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IMPROVISATORY PEACE ACTIVISM?

Graffiti during and after Egypt's most recent revolution[1]

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On January 27, 2011, just two days after the start of massive protests against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo's Tahrir Square, artist Ganzeer released a pamphlet entitled "How to Revolt Intelligently."[2] Circulated by email—and on paper, after the Egyptian government shut down the internet on January 28—the pamphlet highlighted what protesters should wear to protect their bodies (hooded sweatshirts, thick gloves, protective glasses, and running shoes), what to carry to spread their message (spray paint for police visors, pot lids as shields, and a rose for peace), and how to combat police personnel and vehicles (Figure 16.1a, b). Political scientist and blogger As'ad AbuKhalil later described the pamphlet as "the most sophisticated manual by activists that I have seen" complete with "well-done illustration."[3] Indeed, Ganzeer's pamphlet echoed German studies scholar Edgar Landgraf's framing of improvisation as "a basic means for the affirmation of agency and even survival in a society that has become utterly unpredictable."[4]

Prior to the January 2011 protests, basic survival in Egyptian society had grown increasingly difficult. Economically, prices for staple goods such as bread and fruit had skyrocketed while the minimum wage had remained stagnant since 1984. Additionally, though increasing numbers of youth had access to education, 700,000 annual university graduates pursued only 200,000 new jobs every year.[5] Wealth was concentrated in the hands of the few at the expense of the many; six men owned 4.3 percent of the country's wealth while 25 percent of the country lived below the poverty line.[6] Politically, the Mubarak regime had long maintained a state of emergency, contributing to a concentration of power that enabled Mubarak to appoint and remove the prime minister, Council of Ministers, governors, mayors, and deputy mayors at will. He also had the ability to dissolve parliament as he saw fit and bypass their law-making authority through public referenda on proposed laws. This—combined with Mubarak's control over a vast array of militarized security forces—meant that corruption was rife within the government and other public institutions. Socially, issues such as gender and urban–rural inequalities meant that the state's omnipresence heightened power disparities. The prosecution of civilian criminal offenses in military courts and the ban on gatherings of more than five people, for instance, were just two among many symptoms of the systematic stifling of Egyptian society. As political scientist Ann Lesch writes, prior to the January 2011 protests, "all aspects of public life were controlled, ranging from censorship of cultural and media production to the operation of labor unions."[7]

Figure 16.1a Page 10 of "How to Revolt Intelligently," depicting items to carry and wear

Artist: Ganzeer. Image source: *Public Intelligence*.

Figure 16.1b Page 12 of "How to Revolt Intelligently," depicting how to combat police

Artist: Ganzeer. Image source: *Public Intelligence*.

For months after the initial eighteen days of protest, Egypt's future was, in Landgraf's words, "utterly unpredictable." Such uncertainty created an environment of decentralized and open-ended political protest, matching what cultural studies scholar John Lennon has labeled the "spontaneous, rupturing quality" of graffiti.[8] The use of graffiti began a process of democratizing Egyptian public spaces, but did so because of both the content and the forms that various graffiti took. For instance, when artist Hossam used the poetry of Egyptian cultural icon Salah Jahin in his work, conservative Islamists took offense at the use of the word "worship" in terms of an infatuated lover and scratched it from the wall, believing that the word should be reserved for God.[9] Additionally, protesters imprinted hundreds of thousands of messages throughout prominent locations, including on trees in Tahrir Square, making art a public good (Figure 16.2).[10] In so doing, the "interaction" between art and spectator (to use performance scholar Peggy Phelan's term) offered a different approach to Egyptian engagement with public space, in which the spectator—whether through conservative censorship or the decentralization of graffiti—had license to challenge art, recreate it, or offer an alternative message.[11]

In examining graffiti during the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), and the subsequent presidency of Mohamed Morsi, it becomes clear that these artworks were improvisatory acts that enabled both artists and surrounding communities to inch their way towards "survival" of the ongoing struggle by

Figure 16.2 A tree in Tahrir Square covered in protest messages
Source: Nicole Salazar, 2011.

affirming their "agency" and staking a claim for the future of Egypt.[12] At the same time, that graffiti was artistic and political in both content and form meant that its improvisation sought to solve specific problems of marginalization and oppression while crafting and cultivating spaces of positive peace that restored relationships, enabled social practices such as mourning and memorialization, and integrated multiple community stakeholders. In content, graffiti expresses the artist's intentional choices and the revolution's call for "bread, freedom, and social justice." In form, the pieces described below are works of aesthetic beauty with a distinct style; in making them, activists engaged in acts of resistance in response to a particular socio-political moment. These responses thus position graffiti as improvisations that reclaim and reframe contested urban and public spaces, reverberating beyond the walls upon which they are painted and echoing as well as amplifying the voices and events that they reflected. But what is perhaps most powerful about the improvisatory move that graffiti makes is that it speaks truth to power in a way that invokes a response from the mechanisms and machinations of state control.

