Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art

Jeffrey Ian Ross

The field of graffiti and street art in post-January 2011 Egypt

Publication details
Mona Abaza
Published online on: 08 Mar 2016

How to cite: Mona Abaza. 08 Mar 2016, The field of graffiti and street art in post-January 2011 Egypt from: Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art Routledge
Accessed on: 18 Aug 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
The field of graffiti and street art in post-January 2011 Egypt

Mona Abaza

Introduction

A number of generalizations have been made about the emergence of graffiti in particular and the arts in general in post-January Egypt, one of which is to be seen as a novel and unprecedented phenomenon in Egypt. This sudden gaze towards revolutionary street art could be interpreted as part of the Western euphoria in analyzing the Arab spring as an ahistorical unprecedented and sudden revolt. While the January revolution mesmerized the world through the impact of the velocity of information, through the fascinating circulation of images and photography, and the unprecedented usage of social media, mobile phones, and the role satellite channels, such analyses that focused on the Facebook revolution often ignored the long cumulative history of political struggles, demonstrations, and numerous protests that took place prior to 2011.

The same could be said about the long established traditions in the field of art and culture in the Arab World. The field of graffiti, much like the underground and alternative music scene was already quite vibrant in various Egyptian cities well before the revolution. For example, graffiti, together with the alternative or underground scene of young musicians, expressing multifarious and varied musical trends in the city of Alexandria were handled with great sensitivity in the award winning film of Ahmed Abdallah, *Microphone*, which was completed in 2010 just before the revolution. Since 2011, newspaper articles, exhibitions, talk shows, and installations have all focused on clandestine street art and artists.

However, what makes a difference is the fact that the Tahrir effect (so named because this is perceived to be the epicentre of the revolution) led to the explosion of the arts in public to create a novel understanding of public performances, like chanting, grieving, protesting, and communicating through redefining the role of public space. Tahrir opened a myriad of possibilities through a conjunction of an emerging public visibility of an unprecedented powerful visual culture (Abaza, 2013: pp. 88–109) associated with a new configuration of what Mitchell calls “the rhetoric of space” (Mitchell, 2012: p. 11). These transformations teach us that one of the main material transformations of the city of Cairo since January 2011 has been precisely over the fascinating art and tactics of squatting of public spaces.

While it would be unfeasible to provide a comprehensive study on the field of Egyptian street art here, this chapter provides a snapshot about the main trends. A large number of graffiti
Figure 24.1 Gate of the American University in Cairo, Mohammed Mahmud Street. Captured September 3, 2012. Mock Plaque in blue written on it: The Street of the Eyes of Freedom. Underneath is written: entrance forbidden to the dogs of the Ministry of Interior. Top left, Graffiti Nefertiti with gas mask by artist El-Zeft. On the left side: For the memory of Mohammed al-Durra who passed away on August 30, 2000, during the Palestinian intifada. © the author
artists who participated at the beginning of the revolution have argued that they used street art with the intention of occupying the street during the demonstrations and the violent confrontations with the police forces. Shortly said, graffiti was perceived as a performative act of resistance. The artists’ goal was to mark a territory and be present during the battles and urban wars that kept on multiplying as time went by. The drawings on walls and streets faithfully narrated the rapid and unfolding political events that occurred during the past three-and-a-half years. Several walls in cities like Alexandria, Port Said, and Cairo witnessed countless graffiti accompanied with poems, insults against the ancient regime, jokes, as well as famous sayings, quite often expressed in reversals and satire. Mock plaques and reinvented names were painted on the streets, such as the street of the “eyes of freedom” or the street of the Martyrs” to designate the Mohammed Mahmud Street that witnessed various battles, after that cement blocks, as buffers were erected by the army and so many protesters lost their lives and eyes.

The graffiti and murals portrayed the battles and killings against the police forces. These also portrayed the numerous martyrs of the revolution who kept on growing in size through time, gender, and sexual harassment, as well as biting satire about the unfolding political events. They exposed the lies of the successive regimes through, time and again, reversals. The hardships of the poor and street children were portrayed too. Graffiti constantly made mocking portraits of the army and the politicians of the ancient regime.

