

Welcome to Egyptomania!

A fantastic, seductive and disturbing universe

Essay by Christian Skovbjerg Jensen

There is something mysterious, seductive and mildly cryptic about J&K's installations, collages and performances. And the work *Egyptomaniacs* is no exception. Here J&K stage and photograph themselves in an array of performative interventions, suggestive of a narration focused around Egypt. 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. We get introduced to a new world religion and a pact entered into by The Black Witch, The Holy Hiphopper and the local Infamous Body Builders and thus find ourselves in the midst of some fantastical narrative, brimming with magic, action and supernatural powers – and we struggle to make sense of it.

The installation on display is the result of the artists' two-month long residency in Cairo in the autumn of 2006. Like most 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.

The path from photo sessions and performances in Cairo's markets to the ultimate orchestration of the installation 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 Horus and Anubis. 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 produced. 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 the exhibition.

Christian Skovbjerg Jensen is a curator and writer.