My argument is twofold: 1) Egyptian graffiti embodies the three central tenets of the revolution, and 2) it is improvisatory in both artistic form and political content. In reflecting the revolution's three central tenets—economic, political, and social justice—graffiti uses Egypt's urban walls to amplify, challenge, and reinscribe the revolution's demands. Artistic calls for economic justice ("bread") expose the longstanding and growing gap between rich and poor, the subalternity of children who live on urban streets, and ongoing contestation about Egypt's future.[13] Demands for political justice ("freedom") unveil dissonant opinions about the Egyptian military, the decentralized nature with which graffiti was employed, and the social vulnerability required for political freedom. Calls for social change ("social justice") draw attention to the gendered façade of perfection around revolutionary euphoria that

elides sexual harassment issues and the policing of women's bodies such as through so-called "virginity tests" administered by the military, the historic cross-religious resonances of the revolution, and the need for common spaces of memorial.

Second, graffiti, by its very nature, is improvisatory both in artistic form and political content. By this, I mean that the actual act of what to spray and how to do so takes influence from both structural macro-level issues (i.e., economic inequality, mass corruption, and sexual harassment) and immediate micro-level concerns (i.e., needing a memorial to honor protesters who died supporting the revolution and reclaiming specific artworks after state-sponsored censorship). Both the macro and the micro dovetail in the making of graffiti, where choices of location, symbolism, and artistic form constitute particular responses to general economic, political, and social configurations of the Egyptian state. In so doing, artist–activists transformed the economic and socio-political goals of the revolution into an improvisational assertion that the creation of beauty, too, can shape Egyptian life.

Economic justice

During Mad Graffiti Weekend in May 2011, Ganzeer worked to create *Tank vs. Biker* (Figure 16.3). The mural shows the stencil of a life-sized tank pointing its turret at a young boy, who is balancing a large tray of bread on his head while riding a bicycle.[14] The use of the "bread boy" was intentional, as he represents millions of children living on city streets who struggled to survive during Mubarak's regime. The intense image is "absurd" in its disproportional nature: What possible military threat could a boy selling bread pose, one that warrants the focus of all of a tank's energies?[15] This imbalance reflects the economic dynamics that resulted in the core message of the revolution. At its heart, the revolution's cry for "bread" was one that demanded a redistribution of wealth and a reassessment of how Egypt managed its economy. By the time of the revolution, the longstanding gap between rich and poor had increased for some time and over 60 percent of the population lived on less than two dollars a day.[16] Ganzeer repurposed the wall beneath the Sixth of October Bridge in Cairo's Zamalek neighborhood to paint this stark picture.

Ganzeer's work recalls the iconic 1989 image of a Chinese man standing before a column of tanks in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, holding two shopping bags. There, too, economics made an appearance.[17] Both images force viewers to see the injustice at play. In *Tank vs. Biker*, the viewer's position is accentuated by artist Sad Panda's inclusion of a sad panda, which stands behind the biker and takes in the whole scene (Figure 16.4a). The observing

Figure 16.3 Tank vs. Biker

Artist: Ganzeer. Image source: *Huck Magazine*.

panda, a solitary and lonesome creature that Sad Panda uses to interrogate peoples' "ability to trivialize the greatest things" while pushing them to "feel all the sadness of this morbid world," pulls the viewer into an observational stance and throws focus to the violent economic disparity between boy and tank.[18] The poignant, plain, and poised image of the sad panda reflects Landgraf's improvisatory survival, imploring viewers to recognize and respond to Egypt's growing inequality.

Indeed, economic issues contributing to the revolution disproportionately affected residents of deprived urban areas, given infrastructure in disrepair, growing shantytowns, 92 percent of students attending overcrowded and ill-serviced public schools, and half of Cairo's residents lacking "basic utilities."[19] Simultaneously, the rich history of Egyptian workers organizing to demand higher wages and better working conditions, such as the April 6 Youth Movement that organized a strike in 2008 in support of textile workers in Mahalla before spreading nationwide, laid the groundwork for economic–artistic protest. Such activism contributed to a successful court case compelling the government to increase the national minimum wage. Mubarak's Council of Ministers ignored the ruling in mid-2010, and rallies broke out nationwide, presaging the January 2011 protests. An unintended consequence of the intermittent 2010 protests, however, was that drop-in centers and shelters offering food, clean water, and shelter to the 50,000 children living on city streets were unable to carry out their public service missions consistently. By January 2011, these children had no reliable or regular place of refuge and were often co-opted into the revolution's fervor as they wandered toward Tahrir Square and other major protest venues.[20] Pro-Mubarak supporters convinced them to throw stones at protesters as "a national patriotic act," leading to detainment for some children and death for others.[21]

