Beirut Street Art:

Painting a

Revolution

Against Walls

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On October 17, 2019, Beirut slept to the sound of protests; the next day, Lebanon woke up to cheers of revolution. The demonstrations followed in the wake of the introduction of new taxes and fees, which was the last straw for the Lebanese people, the majority of whom have been enduring difficult economic and social conditions. The protests soon transformed into a revolution against a sectarian political system led by a corrupt elite since the 1990s, who have driven the country to the brink of economic collapse and have prioritised their personal interests over the rights of citizens (including the right to basic amenities such as electricity, water, and hospital care) and creating conditions for minimum standards of living in dignity.

In the early days of the protests, the people's rage was expressed in a chaotic manner: roads were blocked with burning tires and garbage bins, protestors broke into shops and vandalised the streets and walls of the city. This behaviour was largely disapproved of, after which protests quickly took a peaceful and civilised turn. That is when we began to witness the people's cultural and creative ways of voicing their demands, and artists were naturally the pioneers of this movement. The roads, walls, buildings, and monuments of the city became a canvas for all people in general, and for artists in particular, to express their aspirations for true freedom and democracy and to call for all sorts of rights (including women's rights and LGBT rights). The city experienced a blast of artistic expression varying from the word 'Revolution' written in Arabic in different graffiti styles to drawings representing messages of power and patriotism, and caricatures attacking the governing politicians (Figure 1):

'If the walls could talk, they would say heaps. Graffiti populated walls: paintings, writings, caricature, slogans, and slurs of all shapes and colours were added on almost every single surface. Art happened everywhere, in an ornamental, intrinsic, or vandalistic manner, depending on how one sees it.' (Hammoud 2019)

Figure 1. Revolutionary expressions by various artists. Beirut Central District, Lebanon, 2019.

This artistic expression was not limited to paintings and drawings; it evolved into yet other forms of public artworks which included an unexpected installation of furniture in the middle of a main road known as 'The Ring', creating a living space for protestors while blocking the street as a means of pressure on the government to respond to their demands.[1] There were also many live performances, including one by a group of protestors who projected a video of a speeding train on a banner, accompanied by a simulation of the warning sounds of a railroad crossing near the location of a former train station in the area of Mar Mikhael (Beirut). This was done to call for the return of train lines and condemn the yearly payment of millions of dollars to the Railway and Public Transport Authority while not a single train has been running in Lebanon since the start of the civil war in 1975[2].

Graffiti and street art, which I will refer to in this paper as 'Independent Public Art'[3] (Schacter, 2014), are not new to the Lebanese scene; they originate from political posters commemorating leaders and martyrs in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Jarbou, 2018) as well as graffiti and stencils used by local militias to mark their territory (Richa, 2019) during the 1975–1990 Lebanese Civil War, thus creating a negative perception of these forms of expression that were associated with vandalism and were hardly perceived as art. After the war, graffiti converted to an opposite narrative shaped by the new apolitical generation that despised the war and was influenced by emerging western art movements (Jarbou, 2018). Lebanese graffiti and street art proliferated in the early 2000s; they gained popularity first as a form of political resistance during each major event and turmoil in Lebanon (such as the demonstrations following the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 and the July War of 2006), and later as an expression of solidarity with the Arab uprisings in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and Libya. During the last decade, street art and graffiti spread in Beirut but also in various parts of the country to be gradually embraced by different communities as a colourful means of tackling social and political issues, and as a tool of resistance. 'Beirut was revived as a cultural hub and became a canvas for the revolution' (Jarbou, 2018: 132) years before the burst of its own revolt.

