Imaging Egypt's Political Transition

in (Post-)Revolutionary Street Art

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Abstract

This thesis offers a conceptualisation of the interrelations between street art and social media within the temporal and spatial context of (post-)revolutionary Cairo by focusing on the reasons as to why street artists in Cairo select graffiti as their medium for political expression in a time in which many other media of communication, most notably social media, are available. Based upon in-depth interviews with Cairene street artists, on the one hand, and a literature study on the concepts of collective action framing, contentious performances and the relation between the political and the aesthetic, on the other, this thesis provides an analysis of (post-)revolutionary street art in Cairo that seeks to clarify why certain politically engaged young people in Cairo select graffiti as the medium of communication to make their political voices heard.

   It is argued that the particular appeal of street art for the graffiti artist lies in its ability to function simultaneously as a medium of communication and a contentious performance, combined with the particular power of the aesthetic to change conceptions of social reality of the audience through what Jacques Rancière has called the *distribution of the sensible*. Graffiti and street art thus present artists with singular possibilities to express one's political ideas and appeal to the public that are not offered by social media because street art, in a unique way, combines the power of framing, the power of performance and the power of imagination.

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Introduction

The revolution in general was an explosion. It exploded many powers in people; one of the powers is art. Especially in this revolution there were many artists and many artists appeared in this revolution and they give their art to the people. This is one of many things that makes our revolution a wide, peaceful revolution. [...] It gave a beautiful picture of Egyptians to all people in the world. It showed how people in Egypt are like their grandfathers, the ancient Egyptians, in civilisation and art. The old Egyptian civilisation was full of art. So we are like our grandfathers. We make art in all situations. [...] Like an old man singing to himself. If he is sad, he sings a sad song. If he is happy, he sings a happy song. We use art in everything in our life. And I think art has a very important role in our revolution. It may change many things. It may change many things in our lives. And I hope that in the future, art will take its place like in the past with the ancient Egyptians.

Omar Picasso

Since the beginning of the Egyptian revolution on 25 January 2011, graffiti art has sprung up all around Cairo. Graffiti has appeared in many different places in the city and is used to comment upon current political and social events and to commemorate the revolution and its martyrs. In different neighbourhoods, such as Zamalek, Heliopolis, Maadi and Downtown, walls that used to be plain and white now are decorated with slogans, stencils and images. In other streets, colourful drawings attract the attention of passersby. The often critical depictions seem to invite the people in the street to reflect on the situation in which the country finds itself after the tumultuous events of the previous year.

When one wanders passed the plethora of graffiti and street art that try to capture the eyes of the people in the streets,[1] one wonders by whom these lines were written and these pictures made. Why do people go out into the streets to express their ideas on the walls? With what intent and with which goals and dreams in mind do they venture out with spray cans, stencils or paint to put their ideas into words and images? Do the makers of these graffiti think that their work can influence the way in which the political transition in Egypt will take shape? Or do they merely seek to get things off their chest and do they not worry about the impact that their work may have on Egyptian society?

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[1] In this thesis, I make use of the concepts *graffiti* and *street art* to refer to writing and painting on walls in public space. Cedar Lewisohn claims that graffiti is generally seen as 'any form of unofficial, unsanctioned application of a medium onto a surface' in public space (2008: 15). Street art, according to Lewisohn, is a 'sub-genre of graffiti' (2008: 15). Lewisohn argues that whereas graffiti is more focused on typography, street art is 'primarily a picture-led graphic art form' (2008: 23).The distinction between the two is sometimes difficult to make, however, since street art can make use of text and graffiti can have great aesthetic quality, which would make it possible to classify it as street art. In general, the distinction lies in the aesthetic quality of the work and in the notion that street art is usually more figurative, whereas graffiti generally consists of words.

The sometimes chaotic and overcrowded walls that are filled with hastily scribbled down tags or stencils, the one overlapping the other, can, with a little imagination, be seen as a reflection of the uncertain political transition that Egypt is undergoing after the former President, Hosni Mubarak, stepped down on 11 February 2011. Since Mubarak's resignation, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Supreme Council of the

A Wall with Graffiti in Downtown, Cairo[2]

Armed Forces and the remnants of the old regime, in Arabic known as the *feloul*, have been struggling over power in a contest in which many of the ideals of the revolution seem to have got lost. Whereas protestors call for a continuation of the revolution, to finish what has been started, many Egyptian people wish for a return to stability and normalcy in everyday life.

The nontransparent and undemocratic ways in which the political transition is taking shape, conjoined with the violence being committed to people who protest against the manner in which the SCAF and other powerful actors seek to influence the changeover to a more democratic political system in Egypt, make people sceptical of what has become of the revolution. It even makes people question whether a true revolution has happened at all. When one ventures out into the streets of Cairo, however, one is immediately reminded of the social change that has taken place. The proliferation of art and graffiti is undeniable as it is material, tangible and in your face. Samia Mehrez states that '[i]f there is a revolution at all, it is in the cultural field.'[3]

The outcome of the revolution and the way in which the political transition will turn out is still uncertain, but one is surrounded by the abundance of visual material that is the result of the explosion of cultural production that accompanied the mass protests in January and February 2011 and the transitional process that followed it. The proliferation of street art and graffiti in Cairo forms the evidence that a radical change has occurred in the relation of certain Egyptian people to public space and the authorities and in the way in which they express themselves.

In order to come to a better understanding of the social change that is taking place in Egypt, I therefore suggest to have a closer look at the graffiti and street art that is produced in Cairo

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[2] All photographs depicted in this thesis were taken by the author with the exception of the images on pp. 41 and 58 (taken by Matteo Colombo) and the images on pp. 46, 47 and 61.
[3] Samia Mehrez, *Seminar 'Translating Egypt's Revolution: The Language of Tahrir'* at Leiden University on 15 May 2012.

during and after the revolution that started on 25 January 2011 and to investigate the ways in which graffiti artists view their own activities. According to me, social change cannot be understood by researching only the particular material conditions under which it arose.

Whereas certain scholars in collective action and mobilization theory, such as Gurr (1970, 2007), Oberschall (2004), Fearon and Laitin (2003) and Collier and Hoeffler (2001), pursue an explanative approach that prioritises the identification of factors which can predict when collective action and mobilization will take place, I intend to offer a more interpretive analysis, informed by the idea that social change is driven by a certain awareness that comes to many people at a particular moment in time that the current situation is not what it should be and that something can and needs to be done in order to improve it. I deem it important to take an approach that focuses on 'integrating the self-conscious perspectives of participants themselves' (King 2004: 453) and on the way in which such perspectives are influenced by framing processes (Benford and Snow 2000) because I hold that situations and events do not mobilize people to act; it is the way in which people interpret the conditions under which they live and the meaning they give to particular events that convinces them to take action in order to attempt to bring about change.

To understand the events that occurred in Egypt, it therefore does not suffice to look at the circumstances under which the Egyptian revolution came about and the political transition is shaped (for such an account, see: Cook 2011, Gardner 2011 and Bradley 2012). Rather, it is important to ask the question which practices and messages have influenced and continue to influence the way in which the Egyptian people look at the conditions under which they live their lives. I thus agree with Jeffrey Alexander who argues that '[w]hen wages and unemployment, birth rates and literacy, youth, the new class and the old state, corruption, repression, and urban decay enter into the tumultuous back and forth of a revolutionary social strife, they do so as signs, folding these empirical facts ("signified" in semiotic terms) into chains of already powerful symbols ("signifiers")' (2011: 3).

"Only allowed to exist at our borders"

Graffiti artists in Cairo are therefore not only interesting as the subject of a research into social change in Egypt because their work shows that the way in which certain Egyptian people express themselves and their relation to public space and the authorities has changed, but also because through their work they are bringing across particular

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messages to the public that might signify the facts of everyday life in new and contentious ways, which may influence the shape that the political transition in Egypt will take.

Previous Studies on Graffiti in Conflict Situations

The idea to study social change in conflict situations by looking at graffiti is not new. Julie Peteet (1996) and Bill Rolston (1987) have investigated the role of graffiti as a means of political resistance in conflict situations in their research on graffiti in the West Bank and on wall murals in Northern Ireland. Their studies suggest that graffiti can function as a means of political resistance by envisioning competing futures, inscribing memory and critically commenting on political events (Peteet 1996: 141 and 143, Rolston 1987). The graffiti and street art that can be found in Cairo seem to pursue similar objectives since many writings and

drawings on the walls provide images of a peaceful future, commemorate the events and martyrs of the revolution or offer sharp commentaries on the current political and social situation in Egypt.

A significant difference between the contemporary case of Cairo and the cases of the West Bank during the Intifada and Northern Ireland during the 1980s, however, is that Peteet and Rolston emphasise that graffiti was one of the few ways in which people could politically express themselves because no other means of communication were available to them (Rolston 1987: 14 and Peteet 1996: 146). In the case of contemporary Cairo, however, political activists

A Vision of a More Peaceful Future by El Zeft

can express themselves through different social media, such as Twitter and Facebook or online blogs. The effectiveness of social media to offer a space for the expression of political opinions and to connect with people and organise for collective action became apparent during the revolution and has been quite extensively researched (see, e.g.: Khalil 2011, Nunns and Idle 2011 and Campbell 2011). The question thus arises why certain politically engaged people in Egypt would choose graffiti as a medium for the expression of political dissent when access to social media is available to them, which offer a seemingly safer and, possibly, more effective way to make one's political voice heard and to mobilise people for collective action. I therefore focus in this thesis on the question why street artists in Cairo select graffiti

and street art as their medium for political expression in a time in which other media of communication, most notably social media, are available.

Objectives and Relevance of the Research

In recent months, much attention has been paid to the role that social media played in the mobilisation of Egyptian youth during the revolution (see, e.g.: Khalil 2011, Nunns and Idle 2011 and Campbell 2011). There is also a rising interest for graffiti and street art in Egypt.[4] These two phenomena have not yet been studied in relation to each other, however. The research presented in this thesis thus contributes to existing knowledge on the role of street art and social media in the Egyptian revolution and the political transition that followed it by offering a conceptualisation of the interrelations between street art and social media within the temporal and spatial context of (post-) revolutionary Cairo.

The goals of this research project are threefold: first, to describe expressions of (post-) revolutionary graffiti and street art in Cairo. Second, to explore what Cairene street artists perceive is their impact on the political transition in Egypt. And third, to find out why certain politically engaged young people in Cairo choose graffiti and street art rather than (or in addition to) social media as the medium of communication to make their political voices heard.

Alaa Awad at work in Mohamed Mahmoud Street

The analysis of graffiti and street art in (post-)revolutionary Cairo presented in this thesis is based on the idea that graffiti can function at the same time as a medium of communication for the expression of alternative political perspectives and as a contentious performance that seeks to make use of public space to articulate competing political views. The act of

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[4] This can be concluded from the large number of MA and PhD students that are now in Cairo to do research about graffiti. When I sent an e-mail to street artist Keizer with the request to meet him for an interview, for example, he declined because he was already helping out 4 PhD students and 3 other MA students, who were writing their theses on the topic of graffiti and street art in Cairo.

making graffiti can be seen as a performance of contentious politics because in drawing on the wall, the graffiti artist performs an act of opposition to the authorities by committing an illegal act. At the same time, however, the drawing or writing resulting from this act can be seen as a carrier of a message, which makes the graffiti a medium of communication.

   I argue that the particular appeal of street art for the graffiti artist lies in its ability to function simultaneously as a medium of communication and a contentious performance, combined with the particular power of the aesthetic to change conceptions of reality of the audience through what Jacques Rancière has called the *distribution of the sensible*. Graffiti and street art thus present artists with singular possibilities to express one's political ideas and appeal to the public that are not offered by social media because street art, in a unique way, combines the power of framing, the power of performance and the power of imagination.

Theoretical Framework

This research can be placed within the poststructuralist tradition as an enquiry into the relation between power and resistance and into practices and the process of the formation of ideas in social life that underlie social change. The fundamental notion that informs this research is that to come to a better understanding of social change, one needs to look at subjects within their temporal-spatial context because meaning is formed and becomes fixed through the negotiations that take place within a particular time and space. I thus take an interpretive epistemological stance that focuses on sense making (King 2004: 453) and is informed by the idea that social change can only be understood adequately by looking at the way in which subjects interpret situations and events themselves.

   Ontologically, my research is based upon a structurationist and constructivist world view. According to this perspective, conditions in life are neither determined completely by structures, nor are fully open to be formed by agency. I follow Giddens' structuration theory that claims that people's ability to act is limited through social structures, while these structures themselves can only exist by virtue of people upholding them through their actions (1984). Limited change is possible because agency and structure are mutually influential and constitutive (Giddens 1984). I take a constructivist stance in claiming that social reality does not exist objectively, but is constructed socially by groups of people within a particular time and place (Dahlbom 1992: 101). The idea that social reality is constructed socially does not imply that it is the same for everyone. On the contrary, it is different for each particular actor because it is not only dependent on social processes of reality construction, but also on the

way in which the individual's perception of these processes is guided by his or her own values (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 111).

Furthermore, I hold that not only processes of meaning formation that underlie social change can only be understood within their specific time and place, but also that power and resistance take their specific form within particular temporal-spatial situations. The analysis offered in this thesis is based upon the Foucauldian notion that power cannot be "held" by persons or institutions, nor can it be understood to be the product of particular structures, but rather should be seen as 'a complex strategical situation in a particular society' (Foucault 1978: 93).

When we understand power to be a strategical situation rather than an element of particular structures or something that can be possessed by persons or institutions, it becomes clear that it can be mediated through different entities, such as persons, groups and institutions, and negotiated in different ways. Resistance, then, is not a mere response to power, but rather partakes in a mutually constitutive relation in which
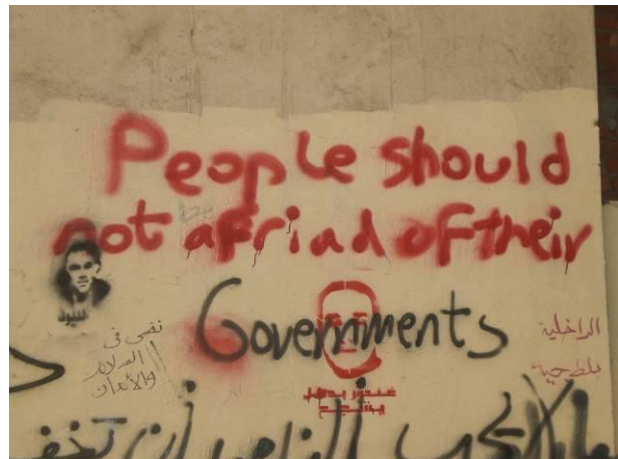
Graffiti in Mohamed Mahmoud Street

both power and resistance are responsive and constructive of each other. In the case of Cairene street art, this can be seen reflected in the struggle between the street artists, who present their counterdiscursive ideas on the streets, and the authorities, who seek to erase their messages. From this perspective, street artists in Cairo are not 'taking' power, but rather negotiate and influence the relations of power that determine the way in which the political transition in Egypt is shaped through their work.

Concerning social change, I depart from a Marxian-inspired perspective that prioritises consciousness as the most important driving force behind mobilisation. As I argued above, situations and events themselves are not able to mobilise people to act; it is the way in which these conditions and circumstances are interpreted and the meaning that is attributed to them that can convince people to take action in order to attempt to bring about change. I will therefore make use of Benford and Snow's theory on collective action framing to analyse the way in which such perspectives can be influenced by attempts of different agents to represent particular events, experiences and occurrences in social life in a particular way to convey 'mobilizing or countermobilizing ideas and meaning' (2000: 613).