Nationally marginalized and socio-economically disenfranchised, increasing the profile of children living on urban streets became a priority for artists. For example, the Mona Lisa Brigades, a collection of artists who first came together to reinvigorate *Tank vs. Biker* (see below),

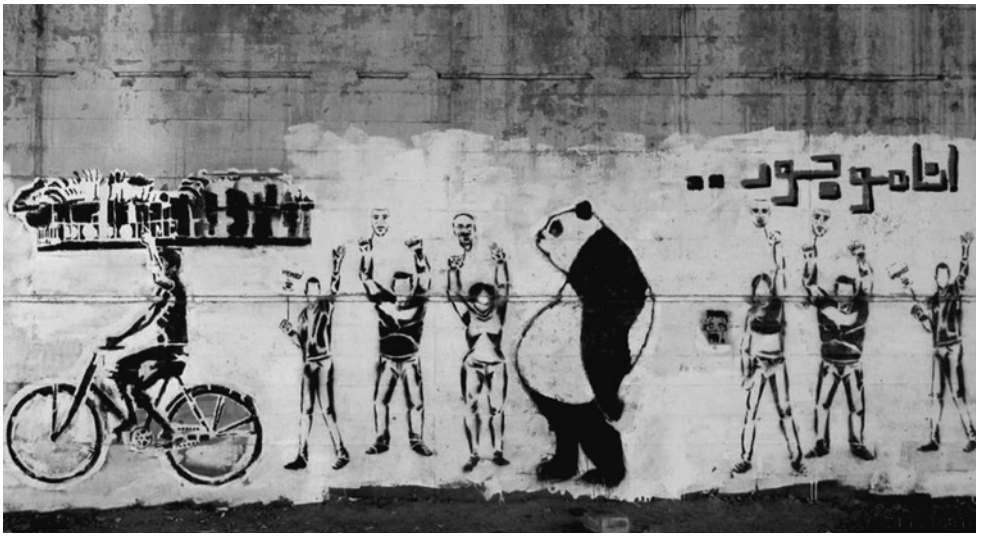

Figure 16.4a Tank vs. Biker, original by Ganzeer, right side shown here after first edit

Source: *BBC*.

Figure 16.4b *Tank vs. Biker*, original by Ganzeer, left side shown here after first edit
Source: *CALEDONIYYA.*

started a campaign titled "I Want to Be." In the campaign, the Mona Lisa Brigades asked these children about what prevented them from reaching their goals—one Brigades member, projecting an understanding of Egypt's predicaments, asked: "Is it the corrupted state? The unfair distribution of wealth?" Then, the Brigades stenciled—a common technique that allowed designs to be shared and artwork to be replicated—the children on the walls of Cairo's Ard El Lewa neighborhood.[22] Yet, even as the Brigades sought to remind passersby that the children were also part of the Egyptian revolutionary struggle, the children were being spoken for. The Brigades' stencils only showcase anonymous faces without reference to the aspirations that the children were interviewed about. In other instances when the children's aspirations were associated with their faces, it is only through the act of being represented—by the Brigades, in this case—that they were noticed, rather than on their own terms and language. Following postcolonial critical theorist Gayatri Spivak, the children were more than just illiterate, oppressed, or marginalized. Rather, they were subaltern, in that they were—and to a large extent, still are—unable to speak for themselves based on their position and their inability to access a form of discourse recognizable by the surrounding hegemonies of illiteracy, socio-economic marginalization and disenfranchisement, and revolution.[23] Despite increasing the profile of these children, the "I Want to Be" campaign underscored their subalternity simply by representing them.

Though unable to transform subalternity, the Mona Lisa Brigades' peace activism extended to other artists' calls for economic justice, including Ganzeer's *Tank vs. Biker*. After Black Sunday—an October 2011 protest at the Maspero building that housed state-run television and radio stations, in which protesters were run over by army tanks—the Brigades improved on and improvised over *Tank vs. Biker* to include a number of protesters holding Guy Fawkes masks, a clear association with the hacktivist group Anonymous.[24] Additionally, the Brigades

Figure 16.5 *Tank vs. Biker*, original by Ganzeer, shown here after second edit
Source: suzeeinthecity (b).

