Resistance Graffiti: The Role of Political Art in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

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“In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it, and the construction of a substitute universe. This also defines art. The demands of rebellion are really aesthetic demands” -Albert Camus in Klanten et al. 55

**Introduction**

Political art has the power to incite emotions, mobilize revolutions, and create a space for political discourse when other venues fail. It is this venue for discourse that many Egyptians chose to engage in during the Arab Spring. Despite living under the strict surveillance and censorship of an oppressive regime, Egyptian artists employed political art as a means of subverting the state and creating a community of support among protestors. Graffiti in public and accessible spaces was a crucial form of political art during the Egyptian Revolution. Graffiti was not a popular means of expression in Egypt until the Arab Spring, which provided an opening for citizens to publicly express dissent. It became a popular tool for dialogue between three actors: artists, pedestrians, and the authorities. Public discourse occurred on the walls of Egypt, notably Cairo, as artists would paint or spray their messages and receive responses from pedestrians. Other artists would engage, adding their own thoughts and artwork to the walls. Pedestrians could engage in the discourse simply by walking along the streets adorned with messages of resistance, or by covering the graffiti if they did not agree with the messages. The state also covered the graffiti, hoping to erase these public, visual documentations of realities and imagined futures. This thesis demands: How and to what extent was art weaponized during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution? I will begin with the introduction of the Tank Versus Biker mural and the
Girl In the Blue Bra. Then, I will provide historical context for the revolution. Next, I will analyze political art and spaces for discourse. Finally, I will tie all of these elements together to discuss the role of graffiti in the revolution.

This discursive process between political artists and the state is exemplified by the graffiti of the Tank Versus the Biker. What began as a graffiti mural featuring the Egyptian military aiming a tank against a bike-riding citizen became a space where other artists supplied their own interpretations and opinions to the wall. The mural evolved with additions of Egyptian citizens crushed under the tank, stencils of Lenin, the Mona Lisa, Egyptian state actors, and phrases that were popular during the revolution. The mural was finally covered by the state, demonstrating the government’s fear of the power resistance art created in the public sphere. The photographs taken of the graffiti are the only evidence that it ever existed, the only lasting documentation of the ephemeral work of art. Though the state did manage to erase the art from the walls, they could not erase what had already been documented and uploaded to social media.

The importance of social media during this period does not lie just in its ability to preserve art, but its ability to share it. Through social media, the image of the Girl In the Blue Bra became incredibly popular and ultimately a symbol of the Egyptian revolution. On December 11, 2017 a woman was photographed while she was dragged and beaten by police officers for protesting. Her face is covered, but her clothing is pulled up to reveal a blue bra underneath. The image of this violence quickly spread through social media and became a symbol of the abuse of power and treatment of women by the Egyptian state. Soon after, images of this woman were displayed on protest signs, a symbol of Egyptians denouncing the use of state-sponsored violence against its own people. Then, graffitied stencils of a blue bra emerged across Egypt as a symbol of resistance. What was once a complicated image was transformed into an accessible means for protesters to express their resistance to the government and military
violence. The stencil of the blue bra did not require any artistic talent or creativity, for one only needed a stencil and a can of spray paint to engage in the discourse and establish support for the Egyptian people.

Social media played a crucial role in documenting and sharing the short-lived graffiti and allowed for citizens to collaborate and show support through online platforms. Additionally, social media played an important role in the Egyptian Revolution by creating a non-state controlled venue for communication and discourse. Though the government shut down nationalized internet services during parts of the revolution, independent internet services still flourished and provided online access (Radsch 97). Sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook created online communities of support for the revolutionaries to share their experiences, opinions, demands, strategies, and plans for challenging the status quo. These larger platforms operating outside of the government’s control were used by those in countries fighting authoritarian regimes as well as international bystanders offering support, providing revolutionaries with the sentiments that they were not alone in their fight. The far-reaching distribution of images online helped stimulate public action in the form of political dissent (Linssen 1). People were able to photograph, preserve, and share the very same graffiti that authorities would erase in the future. The regime could not control all online platforms, and thus could not control the sharing of graffiti through social media. Though the graffiti temporarily reclaimed the walls of Cairo with political messages, the longevity and near permanence of the graffiti on social media prevented the erasure of history at the hands of the authorities.

What was shared on social media could be recreated on walls with graffiti, in the instance of the Girl In the Blue Bra, and what was created on the walls could be shared through social media. It is through documentation and sharing on social media that this graffiti remains alive and researchable. Otherwise, the works would have been permanently erased or altered, often at
the behest of the government. Documentation of these works was an act of resistance and a claim to the truth of what had happened without state interference. Artists creating these murals knew it was likely they would eventually be removed or changed, yet they remained dedicated to painting the streets with messages of resistance. These works of art were not made to exist solely as art pieces, but additionally as means for political discourse and mobilization. For every mural that was erased, it seemed as though ten more took its place. One did not have to be a trained artist to create political art during the Egyptian revolution so long as they were willing to graffit a message onto a wall. To walk by these walls and see images and phrases of resistance was to walk by visual support for the protesters as well as subversion of the government. In a country where art had long been censored and controlled by the state, the revolution created openings and spaces where people could finally freely engage in politics through artistic expression.

**The Egyptian Revolution**

The Arab Spring was sparked by the self-immolation of Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi in protest of the country’s high unemployment rates and rampant police corruption and violence in December 2010. Soon, protests erupted throughout Tunisia and spread to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, especially as the world watched the removal of Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali from power. Egypt followed suit, and a revolution emerged from protests condemning corrupt elections and politicians, widespread poverty, high unemployment rates, government repression, and police brutality. Revolutionaries demanded for free and fair elections, a more democratic country, freedom of expression, and, most of all, dignity. Elections appeared to be somewhat democratic but always favored the Mubarak regime, as authoritarian regimes like that of Egypt “survive and thrive through “upgrading
authoritarianism”, selectively creating openings in the electoral arena and economic sphere” (Faris 5). For example, in February 2005, Mubarak called on parliament to amend Article 76 of the constitution to permit multi-candidate presidential elections while simultaneously imposing tough new limits on potential candidates in what many saw as “yet another attempt by Mubarak to remain in power while giving his quarter-century reign a patina of legitimacy” (Radsch 193).

Years of campaigning for reform led activists to draft a statement outlining the goals of the revolution. “Everything You Want to Know About the Revolution of January 25” was accessible and shared widely through the Facebook page honoring martyr Khaled Said, spelling out four key demands:

1. Confronting the problem of poverty before it explodes by complying with the Egyptian law to increase the maximum wage, especially for people working in the health and education sectors so that we can improve public services. Unemployment benefits of at least 500 pounds should be offered to any recent college graduate without work for a limited period.

