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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Street Art and the Arab Spring: The Passage from Revolution to Institution

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| ABSTRACT
In few decades, street art has succeeded in migrating from the hidden undergrounds to the open streets. Shortly after the Arab uprisings in 2011, street art has proliferated in almost all the Arab countries. Each country used it for its own purpose, producing works of art that are unique to the place where they were produced. This article traces the evolution of street art during and after the Arab Spring. Drawing from social theory, it discusses the context that catalysed the emergence of some Arab street art experiences and the dynamics that interplayed, strongly marking the artistic scene during and after the Arab Spring. The article is a prelude to further research conducted on the street art scene in the MENA region.

| KEYWORDS
The Arab Spring, street art, revolution, institution, protest, MENA region, Morocco

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1. Introduction

Street art began in the 1960s in the streets of New York, offering an opportunity for expression for the marginalized. It became part of a youth culture that aimed at gaining recognition, reputation, and respect among other subcultural groups. Graffiti was a sort of secret language among these voiceless communities. Writing on walls became, then, a chance to speak out and to be heard. It soon moved from being mere scribbled signatures playing on colours and lines to evolving into comments on different political and social issues, inviting the passerby to reflect on them. Towards the 70s, artists decided to go out of the darks of the ghetto and gain more visibility. Street art, as Hanauer (2004) confirms, is "a powerful mode of expression for those who feel ostracized by society or ignored by the media. It is often conceived as an antisocial act performed by groups or individuals" (p. 30). The act that started as simple markings on walls, signs and lampposts has developed to become pieces of art. With the invention of aerosol sprays, graffiti and tagging were everywhere. The subway cars played the role of homing pigeons that traversed the whole city carrying those people's narratives and stories, thus gaining more attention. The Sociologist Richard Lachmann (as cited in Austin, 2001) emphasised the importance of this movement element that made graffiti a uniquely dynamic art form. "Much of the best graffiti was meant to be appreciated in motion, as it passed through dark and dingy stations or on elevated tracks" (Austin, 2010, p.356). Tagging subway stations of Manhattan was a step towards introducing the ills of the poor ghettos to the glamourous high society of New York and creating a modern urban art that gathers different cultures and classes in one place. Years later, street artists officialised their presence by creating a community with a singular identity, techniques and art philosophy; that was the inception of an art that enchanted most of the world's youngsters.

In the Arab world, the start of the Arab Spring was accompanied by a burst of street art, a quite rare form of art in MENA countries. Street art has already been custom in countries such as Lebanon and Palestine where the graphic scene is considerably rich. Both countries have a developed form of street art that has been nurtured by their geographical position and the political tensions in the region. Consequently, various forms of street art developed in Egypt, Syria, Libya, and even in other conservative countries, and became symbols of the uprisings, ones that were very resonant in the public space. Demonstrations in Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt inspired people across the MENA region to express their opinions, feelings, dislikes, joys and hopes in creative ways.

Murals and graffiti were used as a new form of catharsis[1] and protest against the repressive ruling regimes. With the absence of unbiased media, protesters turned to public walls to broadcast their messages. They were aware that messages exposed in the streets could reach people directly, with no censorship or adjustment. As the revolutions continued, oppressive governments realised the real danger of this art form and started to repaint walls. Fearless protesters and artists have consistently returned to the streets, in a countermeasure, to cover walls with anti-government messages and images. The streets of Cairo, Tunis, Tripoli, and Sanaa became places where artists believed they could share stories of resistance, pay tribute to martyrs, and overturn dictators.

In Morocco, urban art is not a new phenomenon as many would think. It began with tiles, calligraphy and arabesque designs ornamenting the narrow alleys of the old medinas. Subsequently, its Western version was embraced by the young generation to display their football affiliations. Street art has become part of a youth culture of football fans who mark their territory and differentiate themselves from other supporters through tagging and spray painting their neighbourhoods' walls with symbols of their favourite football teams. They also use it to send each other messages and to express their concerns about the sports policy in Morocco. Aware of this art's influence on the youth, the Moroccan government was quick to react. The power of street art that appeared during the Arab Spring was channeled towards a more aesthetic and formal representation. Artists were offered a frame to work within; they were invited to compete with artists of the world and expose their creations publicly.

Street art has converted the raw and art-free streets into new territories of visual culture. Like Pop art, street art de-aestheticizes 'high art' and aestheticizes zones that were formerly recognised as non-art spaces. It champions freedom of speech and practice, defying all rules, and believing in art for everyone and everywhere. Street art refuses to be confined in closed spaces as museums, galleries and private collections, as it refuses to favour an audience over another. It aspires to be democratic, accessible and open to the public, uncontrolled or owned by anyone. Nowadays, artists are equipped with aerosols and invited to write on the public walls, with an 'official supervision'. The adoption of an art form by museums, art galleries and the market makes it more visible, present, and valuable. What was once banished from the walls of the art institutions is reflected back on the walls of the city. Street art offers an immediate exposure to experiences that are no less valuable than those exhibited in museums. It presents a real-life context that accurately reflects the world we live in and that is accessible to everyone.

Currently, governments are giving street art a more formal structure by institutionalising it. Street art has become a real trend that cannot go unseen. It is very ubiquitous in the streets, and more tolerated by the public. Some Arab governments have adopted this art and legalised it to become a formal art that is celebrated in art festivals and galleries as any other art form.

2. Literature Review

Throughout art history, each era has been marked by the inception of an artistic movement that has come to break with the previous artistic schools and shake artistic standards. As the art critic and curator Johannes Stahl has argued,

We have long since got accustomed to understanding art history as a succession of epochs [...] But at the same time there has always existed something outside of official art history, an unruly and recalcitrant art, which takes place not in the sheltered environs of churches, collections or galleries, but out on the street. ("10 Fine Art Trends 2021", n.d.). The early street artists came with their own rebellious artistic conceptions, free from any universal artistic or aesthetic restrictions and rules. The styles and techniques of wall writing, then, differ from one artist to another. However, street art did not emerge at the beginning as continuity to a previous art movement or as a product of a specific art school, it mainly came as an independent urban written form of communication but grew into a network eventually. Street art can, then, be considered the new 21st century art movement in the graphic and artistic realm.

These communities that have been in the dark for ages have finally found a platform to make their silenced voices heard. Writing on the wall has become more effective than speaking. Accused of being aggressive, vandal and violating the visual landscape and the public space, the ascent of graffiti incited the authorities' sanctions and attempts to eradicate it. Eventually, street art was acknowledged and embraced as a defining art form. Soon enough, the tradition passed on to other regions of the world where marginalised groups adopted street art to voice their ills and wills.

