

PAINT AND POLITICS

Analyzing the 2011 Egyptian Revolution through Graffiti

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Although the historical roots of the Arab Spring can easily be traced as far back as the eighteenth century, scholars often conflate the regional movement with recent political failure. However, the Arab Spring's occurrence at a particular time suggests that years of tension between authorities and citizens led to the breaking point in 2011.¹ In addition to politics, the breaking point stemmed from the culmination of factors such as the rise of pan-Arab media and social media, the “youth bulge,” and the global economic downturn of 2008.² Accordingly, participants in the revolution represent a myriad of perspectives extending beyond political critique. But political dissidents of all stripes, including Marxists, secularists, feminists, Islamists, and anarchists shared public spaces, such as Egypt's Tahrir Square, Bahrain's Pearl Roundabout, Tunisia's Bourguiba Avenue, and Syria's Clock Tower Square, during the Arab Spring.

With a population of over ninety million people, scholars consider Egypt the Arab world's cultural, political, economic, and military leader. Since Egypt's shift from a constitutional monarchy to a republic in 1952, mass numbers of people have converged on Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo to demand change several times. Originally called Ismailia Square after the 19th century Khedive and commissioner of downtown Cairo Ismail the Magnificent, President

¹ Rashid Khalidi, “Reflections on the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt,” *Foreign Policy*, February 24, 2011.

² Dafna Hochman Rand, *Roots of the Arab Spring: Contested Authority and Political Change in the Middle East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 10.



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Gamal Abdel Nasser renamed it *Midan Tahrir*, or Liberation Square, in 1954 to commemorate Egyptian independence from occupying British forces.³ Nasser and his successor President Anwar Sadat transformed Tahrir Square into the center of life in Cairo by installing circular gardens, an underground metro system, international hotels, and several municipal buildings including the Ministry of the Interior and Arab League Headquarters.⁴ The square remained central to the tradition of political protest. For example, in the 1970s Sadat's policy of *infitah*, or opening to private investment, included an end to state-sponsored food subsidies. The policy intensified class divides and left many families hungry. Indeed, the opposition culminated in 1977 when thousands of lower and middle-class citizens protested the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund's involvement in Tahrir Square.⁵ Again, Tahrir Square became the center of protest in 2003 under President Hosni Mubarak as thousands of university students demonstrated against the war in Iraq.

Although Egyptians have used protests to provoke political change since the 1950s, the presidents of the Egyptian Revolution experienced an unprecedented number of demonstrations in Tahrir Square. On January 25th, 2011, a national day of commemoration for Egyptian police forces, six million Egyptians gathered in Tahrir Square to voice dissent, resistance, anger, and solidarity against increasing police brutality associated with Hosni Mubarak's presidency. Two weeks later, President Hosni Mubarak resigned, ending his thirty-year rule as the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power. However, protests continued as SCAF constricted the democratic process. In June 2012, Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi was sworn in as President and with him came a yearlong battle over the position of parliament between Morsi and the SCAF. Protests subsided in 2014 when Morsi's appointed Defense Minister, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, stepped in as President. The frequency and size of protests during the Arab Spring suggested a rift between citizens and politicians regarding the future of Egyptian political identity.

This paper will explore this rift by analyzing the works of street artists Ganzeer, Zeft, and Ammar Abo Bakr during the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. It will argue that alternative media affected social change more efficiently than traditional digital and print media. Each section will analyze graffiti pieces as belonging to one of three categories: social

³ "Tahrir Square's historic past," *al-Jazeera*, February 1, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/02/201121103522508343.html>; "Tahrir Square's place in Egypt's history," *BBC*, November 22, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12332601>.

⁴ Nezar Al Sayyad, "A History of Tahrir Square," *Midan Masr*, <http://www.midan-masr.com/en/printerfriendly.aspx?ArticleID=140>.

⁵ "Tahrir Square's place in Egypt place in Egypt's history," *BBC*, November 22, 2011.

movements aimed at mobilizing citizens towards a common goal, visions of alternate futures aimed at remedying present problems, or memorials aimed at honoring victims and documenting administrative crimes. Additionally, each section will examine the production and preservation of specific pieces, including audience interaction and distribution, as a factor in the changing perception of national identity during the Arab Spring. The multitude of graffiti pieces complicate the construction of a single narrative by suggesting diversity in political leaders and historical narratives. The graffiti pieces reflect the diversity of citizens and present an acceptance of the multiplicity of national narratives as a solution to the causes of the Egyptian Revolution and wider Arab Spring.

