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CREATIVITY AND RESILIENCE IN THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

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IN SYRIA, A COUNTRY COWED INTO SILENCE AND COMPLIANCE FOR FORTY YEARS, A REVOLUTION BROKE OUT IN MARCH 2011. IN DIGITAL AND PLASTIC ARTS, IN VIDEOS, STILL IMAGES AND FILMS, IN NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES, ORGANIC INTELLECTUALS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THEIR COUNTRY CRAFTED WORKS THAT EMERGED OUT OF THE REVOLUTION, INSISTED ON ITS PERSISTENCE AS A REVOLUTION AND POINTED TOWARD A FUTURE IT MIGHT YET ENGENDER. TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IS BEHIND THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION, ITS RUTHLESS REPRESSION, THE MASS MOVEMENT OF CITIZENS IT PRECIPITATED AND THE CULTURAL MOVEMENT IT PRODUCED, I WILL LOOK BACK TO THE LAST CENTURY AND ALSO FORWARD TO SPECULATE ON THE FUTURE ROLE OF SYRIAN REVOLUTIONARY INTELLECTUALS IN IMAGINING A NEW FORM OF GOVERNANCE AND CREATING A MEMORY FOR THE FUTURE.

INTRODUCTION

After World War I, the French and the British carved up the eastern region of the Mediterranean into zones of control. While Jordan, Palestine and Iraq (for a short twelve years) became British Mandates, Lebanon and Syria fell under French mandatory rule. In each country, resistance to European rule was intense. The French left Lebanon in 1943 and Syria in 1946, the same year that Jordan was separated from Palestine and given autonomy. In 1948, the British handed Palestine over to the newly established Jewish state of Israel. 750,000 Palestinians fled their homes into neighboring countries and those who did not leave became second-class citizens in their ancestral homeland. The Palestinian resistance, begun under the British, persists until today.

For many Arabs, the Palestinian crisis became emblematic of the condition of most Arab countries that the colonizers had left but where their influence remained in the form and practices of local leaderships that soon proved to be corrupt and unjust. The neo-colonialism of post-independence Arab governments mirrored the modus operandi of the Israeli state vis-à-vis its Palestinian citizens. Independence movements, and their failures, gave birth to leftwing Arab intellectualism. How could the formerly principled opponents of the European occupation of their lands have failed their people so badly? What could be done to right those wrongs?

From Iraq to Morocco, the Palestinian cause galvanized socialist and Arabist secular agendas as well as burgeoning Islamist projects. The right of the Palestinians to their land, freedom and dignity symbolized the Arabs' right to enjoy freedom and prosperity in the lands of their birth. With Edward Said at the helm, exiled intellectuals theorized the situation and responsibility of Arabs to critique their governments and to demand accountability. Poet Mahmud Darwish connected Palestinian expropriation with that of the Muslims and Jews in 15th and 16th century Andalusia and of Native Americans shortly thereafter. The lost land, whether Palestine or any Arab country toiling under unjust rule, had to be redeemed no matter how long the struggle might last. Syrians, Egyptians, Algerians, Iraqis and Tunisians, who found themselves as oppressed under their own leaders as they had been under the Europeans resisted, even if only quite quietly and at great risk. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the persecution of critical intellectuals and the recognition of time done in prison as constituting a badge of honor for having dared to speak truth to power. Intellectuals became moral signposts; their words shaped public opinion.

THE ASADS' SYRIA

Although French colonial presence in Syria had ended in 1946, its legacy lingered in the chaos the followed. Coup after coup brought a succession of leaders who could not deal with the sectarianism and other divisions that the French had fostered. In 1970, Hafiz Asad, an Alawite from the North, took over power. Corrupt and tyrannical, he clamped down on dissent. His most committed opponents were the Sunni Muslims who had traditionally ruled Syria, and among them the Muslim Brothers were the most restive. Any attempted coups, any questioning of status quo were viciously quashed during the forty years of draconian Asad repression.

To prove absolute loyalty, citizens publicly paraded their love of the Asads with posters pasted on office walls and car windows. Knowing full well that any form of dissent could be reported to the powerful mukhabarat, or secret police, citizens did not talk openly about politics even in the privacy of their own homes. Fear of incarceration or disappearance created an atmosphere of distrust of everyone, what Arendt called "atomization." When I was there in the mid-1990s, people told me in confidence that the walls are ears, they do not merely have ears. They told me these things because, as one friend explained, I was safe; I did not know to whom to report any slip in loyalty.