2. Cancelling the Emergency Law which allows State Security to control Egypt. The law allows members of the political opposition to be put in prison without due process. We demand that the police stations stop organized torture. We demand that Egyptian government respects our court verdicts.

3. To get rid of Interior Minister Habib al-Adly, due to the security chaos that Egypt has been facing. Members of the Ministry of Interior act with impunity as they carry out terrorist acts and an abundance of crimes.

4. To put a limit on presidential terms to two consecutive terms. Absolute power leads to corruption. There is no developed country that allows its president to stay in power for tens
of years. It’s our right to choose our president and to ensure that no one uses his power to oppress and rule the country until he dies.

Egyptians have several other demands, like improving health and education. But as a start we should all move together to achieve one demand at a time by putting pressure on the government. As the people, our role is to direct the government, hold them accountable, evaluate their performance, and define the priorities, not vice versa. (Herrera 113)

The central location of these protests was Tahrir Square in Cairo, an iconic space for struggle, freedom, and liberation throughout the revolution (Sabea 71). Thousands of protestors gathered in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2011, and many were met with water cannons and tear gas from the police for chanting anti-Mubarak and anti-government slogans (Tesch et al. 2011). After 18 days of occupation and protest in Tahrir Square and around the country, President Hosni Mubarak stepped down. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, led by Field Marshal Tantawi, took over the government for a year, and delayed elections until 2012, in which Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood was elected president on June 24, 2012. Morsi headed a regime that continued the power-hungry and corrupt legacy and was responsible for continuing the decline in the economy and an increase of radical Islam in Egypt (Awad et al. 164). In July 2013, Morsi was arrested by the military, which then announced Adly Mansour as the interim president. In May 2014, former Defense Minister El Sisi was elected president, though there are still doubts as to whether this election was legitimate. By 2015, the Egyptian government declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, a protest law passed to strictly limit the freedom to protest, and the government drafted a law to ban “abusive” graffiti that would imprison artists for up to four years (Awad et al. 164). Ultimately, the demands of the
revolution were not met. The political structures shifted, but the power dynamics remained the same, if not more oppressive than ever. Yet through this revolution, the world witnessed Egyptians exercising agency to express their concerns, dissent, and ability to wage a war against the government through unconventional means, particularly political art. One of the most prominent forms of political art was graffiti; to understand why artists utilized graffiti, it is imperative to discuss what spaces for political discourse were available.

**Limited Spaces for Political Discourse**

Self-expression and citizens’ abilities to freely communicate, both of which were limited under the Mubarak regime that put Egypt under strict censorship and surveillance, are critical tools of resistance. Most media outlets were controlled by the state and therefore projected a specific state-sponsored narrative of events. While independent news and media outlets existed, journalists were made to feel vulnerable in these venues. Writers, film directors, and artists working outside of the government realm were commonly charged with libel or blasphemy for creating works that ventured away from the pre-established discourse, demonstrating the extent and power of state censorship (Zakareviciute 122). Bloggers were surveilled and sometimes tortured (Radsch 228). The government’s censorship and surveillance were so pervasive that journalist and editor Ibrahim Eissa was sentenced to jail in 2006 for insulting Mubarak in an article accompanied by a cartoon that portrayed the president as a “fat depressive man wearing a crown” (Radsch 107).

Much of the censorship and surveillance in Egypt was legal due to the Emergency Law (sometimes referred to as the state of emergency) enacted in 1967 that allowed the government to arrest anyone at will who they suspected of being a threat to national security and public order.
The 2002 Human Rights Watch trial of the State of Egypt VS. Free Expression found that the use of this emergency legislation has been crucial to the government’s efforts to stifle political opposition and dissent (Human Rights Watch 2002).

The art scene was dominated by the elite and powerful as much as the media was controlled by the government (Hamdy 146). It was primarily controlled and regulated by the Ministry of Culture, which promoted art that was “abstract, sterile, and devoid of action” and disconnected from local realities-and local artists (Bseiso 347). The art scene in Egypt existed to serve the elite, did not allow or create room for political discourse, and especially did not encourage political dissent. When these traditional modes of communication were inaccessible as means of communication and protest, Egyptians turned towards political art in the form of graffiti as a mode of political resistance.

**Political Art**

Much of the theory around political art is concerned with its definition, the debate between whether art and politics belong within the same realm, and the existence of, and resistance to, dominant power structures. Asavei argues that political art is that which “criticizes and opposes the status quo of the moment and gives a voice to those who are marginal, forgotten, and excluded” (Asavei 2). She asserts that it is not enough to define political art as “art with a political message or content” because this implies that it could be interpreted as propaganda art, which typically originates from those in power seeking to further their agenda. Propaganda should not be confused with political art, as the nature of political art is subversive and resistant to power structures. Möller complicates Asavei’s definition, stating that:
Art is political if it complicates, not simplifies, and if it extends the thread of recognition and understanding beyond what previously was seen and known. Art is political also if it reinterprets what previously was seen and known so that alternative understandings may emerge. These reinterpretations help reveal existing power relations within society, determining what previously was known and what was deemed worthy of analysis in the first place (Möller 2).

Möller adds to Asavei’s definition by emphasizing complication and reinterpretation, relating them to power structures within society, which should be assumed as political. Möller provides that art can be understood as a form of political discourse, as descriptive, interpretive, or critical, as well as a tool used to transcend the political. Art, especially when political, complicates understandings and perceptions of the world, altering the frames within which the political is negotiated.

Asavei refutes two claims popularly debated in the discourse on political art: that art is always political and that art and politics cannot mix because they belong to separate realms (Asavei 2). The idea that art is always political stems from the idea that all human activity is influenced by political power and class structures. If politics are ubiquitous, then all art is political. This is untrue, as many art pieces are made without message and do not oppose the status quo nor give voices to the unheard. Asavei elaborates on how to utilize her definitions of political art, requiring that instead of placing emphasis on and interpreting the political message, one must focus on the “critical intervention” that political art makes (Asavei 18).

The thought that art and politics cannot mix assumes that art is a “self-enclosing entity with no relation to the reality outside of it” (Asavei 11). Yet it is evident that art does indeed
have a relation to the reality outside of it. Art is the basis of many interactions, encompasses entire fields of study, and is the center of debates similar to those presented here. Political art specifically acts to critique the status quo, be it political, economic, or socio-cultural.