History, Identity and the Importance of Graffiti

Since declaring independence from the British Empire in 1922, Egyptian leaders have sought to develop differing conceptions of Egyptian history and national identity. President Gamal Abdel Nasser founded the Ministry of Culture in 1958 to “give personal definition of Egyptian history and maintain capabilities of [national] heritage.”⁶ The program initially fulfilled its mission statement by funding formal theater troupes that adapted traditional Egyptian texts to address contemporary issues. Unfortunately, the program’s funding decreased in the 1970s under President Anwar Sadat’s program of Corrective Revolution. Sadat sought to replace Nasser’s pan-Arab socialist policies with liberal economics; therefore the program linked a change in policy with a contested attempt to rewrite history. Although Sadat himself participated in the 1952 Revolution, he sought to present his reversal of Nasser’s policies as an extension of the favorable 1952 Revolution. In other words, Sadat set himself up to succeed where Nasser had failed.⁷ Furthermore, then Vice President Hosni Mubarak led a committee in searching for the “historical truth” behind the 1952 Revolution.⁸ The committee’s sole historian, Izzat Abd al-Karim, believed the newly proposed history better suited Sadat’s “new liberal economics.”⁹ However, as a consequence of decreased funding for the arts and the government controlled narrative, independent acting troupes could not apply for state funding. Therefore, playwrights described the “ironies of contemporary life and social tensions” in a manner that appealed to the identity of an ordinary citizen as opposed

⁶ “About the Ministry,” Arab Republic of Egypt Ministry of Culture, <http://www.moc.gov.eg/en/ministry/about-ministry/>.

⁷ Barry Rubin, *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 15-16.

⁸ Yoav Di-Caupa, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 324.

⁹ Nariman Yousef, *Summer of Unrest: Tahrir - 18 Days of Grace* (London: Penguin Books, 2011).

to a formally trained performer.¹⁰

Due to state attempts to control narratives about national identity, Egyptian citizens have recently engaged in the preservation and creation of alternative national identity, historic memory, and collective consciousness.¹¹ Like many Arab countries, access to official information in Egypt is difficult to obtain. For example, researchers must overcome security restrictions and interrogations at the Ministry of Defense. Even with these precautions, the government maintains a “deeply entrenched culture of destroying or hiding” potentially awkward information.¹² Such difficulties strain the relationship between Egyptians and the state. Historian Khaled Fahmy believes a fundamental change in the creation and preservation of history may improve the deteriorating relationship between Egyptian citizens and their state. With the help of activists, bloggers, and analysts, Fahmy formed the Committee to Document the 25th January Revolution in 2011 to begin archiving primary source data so that “Egyptians now and in the future can construct their own narratives about this pivotal period.”¹³ In addition to official records, the group collected sources of alternative media including insurrectionary pamphlets, oral testimonies, multimedia footage, and social media posts.¹⁴

Many of these collected sources were created in public spaces that Egyptians utilized to create social campaigns, imagine alternate realities, and memorialize victims. Sociologist Saskia Sassen notes that urban spaces allow seemingly powerless actors to create history and engage politically, thereby acknowledging that powerlessness is not an absolute condition.¹⁵ The simple act of civic engagement, such as participating in a protest, consuming news, or creating graffiti, is a shared creative process. Philosopher Michel Foucault notes there is no space that is “dead, fixed, undialectical or immobile,” meaning

¹⁰ Sonali Pahwa and Jessica Winegar, “Culture, State, and Revolution,” *Middle East Report* 263 (2012): 5.

¹¹ Judy Barsalou, “Post-Mubarak Egypt: History, Collective Memory and Memorialization,” *Middle East Policy Council* 19, no. 2 (2012).

¹² Jack Shenker, “The Struggle to Document Egypt’s Revolution,” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/15/struggle-to-document-egypt-revolution>.

¹³ Roberta L. Dougherty, “Documenting Revolution in the Middle East,” *Center for Research Libraries* 31, no. 1 (2011): 5.

¹⁴ Shenker, “The Struggle to Document Egypt’s Revolution.”

