

Art of the Uprisings in the Middle East

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THE POPULAR UPRISINGS THAT SWEEPED through so many countries of the Arab Middle East and North Africa during 2011 and 2012 were vivid testimonies to the evaporation of *haibat al-dawla* (“awe of the state”). This had been part of the mystique—some might say mystification—of state power since the emergence of republican and revolutionary regimes across the region in the twentieth century. The state had been seen as the engine of progress: the means whereby the peoples of the Middle East would achieve true independence, develop their economies, and build a political order for all citizens. The reality was rather different. Across the region, state power had been retained or seized by small coteries of dynasts, army officers, intelligence operatives, and oligarchs in the name of Order, Islam, Progress, the People, or the Revolution.

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Integral to these systems of repression and exclusion was the projection of a universal, inclusive image of the state as a strict but benevolent force that provided protection, welfare, and identity to its citizens. This narrative, personified by the president as monarch, was a prominent feature of regimes’ attempts to maintain the “awe of the state.” Through the symbolic projection of these qualities in public discourse and in public space, the political and economic elites in North Africa, the Mashriq, and the Arabian Peninsula effectively appropriated such spaces for their own benefit. Governments poured resources into the production of artistic and architectural projects that were intended to serve two key purposes: demonstrating unambiguously who now owned the state,

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and ensuring that no other version of the truth would fill the space between the reality of the rulers' exclusive hold on power and the claim that such rule was in the name of the people.

This was the terrain on which some of the key battles of the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2012 (often referred to as the Arab Spring) were fought. It is also the reason why the artistic interventions associated with those uprisings have such a powerful political charge. These interventions took many forms. Visual

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art had expressed a culture of dissent in the years leading up to 2011, often indirectly, by way of allegory, but with the uprisings of that year dissident graffiti spelled out explicit messages of rebellion across the walls of Middle Eastern cities. The crowds

that assembled to reclaim public space became performers of unstoppable power, symbolically as well as materially. It was in this context that street art amplified that power, asserting the defiance and the pride of citizens who had come to reclaim what was rightfully theirs.

Thus, visual symbols and representations were not merely indicators of the politics of contestation in the Middle East; in addition, they helped to shape the agenda. Symbolically, they epitomized what these struggles were about. More than that, these symbols contributed to the formation of a new kind of political public, argumentative and plural, that challenged old monolithic techniques of control. Art in all its forms became a means whereby citizens sent messages to multiple audiences and, in doing so, expressed their own political preferences. This aspect remains powerful. In the aftermath of the fall of a number of regimes this is one of the ways in which the multiple voices of recently mobilized citizens can be heard. The artistic field in many countries remains a contested site in which different visions of Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya encounter and compete with one another. Artistic interventions are thus enmeshed in the struggles that are taking place within the institutions of the state and the political economy.

ART AND THE UNDERMINING OF AUTHORITY

Governments across the Middle East have long made use of the striking impact of the visual arts to represent and reinforce their authority. In the twentieth century, plenty of models for this kind of public art have been provided by the extravagant displays of communist and fascist dictatorships, where vast sculptures and posters loomed over the squares and streets of Moscow, Berlin,

Rome, and Pyongyang. Domination of the visual landscape has been considered a crucial part of the battle for the imagination and, thus, for the constitution of the subject. This means not only projecting images of power and the powerful into the spaces of everyday life but also ensuring, through the policing of such spaces, that no alternative or countervailing images should intrude. The common assumption is that these visual signs of the political order fulfill the double function of presenting the untroubled face of power as a marker of stability and actively convincing the onlookers of the normality of their subordination. As author Lisa Wedeen reminds us, the effect on people's political imagination may be a good deal less powerful than the rulers believe.¹ However, in the absence of alternative public expressions, such as poems, songs, plays, or art, that challenge the official version of history and the vision of the future, those who command the state may feel that the battle is as good as won.

