

The Ultras: Ronnie Close Interviewed by Liam Devlin

Ronnie Close talks to Liam Devlin about his ongoing work with the Ultras, groups of non-sectarian football supporters who have held demonstrations and occupied the streets outside Cairo's Parliament after 74 fans were killed during street protests in February 2012.

Liam Devlin The subject matter of your video piece, the Ultras, is a group of dedicated supporters of the Al-Ahly football club in Cairo, Egypt. In the UK we tend to associate the more fanatical football fans with hooliganism, which glorifies the thrill of violence. The Ultras have a different history and orientation: could you give us some context as to who the Ultras actually are?

Ronnie Close The Ultras were founded in Egypt by a group of Al-Ahly supporters who had seen Ultra fans in Italy and wanted to bring this sort of spectacle to the Al-Ahly's terraces. Although football was always immensely popular in Egypt, the national league games were dull affairs and highly monitored by the state. So in 2007 a handful of fans started to unfurl homemade banners, let off flares and sing football chants. This brought them into direct conflict with the police, who under the Mubarak regime banned all [sic.] 'political gatherings'. This meant that the police interpreted the Ultras' activities as a politically subversive threat, and attempted to prevent them from acting in what would otherwise be viewed as apolitical football supporter behaviour. The situation intensified over the years, and, as other teams started their own Ultra crews across Egypt, the state oppression worsened. Al-Ahly is the premier football team in Africa, with a fanbase of 30 million, and therefore a vast Ultra organisation. Founded in 1907, Al-Ahly means 'The Nation', and from the beginning the fans used football as a cover to organise political agitation against British rule. This history and Ultra football fan behaviour put them at loggerheads with the police; for instance, two fans were killed in 2010 in street clashes with the police. Of course, during Mubarak's reign the police routinely imprisoned or killed people, so the Ultras were just another one of the perceived opponents to that regime. When the events of January 2011 came along, they briefly unified the majority of Egyptian society, and the Ultras took to the streets as part of this popular movement against the oppressive government. They were influential in defending the Tahrir Square protesters, as their street-fighting experience and organisational capacity meant they took on a lead role of protecting the popular uprising from attacks. In this formative period the Ultras earned the respect of the wider society, and many believe that the Port Said massacre in February this year was a reprisal for this rebellious activity. No matter who is responsible or what really happened at Port Said, there is little doubt that it was not regular fan-on-fan football violence. The Ultra fans were attacked with

machetes, gates were sealed and 74 died in the ensuing chaos. The Ultras have played an extraordinary role in political agitation in Egypt by helping to reclaim public space predating and including the 2011 revolution. However, such activities do not exclude them from a kinship to other international football hooligan groups, such as the St Pauli left-wing radicals in Hamburg. Also, outside of the Ultra influence, other football fans have paid a heavy price for supporting their teams in the Middle East, and there is a fascinating football scene in the region. So despite the cultural specificity of the Ultras in Egypt, they would still consider themselves to be part of a broader international movement in football.

LD The role and effectiveness of the Ultras in defending the protesters in Tahrir Square came about through their organisation coupled with a strong sense of shared identity. However, it would seem that the Ultras were politicised by the actions of the state from the Mubarak era to the present rather than the Ultras forming themselves around a political ideology or set of ideas. Can you tell us, then, what it was that drew you to this group? What was your encounter with them like as an obvious outsider?

RC I first came across the Ultras when walking through Tahrir Square in 2011 when some young boys starting asking me about which football teams I supported. As a football fan, it was striking the amount of knowledge on Man United or Liverpool these streetwise kids had, and discovering they were part of Cairo's Ultras groups seemed a slightly incongruous but curious social trend for an Islamic country like Egypt. I did some research, and found out about the rich history of Egyptian football, and then Port Said happened, which propelled the Ultras onto the streets. I started to go to their protests and meet with them. I was fascinated by the energy created by their ritualised chants and the choreography of dance movements that create a sense of solidarity. As a non-Egyptian, I stood out at these events, which meant the curiosity between myself and the Ultras went both ways. Through this I got to know some of them quite quickly, although language was an issue. I began by videoing the performance-like protests you see in the film, and eventually I got to meet some key figures. I approached them to begin a long-term documentary film project. This was around a month after Port Said, and coincided with a protest camp they set up outside the Egyptian Parliament.

This occupation of public space was an impressive mobilisation, as the camp self-organised around daily chants and sloganeering.



They transformed this rather sterile street space into their own football terrace, as the national league has been suspended since Port Said, and drew huge crowds of supporters in the evenings. It was an intense atmosphere constrained by the Egyptian military presence that surrounded the camp, with thousands of army troops, military tanks and barbed-wire checkpoints. However, the Ultras have huge public support, and, through Port Said, a bona fide cause to protest about, which made sure the military held back from attacking the camp. Eventually, after three weeks they terminated the protest camp, and the elected parliament was forced to hold a judicial enquiry into the Port Said incident.

