

# **“Loud” and “Quiet” Politics: Questioning the Role of “the Artist” in Street Art Projects after the 2011 Egyptian Revolution**

## **Abstract**

This essay examines the grassroots artistic initiative al-Fann Midan (Art is a City Square) in Cairo and a contrasting approach to street art in Alexandria to demonstrate how each enacted a different relationship to “the political” in a revolutionary moment. Extending sociologist Asef Bayat’s concept “quiet encroachment,” it analyzes these contrasting approaches through the sonic metaphor of “loud” and “quiet” politics. As a spectrum, this framework highlights how the everyday, the gestural, and the affective on one hand can exist simultaneously, and in tension, with larger, more representational political expressions on the other. It thus avoids fetishizing creative “resistance” or “dissent,” while nonetheless analyzing art in a revolutionary moment, by grounding creative expression more historically and with analytical attention to how it reanimates long-standing debates among Arab intellectuals regarding the role of the “artist.”

## **Keywords**

public space, revolution, resistance, DIY art, Egypt, politics

Scholars have recently been critical of trends in English-language scholarship and media that frame creative expression in the Middle East primarily through the lens of “resistance” or “dissent.” For instance, they have insightfully critiqued the way the focus on the so-called Arab Spring erroneously treats creative expression as if it emerged “out of nowhere” (Bseiso 2018; Abaza 2016) and suggested that the focus on “resistance” marginalizes other equally important aspects of artistic practice (Moreno Almeida 2017). Ethnomusicologist Laudan Nooshin asks whose agenda the “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” (Nooshin 2017, 164, 178). Performance studies scholar Rayya El Zein coined the term “neoliberal orientalism” to describe the ways discourses of “resistance” thus actually work to perpetuate Euro-American imperialism (El Zein 2016).

The ease with which analyses of creative expression in the MENA can serve to justify imperialist projects poses special challenges when examining art during moments of revolution. For some artists in Egypt today, for instance, critically analyzing and documenting the ways their artistic forms linked directly to revolutionary action is crucial. Crucial because, as musician and former organizer of al-Fann Midan (Art is a City Square) Ayman Helmy argues, the Egyptian state has actively sought to legitimate its rule through “normalization,” a process of removing any trace of the revolution (Helmy 2015). Some artists are likewise seeking to understand “what happened”—why the revolution did not lead to its intended outcomes and what, if anything, they could have done differently. To analytically avoid any relationship between art and revolutionary action, then, not only risks serving the interests of the Egyptian state but also ignoring a conversation currently circulating among some of Egypt’s most prominent artists.

In this essay, I propose that a possible way to mitigate the fetishization of “resistance” in English-language scholarship, while nonetheless analyzing art in a revolutionary moment, is to ground creative expression more historically and, relatedly, with analytical attention to how it

animates internal debates among the artists involved. Toward this end, this essay examines the grassroots artistic initiative al-Fann Midan (hereafter abbreviated as FM) in Cairo and a contrasting approach to street art in Alexandria. It demonstrates how both these approaches were built upon pre-revolution street arts practices while each manifesting a different relationship to “the political” in a revolutionary moment. They thus demonstrate how long-standing debates among Arab intellectuals—regarding the artist’s role being in the “social” or the “political,” the artist’s relationship to the state, and whether artists view themselves as speaking from within the people’s collective knowledge or to it—manifest in artistic practice on the ground and today are questions resurfacing with fresh relevance (see El-Desouky 2014).

Extending sociologist Asef Bayat’s ([2010] 2013) concept “quiet encroachment” to encompass an approach to artistic expression and organizing, these contrasting approaches can be understood through a sonic metaphor that I call “loud” and “quiet” politics. “Loud” politics, exemplified by FM, involve clear statements identifying ideology and direct engagement with the state. In so doing, it treated the arts as a source of enlightenment and the artist as a particular kind of revolutionary leader. In contrast, the “quiet” politics preferred by some artists working in the city of Alexandria approached the arts through the principles of humility, ambiguity, and *indirectness*. These artists largely dismissed direct interaction with the state as irrelevant, preferring to situate the arts and the artist in the realm of the “social” rather than the “political” even during a time of intense political upheaval.

Using the sonic metaphor of “loud” and “quiet” to describe varying approaches to the political adds complexity to a view of creative expression as “dissent.” It recognizes that not all artists view themselves, nor their work, as “dissenting.” It highlights instead how some artists seek to regulate the political “volume” of their work, such as by discursively situating its meaning in the realm of the social or preferring it be evaluated aesthetically rather than as a political statement. It thus joins scholarly efforts to consider the ways Egyptian creative expression exists beside only grand revolutionary narratives and in relation to smaller gestures, affects, and the everyday (Pahwa 2018; Hussein 2015; Kelada 2015). At the same time, it also provides a way to consider how these actions exist simultaneously with those of other artists who intend for their work to be linked directly to larger revolutionary demands. Rather than presenting a binary, the framework of “loud” and “quiet” situates these various approaches along a spectrum. It acknowledges that artistic activity engaging either of these realms (extremes) is always related to some extent to the “the political.” The “louder” the politics, the more direct and clear the ideology and, at least ideally, the less room left for ambiguity or interpretation. As a spectrum, this framework focuses on the relationship between the everyday, the gestural, and the affective on one hand and the larger, more representational political expressions on the other.