It is not only the murals’ aesthetic appeal that has captured the imagination of many observers, but also how they exemplify a fascinating fusion between a variety of cultural artistic traditions that portray Egypt’s rich history, namely Pharaonic, popular Islamic, and contemporary traditions. They all reinvent, adapt to, and adopt universal schools of painting, adding a fascinating “Egyptian twist” to express – sometimes humorously – the spirit of rebellion and resistance. Moreover, a myriad of symbols derived from either mass culture like superman and superwoman with reversals, to borrowings from Banksy’s graffiti, often accompanied with Arabic slogans and text messages such as “no to military rule,” or simply by drawing the word “no” and a thousand times “no” in different calligraphic forms by art historian Bahia Shehab. And adding the following words: “You can crush the flowers but you cannot delay spring.” Graffiti equally extensively referred to the long and established tradition of Egyptian cinema. Celebrated iconic Egyptian films, famous actresses like late Souad Husni and Nadia Lutfi and even belly dancers, were portrayed to narrate women’s struggles, oppression, and sexual harassment. It is no coincidence that Alaa Awad, who resides and works as an assistant professor of art in Luxor, earned his fame in the field of street art through reproducing sceneries from ancient Egyptian Pharaonic temples. His murals, which were all whitewashed in 2012, (after him insisting on “fixating the walls” by adding a transparent layer of paint that would hinder whitewashing of the wall). This was undertaken through the assistance and financial support of the administration of the American University, upon Alaa Awad’s request. These portrayed ancient Egyptian funeral rituals and demotic calligraphy to mourn the fans of the Ultra Ahli football club who were massacred in Port Said in 2012.

Similarly, female artist Hanna al Degham who spends her time living between Berlin and Cairo painted another wonderful realist mural (that disappeared once again in 2012) portraying the hardship of the poor. She illustrated the critical shortage of Butagaz bottles, which were being sold on the black market, affecting the poor more than ever during the acute shortage in winter 2012. Mira Shehadeh, an artist and Yoga teacher, painted another powerful mural on one the erected Supreme Council for Armed Forces (SCAF) walls in the area of Mohammed Mahmoud Street. Her mural portrayed a clearly terrorized woman surrounded by hundreds of sexual harassers, carrying knives, symbolizing the serial public gang rapes that took place in Tahrir in 2012–2013.
While Ammar Abu Bakr, who is a highly prolific muralist, became famous for painting over dimensional fantastic portraits. He often shifted in styles ranging from resorting to Islamic symbols like the *buraq*, and to reproducing traditional murals of the returning Hajjis (those who go to the pilgrimage), popular in the countryside, to Quranic calligraphy to counteract the Islamists by combating them on their own ground, to portrayals of police soldiers in demonstrations. However, Abu Bakr constantly borrows from a myriad of Western and non-Western traditions. For instance, he recently painted the Mohammed Mahmud Wall in pink to ponder about the complex relationship between the people and the army, while remaining satirical. Abu Bakr states that his recent wall was inspired from Andy Warhol.

