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A CITY OF WALLS
A PHOTO ESSAY ON WRITING ON WALLS
IN ALEXANDRIA, 2011-2017

ABSTRACT

Outdoor walls of Alexandria are full of writings. Stencil graffiti, sprayed messages, painted advertisements, ball-pen notes, stickers and billboards create a mostly anonymous conversation of different messages struggling for space, mostly transient and at times poetic. Especially political graffiti during and after the 2011 revolution became the site of an often uncivil debate made up of deletions, crossings-out and changes to graffiti by others. But also love messages, religious phrases and advertisement have important messages to tell.

The writings on the city's three-dimensional walls often mingle with the metaphorical walls of social media feeds as inhabitants of the city are engaged in poetic, transient conversations and commentary on their phones while they move through their city. Sometimes the different poetics and materialities of wall-writing also converge when social media mimes reproduce or simulate photos of graffiti.

In Alexandria today, both ways to write on walls are common and productive of spaces and social relations in the city. These forms of everyday textual conversation and presence push the limits of conventional understandings of literary vs. ordinary language. They also tell important stories of the coexistence of different visions and ways of life in a plural but not pluralistic city.

INTRODUCTION — WALLS, WRITINGS, CITIES

In 2011, a single word could be found on walls all over Alexandria: Leave (see figure 1). When it was sprayed in January or February 2011, there was no need to say who the addressee was. That much was clear, and the message was everywhere.



Figure 1: “Leave”. Kom El-Dikka, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke

Writing on walls is as old as writing, which has a very long history in Alexandria and Egypt. The story might begin, if not with the invention of writing, then at least with the spread of literacy that made writing in the open widespread, pragmatic, and plural in its uses. The story might also begin with the availability of spray paint, which made it possible to write large, visible messages very quickly. The story could also begin with Alexandria’s iconic wall-writer Gamal El-Dowaly (Khaled 2012; Abu El-Ma’ati 2016), a dedicated fan of the Ittihad football team, who wrote and signed his messages on walls of Alexandria from the 1980s until the 2000s, and even drew the regime’s

attention when he wrote of his intention to run for the presidency on a wall. Another beginning might be messages like “Would you accept it for your sister?” that warn youths on the Corniche against romantic encounters, and which spread along the seashore when the Islamic revival gained societal dominance over the city and the country. Yet another beginning could be the line of poetry borrowed from Amal Dunqul that was sprayed on the Corniche in autumn 2010: “Dream not of a better world / Behind every Caesar who dies is another Caesar”.

January 2011 is therefore an arbitrary starting point for a history of Alexandria’s wall-writing, but there are two reasons behind it.

The first is that it almost coincides with the beginning of my fieldwork on literary writing in Alexandria, in March 2011. I had already developed an interest in the aspirational, moral, and political dimension of visible surfaces such as graffiti, stickers, and posters some years earlier (Schielke 2012). When my fieldwork turned towards issues of text, language, messages, and communication, it was logical to continue to pay attention to writings on walls; however, I began to pay more attention towards graffiti as texts: slogans, announcements, denunciations, declarations of love, invitations, advertisements, lines from songs, or the marking of a space with one’s name. What can these texts tell us about the claims, struggles, and strivings of the people who live in the city? What kind of relationship – if any – might there be between wall-writing and literary writing?

An important methodological and aesthetic choice that resulted from this research interest was that I shifted to working in black and white, consciously avoiding colour, which is usually the preferred method of photographing graffiti. I initially worked with a medium-format analogue camera, and later shifted to a faster-to-use analogue SLR camera. Restricting my vision to black and white and taking fewer pictures (due to my reliance on film) was a way of training myself to be a reader of writings and walls rather than a spectator of graffiti.

The parts of Alexandria where I took my photos are broadly those areas of the city around which I would regularly move: El-Mandara, El-Asafra, and Miami in the east, the Corniche Road, Ramleh Station, El-Manshiya, and El-Shatby quarters, the Abu Qir train line, and the Chinese Housing in Agami. I cannot present a representative survey of wall-writing, and indeed have never aimed for one; rather, my intention has been to document continuities and changes in messages on walls over time.

This leads to the other reason for beginning the story in January 2011. The revolutionary uprising of 25 January marked the beginning of an intensive and highly-politicized period of wall-writing that tells a story of the struggles and shifts of mood in the city during and after the failed revolution. The story of this photo essay continues until the autumn of 2017 (the moment when this essay was completed for publication) to include the depoliticization that followed the establishment of El-Sisi’s new old regime as well as the ongoing societal dynamics that are reflected in wall-writing. It is important to note,

however, that even at the height of the political contestation and its various expressions on walls, political writings never dominated exclusively; they mingled with a remarkably constant use of wall-writing for religious, romantic, personal, commercial, legal, and other purposes.