In some ways quiet politics resembles James C. Scott’s “hidden transcript” in that it encompasses the “fugitive” political conduct of a marginalized group (1990). Yet it differs in the sense that it does not assume homogeneity among the marginalized. In other words, viewing the political through a spectrum of loud and quiet avoids a binary of power between a single “public” and single “hidden” transcript, between the “haves” and “have nots.” Similarly, Bayat primarily analyzes the relationship between two binary groups, the people and the state, leaving less examined how state power works to fracture “the people,” rendering social groups differently marginalized and solidarities between them difficult or near impossible. By using the terminology “loud” and “quiet,” I examine the relationships among differently-positioned social groups within the marginalized, who each vie for power and space in relation not only to the state but also to each other. Since “the people” are positioned differently in relation to state

power, what constitutes a hidden transcript, as well as if, when, and which of its aspects should be made public, is in a state of constant contestation and negotiation. Loud and quiet politics seeks to provide a framework for understanding how dominant power differentially fragments “the marginalized” and their understandings of “the political” by exploring the relationships among differently-positioned artists who live and create with varying access to “the social” and “the political” as spheres of desirable (and effective) action.

This essay thus foregrounds how the events of the last decade have renewed debates within artistic and leftist circles in Egypt. As one Alexandrian arts organizer told me, it is important for artists to present a unified front when negotiating with the state. But, in order to document and analyze “what happened,” it is more important to consider the variety of narratives, initiatives, and histories that made up the revolutionary moment. I view this essay as a modest attempt to document one view of “what happened” through an ethnographic account situated in longer histories and peripheral narratives. As such, it approaches street arts organizing between 2011 and 2014 as part of a larger, still ongoing project.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it joins a current of thought that seeks to avoid romanticized and triumphant narratives of the 2011 revolution or of the arts under authoritarian repression. As the work of artists such as playwright Laila Soliman have shown, revolutions have their darker sides and their own peripheries (see Hussein 2015, 365). To understand “what happened,” then, we must look to experiences and perspectives beyond Cairo as well as to those speaking outside official narratives without reifying a simple binary between “counter-” and “revolutionary.” In discussing the debates surrounding varying approaches to street art, my goal here is likewise not to critique the artists but to document the diversity of “political” action and the myriad ways they have long engaged—and continue to engage—their society by finding creative ways around limitations.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Sound of “Quiet Encroachment”: Pre-Revolutionary Street Music as “Politicized not Political”**

Although not emphasized in most narratives of the revolution, street concerts have a long and ongoing history in urban Egypt. This history is important for considering a) how some street art practices are given revolutionary meanings but not others and b) how citizens have been positioned unequally in relation to state power and, by extension, to the loudly political as a sphere of desirable or effective action. Due to state-led “modernization” beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the state’s increasing role in the last several decades as provider of “security,” street concerts have gradually been relegated to the urban peripheries where the state does not maintain

<sup>1</sup> It thus contributes to scholarship that treats Egypt’s revolutionary period as extending beyond only the protests between 2011 and 2014. For theater and literary historian Margaret Litvin, for instance, “To praise a revolutionary uprising – to try to tell its story, as though it were already over – *is* to bury it” (2013, 117; see also Keraitim and Mehrez 2012). Historian Khaled Fahmy has likewise questioned when the revolution “began” and if it has indeed “ended,” demonstrating instead that it is an ongoing project rooted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fahmy 2015). As such, to pick a starting and ending point with regards to FM is in some ways arbitrary. I present start and end points suggested by one of its organizers, Ayman Helmy (see Helmy 2015).

<sup>2</sup> My approach likewise builds from the work of anthropologist Sherry Ortner (1995) who argues for careful attention to the “internal politics” of marginalized groups.

much power or presence.<sup>3</sup> In these peripheries, *mūlid*-s (saint's day festivals)<sup>4</sup> and popular weddings (*afrāḥ sh 'abīyya*) are usually organized in the street not through negotiation with the state but through enacting logics of ambiguity and "encroachment" that exploit the gaps in state power. "Popular" weddings, for example, are held in the streets of low-income neighborhoods and usually feature the live performance of *sh 'abī*,<sup>6</sup> or, more recently, *mahragānāt* (festival music).<sup>7</sup> These music groups may perform multiple weddings per night, often five or more nights per week. One musician from Bahari, a low-income neighborhood in Alexandria, told me, for instance, that growing up his apartment building had been the backstage to at least two such concerts per week. These musicians' livelihoods depend on the availability of live street performance,<sup>8</sup> which are usually organized through verbal agreements without state involvement and can draw hundreds of listeners. Certain types of street performance thus encompassed a parallel infrastructure to state and corporate media sustained, at least initially, almost entirely by the urban underclasses' relative freedom in public space.

