

# Engaged Ephemeral Art: Street Art and the Egyptian Arab Spring

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“...with a box of colours costing three pounds, you draw an idea, you paint a revolution...”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The wave of uprisings that swept over the Middle East and North Africa from December 2010 to early 2013, known as the “Arab Spring,” was what Aleida Assmann defines as an “impact event” (Assmann 2015, 44–46). I consider it a *kairos*, a fleeting opportune moment where time and action meet and fates may be changed. It was a promising moment, in which governments were toppled and hopes for changes were high. Not only did the Arab Spring leave its imprint on political and social life in the countries concerned, but it also marked a change in various forms of artistic expression (Hamamsy and Soliman 2013b, 12–13; 2013c, 252–254; Jondot 2013). Street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti are perhaps the most striking forms of art from this short period. Artists used to record and comment on events and developments in the political situation. They drew upon their people’s cultural memory to impart their messages and express dissent, civil disobedience, and resistance by combining images and scripts. Poetry and political songs that previously had mostly been known to underground groups and intellectual elites were widely circulated. Verses from the Tunisian poet Abul Qasim al Shabbi (1909–1934) and the Egyptian poets Fouad Negm (1929–2013) and Abdel Rahman al-Abnudi (1938–2015) were used as slogans and chanted all over the region (Nicoarea 2015; Sanders IV and Visonà 2012; Wahdan 2014). Famous quotes from national political and cultural figures were also used, among them Mustafa Kamel’s (1874–1908) “If I weren’t already an Egyptian, I would want to be one” (*lau lam akun mişrīyan la aradtu an akūna mişrīyan*); Saad Zaghloul’s (1859–1927) “It’s useless” (*mafişh fayda*); President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s statement that “the people are the leader and the teacher” (*al sha’b huwa al qa’id wal mu’allim*); and the song “Patience Has Its Limits” (*lil sabr hudūd*), by the famous singer

1 Facebook page *Graffiti in Egypt*, posted 8. April 2015. ...‘albat alwān bi talata guinih tirsim fikra wa tirsim thawra.... The transliteration from Arabic follows the guidelines given by The Library of Congress AIA-LC Romanization Tables, <http://loc.gov/catdir/cpso/romanization/arabic.pdf> [Accessed on 5. August 2016].

Umm Kulthum (1904–1975). These slogans were visualised and written on buildings in many cities and circulated worldwide thanks to a plethora of Internet platforms and social media.

The term “street art,” also referred to as “urban art” and “the art of the subaltern and of political protest,” is used in this essay more generically to encompass various forms of visual arts created in public spaces, graffiti and calligraffiti among them (Abdulaziz 2015; Arnoldi 2015; Zoghbi and Karl 2012). Before the events of January 2011 in Egypt, they were most often found in contained settings and used mainly for advertising purposes (figure 1), or, as the murals on the walls of houses in Luxor and Nubia show, to narrate the *hajj*, or pilgrimage to Mecca (Dawson 2003; Naguib 2011; Parker and Neal 2009).



*Fig. 1: Advertising a chicken farm in Fayoum, 1976. Fayoum.*

In Egypt, street art has its well-known and established artists and writers. Most have a formal education from state-funded academies of fine arts, universities, or university colleges. Many are members of artists’ associations. There are also autodidact artists who try to make a name for themselves in the streets, and others who choose to remain anonymous. The novelty of the period that concerns us here is the obvious invasion of the public space, the political and social engagement, the defiant satire and critique of the regime that emanates

from the creations on the walls of urban spaces. Much has been written about the street art and graffiti of the “Egyptian Revolution” during the last five years; books like *Revolution Graffiti: Street Art of the New Egypt* and *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution* (Gröndahl 2012; Hamdy and Karl 2014), and scholarly and journalistic articles have documented and analysed the unexpected blossoming of this kind of art, its forms, and contents. I will not review all these publications in the limited space of this essay. Suffice it to say that they mostly point to the novelty of the movement and its immediate political and social repercussions. My own approach is situated within cultural history; I address questions of material culture, memory, and heritage studies in the contemporary Middle East, and more specifically, Egypt (Buchli and Lucas 2001; Gonzales 2008, 2014; Naguib and Rogan 2011; Naguib 2015; Olsen 2003; 2010; Tilley 2006).

I consider the ways an intangible oral heritage of popular sayings and poetry is very briefly transformed into concrete, powerful, politically laden images on the walls of urban public spaces and how this heritage reflects on the afterlives of these images. I ask whether, in time, the same images that have been erased from the walls and now circulate on various Internet platforms will be included as part of the intangible heritage of Egypt. To do this, I concentrate on the materiality of visual art and the translation of political contestation into street art, graffiti, and calligraphiti in Egypt. I delve into the ways slogans were visualised, drawn, and inscribed on the walls of the urban space in Cairo and then disseminated on various Internet platforms and social media between January 2011 and June 2015. In my use of the term, materiality refers to the “thingness” of things (Olsen 2003), the physical properties of street art, graffiti, and calligraphiti. Materiality is a medium through which the meanings and affective relationships with people unfold (Ingold 2007, 9–14; Olsen 2003; 2010; Naguib and Rogan 2011; Tilley 2006, 61; 2007). As for translation, it is, according to Peter Burke, a social practice with a focus on context, and as such relates primarily to cultural contacts and exchanges (Burke 2009, 56–58). Moreover, translation indicates an intersemiotic perspective that entails adaptations and connections between various kinds and forms of cultural expressions, and conveys the interplay between texts, images, and contexts from the vantage point of intermediality (Colla 2012). In studying the rebellious street art of the Arab Spring in Egypt, using translation as an analytic approach offers a means of “shaping the space of protest,” according to Mona Baker, from a variety of theoretical perspectives and fields of research (Baker 2016b, 2).

