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### Title

Bombing the Tomb: Memorial Portraiture and Street Art in Revolutionary Cairo

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1bm3z4nc>

### Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 28(1)

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### Publication Date

2015

### DOI

10.5070/B3281025789

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# BOMBING THE TOMB

## Memorial Portraiture and Street Art in Revolutionary Cairo

By Kelly Leilani Main

“The streets mattered. They were where we lived, met, and talked; where we renewed our commitment to our ideas and to each other. . . .and to reaffirm also – to re-experience – the certainty we carried in our hearts: I am not alone. . . .And when the street art of the revolution appeared it reconfirmed that certainty a million-fold. For it did what only art can do: art shows you your own feelings, your own thoughts and impulses, articulated, transmuted, given form. And it show you, in that act of mutual recognition, that you and the collective are one. The streets of the revolution were our world; and the street art of the revolution expressed and celebrated our world. It blossomed on the walls, speaking for us and to us, a miraculous manifestation of the creative energy the revolution had released across the country”

- Ahdaf Soueif, Egyptian novelist and political and cultural commentator

“This is what graffiti is all about. They remove the graffiti so we can paint it again, it is not that difficult. We are documenting history, and they cannot remove history,”

- Abo Bakr, Street Artist

“People forget that the streets belong to the people. . . .They think that they’re some kind of official government-controlled entity. I think it’s important to remind people that they’re not.”

-Ganzeer, Street Artist, in an Al-Monitor interview shortly before his arrest

## I. Introduction

Governments have long used public art and monuments to characterize and legitimize their regimes. The production of visual space has profound implications on the psychology of the nation-state and the way its citizens relate to their histories. It is curious then, to ask what happens when citizens take control of the visual content of their environment, particularly as it relates to memorializing those who have been killed at the hands of political authority or hegemony. This paper will examine different visual forms of memorialization on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, with a particular focus on the memorial portraiture of Ammar Abo Bakr, El Zeft, Ganzeer, and the pharaonic murals of Alaa Awad.<sup>1</sup> It will then examine how such street memorials not only commemorate the martyrs of the revolution, but also criticize the state, take ownership of public space and the memorialization process, and contribute to the formation of a strong, pan-Egyptian identity.<sup>2</sup> It will also show why, as much of this art has now been covered up by other art or whitewashed by the state, this art remains relevant as the government begins to create its own memorials and utilize Egyptian frustrations with the ongoing violence to tarnish the collective memory of the revolution.

As I was unable to visit Egypt to conduct original research and talk to the artists or people who witnessed the unfolding events, this paper does not attempt to be an ethnography. I will rely heavily on images borrowed from a variety of sources including printed materials, news sources, and blogs, as well as quotes taken from interviews of the artists and of people who have shared their reflections on the meaning of the works. I will also be drawing heavily from the recently published book “Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution,” as it provides unparalleled insight into the revolution, its artists, and its citizens via a collection of personal essays, a timeline of events, and a carefully chronicled documentation of the art that has taken hold of Cairo’s imagination since January of 2011. This paper does not intend to provide a comprehensive overview and analysis of the political transitions in Egypt since the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution. Instead, it is intended to provide a specific analysis of popular forms of visual memorialization in the wake of continued violence and political control in Egypt.

In order to further understand the relationship between the youth culture of street art and memorialization in Cairo, I would like to draw from Diane Singerman and Paul Amar’s 2005 book *Cairo Cosmopolitan*, in which they evoke the two polar myths which frame Cairo in the global imaginary: “The Bomb” and “The Tomb”.<sup>3</sup>

The first myth frames Cairo as a “Bomb”: “a population bomb, a pollution epicenter, a laboratory for explosive terrorist cells” and other negative and violent stereotypes which universalize and dehumanize the diversity of Cairo’s population and its potential for positive

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1 Not intended to reflect the work of Basma Hamdy in her article Basma Hamdy, “Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo’s Graffiti,” *E-International Relations*, October 7, 2013, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/07/mourning-narratives-and-interactions-with-the-martyrs-through-cairos-graffiti/>.

2 “The word martyr [Shaheed] signifies a person who has died for a greater cause, either religious or political. In Islamic thought, martyrdom (shahada is the highest honor and martyrs attain the greatest level in paradise, correlating to the Christian notion of sainthood.” (Basma Hamdy and Don Karl, *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution*. ([S.l.]: From Here To Fame, 2014). 56) “Martyr” is often the term used to describe those who have been killed by security forces and the military since January 25 and before. I am not making a judgment on the use of the term, but am adopting the term to reference those who have die over the course of the past three years, as well as to avoid confusion when people use the term martyrs to describe such people in their interviews.

3 Particularly memorialization as seen in the Pharaonic tomb art of Ancient Egypt

growth and change.<sup>4</sup> Cairo's youth are tech-savvy, college-educated, and globally engaged.<sup>5</sup> It is these youth, who are often the most active in street art communities, who compose the negative "bomb," set to explode at any time. Likewise, the colloquial term for graffiti, "bombing," references any form of graffiti. It is intriguing, then, to examine the dynamic of the so called population "bomb" "bombing" the streets of Cairo, destroying the psychological barriers to political freedom through public art. I will utilize the term "bombing" to describe some of the eruptions of creativity and visual production in response to particular political moments or spatial configurations. Rather than interpreting this term "bombing" as a call for violence or as a physically explosive act, I seek to frame it as a political disruption of the status quo and an intentional reclamation of public space intended to destroy hegemonic systems of power.

The other myth, that of the "Tomb," is a description of Cairo in which "the city is hyperpassive—dead or ruthlessly repressed and thus quiescent" and characterized solely by its monumental and historic past.<sup>6</sup> This mischaracterization ignores completely Cairo's role as one of the centers of the modern Arab world and its place as the epicenter of major cultural and political influence, but it also implies a sense of stasis and passiveness.<sup>7</sup> It detracts from any conception of Cairo as a place moving into modernity, breaking with the past, or discovering new forms of social, political or economic formation. This characterization of Cairo as ancient and embedded may have contributed to the West's obsession with the use of the internet and 21<sup>st</sup> century "Western" technologies, and pundits seemed to say: How amazing that such a stagnant civilization could utilize our great technology in order to enact social movements! Such a caricature not only detracts from the agency of Egyptians—particularly the younger ones—but also neglects the fact that many Egyptians in fact do not use the internet and still rely on television, radio, or the streets to gather their information. In this way, street art can be seen as rupturing the theoretical wall which separates the bomb and the tomb as it simultaneously breaks with tradition and embraces it. The following paper will thus be an exploration of this dynamic, and the use of street art as a particular form of memorialization in the context of revolutionary Cairo.

## II. Why Street Art?: A Brief History of "Bombing" the Political Landscape

I would like to begin this paper by explaining how and why I am focusing on street art as a revolutionary tool instead of other mediums. The emergence of Street art and graffiti in places like New York and Philadelphia in the 1970s and 1980s came not only during a time of massive privatization and the end of the industrial era in the US, but also around the time of

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4 Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, "Introduction: Contesting Myths, Critiquing Cosmopolitanism, and Creating the New Cairo School of Urban Studies," in *Cairo Cosmopolitan* (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 3 – 43.

5 Since Egypt signed the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in 1991, Egypt has seen a dramatic increase in unemployment and poverty. This is compounded by the youth bulge across the Middle East, who made up the majority of protestors in Egypt as well as Libya, Tunisia, and Bahrain. College-educated youth, in particular, make up a large percentage of the unemployed population, and their demands for economic choices and desire for more political freedoms were hugely influential in rallies and protests.

6 Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, "Introduction: Contesting Myths, Critiquing Cosmopolitanism, and Creating the New Cairo School of Urban Studies," in *Cairo Cosmopolitan* (Cairo, Egypt: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 3 – 43.

7 Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, "Introduction: Contesting Myths, Critiquing Cosmopolitanism, and Creating the New Cairo School of Urban Studies."

emerging mentalities of neoliberalism; the new police state; and massive social struggles against inequality, oppression, and censorship. Street art garnered a particularly strong following among disenfranchised youth, and although it is often used interchangeably with the term graffiti (or tagging),<sup>8</sup> the two should be thought of as different and complex engagements with space: one being more formative and developed (street art) and the other being more about written verbal communication (tagging).<sup>7, 8</sup> There is a growing body of literature which outlines a number of essential features of street art, some of which include the inherent reliance on the street as backdrop, the piece's ephemerality, its rejection of formal museum settings, a reliance on politicized space, and its sense of surprise.<sup>9</sup> As Basma Hamdy, professor at the American University in Cairo and one of the leading researchers on revolutionary street art in Egypt describes, "as benign as an act of drawing in the street might seem to be, it upsets the long tradition of authoritarianism... graffiti is time and time again regarded as an insulting affront to the patriarchal ruling class."<sup>10</sup> This holds true regardless of who is in power, but is especially pertinent in authoritarian states with heavy censorship.