paid homage to those killed by the army on Black Sunday by painting protesters trying to escape from the tank, its wheels red with blood (Figure 16.4b).[25] A pro-military graffiti group known as the Badr Battalion then edited the edits, turning the Guy Fawkes masks into Egyptian flags, adding the slogan "the people and the army are one hand," and whitewashing away the biker.[26] Not to be outdone, the Brigades returned a few days later to reinstate their anti-military message, clearing the wall and painting an image of then-Field Marshall of SCAF Mohamed Tantawi, de facto head of state between Mubarak and Morsi, as an angry cannibal who ate innocent protesters (Figure 16.5).[27] Tantawi's face was later "splashed with a bucket of black paint" to conceal his identity.[28] Though it's difficult to know who covered Tantawi's face, what is clear is that both the government and fellow citizens took seriously such artistic protest and resistance. Attempts at influencing public opinion about the future direction of the country were wholly improvisational, playing out as an artistic editing process that revealed both decentralized "affirmation[s] of agency" as well as state attempts at socio-political control.[29]

Just as the edible protesters represented an economically oppressed and militarily silenced people, so Tantawi became chief economic oppressor alongside his military silencing duties. Indeed, revamping the mural that first integrated military actions with economic marginalization continued to equate the military with thieves, echoing artist Mohammed Khaled's graffiti of a protester holding a sign that read:

> What does it mean that the military is back?
> It means the thieves are back.
> It means it is once more the word against the rifle.
> It means the revolutionaries have now become thugs.[30]

Simultaneously, the ongoing editing of *Tank vs. Biker* during SCAF's rule challenged longstanding narratives of the army as neutral and on the side of the Egyptian people. Though some still held on to that idea—groups such as the Badr Battalion and whoever splashed the black paint—others such as the Mona Lisa Brigades equated the military's actual violence with the structural economic violence that made life unlivable for Egypt's youth-heavy population and residents of deprived urban areas while enriching the country's military and political elite.[31] The Mona Lisa Brigades' editing of *Tank vs. Biker* was but one example of artists engaging in improvisatory peace activism to hold military officials accountable, a key facet of how many artists saw themselves as part of the revolution's call for "freedom."

Political justice

Economics turned to politics as SCAF took over after Mubarak's departure in February 2011. While many protesters left Tahrir and other major protest spaces around the country, a substantial number remained. On February 26, 2011, one month after the first protest in Tahrir and with Mubarak having left two weeks prior, the military was unabashed about its use of force, attacking protesters at dawn. Though protesters had been "secretly arrested, tortured, and shot at" since the Mubarak regime shut down the internet on January 28, this first public military crackdown of dissent marked a turn toward military abuses of power; the military tried 12,000 people in military courts between January and August 2011, more than the total number of those brought to military trial during Mubarak's 30-year rule.[32] Initially claiming that they would institute elections after dissolving parliament, not put forward any candidates in the presidential elections, and hand power over to a civilian government within six months of Mubarak's departure, it was not until late June 2012 that Morsi took over; by that point, a year and a half of SCAF rule had passed.

During the revolution, the military arrested thousands of protesters, with perhaps an equal number killed or injured. Artists knew this, just as they were aware that many pro-military individuals were convinced by the "sinister counter-revolution" that the military engaged in, as it "sweet-talk[ed] disbelievers" and posed "in pictures alongside protesters holding babies."[33] For example, Ganzeer's sarcastic, sophisticated, and stunning poster "The Army above Everyone," featured the image of a zombie-like army gunman, dripping at the mouth with the blood of protesters, superimposed atop a pile of skulls and a fallen protest sign bearing the slogan "bread, freedom, and social justice" (Figure 16.6).[34] In the background, sketched military leaders look beyond the skulls and the viewer, as if ignoring both. Published at the start of Mad Graffiti Week in January 2012, the poster kick-started nearly two weeks of Egyptian and international artwork that attempted "to destroy the military council using the weapon of art," return to the democratizing principles of Tahrir that first underscored the revolution, and remind the Egyptian people of their vision of the future that inspired many to take to the streets.[35] Indeed, many non-artists from around the country wrote up calls for "freedom," before, during, and after Mad Graffiti Week.

Decentralized political writing was commonplace, particularly in and around Tahrir. Phrases such as "the revolution continues," "the revolution has been hijacked," "liars" (referring to SCAF's co-opting declaration of January 25, 2012 as a national holiday), "I will object so that my freedom can be born," and "a revolution against tyranny that overthrew the regime" sought to re-galvanize the revolutionary movement.[36] Some of these politico-artistic acts took place during Mad Graffiti Week. Others were unconnected and beyond the scope of the event—indeed, a number of the authors of these documented phrases remain unknown. This decentralization suggests that the slogan-based graffiti used before and during SCAF's rule was improvisatory and occurred en masse, reflecting architects Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver's idea that improvisation is a "general and loose approach to [solving] a problem."[37] The decentralization of graffitied peace activism confirms that only 26.7 percent of Egyptians used the internet in 2010—a "closed community"—whereas art on the streets makes sure that "everyone is going to see it."[38] Yet in Western media outlets, widespread labeling of the so-called Arab Spring as the "Twitter uprising" or "Facebook revolution" was insidious in intimating that these region-wide events were *caused by* Western technologies and neoliberal discourses around individual responsibility and unfettered flows of information, despite Egyptian activists clarifying that they only used "Facebook to