Some might be seduced into mistaking political graffiti for something more real and relevant, and into dismissing other themes of wall-writing as trivial or meaningless. In this photo essay, my premise is that all writing on walls is relevant and meaningful. Writing something on a wall already implies a claim of relevance, importance, and reality. The search for work, real estate business, love stories, faith in God, and the claim that this is my street – none of this is trivial. The question is therefore what kind of story of life in a city these different, yet intermingling, writings can tell.

This story may be specific to Alexandria, but of course wall-writing is not. Wall-writing or word graffiti is a globally circulating and exceedingly accessible and plural form of communication (Northoff 2004; 2005). Alexandria is not fundamentally different from, say, Athens, New York, Cairo, or any other city insofar as various forms of graffiti appear to be a general feature of urban living. Around the world, stencilled graffiti, sprayed messages, painted advertisements, ballpen notes, scratching on mortar, stickers, and billboards create a discourse of various types of message struggling for space, mostly transient and at times poetic. There are regional and national differences in genres, of course: for example, forms of primarily visual graffiti and tags in which the content of the text becomes secondary or altogether illegible prevail in much of Europe and North America, whereas in Egypt, by contrast, wall-writing usually conveys a more or less clearly legible and intelligible message. The same is true of most street art in Egypt. Also, while genres travel with relative ease, the stories wall-writing tells are more situational, more specific to a place and time about which they provide an ongoing commentary (Karathanasi 2014; Tsilimpounidi 2015) – as in Alexandria during and after the uprising of 2011.

Outdoor walls are, of course, not the only medium for public writing. Homes, shops, and vehicles carry commercial advertisements as well as messages of a more personal nature. The arts and ethics of home and vehicle decorations in Egypt have attracted their fair share of attention (for example, Parker and Neal 1995; Oweis 1999), but there still remains much unexplored potential for ethnographic research. For example, aphorisms, witticisms, and pious phrases on toktoks might tell interesting stories if one relates them to their owners and drivers, their friends and girlfriends, and the craftsmen who paint the texts on to the vehicles. In contrast, wall-writings are more difficult to analyse because their authors are usually unknown, because they are usually short-lived, and because erasures, alterations, and overwriting make them not only intertextual but often also illegible (see figure 2). This poses an analytical problem.



Figure 2: Layers of wall-writings rendered illegible. Azarita, Alexandria, October 2016. Source: Samuli Schielke

A textual analysis is of course possible, and can be successful. Sayed Oweis's (1999) famous *Chanting of the Silent* is a systematic analysis of writings on vehicles in late 1960s Egypt, and provides striking insights into the public values and emotions that professional drivers and cart vendors expressed on their vehicles. Despite all the inspirational debt I owe to Oweis, I have not tried to reproduce his approach. He provides a systematic account that focuses on varieties of messages and the values they express, and pays less attention to materiality, time, and location. I have not tried to be systematic; instead, my main interest is in the texture of time, location, and materiality, and the urgent issues that writers express on walls.

STRUGGLES AND GENRES, ALTERATIONS AND TRANSFORMATIONS

Soon after the president stepped down in February 2011, a campaign of cleaning and beautification began. It was at least partly driven by a revolutionary desire to make the country one's own, but it also involved a somewhat counter-revolutionary erasure of signs and slogans relating to the struggle (Winegar 2016). Most anti-Mubarak graffiti were painted over in the months after February 2011 – sometimes not very carefully, as in figure 3 where “No to Mubarak” was left legible because whoever painted it over economised with the paint.

At the same time, a euphoric and opportunistic identification with 25 January resulted in the renaming of businesses: for example, a real estate



Figure 3: “No to Mubarak” (erased). Ramleh Station, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke

agency on the Corniche in the east of the city called itself “The Sons of 25 January Property and Furnished Apartments” (see figure 4).

As the initial euphoria faded, different voices began to compete for attention, and posters and slogans of Islamist movements rapidly gained visibility, while other, weaker movements (which after a while became known as “the revolutionaries”) tried to revive street protests. Graffiti and printed posters and stickers by various Islamist movements spread around the city, while revolutionaries’ wall-writings called for demonstrations and an end to military rule, especially at the sites of demonstrations such as Port Said Street, the University of Alexandria, and al-Qa’id Ibrahim Square. In September 2011, activists calling for street protests against military rule stencilled their slogan “We’ll be back” on a wall in downtown Alexandria, together with the iconic portrait of the martyr Khaled Said, who was killed by policemen in the summer of 2010. Two months later, the Salafi Nour Party plastered the same wall with their



Figure 4: "The Sons of 25 January Property and Furnished Apartments. Tel. 0100 553274." Miami, Alexandria, February 2012. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 5: “We’ll be back” (sprayed). “Together we build Egypt. Nour Party” (election poster). Ramleh Station, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke

election posters. Rather than covering over Khaled Said’s portrait, they left him surrounded by bearded men (see figure 5).

