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### Art is Resistance: The Role of the Artist in the Arab Spring and other Uprisings

Assault rifles, tear gas, grenades and riot shields are commonly thought of as the principal weapons of the now ubiquitous uprising across several nations that has come to be known as the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and over a dozen other countries, these weapons have come to be known as common tools of institutionalized oppression, be it Mubarak's Egypt or Sultan Qaboos's Oman (AP). From its start in late 2010 to the ongoing crises in Syria and Egypt, the peoples of the Arab world have had to quickly acclimate to the brutal tactics entrenched regimes have resorted to in order to keep them in line. Demonstrations became louder, fiercer and harder to quell, with the public responding to the governments' attempts to silence them. In the 21st Century, revolution has become a global affair. No longer did each of these nations have to face their governments alone. In the post-internet world, political activists now had platforms to reach people thousands of miles away, as well as a way to legitimize their cause (Maher). This new wave of involved activism has indeed sired many movements beyond the Arab Spring, from the Euromaidan protests occurring in Ukraine to the more directly inspired "Venezuelan Spring" unfolding alongside it. All of these movements share a desire for freedom, expression and a voice in government, and they do it by communicating on an international scale, demanding attention from other nations and their people.

Because of this, the Arab Spring has been marked as a sign of the new age: a global stage where actions behind closed doors are no longer tolerated, and in which people can make statements to an audience of millions. Nevertheless, the present

language barrier of Arabic, Ukrainian or Spanish being the primary spoken language of the resistance meant that the overall message could still be lost in translation. These language barriers have existed for as long as humans have been able to communicate with each other, but the activists of the modern age have proven that there is one language everyone can understand universally: art.

Art has always been a part of the collective cultural conscience, and its role in promoting and condemning political activism or warfare has been around for just as long. Art from July of 1789 depicts the awakening of the “Third Estate” during the French Revolution, with similar symbolic images represented in newspapers or murals since the middle of the 18th Century (Taws). While it has taken many forms, political art is almost always driven by one of two mentalities: the questioning of authority and a desire to call out corruption, or the desire to advocate on behalf of a political entity often in the form of propaganda or idealization. While it’s impossible to categorize every single instance of political art as either one or the other, it’s nevertheless important to recognize the many ways in which art has been used to affect social consciousness, especially when the notion of propaganda is brought up.

Art in the Arab Spring has been decidedly anti-authoritarian in nature, with posters of former Tunisian president Zine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak being deposed, ignored, or defamed now decorating street walls and art galleries alike. Some of these works, such as a large poster of Ben Ali adorning a wall in La Goulette, make overt political statements; for example, advocating voting in order to prevent the return of dictatorship (Rampen). Others, such as a mural painted on a blocked-off wall in Cairo, make symbolic statements about unity in the face of oppression (Anonymous). All of

these works have different origins and specific meanings, but are unified by an overall goal of raising public awareness against tyranny and oppression, and all have been created so that they can be universally understood.

The 2011 Egyptian Revolution was marked by months of non-violent demonstrations and protests interspersed with pockets of intense violence between Mubarak's supporters and pro-democracy activists. During one such incident, Egyptian military police threw stones at campaigners in Tahrir Square. Determined to turn the violent act into a catalyst for further change, artist Ashraf Foda took the stones and had protesters who were present at the time sign them as an indisputable reminder of the brutal tactics Mubarak's regime resorted to during the revolution. Foda also immortalized the struggle of Egypt's revolutionary protesters in the form of murals that depict the oppressive nature of Mubarak's Egypt as well as cries for change (Batty; Raza).

Other artists in the country have had similar experiences, and have reacted in different ways through their art. Nermine Hammam, a photographer and graphic designer, created photomontages juxtaposing the harsh realities of the conflict with idealistic landscapes in order to capture "the frailty that crouches behind stereotypes of force" on display throughout the conflict (Raza). Hammam's message echoes a sentiment shared amongst many youths in the global community about the fading influence of rule by force in an age dominated by increasing access to information and resources.

