Visual Art as Revolutionary Power: Street Art as Religious, Theological, and Ethical Declaration in Egypt’s 2011 Arab Spring

Paul O. Myhre

Introduction

The recent explosion of street art around the globe has promoted a host of responses from outright rejection to wholehearted acceptance. As a diffuse movement it finds expression through people trained and untrained in the art of painting, drawing, and graphic design. It intentionally situates itself outside of gallery systems and commercially acceptable methods where it is regarded as a commodity to be collected, bought, and sold. Instead, those associated with this contemporary movement are concerned more about the provocation of conversation and a systemic ethical shift toward the valuation of human and non-human rights. In short it is largely about challenging human values, systems of ethics, unjust political and social realities local and global, and the rights of all things living. It is a visual revolution rising from creative hands belonging to those marginalized and oppressed by political, social, economic, and religious systems. Their collective creative output includes iconography in stencil, sticker, and spray painted form. Much of the street art is indebted to 20th century figures – including artists, musicians, and poets – who called into question accepted norms and systems of oppression, encouraged reassessments, and systematic change. People like Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Caesar Chavez, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, and others are recognized as agents of change and architects of hope. Images of them and others can be found plastered on walls in any major city of the world. The graffiti street art movement is largely a visual ethics movement oriented toward the promotion of basic human and creational rights.
The antecedents to contemporary street art movements are manifold. Perhaps one could argue that the work of 20th century Mexican muralist artist Diego Rivera, for example, was instrumental in promoting visual conversations about disparities between the wealthy few and the poor majority. Post-revolutionary Mexico was latticed with as many human rights and social justice problems as it was prior to the revolution. Mexican muralist artists recognized that greater systemic change involving shifts in ethical values was necessary. Through artistic means they labored for a more just society.

The impulse for justice finds expression through visual and auditory art forms. For example, in 1970 Beat Musician Gil Scott-Heron's record album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* was released. His album wasn't recognized that widely across American airwaves. But it still produced ripples across U.S. urban landscapes within African American communities because it struck a resounding chord of truth. The music connected with their day-to-day life experience. Scott Heron claimed, “The revolution will not be televised.” The lyrics speak poetically to disparities between political and cultural powers resident within American culture. That which was shared on television aligned with dominant white power and that which pulsed in the music and art of underground movements like his spoke to the African American shared desire for justice and change in systems of oppression in the United States.1 His artistic gift spoke to a generation that waited for the promise of 1965 civil rights legislation to filter throughout American society in the 1970s. Justice was missing and Scott-Heron called for revolution to bring it about. Fueled by thinkers like Malcolm X, Stokley Carmichael, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who recognized the dangers inherent in power structures that sublimated and subjugated people to manageable categories, artists – musicians, poets, painters – caught their messages and produced a massive wave of artistic protest. Their art spoke truth to and about human experience and asked for justice in all spheres of life.

During the 1980s street art in both written and graphic forms gained momentum as a worldwide phenomena. With the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s graffiti art as a means for public expression and discontent became a global phenomena. The capacity to bring into sharp focus ethical concerns, challenge contemporary values, give voice to shared anxieties, and express a desire for human justice and freedom were common. These themes have found visible

---

presence during the Arab Spring of the past few years. It is as if a creative impulse aimed at justice had been unleashed and would not return to a political or cognitively constructed cage that had held it.

A range of visual means was employed by street artists to communicate their ethical ideals or questions. Juxtaposing images that represented power with that of innocence spoke volumes about experiences of oppression and systems of power. Shared hopes for communal human freedom and creational flourishing through basic rights are recurrent themes. In some cases, street artists preferred to ask their visual questions by placing common and uncommon images alongside each to aid in the provocation of cognitive dissonance. This capacity to raise important human and animal rights questions often brought out a degree of discontent by political powers in the countries where the images were placed and by those who were gaining some advantage through the limitation of animal or human rights. As such, the images met people where they lived and thereby could not be easily dismissed. The art prompted conversation, resistance, and opposition. Anna Waclawek in her book *Graffiti and Street Art* speaks to the heart of the issue when she claimed, “As unauthorized art forms manifested in public spaces, graffiti and street art suggest that public art is as political as the space it inhabits.”