Sociologist Asef Bayat's concept "quiet encroachment" is useful for understanding how live music performance had been able to occur in public space prior to the revolution. Quiet encroachment refers to the "noncollective but prolonged direct actions" of "especially poor individuals to acquire basic life necessities in an unassuming yet illegal fashion" ([2010] 2013, 45). Public space is *the* primary site for these actions. It is where social actors act to expand "their space" by constantly gaining new positions to "move on" ([2010] 2013, 56). As just one example, even as the state began in the last several decades to regulate large *mūlid*-s, it largely failed to stop the practices it sought to inhibit. As anthropologist Samuli Schielke found, *mūlid* participants simply moved their "illicit" activities from the state-controlled center of the *mūlid* space to its peripheries (Schielke 2008, 546). Such encroachments are possible on a massive scale in part because the Egyptian state lacks the "capacity, consistency, and machinery" to control its population despite its best efforts (Bayat [2010] 2013, 28). Existing simultaneously with state control of *some* public spaces, then, are conditions of profound freedom in others in which people find ways to act based on relationships of trust, reciprocity, and negotiation rather than through fixed rules and contracts (Bayat [2010] 2013, 49).

As many scholars have previously demonstrated, middle-class and more elite individuals have not had the same access to the street as a sphere of "aesthetic" or "social" action, nor to these same "gaps" in state power (Winegar 2006; van Nieuwkerk 1995; Rizk 2010). The state more tightly controls public spaces in centralized areas of the city, where activities require state permits that can easily be denied. Most indoor performance venues exist only in these centralized locations and require musicians, as one example, to be members of the state-run musicians' union (*al-niqāba*), which opens them up to state censorship and taxation. Likewise most middle-

<sup>3</sup> For more on how music performance was historically a regular presence in coffee shops (*qahāwī*), city squares, and open markets see van Nieuwkerk 1995; Fahmy 2011. For more on state securitization and policing of the working class see Ghannam 2002, 2013; Ismail 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The *mūlid* honors Muslim "friends of God." A festive event held in public space, it is at once a cultural, artistic, social, and religious activity (see Schielke 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Unlike in English, the Arabic word "popular" (*sh 'abī*) has connotations of modesty and humility, literally "of the people," rather than popularity or monetary success (see El Zein 2016, 28-30).

<sup>6</sup> A musical genre which includes a main singer along with his/her band of instrumentalists including violin, *nāī* (reed flute), keyboard, *'ūd* (plucked lute), accordion, and several *duff* (frame) drums.

<sup>7</sup> A genre that mixes elements of *sh 'abī* with electronic music and hip-hop

<sup>8</sup> Some singers, such as Ahmed Adaweya, Ahmed Sheba, and Bousy, developed followings outside only the wedding circuit but even these musicians do not receive much money for their recordings or film roles.

class and elite individuals did not have “access” to peripheral (*sh‘abī*) areas. Organized “informally” through internal community ties, these areas were understood to be closed (*ma‘fūl*) to outsiders. The street as a space of performance and encroachment thus acts as a difference-making mechanism among the marginalized. For many independent musicians, “the street” as a space of artistic performance and “social” action was a site of desire. The pseudo-documentary film *Microphone* (2011) (dir. Ahmad Abdalla), for example, captures these desires. Following real-life independent musicians and their longing to reach the public through street performance, each fictionalized attempt at a street concert is thwarted by state gatekeeping or the police. Ending with scenes of musicians fleeing state authorities, the film demonstrates the difficulty—or near impossibility—for musicians operating in more middle-class spheres to avoid state intrusion. In attempting to mitigate this intrusion and as an aesthetic preference, most independent musicians in the 1990s and early 2000s thus sought to define their music as engaging the realm of “the social” and “aesthetic,” not “the political” (Lewis 2013).

In contrast to the state’s politicization of independent music, the *mahragānāt* musicians, independent musicians, and FM organizers I spoke to understood *mūlid*-s and street weddings to be non-revolutionary, “social” events. According to Schielke, for example, the *mūlid*’s defining characteristic has been its ambiguity. With so many different activities happening in public space at once, each attendee has considerable freedom to make their own experience—attend performances of songs, look at the opposite gender, eat street food, pray, smoke hashish, and so on. *Mūlid*-s are thus temporary spaces where the ordinary rules of daily life are broken, but without ideologically seeking to transform the social and political rules outside the *mūlid*’s bounds (Schielke 2008, 544).<sup>9</sup> Likewise although street genres such as *mahragānāt* are “politicized” in the sense that it sounds subversive identities,<sup>10</sup> the music performances at street weddings were understood to be a part of everyday life and living, not a practice that transformed them. The audience was believed to attend these events out of social obligation and/or purely for enjoying the music itself. In other words, they were understood to be “social” events distinct from “the political.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than transforming the relationship between state and society, they existed *despite* this relationship. It is in part the “non-political” understanding of these activities, as well as their location beyond the state’s reach in the periphery, that has allowed them to continue even under al-Sisi’s regime.

