The 25 January revolution that took place in Egypt in 2011 was not the first of the Arab Spring – the Tunisian one preceded it – yet it was the one with the most impact on the trajectory of revolutions in the region. One could argue that without the Egyptian revolution, there would not have been an “Arab Spring” as we know it: The 25 January revolution was distinct not only because of Egypt’s importance in the politics of the Arab world, but also because it foregrounded forms of political expression that had an impact on political protests across the region (Khatib, 2013). One such form is street art.

Before the 25 January revolution, visual expression in public space in Egypt was largely the domain of the regime. Visual tools of articulating political dissent were limited to demonstrations such as those organised by the Kifaya movement in 2005, when protesters would carry banners and posters criticising the President and the police, making visual expressions of dissident politics fleeting in nature. The Egyptian revolution of 2011 made visual expression a key tool in political protest, catalysing the use of street art in other revolutions that followed in the Arab world, such as in Libya and Syria.

The Egyptian revolution of 2011 made visual expression a key tool in political protest, catalysing the use of street art in other revolutions that followed in the Arab world, such as in Libya and Syria. The 25 January revolution, then, changed political dynamics in Egypt as street art emerged as a key form of expression, used for a variety of purposes: expressing political demands; criticising the regime; congratulating the people on the revolution; memorialising the revolution’s martyrs; naming and shaming oppressors; expressing solidarity with other Arab revolutions; and commenting on current affairs. What started with simple stencils of a fist denoting defiance – the earliest form of street art in the Egyptian revolution, with the fist being the symbol of the 6 April activist movement against Mubarak – transformed into a form of visual commentary on political and social developments. Street art has evolved in content and form from stencils and graffiti into large-scale murals, and its presence as topical commentary has entered everyday life in Egypt, so that it has become almost expected to witness new street art emerging whenever the political trajectory in Egypt takes a new turn (Tripp, 2013).

The Days of the Revolution

During the days of the 25 January revolution, street art was mostly used to mock the Mubarak regime and to express citizen demands for change. Simple graffiti began to appear on walls, such as some in Bab el Louk in downtown Cairo that said, “I want to see another president B4 [before] I die” (Gowaily, 2012). An interesting dimension of such graffiti is that, like the noted example, they were sometimes written in English as a way of appealing to the international community.

However, most graffiti were in Arabic and very local in their cultural references. For example, on Boustan Street in downtown Cairo, a stencil of the great Egyptian singer Oum Koulthoum appeared along with the title of one of her most famous songs, “Patience Has Limits.” Several pieces depicting the ousted President as a pharaoh also appeared. As such, Egyptian street art was a way for Egyptians to reach out to others within their own community by drawing on shared cultural references and heritage.

This sense of national belonging was echoed in street art referencing Egypt’s diverse religious land-
scape. As Egypt harbours a spectrum of commitments to religious doctrine, a stencil appeared on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo affirming the need to transcend categorising Egyptians according to religious expression. This was done through the representation of three women’s heads: the first, on the right, is unveiled; the second wears a headscarf; and the third is covered with a niqab only revealing the eyes. The caption accompanying the stencil proclaimed, “Don’t categorise me.” Similarly, a mural by Freedom Painters in Abbas el Akkad Street in Nasr City referenced the famous ceiling mural in the Sistine Chapel, showing a hand with a tattoo of a cross touching the finger of a hand carrying prayer beads with the words “take care” in English above, the letter “t” made to look like a cross and the letter “c” like a crescent.

Street art during that time was characterised by a sense of optimism about Egypt’s future and of national pride. “Hold your head up, Egyptian” was a slogan seen on many walls across the country, as were statements referencing the most famous slogan of the Arab Spring, “The people want the overthrow of the regime,” such as one appearing on Mansour Mohamed Street in Zamalek that said, “The people overthrew the regime. We won.” It was signed “Tahrir youth.” Thus, street artists were calling for national harmony and a sense of togetherness in Egyptian society as the country looked forward to a brighter future.

