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Introducing the street art of resistance

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TODAY IS A
GOOD DAY
TO...

BURN
DOWN
THE
SYSTEM

STREET ART OF RESISTANCE

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Both creativity and culture are areas that have experienced a rapid growth in interest in recent years. Moreover, there is a growing interest today in understanding creativity as a socio-cultural phenomenon and culture as a transformative, dynamic process. Creativity has traditionally been considered an exceptional quality that only a few people (truly) possess, a cognitive or personality trait 'residing' inside the mind of the creative individual. Conversely, culture has often been seen as 'outside' the person and described as a set of 'things' such as norms, beliefs, values, objects, and so on. The current literature shows a trend towards a different understanding, which recognises the psycho-socio-cultural nature of creative expression and the creative quality of appropriating and participating in culture. Our new, interdisciplinary series Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture intends to advance our knowledge of both creativity and cultural studies from the forefront of theory and research within the emerging cultural psychology of creativity, and the intersection between psychology, anthropology, sociology, education, business, and cultural studies. Palgrave Studies in Creativity and Culture is accepting proposals for monographs, Palgrave Pivots and edited collections that bring together creativity and culture. The series has a broader focus than simply the cultural approach to creativity, and is unified by a basic set of premises about creativity and cultural phenomena.

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Introducing the *Street* Art of Resistance

Sarah H. Awad and Brady Wagoner

The world we live in today is defined more by borders and walls than by common spaces. Mental and physical barriers separate us from them. They divide those in power from the masses, separating people by nationality, ideology, and identity, and marginalizing all those who do not conform to the societal norm. But these barriers, no matter how concrete, are permeable, open to interpretation, negotiation, and destruction. This book is about the multiple ways people use imagination to reconfigure those barriers and create meaningful spaces.

The book covers a wide spectrum of sociocultural contexts in which the power dynamics and the motives for doing resistance art vary widely. Yet the case studies presented share a common intention of proclaiming spaces and influencing public discourses through street art, graffiti, and images. Throughout the book we will look at walls that have become an arena for contentious dialogues through which social and political resistance is manifest.

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We will start the introduction of the book with a case example of a revolution street art image from Egypt, connecting it to the different key aspects of street art that will be discussed in the book's chapters. We will then discuss the social life of images in urban space exploring their symbolic, dialogical, contextual, and transformative character. Finally, we will look at the potential of those images as art tools for resistance.

Revolutionary Graffiti in Egypt: A Case Example

Following 18 days of intensive nationwide protests with an epicenter in Cairo's Tahrir Square, then-president Hosni Mubarak resigned on 11 February 2011 after having been in power for 30 years. One of the most visible signs of the momentous change was a flourishing of street art in the country's major cities, including songs, monuments, posters, performances, and most of all graffiti. Simple paintings of flags, fists, and other symbols of solidarity and empowerment became ubiquitous in the streets, whereas sophisticated murals expressing revolution's values, memory, and project for the future were created in key sights, such as Tahrir (which appropriately means "Liberation" in Arabic). The revolution provided the right conditions for the emergence of major artistic talents energized by the hope for a new Egypt. Their aesthetic success brought the cause international recognition through the countless newspaper articles devoted to their art. Street art, in general, and murals, in particular, became a major tool for the Egyptian revolutionaries. They have continued to use it until this day to fight for the unrealized ideals of "bread, freedom and social justice".

Figure 1 is an exemplary mural, painted by graffiti artist Omar Fathy (graffiti signature: Picasso) in September 2012 at which time the Muslim Brotherhood had taken power through the election of Mohamed Morsi. The Brotherhood was perceived by many to care little about promoting the revolutionary agenda; they had probably also made a backroom deal with the military during the transitional period before the presidential

Fig. 1   Mural in Tahrir Square after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Graffiti artist: Omar Fathy (Picasso). Photo credit: Ranya Habib

election. The mural is significant in a number of ways, each of which points to key aspects of street art that will be addressed in the present book. First, it is painted on the corner of Tahrir Square and Mohamed Mahmoud Street, which became the most widely known site for revolutionary graffiti and was the location of many street battles with the military and police. Occupying central places in the city ensures high visibility and infuses the space with a revolutionary identity, showing it is not under full state control. Throughout this book we will see examples of strategic placement of images to advance a particular political project, as well as how places and images mutually interrelate (see Latorre, this volume; Mattar, this volume; Smith, this volume; Agustín, this volume).