Beginning in 2011 the Arab world was rocked by a series of grass root movements of wide popular appeal to overthrow totalitarian and oppressive governments. Although some of it was televised, much of it was not. Governments in Libya and Egypt could not withstand the tsunami wave of popular uprising and calls for freedom, justice, and human wellbeing. One vital component of the tsunami has been the rise of public revolutionary art that wasn’t broadcast widely on television, but found expression on walls, streets, billboards, and nearly anywhere by artists who expressed their ethical ideals on public spaces and marked the public sphere with notes calling for justice and inviting discernment of what might be most true for collective human wellbeing and creational flourishing.

Four years before the Arab Spring, Anna Waclawek claimed in 2008 that street art is “…the quintessential art movement of the 21st century.” Given the events of the past three years I think she was prophetic and right. Over the past
two decades street art has emerged across the globe as a means for the powerless to provoke conversation about injustice, human rights, freedom, and a number of values often denied people by unjust governments and systems. One might claim that an art revolution is sweeping the planet that reflects common hopes, disrupts cherished opinions, interrogates mass media, and invites thick reflection about religious identity, ethical values, philosophical and political ideologies, and interpersonal relational dynamics and practices. For Waclawek, “Graffiti and street art are exceptional...for three key reasons. First, as unsanctioned interventionist practices, they challenge the art institution and commissioned public art...second, street art practices are guided by and guide a city’s visual aesthetic in that they both assimilate that environment and recreate it. And finally, graffiti writers and street artists fundamentally question the ethos of ownership through the process of creation and thus approach the city from an alternative perspective.”4 In a book review of Surface to Surface: The story of a graffiti revolution, Eric Walberg reflects on the history of art and asserts, “...graffiti...explodes during periods of social unrest. The student protests and general strike of May 1968 saw Paris bedecked in revolutionary, anarchist, and situationist slogans - [translated as] ‘boredom is counterrevolutionary’ and ‘read less, live more’. ...The Israeli West Bank barrier has become a site for graffiti, reminiscent of the Berlin Wall.”5 In Egypt most of the graffiti is hand drawn, stenciled, or the result of spray-paint application and images.6

I contend that contextually produced art – Street Art - is often, at its most fundamental level, about visual theological depictions or visual ethical convictions that aim to spark viewers imaginations about ideas, values, beliefs, hopes, and meaning making in order to open up theological and ethical reflection for dialogue about what might matter most. In Sigurd Bergmann’s recent book, In the Beginning is the Icon: A Liberative Theology of Images, Visual Arts and Culture, he contends, “The aim of iconology is not to establish universal truths, but rather to be a tool for articulating and interpreting visual experiences...A central question is how God, through human creation and observation of pictures, can have a liberating function in images.”7 The global street art movement perhaps could be likened to an improvisational play whose stage has been set and artist actors have stepped forward to take on particular roles as the curtain rises on a contemporary visual revolution.