¹⁵ Saskia Sassen, “The Global Street: Making the Political,” *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (2011): 574.

the simple act of civic engagement “is to resist.”¹⁶ While activities in urban spaces can transmit information that mirrors the opinions of local inhabitants and “delivers a collective learning about diversity, [urban spaces can also] become sites of murderous attacks.”¹⁷ The experiential difference stems from the socioeconomic, gender, and sexual positionality of actors, including politicians, protestors, and citizens, therefore creating contested displays of power through urban space. In addition to the “people versus the state” narrative that is typical of revolutions, Egyptian society additionally fragmented along traditional, modernist, secularist and statist camps. The resulting multilayered messages of protestors can complement, interrupt, and compete with one another.

Although the specific objectives of various protest groups may differ, the shared resistive expressions of graffiti disseminated by protest groups emerges from the intersection of the local and global. Specifically, graffiti creates a “fluid civic community that is materially based in particular city streets but conceptually linked to other streets throughout the region and the world.”¹⁸ Graffiti also bolsters the existing fluid nature of communities during revolutions by allowing graffiti writers to “connect themselves to all the possible reactions the city can muster with respect to a particular image produced over time.”¹⁹ While this paper will explore a number of purposes and consequences of graffiti, street art functions most clearly as a form of mass communication and dialogue.²⁰ Graffiti is inclusive because it can be easily accessed and understood by most people, regardless of literacy levels or regional demographics.²¹ Graffiti is also democratic in that artists strategically place images in high-traffic areas, making it difficult for passersby to ignore and easy for others to share their

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 70-71. Michel Foucault, “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1967), 168.

¹⁷ Saskia Sassen, “The Global Street: Making the Political,” *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (2011): 577.

¹⁸ Sammy Zeyad Badran, “The Contentious Roots of the Egyptian Revolution,” *Globalizations* 11, no. 2 (2014): 276; Noha Mellor, “Who Represents the Revolutionaries? Examples from the Egyptian Revolution 2011,” *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 1 (2014): 85.

¹⁹ John Lennon, “Assembling a Revolution: Graffiti, Cairo and the Arab Spring,” *Cultural Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (March 2014): 240.

²⁰ Mark Halsey and Allison Young, “Our Desires are Ungovernable: Writing Graffiti in Urban Space,” *Theoretical Criminology* 10, no. 3 (2006): 278.

²¹ Hassnaa K. Hassan, “Graffiti as a Communication Medium During the Arab Spring,” The Proceedings of the Laurel Highlands Communications Conference. (2014).

responses.²²

I use several graffiti pieces created in response to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution by three graffiti artists in Cairo to show how this process worked in the context of the Arab Spring. The first, Mohamed Fahmy, founded his own graphic design studio in 2005 under the pseudonym Ganzeer, the Arabic word for chain.²³ He chose the term seeing that his art freed him from the oppressive chains of government restrictions and societal limitations.²⁴ His pieces often explore themes of working class resistance; hence they appear in public spaces as opposed to private art galleries. He gained fame for his street art in 2011, when his pieces became centers of dialogue. However, Ganzeer does not label himself a street artist, but rather a “multidisciplinary maker of things, be it installations, prints, traditional paintings, videos, objects, guerilla actions in public spaces, and even comics” at different periods of time and in different locations.²⁵

The street artist Zeft felt moved to participate in political protests after watching a video of police brutality in January 2011.²⁶ After meeting fellow street artist Ganzeer in Tahrir Square, Zeft felt drawn to the open nature of graffiti.²⁷ The Arabic term *zeft* translates to asphalt, but refers to a derogatory term in colloquial Arabic. Similar to Chinua Achebe’s willingness to use English as a vehicle for African self-expression, Zeft’s decision to use the term as his pseudonym may reflect a desire to reclaim corrupted spaces as his own. His art usually addresses feminist and religious themes by putting strong historical figures in conversation with modern events.

While Ganzeer and Zeft took up graffiti and assumed pseudonyms as a result of the revolution, the third artist, Ammar Abo Bakr, created

²² Hassnaa K. Hassan, “Graffiti as a Communication Medium During the Arab Spring,” *The Proceedings of the Laurel Highlands Communications Conference* (2014).

²³ Ieva Zakareviciute, “Reading Revolution on the Walls: Cairo Graffiti as an Emerging Public Sphere,” *Hemispheres* 29, no. 2 (2014): 18.

