

Revolutionary Art or “Revolutonizing Art”? Making Art on the Streets of Cairo

Rounwah Adly Riyadh Bseiso

In an article published on December 17, 2014, Surti Singh, an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the American University in Cairo (AUC), wrote that “a new set of questions is crystallizing about the role of art in contemporary Egypt” and posed the following questions: “Can art still preserve the revolutionary spirit that spilled out in the graffiti and murals that covered Egypt’s streets? Should this even be art’s focus?” (Singh, 2014). Singh’s questions at the time were indicative of a growing debate in Egypt over what constitutes a legitimate “art” and what its focus should be following the uprising of January 2011, given the emergence of new forms of art in public spaces. Public art is not a new phenomenon in Egypt – its modern history goes back to the late 19th century (Karnouk 2005; Winegar 2006), and street art also has a history prior to the uprising in Egypt (Charbel 2010; Jarbou 2010; Hamdy et.al 2014, Abaza, 2016). However, the form, content and even the players of public art and street art have changed as practices have become more visible and with this visibility come new questions – what is the role of art in uprising and post-uprising Egypt? Should art incite the public to act against a repressive government, should it serve as a form of awareness, and/or should it document the revolutions “real” history versus what is reported in state media? Is overtly “political” art serving the “revolution” or undermining it? Is aesthetically pleasing, but seemingly content deprived art, a disservice to the revolution? Ganzeer, one of the most well-known artists of the uprising, writes:

...there are a bunch of thirty-something artists in Egypt today who think of themselves as cutting edge for adopting a 1917 [citing Marcel Duchamp’s ‘Fountain’ as the example] art form that most Egyptians do not relate to – they adopt it anyway out of an urge to appeal to art institutions centered in Europe and the USA. *Such an art form has no place in Egypt’s revolutionary climate* [my emphasis]. Although Egyptians have obviously failed badly at achieving that (for now), it does not mean that the effects of the revolution should not find their way into art and culture. Conceptual Art in Egypt, with its compass oriented to point north-west, proves itself to be *a rather anti-revolutionary art form* [my emphasis] (Ganzeer 2014).

Questions about the efficacy and appeal of Egyptian art during the uprising of January 2011 were already being addressed in the Egyptian public space. For example, Shehab Fakhry Ismail wrote that:

Perhaps the biggest failing of Cairo’s revolutionary art is that it fails to see itself as art. It fails to reflect on and experiment with its aesthetic vision as aesthetics. Rather, Egyptian revolutionary artists have succumbed to the temptation of seeing their art as subservient to a higher cause....Instead of the facile aestheticization of the revolutionary moment...artists would do better to revolutionize the vocabulary of their art, which in no way precludes treating political themes in a more radical manner. Perhaps then will art do what it can actually do best – shake us away from the complacency of unthinking (Ismail 2013).

Such arguments are representative of the seemingly cyclical discourse of “revolutionary art” revolving around what the “right” equation is for finding the optimum form and content that best serves the revolution – i.e., should the art be more abstract, less direct, and more conceptual, or should it be more realistic, life-like, and contain clear “revolutionary” tropes of justice, liberation, freedom, and change that the public can easily digest. The debate over what should (and should not) constitute revolutionary art is, however, reductive and largely

focuses on art's emancipatory potential through its form and content – however, this chapter argues that there is more to producing art in the streets than the actual art works created. Indeed, while the works are significant as the product of the revolutionary imaginary, the aestheticized and very visible “face” of the revolution, the contemporary visual production of art on Cairo's street during and after the uprising is, as this chapter will show below, by making art “relevant”, that is, accessible and understood within a local context, and connected to the public through a dialogical form of communication. Therefore, instead of focusing on the “revolutionary art” of the uprising, this chapter argues that cultural producers in Egypt are revolutionizing art – that is, the *way* art is thought of and approached during a transforming society, in the aftermath of an uprising which affected the way we perceive and analyze power, politics, art, and culture in a Middle Eastern context.

To make this argument, this chapter examines the ways artists and non-artists alike (from various social, economic, and academic backgrounds) are revolutionizing the way art is thought of and approached in regards to its relevance within the context of its emergence. In doing so, it examines cultural expressions located *outside of* the state and established cultural field – that is, “largely outside normal legitimation processes” – in which they are not subjugated to “vertically impose[d] (‘from above’)...models that were in effect ‘chosen’ by a political, cultural, economic and sometimes even religious elite” (Gonzales-Quijano 2013). Instead, these “new cultural forms...are essentially developing according to a totally different logic” (Gonzales-Quijano 2013). Regardless of the oft-repeated criticisms that cultural producers of the uprisings and their works are being increasingly co-opted, commercialized, and commodified in exhibition venues and the global market (see Dabashi 2011; Demerdash 2012; Scheid 2012; Eikhof 2014; Naji 2014), a debate about the need for intervention in controlled art fields is beginning to emerge.

