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The Emergence of the Mona Lisa Battalions: Graffiti Art Networks in Post-2011 Egypt

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During and after the January 2011 revolutionary protests, Egypt witnessed the surge and spread of graffiti and street art activities. The story of graffiti in Egypt is usually rendered as voices of dissent, modes of symbolic resistance, or expressive force of anger, solidarity, and commemoration. While it is true that the collapse of the state security services and the liberation of public space after the 2011 had fostered the growth of artistic revolutionary expressions, the story of artistic production implies more than politics of cultural representation. Rather, these artistic expressions are usually grounded in the formations, expansions, and contractions of social groups that keep on negotiating their identities, networks, capacities and limitations. In this article, I follow the trajectory of one graffiti group, *Katāʾib al-Mona Lisa* (Mona Lisa Battalions), that started forming by the summer of 2012, to review how they make sense of their worlds, negotiate their desires within objective constraints, and conjure alternative cultures, through continuous perseverance that involves hope, desire and euphoria, as well as failure, frustration and breakdown.

As artists struggle to produce within varied constraints, their quest to find alternative spaces of production and performance, and their continuous improvisations to create alternative aesthetics and public spheres, are inherently political acts and forms of struggle 'from below.' Politics today are not constrained within sites such as Tahrir Square, or events like the 2011 revolution, but in fact, the political is being produced and improvised within everyday life of the artists. Tracing the compositions of art networks and the subjectivities they cultivate should reframe our understanding of notions of political actions. Resistance shouldn't be recognized as the only form of

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negation, rather it is, as Michel Foucault stated: "a creative process. To create and recreate, to transform the situation, to participate actively in the process, that is to resist."[1]

The Formation of the Mona Lisa Battalions

The story starts under the Sixth of October Bridge in Zamalek district in Cairo where the June 2011 mural "Tank vs. Bike" stood to represent a tank standing against a biker holding stacks of bread on his head, and to expresses a symbolic criticism of the SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) that had ruled Egypt from 2011 to June 2012. In January 2012, the mural was redrawn by a group named Badr Battalion to express their pro-SCAF support. Weeks later, a group of artists with names such as *The Winged Elephant*, *Moody*, *Ismail*, and *Boogy*, decided to meet and repaint the "*Tank vs. Bike*" mural to re-expresses the original anti-SCAF message. Adding another layer to the mural, they also drew some sarcastic and witty stencils representing comedians from the legacy of Egyptian Cinema. They removed the *Badr Battalions* signature, and while painting a Mona Lisa stencil, they joked about forming a street art group that would stand against the *Badr Battalions*. As one artist told me in an interview, "We wanted to fight with art, with graffiti, and to fight in the streets." They decided to call it *Katāʾib al-Mona Lisa* (Mona Lisa Battalions).[2]

After several informal meetings between the artists, they created an open event on Facebook and started to spread the word among the community of artists and activists. One of the artists invited me to the meeting saying, "We don't know yet exactly what we want to do, but we want to form a graffiti group." The first meeting was held at the *Nahda Cultural Center* in Fagala (one of the oldest districts in Cairo). A large number of the initial attending artists were already working on a street art project called *Atelier El Shareʿ* (The Street Atelier) organized by the *Nahda Cultural Center*, and which aimed to gentrify the buildings and shops in the district and to spread awareness of the cultural heritage of the district.

About twenty people attended the first meeting in May 2012, including visual artists and students from the faculties of fine arts and art education, as well as script writers, animation artists, graphic designers, amateur actors, theatre directors, and myself—an anthropologist interested in alternative forms of art practices. The first meeting was chaotic. Everyone came for different reasons. Most of the attendees knew each other from art networks and downtown intellectual and art circles. We started only with the name, *Katāʾib Al Mona Lisa*, which quickly became known as just *Al-Katāʾib* (The Battalions). From there we started to work on the group's logo, then on a promotional video for YouTube and Facebook. Through the process we started to discover each other's ideas, political opinions and artistic choices.

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Figure 1. Mona Lisa Battalions logo in Cairo's Downtown area. Photo by Mohamed Ismail.

This initial phase took about ten weeks. It included many logo designs and discussions on the identity and concept of the group. Some artists in the group decided to start painting scattered murals in the district of Zamalek in Cairo. However, no plans, designs or projects were clear yet.

