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Heliopolis Heliopolis

Anja Dornieden, Juan David González Monroy

2016, 16 mm, color, 26 min., English. **Producer** Juan David González Monroy, Anja Dornieden. **Production company** OJOBoca GbR (Berlin, Germany). **Written and directed by** Anja Dornieden, Juan David González Monroy. **Director of photography** Anja Dornieden, Juan David González Monroy. **Sound design** Christian Obermaier. **Editor** Anja Dornieden, Juan David González Monroy. **With** Jonathan Failla.

Contact: <http://www.ojoboca.com>

Heliopolis Heliopolis was the name of a metropolitan simulacrum devised as a training tool for urban planning at the NoUn School of Architecture in Egypt in the 3rd century BC. Heliopolis Heliopolis was created by an insurgent priest (whose name has been lost) as a tool to train students in the design of a revolutionary city meant to surpass the ancient city of Heliopolis. This in spite of the fact that the priest and his students appear never to have visited Heliopolis and based their model exclusively on texts and secondhand knowledge. Eventually this became a source of pride within the school and descriptions of Heliopolis gained a fantastical nature, becoming both meticulously elaborate and wildly implausible.

Heliopolis Heliopolis is a cinematic interpretation of the simulacrum and the hypnotic, trance-inducing ritual connected to its use.

According to amateur Egyptologist I. I. Pearson, Heliopolis Heliopolis was the name of a metropolitan simulacrum devised as a training tool for urban planning at the NoUn School of Architecture in Egypt in the 3rd century BC. On her blog *Secret Cities of Ancient Egypt* Pearson writes:

“Heliopolis Heliopolis was created by an insurgent priest (whose name has been lost) as a tool to train students in the design of a revolutionary city meant to surpass the ancient city of Heliopolis. This in spite of the fact that the priest and his students appear never to have visited Heliopolis and based their model exclusively on texts and secondhand knowledge. Eventually this became a source of pride within the school and descriptions of Heliopolis gained a fantastical nature, becoming both meticulously elaborate and wildly implausible.

How it was used as an educational model is heavily disputed among experts. The researcher J. J. Dummings proposes that Heliopolis Heliopolis was in effect a very large maze. According to him, students were sent into the maze blindfolded and naked with their bodies covered in duck grease. Their goal was to find the models of the city’s main temples and destroy them. To do this they would have used their bodies as torches. To substantiate his claim, he relies on two details. First, on the fact that Heliopolis was given its name (which in Greek means ‘city of the sun’) in recognition of the fact that the sun god Ra presided there, and second, on a passage from the written record that states (according to his own translation), that the purpose of the simulation was to ‘obliterate the light.’

My own research leads me to believe that Heliopolis Heliopolis was not a maze but in fact a very tall tower. It was circled by ever-steeper steps, at the top of which stood the main temple, representing the sun. Along the way the students had to pick up primitive instruments, which, once at the top, they would use to build a large mechanical moon. The moon would create a permanent eclipse, shroud the temple completely in its shadow and thus, (following my own translation of the passage) ‘bring darkness to the light.’”

Now, because of their personal history, opinions about the veracity of these interpretations are starkly divided within the amateur Egyptology scene. Apparently Pearson and Dummings were once married but he left her for their mutual friend and fellow amateur Egyptologist K.K. Apfelbaum. After looking closely at the online record their argument boils down to this: he accuses her of stealing his ideas and she accuses him of resenting her for not taking him back once she found out about his betrayal and forced him to confess. Needless to say, to this day both parties, and their respective factions, continue to argue over the true meaning of Heliopolis Heliopolis.

Although we considered creating versions of Heliopolis Heliopolis that would correspond with each interpretation, building an actual facsimile of the maze or of the tower would have been way beyond our means. Therefore we went with our own interpretation of the evidence to assemble this audiovisual simulation. It goes like this: the model was never meant to be built but was used during the ritual to induce a trancelike state of mind. In a hallucinatory haze, the student wanders through the imaginary city, which does not resemble a maze or a tower, but

an endless body of water in which the temples, like islands, are floating. Each island is made of pure light and the student must transform himself into the island’s shadow, engulf it in darkness and from his inner abyss (following our own translation) “reveal the bright darkness.”

Anja Dornieden, Juan David González Monroy

Anja Dornieden, born in 1984 in East Germany, is a visual artist based in Berlin. Since 2010 she has been working together with the Colombian artist Juan David González Monroy under the moniker OJOBACA. Their body of work consists of short films, performances, installations, and workshops. OJOBACA has presented its works internationally at a wide variety of venues. She is a member of the artist-run film lab LaborBerlin.

Juan David González Monroy, born in 1983 in Colombia, is a visual artist based in Berlin. Since 2010 he has been working together with the German artist Anja Dornieden under the moniker OJOBACA. Their body of work consists of short films, performances, installations, and workshops. OJOBACA has presented its works internationally at a wide variety of venues. He is a member of the artist-run film lab LaborBerlin.

Films

2011: *Awe Shocks* (3 min.), 2012: *Oro Parece* (6 min.), *The Handeye (Bone Ghosts)* (7 min.), *Eigenheim* (16 min.). 2013: *A flea’s skin would be too big for you* (47 min.), *Come and Dance with Me* (4 min.). 2014: *Gente Perra* (25 min.), *Wolkenschatten* (17 min.). 2015: *The Masked Monkeys* (30 min.). 2016: *Heliopolis Heliopolis*.