

ROUNDTABLE

Creative Expression in Egypt Ten Years After

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Ten years have passed since the “Arab Spring”. In Egypt and elsewhere, the arts were widely celebrated for playing an important role in these events. Much of the writing initially published approached the arts in ways that expressed a profound sense of euphoria and renewed optimism. The affective power of the early revolutionary days is what compelled some academics to write about the revolution in the first place, including as participants and advocates for Western readers, and there was a sense of urgent responsibility to document, archive, and translate for the rest of the world what was happening in Egypt.¹ As this extraordinary moment gave way to a longer period of accumulating disappointments and traumas, so too, it seems, this more widespread interest in the arts has waned. This is partially due to the assumption, held by many both in Egypt and abroad, that artistic scenes in Egypt have become stagnant or defunct. Although it is true that the artistic landscape in Egypt today is different than it was in 2011, these accounts do not consider a longer view of how artistic practices inevitably change over time, the ways that innovation and experimentation are fundamental to artistic practice, or that a new generation of artists is coming of age. In short, artists have continued their work in Egypt despite a new normal that Walter Armbrust, for one, considers a liminal crisis without end.²

With much of our understanding of contemporary artistic practice in Egypt coming from the period before 2013, this roundtable questions how the passage of time over the last decade may allow for different understandings of creative expression, foregrounding alternative narratives, viewpoints, and experiences that may have been inadvertently marginalized by the intense focus on the revolution. For instance, despite the strong politicization of the arts in dominant discourses during the last decade, some artists never viewed their work through a political lens (see Anonymous, Yousri, and Sprengel).³ They have felt a special exhaustion regarding Western researchers and journalists who flooded to Egypt after 2011 to impose frameworks—resistance, revolution, freedom of speech, and, for female artists especially, gender—that some artists did not use to describe their own work. In many respects, the question of how audiences both local and foreign interpret a work is one that artists in Egypt and elsewhere have long grappled with, but over the last decade these negotiations in Egypt have been occurring in an extremely polarized environment.⁴ Amid rising tensions around class, gender, religion, and ideology,

¹Anthropologist Samuli Schielke, for instance, considered his work both anthropological analysis and revolutionary propaganda directed mainly at Western readers, stating that “my account of the Egyptian revolution is an extremely partisan one, and I would consider it a failure if it were otherwise”; “Writing Anthropology of and for the Revolution,” *Fieldsights*, 16 May 2013, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/writing-anthropology-of-and-for-the-revolution>. See also Samia Mehrez, *Translating Egypt’s Revolution: The Language of Tahrir* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2012); and Walter Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 8.

²Vivienne Mathies-Boon, “Shattered Worlds: Political Trauma Amongst Young Activists in Post-Revolutionary Egypt,” *Journal of North African Studies* 22, no. 4 (2017): 620–44; Maria Frederika Malmström, *The Streets are Talking to Me: Affective Fragments in Sisi’s Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019); Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters*, 222–38.

³Anonymous, “Observations on the Egyptian Independent Music Scene and Political Dynamics in a Post-Revolutionary Context,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 540–544; Bassem Yousri, “I Am Serious!” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 516–525; Darci Sprengel, “Neoliberal Expansion and Aesthetic Innovation: The Egyptian Independent Music Scene Ten Years After,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 545–551.

⁴For artists grappling with interpretation of works see, for instance, Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); and Ayman el-Desouky, *The Intellectual*

some artistic mediums (e.g., graffiti, independent music) garnered national and international attention for the first time, raising the political stakes of artistic production and its surrounding discourse.⁵

Artists in Egypt have not been the only skeptics. Academics in the humanities and social sciences recently also have been critical of trends in English-language scholarship and media that frame creative expression in the Middle East primarily through the lenses of the revolution or resistance. For instance, they have critiqued the way the focus on the “Arab Spring” erroneously treats creative expression as if it emerged “out of nowhere” and suggested that the focus on resistance marginalizes other equally important aspects of artistic practice.⁶ Others have asked whose agenda the recent “fetishization” of resistance might serve, concluding that these discourses ultimately “promote a singular and very particular model of ‘liberation’ based on Euro-American neo-liberal norms,” amounting to what performance studies scholar Rayya el-Zein calls “neoliberal orientalism.”⁷ Although some artists certainly did feel at home within these frameworks, others found, and continue to find, joy and possibility in existing “at the margins” (Saleh).⁸ The last ten years may best be characterized, then, by exactly that which resists articulation—the messy contradictions, simultaneous attachments and detachments, and ambiguous ways of feeling and acting.

