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Egyptian Voyages: Gustave Flaubert, Maxime Du Camp, and Fouad Elkoury

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In 1849 Gustave Flaubert and Maxime Du Camp embarked on an eight-month tour of Egypt as part of a longer voyage through Italy and the Near East. It was a popular journey for French writers and artists with sufficient funds to finance their transportation, employ guides, and secure safe passage. Details of the pair's travels can be pieced together from various sources, including Flaubert's private journal, his letters to friends and family, Du Camp's extensive photographs of Egyptian monuments, and the latter's own published accounts of the trip.[1] Du Camp achieved considerable popular success upon the publication of his travel memoirs, and he is typically recognised as one of the first artists to use the medium of photography for the purposes of creating an illustrated album for mass distribution.

Between 1985 and 1990, the Franco-Lebanese photograper Fouad Elkoury produced a series of photographs that retraced Flaubert and Du Camp's Egyptian voyage, creating his own visual 'fiction' from the various locations that his nineteenth-century counterparts had visited and described in their works.[2] While Elkoury's photographs exist as an independent body of black and white images, selected works were included in a book published in 1999 entitled *Suite Égyptienne: Sur les traces de Gustave Flaubert et Maxime Du Camp* (hereafter *Egyptian Suite*). In addition to photographs, the book comprises essays by Elkoury and the French journalist Pierre Dumayet and excerpts from Flaubert's letters from Egypt.[3] Focusing on this book version of *Egyptian Suite*, the aim of this article is to examine how Elkoury reinterprets

1 Gustave Flaubert, *Voyage en Égypte*, ed. Pierre-Marc de Biasi, Paris: Grasset 1991; Gustave Flaubert, *Les Lettres d'Égypte de Gustave Flaubert d'après les manuscrits autographes*, ed. Antoine Youssef Naaman, Paris: Nizet 1965; Maxime Du Camp, *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie: Dessins photographiques recueillis pendant les années 1849, 1850 et 1851,* Paris: Gide et Baudry 1852; Maxime Du Camp, *Le Nil: Égypte et Nubie*, 2nd edn, Paris: A. Bourdilliat 1860.

2 Fouad Elkoury was born in Paris in 1952, grew up in Beirut, trained as an architect in London, and currently divides his time between Beirut and Paris. He represented Lebanon at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and has exhibited his works in solo and group shows in Europe, the USA, and the Middle East. Elkoury discusses the production of *Egyptian Suite* in *La Sagesse du photographe,* Paris: L'Œuil neuf 2004, 35–50.

3 Fouad Elkoury and Pierre Dumayet, *Suite Égyptienne: Sur les traces de Gustave Flaubert et Maxime du Camp,* Arles: Actes Sud 1999.

nineteenth-century colonial imagery and interrogates the type of information that photographs produced within this tradition purported to convey about the objects and people they depicted. I shall argue that by investigating the image of Egypt advanced by Flaubert and Du Camp, Elkoury poses questions about the ontology of photography and how it may be conceptualized as an art form.

In an essay published in 2004, Elkoury states that photography is 'irreducible, enigmatic and completely duplicitous'.[4] Eschewing characterizations of the camera as a device for the mechanical, objective recording of reality, Elkoury explains that, for him, photography is 'a means of projecting an unexpected vision of the world which, exceeding the visible, induces the imaginary'.[5] Such comments draw photography close to visual art in traditional media (such as painting or drawing), theories of which typically privilege the personal vision and authorial index of the artist. Yet while Elkoury emphasizes the capacity of the photographic artist to communicate a unique vision of reality, he also suggests that photographs contain random elements that are unrelated to the image as it was conceived of, and composed by, the photographer.[6] In contrast to the expression of a personal vision that is subject to authorial direction, therefore, this statement implies that the production of a photograph diminishes the agency of the maker by capturing a particular moment in a level of detail that exceeds the capacities of conscious awareness. Having regard to these contrasting ideas in Elkoury's writing, I shall argue that *Egyptian Suite* stages an interplay between authorial control and the randomness of mechanical recording and that this serves as the means by which Elkoury interrogates the colonialist viewpoint of Flaubert and Du Camp's vision of Egypt.

In his book *Le Nil: Égypte et Nubie* (1854)*,* Du Camp writes that 'the spirit of modern literature is that of the traveller'.[7] He draws a comparison between his journey to Egypt and voyages to the East that had been undertaken earlier in the century by celebrated writers such as Lord Byron, François-René de Chateaubriand, Alphonse de Lamartine and Victor Hugo.[8] In addition to providing private enjoyment or fulfilling a putative scientific purpose, therefore, Du Camp sought publicly to identify his own journey as part of an established European literary tradition that involved popularizing images of the East. As Ali Behdad has noted, literary precursors such as these came to play an important 'mediating role for the practice of Orientalist photography' later in the century by shaping ideas about the kind of subject that was considered 'worthy' of the new photographic medium.[9] Du Camp summarizes the choices and aspirations of the artist-traveller in lofty terms:

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4 Elkoury, *La Sagesse du photographe,* 5: 'La photographie est irréductible, énigmatique et parfaitement mensongère'. Unless otherwise noted, translations are by the author.

5 Ibid., 7: '[La photographie est] une façon de projeter une vision inhabituelle du monde, qui, au-delà du visible, induit l'imaginaire'.

6 Ibid., 5.

7 Du Camp, *Le Nil,* Preface (À Théophile Gautier), n.p.: 'le génie des littératures modernes est essentiellement voyageur'.

