The World Humanities Report

Comix as Artivism: The Intersection between Art and Critique

Hana Shaltout

This publication is available online at https://worldhumanitiesreport.org.

Suggested citation:

Shaltout, Hana. *Comix as Artivism: The Intersection between Art and Critique.* World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

More information about the author can be found at the end of this document.

Comix as Artivism: The Intersection between Art and Critique

Hana Shaltout Arab Council for the Social Sciences; University of Sussex

Since the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, discussions around the emancipatory potential of artwork and its role in protest or political dissent have become common. The mass protests calling for the fall of the regime, under the unifying chant "al-Shaʿab yurid isqat al-Nizam" (the people want the fall of the regime) led to the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak. People protested the state's injustices, the socioeconomic hardships they caused, and their corrupt practices, rallying around "Aish, ḥorreya, ʿadala ijtimaʿeya" (bread, freedom, and social justice).[1] They expressed their desires through visual art, cinema, memes, satire, music, theatrical performance, comics, books, and poetry.[2] Scholars turned to analyzing the "artivism" that accompanied other forms of resistance and protest.[3] I examine how Egyptian feminists have used the art of comix—*x* instead of *c*

---

[1] For more information about the uprising and the role of music, see Dalia Wahdan, "Singing the Revolt in Tahrir Square: Euphoria, Utopia and Revolution," in *The Political Aesthetics of Global Protest: The Arab Spring and Beyond*, ed. Pnina Werbner, Martin Webb, and Kathryn Spellman-Poots (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press and Aga Khan University, 2014), 53–67.

[2] Nicola Pratt, "Making Sense of the Egyptian Revolution in and through Popular Culture," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 531–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743820000690.

[3] Farida Makar, "'Let Them Have Some Fun': Political and Artistic Forms of Expression in the Egyptian Revolution," *Mediterranean Politics* 16, no. 2 (2011): 307–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2011.583755; Ted Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest: From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha," *Middle East Report* 265 (Winter 2012): 39–43; Shaaban Yusuf, "Poetry and the January 25 Revolution: Introduction and Selected Poems," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 32 (2012): 312–37; Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman, *Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa: A Postcolonial Outlook* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Tilia Korpe, "Artivism in Tunis: Music and Art as Tools of Creative Resistance and the Cultural Re:mixing of a Revolution" (MA thesis, Malmö University, 2013); Anastasia Valassopolous and Dalia Said Mostafa, "Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution," *Popular Music and Society* 37, no. 5 (2014): 638–59, https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2014.910905; Shereen Abouelnaga, *Women in Revolutionary Egypt: Gender and the New Geographics of Identity* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016); Nevine El Nossery, "Women, Art, and Revolution in the Streets of Egypt," in *Women's Movements in Post- "Arab Spring" North Africa*, ed. Fatima Sadiqi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 143–57; Sofia Laine, Leena Suurpää, and Afifa Ltifi, "Respectful Resistance: Young Musicians and the Unfinished Revolution in Tunisia," in *What Politics? Youth and Political Engagement in Africa*, ed. Elina Oinas, Henri Onodera, and Leena Suurpää (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 56–74; Sara Borrillo and Mounira Soliman, "Introduction," *Studi Magrebini* 18, no. 2 (2020): 131–34, https://doi.org/10.1163/2590034X-12340024.

in the end of the word indicates independence, alterity, or dissent, as well as the "formation of a subculture"[4]—to counter gendered inequities in urban spaces since 2011. Through visual analysis and attention to gendered representations, I explore some of the ways Egyptian comix have emerged as outlets for artivism in recent years for feminists and youth collectives.

Contextualizing Artivism

Political, economic, social, and cultural shifts since 2011 highlight the relevance of artivism as a distinct form of expression and activism. Feminist artivists have tackled issues of sexual assault and harassment, techniques used to deter women from protesting in public spaces in Egypt.[5] Another prominent issue is reclaiming public space, as physical and virtual spaces are increasingly shrinking and subject to monitoring and surveillance.[6] This culminated in Law 107 of 2013, commonly referred to as the Protest Law.[7] The law was meant to regulate protest (through such measures as requiring permits for marches) and severely curbed the ability to gather in public space. In addition, independent spaces like Townhouse and the Rawabet Theatre, previously available to artists for free exchange

---

[4] Jacob Høigilt, "Egyptian Comics and the Challenge to Patriarchal Authoritarianism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 1 (2017): 113, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743816001161. It is important to note that this distinction does not exist in the Arabic language, as both are referred to as كوميكس. See the Arabic sections in https://www.cairocomix.com/.

[5] Mariam Mecky, "State Policing: Moral Panics and Masculinity in Post-2011 Egypt," *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research* 4, no. 1 (2019): 94–105, https://kohljournal.press/state-policing; Lucia Sorbera, "Challenges of Thinking Feminism and Revolution in Egypt between 2011 and 2014," *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 1 (2014): 63–75; Sherine Hafez, "The Revolution Shall Not Pass through Women's Bodies: Egypt, Uprising, and Gender Politics," *Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2013.879710.

[6] See Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE), "Speech under Siege from Street to Internet: Annual Report on the State of Freedom of Expression in Egypt for 2019," AFTE, February 23, 2020, https://afteegypt.org/en/breaking_news-2/2020/02/23/18447-afteegypt.html/3; AFTE, "The Quarterly Report on the Status of Freedom of Expression in Egypt (January 1st 2017 to the End of March 2017)," AFTE, June 12, 2017, https://afteegypt.org/afte_releases/2017/05/22/13021-afteegypt.html?lang=en.

