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ROUNDTABLE

Al-Fann Midan (2 April 2011–9 August 2014), or The Last Graffiti on the Wall of the Revolution

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The term "normalization" (*taṭbīʿ*) comes from the words *ṭabʿ* and *ṭabīʿa* (in Arabic, meaning nature, normal disposition or manner) and put simply means a return of things to their "normal" state or behavior, as if some given thing that has happened in fact hasn't happened at all. This is usually achieved by artificial means, involving considerable effort and trouble, because it's difficult to forget what happened and act normally. That's how I understand normalization.

But why am I starting an article about al-Fann Midan, on its fourth birthday—or perhaps commemoration—by talking about normalization?

I connect al-Fann Midan ("art is a public square") to what we like to call the revolution of 25 January 2011. Al-Fann Midan is a free festival of arts and culture held in public squares made possible by voluntary participation on the part of the organizers, artists, and performers and donations that cover the event's costs. It takes place on the first Saturday of every month in ʿAbdin Square (in Cairo) and in other squares and public spaces in cities and governorates across Egypt. There have been as many as fifteen festivals held across the republic each month.

But that's not all. What makes this stand out from the events organized by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, which also sometimes take place in public squares?

The fundamental difference is that al-Fann Midan is a space of freedom—and in that it is exceptional.

Al-Fann Midan is a space of freedom in the true sense of the word, allowing different and even conflicting visions to come into contact, with no censorship over content and no restriction on any voice seeking self-expression. Of course, like anything else, this rosy revolutionary picture has not always been without its faults. And the exceptionality of this freedom lies in the fact that it exists for just a few hours of a single day, rather than being continuous; the event is spontaneous and unplanned as regards its audience—some people are simply passing by, whereas others have planned to attend; no group that wishes to enter the space is excluded; the organizers do not employ any systematic criteria to select the lineup of performers; and the artists enjoy almost total freedom to exhibit or perform whatever work they wish.

Another thing that distinguishes al-Fann Midan is the nontraditional and indeed unprecedented diversity of the group of organizers with regard to perspective, interest, and culture. Naturally, this diversity has led conflict to surface now and again. But on closer inspection the ability of the group to work together and overcome or look past these differences over the course of nearly three and a half years has been astonishing, as has their ability to keep al-Fann Midan going throughout that period without any institutional backing or concrete administrative structure, and with no permanent or even semipermanent funding to cover the substantial material costs of the events. From this perspective al-Fann Midan is a revolutionary phenomenon par excellence. Yes, al-Fann Midan was one of the prizes of the revolution, a dazzling victory in one of its battles: the battle for public space.

Imagine if a group of citizens—civilians—managed to lay their hands on a public square for one day each month, year round. What kind of momentum could it create? And imagine that during that one day, they change the features of the square so completely that you don't even recognize it anymore. The square, which is usually empty and abandoned save for the cars that treat it as a parking lot and a handful

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of boys and teens playing football, is transformed into a huge expanse rippling with crowds, with art in all its forms, with movement, hubbub, and the odd quarrel or brawl. It is another world.

Throughout the period in question, the square was occupied via a simple mechanism: an application for permission submitted to the Cairo governorate authorities. The application was never refused. What happened was a different refusal.

And another detail that turned out to be extremely important: this public square sits right in front of the presidential palace, Qasr ʿAbdin. It is one of many at the disposal of the president of the republic; he has nearly thirty palaces or country houses scattered across the country, four of them in Cairo.

The significance of this fact became clear for the first time on 1 September 2012, when the first Saturday of the month happened to coincide with a visit to ʿAbdin Palace by then-president Muhammad Morsi. The Republican Guard and all of the security agencies attempted to have the event called off—but we had an authorization from the governorate preventing them from doing so without resorting to friendly fire. So, after much back and forth and a four-hour delay, we got what we wanted.

The importance of the fact in question became even more clear on 1 August 2014, when the Republican Guard that controlled ʿAbdin Square rejected—for the first time—the authorization from the governorate that was presented to them by the organizers, instead demanding a police permit. In accordance with a new law, the ʿAbdin precinct's chief of police required the application to be submitted in the form of an application to demonstrate, of the kind made by those wishing to hold political protests—a demand that the organizers refused. At the time, I was preoccupied by the stance these state officials had taken regarding the prospect of a cultural or political event taking place in front of a palace of the republic; presumably they thought it wasn't appropriate.

