schäfer holds a Master's degree from the Berlin University of the Arts (2006) and Agergaard holds a Master's degree from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen (2005). Since 1999, they have worked together as J&K. With their self stagings, performances, free reining imagination and mythical universes, they have participated in a range of exhibitions in Europe such as the London Biennial 2000, the Liverpool Biennial 2002 and 4th Ars Baltica Triennial of Art Photography (2007). In Denmark, J&K have participated in group exhibitions such as *Stafet* at Esbjerg Kunstmuseum (2004). Janne Schäfer and Kristine Agergaard live and work in Copenhagen and Berlin.

GUIDED TOUR

Saturday 15 September 2007 at 1pm J&K will give a guided tour in the exhibition. The tour is free and will be held in English. Booking is not required. Everybody is welcome.

UPCOMING EXHIBITION AT OVERGADEN

On Friday 9 November 2007 we open the exhibition *In the Poem About Love You Don't Write the Word Love* curated by the British curator Tanya Leighton. The last day of the exhibition is 20 January 2008.

Thanks to Ahmed & Mohammad, sculptors from The Pharaonic Village in Cairo, Christina, Christian Skovbjerg Jensen, Cecilie Gravesen, Nick Brooks, Philip, Mika, Mette, Betty, Cecilie, Flemming, Thomas, Ingvar, Ayman, William, Dalia, Osama, Sharkawi, Julia & Misha.

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KUNSTRÅDET

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