Street Art in Egypt – Locating the Research & Defining the Context

Although there have been publications on street art and/or graffiti in the context of the Middle East prior to the uprisings, the literature was largely focused on aesthetics, that is, through the stylistic features of Arabic graffiti (Karl, Zoghbi, eds., 2011), or Egypt's “street graphics” (Dawson 2003). More critical work (with a focus on Palestine) examined graffiti in various ways, from solidifying communities, to a means of resistance and a form of political discourse, to unraveling power relations within specific sociopolitical realities such as the first Intifada (Peteet, 1996), or, for example, within the context of the Apartheid Wall in the West Bank (Hanauer, 2011). Later works on graffiti in Palestine look at the ways in which graffiti can be used to access transnational spaces and networks in order to foster a dialogue with international audiences (Toenjes, 2015).

In the case of Egypt, there were fragmented writings on street art (which tended to be located in blogs, and much less frequently, newspaper articles) yet the notable absence of an academic discourse on street art prior to the uprising is indicative that it was not the prevalent phenomenon it became in the aftermath of January 25, 2011, in which street art has been celebrated, analysed, and documented through the proliferation of coffee-table style books (Gröndahl, 2012; Boraïe, 2012; Maslamani, 2013) and surveys of street art with critical commentary and essays (Hamdy, Karl, 2014), newspaper and magazine articles, and documentaries (for example, “Art War”, 2014; “Nefertiti's Daughters”, 2014). The academic literature has also proliferated, which reflects a wide range of perspectives and multiple levels of analyses, from addressing street art trends in a post-January 25 Egypt (Abaza, 2016), to street art's representations of martyrs and its creation of a memorial space (Lau, 2012-2013; Abaza, 2012), and graffiti as a form of protest and documentation (Sharaf, 2015). One of the most recurrent themes addressed in the literature is understanding street art as a form of dissent and a tool for political struggle (Khatib, 2013) and an “aesthetic product of resistance” (Sanders IV, 2012: 143) which can reclaim and de-territorialize space to promote new understandings of power – as well as belonging - to that space (Tripp, 2013).

Bahia Shehab discusses the ways in which street art in Egypt can be seen as translating artists emotions into the walls through a largely descriptive account of her own involvement in the uprisings (Shehab, 2016). John Johnston looks at the Egyptian uprisings street art (in relation to street art in Northern Ireland) and argues that Egyptian artists need to see themselves as embracing the “role of public educator” (Johnston, 2016: 178) in promoting a “critical public pedagogy”, which, he says, is currently missing in Egypt's street art as it only “inform[s]

rather than transform[s]” and that one of its main limitations is that it fails to adequately address certain issues such as gender inequality (Johnston, 2016: 191). Furthermore, he argues that street art in Egypt did not “pay as much attention as it could have to...corrupt power structures of the political elite” and that they need to incorporate the “universal principles of human rights and democracy...in the politics of revolution and strategies of political street art” (Johnston, 2016: 191). Yet this perspective, which measures the efficacy of street art through universalizing discourses and Western narratives which see democracy as the ultimate measure of success, fails to take into account the critical ways in which cultural producers are negotiating with power within the restraints of their local context and that street art, based on my fieldwork, was not a one way conversation which revolved around “teaching” the public, it was about learning from the public.

Christine Smith explores the ways in which public art during and after the uprising did not just act as a tool of documentation, pedagogy, or protest, but more importantly, she argues, they acted as a “diagnostic...in assessing social and political transformation” (2015: 22). In doing so, she looks at the effects of artistic interventions within public spaces and the ways in which art can not only act as an indicator of the political situation but also “a tool to understand the complex social relationships that shape the politics of an era” (Smith, 2015: 39). However, Smith concludes that while art can unravel societal tensions, in the aftermath of the jubilation of the 2011 uprising she makes generalized claims in which public spaces have now become a place to define what is and is not acceptable in political discussion which have resulted in the “democratic possibilities become ever more narrow” (ibid: 39).

However, this is indicative of a constricted understanding of politics, one which denies the very antagonism, passion, and conflict that defines the political according to Mouffe (2001), or which, Rancière (2004) argues, is not a place for consensus but a place for conflict. Smith further argues that:

...artists largely find themselves either in the role of opposition to the current government or in their old roles of being educators of the masses. Within these roles, the artists mentioned in this article have reproduced the relationships established for them by previous governments with regard to their responsibility to be modernizers and educators on behalf of the state (Smith, 2015: 39).

An article that attempts to diverge from a representational mode of analysis and present a more nuanced way of looking at street art is by Yakein Abdelmagid (2013), in a special section by the Review of Middle East studies entitled “Cultural Production in the Arab Spring Part II”, in which he acknowledges that despite the various ways in which street art has been addressed, it still largely focuses on being represented “as voices of dissent, modes of symbolic resistance, or expressive forces of anger, solidarity, and commemoration” (Abdelmagid, 2013: 172). Beyond this so-called politics of cultural representation, (ibid: 172) he proposes that we look at the ways in which these “artistic expressions are usually grounded in the formations, expansions, and contractions of social groups that keep on negotiating their identities, networks, capacities and limitations” (ibid: 172). Abdelmagid examines one such group, the Mona Lisa Brigades, and the ways in which they “struggle to produce within varied constraints, their quest to find alternative spaces of production and performance, and their continuous improvisations to create alternative aesthetics and public spheres,” which he argues, “are inherently political acts and forms of struggle ‘from below’.” (ibid: 172) By going beyond the politics of Tahrir Square or the events of the uprising, he argues that the political is continuously being produced and reproduced within the everyday life of the artists (ibid: 172), a sentiment echoed by Kelada in her examination of alternative artistic and cultural groups and spaces. What is important to note here is that in describing these decentralized acts and alternative forms of politics and political performances from below, they are not articulated in their resistance solely to the state—rather, they “continually negotiate structures of power by crafting independent forms of collectivities and lifeworlds within the transitional contingencies of post-2011 Egypt, by focusing on establishing alternative public spaces and social imaginaries in the everyday life” (ibid: 182).