8 Ibid., Preface, n.p.

9 Ali Behdad, 'The Orientalist Photograph', in *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation*, ed. Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan, Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute 2013, 16.

> Before each civilization, living or dead, past or future, we are seized by striking curiosities; we interrogate its ethics, its religions, its traditions, its aspirations, its pains, its origins, its freedoms, its constraints; then we resume our course, pleased to have absorbed a little of this Truth towards which we strive incessantly.[10]

His comment suggests an analogy between the traveller and the museum visitor, each individual piecing together fragments of knowledge gleaned from other cultures in a way that satisfies his or her own conception of, and aspiration towards, a greater 'truth'. This aspect of Du Camp's writing was a familiar feature of nineteenth-century descriptions of Egypt by French artists and scientists, a style that reached its height in the multi-volume *Description de l'Égypte* commissioned by Napoleon and first published between 1809 and 1822.[11] Although Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 had ended ignominiously, it was through science and the arts that France sought to assert its supremacy over the country. As Edward Said famously noted with regard to European attitudes towards the East during the mid-nineteenth century: 'to be a European in the Orient, and to be one knowledgeably, one must see and know the Orient as a domain ruled over by Europe'.[12] This point is borne out in the second edition of the *Description de l'Égypte*, a work that was dedicated to the Emperor's successor, Louis XVIII:

> France has united all of its efforts to *conquer* this country [Egypt]; all the means of the arts have been placed at the service of its description. A great number of sketchers, painters, gifted printers, technicians, and nearly four hundred engravers, have dedicated themselves to the execution of this monument that draws together memories of ancient Egypt with the glory of modern France. (emphasis added)[13]

While the second edition of the *Description de l'Égypte* declared itself to be both a comprehensive taxonomy of ancient Egypt and a monument to the glory of contemporary France irrespective of its political regime, Du Camp was able to reinvigorate the genres of both

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10 Du Camp, *Le Nil*, Preface, n.p.: 'En face de chaque civilisation, éteinte ou vivace, passée ou future, nous nous arrêtons pleins de poignantes curiosités; nous interrogeons ses morales, ses religions, ses traditions, ses efforts, ses douleurs, ses enfantements, ses affranchissements, ses servitudes; puis nous reprenons notre course, contents d'emporter au dedans de nous-mêmes un peu de cette Vérité, vers laquelle nous tendons sans cesse'.

11 Commission des sciences et arts d'Égypte, *Description de l'Égypte, ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française*, publié par les ordres de sa majesté l'Empereur Napoléon le Grand, 23 vols, Paris: Imprimerie Impériale 1809–22.

12 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin 2003 [1978], 197.

13 Berthollet, Jollois and Jomard et al., *Description de l'Égypte, ou recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française*, 26 vols, 2nd edn, Paris: Panckoucke 1821–30, vol. 1, Preface, n.p.: 'La France avait réuni tous ses efforts pour la conquête de cette contrée; tous les efforts des arts ont été employés pour sa description. Un grand nombre de dessinateurs, de peintres, des imprimeurs habiles, des mécaniciens, et près de quatre cents graveurs, furent occupés avec une constance admirable à l'exécution de ce monument, qui réunit les souvenirs de l'Égypte antique à la gloire de la France moderne'.

scientific publication and popular travel writing through his championing of photography.[14] No longer tainted by the subjective viewpoint of the painter or etcher, a visual record made in 1849 could purport to present Egypt to the French public as it really was. The advertising 'prospectus' for the collected edition of Du Camp's images and explanatory texts of 1852, *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine et Syrie*, drew attention to this advantage of photography over both engraving and lithography and emphasized the epistemological superiority of the new medium: 'It [the daguerreotype] can capture a still life with scrupulous passivity, whereas the artist might stray in his observation and distort the real, substituting for it his will or its effects: a substitution that runs the risk of altering texts and leading debate astray'.[15]

For Charles Baudelaire, writing in 1859, it was precisely the elimination of the imagination that made photography the enemy of painting and the true 'servant' of the scientist-traveller. His hope was:

> That it [photography] should rapidly enrich the traveller's album and reveal with precision the details that elude memory, that it should enhance the library of the naturalist […]. If it saves from oblivion objects that are on the brink of ruin, books, engravings and manuscripts that are devoured by time, precious things that will disintegrate and that demand a place in the archives of our memory, it will be thanked and applauded.[16]

Baudelaire may well have had his friend, Du Camp, in mind when writing these words, for the use of photography in the latter's travel writing purports to fulfill these dual purposes of scientific observation and the preservation of a cultural heritage that was physically disintegrating before the camera lens.[17] As Julia Ballerini has noted, Du Camp also adopted a linguistic pose that was designed to complement the objectivity of the new medium by

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14 The background to the journey undertaken by Flaubert and Du Camp (including the scientific commission of the latter) is described in detail by Pierre-Marc de Biasi in his Introduction to Flaubert's *Voyage en Égypte*, 9–112. See also Julia Ballerini's entry on Maxime Du Camp in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, vol. 1, ed. John Hannavy, New York: Routledge 2008, 441–3.

15 Du Camp, *Égypte, Nubie, Palestine*, 'Prospectus' (front matter), n.p.: 'Il [le daguerréotype] saisit la nature morte avec une passiveté scrupuleuse, tandis que l'artiste peut égarer son observation et déranger le vrai en y substituant sa volonté ou ses effets: substitution qui a le danger grave d'altérer les textes et d'égarer les discussions'. While the Prospectus highlights the advantages of the daguerreotype over etching and lithography, it goes on to point out that the images for the book were produced using the more cost-effective Blanquart-Evrard calotype process. On the nineteenth-century reception of Du Camp's photographs see also Behdad, 'The Orientalist Photograph', 13–14 and 20.