It is possible to classify the Cairene graffiti into basically two forms: stencils and murals. For stencils, Kaizer and Ganzeer where at the start of the revolution and later al-Zeft, the rising stars in the Egyptian graffiti scene. To my understanding Kaizer and Ganzeer are highly cosmopolitan in the way they manipulate symbols. They mainly use stencils. Al-Zeft, a graduate from the German University in Cairo, faculty of engineer, has drawn the famous Nefertiti with the gas-mask that turned a success to be replicated in numerous performances and posters in Europe, like for example by Amnesty International. Ganzeer is a graphic designer by training who is fluent in English. You need to look at Ganzeer’s “Mask of freedom,” (to be found on his website), to realize that he will be soon internationally acclaimed. Examine Kaizer’s graffiti of Snow White carrying a gun, (which is surely culled from Banksy) to realize that these are, I think, Middle class youngsters who have had a Western education or are at ease with Western culture. They play very well with reversals as well as with cosmopolitan dissident culture. Ganzeer,
was arrested with two other artists in May 2011. The arrests made him even better known for his daring drawing of a huge tank standing in front of a cyclist carrying a large tray of bread over his head. He also posted a sticker of the “Mask of Freedom,” which must have infuriated the SCAF (Ganzeer, 2011, 2012). But this was not the end. Between May 20–21, 2011, Ganzeer launched a successful campaign that he called “The Mad Graffiti Week,” which was picked up and resulted in hundreds of anonymous graffiti that filled the city (El Hebeishy, 2011). Ganzeer and Kaizer clearly differ from Alaa Awad and Ammar Abu Bakr who are the products of the local national university with a more “classical” training in the faculty of the arts. Because of the degeneration of the national education system, teaching art has turned to be quite rigid and uninventive. Alaa Awad lives in Luxor and is himself a teacher at the faculty of arts. He does not for instance speak English. He paints murals wonderfully, rather than stencils that portray his traditional or “classical” training in the academy of the arts.

After January 2011, Keizer has attracted considerable attention from the press for his powerful images combining direct and witty slogans. What grabbed me most is a statement in Arabic: “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.” His sardonic portraits of former pro-Mubarak Minister of Antiquities Zahi Hawass were accompanied by statements such as “traitor to the Pharaohs.” As for the famous actor Adel Imam, who expressed anti-revolutionary sentiments in January 2011, Keizer drew a portrait of him, followed by the comment, “Raahet Alyak ya Zaim” (“You have missed the bandwagon, leader”). The former

![Graffiti by Kaizer, gate of the Ahli Club, Zamalek: “The meaning of life is that you give it (to life) a meaning” (June 8, 2012) © the author](image-url)
Minister of Interior Habib al-Adly’s portrait is accompanied by a rhyming sentence: “Adl al-Nahaārdah ya Adly” (“Justice today Adly”), playing on the words Adl (justice) and Adly (derived from the word for justice). His jokes are short and to the point.

The powerful and heart-breaking drawing of a martyr in the form of a winged angel stands in stark contrast to the previous three graffiti. It appeared on the wall of the Ahli club in Zamalak, following the massacre of the Ultras Ahli fans of Port Said in February 2011. Kaizer complements his graffito with the following sentence: “The meaning of life is that you give it (to life) a meaning.” The Sad Panda is another piece of graffiti found all over the city. It became famous with the following slogan: “al-mushīr mikhallīni hazīn akthar” (“the general makes me even sadder”).

**Satire, laughter, and mourning**

The January 2011 revolution in Egypt conveyed two strong conflicting and yet parallel emotions. On the one hand, the extraordinary courage of the people who no longer feared to confront police vehicles, tear gas, bullets, and the blatant brutality of the Mubarak regime, and who suffered a horrendous death toll during the first days of the revolution, symbolized an epical moment in street battles against a ruthless dictatorship. On the other hand, these moments were followed by the occupation of Tahrir Square that caught world attention through the chanting, slogans, biting text messages, irony, spontaneous jokes, and irreverent sense of humor that Egyptians are famous for.

The revolution was obviously not merely about irony and laughter. The unfinished revolution, marked by a scar that was deepening by the day through the toll of martyrs, killings, disfiguring, conscious mutilation, and torturing of young bodies, and humiliating and raping of women in public. The years 2011 and 2012 witnessed the dramatic massacres of Abbasiyya, the Balloon incidents, the Maspero and Port Said massacres, the Mohammed Mahmud Street episode I (2011) resulting in the killing of more than seventy protesters, the incident of the Cabinet and the burning of the Institut d’Egypte, the Mohammed Mahmud Street episode II (2012) and the death of a young man called Gika. Violent confrontations around the presidential palace were sparked by forcing a referendum on the “boiled” constitution, a popular expression that symbolized the maneuvers of the Muslim Brothers to implement a highly controversial constitution. This time, armed militias of the Muslim Brothers violently attacked anti-Morsi protesters, resulting in more deaths. As a result of these incidents, themes of disappeared young martyrs, mothers of victims, and disfigured and tortured bodies took up a major space in the graffiti landscape.