Despite widespread terror of the regime, some did articulate their dissension from the norm of tolerance of tyranny. Although many intellectuals left the country when the strain of silence had become overwhelming, some stayed. Knowing that critique of the system only has meaning when produced inside where words have power because they court danger, some writers, filmmakers and artists dared to produce coded oppositional work. The problem with much of this cultural production was its allusiveness. Consequently, their revolutionary messages remained locked except for the cognoscenti. Historical allegories remained historical. Interpretations and suggested contemporary parallels were disavowed.

> "PEOPLE TOLD ME IN CONFIDENCE THAT THE WALLS ARE EARS, THEY DO NOT MERELY HAVE EARS

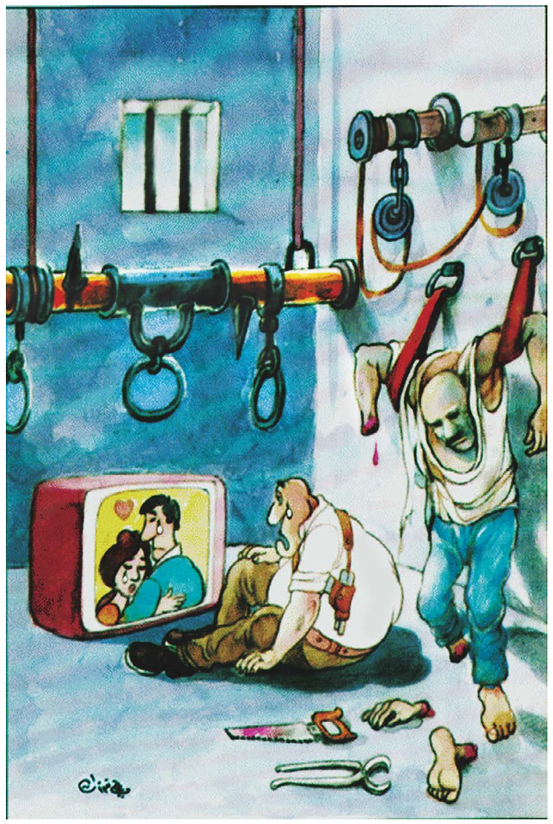
In his 1995 play Al-Ghoul, poet and playwright Mamduh 'Adwan warned the tyrant Jamal Pasha, the architect of the Armenian genocide during World War I: "You shall not escape us even while you sleep. Your victims' vengeance will pursue you for blood (…) Even if you muzzle their complaints they will haunt you as ghosts (…) From now on we shall begin our great duty: This tyranny shall never recur."[1] At a time when the mere whispering of dissent, let alone critique of the state and, above all, of the president, risked prison or death, `Adwan empowered readers and theater audiences to think the unthinkable: coercion is not normal; stolen dignity must be redeemed; liberty seized. But, of course, when asked about the similarity between Jamal Pasha and Hafiz Asad, he was outraged.

Prison writers were the most circumspect and the most difficult to understand, but with the key to their codes one could tell how audacious their art was, how inspiring! These Hafiz-era public intellectuals did not believe that their works could do more than raise awareness of injustice. They had no idea that they might become the pioneers of a revolution that would challenge and perhaps eventually overthrow a dictatorship-turned-dynasty. Yet today, some are looking back to these men and women and discovering there works that presaged a new revolutionary era.

In June 2000, Hafiz Asad died and his son Bashar took over. The oldest son Basil had been groomed for the presidency even though the constitution clearly stated that Syria was a republic with a president who had to be elected. In 1994, Basil died in a car crash and his younger brother Bashar was recalled from London where he was studying ophthalmology. During the following six years, he learned the ropes under the tutelage of his father's men. These politicians retained their power when the reins of office passed into the hands of their charge. But before he could "legitimately" sit on the throne his father had occupied for thirty years, Bashar Asad authorized a constitutional amendment "to reduce the head of state's minimum age from 40 to 34 (Bashaar's age) (…) a republican monarchy was born. The dictatorship passed smoothly from father to son. Otherwise put, the Eternal Leader would rule from the grave for another eleven years."[2] During the first year of his rule, Bashar allowed the Damascus Spring to flower. Unprecedented freedoms were allowed, including the two-year "publication of Syria's first independent newspaper in almost forty years – the satirical weekly Al-Domari (the Lamplighter), managed by renowned cartoonist Ali Farzat."[3] Although he did not critique regime individuals, Farzat threw caution to the winds, as in this explicit depiction of a cell in Tadmor prison, the dreaded Kingdom of Death near the ancient site of Palmyra.

1 cooke 2007: 81, 90.
2 Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 15.
3 Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 20.

Figure 1: Ali Farzat, "Prison Cell "[4]



Some interrogation tools are attached to the walls of the cell and others are scattered on the floor. The prisoner, hand and foot amputated, hangs dying from straps, his blood drip dropping on to the floor. Meanwhile, his torturer having completed his assignment relaxes a bit and weeps at the tenderness of a television romance.