Prior to 2011, visitors to many of the major cities across the Middle East could not escape the massive posters of the countries' leaders: President Ben Ali in Tunisia, hand on heart in an expression of sincerity, accompanied by slogans extolling progress; President Hosni Mubarak in a variety of guises suggesting modernity, accessibility, and authority as the foundations of his guardianship of the Egyptian state; Muammar Qaddafi raising his hands in triumph to celebrate another year of the "glorious revolution" that brought him to power in Libya; or President Bashar al-Assad using the image of his late father, from whom he inherited the presidency, as well as invoking the protection of God for the Syrian nation. These were the well-known faces of power, gazing down with both seeming benevolence and implicit threat onto the public spaces in which their subject populations pursued their everyday lives. While these images may not have been as extravagant in execution and size as those raised by Saddam Hussein in Iraq during the decades of his rule prior to 2003, there was no mistaking the similarities in the iconography or intended messages.²

By the same token, at times of protest or unrest, these same images became immediate targets of defacement and destruction. This was the case in the Kurdish areas of Syria during the protests of 2004 when Kurdish citizens defaced images of the president and of his late father in the mass demonstrations demanding recognition and greater political autonomy. In 2008, during the strikes of that year, the huge portraits of President Mubarak that loomed over the textile factories of al-Mahalla al-Kubra suffered a similar fate when they were torn down and trodden on by enraged workers.³ So desperate was the regime to erase this powerful message of visual defiance from public memory that, in addition to seizing and censoring all photographs of these events, they

arrested and imprisoned the photographers and the publishers responsible for daring to publicize this spectacular puncturing of the myth of authority. It was, of course, a vain attempt at suppression. In this age of electronic imagery and communication, images of the protests and of the destruction of the face of the president were soon disseminated via various social media.

Perhaps just as significant as these sporadic outbursts of defiance were the works of visual artists. While not combating the regimes' productions head-on in the public domain, they were nevertheless communicating an important shift in the relationship between the people and the political order through representations of the alienation, brutality, and despair that the governments were so keen to disguise. The unexpected power, drama, and spectacle of the events of 2011 have led to the suggestion that this was "year zero" of popular defiance and resistance in the Middle East. However, anyone acquainted with the literature, music, and visual arts of the region from previous decades would have been aware that social protest and political dissent had long been a powerful feature of artistic productions. This is not to claim predictive power regarding the timing or the scale of the uprisings of 2011 but rather to assert that the works of a number of artists demonstrated a shift in power relations that began years prior to those events. Thus, the works of the Egyptian artist Muhammad Abla can be seen as a commentary on the everyday violence encountered by Egyptians at the hands of the security services. The series of paintings executed in 2004 that include *No More Killing* and *How Much is the Life of an Egyptian Worth* represents a fierce indictment of the corruption and violence of the status quo in Egypt.⁴ Similarly, the Syrian artist Yusuf Abdelké's dark and threatening works of the 1980s and 1990s powerfully convey the menace of the state confronting ordinary citizens, as well as the price paid for defiance in such a system. These are but a few of the works by artists expressing in their own way the hollowness of the myths that had sustained the state, the regimes, and the *haibat al-dawla*. These works indicate most graphically that the "awe of state" had given way to the more mechanical and brutal *khawf al-nizam* ("fear of the regime")—a relationship between rulers and ruled that was effectively stripped of all authority. Numerous artistic interventions had helped to underline the spurious nature of the rulers' claims to authority. In doing so, they had helped to weaken the grip of the dictators on the imaginations of their subjects. It would be no exaggeration therefore to say that art had played a role in changing the relationship between ruler and subject in ways that came so spectacularly to the fore in the uprisings of 2011.

ART AND THE RETURN OF THE PUBLIC

The battles that were fought in the streets of so many Middle Eastern cities in 2011 and 2012 were mass confrontations between ordinary citizens and the security forces that had once possessed and dominated those same streets with license from their political masters. The clashes, therefore, embodied a number of important aspects that were themselves the long-accumulating consequences of the unraveling of the regimes' authority.