This roundtable takes contemporary creative expression as a starting point for exploring the complexities of the last decade.⁹ Taking this period’s emotional highs and lows together, it focuses on a present marked by the difficulties of verbalizing “All that our bodies experience. All that is indescribable in us,” highlighting the way that some use creative mediums as a means to speak to “those erratic feelings that find no room to be expressed” (Soliman and al-Hajj).¹⁰ Going beyond simplistic notions of linear progress and its binary of success/failure, the essays offer ways of seeing some sort of beginning in a revolutionary ending, but through complex affective states that divest from the teleological narratives of triumphant sovereignty upon which many narratives of the arts in revolution rely (Helmy and Nassar).¹¹

Acknowledging the inherent politics and limitations of imposing a framework, but also the reality that a roundtable assumes some form of coherence, these essays loosely engage “creative expression in Egypt over the last ten years.” The topic is intentionally broad to allow messy and contradictory feelings, approaches, and perspectives to exist in conversation together. For instance, some essays do not mention the revolution at all (Asfour), whereas others do so begrudgingly and only as a source of critique (al-Tarzi).¹² They take a

and the People in Egyptian Literature and Culture: Amara and the 2011 Revolution (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). On the difficulties of writing and researching in a highly polarized environment see Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters*, 158.

⁵For excellent examples of scholarly writing grappling with and demonstrating this polarization see Nesreen Hussein, “Gestures and Resistance between the Street and the Theatre: Documentary Theatre in Egypt and Laila Soliman’s *No Time for Art*,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 25, no. 3 (2015): 357–70; Sonali Pahwa, “Making Revolution Everyday: Quotidian Performance and Utopian Imagination in Egypt’s Streets and Squares,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2015): 56–73; Jessica Winegar, “A Civilized Revolution: Aesthetics and Political Action in Egypt,” *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 4 (2016): 609–22; and Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters*.

⁶Mona Abaza, “The Field of Graffiti and Street Art in Post-January 2011 Egypt,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Graffiti and Street Art*, ed. Jeffrey Ian Ross (New York: Routledge, 2016), 318–33; Cristina Moreno Almeida, *Rap Beyond Resistance: Staging Power in Contemporary Morocco* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017); Rounwah Adly Riyadh Bseiso, “Art in the Egyptian Revolution: Liberation and Creativity,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia* 38, no. 2 (2018): 344–53.

⁷Laudan Nooshin, “Whose Liberation? Iranian Popular Music and the Fetishization of Resistance,” *Popular Communication* 15, no. 3 (2017): 164, 178; Rayya el-Zein, “Performing el Rap el ‘Araby 2005–2015: Feeling Politics and Neoliberal Incursions in Ramallah, ‘Amman, and Beirut’” (PhD diss., New York University, 2016).

⁸Ahmed Saleh, “Our Voices Persist,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 552–554.

⁹This approach foregrounds the unintended consequences and sociopolitical forms that emerge from and after revolutions, situating the revolution across a larger spatiotemporal horizon while questioning to what extent the 2011 Egyptian revolution serves a starting point or unique spatiotemporal marker in the first place; After the Event: Prospects and Retrospects of Revolution, conference, 15–16 May 2019, University College London (conference program: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/anthropology/sites/anthropology/files/after_the_event_ucl_conference_programme_and_abstracts_updated.pdf).

¹⁰Laila Soliman, “A Talk that Never Really Happened in Time,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 501–505; Muhammad El-Hajj, “The Gravel on Our Beds,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 506–509.

¹¹Ayman Helmy, “Al-Fann Midan (April 2, 2011 – August 9, 2014) or The Last Graffiti on the Wall of the Revolution,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 555–558; Aya Nassar, “To Stand By the Ruins of a Revolutionary City,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 510–515.

¹²Ayman Asfour, “Between Dependent and Independent: The Contemporary Music Scene in Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 536–539; Salma El Tarzi, “How do you write about the cultural scene when you’re inside it?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 498–500.

variety of styles, including literary, biographical, poetic, and academic, and most are written by artists themselves. Together, they give a variety of perspectives on the last decade—attempting to capture all that is difficult to say or that which has not yet been said sufficiently.

Creative expression is an umbrella term that enables consideration of how various artistic forms—from folk, to popular, to avant-garde, as well as those more and less religiously informed—are relational and intertwined. Religiously informed artists, for example, are often excluded from revolutionary narratives due to assumptions that Islam and artistic creativity do not intersect. Looking at various artistic forms together not only unsettles these polarities but also helps reveal that notions such as revolutionary and Islamic are “thick” concepts, the production of which needs to be analyzed rather than treated as self-evident (Moll).¹³ Focusing on creative expression as a broad category also allows us to put in conversation various discussions that particular creative forms enable. If there is currently an “against resistance” discursive vein in music studies and among musicians, for instance, what discussions are circulating around theater, film, dance, literature, or visual art and what critical light might they shine on ways to approach—or not approach—everyday life in Egypt today? One of the goals of this roundtable is to revisit what expressive forms have to offer to the study of revolutions and their aftermaths, subjects still dominated by political science and quantitative research methods that often ignore the central role of culture (Pratt).¹⁴ This collection of essays focuses on creative expression precisely because it may be the medium best equipped to bring more nuanced perspectives to these much broader questions.