Modernization, liberalization and development had briefly been the mots du jour until the situation, exacerbated by the 2006 drought that drove over two million Syrians into extreme poverty, started to spin out of control.[5] Media censorship returned, and social fora that intellectuals had opened up for political discussions were closed down. The genie, however, was out of the bottle, even if the increasingly visible opposition was small and disunited. Thin cracks in the wall of fear that the Asads had carefully erected over forty years began to widen.

4 ©Ali Farzat – Fair use (commentary & criticism).
5 Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 33.

REVOLUTION

Then in early 2011, the Arab Spring exploded from Tunisia and spread quickly to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. In early March, some schoolboys from the southern city of Daraa, picking up the mood of the moment, scribbled slogans on a wall: "The people want the regime to fall" and "Go away, Bashar." The boys were arrested and tortured. The popular response was immediate. Despite decades of prohibition on freedom of thought, speech and assembly, Syrians flooded the streets and demanded justice and the ouster of Bashar. They organized Friday demonstrations that persist until today. Across the entire country, citizens chose Friday for their protests because the Friday communal midday prayer in mosques is the only time and place Syrians have official permission to meet. On 25 May 2012, a Friday remembered for the brutal murder of the children of Houla, there were 939 demonstrations throughout the country.[6] These demonstrations were regularly repressed. By spring of 2016, 450,000 had been killed – over half civilians. 9 million were internally displaced; countless numbers had been disappeared, many into Bashar Asad's prisons, and almost five million refugees were wandering the world in search of safety.

The more ferocious the repression – and it was and still is beyond belief vicious – the more people joined the opposition. They knew that they were living an extraordinary moment in history. Their revolution continues in 2016 as the weekly banners broadcast from the village of Kafranbel announce. So what is a revolution? In her influential On Revolution, Hannah Arendt theorizes the conditions shaping socially transformative revolutions in order to distinguish them from popular uprisings, as the Arab Spring revolutions have been characterized: "It is frequently very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins," she writes. "Only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the formation of a new body politic, where the liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution."[7] Frantz Fanon's calls for sacred violence in 1960s revolutionary French Algeria echo this text. The Arab Spring revolutionaries wanted liberation from oppression that in several cases they achieved when they ousted entrenched autocrats. Importantly, they also demanded the constitution of a different form of government that might bring about the formation of what Arendt calls a new body politic "which guarantees the space where freedom can appear."[8] Like their Egyptian, Tunisian, Libyan,

6 Majed 2014: 65, 72-73.
7 Arendt 1964: 33, 35 (author's emphasis).
8 Arendt 1964: 125.

Bahraini and Yemeni co-revolutionaries, Syrians remain committed to creating a new social order based in freedom, dignity and justice.

> THE GENIE, HOWEVER, WAS OUT OF THE BOTTLE, EVEN IF THE INCREASINGLY VISIBLE OPPOSITION WAS SMALL AND DISUNITED

Some Syrians fought for this new order by demonstrating in the streets and exposing their bodies to lethal danger. Songs were especially effective in mobilizing mass protests. In Tunisia and Egypt, rappers had been instrumental in massing demonstrations. In Syria, two singers became emblems of the revolution: Ibrahim Qashush and Abd al-Basit Sarut. The first was murdered the day after he led a crowd in a long liturgy commanding Bashar to go; the second became the star of Our Terrible Country, a 2014 film about his transition from soccer star to revolutionary hero whipping up the crowd through song and leading them into the heart of devastated Homs to fight regime forces.

CORPSES EVERYWHERE

The brutality of the regime response to the protests and then of the international collaborators and then of Islamic State has been mind-numbing. Death is everywhere, trying to drown the revolution. There are corpses to be buried, so many that the only way to dispose of them has been in mass graves. Killed by barrel bombs, chemical gases, starvation, and sectarian skirmishes and Islamist beheadings, Syrians lie scattered in city streets unapproachable because of vigilant snipers. They line roadsides, pile so high in morgues that some are thrown out. This disaster is happening in a country where the fate of the corpse marks the honor and dignity of the family. Regardless of who the dead were in life, they must be properly buried; that means they must be found, washed, shrouded and then buried with all due rituals. People killed while fleeing violence in a panic or disappeared into prisons or buried under the rubble of a destroyed building present a challenge to the living. Where are their dead loved ones? If they can find them what shape will they be in? How can they honor them?