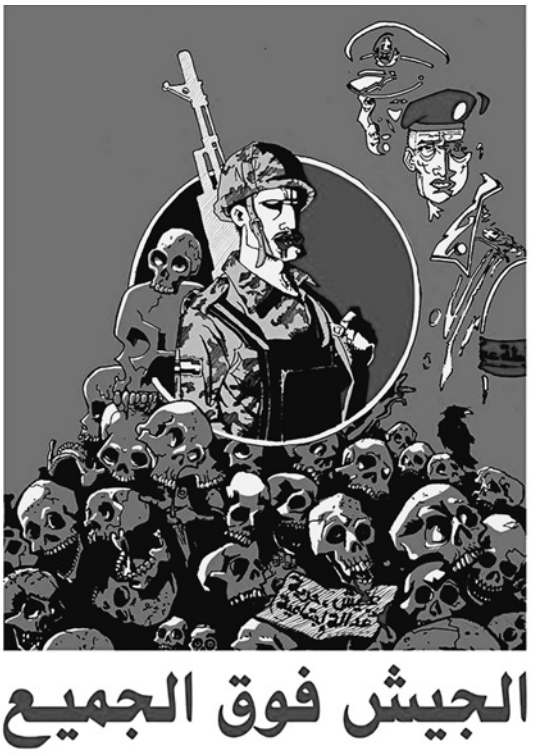

Figure 16.6 "The Army above Everyone"
Artist: Ganzeer. Source: *Hyperallergic*.

schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world."[39] Why else would artists such as El Zeft create graffiti about how "the revolution will not be tweeted," pushing against tired narratives of the West as the savior of humanity?[40] Though some of its tools were imported, Egypt's revolution was clearly locally sourced, grown, and operated (Figure 16.7).

International observers often point to graffiti such as El Teneen's April 2011 work titled *Checkmate* to promote narratives of graffiti as "revolutionary emancipation."[41] In *Checkmate*, forty pawns (a sacred number in Qur'anic and Biblical numerology) advance across a stark red-and-white chessboard toward an overturned king and the queen, bishops, knights, and rooks by his side; the people toppling the regime amid bloody protests (Figure 16.8).[42] While the simplicity and clarity of *Checkmate* may fit the emancipatory narrative, the story of graffiti is more complicated, as seen in the aforementioned edit battles that took place over *Tank vs. Biker* and artist Hossam's work. Further examples of graffiti's complexity include Ganzeer being detained and verbally attacked by other Egyptians for posting an anti-army sticker and artist Ammar Abo Bakr abandoning his plans to memorialize activist Mina Daniel as a martyr—Daniel, a Coptic Christian, was killed during the Black Sunday protests—when spray-painting volunteers claimed that "only Muslims can be martyrs."[43] Calls for "freedom" as embodied by the improvised graffiti during and after the revolution complicate notions of what political justice looks like, as public debate about the future of Egypt was played out

Figure 16.7 "The Revolution will not be Tweeted"
Artist: El Zeft. Source: *This Is Not Graffiti.*

on the country's walls in both the editing and defacing of graffiti and average citizens policing one other.

At the same time, "freedom" exists in the act of spraying a wall itself. The "unsanctioned and unregulated" nature of graffiti intertwines with its illegality and the inherent resistance to authority that graffitiing implies.[44] The graffiti writer who turns her back to others takes a risk that embodies an improvised act of trust, hoping for a delicate political justice amid Landgraf's "utterly unpredictable" society. A "free" society is one in which vulnerability enables the artist to spray a wall or the citizen to tag a statue. Artist Bahia Shehab reflects on her nerves when spraying in Tahrir: "It is safest to spray with a million people around," she writes, "because no one will notice you—you will be lost in the crowd."[45] Painting a message along a wall puts artists in risky positions as they expose themselves to create beauty, echoing conflict transformation scholar John Paul Lederach's call for peacebuilders to "risk vulnerability one step at a time."[46] Political justice that evokes the "freedom" to paint and express oneself on the walls of a city, illegally or not, fashions a new engagement with public space. That is, the degree to which Egyptian society tolerates and encourages graffiti reflects a continuation of what cultural activist Caram Kapp has called "the utopian state of Tahrir," a vulnerable euphoria that risks envisioning and embodying a more politically and socially just future.[47]