Act 1: Bansky

During the first decade of the twenty-first century Street Art witnessed a number of artists rise to global prominence. People such as Banksy and Alexandre Farto aka Vhils are two examples. They are fond of naturalistic portrayals of people placed in juxtaposition with other figures or images. A shared interest in communal and individual justice marks their work. Waclawek claims that “Banksy’s subversive, satirical imagery has become synonymous with stenciling as a street art technique.” For example, one of Banksy’s works show a young girl frisking a soldier. Peace, justice, and freedom are common value laden themes. Banksy as a global force was instrumental in bringing together global street artists to work collaboratively to protest against the Israeli construction of a wall in Bethlehem. This project known as the “Santa’s Ghetto” mural in Bethlehem was organized to protest the separation wall by painting images on it. The project gained worldwide attention and provided Palestinians with a means for voicing their discontent with the injustices they were experiencing. William Parry’s book Against the Wall: The Art of Resistance in Palestine provides numerous examples of the art created to provoke conversation and oppose the Israeli oppression. Some of the most provocative bring images and words together in one statement. Such as “To Exist is to Resist” coupled with hands raised, dogs with open mouths, and weary faces. It is hard to determine how much this street art movement of 2009 had on the subsequent revolutionary street art movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and elsewhere in the Mideast. Resonant tones can be discerned in the compositions and iconographic frames developed.
Banksy is perhaps the most well known graffiti or street artist of the twenty-first century. His stenciled work can be found around the globe and his capacity to provoke commentary is laudable. The span of his work as of date has been to challenge the status quo, question the power of corporations and mass media, and challenge the merits of capitalism. He claims, “The people who truly deface our neighbourhoods are the companies that scrawl their giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message in your face from every available surface but you’re never allowed to answer back. Well, they started this fight and the wall is the weapon of choice to hit them back.”

Banksy’s approach has been one of challenge and confrontation through visual means. Whatever the subject – restrictive governmental laws, religious positions on ethical issues, commercial advertising, environmental degradation, and so on – Banksy is intent on addressing it as a means toward speaking truth against the powers that be. He claims, “I like to think I have the guts to stand up anonymously in a western democracy and call for things no-one else believes in – like peace and justice and freedom.” Some claim that his graffiti subjects or targets include, “…war, capitalism, fascism, imperialism, authoritarianism, greed, poverty, hypocrisy, boredom, despair, absurdity, and alienation.”

Banksy is convinced of the power that one individual can wield through making public their perceptions about the world as it is and what it could be. In reflecting on the regime of President Ceausescu of Romania through John Simpson’s work for BBC News, he relates, “On December 21 the President, disturbed by a small uprising in the western city of Timisoara in support of a Protestant Clergyman, was persuaded to address a public rally in Bucharest. One solitary man in the crowd [at the rally], Nica Leon...started shouting in favour of the revolutionaries in Timisoara. The crowd around him...thought that when he shouted...it was a new political new political slogan. They started chanting it too.

It was only when he called, ‘Down with Ceausescu’ that they realized something wasn’t quite right. Terrified, they tried to force themselves away from him, dropping the banners they had been carrying. In the crush the wooden batons on which the banners were held began to snap underfoot and women started screaming. The ensuing panic sounded like booing…The unthinkable was happening. The head of security…whispered [in the President’s ear] ‘They’re getting in.’ It…was audible…on live national radio. This was the start of the revolution. Within a week Ceausescu was dead.”

The power of one can have enormous effects.
Act 2: Visual Artists Wield Revolutionary Power

The revolutionary street art of the Egyptian Arab Spring was and is a process of creating art from a variety of vantage points for a host of revolutionary purposes. It seems that in the case of the Egyptian context artists were largely focused on the subversion of the status quo, overpowering an unjust governmental system, and raising the voice of the masses publically in ways that could not be easily suppressed. In 2009 Egypt’s graffiti revolution began in earnest with public street artists opposing the Mubarak government through various visual displays.14

In *The Atlantic* October 3, 2011 issue an article by Lois Pashley, assistant editor at *Foreign Policy* magazine, claimed, “...in Egypt, where the Ministry of Culture controlled all public expression, protest art was hard to find — at least until this January, when 18 days of mass revolts toppled President Mubarak's regime and unexpected freedoms flourished, including the right to make art.”

Only 10 months before this edition, in the January 7, 2011 edition of *The Atlantic* detailed plans of the activists were provided in both Arabic and English.
The 26-page pamphlet of plans entitled “How to Protest Intelligently” – reprinted in *The Atlantic* – provided protesters with specific instructions about how they might engage in peaceful protest and protect themselves from security forces. The pamphlet also included six demands that provided scaffolding on which the protesters could unite. These demands included:

1. The downfall of the regime of Hosni Mubarak and his ministers.
2. The cessation of the Emergency Law
3. Freedom
4. Justice
5. The formation of a new, non-military government with the interests of the Egyptian people at heart.
6. The constructive administration of all of Egypt’s resources.  