My viewpoints differ from (neo-)Marxist views, however, in that I do not think that the masses are subject to a "false consciousness" from which they need to be awakened, nor do I see "real" social relations grounded in the economic system as the fundamental source underlying societal conflict. The issue is not that people are alienated from a real state of affairs, which is grounded in class relations brought about through the capitalist system, but rather that social reality is multi-interpretable (Rawls 1989: 237) and that exposure to different viewpoints on the same facts of social life might lead to a different understanding of one's position and of one's ability to change the circumstances under which one lives. When I state that consciousness, or perhaps rather "awareness", plays a fundamental role in bringing about social change, it should, therefore, not be interpreted as implying that people are in a slumber that keeps them blind from the realities of social life, but rather that familiarity with a multiplicity of interpretations of social reality might lead to a more critical perspective and a different understanding of one's ability to influence the processes and institutions that set the conditions that shape everyday life.

From this perspective, street artists can thus partake in framing processes because artists can promulgate a counterdiscourse through their art work in the streets, which challenges the discourse that supports the ruling parties in Egypt, which is disseminated by the official media. Graffiti artists, however, do not only negotiate power relations through the messages that they express in their art work, but also through the act of the spraying of graffiti itself because graffiti writing can be seen as a *contentious performance*, which is defined by Tilly and Tarrow as a 'relatively familiar and standardized way[...] in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors' (2008: 11). It can thus be argued that artists offer a contentious performance, which challenges the Egyptian authorities, because they commit an illegal act when they promulgate their counterdiscursive ideas by spraying messages and drawings on the walls in public space.

Lastly, it is important to focus on the form in which graffiti makers present their message and not to overlook the fact that they express their opinions through art. Art may have a particular power to reconceptualise social relations through what Jacques Rancière describes as the capacity of the aesthetic to "distribute the sensible". Art can render things visible that would otherwise remain invisible and make imaginable what would otherwise be unimaginable because it can transcend the limits of language and thereby possibly change what is thinkable, sayable and doable within a particular place and time.

Research Methods

The research methods employed in this thesis consist of a literature study of secondary sources combined with in-depth interviews with Cairene graffiti and street artists. The study of secondary literature focuses on gathering background information about the Egyptian revolution and the political transition that followed it and on achieving better insight into the major theoretical concepts that inform this research, namely collective action framing, contentious performances and the relation between the political and the aesthetic.

This literature study was complemented by two research stays in Cairo (and Luxor) from 14 to 22 February 2012 and 9 April to 4 May 2012. During these stays, I conducted 12 interviews with 13 graffiti and street artists. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way and the interviewees were identified through Soraya Morayef's weblog about graffiti and street art in Cairo,[5] Facebook pages on revolutionary graffiti in Cairo[6] and *via-via* contacts. In contacting artists, I attempted to create a diverse research group, including artists of different age and gender and religious and educational backgrounds.

During the research stays, I collected visual material in the form of photographs of the graffiti and street art as well. Even though I do not offer a visual analysis of the form of the street art, I do use the images to support my analysis of the particular appeal that street art and graffiti may have as a medium for artists to express their contentious political views.

The street artists that were interviewed for this research were all highly educated, young and politically involved people. Since I was looking specifically for artists with at least a reasonable command of English who were involved in the making of political graffiti, this outcome can be considered the consequence of the specific criteria I was looking for in my interviewees. It can therefore not be assumed that all graffiti makers in Cairo are highly educated, young and politically involved individuals and the conclusions that I draw in this research can thus certainly not automatically be generalised and applied to all persons who make graffiti and street art in Cairo.

However, I do believe that the persons interviewed for this research can be seen as representative for young, highly educated and politically involved graffiti makers in Cairo because the group of interviewees consisted of people with different backgrounds that seem to represent a cross-section of young, highly educated and politically involved street artists in Cairo. The interviewees ranged in age from 19 to 32 years. Five of the interviewed graffiti makers were women and eight were men. The majority of them were Muslim, but there were

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[5] *Suzeeinthecity* weblogs, 2011/2012, available at: http://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/ [accessed 17 January 2012].
[6] 'Revolution Graffiti – Street Art of the New Egypt' and 'NooNeswa' on Facebook.

also a few Christians among them. Eight of the interviewees had followed an education in the arts. The educational history of the others ranged from holding a science degree to having followed an education in business administration. Differences also existed in the extent to which they value their anonymity. Whereas certain people do not mind being mentioned with their full name, others use aliases. The amount of time that they spend on making graffiti and street art differed widely. Some people dedicate a couple of hours a day to make art in the streets, while others only produce something once every couple months. Lastly, some persons travel often to spread their ideas and messages abroad and to speak at conferences about Egyptian street art, mostly in Europe, whereas others do not care much about the events that are organised around their artistic activities.

Limits of the Research

My epistemological stance, which is informed by the idea that social change can only be understood adequately by looking at the way in which subjects interpret situations and events themselves because meaning is formed and becomes fixed through the negotiations that take place within a particular time and space, has as a consequence that my work is submitted to a double hermeneutics. In this research, I interpret the way in which the artists interpret what they do. It may be objected that by including this double hermeneutics in my research, the findings cannot offer any objective conclusions about graffiti and street art in Cairo. It may be said that the outcomes of this research are not reliable because they are filtered through both the subjectivities of the artists and myself. I deem, however, that it is not possible to offer any objective 'truth' as an outcome of a research into social change. The closest we can come to an understanding of social change within a particular society is to achieve better insight into the processes of meaning formation that motivate individuals to take certain actions. This process can only be approached by studying the focalisation of one's ideas by the individual him- or herself. Although a focus on the material conditions and particular events under which change comes about might lead to data that can be described in more neutral and objective ways, such an analysis would not be able to come to the core of what is guiding social change. If one focuses merely on a description of material conditions and particular events, one remains at the level of the signified, but does not come to an understanding of the signifiers that move people to action. A double hermeneutics is thus a necessary handicap that we need to allow for in order to come to a better understanding of the social change that is occurring in Egypt. In order to undercut this issue as much as possible, however, I have included many

direct citations from the graffiti artists themselves to offer the reader the opportunity to compare my interpretations of their discourse with their own.

A second objection might be that I, as a Dutch person, am not well-suited to study the subjectivities of Cairene street artists since my cultural background and experiences differ greatly from theirs. Since I am not well acquainted with Egyptian culture and its different meaning system, it can be questioned whether I can comprehend the signifiers that may move people to action. Indeed, my different background caused certain problems in understanding particular graffiti and street art. However, in those instances where I could not grasp the meaning of a work instantly, I discussed with the artists what, according to them, was the meaning of a particular piece. I thus tried to undercut this limitation through discussions with the artists.

A third issue, which is actually connected to the previous limitation, is formed by the fact that I do not speak or understand Arabic. Since many of the graffiti in Cairo are in Arabic, this meant that I could not understand many of the graffiti unless someone translated them for me. Although I think that my research could have benefited from me having had some knowledge of Arabic, I believe that it is not necessary to understand Arabic in order to study graffiti and street art in Cairo because many of the art pieces do not contain any text and the graffiti could be translated to me by Egyptians.

Fourthly, this research does not focus on the reception of the graffiti and art work in Cairo. It concentrates on the self-ascribed meanings of the artists' work, rather than on the actual impact that their work may have on larger audiences, because this focus on the way in which the artists themselves perceive their practices and the possible impact that they may have on Egyptian society rendered the research more feasible than a research focused on the reception of street art in Cairo would have been. The group of graffiti artists in Cairo is more clearly delineated, smaller and arguably less diverse than the group of audiences. The choice for researching the self-conscious perspectives of the artists thus fitted better within the limitations of time and length of this thesis. This does not take away from the fact, however, that additional research into the reception of the art work of graffiti artists in Cairo may also render very interesting and valuable results.

It is also important to note that this thesis does not intend to offer a complete overview of graffiti and street art in Cairo since the Egyptian revolution. The large amount of graffiti in the city as well as the quickly changing nature of graffiti (since especially political works are often painted over by government officials and then repainted by the same or different artists) would make such a project unfeasible. I therefore focused on studying political graffiti and

street art in the geographical boundaries of the Downtown and Zamalek neighbourhoods and within the temporal limitations of my research stay.

Outline

The first chapter focuses on graffiti and street art as a medium of communication and, more specifically, as a means to "frame" political events. It thus look at the "power of framing" that street art possesses. It is argued that street artists choose to use graffiti as their medium of communication because they seek to counteract the influence of state propaganda. In reaching out to the street, they aim to address all people. Street artists therefore prefer graffiti over social media because access to the latter is limited in Egypt. Since the street is everybody's, street art is everyone's and reaches all people who lives in close vicinity or travel through the neighbourhood in which the work of art is located.

   The second chapter focuses on the making of graffiti and street art as a contentious performance that challenges the Egyptian authorities. It thus looks at the "power of performance" that street art and graffiti possesses. It is argued that artists have lost their fear for the consequences of making graffiti with the revolution. The making of graffiti has become a contest between the authorities and the people and the act of making graffiti has itself, therefore, become a contentious performance. By making graffiti, artists claim the right to express themselves in public space and seek to turn the streets into a space for public political discussions and participatory culture.

   The third chapter focuses on the aesthetic aspect of street art and looks at the "power of imagination." It is argued that artistic practices can be political because they can help determine the way in which roles and modes of participation in the social order are perceived through what Rancière has called the "distribution of the sensible." Graffiti makers present their messages (often) through visual images because pictures can visualise an idea in a condensed form and engage feelings, attitudes and emotions of the viewers. Furthermore, it is argued that graffiti artists seek to increase the resonance of their proffered frames and to catch the attention of the public by making use of symbols and signs that the Egyptian public is familiar with, such as proverbs, references to pop culture, symbolism derived from ancient Egyptian mythology and Islamic art, or by presenting their message in a comical way.

   The conclusion provides an answer to the question why street artists in Cairo choose to use graffiti and street art as their medium for political expression in a time in which many other media of communication, most notably social media, are available. It is argued that the particular appeal of street art for the graffiti artist lies in its ability to function simultaneously

as a medium of communication and a contentious performance, combined with the particular power of the aesthetic to change conceptions of reality of the audience. Graffiti and street art thus present artists with singular possibilities to express one's ideas and appeal to a large audience that are not offered by social media because street art, in a unique way, combines the power of framing, the power of performance and the power of imagination.

1. Framing the Revolution: Spreading the Message

It was about one month after the revolution. There was a big war against the revolution in the newspapers and on television, national TV. So I didn't find any media, except for the walls, to say what I wanted, to say what I believe in. So I just tried to let the revolution continue on the street.
El Zeft

1.1 The Situation in (Post-)Revolutionary Cairo

On 25 January 2011, mass protests on Tahrir Square began that led to the resignation of the former President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, on 11 February 2011. After the initial excitement and joy about the fact that the revolution had succeeded in bringing down Mubarak, it soon became apparent that the future of Egypt would be uncertain. The political transition that Egypt is going through since Mubarak's resignation has led to divisions in Egyptian society.[7]

The most powerful actors in the Egyptian political landscape at the moment seem to be the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Muslim Brotherhood (El Rashidi 2012). After the fall of Mubarak, the military council gained control, but it stated that it will hand over power once a civilian government is established. During the parliamentary elections, the Islamist parties (the Muslim Brotherhood's *Freedom and Justice Party* and the Salafi *Al-Nour Party*) won the majority of the votes and the presidential elections were won by Mohamed Morsi, the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, on 14 June 2012, the Constitutional Court, of which many judges were appointed under Mubarak, declared that the outcome of the parliamentary elections was invalid. The SCAF does not seem to be

'Down with the Mubarak state'   ' SCAF, bugger off!'

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[7] The journalistic articles and background analyses that provide this viewpoint are numerous. See, for example: Larry Diamond (2011), *The Economist* (2011), Elgindy (2011), El Rashidi, (2012), Hamid (2011) Paciello (2011) and Sharp (2011).

willing to give up its powerful position easily. It has declared that it will set up a council that is to have oversight over the drafting of the new Egyptian constitution in order to safeguard that the constitution will be representative of all Egyptians (Al Jazeera English 2011). The constitution will determine the division of power between the president, the government and the armed forces and the

"Danger": SCAF hat and Muslim Brotherhood's Swords

process of its drafting is therefore likely to become a contentious struggle in which all involved parties will attempt to negotiate a situation that is in their favour. It seems that the SCAF tried to manipulate the political transition in Egypt through its influence in the presidential election commission, which barred several candidates from participation in the presidential elections, among whom were Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, an ultra-conservative Islamist and Khairat el-Shater, the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate (Kirkpatrick 2012), leaving the Brotherhood with only its so-called *spare tyre* candidate, Morsi (Khalaf and Saleh 2012).

The trust in the SCAF of (at least part of) Egyptian society seems to have further declined because of the violent interference by the security forces in clashes between Christian protestors and conservative Muslim hooligans in Maspero, Cairo, on 9 October 2011, where 24 people died when the army drove its vehicles into the crowds and fired ammunition

'SCAF: Collecting People'

(Aciman 2011), and more recently because of the clashes between Salafi protestors and the army in front of the Ministry of Defence in Abbaseya, Cairo, on 1 May 2012, which led to the death of 11 people (Fahim and El Sheikh 2012). The spreading news about the ill-treatment of protestors during detention and about the virginity-tests that physicians conducted on

female protestors who had been arrested also contributed to the deterioration of the relation between the army and those who had participated in the revolution.

Another issue that complicates the political transition in Egypt is the fact that the ousting of Mubarak has not led to the collapse of his state apparatus. Ahmed Shafiq, the former Prime-Minister under Mubarak, came in second in the presidential elections because a considerable

part of Egyptian society wishes for a return to stability and safety. Since Mubarak's resignation, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the remnants of the old regime, in Arabic known as the *feloul*, have thus been struggling over power.

The transparency of the political transition in Egypt is lessened further because of the failure of the official media in Egypt to report in a critical and neutral way about the events and developments that are happening. Graffiti and street art in Cairo can be seen as a response to these events, while they try at the same time to influence the outcome of these processes through their own discursive interference.

Graffiti in Zamalek, Cairo

1.2 Graffiti During and After the Revolution and Framing Analysis

The street artists that were interviewed for this research were active in making graffiti during or after the revolution. Even though the personal motivations of the different artists for

'Tahrir – Here is Your Address'

making graffiti and street art range from the enjoyment that they get from the adrenaline rush that spraying graffiti on a wall can give[8] to the belief in a mission to re-acquaint Egyptians with the beauty and glory of their ancient civilization,[9] certain reasons to make graffiti are shared by all. One of the ideas that was common to several artists was that graffiti is a good tool to counter the misrepresentation of particular events by the official media.