For me, the most impressive aspects of the Ultras are their non-sectarian beliefs and self-organisational ability. In a highly controlled society such as Egypt, this free space is particularly radical. Often, aspects of many Egyptian lives are monitored and culturally modified, but the Ultras allow for a sort of autonomous space, where difference in terms of religious beliefs or socio-economic backgrounds don't impact on a belief in football camaraderie. In Egypt, political or religious beliefs can be divisive, and the Ultras don't take any set positions in the ever-changing political landscape. This shared code amongst the Ultras and their role in taking on the state has propelled them into uncharted territory. So their attraction for me is this unique paradoxical quality that they are conventional football fans whilst remaining shaped by and responsive to a political turmoil that at times defies comprehension. They allowed me, as an outsider, to engage with events in Egypt, and in a way to make sense of the world around me through their struggle.

LD The film opens initially with a black screen as we hear the beginnings of another round of call-and-response chanting in Arabic. The visual scene that quickly emerges as you've said, is situated between football sloganeering and street protest. Your decision to not immediately include subtitles to translate their songs is an important one, and the text you do include is used sparingly. Could you elaborate on your decisions to punctuate the imagery with this particular choice and form of text?

RC Given the cultural difference of this political subject and the potential for misunderstanding, I felt I should use a direct way to communicate this complex situation. The idea of the work leads to the form of the video; that is, an uncomplicated narrative of image and sound as essential features of film. This video material then needs a context or framework that the text provides, and follows a progression within the duration of the work. There is a gradual shift as the text panels introduce and provide information on the Ultras. However, towards the end of the video the text takes on another role, and does translate some of their football chanting, returning their voice. This movement is reflected in the point of view of the camera, as its position shifts from outside the crowd to focusing on the expressions and reactions of individuals. Hopefully you get a sense of the power they feel from creating such strong bonds, and that you are guided deeper into their world, building up an intimacy. Finally, the film closes with scenes that position the camera between the chant leader and the Ultra crowd. In a way, the viewer assumes my position, as real physical space and film space connect.



The intersection of text and image draws the viewer into an aesthetic experience. The montage of image, sound and text has been constructed to suggest a film trailer for an unnamed film. I wanted to focus on this relationship, and the tantalising and concise quality of the film trailer format. This sense of incompleteness interested me as an appropriate way to address the complexity of the subject. Of course, the film trailer format also suggests something of the magnetism and mythology that surrounds the Ultras in Egypt, and plays to this allure to an outside non-Egyptian audience. On a personal level, the video work is an expression of my own perception of living in Cairo: the political turmoil mingling with the everyday in this vast metropolis. I have screened it in Cairo with constructive feedback, but it's a very different context there.

LD The intensity and passion with which the Ultras give themselves to their ritualised performance is quite astonishing. Considering the pitfalls of orientalism, is there a danger of giving in to the pure spectacle of the 'other'?

RC Given that I am neither an Ultra nor Egyptian, it is perhaps difficult to avoid such associations inherent in the process of making work within this cultural context. I would be disappointed if it is read purely along such critical lines, and that is not an intention of the work. The Ultras' use of public space is spectacular, however, but in an emancipatory sense, as it both reclaims a public space and forges a new shared identity. In this way, it is tied up with their own history and ideas of revolution in the Egyptian situation now. I have worked with the material in a direct way in order to act as a conduit between the Ultras and a broader Western audience.

LD You mentioned a passage of the film where the viewer is situated between the chant leader and the Ultras crowd. This liminal position is important as the film hints at the relationship between the individual and the collective, spectators and spectators, which seeks to both effect and inform. You also mentioned the different context of a screening. How important is the particular form of display you have chosen for a non-Egyptian audience?

RC The video was made with the Brighton Photo Biennial exhibition in mind to represent the Ultras and in a way speak to a broader political situation developing in Egypt today. The Ultras' specific role and culture offer another way to understand what is happening in Egypt, outside



of the well-known media focus on Tahrir Square. But as I worked on the material, I needed to screen the video work to local people for translation purposes. It was also important for me to screen the work to the Ultras themselves, to get a deeper sense of their reading of it. The comments were varied, and the Ultras said the film was a bit monotonous, and suggested faster edits along with inserting some of their own YouTube video footage. I have uploaded a version of the film onto the internet with Ultra tags so that the video will pop up along with their own material online. So the video exists outside of the Biennial context too, although the exhibition is a valuable opportunity to display the film alongside other materials in an installation. A large image from the Occupy protest camp envelops the video screen, and gives a sense of the street protest space. Also, I have displayed a translation of the video to help facilitate another understanding of the work that is in relation to the overall exhibition and Biennial concepts.