2.1. The inception of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring refers to the anti-regime uprisings that took place in different Arab countries, mainly Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen among many other countries in the region. The events started in 2011, triggered by an incident in Tunisia, where a street seller self-immolated as a reaction against the arbitrariness of the authorities. Outraged by this act of despair, the Tunisians galvanized against the ruling regime.

Most of the literature that treated the Arab Spring agrees that deep-seated animosity against the aging Arab dictatorship and their repressing forces, corruption, nepotism, unequal distribution of wealth, unemployment, and the disparity between people's aspirations and governmental reforms are among the major causes behind the rise of the Arab youth in 2011. Many papers

[1] Coined by Aristotle, the term catharsis means "to cleanse or purge", to describe the release of emotional tension that he believed spectators experienced while watching dramatic tragedy. The word "catharsis" is now used to refer to any experience of emotional release or cleansing brought about by a work of art.

discussed how social tension and discontent were the impetus for the recent uprisings in the Arab world. They also highlighted the similarities between these countries and their rulers, which created a form of contagion and emulation of a model (Kienle, 2012); in this case, the Tunisian model.

Indeed, the Jasmine revolution started in Tunisia, but the spark was quick to jump and spread like wildfire in other countries where large-scale political and social movements burst. Revolutions in different Arab countries followed where people with similar grievances took their demands to the street in an act of civil disobedience and defiance against the system. Many of these protests were conducted peacefully and later cooled down, yet others turned into armed conflicts to end up in civil wars. A wave of unrest and resistance to the ruling systems has swept the whole region and sunk it in instability.

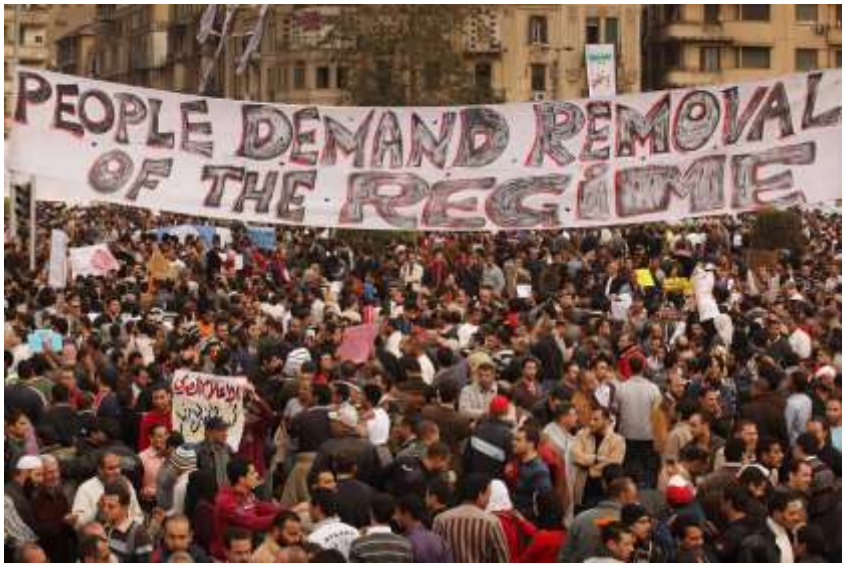

Figure 1: Protesters gathering in Tahrir Square on February 1, 2011. Photo credit: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Image

'*The people want the fall of the regime'* is the famous slogan all revolting Arab countries were chanting in the streets, uniting around the same demands: removal of the repressive regime, call for social justice and political reform. The slogans, chants, banners, flags, along with other performances, were erected in the face of forces to display a newly emerging public power that has long been taken for granted by a certain elite. By gathering in public spaces, people were asserting their presence, the claim of their fate, their determination for change and their attachment to the land.

The mass demonstrations in Tunis' Bourguiba Avenue, Cairo's Tahrir Square, and other public spaces were performances of disobedience against the authorities. Ignored by any institutional channels to claim their rights, the human tsunamis used the street as the ultimate arena to express their discontent. The street, therefore, has become a sacred site of gatherings and demonstrations since the outbreak of the revolution. Tripp (2013) assumes that the significance of these spaces relies in that "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" (pp. 6-7).

Indeed, governments have long been in control of these spaces through which they exercised dominance over the people and enforced rules to follow. Now, the protestors have reclaimed the public sphere that they have been formerly denied and excluded from. The massive protests were eventually able to decline enduring ruling regimes. Thenceforth, the flame of revolution has been burning.

2.1. The impact

Some of the very promising revolutions were crushed against the wall of rebounding autocratic governments that regained power and denied civil liberties, or continuous systems rather than changing ones. The upheavals proved the power of the masses and collective action in changing events, and the leverage of the streets over the governments. They also have shown to the world the will of nations for change, for the right of expression and freedom. However, some of these revolutions have also demonstrated the stubbornness of some regimes that preferred to sacrifice their people and never give up ruling, dragging their countries into never-ending civil wars and political instability.

People's hopes for a better and free society inverted into a more oppressive reality where thousands of people were arrested, jailed, and killed in the bloody conflicts. The Syrian revolution has created the largest 21st century refugee crisis, and while the Egyptian's substituted a military regime with a more oppressing one, Bahrain has tightened free speech by arresting and prosecuting the political opponents and revolution activists, and Libya and Yemen still undergo political unrest.

Away from the dark consequences of these protests, cultural production boomed during and after the revolution varying from political cartoons and caricatures, to rap music, graffiti and street art. Tripp (2013) argues that the evolution of art in the Arab world comes as a response to the dictatorships' pressures. The Arab Spring provided an opportunity not only to stand against censorship but also an occasion to use art as a revolutionary tool. Arab artists believed that a true revolution does not only oust a government but also changes mindsets. Art can trigger an intellectual change in Arab societies (Adel, 2011). Its role was to gather people around the same cause and to initiate a conversation within the diverse communities. This diversity and acceptance of differences have proved to be an asset in making social and political transformations. Social upheavals in the Arab world provided fertile soil for creativity and innovation, especially graffiti, one of the oldest and most politicised genres (Stelfox, 2011; LeVine, 2015).