This is the Edgar Allen Poe scenario that novelist Khalid Khalifa detailed in *Death is Hard Work,* a novel he published in 2016. A father, or what is left of his decomposing body, is finally buried after a three-day journey

that should have lasted a few hours. We are taken on a 400-kilometer road trip from Damascus to the northern border through a dark landscape strewn with corpses. Militiamen and ill-intentioned foreigners man the innumerable checkpoints as though the country was theirs. This is no ordinary trip. Three siblings risk life and freedom to bury the body of a father they had not much loved. He had died of natural causes in a country pervaded with death and no one but them cares. And, we wonder, why do they care. Despite misgivings and temptations to throw the putrefying body out of their microbus, they persevere. The dying man's last wish was to be buried in his village near the Turkish border. Constantly stopped, their six-hour trip takes three days. Stage by agonizing stage of the journey, we watch and smell the corpse decompose. It turns blue and swells and they "breathed their father's death, it penetrated their skin and flowed in their blood."[9] At the last checkpoint where Islamic State men interrogate and imprison one of the sons for not knowing his Islam, his sister is struck with aphasia. Her terror is palpable. Worms had crawled out of cracks in the skin of the cadaver, they had covered the microbus window and seats and her frozen lap.[10] When they do finally reach the village, the remains of the body are washed, shrouded and buried.

Why did burial in the kingdom of death matter so much? The corpse, Khalifa explained, represents the dignity of the family. If at all possible, it must be properly buried. This Faulknerian novel emerged out of his own anxiety about burial after he had suffered a heart attack in 2013. Lying in the hospital bed, he had wondered what would happen to his body were he to die. He started to write. The imaginary journey became so grim that at times he had to stop writing. Some of the scenes in the novel, like corpses thrown out of a morgue to make room for regime soldier corpses, he had personally witnessed.[11] When the story reached the last checkpoint Khalifa knew that he could no longer write in Syria, where he still lives. He flew to Malta and there for two months he wrote the final section.[12]

> THE MORE FEROCIOUS THE REPRESSION – AND IT WAS AND STILL IS BEYOND BELIEF VICIOUS – THE MORE PEOPLE JOINED THE OPPOSITION.

Khalifa's novel did what citizen journalists with their cell phones ever at the ready rarely could. He created the affect that their shock photographs and videos lost during the early days. Even the thousands of gruesome

9 Khalifa 2016: 114.
10 Khalifa 2016: 142.
11 Khalifa 2016: 50.
12 Conversation Durham NC 12-02-2016.

> TDEATH IS EVERYWHERE, TRYING TO DROWN THE REVOLUTION

images of corpses bearing the marks of torture and starvation that Caesar, "a defected military police photographer who recorded deaths in regime custody over a two-year period,"[13] and in January 2014 distributed around the world lost their power when people refused to look at the unimaginable return of the repressed from the Holocaust. Art succeeded where reality failed.

ART ACTIVISM

From March 2011, artist-activists wrote, rapped, painted and filmed their rejection of the violence, and of the regime that perpetrated it. Some artworks ridicule the butcher Bashar, while others express their horror at the extent of the humanitarian crisis, their need to document the atrocities for the future and their determination to maintain the momentum of a revolution that daily exacts its terrible price. As Zuhour Mahmoud wrote in March 2016: "Perhaps the difference between art and political art lies in the fact that the former gives something to the world, while the latter borrows something from the world and gives it back."[14] One such political artist is Ali Farzat.

In August 2011, Farzat's license to mock expired: he was kidnapped, beaten and left for dead in a deserted area near the Damascus airport. A brief spell in hospital was not enough to dampen his spirits. Undeterred, he soon returned to his drawing board. Early in 2012, he penned this cartoon mocking international hypocrisy at the terrible fate of the people. Representatives of world powers visit Syria to drop a few crocodile tears in the outstretched bowl of a member of the opposition. The ground around them is strewn with the newspapers that daily deliver the count of Syrian dead to a heedless world.

13 Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 147.
14 Mahmoud 2016.

