

their rational and emotional faculties, until religious rectitude “acquired the status of embodied habits.”²⁰

In the 2000s, sexual repression became rampant in Egypt, fueled by an explosive mix of unbridled capitalism, political corruption, religious re- crimination, sexual frustrations, and social injustice. Though sexual assault and harassment are pervasive problems worldwide, in Cairo they became a social epidemic that exploded in full view during the 2011 revolution. As the city waded into infamy, the state stood by, unable or unwilling to stem the epidemic. To make matters worse, authorities administered infamous “virginity tests,” an infuriating euphemism for state-sanctioned rape, used as a tool of political repression during the January 25 Revolution. Though virginity tests existed in Egyptian society and were usually performed by older women on a bride-to-be, they were not discussed in public. But the state turned virginity testing into an instrument of political suppression, equivalent to anal probes of suspected homosexual men arrested in regular police raids. If we believe, with Michel Foucault, that sexual repression is political and that power enables resistance to itself, we should not be surprised that sexual defiance emerged alongside political rebellion on the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities. It is against this backdrop that the polemic surrounding *A Rebel's Diary* and what it means for creative in- surgency should be understood.

THE AESTHETICS OF DISROBEMENT

Moral judgment rarely edifies, and the actual political impact of al-Mahdy's nude is impossible to gauge. Considering the nude blogger aesthetically, however, helps us understand how subversive images move public discourse. Al-Mahdy, we should recall, initially cast her photo- graph as “nude art” in October 2011. In November 2014, she reiterated that her action was “feminist nude art/protest.” What can we learn if we seri- ously considered her claims to artistic performance, her argument that *A Rebel's Diary* featured a nude and not merely a naked body?

The nude has preoccupied art critics for as long as it has existed in Western art. In the classic *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, Kenneth Clark argued that “naked” conveys an embarrassing situation, whereas “nude” reflects harmony and assurance.²¹ The nude for Clark, as the book's title indicates, is more than a subject of art; it is an exalted form that holds a special place in Western art. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger disagreed with Clark, writing that “to be naked is to be oneself” but that “to be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not be recognized for oneself.” Whereas for Clark the human body is a form of art, for Berger it is an object of art. As Berger explained, “A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude.” He went on to conclude: “Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is to be placed on dis- play. To be naked is to be without disguise. . . . The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.”²² Nudity, then, is a contrived

version of nakedness. Once the contrivance is achieved, it denies the existence of its own subject. As display, nudity carries a strategic directive.²³

What was the key message of *A Rebel's Diary*? Did the photograph uphold the academic distinction between nakedness and nudity? Together, al-Mahdy's photograph and text generated tension between sexuality and politics, which, unresolved, fueled the impassioned polemic surrounding her blog. Writing about the nude in early twentieth-century Lebanese art, the anthropologist Kirsten Scheid argued that by combining "a foreign genre and local bodies," nudes urged onlookers to think about their society.²⁴ Though *A Rebel's Diary's* text was obviously political, al-Mahdy's photograph was equivocal, playing on several aesthetic, moral, and social registers and consequently giving rise to competing interpretations. That may be why the photograph took in all the media oxygen, leaving the text to suffocate in obscurity. What claims was al-Mahdy making on the people who viewed her photograph?

Before we figure out the answer, we first have to understand a crucial distinction between al-Mahdy's body selfie and nude art in general: authorship. Whereas male painters usually sign artistic nudes, al-Mahdy created and disseminated her own photograph. Authoring the representation of one's own naked body is important because it proves an ability to convey one's own thoughts, the capacity to represent one's own self, the power to lead one's own life on one's own terms—agency. In *Naked Authority*, the art historian Marcia Pointon wrote that in nude art the female body embodies the creativity of the male artist, a creativity imbued with male power and tasked with containing female sexuality.²⁵ The argument that the depiction of disrobed female bodies encrypts "male cerebral processes" may help us explain the commotion surrounding *A Rebel's Diary's* initial appearance.²⁶ In her own room, al-Mahdy took off her own clothes, put on her own accessories, took her own photograph, posted it to her own blog, and made her own political statement. She subverted the dynamic between male creator and female model simply by being both creator and model. This reversal of roles put the power to represent in the hands of a woman willing to violate the prevailing social script, publicly and unabashedly. As al-Mahdy repeatedly emphasized, her action stemmed from an individual's desire to reject social constraints. From the outset, the political manifesto and the nude photograph cast her action as personal and political. Writing about Delacroix's *La liberté guidant le peuple*, Pointon argued that Delacroix's signature deployed "linguistic authority" to disrupt the image's "fem-

inine power."²⁷ By signing her own representation, al-Mahdy acted like a woman unbridled by male authority. So even if we do consider *A Rebel's Diary* a form of nude art, as al-Mahdy claims to want us to do, we must recognize that in this fundamental aspect Aliaa al-Mahdy was an exception to a time-honored principle of Western art as much as she violated Egyptian social norms. Compared to even the small number of women artists who do female nudes, al-Mahdy's full-body selfie stood out because she was at once creator, model, raw material, creation, and, by virtue of digital self-dissemination, promoter and publicist.²⁸