16 Charles Baudelaire, 'Salon de 1859', *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, vol. 2, Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 1976, 618: 'Qu'elle enrichisse rapidement l'album du voyageur et rende à ses yeux la précision qui manquerait à sa mémoire, qu'elle orne la bibliothèque du naturaliste […]. Qu'elle sauve de l'oubli les ruines pendantes, les livres, les estampes et les manuscrits que le temps dévore, les choses précieuses dont la forme va disparaître et qui demandent une place dans les archives de notre mémoire, elle sera remerciée et applaudie'.

17 See also Behdad's discussion of the contradictions inherent in photography's visual 'rescue' of historical monuments in the Near East at a time when those very sites were subject to pillage by colonial occupiers. Behdad, 'The Orientalist Photograph', 23.

favouring impersonal grammatical forms in his essays and avoiding the recording of emotional responses to places or events.[18]

Yet it is precisely this putative link between photography and objectivity that leads Patrizia Di Bello to suggest that it is incumbent on the viewer to enquire how a photograph's content functions at a particular moment in time and within the socio-cultural framework of its making and display.[19] Di Bello argues that these questions are pressing in the context of photography because of the lengthy critical tradition that has vouched for photography's promise to provide a mimetic recording of reality, a tendency that she summarizes as 'the hold of the concept of the index'.[20] Arguing against this tradition, Di Bello suggests that photography is a medium that 'naturalizes' things and that its association with truth is nothing more than a kind of 'myth-making' on the part of those who make and receive images.[21] Taking up Di Bello's point, I want to consider briefly the image of Egypt that is presented or 'naturalized' in Du Camp's photographs and then turn to ways in which Elkoury's *Egyptian Suite* interfaces with or subverts this image.

Du Camp's photographs of Egypt are primarily of ancient monuments. Neither urban life in Cairo nor the lifestyles of contemporary Egyptians impinge on the vision of a country that is frozen in its own history.[22] Extending Baudelaire's thesis that photography best serves an archival purpose, in this case the medium does not simply record facts about a country's past, but actively suspends a demand to understand its society and role in the geo-politics of the present.[23] If, as W. J. T. Mitchell has argued, 'landscape' is a visual category comprising a 'vast network of cultural codes' that combine to distance and commodify the environment, Du Camp's insistence on monumental ruins communicates a pre-modern Egypt that addressed both Romantic tropes of decay and a Western convention of landscape that was premised on the appropriation and framing of selected spaces.[24] For Ballerini this emphasis on ruins is a manifestation of 'cultural hypochondria' in Du Camp's work, a metaphor for concerns about the social and political future of France following the revolution of 1848.[25] The combination of picturesque ruins with the truth-telling 'guarantee' applied by Du Camp's publisher can,

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18 Julia Ballerini, 'Rewriting the Nubian Figure in the Photograph: Maxime Du Camp's "cultural hypochondria"', in *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing race and place*, ed. Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, New York: Routledge 2004, 37–8.

19 Patrizia Di Bello, 'Seductions and Flirtations: Photographs, histories, theories', *Photographies*, 1:2 (September 2008), 144.

20 Ibid., 144.

21 Ibid., 147.

22 In this respect the images conform to a model of 'depopulating iconography', as described by Ali Behdad, that was designed to produce 'a colonializing gaze that positions the European viewer as the potentially legitimate occupier through a visual erasure of the indigenous population'. Behdad, 'The Orientalist Photograph', 24.

23 See also Said, *Orientalism*, 176: 'To look into Orientalism for a lively sense of an Oriental's human or social reality – as a contemporary inhabitant of the modern world – is to look in vain'.

24 W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Imperial Landscape', in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell, 2nd edn, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2002 [1994], 13–15.

25 Ballerini, 'Rewriting the Nubian Figure', 30–1.

however, also be read as an extension of the language of conquest found in the *Description de l'Égypte*.[26]

In this context, the mere fact of taking the photographs is important to the notions of both Egypt and France put forward by Du Camp and, more specifically, constitutes an assertion of difference between the two countries. In *The Nile*, the reader is told that one of the sailors, Ishmael, who operates the boat on which Du Camp and Flaubert navigate the river, is employed to carry cameras and other equipment. He is often included in Du Camp's photographs, we are told, to provide the viewer with a sense of scale.[27] In an effort to encourage Ishmael to remain still during the lengthy exposure time required to produce the negative, Du Camp tells him that the camera lens is a cannon and that the slightest movement will cause it to fire and kill him.[28] Although a minor anecdote, this description is important to an understanding of the role that photography plays in Du Camp's broader narrative. It is not merely the style and content of the photographs that secure an image of Egypt as a beautiful, but crumbling relic: rather, the camera itself becomes a symbol of European technological sophistication that supports racialist assumptions about, as Du Camp puts it, the 'naïve credulity of these poor Arabs'.[29] In this case, photography is not simply an image-making technique, but a process that is used to establish a spurious hierarchy between photographer and subject, France and Egypt.

If, as Said has argued, European Orientalism developed through acts of textual copying and the appropriation of literary precedent, the question arises as to how Elkoury's *Egyptian Suite* unsettles this nineteenth-century, colonialist paradigm rather than falling into the trap of iteration.[30] My answer starts with the content and composition of Elkoury's photographs. In contrast to Du Camp's visual fantasy of Egypt as an ancient and largely unpopulated country, Elkoury's book opens with images of contemporary urban life in Cairo, Alexandria and Luxor. Public spaces are seen to be alive with people, and the spectacular life of the city is attested to by the number of individuals who watch each other or peer from their windows.