After the agencies responsible for security at ʿAbdin Palace (who were answerable to the president) refused to open the square, the organizers released a statement and also asked then–Minister of Culture Gabir ʿAsfur to intervene. Finally, the interior ministry and hence also the Republican Guard agreed that al-Fann Midan could go ahead that day. But, due to the delays, the organizers decided to postpone the event by a week and seek authorization for the later date. On 1 September 2014, the security services refused outright to grant al-Fann Midan a permit to hold the festival planned for Saturday, 6 September.

There are always justifications given, of course. The most important is usually a concern for our personal safety and security. But sometimes they supplement these with a little honesty, as they did on this occasion. The previous July, al-Fann Midan had invited Ahmad Harara—one of the best known of the revolutionaries to have been injured—to address the festival. According to the security services, to have done so, and to have allowed him to express his opinions on the ruling regime on stage, was an expression of ingratitude on our part, given that they had allowed us to occupy "their" square. The message couldn't have been clearer.

Before the revolution, events and performances in public spaces were prohibited. It was possible, however, to submit an application for security authorization for a street event to the security agencies, which might refuse the application or reject parts of the text. The process was guided by the emergency law (in place from October 1981 to May 2012) that criminalized public gatherings in general and placed restrictions on the freedom of movement and assembly of individuals. It doesn't take a lot of intelligence to understand how important public space is, and how easy it is for those who control it to exert pressure and obtain political victories (as happened at least partially on 11 February 2011) or to understand the significance of accumulated experience, strong public influence, and perhaps also an increase in the extent of the space occupied. On al-Fann Midan's first birthday in April 2012, we held a huge celebratory festival in ʿAbdin Square, with the participation of the Choir Project, Al Darb Al Ahmar Arts School, Islam Chipsy and ʿAmr Saʿd, Nagham Saleh, Ramy Essam, Massar Egbari, and Eskenderella. All of them.

These names should give you some idea of the size of the audience expected, as well as its potential for growth. There aren't exact figures for al-Fann Midan's audiences, but estimates are that around 4,000 people on average have attended the monthly festivals in ʿAbdin Square, and perhaps a similar number for the other cities combined. This also may give you some idea of the role that the festival can play, for example, in the "war on terror," or in building a cultural discourse capable of undoing sectarianism and religious extremism.

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Yet the main problem in this battle, as I see it, is the control of public space. Creating a space of freedom means allowing criticisms of the ruling political regime, whatever that regime happens to be. Who among us can tolerate criticism? Especially in the era of the unified voice.

The problem also lies in the state's understanding of the function of the security agencies. What exactly is it? Do they believe that all citizens have a right to public space, and that the security services must protect them when they are making use of that public space?

In October 2010, the organization Egyptians Against Religious Discrimination (*Misriyyun didd al-Tamyiz al-Dini*) was planning a festival called "Egypt for all Egyptians" in al-Azhar Park, and the organization Cultural Resource (*al-Mawrid al-Thaqafi*) agreed that the festival could take place at El Genaina Theatre [an outdoor theater managed by Cultural Resource but located within the park]. Then the security services refused to allow the event to go ahead, despite having previously signaled their consent. Nobody would issue us an official refusal, yet neither would they grant us a permit. Why were the security services banning an event about national unity? One of the explanations that seemed logical to me at the time—even in its derisive illogicality—was that the security services were pursuing this policy of non-action simply because they "didn't want the hassle."

Another important point about al-Fann Midan regards artists, who receive no support from the state by way of direct or indirect funding, opportunities to perform in its venues or on its broadcast platforms, or rehearsal or studio space. The state instead persecutes them through the official syndicates it controls, which have the enforcement power to make artists choose between joining, paying repeated "fines," or going to prison. Through al-Fann Midan, those artists have been able to get out into the street and make unmediated contact with their audiences, avoiding ticketing and closed venue doors, solving their technical problems and obviating the need to obtain the censor's approval of their texts and performances. For many of the artists, performing at al-Fann Midan was the first time they had experienced any of these things. That was the spirit of the revolution. So I think it's crucial that this significant experience and what happened to it—its dates, its images, its heroes and its unknown soldiers—be documented, ready for next time.

