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28 ___
Monuments

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NOT IN THE AGE OF THE PHARAOHS

1—
Population:
84.5 million

Wikipedia

2—
57.2% of population
under age 25

United Nations
Population Fund (UNFPA)

3—
20% below
poverty line

United Nations
Population Fund (UNFPA)

4—
Median age 24

CIA, The World Factbook

5—
77.5% of
youth unemployed

Egypt,
State Information Services

6—
3 million
homeless children

Middle East Voices

7—
1.6 million child
workers (aged 5–17)

Gulf News

8—
16 million in
informal settlements

Ahram Online

9—
90 million mobile-phone
subscriptions

Egypt,
State Information Services

28.6% illiteracy

CIA, The World Factbook

10—
40.6% of
women illiterate

CIA, The World Factbook

11—
49.2% of women subjected
to sexual harassment daily

12—
82 billion cigarettes
produced

The Tobacco Atlas
Fourth Edition

118/176 international
corruption ranking

Transparency International

by
Bruce W. Ferguson

FOR THE PAST TWO AND A HALF YEARS, there has been continuous and vigorous debate within Egypt and elsewhere with regard to the Arab Spring or "white revolution." The debate turns on whether the tumultuous events of January 2011 constituted a "revolution"or merely an uprising, or, following the events of July 2013, a momentary glitch in the otherwise continuous military control of Egypt that, it could be argued, goes back to the Ottoman Empire or perhaps even the pharaohs. It is sometimes even condescendingly called an "awakening," as though the Arab states had been asleep. But these semantic distinctions are important to some, particularly academics and journalists, especially in light of the Western notion that the Arab states will only move toward democracy, if at all, at a glacial pace. Implicit in the American foreign-policy concept of "endless transition" was a belief that the Arab world, famously known as an "institutional wasteland" for its lack of infrastructure, fundamentally relied on cronyism and tribal and familial relations instead of institutions.

Once again, as of August 2013, Egyptian security forces, with excessive force, continue to brutally suppress protestors, killing and maiming indiscriminately. Despite promises of reform from President Morsi and Hosni Mubarak before him, no reforms have been introduced into police or military ranks, and the killing and unjust and illegal imprisonment of Egyptians continues. The government remains in control of de facto "emergency" laws that have been in effect for more than three decades.

It seems obvious that, to those directly involved, and even to those in the mass media, which tends toward cynicism, a revolution is authentic and genuine when people are willing to die for it. And that is what happened, and is continuing to happen, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain, as well as in Syria. These revolutions, in a kind of accelerating domino effect, continue. They are the most significant and dramatically fraught feature of the paradigm shift taking place in the Middle East.

If the revolution in Egypt can be described as a "Circle in a Square,"[1] then the overwhelming number of deaths are its flat-line, geometric opposite. The symbolic power of an individual's death is palpable in the story and images of Tunisia's most famous martyr, Mohamed Bou Azizi. A street vendor, Bou Azizi, after suffering harassment and humiliation at the hands of a municipal official, set himself alight. His self-immolation sparked wider protests throughout Tunisia and elsewhere. In Egypt, on December 25, 2011, a month before the occupation of Tahrir Square, and as a wave of public protests spread throughout the country, the young Khaled Said was beaten to death by members of the state police in Alexandria. Said's death, captured on mobile-phone video and widely distributed, served to mobilize otherwise politically and traditionally indifferent citizens. Precisely fifty-nine years to the day after the "Great Fire of Cairo," an anti-British uprising in response to the killing of fifty Egyptian policemen by the occupying British forces in January 1952, the "18 days," as they are known, began. The Great Fire, which led to the demise of the Egyptian monarchy, also helped to usher in Gamal Abdel Nasser as Egypt's president in 1956, in a previous unfulfilled "revolution."

In those early days of protests and demonstrations in 2011, the lives of at least 840 Egyptians were lost. More deaths can be counted as part of the aftermath. And, of course, there are thousands upon thousands of courageous others—and the numbers continue to rise—who have been tortured or killed by the military forces of other despots in neighbouring countries. Clearly, defiance of regularized state cruelty and institutional violence against citizens is an inherently

[1] This play on words derives from the English translation of the Arabic word "Middan," meaning "square," and the fact that Tahrir Square is circular.

revolutionary stance. In Egypt, some have been struck down by the government's bullets, some have been beaten and tortured, and others callously run over by police, fire and diplomats' vehicles. Some were heroes; all were sacrificial victims in a country whose identity continues to be defined by acts of injustice, of which these particular horrors are just the most recent.