The Media Workshop in *Ard El-Lewa*

While the group was still in the process of formation, another event was beginning: the experimental Media Art Workshop organized by the Egyptian artist Shady El Noshokaty. The workshop has been running one month annually since 1999, offering young artists and art students a series of specialized workshops on painting, calligraphy, public art, graphic design, sound art, video art, and contemporary conceptual art. The 2012 workshop ran during June at the *ASCII Foundation for Contemporary Art Education* in *Ard El Lewa*, one of the poorest districts in Cairo. ASCII is one among several art foundations that have been established in the last seven years by prominent Egyptian artists who decided to relocate and to open cultural and art spaces in poor districts and slums of Cairo to reach out to the populous in these areas who don't have the luxury of studying art or visiting high culture galleries in upper and upper-middle class districts. Most of *El Katāʾib*'s artists attended the workshop.

Through ASCII's workshops, *El Katāʾib* started to expand. Visiting ASCII every day during the workshops introduced the artists to Ard El Lewa and its culture and people. They started to ponder the meaning of street art to this community and to develop several local art projects. The main concept behind their ideas was to bring the community and art together: "Art should be from the street and to the street" as one artist expressed. This process unleashed the *El Katāʾib* project *Nas Ard El Lewa (The People of [the district of] Ard El Lewa)*.
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Figure 2. Mona Lisa Battalions artists draw children's faces and names in Ard El-Liwa, during one of the activities of the *Nas Ard El-Lewa* project. Photo by Mohamed Ismail.

The first phase of the project was "*ᶜayez abaʾa*" (I want to be). It started in August 2012 and lasted for three months. The project included interviews with neighborhood children in Ard El Lewa about their dreams and what do they think about their future. Artists then would draw children's faces, names and desires as murals on the walls of their buildings.

Implementing the project wasn't easy; artists had to deal with different challenges. Firstly, there were problems related to materials and techniques that would suit the urban structures of Ard El Lewa. Artists needed to review the status of the buildings and their walls and to try different techniques and learn from their errors. At some point, they had to redo all the murals and paintings after realizing that building bricks could not sustain the colors and materials they were using. Secondly, the artists' social values and outer appearance as middle class citizens seemed out of place in Ard El Lewa. Hence, artists needed to establish strong social connections with the people of the district. Thirdly, artists needed to find ways to finance their project. They thought about applying for funding from NGOs and art funding institutions. However they realized that they lacked the expertise and the technical knowledge required for writing grants applications. They had no option but to self-finance the project.

Throughout the project, artists started to face the question of organization. Although the friendship between different artists provided a bonding force for the group, the size of the group was expanding to become more than fifty artists. This scale required inventing creative coordinating practices within the group. After several fights and conflicts within the group, they reached a resolution by assigning different artists to different specialization groups: one responsible for materials and preparation, one for public relations and administrative tasks, one for community outreach, one for designs and planning, and one for implementation. This organizational structure was flexible, permitting members from each group to move to another group when it was necessary. Group heads were selected during weekly meetings held at ASCII, which became the meeting spot for the group during and after the project.

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Figure 3. "Nas Ard El Lewa" painted on the wall before the entrance to the graffiti-streets of the Mona Lisa Battalions. Photo by Mohamed Ismail.

The "I Want to Be" project created a fissure among the group members between those who thought of *El Katāʾib* as a "political" project and those who thought of it as a "social" project. Among the first group was the prominent graffiti artist "*The Winged Elephant*," who believed that the current phase required employing art for direct revolutionary messages and radical activism. The second group believed that social intervention and indirect political expressions are more effective. The artists of the second group who came to shape the character of *El Katāʾib* in later phases argued that "real political action is to explore and intervene in social relations and reality." One artist told me in an interview: "What is politics but social relations? Everything in politics depends on the social reality and cultural values of the community. When we interviewed the children about their future dreams and when we painted their faces and desires, we wanted them to think and we wanted to think with them: who is preventing us from achieving our aspirations and desires? Why can't we reach our dreams? Is it the corrupted state? The unfair distribution of wealth? We wanted them to think by unleashing their desires and letting them be expressed in public. We wanted the community to think about the desires and dreams of its children too."