[7] Law 107, "For Organizing the Right to Peaceful Public Meetings, Processions, and Protests," Presidential Decree, Arab Republic of Egypt, 2013, http://www.constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/protest_law_issued_nov_24.pdf.

of ideas and work, were shut down twice (in 2015 and 2019).[8] Similarly, new laws allowed for surveillance and censorship of digital platforms; according to the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression's (AFTE) 2019 annual report, a total of 546 online sites were blocked.[9] As spaces for dissent and protest were shut down, artivism continued to be one of the few avenues of expression, especially for cartoonists, who used the internet and social media to evade censorship and other state mechanisms of regulation.[10]

Defining Artivism

According to Sara Borrillo and Mounira Soliman, artivists are

> artists who use their art as a means of political expression or engagement, which in turn instigates reflection on the part of the audience; and activists who employ art to stimulate awareness and active participation of the audience in a political cause at a given historical moment.[11]

Tilia Korpe offered the following definition: "Artivism is a wide term that stretches from a strategic communication tool and protest to aesthetic expression with political under- or overtones, commonly inviting the by-passers to see, hear, feel, interpret and be affected."[12] The term highlights the intention of the authors, their artistic aims, and the themes they engage with, which are overtly sociopolitical. Artivism in Egypt has taken various forms, including literature,

---

[8] "Cairo's Townhouse Gallery Forced to Close Its Rawabet Theatre," *Ahram Online*, June 19, 2019, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/25/336423/Arts--Culture/Visual-Art/Cairos-Townhouse-gallery-forced-to-close-its-Rawab.aspx; "Cairo's Townhouse Gallery Reopens, Challenges Prevail," *Ahram Online*, February 16, 2016, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/0/187721/Arts--Culture/0/Cairos-Townhouse-Gallery-reopens,-challenges-preva.aspx.

[9] AFTE, "Speech under Siege," 3.

[10] Jonathan Guyer, "Mad Magazines: Underground Comics Come to Egypt," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2016, https://harpers.org/archive/2016/03/mad-magazines/.

[11] Borrillo and Soliman, "Introduction," 131.

[12] Korpe, "Artivism in Tunis," 8.

comix, graffiti, and performance.[13] Comix in particular are increasingly used to express dissent, but they come with setbacks.[14] I recognize comix as a form of artivism because they are a "medium for commentary, criticism, and dissent."[15]

Any consideration of artivism requires analyzing the technical and political dimensions of artistic works such as comix, plays, music, performances, poetry, literature, and graffiti. Moreover, artistic work, as Kirsten Scheid argues, "offers a rich site for studying the emergence of meanings, because it fundamentally is not pre-bound to space/time coordinates the way subjects of economic and political regimes are."[16] In contrast, I argue that artivists, especially the comix authors referred to in this essay, are bound to a specific temporal and spatial moment as they are responding to political and social issues resulting from state's actions. The artists whose work I describe as artivism are responding specifically to the political ramifications and aftermath of 2011, reminding us that "all art is political, because politics is not outside of art but produced through art."[17] When freedom of speech is at risk because of these regimes, and artists respond, contextual nuances arguably give artivism its pertinence—most notably the lengths to which censorship and restrictions on freedom of thought and expression have been taking place in Egypt. Artivism is both a response to this and a result of it.

---

[13] On literature, see Yusuf, "Poetry and the January 25 Revolution"; Hoda Wasfi, "Al-masraḥ b-I'tibaruh mashrou' thaqafi" [Theater as cultural project], *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 39 (2019): 193–215. On comics, see Iman Hamam, "Over the Top and Underground: Graphic Visualizations of Space in Magdy El Shafee's *Metro* and Ahmed Khaled Towfik's *Utopia*," *Arab Studies Journal* 27, no. 2 (2019): 86–114; Jonathan Guyer, "Comic Relief," *Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, Winter 2014, https://www.thecairoreview.com/midan/comic-relief/. On graffiti, see Women on Walls, "About," http://womenonwalls.org/about/ (last modified 2015). On performance, see Marina Samir, "Feminist Egyptian Band Bnt Al Masarwa," *Take Back the Tech*, accessed March 8, 2018, https://www.takebackthetech.net/blog/feminist-egyptian-band-bnt-al-masarwa; BuSSy, "About Us," accessed March 24, 2020, https://bussy.co/en/about; and Darcy Sprengel, "'Loud' and 'Quiet' Politics: Questioning the Role of 'the Artist' in Street Art Project," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 208–66, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877919847212.

[14] Josh O'Neill, "Egypt's Cartoonists Are Drawing a Lost Revolution," *The Atlantic*, November 20, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/egypts-cartoonists-are-still-drawing-a-lost-revolution/546398/; Jonathan Guyer, "The Mad Cartoonists of Cairo," Harvard University, September 22, 2017, video, 43:07, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGpaJwo_5yk&t=3s.

[15] Lina Ghaibeh, "Telling Graphic Stories of the Region: Arab Comics after the Revolution," *Panorama Mediterranean Yearbook* (2015): 325.

[16] Kirsten Scheid, "Start with the Art: New Ways of Understanding the Political in the Middle East," in *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics*, ed. Larbi Sadki (New York: Routledge, 2020), 438.

[17] Scheid, "Start with the Art," 442.

Hanan Toukan argues that the forms of counterhegemonic art produced after 2011, despite being part of a longer history of dissent, "underscored the people as a sovereign subject in a way that was distinct from anticolonial nationalism."[18] Darcy Sprengel also acknowledges this:

> For some artists in Egypt today, for instance, critically analyzing and documenting the ways their artistic forms linked directly to revolutionary action is crucial . . . the Egyptian state has actively sought to legitimate its rule through "normalization," a process of removing any trace of the revolution. . . . To analytically avoid any relationship between art and revolutionary action, then . . . risks serving the interests of the Egyptian state.[19]

Artivism therefore emerges as a useful category to analyze post–2011 urban art in Cairo in terms of its relationship to the larger political context.