As Khaled Said's death demonstrated, however, political murder does not take place only during an uprising or even as a result of deliberate insubordination. People die in the Middle East suddenly and unexpectedly simply for their beliefs. On April 4, 2011, for example, just a couple of months after the Egyptian revolution, Juliano Mer-Khamis, director of the Freedom Theatre, a community theatre he co-founded in the Jenin Refugee Camp in the Israeli-occupied West Bank in 2006, was shot and killed by a masked assassin. An Arab-Israeli actor, filmmaker and cultural activist who used the arts as a model for social and political change, Mer-Khamis was dedicated to fighting against the illegal occupation of Palestine and the human rights abuses practised by Israel's so-called "defense forces." At the same time, Mer-Khamis organized events promoting freedom from certain Islamic traditions, in particular those he believed to repress women's rights.

There is a fundamental reason that artists often feel contempt for those in power and, even more so, for those who misuse it. Globally, the arts are perceived quasi-mythically as a narrative force that has helped to advance freedom in the modern period. From the role of handmaiden to the wealthy and the devout, the arts became, in the twentieth century, a powerful industry that, at the very least, rhetorically champions freedom over repression and expression over suppression. The arts have evolved as a counter-force to the daily injustices, large and small, that, in many cultures, characterize citizens' overly governed lives. They are the fabled and imaginary space of individual rights, particularly in contexts in which the state deliberately and routinely suffocates public discourse, free speech and human rights. The arts are the first item to disappear from shrinking public budgets and the first activity to be censored by fearful authorities, of both left and right, because their power far exceeds that of any individual. Moreover, as "revolutions" are acts of the imagination, artists are often in the vanguard.

And it is the lack of an ability to control the forms of *symbolic capital* that authoritarian regimes fear. In the Middle East, of course, it is not permitted to mock the authorities, even in jest, as Bassim Youssef, the Egyptian television satirist, learned when he was arrested in March of 2013. Being praised by Jon Stewart (of the popular American political satire *The Daily Show*) offers Egyptian commentators, even those with a comic bent, no protection from the authorities.

It is symbolic capital that authorities seek to manage and, if possible, suppress. Vladimir Putin's harsh treatment of the Russian feminist punk rock protest group Pussy Riot demonstrates his fear of losing control of symbolic capital more clearly than any of his other repressive policies. And the British government's censorship of the well-known street artist Banksy in the run-up to the London 2012 Olympic Games is another example of the repression produced by yet another government's fear. Fighting back against this kind of control, in acts of courageous insubordination, people in Egypt tore down billboards featuring Hosni Mubarak's portrait on the first day of the revolution.

From that first day, Al Jazeera, the Qatar-based news network, provided continuous twenty-four-hour coverage of events in Tahrir Square. But it was only when Egyptian national television (the so-called "people's" media), more than ten days later and even then reluctantly,

Following insert
All photographs supplied by
Bruce W. Ferguson

[2] Robyn Creswell, "Undelivered: Egyptian Novelists at Home and Abroad," *Harper's Magazine* 322.1929 (February 2011): 71.
[3] *Ibid.*: 79.

showed an image of Tahrir Square equivalent to those that had been running on Al Jazeera that the revolution was formally acknowledged. Until that time, Egyptian national television (ERTU) had, when not recycling re-runs of popular television shows, been showing serene riverside scenes.

It is surprising, then, to discover that an immense literature examining the fault lines of Egyptian society and politics had been produced in Egypt throughout the six long decades prior to Nasser, and has re-emerged since Hosni Mubarak came to power in 1981. Despite a deeply entrenched practice of state censorship, the injustices perpetrated in Egypt were exposed in a creative writing tradition that continues to enumerate the too-familiar abuses: government corruption, ongoing and egregiously high unemployment, unjustifiable poverty, a disgraceful disparity between rich and poor, police brutality and rigged elections.

