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How to get Egypt's artwork to meet its revolution



Art students from the University of Helwan decorate the walls of the arts academy with murals commemorating the revolution in Zamalek. (AP Photo/Manoocher Deghati)

By **Mariam Hamdy / Special to Daily News Egypt** April 17, 2011, 6:12 pm

During the last couple of years of my work as an art critic and writer, I have had a rather sinister belief on the edge of my thoughts. Having brushed it off time and again in an attempt to remain optimistic and hopeful, the thought has been threatening to be realized as a reality in the wake of the recent revolution, the completion of which we have yet to witness. The thought is simply this: that, with a few notable exceptions, too much of the artwork being produced in Egypt is largely equivocal — if anything, it barely touches the heart, with distant hopes (or not even that) of tugging any of its chords.

This may not come as a revelation to a lot of those who follow the arts; the complaints about the quality and content of the artwork being produced as a whole in the recent years have been as many as the praises for it. There has always been the

underlying excuse that it was due to the corrupt bureaucracy of the Ministry of Culture and the paper pushers that run governmental galleries, and on the other hand the distanced bourgeoisie owners of private galleries from the masses, that the work chosen for display is not quite relevant or up to par. In the aftermath of the birth of the revolution, one hopes that artists would be clambering to voice creations that were stifled and thoughts that were hampered by the censorship of the old regime.

So far, the artists who quickly found their fertile ground post-revolution were the graffiti artists, whose works covered the walls of all squares in Egypt, only one of which is Tahrir Square. Sadly, graffiti works are short-lived by their rebellious nature; they're quickly painted over in an attempt to restore 'normalcy' in society. This however is not the case with paintings, sculptures, installations and other mediums.

Most private galleries and cultural centers (governmental galleries are largely comatose for now) are currently hosting shows that display photography exhibitions of the revolution. With the exception of a handful of inspiring shots, most of the images are of an intifada-esque quality and cliché: they are the visual equivalent of the myriad of tacky songs about the Jan. 25 youth and their efforts. One is tempted to ask: "Where's the beef?" Where is the controversial work that has long been lingering in dark studios waiting patiently for the day where it can hang against a white gallery wall? If the artists are too busy being involved in the current events to create relevant artwork — an oxymoron in and of itself — then where are their manifestos, their pleas, their stance as creators in the public arena?

The current events that Egypt is going through bring to mind the efforts of artists and writers in revolutions past. One of the most prominent and deliberate pieces of writing discussing the role of art and artists in the political and social arena is the "Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art". Written by Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian revolution while in exile and hunted by Stalin's agents, and co-signed by André Breton, cofounder of the surrealist movement, and Diego Rivera, revolutionary Mexican artist and activist in 1938, the Manifesto was a call to all arms, pens and brushes addressed to radical artists and writers. The plea contended that "the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution".

Trotsky, supported by Breton and Rivera, believed that "the role of the artist in a decadent capitalist society is determined by the conflict between the individual (the citizen) and various social forms which are hostile to him. This fact alone makes the artist the natural ally of the revolution." In layman terms. Trotsky is stating that the artist's role in the society is to highlight



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and clarify the discrepancies in the society, making the idea and ultimately "the conception of a revolution irresistible", to use the words of African-American writer and civil rights activist Toni Cade Bambara. Today is the high time for this, because what this revolution has given us is the complete inability to use the government and its people as the reason behind our passivity or shortcomings as artists, writers and creators.

In the same vein, Pablo Picasso had become a leader in culture and politics after his creation of his infamous painting "Guernica", the purpose of which was to bring the world's attention to the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica by German bombers, who were supporting the Nationalist forces of General Franco during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso stated clearly his understanding of the role of art and the artist: "What do you think an artist is? ... he is a political being, constantly aware of the heart breaking, passionate, or delightful things that happen in the world, shaping himself completely in their image. Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war."

It's probably too early to judge — one can only hope that this is the case— but artists and creators need to take this revolutionary opportunity to shine and express themselves like never before. To this day, there is a tangible lack of strength in the role of the artist that is far from the pride and power felt in Picasso's aforementioned statement. However, not to be too harsh on the artists themselves, Trotsky's following statement from his 1983 Manifesto still holds true in our country today: "We know very well that thousands of isolated thinkers and artists are today scattered throughout the country, their voices drowned out by the loud choruses of well-disciplined liars". Egyptian artists need to hold a united front against those who need to maintain the stale cultural situation as it was, to bring to this revolution the colors and creations it deserves.



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Hadayan

Bravo for the artwork of the revolution but it is also a plus for the environment - this is a wall that is part of the Beaux Art Helwan University in Zamalek, it was one of the filthiest pavement and wall ever - so bravo for the revolution that they realized that the have portray through art the revolution and surround themselves with beaux art! Hopefully this will be the case all over Cairo :)

lina Ali

well said

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