Yet while Elkoury's images present the chaos of everyday life, they also contain disconcerting gaps and impenetrable spaces (including, in many cases, the locations in which the camera is placed). A photograph of Ramses Railway Station in Cairo, for example, consists in an image of a train taken from within the carriage of another (fig. 1). The overwhelming blackness of the compartment from which the scene is captured is mirrored by the darkness of the carriage interiors on the opposite platform: the photographer is implicitly hidden from

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26 For further examination of the association of ruins with nineteenth-century anxieties about the present see also Sophie Thomas, 'Assembling Ruins: Fragments and History', *European Romantic Review*, 14 (2003), 177–86, and Ted Underwood, 'Historiographies' in *A Handbook of Romanticism Studies*, ed. Joel Faflak and Julia M. Wright, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2012, 227–44.

27 Du Camp, *Le Nil*, 290.

28 Du Camp, *Le Nil,* 290. Julia Ballerini also discusses this episode as part of her examination of the portrayal of Ishmael in Du Camp's photographs and writings. See Ballerini, 'Rewriting the Nubian Figure', 46. For a more detailed interpretation of the role played by Ishmael in these photographs see Ballerini's longer study, *The Stillness of Hajj Ishmael: Maxime Du Camp's 1850 Photographic Encounters*, New York: iUniverse 2010.

29 Du Camp, *Le Nil*, 290.

30 Said, *Orientalism*, 197.

view, any travellers remain unseen, and the only visible person is sightless – asleep (presumably) in a deathlike pose above the cavernous space of the railway track. The inert body is at once incidental and arresting, an uncomfortable point of stillness between two figures of transit (the carriages) and two empty spaces (the railway tracks and the open door of the opposite carriage). Here, as elsewhere in *Egyptian Suite*, the focus is not on that which photography shows, but on that which it leaves out or obscures.

Throughout *Egyptian Suite*, bodies are blurred, vision is obstructed, barriers are interposed between the camera and the primary object of the composition, and individuals look towards things that remain unpictured. Even during daylight hours, shadows create spaces within the city that resist the viewer's gaze. If Du Camp's imagery functions as part of a tradition that seeks to fix, order, and 'conquer' Egypt through an act of visual appropriation, Elkoury's photographs court uncertainty by breaking interiors and city spaces into a series of layers, folds, gaps, and reflections. It is by confronting the viewer with the limits of vision that Elkoury's images ask what knowledge (if any) we derive from the content of a photograph.

A photograph entitled *Rosetta* provides a good example of the way in which Elkoury achieves this effect (fig. 2). The close-up of a taxi dominates the composition, but its open boot obscures whatever might lie beyond it. Creating the illusion that a mosque and road lie behind the taxi on the left, the wing mirror of an unseen car offers a truncated view of the landscape behind the camera. The camera is located on a margin between two uncertain spaces, and while this composition doubles the viewer's perspective on the scene (thereby expanding the scope of vision), it also breaks up the coherence of the picture plane. The distinctive interest of the image lies in how these objects and viewpoints are animated in ways that alter each other's scale and context without abandoning a commitment to mimesis.

In a discussion of W. J. T. Mitchell's association of landscape with the imposition of a controlling gaze on the environment, Jeff Malpas introduces the following idea:

> The question concerning the place of landscape is […] not only a question of how landscape relates to forms of power or to modes of representation, but of how landscape functions in relation to place itself, in relation to human being in place, and of how place may be said to function in and through landscape.[31]

My suggestion is that *Rosetta*, like other of Elkoury's images, subverts the tradition of 'landscape' by juxtaposing objects and people in a way that disrupts a coherent, totalizing perspective on the visible environment. Taking up Malpas's point, a sense of place – as a space that defeats the imposition of familiar artistic genres – is generated through the fragmentation of a seamless vista and a resultant questioning of the location's depiction point. Here too, the only human presence in the image enhances the uncanny construction of the scene: a branch from an unpictured tree extends towards a man (perhaps the taxi driver), creating Medusa-like outcroppings from his head. While this fusion of the ecological and the human suggests a

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31 Jeff Malpas, 'Introduction', in *The Place of Landscape: Concepts, Contexts, Studies*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2011, xii.

physical metamorphosis of the body, the intrusion of the branch also disturbs the scale of objects on the right: the width of the branch almost matches the strip of land on the other side of the (partially seen) river. Elkoury's image is artfully composed, but the movement of the man as he strides out of the frame, his glance towards the camera, suggests a fleeting moment, an intervention of the random into an otherwise carefully controlled *mise en scène*. Yet as the viewer is drawn into Elkoury's images, the boundary between the real and the staged becomes increasingly uncertain.