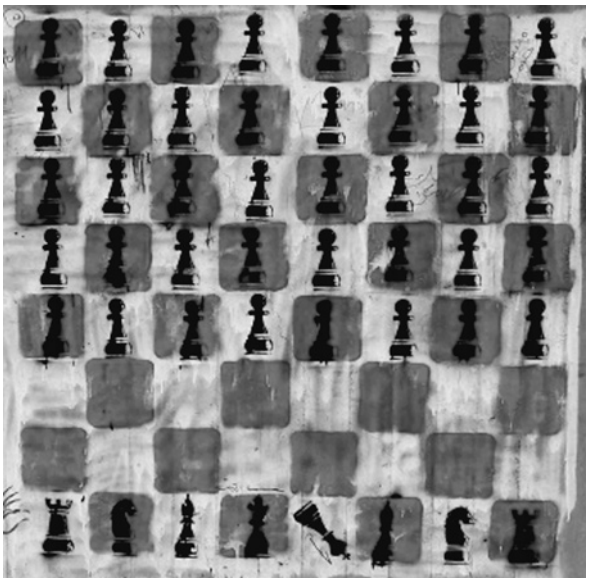

Figure 16.8 Checkmate

Artist: El Teneen. Source: Suzeeinthecity (a).

Social justice

To the extent that graffiti as improvisatory peace activism reflected the 2011 revolution's calls for "social justice," it often did so in the context of an imperfect, contested, and shifting social space. Contrary to Kapp's vision of Tahrir Square as a "utopian state," Shehab's experience of sexual harassment the night Mubarak was overthrown tells a more complicated story.[48] "Please let me celebrate tonight," she recalls thinking, "even if this young ignorant man insists on rubbing his hand against my behind in the crowd, please let me celebrate tonight."[49] Sexual harassment is a major problem in Egypt, and the website HarassMap is one among many entrepreneurial ventures that sought to counter it. Users report incidents of harassment either online or by texting; these are then aggregated and broken down according to type of harassment, with nearly 10 percent of all cases in Cairo occurring in Tahrir Square.[50] Furthermore, artist Deena created a webcomic featuring Qahera: A do-gooding, hijab-wearing superhero who fights against female oppression by beating up harassers and "misogynistic trash."[51]

Superheroes appeared on city walls as well, combining with activism that demanded change in society. Improvising a response to the blue bra incident of December 2011, in which a young female protester was dragged through Tahrir while being beaten by military police such that her torso and blue bra were exposed, artist El Teneen stenciled the young woman as a beautiful and powerful superhero flying through the air above the word "ongoing."[52] The incident reignited protests demanding the end of military rule while also heightening the status of Egyptian women in the context of the revolution.[53] Simultaneously, El Teneen's depiction transformed the young woman's victimhood into a heroic struggle for justice that all Egyptians were part of (Figure 16.9). Artists such as Shehab and Mohammed Khaled also reflected the incident in their work with slogans like "no to the stripping of the

people" and "salute to the Council of Stripping," alongside stenciled images of a blue bra and depictions of half-naked military officers saluting.[54]

To be sure, the blue bra incident was only one among many high-profile events that contributed to a renewed conversation about the double sexual standards within Egyptian society. In March 2011, military officials cracked down on a protest camp in Tahrir. They beat, strip-searched, and electrically shocked "at least 18 women" before forcing the women to endure "virginity tests" that—if failed—would result in the women being charged with prostitution.[55] This unjust public policing of women's bodies resulted in one protester from among the group, Samira Ibrahim, taking the military doctor performing the tests to court. She received no media coverage or public interest in her case. The tests were banned as a result, but the doctor was later acquitted. In contrast, when activist Aliaa el-Mahdy posted a nude photo of herself on her blog as a scream "against a society of violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment, and hypocrisy," the incident was mentioned in more than "50 articles and TV programs" and resulted in "almost three million views of her photo," prompting artist Ammar Abo Bakr to juxtapose the two in a graffiti while calling on Egyptians "to question and reeducate" themselves regarding their double standards.[56]

Calls for basic human dignity extended beyond issues of gender, seeking to incorporate other marginalized and oppressed segments of Egyptian society such as those living in deprived urban areas. Such groups were not afforded space in the Egyptian public imaginary,

Figure 16.9 "Ongoing"

Artist: El Teneen. Source: Amelia Smith.

given that state-run media stations such as those housed in the Maspero building forwarded the official government narrative in outlets ranging from "TV to radio, to newspapers, to magazines, everything."[57] Living in "a country where you can buy your Machiavelli at newspaper kiosks," artists needed to convince the Egyptian public that the media existed to further state propaganda rather than inform and educate its citizens.[58] Particularly in spaces away from Tahrir, where the state-run media machine beamed anti-protest narratives into people's homes, graffiti became an alternative media that sought to counteract the government's counterrevolution.