The predominant topic of this Egyptian literary imagination is the disclosure of this miserable, relentless oppression and the representation of its victims. Albert Cossery, Naguib Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim, Alaa Al Aswany—all well-known and much-loved Egyptian novelists—depicted the effects of subjugation to despots and their minions. These writers spoke out with terrible insight, using irony and absurdity in order to pillory abuses and convey their rage. Their thrilling texts, with brilliant flashes of language, exquisite humour and undeniable pathos, were often met with censorship, sometimes with prison sentences and torture, and even expulsion and self-imposed exile. When Sonallah Ibrahim publicly declined to accept an award from the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 2003, he spoke for legions of disaffected Egyptians. He could not accept the award, he declared, "for it was awarded by a government that, in my opinion, lacks the credibility to bestow it."[2]

In a society in which the overall literacy rate is roughly 70 per cent, it is not surprising that this critical literature produced little effect. Moreover, the national leadership and its thugs, who had relentlessly and remorselessly institutionalized neglect, violence and mistreatment of its constituents, were impervious to criticism. As the critic and scholar Robyn Creswell succinctly summed up the situation: "The dilemma of so many writers in Egypt (and not only Egypt) is just this: How to create an oppositional, truth-telling art when one's enemies don't bother to hide their abuses?"[3]

Nevertheless, the literature did expose cracks, small fissures, in a ham-fisted, propagandistic facade. And some light was—slowly, incrementally, imperfectly—penetrating the darkness of those six long decades. Strikes by lawyers, the clamour of labour unions, and a million other small and brave acts began to widen those cracks. This was particularly so in the five years of increasingly intense protests that preceded the "18 days" of 2011. The Egyptian Movement for Change, in order to ease the fear of public protest, adopted the slogan "*Kifaya*" ("Enough"), which then became the unofficial name of the movement. That single word expressed the stance that was eventually taken up, consciously and unconsciously, by vast numbers of the population. Slowly but persistently, throughout popular culture—in rap songs and movies, television soap operas, independent theatre productions and other activities—a tsunami of resistance was created.

In the wake of the revolution and in view of the promise of a civil society, one was not surprised to see art begin to flourish. Certainly, millions, if not billions, of images of the revolution began to circulate; it was—and continues to be—the most photographed, videotaped and digitally circulated public revolt in history.

Everyone has amazing pictures and stories, and suddenly, everyone has begun to accuse

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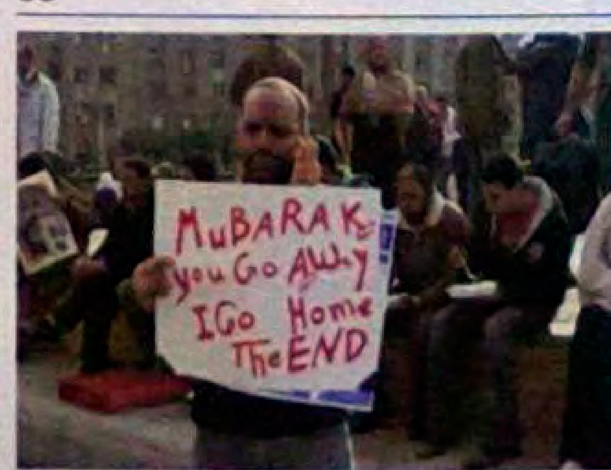

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everyone else of "stealing" the revolution—using its stories and images for their own ends. And "everyone" includes *everyone*, from the short-lived regime of Morsi to the media to the military to corporations such as Mobinil. One of Egypt's three mobile phone companies, Mobinil helped Mubarak to cut off all mobile phone reception in the country during the first few days of the revolution. Today, in a testament to corporate hypocrisy, it represents itself as a champion of the people. Artists and academics, religious fundamentalists, secularists, aging Marxists and preening politicians, all are using the revolutionary impulse—its fundamental humanity and its claims to legitimacy—as symbolic capital for their own narrow, self-aggrandizing ends.

Stolen, and/or used, misused and abused in this process are representations, images of a historical—and historic—moment. These images of the moment—immediately produced and available—necessarily conform to the agendas of those using them. But the strong, individual and independent voices of art do not respond so quickly or definitively. My sense is that the greater the trauma, the more time it takes to reflect upon and make sense of its effects. After the invasion of Iraq by the United States, for example, it was five years before Rajiv Joseph was able to write the play *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*.