Noting this particularity also discourages reading all art as artivism. Analyzing art from the region in terms of resistance dominates discussions around cultural artifacts, particularly since 2011. Indeed, as Sprengel puts it, "the focus on 'resistance' marginalizes other equally important aspects of artistic practice . . . not all artists view themselves, nor their work, as 'dissenting.'"[20] Such romanticization of dissent obscures other merits of the art, like new forms of narration, plot, artistic style, the use of vernacular instead of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), or the mixing of genres.

On the other hand, even if all art is political in some general way, there are particular artworks intended and understood as contributing to dissent. Just as it is important not to essentialize "resistance" as the criteria by which art is understood or judged because it misses the many effects and meanings of the works, it is likewise worth attending to the communities of artists and interpreters that prioritize this role. Not doing so would assume some objective criteria by which to analyze art outside of how people interpret and present their artwork. This also allows for the analysis of such "active protagonism," which "may take on the role of either exposing what the dominant consensus seeks to conceal, or the role of reinforcing this concealment that politics permits even further."[21]

---

[18] Hanan Toukan, "Liberation or Emancipation? Counter-hegemony, Performance and Public Space in Lebanon," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 266.

[19] Sprengel, "'Loud' and 'Quiet' Politics," 209.

[20] Sprengel, "'Loud' and 'Quiet' Politics," 209–10.

[21] Toukan, "Liberation or Emancipation?," 271.

The Four Characteristics of Arabic Comix

While comics and caricatures have existed in the Arab region for over a century—most notably to express anti-imperialist sentiment in newspapers—the comix that have come to exist since 2011 are distinct from their older counterparts. In this essay, I differentiate between comics and comix; the former term encompasses the art form as a whole, including comics for children, and is intended as a translation of the Arabic phrase *al-qiṣaṣ al-musūwarra* (illustrated stories), while the latter connotes comics that are subversive, alternative, and expressing dissent. As Jonathan Guyer notes, the first and most important aspect of modern Arab comics is that they are aimed at adults rather than children.[22] In the twentieth century, Arab comics were aimed at children; Miki, Sindibad, and other characters (similar to Marvel Comics or Hergé's Tintin) were the main comics published.[23] In the years leading up to the uprising, comics went beyond caricatures and began targeting adult audiences in popular print newspapers. One of the first comix/graphic novels specifically aimed at adults was *Metro* by Magdy El Shafee, which was published in 2008. Lina Ghaibeh clarifies,

> Recent years have witnessed a sudden rise in the number of comics that target adult audiences, particularly since the uprisings, and with it an unprecedented growing interest and avid following . . . it was not until the arrival of Shafei's *Metro* in 2008, with its controversial content widely covered in the media, and the long history preceding it, that the adult graphic novel genre publicly emerged and comics targeting adults became more widespread in Egypt and the region.[24]

Comix artists were able to tackle a variety of political, economic, and social issues, and they addressed the concerns of audiences in postrevolutionary states and those facing increasing political repression. The content of these comix differs from those targeted at children; they include issues of harassment and sexuality, sometimes use profanity, and feature more intense subject matter (like urban landscapes and poverty). Unlike older comics, this new generation is marked by more frequent use of colloquial dialects instead of MSA, which is the default form of Arabic used in print. This has changed in recent years and is especially apparent in the comix referred to in this essay. In addition, they are not widely available in print (there is only one store in Cairo exclusively

---

[22] Guyer, "The Mad Cartoonists of Cairo."

[23] For a more in-depth analysis of children's comics in the Arab world, see Nadim Damluji, "The Forgotten Awlad: Pre-1950 Comics in Egypt," *Medium*, February 20, 2017, https://medium.com/@ndamluji/the-comic-book-heroes-of-egypt-7030f6a884fd.

[24] Ghaibeh, "Telling Graphic Stories," 1.

dedicated to comics, called Kryptonite), meaning that interested readers have to search for and read them online. Finally, another indicator that they are aimed at adults is the use of the term "comix" instead of "comics." This distinction between "comix" and "comics" is not apparent in the Arabic, which indicates an Anglophone demarcation of difference within the subculture.

The second feature that distinguishes modern Arab comix from earlier comics is the formation of collectives of artists and cartoonists, such as Tok Tok in Egypt, Samandal in Lebanon, and Skef Kef in Morocco, among others in the region (these are the names of the collectives and the comix). These collectives have published issues addressing everything from crowded urban spaces to war and refugees to religious freedoms to sexuality.[25] The collectives are a significant phenomenon because they counteract state collectives, such as syndicates, which require artists (singers, actors, and so on) to be members to be able to practice their craft. The syndicates are part of the government, which offers comix collectives—and their related activities, such as festivals—significance as an alternative space beyond state reach. Most importantly, they do not censor their members; Shafee (one of the cofounders of the Cairo Comix Festival) responded to a comic artist on Facebook, saying, "The Cairo Comix Festival is opposed to censorship in all forms."[26] Similarly, Moroccan artist Zainab Fasiki challenges taboos around drawing women, as she regularly draws nudes and argues that in the Middle East and North Africa region, "we are always hiding female bodies."[27]

> Artivism is not only one of the few means of creative expression and dissent left . . . but also a site of critique that reflects the experiences of the artists in navigating a complex city like Cairo.