Photography's capacity to combine, or even exploit, the interface between control and randomness is a topic that has generated considerable interest in recent critical literature. Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen have pointed to some of the contradictions inherent in discussions about the ways in which the intervention of chance appears to contradict authorial determination of the content of the photographic image (thereby diminishing the image's artistic credentials), yet supports the notion that photography is a process for the mechanical recording of reality (a view that has fuelled concepts of the distinctiveness of photography as a medium).[32]

Costello and Iversen call for a reconceptualization of photography that moves away from this policing of an artificial boundary between 'agency' and 'automatism'. Rather than viewing chance as the enemy of artistic control, they point to a lengthy modernist tradition that privileges 'authorial abnegation' as part of the creative process, powerful examples of which include Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* (1897), sections of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910), W. B. Yeats's experiments with automatic writing, and Surrealist automatism. In Costello and Iversen's view, it is by conceiving of photography within an artistic tradition that embraces an alternation between the exertion and abdication of authorial control that we might achieve greater accuracy in our discussions of this medium:

> An adequate conception of photographic art should provide scope for both highly skilled photographic practices that follow in the tradition of the fine arts, and for chance-inflected practices that aspire, by means of the camera's automaticity, to short-circuit artistic convention and habits of mind alike.[33]

Elkoury's photographs are the realization of just such a process, and this reflection on the ontology of photography permits him to unsettle the colonialist paradigm of Du Camp's imagery. On the one hand, Elkoury stresses the staged qualities of his own photographs: he freely admits setting up shots in detail, sometimes repeating them until he achieves the desired effect.[34] On the other hand, he also states: 'It is often arbitrary considerations or external circumstances that determine the outcome' of a photograph; 'One plans to make this photograph and is surprised to make another. […] One can never quite predict the moment of

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32 Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, 'Photography between Art History and Philosophy', *Critical Inquiry*, 38: 4 (Summer 2012), 679–93.

33 Ibid., 693.

34 Elkoury, *Egyptian Suite*, 113.

the shutter's release'.[35] By exploiting the relationship between authorial control and randomness and by deliberately confusing the viewer as to where the boundary between the two might lie, Elkoury's photographs refuse to structure a coherent package of information. It is through this implicit reflection on the conditions of photography and the authority of the photographer-artist that Elkoury undoes the epistemological promise of Du Camp's imagery.

Carol Armstrong has also made a strong case that photography's uniqueness consists in its demand for recognition of a 'combined and intertwined relation between the aleatory and the authorial in order to yield that which can count as an artwork'.[36] There is, however, another form of authorial agency that Armstrong discusses, namely, the agency of historical interface. This is not something that is unique to the medium of photography, but it is important to the way in which Elkoury conceives of *Egyptian Suite*. On the one hand, he describes his use of Flaubert and Du Camp's voyage as the imposition of a framework, a limitation on what might otherwise be an infinite and indefinite process of image-making.[37] On the other hand, however, he also describes his eventual liberation from this framework: 'I now started executing compositions that had nothing to do with those I pursued in the footsteps of Flaubert and Du Camp; I had, so as to speak, broken free of all shackles'.[38] Mirroring the tensions between authorial agency and randomness discussed above, here too *Egyptian Suite* is presented as both the submission to a pre-determined itinerary and to the generation of a personal fiction that shatters any such circumscription of the imagination.

Complementing this notion of historical interface, Elkoury's imagery also permits Egypt's more recent past to interrupt the nineteenth-century background narrative. A photograph of the Kasr el Nil casino in Cairo is given a two-page spread in *Egyptian Suite*, a choice that emphasises its rigorous horizontal composition (fig. 3). The image is divided into two sections: below we glimpse a man who has stepped outside to smoke a cigarette. The sky is closed off to him by the low patio ceiling and its garish fluorescent lights. Branches and the fronds of palm trees penetrate the upper section of the photograph and merge with the artificial branching of the scaffolding that supports the illuminated, but only partially visible name of the establishment. Camouflaged by intersecting railings in the upper section of the image are two significant local landmarks: the Cairo tower (completed in 1961) and the statue of Saad Zaghloul (Prime minister of Egypt in 1924) by Mahmoud Mukhtar, a work that was unveiled in 1938.[39] The apparently incidental inclusion of such modern landmarks is significant in the context of a dialogue with Du Camp's photographs. The statue of Saad Zaghloul, in particular, is a powerful symbol of Egypt's nationalist movement from the early part of the

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35 Elkoury, *La Sagesse du photographe*, 92 and 80: 'Ce sont souvent des considérations arbitraires ou des circonstances extérieures qui en déterminent la fin'; 'On pense qu'on va faire telle photo, on est surpris d'en faire une autre. […] On ne peut jamais prédire quand viendra le déclic'.

36 Carol Armstrong, 'Automatism and Agency Intertwined: A Spectrum of Photographic Intentionality', *Critical Inquiry*, 38:4 (Summer 2012), 706.

37 Elkoury, *La Sagesse du photographe*, 37.

38 Ibid., 48: 'J'exécutais à présent des figures qui n'avaient rien plus à voir avec celles que je poursuivais sur les traces de Flaubert et de Du Camp, je m'étais, pour ainsi dire, dégagé de tout carcan'.

39 Lesley Lababidi, *Cairo's Street Stories: Exploring the City's Statues, Squares, Bridges, Gardens, and Sidewalk Cafés*, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press 2009, 86–7.

twentieth century and, more importantly, speaks to the country's own forms of commemoration and public self-expression as an independent nation. Yet the monumentality of this visual self-assertion is dramatically reduced in the complex composition of the photograph: the size of both tower and statue is diminished by the physical foregrounding of the human perspective, namely, the image's emphasis on the everyday and one man's enjoyment of a cigarette. Whereas Du Camp's images encourage a vision of Egypt in which architectural immensity dwarfs human physicality, Elkoury's narrative gives predominance to the individual and to the ephemeral.