An interesting question for me, then, as a resident visitor in Egypt, was, What did Egypt's art look like before the revolution? Were there preludes and clues in the art as to what was to come? Does art have any symptomatic value? Just two weeks before the January 2011 revolution, El Fadhil, an Iraqi artist living in Cairo, posted the following on Facebook: "Why don't Egyptian artists revolt?" Re-reading El Fadhil's provocation, I think of at least four works that shine some symbolic light into the cracks that interest me as a spectator of this historic moment.

The first work is Lara Baladi's *Tower of Hope*. Built for the 11th Cairo Biennale and installed on the grounds of the Cairo Opera House in December 2008, it was a nine-metre-high brick and concrete tower in which every brick had been imprinted with the image of a donkey and a peasant. The word "hope," in both English and Arabic, was impressed on the donkey's torso. The tower, which was open to the sky, featured unfinished staircases of concrete; at the tower's foundation was a bench where visitors could sit and listen to a sound piece. Entitled "Donkey Symphony," this composition for chamber orchestra and soprano was overlaid with the strident braying of donkeys. Incomplete, with no discernible style and haphazardly constructed, the structure was clearly built with no long-term intent.

Towers in Egypt visually evoke the power of the police, the military, the Amn al-Dawla (equivalent to the FBI) and the "central security" (anti-riot and containment forces). Situated along the fences of corporations and military posts and serving as restraining or warning boundaries, towers constitute yet another architecture of exclusion. This extensive defensive architecture expressly delineates the chaos of the public sphere from the pretence of order and precision that characterizes the regime's policing methods.

Baladi's use of the image of a donkey—an icon of manual labour—reminds one of the donkey in Albert Cossery's novel *The Jokers*, in which Karim, an urbane, benign anarchist and artist, has to wait for a street barber to finish clipping a donkey before attending to him. When Karim, who has an appointment with the governor of the city, objects to waiting, the donkey's driver is astonished. "This city is governed? ... Don't tell me that, young man; I won't believe you." When Karim insists, on the grounds that he is an important person, an *effendi*, the donkey's indignant driver exclaims, "Did I just hear you

insulting my donkey? ... Who do you think you are to insult someone who works for a living?"[4]

Baladi's imprinting of a donkey and its driver on every brick, and the donkey's discordant presence in the musical symphony, are, of course, disquieting reminders of the working class, upon whose manual labour all construction in the city depends, whether formal or informal, and whatever economic "hope" may be inscribed in its architecture. In a testament to the trenchant message of Baladi's tower, government workers were ordered to cover it up when then-First Lady Suzanne Mubarak was scheduled to pass through the park on her way to the opera. One wonders which feature of the installation she would have found most offensive—the sound of braying donkeys or a towering monument to squatters.

Baladi's "hope," not surprisingly, offered a deliberately mixed message. It paid homage to the quotidian construction of Cairo's informal housing, which she had researched for a previous project in which she had extensively photographed the *ashwa'iyaat* (poor residential areas) that pockmark the city. This bleak, undifferentiated and unvarying housing, which expands ever outward, extending Cairo and devouring agricultural land, evokes a sense of prisons as much as homes. These neighbourhoods, described by Mona Abaza, a professor of sociology at the American University in Cairo, as "spontaneous, unplanned, informal constructions of squatters or simply slums,"[5] are casually erected by their inhabitants, producing a visually dizzying sense of chaos. Ironically, former Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's liberalization of the laws concerning investment, intended to facilitate suburban development but primarily a benefit to greedy developers, indirectly led to this nightmarish doppelgänger of suburbia. Answering the needs of Cairo's swelling population, which has been fuelled by the migration of the rural poor to the city, these segregated developments nevertheless represent the hopes and aspirations of millions of people for a life of stability and dignity.

In Cossery's first novel, *The House of Certain Death*, a group of tenants, ignored by their landlord, awaits the predictable collapse of their crumbling house. In his last novel, *The Colors of Infamy*, the landlord has become a real-estate developer. When a building collapses, killing its tenants, the developer feels no remorse.