During the summer and autumn of 2011, competition among different voices on the walls became more aggressive. Graffiti against the military rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (February 2011-June 2012) began to spread, and were repeatedly altered or sprayed over. Some graffiti were altered several times. A mural that was painted during the clean-up campaign in February 2011 originally read: “The people and the army are in the service of Egypt.” Later, somebody added “the police” (it is recognizable as an addition because it is sprayed while the rest of the text is painted) between “the people” and “the army”, after which somebody else crossed out both “the army” and “the police” and added “killers” above “the police” (see figure 6).

Unity among Muslims and Christians had been one of the slogans and powerful symbols of the January uprising, symbolized by the crescent and the cross, as in figure 7, where they are placed above the word “Egypt”. This message was



Figure 6: "The people and the army and the police are in the service of Egypt". Corniche between Shatby and Sidi Gaber, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 7: “Egypt”. Shatby, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke

sprayed at some time during autumn 2011, when sectarian violence against Christians was increasing. The wall had recently been whitewashed to cover earlier writings, and the paint began to flake quickly, eroding parts of the message. In October 2011, Christian protesters were massacred by the military in Cairo. Weeks after the massacre, somebody tried to alter the message by scratching away the cross, but managed to leave only a minor mark. The outcome was unintentionally symbolic: both the cross and the attempt to erase it were left visible – until the entire wall was whitewashed again.

Other writings expressed grievances in the form of an appeal to the authorities for justice. A photocopied poster on the seafront in downtown Alexandria in November (see figure 8) was framed by four photographic portraits (counterclockwise from top right): “the first deceased person”; “the deceased wife”; “the father and husband”; “the surviving son”. The text in the middle reads:



Figure 8: Ramleh Station, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke

"An appeal to all supporters of the weak who have lost their rights in this world. I only want justice. I call upon all gentlemen in positions of responsibility and the noble media of communication to report on lawsuit number 6216 of the year 2009, Second Chamber of Raml Court, Alexandria, to reopen the case, and to reveal the manipulation, lowliness, and deception of justice involved in it. My question is: is the owner of the car, registration number 281 Private Cairo, really above the law? So far they have proven that they are above everything. Egyptian citizen al-Sayyid Gamal, tel. 122 408 78 48, profession: driver in the district of East Alexandria."

Other grievances would be absurd-poetic in tone. In Port Said Street, a regular route of the protest marches in 2011, somebody had sprayed between political slogans: "Oh my head" – which can mean "you give me such a headache", "I'm going crazy" or "give me a break" (see figure 9).

Political wall-writings come and go, depending on the moment, the perceived urgency and the opportunity to write one's message in an open space.



Figure 9: "Oh my head". Port Said Street, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 10: “I love you...” (name partly obliterated). Sidi Gaber, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke

Private, commercial, legal, and religious messages are the more persistent genres. In November 2011, shortly before the parliamentary elections, somebody sprayed “I love you...” over electoral posters of political parties in Sidi Gaber. Half of the name of the beloved is covered by yet another poster sponsored by a nearby mosque inviting people to the Eid prayer (see figure 10).

Meanwhile, at the commuter train station of al-Mandara in the east of the city, stickers and handwritten advertisements (see figure 11) offered natural healing, the services of a marriage registrar, and satellite dish installation, and looked for apartments. Below the ads, someone declared their allegiance to the Zamalek football club.

In a period when the police were relatively absent and many social taboos had been shaken, illicit businesses also sometimes made themselves visible on the wall, making use of the comparatively safe guise of the English language (see figure 12).



Figure 11: “Looking to buy an apartment for a suitable price”. “Looking to buy an apartment”. “Natural healing in homes”. “Marriage registrar”. “Satellite dish installation”. “Al-Zamalek”. Mandara Station, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 12: “Mistriss [sic] slave 010 5434267.” Al-Qa’id Ibrahim, Alexandria, February 2012.
Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 13: “Mobile 0123760878. Registered plot not for sale or partnership”. Kom El Dikka, Alexandria, March 2012. Source: Samuli Schielke

Another persistent, and at times innovative, genre is parking prohibitions. At a garage entrance in al-Mandara, somebody had written: “Garage: No parking, you shameless donkey.” (see figure 14).