The third factor that sets contemporary Arab comix apart from its precursors is its framing as a pedagogical tool and its relationship to educational institutions. Artists create comix not just for readers' consumption but also as part of a wider impetus to teach the craft, for example, when comix artists teach enthusiasts different tools of the trade. For instance, the annual Cairo Comix Festival in Egypt (which began in 2015) includes events to teach participants

---

[25] Jonathan Guyer, "War, Romance, and Everyday Life in Beirut's Emerging Alt-Comix Scene," *Atlas Obscura*, September 9, 2019, https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/middle-east-alternative-comics.

[26] O'Neill, "Egypt's Cartoonists."

[27] Zainab Fasiki, "Feminism and Censorship in Arab Comics," American University of Beirut, April 18, 2018, video, 18:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFh9k6OWn_E.

specific techniques (e.g., an annual activity called the Artist at Work, mentioned in their 2015, 2016, and 2017 brochures). The festival is significant because it is the first one dedicated exclusively to comics, comix, and cartoons. In addition, universities have become involved with comics and artists and use them as a resource for teaching and discussion in the classroom. The American University in Beirut established the Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative, which focuses on "the interdisciplinary research of Arabic comics" and hosts an annual comics conference, as well as the Mahmoud Kahil Award, which they have been awarding annually since 2016.[28] The American University in Beirut has also enabled the documentation and preservation of comix in online archives through the Arabic Comic Book Archive and library guide. Similarly, the Cairo Comix Festival occurs annually on the American University in Cairo's downtown campus. This has allowed cartoonists and members of the collectives to partially prefigure how their craft is understood and related to by academics.

Last but not least, digital technologies have led to the proliferation of comix and their dissemination to a wider audience because they are accessible online and in e-book formats. As Jacob Høigilt points out,

> The phenomenon of the new comics is driven by a small but growing number of young and enterprising artists and writers who operate outside of Egypt's established publishing houses and cultural institutions. . . . Self-publishing technology has made it easier to produce comics and has made adult comics available to a wider audience. . . . Digital technology makes comics easier and cheaper to produce, easing for comics creators the financial burden associated with printing.[29]

New physical and online comix shops have made them even more accessible. Artists often publish their work on social media, which is another means of dissemination. As Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye explain with regard to the comic they created, "digital technologies certainly played an important role in challenging the state's monopoly to truth and, importantly, to visual images."[30] Although I am critical of a technologically deterministic view that touts digitization as a panacea, I do not underestimate the ability to easily disseminate digital content to a wide range of people with considerable speed, especially

---

[28] Mu'taz and Rada Sawwaf Arabic Comics Initiative, "About Us," accessed April 11, 2021, https://www.aub.edu.lb/saci/Pages/About-Us.aspx.

[29] Høigilt, "Egyptian Comics," 6.

[30] Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye, "Comics and Revolution as Global Public Health Intervention: The Case of *Lissa*," *Global Public Health* (Fall 2019): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2019.1682632.

given that comix sold online cost nominal amounts, such as five or ten Egyptian pounds.[31] Furthermore, while digitization raises issues of access and connectivity, it also offers artists and cartoonists ways to publish their material outside of traditional routes (such as publishing houses), which can be subject to state intervention. Of course, digital space is not immune from state intervention, but it offers artists a marginally safer avenue in light of laws and regulations such as the cybercrime law.[32] Ultimately, these four characteristics differentiate contemporary comix from their predecessors, which were also concerned with resistance, and place them squarely in the post–2011 era.

Visualizing Gender, Space, and Urbanism in Arab Comix

Feminist theorists have long criticized knowledge that claims to be "objective," positing that knowledge always reflects the positionality and subjectivities of its makers. There is a direct relationship between knowing and seeing, and with comix this relationship is reflected in how artists draw the city and its urban spaces. How they see the world is how they represent it in their work. Gillian Rose put it simply: "knowing the world, it seems, is very often about seeing the world."[33] Donna Haraway has argued that "vision is *always* a question of the power to see."[34] Seeing the world is not a neutral act, but a political one that often makes some things visible and others invisible. In this sense, we can ask, "What is made visible? (And what is rendered invisible?) How is it made visible, exactly—what technologies are used, and how, and what are the specific qualities of the visual objects thus enacted?"[35] By examining what comix artists make visible in their work, we can understand the political dynamics and issues they are engaging with and critiquing. How are inequalities made visible?

With reference to the more general trends that characterize comix after 2011, I refer to *Shakmagia* (largely heralded as Egypt's first feminist comic), *Pass by Tomorrow* by Sherif Adel, *Qahera* by Deena Mohamed, and *Garage* as exam-

---

[31] At the time of writing, which was in 2020–21.

[32] For more information see AFTE, "Egyptian Parliament Approves Cybercrime Law Legalizing the Blocking of Websites and Full Surveillance of Egyptians," June 20, 2018, https://afteegypt.org/en/digital_freedoms-2/2018/06/20/15358-afteegypt.html.

[33] Gillian Rose, "Teaching Visualised Geographies: Towards a Methodology for the Interpretation of Visual Materials," *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 20, no. 3 (1996): 281, https://doi.org/10.1080/03098269608709373.

[34] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 585 (italics in the original).

[35] Divya Tolia-Kelly and Gillian Rose, *Visuality/Materiality: Images, Objects and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 9.

ples.[36] I examine how these comix reveal the embodied experiences of Cairo's residents, with a specifically gendered perspective that is absent from representations in popular culture.