Street artists also often use public space to critique the realm in which certain social, economic, and political struggles take place. When disillusionment with the political system or a lack of government accountability sets in, street art represents a rebellious and populist "do-it-yourself" (DIY) attitude.<sup>11</sup> This will be extremely important in discussing the role of street artists in memorializing the martyrs of the Egyptian uprisings, because it showcases not only a sense of ownership in the memorialization process, but also a lack of trust in the government to control such processes. In addition, street art might also be seen as a form of "DIY politics," meaning that any person could pick up a spray can and express their political opinions without needing to have access to conventional political arenas. In communities or countries where democratic practices and institutions either don't exist or are inaccessible—due to political oppression, censorship and/or corruption—the street, and not the parliament, is the true place for popular and public political expression.<sup>12</sup>

Social media also played a critical role as an organizing and educational tool, but street art has a unique place in the creation of "revolutionary culture."<sup>13</sup> This revolutionary culture is not only about promoting creative and expressive revolutionary ideals, but also about reclaiming emotional, psychological, and physical spaces.

"More importantly, the extraordinary proliferation of street art and graffiti in Egyptian towns and cities has made new forms of public space possible. Not simply chronicling or commenting on current events, graffiti invites citizens to actively participate in public debate around how to live together and declare their rights under authoritarian power structures. This marks a profound shift from the experience of Egyptians under

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8 Graffiti and tagging more commonly refer to the practice of spray painting one's name, often with a single color, on walls and other public locations. Many taggers focus on this particular form in order to get their name out and around town as much as possible. Doing so gives the artists a certain amount of street credit, and can be seen as a way to promote one's self, to be seen, in communities whose members are often invisibilized.

9 Riggle, "Street Art"

10 Basma Hamdy, "Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo's Graffiti."

11 Iveson, Kurt. "Cities within the City: Do-it-Yourself Urbanism and the Right to the City" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Volume 37.3; May 2013; 941-56

12 In response to John Parkinson's discussion of Democracy and Public Space, in which he focuses on governmental buildings and institutions as realms of political exercise.

13 Chad Elias, "Graffiti, Social Media and the Public Life of Images in the Egyptian Revolution," in *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution* (Berlin: From Here To Fame, 2014), 89 – 91.

Mubarak's reign, during which public space was largely given over to images of coercive consent and ideological control."<sup>14</sup>

The reclamation of space in this sense becomes more profound when one considers that not only have Egyptians been living under an oppressive regime, but that the fear that such political situations perpetuates often resulted in people spying on and turning in their neighbors to the secret police. Street Artist Ganzeer was arrested for his controversial "Mask of Freedom" sticker, which criticized the SCAF (military) rule following the ousting of Mubarak in February.<sup>15, 16</sup> In response to his arrest and the various reactions he received, he posted an article entitled "Things I've learned From the Mask of Freedom." The article describes seven things he has learned about Egyptian society and the political transition.

### ILLUSTRATION 1

MASK OF FREEDOM, BY GANZEER. ENGLISH AND ARABIC



Source: See Footnote 17

One of them, We are our biggest enemies, describes how his "arrest was a result of a long-lasting civil crackdown on freedom of expression," alluding to a long-standing culture of "the persistence of structures of interpersonal censorship and surveillance" which dominated civil society throughout decades of emergency law rule.<sup>17, 18</sup> Street artists often put themselves on the

14 Ibid

15 "Mask of Freedom", by Ganzeer. May 2014. Arabic and English Photo taken from: <http://rollingbulb.com/post/6290244614/things-ive-learned-from-the-mask-of-freedom>. This work was completed in May of 2011 and showcases the artist's frustration with oppressive military rule after the ousting of Mubarak. Ganzeer was putting the stickers up all over Cairo, and was turned in by a group of people who disagreed with his work. The images went viral and received wide media attention in both Western and domestic media, and Ganzeer was released shortly after his arrest.

16 Supreme Council of Armed Forces

17 Ganzeer, "Things I've Learned From The Mask of Freedom," *Rolling Bulb*, June 7, 2011, <http://rollingbulb.com/post/6290244614/things-ive-learned-from-the-mask-of-freedom>.

18 Chad Elias, "Graffiti, Social Media and the Public Life of Images in the Egyptian Revolution."

line by publicly presenting their work—not only do they risk the threat of being seen by security forces, but were and continue to be often turned in by people who disagree with their work.

Co-founder of the April 6 Youth Movement Waleed Rasheed describes the passion and importance of Cairo's revolutionary street art in this context:<sup>19</sup>

“When I co-founded the April 6 Youth Movement to promote peaceful political activism, I believed that the most effective tools for documenting our struggle were social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter. . . . Yet, I've come to learn that there will always be new tools -- graffiti is one of them. . . . For me, the graffiti represents the creativity of people to develop new tools for protest and dialogue that are stronger and more permanent than the tyranny of their rulers. The artists have transformed the city's walls into a political rally that will never end as long as noisy Cairo remains.”<sup>20</sup>

Street artists also supplemented the work of many social media platforms in producing public knowledge and criticizing the regime. Some of these social media/digital projects became popular and powerful even before the revolution began, such as the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page.<sup>21</sup> This page was made by activist Wael Ghonim in response to the brutal murder of a young Egyptian named Khaled Said. Said was beaten to death by police in a cyber cafe after refusing to show them his ID card. One of the greatest outcries surrounding his death—in a country where Emergency Law rule had made many accustomed to night raids, torture, and kidnappings by police—was how the government attempted to cover up the story. They claimed that he had “swallowed a bag of drugs” and suffocated, although witnesses recount seeing his head being smashed and beaten to death.<sup>22</sup> Others say that the outrage surrounding his death made everyone realize just how discretionary Emergency Rule was, and that Khaled represented the vulnerability of every person in a violent police state. The awareness that the Khaled Said Facebook page promoted about the lawlessness of police brutality is similar to the work of artists such as Ammar Abo Bakr, whose memorial portraiture surrounding the Port Said Massacre will be discussed later in this paper.

### III. Who Has the Key to the Tomb?: The Battle for Political Memory

Egyptians may have recently become obsessed with documenting the memory of the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution, but historical memory has not always been as easily accessible.<sup>23</sup> Even in a city where history lives through the names of streets, neighborhoods, and monumental relics of the past such as the Pyramids of Giza, a collective sense of national and political history is strikingly absent because “[t]he Mubarak regime, like those preceding it, effectively manipulated historical

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19 Currently banned in Egypt

20 Waleed, “Egypt's Murals Are More Than Just Art, They Are A Form of Revolution”

21 <https://www.facebook.com/ElShaheed>

22 Lina Attalah, “Alexandria Policemen Beat Young Man to Death, Says Rights Group | Egypt Independent,” *Egypt Independent*, June 11, 2010, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/alexandria-policemen-beat-young-man-death-says-rights-group>.

23 Judy Barsalou, “Post-Mubarak Egypt: History, Collective Memory and Memorialization,” *Middle East Policy Council XIX*, no. 2 (Summer 2012), <http://mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/post-mubarak-egypt-history-collective-memory-and-memorialization?print>.

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 ILLUSTRATION 2

STENCIL. "THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TWEETED."

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Source: Photo by Hossam El-Hamalawy. (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/elhamalawy/6427062135/>)

This work, which says in English “the revolution will not be tweeted” references the continued mischaracterization of the Egyptian uprisings by Western media as a “Social Media Revolution” or “Facebook Revolution.”

