



People talk incessantly about things right before they happen—narrating possible outcomes and scenarios of things about to unfold. Historically, revolutionary thinkers have used the genre of the manifesto to call for action. Martin Puchner argues that the manifesto—what Karl Marx called the poetry of the revolution—was the genre through which modern culture articulated its avant-garde, revolutionary ambitions and desires.<sup>1</sup> The manifesto is one of the least understood and at the same time most important inventions. Its morphology includes such features as numbered declarations; denunciations of the past; an aggressive attitude; a collective authorship; varied, often bold, letters; and a mass distribution in newspapers, on posters, and as flyers. These features characterize the genre of the written manifesto, and they foreshadow similar semantic gestures that operate later in the twenty-first century on social networking sites.

The data-body VJ Um Amel emerged from traces of my poetry, community, and tech practices. When I decided to go back to school for a second graduate degree in 2007, an M.F.A. in Digital Arts and New Media, I wrote a statement which I revised a year later into “A VJ Manifesto” (2008):

VJ Um Amel is a name I use in a set of art practices where I explore the implications of placing the identity of “mother” and a techno-feminist construct of “cyborg” within local and transnational expressions of “Arab.” I think of “Arab, Cyborg, Mother” as a convergence of historical experiences, rather than a set of cultural identities, because “convergence” and “experience” embody the notion of movement and phenomenology of action. I bring these words together in order to challenge us to think what does the child of a cyborg look like? If, as Donna Haraway argues, a cyborg is free from biological, technological, or physical determinism, then what does it mean a machine procreates? And when you try to ground those seemingly disparate experiences within a cultural analytics around the notion of Arab, you get this deep fragmentation and set of multiple consciousnesses as a centrifugal force. The concept Arab, or a unified sense of Arab culture, has been a point of debate since before the mid century. I believe that trends in migration and the emergence of a new Arabic speaking Diaspora over the last few decades has given rise to a re-emergence of Arab as a symbol of culture. Being situated, particularly, in a post-9/11 United States, I have felt the urgency to bring up the category Arab again. This moment in history, and its after effects, will mark a critical call to action for all transnational Arab people.

Much has changed since the turn of the-century, and we can see new patterns emerging. Hope has become a loaded term, recently. Just for the record, VJ Um Amel

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Puchner (2005). *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



(Arabic for "Mother of Hope") came into being before Obama's hope campaign! In literature, hope dates back to Greek classical antiquity/Hellenic times and Pandora's box. As the character Femme Bot says in *Call 2 Presence*, "Modern feminists have interpreted Pandora's jar, to represent the female womb. That the jar releases myriad evils upon the earth suggests the culture's unease with friendly female sexuality. Pandora's jar originally contained winged souls." From my perspective, the recent resistant political movements in the Middle East and North Africa have taken on a feminist twist and now hope is somehow linked back to the womb, winged souls, and the seeds of creations. I have yet to map it out, but I do see a feminist praxis at work here.

I think much of it comes down to intention and methodology. In working collectively, there can be some ambiguity between collaboration and appropriation. And sometimes appropriation is intentional and meant to be subversive. When work is remixed with the intention to be in conversation with it, it is similar to the way in which we write papers and cite other texts within them. And this may be because I think of VJing as a critical research methodology. An interdisciplinary approach that incorporates an art and design research methodology, it offers a transformative practice to understanding the nature of blogs, social networking sites, Twitter feeds, YouTube, among other forms of digital culture, and how these new media platforms engage with and affect us.

**TIME**// I simply do not see time as linear. In my world, it is a lot of work to force a linear narrative. is linear narrative? In conversation, I often respond with not one, but several possible avenues of thought—divergent thinking. So simultaneity is natural for me. I sleep weird hours, if at all, and am online UTC (computer time) rather than (PST) Pacific Coast Time where I live. The man-made clock is something I resist.

**SPACE**// As for the role of distance in narrative making, I think of Edward Said and how the experience of the exile, emigrant, and traveler was a central theme in his work. Occupying an "in between" space, straddling two cultures rather than being grounded in one, Said learned to develop a "double-vision"—the ability to see each of his cultures both from the inside and the outside. The insider's and the outsider's are two different ways of knowing. Indeed, seeing from a distance sometimes provides a perspective you can't get from the close-up view with its subjective angle. read John Cage and Merce Cunningham o

**BODY**// I use corpus to reflect a larger idea of the creative act and its transformative nature—which also applies to the sequence of making one clip, video, sound byte or text begin and become another. Through a daily yoga practice, I have learned to emphasize alignment and the inner directional action and movement also



known as vinyasa krama. Krama refers “to the effective sequence of actions” and vinyasa means “to place in a special way.”

At a time when Arab is misunderstood in many parts of the world, an emergent twenty-first century public is publishing and producing copious amounts of media on the region in digital form. I work to bypass the notion of the critic as an authority who controls narrative, and to create a new role in the transnational Arab community that resonates with web culture and to function as critic, curator, and artist all at the same time. This cyber conscious, digital art practice allows me to shift between roles in VJ Um Amel and other technoscapes occupying these subjectivities simultaneously.

### *EPITAPH 2012*

*My information visualizations and 3D modeling of Twitter and Internet data from 2011 Arab protests have emerged from an objective to remix discourse in order to include the input of a "community-author" rather than a single subjectivity—whether expert, popular, or imaginative. I see my visualizations as extending these subjectivities through it and activating the space. Configuring ideas and activating various landscapes—these innovations offer new ways to mobilize communities of people. It is conceptually designed as the virtual embodiment of a 21st century transnational Arab imagination. Somewhere in all of this...I believe we find VOICE. And can collectively get the impact of the voice! Hence, why I believe that a thriving arts scene indicates a healthy environment for democratic practices. This voice flows from the well of the body politic.*

The trajectory of this social mobilization has continued in partial and rhizomatic fashion. In her widely read essay on “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,”<sup>2</sup> Haraway introduced the idea of a cyborg as a creature of social reality and fiction, living in a world in which the increasingly blurred binaries are fertile environments for cyborgs to thrive. She argued that cyborgs “see from both perspectives at once,” with each revealing “dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point.” By living in this in between state, Haraway argued that affinity can supersede identity through oppositional consciousness: “cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other.” Haraway concluded that she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. Jasbir Puar challenges Haraway’s techno-domination in her essay, “I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a

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<sup>2</sup> Donna J. Haraway (1991) “[A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century](#)” In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 149–81. New York: Routledge.



Goddess': Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics." She provides a genealogy of feminist discourse on theory and difference. Instead of operating through difference, Puar challenges the practice of disaggregating and separating: "but why disaggregate the two when there surely must be cyborgian-goddesses in our midst?"<sup>3</sup>

After nearly ten years of critically and creatively examining cyber ecologies as VJ Um Amel, I have come to understand that, at this moment, we need to consider how to proceed forward together. I argue that in this second decade of the twenty-first century, we are at a moment of emergence and emergency as we are witnessing the rise of megalomania, extremism, and violent racism emerge from the ashes of liberal hegemony. If the first decade brought us war, global financial collapse, and social media innovation, how are we now shaping our world into the twenty-first century?

I call upon us all to learn how to move together, to place one foot in front of the other in symbiotic, continual, reparative practices. This is a call to presence. This is a call for a speculative community already networked, even if just online, to assemble and reassemble in constant workings of repetition and difference. If not #NOW, nothing follows.

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<sup>3</sup> Jasbir Puar. (August 2011) "[I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess': Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics.](#)" *Transversal*.