Nazeer is a young graffiti artist who began making graffiti even before the revolution. His 'sign poles' that direct people from all over Cairo to Tahrir Square are hard to miss since they are scattered all over the city. Nazeer observed during the revolution how the government was 'controlling everything. From TV to

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[8] Author's interview with Nazeer and El Zeft on 17 April 2012 in Cairo.
[9] Author's interview with Alaa Awad on 24 April 2012 in Luxor.

radio, to newspapers, to magazines, everything. So it is just the normal consequence that you want to get the word out to normal people living in urban areas.'[10]

Nazeer explains that during the revolution the state television reported that the protestors in Tahrir were paid fifty Euros a day to come there and were given meals by Kentucky Fried Chicken. As a response, he made a sign saying 'Come and eat at Kentucky Fried Chicken'. Nazeer explained that with the signs he wanted to 'get people emotional towards Tahrir. "Come to Tahrir. See us for yourselves. We are good people."'[11]

Ganzeer, a Cairene artist who is well-known for of his anti-military rule pieces, such as the Mask of Freedom and Biker-versus-Tank, says that his initial motivation to write messages on the walls during the revolution arose from a fear that the security forces would disperse the protestors and that no sign would remain that any protest ever occurred.[12] He states that his

The Tank of the Biker-versus-Tank *Piece by Ganzeer*

'first motive was to leave evidence on the streets in this location that something actually happened here.'[13] However, as the protests continued, it became apparent that this was a revolution. Ganzeer noticed that the regime was using the media to counteract the revolution and therefore came to the conclusion that it would be important to do street art away from Tahrir. He explains:

> Tahrir was occupied, taken care of. I mean, you go there, and there is everybody with signs and singing. There was no need to do anything at Tahrir at that point in time. But it seemed like people outside of Tahrir were kind of buying this government propaganda and were very much opposing this sit-in in Tahrir, you know? So it kind of became important to take the energy of Tahrir and to take it away from Tahrir, outside of Tahrir, using street art.[14]

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[10] Nazeer and El Zeft.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Author's interview with Ganzeer on 2 May 2012 in Cairo.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

Ganzeer states that he was trying to 'counteract the propaganda of the government'.[15] He did this, for example, by targeting 'this rhetoric that was being repeated that Mubarak was the symbol of Egypt and that you cannot disgrace the symbol of Egypt [...] So, [...] at that time, I created stencils that would visually show that Mubarak was not the symbol of Egypt. It was just a stencil of Mubarak's face and an equal-sign crossed out and then the Egyptian eagle.'[16]

The idea that graffiti can be used as a tool to counteract the propaganda of the government, which is spread through the media, is an important motivation to make street art for many of the artists interviewed. Yasmeen, a young art student who got involved in making graffiti only recently, stated that 'our media is fake media. It is not saying what happened really outside, no. It is a fake. So we need… we feel that our role is to make people understand what really happened there.'[17]

The use of graffiti in (post-)revolutionary Cairo thus seems to resemble the role that it played in the West-Bank during the Intifada as observed by Peteet, who stated that in the West-Bank '[a]s a form of cultural production, graffiti were a way of communicating in spite of official censorship' (1996, 145).

Supergirl – "[The Revolution] Continues"

El Teneen, an artist known for his piece of a chess game in which the king is toppled by a legion of pawns and his *Supergirl* work, which refers to an incident in which a female protestor was removed forcefully from Tahrir Square by the security forces, who pulled her shirt, which left her blue bra visible, also observes that through his work, he wants people

to think a little bit about what is happening in the media. This is one of the objectives. Sometimes it encourages people. To protest. These are the two basic functions of graffiti. Sometimes it just tells them that the revolution is still going on. That you cannot silence people. A case in point are these military trials for civilians. And the numbers that I got from my friends in human rights' organisation are totally large. Like 10.000 people sentenced something like 3 years, 5 years, without any chance of repealing the sentence. And people were not even talking about it, at first. So we had to do something. To show that it existed. Media, they create an image of reality. Graffiti can discern this image, can mess with it. If it can do that, I think it was successful.[18]

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[15] Ganzeer.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Author's interview with Yasmeen on 24 April 2012 in Luxor.
[18] Author's interview with El Teneen on 27 April 2012 in Cairo.

El Teneen observes how media can create an image of reality and how graffiti is able to mess with this image, for example, by showing that certain things exist that are not covered by the media, such as in the case of the military trials for civilians. In a similar way, Ganzeer argues that graffiti can counteract the propaganda of the government, for example, by simply negating rhetoric promulgated by the official media, as in the case of the depiction of Mubarak as the symbol of Egypt. Graffiti can therefore be seen as a discursive practice that partakes in what Stuart Hall has called the "politics of signification" (1982) through acts of framing.

Framing is defined by Benford and Snow as 'an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction' (2000: 614). The basic idea that underlies framing theory is that reality cannot be experienced directly, but is always interpreted through particular schemata that help people make sense of events and occurrences. The concept of a *frame* was first employed by Goffman (1974), who viewed frames as '"schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals "to locate, perceive, and label" occurrences within their life space and world at large (p. 21). Frames help to render events or occurrences meaningful and thereby function to organize experience and guide action' (Benford and Snow 2000: 614).

Scholars after Goffman have taken this concept of a frame and used it to come up with different theories about the way in which reality is constructed. Entman has focused on the process of framing as 'select[ing] some aspects of perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (1993: 52). Entman's focus on the selection of particular aspects of reality marks a shift towards a study of the conscious use of framing to guide perceptions of social life by representing reality in a specific way. This more strategic interpretation of framing can also be

Stencil in Zamalek

found in the concept of frame that is used in the study of *collective action framing*, which focuses on 'the struggle over the production of mobilizing and countermobilizing ideas and meanings' (Benford and Snow 2000: 613). Collective action frames share with Goffman's

original definition the idea that frames help to interpret experiences and occurrences through simplification and condensation, but they differ in the sense that collective action frames are '"intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford 1988: 198)' (as cited in Benford and Snow 2000: 614).

 Collective action framing thus refers to an activity in which events, experiences and occurrences in social life are represented in a particular way to convey mobilising or countermobilising ideas and meaning. In other words, framing tries to influence the construction of perceptions of reality of individuals and can help shape the way social reality itself is structured because frames guide the way in which people see social reality, which might move them to take action to bring about change in the actual conditions and circumstances under which they live. According to Tarrow's definition, collective action frames 'redefine social conditions as unjust and intolerable with the intention of mobilizing potential participants, which is achieved by making appeals to perceptions of justice and emotionality in the minds of individuals' (1998: 111).

 The production of graffiti and street art in Cairo can be seen as acts of framing because graffiti artists seek to spread a message that intends to mobilise people to take action. El Teneen noted that 'encouragement to protest' is one of the objectives of graffiti, Nazeer stated that he tried to convince people to 'come and see for themselves' what things were like in Tahrir and Ganzeer claimed that with his graffiti, he seeks to 'counteract the propaganda of the government'. These artists thus seek to take part in a contentious process of reality construction by making graffiti and street art because they seek to discern the image of reality that is created by the official media and offer a counterdiscourse to the propaganda that is promulgated by the government.

 As such, the graffiti and street art made by the artists interviewed in this research can be seen as media that spread what Dietram Scheufele has called *media frames* (1999). It was mentioned before that framing offers schemata of interpretation that can guide both the perception of occurrences in social life and their representation. The way people perceive such occurrences is guided by certain "internal structures of the mind," which Scheufele calls *individual frames* (1999: 106). Media frames, on the other hand, are defined by Scheufele as "devices embedded in political discourse" that guide the representation of occurrences in social life and thereby seek to influence the perception of other people of social reality (1999: 106). Graffiti and street art offer media frames because they present alternative ways to

interpret particular events that seek to challenge the way in which such events are represented by official media that promulgate the discourse of the Egyptian authorities.

1.3 Instances of Framing in Cairene Graffiti and Street Art

How do graffiti artists in Cairo use street art to frame political events and conditions? First of all, artists can frame particular events by simply depicting events or ideas that are left out in other media, as was the case in El Teneen's work about the military tribunals for civilians. This can be seen as framing because the artist draws attention to an aspect of social reality that was left out in other accounts, which helps represent social reality in a new way. This process falls under Benford and Snow's category of *frame generation*, which consists of both *frame articulation* and *frame amplification*. Whereas frame articulation refers to 'the connection and alignment of events and experiences so that they hang together in a relatively unified and compelling fashion' (Benford and 2000: 623), frame amplification 'involves accenting and highlighting some issues, events, or beliefs as being more salient than others' (Snow and Benford 2000: 623). This form of framing renders visible what was invisible before and asks attention for what has been neglected.

Stencil depicting El Shenawy

before and asks attention for what has been neglected.

An example of this form of framing, is the graffiti depicting Sergeant Mohamed Sohby El Shenawy, the sniper who was taped while shooting protestors in between their eyes. The video appeared on YouTube, but was not broadcasted, talked about or written about in official Egyptian media.

Secondly, graffiti can be a form of framing when it depicts a particular event or person in a different way than is being done by other media. It represents social reality in a different way and thereby challenges existing frames and seeks to influence people's perception of social reality by suggesting alternative frames. This process can also be characterised as an instance of frame articulation. Benford and Snow state that '[w]hat gives the resulting collective action frame its novelty is not so much the originality or newness of its ideational elements, but the manner in which they are spliced together and articulated, such that a new angle of vision, vantage point, and/or interpretation is provided' (2000: 623). An example of this form of framing is graffiti of Samira Ibrahim on Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Ibrahim is a young

woman, who was forced to undergo a virginity-test after she had been arrested at protests in Tahrir Square. Ibrahim filed a law suit against the physician who had carried out the examination, but the military court ruled against her. In the graffiti, however, Ibrahim is placed above the military, as if she was victorious. This graffiti might be interpreted as going against the actual outcome of events in reality, placing Ibrahim above the military and its court, as morally superior.

Graffiti of Samira Ibrahim and the Army

Thirdly, graffiti can be used to *counterframe* (Benford and Snow 2000: 626). Counterframing can be seen as a part of the process of framing by depicting things in a different way, mentioned above, but the distinction is that whereas the former can simply offer an alternative perspective on the same event or person, counterframing explicitly goes against a particular discourse. Counterframing consists of attempts 'to rebut, undermine or neutralize a person's or group's myths, versions of reality, or interpretive framework' (Benford and Snow 2000: 626). This is what was done by Ganzeer when he denied that Mubarak was the symbol of Egypt. Another example is graffiti of a girl with a gas mask, next to which is written 'the best girl ever'. In Egyptian media, girls that participated in the protests were often depicted as morally debased. Through this graffiti, artists are challenging this perception, claiming instead that girls who participate in protests are not only good girls, but even the best ever.

"The Best Girl Ever"

Fourthly, graffiti can be used as a frame that shows an alternative, competing future (Peteet 1996: 141). The clearest example of a piece of street art that envisions such a future is one of the walls in the side streets of Mohamed Mahmoud Street, which is painted by El Zeft, a young street artist who is known for his symbolic and comical pieces, such as *The Revolution of the Descendants Will Bring Back the Glory of the Ancestors*, in which he combines pharaonic headwear with a *V for Vendetta* mask, often worn by protestors to remain anonymous (see: p. 63). The wall painted by El Zeft shows an alternative future for Egypt in which children can play on the street and a protestor can talk with a security official. The

artist also included the current and past sufferings on the right part of the wall to remind the audience that you cannot have happiness without vengeance for those who died.[19]

Wall painted by El Zeft in Downtown

Fifthly, graffiti can be used as a means to inscribe memory (Peteet 1996: 141). An impressive example of street art that encourages people to commemorate the martyrs of the revolution is the art work that Alaa Awad and Ammar Abo Bakr made on the wall of the American University in Cairo in Mohamed Mahmoud Street after the Port Said incident.[20] Awad and Abo Bakr are assistant-professors at the University of

Martyr Portraits by Ammar Abo Bakr

Fine Arts in Luxor, who came down to Cairo on 2 February 2012 to make graffiti to protest the events that had occurred in Port Said. Whereas Abo Bakr painted huge portraits of the men and boys who had died at the soccer match, Awad took his inspiration from the ancient Egyptian temples and tombs and made use of Egyptian symbolism to depict the mourning of

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[19] Nazeer and El Zeft.
[20] The Port Said incident refers to clashes between the fans of the al-Ahly soccer team (also known as *Ultras*) and al-Masry during a soccer match in Port Said on 1 February 2012 where 74 people died. Many al-Ahly supporters died under highly suspect circumstances, which has led to speculation that the security forces were behind the events as vengeance for the Ultras' involvement in the political protests (see, for example: BBC (2012)).

the survivors, the journey to heaven of the martyrs and the need to avenge those who died in order to achieve justice.[21]

Street Art by Alaa Awad on the AUC Wall in Mohamed Mahmoud Street

Another classification of different forms of framing is suggested by Benford and Snow, who argue that framing has three core tasks: *diagnostic framing*, *prognostic framing* and *motivational framing* (2000: 615). Diagnostic framing concerns the identification of the problem and the attribution of blame (Benford and Snow 2000: 615-616). Examples of diagnostic framing in Cairo can be found in abundance. One example is the graffiti depicted on the right in which freedom is being crushed by a SCAF tank.

Graffiti on Mohamed Mahmoud Street

Prognostic framing concerns 'the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan' (Benford and Snow 2000: 616). In graffiti and street art it is difficult to make a clear distinction between prognostic and motivational framing, which 'provides a "call to arms" or rationale for engaging in

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[21] Author's interview with Alaa Awad on 16 and 19 February 2012 in Cairo.

ameliorative collective action, including the construction of appropriate vocabularies of motive' (Benford and Snow 2000: 617), because the solution proposed to solve the problem usually does not go further than the act to which motivational framing incites. In the case of revolutionary graffiti, the strategy or plan of attack to come to a solution for the problem that is articulated through prognostic framing usually is to protest. But the pieces of graffiti that propose protests as a solution to the problem of course also call upon the audience to go and protest. It seems that the emphasis of graffiti and street artists does not lie with prognostic framing, at least not at this moment, because it is more important to make the audience first become aware of the problems that face them and consequently to stir them up for action rather than to propose a solution for the problem.

An example of prognostic framing can be found in a piece by Awad and Abo Bakr at Champollion Street in Downtown, Cairo. Awad came to Cairo on 9 September 2011 to make graffiti on the wall that the Egyptian government built to protect the Israeli embassy.[22] By the time he arrived in Cairo, however, the wall had been torn down by angry protestors and so Awad and Abo Bakr decided to make a piece about what should be done with Mubarak and his fellow political prisoners. Awad took inspiration from ancient Egyptian punishments of war criminals. In ancient times, assassins were sent out to kill the enemies of the king. In order to ensure that the enemy had been killed the king requested that his hand was brought back to him and the assassin would be rewarded. However, the assassins soon realised that they could receive twice as big a reward if they would take both hands of the enemy and say that they had slain two enemies of the king. From that moment on, the king therefore asked the assassin to bring him the sexual organ of the enemy since a human being has only one of

Hands and Male Sexual Organs in Champollion Street

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[22] Author's interview with Awad on 24 April 2012.

those. With this work, Awad wanted to suggest that Mubarak should not receive a light punishment because traditionally in Egypt enemies did not get off lightly. Even though the suggestion should not be taken literally, Awad appeals through this work to try Mubarak severely as an enemy of Egypt and make him pay a heavy price for the harm he inflicted on Egypt and the protestors who were killed.

A later work of Awad also shows a symbolic example of prognostic framing because it shows how the monster snake with the heads of the SCAF (drawn by Abo Bakr) needs to be killed.

Street Art by Abo Bakr and Awad on Mohamed Mahmoud Street

Motivational framing, as discussed above, calls for collective action to remedy the problem (Benford and Snow 2000: 617). The 'sign poles' of Nazeer are clear examples of motivational framing, as is El Teneen's *Occupy Maspero* piece. Maspero is the place where the official media are located and where 24 people died when the army intervened in clashes between Christian protestors and conservative Muslim hooligans on 9 October 2011.