Street art portrayed these paradoxical and diametrically opposite emotions (such as satire, irony, insults, death, martyrdom, and pain) are closely intertwined in artistic expressions. Large murals and stencil graffiti multiplied in numerous Egyptian cities to narrate stories, to play with humor, or to simply display insults and sheer anger against the symbols of authoritarianism and the violence perpetrated by the army and police forces. The fantastic murals that appeared around Tahrir Square, in particular on Mohammed Mahmud Street, bear witness to the bloody battles that took place during November 2011 and caught the attention of the international media.

The murals conveyed epic visual scenarios of the battles between the police, the armed forces, and the thugs paid by the “ancient regime” on the one side, and the revolutionaries on the other side. They also depicted martyrs of the revolution who appear as ghosts and angels, forceful women who are shown as fighters facing hordes of soldiers and police on their own, injustices, and the dreams of young people for a better future.
The street of the eyes of freedom/The martyrs street

Since 2012, Mohammed Mahmud Street, also known as shari‘a‘ ‘uyun al-hurriyyah (the street of the eyes of freedom) or the martyrs street, became an iconic space. The street was discovered by numerous photographers and passersby, not only for its mesmerizing graffiti and murals, but also for the curiosity it has raised; for the remembrance of the martyrs who were killed there; for journalists who still want to investigate the violent events that took place around that area during the course of the past year and follow-up on how the quarter is coping with the barricades and walls erected by security forces; for its dwellers who suffered not only from skirmishes but also the use of lethal and tear-gas by anti-riot police during successive clashes; for its popular cafés juxtaposing the murals; and, last but not least, for those who still remain nostalgic about popular life around the old campus of the American University in Cairo (AUC).

In the aftermath of clashes between protesters and security forces that took place between November 19 and 24, 2011, Mohammed Mahmud Street witnessed the erection of a cement block-stones-wall that cuts it in the middle and separates it into two different areas. It also witnessed the destruction of this same wall in February 2012 by the revolutionaries and residents who at the time were engaged in similar confrontations with security forces. It later witnessed the construction of more walls and barriers that blocked various side streets leading to the main parallel Sheikh Rehan Street, the location of the monumental Ministry of Interior, currently protected by tanks and wired checkpoints.
Of greater importance, during the entire year of 2011, the wall of the old campus of AUC witnessed fantastic mutations and transformations of graffiti on weekly bases, epitomized in a constant war that entailed the painting of walls. The same street also witnessed a constant erasure and whitening of the walls by both the authorities as well as painting over previous drawings by the graffiti painters. Much attention has been drawn to the mesmerizing appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of the numerous faces and portraits of the martyrs of the revolution on the walls of the city of Cairo.

After the February 2012 Port Said massacre of the fans of the Ahli Ultras, even more publics came to interact with the space of the street after the appearance of many new martyr portraits on the walls. The street was transformed into a memorial space, a shrine (a mazaar) to be visited and where flowers could be deposited.

**Martyrs**

*Words on walls*

“*haq al-shuhada fi raqabatina*”

The martyrs’ right are on our neck

Plaque 94

“*matinsuuch haqqui*”

Don’t Forget my right

Plaque 93

“*iw’u fi huugat al-kalaam . . . damm al-shahiid tinsuh*”

In the midst of the bursting words, don’t you ever forget the blood of the martyrs.”

Plaque 91

– Extracted from Maliha Maslamani (2013: pp. 90–91)

*Al-qassas al-qassass darabu ikhwatna bil russass*

Avenge, avenge the martyrs; they have shot bullets on our brothers and sisters.

*Haq al-shuhada lissah magaash, damm al-shuhada mish bibalaash*

The right of the martyrs did not arrive (was not collected); the martyrs’ blood is not for nothing.

“*Ya nigib Huquhum ya nimuut zayuhum*”

We either get their right (blood) or die like them.