Hannah El Ansary (2014) also attempts to complicate the discourse on street art in Egypt by looking not only at the production and perception of art, that is, the way in which “artists and activists think about their work as makers and shapes of aesthetic and political meaning,” but

also urges us to look at how this art has been received by the Egyptian public.” (El Ansary, 2014) Based on her study on the reception of street art, El Ansary concluded that most Egyptians did not feel they were being spoken to, but being spoken at. El Ansary interviewed about 57 people on their opinion of graffiti and street art, and although that might be a miniscule number for the over 9 million residents of the Governorate of Cairo, she makes a crucial point that the reception of street art and graffiti in Egypt is widely understudied and should be focused on now more than ever, in order to gain a more complex understanding of their possible effects and transformative potential.

While the uprising represents the central political figuration in which analyses of art and cultural production took place, these articles—published several years in the aftermath of the uprising—do indeed indicate the need (as Abdelmagid argues) to go beyond Tahrir and the political events of the uprising, and see the ways in which in its aftermath actors in dispersed spaces continue to displace normative subject-positions and constitute new ways of doing art within the everyday. Furthermore, five years after the uprising, in light of the continuous whitewashing of all traces of “revolutionary art” on the streets and purging archive platforms of the uprising, the conversation has grown to now address the importance of the role of the artist and the archive in contemporary art in society (Downey, ed., 2015; Pinther, 2016). Major projects such as Lara Baladi’s “Vox Populi: Tahrir Archives” (2016)—described as an index of online archives on the 2011 Revolution and its aftermath (Baladi, 2016)—are setting a significant precedent in the ways in which the notion of the archive can be considered as an act of resistance, commemoration, and historical signification in preserving the events, acts, and expressions of the uprising. The refusal to forget is a powerful instigator in archiving, with several Facebook pages dedicated solely to documenting street art not only in Cairo but in Egypt as a whole, the most active ones being “Graffiti in Egypt”¹, “Street Art in Egypt”², and “Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution”³. Indeed, as Mark R. Westmoreland noted, five years following the Egyptian uprising “the prohibition on public image-making has been forcefully reasserted” (Westmoreland, 2016: 257), which makes the process of archiving—and not forgetting—even more crucial.

The (Exclusionary) Cultural Field in Egypt

While public art has its roots in late 19th century Egypt (see Karnouk 2005; Winegar 2006), what predominantly existed was not public art by the *public*, but state-sanctioned art by state-sanctioned artists in state-sanctioned public spaces. As Ashour argues:

There was no such thing as public art in Egypt. What was called public art was actually “public business,” because everyone was just trying to make money. And because such business in the private sector was limited, everyone sought work with the government. What had happened, with the governor giving very little time to the artist to produce a work of blatant nationalism for purely political purposes, was par for the course when one mixed art, business, and government...in the end the artist wins financially and he can still put on an exhibition to redeem himself artistically. That was how the faulty system worked (Ashour, quoted in Winegar 2006: 210).

These powers regulated not only the parameters of the form and content of art works, but *who* was allowed to showcase them in public or in contemporary art institutions, government or private. Several artists I interviewed in Cairo during my PhD fieldwork between November 2013 and August 2014 referred to “gallery art” or “exhibition art” in derogatory terms, to describe a more abstract, sterile and out of touch work of art that is purposefully deprived of any meaningful content and produced by those who were privy to the government’s nepotistic circle. Keizer, an anonymous street artist, emphasized that the power of a group of select individuals to define, create, and promote this art according to neoliberal and political interests – was the end of art in Egypt:

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Graffiti.in.Egypt/?pnref=lhc>

² <https://www.facebook.com/WallsOfFreedom/?fref=ts>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/StreetARTnEgypt/?fref=ts>

The art scene before the revolution was extremely secluded to an exclusive club of people that had money to enter these places, sip a few wine bottles, and point and decide what art was. That's the problem, when they get to dictate what art is, that is a huge problem, I think that is when art died in this country, when they tried to define it and gave it value and turned it into an expensive commodity, when it could be just because that person is part of that exclusive circle. There was loads of nepotism (Keizer, pers. comm., 2014).

Muralist, illustrator, and music producer Sad Panda, the moniker he uses to hide his identity, expressed frustration at the marginalization of young artists who have no connections to this "exclusive circle" in the contemporary Egyptian art scene:

First of all, they [private galleries] would say who are you, you are still in school or university and you want to showcase your work? Secondly, this is a part of them from the beginning not even accepting your work...There are several reasons that lead you to say that you are going to revolt against the art institutions in that I am going to take my drawings and throw them in the street so that everyone can actually get to see it (Sad Panda, pers. comm., 2014).