Graffiti also embraced history to remind Egyptians of the importance of staying united rather than furthering ongoing divides. Recalling the 1919 revolution against British colonial rule, artists recreated that revolution's united image of the crescent and the cross (Figure 16.10).[59] It was a simple stenciled image that called on Egyptians to put country above religion during the 2011 revolution and its aftermath—a prescient call, considering that estimates of numbers of Coptic Christians in Egypt range from 10–20 percent, and this religious minority has been persecuted at various moments throughout the country's history.

Such calls gained new importance after the March 2011 attack on the church and village of Soul in southern Cairo and the May 2011 attack on the Imbaba Church in northern Cairo.[60] The invocation of the crescent/cross was complicated by the fact that, at least in the Imbaba Church incident, witnesses reported that the attackers came from among a group of traditional Salafis (also known as Wahhabis).[61] Here, the complication is that Wahhabism is an ideology that was exported from Saudi Arabia to Egypt and other countries around the world.[62] The crescent/cross image sought to remind Egyptians of their own history, both in terms of the trans-religious unity of the 1919 revolution and the more recent

Figure 16.10 "Brothers," a common stencil

Source: Leslie Koch.

moment in Tahrir when Christians improvised a protective circle by linking hands around Muslims undertaking their Friday prayers.[63] It resisted the temptation to divide society, instead uniting as an "affirmation of agency" and "survival" in an "utterly unpredictable" society.[64]

Links to the past stretched beyond the twentieth century and into what Egyptologist Yasmin el Shazly has called "the origins of the rebellious Egyptian personality," found in the sketches, art, and literature of Ancient Egypt.[65] For instance, artist Alaa Awad took inspiration from the city of Luxor—often billed as "the world's greatest open-air museum" because of its still-standing Ancient Egyptian monuments and temples—to create works such as *Hara'er*.[66] Also known as *The Mural of the Free Women*, *Hara'er* features a group of hijab-wearing women armed with sticks and maps led by a priest, ready to scale a ladder to unknown and exceptional heights. A similar scene is found in the Ramasseum in Luxor, where Egyptian soldiers are depicted attacking Hittite forts during the Battle of Kadesh in the thirteenth century BCE.[67] Remarkable for its stylistic similarity to the Ramasseum image, Awad's graffiti complicates the 2011 revolution's notions of social justice by invoking historical resonances to highlight the ways in which revolutionary experiences connect across space and time, while pushing for trans-religious unity in the fight for a better Egypt. Just as the image of the crescent/cross echoed historical precedent, *Hara'er* used the past to chart an inclusive and unified present and future.

Calls for "social justice" also remembered losses that the revolution sustained during its struggle, especially in terms of those who died fighting for a new Egypt. In particular, the walls along Mohamed Mahmoud Street—a major thoroughfare leading to Tahrir and the site of numerous clashes between protesters and armed forces—turned into a makeshift memorial. Artists Hanna el Degham and Ammar Abo Bakr used the wall to pay tribute to a number of young men who died during the Port Said Massacre, a seemingly coordinated attack on fans of Cairo's Al-Ahly football club that many believe sought to avenge the often violent protesting that the Ultras (hardcore Al-Ahly supporters) undertook.[68] The young men were memorialized as "martyrs" on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, often depicted with a pair of angel's wings sprouting from their back.[69] Fellow protesters and Ultras used the wall as an improvisatory space for mourning, and family members (mothers, in particular) sometimes learned of their loved one's fate from the wall after waiting "months and months" without hearing anything from the military.[70] Such memorialization affirmed the existence and struggle of these protesters, spotlighting their agency in an "utterly unpredictable" world.[71]

Activist intentions, artistic interventions

Given graffiti's improvisatory nature and how such improvisation unifies the artistic and the political, it would seem natural to frame graffiti in the context of the aforementioned "revolutionary emancipation" narrative, one that was built on the backs of a social media awakening that celebrates the individual—and implicitly the West—above all else.[72] What this narrative ignores is that the artistic works that contributed to Egypt's most recent revolution and its aftermath highlighted a phenomenon that was distinctly Egyptian. The desires and perspectives articulated by Egyptians reflected their own political and economic struggles, historical resonances, and unique social narratives and counter-narratives. At its heart, then, graffiti during and after Egypt's most recent revolution should not only be read through the lens of uprising and freedom, but more so as reflecting the complex underpinnings of a society seeking to make change within contested and charged spaces.