– Slogans chanted in the streets

Since 2011, numerous massacres, killings, and obvious violations of human rights were perpetrated by the successive post Mubarak regimes (Abaza, Global Dialogue, May 2013). This occurred at the same time as a mesmerizing public culture of protest through highly well-organized marches and demonstrations, violent confrontations, and violent urban wars. Egyptians were confronted with an unprecedented escalating violence that was building into a “collective trauma” over how to come to terms with the frightening number of very young victims, of mutilated bodies, and even more of blinded protesters. A collective trauma, which has resulted in that, today mourning mothers, who have lost their children, are gaining public visibility in the media by the day. Thus, martyrdom was becoming a public concern. It is no longer the poor man’s concern, since violence and murders have touched upon middle class children. This is so new, since Khaled Said, the good looking middle class young Alexandrian, was turned
into the iconic martyr exactly because of the diffusion via Internet of his face, tortured and fractured by the police officers; this face is one of the iconic symbols that were used in the Facebook campaign that triggered the January demonstrations.

This explains why there is a kind of perseverance in the act of commemorating the martyrs, collectively, in a multiplicity of ways, through displaying large size photographs of the tortured and dead bodies such as those of the protesters who were brutally tortured at the Presidential Palace in Heliopolis in December 2012. A large number of these photographs have been displayed in Tahrir Square and in the marches. To the contrary, President Morsi continuously praised the efforts of the officers when they continued in crescendo to display brutality, while twenty-one civilians were sentenced to death for the Port Said massacre (Kandil, www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n06/hazem-kandil/deadlock-in-cairo, March 21, 2013). This has left the street with mounting anger growing by the day. Al-Quassaas, justice for the blood of the martyrs, remains thus the major unfulfilled demand of numerous parents and friends of martyrs.

The wall of the American University in Cairo in Mohammed Mahmud Street has become iconic by constantly appearing on television, especially on private ONTV channel as symbolizing the stage of the ongoing revolutionary events, so that the epicenter has shifted from Tahrir Square to Mohammed Mahmud Street. The wall was then turned into the new Mecca of foreign tourists.

Then after the Port Said massacre in February 2012, a large billboard appeared on top of the entrance door of the Ahli Club on the residential Zamalek Island (located at a fifteen minutes’ walk from Tahrir Square through the Kasr al-Nil bridge). In the middle of the billboard, a large script of the number seventy-two was encircled by the photos of the seventy-two martyrs who were massacred at the stadium. Then, the fences all around the Ahli club were repainted by huge impressive portraits of each single martyr.

The martyrs are represented in a multiplicity of ways. Often in the form of repertoires, with the sentence that keeps on appearing and disappearing with the graffiti, “Glory to the martyrs”

![Figure 24.6](image-url) Mina and Emad Martyrs Sheikh Emad Effat (Muslim faith) who was killed in the incidents of Mohammed Mahmud I and Mina Daniel (Christian faith) killed in the Maspero massacre, symbolizing Muslim–Christian solidarity (April 2013)
al-magd lil shuhada’ and al-Quassaas, to avenge the blood of the martyrs. Through these repertoires a kind of a conversation with the martyrs is meant to be engaged. For example, underneath the portraits the following sentence appears “I pray God, may you be happy where you are.”

Khaled Said, killed in Alexandria, Azharite Sheikh Emad who was killed in Mohammed Mahmud Street, and Mina Daniel, a Copt killed in the Maspero events in October 2011, have become iconic heroes who keep on appearing and reappearing in multiple metamorphosed ways. The depiction of the martyrs as winged angels is recurrent. The murals of the Ahli Ultra fans that were drawn immediately after the massacre in Mohammed Mahmud Street were filled with many angels dressed in short and ultra Ahli outfits.