Even more persistent and present are religious messages. In homes, shops, and vehicles, they identify the inhabitant or owner as a Muslim or a Christian. In streets and squares, the religious messages are almost exclusively Islamic. Sometimes they are small handwritten messages or prayers, and sometimes the result of more systematic poster, sticker, and stencilled graffiti campaigns (for example, figure 26 right). In 2014, handwritten or photocopied notes saying “Did you pray for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) today?” (see figure 15) proliferated quite suddenly all over Egypt. The campaign had no clear author, and was ostentatiously apolitical and consensual in the midst of an extremely polarized situation after the counter-revolution of 2013, but it did have political resonance as a moral or ethical message: it reminded Muslims of their commitment to the Prophet Muhammad, and

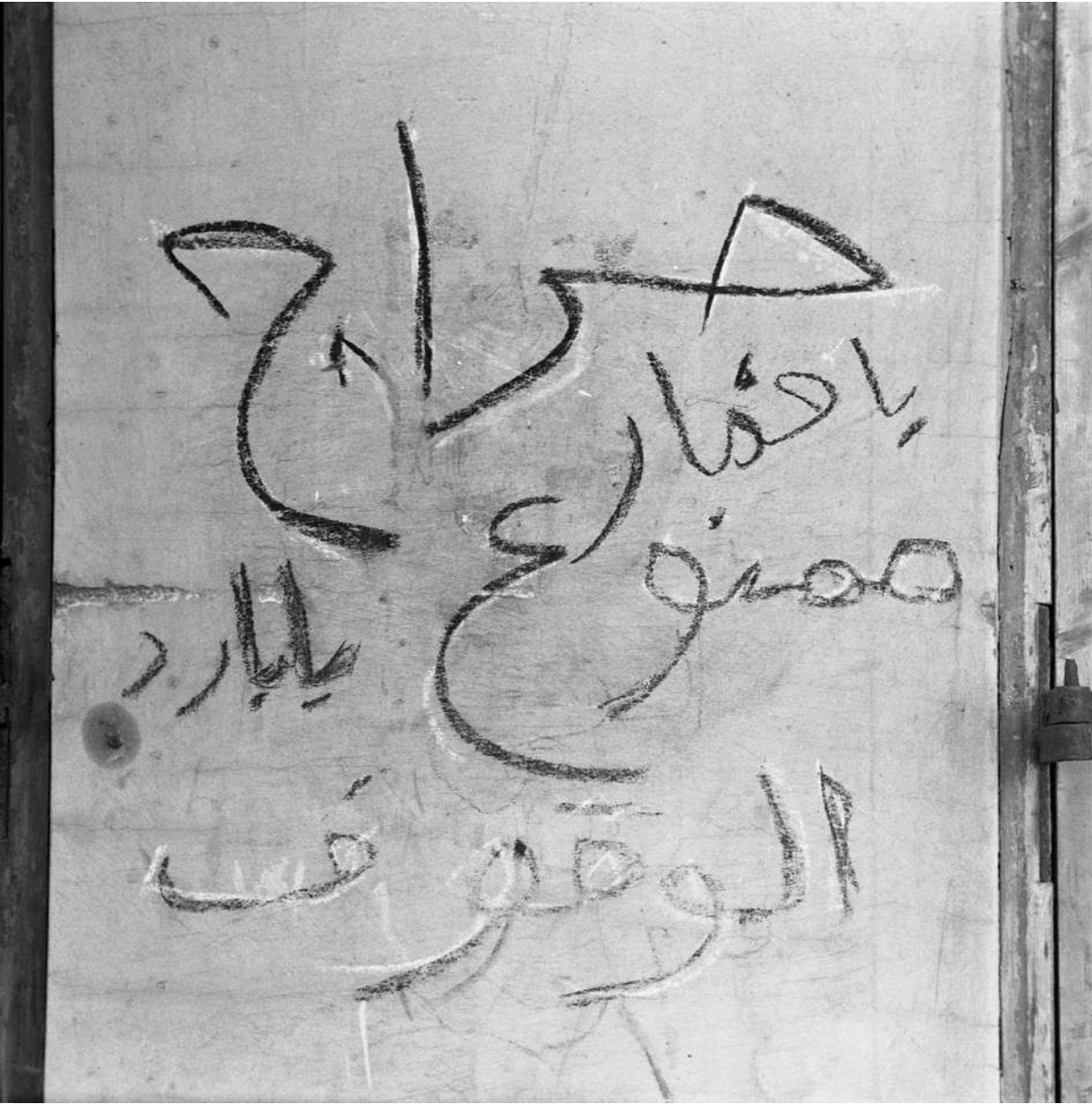


Figure 14: “Garage: no parking, you shameless donkey”. El Mandara, Alexandria, November 2011. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 15: "Did you pray for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) today?" Ramleh Station, Alexandria, October 2014. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 16: "In the name of the All-Merciful God {Whatever good you may have, it is from God} This is the true speech of the Mighty God". Ramleh Station, Alexandria, February 2014. Source: Samuli Schielke

related to the idiomatic use of “pray for the Prophet!” as a way to call agitated people to calm down.