²⁴ Lois Parshley, “For Graffiti Artists, Revolution Brings Inspiration and Uncertainty,” *The Atlantic*, October 3, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/for-egypts-graffiti-artists-revolution-brings-inspiration-and-uncertainty/245941/>.

²⁵ Randa el-Banna, “Graffiti, an art that changed Egypt - in focus with Ganzeer,” *Cairo Post*, February 11, 2014, <http://thecairopost.youm7.com/news/87270/arts-and-culture/graffiti-an-art-that-changed-egypt-in-focus-with-ganzeer>; “Ganzeer,” European Culture Congress, September 2011, <http://www.culturecongress.eu/en/people/ganzeer>.

²⁶ Mohamed Fahmy, “Concept Pop,” *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Summer 2014, <https://www.thecaireview.com/essays/concept-pop/>.

²⁷ Timmy Mowafi, “Egypt’s Forgotten Graffiti and The Revolution That Came to Zeft,” *CairoScene*, March 20, 2015, <http://www.cairoscene.com/ArtsAndCulture/El-Zeft-Revolution>.

art long before 2011. He studied painting at the Luxor Institute of Fine Arts at the turn of the century, where he also served as a professor with research interests in Islamic culture, Egyptian history, and political change.²⁸ He views wall art as the “newspaper of the revolution,” and has covered walls around the Middle East and Europe.²⁹ After hearing about the first protests in January 2011, Abo Bakr left his position in Luxor and moved to Cairo.³⁰ Since then, he has created several murals and collaborative projects around the city.

Tank Versus Bike

“Tank Versus Bike” by Ganzeer, completed shortly after the resignation of Mubarak in 2011, shows a large military tank pointed directly at a young man riding a bike and carrying a tray of bread atop his head. Despite the comparatively threatening degree of power posed by the tank, the biker continues his journey. This painting references the resilience and willingness of the Egyptian youth to strive towards social change, even in the face of physical military threats and uneven distribution of power. The image feels reminiscent of the unknown man who stood in front of a tank in China’s Tiananmen Square or Rachel Corrie’s fateful attempt to block an Israeli Defense Forces’ bulldozer in the Gaza Strip. Thus, this image warns about the possible dangers of opposing authority, while also connecting the events in Egypt with revolutions in other places and times.

As the history of “Tank Versus Bike” illustrates, street art is uniquely collaborative and ephemeral. A few hours after Ganzeer’s completion of the image, fellow street artist Sad Panda added his signature panda to the work. The animal nonchalantly walks behind the biker and watches as the ominous tank approaches. The animal’s symbolism can be understood through several layers. Firstly, pandas are foreign to Egypt and hence represent the international community. Secondly, the panda’s upright stance signifies the international community’s solidarity and support for progress in Egypt, while the panda’s secondary position symbolizes the international community’s general failure to prevent violence in the Middle East.

Egyptian-British journalist and writer Soraya Morayef notes that the self-evident symbolism of the piece is so powerful that the piece

²⁸ Timmy Mowafi, “Egypt’s Forgotten Graffiti and The Revolution That Came to Zeff,” *CairoScene*, March 20, 2015.

²⁹ Giuseppe Acconcia, “Ammar Amo Bakr, Graffiti Artist,” *Slow Words*, September 18, 2014, <http://www.slow-words.com/ammamr-abo-bakr-graffiti-artist/>.

³⁰ Acconcia, “Ammar Amo Bakr, Graffiti Artist.”

has not been defaced for a remarkably long period of time.³¹ Rather, citizens joined the conversation by continuing to add on to the work. In January 2012 figures of anonymous individuals being violently crushed to death by the tank appeared. This addition likely references the Maspero Massacre of October 2011, when military tanks massacred twenty-eight Coptic Christians in peaceful protest outside the Egyptian Radio and Television Union.³² Again, efforts to stand up against authority – no matter how small – risk deadly consequences.

In an attempt to change the narrative, a pro-SCAF group known as the Badr Battalion erased the images of the bicyclist, the panda, and the dead protestors, leaving only the tank and a fresh inscription of “The Army and the Police and the People Are One in Hand.”³³ By erasing select images, the pro-SCAF group attempted to whitewash SCAF actions as murderers of their own citizens and instead assert the importance of positive relations between citizens and authority. Later, a newly formed group of witty street artists known as the Mona Lisa Battalion added a few quirky characters.³⁴ Most notably, former SCAF Chairman Mohamed Hussein Tantawi appears to be chewing a victim to death.³⁵ Reminiscent of Francisco Goya’s *Saturno Devorando a Su Hijo*, the addition suggests that much of Egypt’s political oppression stems from fear of being overthrown by youth movements.

