



Stencil portrait of Khalid Sa'id, with text, "We'll be back," surrounded by campaign posters of the salafi Nour Party. Alexandria, November 2011.

SAMULI SCHIELKE

# The Writing on the Walls of Egypt

Samuli Schielke and Jessica Winegar

**W**hoever has something to say in Egypt these days can write it on a wall.

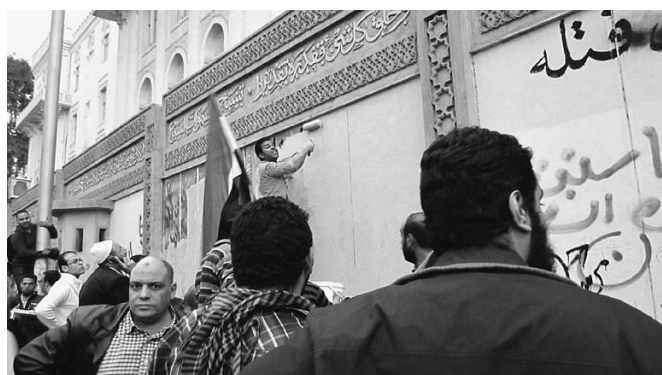
Ahmad loves Rasha; the revolution continues; build unity between Christians and Muslims; make Egypt an Islamic state. Private garage, no parking; we are all Egyptians; don't forget the martyrs of the revolution; apply for a job; those looking for marriage, call this number. ACAB (All Cops Are Bastards). Fuck the Muslim Brothers; I'm a Muslim Brother and proud. Invoke God; the ultras rule Egypt; call Hasan for television and other electrical repairs.

Religious, political, intimate, commercial and other messages fill the public spaces of Alexandria, Cairo and other towns and villages with continuous commentary. Notices can be spray-painted on the wall, written spontaneously with jumbo markers, rendered in vivid



"The revolution continues"—a campaign poster of the socialist Popular Coalition. Alexandria, November 2011.

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Pro-Mursi youth covering up graffiti painted on the wall of the Presidential Palace the night before, December 5, 2012.

JESSICA WINEGAR



A youth puts his hand on the mural of Jika to prevent it from being painted over, December 5, 2012. An argument ensues over whether Jika is a martyr. He was killed in clashes on Muhammad Mahmoud Street, according to the opposition by thugs hired by the Muslim Brothers.

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color and merged with imagery in elaborate murals, printed or hand-drawn on hanging banners, or printed on paper and affixed to the wall. They are continually adjusted, added to, layered over, crossed out or removed. As the writings appear and disappear at a rapid pace, they make the walls a site of ongoing and unfinished discussion and debate.

The international hype around the spectacular graffiti of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in Cairo, and erroneous

claims that the revolution brought graffiti to Egypt, have overshadowed the everyday presence of multiple forms of written messages. Egyptians have a long tradition of writing on the walls. Before the revolution, these writings were mostly religious entreaties, advertisements or romantic declarations, but there is also a culture of political university wall magazines dating back decades. The new writings after 2011 are a testament to rich and interrelated modes of verbal and visual expression in Egypt, of the links between politics, love, death and the struggle to make a living, of the contests in many

Samuli Schielke is research fellow at Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin. Jessica Winegar, an editor of this magazine, is associate professor of anthropology at Northwestern University.





Pro-Mursi demonstrators perform evening prayers in front of the Presidential Palace, covered with opposition graffiti, December 5, 2012. Later that evening, opposition protesters were detained and tortured nearby. JESSICA WINEGAR

aspects of Egyptians' personal and social lives.