Passant Rabie, writing for *Egypt Today*, in his essay “Reclaiming the Streets” claimed that after the revolution, “…Egyptian youth took to the streets with the new and unfamiliar mind-set of ‘the streets are ours.’ Some had brooms while others came with buckets of paint and rollers, but all of them began to mark their reclaimed territory. From that day on, the walls lining the streets of our nation would never look the same as different styles of street art covered up that ubiquitous shade of gray that once surrounded the country’s streets.”

The street artists who had created their art under threat of imprisonment during the Hosni Mubarak regime found that after the revolution the people embraced their art. However, the current military government has been less so. Egyptian artists Ganzeer and Bakry would create stencil works of art and use stickers on posters of political leaders as forms of protest. Bakry claimed, “I feel street art is a good retaliation to all the billboards [the government] used to do with Mubarak’s face on them or for the Sinai Liberation. It’s sort of a way to reclaim the streets.” Nagla Samir, professor of art and design at the American University in Cairo has claimed that the art of the
revolution grew after the overthrow of the Mubarak government. In reflecting on the recent art movement she claimed that the people of Egypt, “...felt [public space was] ...rediscovered and regained territory, making it a comfortable domain for artists to extend their public statements.” Street art production has become a common form of expression across Egypt. How long this movement will last is difficult to determine. At present, it shows no sign of abating.

As I considered the iconography of Egyptian visual production pre- and post-revolution, it occurred to me that it could be further categorized or divided into perhaps five scenes or themes of activity in a collective play about human rights and social justice. The six demands outlined in the 26 page pamphlet outlined above form the backdrop against which the five scenes are played out. The first scene involved the theme of national identity. Who were the Egyptian people and what did they collectively stand for? It is a scene dominated by a symbol of Egyptian unity that incorporates images of the Islamic crescent moon and Christian cross – often in conjunction with images of the Egyptian flag. Hence, as national symbols they function as a rallying cry for civil unity as one people united in a common cause. Egypt is roughly 85% Muslim and 15% Christian. Second, political commentary is orchestrated through a juxtaposition of totalitarian officials and official pronouncements alongside ideas and views that are contrary to them. This scene of activity explores foundation questions of human rights, disparities resultant through the wealth of a few and the poverty of the masses, and the ever present threat of death in relation to the actions of those in power toward the seemingly powerless. Scene three occupies an idealistic space where naturalistic portrayals of “freedom” are recounted as a core value dominating visual performance. Fourth, the scene of martyrs that gave their lives for the cause of collective human wellbeing and the resultant family and communal grief are explored. The fifth scene of street art activity in the 2011-12 Egyptian revolution involves what might be called “mash-ups, mix-ups, or collage” that bring together a host of ideas into one composition to prompt reflection about Egyptian core ideals and values. Death permeates many of the scenes as an ever-present actor who is ready to take away anything gained or diminish revolutionary hopes.
Act 2, Scene 1: Egyptian Unity in Symbolic Graphic Art

The symbol of the Islamic crescent moon was placed in close proximity to the Christian symbol of the cross to provoke conversation and stir unity among the masses. Dating from the 1919 revolution, the image symbolizes the unity of Egyptian Christians and Muslims in their opposition to the British occupation. According to Farida Makar, “the symbol resurfaced as a result of the church bombing in Alexandria on December 31, 2010 and prompted a national conversation about the rights of Coptic people, the role of religion in politics, and the risks of extremist views. He wrote, “In Tahrir Square, the symbol was visible everywhere: A young body sitting comfortably on the shoulders of his father was hear chanting: ‘The Bible and the Quran united till the end’...It was a tactical form of resistance aimed at delegitimizing the state and encouraging both religious groups to join the protest movement [against the Mubarak government].” The symbol was joined with the image of the heart along with other images to show Egyptian solidarity and unity between Christians and Muslims in Egypt. In symbolic form one could read Muslims love Christians and Christians love Muslims.