Taking my lead from Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of chronotope, where time and space merge, and of dialogism, where different forms of communication

echo each other in what could be described as “graffiti of anger.” I first discuss the relevance of translation as an analytical approach when dealing with pictorial source material like street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti (Bakhtin 1981). I then go on to offer a general outline of street art and graffiti and probe its sudden outburst in the urban landscape of Egypt. I limit my analysis to the visualization of four slogans that, in my view, sum up different moments and moods of the uprisings during the period from January 2011 to December 2013.<sup>2</sup> These moments move from hope and calls for change in governance, social and political structures, to a loud, accusatory cry of protest, to distrust, and finally to disenchantment. In the last section of this essay, I reflect on the afterlife of the street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti of the Arab Spring, or rather, Egyptian Spring, and their potential transformation into *mnemotopoi*: sites of collective memory that gradually become part of the intangible cultural heritage of Egypt’s recent past.

### **Translation, transculturality, and the medium**

Translation is not confined to linguistic and literary studies. It has become one of those blurred nomadic concepts or travelling concepts that move between disciplines and scholars, and change value and connotations during their peregrinations. The dynamics of movement provide fruitful grounds for inter- and cross-disciplinary study and foster innovation and academic renewal (Bal 2002; Darbelley 2012; Stengers 1987). At its core, translation combines the ideas of transfer and mediation. It relates to a contextual process of decoding and recoding. It is an act of creation that denotes a search for equivalence rather than sameness. In his seminal essay, *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, Roman Jakobson distinguished three main types of linguistic translation. The first is an intralingual translation based on rewording. The second is an interlingual translation, or translation proper, between different languages. The third type of translation is the intersemiotic type, or transmutation. It rests on the interpretation of the message that is being conveyed and various approaches for studying multimedial and multimodal transfers. Thus, translation between different forms of communication may be seen in terms of intermedial relationships between words, images, music, and dance (Jakobson [1959] 2000, 2). Eugene Nida refined Jakobson’s classification and proposed four complementary perspectives to the study of translation (Nida 1991). These are the philological perspective, the linguistic perspective,

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2 During this period, President Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign on February 11, 2011, and was replaced by an interim government led by a military officer, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. The elections of June 30, 2012, placed Mohamed Morsi, of the Muslim Brotherhood, at the head of the government. After a year in power, he was ousted on July 3, 2013, and another military officer, General Abdel Fattah el Sissi, took over as president.

and—more relevant for the study of street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti—the communicative and sociosemiotic perspectives. As the collections of articles gathered in *Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* (Mehrez 2012) and *Translating Dissent: Voices from and with the Egyptian Revolution* (Baker 2016a) demonstrate, the sociosemiotic perspectives allow for interdisciplinary approaches and a greater attention to the interaction between texts, various cultural and artistic expressions, and their contexts. For street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti artists during Egypt's Arab Spring, translation signified a transposition of ideas, hopes, and political activism into images and writings. The process sheds light on what Mona Baker describes as “the dynamics and complexities of a whole range of translational practices in protest movements” (Baker 2016b, 3), and relies on the intentionality of the artists and their agency. Seen from this vantage point, translation entails interpretation, creative transposition from one mode of expression to another and communication with a broad and diverse audience. It rests on finding the appropriate locations, choosing the surfaces on which artists will produce their works, and deciding on the genre, style, shape, and colours of their creations. But translation does not stop here. It forms a dialogic space, a contact zone that opens onto the different paths that the reception of the pieces produced and their dissemination generates; that is, onto their resonance among people and how their echoes linger in the mind.

A major attribute of translation is going beyond national and cultural boundaries and providing fruitful grounds for transcultural inspiration and borrowings. Fernando Ortiz coined the term “transculturation” to explicate “different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another” (Ortiz [1947] 1995, 102–103). Thus, “transculturation,” and affiliated terms such as “transcultural” and “transculturality” entail the convergence and mixing of various cultural influences. The term implies a measure of cross-fertilization and choice in what to adopt and what to reject. Applied to street art and graffiti, the notion of transculturality denotes alternative ways of perceiving and seeing hybridity and the mixing of cultural elements that were separate (Mirzoeff 1999, 131). It draws attention to the wide-ranging sources of inspiration that are incorporated into local practices and usages. During the Egyptian Spring, street art and graffiti were important media in the artists' aim of visualising transculturality, which became apparent for example in the combination of different languages and scripts, such as Arabic and Arabizi, or Arabic for the Internet, English and its Latin alphabet, and, in some cases, ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs (Abo Bakr 2012). The texts written in Arabizi and English, or combining the two, were clearly intended for an international audience. Many of the recurrent symbols and motifs that covered the walls of cities during the Egyptian Spring are familiar to global audiences. Among them we find, for

instance, Marwan Shahin's adaptation of Guy Fawkes's mask as Anonymous wearing the *nemes* headdress of the pharaohs in Ancient Egypt (figure 2), the encircled A, meaning anarchy, and the acronym ACAB ("all cops are bastards") (Powell 2013). Other, more elaborate pieces are, for example, a group production picturing the figure of Joker from Batman as a puppeteer wearing a military cap and holding the strings of puppets representing central political figures (figure 3), a card displaying president Mohamed Morsi as the queen of clubs,<sup>3</sup> and artist Amr Nazeer's *Joke* posters portraying President Abdel Fattah el Sissi in the style of Shepard Fairey's *Obama* (figure 4)



**Fig. 2:** Marwan Shahin, *Guy Fawkes mask Anonymous wearing the nemes headdress of pharaohs in Ancient Egypt*, 2013. Cairo.