An important sub-genre of religious messages is the elaborate calligraphies of Qur’anic verses that bring together protective, moral-ethical, and aesthetic dimensions. A Qur’anic verse (see figure 16) on the wall opposite a café and sponsored by the owner reads: “In the name of the All-Merciful God: {Whatever good you may have, it is from God.} This is the true speech of the Mighty God.”

Some of the sprayed and stencilled political wall-writings in 2011 and after were made by Alexandria’s small scene of dedicated graffiti artists, who also created some of the murals that were painted on the seaward side of the Corniche shortly after Mubarak’s resignation, and who later participated in other specially organized and sponsored projects. Later in 2011, a stretch of concrete wall on the inland side of the Corniche near Stanley Bridge became a prominent site of visually ambitious political graffiti. But most street art in Alexandria during that time – including the murals near Stanley Bridge – was produced by football ultras. The ultras’ murals often combined commitment to the club with revolutionary claims and themes – increasingly so after the massacre of 74 supporters of the Ahly Club in Port Said in February 2012. Although the art of the ultras has attracted less international attention than the aesthetically ambitious street art produced by the small circle of internationally-acclaimed graffiti artists in Alexandria and Cairo (for a critical review, see Eickhof 2016), some of it has been included in canonical collections like *Walls of Freedom* (2014). The art of the ultras was very visible in Alexandria thanks to the prominent location of many murals along the city’s main thoroughfares, especially the Corniche road. With its use of English and its iconography of urban rebellion, this mural on the Corniche in Sidi Bishr in February 2012 (see figure 17) signed by the Ultras White Knights represents the style of ultras graffiti and murals from the period.

Much like the writings that marked the sites of demonstrations, the art of the ultras also marked (and in small patches here and there still marks) urban spaces, claiming mastery and ownership over them (see also Tsilimpounidi 2015; Selvelli 2016). The marking of spaces is, of course, not a prerogative of the ultras and other revolutionaries – parking prohibitions and legal notices do it, too. And in the widespread genre of writing one’s name on a wall, marking a space is the message itself. On a wall in Azarita, a certain Mu’mín wrote his name in several places (see figure 18) in 2016. He added no comment – his name was enough. Later, an unrelated stencilled advertisement was sprayed above Mu’mín’s signature: “Isaad’s marriage, workforce and real estate services.”

As the political situation shifted, so did the politics of the messages on walls. The election of Mohamed Morsi as president was initially greeted by enthusiastic messages. In Miami in 2012 (see figure 19), a text sprayed on a roadside wall read “Morsi Morsi 2012 God is great”. A shop to the right had the Egyptian flag painted on the wall with the words “God is great. Morsi 2012. EYGPT” [sic, in Latin letters].



Figure 17: “ACAB” (All Cops Are Bastards). Signed: “U.W.K 07” (Ultras White Knights 07). Sidi Bishr, Alexandria, March 2012. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 18: “Isaad’s marriage, workforce and real estate services.” “Mu’min”. Azarita, Alexandria, October 2016. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 19: Right: “God is great. Morsi 2012. EYGPT [sic]”. Left: “Morsi Morsi 2012 God is great”. Miami, Alexandria, October 2012. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 20: “Isolate ~~your ceiling~~ Morsi before the winter 01211174112”. Ramleh Station, Alexandria, January 2013. Source: Samuli Schielke

As conflicts and opposition to Morsi’s rule arose, a veritable battle of wall-writings began. In the winter of 2012-2013, a stencilled advertisement message announced: “Isolate your ceiling before the winter.” Playing with the double meaning of the verb *yi’zil* (to isolate; to remove from office), somebody changed it into: “Remove Morsi from office before the winter.” (see figure 20)

Supporters of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were actively spraying their messages as well. After the former presidential hopefuls Hamdeen Sabbahi and Mohamed ElBaradei had joined a “National Front of Salvation”, supporters of Morsi accused them of masterminding a campaign of wreckage, violence, and chaos. A message sprayed near Alexandria University (see figure 21) called for “No to the Front of Wreckage and Destruction and Bankruptcy” and underlined its call with a prophetic saying that bans Muslims from looting and killing other Muslims: “Your property and blood are inviolable.” Between the two messages stood a stencilled portrait message from another side of the struggle, calling for the release of the imprisoned revolutionary socialist Hassan Mustafa.