In the first place, the actors in this political drama, through their dress and their behavior, put on a public spectacle of what the struggle was about. On one side was the mass of citizens—initially young men but later increasingly both women and men of all ages—who signaled their ordinariness by the varied and casual nature of their dress. On the other side were the uniformed ranks of the security forces, armed and shielded by the latest riot control technologies, and supported in some cases—notably in Libya, Yemen, and Syria—by military units obedient to the regime. The very "horizontalism" of the citizenry confounded the authorities and lent the demonstrations a flexibility that enhanced the unnerving image of a whole people in revolt.⁵

In addition, the sites of these confrontations—the streets and squares of major cities, as well as the nominally public buildings of the parliament, law courts, government ministries, and broadcasting centers—were symbolically crucial as they sat at the heart of state administration. These representational spaces had been appropriated over the years by political authorities as places to exercise their power, demonstrate their dominance over their subjects, and enforce the discipline associated with a manufactured public that had been designed to provide mass displays of support for government initiatives. The protestors reclaimed these spheres of power in the name of a public that had been denied, reduced, repressed, and excluded from these spaces by those who had taken over the state.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the artistry of the uprisings followed and reflected, but also contributed to the development and strength, of these themes. Indeed, it could be argued that the mass demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria were themselves artistic performances of immense power, generating their own aesthetic particular to the place and history of the country and the spatial setting of the many cities in which they occurred. "*Al-Sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*" ("The people want the fall of the regime"), with the stresses falling rhythmically on the final syllable of each word, was one of many examples of chants that communicated themselves so rapidly from one

city to another, from one country to another.⁶ As with slogans, so did songs and poems become characteristic of demonstrations in various countries, such as in Syria, where the song “*Yalla, irhal ya Bashar*” (“Come on Bashar, leave”) became an anthem of the uprising. It spread rapidly from Hama after its composer and singer, Ibrahim Qashoush, was found murdered with his vocal chords ripped out.⁷ In Syria, the effect was even more powerful when accompanied by “radical *dabka*,” the adaptation of a traditional dance to take up the rhythms of the songs of protest.⁸ In each country, performances of this kind enhanced the experiences of the protest, entertaining but also mobilizing people in all their variety and defiance of the established order. The mass demonstrations in Tunis’s Avenue Bourguiba, Cairo’s Tahrir Square, Alexandria’s Qaid Ibrahim Square, Sana’a’s Sahat Taghyir, or Manama’s Pearl Roundabout were performances against the regime’s script, contravening the conventions that defined the obedient subject. By coming together in defiance of the authorities and holding their ground in public spaces, the citizens of these countries asserted their citizenship and ownership of their own land in the most public manner possible. The slogans, chants, songs, and banners were an integral part of these performances, supplemented by specific enactments such as that of the group of young men who carried an empty coffin through Tahrir Square representing the funeral of President Mubarak, who, at that point, still refused to step down.⁹ In Tahrir and on the corniche in Benghazi, platforms were erected not simply for speeches but also for poetry and songs of defiance. Similarly, in the mass demonstrations in Sana’a, poems, chants, and dancing formed key parts of the performance. Furthermore, in all the countries concerned, flags, often of enormous dimensions, were a constant accompaniment, sending out a powerful signal of the attachment of this newly emerging public to the country that had been taken from them. In the cases of Libya and Syria, the flags of the old regimes that had been overthrown decades before by those who were now being challenged underlined the determination of the protestors not simply to defy the present governments but also to negate their very existence in the countries’ histories.

As in other episodes of defiance and protest, the images of the powerful were defaced and, where they existed, their statues were overthrown. From Tunisia to Syria, one of the first acts of the protestors was to attack the faces of those who had dominated them for so long and that loomed so menacingly over the space that the public was reclaiming. These multiple acts of destruction could be argued to be a form of art in and of themselves, especially when the defacing was not simply the annihilation of the image but its aesthetic manipulation in order to deliberately transmit a message that would contradict the original

intention behind the poster or the statue. As author Dario Gamboni points out, such acts of apparent iconoclasm can be variously interpreted but have also been historically associated with political change.¹⁰ Above all, they have been used to signal a new order and, in this case, the entry of a new actor onto the political stage: the public. “No fear, no fear, from today there is no fear,” was shouted out in the streets of countless cities. Importantly, in the context of the 2011 uprisings, such acts of defacement were not only signaling that public space had been reclaimed, but were also graphically demonstrating the breaking of the hold of fear on the subject populations. “No fear, no fear, from today there is no fear” was one of the slogans shouted out in the streets of countless cities, indicating that *khawfal-nizam* had evaporated. As the course of events in 2011 and 2012 proved, the refusal of the public to be intimidated led the regimes, whose authority had long unraveled, to face the choice of either capitulating to the newly mobilized public or intensifying the violence in order to reinstate the rule of fear once more. In this area, the art of defacement played a crucial role.