Indeed, this marginalization of artists with no connections, or whose art works do not conform to predetermined standards of private or government cultural institutions, is the direct result of the totalizing role the Egyptian state occupies in the cultural field:

The [Egyptian] state—primarily through the Ministry of Culture—acted as legislator, patron, producer, distributor and controller of culture. In other words, the state set and enforced the rules for cultural activity, operated cultural facilities, produced or financed cultural and artistic works (books, plays, concerts, art exhibitions, etc.) It promoted and disseminated these works, screened and censored them to ensure that they did not fundamentally contradict the state's value system, and selected those that it deemed suited for serving its interests by ensuring that they are made available at home and abroad (El Husseiny, 2014).

The prevalence of creative expression representing the Egyptian uprisings disrupted this regulated cultural activity by eliminating the state and private cultural institutions as the mediators of culture, removing the barriers of artistic expression by simply becoming visible in public spaces, and blurring the boundaries of the common-sense subject positions over who is allowed to "produce" culture and occupy certain formal positions, thus rendering non-artists and unconventional spectators, whose access to the cultural field has been restricted due to socioeconomic conditions (Mousa 2015), to become legitimate producers and consumers of art, as will be discussed in the next section.

Culture from Below: Finding Art's Purpose and Potential

The proliferation of street art in Egypt during and following the 2011 uprising has been a trendy topic to cover, with commentators using the oft-repeated phrase that Egyptian street art is a "form of revolution" (Rashed, 2013) and applauding it as being a "fiery visual reminder of Egypt's revolution" that "packs a punch" (Sooke, 2013). Yet what lies behind the work of so-called "revolutionary art"? Beyond the aesthetics, how is art now being thought of and approached? In addressing these questions regarding how current critical artistic practices, and producers, are at the forefront of *revolutionizing* art in the post-Mubarak era, we need to go beyond a consideration of what constitutes a legitimate "revolutionary art" form, or sensationalize the art of the uprisings as mere representations of the revolutions. By doing so, it is important to understand that works of art that tilt towards more universal, abstract, and conceptual forms have been heavily promoted at the expense of critical local visualities and local narratives that characterized the art field prior to the Egyptian uprising. As Mousa writes:

While modernist art trends have subsided in many parts of the world and given way to post-modern or contemporary genres, they remain heavily promoted in Egypt by domestic and foreign art institutions. *The effect of this global modern art movement's influx into Egypt has been selective marginalization of works with critical political or social meaning – meanings that are relevant to the realities of*

given localities within Egypt [my emphasis] (Mousa 2015).

Most of the artists I spoke to seemed to retreat from adopting a conception of art as an ahistorical, universal idea towards an understanding of art as located in narratives constituted within relevant local socio-historical and cultural contexts. As artist and art professor Alaa Awad notes, one must use the symbols, context, and language of society if one is attempting to meaningfully address society artistically:

I am in Egypt, so I address the society through its culture and its political, cultural, and social situation. I have to express the society. Art that does not voice the whole society, politically and economically, does not exist. The artist cannot be separated from the world that they live in. Who will present the visualization that expresses the mechanisms of the Egyptian society?" (Awad, pers. comm., 2014)

However, "universal" versus "local" does not necessarily mean authentic versus inauthentic, binaries that have been challenged by the uprising as cultural producers fuse the familiar and foreign, old and new (Kraidy 2016: 16). The disillusionment with art in Egypt's cultural field does not only come from the promotion of Westernized, modern, universal art disconnected from local realities, rather, it is also mainly concerned with the Ministry of Culture's *control*, *regulation*, and *promotion* of abstract, sterile art devoid of action, or what Radwa, an artist and the Head of the Media Unit in the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), characterizes as art "before the revolution was about a state of numbness, people being tired and dragging themselves" (Radwa, pers. comm., 2014).

Furthermore, most of the artists agreed that the uprising was instrumental for the creation of art in public spaces (whether or not this was expressed in their initial motivations for becoming involved in art) as the uprising was the central framework for which to narrate, analyze, and critically visualize and negotiate with the social and political context, either directly or indirectly. As such, the uprising could not be separated from the aesthetic dimension even if it was not addressed in the art on the streets as "the revolution is what lead us to be able to draw on the walls" (Nazeer, pers. comm., 2014).

The connection between art and the revolution is not one solely of revolutionary propaganda, though it may be the case in some of the more obvious "political" art (with clear revolutionary tropes and themes) on the walls – it is one of context. The uprising attempted to deconstruct the idea that the political was the realm of the few, just as the massive participation in organic forms of cultural production in public spaces was also an attempt to deconstruct the idea that the cultural field belonged to the realm of the few. As Hanaa El Degham, an Egyptian visual artist who lives and works between Egypt and Germany, argued, the cultural moved away from a teleological understanding with an "end result", (i.e. viewing or purchasing art in a gallery, or gaining pleasure from looking at a painting) but as a continual social process which informs, and is informed, by the public, in order to foster cultural participation and inclusion:

The idea is that you don't just go down to the street and draw and that's it. You went down because you had an idea, and when you go down you will find that people will ask you what you are doing and what is that, and you will find people disagree with you, and you will disagree back, and they will tell you something you never heard of, so there are nice conversations that occur between you and the people. Our role isn't to draw something and leave, it is to make people understand what you are drawing and their input in turn will allow you to understand things you may not have before (El Degham, pers. comm., 2013).