So far I have focused on ways in which Elkoury's photographs interface with those of Du Camp and have suggested how the questioning of ideas that have shaped the critical reception of photography can destabilize the colonialist narrative of Du Camp's images. I now want to turn to an important link between *Egyptian Suite* and Flaubert and will focus on a key character that informs their respective images of Egypt: the female dancer and prostitute, Kuchuk-Hanem (a name that is often translated as 'little dancer' or 'little princess'). In addition to descriptions of the sights and sounds of cities visited and monuments seen, Flaubert's journal and letters to friends contain details of his and Du Camp's encounters with Egyptian prostitutes and dancers. The pair's encounter with Kuchuk-Hanem is one of the most potent of these stories. It not only expresses the gendered image of the 'Orient' that featured in much nineteenth-century writing, but also epitomises European stereotypes about female sexuality and preconceptions about relations between 'Oriental' women and visitors from abroad. For Flaubert, Egypt is a land with a feminised history (the reign of Cleopatra) and a present characterized by prostitutes who engage in sex with their clients like 'machines'.[40]

Elkoury's *Egyptian Suite* opens with excerpts from a letter that Flaubert wrote to his friend Louis Bouilhet on 13 March 1850. In that letter Flaubert describes his and Du Camp's arrival at the house of Kuchuk-Hanem and the short-lived relation that ensues between them. We learn that Kuchuk-Hanem performs the famous dance of the 'Bee' (essentially an elaborate strip-tease), after which she and Flaubert retreat to the bedroom:

> I sucked her with rage; her body was covered in sweat, she was tired from having danced, she was cold. – I covered her with my fur coat and she fell asleep, her fingers wrapped around mine. As for me, I hardly slept a wink. […] While looking at this beautiful creature, snoring with her head on my arm, I thought about my nights spent in Parisian brothels, a whole pile of memories… and of her, her dance, her voice singing songs that were, for me, without meaning or distinguishable words. […] As for

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40 Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Jean Bruneau and Yvan Leclerc, 5 vols, Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973–2007, Letter to Louise Colet, 27 March 1853, vol. III, 282: 'La femme orientale est une machine, et rien de plus; elle ne fait aucune différence entre un homme et un autre homme. Fumer, aller au bain, se peindre les paupières et boire du café, tel est le cercle d'occupations où tourne son existence'. See also Said, *Orientalism*, 180.

the fucks, they were good. The third one, especially, was ferocious and the last sentimental.[41]

Readers from Sartre and Said to more recent critics, including Charles Bernheimer, Dorothy Kelly and Jennifer Yee, have noted that Flaubert uses his encounter with Kuchuk-Hanem not just as a means of sexualizing Egypt, but as a pretext for exploring his own subjectivity and for bonding with other men, both literally and textually.[42] The sharing of prostitutes with friends was a form of homosocial attachment for Flaubert, and the encounter with Kuchuk-Hanem becomes part of a complementary narrative by Du Camp and the subject of a poem by Bouilhet. Imagery from the Egyptian journey (particularly motifs featuring women) also permeate Flaubert's later writings, including those set in France.[43] This connection is something that Pierre Dumayet is keen to bring out in the essay that he contributes to *Egyptian Suite*. Pursuing an analogy between Kuchuk-Hanem and the fictional Emma Bovary, Dumayet posits Flaubert's Egyptian journey as the threshold moment that sparked a new imaginative trajectory upon the latter's return to France. More importantly, he invites the reader to interpret Elkoury's images as part of this literary constellation.

This is a link that Elkoury explicitly pursues in both his photographs and texts. He tells us that he retraced Flaubert and Du Camp's journey in the company of Nada, a woman with whom he purports to have been in love at the time: 'Which one was I really following', he asks, 'Nada, Flaubert or Du Camp […]?'[44] Nada becomes the central character of the series, the bridge between contemporary life and ancient heritage, and the character through whom Elkoury 'plays with history'.[45] He even goes so far as to refer to her as 'Nada-Kuchuk'. Does this mean, then, that Elkoury's images reinforce the gendered stereotyping of Egypt that we find in Flaubert's writing? Is Nada portrayed as a passive figure, as mysterious, but also as voiceless as Kuchuk-Hanem? My answer to both questions is in the negative, and the reason has to do with the different guises under which Nada is presented in Elkoury's photographs.

Consider, for example, the introduction of Kuchuk-Hanem in Flaubert's travel memoir: the reader is told that she has emerged from her bath and stands at the top of a staircase. Flaubert looks up towards her as light encircles her body; she is dressed in rose

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41 Quoted in Elkoury, *Egyptian Suite*, 9: 'Je l'ai sucée avec rage; son corps était en sueur, elle était fatiguée d'avoir dansé, elle avait froid. – Je l'ai couverte de ma pelisse de fourrure, et elle s'est endormie, les doigts passés dans les miens. Pour moi, je n'ai guère fermé l'œil. […] En contemplant dormir cette belle créature qui ronflait la tête appuyée sur mon bras, je pensais à mes nuits de bordel à Paris, à un tas de vieux souvenirs… et à celle-là, à sa danse, à sa voix qui chantait des chansons sans signification ni mots distinguables pour moi. […] Quant aux coups, ils ont été bons. Le 3e surtout a été féroce, et le dernier sentimental'.

42 – Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Idiot de la famille: Gustave Flaubert de 1821 à 1857*, 3 vols, Paris: Gallimard 1988, 713–15; Said, *Orientalism*, 187–8; Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989, 129–56; Dorothy Kelly, *Reconstructing Woman: From Fiction to Reality in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press 2007, 61–7; Jennifer Yee, '"Like an Apparition": Oriental Ghosting in Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*', *French Studies*, 67:3 (2013), 350–2.