Second, the mural powerfully *positions* the viewer, in this case quite literally. We stand together with the artist and the Egyptian flag from inside Tahrir, facing the violent police and military, who, in turn, shield

the faces of the political leaders behind them. The paintbrush is juxtaposed to the primitive club of the military, which is elaborated in the red text:

> A regime fearing a paint brush and a pen
> An unjust system that attacks the victim
> If you were righteous, you wouldn't have feared what I draw
> All you do is fight walls, show off your power on paintings
> But inside you, you are a coward
> You never rebuild what has been destroyed

In the case studies of this book the positioning takes other forms, such as between conflicting social groups (e.g., Irish Catholics and Protestants—see Mattar, this volume), indigenous groups' struggle with post-colonialism (see Latorre, this volume; Smith, this volume), between artists and the governing system (see Helmy & Frerichs, this volume; Nielsen, this volume; Howell, this volume; Jarbou, this volume) or positioning oneself within city space affirming presence (Zanella, this volume; Mcphie, this volume).

Third, the image is filled with local and international symbols. The military and police are represented as violent in nature through blood, skull and crossbones, fanged teeth, and a club. ACAB is an international symbol standing for "All Copes Are Bastards". The artist clothed in the colours of the Egyptian flag, represented with the tools of a more traditional painter. The composite head builds equivalences between past and present authorities, on the right Mubarak and on the left Tantawi, who was the leader of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Behind them is Mohammad Badie, the Muslim Brotherhood leader, who was thought to be running the show from behind the scenes. The text below reads "the commander never dies," which rhymes a local proverb that offspring are similar to their parents, so that the parents, in a way, never die. All these symbols operate through feelings that they produce in the viewer, rather than through their "face" value. In the studies of this book we see symbolism borrowed from diverse cultural streams, which are threaded together in street art that aims to challenge local structures of power. This is also illustrated in the book in the use of language and its iconic meaning (see Hamdy, this volume), as well as indigenous motifs (see Latorre, this volume; Smith, this volume).

Finally, it is the nature of street art to be transitory. The above mural was, in fact, the third version painted on the same spot, after earlier ones had been painted over. The first version had just the composite face of Mubarak and Tantawi with the phrase below it. The second version was painted during the presidential elections and included, behind the composite face, the faces of Amr Moussa and Ahmed Shafik, who were earlier members of Mubarak's political party. After the mural in Fig. 1, a fourth version was painted that included the face of ousted president Mohamed Morsi and the silhouette of a face with a beret behind him, suggesting the coming of military rule. The next day, the artist painted a civilian face to replace the beret, feeling that it might stifle the collective optimism following Morsi's downfall (Hamdy & Karl, 2014). Thus, this mural took on multiple forms through time, representing the changing power dynamics and popular feelings in Egypt. In addition to being repainted, pictures of the mural were also distributed online and in the publications of numerous books about revolutionary graffiti in Egypt. The best of these books, *Walls of Freedom* (Hamdy & Karl, 2014) is now outlawed there.

This mural is one example from the case study of revolutionary graffiti in Egypt during and after 2011. The name of this book is borrowed from a chapter about this case study written by the editors in collaboration with one of the book contributors (Awad, Wagoner, & Glaveneau, 2017). The initial questions of inquiry had to do with what interaction occurs once those graffiti images are in city space. Who are the different social actors involved and the visual dialogue and tension that occurs through the walls between those actors, and how it could be generative of social change. As the situation in Egypt progressed, it was of more interest what happened to those initial images of street art, how they were erased by government, reproduced, transformed onto online media, and how they were contested by other counter images from the government. This shifted the interest into the transformations that happen to images once they enter urban space, how they can be studied from socio-cultural psychology, and what stories they tell us about change in a society as we follow the social life of those images.