Stencils are a particular form of street art which uses cut outs and spray paint to quickly and easily reproduce a message or striking visual image. This particular stencil shows the Twitter logo circled with a slash mark through it, which universally means “no.” The use of English, and not Arabic, implies that the piece is intended primarily for a Western and/or global audience as a direct counter to the lauding of Western media sites such as Facebook for making the revolution possible. In addition to its clear message to media sites, it also speaks to the broader Egyptian audience, making the claim that the revolution will not happen online, and that people must take to the streets in order to see change happen.

memory to serve its own purposes.”<sup>24</sup> This massive project of keeping public records out of sight and out of mind has seriously dampened Egyptian society’s knowledge of its own history.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, such censorship has suppressed political activism because a “citizen who cannot reason historically about the business of the state is not a participating and change-demanding citizen, but a docile subject. This is the way a succession of Egyptian regimes wanted things to be. And this is how they were.”<sup>26</sup> The state-run program of denial and misconduct prevented the development of an appropriate methodology for public scrutiny and accountability. This was supplemented by a program of continuously propagating Egyptian society as eternal, glorious, and without fault, but which notably excluded the vast majority of the Egyptian population, including the Coptic Christian population, women, rural, and working-class populations. “A sense of Egyptian exceptionalism cut through much of the official and semi-official histories.

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24 Ibid

25 When a fire destroyed the Intitute d’Egypte, a relic of French colonial history on December 17, 2011, Dr. Fahmy said this while attempting to rescue historical manuscripts from the fire: “My greater anger vis-à-vis the sudden interest in the burning of the institute stems from the fact that we are not addressing the real problem that has led to it. It is not that the building was unequipped with fire-fighting devices, or that the army failed to secure it. The real tragedy is that nobody — not even scholars — knew of its existence in the first place, nor did those who lament the lost manuscripts ever bother to read them.”<sup>12</sup> (Taken from Barsalou)

26 Yoav Di-Capua, “Egypt’s Fight for Historical Memory,” *Al Jazeera*, February 21, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/02/2011218142638785949.html>.



Especially ubiquitous is the politically sterile mantra of a glorious 7,000 year old civilization. Can citizens demand their rights with such a triumphalist and uncritical history? Obviously not.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast, activists have gone to great lengths to document the abuses of the regime in digital (and therefore widely accessible) forms. The right to historical memory is something that has framed much of the work done around the uprising, including the previously mentioned Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said.” Other websites have been developed, such as one called Len Nansahom which features pictures of all of the people who have been killed since the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution—and Mosireen, a video and photographic archive which documents violence and human rights abuses by the state, challenging the state media’s coverage of such events.<sup>28, 29, 30</sup>

Judy Barsalou’s recent essay, “Post-Mubarak Egypt: History, Collective Memory and Memorialization,” examines this dynamic. Although some see political transitions as solely forward-looking and progressive, Barsalou brings to light the importance of history in developing strong public notions of self and state. The efforts undertaken by artists and other civilians to capture and document the abuses and violence by the government are part of a broader effort to redefine the collective memory of Egyptian society in the aftermath of the January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution, particularly as it relates to the representation of martyrs and revolutionary youth. In addition, no progress has been made in opening up national archives to the scrutiny and knowledge of the public. As Barsalou highlights, “proof that Egypt’s transition to democracy is far from complete is evident in state policy and practices regarding access to historical documents. Nothing has changed since the January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution.”<sup>31</sup> Efforts undertaken to create a national public archive documenting the uprising were quickly stalled by the same bureaucratic hurdles and security clearances that existed before Mubarak stepped down. To bypass this problem, many street artists have used large murals and public memorials to take ownership of the memory of the revolution.<sup>32</sup> One of the most important of these projects is the work of Abu Bakr on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, where huge portraits of martyrs have been painted to honor the lives of those who have died, and work against the project of the government to discredit or forget them.

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27 Ibid

28 Ar. “We will not forget them”

29 Accessed April 24, 2014, <http://www.lan-nansahom.org/#martyrs>”

30 Other projects include the University on the Square project, Memory of Modern Egypt, R-Shief, and others. There are also a number of projects which directly aim to showcase military abuses, such as Askar Kazeboon, Lying Military, and SCAF crimes, which have come under heavy fire as part of SCAF’s public media campaign. SCAF has repeatedly targeted both Egyptian and international human rights abuse organizations, in an attempt to prevent them from making public materials which testify to the violence of the regime.

31 Judy Barsalou, “Post-Mubarak Egypt: History, Collective Memory and Memorialization.”

32 Some of these memorials include the February 2011 memorial in Tahrir square, a Coptic Christian memorial march on November 11, 2011, a memorial demonstration by political parties and public monument on December 2, 2011, a New Year’s celebration on December 31, and on the first anniversary of the revolution, January 25, 2012, where a large obelisk, inscribed with the names of those who had been killed over the course of the year, was erected in Tahrir Square.

#### IV. The “Tomb of Tahrir”: Memorial Portraiture on Mohammed Mahmoud Street

Street art is highly site-specific and often relies on the urban landscape for its shape to take place.<sup>33</sup> Often, the art is site-specific because its location has a certain critique inherent to it as it forces the viewer to encounter the piece within this context. “Given that architecture and urban design ‘are among the very few truly inescapable—and therefore public—art forms,’” (Carmona and Tiesdell 2007, 179) the greatest possible intervention (other than destroying them) is to alter their aesthetic form. Thus, “street art provides the opportunity for authentic participation to flourish beyond institutionalized political arenas.”<sup>34</sup>

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#### ILLUSTRATION 3

PHOTOGRAPH OF MOHAMMED MAHMOUD STREET AFTER CLASHES WITH THE GOVERNMENT

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Source : Photo source: Maggie Osama, “The Battle of Mohamed Mahmoud Street,” *Al Akhbar English*, accessed May 9, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/photoblogs/battle-mohamed-mahmoud-street>.

This authentic participation can be seen in Mohamed Mahmoud Street, which is now an iconic space for revolutionary art. The street, which runs aside the American University in Cairo, has been the site of many iconic battles between protesters and security forces due to its proximity to the Ministry of Interior and Tahrir Square. Many artists have responded to this violence by dedicating the walls of the street to the memory of those who died or were injured in the struggle, giving the location a number of nicknames including the “Tomb of Tahrir.” In the context of Cairo’s second nickname, the Tomb, the way in which artists, the broader public, and the government engage with the memory of the revolution has proved to be a battle of representation and forgetfulness that transcends the events of 2011.<sup>35</sup> As Rasheed Waleed, leader of the April 6 Youth movement states, “[f]orgetfulness is the national disease of Egypt. But a new generation, born from the revolution that erupted during the Arab Spring, refuses to forget

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33 Burnham, “Scenes & Sounds: The Call and Response of Street Art and the City.”

34 Visconti et al., “Street Art, Sweet Art?”

35 Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, “Introduction: Contesting Myths, Critiquing Cosmopolitanism, and Creating the New Cairo School of Urban Studies.”

and insists on recording everything and anything.”<sup>36</sup> This new generation acts in direct challenge to the state’s control of memory, and many of the portraits stand in direct disobedience to the state’s attempts to minimize or completely ignore the numbers of civilians killed throughout the protests. Mohammed Mahmoud Street also became an important gathering point for rallies and a place of revolutionary pride. As noted, “the blood of the martyrs had consecrated Mohamed Mahmoud as a place of pilgrimage, [and] the murals made it a pilgrimage of both mourning and celebration, of renewal.”<sup>37</sup> This depiction of the street highlights both the power of visual art to evoke a range of emotions, both somber and celebratory.

More than those who have been killed, it also serves the purpose of honoring those who have repeatedly put themselves in danger, including the protesters who lost eyes to the “Eye Sniper.”<sup>38</sup> A series of portraits done by Ammar Abo Bakr, a teacher at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Luxor University, were some of the first images on Mohammed Mahmoud Street and represent in human likeness a group of protesters whose eye(s) were intentionally shot out by one member of the security forces. Here, we see that the memorials do not only function to focus on death, but instead honor the sacrifices of those who continue to take to the streets despite threat of bodily harm.

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#### ILLUSTRATION 4

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PORTRAITS OF MARTYRS WHO LOST THEIR EYE(S) TO THE “EYE SNIPER”

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Source: by Ammar Abo Bakr. Photo By Beshoy Fayez. From *Ibid.*, p. 109

When considering the works of Mohammed Mahmoud street as memorialization against the state, it is important to recognize one aspect in particular: impermanence. Just as the various political transitions have been short lived, street art is essentially impermanent. Although the memories of the martyrs are not to be disregarded, it is important to consider why martyrs have been memorialized in the form of impermanent, public art, particularly in the wake of historical obliteration. I argue that this form of impermanence refers back to the unfinished nature of the revolution; a permanent memorial is a disservice to the revolutionaries who continue to risk their lives for political and economic justice: therefore, street art serves to keep the memory of

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36 Rasheed Waleed, “Egypt’s Murals Are More Than Just Art, They Are a Form of Revolution,” *Smithsonian*, May 2013, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/egypts-murals-are-more-than-just-art-they-are-a-form-of-revolution-36377865/>.