Nevertheless, it looks like the 2019 revolution was a turning point for the Independent Public Art scene in Lebanon. It provoked the booming of artistic forms of claiming social and political rights and freedom, and paved the way for the emergence of artists on this art scene. It also prompted the birth of a new special connection between these kinds of art and the public who saw its problems, demands, emotions, and aspirations materialise in the paintings and tags spread across the walls of the country. Protests and revolutionary movements tend to bring the public closer to, and also make it involved in, street art and to 'legitimise' graffiti (Jarbou, 2018) as people witness the powerful influence of these forms of art that cannot be denied even by politicians 'who rush to have the city's walls whitewashed in an effort to solidify the state's authority' (Taş, 2017: 805–806). This novel bond could be observed in similar uprisings and protests in Tunisia (Georgeon, 2012), Egypt, and Turkey (Taş, 2017).

RECLAIMING THE RIGHT TO PUBLIC SPACE AND REINFORCING SOLIDARITY

Remarkably, this artistic movement broke many geographical and conventional boundaries of art in public spaces in Lebanon – which is normally limited to the graffiti on walls of poor or neglected neighbourhoods, or to comm-issioned works or murals that require previous permission – to the extent of translating into the reclamation of public space. This movement especially marked the Beirut Central District which hosted most of the protests in Beirut. This district used to be vibrant with life and a venue for markets, a cinema, and an opera house until it was ravaged by the Lebanese Civil War. After the end of the war, Solidere – a private company owned in majority by one of the political elite families – undertook the redevelopment of down-town Beirut.[4] After its reconstruction, Beirut Central District became a cold concrete jungle devoid of life.

In fact, before the revolution, very few artists vent-ured into the territory of Solidere and those who did were viciously fought by the monster contractor. The most prominent art installation in this district in recent years was 'Burj El Hawa' (Tower of the Wind) in 2018 by Lebanese artist Jad El Khoury, who succeeded in reviving the abandoned 'Burj El Murr' (Murr Tower) – one of the best known war 'monuments' in Beirut Central District – by installing colourful curtains on its 400 dark windows without prior authorisation from Solidere.[5] Despite the forced dismantling of the installation[6], the dancing curtains moved by the wind survived in the minds of the citizens, as they transformed the bitter monument into a happy tower conveying positivity and contributing to erasing the dreadful collective memory of the war. The impact of the installation also took another dimension as its forced removal sparked controversy among the press and awakened the dormant voice of the citizens who desire to reclaim public space.

The October 2019 revolution opened the door wide for breaking the 'untouchable' character of the gentrified zone of the Beirut Central District and stimulated a full-fledged awakening of the desire to recover areas and monuments that were once open to, but had since been 'robbed' from, the public. People spontaneously sprayed and painted stencils, tags, words, and drawings everywhere, perhaps without entirely realising the motive behind their actions and their powerful impact. Street art and graffiti hence became popular tools not merely for professional artists, but for everyone who wished to assert their right to public spaces, and they emerged as forms of resistance challenging the state's authority over urban space.

The movement particularly targeted former cultural monuments, driven by a collective yearning for the cultural venues that once characterised Beirut, and for public recreational spaces that the city sorely lacks, as can be inferred from the interventions described in the following paragraphs.[7]

Soprano singer Mona Hallab shot a short video inside the derelict Beirut Grand Theatre where she sang the lyrics of a song written by a protestor, to make a statement about the people's right to public spaces. The theatre, like many other cultural monuments in Beirut, has been abandoned since the end of the civil war and is yet another 'victim' of Solidere that has demolished some parts of the magnificent structure that represents a principal element of the heritage of Beirut (Figures 2 and 3).[8] In the same spirit, a live cello performance was organised in front of the theatre in an attempt to revive the iconic landmark.