'Occupy Maspero' by El Teneen in Maspero, Downtown

Another more symbolic example of motivational framing can be found in a piece by Alaa Awad at Tahrir Square that visualizes the participation of people in the revolution. On the far right side of the piece, in the lower corner, a pitiable figure is depicted that is subjected to Sekhmet, the Egyptian goddess of war, who symbolizes the SCAF. With this piece, Awad wants to warn people that if they are not brave enough to fight for their freedom and join in the revolution they will end up as slaves who are controlled by the army.

1.4 Why the Streets?

It has been argued so far that graffiti and street art are used in Cairo as a medium of communication that can offer alternative media frames because graffiti and street art can propagate messages that challenge the manner in which particular events are represented by official media that promulgate the discourses of the Egyptian authorities. Graffiti can highlight events and ideas that were left out in other media, it can present events in a different way than was done by official media, it can offer a counter-

Detail of Piece by Alaa Awad

discourse to the discourse disseminated by the media, it can present an alternative and competing vision of the future and it can inscribe memory. These five functions make it possible for graffiti to perform its three major tasks, as identified by Benford and Snow, namely to signal what is the problem and who is to blame for it (diagnostic framing), to suggest how the problem should be solved (prognostic framing) and to mobilise people to take action (motivational framing). The question is, however, whether these functions can only be performed by art in the street, in the form of graffiti, or whether it would also be possible for artists to spread their ideas through different media. Would it not be possible, for example, to make drawings and paintings and put them online to spread them through Facebook? Would this not cancel out the risk of being arrested? And would it not be possible with the use of social media to target a much more specific audience that is more likely to be

mobilised? Why do street artists in Cairo select graffiti and street art as their medium of communication in a time in which other alternative media, most notably social media, are available?

The important role that the internet and social media played in bringing about the Egyptian revolution has been noted by different observers (see, e.g.: Khalil 2011, Nunns and Idle 2011 and Campbell 2011). Wael Salah Fahmi notes in his research about the activities of Egyptian bloggers' movements that he carried out in 2009 that '[c]onfronted by an emergency law since 1981, which restricts the organization of public rallies and the distribution of posters in the streets, the Egyptian blogosphere has developed into a virtual platform for socio-political expression' (2009: 92). One of the bloggers that Fahmi interviewed stated:

> The Internet, and the rise of blogs in particular, have afforded Egyptians an unprecedented opportunity to make their voices heard, to exchange ideas and to communicate across borders. Where the press is tightly controlled, pro-democracy human rights activists and journalists, who are shut out from the mainstream media, have taken to the web to disseminate information as they set up their own blogs free of charge (Fahmi 2009: 94).

Fahmi notes, however, that even though the blogs play a vital role as places in which alternative accounts on events can circulate, the effect of activism will remain limited if it remains confined to virtual space. He writes that '[b]loggers' alternative news websites are probably the most important sites through which networks of critical and informed constituencies are formed; yet the extent and efficacy of these new virtual spaces of contention remain limited. The street remains the most vital locus for the audible expression of collective identities' (Fahmi 2009: 97).

Asef Bayat also deems the street the most important place for the expression of political opposition. He argues that 'streets represent the modern urban theater of contention par excellence' (2010: 167). Because they are '[s]imultaneously social and spatial, constant and current, a place of both the familiar and the stranger, and the visible and the vocal, streets represent a complex entity wherein sentiments and outlooks are formed, spread, and expressed in a remarkably unique fashion' (2010: 167).

As discussed above, many of the graffiti artists interviewed for this research seek to offer alternative frames that contest the interpretations of events offered by official media. In order to make their graffiti function as such an alternative media, the contentious political messages underlying their art work need to reach a large part of Egyptian society. Radz, a young female

graffiti artist, who works mostly on political and feminist issues, argues that social media and blogs cannot function as such an alternative media to the same extent that graffiti and street art can because 'not all the people have the liberty of having an internet connection'.[23]

Indeed, according to research by the International Telecommunication Union only 26,7 % of the Egyptian population was using the internet in 2010 (ITU 2012: 26). El Zeft also observes that 'the internet is a closed community. […] But in the streets it is not a closed community. People from the suburbs can be travelling to have some medicine and they will see. So putting something in the street, everyone is going to see it. Not just a closed community.'[24]

Furthermore, the audience that is targeted by street art is not only bigger than the one targeted by social media and blogs, but it is also a different audience. According to El Zeft, 'the internet community is the upper and middle class community so they are pretty much educated. So they don't need the message as much as the people from the streets, you know, that are not as much educated as the people from the internet community.'[25]

According to UNICEF, the total adult literacy rate in Egypt is 66 % (measured over the period 2005-2010). Many Egyptians have not finished secondary school and some have not participated in primary school. Research shows that in between 2005 and 2010 90 % of Egyptian boys and 87 % of Egyptian girls of the age to go to primary school attended primary school and 70 % of the Egyptian boys and girls of the age to go to secondary school attended secondary school (UNICEF), but in the older generations these numbers are lower, although exact numbers are not available. Omar Picasso argues that graffiti and street art are an appropriate medium to spread awareness among the Egyptian public about the events of the revolution and the political transition in Egypt precisely because of the low education level of the Egyptian people:

> Most people in Egypt are simple people. Many of them are not… don't know how to read and write. Many of them don't know anything about the revolution. We wanted to explain the revolution in a simple way. Art was in special places and people went to see art, but we had to do it in the street to have most people, simple people, see the art and the message of the art and make them more active in the revolution and its future. We know many things, many facts. Many people don't know it. About the revolution and about the corruption in Egypt. We have to make people in Egypt know the facts. The main mission for art is to send messages in a simple way and to make people know more than they do through seeing and hearing in normal media. Arts, and painting and drawing especially, can do things that many things can't

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[23] Author's interview with Radz and Mostafa on 19 April 2012 in Cairo.
[24] Nazeer and El Zeft.
[25] Ibid.

do. Like the press or media, or words, can't do. Not all people can understand the words, the message of words or of speech. [26]

It is thus important to convey messages through images in street art because, as El Teneen puts it, 'everyone can understand a picture easier than an online statement.'[27]

According to the graffiti artists interviewed, graffiti and street art can influence the way in which people see and interpret particular events. Merna from the feminist graffiti group *Graffiti Harimi* argues that 'the idea of graffiti […] plays on collective consciousness. This is how the revolution started. This is how the Arab Spring started. An idea started somewhere in Tunis that change is possible or maybe that enough, injustice, and it spread. I think this is what graffiti does. […] It is not very obvious, but this is the main power of graffiti. It plays on collective consciousness. That you walk by it every day, you can't help but be affected by it.'[28]

Nawara, another member of the *Graffiti Harimi* group, explains this process by arguing that 'if you keep restating the same thing a lot, someone might eventually have to double-check his own convictions.'[29] Since the makers of political graffiti that were interviewed for this research seek to bring about change in Egyptian society and to motivate people to participate in the revolution, it makes sense that they seek to appeal to as large an audience as possible and to address particularly those people who are not already convinced of the importance of the revolution. Art can therefore better be presented on the streets, rather than on the internet, because in the streets the message of art can reach people who might otherwise not come across it. Street art can thus offer an alternative medium to official media, according to the graffiti artists interviewed for this research, because it can provide alternative views to those given in the media, which can also be understandable and accessible for people who have followed little education. In order to function as a medium that can change people's minds about particular subjects, it is important, furthermore, that the people who are confronted with its message are not necessarily the people who seek out this message. Ganzeer observes that

when you do something on the street, you're kind of communicating with people who not necessarily seek out that communication. Which is a point of a protest. When you go protest and you have signs or whatever, people who aren't participating in the protest go see what you are protesting about and maybe they get encouraged by your cause. And that is the same case for a wall in the street. But you use it

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[26] Omar Picasso.
[27] El Teneen.
[28] Author's interview with Merna and Nawara from *Graffiti Harimi* in Cairo on 30 April 2012.
[29] Ibid.

probably in a more creative way than a typical protest. It is not just standing with a sign. However with online media, the people who get the message are pretty much the people who seek out the message.[30]

Streets are thus important because, as Bayat notes, 'streets are not only where people protest, but also where they *extend* their protest beyond their immediate circle' (2010: 167).

The choice between making art in the streets and using social media and blogs to spread one message is not an *either/or* choice, however. Indeed, all of the artists interviewed also put pictures of their pieces on Facebook and some use Twitter or write blogs. El Zeft notes that '[i]t will have a double impact by doing it on the street and then by posting the pictures on the internet. So the internet community will see it and the street community will see it.'[31]

By putting pictures of graffiti online it becomes accessible also to people who are not physically in the vicinity of these works. According to El Teneen, graffiti and social media are interconnected. He argues that 'they work together, *yani*. You go on Twitter and you understand what people think about and you are part of their conversations. Then you make a graffiti piece and it goes online. It gets feedback. They are very interconnective.'[32]

Furthermore, placing pictures of pieces online in a sense overcomes the issue of the temporality of graffiti. Whereas street art can be painted over, the pictures that are posted online continue to exist and are spread even as the work itself has been removed. Nazeer thinks that it is important to document art pieces because 'in a matter of two to three days it can be painted over.'[33]

The internet is also a good way to spread graffiti. Stencils are often put online so that people in other cities or countries can download them in order to spray them on walls in their neighbourhoods. El Teneen narrates how he got into contact with a Lebanese graffiti artist online, whom he had never met with in person, but with whom he decided to design a stencil. He recollects how 'we kind of designed it online together by just sending messages. Apparently this piece has spread somehow. It was just Bashar with a Hitler-moustache. It went to a couple of places. Lebanon at least. It was there, but they painted over it really quickly. He [the other graffiti artist] also told me it went to other places. I don't know, I am not really sure about it. He says that it is in Sweden, in different places. But I don't know, maybe.'[34]

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[30] Ganzeer.
[31] Nazeer and El Zeft.
[32] El Teneen.
[33] Nazeer and El Zeft.
[34] El Teneen.

Even though social media and graffiti art thus show certain interrelations, the primacy for the artists interviewed lies with the street because their primary audience are the people of Egypt. Since they want to offer an alternative medium to the official media that promulgate the discourse of the authorities and to win people for the revolution, it is important that their message reaches many people of different parts of the society. Social media and blogs provide an opportunity to spread one's art even further, beyond the borders of one's neighbourhood, city or even country and makes it possible for a work that may be erased shortly after it is made to live on and be disseminated in virtual space. The opportunities that

Graffiti depicting Bashar al-Assad by El Teneen

these media offer to spread one's message, however, do not correspond to the audience that the graffiti artists seek to target in the first place since only a small part of Egyptian society has access to the internet and those people that belong to the Egyptian internet community and would seek out the message of revolutionary graffiti artists are not the ones that artists want to direct their message to because they are not the ones to be persuaded of the importance of the revolution.

2. Graffiti as a Contentious Performance: "No Longer Afraid to Speak Out"

At the beginning of the revolution, there was an opening. You could do a lot. You are already running from security, special security, so you might as well spray something on the walls. Even if they catch you, then something will remain. This is in protest. It is a different kind, instead of chatting and saying "Down with Mubarak," you can write it on the walls.
El Teneen

2.1 State Control of the Streets and the Revolution

Before the Egyptian revolution only few people made graffiti in the streets of Cairo. Even though many of the interviewed artists were involved in artistic activities before the revolution as they were working on sketches and calligraphy,[35] not many actually ventured out into the streets to put graffiti on the walls. An exception is Nazeer, who made his first graffiti in 2010 with his cousin who was in the 6th of April movement.[36] Nazeer and El Zeft explain that the 6th of April movement was not involved much in making graffiti because they were afraid of doing so.

Nazeer: 'they [the 6th of April movement] went and gave people flyers […]. They talked to people on the streets. They did everything. But the graffiti, they were scared of it. Because if you got caught doing graffiti they could…'
El Zeft: 'It was like committing suicide back then.'
Nazeer: 'They would use, *like*, different cases. You were vandalising the walls. Maybe you hit the police and after we took you, you defended yourself.'
El Zeft: 'Yeah, and some drugs.'
Nazeer: 'Yes, we found drugs in your pocket and you did this and that and that. And all of a sudden you have *like* sixty cases.'

Otpor! *Sign in Downtown*

State control over the streets was very strong before the revolution. El Teneen states that 'you

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[35] Calligraphy refers to the practice of writing the names of shops, etc., on the walls.
[36] The 6th of April movement is an Egyptian civic youth movemen that played an important role in mobilising people for the 25 January protests. People from the 6th of April movement had received trainings in how to mobilise people for political protests from the Serbian movement *Otpor!*, which had been a key factor in the overthrow of Slobodan Milosević in Serbia in 2000 and has since then been active in supporting similar movements in other countries. Even though *Otpor!* had provided the 6th of April movement with stencils and other material to make graffiti, the movement was reluctant to use it.
  Nazeer and El Zeft.

had to be more careful at the beginning. There was police everywhere. They didn't take it lightly.'[37]

This did not mean that no graffiti existed in Egypt before 25 January 2011, but the amount of graffiti was limited. El Teneen recalls: 'There was not a lot of graffiti before and I was also really surprised that no one did any vandalism to all the Mubarak propaganda. Everywhere you'd go, there would be a big poster of Mubarak's *National Democratic Party*. People were fed up with it, but no one did anything about it.'[38]

An exception was formed by the officially sanctioned graffiti festivals. Radz participated in a graffiti festival in 2010. She explains that the festival was

> kind of funded by the government and in that year the theme was Egypt […] but the problem with the graffiti festival is that it does not really let you do what you want. It is by the government, so they won't really let you write, *like*, your heart out. At that time, […] they called me: "Okay, the theme is Egypt," so I thought: "What does Egypt mean for me?" I thought about putting the crescent and the cross in some kind of combination alongside with taxis and traffic, lots of traffic. Stuff like that. Well… the main motive was the crescent with the cross. And they didn't like that so I had to change that. They literally said: "Okay, no politics and no religion." And that was graffiti, so it was like: "What the hell?" That didn't really make sense.[39]

Omar Picasso, who was making cartoons for several newspapers (i.a. *Al Gamahir*, *Al Gomaa* and *Al Sharea*) and working in animation before the revolution, also felt that there was no freedom to make art: 'About one, two years before the revolution, I felt hopeless because nothing was changing. Corruption was everywhere. There was no freedom in exhibitions. I could not make art freely. I had no liberty.'[40]

Something changed, however, with the revolution. First of all, the chaos of the revolution and the fall of the regime led to a loss of state control over the streets, which reduced the risk of getting caught. The rise in numbers of graffiti artists further limited the risk of being arrested. Omar Picasso states that 'although they are still catching people and putting them in prison, it is less than before.'[41] Merna also observes that 'the rule of law does not apply anywhere. So it is not going to come to graffiti and stuff, you know what I mean? There is no

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[37] El Teneen.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Mostafa and Radz.
[40] Omar Picasso.
[41] Ibid.

rule of law in traffic. There is no rule of law in the big criminals that were caught since the revolution. […] The state does not have the capacity to apply the law.'[42]

But second and perhaps more importantly, the risk that people have taken in protesting and facing the regime, which responded to these protests by using brutal violence, has cancelled out the fear that (prospective) graffiti makers previously felt for the consequences that making graffiti might have. El Zeft explains how 'during the protests, they shot at me with real bullets. They tried to kill us. After that, they cannot scare us anymore. I do not care about going to prison. It is a game, a contest now between them and us.'[43]

Omar Picasso at Work at Tahrir Square

Even though the authorities are attempting to keep people from making graffiti, their tactics to discourage people no longer seem to have a deterring effect on many graffiti makers because the penalties that are set for the spraying of graffiti do not measure up to the risks that protestors took in expressing their political dissent and demanding greater freedom during the revolution. Now that they have claimed the right to make known what is on their mind in a revolution that has cost the lives of other protestors, many of those who protested on Tahrir Square will not abstain from expressing their opinions for fear of a prison sentence. El Teneen explains that 'we have been repressed for the past thirty years. So when you have an opportunity to express yourself like that in the streets, people will take it.'[44]

Radz also recalls how the governor of Alexandria recently decided that the penalty for making graffiti would be raised to three years of prison. Instead of keeping people from spraying graffiti, she states that the response of people on Twitter was: "Okay, that just made it more fun."[45]

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[42] Merna and Nawara.
[43] Nazeer and El Zeft.
[44] El Teneen.
[45] Radz and Mostafa.