Throughout Egypt graphic art symbols of national unity became as common as dandelions on Midwestern American lawns. They expressed common yearnings for solidarity against an unjust regime. They suggested the value and power of popular unity outweighed the powers aligned with money, weapons, military might, and political clout. The form, function, color selection, and so on are not as important to the street artists and are the iconic symbols. By whatever means possible the Egyptian revolutionary artist seemed to be intent on creating massive numbers of images swiftly. Spray paint, canned paint, stencils, and so on were the preferred means of mark making. Anything that could be applied quickly and reused multiple times was appealing to artists who would need to dodge gunfire and avoid imprisonment. The simple marks and swatches of color could inspire and provide hope for those who desired a better life.

![Islamic crescent moon and Christian cross]

Act 2, Scene 2:
Political Commentary and Justice Ethics through Image Juxtapositions and Stencil Art

The power of stencil art is such that it can be made quickly, reproduced often, and is relatively inexpensive to produce. One wonders about the causal elements and figures behind the rise of stencil art and how iconographic themes were chosen. Little can be discerned at a distance since street artists are not keen about writing about factors that prompted them to engage in the creation of street art. They just do it. The book *Reproduce & Revolt* was created for street artists to use freely. Some of the most common images were of a raised fist,
human figures with words of protest or human figures behind bars, tanks and children, and global symbols of peace. Although the book may be of interest to some in the Egyptian street art movement, it seems the power of the Internet to provide an endless storehouse of images from which to choose may be the most widely used source.

Perhaps the most widely known street artist in Egypt is Ganzeer. His work is widely known among Egyptian artists and the general populace. In 2011 he was arrested by the Egyptian government for engaging in political protest via his street paintings. According to Egyptian law the Ministry of Culture controlled all public expressions of art and protest art was forbidden. Yet, he could not stop creating street art that opposed the unjust systems of oppression and laws that violated basic human rights. For him, the art of the street is the art of protest and revolution. It is difficult for him to see it as anything but critique. In commenting on the recent outpouring of public art he said, “If you’re going to take the time to go out on the street and paint, it makes sense to me for it to be critical… Street art is sensitive of the social situation, in which the majority of the people are being brainwashed by the media and happy with what’s going on while the minority is critical of [the current events] and keeping an eye on the political landscape.”

Act 2, Scene 3:
Calls for Freedom through Naturalistic Narratives

The cry for freedom is a common human desire and represents a dominant theme in the 2011 uprising and subsequent opposition to military rule. The use of naturalistic images connects with a media saturated populace. A human face can communicate volumes about what life experience exists behind the face. The human visage writ large can provoke and press for a conversation about whatever it might be the thing worth talking about. Selecting images from ancient Egypt to evoke national pride and unity were commonplace. Images of a mummy shouting “I’m Free,” roped fists raised in defiance with the rope severed alongside the date of January 25 and the word ‘Freedom,’ and icons of ancient Egyptian dynasties could be found within the art covering Cairo’s walls. Images of raised fists with either broken changes or severed ropes are common subjects for naturalistic narratives. As such, they share a common iconic bond with global
visual art associated with hopes for release from tyranny and oppression. Others images associated with the theme of freedom include: birds of peace coupled with rifles or guns, chessboards with more pawns than power pieces, and heads screaming defiance and revolution.

Act 2, Scene 4:
Cries for Justice through Portraits of Martyrs

Martyr portraits show boldly the power of oppression and victimization as a result of unjust oppressive powers that take human life. The decades of imprisonment and torture that marked Egyptian existence under the Mubarek regime are widely known. Placing martyr images on public spaces pushes what may have been spoken about quietly out into public conversational space. In a way, the martyrs represent a panoply of contemporary saints who died for a cause bent on justice, basic human rights, freedom, and peace. The artists know well that the blood of martyrs stirs the human spirit to action. This was true in the 1960s street art of the United States, the 1970s and 80s street art of Northern
Ireland that pictured fallen members of he IRA and revolutionaries like Bobby Sands.  