The "I Want to Be" project was critical for the development of *El Katāʾib*. The success of the project increased the popularity of the group among the art

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community in Egypt and the project received wide media coverage in Egypt. In addition it helped in consolidating the group identity of the participating artists who started to see the effects of their art projects in the streets of Ard El Lewa.

The *Sixth Floor* Exhibition

After the success of the "I Want to Be" project, *El Katā'ib* started to get invitations to participate in gallery exhibitions. One important exhibition they were invited to was "*The Sixth Floor*" exhibition, curated by the sound and visual artist Yara Mekawei. For the curator, the "sixth floor" symbolizes an attic where one stores old unwanted things. The curator invited artists to express their ideas and feelings about "What is Forgotten," "Nostalgia," and "Returning to the Past." This multimedia exhibition included art installations, video art, indoor graffiti, and sound art. It was held at the Vinnouse hotel in downtown Cairo during March of 2013.

The curator met with two members of *El Katā'ib*, invited them to participate in the exhibition, and offered *El Katā'ib* one showroom in the exhibition. The two artists in *El Katā'ib* decided to join and invited the rest of their group. The participating artists from *El Katā'ib* and the curator described the process of implementation as "tedious, chaotic and extremely inefficient." The curator explained to me the frustration that accompanied such a process by saying that she wasn't sure if they would be ready before opening and whether any coordination was possible with such informal and flexible agreements. She emphasized the need for some kind of a formal organizational structure. Many fights and conflicts emerged throughout the implementation process. In spite of such disagreements, lack of organization and chaotic implementation, the final work represented a common theme that all members of *El Katā'ib* agreed upon. At the beginning of their preparation for the exhibition, the artists pondered their participation as street artists in indoors gallery exhibitions.

The final work of *El Katā'ib* showroom exhibited a mural of a donkey-cart extended over the walls of the room. In the middle of the front wall, the cart was drawn carrying a heap of written curses. On the opposing wall, the local Egyptian idiom "Your mother didn't cook today" was printed. This popular idiom in lower class communities and districts in Cairo is an insult meaning: "Your mother will be fucked today." However, most of the middle class citizens wouldn't be aware of such an idiom and its usage in lower-class districts. One artist described the work of *El Katā'ib* in the *Sixth Floor* exhibition by telling me:

> We considered it a breakthrough: to bring the vulgar culture of the street, its insults, its curses and the slang of poor areas to the high art culture of the indoor gallery. This is how we understand our role as street artists. Not only do we do art in the street, we also bring the
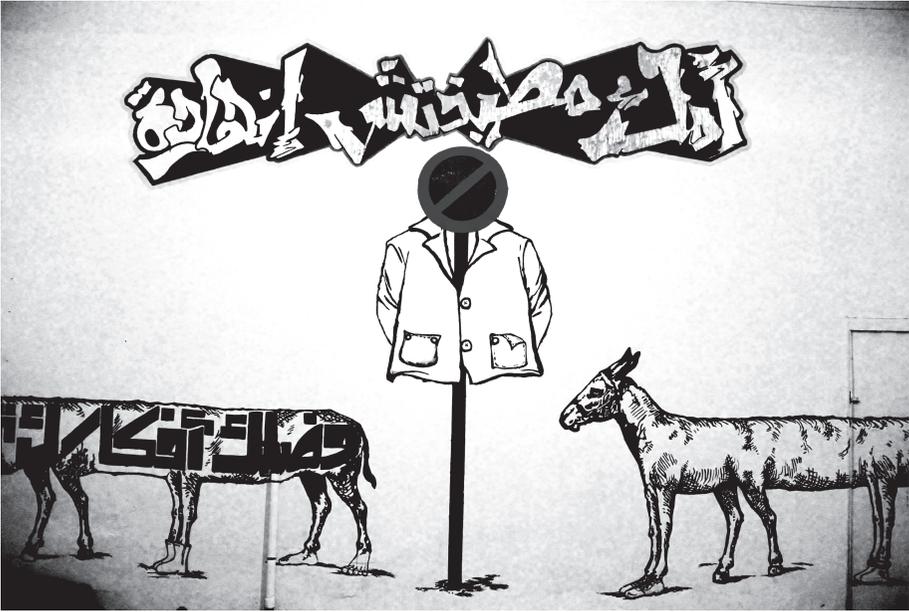
Figure 4. "Your Mother didn't cook today" by Mona Lisa Battalions from *The Sixth Floor Exhibition.* Photo by Mohamed Ismail.
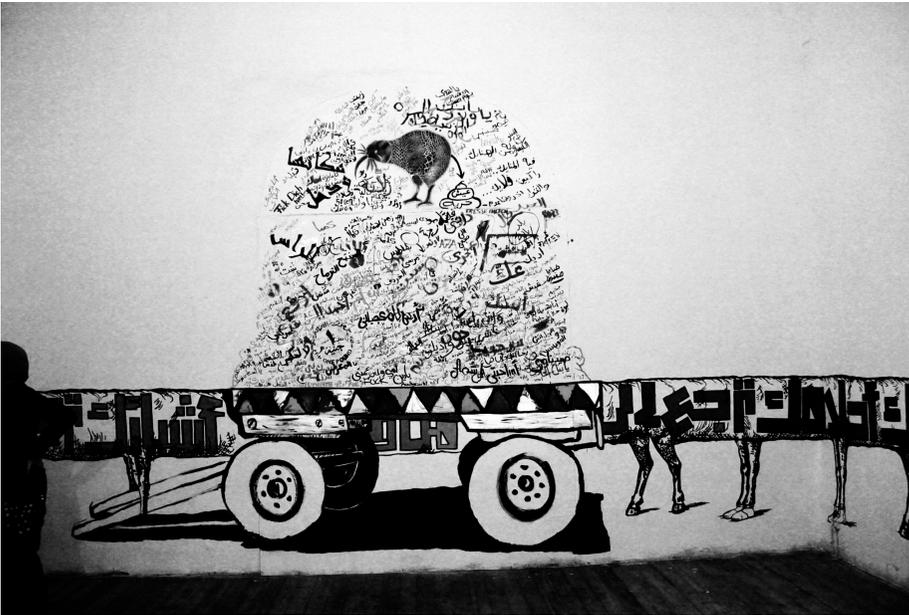

Figure 5. A heap of Egyptian street curses by Mona Lisa Battalions and the visitors of *The Sixth Floor Exhibition.* Photo by Mohamed Ismail.

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Figure 6. "Free Zwawla" painted by Mona Lisa Battalions artists in Zamalek, over their earlier mural "You won't be able to burn me" (2012). Photo by author.

art of the streets to the exclusive space of the gallery. Language and performances of the street aren't marginalized anymore. What is in the street invades even the exclusive space of the gallery.

Reaching Beyond Cairo and Egypt

By 2013, *El Katāʾib* artists started to expand beyond Egypt and Cairo. In April-May of 2013, the artists participated in the *Women on Walls* (*WoW*) projects, which brought over sixty street, graffiti and visual artists to work together in four different cities (Cairo, Alexandria, Mansoura, Luxor) on a national campaign focusing on women's empowerment and gender rights through street murals art and graffiti stencils. Artists were highly critical of the developmental discourses behind the *WoW* project. They thought such developmental discourses are irrelevant to the everyday local contexts of the Egyptian culture. However, they highly appreciated the opportunity that *WoW* provided to work with prominent Egyptian artists beyond Cairo.

During the spring of 2013 some members of *El Katāʾib* started to establish transnational connections with other graffiti groups in the Arab World by starting a series of discussions with the Zwawla graffiti group in Tunisia. The relationship between the two groups developed when some of Zwawla's members were arrested in Tunisia. *El Katāʾib* expressed their support and solidarity for *Zwawla* by drawing "Free Zwawla" graffiti over one of *El Katāʾib* previous murals. After several Skype meetings between artists from both groups, they started to think of cooperative projects in Tunisia and Egypt. Although *El Katāʾib* managed to arrange funding from an Egyptian institute,

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Zwawla members were concerned about the institution's source of funding and implicit cultural policies. Thus, the cooperation between *Zwawla* and *El Katāʾib* is still on hold.