For many of the artists I interviewed, any reaction and involvement by the public meant that they were successful in fostering an interactive (versus one directional) art which embodied the collective and popular sentiments of the uprising into the cultural field. Any art that received no reaction was, to them, considered a failure, regardless of the aesthetic form. As Ganzeer said:

...we don't want to create art that creates no reaction whatsoever, then that means we probably did the most boring piece of nothing ever, it's just nothing, and you

don't want to create nothing, so definitely for me I hope for a very positive and negative reaction. If I get either, one or the other, that is fine, if I get both, towards the same work, then I would say it is probably a successful piece of art (Ganzeer, pers. comm., 2013).

Several artists suggested that art was about *involving the public* in its very creation, and fusing the artist and the public's everyday experiences into its creation. In this sense, social relations are constitutive of the creation of the work, and art (and the artist) were centrally involved in processes of mediation though the recognition of the street not as a platform, but as *the* platform in which to meaningfully communicate with others, that initiated the premise of its cultural importance in the revolution. As Radwa noted, the power of the street (and street art) emanates not only as a cultural form, but as essentially the *only* legitimate media form in its:

Interactivity. This is the power of street art. If it is not interactive it will be just like exhibition art, *nothing*. *It says what the artist wants but it doesn't say what people think of what the artists think, this dialectic kind of conversation going on between the art piece and the people, it shows how diverse the country is, or the society is. If that dialogue kept going, and it kind of pushes forward it will change things...because we do not have an equivalent media, especially the media, we do not have a media that is interactive or intriguing* [my emphasis] (Radwa, pers. comm., 2014).

This observation serves as a reminder of the largely unidirectional dialogue between the artist and the public which characterized the cultural field prior to the uprising, and the attempt of artists and non-artists alike in the *aftermath* of the uprisings to create a counter-dialogue, one which is informed—and informs—by societal discourse, conflict, and antagonism. As such, as El Zeft, an anonymous street artist who had no interest in either art or politics prior to the uprising, noted, street art becomes the medium through which to communicate and connect with the intended audience and create an interactive dialogue:

Right now...it is much better for you to say what you want in the street, to tell the people *I am with you I am sitting in the same place as you* [my emphasis] – not like the people who are sitting in the air-conditioned studios on a stage telling you something else. Street art creates question marks and discussions. This is what you want. You don't want to put full stops you want to put question marks (El Zeft, pers. comm., 2014).

Put differently, art is about being co-present with the public and therefore about being connected – either positively or negatively (in that the art is not necessarily intended to garner approval) – and stimulating engagement with other artists and between members of a community. In the aftermath of the uprising, art was viewed more as a social process in that it involved the interaction and dialogue of artists and non-artists alike between each other and the greater community in which they work. Therefore, creative practices are informed by practical, real world considerations, and is largely an outcome of societal interaction, dialogue, and mutual experiences.

Mustafa El Hosseiny, an artist and member of the Mona Lisa Brigades (an Egyptian street art collective that focuses primarily on social issues concerning women and children) whose artistic projects and works are focused in *'ashwa'iyat* (slums) and lower-income *sha'abi* (popular) areas in Cairo and Giza, argues that one of the most important lessons one can learn when drawing in the street is to not necessarily impose the art on the public as gallery art does, but to produce it through an open, and transparent dialogue:

We don't come and have an idea in our head that we are going to do it and that is it. We talk to people and what comes out of our conversation with people we try to translate it together so that we can produce an artwork from it (El Hosseiny, pers. comm., 2014).

This idea was echoed by Hanaa El Degham who said that: "Creativity has no location. You can go to the streets wherever you are...This is how awareness will come about everywhere, if one

person starts with himself and the people around him, he will also learn because he needs that awareness as well. (El Degham, pers. comm, 2013)

Seen this way, the art work is the product of a shared artistic-societal discourse, a merging of experiences and situations, that both constructs, and responds to, their needs and their wants, by enhancing the artists own realizations through the consciousness of the public, a consciousness that has been largely absent from the cultural field. This interactive aspect, according to Amr Nazeer, who never studied art or was interested in politics prior to the uprising, means that street art can not end with the art work, but was about the continuous flow of ideas and dialogue in which both the public and the artist are actively involved in the *process* of its creation, a process which does not end with the completion of the product (which, in itself, being street art is transitory):

The idea is that you don't just go down to the street and draw and that's it. You went down because you had an idea, and when you go down you will find that people will ask you what you are doing and what is that, and you will find people disagree with you, and you will disagree back, and they will tell you something you never heard of, so there are nice conversations that occur between you and the people (Nazeer, pers. comm., 2013).

