STREET ART IN CAIRO AS A MEANS OF POLITICAL RESISTANCE EMPLOYED TO RESIST EGYPT’S MILITARY GOVERNMENT (2011-2012)

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ABSTRACT

This article discussed street art in Cairo after the Arab Spring (الربيع العربي). Revolution took place on January 25, 2011 when Egypt was led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). This paper was aimed at elaborating how street art in Cairo served as a means of political resistance employed to resist SCAF military government. This study employed a descriptive-qualitative method, Jenkins’s (2009) participatory culture theory and Peteet’s (1996) art as a means of political resistance. This study found out that, in general, street art or graffiti in Cairo during SCAF military government era emerged in the forms of stencil and mural works. In that era, street art served as a means of political resistance employed for various purposes such as criticizing the regime, telling stories of what was going on, depicting violence and murders committed by the security forces, commemorating martyrs of the revolution and telling stories of struggle, oppression and sexual harassment towards Egyptian women. Street art offered opportunities to the community to participate there so as to express their aspirations and make Cairo’s streets and walls public space for a participatory culture. Graffiti or street art found in Cairo served as a means of political resistance. Most of the murals on the walls depicted chaotic situations of that era, commemorated events and martyrs of the revolution, and commented on the social and political situations sharply.

KEYWORDS: Street Art, Cairo, Arab Spring, Supreme Council of the Armed Forces

INTRODUCTION

A series of revolutions hitting the Middle East and North Africa from December 2010 to the beginning of 2013 known as "Arab Spring" (الربيع العربي) was what Aleida Assmann defined as "events having such far-reaching consequences" (Naguib, 2016). Not only did the Arab Spring leave a trail behind on the political and social lives of the pertinent countries, but it also marked such a big change in the forms of artistic expressions in other countries. The January-25-2011 revolution in Egypt was not the first Arab Spring; however, this revolution was deemed to be the most impactful revolution in the Arab’s world.

The January-25-2011 revolution differed in that not only did Egypt played a crucial role in the Arab’s world, but this revolution also raised a new form of political expressions in this region one of which was street art (Khatib, 2013). This revolution employed visual
expressions as its primary means of political demonstration; moreover, it also catalyzed the use of street art in other revolutions such as that of Libya and Syria. With the population amounting to over 80 million people, Egypt was known as the leader of the Arab countries in the cultural, political and military fields.

During the January-25-2011 revolution, lasting for 18 days from January 25 to February 11, 2011, more than 6 million Egyptians flocked the streets, conquering them and creating the biggest pro-democracy rally in the history of the Arab’s world (Hamid, 2011). Tahrir Square located in the heart of Cairo was a landmark of the central culture serving as the home of the Archaeological Museum, headquarters of the Arab League, and headquarters of a television channel owned by the ruling National Party served as the epicenter of those series of this revolution (Lennon, 2014).

Hosni Mubarak, the President of the Republic of Egypt having been in office for over three decades was faced with resistance of citizens having been globally aware and declaring themselves as the oppositions at Tahrir Square, filled with Egypt’s historic, rich elements and media apparatuses available at that time. They are those willing to risk their life when they flocked to Tahrir square demanding Mubarak’s resignation. Many of them recorded their experience directly, documented their photos and videos with their gadgets and uploaded them to various social media platforms such as Blog, Facebook, and Twitter. Those protests photos and videos were then rapidly widespread throughout Egypt and the world (Lennon, 2014).

Street art is a method employed to resist Mubarak. Although street art had existed in Egypt several years before, the January-25-2011 was the event triggering a sudden surge of graffiti all over Cairo’s streets. That revolutionary graffiti emerged on the first days of the revolution in which those Egyptian protesters would spray their messages on the walls to the government of Egypt. Some other people would design, cut, and make stencils that they would bring to the streets; then, they would make graffiti during and after the rally (Morayef, 2012). During that 18-day revolution, there were many slight clashes, victories, and defeat territorialized and documented through graffiti. Street art played such an important role during that 18-day revolution. Ahmed Aboul Hasan, one of the protesters, said that “the walls” were a voice of democracy, the birthplace of Egypt’s revolutionary identity, where he was nurtured (2014, 134).

