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Urban dialogues: The lives and after-lives of political street art images

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to explore political street art images as sequences in a dialogue that feeds from, and extends to, wider political discourse. The paper argues for the centrality and predominance of the visual in the way everyday political discourse is negotiated and in the process through which space is produced in the city. The images are conceptualized through sociocultural psychology as intervention tools that are used by different social actors in response to different political dialogues in public discourse. A longitudinal methodology is used to follow the transformative social lives of those images as they borrow from, and respond to, one another. A longitudinal series of images will be presented from one wall in the area of Tahrir Square during and after the Egyptian revolution of 2011, images which were made by different social groups in response to political and social changes, and which thus demonstrate contested political dialogue in the form of inscribing and re-inscribing the recent history of the revolution.

Key words: street art, urban space, urban images, social life of images, Egypt, revolution

Urban Images

Images in city spaces communicate something about the social relations of their inhabitants and the larger society in which we live. Whether they are street signs, political campaigns, advertisements, or graffiti, they communicate something about the order and disorder of social life. Urban images tell stories of who is in the dominant position of power, for example by means of who is represented and who is excluded. As we inhabit those spaces, they also come to inhabit our life stories and the way we live and think.

For the purpose of this paper I will focus on political graffiti and street art images and discuss how they can be analyzed within the broader visual culture of the city and broader political dialogues. The argument of the paper will have two threads: the first argues for the centrality and predominance of the visual in today's political discourse and within the struggle for power in the public space, more specifically within urban space. The second thread concerns the methodological implications of the first, arguing for the value of a longitudinal sociocultural perspective for the analysis of the transformative social lives of urban images as sequences set within a wider political dialogue.

Urban space in this context is conceptualized as a social product predominantly produced by the governing power, but also re-produced by different social actors in resistance to this power (Lefebvre, 1991). This space constitutes the physical, constructed infrastructure, as well as the soft spaces of representation, imagination, and everyday life (Soja 1996). Thus, the city provides a platform and a “theatre” for social action (Mumford 2002, 92), and this platform is a site of conflict and political struggle rather than consensus. Visual images and representations in this urban space are not simply by-products of urban life, but a central way in which urban life is ordered and made sense of (Koch & Latham, 2014). The visual plays an increasingly significant role in the everyday negotiation of power in urban space and political discourse. This argument builds on Ranciere's (2004) understanding of politics as the struggle over presence, visibility, and recognition within an established order. It is about the contestation over the representation of society and who is permitted to represent it. Visual culture thus provides a lens into the diffusion of everyday politics and into the political agency of actors as they reclaim the right to be seen and reclaim their ownership of public space (Khatib 2013).

Thus, graffiti and street art images can be seen as one form of intervention into that political space, as a meaning-making process where social actors are imagining and presenting alternative possibilities, negotiating their power over the space, and resisting the exclusion of marginalized voices. Analyzing these micro-interventions in their material and expressive forms shows the everyday dynamics of how politics are visually negotiated in urban space, how that urban space is produced and reproduced, and how those processes influence those living there.

In this paper, graffiti and street art images are conceptualized from a sociocultural psychological perspective as tools and artifacts through which individuals represent themselves and mediate their relationship with the environment around them (Vygotsky 1997). People create, modify, and transform those images so as to symbolically act on the world,

others, and themselves (Valsiner 2014; Cole 1996). When looking at those images, we not only see the intentionality of the different social actors producing them, but we also see how, once they are produced in urban space, they take on a life of their own as they are re-appropriated, responded to, or destroyed by other social actors. They also become part of a wider visual dialogue in the city space, responding to, and borrowing from, other images and together producing a certain affective city space.

This conceptualization informs the methodological framework used here to analyze the social life of those images. The concept of the social life of images emphasizes the transformative and co-constructive dynamic of images (Awad 2020). Similar to Bakhtin's (1989, 1992) approach to the social life of discourse, every new production of an image affirms, supplements, or refutes a previous production, and its meaning presupposes the knowledge of those previous productions. The analytical approach to images' social lives therefore looks at the different stages in the cycle of an image, from its production and circulation to its reconstruction and destruction (Awad 2020). It is through those stages that images as material artifacts are actualized and gain meaning in a specific moment of use and in a specific context (Appadurai 1986). Rather than focusing solely on the image composition and production, this approach puts significance on the transformation of the image in the process of its social life and the human-human and human-object interaction. This leads to a methodological approach that focuses on how people use images in specific temporal, social, and political contexts, how images are transformed during this process, and how images in return act back upon individuals and societies, thereby creating sequences in an ongoing dialogue in public discourse.

