

# Erasing the Memory



## on the Streets

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On November 17, 2012, in a village near the city of Assiut, Egypt, a train crashed into a school bus killing 51 children. These kinds of accidents have always been brushed aside as random acts of chance. The minister of transportation resigned as a result, and the families of the children were compensated financially. There was a huge public outcry, but eventually these children were forgotten.

The details of this accident that circulated on social networks were vivid. A video of a regretful father who,

when asked the last thing he said to his son before he got on the bus, cried bitterly and said that he hit his son so that he would not miss the bus. Another video showed a girl, only nine years of age – one of the survivors – saying calmly on TV to the government, ‘You are all dogs’. A note circulated commenting on the price paid by the government to each family and comparing it to other more expensive items, like an iPhone or the front light of a Mercedes Benz. The image of the children wrapped in their shrouds. The cries

# of the Revolution



## of Cairo

All photographs by author

of the mothers who lost two, or three, or four children in that accident — one of them has been admitted to a psychiatric ward. And finally, a list of the dead children's names.

All the other details were very painful, but the list of names must have locked the deal in the artist's head. They wanted to paint these children. These children were killed by a corrupt system of governance. We started a revolution so that accidents like this would not happen again.

The artist wanted to bring the children back to life.

The artist collected the names of the children and grouped them into boys, girls, and families. They wanted to paint the sisters and brothers who died together — so that they could come to life again on the streets of Cairo, together. They painted each child walking on a train railway. The children are painted in black but their wishes and dreams are painted in colour.



**Figure 2.** Inside bubble (in red): Congratulations on the new paint. Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, engraved in the paint: Fuck the Muslim Brotherhood  
Line 2, engraved in the paint: They (the Muslim Brotherhood) are the terrorists



**Figure 3.** Inside bubble (in black by artist): Has illiteracy disappeared? Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in black: CC<sup>1</sup> is a murderer  
Line 2, sprayed in white: Syria is free



**Figure 4.** Inside bubble (in black by artist): Has the revolution succeeded? Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in red: Morsi is my president  
Line 2, sprayed in red: Islamic not Secular



**Figure 5.** Inside bubble (in black by artist): Not yet?<sup>2</sup> (covered in white). Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in red: CC is a traitor and a murderer  
Line 2, sprayed in green: Remember Allah



**Figure 6.** Inside bubble (in black by artist): Khalawees (Are done)<sup>3</sup> Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in black: Do you know that Morsi is your president, Morsi is your president, Morsi is your president.



**Figure 7.** Inside bubble (in black by artist): Not-yet? (in red): CC is a traitor. Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in black: We are going to defeat frustration (defeat)



**Figure 8.** Inside bubble (in black by artist): Not-yet? (in red): CC is a murderer. Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in red: Nawal's Army<sup>4</sup>  
Line 2, sprayed in red: Left Army<sup>5</sup>

← Previous spread:  
**Figure 1.** Children painted on Ring-Road with empty bubbles, Cairo, Egypt.



Figure 10. Inside bubble (in black by artist): Not yet (covered in white). Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed and engraved in paint: They (meaning the Muslim Brotherhood) are the terrorists  
Line 2, sprayed in black and white: CC is a murderer



Figure 9. Inside bubble (in black by artist): Are the roads clean? Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in black: CC is a traitor



Figure 12. Inside bubble (in black by artist): has education improved? Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in green: Remember Allah



Figure 11. Inside bubble (in black by artist): has Egypt become heaven on earth? Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed and engraved in paint: They (meaning the Muslim Brotherhood) are the terrorists  
Line 2, sprayed in white: Egypt is Free



Figure 14. Inside bubble (in black by artist): not yet (covered in white). Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in black: CC is a traitor



Figure 13. Inside bubble (in black by artist): not yet (covered in white). Cairo, Egypt.

Line 1, sprayed in black: Egypt is Islamic

On January 25, 2013, the children of Assiut were painted on the walls of Cairo. Some of them appear alone to ask a question, like 'I wish I grew up to be a princess' or 'I could have grown up to be a policeman or a scientist'. A sister calms her brother with a lullaby near a bus stop. The lullaby reads, 'Mother is on the way' and her brother asks her, 'Soon?' A little girl states that she has died and gone to heaven but they (meaning those responsible) are all going to hell.

In April 2013, the children were painted on the ring road of Cairo but this time the artist left the bubbles empty in the hope that someone passing by would fill them with their own dreams. For a while nothing happened. People would pass by the wall and nobody wrote anything. Then one night, the artist filled them in. The text in the bubbles made it seem as if the children were playing a game of hide and seek. So, one child would ask a question like: 'did education improve?' or 'has Egypt become heaven on earth?' and the next child would answer 'not yet', giving the message that none of the hopes of the revolution have come true yet.