Lina Khatib (2013) said that street art during the revolution was employed for various purposes such as to express political wishes, to criticize Mubarak’s regime, to show the protesters’ solidarity to other Arab countries undergoing the revolution, and to commemorate victims of the rallies. When street art appeared on the walls around Tahrir Square on the onset of the revolution, most of the graffiti, stencils and murals contained ridicules and reproaches against Mubarak’s regime.

A depiction of irony denouncing Mubarak and his regime, together with pieces of graffiti calling for a revolution symbolically marked the beginning of the revolutionary street art. During and after the series of mass rallies, those artists decorated walls of Cairo’s downtown, especially Tahrir Square with various murals. Charles Tripp (2013) said that, during the revolution, street art had evolved well from simple forms such as simple stencils and tags and large-scale murals to contents, and that street art served as
‘topic-based commentators’ existing in Egyptians’ daily life. Tripp (2013) added that it could be ensured that street art would follow Egypt’s political situation changes.

The revolution lasting for two weeks and 3 days ended on February 11, 2011 was marked with the resignation of President Husni Mubarak who had ruled the country for 30 years. Afterwards, Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over the government.

SCAF’s reign lasting from February 12, 2011 to June 30, 2012, created the second wave of revolution in Egypt (Abaza, 2013).

Street Art

Street art is a unique phenomenon taking place in public space and capable of attracting the attentions of many people, especially those actively involved in the artistic and cultural fields. This phenomenon has various definitions from various experts such as Lewisohn (2008), and Young (2014). Street art refers to unauthorized pieces of art works or artistic expressions created in public locations. It includes graffiti, stencils, stickers, murals, and non-commercial posters taped to a surface or an object such as a mailbox, a trash can, or a sign (Ross, 2016).

The term ‘graffiti’ derives from Italian graffere, which means ‘to scratch a surface’. In many dictionaries, graffiti is defined as ‘words or pictures, especially those which are funny, sarcastic, or political, on a wall, door, in a public locations’. Graffiti is often defined as ‘an illegal application of media on a surface’. Ancient pictures and paintings have existed since the dawn of mankind; in fact, they have survived in caves for thousands of years. The Greeks and the Romans scratched their names and their protest poems on buildings.

Modern graffiti was rooted in the United States. In the beginning, graffiti had simple forms such as names or written words usually in the form of ‘tags’, most of which were written by children and teenagers of that age. They did the ‘tagging’ or marked the walls or other surfaces with their pen names. The first widely-known modern graffiti writer were Cornbread and Julio, based in Philadelphia and New York. They spread their graffiti pen names, usually a combination of aliases and street numbers, and they made them in late 1960s and early 1970s.

This form of art developed and flourished several years later. It started from an initial spray tag painted or drawn with a marker serving as the signature to mark the zone or serving as a simple aesthetic piece of work with capital letters.

In today’s era, graffiti is considered as a form of vandalism. Graffiti usually refers to words or figures drawn, marked, carved, scratched, sprayed painted, or written on a wall or other surfaces (Cowick, 2015).

A mural or an urban painting is a painting painted on a building or a wall. While a stencil is a kind of an urban painting using a template cast to draw or paint a letter, number, symbol, form, or pattern identical applied for each use. In its fabrication, a stencil uses a spray paint or a marker. A stensil may be in the forms of a phrase, picture, a combination of both of them. Street artists prefer to use a stencil due to its practical fabrication, so it will not take a long to to fabricate it, and they are able to make a mss production of their work
as many as possible (Cowick, 2015).

Poster street art is usually hand-made, or it is printed on a piece of thin paper. This kind of street art has an advantage; it is capable of being easily reproduced with a screen printing kit. Since it is made in a studio or at home, it takes a little time required to install it. Many artists use whole wheat paste taped to the walls in public locations. It is well known that whole wheat paste will make a poster last longer in a bad weather (Cowick, 2015).

One of the main characteristics of street art is its anonymity, without mentioning the painter’s name. One of the main reasons why street artists are anonymous is that street art is considered illegal since it seemed to be a form of vandalism or an action destroying a property. Another characteristic of street art is that it has a clear inclination. Therefore, in general, street art tends to be non-neutral. Moreover, it contains lucid messages due to its temporary nature. Another characteristic of street art is its visibility. With big murals or posters in massive numbers, street art should be clearly visible, so the community will receive its messages in a relatively short time (Cowick, 2015).

Graffiti may serve as a means of political resistance by imagining a competitive future, jotting down memories, commenting on political events critically, and commemorating and lamenting the deaths of martyrs (Peteet, 1996).