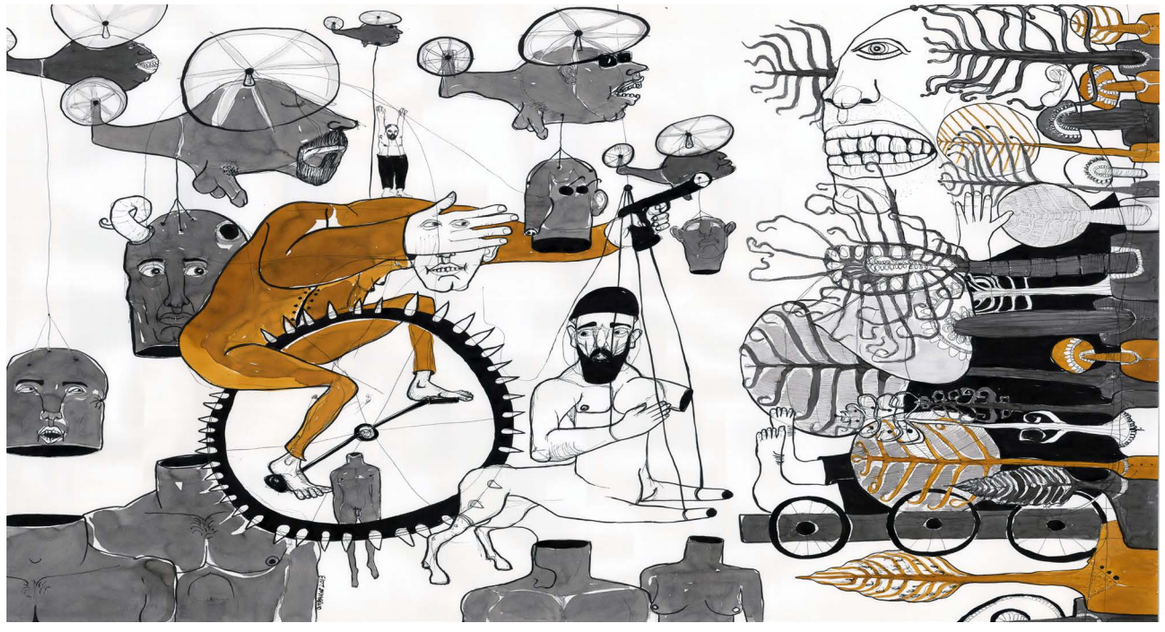
Figure 2: Ali Farzat, "International Hypocrisy "[15]

This cartoon is one of the first items uploaded to Sana Yazigi's Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution site that features thousands of cultural works from inside Syria and outside.

Plastic artists have been very productive also, knowing that their work does not have to wait for a gallery to approve and exhibit but rather it can be circulated on social media platforms. In this 2013 artwork, Muhammad Omran depicts Hafiz Asad, the puppeteer beyond the grave, still running the show.

15 ©Ali Farzat – Fair use (commentary & criticism).

Figure 3: Muhammad Omran, "Untitled "[16]



In 2013 during a Copenhagen workshop, Muhammad Omran had collaborated with poet Golan Haji to create four works on the revolution. One day, Haji wrote "Eyes:"

At noon, the wind is silent.
The curtain is a banner; time has obliterated the letters.
Behind it, two eyes are scanning
an alley, empty
as a long trench for castrating the dead.
Helicopters are flying away.
Parachutists are ejected like the sperm of rapists.
The present is an eye with amputated lids.
The glance is bleeding.
The sun in the south is a merciless eye,
an eye of a fevered Cyclops.
Two hands on the balcony feel its heated rails
like someone in a circus clutching the bars of a cage,

16 Permission 21-02-2016.

one half of which has disappeared.
The shadows that striate your blue nightgown
will not vanish when you hide again.
Shadows imprison you.

I have cited the entire poem so that the reader can trace the collaborative process between poet and artist. While Haji was writing Omran painted his parallel version of a Syrian inferno with civilians beheaded and the mukhabarat wearing their signature sunglasses and flying as human helicopters surveying the land for further prey. Like so many of these revolutionary works, this one is "Untitled" – the new freedom to express does not mean that cultural workers have thrown all caution to the winds.

The number of revolutionary videos, paintings, sculptures, graffiti, banners and digital works circulating in the Internet is beyond calculation. The intensity of this creative outpouring may well signify an awareness that this art as memory for the future is finding a response among those whom artists are hoping to reach and to touch. At a time when the world seems to have turned its back on this humanitarian crisis, artists fill the vacuum. Why are we not paying them the same attention that we pay to the numerous instigators of violence?

The Internet has of course facilitated the production and circulation of hundreds of thousands of these works that broadcast the catastrophe from places that the Asad regime has closed to international reporters. Several sites have been archiving some of this work, none more systematically and profusely than Sana Yazigi's Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution opened in mid-2012. In an interview with my student Melissa Zhang, Yazigi confirmed, "These artists are adopting the revolution and dedicating their work to the revolution. [The artist] is not only doing the caricature because of the beauty of the work – no, he doesn't care about the beauty – he cares about participating. This participation is very important and very new for a society that was forbidden from participating in any issue – social, economic, political."[17]

Despite so much energy, resilience and creativity the revolution floundered. There are many reasons. Activists talk of decades of atomization and, almost enviously, about the Islamists who were united by ideology and were able to organize collectively. In the beginning, demonstrators met without concern for creed or level of education or class: "We didn't know what we were doing, but the experience made us think, discuss and learn. We worked