**Fig. 4:** Amr Nazeer, *Joke*, 2013. Cairo.

### Street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti

Street art and graffiti are rapidly developing arts on the international scene. In Western countries, they are tied to hip hop culture, often with underlying social and political messages. As mentioned above, these forms were also practiced in the Middle East before the Arab Spring, but within accepted political frameworks. In Egypt, they were used for advertising purposes or to decorate the outer walls of dwellings with scenes inspired by the pilgrimage to Mecca. The terms "street art" and "graffiti" are frequently used interchangeably.

3 [http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-N2kooT11N2Y/U\\_cT\\_u6J7DI/AAAAAAAAADhT8/G7NRmTfPCJk/s1600/2.jpg](http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-N2kooT11N2Y/U_cT_u6J7DI/AAAAAAAAADhT8/G7NRmTfPCJk/s1600/2.jpg); <http://venitism.blogspot.no/2014/08/graffiti-artists.html> [Accessed on 7. May 2015]





Fig. 3: Mad Graffiti Week (Facebook group), Joker as a puppeteer, 2012. Cairo.

However, the majority of Egyptian artists I interviewed considered themselves street artists, resorting to graffiti and calligraffiti as one of their many modes of expression and techniques. Accordingly, they consider street art, which is also referred to as “urban art,” the art of the subaltern, political protest, and one of their many modes of expression and techniques. Graffiti includes a great variety of genres and styles and mixes several graphic genres such as calligraphy, poster art, and graphic novels (Genin 2013, 22–32). The word “graffiti” combines the notion of writing derived from the Greek, *graphein*, to write, and that of incising, from the Italian *sgraffiare*, to scratch. The term is used in art history and archaeology to designate inscriptions and drawings that have been added to a cave, monument, statue, or painting. Graffiti has existed since the most ancient times and several sites and monuments dating from prehistory, pharaonic Egypt, Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire show the passage of time through the names, words, phrases, and drawings people have inscribed on them while visiting. Today, graffiti range from simple words, the artist’s signature or tag, or short phrases to elaborate wall paintings or pieces. The term “calligraffiti” was coined by the Dutch graffiti artist Niels Shoe Meulman and denotes the combination of traditional calligraphy, with its strict rules and methods, with the nonconformity and openness of graffiti and

its use of varied methods, mediums, and tools (Wikipedia, s.v. “Niels Shoe Meulman”; Wikipedia, s.v. “Calligraffiti”; Yoo 2010).

In his study of street art and graffiti in Western Europe and the USA, Christophe Genin gives it two sources. One is a European practice of contestation that began in the 1950s among artists with formal academic backgrounds and training in visual arts. Some other practitioners were non-professionals with anarchist or communist views (Genin 2013, 118–122). The other source, according to Genin, sprung from the civil rights movement at the end of the 1960s among North-American autodidact artists. The early 1980s witnessed a boom of new forms of street art and graffiti in different parts of the world, including the Middle East (Zoghbi and Karl 2012).

Generally speaking, street art, and thus graffiti, is a multi-sited, interactive, and ephemeral kind of art. Walls in the urban space are its favoured surfaces. Common methods and techniques of street art today are stencil and spray-can art, writings, stencils, wheat pasted posters or sticker art, murals, mosaic, street installations, paint lighting, and knitting. In Egypt, street artists favour stencils, murals, and posters. Intentionality and performance are central characteristics of street art. Artists appropriate the public space to convey their messages and the streets become their exhibition space. In this way, they communicate directly with a large and diverse public free from the restrictions imposed by the formal world of art and governmental censorship, especially in totalitarian regimes where freedom of expression is strictly limited. Artists in these countries frequently resort to parody and satire as a means to circumvent censorship and, at the same time, share their ideas and political standpoints. Performance, spectacle, and the carnivalesque as a form of political activism were salient elements of the “Egyptian Spring” (Mehrez 2012; Hamamsy and Soliman 2013c, 250–257). Mona Abaza posits that the satire and irony voiced in the graffiti and murals that flourished on the streets of Cairo after January 2011 were indeed persuasive vehicles of resistance (Abaza 2013; 2016, 324).

The written texts often show great attention to the graphic properties of the letters and a quest for aesthetics rather than legibility. Calligraphy has a unique place in all Islamic visual arts. As the language of the Qur’an, the Arabic writing acquired a special status and developed a variety of styles.<sup>4</sup> However,

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4 Arabic script comprises of two major stylistic groups. The first group is the angular *kufic* that is used on monuments and that branched into plain *kufic* and ornamental *kufic*. The second group consists of cursive scripts. The classical tradition counts six major styles of cursive scripts. The most used are the common *naskhi* or “copy-hand,” the *nastaliq*, which is originally Persian and prevails in Iran and South Asia, and the hieratical *thuluth*. The latter is used mainly for ornamental purposes on monuments and for Qur’anic inscriptions.



the many political and socio-cultural changes that took place in the Middle East and North Africa during the twentieth century did have enduring repercussions on the visual arts. Art education followed Western patterns and criteria, and several artists from the region were influenced by trends in modern Western art. One of the consequences of this shift in focus is that the Arabic script somehow lost its aura of sacredness and calligraphy was demoted from the status of art to that of traditional craft (Shabout 2007, 70–71). The situation began to change with the independence movements of the 1950s. During the decolonization processes in the region and later in the 1970s and 1980s, artists searching for their roots and identity rediscovered the Arabic script and calligraphy. They used them in new ways, not only as a symbol of authenticity, identity, and nationalism, but as a novel genre of Arab/Islamic modern art.<sup>5</sup> Calligraphic modernism, to use Iftikhar Dadi's expression, leans towards abstraction and emphasizes the forms of the script as well as the textual content. Furthermore, modern typography and graphic arts have prompted contemporary artists, including graffiti artists, from the Middle East and North Africa to explore a kind of freeform calligraphy, by mixing different types of scripts and mediums and to experiment with the array of options offered by calligraphiti (Zoghbi and Karl 2012, 15–31).