2.2 Graffiti and Street Art as a Contentious Performance

It can be argued that the making of graffiti and street art has become a contentious performance in Egypt because writing and drawing on the wall has become the stake of a contest between the authorities and the graffiti makers. The street artist performs an act of opposition to the authorities by drawing on the wall because the spraying of graffiti is an illegal act and a struggle is taking place between the authorities, who seek to erase the critical political messages on the walls, and the graffiti makers, who keep making new pieces.

The act of making graffiti can thus be seen as a contentious performance because it can be seen as a political action that challenges the representation of events by the authorities by offering contentious alternatives to the portrayal of events by those in power in a performative way. In the previous chapter, it was argued that graffiti and street art offer alternative views on events, persons and situations that challenge the way in which these are represented by the government and the official media through media frames. In this chapter the focus lies on the performative aspect of the way in which these alternative frames are presented to the public.

Tilly and Tarrow describe contentious performances as 'relatively familiar and standardized ways in which one set of political actors makes collective claims on some other set of political actors' (2007: 11). Examples of contentious performances are mass demonstrations, petitions, lobbying, press releases, public meetings, but also strikes and violent assaults (Tilly and Tarrow 2007: 11-12). Graffiti can also be seen as a contentious performance because it has been used in different historical and spatial contexts to make collective claims on political actors (see, e.g.: Peteet 1995 and Rolston 1987). Peteet furthermore notes how '[t]he riots of signs on stones, and their erasure, signalled a contest over place and its definition' (1996: 146).

Contentious performances are part of contentious politics, which Tilly and Tarrow define as 'interactions in which actors make claims bearing on someone else's interests, leading to coordinated effects on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties' (2007: 4). Even though Tilly and Tarrow's definition of contentious politics is the most well-known, an alternative is suggested by Leitner *et al*, who propose to characterise contentious politics as 'concerted, counterhegemonic social and political action, in which differently positioned participants come together to challenge dominant systems of authority, in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries' (2007: 157). This definition is useful as an addition to the one of Tilly and Tarrow because it focuses less on the state, emphasises the individuality of the different participants involved and draws explicit attention to the aim of contentious politics to promote

alternative imaginaries.

The production of graffiti and street art in Cairo can be characterised as a contentious performance because it includes the three characteristics of contentious politics: contention, collective action, and politics. Firstly, even though not all graffiti and street art made in Cairo makes claims on the Egyptian authorities, many pieces involve the Egyptian government as an object of criticism and can thus be classified as political. Secondly, many pieces of street art are contentious because they criticise the current state of affairs and depict alternative interpretations. Furthermore, the act of making graffiti itself is contentious because in drawing and writing on walls graffiti artists question the legitimacy of the ban on the making of graffiti of the state authorities. Thirdly, it is possible to

Ammar Abu Bakr in Mohamed Mahmoud Street

argue that the production of graffiti and street art can be classified as collective action because certain (informal) networks exist that bind street artists together and assure a minimum of coordinated action and consensus in program (Tilly and Tarrow 2007: 5). The making of street art is also clearly a form of contentious politics, according to the definition of Leitner *et al*, because it can be characterised as an action that seeks to counter dominant discourses of official media and thereby challenge dominant systems of authority in Egypt by promoting alternative imaginaries.

To understand the appeal of graffiti and street art to graffiti makers it is important to focus not only on the way in which graffiti can be used to distribute a competing frame to a large and diverse audience, but also to pay attention to the act of the making of the graffiti itself as a contentious performance. Radz states that for her it is not necessarily important what message a graffiti is expressing. Rather, she argues that

I think, for me, it is more about taking the risk of having a spray can and you want to say something and you actually took the risk of writing it on the wall. You didn't care. And for that anyone who does a piece

like that should be respected. He is trying to say his opinion out loud. Even if he is just like reciting or repeating some things that are already known, like "Down with the SCAF" or stuff like that. […] It is when you have an opinion about an issue that you want to say and you choose to say it to the street, whether you tag it or you don't tag it, whether you write your name down it or you don't. I think it is mainly about that. It is about saying: "I exist. I am there. So hear my voice. This is my voice."[46]

Radz thus argues that the importance of graffiti lies more in the act of taking the risk to write something on the wall than in the message that is presented. Not everyone agrees on this point, though. Ganzeer argues that 'obviously you could make bullshit and in that case what is it for a form of protesting? What if you do something stupid on the wall? […] So I am not sure whether it is necessarily a form of protest all the time. Sometimes it is just a form of kidding around.'[47]

"Death to Socrates!":
A Form of Protest or Just Kidding Around?

However, even if one is just "kidding around," one does commit an illegal act by spraying graffiti and claims the right to express oneself in public space (even if it is by stating nonsense). By writing something on a wall a person contests the legitimacy of the state authorities to prohibit people from using public space as they wish. Furthermore, even though it may be questioned whether all forms of graffiti in Cairo should be seen as a form of protesting, it is clear that at least certain individuals seek to contest the Egyptian authorities by spraying graffiti in public space. Mostafa proclaims, for example, that 'we want the army to see that we are against them,'[48] El Teneen argues that the SCAF 'control[s] the media. […] They can completely, *yani*, control the people. They can tell them that the street is happy with what they are doing and it is not true. You have to show dissent, in some form'[49] and Radz states that 'the bottom line of it all is about the public versus the government'.[50]

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[46] Radz and Mostafa.
[47] Ganzeer.
[48] Radz and Mostafa.
[49] El Teneen.
[50] Radz and Mostafa.

2.3 Claiming the Right to Express One's Opinion in Public Space

The act of graffiti writing and the making of street art can thus be characterised as a contentious performance because it challenges the Egyptian authorities, both in its often oppositional political messages that negate particular representations of events, persons and situations by the authorities and because graffiti 'does not ask permission but freely claims spaces on the walls of the city' (Smith 2011). Graffiti making is contentious because it denies the authority of the Egyptian state to determine in which way people are allowed to use public space. Ganzeer explains that if he would want to do a piece on a wall in a street and he has spoken with all the people who live there and they agree that it would be nice if he would make a piece of art there,

> it would still technically be illegal to do it on the wall. And that is absurd, you know? Just, I mean, this is an absurd example of how the structure, the power structure of who is responsible for what in the city is just messed up. Why would it be okay for some guy in a suit in an office, who doesn't live in this street, to say: "No, you can't do that," when everyone who does live in that street says it is okay?[51]

Ganzeer claims that the idea that state authorities can decide in which way citizens can use public space rests on a false assumption. He argues that '[t]he city does not belong to them [the authorities]. It belongs to us [the people]. They work for us. […] As a people, I don't think we need permission to use the streets. […] This is something we are accustomed to, but it should be the other way around. They should need permission from us to use it.'[52]

According to Ganzeer, graffiti thus revolves around the reclaiming of space in the city as public space that can be used in a way that local people agree to. This constitutes a contentious performance because graffiti makers thereby claim the right to use the city actively in contradiction to the way in which subjects 'are allowed to use [public space] only passively – through walking, driving,

Anti-SCAF Graffiti by Mohamed Khaled

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[51] Ganzeer.
[52] Public talk by Ganzeer in Cairo on 20 February 2012.

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watching – or in other ways that the state dictates' (Bayat 2010: 11). This process of claiming the right to an active use of the city can be connected to Lefebvre's notion of a *right to the city*, which envisions people being entitled to the use of urban space as a 'place of encounter' (Lefebvre 1996: 158). According to Fahmi, Lefebvre's concept of a right to the city 'has highlighted people's right to participate in the public sphere, spatializing this right and associating it with everyday urban life' (2009: 99). It can thus be argued that graffiti artists reclaim an active use of public space, which contests the authority of the state to restrict the activities of the people in the streets of the city, by claiming the right to express themselves in public space in setting up a communication with other people in society through the promulgation of politically contentious messages that are presented on the streets through their art work.

The authorities in turn seek to push people back into the confinements of the allowed uses of public space by acting against those persons who trespass the boundaries of sanctioned practices in public space. El Zeft recalls how police officers came when he and his friends were making graffiti one night: 'I was drawing in the street and two police cars came. Like about fifteen police officers came out […] and they shouted and they tried to hit one of us and they looked in the pockets and they threw all the stuff on the streets. […] They took my name and *id* and the number of my *id* and said that the next time […] I will have to spend three years in jail.'[53]

El Zeft and his friends were not arrested because the capacity of the authorities to deal with graffiti artists at the moment is limited, as was discussed before,[54] and El Zeft and Nazeer claim that 'whenever you arrest a graffiti artists, you are gonna have a head ache from all the activists.'[55]

When Ganzeer was arrested for spreading an anti-SCAF piece called the *Mask of Freedom*, for example, graffiti makers and other sympathisers quickly reacted by changing their Facebook pictures into Ganzeer's piece and calling for his release. Although the security officials were able to exert control on the allowed uses of public space by arresting Ganzeer for the spraying of graffiti, his arrest caused the subversive art piece to spread much faster and to acquire much greater renown than the work most likely would have obtained if Ganzeer would not have been taken into custody (see: Cavaluzzo 2011: 76).

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[53] Nazeer and El Zeft.
[54] Merna and Nawara.
[55] Nazeer and El Zeft.

Overpainted Piece by Radz

It is therefore easier for the authorities to just erase critical pieces and attempt to scare people off by intimidation rather than to arrest graffiti artists. Officers are send into the streets to wipe out critical graffiti and art. Radz narrates how one time when she was making an anti-SCAF graffiti, a group of men who were dressed in civilian clothes came and waited for her to finish the piece and then threw black paint over it.[56] The graffiti artists in turn respond to the authorities' attempts to eliminate their work by making new pieces or by seeking to retrieve the original work.

Original Martyr Portrait by Abu Bakr (16 March 2012)[57] (Photo by Matteo Colombo)

Portrait after it Has Been Removed (10 April 2012)

Portrait after it Has Been Recovered (22 April 2012)

2.4 Creating a Public Space for Participatory Culture

It has so far been argued that graffiti artists claim the right to express one's opinion in public space and thereby reclaim the right to actively use the streets in an act that can be described as

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[56] Radz and Mostafa.

[57] The person depicted in this mural is General Mohamed al-Batran, a prison guard at the el-Qatta prison, who was killed by his colleagues on 28 or 29 January 2012. The precise reason for his death remains unclear as different sources state that he was allegedly shot because he refused to release the detainees as was ordered by the former Interior Minister Habib el-Adly on 28 January 2012 (see: *Uprisings in Translation* 2012) or that he intervened when the prison wards started to shoot randomly at the detainees, allegedly in an attempt to ignite riots (see: Atteya and Sabry 2011).

a contentious performance. To come to a better understanding of the motivations that underlie the practices of Cairene graffiti artists, we should also have a look at the way in which graffiti makers claim this right not only for themselves, but for all people in Egyptian society and thereby seem to wish to produce what could be called a public space for *participatory culture* (Carrington 2009: 421).

De Bruyne and Giesen argue that 'different forms of community art reclaim the streets, in the broadest sense of the term, salvaging a public and democratic space, sometimes even literally laying claim to a "common"' (2011: 6). The graffiti artists interviewed also seem to wish to create a space for public discussions about political events and Egyptian society more generally, in which a multiplicity of voices can be heard that counters the uniformity of the official media. Many of the artists interviewed say that they want to make people think about the events that are occurring in the country and that they wish to offer a counterdiscourse to the discourse that is presented in official media, but based upon their reflections of their practices it can also be argued that they furthermore wish to create a public space in which people are stimulated to discuss these issues with each other. Yasmeen explains that when she was first asked to help in making graffiti, she was confused about what the sense of it all was. She says: 'At first, I was afraid, I wasn't understanding what is the exact meaning or what is the use of it, you know? Okay, so what, we just paint on the wall? […] What is the point? But then I saw. I saw many people just walking down the street and looking to it, saying: "What is it?" Asking me something: "What happened?"'[58]

As a practice that is performed in the streets, the drawing of graffiti and making of street art offers opportunities for direct interaction with the public. When passersby asked Yasmeen what they were doing and what happened, this created an occasion to explain the situation in Cairo to people in Luxor.[59] Graffiti making attracts attention of passersby in the street and often leads to discussions. Merna states that

> [w]hen we first started, we were committed to going to really like non-mainstream areas that don't see graffiti. Like Zamalek and Downtown and Heliopolis, all these areas are familiar. I mean, the audience's eyes are familiar with graffiti. So we wanted to go to areas that are called "shaby" here. It means popular, or populated. They are more crowded. They are less developed than the main city areas. So we went there and we sprayed the graffiti. That would produce more dialogue.[60]

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[58] Yasmeen.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Merna and Nawara.

The issue for graffiti artists is thus not only to express one's opinion in public space, but also to transform the streets into a space for dialogue. Obviously the ideas expressed in street art are not always accepted by different audiences. Peteet's observation about the situation in the West-Bank that '[w]riting and reading were structured by positionality, and thus audiences endowed graffiti with affirmative, opposed, and alternative meanings' (1996: 155) also applies to graffiti and street art in (post-)revolutionary Cairo.