Indeed, graffiti reveals Egyptians saying "no" to many different aspects of society (Figure 16.11). The multiple types of "no" that artist Bahia Shehab highlighted in her "A Thousand Times No" campaign, for instance, made clear what was at stake: "no to a new pharaoh," "no to stealing the revolution," "no to killing men of religion," "no to sectarian divisions," and "no to sniper pashas" were among her spray-painted slogans.[73] The multiplicity of challenges facing the Egyptian people, echoing calls for "bread, freedom, social justice," said no to the ongoing state of affairs and demanded inclusive change. The aims of the secular revolution should be respected, but so too should religious rights and practices. Religiosity should not divide society, but neither should it facilitate a co-opting of the revolution. Shehab's "no" took a firm stance on what she and other artists were unwilling to tolerate.

Establishing the "no" clarified the "yes," bringing to bear the peace activist component of graffiti. That is, by saying no to singular narratives, Shehab and others called for a pluralistic approach to change that brought multiple stakeholders to the table rather than silencing some in favor of others. One final no, the "No Walls" campaign, took one of the military's responses to the people's demands—the construction of concrete-block walls throughout major cities, impeding freedom of movement and protest—and transformed it into an imagined future. The walls were reconstituted as trompe-l'œil, artwork designed to create visual illusions, making them one with their surroundings by combining the context with a future vision.[74] For instance, artist Hossam integrated Palestinian resistance cartoon character Handala—a ten-year-old cartoon boy first created by Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali in 1969 that is drawn facing away from the viewer with his hands behind his back

Figure 16.11 "A Thousand Times No" campaign

Artist: Bahia Shehab. Source: Bahia Shehab.

(reflecting a disinterest in non-local political solutions to problems) as well as barefoot and in raggedy clothes (reflecting an allegiance to the poor), in order to symbolize "Palestine in its humanitarian sense—the symbol of a just cause"—into his piece.[75] Elsewhere, artist Salma el Tarzi continued the street with a future imaginary of a peaceful stroll down a tree-lined avenue. And a team of artists—Ammar Abo Bakr, Mohamed Elmoshir, Layla Magued, and Hanna el Degham among them—tied the stained glass of surrounding buildings to a young boy standing on his bicycle and peering through the wall's cracks at protesters being beaten by police. By creating visual illusions on temporary walls established by army forces seeking to divide and conquer physical and metaphysical space, artists both said "no" to the current state of affairs and "yes" to the possibility of a different future.

Improvisational transformations of and in spite of such great physical obstacles marked a move that clarifies the intersection of the artistic and the political that graffiti embodied. Graffitiing did not just advocate for peace. Rather, the very act was often peaceful, in the spirit of journalist Dorothy Thompson's oft-quoted idea that peace is not the absence of violence but instead the presence of creative alternatives to violence. These creative alternatives, which challenged the very nature and fundamental mechanisms of hegemonic control, contested and pushed against the machine of the Egyptian state. Though graffiti was unable to make the subaltern speak—something inherent to the subaltern rather than a flaw of graffiti as a form—it aided the revolution by documenting and exposing the fault lines between the state and everyday citizens, as well as among Egyptians themselves, such that the state was compelled to respond and take seriously the demands of artists as activists. More broadly, decentralized and improvisatory art forms have the capacity to go beyond negative peace towards positive peace, provided the forms chosen fit that moment of the conflict's life cycle, such as when they facilitate and accentuate social systems and relationships, as in mourning and memorialization. In Egypt's case, graffiti—both in form and content—was in the right place at the right time to unify various political and artistic challenges during and after the revolution. By converting pre-existing and temporary structures, citizens and artists alike re-articulated and reconstituted their militarized surroundings as reclaimed and contested spaces, uniting activist intentions with artistic interventions.

Notes

1 I wish to thank the editors of this volume for their careful and thoughtful comments, as well as Ghadeer Mansour and Mohamed Sallam for reviewing earlier versions of this essay. Outside opinions are most important here, because I am nothing more than an interested observer of Egypt's most recent revolution, particularly in terms of the intersection of improvisatory artistic and political practices. I have never been to Egypt, nor have I walked the streets or touched the walls that were and are furnished with the graffiti described herein. The copyrights for all artwork found in this chapter belong to the artists who created them. Full citations regarding where each artwork was found are in the Notes, referenced at the first mention of each image.

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4 Edgar Landgraf, *Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 139.

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8 John Lennon, "Assembling a Revolution: Graffiti, Cairo and the Arab Spring," *Cultural Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (2014): 241.
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36 Hamdy and Karl, 114–131.

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Islam (and Islam in general), while highlighting the increasing frequency with which Saudi Arabia has exported Wahhabism to countries that have no historical precedent for it.

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