Following the social life of images requires the longitudinal documentation of images as instances of sequential interaction in a visual dialogue (Hansen and Flynn 2015). This further requires a selection criterion of what images to include. The researchers need to decide what set of images can be looked at together, and how they are meaningfully inter-related. One strategy is to follow a single image as it moves between different mediums and to look at the changes it undergoes in every reproduction. Another strategy is to focus on one specific contested topic in a certain medium (e.g., a specific urban space) and to follow all the urban images responding to that contested topic. Yet another strategy is to follow one specific material city wall across time, following how it gets inscribed and re-inscribed by different images responding to each other and to wider social dialogues. This latter strategy will be the one used in this paper.

In what follows, I will present this methodological framework by means of an example from my previous research about political street art in Egypt during and after the 2011 revolution. The example is from a sequence of 80 images from one wall from the area of Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the revolution, taken between 2011 and 2019. The 80 images were categorized into nine distinct stages in a dialogue which will be elaborated on throughout the next sections. These images are part of a wider data set that included interviews with 13 street artists and 25 pedestrians, in addition to photo documentation investigating the use of political street art in resistance movements, the results of which are discussed elsewhere (Awad 2017; Awad and Wagoner 2018). The framework will be presented below in four main sections: situating the images, looking at the social actors involved, following the images' social lives, and finally, analyzing the power dynamics of the images within the wider political dialogue.

The where and when: Situating the images

This first part of the analysis will have three focuses: the first is to contextualize the images within their sociocultural, historical, and political context; the second is to examine the material form of the images and where they are placed; and the third is to situate the images' topics within the broader social dialogues and discourses.

The images presented here come from the context of Egypt during and after the 2011 revolution. The longitudinal sequence of images covers the years from 2011 to 2019. During this period, Egypt underwent major political and social changes. Given the tremendous complexity of that period, it is difficult to briefly summarize the events of those years in a manner that is fair to, and representative of, all parties involved. The events in question started in January 2011 with expanding protests against the Mubarak regime, eventually leading to his overthrow. This initial success of the protests was a defining moment for many Egyptians who saw it as a chance for the establishment of democratic and representative governance. The army managed the transitional period, after which presidential elections took place in mid-2012. The election was won by Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Morsi's presidency was short-lived, as dissatisfaction quickly grew against his government, leading to another wave of protests a year after the elections, this time with the support of the Egyptian army. In mid-2013, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, then Defense Minister and Commander of the Armed Forces, deposed and arrested Morsi, and announced an interim president. This was followed by a strong crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, with many leaders and supporters being arrested or even killed, and the group being declared a terrorist organization. In mid-2014, controversial presidential elections were held, in which el-Sisi won against Hamdeen Sabahi, the sole opponent. The elections saw only 47% participation, as many groups questioned the legitimacy of the elections and boycotted participating therein. In 2018, el-Sisi was elected to a second term in another controversial election marked by nominal opposition (Khorshid, 2018).

These rapid political changes have subsequently reshaped public and urban space (Abaza 2017; Nagati and Stryker 2013). Tahrir Square in Cairo is one of those places, as since 2011 it has been marked by political struggles, being claimed and reclaimed by the different political groups (Awad 2017; Abaza 2014). Before 2011, the square was visually monopolized by a glorified image of Mubarak and his governmental buildings. Then, in 2011, protestors claimed that same space by sit-ins and revolutionary street art images that destroyed this glorified image. However, as we will see, those protest images were subsequently erased, reproduced, and variously contested as first the Muslim Brotherhood and then the army took charge, and then as the counter-revolution momentum spread. This contestation over visual representations formed part of the wider political dialogue about the revolution, who represents it, and how it is represented.