Social Life of Images

The features of the mural in Fig. 1 suggest a much more complex notion of images than is typical. The traditional view of images going back to Aristotle is that we replace direct perception with mental images, which we use in thinking. Sensory experience is thus the basis of all knowledge. Consciousness becomes an activity of pictorial production, reproduction, and representation like something projected on a surface (Mitchell, 1984). The world is split between physical and mental space, object and subject. The world and mind are symmetrical, except that the later depends on the former. While this notion of images feels intuitively correct it comes with a number of difficulties. First, images become sites of consciousness in their own right; we think through physical images just as much as mental (Wittgenstein, 1958). Second, they cannot be seen without a "trick of consciousness," being "there" and "not there" at the same time (Mitchell, 1984). Third, images as in Fig. 1 are not perceived simply visually but through multiple senses. We put our body into the image; stand beside the artist and confront the bloody violence of the authorities. This presents a more dynamic view of images than the traditional notion would have it. Fourth, people perceive images different as a result of their personal and social-cultural background. The interpretation of images is thus part of a *social process*. In short, images are not passively perceived impressions of the world; rather, they construct a representation of the world, ourselves, and our social relationships, which can motivate collective action as revolutionary murals in Egypt did. In what follows we will outline key features of images as approached through social-cultural psychology—namely, their symbolic, dialogical, contextual, and transformative character.

The Symbolic Nature of Images

Images are interpreted here from a psychological understanding of humans as beings that create and use symbols to act on the world, others, and themselves (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). These symbols are social in origin, being derived from ones social group, but are also creatively

transformed by individuals. Through symbols human beings are in a constant process of mutually changing their environment and, in turn, being changed by it (Valsiner, 2014). We build monuments and create archives so as not to forget. Mitchell's (1984) approach to graphic images is further elaborated in this account to explore their dynamics in urban space, including how they function through graffiti, street art, posters, and monuments. They do not just communicate a single message, but are embodied with changeable meanings that give them their symbolic status. Their iconic construction of shape, color, and form propose a meaning, and borrows from previous images, as well as creates new compositions and meanings. Because of these polyvalent qualities we refer to them as symbols rather than signs. Symbols are signs embodying multiple meanings, carrying a face and an underlying sentimental value that gives them their stability and effectiveness (Bartlett, 1924; Wagoner, 2017). Contemporary politics often involves creating compelling images of group leaders to rally the public around a cause. Returning to the example of Egypt, now-president Al-Sisi has effectively created an image of himself as a strongman that can save the country from the impeding chaos, which can be seen on government billboards and in other media.

Social Actors and Dialogue

Once in the public sphere, the image takes on a new life in the hand of several actors as they take the positions of *producers*, *audience*, and *authority*. These social actors exercise agency as they produce, interpret, transform, and destroy images. The *producer* of an image could be a graffiti artist, a caricaturist, or a government entity producing a poster or building a monument. The image then is exposed to an *audience*, including pedestrians, as well as authority figures, who not only perceive those visuals, but actively interpret, modify, and destroy them. Audience exposure also goes beyond the physical location of an image through news and online media. Many street art images were seen by international audiences; their visual nature transcended language barriers and facilitated a wide exposure. The social life of images is further controlled by *authority*. The position of authority refers to any actor controlling what is allowed

or not allowed in public space. Most of the time this is the government and local authorities through censorship, but it could also be private owners, pedestrians, and neighborhood watchers claiming authority over certain parts of the city and erasing images that they see as violating their space. The different social actors also play different roles in different phases of an image process, for example the government could be image producer one moment, audience in another, and authority in a third.