Thus, political art criticizes and opposes the status quo, gives a voice to those who are marginal, forgotten, excluded, and complicates understandings and perceptions of the world.

Political art does not belong to just one field of study. Rather, it encompasses issues within social science including anthropology, sociology, political science, and art history. Political art can be difficult to qualify, as much of it is open to individual interpretation. There are no established metrics by which to measure it, nor any studies that reveal quantifiable results. To study political art requires an understanding of what the message is and how it opposes the status quo; therefore, the status quo and its opposition must be included in the context. These contextual understandings could be achieved through similar methods utilized in social sciences for determining socio-political realities, such as polling, measuring the extent of freedom in a region, the spaces available for political communication, and the type of regime.

Political science too often overlooks the essential role that art plays in revolutions. The Egyptian Revolution illuminates and reinforces the importance of resistance through art, which became one of the most viable venues of socio-cultural engagement and political discourse. To fully understand how revolutions operate in the current age, the relationships between artists and audiences, citizens, and authorities must be thoroughly considered through the existing frameworks of study provided by social sciences. Further, political scientists must pay specific attention to who has control of the narrative in the country, the availability of spaces for the public, how these spaces are used, and the presence of political discourse.
Political Art in Action

By exposing the power structures between the people and the state, political art threatens the power of the regime; thus, political art affects the way people perceive power and politics (Bseiso 346). Many governments are keen on maintaining their power but hesitant to reveal the exact power structures that are in place, often because that power derives from some magnitude of exploitation of the public. If the public were to gain insight into existing power structures, they may be able to disrupt them. For authoritarian regimes like Mubarak’s, controlling visual output is a necessary condition for obtaining and maintaining political power; therefore, those who oppose such regimes emphasize the need for their own visual representations (Nicoarea 176). By providing unfiltered commentary on the political sphere, artists are inherently performing an act of resistance.

Political art is a tool of resistance that fights against authority and its dominant practices and ideas. More so, artistic practices expand the very notion of cultural engagement, political activism, popular protest, and social participation, therefore establishing means of communication for discourse (Downey 28). Indeed, political art is often the catalyst for communication, whether it be pointed to the authorities, to those that support the content of the message, or to those that are uneducated on the topic of the message. Political art has the power to translate social and political imperatives into “aesthetic particularities and material procedures in a formal or aesthetic revolution” (Beech 9). Simply put, political art can turn demands into a visual form. It can be used as a diagnostic for social and political change, a memorial space, a tool of dissent and power, reclamation of public space, and a means of protest and documentation (Bseiso 347). Each of these categories should be considered in the social sciences, as well as audience analysis, as it is noticeably absent from political science regarding
Graffiti

Prior to 2011, graffiti was a rare sight in Egypt, even in Cairo. Until the revolution, graffiti was used for advertising purposes, to decorate walls with scenes inspired by the Hajj, and support for football clubs (Naguib 58). Graffiti was rarely political and certainly not widely utilized to mobilize citizens or encourage dialogue. Further, there was a near-guarantee that those who attempted to display political messages through graffiti would be arrested. An important factor in the lack of political art and graffiti in Egypt was the lack of space for it, as the aforementioned traditional spaces for self-expression and political discourse were controlled by the state. The revolution was instrumental in reclaiming space for the public and subsequently instrumental in opening the idea that art can be created in public, for the public.

Tahrir Square was reclaimed by and for the people and became the main site that was designated not just for traditional revolutionaries but revolutionary artists as well. Forms of art such as music, graffiti, posters, song, photography, poetry, and performance transformed Tahrir Square into a place of political, cultural, visual, and artistic revolution. This sense of cultural and artistic production was self-perpetuating, as the sense of urgency and creativity encouraged other artists to join, create, and contribute to the revolution. By having a space conducive to resistance,
artists could communicate directly with a large and diverse public, free from the restrictive art world and strict state censorship (Naguib 60). The revolution served not just as a political opening, but an artistic one as well. The two concepts of the political and aesthetic merged together during the revolution in these sites of artistic resistance, offering a new form of political participation in public spaces that fostered the emergence of a powerful revolutionary culture (Awad et al. 165).

Tahrir Square set the example for reclamation and soon the people took to the streets - and walls. As if overnight, graffiti and street art appeared on the walls of Cairo, most of them in relative proximity to Tahrir Square. The sudden appearance of highly visible political graffiti undermined the strict state-sponsored censorship in the country and was a critical tool of resistance. Graffiti marked a location as a site of revolution and dissent outside of the government's control. The walls and streets no longer belonged solely to the state; it was now the people’s public. Graffiti’s social power is in part due its importance as a medium and indicator of who controls physical space. In this case it was the state of the opposition who held the power (Levine 1296). Street art, specifically graffiti, is a reclamation of space now made public and for the people, and is therefore inherently anti-authoritarian (Vogel et al. 5). Of course, many of the messages etched into the walls were unquestionably anti-authoritarian and anti-status quo. In a society where the voice of the government was all but ubiquitous, the walls and streets offered a reclaimed space where the voice of the public sphere was finally heard and seen.

Graffiti was one of the few means for expressing political opinions that had the potential to shape public opinion and social consciousness. In Egypt, graffiti could function as “a silent actor that visually propagates the contesting message of an unheard opposition” (Nicoarea 178). Messages are graffitied on walls by those who wish to express themselves but feel as though they
have a lack of a formal platform, which was clearly the case in Egypt, as the government controlled representation in the media. The graffiti in Egypt served as socio-political commentary at the local level with topics ranging from violence and crimes of the state, economic conditions, misogyny, class status and elitism, westernization, religion, empowerment, power imbalances, censorship and surveillance, revolutionary support or condemnation, nationalism, oppression, to martyrdom and heroes. These visual marks of subversion were often accompanied by Arabic calligraphy or English, while others consisted of images without words.

While much of the graffiti pointed to crimes of the past, some were dedicated to imagined futures. People murdered and subjected to violence by the police became martyrs, their portraits encompassing the walls in celebration of their lives while simultaneously serving as a reminder of the regime’s brutality. Artists imagined futures with toppled regime leaders, the broken system dismantled and replaced, the country’s citizens viewed with dignity and given, most of all, freedom. The artists that called for freedom were themselves creating it through reclamation and reterritorialization of the streets that were in turn conducive for freedom of expression, even if this freedom was temporary. Graffiti served as a called to action, conveying political messages and ideologies to the masses: “These visual messages were the “war paint” of the revolution and a weapon in the hands of resistance against the authoritarian regime” (Levine 1294). When the people did not engage in violence out of fear for their safety, they could employ artistic modes as not only a means of expression but a cultural and political weapon.