Much academic attention has been given to the street art of the Egyptian revolution during and after 2011. As Alexander (2011) argues, the Egyptian revolution was a living drama whose political success depended on its cultural power and its ability to project powerful symbols, which helped to stimulate and circulate powerful emotions and to organize exemplary

solidarity. The production of visual images was an integral part of the revolution, as every person on the street was a potential image creator and broadcaster of political messages, breaking away from the government's control over visual representation in the public space (Khatib 2013). As argued by Abdelmagid (2013), these artistic expressions extend beyond the politics of cultural representations; they are grounded in the formation and expansion of social groups that keep negotiating their identities, capacities, and limitations. This street art was diagnostic of the pressing tensions in the society, creating a site through which politics are contested and debated (Smith 2015). However, the space created in Tahrir Square in 2011 did not last in empirical terms, however, its representations remained in the minds of those who experienced it. The space therefore poses a particularly difficult problem for research because what it was is no longer present, but it nevertheless represents what could be and what many of the protesters still seek (Gunning and Baron 2013).

Thus, it is important to follow the visual transformation of such spaces, looking at how the street art of the revolution was transformed and replaced over time, and how it was documented as a valuable resource for the memories of the revolution. Numerous books were produced to narrate the revolution through its visual production of street art, the most comprehensive of which is "Walls of Freedom" (Hamdy and Karl 2014). Similarly, several scholars have argued for the importance of longitudinal analysis within the study of the changes in the images produced in urban space. Khatib (2013) emphasizes the importance of looking at the continuity of street images, highlighting how each addition to the wall adds another layer of experience to the original graffiti. Subsequent additions to the same wall signal the persistence of the problem critiqued in the original graffiti and the necessity of action. Abaza (2013) also highlights how those changes implemented by different social actors on the city wall reflect a process of reproducing repertoires, unfolding a continuous performance in the city space that visually narrates the multiple ways of remembering the revolution. This performance has made the walls into a public archive that reflects the revolution's life history and the current political discourse (Nicoarea 2014). The processes of image transformation themselves leaves their own traces of histories of arguments and dialogues. Thus, looking at which messages persisted and which were erased makes the conflict over public space and the attempts to suppress voices manifest as part of the everyday life in the city (Gaber 2013).

To illustrate these transformations of urban images, I focus on one city wall adjacent to Tahrir Square. It is the wall of what used to be the American University (AUC) Greek Campus before it moved to the outskirts of Cairo. The building is now rented by a private business hosting a hub for technology start-ups. The wall runs along Mohamed Mahmoud street, a street that witnessed many of the violent clashes between police and protestors, and its walls have become one of the main destinations for the street art of the revolution. Before 2011, the blank concrete wall contained the sign: "AUC Library." Between 2011 and 2012 we see the first group of images produced by protestors. During this time the wall was inscribed and re-inscribed by different revolutionary messages, first in the form of small spray-painted messages, then by means of pre-prepared stencils, and later becoming elaborate murals that became iconic visuals of the revolution. The messages of those images also developed over time and they spoke to a variety of issues, such as protest mobilization, messages against different authorities (e.g., the Mubarak regime, the military, and the Muslim Brotherhood), and the documentation of particular protest-related events, such as the commemoration of those who lost their lives in clashes with police and military forces. These different images

were usually whitewashed by the authorities, an act that triggered the subsequent appearance of new images on the wall.

One example of the commemoration murals from this period is shown in Figure 1. This image was painted in February 2012 by artist Ammar Abo Bakr. This mural was iconic within the visual production of the revolution and its placement on this wall was a reaffirmation of the protestors' continued ownership of this place. Even though the physical presence of the protestors declined by 2012, the walls were still claimed as a place of documentation and commemoration of the revolution, a place to honor those who died in the protests and to remember what they died for. The painting shows Sheikh Emad Effat, an Islamic scholar who was a revolutionary figure known for his stance against the instrumentalization of religion by the authorities (Hellyer 2021). It was drawn two months after Emad Effat was shot dead during a protest. His figure is drawn with angel wings, a common symbol on similar murals that emphasizes his status as a martyr, that is, his having died for a higher cause. The mural further uses Islamic design patterns and verses from the Quran that criticize corrupt leadership. The image emphasizes the meaning embodied in this place, a place for protestors that represents what they stand for, a meaning that will be contested in the next sequence of images.