The artistic movement did not spare one of the most controversial monuments in the Beirut Central District, which used to be the largest film theatre in Lebanon and which, due to its shape, is called the 'Egg'.[9] The building was left abandoned as a result of the civil war that damaged it and interrupted the construction of an adjoining struct-ure and it remains, to this day, a vacant bullet-riddled grey lump in the city centre.[10] In the midst of the chaos early in the revolution, the fences shielding the Egg were removed allowing the rebirth of this monument as a historical sight-seeing landmark, a meeting place for cultural discussions and events, and even as a venue for film screenings and techno parties. Visitors made sure to leave their marks with paint and spray cans; tags, writings, drawings, and colours revived the inside walls of the dome as well as its façade (Figures 4 and 5). Surprisingly, neither the owners of the Egg nor the security forces contested or halted the art 'attacks' on the dome. However, those interventions prompted an angry backlash from some people who opp-osed any changes to a structure they believed is an iconic monument and an important landmark in the history of Beirut – that, as such, should remain intact. This opposition was especially flagrant and escalated on social media with the hashtag *#DontPaintTheEgg* when the artist Mohamad Abrash proposed to paint the Lebanese flag on the dome. Yet others acclaimed art interventions on the Egg as they felt the abandoned gloomy theatre only served as a trigger for bad memories and was a sore reminder of the regretted 'Golden Age' of Beirut, and hence they encouraged it becom-ing a revolution monument marking the real end of the Lebanese Civil War and symbolising the cradle of a new era for Lebanon.[11] Despite the Egg being a privately owned building, it is part of the collective memory of Beirut, which is the very reason why having artworks on the dome remains controversial. Imane Assaf, the director of an organisation called 'Art of Change'[12], mentioned in an interview conducted for this paper, that she personally wishes that there were guidelines to 'paint the Egg prop-erly and in a beautiful way', but she does not, however, see the random artworks on the structure as a 'bad thing'. Rather, she embraces these as a representation of the whole revolution and as a reflection of the chaotic situation which leaves no room for proper guidelines. In essence, the symbols of resistance are not destined to remain as memorial shrines but should continually metamorphose in tandem with the causes, purposes, and character-istics of resistance that keep changing with time; in Rana Jarbou's words 'constructing new collective memories in public, and defacing older ones, exhibits the transitory nature of resistance and its prevailing impact in challeng-ing systems of power.' (Jarbou, 2018: 149)

More than 60 days after the start of the revolution, and instead of finding ways to mend the broken bridge between the ruling class and the people and to encourage unity between citizens, officials ordered the installation of a fence (later reinforced with cement walls) at the entrance of Nejmeh Square[13], where parliament is located, and commanded the construction of cement walls in different locations in order to block the entrances to Riad El Solh Square (one of the main gathering points of the demon-strations) and separate the citizens following a few violent clashes between protestors, security forces, and some residents of the surrounding areas. Despite strong criticism, the walls were built as part of an attempt by the authorities to further deviate from the people's demands and aspir-ations for unity and freedom, and they established fiercer geographical restrictions, hence the name 'Wall of Shame'.
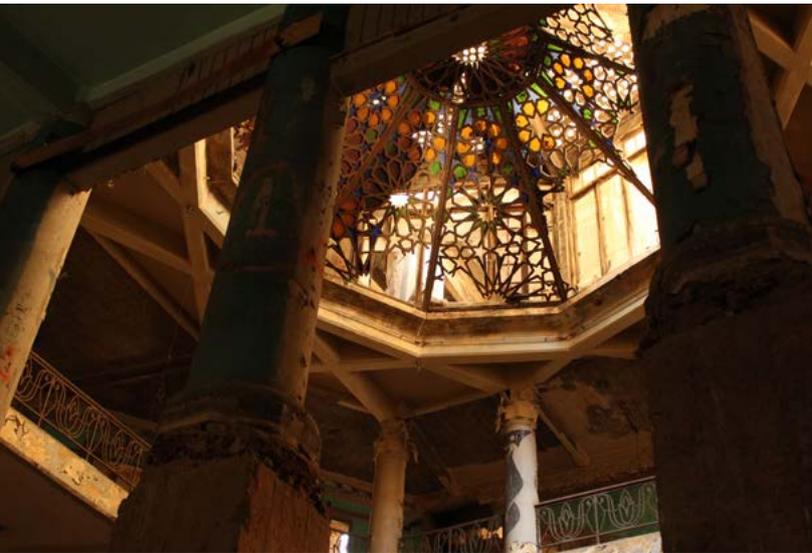
Figures 2 & 3. Beirut Grand Theatre. Beirut, Lebanon, 2019.