17 Cited in Zhang's final research paper for my course "Refugee Lives: Violence, Identity and Politics in 21st Century Arab World" Spring 2016.

hard to coordinate the slogans of the revolution across the country."[18] At a meeting of expatriate and refugee activists in Paris in the summer of 2015, I heard a recently arrived Syrian say, "we had no experience in mobilizing action, no leadership and we had no unifying ideology." But, of course, that is less than half the story. Had Bashar's Shiite allies Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah not supported him he would not have survived the growing organization of the opposition. Had Islamic State not taken advantage of the chaos, the people would not have had to fight on yet another front. Had Russia not always quietly but then in 2015 overtly supported the regime, the people's demands for freedom and release from Asad tyranny might have succeeded.

But even without success, the revolution and its creative outpouring persist. According to graphic designer Fares Cachoux, Syrian artists are:

> "telling the story of the Syrian Revolution. Today, and years after the war is over, we will see hundreds and thousands of artworks, each showing the conflict in its own way. From Daraa's children [in 2011], to the final solution to the crisis, we will see a very clear timeline consisting of works of art. Despite the fading memory of the peaceful revolution, Syrian artists believe that years from now, the artistic memory of Syria will bear witness to the uprising turned civil war turned multi-pronged proxy war that has torn the nation apart."[19]

Art is not solace as the PBS ArtBeat series on Syrian art[20] would have it – though sometimes it may be; it is not cathartic—though it may be; it is not therapeutic – though it may be. More than anything else, art is proof of resolute commitment to a cause; it provides a timeline and an archive.

DANCING FOR THE REVOLUTION

In an oil painting, Wissam al-Jazairi has brilliantly represented the people, and especially the women's, defiance of the tanks and the fires raging around them. No matter how hard the regime tries to kill its citizens they will not give up. They have seen too much, suffered too greatly not to dance on the flames and the rubble of destroyed homes to prove their unflagging faith in the revolution.

18 Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 58.
19 Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 58.
20 PBS Artbeat 10-10-2016.

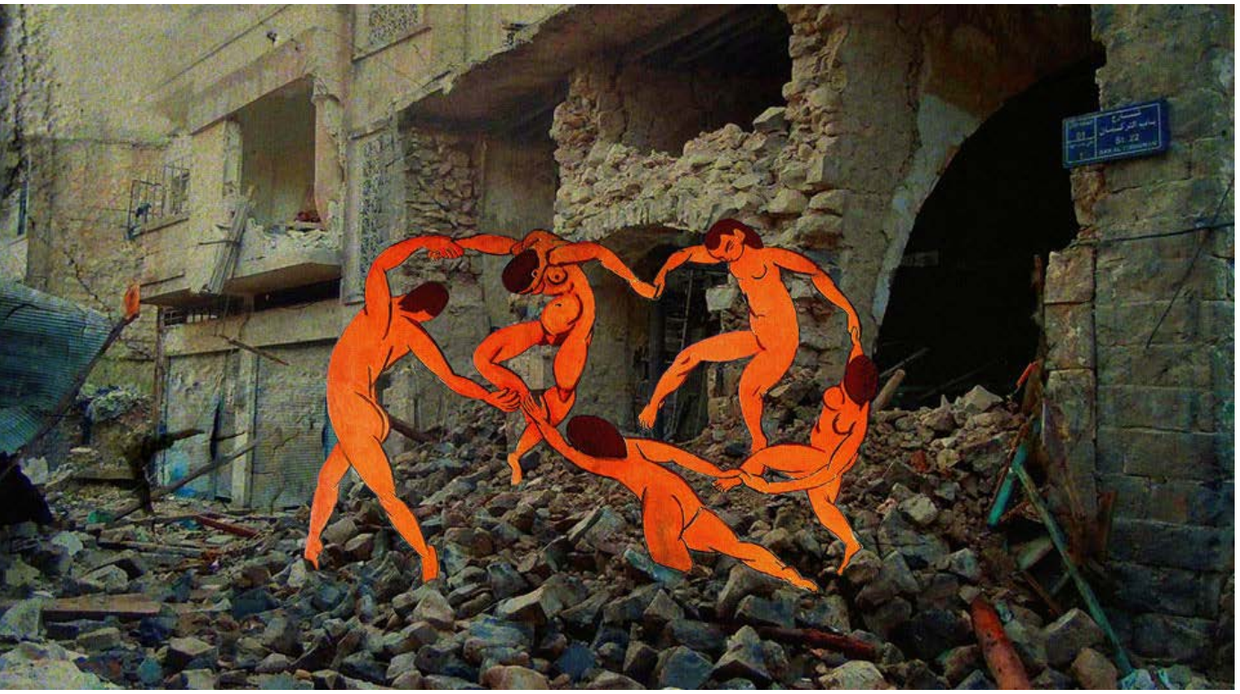
Defiantly dancing,[21] the revolutionaries refuse to be called victims; they refuse to return to silence and acquiescence. Dance proves that the revolution goes on, and that is why there are so many extraordinary examples of dance in Syrian revolutionary art. With this sculpture of a muscled man dancing on the edge of a barrel soaked with blood, Sari Kiwan announces to the world that no amount of regime barrel bombs will stop the people from celebrating their revolution with dance.