Likewise, Ganzeer’s “Mask of Freedom” quickly created much social unrest in Cairo. Described as both “superhero-style” and “Satan-like,” the cartoon shows a blindfolded and gagged bust with the phrase “New: Mask of Freedom. Salute from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to sons of the beloved nation. Now available for an unlimited period of time.”³⁶ The advertisement’s text suggests that the SCAF is giving out masks that promote a sense of freedom, but

³¹ Sarah Mousa, “Ammar Abo Bakr: Committing Murder, then Marching in the Funeral Procession,” *Jadaliyya*, January 27, 2014, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/16192/ammara-bo-bakr-committing-murder-then-marching-in-?fb_comment_id=3453387889389931653145.

³² “Cairo clashes leave 24 dead after Coptic church protest,” *BBC News*, October 10, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15235212>.

³³ Soraya Morayef, “War on Graffiti – SCAF Vandalists Versus Graffiti Artists,” *Suzee in the City*, February 6, 2012, <https://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/2012/02/06/war-on-graffiti-scaf-vandalists-versus-graffiti-artists/>.

³⁴ James D. Hoff, “Revolutionary Graffiti in Egypt,” *Warscapes*, December 12, 2013.

³⁵ Soraya Morayef, “War on Graffiti – SCAF Vandalists Versus Graffiti Artists,” *Suzee in the City*, February 6, 2012.

³⁶ Barbara Pollack, “Hieroglyphics That Won’t Be Silenced: Ganzeer Takes Protest Art Beyond Egypt,” *The New York Times*, July 10, 2014. Frida Boeke, “Ganzeer, politics and art in the public space,” *PoliticsMediaArt*, May 6, 2013.

the accompanying image reveals the true irony.³⁷ The masks serve the opposite purpose of blinding people and restricting free expression. Ganzeer experienced the effects of the mask of freedom firsthand when the SCAF detained him for circulating the image.

Ganzeer originally released the image online on May 19, 2011 and posted physical stickers around Cairo on May 26. While posting stickers around downtown, two civilians stopped Ganzeer to share their discomfort with the image. The three-person debate became a big scene within minutes as passersby stopped to share their opinions, some even accusing Ganzeer of being a foreign spy. Thus, the SCAF arrived and arrested Ganzeer. While in detention, authorities searched for a link between Ganzeer and anti-government forces. Despite the controversial nature of his graffiti, authorities failed to find evidence of political threats against the regime.³⁸ Authorities released Ganzeer a few hours later. While confiscating Ganzeer's remaining stickers, the interrogating officer pocketed a few and laughed. Additionally, the arresting officer asked, "What's the big deal? Freedom" after reviewing the scene.³⁹

As a result of the arrest, three conclusions can be drawn about the relationship between people and government during the Egyptian Revolution. The early attempts to restrict expressive freedoms generated a demand in and increased the use of expressive freedoms. For instance, the image "garnered even more exposure [via Al-Ahram Online, Al-Shorouk News, the Daily News Egypt, the Christian Science Monitor, and CNN] only because [the two civilians] stopped [Ganzeer]."⁴⁰ Second, the Egyptian military allowed institutions to continue "regardless of their inefficiency as long as things work."⁴¹ Instead of fixing the underlying problems that have caused tensions since 1952, the Egyptian government addresses the symptoms of unrest such as mass protests, street art, and revolution. Third, the spread of physical ideas was more effective than the spread of digital ideas in seeking attention for the issue. The "Mask of Freedom" garnered a significant amount of international attention after being shared via stickers in late May when compared with the humble impact

³⁷ Danna Lorch, "Walls of Freedom Documents the Art of the Egyptian Revolution," *Art Slant Magazine*, December 15, 2014.

³⁸ Wendell Steavenson, "Revolution in Cairo: A Graffiti Story," *The New Yorker*, July 17, 2014.

³⁹ Mohamed Fahmy, "7 Things I Have Learned From the Mask of Freedom," Ganzeer, June 2011, <http://www.ganzeer.com/post/158072880804/7-things-i-have-learned-from-the-mask-of-freedom>.