For instance, to what extent does a revolution, and the 2011 revolution specifically, serve as a temporal marker in scholarly or creative work? Historian Khaled Fahmy asks when the Egyptian revolution began and if it has in fact ended, arguing that it is possible to view it as a continuation of struggles begun in the 19th century against the founding of the modern Egyptian nation-state.¹⁵ The temporal question becomes especially significant in light of the recent focus on artistic repression, a political tool with a much longer history and one that includes players beyond Egypt’s own borders.¹⁶ In this context, what do terms like *post-revolutionary* or *post-Mubarak* Egypt mean, terms that are sometimes the pithiest way to title a paper? Political scientists such as Reem Abou el-Fadl have argued that any conceptualization of the Egyptian revolution and subsequent counterrevolution must consider international players, and this includes not only the United States and Europe but also the wealthy Gulf states.¹⁷ The near necessity for artists to garner international interest—and thus funding—is a topic raised by many of the roundtable’s contributors, demonstrating the extent to which gatekeeping is not *only* a policy of the Egyptian regime. Instead, international players have a powerful seat at this table. Creative expression is an important yet often understudied facet of much larger geopolitical stakes (Elnozahy, Saleh, al-Tarzi).¹⁸

Although never fully extricated from these relations of power, hearing from artists themselves is essential because of the disjuncture enforced between daily life and the methodological limitations of

¹³Yasmin Moll, “Living through Thick Concepts in Revolutionary Egypt,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 493–497.

¹⁴See also Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters*, 11. Nicola Pratt, “Making Sense of the Politics of the Egyptian Revolution in and through Popular Culture,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 531–535.

¹⁵Khaled Fahmy, “Opening Politics’ Black Box: Reflections on the Past, Present and Future of the Egyptian Revolution,” in *Shifting Sands: The Unravelling of the Old Order in the Middle East*, ed. Raja Shehadeh and Penny Johnson (London: Profile Books, 2015), 69–81; see also Armbrust, *Martyrs and Tricksters*, 214.

¹⁶For instance, the repression of certain types of art in Egypt, especially downtown, was a key practice of Ottoman and British colonial rule as well as previous Egyptian military regimes. See, for instance, Karin van Nieuwkerk, “A Trade Like Any Other”: *Female Singers and Dancers in Egypt* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995); Eve M. Troutt Powell, “Burnt-Cork Nationalism: Race and Identity in the Theater of ‘Ali al-Kassar,” in *Colors of Enchantment: Theater, Dance, Music and the Visual Arts of the Middle East*, ed. Sherifa Zuhur (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 36; and Samia Mehrez, *Egypt’s Culture Wars: Politics and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁷Reem Abou el-Fadl, “Introduction: Connecting Players and Process in Revolutionary Egypt,” in *Revolutionary Egypt: Connecting Domestic and International Struggles*, ed. Reem Abou el-Fadl (London: Routledge, 2015), 15; Adam Hanieh, “Re-Scaling Egypt’s Political Economy: Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Regional Space,” in Abou el-Fadl, *Revolutionary Egypt*, 172.

¹⁸Mariam Elnozahy, “The Economics of Creative Expression,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 526–530; Saleh, “Our Voices Persist”; al-Tarzi, “How do you write about the cultural scene when you’re inside it?”

the academy.¹⁹ This disjuncture becomes especially pronounced when academics participate in revolutions as protestors, activists, witnesses, and archivists, yet their work is expected to adhere to the academy's institutionalized standards of scholarly achievement.²⁰ El-Khouni et al. have interrogated the role of the Western academy in producing revolutionary narratives, challenging the way scholars too often tell the story of revolutions through tools developed in universities of the Center and North that revolve around terrorism, political Islam, or new Orientalism.²¹ There is an additional imbalance of power when one considers the affective labor not only of experiencing the early euphoric days of the revolution but also the longer emotional vicissitudes of its aftermath. Those most willing and able to write are sometimes those who enjoy some emotional distance from events—the last decade can be too difficult to recount for some of those who lived it and who continue to live its consequences amid increasingly precarious conditions, whether in Egypt or abroad (Anonymous, al-Tarzi).²²

None of these issues can be fully explored—let alone resolved—in the space of a roundtable. Instead the contributors here present different perspectives on the last decade as a means to remember, forget, critique—or, more likely, some combination of the three. Although great effort has been made to include diverse perspectives, there are many voices missing, notably academics at institutions located in Egypt and artists working from the diaspora. It is not possible to represent the full spectrum of creative expression in Egypt. Indeed, many artists express themselves best through mediums other than the written word. Although these essays are modest attempts to verbalize that which rejects verbalization, it is with the recognition that even more remains unsaid.

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¹⁹For instance, the essays here raise questions regarding the politics of translation (and indeed of writing for translation), of writing for an English-speaking academic audience, and so on.

²⁰Yasmin Moll, "Conversation on the Egyptian Revolution: Fieldwork in Revolutionary Times," *Fieldsights*, 17 May 2013, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/conversation-on-the-egyptian-revolution-fieldwork-in-revolutionary-times>.

²¹Mohsen el-Khouni, Mouldi Guessoumi, and Mohamed-Salah Omri, "Introduction," in *University and Society within the Context of Arab Revolutions and New Humanism*, ed. Mohsen el-Khouni, Mouldi Guessoumi, and Mohamed-Salah Omri (Tunis: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 2016), 9–18.

²²See also Mona Abaza, *Cairo Collages: Everyday Life Practices after the Event* (Manchester, UK: University of Manchester Press, 2020), 3–4.