The numerous victims of the fans of Ultras Ahli of Port Said and young martyr Gika killed on Mohammed Mahmud Street in 2012 all appear, disappear, and reappear on the walls as if they were repertoires (especially the repetition of images of martyrs). Sheikh Emad Effat and Mina Daniel keep on appearing as pairs in multiple drawings. Sometimes they are holding each other’s hands, smiling in a position of victory. Here too one notes the size of both Sheikh Emad Effat and Mina Daniel kept on growing over time. Often their portraits are juxtaposing each other. They symbolize Egypt’s religious unity as the Azharite Sheikh and young Coptic activist are united by martyrdom.

In November and December 2012, the wall was once again repainted, portraying more martyrs and Khaled Said’s smashed, destroyed face appearing against a red background with a long series of disfigured martyrs. This series of portraits is remarkably powerful, or rather chocking through accurately conveying the destroyed and tortured young dead bodies. It was drawn by Ammar Abu Bakr. On top of the portraits is written: “If the picture still needs to be made clearer, Sir, then the reality is even uglier.” Ammar Abu Bakr told me that Khaled Said’s sister conveyed to him her disagreement at such a brutal portrayal of her deceased brother. She felt it was simply debasing the dead. Abu Bakr’s point of view is that to bluntly expose brutality is the most pervasive way of confronting public with reality. Thus, it still remains the most effective way of conveying a message. It is a conscious counter-portrayal to the smiling good-looking face of the Khaled Said stencil that is accompanied with the play of words “Khaled mish Said” “Khaled is not happy.”

Nevertheless, despite continuous erasures, the martyrs continue to occupy a prominent place on the walls of Cairo, as the main subject matter in the graffiti. Another prominent subject matter concerns gender issues, such as sexual harassment or the so-called blue bra incidents. Gender also figures centrally in the iconography of martyrdom itself, which explains why graffiti is drawing so much the attention of feminists. For example, the long Egyptian tradition of funerary rituals, of mourning and excessive weeping, or what could be called a local culture of death, mainly perpetrated by women, is wonderfully depicted in the murals. The mothers of the martyrs keep on appearing and reappearing on the walls. Gowayya shahiid, Inside me is a Martyr, by Heba Helmi (2013) is among the most recent publications on graffiti, once again dedicated to the martyrs of the revolution.

Commodification is (for sure) coming

If one undertakes a Google search with the keywords “graffiti Egypt,” about 4,340,000 results will emerge. If one searches the same keywords on Youtube one gets 1,500,000 results. The immediate impression one gets not only from the Internet, when following the cultural scene in Cairo since January 2011, is that nothing has become more popular and fashionable among foreign and Egyptian journalists, documentary film makers than produce Youtube videos, articles
for both Arabic newspapers and the international press, reports, and documentaries about Egyptian street art.

I would even dare say that Egyptian graffiti is the next most globally appealing art, widely circulated after the powerful universal effect of birds eye shot of Tahrir Square. Graffiti images internationalized the Egyptian revolution as well, in selling an appealing counterculture. Nothing became more fashionable than flying into Cairo as a journalist or a documentary filmmaker, to be aided by local fixers, and produce a film on graffiti. As evidence, hundreds of Youtube documentaries have been recently overflowing the market.

In my capacity as a sociologist at AUC, I have never been so much solicited on regular bases for the past three years by countless students, artists, Western graffiti artists, journalists, and academics, asking me for either providing helpers, translators, research assistants, addresses, and names of graffiti painters or ideas about the topic. The question to be raised is then why such an interest today in graffiti from the West? Why is it for example that much less studies are undertaken on social movements, the role of the army, or political parties in the Egyptian revolution? Is not the study of graffiti easier to research, rather than dwelling in the complexity of longue durée studies, to circuit the confusion of a counter-revolutionary moment? Possibly then, foreign journalists, Western young academics and pundits focused intensively on graffiti, perhaps because it is less demanding intellectually? This leads me to raise the question, is this interest mainly because it is visually a highly appealing art? Or is it because quite often, many such readings are undertaken at the expense of neglecting the paramount significance of text messages, insults, the play with words, satire, poems, puns, which appeared on all the walls of the city from the first days of the revolution that accompanied graffiti.