In this article, I used the term 'graffiti' and 'street art' alternately when referring to inscriptions or paintings on a wall in public locations. Cedar Lewisohn (2008) claimed that, in general, graffiti is considered as “any unofficial media applications to a surface” in public locations; meanwhile, street art served as a subgenre of graffiti. Moreover, Lewisohn said that graffiti focused more on typography, while street art focused more on a drawing. However, it was difficult to distinguish them since street art might use texts and graffiti might use a good-quality graphic (Lewisohn, 2008).

Participatory Culture

Jenkins (2009) defined participatory culture as a culture which faced a relatively low resistance against its artistic expressions and civil society involvement, a culture of assessing and sharing various artistic expressions and having a kind of informal mentorship like knowledge sharing from the experienced to the novice. Moreover, he added that participatory culture was a culture where the people (as an individual or public) could not act as consumers; they could also become the contributors.

Street Art as a Means of Political Resistance

Using a literature study, I collected data from library sources such as articles, journals, thesis, papers, books, news articles as the reference; I then analyzed them using a theory of participatory culture. I obtained the primary data such as pieces of street art works from various sources such as news articles, blogs, and webpages.

Of all the data obtained, I used 4 pieces of street art works to be analyzed. The first work, a mural titled “Half Tantawi half Mubarak” by Omar Fathy, was obtained from an article on Jadaliyya.com website titled “The Revolution’s Barometer” written by Mona Abaza. The
second work, a stencil titled “A Blue Bra”, obtained from an internet article titled “Blue Bra Graffiti (Bahia Shehab)”, which was written Nama Khalil, could be accessed on Design and Violence page of www.moma.org. The third and fourth works were a mural of Sheikh Effat and Mina Daniel and a “No Wall” project mural on Sheikh Rihan street, documented by Soraya Morayef. She was an author and journalist from Cairo documenting revolutionary street art in Egypt. Her documentations could be accessed on her blog named Suzee in the City.

“Half Tantawi Half Mubarak” Street Art

After a series of 18-day mass rallies ended and SCAF took over the government, walls in Cairo which had been once filled with revolutionary street art were erased by members of SCAF. The soldiers painted the walls white in order to put the city downtown in order, as if that chaos described and inscribed had never happened. In return, those professional and amateur artists repainted new drawings there. One of the most famous pieces of street art was a mural found on Mohamed Mahmoud street and named “Half Tantawi Half Mubarak”. That mural was painted by Omar Fathy.

This Omar Fathy’s mural depicted a big portrait of a face half of which was the face of the former President Mubarak and half other of which was the face of Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, Head SCAF who replaced Mubarak at the time. Above the facial figure was the writing “الثورة مستمرة” (“Aṣṣauratu mustamirrah”) meaning “The revolution continues”.

The end of this first-wave revolution was marked with the resignation of President Husni Mubarak who had ruled the country for 30 years. Afterwards, the government was taken over by leaders of Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) appointing Muhamad Hussein Tantawi the de facto President.
of those Egyptian leaders before and after the revolution implied that the leadership replacement from Mubarak to Tantawi (SCAF) had not changed the situation. The mural painter thought that Tantawi’s government was merely a successor of the previous Mubarak’s regime.

“The Blue Bra Street Art”

A serious threat that Egyptian people faced after the revolution concerned the position of women constantly harassed sexually by not only the thugs but also the police (Khatib, 2013). They launched those attacks in order to terrorize wider communities by targeting women’s honor. Since the onset of the revolution, women had joined the rallies and become prominent activists in the series of those mass rallies. After SCAF took over the government in February 2011, sexual harassment was one of the methods employed by the police to intimidate and humiliate women who joined the rallies in public (Abaza, 2013).

The next street art was a stencil of Bahia Shehab’s depicting a bright blue bra on top of which was a large, black Arabic script saying “Do Not Strip the People”. Below the stencil was an Arabic script resembling a foot-step saying “Long Live the Revolution”.

This “Blue Bra” was motivated by an incident taking place on December 20 2011. On that incident, a woman joining the mass rally was persecuted and dragged by the police on a street in Cairo. That law enforcer’s treatment towards the woman made her black robe revealed and the blue bra that she was wearing was exposed (Khatib, 2013).