Ideas conveyed through political graffiti could meet an audience outside of the expected protesters, such as the authorities and citizens who wished to preserve the hegemonic powers. However, artists primarily seemed to be more concerned with their messages reaching and impacting pedestrians than the authorities (Awad et al. 172). Subversive graffiti attempted to
establish communication and an exchange of ideas among the non-ruling Egyptian society even more so than it attempted to undermine authority. The graffiti also catered to a diverse audience, with artists knowing that not all citizens were literate and therefore it was imperative that the graffiti be accessible: “The existence of this dialogue in the street opened up new ways to reach citizens who are left out by other means of communication. The visual nature of the graffiti as well as the presence of the graffiti artist in the street allowed a dialogue that transcended the illiteracy barrier” (Awad et al. 172). Graffiti was not only accessible to audiences, but for artists as well. Anyone could create the art themselves when armed with just a can of spray paint. People could use computer skills to create and share stencils, then implement those designs on the walls. Artist Ammar Abo Bakr declared, “You can use a stencil and still deliver a very strong message, while tackling an important cause in a different, yet effective way” (MENASource 2019).

Many artists like Ganzeer and Sad Panda created their art in the light of day, which allowed for pedestrians to directly or indirectly engage with the artwork or artist. The indirect engagement came in the form of people passing by, viewing, then internalizing the messages sprayed on the walls. The sight of the art affirmed public dissent towards the elite, and displayed representations and opinions not sponsored or shared by the state. Whether they agreed with the messages or not, pedestrians were inundated with visual indicators of challenges to the status quo. Direct engagement with artists and their graffiti could lead to discourse about the message, be it clarification or a conversation about the issue. Bakr says of graffiti: “… it is art with no rules, and it is available for everyone, unlike a private exhibition. And that is what is beautiful about it, you cannot target a certain audience or put expectations on what they will think of it” (MENASource 2019). This lack of expectation is what encouraged open dialogue between artists
and their audience on topics of the revolution. These conversations served as a gateway for education, mobilization, and sometimes disagreement. As the artists could not target certain audiences, the graffiti was subject to people who disagreed with the messages or the overall cause of the revolution. Those who wished to uphold the status quo and promote nationalism often interacted with the graffiti itself by adding their own additions to the art. Though the new additions may have undermined the author’s original intentions, these interactions offer a clear example of the discourse and exchange that graffiti facilitates. The anti-revolutionary messages indicated that not all citizens supported the revolution, and the new markings shifted the space from revolutionary territory back to that of the status quo.

Graffiti targeted towards the masses also served the purpose of inciting people’s emotions. The more emotionally invested an individual is in the issue, the more motivated they are likely to be to fight for the issue, and therefore the more likely they are to mobilize. Some graffiti created by artist Nazeer even pointed protestors towards Tahrir Square with arrows and the accompanying text: “Tahrir: your address is here”, with the goal to lure people towards the square in order to join activists in the path to freedom (Gröndahl 81). Further, the sheer amount of graffiti assured citizens that they were not alone; they were surrounded and supported by at least hundreds of others in the revolution.

Interactions between revolutionaries and regime supporters presented clear, public political discourse on the walls, indicating that political art opened a venue for citizens to express their views and opinions. These discursive venues presented a threat to those in power; therefore, many were painted over by the authorities. Graffiti artists expected this reaction from authorities, for if the messages were allowed to stay on the walls, the revolutionaries would gain more power. The artist known as KZ cited that when he was arrested for spraying graffiti during the
revolution, the authorities told him: “You are part of the graffiti people vandalizing the country, if we see you here again you will not get away with this”. He was told that what he was doing was political and against the government. On this topic KZ says: “Of course they fear graffiti, because if they didn’t find it powerful they would have left it. It makes me proud that a whole government is nervous about my work” (Awad et al. 170-171). Another artist argues that “authorities erase for political reasons. Not for cleanliness... they just erase statements that frustrate them” (Awad et al. 169). When a government building was graffitied, the authorities were quick to repaint and add their own message: “Your opinion doesn’t belong on the wall” (Awad et al. 169). Though artists expected these kinds of reactions, the erasure of graffiti by the authorities represented “the active expungement of history and the creative memory of the Revolution as embodied in graffiti and murals on the walls of Cairo. The removal of these forms of expression erases all traces of public dissent by Egyptian graffiti and mural artist-activists, making it appear as if nothing was ever there” (Aamiry-Khasawnih 17). Yet the more the police cracked down, the more artists created, displayed, and utilized graffiti to subvert the authorities.

**Conclusion**

Political art in the form of graffiti clearly served as a viable venue for political discourse and dissent during the Egyptian Revolution. The protests in Tahrir Square exemplified the phenomenon that consists of aesthetic political actions, demonstrating its rapid development in the context of “intense socio-political struggle that destabilizes and even reconfigures previously dominant, congealed structures and networks of power and identity” (Levine 1281). Artists used graffiti to reclaim spaces, display the truth for audiences locally and globally through social media, and challenge the status quo that had previously defined Egyptian society and politics.

Spaces that were re-territorialized by revolutionaries served as accessible sites of demonstration,
creation, collaboration, division, and sometimes violence (Aamiry-Khasawinh 4). Violence occurred in the traditional sense as protesters faced brutality at the hands of the police, as well as through the erasure of the dissenting graffiti by authorities as an attempt to silence the people and exclude truth from history. The uprisings were not as successful for revolutionaries as they had hoped, but they clearly indicated that for citizens, political agency meant the ability to be heard and seen (Nicoarea 177). Protesters created their own venues for political discourse when those that already existed had failed them. By utilizing these venues created by art, protestors were able to motivate and mobilize other citizens for the cause, establishing a unity among the citizens that threatened and disrupted the hegemonic powers. A united group is far more dangerous than a divided one.