The Post-Revolution Period

As Egypt began to witness a number of challenges in the post-revolution period, the mood in street art changed to reflect those challenges. Several stencils and murals appeared commemorating the martyrs of the revolution (Armbrust, 2012), as well as citizens who were still being detained for political activity by the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Street art began to criticise the leaders of the SCAF, showing them as a continuation of the old order. Well-known pieces of street art, such as one of SCAF leader Hussein Tantawi’s underwear, lent their creators public recognition and international acclaim, so that for the first time in Egypt’s history, street artists such as Ganzeer, Keizer, Hosni, and Sad Panda became famous. Through their work, Egyptian citizens were attempting to reclaim public space from the regime and, in so doing, reclaim political agency.

A serious challenge faced in Egypt in the post-revolution period concerns the position of women, who have continued to be sexually harassed and assaulted not only by thugs but also by the police. These assaults have been inflicted to terrorise the wider population by targeting women’s honour.

Street artists played an activist role in this context. As the SCAF-controlled media tried to influence the political process through propaganda, street art appeared cautioning people against media messages about maintaining the old order through calls for “stability.” One stencil by Keizer in Mahmoud Bassiouni Street in downtown Cairo showed a man with a television set for a head shooting himself in the head, captioned in English, “Kill your television.” A drawing by Hosni in Tahrir Square also showed a man with a television overtaking his head, rendering him cross-eyed and with his tongue hanging out idiotically. The slogan said, “Join the largest political party in Egypt: The Sofa Party.” Underneath it continued, “Yes to stability. Yes yes yes my darling.”

A serious challenge faced in Egypt in the post-revolution period concerns the position of women, who have continued to be sexually harassed and assaulted not only by thugs but also by the police. These assaults have been inflicted to terrorise the wider population by targeting women’s honour. A well-known incident took place in 2012, when a woman was beaten and dragged down the street in Cairo by the police, causing her abaya to lift revealing her blue bra. Stencils of a blue bra began appearing all over Cairo in solidarity with the woman, such as one on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo that added to the bra stencil the statement “No to stripping the people,” signed “Long live the revolution.” On the same street, another stencil represented a police officer, Ahmed Adel El Mogy, who became known for sexu-
ally assaulting female detainees by inflicting on them “virginity tests” and whom one woman testified against in court. The stencil was captioned, “Rapist of our daughters’ honour.” In a conservative country where issues such as women’s honour are normally only referred to in hushed tones, these kinds of loud expressions in public space speak to the beginning of a fundamental change in society as social and political taboos start to be broken.

A New Politics of Resistance

Street art in Egypt in the context of the revolution became an illustration of the breakdown of the wall of fear and of taboos (Khatib, 2012). Street walls almost replaced newspapers in commenting on the trajectory of the revolution. No sooner had the country faced an emerging challenge than street artists would diligently call public attention to it. In this way, street art played a role in the creation of a new public sphere in Egypt, where awareness about issues concerning citizens is raised, topics previously regarded as taboo are highlighted, and debates about what can be done about them are conducted. Street art also indirectly articulated a “conversation” between the government and the people, as a new government took over from the SCAF but continued to exercise control over freedom of expression. In this “conversation,” street art was used by citizens to defy this control. When the government put up barriers in the street to restrict public movement, street artists painted huge murals over the barriers, such as one on Sheikh Rihan Street in Cairo, where the barrier was cleverly painted by seven artists to depict the illusion of the street as if the barrier did not exist. And whenever the government whitewashed walls to cover murals or graffiti, street artists responded by writing sarcastic comments on those walls, such as “Congratulations on the paint!” Street art, then, has become a prime tool in the new politics of resistance led by Egyptian citizens. As other revolutions began in the Arab world, Egyptian street artists also expressed their support for those revolutions through their work, speaking of the birth of a new sense of belonging in the region. Gone is the patriarchal, rigid “Arab nationalism” promoted by Arab dictators, and in its place is a new-found pan-Arab solidarity characterised by pluralism and fluidity. Street art is playing an important role in uniting citizens both across and within borders in their continuing struggle for freedom and dignity.

References