After this incident, many activists then organize a mass rally to defend the woman against those SCAF officers’ treatment. They marched from Tahrir Square to Talaat Harb
Square, and they really attracted thousands of spectators’ attention. After that event, the blue bra served as a symbol of national contestation against SCAF and Salafists. Hundreds of blue bra murals and stencils embellished walls in the city of Cairo in order to show their solidarity with the woman (Abaza, 2013).

“Mina Daniel and Sheikh Effat” Street Art

Since January 2011, in Egypt, mass rallies had escalated on the streets ending up with violence, cruelty, and murders like Maspero Tragedy in October 2011, Mohamed Mahmoud Street from November-December 2011 to February 2012, and tragedies taking place at Port Said stadium in February 2012. Mohamed Mahmoud Street was one of the main streets leading to Tahrir Square and the Ministry of Internal Affairs office building. This street was located at the entrance of American University Cairo (AUC). Due to its strategically-situated location, this street had witnessed several violent incidents such as assaults with poison gas and massacres of hundreds of protesters by the Egyptian police. During these incidents, the armed police officers and snipers reportedly targeted and injured the eyes of those protesters (Abaza, 2016).

The next street art was a mural located on Mohamed Mahmoud Street. That mural depicted two male figures wearing robes known as Mina Daniel and Sheikh Emad Effat. Mina Daniel was a victim killed at Maspero incident, while Sheikh Effat was a victim shot dead by the police on Mohamed Mahmoud Street.

Initially, Maspero Massacre started with a peaceful mass rally on October 2011 by hundreds of Egyptians most of whom were Coptic Christians as a reaction against demolition of a church in Aswan province claimed by the Governor of Aswan to be an illegally-built building. The protesters intending to stage a sit-in in front of Maspero Television building were attacked by the security forces and the soldiers. They demanded that the Armed Forces Council remove
the Governor of Aswan. They also accused that state-owned television station of continuously broadcasting manipulated news fanning the flames of agitation against Christian adherents.

Those protesters said that they had been assaulted by plain-clothed attackers before the riot police clashed with the protesters. Smokes from the tear gas and burnt military vehicles filled the air of Maspero. Several protesters reported to BBC that they had heard gunshots. There was a video evidence recording protesters crushed by a military tank. Nigel Hetherington, an eye witness, said to BBC News that the riot police fired rubber bullets and tear gas into the crowd. This tragedy left 24 people dead and more than 200 injured (BBC News, 2011) most of whom were Coptic Christians. After this incident, murals depicting the event and victims started to spring up on the walls of Mohamed Mahmoud Street. One of the victims depicted was Mina Daniel, a 20-year-old Coptic activist, who was shot dead by a soldier on his shoulder and leg while covering the rally (Khalif, 2014).

On December 16, 2011, Sheikh Emad Effat, an Egyptian Al Azhar cleric, was shot dead by a soldier while attending a sit-in at the cabinet building. The forensic report revealed that a bullet penetrated his left arm and his chest and went out of his right arm with a 19-cm firing range. His family and students suspected that Effat might have been targeted due to his criticism against the ruling Armed Forces and due to his last fatwa prohibiting the people to vote for any parliament member candidates linked to Mubarak’s regime and any former members of the National Party (Egypt Independent, 2011).

Thousands of mourners attended Effat's funeral on the following day at the Al-Azhar mosque, including Al-Azhar clerics, politicians, Christian leaders and his students. They chanted slogans against the military government and demanded the execution of Hussein Tantawi, the head of SCAF. When the protesters reminisced about the clashes in the cabinet building, the death of Sheikh Emad Effat did not escape the memory. Effat's portrait was idolized through lots of graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud street.

Emad Effat, an Al Azhar sheikh, who was shot dead on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, and Mina Daniel, a Coptic activist, who was killed at Maspero in October 2011, became martyrs who kept appearing, disappearing, and reappearing on Cairo's wall as if they had been repertoires (Abaza, 2016). Sheikh Effat and Mina Daniel kept appearing together in lots of graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street. They were sometimes depicted holding their hands together and smiling. They symbolize religious unity in Egypt in which an Al Azhar cleric and a Coptic activist were united in their martyrdom (Abaza, 2016).