Figures 4 & 5. 'The interior and exterior of 'The Egg'. Beirut, Lebanon, 2019.

Artists were very quick to react to what many felt was an outrageous measure, and turned the walls into pieces of art overnight, with graffiti slogans such as 'the fall of the Wall of Shame' and 'Beirut is ours' alongside drawings and paintings (Figure 6). Political resistance movements have shown that the public resents separation walls and tends to favour solidarity and peace. This rejection was previously articulated for example through graffiti on the Berlin Wall which divided East and West Germany (Taş, 2017), and more recently during the 2011 uprisings in Egypt through paintings illustrating the extension of the street beyond the walls that were erected by the regime to block the roads around Tahrir Square in Cairo (Jarbou, 2018).

Figure 6. Wall of Shame. Various artists. Beirut, Lebanon, 2019.

ARTISTIC EXPRESSION OF
DEMANDS, RIGHTS, AND ASPIRATIONS

The revolution put new influential spaces at the disposal of artists – ironically in areas and on walls that 'belong' to the same political elite and public institutions that are targeted by the uprisings – not only to reclaim the right to public space, but also to express the people's (and, evidently, the artists' own) other demands, rights, and aspirations.

Indeed, the organisers of Art of Change believe in the great impact of street art, notably when the works are located in strategic areas of protests to convey the people's voice while at the same time giving the protestors drive and motivation. According to its director Imane Assaf (2019) 'the walls are supposed to be part of the demonstrations in the scene'. Art of Change played an essential role in the advancement of the public art scene in Lebanon in general[14] and of the street art scene during the revolution in particular. As the revolution gained momentum, Art of Change wanted to contribute to the uprisings by gathering a team of artists to express people's pain and anger through art on walls in the revolution area. The initiative started with calling artists to draw on the outer wall of the 'ESCWA'[15] building located in Riad El Solh Square. The wall was labeled the 'Revolution Wall' (Figure 7). The Revolution Wall then expanded beyond its original location to reach 'The Ring' bridge which is another main location for protests in Beirut (Figure 8), as well as the wall of 'Electricité du Liban', the main electricity producer in Lebanon, which also witnessed protests condemning the daily power shortages in the country (Figure 9).

The walls include works not only of artists that were connected to the Art of Change, but also of other artists who joined from the street.[16] The drawings on the Revolution Wall stemmed from the requests and pains of the people (including the artists themselves), hence serving as a support for all demonstrators.

However, holy places and private properties remain off limits for Art of Change, limits that do not seem to apply when it comes to properties of the state. No rules have stood in the way of making statements on the wall of the just mentioned and state-owned Electricité du Liban, which, in the words of Assaf (2019), 'is a major culprit in the corruption. We are telling ourselves that it's fine to do it', she said jokingly, explaining that the wall in Riad El Solh Square is not the actual wall of the ESCWA building but a protective wall built around it. Such street art 'attacks' are common in the context of political uprisings. Their rationale may be explained by a desire of revenge, an act of assertion of power and control by the people or an emphasis on human existence and dignity. A similar pattern could be discerned during the uprisings in the Middle East and its neighbouring region to the west: following the Tunisian revolution in 2011, artists were able to paint on the walls of the former property of the ousted president 'taking revenge against Ben Ali himself [...] through art by defacing the walls of this powerful symbol of repression' (Georgeon, 2012: 73), while graffiti on military tanks and public vehicles in Egypt during the 2011 revolution and in Turkey during the 2013 Gezi Park protests was a symbol of 'defiance against the state' and represented 'symbolic transgressions that question who actually owns the streets and the resources of the state'. (Taş, 2017: 810) This denotes the reappropriation of public spaces and properties, and reminds those in power of the existence of the people, who desire equal respect.