Nawara recalls how *Graffiti Harimi* started a feminist graffiti campaign in which they spread graffiti of famous Egyptian women and made use of Egyptian proverbs to assert a female presence in public space. She narrates how '[w]e chose a variety of public figures. Some of them are very controversial for being known as dancers and actresses. […] We had our deal with scepticism, some refusal. But […] what we wanted to do was somehow accomplished. The idea of engagement. Opening up a conversation about why and why not, should or shouldn't women have more of a presence in public spaces, and so forth.'[61]

By making graffiti in the street and discussing with people, graffiti artists are trying to convey the message to the people that they should think for themselves and dare to speak up for themselves. Alaa Awad explains that

> first, I wanna, *yani*, make them [the Egyptian people] just in the beginning remember. First, remember civilisation. Remember the pride of being Egyptian. Make them also look now for the life now. Make them see the life now. If you really are… know yourself from the beginning, *yani*, you must have choice now. You must have choice now. […] we must also have freedom. And nobody can think for us. Nobody can think. We refuse their thinking. From anyone. For anyone to think for us.[62]

Awad thus seeks to encourage the Egyptian people with his art to think for themselves. Furthermore, it is not only important to think for oneself, but also to express one's ideas because as Yasmeen claims, 'we need to break with our problem here in Egypt because we get used to be silent. You get used to not saying what you feel or what you think or not just drawing what you want. […] No, we did not have that freedom before. That we could do everything what we want.'[63]

Merna, in a similar way, explains that for many Egyptians, and especially women, it is still difficult to see that they can say and do things that they could not before. About the situation

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[61] Merna and Nawara.
[62] Awad on 24 April 2012.
[63] Yasmeen.

of women in Egypt, she observes that '[i]t is hard to understand, to see yourself have a voice, or to see yourself represented is a bit hard when the whole culture is very repressive.'[64]

Graffiti is thus not only motivational for the revolution, but also seeks to convince people to participate in civil life, to dare to think independently and voice one's own opinions. The act and the work of graffiti artists can therefore be a starting point for discussions that can be carried out either verbally, between people that are present in the same space at the same time, or through the walls, by writing down graffiti, commenting on pieces by others and sometimes even changing or erasing (parts of) other people's work. Nazeer explains that 'you have people posting things that are pro-revolution and people that are posting things that are anti-revolution and you have got these people painting over these people's stuff and vice versa. So it is just free for all, you know, and not been held by one or two persons.'[65]

Omar Picasso, in a similar way, stresses that 'the walls are for all people. After painting, it is not mine. It will be public. For all people.'[66]

From this perspective, it can be argued that graffiti artists are attempting to reconstitute 'the urban space of the street [as] a place for talk, given over as much to the exchange of words and signs as it is to the exchange of things' (Lefebvre 2003: 19). In other words, it can be said that graffiti artists want to turn graffiti and street art from a medium of expression into a medium of communication that is not only public, but also democratic. The point is thus not to claim the right to express one's opinion in public space for oneself, but rather to transform this space into a place in which all people are able to partake in public discussions about politics and society. This point is also emphasised by Peteet who claims that '[g]raffiti [in the West-Bank] transformed contested space into a communicative arena in which directives were sent and visions of a future were encoded' (Peteet 1996: 149).

Graffiti has particular characteristics that enable it to function as a means that can transform public space into a communicative arena. Merna argues that 'graffiti is a channel for the voiceless. We don't have money to advertise. We don't have the resources to go and everywhere discuss it. […] I think this is the appeal of graffiti. That people just use it. It is inexpensive. It is accessible. The streets are everywhere so they use it to say a message to other people.'[67]

In the previous chapter it was argued that graffiti and street art offer the opportunity to politically involved people to challenge the representations of particular events by official

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[64] Merna and Nawara.
[65] Merna and Nawara.
[66] Omar Picasso.
[67] Merna and Nawara.

media that promulgate the discourses of the Egyptian authorities by offering counterframes through their art work, which is present in the streets and thus reaches a larger and more diverse audience than would be reached if artists would spread their art through social media and blogs on the internet. It is important to add that graffiti also offers the audience a chance to participate, which turns graffiti from a medium of expression into a medium of communication and may transform the streets of Cairo into a public space for "participatory culture" (Carrington 2009: 421).

   Participatory culture is defined by Jenkins *et al* (2006) as a culture 'in which there are relatively low entry barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, a culture of valuing and sharing the outcomes of artistic expression, patterns of informal mentorship and a sense of social connection' (Carrington 2009: 421). Through their graffiti and street art, the artists interviewed seek to engage the public in discussions about Egyptian politics and society and their work thus has an emancipatory aim, directed at creating a more participatory cultural environment in Cairo that may increase the public's involvement in the political transition that Egypt is going through. By placing their art in public space, street artists seek to render both culture and politics common, in the sense that it belongs to all.


Men Watching and Taking Pictures of the Martyr Murals in Mohamed Mahmoud Street

Graffiti artists can use particular spatial strategies to contest the Egyptian authorities and to attempt to set up a public and democratic space in which people are encouraged to think for themselves and discuss their ideas with others. It is important to note that in order to bring

about discussions, not only the art work itself is important, but also the location where it is placed. Leitner *et al* observe that 'geography matters to the imaginaries, practices and trajectories of contentious politics' (2008: 158) because '[p]laces are imbued with meaning as well as power' (161). Lefebvre (1993) theorised the relation between physical space and its symbolic meaning by noting that 'the social experience of space is always mediated by a system of meanings and symbolisms that operates through the imagination. Accordingly, there exists a *representational space* that "overlays physical space," which is "directly lived through its associated images and symbols," and "which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (p. 45)' (as cited in: Batuman 2003: 262). Batuman explains that '[t]he relation between identity and place, therefore, is not merely one of territorial identification but one of continuous imagination linked to the social practices that are rooted in space' (2003: 262).

The work of graffiti artists can thus also be seen as a form of contentious politics because with their work they seek to change the "social imaginaries" of "representational space" (Batuman 2003: 262) by 'strategically manipulat[ing], subvert[ing] and resignify[ing] places that symbolise priorities and imaginaries they are contesting; to defend places that stand for their priorities and imaginaries; and to produce new spaces where such visions can be practised, within that place and beyond' (Leitner *et al* 2008: 161-162).
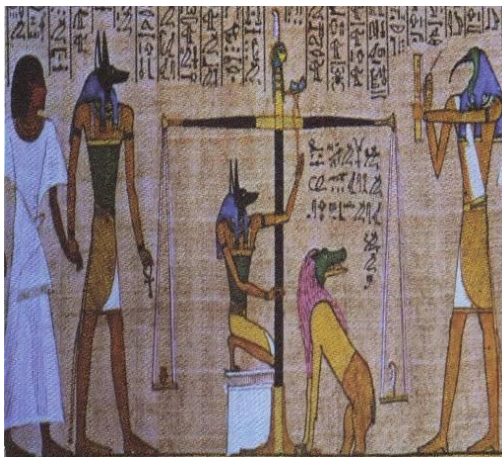
Judgement before Osiris (from the book of the dead by the scribe Hunefer, 1285 BC, painted papyrus, British Museum, London)

Detail of Street Art by Awad in Mohamed Mahmoud Street

A clear example of street art that seeks to transform particular social imaginaries of representational space is the work in Mohamed Mahmoud Street by Ammar Abo Bakr and Alaa Awad. With their street art, Abo Bakr and Awad seek to transform the street into a

public space for dialogue and remembrance.[68] The location of the martyr murals of the al-Ahly supporters is significant because violent clashes between the authorities and protestors occurred in Mohamed Mahmoud Street in November 2011, during which several protestors died and many lost their eyes (see: Abaza 2012a). It is thus a place that is loaded with meaning and that is of special importance to many of the people who support the Egyptian revolution. By placing their art work in this street, Abo Bakr and Awad change the representational space of Mohamed Mahmoud Street into a place of the commemoration of the dead. The pieces by Awad, which reflect the art work in ancient Egyptian tombs, symbolically transforms the audience's social imaginaries of the place by visually relating Mohamed Mahmoud Street to the burial sites of the pharaohs and their high officers.

Mourning Women in a Mural in the Tomb of Ramose[69]   *Detail of Street Art by Awad in Mohamed Mahmoud Street*

Merna narrates how in Mohamed Mahmoud Street 'they drew the portraits of the people who died. Things that reflected the events. Things that spoke out against the military […] it is still there, people still visit it and it is something like a reminder. And it is also where people gonna mourn the dead because all the dead are gone and lost.'[70]

    Mohamed Mahmoud Street is thus turned into a public space where people can come together to remember the people who have died. The location of the art work thus contributes to delivering the message because protestors were killed and lost their eyes during violent clashes with the Egyptian authorities in this street.

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[68] Author's interview with Ammar Abo Bakr in Cairo on 16 February 2012.
[69] Image was published in: Julia Schauer, 2012, 'Mourners are Something to Cry About,' on *Artventures*, 5 February, available at: http://artvent-artventures.blogspot.nl/2012_02_01_archive.html [accessed 25 July 2012].
[70] Merna and Nawara.

Young al-Ahly Supporter putting Flowers in Front of Martyr Murals at Mohamed Mahmoud Street

Mohamed Mahmoud Street is thus turned into a public space where people can come together to remember the people who have died. The location of the art work thus contributes to delivering the message because protestors were killed and lost their eyes during violent clashes with the Egyptian authorities in this street.

So when we look at the question why street artists in Cairo select graffiti and street art as their medium for political expression in a time in which other media of communication, most notably social media, are available, it can be argued first that the spatial character of the act of making graffiti and street art, contrary to the virtual nature of social media, offers graffiti artists the opportunity to carry out a contentious performance by challenging the Egyptian authorities, both in its often oppositional political messages that negate particular representations of states of affairs by the authorities and by denying the authority of the Egyptian state to determine in which way people are allowed to use public space. Second, as a practise that is performed in the streets, the drawing of graffiti and making of street art offers opportunities for direct interaction with the public, which is an important asset since many graffiti artists seek to produce what could be called a public space for participatory culture. Third, through the act of making graffiti, street artists offer a contentious performance because they seek to challenge the authorities not only through an active use of public space, but also by attempting to challenge the social imaginaries of public space that the state has constructed and seeks to uphold.

The graffiti artists interviewed thus seek to convince people to participate in civil life, to dare to think independently and voice one's own opinions and they make use of spatial

strategies to achieve this aim. The making of graffiti and street art, as a spatial practice, thus offers certain politically engaged young people in Cairo an opportunity to stage a contentious performance that may contribute to rendering both culture and politics common by creating a public and democratic space in which all Egyptian people can partake by changing the social imaginaries of representational space in Cairo.

Graffiti as a Democratic Practice: Horse Carriage Driver in Luxor Drawing Graffiti During A Break

3. The Power of the Aesthetic to Distribute the Sensible: "Art" in Street Art

It is dangerous more than the guns, the culture, yani.
Alaa Awad

3.1 Artistic Practices and the Distribution of the Sensible

In the previous chapter, it was argued that the making of graffiti and street art offers certain politically engaged young people in Cairo an opportunity to stage a contentious performance that may contribute to rendering both culture and politics common by creating a public and democratic space in which all Egyptians can partake by changing the social imaginaries of representational space in Cairo. It is important to focus now on the fact that graffiti artists seek to challenge the social imaginaries of representational space through works of art because artistic practices may possess a particular power to reconceptualise social relations through that which Jacques Rancière describes as the capacity of the aesthetic to "distribute the sensible".

   According to Rancière, politics revolves essentially around 'the configuration of a space as political, the framing of a specific sphere of experience, the setting of objects posed as "common" and of subjects to whom the capacity is recognized to designate these objects and discuss about them' (2006). Rancière thus holds that politics is a process in which people determine who is able to decide which issues belong to the realm of the political and which people are capable of debating about these matters. Politics therefore centres first and foremost on issues of representation and perception. Sayers (2005) argues that Rancière holds that the social order consists of

> a set of implicit rules and conventions which determine the distribution of roles in a community and the forms of exclusion which operate within it. This order is founded on what Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible" [which refers] to the way in which roles and modes of participation in a common social world are determined by establishing possible modes of perception (in this context, "sensible" refers to what is apprehended by the senses). Thus the distribution of the sensible sets the divisions between what is visible and invisible, sayable and unsayable, audible and inaudible.

Artistic practices can play a political role, according to Rancière, because they can influence the *distribution of the sensible*, which determines the way in which roles and modes of participation in the social order are perceived. Rancière therefore argues that 'artistic practices take part in the partition of the perceptible insofar as they suspend the ordinary coordinates of

sensory experience and reframe the network of relationships between spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular' (2006).

This capacity of art to participate in the partition of the perceptible gives art its political dimension. Rancière (2006) argues that art

> is political as it frames not only works or monuments, but also a specific space-time sensorium, as this sensorium defines ways of being together or being apart, of being inside or outside, in front of or in the middle of, etc. It is political as its own practices shape forms of visibility that reframe the ways in which practices, manners of being and modes of feeling and saying are interwoven in a commonsense, which means a "sense of the common" embodied in a common sensorium.

Art is thus political when it changes the ways in which people perceive their practices, manners of being and modes of feeling. Art can render visible what would otherwise remain invisible and make imaginable what would otherwise remain unimaginable and thereby change what can be thought, said and done within a particular place and time. Downey therefore observes that 'insofar as it determines the way in which we see the world, the aesthetic subsequently plays a significant part in defining our place within it' (2011).

3.2 Street Art and the Politics of Representation

Art can thus play a role in politics and is able to reconfigure the social imaginaries of representational space because 'politics and aesthetics can determine who is included and who is excluded in any given "distribution of the sensible"; who is the subject of equality and who is abandoned to the realm of non-representation' (Downey 2011).

Street art takes part in the politics of representation by putting forward alternative representations. Fairclough argues that the politics of representation revolves around questions concerning 'whose representations are these, who gains what from them, what social relations do they draw people into, what are their ideological effects, and what alternative representations are there' (1999: 75). Graffiti artists take part in politics of representation, in which representation can be understood, according to Mitchell's definition, as 'a multidimensional and heterogeneous terrain, a collage or patchwork quilt assembled over time out of fragments [...] in which act[s] of representation ([...] as interpretation, description, or explanation) [are simultaneously] an intervention, an experiment, an interpretation of the world that amounts to a change in the world' (1994: 419).

This idea that street art takes part in the politics of representation can most clearly be seen in the work of feminist graffiti makers. Merna explains that the *Graffiti Harimi* group makes street art in order to reclaim public space for women:

> I feel this is about public spaces and our presence in the public spaces. It is becoming difficult. It is not… we are there still equally… because we have to use the streets and we are an integral part of society, but they make it so difficult. I mean, the amount of sexual harassment, how unsafe it is at night and how society limits the street for you is bizarre. And this is cross-cutting across all classes in Egypt. If you are middle-class this means that it is not safe for you to get into a cab. This means that you must have a car and if you don't have a car, this means that someone will have to drive you. So it is more like… It is a question of just being there. Of claiming space. Of owning the space.[71]

Nawara supports this idea when she claims that their campaign is '[m]ore of a statement of women reclaiming public spaces. It should not be a fight that we see women in public spaces. It should be that if you are walking down the street, you feel that you are owning the street that you are walking in.'[72]

Merna explains that

'Equal'

> I feel that we are being pushed back further and further and that space is being taken, whether that is in the discourse or whether it will be literally in the streets, like physically, it is almost like there is this kind of desire to put women back into their homes. So when women participated in the revolution, although they were an integral part, now the discourse that recognizes them, what is that: the mother of the martyr. And any other woman, she is questioned: "Why are you in the street?" She is blamed. You know about this blue bra girl? She was blamed. The whole country blamed her. "No good girl spends time in the street [...]." Your honour is being attacked just because you exist in the street. Therefore it is important to have a woman [depicted in the streets].[73]

The *Graffiti Harimi* group seeks to challenge the role that is attributed to women within Egyptian society by redistributing the sensible through their art work, which they place in the streets. It has tried to do this on a previous occasion by starting a feminist graffiti campaign, as was discussed in the previous chapter, in which they spread graffiti of famous Egyptian

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[71] Merna and Nawara.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.

'Egypt Brought Forth Women'

(Adaptation of the famous Egyptian saying: 'Egypt Brought Forth Men')

women and made use of Egyptian proverbs to assert a female presence in public space. By putting graffiti of famous women in the streets in Cairo, the graffiti makers of *Graffiti Harimi* sought to challenge the way in which women are generally represented in Egypt. Nawara reflects: 'What kind of woman did we use to see before? A mother of the martyr, a mother of the hero. It is always related to a man. Someone's mother, someone's daughter, someone's wife, sister… It is always a sub. Like an extra. But we are not!'[74]

Merna states that for her it gives satisfaction to see women depicted on the walls. In this way, as Peteet notes, '[g]raffiti proclaim[s] place as one's own and assert[s] one's power in it' (1996: 146).