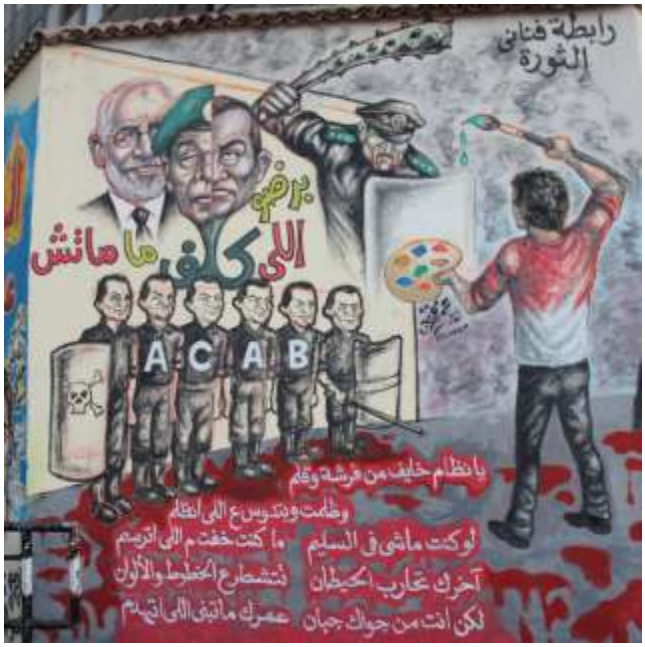

Figure 2: A piece by Omar Fathy (aka Picasso), in Cairo, 2012. Photo credit: Google

The enthusiasm that fueled the uprisings during the Arab Spring incited the artists to work collectively and anonymously to support people in the streets through their artworks. Once artistic expression is shared, it becomes a collective action (Boubia, 2015). Art during these protests, and particularly street art, had become vital to the masses to express freedom of speech and thought (Duxbury, 2019). Street artists in the Arab Spring were very creative, engaged in the cause, and willing to 'immortalise' the struggles that the nations have experienced. Artistic activism aims at social change (Duncombe, 2018). They were conscious that participating in any form of artistic intervention may result in behaviour change, a shift in individual and social consciousness, to eventually affect the state's structures and politics. Indeed, artists were at the heart of the movements, denying any personal recognition while favouring social consciousness and responsibility. The path of the 'artivist' in their resistance journey is attested to be thorny and bloody.

3. Methodology

For a better analysis and interpretation process, this article interconnects its findings with various social theories. Social theory is a scientific thinking about social life (Harrington, 2005), encompassing "ideas about how societies change and develop, about methods of explaining social behaviour, about power and social structure, class, gender and ethnicity, modernity and 'civilization', revolutions and utopias, and numerous other concepts and problems in social life" (p.1). Built upon common sense, social theory reflects on everyday life, contexts of communication about social and political issues and the interaction between people. By using well-defined concepts and analytical techniques, social sciences that are embedded within social theory try "to explain social phenomena or 'the social'" (Turner, 2008, p.3).

Social theory tends to be more concerned with the social behaviour of people, their structures and dynamics of organisation (Harrington, 2005). It deals with issues related to revolution, mass consumption and public space, all of which motivate my research problem. Firstly, it can elucidate the reasons behind governmental dependence on coercion and persistence to mould the organisational structures of society. This facilitates a discussion on the circumstances conducive to coercion, contentious behaviour, and social protest. Secondly, processes of cultural industrialisation, commercial mass production, and consumption were scrutinised by the Frankfurt School, inquiring about aspects like commodification and standardisation. The institute was at the forefront of examining the impact of a consumer society on social classes, exploring how consumption and culture industry served the interests of capitalism. In this discourse, some of the Frankfurt School scholars theorised how mass production replaced the

originality and uniqueness of artistic works and high culture. They aspired to establish media politics that would counter the mainstream culture. Thirdly, the institute approached the concept of the public sphere in its relationship to civil society and the state through the work of Habermas. The public sphere provided a platform for the bourgeoisie to shape public opinion against state power, allowing them to express their needs and interests while influencing political practices. Indeed, the Frankfurt School expressed concerns about the failure of reason to protect individuals from objectification and the deterioration of culture into mass entertainment. The individuals, in turn, relinquished their needs and desires, assimilating to a system of passivity and conformity manipulated by media industries exerting power over them.

Social theory also deconstructs the notion of ideology. Social theorists explore how individuals support the dominant class, and how ideology serves as an identity marker to position and give social meaning to individuals within the social fabric. Ideology offers individuals a structure through which they can recognise themselves and others. The "ideological subjection of the subject" (Harrington, p.184) has influenced discussions about class, structure and cultural order. This interest in individuals as a subject is also shared by Bourdieu (as cited in Harrington, 2005, p.216). One of the prominent thinkers in social theory, Bourdieu developed a social theory that explained the institutional realities of modern society without discarding individual agency. This latter is imposed by the culture of belonging. According to Bourdieu, culture exists independently of individual knowledge and understanding, and is shaped by socio-economic positions

Globalisation is another issue that is seminal in social theory. It cannot be limited to economic terms but also accounts for the global spread of political, cultural, and religious institutions and ideas. Since markets are a key driving force behind economic globalisation, global capitalism is now structured around global cities, such as New York, London, Frankfurt, and Tokyo, which are the centres of economic power. Power relations are no longer defined by national boundaries but by the relationships between global cities. Traditional national societies are being replaced by this new transnational network (Harrington, p.295). Moreover, social theory explains the process of urbanisation, which began largely as a result of the Industrial Revolution, involving the migration of many people from rural areas to urban settings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The growth of cities created numerous difficulties for those who had to adjust to urban life (Ritzer, 2011). Defined by its focus on the city and its problems, the Chicago School of Sociology was intrigued by these concerns.

4. Results and Discussion

The role of art does not only consist in imitating the events but in broadening the scope of the viewer's perceptions, as well. Art provokes, disturbs, and forces the viewer to see what is in between the lines. People tend to rationalise art as being 'unreal' and just 'art' as a way to escape reality, while art focuses on the unseen and the untold.

The Arab Spring inspired many artists to unleash their artistic creativity and contribute to the events each in their genre. After the Arab Spring revolutions, art has become more a tool to portray the revolution than an entertainment. The Arab artistic spirit that was long accused of being latent has eventually responded to the hectic events. Street art has been omnipresent during the revolution. Hall et al. (1975) regard street art as a form of political resistance that can be interpreted as an act of protest against unprivileged conditions. Street art was privileged as it served the cause of the uprisings. It advocates two main causes: the questioning of authority and the desire to end up corruption, or the promotion of a certain agenda through propaganda. While the line between the two causes is often blurred, it is undeniable that art is a powerful tool that affects social consciousness.

4.1. Urban art in Tunisia

'DÉGAGE' was the Tunisians' call to chase Ben Ali's regime that had been suffocating them for more than 20 years. State media acted a blackout, distorting the events of the revolution. With the fall of the regime, public opinion in Tunisia replenished, allowing an artistic effervescence of all forms. Rizk (2015) links that creativity to revolution. She believes that "this vibrant wave of creativity was arguably a reflection of a flaring revolutionary passion, in part reviving previously prohibited art forms that touched on sensitive socio-political issues" (p.48). In other words, revolution opens the door for art to discuss taboos.

