

The Graffiti Revolution: An Expression of Political Dissent at a Time of Crisis

Book Review

By [Eric Walberg](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Review of *Ard ard (Surface-to-surface): The story of a graffiti revolution*

Sheif Abdel-Megid

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Graffiti — the art of the masses, by the masses, for the masses — has existed since ancient times, with examples dating back to ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, and arguably to Pharaonic Egypt. Sherif Abdel-Megid, a writer who works for Egyptian television, boasts that Egypt's revolution and the explosion of popular art that followed it finds its roots in the decay of the Sixth dynasty in Egypt's Old Kingdom, following the reign of Pepi II (2278-2184 BC), credited with having the longest reign of any monarch in history at 94 years (Mubarak, eat your heart out). His own decline paralleled the disintegration of the kingdom and it is thanks to Pharaonic graffiti that we know about it.

In modern times, graffiti continues to explode during periods of social unrest. The student protests and general strike of May 1968 saw Paris bedecked in revolutionary, anarchist, and situationist slogans such as *L'ennui est contre-révolutionnaire* ("Boredom is counterrevolutionary") and *Lisez moins, vivez plus* ("Read less, live more"). It also is a rapidly growing art form in Israel/ Palestine and Iran. The Israeli West Bank barrier has become a site for graffiti, reminiscent of the Berlin Wall.

Egypt's latest revolution is no exception to the rule of graffiti. Its messages are visually inventive and at times both highly emotive and entertaining, with a chaotic mix of Arabic and English, as befits a revolution against the global order's very own Pharaonic potentate.

Al-Ahram Weekly featured AUC's bestseller exploring the popular art of the revolution *Messages from Tahrir: Signs from Egypt's Revolution* by a collective of photographers, including editor and medical doctor Karima Khalil. Megid's *Surface-to-surface*, winner of the LE10,000 prize for best art book at the Cairo Book Fair, is a fine complement to Khalil's.

Most graffiti is handdrawn but much is also stencilled and spray painted. An inspiration for Megid and the greatest contemporary graffitist is the British Banksy — his actual identity is unknown to avoid arrest. His political, anti-war stencil art can be seen from Los Angeles to Palestine, is sought after by art galleries, and auctioned for large sums, though he spurns this attempt to co-opt him: "When you go to an art gallery you are simply a tourist looking at the trophy cabinet of a few millionaires."

Banksy's art highlights the classic controversy: vandalism vs art. Art supporters endorse his works and some councils, such as his home town Bristol, have officially protected them, while other officials have deemed his work to be vandalism and have removed it. Banksy's targets are war, capitalism, fascism, imperialism, authoritarianism, greed, poverty, hypocrisy, boredom, despair, absurdity, and alienation (whew), using (and poking fun at) the spirit of anarchism. In summarising his list of "people who should be shot", he lists, "Fascist thugs, religious fundamentalists, and people who write lists telling you who should be shot." While describing his political nature, Banksy declared that, "Sometimes I feel so sick at the state of the world, I can't even finish my second apple pie."

Governments invariably take a hard line on this disruption of the status quo. Most famously, Britain's New Labour passed the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 — "Graffiti is not art, it's crime" — and in August 2004, the Keep Britain Tidy campaign called for zero tolerance of graffiti and banned the sale of aerosol paint to anyone under the age of 16. Artists in Britain have been imprisoned for up to two years and even lackadaisical property owners who tolerate graffiti are fined.

Megid is a great fan of Banksy, who has contributed his graffiti to the project to turn the Israeli separation wall into a huge outdoor art gallery, while making fun of Israel, "turning reality on its head". His favourite: a little girl frisking an IDF soldier.

Megid's revolutionary credentials as graffitoman are impeccable: his father was a Communist and imprisoned from 1959-63. He was a bona fide working class intellectual, writing poetry in Nubian. "He would have been on the frontline during the revolution," Megid told the *Weekly* proudly. Sherif inherited his father's love of the printed word, and managed to get work in TV writing scripts. In 2007 he organised an exhibition Walls which was praised in New York's Fray Magazine and shown at the El-Sawi Culture Wheel.

In 2009 graffiti began to appear spontaneously in Egypt with the growing opposition to the Mubarak dictatorship. Apart from propaganda on school walls, the Culture Ministry only allowed public art that was devoid of politics. "After the revolution, the genie was out of the bottle," explained Megid to the *Weekly*. "The main gallery for graffiti has been Mohamed Mahmoud, Saad Zaghlul, Abdel-Minam Ryad and Falaki Square. It was like a collective sigh of relief, inspiring the people. The streets became an open-air exhibition ground, with ordinary people interacting with artists during the creative process, finding mutual inspiration," Megid told the *Weekly*.

Sherif's title *Surface-to-surface* suggests graffiti is the artistic answer to military attempts to change society. He dedicates the book to all the revolutionaries and the artists who took part in this historic moment in Egypt's art history. In its pages you can see Khaled Said, whose martyrdom in 2010 was the catalyst for Egypt's revolution, just as Mohamed Bouaziz sparked the revolution in Tunisia. Other revolutionary icons immortalised (at least temporarily) include Google executive Wael Ghonim, martyred artist Ahmed Basiumi, and Lieutenant El-Batron who was killed defending his station from escaped prisoners.

Not all artists are trained, but they make a bridge with the people. Graffiti in Sherif's view is "one of the heroes of the revolution, inseparable from it, taking inspiration from it and inspiring revolutionaries." He is already working on a second volume devoted to Ultras graffiti which he hopes will be off the press in June.

Unfortunately for hawagas, there is no English title and no captions to identify the contents

of the various graffiti, but this book earned its Book Fair First Prize as a valuable archive of the revolution. Perhaps a second edition can add some English and captions for non-Egyptians. So, graffitophiles, take note of the ISBN number. It is available at the Egyptian Association for Books retail store near Maspero and at Amr Bookstore near El-Felfela restaurant in Talaat Harb.

Reviewed by Eric Walberg

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Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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