The following chapters explore how graffiti was used as a venue for political discourse during the Egyptian Revolution, often involving three primary actors: artists, pedestrians, and authorities. The first chapter examines the Tank Versus Biker mural, how graffiti was used to condemn the military, and the public political discourse that appeared on the walls. The second chapter examines the Girl In the Blue Bra, the graffiti that emerged from the event, and how the blue bra served as a symbol for the revolution and against military violence towards women.
Chapter 1

Tank Versus Biker Mural

Introduction

Artist Ganzeer proposed Mad Graffiti Weekend as a two-day marathon for people to create as much graffiti as possible in response to the censorship of the mural of martyr Islam Rafaat (Hamdy 64). The street art campaign spread like wildfire, partially due to its sharing on social media sites including Facebook and Twitter. The campaign even had its own hashtag: #MadGraffitiWeekend. On December 20th, 2011, Ganzeer appealed to artists everywhere:

This is an appeal to help save lives. The Egyptian Military Council has unleashed a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests by the Egyptian people, calling for the resignation of the military council and a cancellation of the sham elections that they’ve been running under their supervision. Soldiers have shown us no mercy, hitting fallen women with their batons, stomping on skulls with their boots, and shooting unarmed civilians dead. I’ve seen this happen with my own eyes and was unable to stop it. It’s a soul-shattering pain like no other. Our only hope right now is to destroy the military council using the weapon
of art. From January 13 to 25, the streets of Egypt will see an explosion of anti-military street art. If you are a street artist elsewhere in the world, please do what you can in your city to help us (Hamdy 120).

It was during this weekend that Ganzeer created the Tank Versus Biker mural which features a military tank directed at a boy on a bike carrying a tray of bread. The mural was placed on an abutment of the Sixth of October bridge in Zamalek, Cairo (Gröndahl 25). The Sixth of October bridge crosses the Nile, connecting the western Agouza district to downtown; the bridge served as a main route for pedestrians to Tahrir Square during the revolution (Egyptian Streets 2019). Thousands, if not millions, of people saw the graffiti as they made their way to the central location of the revolution. The simple act of viewing this mural fostered a political discourse
between the artist and pedestrians; the artist presented his political opinions on the abutment and onlookers could tarry with his message and decide whether they agreed with it. Other artists could participate by adding their own political ideas to the mural. Over the course of two years, the mural was altered to reflect the revolution as pro-military and pro-revolutionaries brought their ideas to life, using art as the vehicle for public political discourse. This evolution demonstrates the political participation between artists, pedestrians, and the authorities.

**Tank Versus Biker- Reminisce of Tiananmen Square 1989**

The Tank versus Biker mural is an undeniable ode to the Tank Man of 1989, an homage to dissenting individuals who are directly faced with the immeasurable power of the state. By mid-May of 1989, tens of thousands of people gathered in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China, to protest the actions of the government. The death of communist opposition leader Hu Yaobang spurred student-led protesters to join at Tiananmen Square, where they called for more political freedom, economic and educational reform, and free speech and freedom of the press (Yu 2019). These demands are glaringly similar to those of the Egyptian Revolution. By May 20th, the Chinese government declared martial law and 250,000 troops were sent to occupy Tiananmen Square which had over one million protestors (Westcott 2019). Two weeks later, the Chinese government approved use of force against its own citizens. On June 3rd and 4th, the military shot into the crowds at Tiananmen, killing hundreds to thousands of protestors (the exact number is not known). More than 10,000 citizens were arrested. On June 5th, after the crowds had been violently cleared and disbanded, a convoy of tanks rolled down the streets of Beijing. One man, dressed in a crisp white shirt and clutching two grocery bags, calmly walked up to the first tank in the convoy, defiantly blocking the machine with his body. Very little is known of the Tank
Man, but the image of a lone citizen challenging the tanks remains one of the most recognizable photographs of the 20th century (Hernández 2019). The image of the Tank Man is a documentation of courage, freedom, and resistance to the violent forces of government. Ganzeer’s mural not only drew parallels between the two authoritarian regimes but also depicted the power of one person’s defiance.

Jeff Widener/ Associated Press 1989

Bread Boy on Bicycle

One slogan that permeated the Egyptian revolution was “Bread, freedom, and social justice”. Due to economic stagnation and high rates of unemployment, bread remained one of the only affordable foods. Like many others in the MENA region, Egyptians rely on bread as a source of sustenance, especially when times are tough. For the majority of the population who live below the poverty line, bread is indeed life. Instead of utensils, bread is often used as the serving mechanism for food. It is a staple of the Egyptian diet, included in almost every meal and for some, it is what the entire meal consists of. The bread industry also employs many young
men who carry and deliver the bread to their local neighborhoods on bikes. Thus, the boy on the bike featured in the Tank vs Biker is instantly recognizable as a symbol for the population of Egypt, and specifically the work force that keeps Egyptians fed. The boy on the bike is a symbol for life itself, threatened and targeted by the tank of the Egyptian military.

Looking closely, it becomes clear that the bread boy is not carrying bread, but a city instead. Cairo runs on bread provided to the city by boys like these. The tank is not just facing off against the boy- it’s facing off against the entire city. Ganzeer’s use of a bread boy was intentional, as “underprivileged children working as bread boys generally have limited access to education, and they face a grim future. The single bread boy stands for the millions of children of
Egypt who are victims of the Mubarak regime, who must work to support their families” (Hamdy 127). Ganzeer could have used any martyr to look down the barrel of the tank, yet he used an ordinary, anonymous boy doing an everyday task- anyone could know or be him. In doing so he visually depicted the precarious situation of the Egyptian people whose lives were at risk from the military that should have protected, not threatened, them.

Public Discourse

Other artists saw the political potential for this mural and capitalized on its high-traffic location. Additions were made to the mural almost immediately. The same night of its inception, the artist known as Sad Panda added his recognizable character (a sad-looking Panda) a few feet behind the bread boy. The artist uses Sad Panda to symbolize sadness, thus it is fitting for the solitary panda to indicate the sadness he and many other Egyptians felt towards the state sanctioned violence against its own people (Hamdy 79). It can be theorized that the panda was a representation of other Egyptians standing in support of the bread boy, against the tank. Alternatively, the panda may have been added to signal the witnessing of military violence. Not a direct target of the tank, the panda stands watching as the state threatens peaceful citizens with violence. Perhaps Sad Panda is a representation of not just Egyptians but the world watching the events of the revolution unfold with melancholy. Sad Panda’s addition indicated that the mural was indeed a space for additions, alterations, and interpretations.
On October 9, 2011, peaceful protesters marched toward the Maspero building, the headquarters of the Egyptian Radio and Television Union, to demonstrate against an attack on a church in southern Egypt. That night, at least two armored personnel vehicles drove through the crowds, killing at least 10 peaceful protestors (Human Rights Watch 2011). Security forces also fired teargas and live ammunition into the crowd of thousands, ultimately killing 28 and injuring 321 people (TIMEP 2018). In reaction to this horrific event, artists immediately added Egyptian protestors under the bloodied wheels of the tank. The decision of artists to render citizens under the wheels of an armored vehicle was more than a representation of real events - it was a depiction of the violence under which Egyptian military ruled over and treated its own people. The artistic broadcasting of systemic use of state-sponsored violence subverts the government’s
narrative of the revolution and ensures that the Maspero Massacre could not be easily erased from history. Through this addition, the mural shifted from a fictional version of violence to a historical account of events, presenting pedestrians with a new topic of conversation.