The revolution led to an outburst of artistic creativity in Tunisia, mainly urban art such as rap music, break dancing, street theatre, and graffiti. It gave a voice to the youth, a voice that was previously silenced and excluded from the autocratic discourse. Street artists, also, had their say in the events. Artists like Zoo Project[2] and the group Zwawla[3] were among the very few artists who used graffiti to document the revolution (figure 4). The use of graffiti becomes a means of commemoration to the martyrs and a 'counter-narrative' to the official version of the dramatic events that happened in the street (Abaza, 2013).

The works of Zoo Project mainly represented the people who were killed in the conflicts by the police during the Jasmine revolution, while Zwawla's graffiti commonly consisted of anti-regime slogans. "A graffiti artist must remain anti-system. We do graffiti to

[2] Zoo project is a French Algerian artist who moved to Tunisia with the breakout of the revolution. He was found dead shortly after.

[3] Zwawla, meaning poor men, is a group composed of 20-24-year-old graphic arts students. The group was prosecuted, and their trial started a huge polemic in Tunisia.

denounce the regime and not to praise a certain political figure that embodies the system"[4], said Feriel, a member of the Zwawla group, in an interview with *Nawaat* online magazine (Chennaoui, November 2014, para.4).

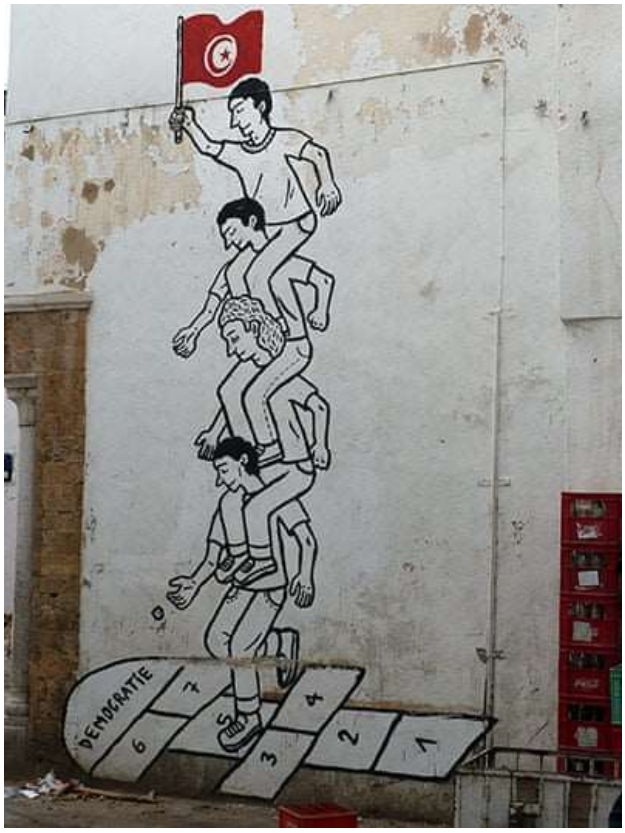

Figure 4: A mural by Zoo project in 2011. Photo: The Guardian

Artists from different backgrounds agree that the art they present aims to reclaim the public space they had been denied and has long been occupied by the forces. Through their works of art, they claim that public space. "Through this street art, we reappropriate the public space"[5], commented Elyès Mejri, one of the founding members of *Ahl El Kahf* [6] to Les Observateurs France 24 online (Grira, May 2011, para.11). Unfortunately, many of these potent murals have been washed out, leaving the floor for another form of murals, "this new generation was struggling for new spaces to express their views on their own terms" (Saidani, 2019, p.116).

The post-revolutionary Tunisia opened up to a more international street art trend. Graffiti and murals of different artists from all around the world can be found now embellishing the streets of Tunisia. Although Tunisia took the lead in starting the revolution that altered the whole region, Tunisian street art was not as remarkable as the Egyptian one. In fact, rap music predominated in the revolutionary scene in Tunisia.

4.2. War of walls in Egypt

Egypt has the lion's share when it comes to writings that either describe or analyse the artistic situation. Street art flourished in almost the majority of Arab streets after the Arab uprisings. It is believed that the political revolution incited an unprecedented cultural renaissance in most of the countries involved in the upheavals. The Egyptian street art, in particular, was one of the most powerful reactions after Hosni Mubarak was ousted in 2011. Abaza relates this reaction and vibrancy of the streets to the marginalisation of protesters from decision-making by the ruling regime.

[4] Original comment : « Le graffeur doit rester anti-système. Nous faisons des graffitis pour dénoncer le système et non pas pour faire l'éloge d'une figure politique qui incarne le système… »

[5] Original comment :"À travers cet art de rue, nous nous réapproprions l'espace public".

[6] *Ahl El Kahf* is a group founded by three artists who performed graffiti during the revolution. the group wanted to revive the underground art in Tunisia. The name of the group is inspired by the story of Ahl El Kahf, people of the cavern, present in the Quran and in Christian texts.

Much ink has been spilled over the rise of street art in Egypt. Scholars from different countries were interested in post-revolution Arab art and related it to different topics and themes. Scholars such as Mehrez (2012), Khatib (2013), Abaza (2013, 2014), Pruitt (2017), among many others, have all analysed the reclaiming of urban space by street artists in the post-Mubarak era, discussed artists' works such as Ganzeer, interviewed artists of revolution, offered a timeline of street art evolution during the Arab spring, studied the connections between street art and activism, and interpreted the dynamics of image and social media in the middle east, especially during the recent Arab revolution. Even more journalists documented and commented on the event, declaring it 'an awakening'. Street walls almost replaced newspapers in reporting the evolution of the revolution (Khatib, 2013). In 2011, The New York Times proclaimed Cairo as the street art capital of the region, while the social media platforms covered the spread of street art in Egypt and equated "the liberation of the artists to the liberation of the country" (Pruitt, 2017, p.4).

Artists from different backgrounds, artistically educated or autodidact, united to paint the streets of Cairo and depict the events that took place during the uprisings. A group of young artists working in the street, including Ganzeer, Keizer, El Teneen, Hosni and Hany Khaled have been actively engaged in the revolution. Artists during and after the revolution have decidedly become agents of change in society. When asked about the choice of graffiti rather than other art forms, Ganzeer confirmed in an interview with *Al Jazeera* that he "chose graffiti over other types of artistic expression because there was a need for alternative media… street art is the only way we can tell our story" (Hussain, May 2012, para.8). Interestingly, if artists felt the urge to paint and write on walls, so many young people also wanted to paint to express their frustration.