A primary reason that existing street arts practices were not already considered revolutionary, then, was that for most cultural elites these practices occurred in the realm of what literary theorist Ayman El-Desouky refers to as “the politicized but not political” (El-Desouky 2014). In providing the basis for revolutionary artistic action during and after the 2011 protests, as the next section demonstrates, existing street arts practices had to be ascribed with new associative meanings, and occur in new geographic locations, in order to be loudly political and, thus, revolutionary.

### **Art is a City Square (al-Fann Midan): Loud Politics**

<sup>9</sup> According to anthropologist Samuli Schielke, *mūlid*-s were not understood to transform the world outside their bounds nor present the view that the norms of daily life *should* be transformed. The state, though seeking to regulate and “civilize” their larger iterations, likewise viewed *mūlid*-s as harmless since they had not historically been used as sites for political mobilization (Schielke 2008, 544-45).

<sup>10</sup> Performance studies scholar Tarek Benchouia argues, for instance, that *mahragānāt* is “political” because it challenges sanctioned modes of existence and ideas of how urban space should be experienced (2015, 60-67).

<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that none of these artists have ever been loudly political. *Sh‘abī* and *mahragānāt* have their own histories of discursive critique (see Grippo 2007; Swedenburg 2012).

Al-Fann Midan (FM) was a festival (*iḥtifālīyya*) initiated in 2011 by “The Independent Cultural Coalition” (ICC) (*al-’italāf al-thaqāfa al-mustaqilla*),<sup>12</sup> a group of civil society and private sector organizations as well as individual artists that formed after the initial 18 days of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. For three years between 2011 and 2014, FM was held on the first Saturday of every month in various cities throughout Egypt, with its largest event held in Abdin Square in downtown Cairo.

At the FM held on September 1, 2012, the activities were set to begin at four pm. As I approached the square at four, the equipment for the stage and art displays were just arriving on trucks to be unloaded and take a little over two hours to set up. On this particular day, the square was surrounded by black-uniformed police, *al-amn al-markazī* (the Central Security Force). Newly elected president, Mohammad Morsi, was at Abdin Palace, and thus the reason for the delay and heightened security. Having secured a permit from the Governorate, the organizers threatened to turn that month’s FM into a protest if the street police tried to prevent their activities due to the president’s visit (Lewis 2014).

[IMAGE 1: Stage set up in front of Abdin Palace. Photo by the author]

[IMAGE 2: Craft tables. Photo by the author]

The square is organized in a way that facilitates multiple events occurring at the same time and features artistic forms not normally welcome at state-run venues. The west end of the square represents the main entrance, and the east side is buttressed by the illuminated white palace. The stage is set up directly in front of the Palace and represents the focal point of the square. To the left of the entrance, a white wall is surrounded by chairs and shows two films: one on the tragedy of the Beni Suef Theater fire and another documenting the horrors of Egyptian police brutality. To the right is a large poster with pictures of all those who died in the theater fire and displays of artwork. In the middle of the square until the stage on the opposite end, there are fifteen to twenty craft tables, at which local artists sell handmade jewelry, notebooks, small paintings, and trinkets. These tables were available for anyone to rent at a price of about 100 EGP (about \$15 at the time).

There are two prominent themes for this particular FM: the Sept. 5, 2005 Beni Suef Theater fire that killed forty-six people<sup>13</sup> and the ongoing Syrian revolution. During this FM’s proceedings, the actors and actresses killed in the fire were consistently referred to as *al-shohadā’* (martyrs). In one of the opening remarks on the main stage, prominent film director Yousry Nasrallah, wearing a Syrian flag around his neck, announced in reference to those killed in the 2005 fire, “We have gathered here today to celebrate these martyrs, and to celebrate all the martyrs from the pyramids to the Levant.” In this way, the 2005 fire in a small Egyptian city was turned into a current political issue. It was made directly related not only to the recent Egyptian revolution, but to, what had been at the time, the ongoing revolution in Syria as well.

[IMAGE 3: Remembering the martyrs of the Beni Suef theater fire. Photo by the author]

<sup>12</sup> The ICC included about 200-250 different organizations as well as individual actors/actresses, playwrights, musicians, intellectuals, writers, poets, and performers.

<sup>13</sup> Many of those killed in the Beni Suef fire were prominent actors and actresses. The deaths caused by the fire came to represent the brokenness and neglect, as well as the general devaluation of the arts, that had festered for years under the former regime (see Lewis 2013).

As I meander through the different craft tables before the official concert begins, I hear a pounding drum coming from outside the square. A theater group, led by a young man on stilts and another man pounding a bass drum, approaches. Behind the man on stilts is a group of about four or five performers carrying large puppets modeled after SCAF leaders on their shoulders. The puppets are about four times the size of a person, and the performers use poles to move their arms and hands, which are gnarled open fists. The line snakes through the square. Upon reaching the center, the lead performer on stilts rips the puppets' papier mâché heads from their bodies and throws them to the ground. As the heads hit the ground, the crowd begins cheering and rushing toward the center for their chance to kick the heads around like soccer balls or stomp them. After a few minutes, only scattered pieces of paper remain.