⁴⁰ Mohamed Fahmy, "7 Things I Have Learned From the Mask of Freedom," Ganzeer, June 2011.

⁴¹ Mohamed Fahmy, "7 Things I Have Learned From the Mask of Freedom," Ganzeer, June 2011.

of the initial, digital release.

Nefertiti in a Gas Mask

In addition to freedom masks, gas masks became a symbol of revolutionary resistance. Zeft's image titled "Nefertiti in a Gas Mask" shows the ancient Queen wearing a tear gas mask with the phrase "the woman's voice is a revolution." The image appeared in September 2012 on the popular Mohammed Mahmoud Street, which became a strategic meeting point for protestors, riot police, and politicians at the Ministry of the Interior. Zeft also shared the image on the Op Anti-Sexual Harassment Facebook page, a group that aims "to combat sexual harassment incidents and collective sexual assaults that women face in squares during sit-ins, protests, and clashes in the perimeter of Tahrir Square."⁴² Zeft included a caption saying, "A tribute to all women in our beloved Revolution. Without you we wouldn't have gotten this far. Thank you."⁴³

Queen Nefertiti, one of most powerful and beautiful women in Egyptian history, ruled as joint-pharaoh beside her husband. Artists usually depict most ancient Egyptian queens standing behind their husbands, whereas artists draw Nefertiti beside Pharaoh Akhenaten. The couple reoriented the country's political structure around religious worship of the sun god Aten. Additionally, she worked to shape Egyptian identity as inclusive of women in various spheres. In addition to her significant cultural upheaval, Nefertiti's role as co-regent and her daughters' roles as religious advisors created her legacy as a symbol of female power and beauty. Thus, it is ironic that someone as renowned as Nefertiti would be depicted wearing a tear gas mask. Military violence often stems from royal authority, yet the image instead suggests that Zeft understands Nefertiti as standing with Egyptian women in spite of her high socioeconomic class. Zeft thereby uses Queen Nefertiti's strong legacy to remind Egyptian women of their roots in female political leaders, to advocate towards a multifaceted revolution, and to recognize the significance of female contributions during the revolution.⁴⁴

Tomorrow

Zeft's "Tomorrow" emerged as a reaction to the February 2012 Port Said Stadium riots and subsequently erected military barricades that

⁴² Op Anti-Sexual Harassment/Assault's Facebook page, founded December 2012.

⁴³ Christiane Gruber, "Nefertiti in a Gas Mask," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 3, 2015.

⁴⁴ Orlando Reade, "Egyptian Graffiti and Gender Politics: An Interview with Soraya Morayef," *Africa Is A Country*, April 13, 2015.

prevented access to Tahrir Square. The soccer match ended with fans happily swarming the field, but the event quickly turned violent as pro-SCAF and anti-SCAF fans attacked one another with stones, fireworks, and bottles.⁴⁵ As news spread and riots escalated, protestors blamed the seventy-nine deaths on the lack of police presence at the match.⁴⁶ In an attempt to protect themselves from the rock-throwing crowds and limit protestors' access to Tahrir Square, the SCAF erected seven barriers on the streets leading into downtown Cairo. These walls became artists' canvases: graffiti artists sought to make the new walls disappear using the collaborative "No Walls Campaign."⁴⁷

Zeft chose the new barricade outside of the Ministry of the Interior, an organization responsible for handling national security, emergency management, and local elections, as the site for his mural "Tomorrow" in March 2012.⁴⁸ Zeft initially drew a girl and her dog sitting on a bench underneath a rainbow, while later additions by others include a mother pushing a stroller, a girl purchasing balloons from a street merchant, birds in flight, and children holding hands while walking. The mural's idealistic and playful display of the future starkly contrasted with the violent massacres occurring on the street.⁴⁹ Zeft drew the mural at a moment when he "really lost hope" and wished that viewers would use that desperation as fuel for a better future.⁵⁰

In addition to mobilizing citizens towards a common goal or imagining an idealized reality, graffiti also provided citizens with information that traditional, print media sources failed to report. By sharing information about atrocities that had been covered up by the SCAF, artists also memorialized victims of military brutality. One such image told the story of nineteen-year old engineering student Belal Abi Saber.⁵¹ Military forces shot and executed Abi Saber as he participated in a daytime protest in Tahrir Square in October 2013. The SCAF

⁴⁵ Mohamed Fadel Fahmy and Ian Lee, "Anger flares in Egypt after 79 die in soccer riot," *CNN*, February 2, 2012.