The nude body has a charged relationship with authority. If in the French revolutionary period Liberty preserved her womanhood in the eyes of French citizens, al-Mahdy appears to have lost both her womanhood and her intended symbolic thrust in the eyes of many Egyptians. But the space between woman and allegory is a fraught one, and the boundary between them is unstable.²⁹ Though al-Mahdy herself never claimed to represent any specific group of women and insisted on her individuality, critics, trapped in Egypt-as-woman symbolism that began in the 1880s, nonetheless repudiated her with the argument that her actions did not represent women—Egyptian, Arab, Muslim. The volatility characterizing the relationship between women, Islam, and identity increases when nudity is involved, for the naked body connotes both truth and sexuality.³⁰

Further examination of the controversy surrounding *La liberté guidant le peuple* in 1830 and 1831 can give us insight into *A Rebel's Diary* in 2011 and 2014. Inspired by the 1830 Trois Glorieuses revolution, which ousted Charles X from the French throne, Delacroix's painting was first exhibited in 1831, and by 1874 it had made its way to the Louvre.³¹ In the painting, Liberty, barefoot and breasts partially revealed by a rumpled and sagging dress, brandishes the French flag in her right hand and clutches a rifle in her left hand. On the blog al-Mahdy is fully naked except for red ballerina flats, black tights, and a red flower in her hair. Enacting forward movement, one leg in front of the other, Liberty appears as a fiery and martial leader. Executing a pose, one leg open and raised, al-Mahdy appears as a feisty provocation. In the first, the flag, the rifle, the posture, and the glimpse of Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral in the background subsume the woman in the political allegory. In the second, the space is private, the accoutrements erotic, the pose provocative. Reminiscent of a *Playboy* centerfold, the photo's sexual aura absorbs its political symbolism. Even as we

consider that nakedness also connotes transparency and truth, al-Mahdy's self-installation raises questions, for a fully naked body in natural color would have conveyed truthfulness better than a black-and-white body with cabaret-style red accessories. *A Rebel's Diary* underscores the puzzle of the bare body in which "nakedness symbolizes Truth but Nudity suggests sexuality."³²

Because al-Mahdy's action was at once personal, political, sexual, and artistic, comparing her photograph to Delacroix's painting puts the Naked Blogger of Cairo in historical perspective. If we consider the circumstances under which the debates about *La liberté guidant le peuple* and *A Rebel's Diary* unfolded, we would conclude that, by featuring an armed, patriotic, half-naked woman stepping on naked male bodies as she guides the people to their destiny, the French painting offers a blend of sexuality, politics, and violence that is more explosive than the imagery of the Egyptian blog. After all, in Delacroix's painting, Liberty tramples on the inert bodies of men lying on the ground beneath her. The violence visible in the French painting is indiscernible in the Egyptian blog, but both triggered viriolic reactions. Many French critics repudiated Liberty as represented in the painting as a whore. Some obsessed over her dirtiness, and by one account she was "the most shameless prostitute of the dirtiest streets of Paris."³³ Many critics, trolls, and haters of al-Mahdy used similar language.

The controversy reflected the high stakes that come into play when women's bodies storm a revolutionary political field. Just as the controversy over Liberty could not be subsumed into a struggle between French republicans and monarchists, so the polemic over al-Mahdy cannot be understood merely as a scuffle between Egyptian secularists and Islamists. By deploying her nude body with a political manifesto in the endlessly reproducible and accessible realm of cyberspace, polarized by revolutionary spasms, al-Mahdy conjured an explosive mix of sexuality, politics, identity, and violence. In doing so, al-Mahdy came to represent Egypt, or to be more precise an anti-Egypt. A naked woman means a defenseless Egypt, vulnerable to foreign intervention and humiliation, resonating with deep historical memories that go as far as the 1919 Revolution against the British and their local consorts. Even as al-Mahdy signed her own visual representation, she could not avoid the societal countersignature motivated by womanly symbolism, revolutionary upheaval, entrenched patriarchy, and the politics of authenticity.

The inflamed battle to determine the meaning of al-Mahdy's disrobed body was as much about sexuality as it was about politics. Hers was a power struggle manifest through a dispute over sexuality.³⁴ By mixing sexuality and politics in an aesthetically equivocal, politically straightforward statement, about women, sexuality, and repression in Egypt and elsewhere, the initial and most inflammatory posting on *A Rebel's Diary*, al-Mahdy's full-body nude can be said to be feminist nude protest art, as its creator has insisted for several years. Al-Mahdy's black stockings, red flats, and red flower are contrived, erotically charged accessories that raise questions about the political sincerity and "purity" of her activism, but they nonetheless contribute to the aesthetic potency of the photograph.³⁵ Other figures would soon show that women's bodies can enter revolutionary struggle without premeditated undressing.