Martyr images commemorate the dead and ask viewers about the cause of their untimely death. They invite reflection on human experience and what values one holds as sacred. They prompt people to not only remember the people, but the cause for which they died. The images are one way by which to make meaning out of loss and sense out of what can only be seen as senseless violence. Grieving mothers clutching the images of their martyred sons were common.

Ganzeer is currently working on a massive street art project. He plans to draw murals of the 840 or so martyrs who died during the January 25 revolution. According to Passant Rabie, “...he plans on honoring each one in the governorate they are from.” Furthermore she claimed that when Ganzeer was working on the first martyr work on the wall of the Egyptian Supreme Court he stated, “A lot of people stopped to help me out, and other people were bringing paint...I could have left and they would have finished the mural themselves.”


Act 2, Scene 5:
Mash-ups, Remixes, and Reinterpretations of Political Images

The common movement known as mash-ups and remixes has swept the music world over the last decade. It has also become a popular means for making images in the street art world. According to Chris Carlsson -- in his essay "Timely Stencils, Timeless Meanings, in Russell Howze's book Stencil Nation: Graffiti, Community, and Art" -- "Ours is a curious moment in history. A greater number of people are traveling for more reasons than ever before, cross-pollinating, miscegenating, hybridizing, and inventing new media, new multilingual expressions, and new art forms... The artists and agitators who are decorating our build environment [with stencil art] are simultaneously invoking millennia-old art forms, echoing pre-literate and pre-industrial signage, and jumping across the chasms of the digital divide and the complete commercialization of public communication... stencil artists are inventing a new language that resonates deeply...." One might say in a global way. Carlsson claimed that in 2008 he saw in Istanbul, Turkey stenciled images of Malcolm X and Osama bin Laden with a woman clutching her ribs and yelling in Turkish, "War or wage war, kill, be killed, die, and enough." The mash-up and remixing of images would have been enough to communicate the concept intended without any words accompanying them.

Egyptian street artists have employed this method both prior to and after the revolution. Street artists construct new sets of images for post-revolutionary contexts that combine, mix, remix, and comment on popular views even after the revolution ended. For example, the Egyptian artist known as Sad Panda -- so named for his or her preference for using the Panda image as a vehicle for social and political commentary -- has found the proliferation of Egyptian flags and patriotic symbols offensive. So much so that he painted a two by three meter stencil of a panda urinating yellow paint on a tunnel's wall where a large Egyptian flag had been painted.

Class struggle and economic realities push the majority poor to question the status quo of class and economies that are built to privilege a few and subjugate or restrict the capacity of people to attain an elevated class status or economic prosperity. Taking what could be seen as a value by some and placing


next to something else valued by another can provoke reflection and thought about what ought to matter. For example, the image of a tank juxtaposed against a rider on a bicycle with a loaf of bread on his head can speak volumes to a cultural context experiencing military oppression that seeks to rob life itself symbolized in the loaf of bread. Yet, even here other images might appear alongside an image crafted by Ganzeer to make commentary on people taking it too lightly -- as with Sad Panda’s image of a panda appearing to question the whole scene and invite viewers to do likewise.

Conclusion

The Egyptian revolution was somewhat televised in the Western world and made its way to computer screens around the planet. The street art revolution that accompanied it was both a catalyst for change and a running documentary of human solidarity against injustice through visual art production. It marked the revolutionary power of street art to remind people about what they valued most, what events brought them to this place in history, and what steps are required for human rights and peace to be realized.

In reflecting on the role of street art in the recent Egyptian revolution, Sherif Abdel-Megid was bold enough to claim that Egyptian street art was “…one of the heroes of the revolution, inseparable from it, taking inspiration from it and inspiring revolutionaries.”31 One can only imagine what role street art will take in the next global revolution.