Hammam and Foda are hardly alone in their desire to inspire Egypt towards a better future. Visual artists like Natalie Ayoub and hip-hop bands like Arabian Knightz

have also contributed to the country's artistic movement both during and after the initial revolution. For these people, the message is just as important as the medium, with a consistent theme throughout being a desire to relay both the suffering of a people and their eventual triumph against oppression. "I grew up in an environment of impassivity," Ayoub said about early life in Egypt, "no one felt or imagined a change; apathy was king." As a witness to the events of the revolution, she describes the changes as something to be proud of. "The immense pride I feel towards this movement still burns in me, and every part of me embraces my nationality" (Raza).

To be sure, Egypt's revolution has been marked by blood but also by displays of resolve and courage by activists, who have been further inspired by artists of all kinds. The Arab Spring, however, does not begin and end at Egypt's borders. In Syria, where a large-scale civil war has been ongoing for months, artists have been working to preserve a sense of hope and morale even in the face of war crimes committed upon them by the Syrian government.

Syrian painter Anas Homsy has worked tirelessly by his own admission to depict the strife rampant in his country (Jamjoom). Even as artists fled the country as open fighting broke out, they made every effort to capture the suffering of their homeland and to provide support in any way they knew how. Wissam Shaabi says the bright colors and beauty of the art he has created is a way of offsetting the death and violence he and his family have witnessed. For him, the value of his art is forward-focused, and "for a bright future" (Jamjoom). Others, such as Fadi Al-Hamwi, have stayed behind in order to give their art a sense of urgency and legitimacy, despite the anxiety and fear that such a life creates. Al-Hamwi sees the role of the artist as a necessary one, a socially

conscious voice of the people.

For the people involved in the movement, art is less about personal recognition than it is about social consciousness and responsibility. Given the region's notorious lack of tolerance for subversive social commentary and the volatile nature of the ongoing conflicts in these regions, it has become clear that acts of civil disobedience, be they physical, artistic or anything else, have become dangerous in and of themselves. Artists such as Syrian political cartoonist Ali Ferzat have been physically assaulted and, in Ferzat's case, nearly killed for speaking out against the regime, even in jest. Rather than taking the event as a sign to desist, Ferzat used the attack as a source of personal resolve to continue to fight Bashar al-Assad's regime in any way he could (Carrington). While Ferzat eventually recovered from the attack and continues to draw while living outside of Syria, others have been far less fortunate. Akram Raslan, another Syrian artist, was detained by al-Assad's government and has been held indefinitely since. With no word from him since, fellow artists in his community have slowly begun resigning themselves to the possibility that he may be dead (Carrington). While Raslan is far from the first martyr to die for the cause of freedom of expression, his sacrifice is symbolic of a group of people who have declared that their own lives are worth the freedom they are all fighting for.

In Lebanon, even artists exiled by their governments continue to speak out in any way they can. A Syrian civil engineer named Raghad Mardini living in the country created a residency for displaced artists to stay in between countries, asking only for the artist to contribute to her collection (Elass). Her art colony has housed artists of all stripes, from impassioned activists to normal professionals caught in the storm.

Mardini's act serves to encapsulate the international response to the artistic movement in the region: a welcoming of open arms. In many ways, the act shows a movement towards communal inclusiveness and understanding on a larger scale.

While in many cases these artists work to capture the beauty within the chaos of the revolutions, or the oppressive nature of their governments, their artistic contribution represents only a part of the larger picture. In the case of Syrian-American Dr. Zaher Sahloul, art is also a viable method of growth from the tragedies of death and destruction. Sahloul has devised a system in which displaced Syrian refugees, most of them children, use art as a way of expressing complex emotions regarding what they've witnessed. "They will draw tanks and blood, people who are dying." Sahloul uses this method to get at the core of the emotional issues affecting the children caught in the middle of the revolution, and uses the information to help them cope. "With time, that art is healing themselves and they will be able more to express what they are feeling with art and also with words" (Sahloul). This demonstrates how art is again used to create a foundation of universal understanding, across borders, and across generations.