On July 3, 2013, national religious figures along with the legal scholar Mohamed ElBaradei, General AbdulFattah al-Sisi, and several other army generals all appeared on television to announce the ousting of Mohamad Morsi from his post as president and to declare a new roadmap for Egypt.<sup>6</sup> Pro-Morsi supporters flooded the streets in the thousands occupying two major squares, al-Nahdaa and Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. On August 14, 2013, the Egyptian army and security forces raided the two camps of Muslim Brotherhood protesters in Cairo. Initiatives to end the six-week sit-ins by peaceful means had failed and the camps were cleared out within hours. The raids were described by Human Rights Watch as 'one of the world's largest killings of demonstrators in a single day in recent history'.<sup>7</sup> According to the NGO, a minimum of 817 people died during the dispersal. 'However, according to the Egyptian Health Ministry, 638 people were killed on August 14 (of which 595 were civilians and 43 police officers) and at least 3,994 were injured.'<sup>8</sup>

Suddenly the paintings of the children of Assiut came to life and a conversation took place. The artist included the pre-coup and post-coup images of the same child with their name on their backpack as a reference to what happened in the country within the six months of when the children were first painted and when they were last documented in November 2013. The images on the left are from before the coup and the images on the right are from after the coup. (see Figures 2–14).

Many people refused to believe that what had happened was a military coup because in a way it was also the will of the people; people did go down to the streets in the millions demonstrating against the Muslim Brotherhood regime. A video circulated of General al-Sisi saying that he had no interest in anything except seeing Egypt as the best country in the world, that the army had no intentions of running the country, and that they were only concerned with realising the will of the people. General AbdulFattah al-Sisi resigned from his post as head of Egypt's armed forces in March 2014 to announce that he would run for president.<sup>9</sup> In May 2014, al-Sisi was elected president with the overwhelming majority of votes in his favour.

On June 17, 2019, president Mohamad Morsi died due to a heart attack while undergoing trial for accusations of espionage. Al Jazeera (2019) reported that, 'former president Morsi's death followed years of government mistreatment, prolonged solitary confinement, inadequate medical care, and deprivation of family visits and access to lawyers.'<sup>10</sup> Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa division, tweeted that his death was 'terrible but entirely predictable'.

The fact remains that police brutality, activist imprisonment and assassinations, as well as the silencing of opposition, have intensified. The examples are too many to be ignored. Will the people go down to the streets again? We do not know; so far some of the people are still happy with their 'elected' president, but the torture machine is still working. Part of society chooses to ignore the fact that injustice is being practiced against people who have views different from its own, but how long can this section of the public really ignore it? The road to justice is still long and the biggest battles are yet to be fought. Decades of corruption will not disappear overnight. What we are left with is a journey and the realisation that this is a long term fight, and we may not live to see its fruits.

1 CC here meaning president AbdulFattah El-Sisi.

2 Lissa is a word said by children when they are playing hide and seek and are not ready to come out.

3 Khalawees is a word shouted by children when they are playing hide and seek, meaning did you hide? Are you done?

4 Nawal is a term used by the Muslim Brotherhood to call out the Egyptian army. Nawal is the name of a woman and also the name of an army general, Nawal elSaid, from the 1973 October War. The term 'Nawal's army' emerged when president Anwar el-Sadat was asked about the date of the October war, and replied

'ask Nawal.' Fundamentalist army officers assassinated el-Sadat on October 6, 1981. This video shows young men showing placards with the Rabaa sign (4 fingers up, as rabaa also means 4 in Arabic) identifying the June 30th 2013 massacre as a military coup, and calling out Nawal's Army, 'Left Army', like the graffiti sprayed on the wall: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb-Y6oQqalw>.

5 The word Shimal or 'Left' is vernacular Egyptian slang and in this context means gay.

6 The video 'Dr. Mohammad al-Baradie's speech at the Armed Forces conference, July 3, 2013' (in Arabic) can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wu1A79lpogA>. The video 'Statement of the army's general leadership and Egyptian Armed Forces on the excommunication of President Mohammad Morsi, July 3, 2013' (in Arabic) can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAssiYJLFL4>. The video 'Sheikh al-Azhar excommunicating Morsi from rule, July 3, 2013' (in Arabic) can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBAY5gvnXzU>.

7 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/08/12/egypt-rab-killings-likely-crimes-against-humanity>.

8 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August\\_2013\\_Rabaa\\_massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_2013_Rabaa_massacre).

9 The video 'Sisi: I swear by Allah that I will not run for the presidency' (in Arabic) can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhXZKNWG5jo>.

10 Al Jazeera (2019) Morsi's death spotlights systematic mistreatment of prisoners: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/morsi-death-spotlights-systematic-mistreatment-prisoners-19061911348984.html>



Figures 15 & 16. Panels before the coup and panels after the coup. Cairo, Egypt.