Figure 4: Sari Kiwan: "Dancing on a Barrel Bomb"[22]

21 Hence the title of my forthcoming book *Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution* (cooke 2016).
22 Artist's permission 10-07-2015.

Tammam Azzam has developed a new technique for his representation of the people's defiance. Photo shopping images of European masterpieces and superimposing them on to found images of newly destroyed buildings, he produces intericonic digital works that insist on the survival of the human in inhuman circumstances. In this image, Azzam has superimposed Matisse's Dancers on to a pile of rubble. In their crazy wild dance the naked red figures scream survival and defiance.

Figure 5: Tammam Azzam: "Dancing on the Ruins "[23]



CONCLUSION

In December 2015, thirty-five collaborating artists from Kafranbel, the town that weekly produced revolutionary banners to be broadcast around the world, unveiled a spectacular 24-meter, one million stone mosaic wall entitled "Revolution Panorama." Featuring the faces and stages of the revolution, the mosaic documents in intricate detail the revolution from its beginnings in March 2011 until today.

23 Artist's permission 12-02-2016.

Figure 6: Kafranbel "Revolution Panorama "[24]

Many have buried the Arab Spring and especially the Syrian Revolution, but I have argued in Dancing in Damascus: Creativity, Resilience and the Syrian Revolution that these people's movements need to be placed into the larger context of modern Arab intellectual history. These revolutionaries are not rabble to be dismissed because without leader, ideology and agenda – doomed to fail. They are part of a hinge moment in their nations' histories. As Wassim al-Adl asserts, the "revolution was not about an ideology or a religion, and it wasn't about grand political scheming, it was about normal people who stopped what they were doing to stand up for what they believed in, and they did that even though they were afraid and, in many cases, would lose their lives."[25]

The revolution was not only about the surprising resilience of normal people but also of artist-activists. Their indefatigable creativity while witnessing wickedness has created the conditions for the emergence of a new stage in the complicated relationship that Arab intellectuals have had with the people and the powers ruling their countries.

With the explosion of the Arab Spring, moral authority has been democratized. Social media and the Internet have played their role in all of the 2011 revolutions, nowhere more so than in Syria. Artist-activists have emerged as Gramsci's organic intellectuals who are replacing the singular, prophetic intellectual of the 1960s who had become emblematic of the Arabs' resistance to colonialism and its lingering legacy. Sole source of wisdom, the postcolonial intellectual had provided guidance through

24 Internet fair use.
25 Yassin-Kassab, al-Shami 2016: 210.

the maze of colonial legacies that lurked in the interstices of indigenous authoritarian regimes. Graffitists, digital artists, sculptors, musicians and writers are now filling the ether with their creations that call not for ideological warfare but for loyalty to the revolution with its goal to transform a repressive system into the Arendtian new body politic which guarantees the space where freedom can appear and unite a country that for forty years had been atomized.

Wissam al-Jazairi, Muhammad Omran, Sari Kiwan, the people of Kafranbel and Tammam Azzam have greater moral authority than the veteran Syrian poet Adonis who had long stood at the vanguard to Arab intellectualism. When he could not come out in full support of the revolution or denounce the Asad regime he hammered the last nail in the coffin of the traditional Arab intellectual standing high on Mount Olympus. These revolutionary artist-activists refuse ihbat, meaning frustration, a word that has become the mantra of so many Arab Spring activists who have given up on their revolutions. Their creative works that social media daily distribute around the world maintain the revolutionary momentum, and expand it into a transnational terrain of committed cultural praxis.

Ideology is now the monopoly of Islamist groups like Islamic State whose destructive worldview is failing to deliver on its promises. This may be the best outcome for a revolution without ideology – it leaves open a space for something new to emerge –Arendt's "new beginning." This new may be a different relationship to power – horizontal rather than vertical, alongside rather than directly oppositional, democratic rather than elitist, speaking for oneself and not for the people. No longer relying on elite others to articulate their grievances and fight for them, these organic intellectuals are assuming the burden of representation and action.