After much anticipation, the live music begins around 8 pm. The first band features a Syrian singer who is described as the "voice of freedom" for the new "democratic Syria without sectarianism . . . the Syria with nothing but freedom." The second band, an Egyptian band named Taxi, features five male youth performing electric guitar, *ūd* (plucked lute), keyboards, drum set, and bass guitar, a set-up including electronic and acoustic instruments typical in the independent music scene. Before the band begins playing, the guitarist and lead singer addresses the crowd: "I want to draw your attention to what happened here about twenty or thirty minutes ago while we've been happily standing here. The president of the Republic just drove past us in his car and nothing happened . . . of course had this happened a few years ago, we would all be in jail for three months." As many people in the crowd cheer, he then reminds the audience, "But if anything happens, Tahrir is right there at the end of the street."

[IMAGE 4: Live music was FM's most popular attraction. Photo by the author]

In its spatial and aesthetic organization, FM drew from some organizing principles of the *mūlid* and the street wedding. Multiple artistic and social events occurred a public space at the same time and featured artistic genres, such as *mahragānāt* and independent music, not normally welcome at state institutions nor available as live performance in urban centers (see also Pahwa 2018, 5). Festive lights in the style common at *mūlid*-s and street weddings delineated the space of the square, and it was open for free to the public.

Though built on familiar rituals, it also perpetuated a transformation in their symbolic meanings, bringing to encroachment new sensorial associations of "loudly" political action (see also Taha and Combs 2012). Unlike the interpretative ambiguity of the *mūlid*, for instance, the artists on stage connected FM's activities discursively to the idea of "revolution." Beyond only the artists who took the stage, it encouraged ordinary people—in physically stomping the papier mâché heads, for instance—to be actively engaged in this process. Having the heads clearly depict SCAF leaders directed this act's symbolic meanings toward a political statement. Likewise, the musical genres performed there, such as *mahragānāt*, no longer only sounded the state's inability to control and the supposed "ungovernability" of the peripheries. Instead, they were framed with new associative meanings of what the state permitted and even, ideally, financially supported.<sup>14</sup> It thus redefined encroachment from what one FM organizer referred to

<sup>14</sup> The ICC initially obtained permission from SCAF (the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the temporary military government imposed after Mubarak's resignation) to hold the event and at first received 30,000 EGP (approx. \$5,000 US at the time) per month from the Ministry of Culture in support. When president Mohammad

as a type of “stealing” (*sirqa*) to a legally-defined right. The artists on stage continually guided the interpretation of these events, connecting them directly to transformative, revolutionary action.

The ICC also loudly defined its politics by publishing on its FaceBook page a list of demands. They included the formation of a transitional presidential council comprised of civilians, removing Mubarak cronies (*fulūl*) from local councils and all government positions, prosecuting those responsible for the murder of protestors, abolishing the state of emergency that was in place for nearly the entirety of Mubarak’s thirty-year reign, and so on. And, in the realm of culture, it called for limiting the role of security in cultural activities to the protection of facilities and civilian safety, establishing a legal framework for non-profit institutions and cultural entities, eliminating the centralization of art and culture, incorporating culture as an essential component of state education, and compelling state media to broadcast non-commercial culture and art to the general public as a means of “enlightenment” (*al-tanwīr*), among others.<sup>15</sup> These statements entwined transformations not only confined to the space of the square, as was seen in the *mūlid*. Instead, they directly called for transformations in political and social life outside of FM’s physical bounds.

Although the ICC comprised artists with a variety of approaches and viewpoints, the dominant approach that emerged of the arts as a form of “enlightenment” placed artists (and independent artists, especially) in positions of social and political leadership. This view of the artist has an extended history among some intellectual circles and has likewise been a view long endorsed by the state’s Ministry of Culture (see Winegar 2006). What was different from the state’s vision, however, was that FM included in it artists (such as independents) and artistic practices (such as street performance by independents in centralized areas) that had not previously been accepted under its purview. In so doing, it endeavored to use arts organizing in city centers as a political tool to transform the “culture” and “mentality” of state institutions. According to one organizer<sup>16</sup> in Cairo,

I feel for example that dealing with the governmental authorities to get the permits, you are changing the mentalities, you are changing the way the state is dealing with the civil society and independent sector. It’s not only having songs against the state, this is not the only politics. It is about how you can change all these dynamics using the public spaces . . . politics is not only this direct way of criticizing the state. It is changing the whole structure, the whole dynamics between the state and the civil society and the independents.