With so much recent activity both in print and in production, it's easy to think of the Arab Spring as a genesis of sorts for modern Arab art, which has been previously associated with traditional cultural exports and images mired in the sort of cultural iconography the west has come to associate with the region. However, the truth is quite different. Professor Charles Tripp would direct attention to the Arab world's past as evidence of the region's predilection for dissident art. Art, he says, has evolved as a response to external pressures from dictatorships that use images of leaders such as Mubarak and Gadaffi (Tripp). "If you can destroy the face of the dictator," he explains,

“the dictator’s power is broken.” Images of various Arab heads of state have been defaced in various ways since at least 1991, as part of larger acts of defiance. As Tripp goes on to explain, art has a way of establishing a cultural identity through expression, which becomes a sort of glue that holds rebellions together (Tripp). Often, these works are the inciting force behind actions that lead directly to rebellion, which further supports the notion that art is an invaluable weapon against oppression.

Although art in the region has often been ascribed to one artist or another, it’s important to note the impact of anonymous artists on the movement. A vast majority of street murals, chants and other ad-hoc artistic demonstrations in Egypt, Syria, Libya, and other countries in the region were created by anonymous demonstrators and resistance fighters. Art collectives like Masasit Mati serve to provide an outlet for artists performing dangerous acts of dissent in the midst of a government-sanctioned embargo on freedom of expression. “From the beginning the regime has known it’s dangerous to use the image, to use art,” says journalist Aram Tahhan, one of the curators of an Amsterdam museum’s exhibition on the Syrian art scene (Hume).

Artists have precious little protection from the wrath of the autocratic states they are speaking out against, such as poet Ibrahim Qashoush, whose body was found dumped in a river with his vocal cords cut out for writing anti-Assad songs that were sung as demonstrations against him (Hume). The path of resistance is a long and bloody one to be sure, and no artist is spared by virtue of their profession. Still, it speaks to the commitment of the people who have involved themselves in such a way, and serves a sobering reminder that life as a resistance artist is far from glamorous.

While the Arab Spring can be said to be the genesis of the modern, widespread

uprising in the 21st Century, its effects are only now starting to be understood as the realization that change is possible sweeps over the world. Even as nations like Egypt and Libya slowly march towards lasting reform, other nations around the world are beginning to experience revolutions of their own, all towards the same end. And just as they did in the Arab Spring, artists emerge to tell the story of the people caught in the midst.

Further east, a massive surge of civil unrest and revolution has sparked in Ukraine, where a similar story of protests, police brutality, and government corruption is unfolding. However, unlike in Egypt and Syria where the situation has had time to cool down or otherwise stabilize, the violence and degree of severity is increasing day by day. With news that Russian parliament has approved military deployment in Ukraine, it does not seem as though the violence will stop any time soon (BBC). Amidst the growing levels of carnage in the streets and corruption in the government, art has again begun to sprout from the cracks to illustrate the struggle for the heart of the nation.

Near the Dynamo sports stadium in Kiev, government riot police bar entry to the road leading to the Ukrainian parliament, all the while, protesters stand vigilant, demonstrating and responding in kind to threats of violence from the opposition. In the background, a man named Sergey Pushchenko painted a picture of the proceedings. Pushchenko is a trained fine artist native to Ukraine who uses his skills to capture the feeling of desperation and grim determination that has come to define the movement (Corbishley). cursory examinations of photographs from the region can only serve to further magnify the degree of violence in the country, and Pushchenko's stark style is amplified by the fact that everything about the piece, from the scene to the models to



the lighting, was provided on sight, firsthand (Corbishley).

Common to many works of art to come from Euromaidan are the central colors of blue and yellow, the national colors of Ukraine. For Alexander Hodyayeva, these colors represent a central focus amidst a sea of black, as illustrated by her works (Tytysh). Hodyayeva's work features images created to evoke a sense of fear and anguish in the viewer, showcasing grotesque images of monstrous entities consuming the innocent and destroying the pure. "It is difficult," she says of the feelings created by her art, "there is a lot of pain, but there's still a lot of love and genuine compassion" (Tytysh). Works such as hers indicate the emotional toll the violence has taken on Ukraine's people.

On the streets, Georgian photographer Irakli Dzneladze captured the escalating violence from near the event's beginning in early December until February 6. "For two months I have not met a person who would be against [Euromaidan]," he says of the many people he photographed over the course of nearly two and a half months (Pravda). Dzneladze witnessed much over the course of his stay in the country, including several incidents of violent police action against protesters and media workers, and was shot at himself. "It was a little scary, of course, but in the end [it gave me] only power to keep shooting," he said of the incident. Of his work, he explains that he desired to capture the spirit of fearlessness shared amongst Ukrainians, which goes to show in the various images he captured of the movement (Pravda). Dzneladze and others like him represent the sentiment of international support, both in a physical and artistic sense.