The assessment of the limits of Independent Public Art, or even the existence of such limits at all, remains subjective: some might argue that the artistic interventions went so far as to become vandalism, ruining the appearance of the city, while others root for absolute freedom of expression, especially in the context of a revolution. This divergence of opinions is generally inherent to street art and graffiti but is especially flagrant during political uprisings and may even occur between artists of the same crew (Georgeon, 2012). In all cases, Beirut has undoubtedly bloomed to become an arena for artistic expression and the voice of freedom – whether through random, impulsive interventions, or more organised ones – making the city centre resemble its citizens again in addition to providing a tool to regain possession of public space.
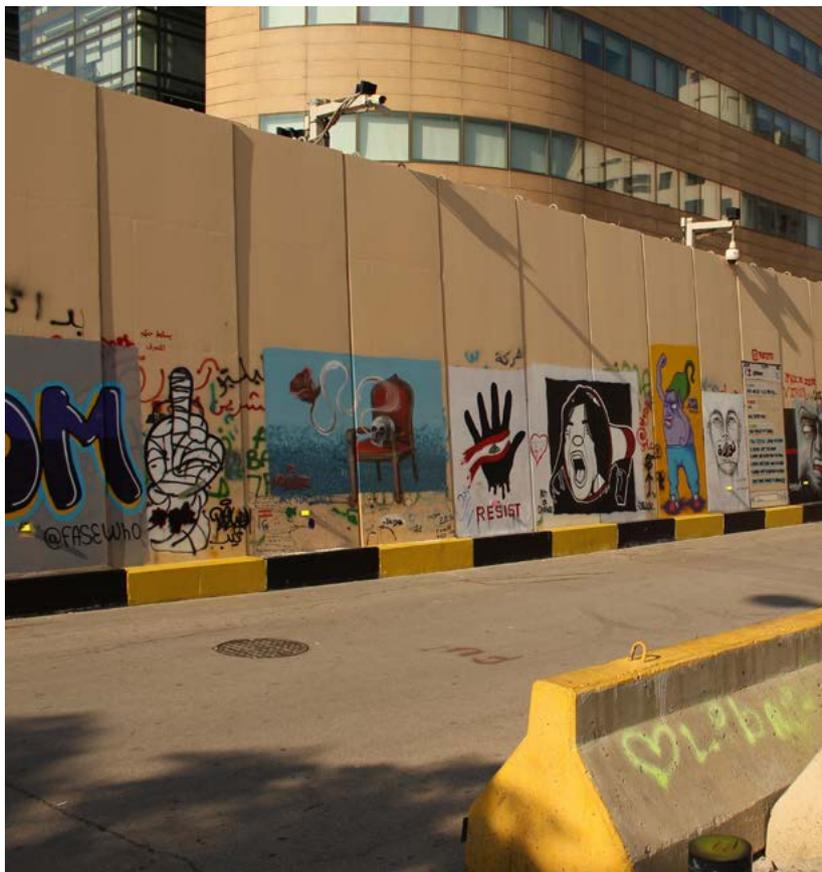

Figure 7. The Revolution Wall. Various artists. Riad El Solh, Beirut, Lebanon, 2019.

Figure 8. The Revolution Wall. Various artists. The Ring, Beirut, Lebanon, 2019.

