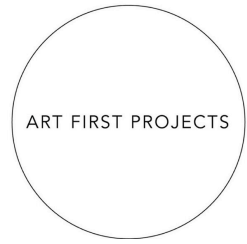


RASHA KAHIL

## ANATOMY OF A SCANDAL

19 May – 11 June 2016

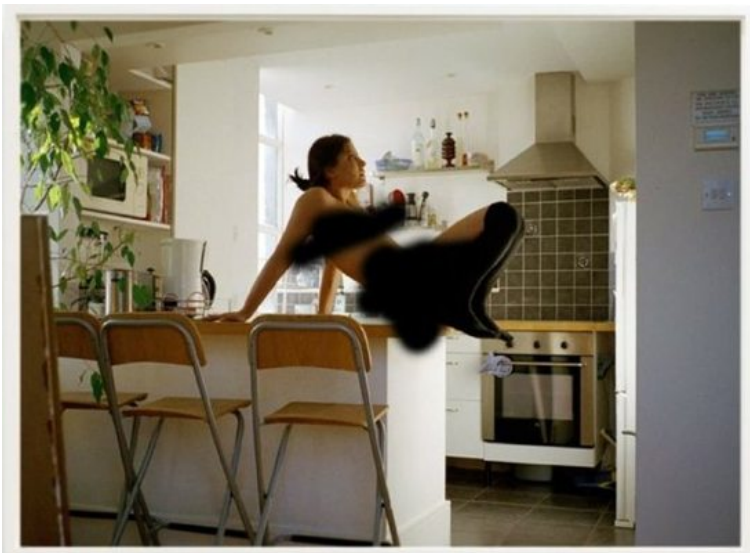


Many artists come to see solo exhibitions as significant staging posts in the evolution of their practice, and the development from one to the next a sign of the rate and nature of that evolution. Rasha Kahil's second solo presentation at AF Projects though, is a little more literally part of that process than usual, in that the second show has been *generated* entirely by the first.

In 2011-12, in London and her hometown of Beirut, Kahil presented her major series *In Your Home* - a photographic group of nude portraits taken covertly in the living spaces of her friends and acquaintances. In late 2013 an Arabic satellite channel featured her work as a 'news interest' story, and encouraged viewers across its 20-nation Middle Eastern audience to make their opinion known through social media. Her 2016 exhibition *Anatomy of a Scandal* creates an intense and immersive multi-media installation that reflects and interprets the deluge of 'opinion' that followed.

Kahil writes:

"From that point on, I became an internet scandal, as the story was quickly picked by a multitude of online news channels, discussed by all in the comments and diffused on Facebook. Everyone suddenly had something to say, either defending my work – and condemning the media for creating a scandal– or vilifying it, judging me as a woman, as an Arab, as an artist. I was branded a "slut", a "Middle-Eastern hero", an "attention-seeker" or even "the Lebanese Tracey Emin".



...I observed from afar: I did not partake in the debate and refused to appear on TV talk shows, for the sole reason that my work was not being judged on its artistic merit, but was rather being tossed around as a sensationalist social scandal. I was asked to go on the record and "defend myself", which sounded more like throwing me to the lions, rather than initiating a proper discussion about the work itself.

Instead, I collected all the material surrounding the scandal I was thrown into. I was especially interested in the Facebook comments and the debate that happened within this very public forum. Trolling has become a widespread phenomenon whereby online lynching occurs within the seemingly safe confines of the web. However, the Facebook pages on which the article about my scandal appeared were very public, and along each comment was the name and profile picture of the speaker.

Alongside the comments (attached to a name and a profile picture), I also collected all the online reproduction of my images from *In Your Home* which had been censored by the different media outlets –an assortment of pixels, black tabs, and Photoshop paint splodges– as well as the emails that were sent to me soliciting my friendship, my hand in marriage, my participation in porn films, or just complimenting and encouraging my work.” – Rasha Kahil, March 2015



It is as important to realise what Kahil’s new installation is *not* as well as what it *is*. What it is *not* is in any way a reactive or defensive move from a personal point of view. There is no refutation of, or confrontation with, her newfound supporters and detractors. Kahil states above that ‘my work was not being judged on its artistic merit’ – but in the gathering and representation of the thousands of responses, the ‘material’ itself is treated as just that – artistic material; subject matter. The collation and presentation of this generated matter bears very little in the way of judgement or even preference for one position or the other – well thought-out letters of support are given the same weight and exposure as threats of violence, pornographic taunts and incomprehensible ramblings.

In maintaining an emotional distance from the personal nature of the material, and treating it as a single mass rather than grant any ‘grade’ to the various instances in which strangers are identifying with, objectifying or vilifying her, Kahil achieves a profound shift in the focal point of the material – a form emerges that is a portrait of both deeply ancient aspects of human nature and very modern forms of neurotic or egotistical response. The artist Sophie Calle, with whose work Kahil’s resonates, wrote ‘Art is a way of taking distance. The pathological or therapeutic aspects exist, but just as catalysts’ – and in *Anatomy of a Scandal* we see a perfect example of this use of self-removal as a creative process.

One involved in a scandal in tabloid media is often described as being caught in a ‘media storm’. The absolute centre of many storms, though, is often the calmest place to be – and only by wading into the melee is one damaged and swept away. Kahil’s latest exhibition is a perfectly poised and coolly executed rendering of modern media and internet culture: Its power, its anonymity and its often utterly surreal nature. This is an image clearly captured, with a steady hand, from the eye of the storm.

Rasha Kahil (born 1980) is a visual artist living and working in London, originally from Beirut, Lebanon. She completed an MA in Communication Art & Design at the Royal College of Art, London, in 2009. Her projects take the form of photography, text, video and installation. She has exhibited solo and in group shows and art fairs internationally, including in London, Paris, Istanbul, Zurich, Taipei and Beirut.