

Arab Art in the Age of Revolution



For many Arabs, 2011 has been spent peacefully resisting police brutality, or watching events unfold through Twitter streams and grainy YouTube footage. As the Arab Spring enters its second year, the initial shock has begun to die down, and Arab artists have begun to reflect on the incidents of the past year.

Memories will perhaps consist of YouTube clips of shaky mobile phone footage, strung together over the nostalgic music. From the jubilant panoramic view of millions of people in Tahrir Square in early February to more recent images of brutality in Egypt, Yemen and Syria, scenes that have been burnt into our minds over the past year will undoubtedly feed into the cultural and artistic expressions of the new generation of Arab artists.

In a , Malu Halasa reflects on the 2011 Arab revolutions and what it means for contemporary Arab photography, documentary and art. In a post-9/11 age, Arab and Iranian artists have struggled to produce art that transcends particular religious and/or geopolitical boxes. Halasa argues that we have started seeing a direct

challenge to this through the emergence of ‘The New Arab’: “along with the IT architects, bloggers and activists involved in the mass demonstrations across the region, Arab creatives have been instrumental in changing perceptions of Arab-ness.”

Creative expression of resistance is not just something for reflection: for many, creativity was sometimes the only way to resist the Arab regimes. In its early stages, public protest in Syria needed to be creative to survive: a garbage bag full of ping pong balls, each with anti-regime slogans carefully written on it in permanent marker, were left to roll down a Damascene hilltop and into the city. This is just one example of many. Halasa’s photo-essay shows how Arabs throughout the region have found creative and ingenious ways to circumvent censorship and forced silence.

For the so-called ‘silent majority’ living outside of urban areas in Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, who have no access to Twitter, YouTube or the Internet, their memories of the events of 2011 may be markedly different. For many Yemenis in the countryside, 2011 marked what was perhaps the worst humanitarian crisis in the country’s history. Many in Yemen’s remote countryside were unable to go out to protest, and simply stayed inside, locked their doors, and prepared to die. And yet, as Halasa notes, the Arab Spring has brought with it a renewed patriotic pride in the working class, the peasantry, those who had been marginalised and forgotten in the neoliberal era of Western-backed Arab regimes:

“Photographer and artist Yasser Alwan has been taking iconic black and white portraits of Egypt’s working poor since the late 1990s. Yet these same images before the 25 January revolution, he writes in an email from Cairo, ‘often made Egyptians recoil and react unpleasantly. The post-revolution period has allowed for all kinds of imagery to be recontextualised. Instead of reacting to my portraits as images of poor people who make us ashamed of being Egyptian, there is now room to see these as portraits of people who persevere in all kinds of ways.’”

Beyond a political revolution, the Arab Spring is also a social and cultural revolution. And as Halasa notes, it has shown that “the people of the Middle East are not invisible after all, and they are patently not all the same. Their pictures and stories attest to the healing power of culture.”