37 Ahdaf Soueif, “Forward.”

38 The Stream, “Egypt’s ‘Eye Sniper’ Sentenced,” *Al Jazeera*, March 5, 2013, <http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201303052001-0022587>.

the uprisings alive while simultaneously recognizing that there are many more who continue to be threatened by violence as the regime remains unstable and violence continues.<sup>39</sup>

This feeling is supported by some of the artists as well: “I am totally against the [opinion] that graffiti should be preserved as is because the mural, the graffiti is indeed a response to the events that are taking place. . . . There has to be new murals to come as a response to new events or current events.”<sup>40</sup> Although street art is easily erased, it is also easily reproducible. The fact that the work is done in an impermanent form in no way dissolves its ability to be reconstructed after any sort of cover-up by pro-military groups or the state. These portraits could be done again anywhere, on any day, to re-evolve the memory of the revolution.

The nickname of the “Tomb of Tahrir” is also extremely relevant to a broader history of memorialization. “One of the most significant attributes of Egyptian art history is the representation of their dead. Between the elaborate tombs of pharaohs and the realistic Greco-Roman inspired Fayoum portraits, one cannot look at the martyr portraits of Mohamed Mahmoud without making such an analogy.”<sup>41</sup> In order to understand the works’ relationship to the revolution as a whole, it is important to consider more than just symbolic imagery. It is essential to analyze the performative gesture as one that challenges the constructed identities, histories, and memories that have controlled concurrent regimes for decades, if not centuries. In contrast to hyper-nationalistic or ruler-focused effigies, the portraits break with historical norms of representation by utilizing symbols that dissolve lines of sectarian identity.

One such feature is the prominent use of the color green. Green is an extremely important color in Arab and Egyptian traditions, as it is considered to be the traditional color of Islam and plays a significant role in ancient Egyptian symbology. In symbology, the color green was

“a symbol of growing things and of life itself (to do ‘green things’ was a euphemism for positive, life-producing behavior...), green was also a potent sign of resurrection. Early texts refer to the afterlife itself as the ‘field of malachite’ after the vivid green mineral used by Egyptians in the production of this pigment.”<sup>42</sup>

Because of this dual symbolism, it is unclear (and therefore, perhaps, irrelevant) whether the revolutionary martyr was Islamic or secular. The wings, on the other hand, are Coptic Christian iconography from fourth century Sahidic manuscripts.<sup>43</sup> This fusion of iconic traditions in the light of (increasing) sectarian violence between the Muslim Brotherhood, secular liberals, and the Christian population, is to defy the official narrative that sectarian violence was the downfall of the revolution. Instead, it supports a broader project of Egyptian identity-building that transcends modern categories.

Memorials are political because they are narrational. Especially in times of conflict, memorials can perpetuate divisions within society, especially if they place priority over one group’s losses, or emphasize the victory of one population over another. This occurs in a number of formal and informal ways. “The running contest over place names, graffiti and memorials is

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39 Basma Hamdy reflects a similar opinion in her piece, although I developed this idea before reading her essay. Please see: Basma Hamdy, “Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo’s Graffiti.”

40 Durham, “Tomb of Tahrir.”

41 Basma Hamdy, “Scarabs, Buraqs and Angels,” in *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution* ([S.l.]: From Here To Fame, 2014), 146–49.

42 Richard H. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 1994). p. 108

43 Ibid

## ILLUSTRATION 5

AMMAR ABO BAKR AND HANNAA EL DEGHAM



Source: Photos: Top: Munir Sayegh; Bottom left and bottom right: Ali Khaled. From Ibid. p. 142.

Section of a larger mural including portraits of Ultras Ahlawy fans who were killed in the Port Said Massacre, February 2012. Many of the above portraits are captioned with the title "Shaheed [name]", given them an official and formal title in public, so that all know they were killed in the revolutionary violence. The wing motif alludes to Sahedic Christian manuscripts and the color green is both the color of Islam and a reference to death and life in ancient Egyptian symbology.

one way that its protagonists proclaim their positions and keep score."<sup>44</sup> In contrast, Mohammed Mahmoud Street does not cast a shadow on the revolution because it does not promote sectarian conflict or violence, a tactic often used by parties in post-conflict situations which valorizes one population affected by violence while detracting from the suffering of others. It also ascribes importance to each individual, supporting a space that promotes a national Egyptian identity and honors individual sacrifice for the collective good.

44 Judy Barsalou, "Post-Mubarak Egypt: History, Collective Memory and Memorialization."

This trend towards recognizing the every-day Egyptians who took to the street in protest is different than many other revolutionary stories. “In newly democratic societies, national memorials often honor the ‘great men’ who prevailed during the conflict at the expense of marginalized groups, such as women and ordinary citizens also involved in the struggle.”<sup>45</sup> Although some considered the horizontal power structure of the movement and lack of leadership to be a weakness, it showcased the truly democratic and egalitarian ideals of the revolution. There was no singular “great man” who died at the hands of the regime; each individual is seen as essential to the cause and their memory sacred. As explained by street artist El Zeft, “The revolution I dream of, the one I took to the streets for on the first day, does not raise portraits of rulers.”<sup>46</sup> Instead, it raises the portraits of Egyptians, the common identity among all participants.

The recognition of Egyptian identity as primary transcends decades of heavily promoted sectarian identities among the masses. “For a brief moment it seemed as though Egyptians had a tabula rasa and all the divisions and tribulations of the past had been washed away . . . It seemed necessary that the art painted on the walls of Egypt be a representation and endorsement of this unity.”<sup>47</sup> The military regime had utilized and exacerbated differences in religion, race, class, and gender for decades to justify a prolonged state of emergency law. In order to delegitimize and overthrow the regime, it was necessary to uphold and promote a strategy of unification across all social lines. Without underscoring the seriousness of sectarian violence in Egypt’s history, it is critical to see this public portrayal of martyrs as unified, not divided, in order to understand how important memorialization is in the democratic process.

Despite this unity, the philosophy did not always hold, and some martyrs and their stories became more public than others. Some viewed the overutilization of memorable martyrs as a means of monopolizing collective memory and detracting from the hundreds of people who had been killed or tortured and now lay almost completely unidentifiable in state morgues or at the bottom of the Nile. As Hamdy points out, “not all martyrs are commemorated equally, much like human lives and deaths seem to be evaluated differently.”<sup>48</sup> In particular, four martyrs repeatedly mark the urban landscape: Emad Effat, Khaled Said, Gika, Mina Daniel because they have all come to represent particular struggles and/or moments within the uprisings. Unfortunately, sometimes this process is not benevolent. Citing Abu Bakr, Hamdy also describes the possibility that “iconic martyrs . . . have been utilized at various times by ‘infiltrating’ painters who might have been encouraged by the ‘fulul’ (ancient regime class) for different agendas that had little to do with revolutionary political activism.”<sup>49</sup> While this is possible, I believe the repetitive use of important figures such as Khaled Said or Gika (shown below), symbolically commemorates and recognizes the collective sacrifices of many. Figures such as Khaled Said (described earlier in the paper) are iconic of the revolution, not because of their individual identity, but because of the way their deaths represent struggles across the timeline of the revolution and the violence of the regime. All four figures are from different backgrounds—Gika was a young, enthusiastic revolutionary, Mina Daniels a Coptic Christian leader, Emad Effat an Azharite Sheikh, and Khaled Said an ordinary Egyptian who could have been anyone’s brother or son. Because most of Cairo now knows these four faces, I argue that they instead seek to remind the broader public of the pan-Egyptian struggle for freedom as they are all “united by martyrdom.”<sup>50</sup>

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45 Barsalou and Baxter, *The Urge to Remember*.

46 Ibid

47 Basma Hamdy, “Scarabs, Buraqs and Angels.”

48 Basma Hamdy, “Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo’s Graffiti.”

49 Ibid

50 Ibid

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**ILLUSTRATION 6**
**THE BATTLE MURAL (PART 2)**


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Source: Ammar Abo Bakr. 14 October 2013 Photo By: Abdo El Amir, from Hamdy and Karl, *Walls of Freedom*. p. 253

Not all of the memorials on Mohammed Mahmoud Street represent the martyrs' ways as peacefully as the portraits that utilize the color green. Another series of work, including a collaboration between Abo Bakr with El Zeft, an Egyptian street artist and revolutionary, display more graphic scenes of violence.