Yet as both, Amr Shalakani (2014) and Sherief Gaber (2013) argued, while the Western press focused on graffiti, most of the time it actually ignores often the semiotics accompanying it. Often jokes and insults reveal a local twist hard to be decoded by foreigners. Egyptian artists have not only genuinely developed an innovative own style, but the walls turned to be the pulse of the unfolding events narrated with symbols and codes, quite often, mainly understood by those following closely politics.

It is difficult to oversee the element of commercialization of the revolution. On the other hand, the commodification of revolutionary art evidently reveals paradoxes and tensions among artists, in addition to frictions between the street artists and the gate keepers of cultural production such as curators, foreign donors in the domain of art and culture, and foreign cultural centres wanting to promote once again revolutionary art. Not only foreign donors became at a certain point important players in the promotion of what is marketable art in the West, equally too, is the noticeable phenomenon of booming elitist galleries discovering how lucrative revolutionary art can turn to be.

**Conclusion**

Kirsten Scheid interprets the discourse about the marveling of the “awakening of revolutionary art” as going parallel with a perpetrated orientalist perception that is emptying Arab history from the long and complex tradition of political anti-colonial struggles. These novel politics of culture are the reverse side of a yet disguised neo-colonial policy of what Scheid labels once again as a “humanitarian intervention that minimizes and limits how victimized people may come to participate in global politics” (Scheid, www.jadaliyya.com, August 31, 2012). Scheid, just as Nancy Demerdash (www.brismes.ac.uk), and myself (www.e-ir.info/2013/10/07/) point to the growing and quite often far from innocent role of the curators, funders, and gatekeepers of revolutionary art as the everlasting profiteers in the neo-liberal art market. Scheid
laments the fact that art is being promoted at the expense of denying the despicable economic conditions of bare survival in the Arab world and thus obfuscating the entire role of foreign funding as a corrupting element. Second, the “awakening” discourse remains silent, for instance, on the way the long tradition of contemporary modern Iraqi art, including the pillage of antiquities after the American invasion, has been intentionally denied. According to Scheid,

In fact, many of the lesser-known Iraqi artists who remained inside the country after 1991 turned to reproducing nineteenth-century Orientalist paintings. They had discovered a new souvenir market for the diplomatic and humanitarian delegates who desired to bring home images of a nargileh-drugged, bed-ridden populace, whose siege the same delegates effectively supported by keeping it on a ‘minimal life-support’ system.

(www.jadaliyya.com, August 31, 2012)

The expanding field of the producers of the knowledge on graffiti, over and above the controversies among graffiti painters themselves, seem to be two highly sensitive and yet quite fascinating spheres to study the process of the commercialization, of earning fame and social capital for artists and of the labelling of what is considered to be “revolutionary art” in international markets. One is tempted to speculate that post January street art, in general however, the entire field of art is turning to be a highly competitive bread winning domain for photographers, publishers, foreign donors, and foreign cultural centres located in Egypt, as well as being quite attractive for the workers in the cultural sphere.

Alone the fact that graffiti artists have received so much attention from the Western media raises questions about whether the community of street artists have developed a sufficient critical awareness regarding the effect of the “culture industry” on the emerging street art scene. Whether the artists have been able to raise pertinent questions regarding self-perception of belonging to an underground scene, that is being co-opted in the art market.