Genin lists a number of features common to street art in general, and hence, to graffiti and calligraphiti (Genin 2013, 123–125). A major characteristic, according to him, is repetition. The same motif is reproduced, often with small variations and by different people, on different backgrounds. In Egypt, texts and images were written, painted, re-written, re-painted, and combined with other texts and pictographs so as to craft new texts and new tableaux that echoed each other. Visualizing political protest entails the use of visual topoi and codifying images in such a way that they acquire symbolic properties. In time, the recurrent image becomes, in Lina Khatib's words, a "floating image". A floating image is according to her "a strong image"; one of those images that have "the ability to originate, to multiply, and to distribute themselves" (Khatib 2013, 11–12). Thus, floating images are copied over and over, each time with alterations here and there to adapt them to changing contexts. Meaning is thereby continuously renewed and actualized. The very repetitiveness of the motifs and themes depicted contributes to the transmission and retention of the message. It helps inscribe it more and more deeply in the political discourse of dissent and in the minds of those at the receiving end. It is not a matter of plagiarism, but rather of relaying and broadcasting protest. The thousand *Nos* of Bahia Shehab, and the series *The One Who Delegates Does Not Die*, by Omar Fathy, aka Picasso, were such floating images during the Egyptian Spring.

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5 Master calligrapher and artist Samir Sayegh underlined this point in his paper, *Arabic Calligraphy and Revival*, Granshan conference, The American University in Cairo, 28 October 2016. See also: Dadi 2010, 560–571; Naguib 2015, 69–74.

The second common feature of street art and graffiti is, in Genin's view, that they are simultaneously *in situ* and *ex situ*. They may be produced on a solid wall or a movable surface, like the trucks and tuk tuks in South Asia and the Middle East. They are flexible, many-layered, and not contained within the limits of a frame. Rather, they are art forms that flow over borderlines and often glide from one context to another. A third aspect of street art and graffiti in general is their ruggedness. Usually, the surface on which the pieces are created is not prepared or smoothed, and this gives the image an uneven texture. Additionally, there is a sense of saturation tied to street art and graffiti, which is due to the fact that after some time, the surface is completely covered with other images, scribblings, and tags, giving a feeling of disruption and unruliness to the whole. A fifth shared characteristic of street art and graffiti, growing from the former, is loudness; Genin calls it *parasitage*, in the sense of "interference," as is found in radio transmissions. Here, the noise is produced by colours, motifs, additions, and scripts that criss-cross each other and disturb the "clarity" of the picture, many emphasizing the impression of chaos that emanates from them. In Egypt, the wall of The American University in Cairo, along Mohamed Mahmoud Street, offered a salient example of saturation and loudness in street art.

Ephemerality is another common attribute of street art and graffiti. The reasons for this impermanence are many. It may be due to damage caused by people passing, or by weather and erosion. The pieces often hold subversive, provocative, even abusive messages, prompting the building's owners or the local authorities to whitewash the walls at regular intervals. Thus walls bearing murals, drawings, and texts of all kinds act as palimpsests. They present superposed layers of writings and images that shine through the next covering layer and, hence, are never completely wiped out. Ephemerality in art has its appeal. Rafael Schacter observes that several artists he interviewed in London considered the destruction of their works as a condition of the process of creating "*for the moment, for the experience, for the freedom.*"<sup>6</sup> Instead of erasing the artists' works, the removal may actually emancipate them (Schacter 2008, 46). Likewise, a number of Egyptian street art and graffiti artists, such as Ammar Abo Bakr and Bahia Shehab, believe that things, even works of art, have their lifespan and are not meant to last forever.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the pictures and messages continue to linger in people's minds long after they have disappeared from public space, and thus they accentuate, in my view, the long-term resonance of the message imparted. The murals are interconnected "ephemeral interventions," initiated by activist artists and then reproduced

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6 Italics in the original.

7 Personal communication.

and disseminated through different media. The ephemerality of street art and graffiti is thus neutralised by new channels that, according to Jeff Ferrell, “elongate” in time and space the experience of creating street art and graffiti, and offer new kinds of aesthetic durability (Ferrell 2016, xxxiv–xxxv). As Kevin D. Murphy and Sally O’Driscoll argue, ephemeral interventions occur in specific moments, in contexts of politically engaged art practices, and they do have a lasting impact (Murphy and O’Driscoll 2015, 330).

Digital photography is increasingly used to document the various artists’ creations and the public’s responses. The pictures are published on the Internet and circulated on social media. The World Wide Web has become a global, interactive, virtual art gallery. Exhibited online the material properties of the pieces have taken on a more immaterial quality (Carle and Huguet 2015). In an interview with Louisiana Channel, Bahia Shehab says:

Our work gets erased very quickly on the street. That’s why TV and the Internet are very useful tools—you can communicate your messages in the digital sphere. That’s the game-changer now. The government can resist you, it can try to hide what you try to communicate, but it’s a completely different ballgame now (Louisiana Channel 2014).

The aesthetic and economic values of street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti are highly disputed. In most countries, scribbling or painting on private or public property without the consent of the owner(s) is considered defacement, an act of vandalism, and thus a crime. Nevertheless, some pieces have become subject to protection and some measures for their preservation are being tried out. In Egypt, for instance, there have been calls to save the murals that the artist Alaa Awad created on the walls of The American University in Cairo, but to no avail. The pieces were largely inspired by the tombs of New Kingdom nobles on the west bank of Luxor (Hamdy and Karl 2014, 136–137; Abaza 2016; Untitled 2013). A way of keeping street art from obliteration is to make smaller copies and exhibit them in conventional art galleries. Internationally renowned artists like Banksy sell posters reproducing their murals, printed on canvas, through the internet.<sup>8</sup> The transfer from the walls in open urban spaces to the interior walls of homes and offices not only changes the texture and size of the pieces, but also their significance. From being accessible to all, they become private commodities and lose their ephemerality. The copy might not be imbued with the same aura as the original, but it keeps it from being forgotten. The afterlife of street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti from the Egyptian uprisings is still uncertain. A few

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8 One can buy them on Amazon.com.

photographic exhibitions, such as the recent *Fighting Walls: Street Art in Egypt and Iran*, are being arranged (Seymour 2016). There is, however, no way of knowing at this point whether pictures of some of the pieces from the Egyptian Spring have been downloaded, printed and framed to adorn the walls of private homes and offices, and what kind of connotations and value they have acquired in the process.