Ammar Abo Bakr, an artist who also used to teach arts at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Luxor, argued that Egypt's cultural institutions and the artists (and their "inaccessible" gallery art) they promoted were only concerned with art as a commodity, that the artist was completely disconnected from producing any art which contained any relevance to society – for political and economic reasons –, and that it was this type of artist that now had to be discouraged in light of the uprising:

The artist in Egypt that draws a nice portrait of a traditional Egyptian man in his *jalabiyeh* or a nice typical looking Egyptian scenery in the countryside, and then sells it to some random person, that artist is a bastard and hopefully we will destroy and break him, because his role does not serve our society." (Abo Bakr, pers. comm., 2014)

He adds that this kind of artist and his works have no place in the cultural field after the revolution because art should no longer be a modernist, and neoliberal, endeavor:

As we [artists] understood it, our role was not to draw portraits and rush off to sell them in galleries...the art I adopt is ...from the motifs on the *koshari* food stalls and the art that the shoe shine man does on his shoe shine box, I adopt this art that comes from a country which has been devastated over the years. It is impossible that you are going to reach the entire society if you don't reach his link, that is if you don't understand his tastes, you should be following his taste to see the material and the colors the regular Egyptian uses in his day to day life and how he uses it, such as what he uses to decorate tombstones. (Abo Bakr, pers. comm., 2014)

Indeed, in a revolutionary context art is created not necessarily in isolation to the revolutionary event but is constitutive of it, and the artist does not create in isolation of the social processes of the public sphere. Artist and non-artists alike are using art to mediate between themselves, the street, and the people in it, through interaction, dialogue, and sometimes conflict, thus illustrating the potential for art to liberate hegemonic narratives of what constitutes cultural production and may serve to liberate not only the consciousness of the audience in the process, but of the producer as well. The emphasis of liberating the artist and the audience's consciousness by connecting to society *through* society and by adapting to its circumstances comes across in the following comment by Radwa: "As a graffiti artist it is not only about me...I am part of the big picture. You should not get yourself into the bubble of an artist, the world does not revolve around you and your opinion, so draw your opinion but bear in mind other peoples lives. (Radwa, pers. comm., 2014)

The emphasis on collective understanding and cooperating with others suggests there is not only a desire, but a need, to connect with the public. Abo Bakr emphasizes the importance of connecting art to the people in order to essentially "return" art (and

culture, more broadly) to its rightful location—to the public—echoing the demands for public participation in politics during the uprising. As he notes:

Art should be for the people. It should be everywhere for the people. It has to be for the people, it's not an option it's a necessity... look at the revolution. The meaning of revolution in its most essential [form] is groups of people going down in the street – it has no other meaning. A revolution is about a collectively going down to the street, so that the street becomes the property of the public. (Abo Bakr, pers. comm., 2014)

In this sense, the concept of the “people” extends beyond the immediate community, but refers to society at large—implicating a greater role for the cultural, which extends beyond the personal need to be creative or express some form of artistic genius, but to recognize that the potential of art lies in eliminating the normative understanding and location of art in Egypt as an elitist pastime by subverting the barriers between the private (art confined within state institutions and private galleries), and the public while simultaneously emphasizing that the autonomy of art is essentially a reflection of the modernist (and outmoded) condition of the cultural field characteristic of pre-uprising Egypt.

During the uprising, the idea that politics was restricted to formal domains was—at the time—eliminated. This is also reflective of a challenge to the consideration of art as a formal discipline and the broadening of the understandings of culture, no longer seen as a privileged, restrictive domain, and the challenge to formal subject positions that an artist is a privileged, formal occupation (where validation is sought from the state) and the spectator (coming from a particular social and economic background) equipped with an understanding of art history and art terminologies. With artists and non-artists alike articulating the importance of the public's participation, interactivity, dialogue, and conflict in the process and production of street art highlights the importance of plurality as the *condition per quam* (Arendt 1998: 7) not only of political life, but of cultural life, of which so many Egyptians are excluded from in their day-to-day life. The continued existence of this creative expression and discourse, in a historically heavily regulated political and cultural field, is emancipatory in and of itself for its ability to maintain its presence while subverting rigid boundaries of what art can be and who can make it, articulate different modes of thought, and constitute alternative ways of thinking, seeing, and producing art and culture. Furthermore, it is the artist who is the mediator between himself, the art, and the public, underlining the basis of understanding art as a non-exclusionary cultural form which can absorb, rather than negate, local narratives, visualities, and sensibilities relevant to the public at large.

Conclusion

In the Egyptian context the work of art cannot be placed in isolation from its producer and the context of its production. The uprising did not simply add labels to subversive cultural forms (i.e. “revolutionary” art, “revolutionary” music, “revolutionary” film), its cultural producers altered the very way art was thought of and approached, i.e. the process of their creation, thereby revolutionizing—and liberating—the very practice of controlled cultural production which favored modernist art that largely characterized the Egyptian cultural field prior to the uprising. Altering the process changed the dynamic of the creation of cultural forms, which sees the cultural producer located not in a separate, regulated, and privileged dimension above society, but recognizing that the cultural producers, be they formal or non-formal actors involved in the creation and distribution of cultural forms, need to operate within, and through, society and its discourses.