Feminist graffiti thus forms an example of the way in which art can be used in the politics of representation because it seeks to redefine the role that women can have within society. It thus is part of the partition of the sensible, which Rancière describes as '[t]hat distribution and re-distribution of times and spaces, places and identities, that way of framing and re-framing the visible and the invisible, of telling speech from noise and so on, [of] bringing on the stage new objects and subjects' (Rancière 2006).

Other artists also seek to redistribute the sensible because they offer alternative representations of the relations between people in society. This can be seen, for example, in a work by El Zeft that is called *We are the People from Tahrir*. El Zeft explains that this work

> is a play on a famous Egyptian movie
> called *We are the People from the Bus*.

'We are the People from Tahrir'

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[74] Merna and Nawara.

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It is a story in the sixties. The president before Mubarak was Sadat and before him was Gamal Abu Nasr. He used to torture people a lot. Anyone who thought to contribute through any kind of political acting, he just took him to prison and tortured him a lot. So it is very similar to what is happening right now. So that is why I did it.[75]

Through this work, El Zeft seeks to offer new ways of perceiving the relation between the Egyptian people and the authorities by showing to the audience the similarities between the way in which the current authorities respond to the protests on Tahrir Square and the way in which in the time of Nasr, the authorities reacted to political opposition. He thus tries to redistribute the sensible by drawing on a historical analogy that is presented in the form of a reference to Egyptian cinematic history.

3.3 The Form of the Message: Visual Art, Egyptian Culture and Humour

It has thus far been argued that artistic practices may hold a particular power to influence politics by taking part in the distribution of the sensible. Art revolves around offering different ways of seeing, hearing and experiencing the world. It can take part in the politics of representation and propose new ways in which people perceive their practices, manners of being and modes of feeling because art focuses on 'the delimitation of the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the thinkable and the unthinkable, the possible and the impossible' (Sayers 2005).

Street art, as a visual art, focuses specifically on the visual senses. Visual culture has particular characteristics that make it well-suited to distribute the sensible. It can make things visible that otherwise would remain invisible and thereby make things thinkable that were unthinkable before. Kress notes that '[t]he sequential/temporal characteristic of language-as-speech may lend itself with greater facility to the representation of action as sequences of action; while the spatial display of visual images may lend itself with greater facility to the representation of elements and their relation to each other' (2000: 147).

Visual art has the capacity, for example, to capture certain juxtapositions in an image, thereby visualising for the viewer a new way to look at the relations between certain actors in the social field. An example of such a visualised dichotomy can be found in the work of Awad and Abo Bakr in Mohamed Mahmoud Street, where the snake monster with the heads

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[75] El Zeft.

of the SCAF confronts the Egyptian people. The ugliness of the army becomes vividly apparent when it is juxtaposed to the beauty of the Egyptians.[76]

Three-Headed Snake with Faces of the SCAF by Abo Bakr facing the Egyptian People by Awad

Furthermore, images can capture complex phenomena through "condensation," which is described by Morris (1993) as 'a compression of a complex phenomenon into a single image which captures its essence' (El Refaie 2003: 88). Through condensation, visual images can express certain ideas in a much more concise and clear form. One way in which images can visualise an idea in a condensed form is through the use of visual metaphors. El Refaie notes that it is difficult to distinguish visual metaphors from "literal" images, but proposes 'to identify a visual metaphor by referring to the thoughts or concepts that appear to underlie it' (2003: 90). She argues that

> [t]he fuzziness of boundaries arises partly from the fact that metaphor may well be a common element of many ordinary thought processes and partly from the recognition that all visual signs are, to a greater or lesser extent, based on a process of creating analogies. Because of this, the differentiation between a "literal" image and a visual metaphor is never absolute but it will always depend on the discourse context and on the degree to which particular metaphors have become accepted as the "natural," commonsensical way of representing certain meanings (2003: 90).

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[76] Author's interview with Awad on 24 April 2012.

A visual metaphor can contain, for example, 'a visual fusion of elements from two separate areas of experience into one new, spatially bounded entity' (El Refaie 2003: 79). An example of a visual metaphor that makes use of the technique of visual fusion is the piece by Omar Picasso that blends the faces of Mubarak and Tantawi into one. El Refaie notes that '[p]rovided that the viewer is familiar with the context, a cartoon is thus sometimes able to convey a complex message in a much more immediate and condensed fashion than language' (2003: 87). One look at this work is enough to understand the message that Mubarak

Tantawi/Mubarak Piece

and Tantawi are the same (if one knows at least what Tantawi and Mubarak look like).

Visual metaphors are an important instrument in partaking in the distribution of the sensible because 'metaphors tend to represent the unknown, unresolved or problematic in terms of something more familiar and more easily imaginable' (El Refaie 2003: 84). It can thus make imaginable what was unimaginable before and visible what otherwise would remain invisible because it can represent ideas in ways that are more accessible to the public. However, since visual metaphors are dependent on the context and on the background knowledge of the viewer, not everyone might understand their meaning (in the same way). El Refaie notes that '[t]he high context dependency of many visual metaphors means that their meaning is often implicit and that they tend to be open to quite a wide range of interpretations' (2003: 89).


Image of Two Mating Jackals by Awad

A case in point is Awad's piece of two mating jackals in a corner of the AUC library in Mohamed Mahmoud Street. This image is multi-interpretable because the meaning that underlies this visual metaphor does not immediately become apparent. Awad states, however, that it stands for the SCAF and the government who also do things in secret, away from the eyes of the people.[77]

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[77] Interview with Awad on 24 April 2012.

Another aspect that makes visual images an appropriate medium for the dissemination of collective action frames that seek to 'mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists' (Benford and Snow 2000: 614) is that 'visual images may be more suited than verbal texts to the task of implicitly conveying affective meanings' (El Refaie 2003: 89). In the first chapter, Tarrow's definition of collective action frames was discussed, which focuses on the idea that such frames 'redefine social conditions as unjust and intolerable with the intention of mobilizing potential participants, which is achieved by making appeals to perceptions of justice and emotionality in the minds of individuals' (1998: 111).

Visual images are capable of appealing to emotionality in the minds of the audience because the visual mode, as Hall (1997) has pointed out, '"engages feelings, attitudes and emotions and it mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer, at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common-sense way"' (as cited in El Refaie 2003: 89). The work in Mohamed Mahmoud Street is an example of street art that engages feelings, attitudes and emotions by placing bystanders face-to-face with the portraits of young men who died during the Port Said

massacre. El Refaie notes that 'in visual terms, there are several ways of establishing an imaginary contact and of inviting the viewer of an image to empathize with the depicted persons. In photographs this can be achieved, for example, by shortening the distance between the camera and its subject and by showing people looking directly into the lens so that they appear to be gazing into the viewer's eyes (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996)' (2003: 90). The martyrs of Mohamed Mahmoud Street look straight into the eyes of the viewers. By using photographs of the young men for his portraits, Abo Bakr was able to give faces to the dead, depicting them as individuals.
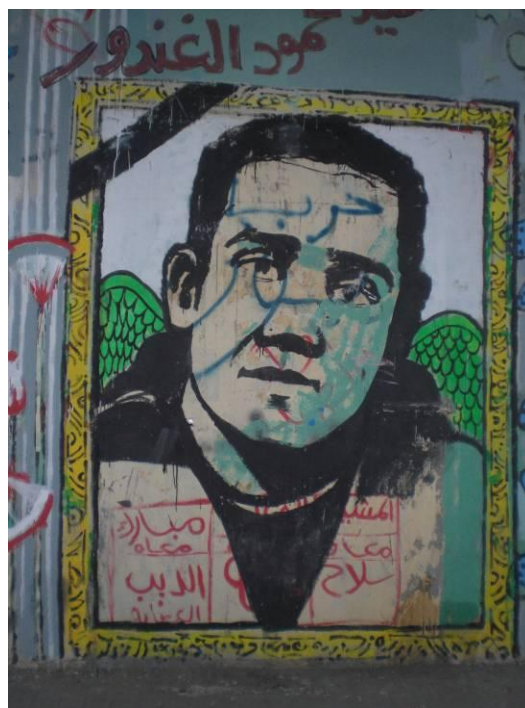
Portrait of Mahmoud Ghandor

Furthermore, in May, Abo Bakr returned to Mohamed Mahmoud Street to add to the portraits of the martyrs, images of their mourning mothers. The way in which the depicted women hold up the pictures of their deceased sons directly engages the audience and is an indictment against the regime. In depicting the mothers of the men who died Abo Bakr makes the sorrow and pain of the relatives of the martyrs tangible. Furthermore, he shows that the

young men who died were people who had a family, a life. The pain of the family of the deceased that is illustrated here reminds people who pass by that these men are not to be forgotten and makes an emotional appeal to them to support the cause that these people were willing to die for.

Portraits of the Mothers of Martyrs Holding Up the Pictures of Their Murdered Sons
(Photo by Matteo Colombo)

The aesthetic quality of street art, furthermore, plays an important role in the perceived legitimacy of graffiti. Nazeer and El Zeft explain that, as a graffiti artist, one has a social responsibility to make one's environment look better.

El Zeft: 'There are many walls everywhere where you have dozens of stencils on top of each other and they have a very good political message, but it is spam. Anyone who is passing by, he would never think to look at this because it is not catchy, it is not beautiful to look at. So, you have to do beautiful stuff.'
Nazeer: 'And it is backfiring on them. It looks bad. It puts up a good message, but it looks bad. So it is gonna backfire on me.'
Zeft: 'And it damages the revolution because graffiti, I think, is the art of the revolution so definitely you are damaging the revolution.'
Nazeer: 'You won't change it and you want a clean conscience. So don't spam the walls. Don't write anything. I think, personally, it's a social responsibility. Like, for example, if you are a good musician,

okay, play some good music, if you have money, donate the money, if you are a graffiti artist, make the place look better, you know?'[78]

When alternative representations are offered, it is thus important that these frames resonate with the Egyptian people and that they are capable of capturing the attention of bystanders because they are presented in a beautiful and catchy way, which makes people not resent graffiti makers, but instead admire them and their work. El Teneen remarks about his work that

[i]n the beginning it was just political, not artistical. […] Later on it started to change. Even the politics… people were divided about politics. So you had to make something not as direct, not as… Something to catch people's attention. There was a lot of graffiti afterwards. In the beginning we were almost the only ones. We were few people, but then… it exploded. There were more people. So it became harder to catch people's attention.[79]

In order to capture the attention of the people in the streets and to render common the reframing of the ways in which practices, manners of being and modes of feeling and saying are perceived, it is important that the frames offered by graffiti art are not only understandable and acceptable, but also convincing to the audience. Benford and Snow argue that 'the effectiveness or mobilizing potency of proffered framings' depends on their resonance (2000: 619). *Frame resonance* is determined by two factors: the *credibility* of the proffered frame and its *relative salience* (Benford and Snow 2000: 619). Credibility has to do with whether the offered frame is consistent, whether it fits with events in the world and whether the people who articulate the frame are seen as credible actors (Benford and Snow 2000: 620). The salience of a frame is determined by whether the beliefs, values and ideas expressed by a frame are central to the lives of the people who are to be mobilized, whether the frames offered relate to their everyday experiences and whether the framings are culturally resonant (Benford and Snow 2000: 620-621).

The graffiti artists interviewed use different methods to increase the resonance of the frames that are offered in their art work and to draw the attention of the audience. As was noted before, the *Graffiti Harimi* group sought to redistribute the sensible by making use of Egyptian proverbs and El Zeft referred to a well-known Egyptian film from the 1960s. Other artists go further back. Awad makes use of the symbolism of ancient Egyptian art to appeal to

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[78] Nazeer and El Zeft.
[79] El Teneen.

the public. Previously in this chapter, an example was shown of how Awad visually juxtaposes the ugliness of the army to the beauty of the Egyptian people. Behind the seven Egyptians stand seven cows. Awad explains that these cows represent Hathor, the ancient Egyptian goddess of beauty. Seven was in ancient Egyptian civilisation the symbol for perfection and Alaa explains that the cow 'is the symbolism of very good things because of the milk, and the mother and also the meat and helps the farmer with the land.'[80] Awad thus makes use of ancient symbolism to place a promise of beauty and goodness opposite the present challenge of ugliness and conflict.
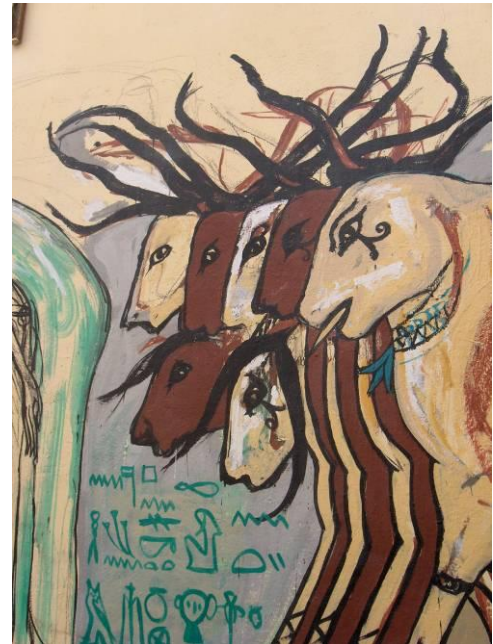
Hathor *in the Form of Seven Cows*

In another piece by Awad on a side street of Mohamed Mahmoud Street, which depicts fights between animals and people to convey the message that conflicts occur on all levels of existence, a friend of Awad, called Amir, has added a text in hieroglyphs taken from the statue of Ramses II in the Luxor Temple, which states: 'I made all the countries stand under your foot.'[81] Awad explains that Ramses II was a very strong ruler, but that he was crazy and very aggressive. Awad states that the text was put there to convey the message to the authorities that: 'If you are strong, save Egypt. Don't kill it.'[82]

A Bull and Hieroglyphs

It can be questioned, however, whether the contemporary Egyptian public is familiar with all these symbols. Awad admits that only very few Egyptians are able to read the hieroglyphic script, for example. It seems more important for Awad, however, to make the Egyptians curious about their ancient culture. He states that '[m]ost Egyptian sleep. Inside each one.

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[80] Interview with Awad on 24 April 2012.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.

From thousands of years. A gene, *yani*. Sleep. They forget about language, they forget about his life, he forget about his personality.'[83]

Awad thus wants to awaken in Egyptians an interest for their ancient culture. Awad is not the only graffiti artist who draws part of his inspiration from ancient Egyptian culture and art. The already mentioned piece by Abo Bakr in which the SCAF is depicted as a snake with wings, legs and three heads actually is inspired by a creature from ancient Egyptian mythology. This monster was depicted in a mural in the tomb of pharaoh

Piece by Abo Bakr on Mohamed Mahmoud Street

Ramses III. According to Egyptian mythology, the pharaoh needed to overcome certain obstacles after his death in order to go to his afterlife. At one point during his journey, the pharaoh would be confronted by three snakes that sought to keep the pharaoh from going any further. The pharaoh then would be helped by a creature with the body of a snake, wings, legs and three heads to overcome the hostile snakes.[84] The use of this creature in this graffiti may be interpreted as meaning that the SCAF is the helper of Mubarak because Mubarak was often referred to as "the pharaoh."

Three-Headed Snake with Wings and Legs in a Mural in the Tomb of Ramses III (ISPN No 2005/7145)

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[83] Interview with Awad on 24 April 2012.
[84] This story was told by a guide in the Valley of the Kings in Luxor.