Egyptian comix most commonly attend to urban and spatial discrimination in Cairo. The neoliberalization of the country and the privatization of living areas (the rise of gated compounds) are critiqued for their coproduction and reflection of a deeply stratified society. This theme is likewise analyzed in scholarly publications on *Metro* and novels like *Utopia*.[37] As Iman Hamam points out, "much of the scholarship that examines class inequality in Cairo focuses on the city's neoliberal spatial order."[38]

> I read superhero Qahera not only as a defender of public space for women but also as a personification of the ideal city, the unrealized potential of an urban space where women walk freely, the haunting potential of a Cairo that could be.

The city is reflected in the names of comics. *Tok Tok*, *Garage*, and *Metro*, for example, are indicative of urban life; in addition, many stories in comix revolve around navigating complex and crowded urban landscapes, especially through public transportation. As Dominic Davies points out,

> Contemporary urban comics in Cairo are entwined with the material occupation and subsequent transformation of the infrastructure of the global city. . . . Egypt's 2011 Revolution has re-centred the importance of public space in contemporary debates about the global city, a re-evaluation of urban politics that impacts, in turn, the infrastructural form of contemporary graphic narratives.[39]

Architect Omar Nagati, cofounder of Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training, and Environmental Research, likewise emphasizes the significance of the city's built environment in understanding inequities. In their issue on the Egyptian uprising, *Bidoun* magazine interviews Nagati:

---

[36] For more about feminist comics, see Aisha Nasser, "A Generation of Resistance," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 4 (2017): 377–94, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877916629731.

[37] Hamam, "Over the Top"; Dominic Davies, "Drawing Public Space: Revolutionary Visual Cultures and the Right to the City in Cairo," in *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 47–90.

[38] Hamam, "Over the Top," 86.

[39] Davies, "Drawing Public Space," 8, 31.

Of course architecture and urban management are really complicit with power,
by definition. The paradigm for the past five years has been very limiting, almost
suffocating . . . so we'll talk about sustainability. Let's make this gated community
more "green." But the parameters are incredibly fixed—you couldn't dare suggest
the compound should be socially or economically diverse.[40]

Comix reflect the inequality one faces when navigating the city.

Gendered Narratives of Navigation

These comix also emphasize the gendered experiences of the city. In *Pass by
Tomorrow*, a story set in the year 3014, the protagonist, Fahmy, is considerably
delayed on his way to a new job because he is stuck in traffic. Several pages are
dedicated to the claustrophobic crowdedness of Cairo. Fahmy asks his auto-
mated personal assistant, Aal, to find an alternative route, and the robot tells
him that there is none and that he must wait. As Fahmy sweats profusely, his
frustration takes center stage.[41] The unrelenting cacophony of cars is reflected,
with the words "beep-beep" overwhelming the page in a traffic jam through the
visualization and onomatopoeia. However, we do not feel that Fahmy is in any
physical danger—unlike the women characters in other comics.

In contrast, *Shakmagia* relays the discomfort and harassment of a woman as
she navigates the city. While the scene in *Pass by Tomorrow* was one part of the
narrative, comix with women protagonists often revolve around their experiences
using public transportation. In 2015, *Shakmagia*'s Facebook page featured a series
of comix about personal space titled "1 Square Meter." The campaign focused on
the right to personal space regardless of whether it was in the workplace, crowded
areas, or the home; everyone has the right to have personal space without anyone
invading it unless allowed to do so. In one of the images in the campaign, drawn
by Mona Sonbol, a woman driving her car is harassed by two men and complains
about the lack of privacy in crowded streets. She says, "‏ما تتفضل معانا احسن!‏" (*Ma
titfaḍal maʿana aḥsan!*; Why don't you just invite yourselves in!).[42]

[40] Omar Nagati, "Habitat for Inhumanity: Interview with *Bidoun*," *Bidoun*, Summer 2011,
https://bidoun.org/issues/25-25#habitat-for-inhumanity.

[41] Sherif Adel, *Pass by Tomorrow*, issue 1, "Take Care of Bovo" (Barbatoze Comics, 2014), 11,
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1IaGsN2FRnPGzeSLP9YtP0yXLR4V8ipaH/view.

