In the West, satire and irony have always been regarded as inseparable companions of the flowering genre of urban street art. The art of graffiti in the United States and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s was widely acknowledged as a provocative expression of underground subcultures. It does not take much to determine that the internationally known English graffiti artist Banksy owes his success to the creation of extremely bizarre and ironic visual reversals in his graffiti; reversals that directly challenge power and authority, and that mock established norms by simultaneously evoking perplexity and laughter. Banksy gained a worldwide reputation through inventing new expressions of anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment "guerrilla-art".\(^1\) The ironic reversal of a child searching an armed

\[^{1}\] Anna Waclawek: Graffiti und Street Art, Berlin 2012, 33.
soldier became an iconic graffito that satirically conveyed a most illogical power relationship between colonizer and colonized. Banksy’s trompe l’oeil landscapes were very powerful in mocking the apartheid wall erected by Israeli occupation precisely because they aspired to freedom by breaking down walls.²

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Picture 3: "I want to kiss you". Near the gate of the Ahli Club, Zamalek, Cairo. 14 November 2012.

The January 2011 revolution in Egypt mesmerized the world by conveying two strong conflicting and yet parallel emotions. On the one hand, the extraordinary courage of the people who no longer feared to confront police vehicles, tear gas, bullets and the blatant brutality of the Mubarak regime, and who suffered a horrendous death toll during the first days of the revolution, symbolized an epical moment in street battles against a ruthless dictatorship. On the other hand, these unforgettable moments were followed by the occupation of Tahrir Square that caught world attention through the chanting, slogans, biting text messages, irony, spontaneous jokes and irreverent sense of humour that Egyptians are famous for. This humour drew the attention of many observers, who pointed to the highly sardonic aspect of the revolution from the very start. Heba Salem and Kantaro Taira dedicated a chapter to this in Samia Mehrez’s important recent volume on the revolution. They elaborated brilliantly on the crucial significance of the well-established tradition of the joke, the nuktah, in Egypt’s political culture. Salem and Taira rightly described it as "the laughing revolution (al-thawra al-dahika)" precisely because of "the very structure and instant dissemination of the jokes themselves, which were inspired to a great extent by both traditional and social media discourses, forms and languages."³ Laughter is once again one of the most pervasive weapons that challenge tyranny.⁴

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² Waclawek: Graffiti und Street Art (see FN 1).
⁴ Salem / Taira (see FN 3), 185.
The revolution was obviously not merely about irony and laughter. As I write this article, the unfinished revolution is well into its third year, marked by a scar that is deepening by the day through the toll of martyrs, killings, disfigurings, conscious mutilation and torturing of young bodies, and humiliating and raping of women in public. The years 2011 and 2012 witnessed the dramatic massacres of Abbasiyya, the Balloon incidents, the Maspero and Port Said massacres, the Mohammed Mahmud Street episode I (2011) resulting in the killing of more than 70 protesters, the incident of the Cabinet and the burning of the Institut d’Egypte, the Mohammed Mahmud Street episode II (2012) and the death of a young man called Gika. Violent confrontations around the presidential palace were sparked by forcing a referendum on the “boiled” constitution, a popular expression that symbolized the manoeuvres of the Muslim Brothers to implement a highly controversial constitution. This time, armed militias of the Muslim Brothers violently attacked anti-Morsi protesters, resulting in more deaths. Violence reached its culmination in torture chambers created by the Muslim Brotherhood. The past two years have witnessed endless dramatic narratives of desperate parents searching for their loved ones in morgues and hospitals. Horror stories abounded of torture, of humiliation and of shooting protesters with live ammunition. It was as if a targeted vengeance was directed against youth, more particularly against young bodies. The shocking November 2011 image of the dumping of a dead protester in the garbage will be hard to erase from the collective memory. It was followed by the image of a female protester dragged around and stripped of her clothes, which ignited a volcano of anger. As a result of these incidents, themes of disappeared young martyrs, mothers of victims, and disfigured and tortured bodies took up a major space in the graffiti landscape.