Yes, I believe that there will be a next time.

There are important questions worth searching for answers to, now. For example, why didn't al-Fann Midan's fantastic audience decide to keep the festival going by shouldering organizational responsibilities after the security services put a stop to it? Should residents of the local area have been included more in the process of organization, so as to build a more lasting relationship? Were the organizers right to ultimately agree, during negotiations with the security services over permits, to move the festival to a different location? Why has the street theater movement, with audiences that expanded so remarkably following the revolution, recently ground to a halt? And is it possible to revive al-Fann Midan without security authorization? Could it be organized, for example, in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture, to make it easier to obtain security authorization, and would that compromise its spirit or turn it into something else? When might there be a new life for al-Fann Midan—will it be connected to the existence of a revolutionary movement on the ground, or to the birth of a new awareness or indeed some new need on the part of audiences or artists? Most importantly, what can we do next time to make it harder for the security services to put a stop to the festival with one swift decision?

Many people won't agree with the parenthetical part of this piece's title, which makes the two dates look like a beginning and an end: 2 April 2011 until 9 August 2014. There are some people who believe al-Fann Midan can continue now.

I wish it could. But I believe that that would be a new phase of life for al-Fann Midan, a new incarnation. Because al-Fann Midan didn't burst out into the world from nowhere. It grew out of an atmosphere of creativity and innovation in the streets, from a revolutionary enthusiasm that grew, day by day, into something so big we could scarcely comprehend it. Now it's become one of the stories of the past. Many things would have to come back for al-Fann Midan, as we knew it, to return.

In my opinion, al-Fann Midan has been the only tangible change on the ground to be felt in the post-revolutionary arts and culture scene. Most of the changes that took place following the revolution in the Ministry of Culture and other government-run cultural institutions have been neutralized, peacefully or semi-peacefully, and all remaining "traces of transgression" have been removed. Al-Fann Midan was the last of those traces. The last graffiti on the wall of the revolution.

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Al-Fann Midan was like the graffiti of the revolution: it was one of its most distinctive features, something you could recognize it by. It's unsurprising that those who don't want to remember the revolution—or who don't want anyone else to remember it—should try to erase those features. Just as we saw the revolution's graffiti being effaced or replaced with some *other* graffiti. It makes sense that the security services should try to make us forget what happened, along with all the traces that might remind us, so that things will go back to what for them, and us, is "normal"—perhaps even by changing the familiar appearance of ʿAbdin Square, as is happening now. You wouldn't recognize it if you went there today, with all the incomprehensible demolitions and excavations that are underway. The same could be said for Saʿd Zaghlul Square in Alexandria, which also played host to al-Fann Midan for awhile: a wall has been built around it as if by some plan to change its very personality as an open space. To put it another way, we'd be avoiding the truth if we were to act like nothing has happened to the revolution. If we were to act like the graffiti of the revolution was still there in all its colorful glory, emblazoned victoriously across the country's walls. The graffiti of the revolution must admit that if it still adorns those walls today, it is only faintly.

But the picture isn't as grim as it might seem. It's true that we're not singing any more, but we haven't forgotten how to sing. And we haven't forgotten how we loved those moments of unexpected joy that united us in song. That's why, despite everything, it's possible to see some sort of beginning in this ending.

Before 25 January 2011, it wasn't possible to sing a celebratory song like this:

When the revolution started, we took to the streets across the country
We died for freedom and an end to corruption
We couldn't stay silent while the regime was still in place
The interior ministry dogs and injustice were everywhere
Kill the revolutionaries again and again
To you the word "free" is madness
Never mind the jailer's brutality
Faced with my voice, he's a coward.[1]

Ayman Helmy is a composer and lyricist, music producer, and art manager. His latest project, "Bahgaga," is led by five female vocalists who perform contemporary comedy and satirical songs. He was one of the founders of the Egyptian revolution's festival Al-Fann Midan (2011–2014).

Katharine Halls received the 2017 Sheikh Hamad Award for Translation for her translation, with Adam Talib, of The Dove's Necklace by Saudi author Raja Alem.

[1]From the song "Hikayitna" (Our Story) by the al Ahly Ultras.

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