This tripartite framework thus looks at images as creating interactive dialogues between the social actors as they negotiate different contentious issues. This is possible because images present a condensed argument and prototype for a socially shared form of knowledge; in theoretical language we can say images provide the figurative nuclei for new social representations (Moscovici, 1984). The audience can then actively create their counter-arguments in response to those attributed to the image (Davis & Harré, 1990), engaging in a dialogical and argumentative process (Lonchuk & Rosa, 2011). We normally think about dialogue as a symmetrical conversation, taking place through language discourses, but the dialogue in street art is a visual one, that is relational, temporal, dynamic, power-based, and changing through time. This dialogue presupposes change rather than stability, involving the constant negotiation of thoughts and meanings together with the creation of divergent social realities. A creative image may trigger a special kind of tension for the viewer. It may represent the existing social realities of the time, while simultaneously communicating something new that violates these realities, playing between the familiar and the unfamiliar (Markova, 2003). This dynamic often creates perceptual, emotional, and representational tensions that can continue to influence the viewer long after (Moscovici, 1976). Through this visual dialogue power is distributed among the different social actors and the multiple voices they present.

Context

Context is a complex notion that involves social-cultural factors, the medium, and materiality. As already mentioned, *socio-cultural factors* directly influence how we understand images. This point has been

thoroughly described by hermeneutic philosophy: when we interpret some material we enter a cultural stream of interpretation. There is no understanding without social and historical mediation (Gadamer, 1989). Thus, similar to other human behavior, images cannot be analyzed in isolation of the place and time of the action, and the social, cultural, historical, and political dynamics affecting the production, perception, and social life of the images. The chapters of this volume provide ample historical contextualization in order to highlight the evolving norms, sites, and relationships that continuously gnaw into the present. It is only against this background that we can adequately understand the particularities of each case.

The *medium* through which the image is placed whether city space, online, or news media, as well as how the image travels in between those mediums is also of interest in interpretation. For example, the city space is an especially effective medium in creating visibility and negotiating the power dynamics within a system. The specific placement of an image in the urban environment reproduces space that is initially produced by a centralized power, thus negotiating the authority's dominant control over this space (Lefebvre, 1991).

The specific *materiality* of an image further tells the situated story of it. The physical locality of those images, the surface they occupy (legal/illegal graffiti walls, government building, under the bridge, gentrified and touristic areas), and the tools used to produce them (paint, stencil, spray, print posters) are all informative of the social life of the image. In a gray sandy city as Cairo, colors easily strike recognition on the wall: a large yellow smiley face on a barricade wall in the middle of clashes between protestors and security forces creates a symbol for recognition; placing a stencil spray documenting the killing of a protestor in the same spot they were killed create an experience of remembrance in its situated immediacy; and the change of revolutionary graffiti from big murals to sprayed stencils in response to security risks and threat of arrest illustrates adapted resistance strategies in a changing political landscape (Awad, 2017; Awad et al., 2017). Or outside of Egypt: the placement of the graffiti of a relaxed nude body, which far from the aesthetic ideals of the society, by the natural topography of the beach in Chile helps to defy patriarchal notions of feminine beauty right where they are contested (see Lattore, this volume); and the strategic

placement of markings on colonized space is a physical symbolic act of reclaiming lost land (see Smith, this volume). There are also surfaces that invite and trigger expression as they form physical and symbolic barriers that give shape to different forms of injustice. To name but a few examples: the Israeli–West Bank wall (see Jarbou, this volume), the USA–Mexico wall, new walls erected within Baghdad, ruins of the Berlin wall which stands as a reminder of a segregated past, and the sectarian divisions on walls in Northern Ireland (see Mattar, this volume).

Transformation of Images

Central to the study of images in the public sphere, especially urban space, is the acknowledgment of their temporality. The social life of image transformation can be as or more informative as an analysis than the content of an image at one point in time. The key idea is that as an image is produced in a certain context, no matter how novel it is, it has a past life and is oriented toward future dialogues. The past life includes the history of the different icons constructing the image, the previous images it is contesting, and the medium it travelled through. Then once introduced in a certain context, it takes a life span of its own, independent of the intentions of the producer; its audience and censors appropriate it differently, assign meanings to it, and physically alter it by modification, reproduction, or destruction. Following this social life for a certain image tells a story about a contentious dialogue within a certain community. This is a story about arguments, what is tolerated, negotiated, and repressed. The different additions made to the mural in Fig. 1 every time it was repainted, for example, tells a story of power transitions, desperate aspirations, and counter-revolution progression.