“Changing the mentalities” involved the state recognizing the legal permissibility for previously non-state-affiliated artists to access a broad public. It likewise involved consolidating state power by removing legal ambiguity and “rationalizing” state hierarchies. Written permission granted by one government authority, for instance, could not be subsequently invalidated by another (such as when Central Security threatened to invalidate FM’s permit remitted by the Cairo Governorate). Given the unequal access to certain forms of quiet encroachment, independent artists would clearly benefit from the *legalized* freedom to act and perform in public. Although whether to involve the state in their activities with regard to permits and funding was debated

Morsi was elected in June 2012, the ICC stopped receiving government funds, and thereafter FM depended on individual donations or funding from non-governmental organizations.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/indculturecoalition/>

<sup>16</sup> It is necessary to keep those who spoke with me anonymous due to an unsafe environment for artists and arts organizers in Egypt.



among the organizers (Pahwa 2012; Winegar and Pahwa 2012), by seeking permits, FM manifest a view that ultimate authority was still the state (see also El-Raggal 2019).

Some artists' ambivalence toward framing their work in terms of the loudly political did not simply disappear with the outbreak of the revolution, however. For instance, nearly all of the independent musicians I spoke to performed at FM because it granted them exposure to a large audience, not because they were eager to make a political statement. This suggests that some artists' preference for situating their work in the realm of the social was not only a form of self-censorship resulting from state repression. Instead, it was an aesthetic or ideological preference. Additionally, given the regularity of certain forms of street performance in the urban peripheries, FM's message of street art as "novel" or "revolutionary" was not transformational for all attendees.<sup>17</sup> It was less clear how and if widening the permissibility of public artistic action would benefit the urban poor already living, acting, and performing in the gaps of state power.

### **"The Concept that No Decisions Are Made": Quiet Politics**

In contrast to FM's loud approach, other artists in the city of Alexandria utilized the logic of encroachment but in a way that sought to maintain, as much as possible, its "quietness." These artists lived and created in another periphery—Cairo's.<sup>18</sup> For them, Alexandria's lack of regular venues and greater intimacy, for instance, were believed to render both its residents and local government less receptive to large, "loud" events. Instead of endeavoring to transform the state, these artists worked in the gaps of state power to repair the social cleavages that state power exacerbates. Looking at these quiet politics adds complexity to Bayat's dichotomy between "quiet encroachment" and ideology. Unlike unauthorized street sellers, who encroach in the street to sell their products and earn a living, Alexandrian arts organizers encroached on public spaces with the conscious intention of achieving certain—yet unnamed—ends.

As just one example, a cultural organizer whom I will call Mohamed is the founder of a small non-profit organization in Alexandria that had successfully organized street arts projects primarily in low-income areas in Egypt for almost two decades (from the late 1990s until 2016). These projects focused especially on street theater, but also included music, craft-making, dance, parkour, and creative workshops.

Sitting with him in his office in early 2016, I ask how it had been possible prior to the revolution to organize highly attended events in the street given the state's ban on public gathering. He tells me quite plainly, "Practically speaking, nothing is banned or allowed. There is the concept that no decisions are made." Through decades of experience, Mohamed became highly skilled in exploiting the limitations of state control and the ambiguity written into the law to his own advantage. The law that criminalized public gathering, for instance, defines "gathering" so widely that it potentially includes everything and, sometimes conveniently, nothing at the same time. He tells me, "Nothing is clear . . . and we are taking advantage of this."

<sup>17</sup> One woman from "a village near Helwan" whom I spoke with at FM was disappointed because it seemed to her that the people at FM only wanted to have fun. Frustrated, she told me "I want to talk issues! There are more important things right now than having a party in the street!" When I asked her what issues she wanted to discuss she told me the unemployment of her family members and power outages in her village.

<sup>18</sup> As part of FM's efforts to decentralize the arts and politics away from the capital, it initially put on events in Alexandria through its Alexandrian partner organizations in the ICC. Due to disagreements, however, FM stopped in Alexandria for almost two years, restarting only briefly without Alexandrian organizational support in 2014. One Alexandrian organizer attributed this interruption to the fact that "Alexandria is completely different from Cairo." For more on the topic of local specificities outside Cairo see Abu-Lughod 2014; El Chazli 2016; Ramzy 2018.

There were two key factors to enacting quiet politics: exploiting the gaps in state power and “humility.” First, according to Mohamed, one of the most important aspects of his work was to never speak to the government directly in-person. Instead, he used what he called the “procedural method”: sending faxes to multiple authorities because “each authority will wait for the other’s answer.” The street is controlled by more than one authority: the local Governorate, State Security, and, in some areas, Military Intelligence and General Intelligence. “So,” he tells me

We send faxes to all of them, and we don’t wait for any answers. We select someone from the community to answer calls about it, not one of us. So they call, all of them, and ask. The community person will answer and say, ‘I’ll ask my management and get back to you’ . . . [Likewise] when the officer comes and asks, ‘who do you work with,’ we won’t say X organization. [We say] ‘we are working with the honorable Mr. Farag, you go and talk to him.’

In this case, “Mr. Farag” would be any prominent person in the community, either a community leader or the area “thug” (*balṭagī*) who exerts the most influence and/or control. Once a community leader agrees to help facilitate a street arts project, both he and Mohamed will defer responsibility for the project on to the other in the face of state security.