In closing, I would like to return to the corpse in the car that Khaled Khalifa describes so vividly in Al-mawt 'amal shaqq and ask who is this father of the three siblings who could not stand the old man but who cannot think of abandoning the corpse that after three days in a microbus is stinking, swelling, its skin splitting with worms crawling out of the stinking, decomposing flesh? This fictive father may be the legitimacy of the Asad dynasty that is dying and however evil it may have been it must be ritually buried for the honor and dignity of the country to be salvaged. He may be the idealized Arab postcolonial intellectual whose unmatched moral authority as spokesperson for the abstract people dissipated. He may be all of these and also the moribund institutions from a defunct past that are calling for a burial that will salvage Syrian honor and dignity and allow for a new beginning when Syrians can return home and dance in the streets of Damascus.

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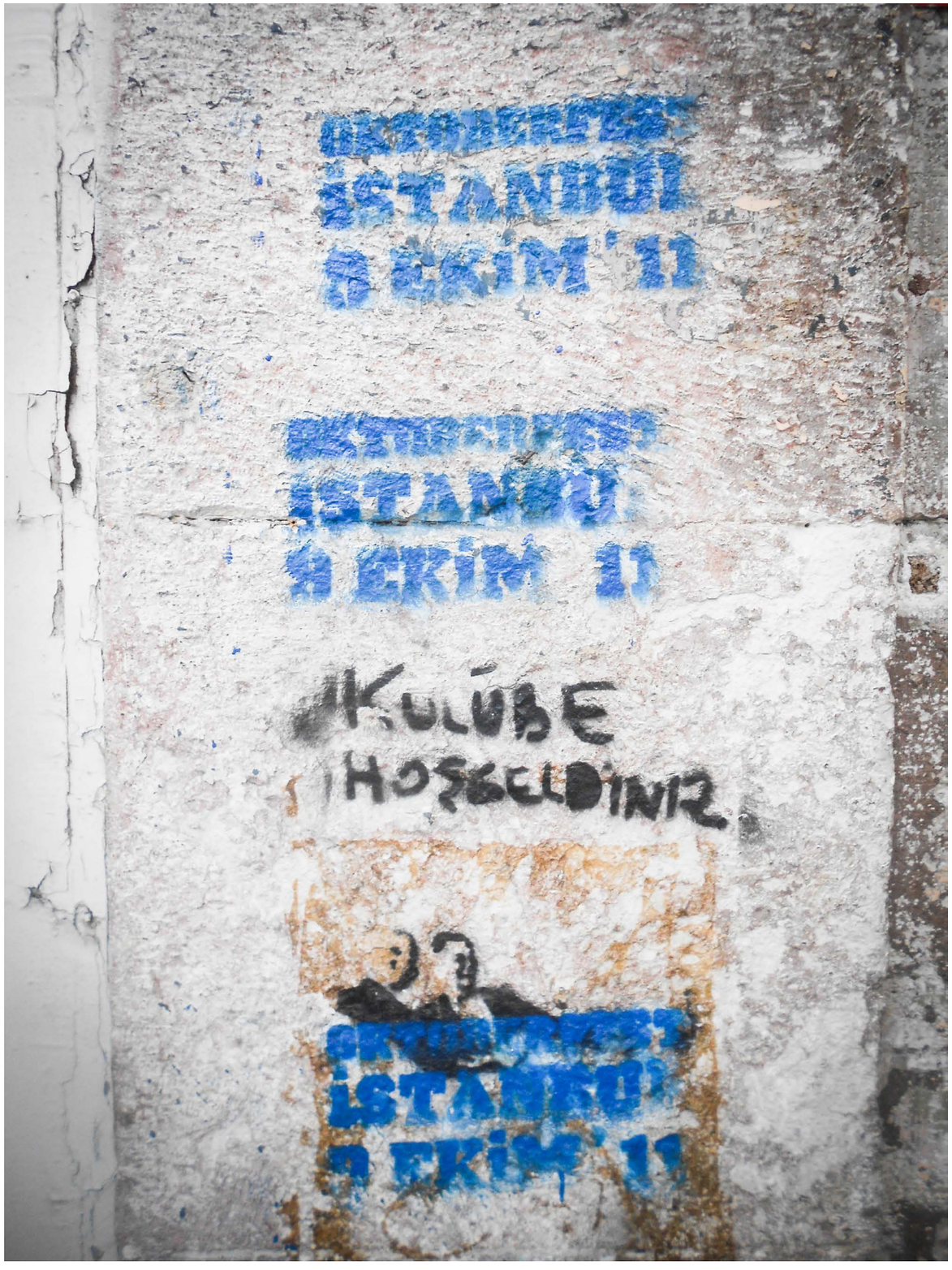

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