As remarked above, the meaning of these artworks is tied to their emplacement. The public space where street art, graffiti, and calligraphiti are created may acquire an emblematic status in future cultural memory. During the Arab Spring, the streets became the space of civic and cultural manifestations. In Cairo, Mohamed Mahmoud Street, off the famous Tahrir Square, witnessed some of the most violent clashes with police and army forces during the uprisings of 2011. Thus, the place has acquired political meaning, and through their creations on the walls of The American University along this street and the adjacent ones, the artists have imbued them with an atmosphere of mutiny.

### **Unzipping the lips and freeing the words**

The first moment of the Arab Spring entailed what I would describe as “unzipping the lips and liberating the words” (figure 5). A general sense of unexpectedness and familiarity permeated the street art, graffiti, and calligraphiti of the Arab Spring. Reflecting on the spread of graffiti in Tunisia, Sarra Grira underlines their unforeseen dynamics (Grira 2013). In her view, three central elements contribute to the impression of unexpectedness. The first is the sudden re-appropriation of the public space. This is followed by the unforeseen engagement of artists, who, seeing themselves as the guardians of history, record and analyse events on the walls of their cities. The third element is political and ideological. Artists address socio-political issues and their murals and graffiti question the legitimacy of regimes, governments, and political parties. They get responses from the onlookers, many of whom draw or write in their own comments. According to Charles Tripp, reclaiming public space with graffiti is an act of defiance against

authorities that want to assert their own unchallenged control of such spaces, forcing those who challenge that control to risk paying with their lives or with their freedom. The messages conveyed by the writings on the walls, by the images and symbols, signal alternative sources of authority, disrespect for established power and, implicitly, its loss of control (Tripp 2013, 307).



**Fig. 5:** *Freedom Painters, 2011. Nasr City, Cairo.*

As mentioned earlier, the Arab Spring witnessed a surge of poems, songs, and slogans that, with small variations in wording, were chanted in the streets and inscribed on the walls of various cities across the whole region. Egypt was no exception, and slogans were not only heard but also translated visually on the walls of towns and cities. Elliott Colla points out that slogans are not literary texts, but rather, part of a performance, and as such belong to what he calls a repertoire of “contentious performance” that are all expressions of ephemeral interventions (Colla 2012). The slogans heard in the streets and represented on the walls during the demonstrations in Cairo between 2011 and 2013 drew on a wealth of texts that were anchored in people’s cultural memory. They had a strong emotional resonance, that is, a power to evoke images, memories, emotions, and meanings. According to Aleida Assmann, the notion of resonance implies “the interaction between two separate entities, one located in the foreground, one in the background” (Assmann 2015, 45). The elements in the foreground, or the present, are connected to those in the background that make up cultural memory, and that, at an opportune moment, are reactivated. In Egypt, the use of the vernacular form of Arabic sprinkled with coarse language and references to central cultural and political figures from the past such as Mustafa Kamel, Saad Zaghloul and Gamal Abdel Nasser, emphasized the dimension of shared experiences that fashions cultural memory.

I will now present the various moments of the uprisings in Egypt through some of the most widely used slogans and popular sayings and explicate how they have, in my view, been visualized in compelling images. Apart from the works of Bahia Shehab and Omar Fathy, who are explicit about the message they convey, the equivalence, or rather, the translation made between the slogans and the images is based on my own interpretation of the murals and graffiti I have selected. The artists who produced them might have chosen other texts to explicate their pieces.

The first slogan, *al sha'b yurīd isqāt al niẓām* (the people want the fall of the regime), was heard in the early days of the uprisings. The slogan derives from the opening lines of the poem *The Will to Life (idha al sha'b yauman arād al hayāt)*, by the Tunisian poet Abul Qasim al Shabbi (1909–1934). The slogan affirms the people's desire for change. It was first heard in rallies in the streets of Tunisia and from there it travelled to Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, and Yemen. One of the most powerful visual translations of this slogan, is the chessboard by an Egyptian street artist who uses the pseudonym el-Teneen, which means “the dragon” in Arabic. The chessboard shows all the pawns, representing the people, on one side of the board facing the line of dignitaries. The king is toppled. The pawns are all black and the squares on which they stand are red and white; the red probably symbolizes the blood that has been spilled during the demonstrations (figure 6). The immediacy of this piece derives not from narrating the development of events, but distilling the demands of the people in a very direct way.

The second moment of the revolution is one of sharp protest and a roar: *NO*. Bahia Shehab's project, *A Thousand Times No: The Visual History of Lam-alif (la' wa 'alfa')*, denotes a prefiguration of that moment. The project resulted in a 3m x 7m installation exhibited at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in September 2010, that is, in a time of gestation before the Arab Spring really took off. Shehab's project traces the history and different scripts of the Arabic letterform Lam-Alif (pronounced *la'*, and meaning “no” in Arabic), and repeats it in a thousand different forms to illustrate the common Arabic expression for total refusal: “No, and a thousand no!” Shehab is an artist and art historian who developed the graphic design program at The American University in Cairo in 2011. She explains the idea behind her installation as follows:

When you want to deny all of the stereotypes that are imposed on you and that try to define your role in the world. When you want to reject almost every aspect of your reality. When you want to decline every political reality you live under. When you want to dismiss all of the options available to you. When you want to negate all the accusations that go hand in hand with your identity. When you





Fig. 6: el-Teneen, *The king is down*, 2011. Cairo.

want to refuse to be an imitator or follower of the West, yet you also refuse the regressive interpretation of your heritage. ‘A thousand Nos’ are not enough. (Goethe Institute, n.d.).