Except for pharaonic symbolism, certain artists also make use of symbols from the Islamic art tradition. One example of this, can be found in a piece by Awad that depicts the struggle of people to participate in the revolution. In this work of art, the revolution is portrayed as a *buraq*. Mona Abaza explains that '[t]he Buraq is a mythological creature that is half-animal and half-human with wings. The body has often been described as representing a half-mule, half-donkey' (2012b). Furthermore, she notes that 'the Buraq is famously known as the creature that is said to have transported the Prophet Muhammed from Mecca to Jerusalem and back on the night of the "*Israa and Meraj*" (the night journey). Associated with flying and defiance of gravitation, the Buraq is often viewed as a symbol of freedom and liberation' (Abaza 2012b). It thus seems that Awad depicted the revolution as a buraq in order to convey to the audience a sense of freedom and liberation (Abaza 2012b). Awad states that is also stands for braveness.[85] The use of symbols from the ancient Egyptian and Islamic art traditions may render the art more culturally resonant and it can also be used to draw the attention of passersby.

Buraq *Representing the Revolution by Awad*

Other artists make use of humour to boost the resonance of their frames and to catch the attention of the public. El Teneen notes about jokes and humour that 'this is what Egyptians do, *yani*. They make jokes about it. Even at the beginning, before Mubarak left, there were a lot of funny signs and funny things. In Tahrir, it was not all violence. There was violence, but then they began to see how big it is. You have to make fun of it.'[86]

Also Omar Picasso points to the importance of humour in the everyday lives of Egyptians when he says: 'You know cartoons? It is another important thing in our lives in Egypt. Because it makes people laugh. It does two things. It sends a message. Second, it makes people laugh and be happy.'[87]

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[85] Interview with Awad on 24 April 2012.
[86] El Teneen.
[87] Omar Picasso.

An example of a piece of street art that tries to appeal to the sense of humour of passersby and thereby seeks to draw the attention of people is *The Revolution of the Descendants Will Bring Back the Glory of the Ancestors* by El Zeft, in which he combines pharaonic headwear with a *V for Vendetta* mask, often worn by protestors to remain anonymous. This combination of elements from ancient Egyptian civilisation and pop culture is surprising and can therefore be found funny.

'The Revolution of the Descendants Will Bring Back the Glory of the Ancestors'

Graffiti artists thus make use of different techniques to capture the people's attention and to seek to convince the audience of their proffered collective action frames. They make use of visual images in order to visualise an idea in a condensed form and to engage feelings, attitudes and emotions of the viewers and they seek to increase the resonance of their frames by making use of symbols and signs that the Egyptian public is familiar with, such as proverbs, references to pop culture, symbolism derived from ancient Egyptian mythology and Islamic art, or by presenting their message in a comical way.

3.4 The Spatiality of the Aesthetic Moment

The artistic aspect of graffiti art is thus important because visual culture has particular qualities that render it capable of partaking in the distribution of the sensible. But why does art need to be placed in the streets in order to partake in this process? Would the power of art to redistribute the sensible not be just as strong if artists would take the role of designers, making pieces of art at their house and distributing them over the internet, rather than as graffiti on the walls?

In certain cases, the power of the visual image to redistribute the sensible would indeed remain intact when art work would be spread through a different medium, such as the internet or newspapers. Cartoons in newspapers, for example, can also often offer different ways of perceiving social relations and affairs by making use of condensation and visual metaphor. In many cases, however, the physical spatiality of graffiti pieces plays an important role in conveying the meaning of the work of art.

One example of a work of graffiti art in which the physical location plays an important role in repartitioning the way in which social reality is experienced is the mural that was made on the wall that was put up by the army in Sheikh Rehan Street, one of the side streets of Mohamed Mahmoud Street, by Abo Bakr and Mohamed el-Moshir (Trew 2012). This wall is one of the seven military barricades that were put up around the Ministry of Interior to prevent protestors from entering the area around the ministry (Trew 2012). The art work on the wall shows the street that lies beyond the wall, thereby negating, in a certain sense, the existence of the wall. This work conveys a message of freedom in denying the boundaries that are set to the free movement of the people by the Egyptian authorities. El-Moshir stated that: 'As we can't pull the walls down we can deliver the message that there are no walls, that the streets are open.'[88] This piece of street art could only distribute the sensible in this way, however, because it is located on this specific wall.

Negating the Wall on Sheikh Rehan Street

A different example of graffiti, which meaning depends on physical location, are Nazeer's sign poles, which were mentioned before. The poles, for example, mention the distance to Tahrir. As sign poles they need to be located in a specific physical space because otherwise

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[88] Mohamed El-Moshir, as cited in Trew 2012.

they would not be sign poles at all. Another work that derives its meaning from its location is a piece by El Zeft that is placed on the wall before the former office of the National Democratic Party of Mubarak, which was set on fire during the revolution, that reads: 'Soon to be (re)opened.'

The spatiality of graffiti is furthermore important because the process of distributing the sensible revolves not only around presenting social reality in a novel way, but is also about educating people about new modes to sense and to speak (Sayers 2005). Sayers (2005) observes that '[t]he liberation of the senses does not occur simply with the lifting of social barriers and exclusions, the senses must be educated if they are to be extended.' The distribution of the sensible therefore also revolves around 'matters of capability and expertise; they imply skills which come into being only with education and culture. To transform the distribution of the sensible, these things too must be transformed' (Sayers 2005).

By placing their art work in the streets, graffiti makers do not only seek to present their message to the audience or to perform an act of contentious politics that challenges the authorities, but they also seek to create a place in which people can be educated in perceiving social relations in different ways. This relates back to the issue discussed in the previous chapter that graffiti artists seek to create a public space for cultural participation. The public space is thus not only turned into a space for dialogue and discussion, but also for education. Merna narrates, for example, how Mohamed Mahmoud Street is also called 'the street of free eyes. They called it that because people there saw the truths that was not being portrayed by the media.'[89]

The fact that Mohamed Mahmoud Street is also called the "street of free eyes" points to this process in which people are taught a new way to make use of their senses. The spatiality of street art is thus important because its place in the streets is vital to educating people to see social reality in different ways because the street is a social space for interaction.

Lastly, another way in which the location of graffiti in the street is important concerns the 'credibility of [the] frame articulators' (Benford and Snow 2000: 620) that contributes to the resonance of the proffered frame. Nazeer explains that he makes most of his work in Maadi, the neighbourhood where he lives and grew up, because

> people know me in Maadi. They know what I am all about and they trust me for certain judgements. So if
> they see that one of their friends is doing something for Tahrir, why not sympathize with Tahrir also?
> Unlike other places, I'm not known in Mohandiseen […], but I have a lot of my friends in Maadi. I have

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[89] Merna and Nawara.

been living in Maadi for 22 years, so this circle of influence… I have it in Maadi. So people will start sympathising with Tahrir because they know the people who is supporting Tahrir and it is one of their friends.[90]

Nazeer thus uses his "socio-spatial positionality" (Leitner *et al* 2008: 163) to increase the resonance of the collective action frames that he offers.

It is thus important for graffiti artists to place their art in the streets because certain works derive (part of) their meaning from their location in physical space and in other cases the message that is promulgated in graffiti is more likely to be accepted because of the socio-spatial positionality of the artist.

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[90] Nazeer and El Zeft.

Conclusion

You have nothing except the streets.
Nazeer

This thesis offered a conceptualisation of the interrelations between street art and social media within the temporal and spatial context of (post-)revolutionary Cairo by focusing on the reasons as to why certain politically engaged young people in Cairo select graffiti as their medium for political expression in a time in which many other media of communication, most notably social media, are available. It was argued that, as a medium of communication, graffiti and street art are able to frame political events. The production of graffiti and street art in Cairo can be seen as a form of collective action framing because graffiti artists seek to spread messages that intend to mobilise people to take action by presenting alternative ways to interpret particular events that challenge the way in which such events are represented by official media that promulgate the discourse of the Egyptian authorities. In order to counteract the influence of state propaganda, it is important for graffiti artists that they can reach a broad audience. In reaching out to the street, they aim to address as many people as possible. Street artists thus prefer graffiti over social media because access to internet is limited in Egypt. Since the street is of all people, street art is everyone's and reaches everybody who lives in close vicinity to the work of art or travels through the neighbourhood in which the piece is located. Street artists thus select graffiti as their primary medium of communication because they seek to address a wide and diverse audience. Many of the graffiti makers interviewed in this research hold that the walls in the streets are the only medium available to speak out to the Egyptian public and present a counterdiscourse that challenges the representations of social reality that are disseminated by the official media in Egypt.

   It can thus be concluded that the situation in contemporary Cairo might actually not differ that much from the situation in Northern Ireland or the West Bank as described by Rolston and Peteet, who argued that graffiti was one of the few ways in which people could politically express themselves because no other means of communication were available to them (Rolston 1987: 14 and Peteet 1996: 146). Although the Egyptian revolution showed that political activists in contemporary Cairo can express themselves through different social media, such as Twitter and Facebook or online blogs, and demonstrated the effectiveness of these media to offer a space for the expression of political opinions and to connect with people and organise for collective action (see, e.g.: Khalil 2011, Nunns and Idle 2011 and

Campbell 2011), the graffiti artists interviewed in this research are of the opinion that social media cannot offer an effective alternative media to the official media because only a small percentage of Egyptian society makes use of the internet. Art work in the street is, furthermore, not only more accessible than political expressions that are presented on social media or online blogs, but also better understandable to the Egyptian people, many of whom have followed little education.

This does not mean, however, that street artists in Cairo do not make use of social media. Many graffiti makers use social media in addition to graffiti to spread their works of art even further, to people who live in places that are not in close vicinity of the place where the pieces are located. The primacy lies, however, with the making of art in the street.

Graffiti does not only offer politically engaged young people in Cairo a chance to present a competing frame to a large and diverse audience, but also provides them with an opportunity to oppose the authorities by staging a contentious performance. The spatial character of the act of making graffiti and street art, contrary to the virtual nature of social media, offers graffiti artists the opportunity to carry out a contentious performance by challenging the Egyptian authorities, both in its often oppositional political messages that negate particular representations of states of affairs by the authorities and by denying the authority of the Egyptian state to determine in which way people are allowed to use public space.

The research presented in this thesis endorses the notion that power and resistance partake in a mutually constitutive relation. In the case of Cairene street art, this process of constant (re)negotiation of relations of power and resistance can be seen reflected in the struggle between the street artists, who present their counterdiscursive ideas on the street, and the authorities, who seek to erase their messages. The means available to the authorities to keep graffiti artists from venturing out into the streets to spray their contentious messages on the walls are influenced by the graffiti makers. This could be seen, for example, after the arrest of Ganzeer when graffiti makers and other sympathisers quickly reacted by changing their Facebook pictures into Ganzeer's piece called the *Mask of Freedom* and calling for his release. The "power" of the authorities to take people into custody in order to keep them from disseminating ideas that may cause societal unrest thus backfired in this case because the subversive art piece spread much faster and acquired much greater renown because of the mass response of outrage over Ganzeer's arrest than the work most likely would have obtained if Ganzeer would not have been taken into custody. Street artists and their sympathisers were thus able to influence the form of effective action that the authorities could take against them. At the same time, however, the authorities are able to restrict the ability of

street artists to present their work in the streets. Graffiti artists often choose the location and time to make a piece carefully and bring a person to stand guard to avoid police interference. The authorities, furthermore, can limit the artists' ability to spread his or her message by removing graffiti.

This thesis also offers certain reflections on structurationism. It seems that street artists in Cairo are trying to find the limits of what they are able to say and do in Egypt after the revolution and are testing how far they can go in their attempts to change Egyptian society and its political and social institutions. It may be argued from a structurationist perspective that the mass protests that led to the resignation of Mubarak in February 2011 have left more space than usual for people to act because some of the social structures that limit people's ability to act have been shaken as a consequence of the protestors' refusal to uphold the political structures (and some of the social and cultural structures) in place in Egyptian society any longer. The exact limitations to this space for relatively more free forms of agency cannot clearly be established, however, since a process of reconstruction of the social structures that have collapsed during the revolution is arguably already under way since the political structures are re-established through elections and the call for a return to normalcy and stability by a majority of the Egyptian people can be interpreted as a demand for a return to a renewed fixity of social structures within society. The image that arises from this research nevertheless is that certain young political engaged people in Cairo are willing to test what they are able to say and do within the temporal-spatial context of (post-)revolutionary Cairo and to explore the space that is left to them as a consequence of the weakening of the social structures within Egyptian society during the revolution. This applies not only to street artists who take the risk of being arrested for spraying graffiti, but also, for example, to Egyptian women who decide to take part in demonstrations and thereby push the cultural and social structures that are in place in Egyptian society that determine conventional gender roles. The outcome of such processes remains yet uncertain, but it is clear that at least certain Egyptian people no longer accept some of the previous limitations to acceptable forms of action that were set by former social structures and are willing and capable of acting in order to attempt to change the way in which social reality is structured.

Another reason why graffiti can function as an effective medium for political expression is that, as a practice that is performed in the streets, the writing of graffiti and drawing of street art offers opportunities for direct interaction with the public, which is an important asset since many graffiti artists seek to produce a public space for political discussions. Graffiti offers the audience a chance to participate, which turns graffiti from a medium of expression into a

medium of communication and may transform the streets of Cairo into a public space for participatory culture. Moreover, through the act of making graffiti, street artists offer a contentious performance because they challenge the authorities not only through an active use of public space, but also by attempting to challenge the social imaginaries of public space that the state has constructed and seeks to uphold.

Lastly, graffiti as an artistic practice may function as a powerful instrument to change the ideas of the audience about the relations between people in society because artistic practices can help determine the way in which roles and modes of participation in the social order are perceived through what Rancière has called the distribution of the sensible. Art can therefore be political and partake in politics of representation. Graffiti makers present their messages (often) through images because pictures can visualise an idea in a condensed form and engage feelings, attitudes and emotions of the viewers. The spatial nature of these works of art is important because through street art particular groups can reclaim public space, certain works derive their meaning from their physical location and in other cases the message that is promulgated in graffiti is more likely to be accepted because of the socio-spatial positionality of the artist.

In brief, it has been argued that certain politically engaged young people in Cairo select graffiti as their medium for political expression because graffiti and street art can function simultaneously as a medium of communication and a contentious performance and may be able to change people's perception of social reality by partaking in the distribution of the sensible. It is important to note here that this thesis has focused on researching the self-ascribed meanings of the artists' work and not on the actual impact that their work may have on audiences. Whether graffiti and street art are in fact able to change the conceptions of people who pass by it in the street and in this way influence collective consciousness is a question that this research did not attempt to answer and that remains open. Additional research into the reception of the art work of graffiti artists in Cairo and into the effects that these pieces have on the way in which people perceive Egyptian society and the political transition that it is going through would be a valuable addition to the research presented in this thesis.

It has been established, however, that the belief that graffiti can have an effect on the ways in which people in society perceive social relations, events and situations is an important motivating factor for the artists interviewed in this research. Many of the graffiti makers that I spoke to think that something needs to be done to counter the representations of social reality that are disseminated by the official media in Egypt and that the walls in the streets are the

only medium available to speak out to the Egyptian public and present a counterdiscourse. I have therefore argued that street artists in Cairo select graffiti as their medium for political expression in a time in which many other media of communication, most notably social media, are available because they see in graffiti and street art a unique medium that combines the power of framing, the power of contentious performance and the power of imagination.

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