The outbreak of the revolution emphasised the role of public space in exerting pressure on authority and decision-making. In the Egyptian revolution, Tahrir[7] Square was the beating heart of mass demonstrations. It already had a historical connotation, being the place of gathering, contestation and liberation. With the rise of protest, the Square has regained its iconic meaning and become the space per se of confrontation, riot, performance, presentation, painting, and recording the bloody events. On the importance of this space, Abaza (2013) comments that "Tahrir Square did trigger a powerful process for advocacy of freedom through reshaping street politics" (p. 125). She continues by saying that Tahrir Square triggered a new visual culture that raised political consciousness and allowed people some visibility, while Mehrez (2013) considered the descent to it during the uprisings as a formulation of "a novel understanding of public spaces as spaces of contestation, communication and debate, as spaces of the spectacle" (p.5). Tahrir Square along with Mohammed Mahmud Street, the main street leading to the square, has been the iconic heart of the revolution; mainly because of the dramatic but memorable events that happened there. "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", underlines Tripp (2013, p.7).

Figure 5: No Walls graffiti in Cairo's streets. Photo credit: Huck magazine

During the uprisings, the city of Cairo was divided into zones. Consequently, many streets were barricaded or blocked, hindering the movement of protestors. Walls were destroyed and others built, cutting Cairo's main streets and avenues. They were a clear sign of oppression as much as resistance, since artists used these newly constructed walls for graffiti, insults and jokes against the authority. A group of artists and graffiti writers organised an initiative under the name of 'No Walls' in 2012 to turn the concrete walls into an imaginary space inspired by Banksy's trompe l'oeil works (figure 5).

[7] *Tahrir* means liberation in Arabic.

The overtly political graffiti was whitewashed by the ruling military council. The act of whitewashing the walls triggered a 'wall battle' in which the artists and forces entered in skirmishes in which the forces washed the walls and the artists repainted them. "People forget that the streets belong to the people. They think that they're some kind of official government-controlled entity. I think it's important to remind people that they're not", said Ganzeer[8] to The Christian Science Monitor's correspondent, commenting on this claim for public space (Chick, May 2011, para. 4). Most of the walls that were highly significant with striking messages and drawings were washed over but can be found online. Aware that the ruling authority would not allow such murals to live in the streets, artists were documenting their writings online. Whether political or artistic, both powers clashed to claim the public space.

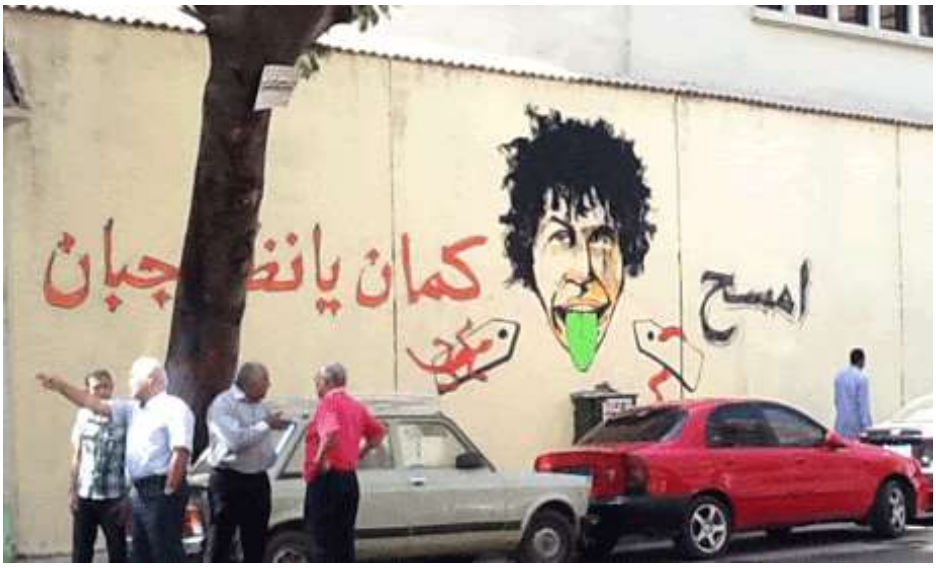

Figure 6: 'Wipe again, ô coward regime', mural painted after the removal of murals previously covering the walls of Mohamed Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo. Photo credit: Ahram online

Not only that, but the capitalist warrior also claimed its share in the wall battle. The advertising sector seized the opportunity to promote their products. They had the hold of streets and walls to pass their commercial slogans in a revolutionary way. This sabotage and commodification of the revolution pushed the artists to get a grip once again on the streets.

Accompanying revolutions with street artworks is not specific to Egypt and its streets; the tradition has always been that in most political protests where walls were covered with messages. After the Arab Spring revolution, graffiti was ubiquitous in the streets of Tunis or the Libyan Sirte. However, despite the unified voices that called out for the downfall of the authoritarian regimes, each country has developed its own 'idiosyncratic' street art. What can be noted, as Khatib (2012) has underlined, is that street art created a new public sphere that raised awareness about issues that used to be taboos or prohibited.

4.3. Fearless walls in Libya and Syria:

Libya and Syria were the next in line to contract the revolution fever; but unlike the former countries, they are still unstable. Revolution in Libya and Syria was also people's revolution par excellence. People took to the street to break the shackles of a firm, enduring and repressive regime. While the Libyans succeeded in achieving this goal, the Syrians were thwarted. This said, street art in Libya and Syria seems to be less sophisticated than their Egyptian or Tunisian counterparts, yet similarly meaningful and politically laden.

Street art erupted in the Libyan streets in the early days of the protests that ended forty-two years of tyranny. Artists in Libya had long been at the service of Ghaddafi who self-proclaimed himself the one and only artist. Most works of graffiti and street art in post-revolution Libya are a commemoration and a reminder of what was fought for. With the retrieval of the dreadful regime and its forces, walls, and public space have become the canvases for visual art. Tripp (2013) recounted how people in the Libyan city of Benghazi in 2011 made use of time and space to represent in "colorful and elaborate ways what was at stake in the conflict" (p. 11). In the same token, Salah Amr who is a political cartoonist, notes how his pictures would have cost him his life if Ghaddafi was still in power while he can now draw his popular cartoons anywhere.

[8] Muhamad Fahmy Ganzeer is one of the most famous and influential Egyptian artists during the uprisings.