Confrontations, brutality and killings keep escalating, yet the fact that humour and satire remains one of the dominant features of resistance is what I wish to focus on here, through an alternative reading of the recent explosion of graffiti in Egypt. I will also provide snapshots of various moments pictured on the changing walls. Graffiti have been mesmerizing in that they opened up a space for multifarious readings of the transmutations and dramatically transforming political events, while the constant erasure of the murals both by the authorities and by the graffiti artists themselves – who painted over each other’s works – inspired me to chronicle the walls. This endeavour began by publishing short articles on Jadaliyya, and will eventually become a book.
I will here explore the role of street art, which blossomed after the January revolution, and the way in which paradoxical and diametrically opposite emotions (such as satire, irony, insults, death, martyrdom, and pain) are closely intertwined in artistic expressions. Large murals and graffiti multiplied in numerous Egyptian cities to narrate stories, to play with humour, or to simply display insults and sheer anger against the symbols of authoritarianism and the violence perpetrated by the army and police forces. The fantastic murals that appeared around Tahrir Square, in particular on Mohammed Mahmud Street, bear witness to the bloody battles that took place during November 2011 and caught the attention of the international media. Since then, Mohammed Mahmud Street has been nicknamed "the Street of the Eyes of Freedom", because many revolutionaries lost their eyes through one sniper who specialized in targeting eyes.

The murals convey epic visual scenarios of the battles between the police, the armed forces and the thugs paid by the 'ancient regime' on the one side, and the revolutionaries on the other side. They also depict martyrs of the revolution who appear as ghosts and angels, forceful women who are shown as Amazons or as fighters facing hordes of soldiers and police on their own, injustices, and the dreams of young people for a better future.
These newly created street-art spaces are not only "memorial spaces" for remembering the dead and the injured; they are also becoming spaces of visual narratives, with unfolding plots between the

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enemies and the defenders of the revolution.

Graffiti artist Keizer has recently attracted much attention from the international media for his powerful images combining direct and witty slogans. His sardonic and topical portraits of former pro-Mubarak minister of antiquities Zahi Hawass were accompanied by statements such as "the traitor to the pharaohs". His jokes are short and to the point, needing no further commentary.

Picture 10: Zahi Hawass, former minister of antiquities. By artist Kaizer. 8 June 2012.

Picture 11: Snow White with a gun. By artist Kaizer. 8 June 2012.

Picture 12: Housewife with a hand grenade. By artist Kaizer. 8 June 2012.

All three photographs were taken of the wall around the Ahli Club in Zamalek.
The powerful and heart-breaking drawing of a martyr in the form of a winged angel stands in stark contrast to the previous three graffiti. It appeared on the wall of the Ahli club in Zamalak, following the massacre of the Ultras Ahli fans of Port Said in February 2011. Kaizer complements his graffito with the following sentence: "The meaning of life is that you give it (to life) a meaning".

Saad Zaghlul's finger

Two graffiti that appeared in May 2012 on the walls of Mohammed Mahmud Street point to the biting sense of humour and the way in which the younger generation of artists plays with the reversal of icons historical figures and celebrities. In these murals, respected figures are parodied and symbols reversed, so as to mock the established bourgeois culture.