The image below is a portrait of 19 year old Belal Ali Gaber, who was killed on October 11, 2013 during a pro-Morsi March in Cairo Belal is rendered as though from a photograph taken immediately after his murder.<sup>51</sup> His arms lay relaxed by his side, but his legs are cut off at the knee, making him grotesquely disfigured. Contrarily, they give him the appearance of floating, of no longer being attached to the earth. The use of this image is both haunting and immediate—it memorializes Belal and his place in heaven, but also speaks to the continuing earthly violence and its pain.

An Egyptian blogger describes the scene:

“There’s something angelic or Raphaelite about Belal’s glazed eyes and face, the soaked blood of his shirt bursting with flowers in bloom, bringing to mind Pablo Neruda’s quote ‘You can step on the flowers but you can’t prevent the Spring,’ which was first made into graffiti by Bahia Shehab on the military walls of Tahrir in early 2012.”<sup>52</sup>

The choice of composing with three identical images is also striking. Such compositions evoke the use of triptychs, which are defined by the use of three panels in a contiguous or series of related paintings. Triptychs were especially popular in churches throughout the Middle Ages to reference various chapters in the bible and their stories. These particular pieces are not only

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51 Hamdy and Karl, *Walls of Freedom*. p. 253

52 Suzee in The City, “Belal Ali Saber: Graffiti by Ammar Abo Bakr and El Zeft,” *Suzeeinthecity*, accessed May 1

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**ILLUSTRATION 7**  
THE BATTLE MURAL (PART 3)

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Source: Ammar Abo Bakr, Sabry Abou Alam Street, Downtown. 29 October 2013.  
Photo by Abdo El Amir. From Hamdy and Karl, *Walls of Freedom*. p. 254

reminiscent of angels and other Christian iconography with the utilization of wings, but extend the violence past an individual feature into a broader evocation of the sheer number of people who have died. The repetition seeks to emphasize this feeling; each image its own grave, while eliciting the infiniteness of rows of white crosses in war graveyards. Belal's own religion is unclear, although his death at a pro-Morsi rally is not insignificant.

Another part of this same mural is a hybrid portrait of 8-year-old Mariam Ashraf Mesiha and her cousin, 12-year-old Mariam Nabil Fahmy (shown above). Both girls were killed by unknown gunmen with automatic weapons on their way to a Coptic wedding on 20 October, 2013. "The two cousins are combined to create a hybrid image: the unharmed face of Mariam Mesiha with the gruesome, bullet-ridden body of Mariam Fahmy. The gushing holes and bullets jammed into Mariam's body reference St. Sebastian . . . The religious symbolism denotes sacrifice and gives them a holy, divine quality."<sup>53</sup> The composition also speaks to numbers in Egyptian mythology. The number three symbolizes many things, among them plurality, a closed system, and cycles.<sup>54</sup> The Ancient Egyptian symbol for three (|||) was often used to denote groups or pluralities, and might be seen as referencing the sheer numbers of young men like Belal and children such as Miriam who have been killed at the hands of the police and security forces. Artist El Zeft describes the prolonged violence:

"For three years, I would jump into a blender of bodies, batons, tear gas and gunshots to advocate the rights of the martyrs and continue their cause, every time someone would fall. In the meantime, another would be killed, so you'd forget about the first one for a bit and agitate for the rights of the next, only to turn around in the end and realize you

<sup>53</sup> Hamdy and Karl, *Walls of Freedom*. p. 254

<sup>54</sup> "Meaning in Many: The Symbolism of Numbers," *Symbol & Magic in Egyptian Art*, by Richard H. Wilkinson, Thames and Hudson, 1994, page 131-133.



never really brought justice to Khaled Said's rights – the one in whose name you were chanting slogans the very first day.”<sup>55</sup>

His feelings speak to the absurdity and volume of the violence that has shaped the revolution, and it has made the development of universal symbols extremely important. Such universal symbols or references to the large revolution frame each memorial portrait with the knowledge that many more have (and perhaps many more will have) died. El Zeft's essay in *Walls of Freedom* is filled with anger and disgust at political pandering and violence on both sides. The disenfranchisement, frustration, and disgust that comes through in his commentary bring a certain light to his works, which are brutally honest in their renderings, surreal in their decoration, and black and white like something out of the past.

## V. Unlocking the Tomb: Reclaiming National Narratives Through Pharaonic Art

Although El Zeft and Ammar Abo Bakr's works fuse many elements of Egyptian culture, one artist in particular used ancient Egyptian motifs to make his point. Artist Alaa Awad, a fine arts teacher at University of Luxor, created a series striking murals which specifically evoke ancient pharaonic symbols and scenes. His work portrays a number of vivid pharaonic symbols and peoples and are often directly inspired by the art that lines the walls of ancient Egyptian tombs. Like Abo Bakr, Awad created a number of pieces in response to the Port Said Massacres to commemorate those killed in the violence. Similar to the color green and angel wings in Bakr's work, the pharaonic imagery does not support primarily an Islamic or secular identity; Awad's images, then, become interesting as sites of a new national identity by referencing and reclaiming Egyptian history. This is not to say that all Egyptians identify primarily with pharaonic imagery and culture. Indeed, “Egyptian symbols could be used both to reveal and to conceal: to reveal by evoking important aspects of reality, and to conceal by limiting the audience who would understand their message.”<sup>56</sup> Contrarily, I believe Awad employed such imagery to subvert the censorship of the regime and make his pieces appeal to a broader audience.

Despite its relevant applications in political commentary, ancient Egyptian imagery had little place in the street art scene before the events of 2011. Some argue that an upsurge in this imagery appeared after the burning of the Institute d'Egypte and the resulting backlash from the Western media against Egyptian society's seeming neglect of ancient history.<sup>57, 58</sup> Aside from being particularly beautiful, these images utilize great collective memories of the past, nation, self, and community. As noted by Maurice Halbwachs in his work on memory and society, “In this way, the framework of collective memory confines and binds us to our most intimate

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55 El Zeft, “The Revolution Blender,” in *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution* ([S.l.]: From Here To Fame, 2014), 252 – 254.

56 Richard H. Wilkinson, *Symbol and Magic in Egyptian Art.*, with reference to Bourghouts, 1976. p. 3

57 It is also important here to note that the Institute d'Egypte was a French colonial institution, whose particular portrayal of Egyptians and their national history is not owned by the post-colonial Egyptian psyche. That is, the French colonial portrayal of the Egyptian past is not necessarily the past which Egyptians want to or care to maintain.

58 Lau, “The Murals of Mohammad Mahmoud Street: Reclaiming Narratives of Living History for the Egyptian People.”

remembrances to each other.”<sup>59</sup> Such a project, when placed beside popular and revolutionary stencils and graffiti, has a strangely surreal, yet anti-authoritarian effect.

“It is not only the murals’ aesthetic appeal that has captured the imagination of many observers, but also how they exemplify a fascinating fusion between a variety of cultural artistic traditions that portray Egypt’s rich history, namely Pharaonic, popular Islamic, and contemporary traditions. They all reinvent, adapt to, and adopt universal schools of painting, adding a fascinating “Egyptian twist” to express—sometimes humorously—the spirit of rebellion and resistance.”<sup>60</sup>

## ILLUSTRATION 8

MURAL OF THE WAILING WOMEN OR NA’EHAT



Source: Alaa Awad, originally painted on the Ancient Tomb of Ramose, Governorate of Thebes during the 18th Dynasty. Mohamed Mahmoud Street. February 2012. Photo by Munir Sayegh, in Basma Hamdy and Don Karl, *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution* ([S.l.]: From Here To Fame, 2014). p. 136 – 8.

This imagery also builds off of the democratization of suffering as seen in the portraits of Mohammed Mahmoud street. What does it mean that those who died in the revolution are now being represented in the same manner as the ancient pharaohs were, particularly after the fall of Mubarak’s hegemonic rule and then the reforms of the “New Pharaoh,” Mohammed Morsi? After Egyptians won back rights to their cultural sites following 19th century colonial archaeological investigations, there was a resurgence of national interest in pharaonism and ancient Egyptian culture. The glory of the past became a strong focal point for creating a post-colonial nationalism

<sup>59</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980). p. 53

<sup>60</sup> Abaza, “The Buraqs of ‘Tahrir.’”