LD For me, the film is a fascinating introduction to the Ultras that offers an opportunity to consider alternative formations of collective organisation and activism. The fact that the film operates in the various different formats is interesting and important, in that you have claimed an equivalence between your film as a piece of art and the videos that the Ultras make for their own purposes. Given the theme of the installation that the film is situated in as well as the curatorial theme of this year's Biennial, what are your thoughts on the relationships between art and activism?

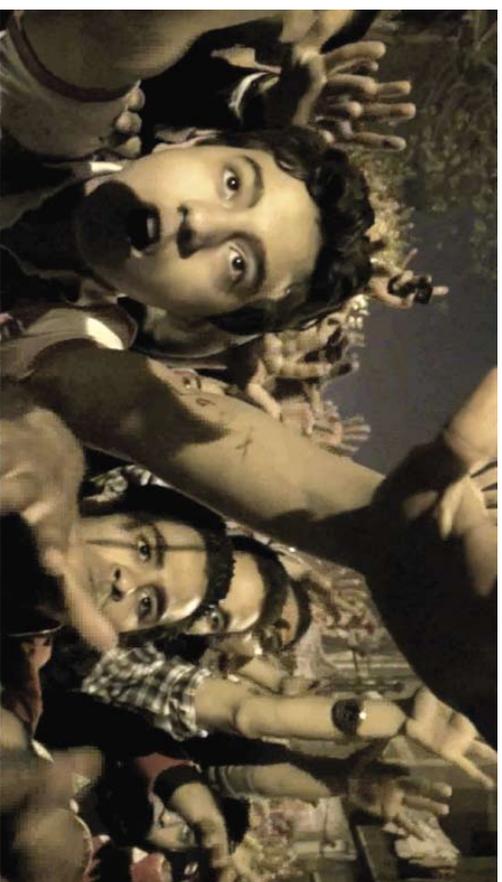
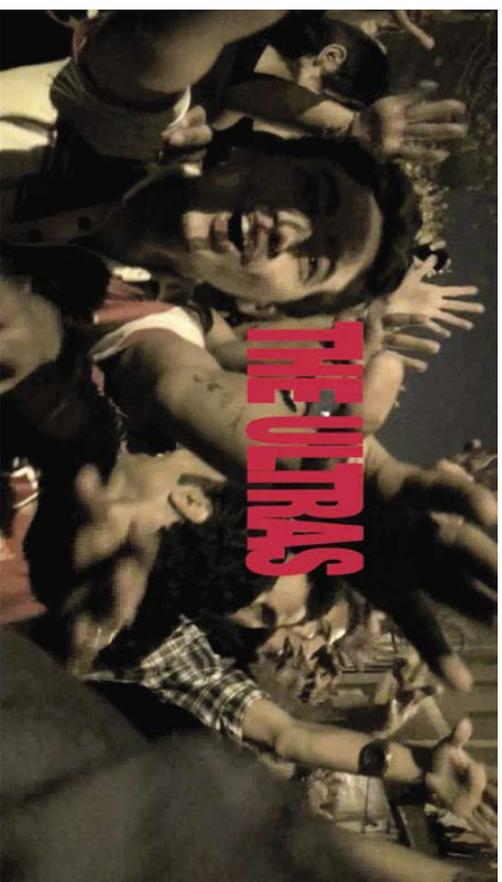
RC For me, all art is political, regardless of its form or specificity. Activism is perhaps another step in terms of the intention to raise awareness that the art process can be a part of — but without having to be wholly anchored down by it. There is a disruptive effect that art can have that sets it apart from direct communication, such as campaigning for set causes arguably associated with activism. However, the probing of social relations is something that political agitation can also do, so perhaps there is an envy or affinity between art and politics. For me, the circulation of art into the everyday is a logical progression, and appropriate to a sense of discursiveness that I find rewarding. The Biennial has taken a strident step to bring diverse and thought-provoking elements together from various artists and the broader culture. Outside of the exhibitions there is an extensive series of events that creates a framework to offer real opportunity for discussion and debate. This is an approach that can potentially realign the relationship between art and activism. ■

left: Ronnie Close, *Ultra Camp*, Motion, Port Said, 2011, outside the Al-Adly Football Club Camp, Feb. 2012. © Ronnie Close

right: Ronnie Close, *Ultra Camp*, outside the Parliament, March 2012. © Ronnie Close



Ronnie Close, *Ultra Camp*, outside the Parliament, March 2012. © Ronnie Close



Ronnie Close, stills from Ultra Camp outside the Parliament, March 2012. © Ronnie Close