> "We are not in the time of the Pharaohs," said Suleyman.... "My opinion...is that one must construct buildings that last for a limited amount of time; otherwise, it would be a disaster and the end of real estate."[6]

Amal Kenawy's performance, entitled *Silence of the Lambs*, which signalled the opening of the exhibition *Assume the Position* at the Townhouse Gallery, was staged in downtown Cairo in December 2009. Eager to extend her work beyond the confines of the gallery and to bring art to a wider audience, Kenawy led a few friends and children, who had volunteered to participate, together with twelve paid performers, in a slow, literal crawl across a major downtown intersection, remarkably bringing Cairo's legendarily frenetic traffic to a stop. As a courtesy, Kenawy had informed a few local residents about her project in advance. As Cairo is the centre of the Arab world's film and television production, the residents were expecting something familiar. But when the performance, which was being videotaped, began, no big-budget movie cameras materialized, and the residents' interest turned to skepticism and suspicion.

A shop owner, followed by another man, suddenly accosted Kenawy and the performers. More soon joined the fracas; interpreting the performance as an insolent public gesture, all

[4] Albert Cossery, *The Jokers*, trans. Anna Moschovakis (New York: New York Review Books, 2010): 90–91.
[5] Mona Abaza, *The Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2006).
[6] Albert Cossery, *The Colors of Infamy*, trans. Alyson Waters (New York: New Directions, 2011): 92.

were angered by her apparent deception and distressed by a scenario that was neither familiar nor predictable. Was it art or politics? Had they been deceived? Was Kenawy really Egyptian? Was she a prostitute? An almost violent confrontation ensued, and, by the time the police arrived, the atmosphere was hostile and volatile. Kenawy and a number of the performers were ultimately "investigated" by the police.

In retrospect, *Silence of the Lambs* stands as an acute foreshadowing of the days of the revolution. The question at the core of the performance, to which the onlookers immediately reacted, was whether it was *about* humiliation or whether it was an act of humiliation in and of itself—in other words, whether humiliation was its theme or its effect. Everyone present seems to have had an immediate and strong opinion, and these opinions, vigorously expressed, threatened to erupt in violence. Performed in an environment of censorship that had long held sway in Egypt, *Silence of the Lambs* has become a touchstone in local art discourse.

Equally pointed was Ahmed Basiony's performance piece—his last formal work—entitled *Thirty Days Running in Place* (2010). Basiony was executed during the embryonic revolutionary bedlam of January 28 ("Friday of Wrath"). Now one of the often-pictured victims of the early days of the revolution, Basiony, at thirty-one years of age, was wearing a street cleaner's uniform when he was shot down by government snipers in Tahrir Square. In the preceding days, police had beaten him with their batons, but he maintained an irrepressible attitude of optimism in the face of the government's violence.

Originally exhibited outside the Palace of the Arts, located across the Nile from Tahrir Square on the grounds of the Cairo Opera House, Basiony's performance took place within a rectangular, enclosed structure made of transparent plastic. Basiony wore a plastic suit of his own design that contained sensors, which monitored the energy he produced and the number of steps he took while jogging on a treadmill for several hours a day, for thirty days. The data was wirelessly transferred to a screen at one end of the space; on the screen, a variety of colours morphed into an index of the data. The sweat from his body was also collected in a bottle at the end of each workout.

Thirty days of running in place symbolically represented the thirty years of the Mubarak regime. Casually emptying the bottle of his hard-earned sweat into the dust at the end of his month-long performance, Basiony clearly intended viewers to draw the inference that, high-tech monitors and flashing lights notwithstanding, three decades' worth of their sweat had been of little or no consequence.

Witnessing this performance was to see the bleak articulation of the socio-economic and cultural conditions that had prevailed in Egypt for at least three generations. Basiony's high-tech efforts dramatically incarnated the utter uselessness of Egypt's policy of so-called "gradualism" or "endless transition." Furthermore, a resemblance between Basiony's *Thirty Days* and an anecdote in Sonallah Ibrahim's Kafkaesque novel *The Committee* can be detected. Ibrahim's protagonist, worn down by the sheer unfathomableness of the committee investigating him, is told by the porter who guards the door to the proceedings about his inevitable punishment:

> "In your case, which I have followed with great interest, there is no punishment more severe or rigorous than consumption."
>
> Astonished, I asked, "Consumption? Who consumes and what does he consume?"
>
> He looked at me a while, then getting up, said deliberately, "You consume yourself."[7]

[7] Sonallah Ibrahim, *The Committee*, trans. Charlene Constable and Mary St. Germain (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001): 135–36.

Lara Baladi
Tower of Hope
Site-specific construction and sound installation
2008–09
COURTESY LARA BALADI