Figure 1 A commemoration mural by Ammar Abo Bakr at Mohamed Mahmoud street near Tahrir Square, Cairo
Photo credit: Ammar Abo Bakr
February 2012

The mural is described by its artist as follows: “A 10-meter long mural on the AUC Library with the Revolution's sheikh, Al-Azhar Islamic scholar Emad Effat, shot dead during Cairo protests on December 16, 2011 by military police (...) The Quranic Verses read: ‘God, we obeyed our lords and they misled us, punish them God twice as much and curse them’. The mural painted in February 2012 would be whitewashed.” (From Artist's [facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/Ammar.Abo.Bakr/photos/a.294726310635240/300520400055831/?type=3&theater):<https://www.facebook.com/Ammar.Abo.Bakr/photos/a.294726310635240/300520400055831/?type=3&theater>).

The who: The social actors of images

Having situated the images within the spatial and social context, we now examine the social actors behind this visual dialogue on this wall. Once an image producer intervenes in a certain space with an image, this image takes on a social life of its own as it is appropriated and transformed by different (re)producers, audiences, and censors (Awad 2020). An image producer here refers to the social actor who makes an image emerge in a certain time and

space. This social actor is not necessarily the sole original “artist” creating that image, because as discussed before the conceptualization of images in this methodological framework assumes that such images generally do not exist in isolation without reference to, or a degree of borrowing from, previous images. The image’s audience includes all social actors exposed to that image, for example passing pedestrians. Finally, a censor of an image is any individual or institution that exercises the power of gatekeeping or censoring an image in a certain space. The social actors’ roles are not static and they change as social actors take on different actions and positions.

Ammar Abo Bakr, in his role as an artist and producer of the mural in Figure 1, is also part of a political street art movement. In fact, he is among the most prominent artists associated with the 2011 revolution. To understand his image in that context is also to understand his voice and intention behind the image. In an interview, Abo Bakr explains his choice of the Quran verse: “since Egypt’s new parliament is dominated by Islamists, we thought we should speak their language.” He adds: “We paint because talk is dead... Talking doesn’t work anymore because people in charge create fake narratives to shift public discourse.” (El Shimy 2012). He eloquently positions himself as a contributor in the political dialogue through his paintings whereby his paintings can do what talking cannot, that is, communicate in opposition to the authorities’ dominant narratives.

His images, like other political street art, were regularly destroyed by censors, most typically by means of literal whitewashing by the authorities. However, Abo Bakr does not mind interaction with his images as long as it means opening up dialogue, not silencing it. He opposes attempts to preserve street art, arguing that those images are temporal products of “this” moment, and that new martyrs and new struggles can be painted over them by other artists (Coletu 2012).

Abo Bakr’s mural became the canvas for the developments to follow. The next sequence of images to appear on this particular wall occurred at the time when the revolution’s street art had started to diminish in the Tahrir Square area. By mid-2014, a new space had been produced in the area as a consequence of several changes. First, el-Sisi’s government reclaimed the area and attempted to restore order through a major “renovation” and gentrification plan for the Tahrir Square area. This renovation included the systematic erasure of all traces of the revolution, including its street art (Awad 2017). Second, this was accompanied by a large security presence in the area, which prevented artists from drawing elaborate political murals in fear of arrest. This resulted in a further change to the area, namely, to the form of the political street art produced at that time, as it was marked by a return to spray-paint stencils, most of them depicting the faces of political prisoners. Third, the wall’s ownership changed, as the building was transferred from the university to a private hub for technology start-ups.

These changes led the way for new social actors to claim the wall, namely Women on Walls (WoW), a project funded by the Swedish Institute and the Danish Centre for Culture and Development. WoW announced a street art workshop called “Unchained,” where artists were invited to draw “unchained” graffiti in support of women’s rights. This project fit well into the new context, as their images were apolitical, commissioned in agreement with the building’s new ownership, and in keeping with the new gentrified look of the area. The project, though including some Egyptian political street artists, created controversy among activists

and street artists. For example, many saw the project as staking claim to the place and to the forms of revolutionary expression, and as rebranding street art in the form of an institutionally funded intervention. This project was even more problematic for many when understood within the discourse of Western intervention to “unchain” and empower Egyptian women (Eickhof 2015).