43 See Yee, 'Oriental Ghosting', 342–3.

44 Elkoury, *Egyptian Suite*, 114: 'Qui suivais-je réellement, Nada, Flaubert ou Du Camp […]?'.

45 Elkoury, *Egyptian Suite*, 114.

coloured trousers, wearing around her torso nothing but a gauze of deep violet; a light odour resembling sugared turpentine exudes from her skin.[46] This is also borne out in Du Camp's account of the occasion: 'Kuchuk-Hanem waited for me at the top of the steps. I saw her as I lifted my head; it was like an apparition'.[47]

Elkoury explicitly takes up this key moment and accompanying depiction point in a photograph that shows Nada descending a staircase in a building located in the Garden City suburb of Cairo (fig. 4). Yet this is far from the highly charged and sexualized encounter described by Flaubert. The camera is placed at the foot of the stairs in echo of Flaubert's description, but Nada is clad in a heavy coat that hides the contours of her body (at first glance it is not even clear that the individual is female). As she looks towards something unseen, the implied gaze of the viewer fails to hold her interest.

The image develops the theme of androgeny that is introduced much earlier in the series. Elkoury begins his journey in the town of Rosetta. He emphasizes that the name of the city is feminine (derived from 'Rosette' in French following the Napoleonic invasion), but that its original Arabic name is male, Rashid.[48] Searching for ideas with which to open his series, Elkoury explains that he suddenly envisioned Nada as a 'priestess' or 'sinner', two types that fit well within Flaubert's feminine paradigm of the 'Orient'. In the resulting photograph, Nada once again assumes an elevated position, but her body is obscured and she looks away from the camera (figure 5). While, for Elkoury, she is visually transformed into a gargoyle on the parapet of the building, Nada prefers to describe herself as a 'chimera'.[49] It is the mythological origin of that term that has the greatest resonance for an interpretation of the fictional Nada-Kuchuk in *Egyptian Suite*: a hybrid creature, male and female, an amalgam of different animals. Throughout the series, she is presented as faceless or bird-like, an imitation of the human figure in Egyptian painting, a shadow, or a fragment. If Flaubert constructs a textual Kuchuk-Hanem to feminize Egypt in a way that permits meditation on his own sexual history, Elkoury's visual counterpart, by contrast, resists categorization and slips free of a desiring and controlling gaze.

I mentioned earlier that Elkoury acknowledges the contrived set-up of many of his compositions. Here, too, Nada plays an important role. In his essay about the production of *Egyptian Suite*, Elkoury describes himself as the director and Nada as the 'principal actress'.[50] However, he also draws attention to Nada's active participation in determining the trajectory of the journey and the composition of the images, including, at times, her unwillingness to

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46 Flaubert, *Voyage en Égypte*, 280–1.

47 Du Camp, *Le Nil*, 116: 'En haut des degrés, Koutchouk-Hanem m'attendait. Je la vis en levant la tête; ce fut comme une apparition'. For further discussion of the wider relevance of this key passage in Flaubert's works see also Yee, 'Oriental Ghosting', 344–7.

48 Elkoury, *Egyptian Suite*, 111.

49 Ibid., 111: '…son corps disparaît dans les murets, je pense à une gargouille, elle dit *je suis une chimère*' (emphasis in original).

50 Elkoury, *La Sagesse du photographe*, 37: 'nous allions voyager ensemble, elle comme actrice principale et moi comme metteur en scène, elle exécutant une série de figures et moi la photographiant'.

complete a session or to pose in a particular way.[51] This resistance of the actor is another threat to authorial control and, as such, represents a further unsettling of that paradigm in Elkoury's work. Considered in dialogue with the historical framework of the photographs, it is through acts of collaboration that actress and photographer grant Kuchuk-Hanem an agency that she lacks in Flaubert's narrative. In tracing links between the fictional depictions of Nada and Kuchuk-Hanem, Elkoury frustrates nineteenth-century associations of Egypt with masculinist notions of transgressive female sexuality. By presenting Nada-Kuchuk as an androgynous character, at once visible and invisible, human and animal, male and female, object and agent, Elkoury dispenses with such easy equivalences, including the role of visual art and literature in crafting an image of the 'Orient' from preconceptions about the female body.

I do not, however, want to reduce Flaubert's conceptualization of Egypt to a simple association between sexual, national, and textual conquest.[52] Any such notions of dominance are attenuated in *Voyage en Égypte* and, indeed, in Flaubert's works generally, by a thought that mirrors the problem of photographic authorship discussed above. Dorothy Kelly examines a question that continually troubles Flaubert: 'Is the work of art a manifestation of the unique talents, mind and will of the individual artist […], or is it a mechanically generated product of a particular body and environment?'[53] This concern of Flaubert's (as described by Kelly) identifies literary creation as being susceptible to the same intrusion of the mechanical that threatened the integrity of visual representation in the mid-nineteenth century, but here the human body is the automaton. Like the camera, the author is envisaged as a mere conduit of external stimuli in a way that threatens individual selfhood as a source of spontaneous creativity. Kelly goes on to cite Flaubert's comment on this issue in a letter of 1864 to the actress, Edma Roger des Genettes: 'In the past, it was thought that literature was something completely individual and that works fell from the sky like meteorites. But now any idea of the will, of the absolute, is denied. The truth is, I think, somewhere *in between*'.[54]

In this comment, Flaubert – like Elkoury – identifies creativity on the faultline between control and chance, authority and authorial abnegation. In contrast to the totalising projects of the *Description de l'Égypte* and Du Camp's photographic landscapes, Flaubert describes Egypt as something 'immense and ruthless' in the midst of which one is simply 'lost'.[55] Pre-empting the gaps, shadows, and precarious viewpoints of Elkoury's photographs, Flaubert records only

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51 Ibid., 46–8. See also Christopher Pinney's discussion of the uncertainties that arise in the context of a photographic 'portrait event', a process in which 'live – and possibly noncooperative – bodies are brought before the camera'. In Pinney's account, such uncertainties contribute to making photography a 'transcultural' space that admits contingency and often unexpected exchange between photographer and subject, coloniser and colonised. Christopher Pinney, 'What's Photography Got to Do With It?', in *Photography's Orientalism*, ed. Behdad and Gartlan, 37 and 42.