For organizers espousing this approach, building deep relationships with the local community was key to the success of any street project because “they know how the street works.” They often build these relationships through prolonged contact. Mohamed, for instance, spent over a decade building relationships with local community leaders in Alexandria. The goal was to have the community, not the artist, take the most active role in determining the form and outcome of an event. In Mohamed’s organization, the community members themselves suggested the social themes and/or types of projects they wanted in their neighborhood based on their own assessment of their community’s needs. The cultural organization provided only the resources to execute it. In this way the community ideally takes ownership of the event and would be willing to defend it, as they would a local street wedding, in the face of state power.

To take advantage of the gaps in state power, “quietness” likewise necessitates interpersonal verbal agreements, speed, and lightweight logistics. This meant, firstly, little to no advertising or media attention. For Mohamed, the inability to advertise was not a problem because, “you are going to the people in their place, why should you need advertising?” Likewise, another Alexandrian organizer told me that these events must be executed without the media because it is based on trust between one individual and another, which the media would destroy. Second, these events rely on “lightweight logistics,” easily movable equipment. Mohamed tells me, for instance, that most organizations who try to organize street events make the mistake of having too much equipment, especially sound equipment and a built stage, that take hours to set up. In the hours it takes to set up such equipment, Mohamed maintains, “you could have performed your show and all . . . Even if a security authority is standing in the street, he will take more time than that to think about it.”

A second aspect of quietness is practicing an ideology of “humility” (*tawāḍūʿ*). Mohamed told me, “I don’t want ‘awareness,’ it is not my job to spread ‘awareness’ or ‘enlightenment’ . . . and we don’t provide ‘development,’ because we believe that we are with all people in the same crisis that is bigger than our perception, and bigger than any ideas or solutions than we may provide.” In his projects, then, artists must learn to abandon positions of superiority in relation to ordinary people, whom artists often initially treat “like children.” Working in the street, artists quickly realize that their assumptions had been grossly inaccurate and it becomes a

profoundly transformative experience: “When artists first meet with the people, they find out that *they* are the children.” This humility, Mohamed argues, is key to avoiding the realm of “politics.” He focuses instead on “social” participation, directing artists “to speak only within the limits of what [they] know. What [they] know is how to turn a topic into something artistic. So we work with people to turn *their* topics into artistic things. That’s all.”

Prior to and throughout the 2011 revolution, there had been dozens of organizations enacting “quiet” street projects in places such as street coffee shops (*qahāwī*), small store fronts, and alleyways for decades, especially in smaller cities such as Alexandria, al-Minya, al-Fayoum, Suez City and in Cairo’s peripheries such as Imbaba. These events were often small, unfunded, and invisible beyond those directly involved. Many directed their efforts at women and children, using kinship ties as well as hospitality and gift giving, to cultivate broader relationships of trust that permeated the whole community.

Quiet politics thus primarily focus on the relationship between the artist and the people, endeavoring to strengthen communities—and relations between disparate ones—to such an extent that the state was secondary if not irrelevant. Ultimate authority is the community, not the state. They exploited state bureaucratic inefficiency and social-political ambiguity to their advantage—they did not seek to “rationalize” them or expand their reach. Interpretation of these actions was left open. In these cases, the social-political message emerged from the intimate collaboration between artists and community, with the meaning and function of the arts, at least in theory, determined by the community members themselves.

Quiet politics have their limitations. Alexandrian artists were sometimes required to articulate their work in “loudly” political terms, such as when seeking (foreign) funding for instance. Additionally, like Bayat’s quiet encroachment, quiet politics are highly individualized and fragmented. By necessity, the dozens of cultural organizations espousing this approach rarely collaborated prior to 2011 because being “quiet” required certain levels of secrecy and insularity to protect (often foreign) funding and maintain trust with the community through personal agreements. By marginalizing state power, quiet politics is likewise characterized by a constant state of precarity. At any time, the state can re-exert its authority. Through making their politics louder, FM, in contrast, endeavored to rid public life of this precarity by redefining what the state treated as permissible. In so doing, it likewise sought to provide a platform for arts organizations to bring their quiet and “hidden” work out into the public, producing new opportunities for small, disparate arts organizations to work together toward a common goal, as exemplified in the founding of the ICC.

Although artists favoring different political “volumes” were often friends and colleagues who supported each other, the organizers taking a quieter approach were sometimes critical of FM because they believed it did not do enough to utilize the preexisting logic of the street. According to Mohamed, for instance, “what was wrong [with FM] from the beginning was their assumptions, their prior ideas about the street, which came from people who never worked in the street and had no experience, yet wanted to make a huge political appearance.” Another Alexandrian arts organizer similarly criticized FM because

The political appearance overcame the cultural and the artistic. Being organized in the street in the same place is an advantage, a huge advantage. If it had been correctly organized in the street, the people would have loved it, protected it, and they wouldn’t have needed the security or the [state] directorate. They wouldn’t have needed to wait for permission from the directorate because the people themselves would have made it.