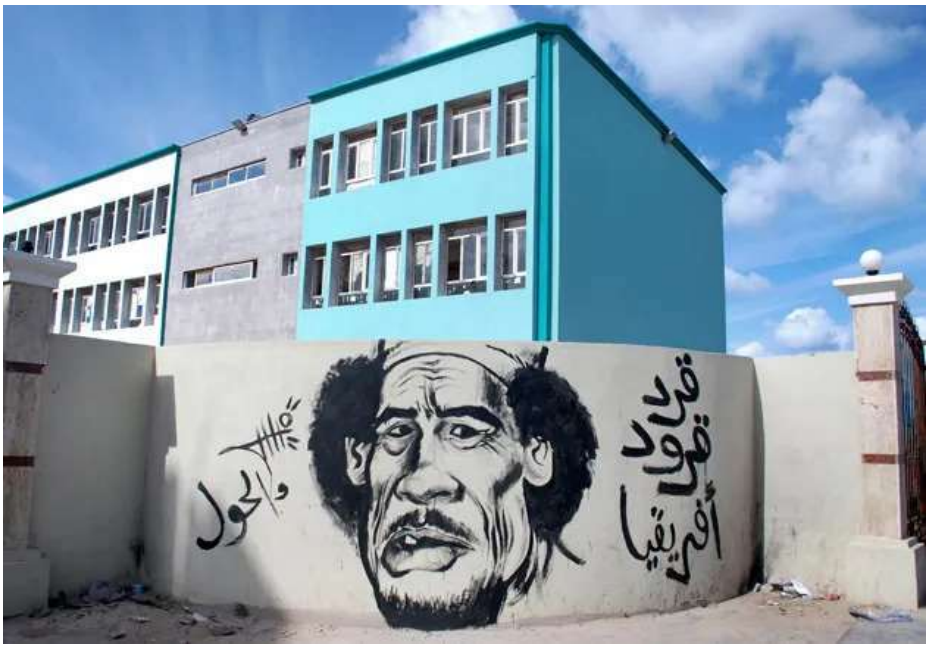

Figure 7: "The monkey of Africa's monkeys", Libya. Photo credit: justiceinconflict.org

In a country whose ruler had a glorified ego, nurtured by decades of oppression, intimidation and torture, most of the street artworks featured mocking or ridiculing representations of him. Ghaddafi was belittled as revenge for his formerly feared figure (figure 7). Other works passed on messages of unity and patriotism, reminded of the fallen victims, or praised ancestral leaders that marked the Libyan imaginary consciousness, mainly Omar El Mokhtar. Street art, later, has taken on more youthful and free forms.

To escape censorship in Syria, visual art was either abstract or dealing with universal themes transcending any political stand. The slogan written on the wall calling for the toppling of the Baath regime, was the message that initiated the whole revolution that has not settled down yet. The message on the wall was the flare that set the whole nation on fire. Streets were destroyed, cities were bombed, people were killed and millions were exiled, leaving the country in ruins.

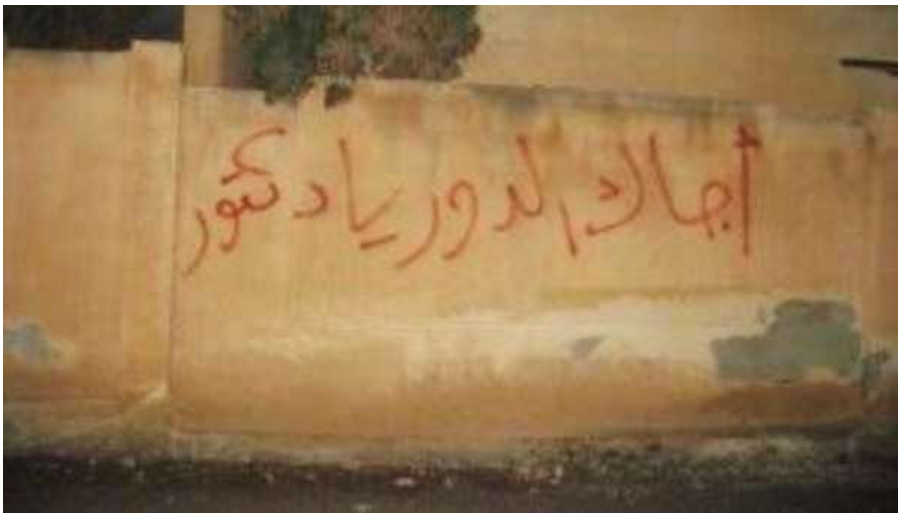

Figure 8: "Your Turn Has Come, Doctor". Slogan by the children from the Syrian city of Daraa in 2011. Photo credit: the New Humanitarian

Abdalla Omari, a painter and filmmaker from Damascus, believes that rebellion is intrinsic to art; "Art is rebellion against rules and norms, and an attempt to construct new rules and norms, (…) That's why the documentation through art began from the moment these kids in Daraa wrote the slogans on the walls" (Mahmoud, May 2016, para. 8). The Syrian forces tried to contain the graffiti movement that emerged with the uprising. They responded to the opposition messages with other writings on the wall that praised

and quoted former president Hafiz Al Assad. Unlike in Egypt, Syrian graffiti was not graphically sophisticated and was mostly made of slogans. It was mainly written at night, far from the spying eyes of the authority. The simple act of writing on the wall was a challenge to the regime, and those who were caught were arrested, tortured and killed. One may say that the walls in Syria were painted with the artists' blood.

However, displaced Syrian artists still contribute to the Syrian street art movement by working from abroad. "The Syrian art scene can be said to have mobilized out of the country's borders", explains Cusenza (2019, p.2) in her article on Syrian artists. They work to capture the suffering of their people during the war. They all agree that their art is an attempt to draw a 'brighter future' for their country and to spread hope. Exiled Syrian artists use street art to support not only their homeland from afar, but also neighbouring countries, such as Lebanon.

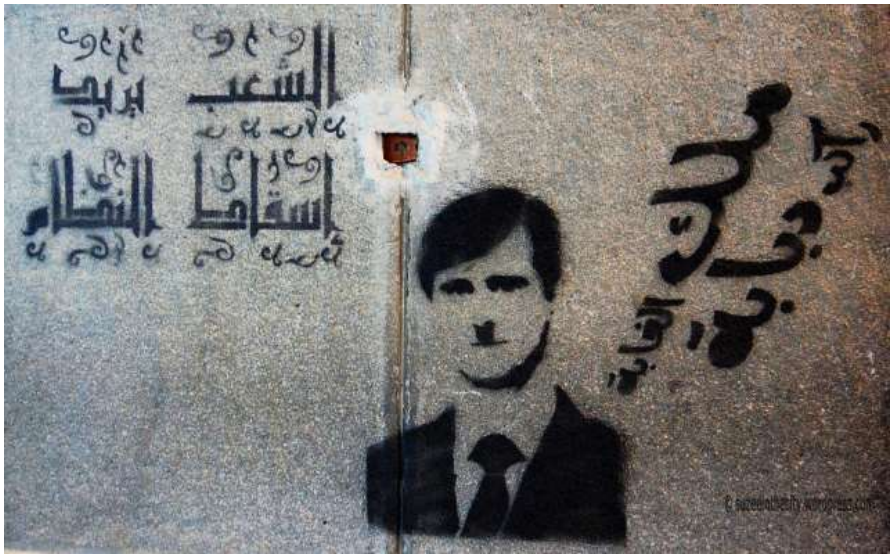

Figure 9: A piece made in Beirut in support of the Syrian revolution. Photo credit: huffingtonpost