The reclaiming of public space and the reconstitution of the public was not only achieved through the artistry of occupation, the art of protest, and the art of destruction. Graffiti and the visual images stenciled or painted on the walls of the cities of the Middle East were equally important in signaling presence, in communicating messages of solidarity and defiance, and, given the languages used in some cases, in appealing to an international audience. While the authoritarian regimes were still intact, spraying or painting graffiti in a public place was dangerous because the authorities could not ignore its very public nature. Even if the intention had been innocuous, the very act of stenciling or spraying an unauthorized image was treated as an act of sedition. Yasmine El Rashidi vividly illustrates this in an account of the experience of her friend, the artist Ayman, when he was arrested for stenciling images of a street sweeper on pavements in downtown Cairo in 2009.¹¹ It was therefore hardly surprising that political protesters across the Middle East used graffiti to make their messages known and their presence felt. As in other countries, political graffiti have an immediate impact—they can be swiftly sprayed or painted using elaborate scripts, decoration, and plays on words to catch the eye of the passersby and to assert the presence of dissent. They communicate the existence of like-minded citizens and the solidarity of the oppressed, as well as blazoning defiance to those authorities who considered themselves in control of the cities. The slogans, the verses, and the roughly drawn images appeared on walls across the towns and cities of the Middle East. Indeed, it could be argued that

the act of spraying up graffiti by a group of teenage boys in the Syrian town of Dara'a in March 2011, which led to their subsequent detention and torture by the security forces, was the spark that ignited the uprising and later the civil war in Syria. Elsewhere, in Tunis and other Tunisian towns, the graffiti echoed the placards held up by the protestors, aiming one word in French and Arabic at the president: “*Dégage!*” or “*Irhal!*” (Go!).¹² Similar messages appeared across the walls of Egyptian cities. In Tahrir Square where there were no walls as such, the ingenious citizens wrote slogans on placards, cardboard boxes, their shoes, their bodies, their children, and even, in one memorable photo, on their pet cat. This and the other images feature in Karima Khalil’s magnificent book, *Messages from Tahrir*. It captures well the variety, humor, and power of the words of the Tahrir Square graffiti that are no less striking than the range of media through which they were expressed.¹³

As the uprisings continued and space was gradually wrested by the public from the control of the authorities, walls and other public surfaces became the canvases for more elaborate and sophisticated visual art. For instance, in the Libyan city of Benghazi in the first half of 2011, once the forces loyal to Muammar Qaddafi had been driven out of the city, there was time and space to represent in colorful and elaborate ways what members of the public felt was at stake in the conflict. This centered chiefly on the person of Qaddafi—hardly surprising, given the position he had occupied in the country for over 40 years, mocking him and showing the punishment due to him by the Libyan people.¹⁴ In Tunisia, where the flight of President Ben Ali in mid-January encouraged people to press ahead with full-scale reform of the political system, demonstrations continued in protest at the slow pace of change and the ominous survival in office of so many of Ben Ali’s protégés. However, the demoralization of the police and the greater personal freedoms that had been won provided the opportunity for political messages and images to appear across the walls of Tunis and other cities. Some of the most striking of these works were by a French-Algerian artist called Zoo Project. In addition to images of the Constitutional Democratic Party—the former ruling party of Tunisia—being swept into the gutter, he also painted some two hundred life-size cutout figures of each of the people who had died in the Tunisian uprising, placing them in groups or in single file in prominent places and in front of public buildings around Tunis.¹⁵

Similar themes could be found in Egypt in the aftermath of the resignation of President Mubarak. Commemoration by artists of the individual Egyptians killed by the security forces became a constant and a moving theme of street art in 2011 and 2012.¹⁶ Another theme in Egypt revolved around suspicion of

the ambitions of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that had taken over supreme power after Mubarak’s departure. Artists such as Ganzeer (Mohamed Fahmy), Keizer, Sad Panda, Husny, and KIM took up these themes and incorporated them into their art across the walls and flyovers of Cairo in particular. The confrontations between the military and the demonstrators persisted and the violence of the security forces became more open and unashamed. In October 2011, they killed 28 protestors at the Egyptian state broadcasting building in Maspero, and in one bloody week in November 2011, nearly 40 demonstrators lost their lives in and around the Ministry of Interior buildings near Tahrir Square. Accordingly, the images on the walls became more unforgiving: Ganzeer’s picture of the confrontation between a bicycling bread seller and a tank was transformed by the addition of bloodied corpses of citizens being crushed under its treads.¹⁷