This graffito portrays the leader of the nationalist movement, Saad Zaghloul, who is remembered as the ideologue of the 1919 revolution that erupted in response to British occupation. Until today, Zaghloul’s image evokes the respected nationalist leader who contributed to the making of the modern Egyptian nation-state. Many still perceive him as the spokesman for the interests of the then emerging landed bourgeoisie, which clashed at the turn of the century with British colonial interests. The 1919
revolution turned out to be one of the main triggers for drafting Egypt's constitution. It was also a turning point in the birth of Egyptian feminism, since for the first time in Egypt’s modern history women took to the streets without the veil. What is seldom mentioned is that the revolution was strongly supported by a large peasant rebellion, which in the last instance served the interests of the landed class. In short, Saad Zaghloul symbolizes respectability and, even more, modern Egyptian bourgeois aspirations. However, he is also famous for a popular saying, perhaps even a joke. When the 1919 nationalist revolution failed, he told his wife before going to bed: "There is no hope, Safiyya (his wife’s name), just cover me up". Underneath Saad Zahgloul's graffiti, the words say: "There is no hope sons of b...", "The revolution will win, sons of dirty women...", "We will continue to paint time and again sons of b...". It goes without saying that portraying Saad Zahgloul sticking up his finger evoked both laughter and anger, depending on how one saw it, but it is worth noting as a novelty in publicly displayed jokes. When I visited Mohammed Mahmud Street at the end of August 2012, the graffiti had been erased.

Picture 15: Concrete wall erected by SCAF in Mohammed Mahmud Street. 15 December 2011.

This graffito was painted on one of the concrete walls erected by the army on Mohammed Mahmud Street following the bloody encounters between protesters and the police in November 2011. The picture was taken in early December 2011. The Arabic script says: "Search with the people", as a reversal of "Search with the police". Above the high official of the Ministry of Interior is written: "Know your enemy". The concrete walls were allegedly erected to create a buffer zone to prevent protesters from reaching the ministry of interior. Residents and protesters together destroyed this wall in February 2012, the graffiti disappearing with it.

The constant, almost neurotic erasure of graffiti on city walls by the authorities through endless whitening made the artists even more determined to repaint them immediately with more biting insults,
sardonic jokes and drawings. "Congratulations for the new paint" became the standard slogan that covered the walls after each layer of white paint. Each newly whitened wall produced a wave of brand-new graffiti, so that to follow these drawings on a daily basis could turn into a fascinating sociological endeavour portraying an accurate and inventive visual chronology of the revolution. Street art was turning out to be the most faithful measure of the street pulse. Simply said, graffiti had become the revolution's barometer.⁶

![Picture 16: Erase even more, cowardly regime. From Mohammed Mahmud Street. 18 November 2012.](image)

![Picture 17: The regime has not fallen down. Congratulations for the new paint. Photo taken in Zamalek opposite the opera house. 16 October 2012.](image)

Recent newspaper articles, exhibitions, talk shows and installations have all focused on clandestine street art and artists. Multiple publications have started to emerge, offering compilations of the different graffiti styles overwhelming the city of Cairo. Pro-revolution installations and art exhibitions taking place both in Egypt and Europe, fantastic sardonic graffiti that blossomed in the city and whose success can be followed on the Facebook page "Revolution Graffiti", mushrooming young singers and artists, performances of giant satirical puppets in the streets parodying the army, and photographers have all drawn further attention to the fast expanding revolutionary street art. I am glad to say that none of these subcultures can simply be suppressed by regimes, nor erased by neurotically repainting walls every other day. Graffiti are perceived as an underworld clandestine art; a forbidden act for those

wanting to establish public order and cleanliness and to defend official culture. Yet this art form is one of the most attractive means for spreading dissenting ideas and innovative images while maintaining anonymity, because graffiti are often drawn without signature. Who would have believed that the monumental administration building, the Mugamaa facing Tahrir Square, could have been turned into an ideal space for expressing creativity and dissent? Who could have imagined colourful and ironic anti-government satirical paintings on the Mugamaa’s walls? Who would have believed that we can speak today of a specific genre of "Mugamaa Graffiti" that has attracted the attention of many? The contrast between the thousands of state employees and the public who daily frequent this colossal bureaucratic building and the mushrooming graffiti could not be starker.

Picture 18: Mugamaa graffiti. 12 March 2012.

Picture 19: Mugamaa graffiti. 12 March 2012.