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 ILLUSTRATION 9

 MURAL OF THE WAILING WOMEN OR NA'EHAT
 

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Source: Painted on the ancient Tomb of Ramose, Governorate of Thebes during the 18th dynasty.  
 Image from <http://factsanddetails.com/world/cat56/sub364/item1945.html>

that Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar El-Sadat both used to supplement pan-Arab and pan-Islamic ideologies.<sup>61</sup> Considering the long history of promoting Egyptian cultural heritage to lure in an orientalist tourist market, and the succeeding implementation of prideful propaganda by Egypt's autocratic rulers, the remixing of Egyptian cultural heritage as a collective sign of mourning is particularly telling of the revolutionary culture surrounding the uprisings of 2011. In this way, "[t]he collective Egyptian imagination renews a sense of national identity by creatively reviving historical narratives of social and cultural memory in the present."<sup>62</sup> To illustrate this point, I will discuss one of Alaa Awad's murals below.

The piece above is a section of a much larger mural done on Mohammed Mahmoud street painted by Alaa Awad on the day following the Port Said Massacre. The mural is called *Mural of the Wailing Women*, or *Na'ehat*, and is a replica of a much older mural painted on the Tomb of Ramose, who was Governorate of Thebes during the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty in ancient Egypt [see image above]. In an article he wrote for Art Forum, Awad describes the scene:

"Here the women are mourning the deceased. They are carrying black flowers. There is the door of Osiris, which you pass through on your way to the land of the dead. At the funeral procession the women are wailing and smearing themselves with earth. This is a very old Egyptian tradition. The goddess of the Sky, Nut, is rendered above, and the martyr's soul is being welcomed into heaven with a lit candle."<sup>63</sup>

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61 Donald Malcolm Reid, "Nationalizing the Pharaonic Past: Egyptology, Imperialism, and Egyptian Nationalism, 1922 - 1952," in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

62 Lau, "The Murals of Mohammad Mahmoud Street: Reclaiming Narratives of Living History for the Egyptian People."

63 Clair Davies, trans., "Alaa Awad (Interview)," *Artforum.com*, February 27, 2012, <http://artforum.com/words/id=30394>.

Although the image is taken from an ancient Egyptian tomb, the tradition is still in practice to this day. “[A]ccording to Alaa Awad, up to the present the persistence of ancient Egyptian mourning traditions is to be still witnessed in Upper Egypt.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, although not all viewers might know that this image is taken from the Tomb of Ramose, some might identify with the imagery, as the practice continues to this day. In addition, a Ba-Bird, meant to represent the soul or spirit, is seen sitting on an elaborately decorated coffin as the muses welcome the martyrs into the afterlife.<sup>65</sup> Egyptian scholar Dr. Basma Hamdy is critical of Awad’s application of *turath*, primarily because it “seems to be fitting with the trend of commodification in the international art market in which the need for ethnic and national classifications is art and parcel celebrating exoticisms.”<sup>66</sup> Would it thus be a coincidence that . . . his entire murals have been reproduced for display in galleries?<sup>67, 68</sup> I argue instead that street art is inherently anti-commodification because of its location in the street (as opposed to museums or galleries). Whether or not a piece of work is reproduced in a gallery or commodified space does not detract from its original intent: to offer a public space dedicated to those killed in the massacre. To argue after the fact against its eventual commodification is to miss its original intent. It is debatable whether Alaa Awad made this piece with a more elite audience in mind, or if it was an application of his style in the spirit of the revolution.

In the same way that wings have developed to represent a particular symbology of martyrdom in the context of Cairo, I believe the work of Awad is done within the broader context of a street art movement which utilizes all forms of communication and popular memory in order to critique and challenge the existing social order.

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64 Basma Hamdy, “Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo’s Graffiti.”

65 Also, personality and connection with gods. The Ba represented the part of the deceased which left the body upon death to join the Sun god in the afterlife but had to return to the underworld every night to feed the body of the deceased.

66 Arabic., “Heritage”

67 Basma Hamdy, “Mourning, Narratives and Interactions with the Martyrs through Cairo’s Graffiti.”

68 In the same article, Hamdy relates Abu Bakr’s beliefs about the commodification and control of Cairo’s now blooming graffiti art scene through organizations, cultural centers, and the like. Although Abu Bakr’s commentary is relayed second-hand from Hamdy, I think it is important to respond to his critique of graffiti as it was “then” (during November and December of 2011) and graffiti as it is “now” (appropriated and commodified). As noted, “Here investing in art becomes a forum for gentrifying public spaces and a way of manipulating violence, ultimately creating a new wave of a “culture industry” highly dependent on financial capitalism. Graffiti might not be spared from such manipulations” (Hamdy, “Mourning.”) It is fine and fair to critique the indoctrination of art into capitalist system, of which I personally believe graffiti is one of the highest forms, but I think I would like to emphasize to the reader that this critique of commodification should remain separate from the continued use of street art as it pertains to promoting revolutionary ideals, commemorating martyrs, and criticizing the regime. The “original artists” such as Abu Bakr certainly have made their name visible through their and are now touring the world speaking on their work-- he was among the pioneers of Mohammed Mahmoud street’s original murals—which is something that the majority of kids and/or artists who are now taking to the streets do not have the luxury of doing. Many of the artists he critiques for undertaking large art projects are most likely jobless, broke, and searching for any way to make a buck doing what they love. Similar tensions are apparent in other graffiti hubs such as Oakland and the Mission district in San Francisco, where Latino and Chicano artists can be seen painting elaborate murals for new development projects which are gentrifying the neighborhoods the art was originally intended to defend. A further discussion is outside of the scope of this paper but I urge the reader to consider the nuance and difficulty in deciphering public art and its role in social justice, critique, and gentrification.

## VI. Defacing the Tomb: Street Art as a Public Act of Rewriting History and Why Whitewashing the Walls Is More Than Just “Clean Up”

Street artists create their art knowing that it will not last forever and governments often spend billions “cleaning up” such work.<sup>69</sup> Those who advocate against graffiti often cite it as a cause of violence, crime, community degradation, and an assault on private property rights.<sup>70</sup> In Egypt, however, it is more than just a clean-up attempt. Instead, I argue that the government’s attempts to white-wash the walls of Mohammed Mahmoud street can be seen as part of a larger effort to eradicate the memory of the martyrs and stifle public criticism. “These struggles are reminiscent of timeworn practices in Egypt, where pharaohs removed or appropriated monuments constructed by their predecessors and ancient Christians and Muslims chiseled away or deconstructed statues, friezes and pyramids honoring previous rulers or disputed gods.”<sup>71</sup> In this same way, Mubarak and the successive interim Military regime tried to erase the history of the uprisings.

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### ILLUSTRATION 10

#### TANK VS. BIKER

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Source: by Ganzeer and friends with Sad Panda. 21 May 2011.  
Photo by JoAnna Pollonais. Image taken from *Ibid.* p. 66-67

However, such destruction did not deter the artists from returning. “As Egyptian authorities kept erasing the art by whitening the walls, artists responded with elaborated and sometimes improved versions of the previous paintings, until they excelled at the art of resisting, challenging, and insulting the counter-revolutionaries among with the wielders of power and their allies.”<sup>72</sup> Examining the lives of images—both their additions and their destructions—can help to understand not only government hegemony, but also the diversity of opinions in Egyptian society and the public’s relationship to such images. Therefore, “In order to have a clear understanding of history, one must not only look at the images that were preserved, but also examine those modified, appropriated, and destroyed,” whether it be by governmental forces or by citizens.<sup>73</sup>

We can look at the following pieces as an example. It was not uncommon for artists—whether they be in agreement or in disagreement with the original work—to paint over other

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<sup>69</sup> Estimates vary, although no official date has been collected or published that I could find record of.

<sup>70</sup> “Graffiti Facts: Costs of Graffiti,” *Graffiti 911: Fight the Blight*, 2008, [www.graffiti911.com/costs.php](http://www.graffiti911.com/costs.php).

<sup>71</sup> Judy Barsalou, “Post-Mubarak Egypt: History, Collective Memory and Memorialization.”

<sup>72</sup> Abaza, “The Dramaturgy of A Street Corner.”

<sup>73</sup> Basma Hamdy, “The Power of Destruction,” in *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution* ([S.l.]: From Here To Fame, 2014), 246 – 251.