According to Shehab, the installation thus represents a rejection of both the conformity and the repression that often stifle the Arabic speaking region and Islamic cultures. The events that followed the uprisings in Egypt prompted Shehab to record the memory of these days by taking her *Nos* to the streets of Cairo, in the form of a series of calligraphiti placed in different locations of the city (Shehab 2014a). She added two new pieces. One visualizes Pablo Neruda’s famous quote, “you may crush the flowers, but you cannot delay the spring,” translated into Arabic.<sup>9</sup> The other recalls the incident of the veiled “blue bra girl” who was stripped and beaten by the police on December 18, 2011 (Soueif 2011). In their new context of open urban space, the calligraphiti *Nos* reiterate, in the words of the artist, “no to military rule,” “no to a new pharaoh,” “no to emergency law,” “no to stripping the people,” “no to blinding heroes,” “no to burning books,” “no to violence,” “no to stealing the revolution,” “no to barriers and walls” (Shehab 2012; Khalil 2014) (figures 7, 8, 9). The third moment of the Arab Spring in Egypt is one of distrust, of

9 *Yumkinak tadhass el ward, lakina la tastali’ an tu’akhir al rabi’*; the original quote: “Podrán cortar todas las flores, pero no podrán detener la primavera.”



Fig. 7: Bahia Shehab, No, and a Thousand Times No, 2011. Cairo. Calligraffiti.

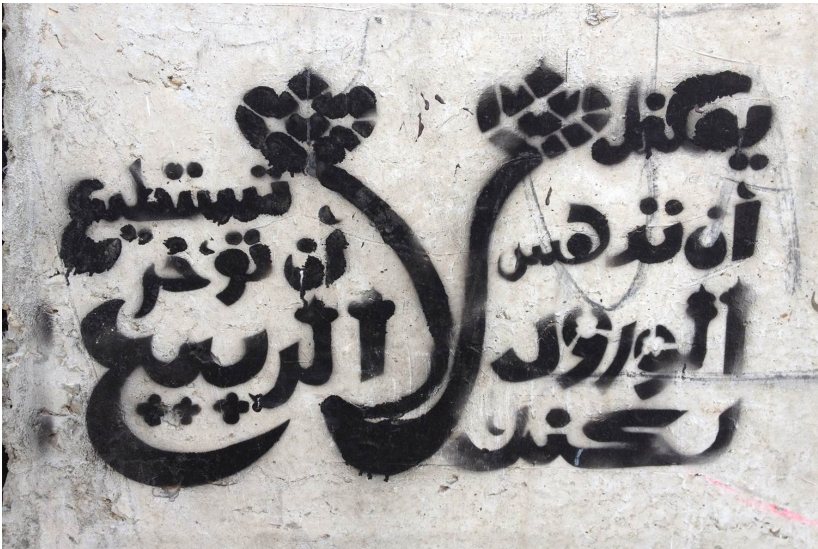


Fig. 8: Bahia Shehab, You May Crush the Flowers, But You Cannot Delay the Spring (verse by poet Pablo Neruda), 2011. Cairo. Calligraffiti.



**Fig. 9:** Bahia Shehab, The Blue Bra. On top: “No to stripping the people.” The sole of the military boot reads: “Long live a peaceful revolution,” 2011. Cairo. Calligraffiti.

a creeping feeling that “the more things change the more they stay the same.” The sense of wariness is conveyed by the recurrence of the popular saying *illī kallif mā māʾsh*, meaning “the one who delegates does not die,” and visualized in a series of murals by the artist Omar Fathy, also known as Picasso. The first murals created after President Hosni Mubarak resigned on February 11, 2011, showed the slightly superposed half faces of the president and Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, who was then leading the interim government. At the top of the scene, a white hand holds a red pencil, and beside it, a text asserts that “the revolution goes on” (*al thawra mustamira*). Beneath that is the logo of the “Association of the artists of the revolution” (*rābita fanānī al thawra*). The popular saying in question is written at the bottom. The letters are painted in red, yellow for the negative form *mā*, and green for *kallif* (to delegate). The *lam* (l) in the word is shaped like the joined necks of Mubarak and Tantawi (figure 10).

Other pieces in the same spirit but with additional text show the same half faces of Mubarak and Tantawi joined by the neck. Behind them, we see Amr Moussa, the secretary of the Arab League at the time, and Ahmed Shafik, who was prime minister from January 29 to March 3, 2011. The inscription, in red and black on the left side of the mural, reads, “I will not trust you and you will not rule over me one more day” (*mā hadika amān, walla tuhkumnī yūm kamān*) (Graffiti at





**Fig. 10:** Omar Fathy aka Picasso, Illi Kalif Ma Matsh (*The one who delegates doesn't die*), (first version), 2012. Cairo.