Figure 9. The Revolution Wall at the site of Electricité du Liban. Various artists. Beirut, Lebanon, 2019.
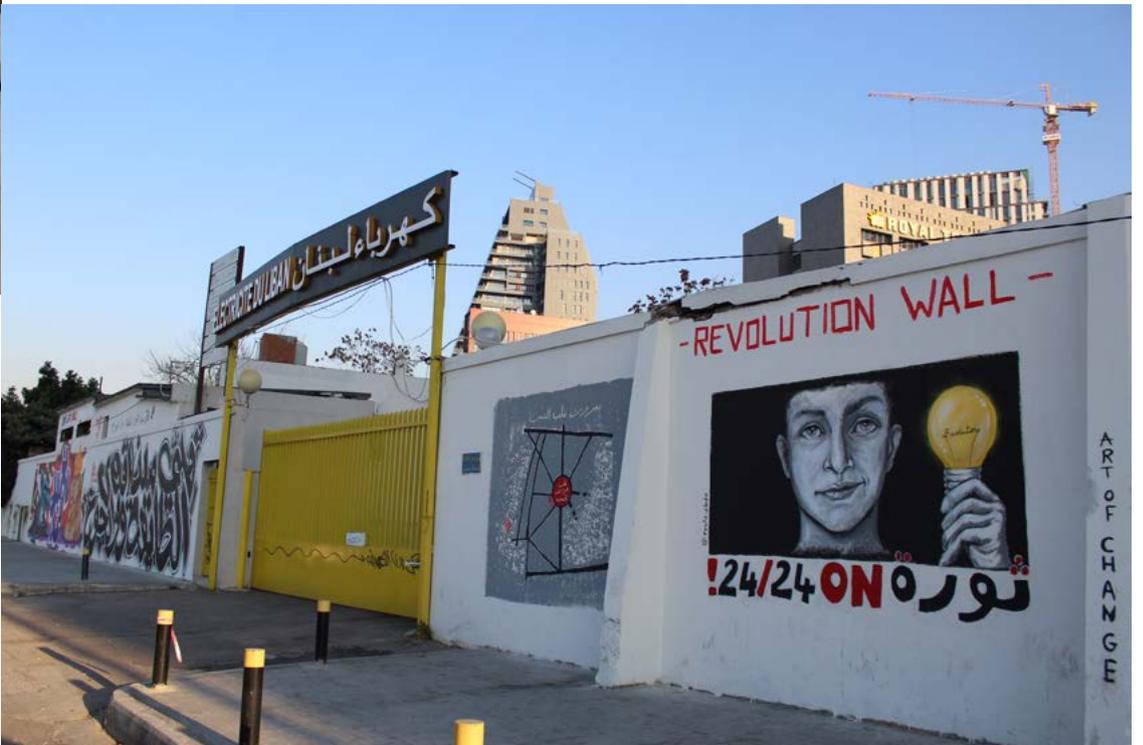
Figure 10. The Phoenix. Hayat Nazer. Beirut, Lebanon, 2019.

RESISTANCE, FREEDOM FROM VIOLENCE, AND FIGHTING OPPRESSION

Much in line with the general peaceful character of the Lebanese protests, street art and graffiti have also been used as a peaceful weapon of resilience against attempted acts of state violence aiming to silence the voice of freedom. Street art and graffiti epitomise sheer democracy in the sense that 'everybody is a potential graffiti or street artist' (Nielsen, 2018: 308), fighting violence and oppression with a counter-force distinguished by beauty, peace, and unity.

Out of the ruins of the protestors' tents destroyed by thugs (defending, and most likely encouraged by the political regime) in 'Martyr Square' in Beirut Central District, Lebanese artist Hayat Nazer built a sculpture of a phoenix with the help of people who joined from the streets on Independence Day[17]. In an interview conducted with the artist for this paper (Nazer, 2019), she explained that, with the unwavering support of the joiners, she was determined to make the phoenix rise on that same day to convey a message that the protestors will rise again and again despite all the attempts to defeat them. The sculpture also holds another powerful message of unity and love, as Nazer considered the men who smashed the tents to be 'our brothers, because if they hadn't destroyed the tents, we wouldn't have been able to build the phoenix' (Nazer, 2019) (Figure 10).

Many Lebanese artists had no street art experience prior to the revolution, but as they joined the protests they felt the need to express themselves in the urban environment. A good example is Nazer, who discovered that street art is something very selfless that can make people happy as they feel included in her work, and she even believes that it is her duty to provide something to the protestors

and to come up with projects that encourage people to take part in the protests (Nazer 2019). Her statement concurs with Taş's insight on graffiti as a form of resistance that 'not only sustains the protests in the present, but also draws its viewers into the protests' (Taş, 2017: 809).