Street Art on Sheikh Rihan Street

In response to the series of rallies having taken place in Cairo, SCAF officials tried to control major roads there. They tried to limit the protesters’ movement to cabinet buildings especially the Ministry of Internal Affairs building where the protesters held their rallies. The government tried to close any public access by putting big barricaded on streets leading to the Ministry of Internal Affairs building. The barricade’s walls consisted of square blocks put on top of each other to create ‘a military zone’ (Hope, 2012). At first, this barricade of wall creating a buffer zone between the protesters and the riot police was built in November 2011 Mohammed Mahmoud street. Chaos took place when 40 protesters were killed by the riot police
using such extreme, violent measure to push the protesters out of Tahrir Square. Then, several additional barricades were built in December 2011 after Kamal Ganzouri was appointed the prime minister by SCAF, which resulted in more formidable rallies making l'Institut d'Egypte incinerated. This incident inflicted more casualties. The riot police then built more walls blocking Kasr al-Ainy Street and Sheikh Rihan Street, streets parallel to Mohammed Mahmud Street. Then, in February, they built another one after Ultras Football players were massacred, creating such huge rallies.

SCAF’s policy of building concrete walls motivated the activists and artists to launch campaigns at Facebook to paint the walls as a form of non-violence reclamation in public space against SCAF. The participants most of whom were activists and artists might have been inspired by works of Barsky, an English graffiti artist in West Bank, who employed trompe l’oeil to penetrate separating walls with illusory landscapes. SCAF’s concrete walls were quickly reclaimed. The initiative called ‘No Wall’ was carried out on March 9, 2012 (Morayef, 2012). Those artists painted landscaping views to ‘reopen’ those streets, making as if the walls had been invisible. These wall murals artistically replicated the street itself one of which was on Sheikh Rihan street. The mural painted on the wall made as if the street had been open for traffic and pedestrians.

The walls on those main streets contained murals depicting life on peaceful streets; these artists tried to change a militaristic city landscape into an ideal and peaceful city landscape. Ibrahim Essa, an editor of Al-Tahrir daily newspaper, said that ‘Concrete Wall Politics’ initiated by SCAF was divisive and sought to drive protesters from the streets where the revolution was born. Barricades built by SCAF on several main streets paralyzed the economy of small shop and coffee shop owners, taxi drivers, and big informal sectors in the downtown and areas around Mohamed Mahmoud Street, causing the citizens to continuously
demand that the military authority remove these barricades (Egypt Independent, 2012).

Those female protesters harassed in public by the security forces and those revolution martyrs kept reemerging in the forms of various murals. All violences and clashes with military authority were documented on the street walls. Street art decorating walls of Mohammed Mahmoud street made the street ‘a memorial’ constantly visited and documented until at least those works were erased by the military authority. Therefore, Mohammed Mahmoud street was dubbed “شارع العيون الحرية” (syāriun’ al-'uyūn al huriyyah) meaning “Street of the Liberated Eyes”. On these street walls, the artists wrote or painted mourning scenes in various themes such as ancient Egypt, the martyrs’ names and faces, Koranic verses, criticisms to politicians, and commentaries on what was going on in the Middle East and North Africa (Smith, 2014).

CONCLUSION

The January-25-2011 revolution changed political dynamics in Egypt with the emergence of street art as a means of political resistance. As the revolution continued in Egypt, especially in Cairo, the revolutionary street art existing in the city walls still survived to reflect the society’s attitudes towards events taking place during the SCAF reign. Street art existing on walls and streets of Cairo narrated political events taking place during the one-year SCAF reign rapidly.

In general, street art of graffiti during the SCAF reign appeared in the forms of a stencil or a mural. Street art at that time criticized SCAF leaders, accusing them of part of the previous regime. Moreover, street art depicted violence and massacres perpetrated by the security forces. Besides, street art was employed to reminisce martyrs of the revolution the number of which kept increasing as time went by. Those martyrs killed by the security forces like Mina Daniel and Sheikh Emad Effat keep emerging on Cairo’s street walls especially on Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Street art also played a crucial role in telling stories of women’s struggles, repressions and sexual harassments in Egypt.

Cairo’s street walls almost replaced newspapers and televisions as a means of reporting and commenting on the series of events after the revolution. Street art played an important role in creating a new public space in Egypt especially in Cairo. Street art raised issues currently hot in the community, highlighted topics previously deemed to be taboo, and discussed what the community could do. Street art offered the community to take part and make streets in Cairo public space for ‘a participatory culture’. Street art in Cairo served as a means of political resistance.

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