Muhammad Mahmoud Street, n.d.). The next pieces in the series depict the half faces of Mubarak and Tantawi, still joined at the neck in the foreground. Slightly to the back is the elected President, Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood, almost in full face. The word *lissa*, meaning “still,” coloured in brown, is added a bit higher up on the right side of the mural. Thus, the meaning is “still, the one who delegates doesn't die” (Graffiti outside the presidential palace 2012). Another mural portrays the artist, seen from the back, finishing a mural representing Mubarak and Tantawi, joined at the neck, and Mohamed Badie, who was then the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, in the background. The word *bardū*, or “nevertheless,” painted in yellow, precedes the slogan written beneath the portraits. On the right, we see a police officer with fangs instead of teeth, brandishing a club at the artist and holding a shield in his left hand. Six men, with Mubarak's features, wearing the uniforms of the security police, are standing under the portraits. The ones at either end of the row are holding shields; the one on the left has a skull decorating his shield, while the one on the right holds a baton. Each of the remaining four men bears a letter on his chest. Together the letters form the acronym ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards). The ground on which they stand is covered with red paint, indicating that blood has been shed during the demonstrations. Beneath the scene, a poem in vernacular Egyptian Arabic, written in grey letters, tells the beholder:

Oh! Regime you are afraid of the brush and the pen, you oppress and step on those who have been abused.

If you were doing right, you would not be afraid of what has been drawn.

You are only able to wage war against the walls, play the strong man against lines and colours.

But inside you are a coward, you'll never build up what has been destroyed.<sup>10</sup> (figure 11).



Fig. 11: Omar Fathy aka Picasso, Illi Kalif Ma Matsh (*The one who delegates doesn't die*), with the poem "Oh! regime you are afraid of the brush and the pen," 2012. Cairo.

The last piece in the series shows the half faces of Mubarak and Tantawi joined at the neck: Morsi appears slightly in the background and behind him, the silhouette of a face, painted black with a big white question mark in its middle, wears a military beret (figure 12). Above, the inscription on the right says "Down with all those who betray" (*visqut kul man khān*), and above the

10 *Yā nīzām khayif min fursha wa qalam/wa ḡalamt wa ḡalamt wa bitudus 'll itḡalam/law kunt māshī fil salīm/mā kunt khuft millī itḡassam/akhrak tuhārib al hitān/tiḡshatar 'll khutūt wil abwān/ lakin inta min guwāk gabān/umrak mā tibnī illī ithadam.* Hamdy and Karl 2014, 186.



Fig. 12: Omar Fathy aka Picasso, Illi Kalif Ma Matsh (The one who delegates doesn't die), (last version), 2013. Ittihadiya Palace wall, Cairo.



Fig. 13: Saad Zaghloul, "It's useless, sons of bitches," 2012. Cairo.



portraits we read “Mubarak, the military, the brotherhood” (*Mubarak, ‘askar, ikhwān*). Here, the artist implies that the military had actually always been in power in Egypt and announces their visible takeover.

Disenchantment with the results of the uprisings continued to grow. In June 2012, a group of artists expressed their feelings with a mural showing a highly respected figure from the past, the nationalist politician and first prime minister of independent Egypt, Saad Zaghloul (1859–1927), who is considered to be the “father of the nation”. He sits cross-legged in a comfortable chair and wears a black suit, a white shirt, a red bow tie, and the red *tarbush* or fez. The colours are those of today’s Egyptian flag. Zaghloul lifts his right arm and raises his middle-finger. The text reads “it’s useless, sons of bitches” (*maʿfīsh fayda ya wilād al mar’a*). The phrase refers to the dying Saad Zaghloul’s famous last words to his wife, Safeya: “it’s useless, cover me up, Safeya.”<sup>11</sup> These words have been interpreted as Zaghloul’s disillusionment with the political situation in Egypt at the time of his death<sup>12</sup> (“The Presidential Election” 2012) (figure 13).

### Concluding thoughts: From solid walls to intangible heritage?

President Mohamed Morsi was removed from power on July 3, 2013, and the military regime, headed by General Abdel Fattah al Sissi, took over. Censorship increased; many activists, intellectuals, and artists were arrested, some disappeared, and some left the country. However, street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti continued to appear, albeit sporadically, on the walls of the main cities, and to circulate on social media. On May 18, 2014, the artist known as Keizer posted a graffiti with the question: “Do you remember tomorrow that never came?” (*fakir bukra illī magāsh*) on his Facebook page (figure 14).

On September 1, 2014, el-Teneen posted a new version of his chessboard on his Facebook page. The squares are yellow and red and the pawns are aligned over the whole surface. The king stands alone amongst them and dominates them all. There are no dignitaries around; the king is back (figure 15).<sup>13</sup>

The sense of disillusionment was echoed in early May 2015 with calligraffiti by the artist Ahmed Naguib on the walls of the Greek campus of The American

11 *Maʿfīsh fayda, ghatinī ya Ṣafeya.*

12 However, he may also have meant it as acceptance of his fate.

13 The image was reposted on the Facebook page of Revolution Graffiti—Street Art of the New Egypt on 23 November 2014. The image can also be found here: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/118891/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/Public-space-negotiations-Art-continues-despite-st.aspx> [Accessed on 4. May 2015]



Fig. 14: Keizer, "Do you remember tomorrow that never came?" 2014. Unknown location.



Fig. 15: el-Teneen, *The king is back*, 2014. Cairo. Photo: el-Teneen.

University in Cairo (figure 16).<sup>14</sup> The text, composed of interlaced superposed letters and words, reads “*Taffī al nūr yā Bahya...*” (Switch off the light Bahya...). Bahya is a girl’s name meaning “beautiful, radiant, splendid”; it is also used as an epithet for Egypt. The line is from a song from the 1998 musical, *Al malik hūwa al malik*” (The king is the king), by the composer and singer Mohamed Mounir (Mounir 2011). The musical, in turn, is an adaptation of the play bearing the same title by Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous (1941–1997). Penned in 1977, the play was performed in the late seventies but was subsequently banned from the stage in Syria.<sup>15</sup> The rest of the text in the musical, that is not included in the calligraphitti, says: “...switch off the light Bahya, all the military are thieves. But in our country not only the military are thieves”.