This criticism stems in part from the fact that, although one FM organizer temporarily lived in the Abdin area, there were few members of the community involved in organizing the event. FM organizers did not excluded the community. But, given the fast pace of change following the initial 2011 protests, there was not enough time to cultivate the deep connections that other organizers taking a quiet approach built over decades.

FM's loud politics likewise contrasted with the quiet principle of "humility." Viewing the arts as a form of enlightenment necessarily separates "the artist" from "the people." It stands in contrast to Mohamed's view that artists do not have all the answers. For him, artists should instead provide resources that aestheticize what a community already knows. Without the backing of a revolutionary moment in which the state (and its police) were weakened, organizers of "quiet" street art events felt that they had shouldered considerably more risk and, as one such organizer told me, laid the unacknowledged groundwork that "was the reason al-Fann Midan could emerge."

### **Concluding Questions**

Looking at "creative dissent" through the lens of loud and quiet politics avoids fetishizing dissent by providing a framework for recognizing how power, in this case state power, differentially fragments "the people" and their understandings of—and desires for—"the political." It allows room to analyze the extent to which dissent is not a uniform practice, nor uniformly desired even during moments of revolution. In the Egyptian case, loud and quiet politics demonstrate how long-standing debates among Arab intellectuals regarding the role of "the artist" materialize in on-the-ground practice.

These debates became all the more urgent when, in the context of the 2011 revolution, many intellectuals positioned themselves prominently as speaking to power the truth of the people but now these same people, in the context of a return to military rule, "seem to have spoken" (El-Desouky 2014, iix). In an essay posted online in 2015, musician and former FM organizer Ayman Helmy, asks for example,

Why didn't FM's audience continue organizing the event themselves after state security forced it to cease? Should the local community have played a larger role in its organization in order to have built a deeper relationship with them? . . . Is it possible for FM to return without the permission of state security? . . . When will come the second stage of FM? Will it be connected to the concept of "revolution," to the birth of a different consciousness, or to something more connected to the people or to artists? And most importantly, what can we do next in order to make it more difficult for state security to stop our activities with a single decision? (Helmy 2015)

While quiet politics, for some Alexandrian arts organizers, provides some solutions to these inquiries, others in Alexandria have begun to doubt whether street performance is indeed the best way to reach "the people" in the first place. For El-Desouky, the task is to understand "how the people speak" and to recognize that the forms of collective knowledge they possess are indispensable. The issue is then how intellectuals situate themselves within the knowledge production of the collective. He argues that the "social" and "cultural" themselves must become "the political" in a way "beyond functionary politics" (El-Desouky 2014, ix-x). Challenges remain in understanding artists' aversion toward "the political" as more than only a surrender to state power, and in taking seriously the epistemologies of the poor and peripheral without romanticizing them.

That loud and quiet politics exist together, simultaneously, also tells us something about current understandings of power. Studies of “resistance” often suggest the inevitability of positive outcomes and a linear temporal relationship in which smaller gestures eventually lead to more overtly political demands. For Scott, for instance, the hidden transcript goes public, and truth is spoken to power. His analysis mostly stops at this moment. But what happens after that?<sup>19</sup> For artists in Egypt, making hidden transcripts public has not—so far—brought a happy ending. Reflecting on the choices they made, one FM organizer in Cairo concluded, however, that, “It wouldn’t have mattered if we had done something differently.” Such a statement indicates a growing sense that power itself has become “non-political”—all-encompassing and unshakable in the face of political action (see also Litvin 2007). Indeed, even most of the arts organizers enacting quiet politics were forced to cease their activities by 2017 due to the state enacting new laws limiting non-profit organizations (Abdoulenein 2017). Viewing creative dissent in terms of loud and quiet politics opens the possibility for these more ambiguous endings. Smaller “hidden” gestures and everyday practices can exist simultaneously, and in relations of tension, with more public and representational political actions.

If power has become “non-political,” is it likewise only forms of “non-politics” that can undermine it by, for instance, existing outside dominant power’s reach? Does “quiet encroachment” represent the knowledge of the collective? What might it inspire if it were understood as a creative, artistic practice—as a political practice that eschews ordinary politics? Are *mahragānāt* music and *mūlid*-s, then, radical political forms that have yet to be recognized or theorized as such? Analyzing street art practices in Egypt offer more questions than answers. In order to account for “what happened,” attention must be given to these peripheral narratives, smaller actions, and subjugated knowledges that might appear “non-political” or “counter-revolutionary.” When it comes to the notion of creative expression as dissent, we have to ask: whose art and whose politics does it enact, and for which people is it revolutionary?

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<sup>19</sup> Even the examples of Scott’s analysis remain unresolved: African Americans today are still demanding equal rights in a white supremacist society long after the abolition of chattel slavery in the United States, with many Black activists arguing that slavery has not “ended” but rather been transposed into other institutional forms such as the prison-industrial complex.

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