Insults on walls

Would it be erroneous to draw analogies between the January revolution and the French-German protest movement of 1968 in terms of undermining authority and patriarchy? Is it possible to draw analogies in terms of how both movements used irony as a tool against older generations, and against ageing generals and politicians? Far from being able to answer this question in a satisfactory manner, many insist that the Egyptian revolution was not comparable to France’s May 1968 revolution. The latter was clearly not only a generational conflict, but also a rebellion directed against capitalism and the consumer society, and a sexual revolution that institutionalized the pill and finally dissociated sexual desire from procreation. This was not what the Egyptian revolution was about. January 2011
was essentially an upheaval against tyranny, flagrant social injustice, and long decades of humiliation and violation of human rights. However, the common denominator is that both upheavals publicly confronted power with insults and mockery. In 2011, the power of insulting and defaming the sacred gods led to constant erasure. Insults and defaming filled the walls of the city in colloquial Arabic. Creativity was not only expressed in paintings and drawing, but also in the way that colloquial Arabic was reinvented and written.


Picture 21: Down with the police thugs, SCAF the enemy of the people. 6 September 2011.

Picture 22: (Insult) Mother’s C… the ministry of interior (notice the way colloquial Arabic is written) … down with the military rule. Mohammed Mahmud Street. 21 February 2012.
… (Insult) The dogs of the ministry of interior… (Insult) A gang of thieves shooting us with live bullets because we said bread and freedom… 2 November 2012.

The ministry of health and population is located opposite to the people’s parliament where the Ultras
Ahlis squatted during May 2012.

On 23 November 2012, millions marched from all over the city to Tahrir Square. Marches were organized as a protest against President Mursi’s constitutional declaration, which guaranteed him unlimited powers by preventing the courts from challenging any law or decree, and by appointing a new, loyal prosecutor general. In Mohammed Mahmud Street, fierce street fights continued for several days between young protesters and the police. The fights turned into a street war, which started as a commemoration of the previous year’s events that took place in the same street, in the area opposite the American University in Cairo and the French lycée. At the same time, only a few meters away, a group of graffiti painters and photographers were similarly occupying the street, this time by drawing anti-Islamist graffiti while simultaneously photographing both the newly painted graffiti and the confrontations at the end of the street towards Tahrir Square. One young woman was drawing an ironic graffiti, stating "the Arabic letter of nun will dress you as such" next to a sexy red dress. The letter nun is used in Arabic grammar as a feminine inclination. This graffiti was meant to be a play on words, but it may also have meant that women were going to dress men in such a fashion.
It was surreal to experience that moment in one and the same street. On the side of Tahrir Square, a tense war zone with youngsters throwing stones at police, and snipers on the rooftop of the French lycée. A few meters away, at the crossroad of Youssef al-Guindi Street and Mohammed Mahmud Street, passers-by and curious residents gathered behind what was considered the safety line, from where they participated as spectators out of reach of stray stones or police bullets. Another few meters away, one could observe a group of graffiti painters, photographers and others who were filming each other against the background clashes. It was a first-hand experience of how artists were
occupying the street while clashes were ongoing.

Continuous Changing Wall

Picture 33: October 2011.

Picture 34: 21 February 2012

Picture 35: 21 February 2012

Picture 36: 29 September 2012
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This article has attempted to provide scattered snapshots of a personal reading of graffiti reflecting the emotions of pain, sorrow and irony. It has also tried to provide a glimpse of the artists’ interactions and the confrontations between the police and the protesters. The aim was to depict a unique moment in
the appropriation of public spaces as spaces of contestation, by the younger generation of artists. The speed of the changing walls tells us a lot about how events move faster than can be grasped. Finally, most intriguing is how the authorities’ obsessive erasure has stimulated a growing interest among bloggers, photographers and film-makers to thoroughly document the fascinating rapidity of the walls’ daily transmutations. These are the best testimonies of the unceasing, innovative, emerging culture of dissent among the younger generation of artists.

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