This project introduced new social actors into the visual scene of the urban space and opened up a new contested dialogue about who gets to be an image producer in this street, who has the right to be represented on the wall, and what kinds of images are appropriate for this space. This contested dialogue was visualized clearly on the wall. Figure 2 shows the wall before the project’s intervention and we can already see layers of different social actors claiming and re-claiming the wall. Behind the whitewash we see traces of one of the last remaining political murals explicitly attacking the army. Among other symbols, it portrays a snake with the letters SCAF on it, which stands for Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. A few days before el-Sisi’s election, local security forces whitewashed the painting. Over the white paint we see red Arabic text that reads: “teslam el ayadi” and “boshret kheir,” both titles of new songs at the time in support of the Army. The red text was later half erased by black paint. Shortly thereafter, two spray-painted messages appeared underneath (not visible on this image). One appears to have been made by protestors, and is directed against the Interior Ministry, as the Arabic message translates as “the Interior Ministry is a group of thugs.” The other appears to be directed against the new street art project. This message is in English: “This street is a necropolis only, here, no commercial graffiti allowed.” The two messages seem to speak in the language of their targeted audience.



Figure 2 Photo credit: Author
September 2014

The wall inscribed and re-inscribed over several layers by different political views responding to each other and to wider political dialogues. A revolutionary street art mural at the back, covered by white paint, over which red text in support of army is covered by black paint.

The what: The social life of images

By looking closely at those different layers and stages of the social life of the images and of the wall, we are able to shed light on how the processes of their transformation are shaped by different social actors and in response to other images in dialogue. The dialogue is materialized and negotiated visually on the wall and its interpretation requires us to incorporate the visual into the way we look at dialogue and political discourse, going both through and beyond the spoken and written word. Understanding every image on the wall is dependent on understanding the previous ones. Borrowing from Bakhtin's analysis of speech acts in a dialogue, we notice that "every utterance must be regarded primarily as a response to preceding utterances of the given sphere (...). Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies upon the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account" (1989, 91).

The images on the wall went through different stages, from emergence, reception, diffusion, and transformation, to destruction. A longitudinal documentation of the wall shows the initial emergence stage of what became known as the street art of the revolution. The transformation stages of the images can be followed through various forms of expression—from spray-painted messages, to stencils, to murals, and back to stencils and spray-painted messages—changes that show how visual alterations in free expression parallel the trajectory of the surrounding political atmosphere. The various reactions to those images, from government whitewashing to pedestrians either covering or restoring them, speak of their reception by the public and the wider society. Finally, we are able to follow those images as they travelled by means of photo documentation into social media and books, a process that shows their wider diffusion, and how their meanings were circulated in wider discourse.

Continuing on with the trajectory of the wall, we now focus on the contestation over the right to the wall. In Figure 3 we see the wall after the installation of one of the WoW's project images. The painting, which was done by Dina Saad in April 2015, shows an angel-winged heart with the text "Unlock your passion." The image is of an obviously different genre and meaning from the angel winged martyr seen on Figure 1. A month later, Saad's image is refuted by a spray-painted message: "We're locked in a counter-revolution, fuck you and your passion." In a later photo documentation of the wall from January 2016, the wall looks the same except for the fact that this latter spray-painted message has been whitewashed.



Figure 3 Photo credit: Author
May 2015

An “unchained heart with wings,” painted by Women on Walls project, creates controversy as it takes over the “revolution street art” space. In response, a spray-painted message at the bottom ridicules the call for unlocking one’s passion when one is locked in a counter-revolution.

Of interest here is the stage of destruction, and the question of which social actors censor which images. Prior to the creation of the WoW image, the producers most commonly came from among the protestors, while the whitewashing was done by the authorities (as seen in Figure 2). However, the dialogue now gets more complex. The WoW project is criticized for taking over the place of the revolution’s commemoration, and for further whitewashing their critiques. In response, the WoW project commented on their [Facebook page](#):

“WOW's project has not erased any graffiti from the revolution (...) The old graffiti at Mohamed Mahmoud street was already destroyed by the police a year ago (...) as you can see Dina has saved what was left of the ruined graffiti, the eye on top of her mural from the old graffiti has now been incorporated in Dina's piece. That's how WOW shows respect for others' work.”