Drawings and paintings on the walls and floors of the streets where protests were taking place concurrently depicted the actual events and celebrated resistance and victories, such as the power and role of women in resisting violence and oppression[18], and the victory of the independent candidate at the Beirut lawyers' bar elections[19]. In addition to its commemorative role, Independent Public Art in the context of the revolution provides the people with a continuing reminder of their cause and ideals, as they encounter works which visibly record their words that otherwise have an ephemeral nature and disappear once spoken: 'graffiti makes the revolts immediate, as part of 'today' and not a matter of 'yesterday'' (Taş, 2017: 808).

WHAT IS NEXT?

The surge of Independent Public Art that recently swept Beirut is unprecedented, but is evidently not autonomous as it keeps pace with fluctuations of the sociopolitical context. In fact, it is not so sudden; it has been surely and gradually building up over the course of the years – just like the people's anger and frustration – anticipating the Spring. However, this does not mean that Independent Public Art is merely a follower of, or subordinate to the socio-political situation as we cannot deny the role of street art and graffiti in fueling the recent protests. Indeed, Independent Public Art and the revolution alternatingly feed each other. In this same context, Taş argues that graffiti cannot be reduced to a simple expression

Figure 11a & 11b. Revolutionary expressions by various artists. Beirut Central District, Lebanon, 2019.

of the 'political sentiments of the time'; he asserts that 'graffiti not only reflects, but also interjects. It not only represents but also performs resistance' (Taş, 2017: 803). Street art and graffiti can even spark uprisings, as in the case of the Syrian protests which were triggered after a teenager, Naief Abazid, impulsively wrote on a wall in Dara'a 'Your turn has come doctor', alluding to Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad following the ousting of his peer Husni Mubarak in Egypt (Jarbou, 2018: 134).

The artistic movement that Beirut witnessed since the start of the revolution equally mirrors and sustains the popular uprisings that destroyed the barriers of fear – fear of the other, of those in power, of the reoccurrence of the horrors of the war – to instead unfold into a culture of beauty, freedom, and unity. No matter the form of expression, all the described public artistic interventions have a common denominator; they broke preset conventional boundaries and shattered the wall of fear allowing a stream of shapes and colours to reach previously forbidden geographical, physical, and psychological territories to serve a greater cause: freedom. (Figure 11)

With regard to the perception of street art and graffiti in Lebanon and beyond, the Lebanese revolution seems to have pushed, if not erased, the line between, on the one hand, the liberty of artistic expression, and on the other, the act of reclaiming public space through resistance, or even vandalism, trespassing, and transgression. The question however remains: will this line be restored after the end of the revolution or has it permanently shifted in favour of freedom?

1 For pictures of 'Beit El Sha'eb' (the house of the people), see: Hammoud (2019).

2 Lebanon suffers from massive traffic jams as a result of poor infrastructure and road conditions as well as a very limited public transport system. Rail transport in Lebanon was begun in 1895 and for a long time the railways used to connect Beirut to neighbouring countries. However, many railways and train stations were destroyed during the civil war that broke out in 1975 and railroad transport has been halted ever since. As corruption crept into most institutions and authorities after the end of the war in 1990, the government has never shown any intention to restore it.

3 Schacter (2016, Preface) uses the term 'Independent Public Art' as an 'umbrella label which incorporates all forms of autonomously produced aesthetic production in the public sphere', including street art and graffiti.

4 The works of Solidere were largely controversial and contested by the citizens who claimed that the company illegally seized most of the buildings in the district from their property rights owners (landlords and tenants) and demolished hundreds of historical remains and cultural heritage buildings. Those who exceptionally maintained their rights of property are being constantly fought and denied licenses with pressure from Solidere.

5 For more about Burj El Hawa, see: El Khoury, J. (2019) 'Burj El Hawa'. *Nuart Journal*, 2(1): 52–57.

6 Solidere ordered the immediate dismantling of the installation, but the artist managed to keep his art piece alive for a couple of weeks before succumbing to the attacks of the company.

7 This observation stems from the build-up of public resentment, over the years preceding the revolution, towards the expansion of private real estate development at the expense of public spaces and from the nostalgic regret for the lost cultural venues in Beirut expressed by the older generation. It has manifested during the 2019 revolution through the different interventions, performances, and activities that took place in abandoned cultural structures and public places. On this subject, see Hammoud (2019).