The artist Sad Panda (so called since his work was always marked by the image of a despondent panda watching proceedings) was infuriated by these events and was particularly angered by a series of posters published by the armed forces that had started to appear around Cairo. These posters had taken up the slogan used in early 2011 “*Al-jaish wa-l-sha‘b ‘id wahda*” (“The army and the people are one hand”) by both civilians and the military to ensure that armed force would not be used against the people assembled in Tahrir Square. The SCAF used this slogan to suggest that the armed forces and the people shared a common interest and purpose, and that therefore there should be no concern about the concentration of power in the hands of the army. As 2011 unfolded, this tenuous relationship became ever more questionable. As such, when posters appeared with this slogan below a picture of a uniformed Egyptian soldier awkwardly hugging a small child, Sad Panda painted a uniformed Egyptian soldier placing a baby on a bonfire across a wall on Mohammed Mahmoud Street just off Tahrir Square.¹⁸ However, in doing so he found himself overstepping the limits of public tolerance. The reactions of many of the passersby were extremely hostile. He had succeeded in provoking them to think, but in doing so the artist appeared to have outraged the respectful attitude that many Egyptians still had towards the armed forces.

Other artists also expressed their concern about the position and the political ambitions of the military high command. Muhammad Abla, whose works had been such a powerful indication of the erosion of the authority of the Egyptian regime, had his own take on the situation. In a memorable painting, *Hand in Hand*, he depicted three Egyptian soldiers apprehensively holding each other’s hands as the dimly seen crowds of civilians swirled around them.¹⁹ In a similar

vein, he also portrayed, as part of his exhibition *My Family, My People*, a group of three men—an army officer, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and a *salafi* Islamist—sitting on chairs in the manner of the traditional family portraits of the early twentieth century. His concerns about what might be developing in the aftermath of the fall of Mubarak were apparent since he foresaw the possibility of a country carved up between the Islamists and the military.

Some of the more vehement street artists portrayed what this might mean for other Egyptians, particularly for women, although not all went so far as the artist who painted a disturbing mural of SCAF, the Muslim Brotherhood, and *salafi* Islamists as zombies eating the dismembered corpse of a woman.²⁰ Given

The visual arts helped to focus a beam of light on the powerful that could not easily be deflected. the harassment of women by the security forces and the open intolerance shown towards women who were not deemed to be “modestly” dressed, this became a recurring theme of art, street art, and graffiti in Egypt and in Tunisia. As the following section will demonstrate, anxieties about the future

became even more prominent as the new political institutions took shape in the aftermath of the uprisings. Fears of what Islamist constitutions and parliaments might mean for the future of civil liberties, as well as for women’s rights have become subjects of public debate and thus of artistic interventions. The visual arts were important and often spectacular aspects of the uprisings, helping to mobilize the citizens of numerous countries, in part because they succeeded in summing up succinctly and powerfully what the struggle in different places was all about. They helped to focus a beam of light on the powerful that could not easily be deflected. For that very reason, artistic interventions remain significant in the politics of contention that has followed the overthrow of the dictators.

ART AND THE PLURAL PUBLIC

As with literature, poetry, and song, so too do the visual arts reflect the emerging struggles that have developed in the wake of the uprisings. Part of this has to do with the suspicion that far too many *filul* (remnants of the old regimes) remained in positions of power, manipulating events behind the scenes. However, it has also in large part been due to the very nature of the plural public that emerged during the uprisings. In many countries of the Middle East in 2011 and 2012, the public has sought to define its interests and to develop a collective voice, while also seeking to make that voice heard as new political institutions were beginning to take shape. Artists have played and continue to play prominent

roles in this process, representing their own concerns about the new holders of power, about dangers to freedom of expression, about a new conformism. At the same time, like many of their fellow citizens, they have expressed their hopes and ambitions for the future, imaginatively representing the themes and aspirations that were at the heart of the uprisings.