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**ILLUSTRATION 11**

DETAIL OF “TANK VESUS BIKER”

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Source: by Ganzeer, with addition made by Winged Elephant after the Maspero Massacre. Zamalek, Cairo.  
Image from *Revolution Graffiti: Street Art of the New Egypt* by Mia Gröndahl (American University in Cairo Press, 2013).

pieces as part of an additive process of visual development and communication. One such example is that of the development of Ganzeer’s “Tank Vs. Biker” piece, which was originally done on Mad Graffiti Weekend.

The image of the boy on the bicycle represents the struggles of hardworking Egyptians who persist under difficult economic circumstances. The youth in Egypt, represented by this boy, particularly remain disaffected by low unemployment and regime violence. The word “aish”, or bread, also means life in Arabic. The military tank, in all of its grandiose power and might, is seen pointing the barrel of its gun toward a young Egyptian, balancing life on his head, fearlessly facing

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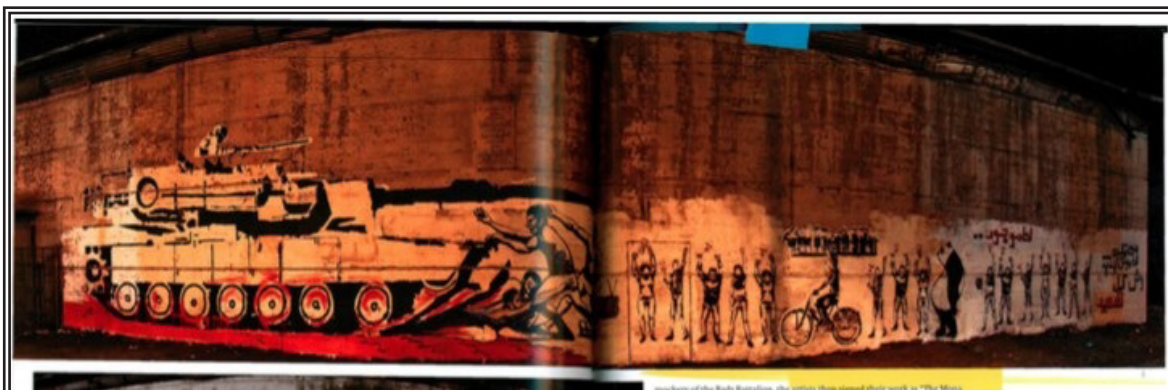
**ILLUSTRATION 12a**

“TANK VS. BIKER REWORKED TO SHOW PROTESTERS HOLDING THE GUY FAWKES MASK WHILE SOME ARE BEING RUN OVER BY THE TANK. . .”

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Source: Photo by Mosa’ab AlShamy.  
Top image on double page spread accompanied by images in 12b

ILLUSTRATION 12b  
THE BADR BATTALION



Source: Photos by Maggie Osama.

Top Image: The Badr Battalion (a pro-military street art group) changes the image by erasing the crushed figures and showing the crowds waving Egyptian flags, including the phrase "The people and the army are one"; Bottom Image: Mohammed Khaled and the Mona Lisa Brigades erase the crowds and add an animalistic Tantawi devouring a protestor. Image taken from *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution*, p. 128 - 129

ILLUSTRATION 13

VARIOUS "NO" STENCILS SPRAYED ON THE TANK VS. BIKER WALL IN ZAMALEK



Source: Photos By Bahya Shebab. Image from Don Karl and Basma Hamdy, *Walls of Freedom: Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution*

death. Ganzeer was briefly arrested for another one of his pieces, “the freedom mask”, which shows a mannequin’s head blindfolded and gagged, as distributed to the Egyptian people by the SCAF.<sup>74</sup> This work, done only a few months after the toppling of Mubarak, already challenged the authority of Egypt’s military, who continued to crack down on protests and use emergency laws to censor and arrest dissidents.

Instead of showing multiple images of tanks, the artist condenses the figures, developing a scene which, instead of recreating the event exactly, evokes the subjective experience of the massacre. Portraiture is used in many other street memorial spaces to honor and remember those who died. Here, however, the figures are more universalized; they could be Muslim (one figure has a beard), or Christian, although the protesters at this tragedy were mainly Coptic.

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#### ILLUSTRATION 14

AMMAR ABO BAKR AND EL ZEFT’S *THE BATTLE MURAL (PART THREE)* WITH  
BLACK PAINT SPLASHED ON THE FACES.

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Source: from: <http://egyptianchronicles.blogspot.com/2013/11/banksy-is-not-welcomed-in-new.html>

Unlike other recognizable portraiture, this scene is not intended to memorialize the Christians who died during the massacre as much as it is meant to critique the violence of the security forces, which continued after Mubarak. Shortly after the massacre, a group of pro-military artists named the Badr Brigades erased the violence and painted a pro-military scene. Next, the Mona Lisa Brigades painted an image of a murderous military general eating protesters, and added memorial portraiture and other slogans. The back and forth continued.

Lastly, artist Bahia Sheba painted over the entire series with her “One Thousand Times No” project, utilizing the Arabic script “la” to create beautifully intricate designs.<sup>75</sup> As she states,

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<sup>74</sup> Discussed earlier in this paper

<sup>75</sup> Arabic. “No”



“The nos I spray are always relevant to the topic. For example, I take a no from the wall of a mausoleum and use it to protest a man dying or one being beaten. The man who lost his eyes to snipers and became a symbol of the revolution – I used a font for him, a font that’s called neg, which means star, because he became a star of the revolution. But these are small nuances just for me. Nobody knows this on the street. Nobody will ever get them. These are just little cues for me to make history relevant to modernity. I don’t think anybody will know that this is a no taken off a tombstone or a mosque or a pot or a textile or a box. That historic knowledge is only available to me, because I did the research. It’s not public knowledge. But I think it’s felt on the street.”<sup>76</sup>

Shebab’s last piece on this area for a number of weeks represented more than an opinion. Instead, it seems to coalesce all of the feelings around the uprisings and the continued violence: the simple desire for peace and for an end to the bloodshed.

Much of this back and forth contributes to the increasing freedom of expression which graffiti promoted and supported. However, there were a number of instances of more flagrant desecration of imagery, particularly times when unknown people came and splashed black paint on the faces of memorial portraits. More malicious desecration of images can be seen, especially in lieu of increased sectarian violence. Shown below are two examples:

As shown, instead of erasing or manipulating the images to tell a new story, it appears that the black paint was used to specifically erase the faces of the martyrs. More than showing contempt for graffiti, such an action alludes to the ancient Egyptian practice of defacing memorials or monuments of the dead. “Ancient Egyptians believed that destroying someone’s inscription or cartouche was equivalent to destroying the person himself, and this held great significance in the afterlife. This ‘damnatio memoriae’ (condemnation of memory) persisted throughout Egypt’s history.”<sup>77</sup> However, in ancient Egypt, such monuments or images were often replaced with the image of the new king or pharaoh. The fact that the people who defaced the above images did not replace them with an alternative feature speaks to a desire to eliminate the faces (and therefore the memories) of the martyrs from public view. “When murals are defaced, it’s an attempt to undermine the martyrs’ legitimacy by breaking their connection with the people....In many cases, only the faces were destroyed and not the entire mural, since faces are what make an image seem life-like.”<sup>78</sup> This differs significantly from the additive creative process seen in the “Tank-vs.-Biker” mural, and is probably a result of the decrease in revolutionary fervor and sense of disillusionment which has taken over Egypt since February 2011.

## **VII. Entombing Tahrir: Why the Military’s Monument to the Martyrs of the Revolution Was Unsuccessful and How It Co-opts the Memory of the Revolution**

The government and state media continue to cover the revolution in such a way that excludes the military from all implications in the violence and defames the martyrs who died in the process. One of the ways they have done this was through the construction of a memorial in Tahrir Square to “all of the martyrs of the revolution” on November 18, 2013, four months

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<sup>76</sup> Karen Eng, “A Thousand Times No: Q&A with Artist+activist Bahya Shehab | TEDFellows Blog,” accessed May 8, 2014, <http://fellowsblog.ted.com/2012/06/28/a-thousand-times-no-qa-with-artistactivist-ba>.