[42] "*Ma titfaḍal maʿana aḥsan!*" by Mona Sonbol, Nazra for Feminist Studies Facebook Page,
November 28, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/Nazra.for.Feminist.Studies/photos
/a.894965087223519/895553937164634/. This sketch is part of their 1 Square Meter
campaign; for more information see https://nazra.org/en/2015/11/wa7ed_mitr_morabba3-
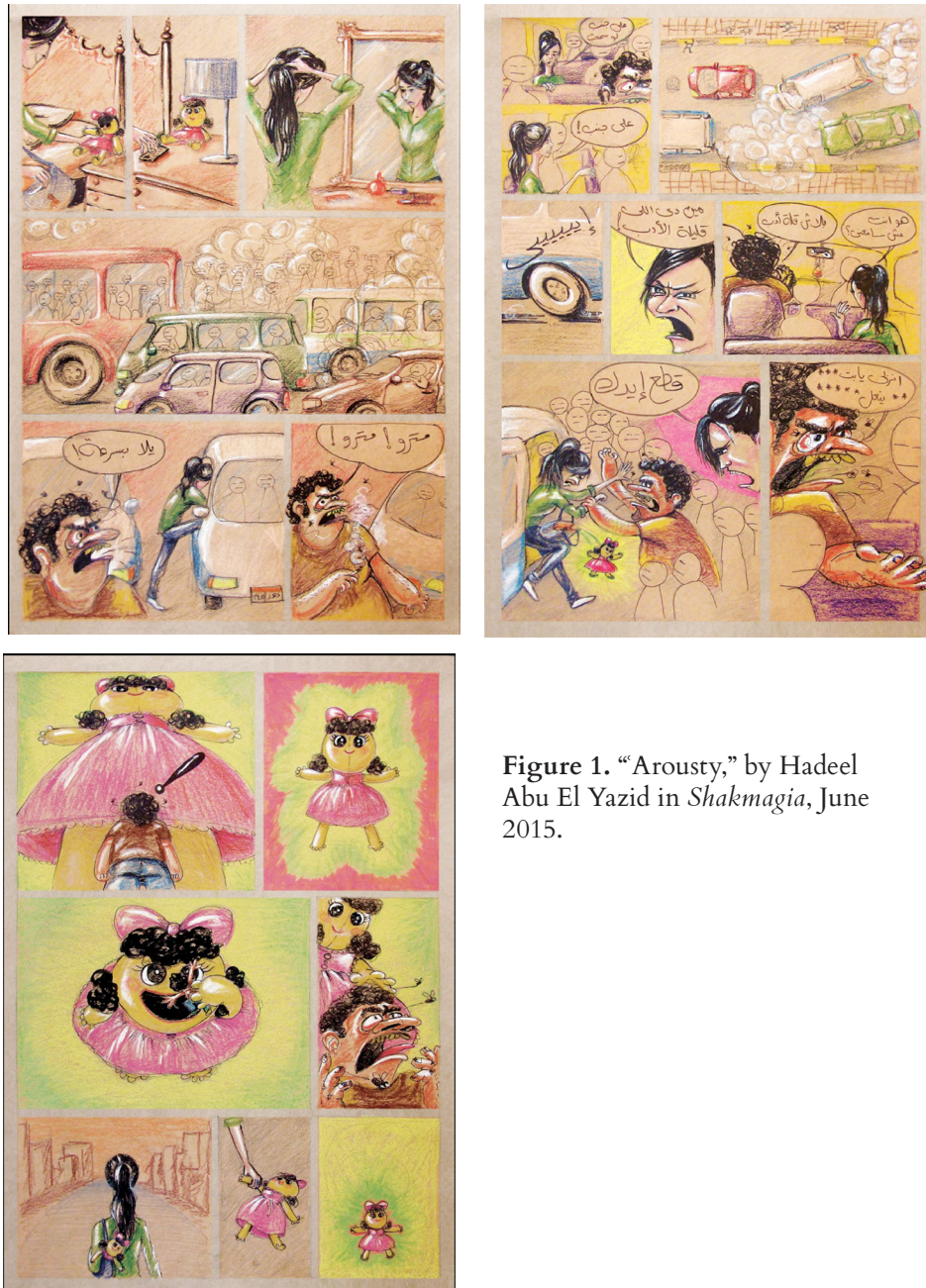one-meter-squared-campaign.

Figure 1. "Arousty," by Hadeel
Abu El Yazid in *Shakmagia*, June
2015.

Similarly, in the second issue of *Shakmagia*, one of the artists imagines that
a doll she had as a child accompanies her as she navigates Cairo, protecting
her from harassment. The story is drawn by Hadeel Abu El Yazid and named
"'Arousty" (My doll; figure 1). While she is riding a microbus—a hallmark of
Cairo transportation and traffic—the protagonist and the driver get into an

argument.[43] The protagonist tells the driver politely that she wants to get off the bus (since microbus routes do not always have designated stations, riders can tell the driver where they want to get off). He continues on without paying her any attention, and when she asks him, "Can you not hear me?" he responds rudely and demands that she get off the bus. While the protagonist and the driver are drawn in color with great detail, the multitude of stick figures in the background show a sea of people who could help but do not. The story ends with the doll saving the protagonist by eating the driver.

Qahera, Gender, and Urban Cairo

In a ten-piece comix series by Deena Mohamed, *Qahera*, its eponymous hijabi superhero, patrols Cairo, helping women in trouble. The comic is available for free in English and Arabic on Mohamed's blog and social media sites and has gained a substantial readership and local and international press coverage. The comix are short but cover an array of topics from sexual harassment to misogynistic music to Western stereotypes about Muslim women. Although the comics are not specifically about Cairo, the city features in all of them, whether Qahera is on the street, in a café, or at a bus stop. As Davies states,

> That the superhero Qahera shares her name with the city is suggestive of a right to, or ownership of, Cairo, and indeed it is this project to which Mohamed's superhero applies herself. . . . In the context of a comic that attends especially to issues of sexual harassment, gender violence and the everyday reclamation of public space in Cairo . . . Qahera literally "conquers" public space for women, reclaiming their right to the city and "overpowering" those who obstruct such efforts.[44]

We see this in the third comic, "On Sexual Harassment," where a woman, Layla, is verbally and physically harassed and goes to the police station to report it, to no avail. The police officer engages in victim-blaming (commenting on her clothes, for example) and ultimately refuses to help her. Qahera rounds up the perpetrators, hangs them to from wall by their shirts outside the police station, and graffitis "these men are perverts / متحرشين" (*motaḥarisheen*; figure 2).

Aside from the comics, Mohamed releases illustrations without any text on

---

[43] An example of a Cairo microbus can be seen at https://egyptianstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/image15.jpg. The microbus is one of the ubiquitous modes of transportation in Cairo because of their affordability and their routes.

[44] Davies, "Drawing Public Space," 68.