Just as the uprising sought to make politics accessible and relevant, this is applicable to the cultural realm. There is no political revolution without a cultural revolution that follows the same emancipatory principles. In this sense, creative acts of the Arab uprisings “may signal a reordering of the top-down, state and elite led, culture industry in the Arab world in favor of a model that allows for alternative aesthetic expressions and new cultural politics to emerge as forces of change.” (Salih and Richter-Devroe 2014: 17) However, although the current political climate in Egypt has not been conducive to the independent cultural scene, (Amin 2015; Kennedy 2015; Tantawi, Rizk 2016; Chams 2016) creative manifestations of public expression and unconventional cultural acts still continue under increasingly difficult circumstances

(Alfred, 2014; Jankowicz 2016). The very existence, and resilience, of these creative acts presents a challenge to the normative function of art and the monopolization of culture in Egypt by addressing broader, and pressing, questions regarding the role of art in a post-uprising Egypt, which touches upon crucial issues of control, relevance, and accessibility in the cultural field.

Rounwah Adly Riyadh Bseiso is a final-year PhD candidate at the Centre for Media & Film Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)-University of London. She has worked as an intern for the International Organization for Migration and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Cairo, Egypt and for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Kuwait. She has also worked for the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN Habitat), as a researcher for the Palestine Land Society, and as the International Program Coordinator in Gulf University for Science & Technology in Kuwait. She has published a chapter in the edited book *Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communications Practices in Lebanon and Palestine*.

References

- Abaza, Mona. 2012. "An Emerging Memorial Space? In Praise of Mohammed Mahmoud Street." *Jadaliyya*, 10 Mar. Available online at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4625/an-emerging-memorial-space-in-praise-of-mohammed-merging-memorial-space-in-praise-of-mohammed-m> [Accessed 29 April 2013].
- Abaza, Mona. 2013. "Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti." *Theory, Culture & Society*, 30(1): 122–139, <http://tcs.sagepub.com/content/30/1/122>.
- Abaza, Mona. 2016. "The field of graffiti and street art in post-January 11 Egypt." In: *Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, edited by Jeffrey Ian Ross, 318–333. London, New York: Routledge.
- Abdelmagid, Yakein. 2013. "The Emergence of the Mona Lisa Battalions: Graffiti Art Networks in Post-2011 Egypt." *Review of Middle East Studies*, 47(2): 172–182, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43741453>.
- Amin, Shahira. 2014. "Egypt's nascent street art movement under pressure." Index, Aug. 22, <https://www.indexonensorship.org/2014/08/egypts-nascent-graffiti-movement-threat/>
- Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Baladi, L., 2016. "Archiving a Revolution in the Digital Age, Archiving as an Act of Resistance." *IBRAAZ*, 28 Jul. Available online at: <http://www.ibraaz.org/usr/library/documents/main/archiving-a-revolution-in-the-digital-age.pdf> [Accessed 12 August 2016].
- Chams, Dalia. 2016. "Backed into a corner: Egypt's independent culture five years after the revolution." *AhramOnline*. Jan. 26, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/185941/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/Backed-into-a-corner-Egypt's-independent-culture-fi.aspx>
- Charbel, Jano. 2010. *A Cry on the Walls: Graffiti & Street Art in Egypt*. Daily News Egypt, March 3, <http://she2i2.blogspot.com/2010/03/graffiti-street-art-in-egypt.html>.
- Dabashi, Hamed. 2011. "Art as the politics of the impossible." *Al Jazeera English*, December 20, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/12/20111218113148105494.html>.
- Dawson, Barry. 2003. *Street Graphics Egypt*. New York: Thames & Hudson Inc.

Demerdash, Nancy. 2012. "Consuming Revolution: Ethics, Art, and Ambivalence in the Arab Spring". *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 2: 1-17.

Downey, Anthony, (ed.). 2015. *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Eikhof, Ilka. 2014. "My friend the Rebel: Structures and Dynamics of Cultural Foreign Funding in Cairo". Working ChapterNo.11, Arab Revolutions and Beyond: Change and Persistence.

El Ansary, Hannah. 2014. "Revolutionary Street Art: Complicating the Discourse." *Jadaliyya*, 1 Sept. Available online at: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/19033/revolutionary-street-art-complicating-the-discours> [Accessed 26 November 2014].

El Husseiny, Basma. 2014. Culture, the state, and the culture of the state. *Mada Masr*, Jan. 7, <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/culture-state-and-culture-state>

Ganzeer. 2014. "Concept Pop." *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Summer 2014, <http://www.thecaireview.com/essays/concept-pop/>.

Hanauer, David I. 2011. The discursive construction of the separation wall at Abu Dis: Graffiti as political discourse. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 10(3), pp. 301-321.

Hamdy, Basma and Stone, Don. 2014. *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution*. Berlin: From Here to Fame Publishing.

Ismail, Shehab Fakhry. 2013. "Revolutionizing Art." *Mada Masr*, Oct. 15, <http://www.madamasr.com/opinion/culture/revolutionizing-art>.

Jankowicz, M. 2016. "'Erase and I will draw again': the struggle behind Cairo's revolutionary graffiti wall." *The Guardian*, Mar. 24, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/mar/23/struggle-cairo-egypt-revolutionary-graffiti>

Jarbou, Rana. 2010. "The Seeds of a Graffiti Revolution." In: Hamdy and Stone, 2014: 9-12.