In Lebanon, most of street art that was produced after the revolution was supportive of the uprisings in the other Arab countries. Being relatively open, artists from different nationalities commented on the revolution in Syria through graffiti. They used the war as a substance for their artworks. Activists organised a pro-Syria campaign where the walls in the Streets of Beirut were painted and anti-Al Assad slogans were written. In fact, it has always been the case where regimes cooperated and covered for each others' deeds to remain in power; it is now people's turn to stand by each other even if only symbolically. The support campaign did not stop at the Lebanese level; it traveled to reach the walls of the streets of Cairo and Gaza.

4.4. Walls for all:

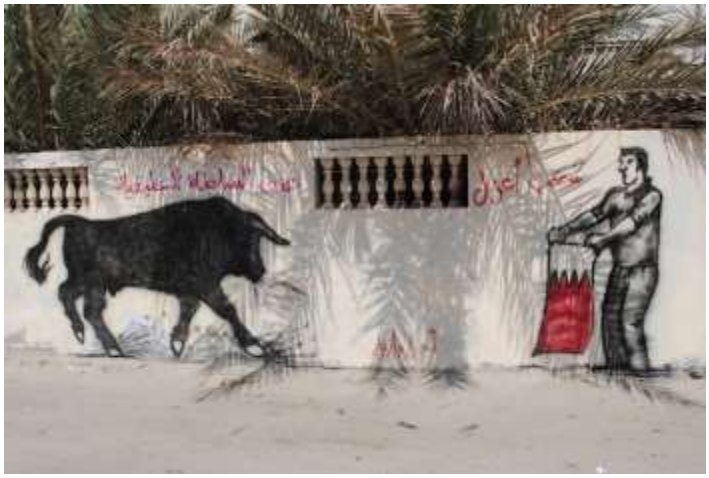

Figure 10: Unarmed people vs. the violence of the ruling family, Bahrain. Photo credit: Google

Street art has sprouted differently in Arab countries based on the land where it was sowed. Some of the countries that were affected by the Arab Spring revolution responded differently to the visual art's explosion. For Demerdash (2012), graffiti and other visual forms have unquestionably worked to build a "community and solidarity" (p.11). In other words, despite the political disparity, artistic reaction succeeded in unifying the revolting countries.

Bahrain is one of the Gulf countries in which people have reacted to the Arab uprisings through street art. In 2011, people turned to Manama's Pearl roundabout with graffiti, posters, and other artifacts to express their opposition to the political elite and call for change. Similar to the aforementioned countries, most of the street art was slogans or drawings that paid tribute to the heroes and martyrs who fell during the confrontations with the forces. The protestors also used graffiti to oppose former decisions such as the organisation of the Formula 1 race in their country. The authority answered positively by canceling the event. However, most of the graffiti pieces were censored and monitored by the authorities who pushed them to the suburbs while cleaning the centre of the city from any politically charged writings on the wall.

The political turmoil has, subsequently, rested but the street art scene has not. The political movement in Bahrain escalated from calling for reform to the calls for the downfall of Al Khalifa. Similarly, street art in Bahrain evolved from being political slogans, messages and drawings accompanying the protestors to a very sophisticated graffiti art of an international level. Bahrain has known an expansion in the street art movement that can be counted as one of the most developed and organised in the region. With the governmental funding, annual art festivals and initiatives are now being organised. *Alwaan 338* festival started in 2012 celebrating all forms of art, particularly street art, and inviting artists from all over the world to participate in the collective artistic dialogue, making Bahrain one of the most active street art spots in the region.

As far as Jordan and Morocco are concerned, they were the least affected by the tidal wave of the Arab revolution in 2011. People in both countries went to the streets to demand social and political reform but the tension was quickly absorbed by enacting a constitutional reform. In his reading of the events, Kienle (2012) believes that:

The relative calm and limited political change in Jordan and Morocco highlight the advantages of monarchies able to balance the lack of rents and resources with institutions that provide a degree of representation and participation without threatening the dominant role of the unelected sovereign. (p.552)

Despite the absence of political graffiti and murals during the protests and the rapid containment of the upheavals in both countries, the artistic scene bloomed subsequently. Different forms of art flourished after the revolution and street art is one of them. The two countries currently organise renowned art festivals that attract street artists from different nationalities.

"Amman is full of empty walls that need to be covered," comments Muath Isaeid, the organiser of the annual *Baladak*[9] Street Art Festival in an interview with The National (Talty, July 2018, para.2). It is the biggest street art festival held in the capital Amman. The festival attracts artists and tourists from around the globe. Instead of being subversive, the murals are cosmetic in that they embellish parts of the city and introduce it to the public. The festival has become a visual map that allows visitors to get to know the city of Amman.

In his article in The Jordan Times, Al Deek (2018) stresses the fact that the peculiar underground culture that developed in Jordan is "an effort to articulate a sociopolitical discourse, which years of regional unrest have made more than necessary" (para.3). He also emphasises the fact that the Jordanian graffiti and graphic realm is still a virgin land that was not academically exploited; only a few foreign studies have been conducted to research the phenomenon.

Figure 11: Mural by Dina Saadi in Baladak festival, Jordan 2018. Photo credit: Google

[9] The Arabic word for "your country"

Jordan and Morocco were brothers in arms in their battle to avoid the fate of the adjacent regimes. In Morocco, the movement calling for social justice and political reform was led by a young group of activists under the name of the 20 February Movement (The date on which the 'Moroccan revolution' started). The Moroccans joined their voices to their Arab counterparts, yet the authorities' intervention was less violent.

The King hurried to announce a referendum that aimed at constitutional change. Other changes followed later. These reforms enabled Morocco to become an exception compared to the neighbouring countries. In its report on the research conducted in twelve countries about mass protests, Freedom House (2015) concluded that in Morocco, "the monarchy tactically responded to protesters' demands and prevented a structural shakeup" (p.44).