⁴⁶ "The Seven Wonders of the Revolution: Cubic Street Art Against SCAF," *Mashallah News*, March 26, 2012.

⁴⁷ John Lennon, "Assembling a Revolution Graffiti, Cairo and the Arab Spring," *Cultural Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (March 2014): 262. Marwan M. Kreidy, "The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 98.

⁴⁸ Soraya Morayef, "For the Love of Graffiti: Cairo's Walls Trace History of Colorful Revolution," *Suzee in the City*, September 20, 2012.

⁴⁹ Yahya Bedair, "Graffiti and Political Polarization in Egypt: From Optimism to Silence," *Egyptian Streets*, April 18, 2015.

⁵⁰ Mowafi, "Egypt's Forgotten Graffiti and The Revolution That Came to Zeft," 2015.

⁵¹ Soraya Morayef, "Belal Abi Saber: Graffiti by Ammar Abo Bakr and El Zeft," *Suzee in the City*, October 16, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/12/world/la-fg-wn-egypt-student-death-20131012>.

sought to prevent the “student’s death from becoming a rally cause for the backers of Egypt’s recently deposed Islamist president;” they wanted the fight against terrorists and Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers to preoccupy the country.⁵² No traditional Egyptian media sources reported on his murder, but by seeing the street art dedicated to his story, artists could bring his story to the people’s attention and help shape the narrative of the revolution.

Instead of leaving flowers at the scene of the crime, artists Ammar Abo Bakr and Zeft created a mural that commemorated Ali Saber’s life and exposed the officer who killed him. Although Ali Saber’s body appears lifeless, the angel wings growing from his back and colorful flowers sprouting from his bloody wound suggest otherwise. Morayef compares the poet Pablo Neruda’s quote “you can step on the flowers but you can’t prevent the spring” to the mural. Young Czech reformists used the quote in their fight against crushing restrictions on personal freedoms during the Prague Spring in 1968.⁵³ Likewise, the mural’s flowery imagery suggests that attempts to limit freedoms can only increase revolutionary spirit. After all, cutting flowers spreads more seeds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Egyptian citizens used creative activism to mobilize social change in Cairo’s public spaces during the Arab Spring. During times of revolution, public spaces become contested spaces of power in that their potential experiences differ based on individual positionality. Citizens used public spaces, whether old walls or newly erected barriers, for resistance in response to governmental efforts to censor traditional media, limit expressive freedoms, and homogenize Egyptian identity. The resulting images captured current events, explored national identity, and imagined the development of future Egyptian life, while representing myriad goals including gender equality, religious freedom, economic stability, and political change.

Likewise, images created by Ganzeer, Zeft, and Ammar Abo Bakr, among other artists and activists, depicted the array of experiences held by Egyptians during the Arab Spring. The three artists suggested plurality as a solution to conflict. The multitude of available graffiti makes it impossible for a single narrative to encompass the vast array of revolutionary demands. Thus, graffiti places plurality at the forefront of the discussion. Therefore, the aforementioned artists

⁵² Laura King, “Egyptian student’s death at protest to be probed,” *LA Times*, October 12, 2013.

⁵³ Rebecca Solnit, “You Can Crush the Flowers, But You Can’t Stop the Spring,” *Common Dreams*, November 22, 2011, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2011/11/22/you-can-crush-flowers-you-cant-stop-spring>.

and examined works are important contributions to Egypt as they demonstrated the contested nature of national identity, future, and visions of Egyptian history. The artists depicted current events, but as their art was augmented, amended or even erased, they provided a forum for organic, dynamic and active participation in dialogues about the future of Egypt. Since the Arab Spring, the international community has experienced an increase in tumultuous global politics and a diminution in the line between persona and political. Indeed, creative activism magnifies the role of individuals from all backgrounds as active participants, not passive spectators, in the creation of their future and sources of critically engaged media. After all, cultural historian Joe Austin writes, “A revolution that does not allow citizens to write on the city walls can be no revolution at all.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Joe Austin, “More to See Than a Canvas in White Cube: For an Art in the Streets,” *City* 14, no. 1-2 (2012): 33-44.

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