The Problems of Finance

The issue of financing projects is one of the topics that *El Katāʾib*'s artists disagree about how to manage. In the beginning, the group financed its projects by collecting funds from its members. However, as the scale and reach of the projects continued to grow, members realized that they couldn't rely solely on their personal support and started to discuss other possibilities of funding. Generally artists of *El Katāʾib* are concerned about sources of funding, the extent to which funding institutions might intervene in their work and aesthetic choices, and the implicit cultural policies and uses imposed by such institutions. However, there is disagreement among the group on whether this should be a concern that would prevent them from applying for funding support and assistance. Many artists believe that whatever the source of funding or the institutions' cultural policies, they still have the space to maneuver and negotiate such power structures. Those artists believe that what matters is how you make use of the funds. Some members also started to think of making use of the recent commercialization of graffiti to support the group projects, including providing decoration services, and teaching graffiti to students in elite schools in Cairo—capitalizing on the growing hype of graffiti as a "cool" and "funky" practice.

In all such endeavors, artists are trying to sustain a balance between their independence and their need to finance their projects. However, they have the initiative and desire to develop their projects with minimum resources if the lack of sources of funding should continue. Before receiving funding from a European source for their second phase of the project in Ard El Lewa during the summer of 2013, *El Katāʾib* artists were also discussing the different options ahead of them in case their applications were rejected. As one artist told me,

> If we got the funding, we will have strict schedules, deadlines, budgets and we will need to be ready with designs and well-defined conceptual frameworks. But even if we didn't get the funding, we will continue to work in Ard El Lewa.

The more *El Katāʾib* artists are getting involved with formal funding institutions and commercial industry the more they discuss their status as group and the process of institutionalization and organization required for their projects. By the beginning of the second phase of the Nas Ard El Lewa project, artists realized that the institutions they are working with require well-defined schedules and responsibilities. In addition, the extension and

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Figure 7. "No Compromises on Women's rights" above Mona Lisa Battalions logo in Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Cairo's downtown area. Photo by Mohamed Ismail.

growth of *El Katāʾib* introduces new problems. For example, the funding and financial resources that *El Katāʾib* receives require a bank account in the name of an institution. Several discussions have been held on how to institutionalize and legalize the status of *El Katāʾib*. According to the Egyptian law they can become a non-profit company, but in this case they have to pay monthly taxes. Alternatively they can become an NGO, but this will put them under the scrutiny and the control of the Ministry of Social Solidarity. In either case, they are trying to manage the different trade-offs between practical needs and values of independence, flexibility and openness.

Concluding Thoughts

Although the events of June 2013 have changed the political scene of Egypt and affected the personal lives of *El Katāʾib* artists, they are still implementing their projects and making future plans. The recent proposed graffiti law which criminalizes graffiti with possible punishment ranging from imprisonment to fines of EGP 100,000, represents a new threat against the development of art groups like *El Katāʾib* and reflects how political changes in Egypt might affect the development and activities of art networks. However, the mutability of these art networks' goals and ideals, their decentralized organization, and the heterogeneity of their members wouldn't make their decline easy. Like many art networks and collective initiatives emerging after 2011 in Egypt, *El Katāʾib* embodies high adaptive capacities to the emerging situations and contexts of post-2011 Egypt. In addition, these art networks don't "fight" against single

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institution of authority and hegemony (e.g. the state). Rather, they continually negotiate structures of power by crafting independent forms of collectivities and lifeworlds within the transitional contingencies of post-2011 Egypt, by focusing on establishing alternative public spaces and social imaginaries in the everyday life.

The projects of these art networks don't always succeed: they do fail sometimes. But failure can be productive. Not only can failure be educational, illuminating which investments are productive and which modes of organization are effective, but also failure may provide an opportunity to connect again, to reimagine the future that has been lost, and to try once more. Nevertheless, failure can also be destructive: artists can fall into despair, frustration and exhaustion losing the sense of the future and its horizons. Only time will tell whether and how such networks will succeed or fail in their collective projects and negotiations of power structures. Yet, their pursuits and endeavors will continue to suggest creative forms of resistance in the post-2011 Egyptian society. ✣

End Notes

[1]Michel Foucault. "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity." In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Paul Rabinow, editor (New York: New Press, 1967), 168.

[2]Artists translate the Katāʾib Al Mona Lisa on their formal Facebook page as "Brigades Mona Lisa," https://www.facebook.com/kta2eb.monalisa.