They also stake claims to parts of cities for particular political affiliations, commercial operations, memorials or romance. Plumbers, electricians and marriage arrangers, among others, vie for the most visible walls on which to announce their services and attempt to mark certain areas as "theirs." Lovers take over other walls with their vows of fidelity. Political activists (who might also be plumbers and lovers) place dibs on still other spaces for their viewpoints. Muhammad Mahmoud Street, for instance,

Mural of Jika next to the KFC franchise in Tahrir Square, December 10, 2012. Anti-revolutionary forces from the Mubarak era to the present often accuse protesters of being fed meals from places such as KFC to entice them into a foreign conspiracy. JESSICA WINEGAR





**"Appeal to all supporters of the weak without rights in this world. I seek only justice." The notice goes on to list the license number of a car that struck another, killing the wife and daughter pictured on the top right and top left, leaving the father and son behind. Thus far, the notice says, the courts have done nothing. Alexandria, October 2011.**

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**"ACAB" (All Cops Are Bastards), signed by the White Knights, a group of soccer "ultras." Alexandria, March 2012.**

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is the domain of the "civil opposition" to the new Muslim Brother-led government. In certain alleys in Sayyida Zaynab, by contrast, one sees only pro-Brother graffiti. The image and messages of former presidential candidate and opposition leader Khalid 'Ali rule a major street in Asyout. The murals of soccer ultras dominate the eastern half of the Alexandria waterfront. Even so, most political writings on the wall are constantly effaced or replaced by alternative views. In Tahrir Square, one finds pro-Brother signs pasted over opposition graffiti.

Immediately after Husni Mubarak left office, citizens adorned Cairo with large portraits of martyrs. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) just as quickly began painting them over. Pro-SCAF youth whited out the famous image of a tank facing a panda, by the graffiti artist Ganzeer, under a bridge near a government-run youth center on Gezira island. Ganzeer and his crew returned and drew a SCAF figure with a forked tongue over the pro-junta graffiti. This well-known graffiti battlefield has been covered up with paint and scrawled upon again several times since then.

On December 4, 2012, opposition protesters gathered by the thousands in front of the Presidential Palace to protest President Muhammad Mursi's November 22 constitutional decree. That night, they transformed the palace walls, which had radiated executive privilege for 30 years with their clean, regularly applied pale yellow coating, into an explosion of oppositional political claims. Through their stenciled spray-painting of martyr images and spontaneous insults of the president, they were putting death right in the regime's face. Writing was key to this challenge to political legitimacy. The very next day, pro-Mursi demonstrators came, also in the thousands, with huge buckets of the same pale yellow paint to blot out the opposition graffiti. As two youths



atop ladders slathered the walls from top to bottom, another man assured onlookers that “this filth”—meaning the graffiti—“will be gone by tonight.” Meanwhile, two (outnumbered) opposition protesters stood defiantly by with their hands on the image of Gabir Salah or “Jika,” a young man killed in a clash with police in November. An argument erupted over whether or not Jika was a legitimate martyr, as he died in demonstrations that were, in large measure, anti-Mursi. Even some Brothers agreed with the opposition youth that the dead should not be covered up in a graffiti war. Some writings cannot be erased.

The visual experience of public space has changed fundamentally as people moving through it are constantly reminded of the different political claims to hearts and minds. These messages are mixed, physically and aesthetically, with others that were there before. Yet the older writings may have new meaning today for many Egyptians who are tired of the revolution, who feel it brought them nothing. Ahmad still cannot afford to marry Rasha; the half-broken television still airs plenty of political propaganda; and earning a living remains a struggle. In the autumn of 2010, a graffiti artist spray-painted at several spots along the Alexandria corniche a passage from a poem by Amal Dunqul: “Do not dream of a happy world / After every dead emperor comes a new emperor.” The verse expresses the political sensibility of the pre-2011 period, and for many, that mood has returned. And so life goes on. But the writing continues. At the very center of Tahrir there are no walls, but citizens have created a “museum” where visitors can write messages on pieces of paper. These notes are then hung from strings to form temporary walls, a space inside which one stands and hears the flapping of paper in the breeze and realizes that all expression is possible but also, in the end, ephemeral. ■



“The people and the army [crossed out] and the police [added, then crossed out] in the service of Egypt.” Alexandria, October 2011. SAMULI SCHIELKE

“I love you,” spray-painted amidst campaign posters and calls to prayer. Alexandria, November 2011. SAMULI SCHIELKE