8 The Beirut Grand Theatre was built in the 1930s and hosted a large number of performances by local and international artists. Since the early 1990s, it has been fenced off and any plans for its restoration have been indefinitely delayed. With the start of the revolution, the fences around the theatre have been removed to reveal the glorious gem which was unknown to many people.

9 The 'Egg' was conceived initially to be part of a commercial complex designed by the Lebanese architect Joseph Philippe Karam in the 1960s and was distinguished with its modern architecture at the time.

10 The 'Egg' is currently privately owned after it was sold by Solidere. This sale was also controversial as it did not guarantee the protection of the building as a historical site and the parceling of the land does not leave any room to preserve or restore the structure.

11 Although the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, its ghost haunts the Lebanese people, and especially the war generation, to this day. Many of the protestors claim that the 2019 revolution marks the real end of the civil war.

12 'Art of Change' was created in May 2019 as a partnership between two organisations: 'Ahla Fawda' an NGO working on community projects and managed by Imane Assaf who supports artists to execute murals in Beirut and organises art festivals that bring international artists to work with local artists, and 'WhereTheresWalls' represented by Jason Camp who facilitates connections between the Lebanese and international street art scene. It is dedicated to urban street art and aims to turn the streets into a public street gallery that gives access to culture to people of all financial classes and invites people to look at art in a positive way and appreciate its impact on them and on society.

13 Nejmeh Square is a public area which used to be bustling with people, either visiting restaurants and cafes or just enjoying a walk around. As the square hosts the parliament building, it was repeatedly closed off to people during the last decade for security reasons, which caused the businesses in the area to shut down. Protestors have always been faced with a shield of security forces and later with cement walls at the entrance of this area, prohibiting them from reaching closer to the parliament.

14 Since its inception in May 2019, 'Art of Change' has organised the painting of 12 murals in the area of Hamra (Beirut) alone.

15 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).

16 Imane Assaf explained that the number of artists in the team increased from 15 to around 45. In her words 'it [the team] grew spontaneously, just like the revolution' (Assaf 2019).

17 Independence Day is celebrated on November 22, commemorating the independence of the Lebanese Republic from the French mandate in 1943. The annual memorial usually excludes the participation of the Lebanese people and is limited to a military parade attended by the president and high-ranking officials. In 2019, the picture was different as the people took back the city center by organising a civil parade in the heart of Beirut, with celebrations that included people from all over the country as well as expatriates, while the officials were confined to their usual ritual in the suburbs.

18 On the first day of the revolution, a woman kicked the bodyguard of a member of parliament who was holding a firearm and aggressing protestors; the kick became an icon of the revolution and illustrations of it went viral. Another central role for women during the revolution was them standing as a human shield between the protestors and the riot police to avoid any clashes between them.

19 Beirut lawyer's bar elections represent a major indicator of the popular voting behavior in future parliamentary elections. Polls were held on November 17, 2019 to elect a new president of the bar where the independent candidate supported by the protestors defeated his rivals who were backed by traditional political parties.

Danielle Karam was born and raised in Lebanon. She has always been a keen believer in the ideals of freedom and justice, so she went to law school and graduated with a Master of Laws in 2014. However, her career path failed to fulfil her aspirations and to extinguish her frustrations about events and behaviours surrounding her. Looking for alternative ways to articulate her feelings and thoughts, Karam started to dig into her childhood to rediscover her love for art, music, reading, and writing, and remembered how her mother used to read her short stories and tell her that one day she would become a writer. All the while, she got more and more acquainted with the art scene and in September 2019, she had the chance to attend Nuart Festival in Stavanger, where she was fascinated by the artworks she encountered on the streets and the social and political messages they conveyed. She then decided to combine her love for writing with her passion for photography and use that as a tool to transmit a full image of the street art world and to emphasise and spread the messages behind it.

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