**Fig. 16:** Ahmed Naguib, “Switch off the light Bahya,” 2015. Cairo. Calligraphitti.

<sup>14</sup> Posted on Ahmed Naguib’s Facebook page and Facebook page Graffiti in Egypt on May 8, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> The play draws on the story of “The Sleeper and the Vigilant” in *Thousand and One Nights*. It is about a powerful king who is bored. To amuse himself, he sets up a disguise scheme and installs a drunken henpecked commoner, Abu ‘Izza, as king for one day. The plan backfires when Abu ‘Izza easily fills the role and no one from the real king’s entourage, not even the queen, notices the subterfuge. For an analysis of the play see al-Anezi 2006, 161–193.

Ephemerality does not mean that the fleeting moment, the *kairos*, has no lasting effect. Street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti of the Arab Spring blossomed at an opportune time when many options to improve social and political conditions seemed available. *Kairos* has the power of triggering change, of having a long-term resonance and giving way to a sense of shared experiences and memories. In Egypt, it has brought about a general awareness of and engagement in politics that had been lacking among the majority of the population. During the Egyptian Spring, artists resorted to street art, graffiti, and calligraffiti to impart their views to a varied audience both at home and abroad. They translated their dissent and political activism into potent visual images that covered the walls in significant locations of the urban space. In the process, they created a dialogical space where ideas are transposed into images that reach a transnational and transcultural public. In their works, the artists combine originality in giving form to their ideas with familiarity in using the vernacular language and referring to elements of shared cultural memory. The interpretations of the pieces by passers-by in the streets, users on the Internet, and members of different social media networks may differ completely from the intentions of the artists. However, this does not mean that the pieces they created lose their affective power and cease to impact the feelings and perceptions of various audiences. Although the art is ephemeral, it is still stored and shared on a plethora of Internet platforms. These have become the kind of museum without walls accessible to all—at least to those who have access to these technologies—that the French writer and politician André Malraux (1901–1976) envisioned. These developments suggest that the World Wide Web is developing into an effective tool to store the memory of events and to help shape part of the intangible heritage of the twenty-first century in different countries, Egypt included.

Richard Jacquemond posits that the period between 2011 and 2013 in Egypt did not merely expose a deep societal and political divide, it also brought to light a significant generation gap in a number of cultural fields (Jacquemond 2015). It provided the space for new cultural productions and novel cultural practices. The road to freedom of expression, however, is long and arduous. As mentioned above, in the aftermath of this euphoric period, a number of intellectuals and artists were silenced, put behind bars, subjected to what is euphemistically referred to as “forced” disappearance (i.e. whereabouts are unknown) or chose to leave. Some, like Ganzeer, who now lives in the USA, produce smaller-sized pieces in studios, exhibit in art galleries, and explore the possibilities offered by different genres such as graphic novels. Other internationally known artists, such as Ammar Abo Bakr, Bahia Shehab, and Ahmed Naguib, are regularly invited to participate in street art and graffiti festivals and other cultural venues in various countries. Street art and graffiti



from the Egyptian Spring attracted attention worldwide, and a vast number of publications appeared. The documentation and literature produced provided fertile grounds for an international market (Abaza 2016). It prompted sponsors to provide funds to promote the image of the “post-orientalist, post-2011, rebellious Arab artist.” This interest may persuade all involved to find a *modus vivendi*, according to Jacquemond. As often happens in similar political situations, the authorities may become more accommodating towards “rebellious” artists and try to placate them by allowing them to practice their art within certain limits and under the somewhat lenient control from relevant ministries, especially the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Education. A way to do this is by sponsoring street art festivals such as the one that has been held in Burullus, a fishing town in Egypt’s eastern delta, since 2013. Conversely, the artists may agree to conform to some form of censorship and to the images of post-orientalist, rebellious Arab artists that circulate in Western countries, or at least to negotiate with these representations (Jacquemond 2015, 142–143). Several produce their new pieces in foreign environments and tend to combine activism with poetry. Bahia Shehab’s recent series on the poems of the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) illustrate this trend well. (figure 17).



**Fig. 17:** Bahia Shehab, *Those Who Have No Land Have No Sea* (verse by poet Mahmoud Darwish), August 2016. Kefalonia, Greece. Calligraffiti.

Another example of this kind of compromise is the anamorphic piece entitled *Perception* by the Tunisian-French calligrapher artist el Seed. He created it in Cairo's district of garbage collectors, Mansheyat Nasser (figure 18). The inhabitants are predominantly Copts who are known to have developed an efficient recycling system. El Seed spread his calligrapher on the surfaces of about 50 apartment buildings in the area. The piece, which can only be seen in full from a specific point on the Moqattam Hill, is a quote dating from the third century patriarch of Alexandria, St. Athanasius, "Anyone who wants to see the sunlight clearly must wipe his eyes first."<sup>16</sup>



**Fig. 18:** *el Seed, Perception, 2016. Cairo.*

The afterlife, or, to use the term coined by Aby Warburg, the *Nachleben* of the Egyptian Spring remains unclear.<sup>17</sup> The events are still too recent for mnemohistory or to understand their long-lasting effects. Today, most walls bearing murals or stencils have been whitewashed or pulled down and rebuilt; very few pieces of street art survive. Nevertheless, some places, such as the area around Tahrir Square and Mohamed Mahmoud Street, are slowly

16 *In arāda ahad an yabshur nūr al shams fā in 'aliyhu an yamsah 'aynayhu.*

17 For a discussion on the afterlife of events see Tamm 2015.



becoming iconic sites and may gradually acquire the aura of a *mnemotopos*, that is, a place where collective memories converge. As such, sometime in the future they may represent the material foundation for elaborating the cultural memory of the Arab Spring in Egypt (González-Ruibol, 2008, 256–259; 2014). The digitized pictures of the street art produced in this short time may then constitute a significant documentation on which to elaborate a new kind of intangible heritage.

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