The WoW project also criticized the spray-painted message as a sexist response to the women empowerment project rather than a revolutionary political one: “This macho graffiti artist just can't stop scribbling. Here is his juvenile reaction to Dina Saad's great piece.” Dina Saad further comments:

“they think they can do whatever they want and they consider this their wall, we made it look better (...) they asked for freedom on these walls. But they are acting not any different from the dictators they were fighting against. I call this hypocrisy (...) what is done now under my heart is not art!! What I am doing there was Art not vandalism! (...)”

Unlike image destruction by whitewashing, the spray-painted response message did not cover the image of the heart, but rather symbolically destroyed its meaning. Creative destruction transforms an already existing image through a counter image, where “a secondary image of defacement or annihilation is created at the same moment that the target image is attacked” (Mitchell 2005, 18). Before the spray-painted message appeared, the heart image communicated a message of passion and liberation, but after the spray-painted message was added the heart image is “out of place,” and communicates the “wrong” message on the wrong wall, oblivious to the wall’s history. The spray-painted message ironically destroys the heart image by highlighting that one cannot “unlock” their passion when one is “locked” in the suppression of a counter-revolution.

The transformative social life of the wall discussed so far raises questions about the nature of street art, about what vandalism is, and about who decides what is street art. It also raises the question of who has the right to legitimately censor others’ images—the government censoring political street art, the activists censoring any image that is different from what they perceive as political street art, or the WoW project commodifying the street art in this symbolic space.

The how: The power dynamics of the images

Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (Rancière 2004, 13)

Other than the unfolding of an urban dialogue on a wall, what meanings and social processes of change can we see through the wall’s social life? Through the images presented in this paper I have tried to show how such places provide an arena through which political and social struggles are reflected; we see on the wall the spatialization of power, including the resistance to, and negotiation of, that power through images on the part of different social actors.

The potential power of those images draws from their ability to engage in wider political discourse and to gain visibility within public space. We see the discursive constructions as images respond to one another in a sequence that is related to wider contestations in public discourse. The activists resort to using the visual to create visibility for their positions in the political dialogue, because as mentioned earlier, they find that the spoken and written narratives do not work anymore in response to the authority’s dominant narratives. As Gaber (2013) argues, putting up those images on the wall makes the social dialogue durable, lasting, and extendable beyond the private interactions between a speaker and a listener, resulting in a city that is more public, where we are confronted by strangers’ messages on the walls, and have the freedom—albeit not legally allowed—to add our voice to the dialogue, to contribute to this geography of strangers and their speech.

The emphasis placed on the power dynamics of images in urban space and the dialogues they create, presupposes the initial argument of this paper, namely, that the visual plays an increasingly central role in today’s politics. This is even more clearly the case in the domain of

urban space, where the visual is the predominant mode of communication used to claim space and to make one's voice visible. Street art has not only given visibility to activist voices within the urban space of Egypt, but it has also attracted an international audience that can relate to, and interpret, the images in a way that is different from spoken or written narratives. The social life of the images has also involved the extension of that dialogue beyond the several layers on the wall to the afterlives of those images in books and online media.

Furthermore, the images' power dynamics operate within the politics of visual culture and the contestation over the representation of society and who is permitted to represent it (Ranciere 2004). Through street art the activists seek the right to be seen and heard in a public space in which visual production and consumption is controlled by the government (Khatib 2013). Those images thus become a political field of knowledge production, and a part of the collective elaboration of meaning through their production, circulation, and interpretation (Rogoff 1998). Through these political fields, different social actors can grant visibility to their group and their cause, shape the emotions of the public and mobilize action accordingly, position themselves and others in relation to different social issues, and shape collective memory (Awad and Wagoner 2018).

This leads to the second thread of argumentation within this paper, that is, the argument that for those dynamics to be analyzed we need a longitudinal method that looks at the images' social lives as they transform and travel in the public space and as they form sequences in a wider political dialogue (Awad, 2020). In limiting the examples provided in this paper to those that appeared on one specific wall, I aimed to highlight the social lives of the images as constituting a sequential temporal and situated dialogue that draws on, and feeds into, a wider contested societal dialogue.