On the Multiple Forms of Art and Resistance

Now that we have highlighted some key features of images that will be discussed further in the chapters, we look here at their potential as tools for resistance. This book starts from the premise of understanding

resistance as an act of opposing dominant representations and affirming one's perspective on social reality in their place. Resistance is seen as a "social and individual phenomenon, a constructive process that articulates continuity and change, and as an act oriented towards an imagined future of different communities" (Awad et al., 2017). Therefore, when we choose to focus on art that triggers social change, we look at social change as the collective, symbolic, meaningful, and substantial processes of change affecting society (Wagoner, Jensen, & Oldmeadow, 2012). With this premise we are adopting a very inclusive definition of art, which includes different creative visual interventions that open up spaces for multiple voices in a society. In a broad sense, this book deals mostly with different forms of street art interventions that are used as political tools in order to create dialogue, tension, resistance, and social change. But it also includes street interventions that contrast this meaning such as commissioned interventions and murals that hinder this dialogue (see Mattar, this volume).

We will look at the aesthetic value in those interventions as embodied in their meaning and social act of resistance, rather than in how they might be evaluated by their traditional artistic criteria. Murals—large paintings directly executed on walls (coming from the Spanish word for wall, *mural*)—will be a prototype thoroughly explored in the present book but are by no means the only form. Graffiti is another form explored, that includes mainly typography, but also images in many instances. Graffiti is a diverse genre that belongs to an underground culture where its freedom of expression and in many instances illegality are at the core of its practice. In contrast to graffiti's typically illegal status, there will be also examples of commissioned urban art. From one side, commissioned art shows the growing success of street art that made local authorities and businesses want to embrace it and use it for beautification, profit, and tourism. From the other side it opens up questions about its commercialization. What started as an organic and free-spirited movement is now often done for profit (see Bansky's film *Exit Through the Gift Shop* for a brilliant portrayal of this dilemma). This also raises the question, "what is public art?": is it all forms of art outside of the formal spaces of museums and exhibitions? Is it about accessibility to all and interaction with the public (Miles, 1997)? And what is public versus

common space (see Agustín, this volume)? Lastly, the discussion of different visual interventions in city space will also include printed posters, installations, and even structures, which all communicate different stories through representations in images.

The distinctions—murals, graffiti, urban art, etc.—highlighted above can be limiting. They are mentioned here mainly to point out that there is an open discussion around what counts as each, and not to imply that we can neatly classify works into different boxes. Classification tends to simplify one form and restrict oneself to a single perspective. Most of the time an image can be interpreted as an intertwined style of more than one form. Moreover, the styles continuously travel between different mediums with changing forms. In this book we have left the definition of terms open for different contributors to use them as they best fit their context of investigation.

The Chapters to Follow

In the first section of the book "Theories of Aesthetics, Resistance, and Social Change", **Vlad Glaveanu** explores the relationship between creativity, wonder, and social change with a particular focus on public, participatory, and interactive forms of art. Glaveanu discusses art as a creative activism that has the potential to create spaces for reflexivity and foster social transformation. **Thomas Teo** then highlights various forms of struggle and injustice that relate to subjectivity and the arts, admitting that art embodies neoliberal contradictions and often supports the status quo. Teo elaborates on the possibilities and limitations of aesthetics in resisting power in the visual and performing arts, arguing that street art may be a better candidate for challenging the status quo than traditional art. **Robert Innis** uses Dewey's aesthetics to point out how various creative practices that were not meant to be considered works of art give rise to material forms that provoke new ways of interaction and destabilize existing social and political relations, looking specifically at the critical–aesthetic role of graffiti as "resisting forms".

In the second section, "Image Circulation and Politics", **Guisela Latorre** looks at Chilean community-driven street art that recognizes and

celebrates the current and past challenges to colonization posed by native peoples of the Americas, casting them as models for resistance to the Chilean neoliberal state. She investigates the Chilean urban landscape and how it could promote experiences, ideas, and aesthetics often marginalized or silenced in the country's official history. **Rana Jarbou** studies graffiti in the Arab world before and after the Arab uprisings. She investigates the interrelation between visual production and political struggle in the region and how it continues to shape cultural identity. Graffiti circulation is seen as creating online and offline social spaces in which expressions of resistance are shared beyond physical communal borders, highlighting new networks of knowledge production and solidarity. **Basma Hamdy** then focuses on the creative use of language in resistance and its symbolic attributes. She looks at the significance of the Arabic language, its influence on collective identity in the Middle East, and illustrates where it is used in resistance as a symbol of power.