The public cannot be assumed to be, and rarely is, a unitary political actor. It embodies above all what it means to be a citizen and thus represents the possibility of realizing individual and collective aspirations by citizens defending and pursuing their rights and interests. It is in the nature of pluralism that each citizen has the right to speak in favor of his or her own interests and these may well be in contention with one another, despite general agreement on their rights to express such differences. The crucial question—hence the debates and arguments about the nature of the constitution in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya—has been the extent to which the new framework will protect the rights associated with the idea of the plural public. More than that, many have been determined that there should be widespread acceptance of new norms of tolerance, dissent, and self-expression in the public sphere. Their fear has been that plurality would be suppressed and restricted by the new popular mandate of Islamist political organizations and by the demand for order, stability, and a return to normality by the new political elites.

This latter aspect has already become apparent in Egypt and Tunisia as far as forms of public art are concerned. Throughout 2012, local and national authorities in Egypt attempted to erase some of the more striking and provocative works by the cohort of Egyptian artists. In the name of “tidying up,” the Cairo municipality sent out people to whitewash walls around Tahrir Square and elsewhere—particularly those adorned with pictures of the head of SCAF, Field Marshal Tantawi, morphing into the face of ex-president Husni Mubarak, or of Muhammad Morsi (now president of Egypt) and Ahmad Shafik (former presidential candidate), poised as puppets of the military leadership. The erasures led artists to retaliate. They used the newly whitewashed walls to paint even more critical images of the military, their allies, the entrenched political and economic establishment, as well as the new aspirants to power, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. “*Imsah wa-narsum tani*” (“Erase it and we shall paint it again”) and its variations became a commonly seen graffiti as a tit-for-tat battle for the walls of Cairo played out between artists and the authorities.²¹

In Tunisia, the authorities acted against the artists themselves, arresting Chahine Berriche and Oussama Benaglia in November 2012 for “breaching the state of emergency, writing on public property and disturbing public order.”

As part of an activist group of street artists called *Zwewla* (the poor), they had painted the phrase “The people want rights for the poor” on walls in the neglected and impoverished southern town of Gabès. This was clearly not a message that the ruling coalition wanted to hear.²² Earlier in the year, a group of Tunisian artists had deliberately set out to provoke a debate with what they regarded as an emerging Islamist, *salafi*-dominated order through an art exhibition in June 2012 at the Palais Abdellia in La Marsa. They used the 11th Printemps des Arts fair to mount a number of works that drew attention particularly to the threats to women’s rights under an Islamic regime. One striking installation at the center of the exhibition, *Punching Ball* by Faten Gaddes, was of a boxing ring with three punching bags hanging from the ceiling on which were larger-than-life portraits of a woman who looked, at first sight, to be wearing a *hijab* (the head covering that hides the hair). On closer inspection it could be seen that the *hijab* was in fact her hair, artfully arranged, and underneath the portraits were the phrases “*Je suis chrétienne, je suis juive, je suis tunisienne*” (“I am Christian, I am Jewish, I am Tunisian”). The exhibition provoked a riot in which salafists destroyed this and other works and sprayed graffiti on the walls of the gallery such as “Tunisia is an Islamic state—with license from the Ministry of Culture the Prophet of God is insulted” and “Infidels! Ennahda, Tahrir and Salafists are brothers.”²³

It was not only in the countries that witnessed the uprisings that there was controversy about their artistic outcomes. In the United Arab Emirates, where the market for contemporary Middle Eastern art is most affluent, enhanced by art fairs and biennials in a number of the Emirates, a fine line exists between art that is seen as current, edgy, and innovative (and thus highly marketable) and art that outrages either public sensibilities or the ever-anxious political authorities. These came together in the Sharjah biennial in 2011 when the work of Algerian artist, Mustapha Benfodil, entitled *Maportaliche/It has no importance* was removed from the show and led to the dismissal of the director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, Jack Persekian. The artwork in question comprised a number of headless mannequins, dressed as two teams of footballers confronting each other in a public space. They wore shirts inscribed with explicit sexual and religious slogans mixed together accompanied by a soundtrack blaring out the shouts and slogans of protesters from the uprisings across the Arab world. The artist himself said that this was a commentary inspired by the Algerian civil war, in which Islamist extremists had used rape and murder as weapons against women. From his perspective, therefore, the aspect of the work that had so shocked people “isn’t an attack against Allah, it is an attack against the god of these people, of the Armed Islamic Group and of other groups like them.”²⁴ The authorities