Soon, the Mona Lisa Brigades and artist Mohammed Khaled edited the mural, adding protesters holding the Guy Fawkes mask, typically associated with the movie *V for Vendetta* and the Anonymous movement. The main character of *V for Vendetta* serves as “...a warning to the government not to try to push their people too far into submission… He also awakens his fellow citizens to recognizing their collective power… He persuades them to rise up against their government” (Herrera 72). The mask is immediately identifiable as a symbol for resistance, anti-totalitarianism and anti-government sentiments.

Other protestors were stenciled with the faces of martyrs in their hands, and an accompanying message on the wall read, “Starting tomorrow I wear a new face, the face of every martyr. I exist” (Hamdy 127). This political statement reminds the authorities and pedestrians of the cause the martyrs died for and the sheer amount of deaths that came out of the revolution. The public display of the martyrs’ faces also serves to preserve their memory and prevent the erasure of their stories.

Until January 20th, the mural had primarily been graffitied with pro-revolutionary ideals and condemnations of military violence. Then, a group known as the “Badr Battalion” added alterations that transformed the piece into pro-military art (Gröndahl 26). The people under the wheels of the tank were erased with white paint, the masks in the protesters' hands were replaced with Egyptian flags, and a new message read out: “The military and people are one hand, Egypt for all Egyptians” (Hamdy 127). It would have been easier to simply erase this part of the mural and paint their message on a blank canvas, but the Badr Battalion wished to represent those who
continued to support the military. There is political discourse occurring between those who condemn the military and those who support it in a space it could not otherwise happen, like state-controlled media outlets:

Street art becomes the medium through which to communicate and connect with the intended audiences and create an interactive dialogue… Both artists and non-artists are using art to mediate among themselves, the street, and the people in it through interaction and dialogue and sometimes conflict… (Bseiso 348-349).

![Badr Battalion January 2012/ Gröndahl](image)

Only three days later the pro-military phrases, bread boy, protesters, and Sad Panda were covered, the tank the only remaining piece of the original mural. Seizing the moment for further public demonstration of anti-government and anti-military sentiments, artists added a massive, cannibalistic monster that rivaled the size of the tank. Barefoot and crouched with a bloodied
corpse hanging from its mouth, the monster wears the green Egyptian military uniform; the facial features, hat, and military insignia indicate that this monster is Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi. Tantawi was head of the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces (SCAF) and gave countless orders throughout his military reign to arrest, attack, and torture his own people. When Mubarak stepped down from power, SCAF took over with Tantawi as the de facto head of state. The military was the enemy of the revolution, and Tantawi was its commander (Hamdy 55). It makes sense, then, that the artists wanted to show the military “devouring” its own people. This is an especially political addition to the mural because the Emergency Law banned any kind of criticism of public officials. If a man had been put in jail for drawing Mubarak as a fat man with a crown, the ramifications for depicting Tantawi as a massive, violent monster would be far more sinister.

Along with the depiction of Tantawi were the additions from the Mona Lisa Brigades: Egyptian actress Mary Monib brandishing an assault rifle, a “corrupt” flower, images of Mona Lisa, and stencils of Vladimir Lenin. Artist Nazeer added his signature yellow traffic sign
pointing towards Tahrir Square “crushed” under the wheels of the tank, asserting that the military actively discouraged citizens from attending protests. Artist Bahia Shehab added small icons with stencils over the tank, including blue bras, and others stating simply “La”, the Arabic word for “No”. These additions from Shehab pointed towards the gender-based violence that occurred during the revolution, often at the hands of the military.

Conclusion

The Tank Versus Biker remained on the walls until June 2013, when the “Zamalek Guardians" whitewashed the wall in a cleaning initiative (Hamdy 129). Though the authorities were able to physically erase the mural, they were not able to erase the dialogue that already transpired. Fortunately, due to social media, the mural lives on in a digital, shareable, and accessible realm.

In this space, reclaimed by and for revolutionaries, political participation in the form of public political art was made available to supporters and critics of the revolution, where they could discuss their ideas beyond the limited existing spaces of discourse. Artists exercised their political and artistic agency to create a space for discourse when the state intentionally failed to provide a viable one.

Ganzeer wished to destroy the military council through “the weapon of art” (Hamdy 120). He and other artists attempted to do so at an accessible, high-traffic location through graffiti that promoted dialogue regarding issues of military violence. The mural transformed to reflect events and issues of the revolution, including conversations of martyrs, massacres, and gender-based violence. The mural resisted the authorities’ hegemonic narrative of the revolution and is one of the best examples of how the general public’s understanding of the revolutionary
events is seen from differing perspectives through different images and portrayals, as well as how graffiti creates a public sphere where these images, portrayals, and opinions compete (Zakareviciute 119).
Chapter 2
The Girl in the Blue Bra

Introduction

Almost a year after the start of the Egyptian Revolution on December 17, 2011, the brutal attack of an unarmed young woman by the military in Cairo was captured on video. In the video, uploaded to YouTube with over one million views, the woman is seen trying to flee the military with some of her revolutionary companions. She loses her footing and falls as a mob of eight soldiers clad in full riot gear descend upon her with batons. The military men surround and beat her with their batons and kick her in the legs, stomach, and chest. One soldier repeatedly stomps on her head. She is then dragged by her covering, or abaya, through the street while a soldier continues kicking her. Her abaya becomes undone and is pulled above her head, exposing a naked torso and blue bra. A soldier forcefully stomps in the middle of her chest, and another lazily pulls her abaya across her stomach to partially cover her. She is dragged again, placed on the ground, and her abaya is now maliciously pulled over her shoulders by the soldiers before they make a retreat from advancing revolutionaries who aim to protect the girl (RT Youtube Video, 2011). A still from the video featuring the exposed woman was turned into a photographic still and spread through the news and social media, which dubbed her The Girl In the Blue Bra. The #BlueBra hashtag became popular on Twitter and referred to the events of December 17th. It served to draw attention to the event and spark a conversation about the systemic use of violence against female protestors. The hashtag also served as a rallying cry for those who wished to publicly share their disapproval of the events of December 17th.
The image of the woman became one of the most striking and recognizable of the revolution, spurring international discourse surrounding the event. Responding to the event, then U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked, “This systematic degradation of Egyptian women dishonors the revolution, disgraces the state and its uniform and is not worthy of a great people” (Zayed 2011).