Johnston, John. 2016. "Democratic walls?: street art as public pedagogy." In: Baker, M., (ed.), 2016. *Translating Dissent: Voices From and With the Egyptian Revolution*, pp. 178-196. New York: Routledge.

Karl, D., Zoghbi, P., 2011. *Arabic Graffiti*. Berlin, Germany: From Here To Fame Publishing.

Karnouk, Liliane. 2005. *Modern Egyptian Art: 1910-2003*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Kennedy, Merrit. 2015. "Egypt Raids 2 Major Independent Cultural Institutions In 2 Days". National Public Radio (NPR), Dec. 29, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/12/29/461401135/egypt-raids-2-major-independent-cultural-institutions-in-2-days>

Khatib, Lina. 2013. *Image Politics in the Middle East: The Role of the Visual in Political Struggle*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris.

Kraidy, Marwan. 2016. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*. US: Harvard University Press.

Lau, Lisa. 2012-201. "Mohamed Mahmoud Street: Reclaiming Narratives of Living History for the Egyptian People". *WR: Journal of the CAS Writing Program*, 5, <http://www.bu.edu/writingprogram/journal/past-issues/issue-5/lau/>.

- Mehrez, Samia. 2008. *Egypt's Culture Wars: Politics and Practice*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Mouffe, Chantal et al., 2001. Every Form of Art has a Political Dimension. *MIT Press Journals: Grey Room*, 2, pp. 98-125.
- Mousa, Sarah. 2015. "Egypt: Making Art Public." *Al Jazeera*, August 25, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/08/egypt-making-art-public-150822104944575.html>.
- Naji, Ahmed. 2014. "Learning to walk after crawling: Independent cultural institutions." *Mada Masr*, Aug. 28, <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/learning-walk-after-crawling>.
- Peteet, Julia. 1996, The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada. *Cultural Anthropology*, 11(2), pp. 139-159.
- Pinther, Kerstin S. 2016. Artists' archives and the sites of memory in Cairo and Algiers. *World Art*, 6(1), pp. 169-185.
- Quijano-Gonzalez, Yves. 2013. "Rap, an Art of the Revolution or a Revolution in Art?" *Orient-Institut Studies* 2, 2013, http://www.perspectivia.net/publikationen/orient-institut-studies/2-2013/gonzalez-quijano_rap.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2004. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London and New York: Continuum.
- Rashed, Waleed. 2013. "Egypt's Murals Are More Than Just Art, They Are a Form of Revolution." *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2013, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/egypts-murals-are-more-than-just-art-they-are-a-form-of-revolution-36377865/?no-ist>.
- Rizk, Najla. 2015. "Revolution, Graffiti, and Copyright: The Cases of Egypt and Tunisia." *The African Journal of Information and Communication (AJIC)*, 16, 48-59.
- Sanders IV, Lewis. 2012. "Reclaiming the City: Street Art of the Revolution." In *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir*, edited by Samia Mehrez, 143-182. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.
- Scheid, Kristen. 2012. "On Arabs and the Art Awakening: Warnings from a Narcoleptic Population," *Jadaliyya*, August 31, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7149/on-arabs-and-the-art-awakening_warnings-from-a-nar.
- Selim, Adham. 2014. "Toward an art that hides nothing behind." *Mada Masr*, August 3, <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/toward-art-hides-nothing-behind>.
- Sharaf, Radwa Othman. 2015. "Graffiti as a Means of Protest and Documentation in the Egyptian Revolution." *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 5(1): 152-161.
- Shehab, Bahia. 2016. "Translating Emotions: graffiti as a tool for change." In: Baker, M., (ed.), 2016. *Translating Dissent: Voices From and With the Egyptian Revolution*, pp. 163-177. New York: Routledge.
- Singh, Surti. 2014. "Historical Realities Of Concept Pop: Debating Art In Egypt." *Jadaliyya*, December 17, http://reviews.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20305/historical-realities-of-concept-pop_debating-art-i.

Smith, Christine. 2015. "Art as a diagnostic: assessing social and political transformation through public art in Cairo, Egypt." *Social & Cultural Geography*, 16:1, 22-42, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14649365.2014.936894>.

Sooke, Alistair. 2013. "Egypt's powerful street art packs a punch." BBC Culture, May 9, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130508-egypts-street-art-revolution>.

Tantawi, Ghada, Rizk, Mariam. 2016. "Egypt takes harsh line towards artists and authors." BBC News, Apr. 20, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36039529>

Toenjes, Ashley. 2015. This Wall Speaks: Graffiti and Transnational Networks in Palestine. *Jerusalem Quarterly*, 61(1), pp. 55-68.

Tripp, Charles. 2013. *The Power and the People: Path of Resistance in the Middle East*. London: Cambridge University Press.

Westmoreland, Mark R. 2016. Street Scenes: The Politics of Revolutionary Video in Egypt. *Visual Anthropology*, 29(3), pp. 242-262.

Winegar, Jessica. 2006. *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.