In the third section, "Urban Space: The City as an Extension of Self", **Daniela Vicherat Mattar** investigates cases when visual productions on city walls become objects of division, conflict, and barriers to coexistence rather than spaces of resistance and negotiation. She analyzes murals in Belfast, Northern Ireland, as they express the contested memories about the city's contemporary history of division. Looking at how urban infrastructures shape our social life, where street art, murals, and urban graffiti afford walls having a voice, telling stories, and keeping memories alive. **Andrea Vieira Zanella** then looks at graffiti in different cities of Brazil as re-inventing urban space by adding voices to the urban polyphony, provoking sacred sensibilities, and in a way affirming others possibilities to life. This, in turn, affects how people relate with their city. **Jamie Mcphie** then draws the connection between our bodies and the environment, looking at mental health and well-being as not bounded within a subjective self, but as a process distributed in the environment. He describes graffiti and tattoos from Liverpool, UK, as extended dermatological layers of the self, creating forms of narratives, testimony, and resistance. **Mathew Ryan Smith** then focuses on indigenous graffiti writers in European colonies such as Canada, Australia, and South Africa. Looking at how graffiti writing indicates resistance through signifiers and symbols of decolonization. He argues that the writing of graffiti

serves as a symbolic method of occupation, where the image stands in for the physical body. Graffiti here represents another means of visibly re-occupying tribal lands by embodying its spaces as a mode of decolonization.

In the last section, "Artists and Social Movements", **Jayne Howell** illustrates the irony employed by a social movement in the state of Oaxaca in Mexico in their visual productions. The chapter discusses the production as well as the interpretation of posters, graffiti, and three-dimensional imagery to critique neoliberal policies that they contend contribute to economic marginalization. **Cecilia Nielsen** then discusses the street art and graffiti scene in Denmark, focusing on the political aspect of those city interventions and their democratic potential. She argues that the aesthetic value of graffiti and street art works are beyond their beautifying values, but in their potential of exposing new ideas and questioning status quo in public space. **Óscar García Agustín** then looks at the visual representations of three social movements in Spain as they transform the privatized public space into a common space, giving voice and visibility to those who think that their voice has been excluded from the public and is not being taken into account. **Mohamed Helmy** and **Sabine Frerichs** then turn to the visual production in caricatures and the use of humor. They look at contemporary political cartoons in Egypt and how they are deeply connected with the Egyptian national character despite heightened censorship. Building on a rich repertoire of visually and conceptually authentic elements, it is argued that those images are used as a democratic practice that has the potential for being a sword as well as a shield.

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communication from the American University in Cairo. Her research interests are in the interrelation between the fields of cultural psychology, communication, and social development. She studies the process by which individuals develop through times of life ruptures and social change using signs to create alternative visions of social reality. She looks specifically at images in the urban space and their influence on identity, collective memory, and power relations within a society.

Brady Wagoner completed his PhD in psychology at University of Cambridge and is now Professor of Psychology at the Aalborg University, Denmark. He has received a number of prestigious academic awards, including the Sigmund Koch Award, Gates Cambridge Scholarship, and was awarded the early career award from the American Psychological Association (division 26). His publications span a wide range of topics, including the history of psychology, cultural psychology, remembering, imagination, creativity, and social change. He is associate editor of *Culture & Psychology* and *Peace & Conflict*, co-founding editor of *Psychology & Society*, and on the editorial boards of several other journals. He has published ten books, including *Symbolic Transformation: The Mind in Movement Through Culture and Society* (Routledge, 2010) and *Culture and Social Change: Transforming Society Through the Power of Ideas* (Information Age, 2012). His latest books are *The Constructive Mind: Bartlett's Psychology in Reconstruction* (Cambridge University Press) and *Handbook of Culture and Memory* (Oxford University Press).