Figure 21: "No to the Front of Wreckage". "No to the Front of Wreckage and Destruction and Bankruptcy". "Free Hassan Mustafa". "Your property and blood are inviolable". Shatby, Alexandria, February 2013. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 22: “America spies on all humans through satellites (on every home)”. El-Mandara, Alexandria, January 2013. Source: Samuli Schielke



Figure 23: Sidi Bishr, Alexandria, February 2014. Source: Samuli Schielke

In the polarized and paranoid atmosphere that evolved in 2013, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the truth and lies. The general paranoia was also reflected in writings such as figure 22 which I spotted in al-Mandara in January 2013: “America spies on all humans through satellites (on every home)”.

After the military seized power in summer 2013, my photographs of wall-writing became fewer and more sporadic. Paranoia increased, and photographing in the streets raised suspicions. I shifted to using a smaller camera and took fewer and fewer pictures. I therefore only have a few images of the abundant graffiti by supporters of the Muslim Brothers protesting against the coup d’état. The few I have were mostly taken from a moving car, such as figure 23 taken in spring 2014 in Sidi Bishr in eastern Alexandria, an area where pro-Morsi demonstrations were common and well-attended in 2013 and 2014. Every protest would leave a dense trace of graffiti, which the city authorities would only manage to paint over after some delay. On this wall, slogans for and against Morsi and Sisi mingled with commercial ads and ultra slogans: Framed by the stencilled four-fingered Rabea sign of the Brotherhood supporters on the right and left, the messages read: “Furniture transportation and lifting: winches and manual”; “Football belongs to the crowds”; “Morsi is my president”; “Liar” “Down with Morsi Sisi” “30/8” (date of a demonstration); “Real estate agent”; “CC is a killer”; and “Traitor”

CC, a phonetic abbreviation for Minister of Defence and (since 2014) President el-Sisi, was all over the walls in those days, in expressions of love and hate alike. In February 2014 in Sidi Bishr, a mural painted by a professional



Figure 24: “Al-Mutamayyiz Advertisements, mobile 01220092941. We love you El-Sisi and I hope you will be my president. Egypt first. I love you C.C. With greetings from Your President’s Support Campaign”. Sidi Bishr, Alexandria, February 2014. Source: Samuli Schielke

advertising company (covering a graffiti by ultras, traces of which remained above the mural) declared in English: “I love you C.C.” and in Arabic: “We love you El-Sisi and I hope you will be my president.” (see figure 24)

On the other side of the struggle, countless rapidly sprayed messages accused CC of being a killer and a traitor. Despite systematic efforts to erase these messages, one accidentally made it on to a scene in a Ramadan soap opera that was aired in 2017. The video still (see figure 25) went viral, causing major embarrassment to the channel and the production company (*Almogaz* 2017; *Aljazeera* 2017).

Because of increasing difficulties with photographing anti-regime slogans in particular, I do not have any photos of the political graffiti that still occasionally emerge along the Abu Qir train line, such as a 2016 message that read “Down with the illusion of stability and the dogs of Daesh in the Sinai” in a rhetorically somewhat cumbersome gesture of rejection towards the regime and its Jihadist enemies alike. I also do not have a single photograph of the once widespread “Morsi will return”, which has been painted over almost everywhere in the meantime. But in the public housing area of the Chinese Housing (al-Masakin al-Siniya) in the far west of Alexandria, a message sprayed in a side street in 2014 was still withstanding the passage of time in 2017: “Mohab will return, God willing.” (see figure 26 left) I do not know who Mohab is or where he went, but a friend who lives in the area claims that he was a small-time drug dealer who was imprisoned.



Figure 25: “Traitor C.C.” in a scene from the soap opera *The Sun Will Never Set* (*La tutfi’ al-shams*). Source: <http://urlz.fr/6dys>, published 11 June 2017, viewed 23 July 2017



Figure 26: Left: “Mohab will return, God willing”. Right: “The speech God loves most: exalted be God; and praise to God; and there is no deity but God; and God is great”. Al-Masakin al-Siniya, Alexandria, February 2017. Source: Samuli Schielke

The writings from between 2011 and 2017 that are depicted in this essay tell the contemporary history of a city that is plural, but not pluralistic. Sometimes messages live side by side in apparently peaceful coexistence. Sometimes they seem to simply ignore each other, like the message of love sprayed over electoral posters and then partially covered by another poster (see figure 10 above). Especially when it comes to politics, walls become a site for an uncivil debate of competing claims, erasures, and alterations.

Scratchings on mortar, “spray and run” messages, stickers and posters, and elaborate murals all not only spread messages, but also contribute to the aesthetic feel of a place. During the revolution and the struggles that followed it, the protest sites were recognizable by the density of sprayed messages (see, for example, figure 23 above), and the state’s imposition of its control was marked by whitewashing the walls again (for example, figure 3 above). In residential areas, the names of individuals cover many walls with the simple message that this is so-and-so’s street or that so-and-so and their friends were there. Working in a different sensory genre, Charles Hirschkind (2006) has described Islamic cassette tape sermons of the 1990s as an “ethical soundscape” that made the call to craft oneself as a God-fearing person highly present and persuasive. Wall-writing works in a similar way, creating a persuasive presence (Starrett 1995). And just like different sounds and moods constantly mingle in the soundscapes of Cairo, which even at the peak of the Islamic revival in the 2000s were never exclusively dominated by pious messages, in a similar manner the walls of cities and villages host a visible, constantly changing presence of different values and struggles, some more pervasive and prevalent than others, but none exclusively dominant.