rationalized the removal of the piece by referring to the very public nature of the site and the outrage it was causing to people wandering around with their families or on their way to and from the mosque. For the artist, however, the authorities’ response had as much to do with the overtly political aspect of the soundtrack that made it seem as if the uprisings had reached Sharjah.²⁵ Other acts of censorship at the Sharjah biennial—for instance, the Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi’s minimalist but telling work *The Lost Springs*—suggests that the authorities were indeed disturbed about the potential of such art to disrupt the air of calm, indeed motionless normality, that they were so keen to project.²⁶

CONCLUSION

The uprisings across the Middle East during 2011 and 2012 were in some respects the outcome of processes that many writers, poets, musicians, and visual artists in the region had already identified and to which they had also contributed as both artists and citizens. Once the protests started and gained momentum, many artists moved to the forefront, exploring new media and expressing themselves in new and innovative ways that served to reflect and encapsulate the spirit of the age that they helped to create. It is therefore worth reflecting on what may be learned from the study of the art of the uprisings that can supplement our understandings of these phenomena from other perspectives.

In the first place, understanding the arts of the uprisings brings us closer to understanding the vital imaginative aspects of power and resistance. It allows us to gain insight into the ways in which power has been visualized and how common idioms and images resonated across the Middle East because of the similarity of the experiences undergone by its peoples. By the same token, art and the reactions it provokes can give an excellent indication of what makes the powerful uneasy and can shed light upon the hidden vulnerabilities of those in authority. Indeed, part of the skill of so many of the artists involved in the uprisings of the past two years has been their ability to discover and to lay bare, graphically and uncompromisingly, some of the weaknesses of the powerful and their narratives. The originality and power of these artistic interventions, through performances and representations, have helped to mobilize an activist public—defining and providing a stage for the public to emerge and developing a repertoire of defiance, identity, rights, and liberation.

However, the activities of many of the artists across North Africa and the Middle East have raised a series of necessary questions. Precisely because of the plural nature of the mobilized public and their varied and contrasting views, a

debate has begun about what forms of artistic expression will be allowed and indeed about the nature of art itself in these countries. Thus, both during the uprisings and especially in the aftermath of the flight and fall of presidents, questions have arisen about the conventions, the repertoire, and the grammar of artistic expression. Ideological divides, contrasting ideas about propriety, and different modes of recognition have provoked spirited discussions—even open conflict—over artistic interventions. These debates reinforce the notion of aesthetic communication but also underlie its capacity to move people in distinct and powerful ways. This, in turn, raises questions about the relationship between the artist and the community—whether in the visual arts, in music, or in literature. As many have discovered, the social and political expectations that can take shape during and after dramatic political upheaval can form a constricting set of obligations for an artist whose creative mission may be to think against the mainstream, regardless of its origins or direction.

Finally, the events of 2011 and 2012 and their associated artistic interventions have drawn attention to the power of artistic resistance as social memory. This is not about nostalgia, although some have used the idioms of previous eras to great effect as ironic commentaries on the present. It has more to do with the development of a collective sense of potential through the visual arts, reminding people of what they are capable of as citizens holding rights and power. The force of the aesthetic moment creates a heightened awareness of these rights and indeed of the dignity of the citizen. It creates thereby a repertoire of resistance. In this respect, art can rupture the complacency of contempt that besets the powerful as they look out from their privileged positions, obliging them to acknowledge that their subjects are no longer constrained by the will of the rulers. The artists of the Arab uprisings, both those trained in the visual arts and those ordinary citizens who lent their artistry to the performance of resistance across the region, have contributed to one of the most significant outcomes of the Arab uprisings: a reminder to those who rule of the conditional nature of their power. 

NOTES

1. Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination—Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 67–86.

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