On this particular wall we can see how such dialogues constitute a contestation over visibility and presence. Who are the "legitimate" social actors and what are the legitimate social issues that have the right of representation in this space? The timeline of the wall is a timeline of a revolution struggling to persist and to gain the space for commemoration. The significance and power of the images of the revolution on the wall come from the broader struggle of the activists over their presence in the public space. The protests in 2011 actively claimed a place that people were only allowed to use for walking, driving, or any other everyday city practices that the state saw as appropriate (Bayat 2010). The images on the wall visualized the struggle to keep the reclaimed space in the face of both whitewashing by the authorities and the commodification on the part of different organizations.

The images did not just claim that place, but also re-inscribed the space with new meanings. Those new meanings were challenged by the WoW project images. The struggle over space shifted from activists vs. authorities to a struggle over meaning and commemoration. Here we see the social actors positioning themselves and others (Harré and Langenhove 1998) and ascribing moral judgments based on those positions regarding who has the right of expression and what kind of expression can exist in that specific place, judgments that in turn legitimize certain images while delegitimizing others.

Even though the street and wall still physically exist, the timeline shows how the visual space produced during 2011 struggles to persist. Memory thus becomes a pressing theme with regard

to revolution images and the revolution momentum at large, and the visual documentation used to preserve memory becomes the new venue for the creation of meaning (e.g., as seen in online disagreements and even “fights” over how to interpret the images that have been posted on various social media platforms). However, it is precisely in the temporality of street art that it gains its meaningfulness and urgency, and it is through documentation, rather than conservation, that urban stories live on. The documented after-lives of those images are important because, as Khatib (2013) argues, a revolution sees itself in the images it creates, and to understand a revolution is to recognize its visual productivity and the centrality of the image in the way the revolution is interpreted. Paying attention to those images is one way to recognize the importance of diffused everyday politics and it is a way to acknowledge the potential of informal subversive actions to influence political change. This instates a new way of looking at politics as an intentionally visual act performed on a global public stage, where social actors are aware of the resonance of the image projected by this performance (Khatib 2013).

A final note

I conclude with the last image in the sequence of the photo documentation, which is by no means the end of the story, even if it seems to be temporarily on pause. The storyline started with a blank wall expressing the control of established authorities, and in this final image we see something similar. The dialogue seen in Figure 3 is now all “cleaned-up,” and in Figure 4 we see the wall renovated and painted over by a private company (to the left side we see the text: “A contribution of Sipes company”). This new look goes in parallel with the wider renovation and gentrification plan of the Tahrir Square area. This time the street art is used by the new private owners of the building and a paint company, in line with the new renovation plans. This is yet another appropriation of what the protest street art has introduced to this place.



Figure 4 Photo Credit: Mostafa Hanafy

January 2019

The wall is now cleaned up and renovated by a private company in line with wider renovation and gentrification plans for the Tahrir Square area.

The wall affords no more dialogue, no multiplicity of voices, and no contestation, just like the wider public sphere in the current political climate. The green painting with Arabic calligraphy merges with the trees in the street and offers a fresh clean design, one that is in line with the homogenization and monopolization of visual culture taking over the country along with the new regime. This design is possibly pleasing for a passer-by who wants to move on, who wants stability in spite of the collateral damage that stability may cause, and who wants to move away from the hefty costs of the revolution. For a passer-by who grieves the revolution, the wall is now a cover-up of what took place in that street, a meaningless canvas that is not open except to one voice, a voice that fits to the homogeneous discourse endorsed by the authorities. At the lower part of the wall we see a few attempts to insert different voices, but they are quickly erased. We still see the traces of a spray-painted “wahashtini” (I miss you), probably a lover’s message.

It is precisely when looking at the social life of images that we see that the story is not over, the whitewashed images live on in other mediums, such as books, the internet, and archives. It is through these new lives of those images that the story continues to be told and the memory continues to be preserved. Memories of the place live on, in people’s stories of what used to be and how it was experienced in certain ways at certain times. Even if the place now seems empty, it is filled with the presence of absences (De Certeau 1984).

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