POETRY OF OPEN-AIR AND VIRTUAL WALLS

Are these writings literature? Some have undeniable literary or poetic qualities, and even where they do not, they contribute to something akin to a poetry of open spaces – poetry in a wider sense, in that they suggest imaginative and associative ways of restructuring open spaces, of giving them symbolic depth and complexity. But literature is both more and less than the aesthetic, imaginative work of words: it is an institutional field (Bourdieu 1998) in which certain forms of writing, speech, and reading are included, while others are excluded (Allan 2016).

The question is thus not whether wall-writing is literature or not, but how some wall-writing may become literature. Social media are instrumental to this process.

The writings on the city’s three-dimensional walls often mingle with the metaphorical walls of social media feeds as inhabitants of the city engage in poetic, transient conversations and commentary on their phones while they move through their city. Sometimes, the various poetics and materialities of



Figure 27: “And I wonder how your fragrance spreads without your presence”. Line from a song by Jadal, a Jordanian pop-rock band. To the right of the line is a stencilled advertisement for hearing aids. Corniche by Ibrahimiya, Alexandria, September 2017. Source: Samuli Schielke

wall-writing also converge, when social media memes reproduce photos of wall-writing. During the intense days of revolutionary political contestation, photographs of expressive messages on walls were often shared and distributed to underline individuals’ positions. Since then, messages on walls have become increasingly distributed online as out-of-context aphoristic texts. This growing online circulation of wall-writings has in turn inspired new ways of writing on open-air walls. As the mood has become more subdued and fearful in recent years, and political wall-writing has become rarer, a different genre has become more visible: poetic messages – often lines from songs by popular bands (see figure 27).

This is a decidedly hybrid genre that thrives on the interface between the virtual and open-air walls.

Two young women I know from a village near Alexandria often post photos of wall-writing on their social media feeds, either as background images for their Facebook walls or as individual posts. They collect and save images on the Internet, where one of their main sources is the Facebook site *Gudran/Walls* (<https://www.facebook.com/godran.walls/>). The site had over 100,000 followers by the summer of 2017. It is administered by an Egyptian, but many of the wall-writings posted on the site recently appear to come from the Levant. The writings are sometimes religious, philosophical or political, but most importantly they are romantic. They often have clear literary ambitions, tending towards an aphoristic or poetic form. Many are also signed, thus laying claim to individual authorship.



Figure 28: “Never mind.” (An expression used in Egyptian Arabic as an excuse or to soothe somebody who is upset). In the comments section, M. has posted a caricature in which a person is surrounded by characters who all say “Never mind.” Posted by S. on 22 March 2017. Probably on the Alexandria seafront. Date, photographer and original source unknown

S., a university student in Alexandria in her early twenties, told me why she often posted images of this genre of graffiti on her Facebook account:

In my view, images of graffiti are better because everybody sees them and they communicate what people want to say, while posts are not seen by everyone, because images draw the attention of the eyes. [...] And besides, people interact more with an image than when you write text.

A., a university student in her late teens who lives between her village and Alexandria, saw the online images of graffiti as part of an emerging generational youth culture:

In my opinion, I find them very useful, especially after the revolution and the spread of underground artists, and they also have a better future because most people of my generation are interested in this kind of writing.

The two women’s appreciation of these hybrid messages – analogue turned digital, at once both writing and image – and their skill in dealing with them is a telling example of the transformation of both written and visual culture in the digital age. The crossover between walls of brick, mortar and wood, and digital walls is central to the attractiveness of the genre.

Just like three-dimensional wall-writings, their digital avatars are mostly anonymous. Additionally, they also become decontextualized and delocalized. Images posted on *Gudran/Walls* always contain a transcription of the message because the handwriting may be difficult to read. Some of the writings are signed, but their circulated images are never dated and never



Figure 29: “They sedated you in the artery and said: your apathy is good for the homeland”. Line from *Al-Watan* (Homeland) by the Lebanese band Mashrou’ Leila. Forwarded to me by A. on 21 July 2017. Photography and original post by Fares Abdallah, 23 February 2017. Location unknown. Source: <https://lc.cx/gTPQ>

localized, except incidentally through dialect and references to events like the Syrian civil war. Their indexical and referential relations with specific persons, conflicts, or issues are entirely, or largely, severed. They are transformed into travelling aphoristic literary texts that are appreciated as such by those who circulate them. According to A:

The images I post are by unknown people, and I don’t know what the motivation is behind the pages that upload them. ... I select them on the basis of the similarity between what is inside me and what is written. ... That is, I use these images to express what I don’t know to write in a direct manner in a Facebook post.