<sup>77</sup> Basma Hamdy, “The Power of Destruction.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

after the military removed democratically elected Mohammed Morsi from power. Ironically, the inaugural ceremony was not open to the public and the square was closed off by the same security forces and armed vehicles which had killed thousands of people in less than three years. Many protesters distrusted the memorial because they saw it as “an attempt to blur the lines between the January 25, 2011 revolution which is more widely acknowledged as a revolution of the people, and June 30, 2013, which remains controversial, as some consider it a revolution and others a military coup.”<sup>79</sup> The day after its erection, on the two-year anniversary of the battle of Mohamed Mahmoud Street, protesters and friends and family of those who lost their lives during the Mohamed Mahmoud Protests marched in remembrance. “[T]heir chants focused on remembering, as if they were fighting to preserve the memory of the battle. The marchers shouted out the names of those who died, enumerated the fatal battles that took place under military and Brotherhood rule, and laid down the facts, repeatedly chanting ‘remember, never forget.’”<sup>80</sup> Said one of the protesters, “They took away our dreams, so the only thing left for us is our memories, but they’re trying to steal them too. . . . There is a very systematic plan to falsify history and create a different discourse and force it on people.”<sup>81</sup>

Memorials have a profound power to shape collective memory. The way that heroes and villains are depicted in a memorial site can influence, for better or for worse, the long-term stability of transitioning societies and reconciliation efforts. It appears the military rushed to build a monument as an attempt to appease international observers and military supporters, without having to make any concessions towards democratic progress. With violence and instability still shaking the country, there are no unified ideas about who is to be held responsible for the violence, although revolutionaries hold the military responsible for the lack of democratic functions. With Egyptian General Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi now running for president and set to win in May, it is hard to pinpoint what has been lost and won. A military state which is seeking to restore its complete hegemony over social, economic and political life would benefit heavily from eliminating the spirit of the revolution and attempting to distract the masses from the military’s implicit role in the violence. As military support continues to grow in the lead-up to the elections, some might see such a project as a restoration of the idea that “the people and the army are one”, which framed much of the initial sentiment in February of 2011. Such a monument attempts to create the illusion that the country has regained stability and establish government control over the fundamentally anti-authoritarian space of Tahrir Square.<sup>82</sup>

However, some Egyptians support the government’s memorial, and there is a growing desire of many citizens to return life to some semblance of normalcy, particularly due to a deteriorating economic situation. As Wael Ghonim, founder of the “We are all Khaled said” Facebook Page said,

“People, they are scared, they want stability. They don’t want to see the country in chaos. And I think this is the message we have to work on. This is the messaging part that revolutionaries have to work on, because we do not want to see our country in chaos. We want to see our country stable, but at the same time, not at the price of democracy.”<sup>83</sup>

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79 Masr, “Beblawi Opens New Tahrir Monument | Mada Masr.”

80 Afify, “A Battle for Memory | Mada Masr.”

81 Ibid

82 Tony G. Gabriel, “Memorial at Egypt’s Tahrir Square Sparks Protest,” *Yahoo News*, November 18, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/memorial-egypts-tahrir-square-sparks-protest-073448251.html>.

83 Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, “Egypt’s Military Government Quiets Revolutionaries,” *Morning Edition* (Cairo: NPR, January 19, 2012), <http://www.npr.org/2012/01/19/145437585/egypts-military-government-quiets->

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 ILLUSTRATION 15
 

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A VOLUNTEER CLEANS UP RUBBLE FROM THE DESTROYED AND  
VANDALIZED MONUMENT IN TAHRIR SQUARE

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Source: Photo from Tony G. Gabriel, “Memorial at Egypt’s Tahrir Square Sparks Protest,” *Yahoo News*, November 18, 2013, <http://news.yahoo.com/memorial-egypts-tahrir-square-sparks-protest-073448251.html>.

Ghonim’s quote describes a fundamental split in society: many people desire more political freedom, but not at the expense of social unrest and economic struggle. The role of the memorial thus becomes a contested space because it creates static form in the face of ongoing change. As described in their USAIP report, Judy Barsalou and Victoria Baxter define memorialization as “a process that satisfies the desire to honor those who suffered or died during conflict and as a means to examine the past and address contemporary issues.”<sup>84, 85</sup> The most important part of this definition is that Barsalou and Baxter define memorialization as a process, and not as a finished product. This activity embodies the transformative process of any social, political, or economic transition, and it is often true that memorials take a long time to reach a finished form. It is not enough to simply create a memorial. The process which results in a memorial is one often heated by controversy and can even lead to an upsurge in conflict. For these reasons, the process of memorialization is as crucial as the finished product itself.

“In this process, the past can be reinterpreted to address a wide range of political or social needs—recasting “subversives” as martyrs or innocent victims, for instance, or consolidating a new national identity, such as the transformation of South Africa from apartheid state to “Rainbow Nation.” Memorialization thus represents a powerful arena of contested memory and offers the possibility of aiding the formation of new national, community, and ethnic identities.”<sup>86</sup>

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 revolutionaries.

84 United States of America Institute for Peace

85 Barsalou and Baxter, *The Urge to Remember*

86 Ibid

Thus, I would like to return to the function of street art, both as an ephemeral form and drawing from Kurt Iveson's notions of DIY urbanism. If one considers Belbawi's monument as a form of state advertising in preparation for further military rule, then we can see street art as the counter-advertisement to reframe public ownership of space. Iveson's article describes street art interventions against private advertisements, asserting that the politics of inhabitancy hold that the public has the right to public space above the private interests of commercial advertisers. More specifically, the politics of inhabitancy in a democracy take precedent over class, race, wealth, gender, and other operative norms of hierarchy.<sup>87</sup> Beyond the public/private dichotomy of advertisements, Iveson's notion of the "city within a city" highlights the ability of street artists and other citizens to create Cairo in their own image. "Enacting our right to the city is a matter of building 'cities within the city', by both declaring new forms of authority based on a presupposition of the equality of urban inhabitants, and finding ways to stage a disagreement between these competing forms of authority."<sup>88</sup> The disagreements lies between the government and the people. Therefore, not only does memorial street art in particular represent this dialogue between democracy and dictatorship, one continuously painted over the other, but the politics of inhabitancy hold that the Egyptian people, and not the government, have rights to shaping the memorialization process of Tahrir Square and all of the people who lost their lives defending it.

## VIII. Afterword

Blood and paint have been spilt all over Cairo. The call and response of death and creation which marked spaces such as Mohammed Mahmoud Street will continue to be an integral part of the story of Egypt's historic uprising. Most of these revolutionary images have since been destroyed, either painted over or replaced with new work, but that does not mean that they are completely lost. In many ways, Cairo changed during the course of the last three years—there was a level of civic engagement and community building unprecedented since perhaps the protests against colonial rule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—but in many ways things stayed the same: violence, oppression, and military hegemony have reigned triumphant. With Sisi set to win the bid for presidency, the political situation has come full circle and life in the Egyptian capital has returned to the same oppressive structures that brought people to the streets in the first place. In some ways it has become worse. New laws allowing for the military trials of civilians and the complete outlawing of any form of spontaneous (not pre-approved) protest will make it even more difficult for protests to occur.<sup>89</sup> In addition, with the passing of a November law outlawing street art, it appears that the street artists, already acting in subversive ways, will surely be at greater risk.<sup>90</sup> At this time it is unclear whether or not the artists, many of whom are now in prison, will return to the streets and continue their battle for a creative destruction of the status quo.

The socio-political fabric of the city has been irrevocably marked by the combat between physical containment and destruction and the glorious outpouring of creative expression as manifested in public art. Although the situation for such artists and opportunities for civic engagement appear rather bleak in this moment, it is important to recognize that the great

87 Iveson, "Cities within the City: Do-It-Yourself Urbanism and the Right to the City."

88 Ibid.

89 Sonia Farid, "Military Trials back to Haunt Egyptian Civilians," *AlArabiya*, December 2, 2013, <http://ara.tv/2u7uq>.

90 «مويلا يبرصملا | هينج فلأ 100 قمارغو تاونس 4 سبجلا: «ناردجلا يلع قباتكلا» عنمل نوناق نع «ببيل»  
accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.almazryalyoum.com/news/details/336081>.

work which first opened up the waves of public criticism and oppositional voices is perhaps unprecedented in Egypt's modern history, and will not disappear without a fight. With continued military efforts to monopolize both politics and memory, the place of art remains the same. It will be essential to not lose sight of the past three years in frustration and disenfranchisement with the violent forces that continue to brutally suppress any form of civil resistance, and find a way to continue to merge ownership of the past with imagination for a different future.

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