Numerous publications on graffiti and the revolution have come out. However, as a first impression, each newly published book seems to perhaps intentionally or un-intentionally ignore the cumulative process of knowledge of previous works, books, and articles in the field. Similarities in depicting one and the same motive like take for instance the “buraq,” is repeatedly referred in each new book on graffiti without referring to the previous published texts on exactly the same and identical murals. It is also possible to observe numerous repetitions in the accompanying texts explaining the artists’ work. Moreover, for example, it is worthwhile pointing to three recently published excellent Arabic books. First, Walk Talk (2012) edited by Sherif Borai, second Heba Helmi’s Inside me is a Martyr (2013), and third Maliha Maslamani Graffiti of Egyptian Revolution (2013). All three remain perhaps less lavish in the quality of paper and print compared to the English works, but which function parallel to the English publications, yet to be hardly acknowledged in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Often too, and at the expense of infuriating some, the English publications still remain as coffee table books. They seem to dismiss various rich analyses easily traced in previous writings published in academic journal and websites. Significant bloggers who made major contributions through keeping a thorough chronology of street art since the start of the revolution such as the excellent work of Soraya al-Morayef’s suzeintheacity (http://suzeintheacity.wordpress.com/), once again, are not properly acknowledged in these publications. Here the lack of knowledge of Arabic language from the part of the mass of flocking researchers, journalists, and film makers, a lacunae which often goes as consciously understated in academic theses and works, is worth reflection on once again the nature of expertise and scholarship.
The ongoing internal battle for social justice and the respect of human rights, the two main reasons that triggered the revolution remain still unaccomplished. Let aside the internal ego struggles among artists and/or struggles with curators, street art has been undergoing a new phase of curtailment. This is happening with the massive campaign led by the Sissi military regime, after ousting President Morsi who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood and him becoming President to “clean up” the city from street vendors. Thus restoring “order” is part and parcel of eliminating the poor and the “riff raff” (according to those in power), whitewashing the walls, closing down street cafés, police patrolling the centre of town, and maintain military public visibility (tanks and soldiers in town) on alert for possible demonstrations. One wonders if street art has not lost altogether momentum since the walls of Mohammed Mahmud Street remained unchanged for quite some time.

Notes

2 Natural gas used for cooking and heating homes.
3 The Buraq is a mythological creature that is half-animal and half-human with wings. The body has often been described as representing a half-mule, half-donkey. In some Islamic traditions the Buraq is figured with the head of a woman, while in some paintings it appears with a male head. Earlier Islamic references do not seem to define the human element of the head. The Buraq is famously known as the creature that is said to have transported the Prophet Muhammed from Mecca to Jerusalem and back on the night of the “Israa and Meraj” (the night journey). Associated with flying and defiance of gravitation, the Buraq is often viewed as a symbol of freedom and liberation. (Mona Abaza The Buraqs of Tahrir www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5725/the-buraqs-of-tahrir) accessed November 2014.
4 Personal communication with Ammar Abu Bakr September 2014.
5 Unfortunately, Ganzeer has left Egypt recently, following a significant exodus of intellectuals and human rights activists who feared for their lives after the two recent draconian anti-demonstration law and the law curtailing the activities of the NGOs.
6 On December 20, 2011, a veiled female protestor was beaten, dragged, and stripped of the clothes by soldiers in Tahrir Square. The photographs taken while she was dragged, stampeded with the soldiers shoes, revealed her blue bra and the jeans she was wearing under her abaya (a cloak). The female protestor with the blue bra, turned to be another icon of the revolution, resulting to painting all the walls of the city with blue bras graffiti.
8 Numbers according to the author’s search carried out on July 26, 2014.
9 Fixer is a term used for local journalists or helpers to foreign journalists who assist them in writing the story. Obviously, there are numerous stories about the unequal relationship between fixers and foreign journalists. Fixers end up being the unacknowledged heroes and sometimes victims in the making of stories. For example see the article of Andrew Bossone “The Thankless Work of a Fixer,” www.cjr.org/reports/the_thankless_work_of_a_fixer.php?page=all (accessed December 13, 2014).
10 I consciously avoid here the systematic tracking of the biographies, and works of the street artists, who have been by now widely advertised and diffused in Websites and in the international press. Suffice here to mention the most prominent names which can be easily googled such as: Ganzeer, al Teneen, Kaizer, Ammar Abu Bakr, Alaa Awad, El-Zeft. Female artists: Hanaa Degham, Aya Tarek, Mira Shehadeh, Salma al Tarzi, less famed but remaining very interesting artists are Charles Aql and Amr Gamal, Ahmed Naguib, Mohammed Khaled, El Mozzah.
11 Only the upper class residential island of Zamalek witnessed, as never before, a boom in galleries amounting to nineteen galleries.
References

Websites


332
Books


