

Political Veggies: Launching 'The Non-Egyptian Restaurant' in Ard al-Lewa

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Like most Egyptians, the residents of Ard al-Lewa begin their day with a bowl of fuul and a potato and tahina sandwich, the most filling breakfast option for tight budgets. The irony is that the buildings they currently live and eat in sit on top of what was, only a few decades ago, some of Egypt's most fertile agricultural land. Now, instead of growing food, they have to purchase it from the local market, where the selection is decided on by agricultural policies with different priorities. To highlight these issues of food sovereignty in Egypt, Spanish artist Asuncion Molinos Gordo is launching this Saturday "El Matam El Mish-Masry" (The Non-Egyptian Restaurant) in an informal neighborhood of northwest Giza.

Inspired by Molinos' project, Egypt Independent is also tackling food sovereignty issues in its new "Political Veggies" series. The month-long art installation offers a space to reflect on an issue that should not be ignored in Egypt. Considered one of the world's most arid countries, Egypt's agriculture and food production are limited to the fertile Nile River banks that are threatened by rampant and fast-paced urbanization and a set of agricultural policies that favor cultivating crops solely meant for export, rather than a nutritiously balanced local diet. High-quality Egyptian food subjected to strict safety standards is mostly exported, while most of the local population can only access lower quality products, grown in sewage water and sprayed with strong pesticides.

In the first installment of Political Veggies, Egypt Independent interviewed Molinos, who is using the pocket-sized premises of the Artellewa Gallery to install her restaurant that will offer a unique menu every week.

Egypt Independent: Tell us about how you came up with the idea for this project.

Asuncion Molinos Gordo: This project is part of an ongoing research I've been conducting since 2006, related to what's happening in the rural hemisphere. I've been looking into cultural phenomena and traditions; and to me that includes food production and consumption patterns. Through my research I learnt that one major problem Egypt is facing now is building on agricultural land, which is already very scarce.

Then, Hamdy Reda, an artist and director of Artellewa, saw my 2010 exhibition, "World Agriculture Museum." He really liked it and asked me to think about doing a project in Ard al-Lewa. So, I started looking more into the neighborhood and came up with "El Matam El Mish-Masry."

Through it, I felt I could start a conversation about food sovereignty, which translates into the people of a nation being able to decide what to grow and eat versus food security, which only implies making food available. Governments, international organizations and corporations focus on food security. But we don't want to just eat at any cost. We want to decide what to eat according to our priorities, which could be environmental, social or cultural. Since Argentina started producing large amounts of GMO soya for animal feed meant for the international market, locals' access to food has significantly diminished since much agricultural land is dedicated to growing soya rather than the food they need to eat.

EI: And why did you chose this particular form, that of a restaurant, for your project?

AMG: I really wanted to get the neighborhood residents to attend the show, so I started thinking about what is popular in Ard al-Lewa: small shops, coffee shops and restaurants; that's how I decided on opening a restaurant. From the outside, it doesn't look like a contemporary art show, but more like the average neighborhood business; the restaurant is a sort of camouflage for the project to fit into the context of the area and to actually be able to engage with the people.

If we were to describe it in the terminology of the art world, the restaurant would be a site-specific installation that also includes a performative aspect, that of the cook preparing the meals. But it's also preceded by long research, and we will document the process and the dishes photographically throughout November, to represent each day.

EI: And how do the documentary photos fit in the project?

AMG: We have a very close yet uncritical relationship with what's on our plates. I want to bring the end product — the dishes we can make out of what's available now, what was available in the past and what might be available in the future — right at our face. For example, in the third week, our meals might be made of rubbish.

EI: Rubbish? Can you tell us how you come up with menus you'll be serving people?

AMG: During the first week, we'll be cooking 100 percent locally grown food. But, it's that which Egypt grows either for export markets or for a very small privileged group in the country as it is mostly unaffordable. Iranian-Swedish chef Elisabeth Shogi will be preparing the most exquisite of international cuisine; and we'll be offering the dishes at LE5 or less, which is the price of an average meal in Ard al-Lewa. The foodstuffs are all grown here. They should be affordable to Egyptians.

For the second week, we'll be working with the Women and Society Association in Ard al-Lewa. Four women from the neighborhood will be preparing meals based on the average family income. If a woman for instance has to feed her family of four for a week with LE100 (less than US\$17), we'll be buying food from the local market and cooking it according to that budget. This shows the magical skills of these women, but also the limitations they operate within.

By contrasting the food offered in the first two weeks, we are showing the consequences of foreign trade policies and rising food prices. We are not trying to make a case against providing for international markets, but about not having it as our main priority and exploring what we're doing to our agricultural land.

EI: So what will happen in the following two weeks?

AMG: In the third week, we'll be using whatever we harvest from the soil of Ard al-Lewa, which used to be agricultural land, seeing what kind of ingredients we'll be able to pick. Perhaps a chewed bubble gum or an empty pack of chips. Some dishes of course would be solely for display purposes to get people curious.

Then in the last week, we'll be looking for possible ingredients underground, the same way scientists and archaeologists look for the signs of a lost civilization, in this case that of peasant life. Egyptologist Salima Ikram will be our guest and will show us how to make a proper excavation.

That would be the end of the restaurant, which somehow works chronologically in parallel to the development of Egyptian agriculture in recent decades. Not so long ago, Egypt was feeding the world. The second week is like a microcosm of the present. And in the last two weeks, we're kind of moving into the future.



EI: What kind of reactions are you expecting from the people?

AMG: We haven't opened yet. But people see the restaurant's sign and come asking what about it that is not Egyptian, especially that the interior looks very Egyptian. So we are starting a conversation and they're also interested in knowing when it'll open and what kind of food we'll serve.

The calligrapher who made the sign for the restaurant also started saying how "we've lost what we had before, which was the ability to enjoy a good meal. All we think of now is fulfilling a need."

So I see the restaurant as a tool to arouse people's curiosity, especially that in the political arena, we are distracted by cultural, ideological and religious differences rather than talking about what is really necessary and common like food, transportation, education and the like.

I wanted to take this conversation to the public sphere, have a discussion in the open and maybe make some decisions about what we want collectively.

EI: Your previous project, "World Agriculture Museum," also dealt with issues of food sovereignty and security but perhaps in a more global sense. How do you see the two projects in relation to one another?

AMG: I think the background is definitely the same. Of course some of the policies that brought about the current situation like import and export patterns are reflected in the "World Agriculture Museum." But this project is also more Egypt-specific.

The other common thing among the two projects is the idea of "camouflage." They both take distance from the most predominant aesthetics of contemporary art, the idea of the well-known white cube and its strong legacy. I really want to be able to reach a broader audience than that of the art world; that's why I am playing with the "familiar" and the "known" mixing what's real with that which is fictional. And this also allows me to explore the artistic possibilities of these two settings, the museum and the restaurant.

"El Matam El Mish-Masry" opens on 3 November at 5 pm and runs until 27 November. It works Saturdays through Tuesdays from 5-10 pm at Artellewa, 19 Mohamed Ali El Eesary Street, Ard al-Lewa, Giza.



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