Figure 2. Deena Mohamed, "On Sexual Harassment," *Qahera*, September 2, 2013, https://
qaherathesuperhero.com/post/60081962515. © Deena Mohamed.

a Facebook page devoted to *Qahera*. Though they do not have captions, the images convey messages clearly. In one from 2016 (figure 3), Qahera stops a bridge from collapsing, pointing to decaying infrastructure; in another from 2019 (figure 4), she stops men from ogling a woman at a bus stop. The bus stop is an example of how "Mohamed's depictions of urban infrastructure . . . [fore-ground] her efforts to reclaim a right to the city on behalf of Muslim women."[45] In the comix and the images posted on social media, Qahera not only uses her superpowers to help women, such as Layla or the girl at the bus stop, but also indirectly reflects the struggle of women navigating urban space in an unequal and decaying city. I read Qahera as a defender of public space for women and as a personification of the ideal city, the unrealized potential of an urban space where women walk freely, the haunting potential of a Cairo that could be. In that sense, Qahera's superpowers go beyond a depiction of a heroic woman or a representation of how women experience the city to visualize hope.

[45] Davies, "Drawing Public Space," 70.

Figure 3. Qahera the Super-hero, Facebook, April 5, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/qaherathesuperhero/photos/pcb.885905608204801/885904168204945/. © Deena Mohamed.
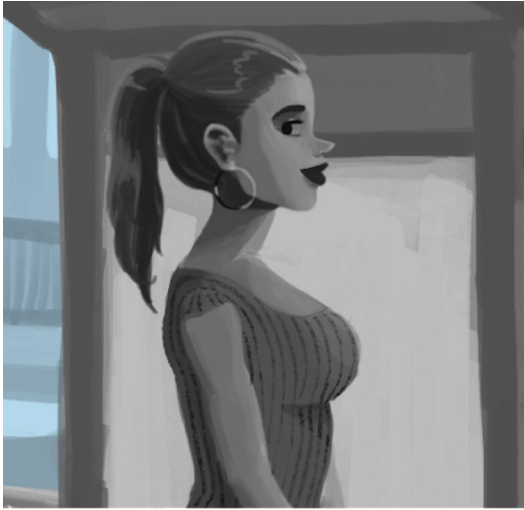
Figure 4. Qahera the Superhero, Facebook, "a superhero in cairo ii," January 10, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1895556223906396&set=pcb.1895560190572666. © Deena Mohamed.

Garage: Apathy and Passiveness in the City

If Qahera represents the experiences of women and the hope of a superhero who cares for them, the character in *Garage* is the opposite. The inaugural issue, which came out in August 2015, featured several authors and artists who contributed a range of plots and styles. In the first one, "Comfort Zone" by Farid Nagy, people are drawn living in bubbles, oblivious and uncaring to those around them (figure 5a). Contrary to the other characters mentioned so far, who have encounters with the city that are felt, embodied, and affective, the unnamed protagonist of "Comfort Zone" embodies extreme apathy and complete detachment from his surroundings. The panels reflect familiar urban locales—the street, the home, the café, McDonald's, the car—but the protagonist ignores the plight of people around him. He disregards poverty, hunger, harassment,
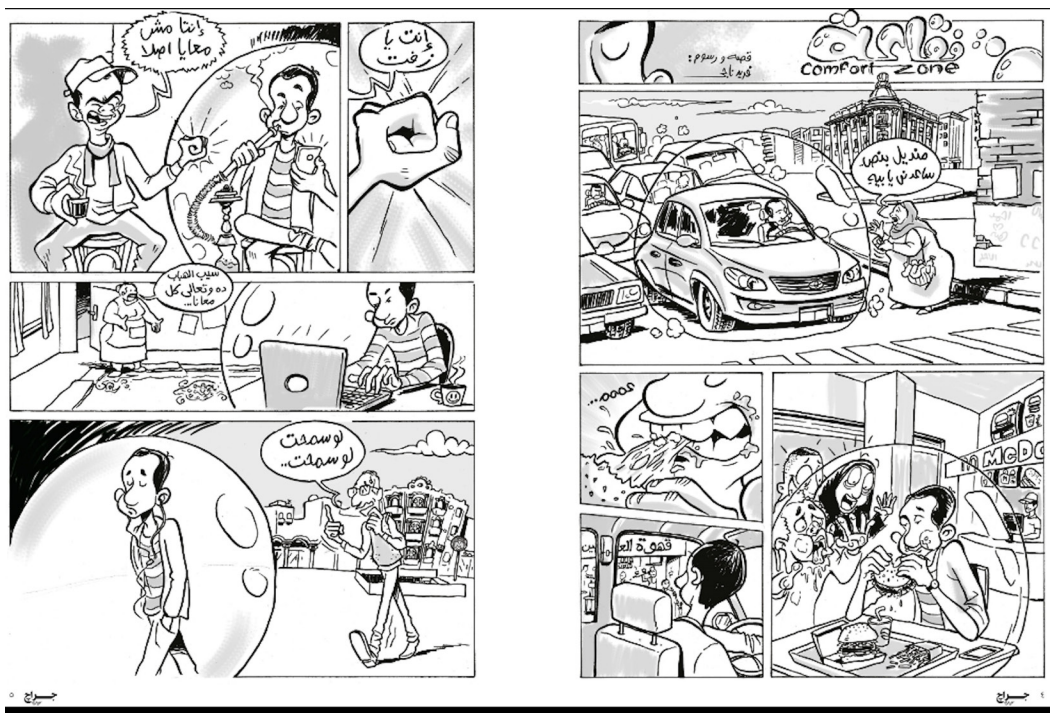

Figure 5a. "Comfort Zone" by Farid Nagy, *Garage*, 2015. Image courtesy of Kawkab El Rasameen.
Frame 1 *(top right [the story goes right to left]):* As the protagonist is driving his car, a woman tries to sell him tissues at a traffic light, "Tissues for half a . . . help me son."
Frame 5 (top left): The protagonist's friend calls out to him, "Hey idiot!"
Frame 6: The protagonist's friend continues, "You're not even paying attention to me."
Frame 7: The protagonist's mother comes into his room, "Leave that crap and come join us for dinner."
Frame 8: A stranger tries to approach the protagonist, "Excuse me . . . excuse me . . ."

suicide, and crime (figure 5b), reflecting a disillusionment and disengagement that is the opposite of Qahera's agency. When someone pops his bubble, he screams for help only to realize that no one else can hear him.