52 See also Said's discussion of Flaubert's sense of 'powerlessness' in Egypt in *Orientalism*, 188–90.

53 Kelly, *Reconstructing Woman*, 63 (translation and emphasis by Kelly).

54 Ibid. See also Flaubert, Letter to Edma des Genettes, 20 October 1864, *Correspondance*, vol. 3, 411: 'Autrefois, on croyait que la littérature était une chose toute personnelle et que les œuvres tombaient du ciel comme des aérolithes. Maintenant, on nie toute volonté, tout absolu. La vérité est, je crois, dans l'entre-deux'.

55 Flaubert, *Voyage en Égypte*, 81–2: 'voilà le vrai Orient; effet mélancolique et endormant; vous pressentez déjà quelque chose d'immense et d'impitoyable au milieu duquel vous êtes perdu'.

small details of his experiences in Egypt, prioritizing the fragment over the whole and subjecting narrative continuity to unexpected breaks, interruptions, and silences.

Throughout this article, I have argued that *Egyptian Suite* stages an interplay between authorial control and the randomness of mechanical recording in a way that unsettles the colonialist viewpoint of Du Camp's photographs of Egypt and of Flaubert's gendered portrayal of the 'Orient'. By incorporating multiple perspectives into images and exploiting the presence of lacunae and compositional dislocations, Elkoury's works question the reliability of information conveyed by the camera and offer a counterpoint to nineteenth-century associations of photography with truth-telling. In so doing, *Egyptian Suite* also eschews the visual hierarchies associated with the genre of European landscape and functions as a palimpsest that comprises the incomplete and often contradictory traces of personal, political, and artistic histories. In this work, the journey undertaken by Flaubert and Du Camp thus becomes the point of departure for an engagement with Egypt in which visual uncertainty is exploited for the purpose of interrogating the articulation of place through photographic imagery.

The final scene depicted in *Egyptian Suite – Fishawi, Cairo* – powerfully encapsulates these ideas about the communicative potential and limitations of photography and the ways in which the medium can engage creatively with its own history (fig. 6). In this instance, the camera produces an image of another optical device: a mirror. But the mirror is tarnished and the reflection is obscured. The blurred face and upper body of a man are just visible, and the mirror also seems to reflect the head of another man who appears in the lower right corner (part of his body can be seen in the foreground). This physical fragmentation makes it difficult for the viewer to draw connections between the figures and, as a result, the visual information presented by the mirror is devoid of sense. A blurred and ghostly hand reaches into the frame from the left, but it is virtually disembodied and, indeed, almost transparent. Neither a reflection, nor a definite 'presence', it belongs to an indeterminate visual and temporal plane. A black bag is the sharpest (and physically most complete) object in the photograph, its leather glistening in the light. However, its place in the narrative of this scene, like the identity of its owner, remains unclear. The bag is a container of things, just as the photograph is a container of meaning, but in each case their content (if any) is inaccessible. This is a fitting concluding metaphor for Elkoury's conception of photography as I have described it in relation to Flaubert and Du Camp's nineteenth-century journey: a form of image-making on the boundary between control and chance, the real and the imaginary, and that constantly presses us to question what it is that we deduce from that which we see.

Figure 1. Fouad Elkoury, *Ramses Railway Station,* 1998 in *Suite Égyptienne* (Actes Sud). Image © 2014 Fouad Elkoury. Image provided courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2. Fouad Elkoury, *Rosette*, 1989 in *Suite Égyptienne* (Actes Sud). Image © 2014 Fouad Elkoury. Image provided courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3. Fouad Elkoury, *Casino Kasr el Nil,* 1987 in *Suite Égyptienne* (Actes Sud). Image © 2014 Fouad Elkoury. Image provided courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4. Fouad Elkoury, *Nada Standing in the Entrance of the Building in Garden City,* 1990 in *Suite Égyptienne* (Actes Sud). Image © 2014 Fouad Elkoury. Image provided courtesy of the artist.
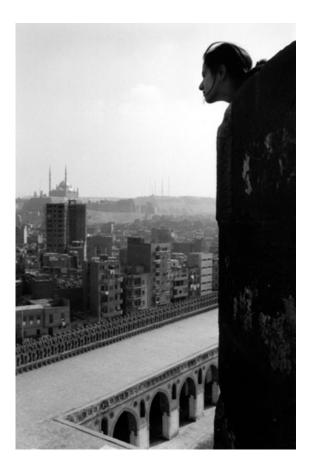

Figure 5. Fouad Elkoury, *La Chimère,* 1990 in *Suite Égyptienne* (Actes Sud). Image © 2014 Fouad Elkoury. Image provided courtesy of the artist.

Figure 6. Fouad Elkoury, *Fishawi,* 1988 in *Suite Égyptienne* (Actes Sud). Image © 2014 Fouad Elkoury. Image provided courtesy of the artist.