For A., images of wall-writing work in a way that is similar to the memorized verses of poetry, songs, and proverbs that have been part of the culture of expression in different languages since time immemorial. The digital walls of S. and A. generate something resembling a poetic map of some of their stances, moods, and public emotions. In their wall-writing posts, they both appear as romantic, sentimental, committed to their parents and families, sometimes religious, and often ironical (see figure 28). A. also often posts images that are

explicitly political or socially critical, reflecting her more outwardly rebellious attitude (see figure 29).

Some of the images A. sent me as examples were lines from songs by her favourite bands, such as the Lebanese group Mashrou' Leila in figure 29. While the images of these texts are delocalized for A. and others who circulate them, they resonate with knowledge of the entire song as well as the class habitus and world views associated with the artists and style of music. The music of Mashrou' Leila in particular resonates with a liberal, even rebellious, attitude but importantly also with (aspirations for) a bourgeois, cosmopolitan habitus. But this is not the only story A. and her virtual wall have to tell, of course: a different selection of her online posts would show her as somebody who is very committed to her mother. Like the poetry people cite since age immemorial, the images people post in the digital age move in that productively ambiguous space where they are common popular culture and intimate expression at one and the same time, and may stand in contrast to other roles and expressions they cultivate, without necessarily entering into conflict with them (Abu-Lughod 1996).

Wall-writings can thus be literature when they participate in a poetic making of moods and space that relies on words and imagination, and – most importantly – when they are read and circulated in that capacity. But in another sense, they differ from the institutional meaning of literature, because “literature” in the institutional sense has aesthetic, formal, linguistic and other mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, which wall-writing does not have.

CONCLUSION: SPEAKING OUT LOUD AND REMAINING INVISIBLE

Writings on all kinds of walls – those made of mortar, brick, and concrete as well as virtual ones – combine disclosure, anonymity, and intimacy, and cross over the conventional divisions between ordinary and literary language. This makes them interesting as historical witnesses of conversations that take place among inhabitants of a city, both straightforward and poetic.

Whenever I arrive in Alexandria (I live in Berlin but often go there for short or long visits), I take the minibus from al-Mandara to al-Manshiya and read the graffiti on the Corniche. Having read them frequently and knowing where to expect them, I also read their absences. For me, this has proven a good way to gauge a sense of the current mood and situation, because wall-writings tell me about issues that would not make it into the news (such as love affairs and job ads), and because they contain voices I may not otherwise hear of people whom I may never meet.

The people whose messages on vehicles Sayed Oweis (1999) studied in the 1960s were “silent” in the sense of being subaltern; they were not among the hegemonic voices heard in late Nasserist Egypt. And yet in Oweis's work, the subalterns certainly do speak, and eloquently so, but they do this on the

condition of their being invisible. I doubt whether 21st century wall-writers generally speak from the subaltern position in which Oweis found drivers and vendors in the late 1960s. The music of Jadal and Mashrou' Leila cited in figures 27 and 29 speaks mainly to young people who either command or aspire to a cosmopolitan sense of global connectedness (see also Tsilimpounidi 2015). Rather than being a means of expression for people who are otherwise silenced, walls are better understood as a space that is accessible to subaltern and non-hegemonic voices, but not to them alone.

Wall-writing relies on the productive tension between speaking out loud and remaining invisible. This tension makes wall-writing a very effective means of communicating and contesting public moods and values, and also of expressing impolite or aggressive positions or stances that may otherwise be censored. Wall-writing and street art therefore thrive in times of protest and conflict (Northoff 2004; *Walls of Freedom* 2014; Karathanasi 2014; Rolston 2014; Selvelli 2016; Tsilimpounidi 2015). Their ability to mark and occupy physical space makes them even more potent as a means of conflict and contestation. The rise and decline of revolutionary graffiti in Alexandria and elsewhere in Egypt since 2011 is a case in point here, but wall-writing can also be, and is, used to legitimate those in power as well as for altogether different aims. This open-endedness towards different uses – both contrary and unrelated – makes wall-writings a helpful entry point among others for understanding life in a plural, but not pluralistic city, such as Alexandria. It is a city connected by roads, railway lines, streets, and the circulation of people, goods, money, ideas, messages, and images, while at the same time divided by lines of class, demography, and religious and political faiths. Wall-writings express and make visible a plurality of stances and views, but also highlight the precarious, and at times explosive, nature of their coexistence.

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