All across Kiev and the rest of Ukraine, artists of all flavors and walks of life have created a united front of expression against tyranny and brutality. Given the level of

violence in the region, as well as the projection that it will likely escalate in the future, it's important to note that the conflict is far from over. Nevertheless, the artists and those they depict further serve to showcase the growing global trend of youths shaking off the shackles of oppressive, despotic regimes and joining the global stage in their own right, of their own free will.

In Venezuela, long-seeded tensions have erupted into open protests as Venezuelan protesters call for President Nicolas Maduro's resignation over the high levels of criminal violence, chronic scarcity of basic goods, inflation, and government corruption (Diaz). In what has come to be called the "Venezuelan Spring" by various reporters, yet another nation of restless and oppressed youths have risen up to take power from illegitimate governments.

In the case of Venezuela, artistic demonstration against Maduro's government is especially difficult, given that the government actively controls and monitors information flowing to and from the country in the form of blocking internet access, banning channels, harassing reporters, and numerous other methods (IAPA). Maduro himself has reportedly equated the artistic movement against his regime as a "propaganda war" and has, on numerous occasions, denied the importance of artistic opinion, especially on international fronts (Lapatillia). In response, a group of Venezuelan artists have united under the banner of Eco to speak out and "echo what is happening in Venezuela."

In lieu of visual art, Eco created a series of videos featuring prominent artists from a variety of disciplines that describe the truth of what is occurring in the country (Eco). Despite attempts by government funded media outlets like VTV to discredit the

message and the group behind it, the group stands by its message, and continues to be an outlet for artists and citizens alike who are dissatisfied with the current government (VTV; Eco).

Venezuela's music scene has also responded to the protests in a significant way. La Vida Boheme, rock act native to Venezuela, has soared in popularity as a result of the protests, and functions as a sort of unofficial soundtrack for protesting students. La Vida Boheme's music has served as a rallying cry for Venezuela's politically active youth, whom lead singer/songwriter Henry D'Arthenay say protest in response to long-held feelings of fear and distrust of the late Hugo Chavez and his successor. "Even if you're not involved politically, your life is in jeopardy," D'Arthenay says of the situation and their role in it, "I've been politically active since I was young because I always thought it was a responsibility" (D'Arthenay). D'Arthenay echoes the sentiment of many artists, not only in his home country, but across the world, who have voluntarily involved themselves in these conflicts in an attempt to spread the message to as many as possible. Their goals reflect a growing trend of community that isn't restricted by nationality or creed, and indicate a move towards a more globally inclusive society as a whole.

Art is a visual representation of a culture, a snapshot of the times that can be preserved and interpreted long after the point in time has passed and even the language has been forgotten. For centuries, artists have used art as a method of communicating with the masses, and have used it to convey a large variety of emotions, from the majesty and awe in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel to the swagger and bombast of a Bing Crosby performance. With its ubiquity in our daily lives, it's easy to forget that

art can be an important tool, both for self-identity and unity, especially in a time where communication across continents is instantaneous.

For the people of the Arab world, art has become more than a simple distraction or diversion, and it has come far from the oppressive ways it was used to portray the region's cadre of dictators and tyrants. Art is a universally translatable rallying cry. Murals, songs, collages, paintings and sculptures have all been created in response to the most tumultuous three years in recent Arab history, and all are apart of a larger whole. Going forward, art will continue to evolve in the region, with many saying that the uprisings have awoken the Arab artistic spirit thought dormant or even absent (Tripp).

Across the globe in Ukraine and in Venezuela, the events of the Arab Spring serve as indicators that the uprisings are far from over. As more and more groups of people become aware of their power and voice, the movement towards a global union promoting freedom of thought and expression will continue, even as opposition mounts from corrupt governments and their supporters. With a great many oppressive leaders stripped of their power, the world may be at the precipice for a cultural renaissance in the Middle East and a further boom of expression in many other corners of the world, thanks in part to the actions of a determined group of people willing to do whatever it takes to get across their message in the best way they know how: art.

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