Three days after the event, the largest demonstration of women in Egypt since 1919 was held in Tahrir Square to protest military rule and violence against women (Coleman 2011). The dissemination of the image of the girl in the blue bra finally brought women’s issues to the forefront. Though female activists tried to bring attention to women’s issues towards the beginning of the revolution, they were never able to fully gain the support of the masses.
(Coleman 2011). This failure is in part due to the treatment of female protestors at the hands of the military: “The army, which has adopted a paternalistic attitude towards women since it has been in charge, has singled out women protesters for humiliation and degrading treatment. The aim of behavior like this seems to be to deter women from demonstrating” (Sahraoui in Zayed 2011). In 2011, 18 women were arrested when army officers cleared Tahrir Square. Some of the detainees underwent abuse including forced virginity tests, beatings, electric shocks and strip searches while being photographed by male soldiers (Zayed 2011). In a conservative Muslim society, uncovering a woman to show her exposed body underneath is taboo and an extreme form of religious violation and humiliation. It violates one of the strongest traditions of Islam that many women follow, often to preserve female modesty. The girl in the blue bra proved that women risked not only sexual violence, but humiliation if they dared to protest.

Despite these risks, women took part in - and were crucial to - the revolution. During the 18 days of protest, approximately one quarter of the million protesters who came to Tahrir Square each day were women. They shouted, fought and slept in the streets alongside men, and defied traditional expectations that women ought to stay at home (Otterman 2011). Dalia Ziada, executive director of Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies in Cairo remarks, “I remember in so many days during the revolution, especially in the last days when people started to give up. The women were the ones who were motivating them to remain in the street” (NPR 2013). The revolution would not have gained the momentum it did without women, and they were necessary for continuing the fight after Mubarak was ousted from power. Women founded political and cultural campaigns that were crucial for mobilizing citizens to join the revolution, such as Mosireen, Kazeboon, No to Military Trials for Civilians, Freedom for the Brave, and Bossi (Mostafa 123). Women did not participate in the revolution as part of a “feminist” agenda,
but as Egyptian citizens united with their male counterparts in the fight for freedom, justice, and dignity.

**The Blue Bra as Political Art**

The image of the girl in the blue bra became a visual symbol of the revolution. The woman soon achieved martyr status, a concept deeply rooted in Muslim societies. Martyr’s stories are typically used in struggles of good against evil and carry profound emotional power (Herrera 52). In this case, the blue bra is the “good” and the military are the “evil”. Graffiti stencils of a blue bra quickly emerged on the walls in Cairo, visually reminding audiences of the struggles of female protesters and the violence they faced at the hands of the military.

If revolutionaries could use #BlueBra as a rallying cry, they could also use the stencil as a rallying symbol and as a form of visual support for the revolution. Further, to stencil the graffiti of the blue bra could be seen as a way of supporting the causes that women were fighting for, providing a sense of solidarity and sisterhood among Egyptian women. Street artists transformed the blue bra from a site of violence and injustice to an “unmistakably identifiable site of resistance” (Linssen 11). To graffiti the blue bra was not just act of resistance against the authorities but also an act of resistance towards societal norms, such as the taboo surrounding talking about sexual assault (NPR 2013). It is often women who challenge socio-cultural taboos by speaking on topics like sexual assault; spraying the blue bra stencil was a way to publicly condemn the issue. Those who sprayed the graffiti hoped that the blue bra would catch the attention of pedestrians: “You need to provoke a reaction in the public consciousness, otherwise we will brush it over and the incident fades into our collective subconscious” (Morayef 2013).
Thus, the provocative blue bra graffiti sought to condemn the military and force pedestrians to remember the events of December 17th. 

One of the most well-known iterations of the stencil is Bahia Shehab’s piece that features a blue bra, a boot print, and text that demands: “No Stripping the People”. The footprint reads: “Long Live a Peaceful Revolution” (Shehab 2012). The boot print is a direct nod to the military officer who stomped on the chest of the girl in the blue bra, which urges viewers to remember the violence associated with the symbol of the bra. Shehab relates the individual event of the brutal stripping of the woman to the brutal stripping of the rights of the people by Egypt’s military and government. Pedestrians could relate to the blue bra, for they, too, had been stripped of their rights; what happened to the girl in the blue bra happened to them as well. Thus, the
piece is a statement that many citizens, regardless of gender, could identify with and use to express their dissent of the military and authorities at large.

The graffiti of the blue bra was highly accessible— one only needed a can of spray paint and a stencil to create a political statement. The stencil allowed for artists to spray the design on any location and create dialogue in different areas. Freedom of location provided for the proliferation of the blue bra around Cairo, whereas the Tank Versus Bike mural limited artists and the audience to a singular location. The blue bras stenciled all over Cairo made the issues of violence against women impossible to ignore, as they could be around any corner. The presence of the blue bra graffiti around a multitude of locations in the city forced pedestrians to remember that women were crucial actors in the revolution. Thus, the blue bra graffiti could engage in a broader dialogue that was not limited to a singular location. Reclamation of these spaces indicated and reaffirmed that the streets and the revolution also belonged to women.

Shehab demanded that the women’s issues be part of the dialogue in the Tank Versus Biker mural by adding Arabic calligraphy of the word “La”, or “No”. “No” to military violence, “No” to misogyny, “No” to dictatorship, “No” to the Emergency Law, and “No” to stripping the people (Hamdy 117). Among these symbols of “no” was the iconic stencil of the blue bra, situated among a larger conversation of military violence. This addition to the mural cemented a visual reminder of the reality that women face violence at the hands of the military. The tank is aiming at them, too.
Though the blue bra was widely popularized in its stencil form, other artists seized upon the opportunity to interpret the symbol in their art. El Teneen transformed the blue bra from a site of violence and oppression to an image of heroism and power. In the graffiti, El Teneen presents the girl in the blue bra as a superhero, clad in red boots and cape, blue leggings and skirt, and of course, a blue bra. In the center of her chest is a red *thaʾ*, the letter that stands for *thawra*- revolution (Gröndahl 42). Just as Wonder Woman can be identified by the “W” on her chest, and Superman by his “S”, the girl in the blue bra can also be identified by her revolutionary letter. When the girl in the blue bra is transformed into a hero, she becomes an iconic warrior of the revolution that others can rally behind. At the hands of El Teneen, the girl in the blue bra was not just a victim of violence but instead a hero of the people who faced oppression at the hands of the military and rose to power as a superhero. She is transformed into a brave woman, leading the people to the front lines of the revolution as someone they could follow and fight for.
Below the superhero reads: “It continues” (Linssen 11). The graffiti was created on the first anniversary of the revolution, reminding viewers that the fight was far from over (Hamdy 4). The phrase could also be understood as a commentary on the violence against women, what the blue bra had initially come to symbolize- a year into the revolution, violence against women remained a pressing issue.