The shakeup was not avoided, though, in the artistic arena. Since the revolution was initiated by the youth, this latter seized more space to express themselves. Street art was one of these spaces that were open to the young generation. Moroccan street art has taken a different path from the Egyptian or the Syrian ones which were revolutionary to the core. The openness to the world that Morocco is adopting in all its political transactions is also reflected artistically. Street art in Morocco is now open to the international visual scene, championing dialogue between different cultures and exchange of views. The organisation of annual and fixed art festivals offers both local and international artists, a chance to share experiences and draw collective walls. Therefore, art festivals have gained fame, and street art contagion jumped to smaller cities that now celebrate it locally.

Unlike Egyptian street art which monopolises academic coverage and analysis, studies on street art in Morocco remain very shy or limited to few media reports or personal blogs. The few existing writings delve into the emergence of the 20 February Movement and its relation to the social movements' phenomenon and youth culture. Marmié (2019) has underlined the characteristics of street art in Morocco and how it does not stand in confrontation with the state. This lack of exploitation has triggered my interest in diving into Moroccan street art in comparison to the other street art that flourished after the last Arab revolution.

In 2015, the president of the National Museums Foundation, Mehdi Qotbi, declared that urban art was made from and to the street, but has resisted being stigmatised as urban pollution to become a major art acknowledged in the artistic and cultural arenas [10]. Street art festivals such as *Jidar* in Rabat, *Sbagha Bagha* and *Casamouja* in Casablanca, and La Biennale in Marrakech have now fixed dates and yearly editions. Other Moroccan cities also participate in the visual culture of the country by hosting their own street art ceremonies. Such festivals celebrate street art and public space by exhibiting works of famous street artists from around the globe, organising master classes, art discussions, press conferences, and exhibitions in museums and galleries. In a country where museums are not people's first attraction, arts festivals are important sites that offer a civic space to stage art. They offer an outdoor museum experience different from the confines of closed museums and galleries. They transform street walls into canvases and allow the public to move freely from one performance to another, as they transform the identity of art institutions from hierarchical constructions to a more flexible, dynamic and democratic space of cultural exchange. For Pieprzak (2015), arts festivals are one form of the ephemeral outdoor museum. This latter is "a mobile and temporary site, it has the promise of serendipitous interaction with heterogeneous publics, and dislodges the idea that culture is an object to be located in a central, static and symbolic temple" (p.2).

[10] "*L'art urbain créé dans la rue et pour la rue était exercé autrefois illégalement dans les quartiers et était considéré comme une pollution urbaine, mais cet art a su résister pour devenir aujourd'hui un art majeur et une forme d'expression reconnue des milieux artistiques et culturels… il présente de plus l'avantage d'ouvrir la culture aux jeunes*". https://blog.courrierinternational.com/my-little-maroc/2017/01/27/le-phenomene-street-art/

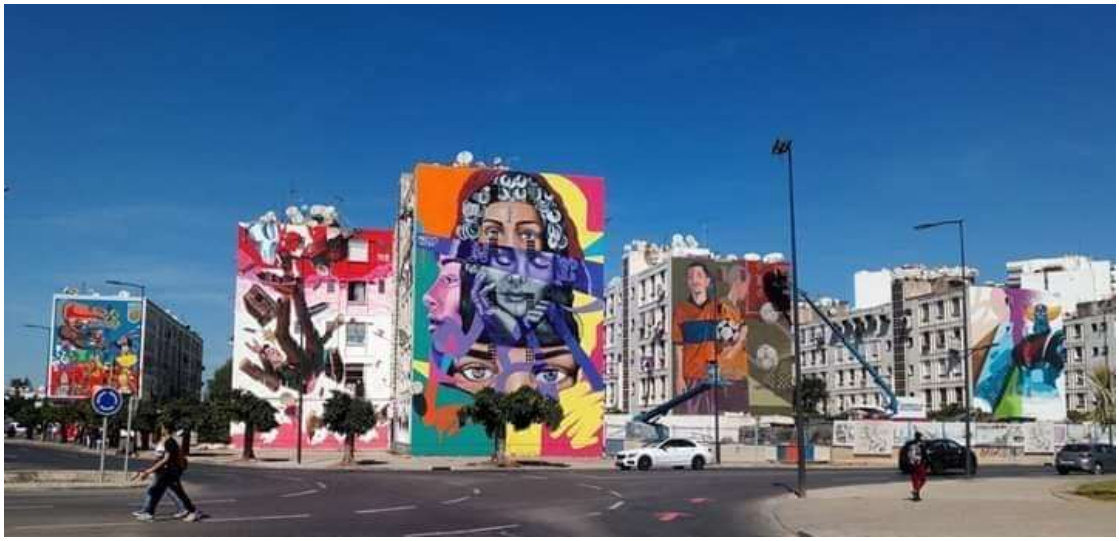

Figure 12: Pieces of street art works from Casablanca, Morocco. Photo credit: Google

Street art in Morocco translates to the global trend towards asthecising and standardising the cities of the world. Art is used as an urban strategy to unify the urban look, embellish public space and make it a liveable and breathable space to be at. It was employed to enliven and enrich the city's visual scene, promote tourism and engage young artists socially, and create job opportunities for them. Moroccan street art was institutionalised to revolutionise the city and public space.

During and after the revolution, street art was the magic tool for artists and people who were taken amid the event to vent their frustrations and share their stories away from media blackout, censorship, and distortion. It has proven to be a passive but potent form of civil resistance against despotism and a powerful message of unity and freedom.

Street art insists on writing 'history' that would not be effaced despite the ephemeral nature of its works. As long as artists continue to flood the streets of cities with their works of art, leaving a mark and an impact, street art will continue to gain significance and meaning. Its dynamics, techniques, styles, and codes will continue to communicate with an audience of passersby and artists, and travel borders to inform and inspire.

5. Conclusion

This article is contextualised within the timeframe of the Arab Spring in the MENA region. It addresses the revolutionization of street art during the 2011 uprisings, and the adoption of street art by state institutions. It raises questions about the acceptance of such a notorious art by the higher authority in the country. One wonders if this interest in street art does not hide other motives, or if this decision comes in the realm of the new art policy in the MENA region to enrich the visual artistic scene and to orient the artists' anger towards a milder form of expression. Moreover, many would think that organising street art festivals is a way of acculturating and conditioning this art to make it more entertaining and less transgressive.

Although street art belongs to the street, it now tends to melt into the 'mainstream' culture. If tags and graffiti were fought before, they would now be more accepted and appreciated by the public. They gain more popularity by colouring the daily, customising the city walls and telling stories about people and events. Not only that but street art events worked as visibility vehicles by creating platforms for those mural representations. Furthermore, merchandizing street art forms involves it in the very norms it used to fight.

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