In this story, it is not the population density or harassment that is reflected but rather a deep sense of alienation. If "space and place shape daily life, social structures, politics, and intimate relations among people," as Aseel Sawalha asserts,[46] then the space that the protagonist inhabits has shaped a person who is no longer able to care about the issues plaguing the city (or feels helpless to do anything about them). His relations with family and friends are replaced instead by technology (a laptop and phone), further evidence of alienation. Ultimately, this protagonist displays a completely different way of engaging with the city.
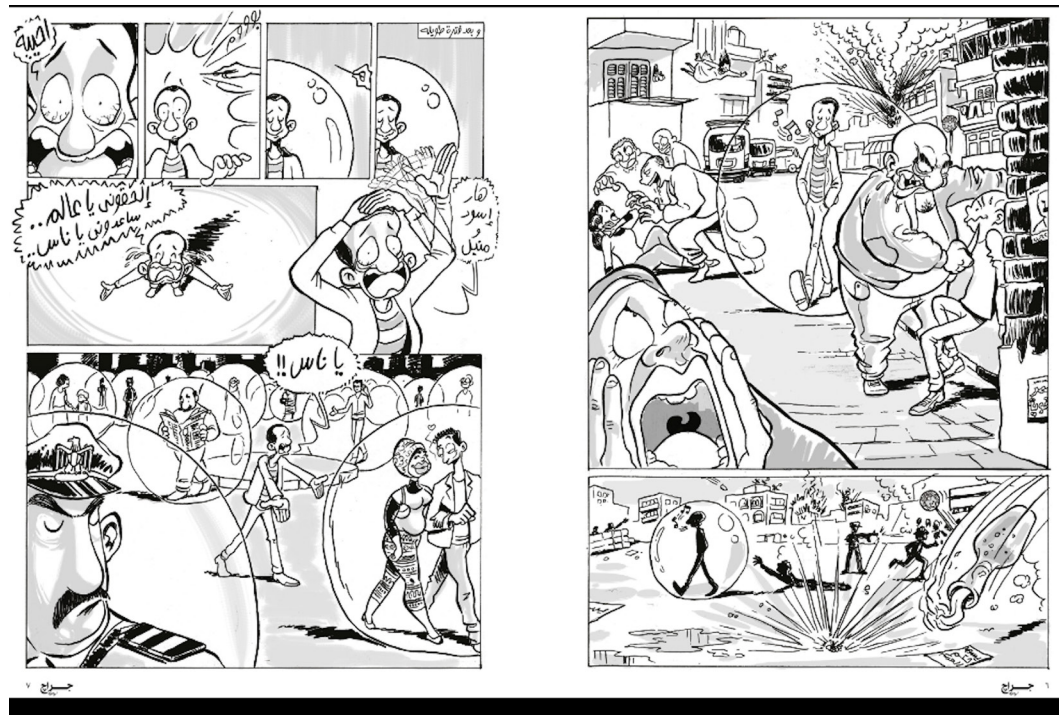

Figure 5b. "Comfort Zone" by Farid Nagy, *Garage*, 2015.[47] Image courtesy of Kawkab El Rasameen.
Frame 11 (top left): The caption reads, "After a long time . . ."
Frame 14: "F**k"
Frame 15: The protagonist panics and uses an Egyptian phrase "it's a black and damned day" (conveying a sense of panic).
Frame 16: The protagonist cries out, "Save me, world . . . help me anybody . . ."
Frame 17: The protagonist tries to get anyone to hear him, "Anybody!!"

[46] Aseel Sawalha "Gendered Space and Middle East Studies," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (2014): 166, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743813001359.
[47] My translation.

Conclusion

Questions and debates worth exploring remain. How is the evolving urban landscape of Cairo, with its increasing privatization and neoliberalization of living areas, reflected in other artistic works and visual artifacts? Can these visualizations and expressions of dissent be read alongside other visual representations of the city in film, television, advertisements, and so on? How can we further understand the ways gender and embodiment allow for reading, visualizing, and understanding urban space? What are the particular advantages of a feminist positionality in creating and reading these comix?

In sum, I have explored how dissent is expressed and visualized since 2011 through artivism, particularly comix. I argue that artivism is not only one of the few means of creative expression and dissent left in light of a shrinking and increasingly policed and surveilled public space, but it is also a site of critique that reflects the experiences of the artists in navigating a complex city like Cairo. I analyzed the gendered dimensions of these narratives and how they address discrimination in urban space life. The comix also use text and image to convey feelings of alienation, whether it is Layla who can't get justice through the police, the character in "'Arousty" who has to fend for herself, or the character in "Comfort Zone" who neither helps those around him nor receives help when he needs it. Ultimately, artivism through comix offers insight and critique of embodied experiences and of navigating Cairo.

Hana Shaltout graduated from the American University in Cairo in 2014 with a BA from the Political Science Honours Programme with a specialization in international relations. She completed her MSc in gender, media, and culture at the London School of Economics in 2015. After being a researcher at the Arab Council for Social Sciences working on the World Humanities Report, she is currently doing her PhD in cultural studies at the University of Sussex, on feminist artivism in Egypt post-2011. Her research interests include alternative knowledge production, gender studies, cultural studies, and women's participation in the political arena.