The superhero and the blue bra stencils elongated the temporality of the original event of the attack against the girl in the blue bra. The graffiti that appeared all over Cairo reminded people not only of the event, but of women’s struggles against violent military power. The girl and her blue bra, and the women who fought in the revolution, could not easily be erased from history.
Conclusion

The revolution opened spaces for artists to freely provide discourse on topics considered taboo through graffiti. It opened a new venue of discourse surrounding women’s rights, and the walls were the spaces where these messages appeared. The stencil of the blue bra is simple, recognizable, and hard to ignore. It signals back to the appalling events of December 17th and prevents citizens from forgetting how the military violently stripped and humiliated the woman in Tahrir Square.

The girl in the blue bra is an example of the political art that emerged during the revolution, insisting on “the presence of the defiant human body in the public sphere” (Linssen 7). Anyone with a can of spray paint and the blue bra stencil could become a political artist, and the freedom of location allowed for the dissemination of the graffiti across Cairo. The blue bra graffiti was an assertion that women belonged in the revolution and that they would fight despite the violence that they faced. It was an assertion that the revolution was also about women, for women, and that they had a voice to dissent. Women’s presence belonged on the walls just as it did in the revolution.

The graffiti was a reaction to violence, and artists transformed a moment of violation into a symbol of resistance and empowerment. Spraying the stencil was an act of resistance that showed solidarity with the girl in the blue bra, solidarity with women, and solidarity with all revolutionaries who had been stripped of their rights.
Conclusion

Graffiti is clearly a viable form of political participation and must be recognized as such. When citizens in Egypt could not vote for their leader, when they could not voice their opinions through traditional venues like news or television, they turned towards graffiti to express their opinions. For the first time in years, the revolution offered an opening for truly free expression, and art proved to be one of the most effective ways to do so. Graffiti served as a weapon to undermine authorities, unite and mobilize citizens, compete with the hegemonic narrative, and broadcast revolutionary messages. Graffiti reclaimed the right to freedom of expression that Mubarak’s regime denied to Egyptians.

The Tank Versus Biker mural explicitly told pedestrians that the military had no regard for Egyptian’s lives. The mural provided revolutionaries with a sense of solidarity, confirming that they were together in the fight against the military, and ultimately the regime. It exemplified public political discourse through art, as members from opposing “sides” of the revolution contributed to the mural with their opinions, ideas, and messages.

The Girl In the Blue Bra made it clear to audiences that the military was a perpetrator of gender-based violence. The stencil allowed any citizen to become a political artist and visually display support for women in the revolution. Due to the portable and accessible nature of the stencil, the blue bra appeared across Cairo, causing a great number of pedestrians to view the piece and reflect on its messages. Further, the graffiti of the blue bra presented a visual reminder that women played a crucial role in the revolution.
There are several themes present within both the Tank Versus Biker mural and graffiti of the Girl In the Blue Bra. The first is the relationship between artists, pedestrians, and the authorities. Artists created graffiti that addressed both pedestrians and the authorities, but emphasized the importance of dialogue with pedestrians. The second is the importance of space. Graffiti reclaimed spaces for revolutionaries, establishing that the walls belonged to the people. The third is the role of history and narratives. Those who control the narratives and history of the nation hold power; therefore, graffiti placed the narrative in the hands of citizens, threatening the power of the regime. Graffiti ensures that the martyrs and massacres of the revolution would not be forgotten. Graffiti ensures that the history of the role women played in the revolution would not be buried. The fourth is that both the Tank Versus Biker mural and graffiti of the Girl In the Blue Bra presented evolutions of ideas. The mural reflected events and issues of the revolution. The blue bra evolved from a violent event to a symbol of resistance and empowerment. The fifth, and final, is that the inevitable erasure at the hands of the authorities proved that the government feared the threat - and power - of graffiti.

Graffiti, functioning as a mode of political art, criticizes and opposes the status quo, gives a voice to those who are marginal, forgotten, excluded, and complicates understandings and perceptions of the world. Graffiti can turn political imperatives into aesthetic demands that pedestrians and the authorities cannot ignore, proving that emotions, visual styles, and images are central to political activities and ideas (Tucker 15). There is a clear need for political science to include more political art among its many disciplinary academic attributes and studies in order to understand not only revolutionary politics, but also the relationships citizens have with their governing authorities. Examining the role of graffiti can enable political scientists to understand how peace and conflict are viewed among citizens, away from the narratives of the political and
elite (Vogel et al. 16). I offer several questions to study the kinds of political and spatial representations in a nation: Are there multiple venues for self-expression? Are these venues open to the public? Do these venues allow for diverse representation and political discourse? Further, are the people heard, or silenced? Who is telling the history of the state, and is it true? Who has control of the narratives? What is the message of the graffiti, and who is it pointed to? How can these messages disrupt the power of the regime? What extent of censorship and surveillance is the population under? These questions are only the beginnings of what an approach to political art through the lens of political science can provide. A more thorough understanding of political art will lead to a better, more nuanced, and often more truthful understanding of the political sphere of any region.

If political art is as instrumental to global revolutions as it was to the Egyptian Revolution, then it is without a doubt that “the political theory of art’s relationship is tormented by the insignificance of art in the strategies of revolutionary politics” (Beech 10). The revolutionary strategy of utilizing art as a weapon can be applied to the events currently unfolding in Myanmar. In protest of the coup, thousands are turning towards art as a form of resistance and dissent (Beech 2021). Just as the blue bra became a symbol for Egypt’s revolution, a three-fingered salute has emerged as the artistic symbol for those participating in the mass uprisings. The citizens of Myanmar are using political art as a creative venue to condemn violence, create solidarity, and mobilize citizens to join them in the fight against military rule, much like Egyptians during the revolution of 2011.
References


