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The “Banksy Effect” and Street Art in the Middle East

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Abstract

The English street artist known as Banksy has in recent years become an important figure in the contemporary art world, garnering both critical acclaim and commercial success with his work. The “Banksy effect” is a term coined to describe the increased interest in street art that has emerged in the wake of Banksy’s popularity. Although the Banksy effect is not universally applauded, it offers a useful lens through which to consider the emergence of street art as a means of popular expression in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. This paper considers three places in which street art has been intentionally deployed as a vehicle of political protest or as a means to generate tourism in the face of political unrest: street art in the Palestinian territories; street art in Egypt, particularly Cairo; and the Djerbahood project in Tunisia. A brief discussion of the way in which street art is created and received in the particular area is provided, followed by some observations on how the Banksy effect may be at play in that particular context. The paper concludes that the idea of the Banksy effect has relevance in discussions of street art in the MENA region and that both the positive and negative aspects of the Banksy effect are seen in the region.

Keywords

Street Art, Urban Art, Banksy, Graffiti, Middle East, North Africa

Introduction

Once relegated to subway trains, abandoned buildings, and seemingly inaccessible areas of the urban landscape, street art has emerged in recent years as a critical element in political commentary on current events. This is in no small part due to the unprecedented rise of Banksy, a “writer” from the English city of Bristol whose anonymity, ubiquity and creativity have garnered him an international following among the art establishment and the general public. Banksy’s visual commentary on contemporary social and political concerns has taken many forms and his fame, public validation and commercial success have helped pave the way for other street artists to emerge as key players in the global art market – the so-called “Banksy effect.” This increased publicity and market for street art can be seen as a positive result of the Banksy effect, but critics have argued that the popularity of Banksy’s work encourages the adoption of a similar visual style and has led to an over-commercialization of the genre. This article summarizes the concept of the Banksy effect, positions the term as a tool for critical discourse about street art, and uses the concept as a lens through which to analyze three examples in the Middle East and North Africa: street art in the Palestinian territories; street art produced in Cairo during and after the revolution of 2011; and the Djerbahood project in Tunisia. The conclusion of this analysis is that the Banksy effect can be felt in both positive and negative ways in the rise of street art in the MENA region.

1. The Banksy Effect

The pseudonymous English street artist Banksy has become a cultural phenomenon in the two decades or so since he emerged onto the art scene in the 1990s. His well-crafted, stenciled works of street art provide satirical commentary on contemporary politics and social issues, or just on life itself, in ways that are somewhat enigmatic, leaving the viewer to complete their meaning. Speaking of his early time bombing walls in the Barton Hill district in the English city of Bristol, Banksy has described the evolution of his signature stencils. Describing an incident in which the British Transport Police arrived on the scene as Banksy and other graffiti artists were painting a train, the artist recalls hiding from the police under a truck: “As I lay there listening to the cops on the tracks, I realized I had to cut my painting time in half or give it up altogether. I was staring straight up at the stenciled plate on the bottom of the fuel tank when I realized I could just copy that style and make each letter three feet high.” (Ellsworth-Jones, 2013, *The Story Behind Banksy*) However, he has also acknowledged the particular political power of the stencil style, stating that “As soon as I cut my first stencil I could feel the power there. I also like the political edge. All graffiti is low-level dissent, but stencils have an extra history. They’ve been used to start revolutions and to stop wars.” (Ellsworth-Jones, 2013, *The Story Behind Banksy*)

In addition to his street works, Banksy also gained notoriety for his museum interventions that he performed occasionally for several years, beginning in 2003 with his insertion into a gallery of the Tate Britain an altered painting of an English landscape which he titled *Crimewatch UK Has Ruined the Countryside for All of Us*. These incursions into the museum space share themes with his street art in their tongue-in-cheek questioning of authority, presentation of multiple avenues for interpretation and their subversion of popular expectations for images and text. By both utilizing and destabilizing the museum environment, these works call into question a specific kind of authority: that of the art establishment itself. Banksy continually walks the line between joining and rejecting that establishment. His choice of the street as the primary location for his

imagery and the sarcasm he displays toward cultural authority suggest a wholesale rejection of the “white box” of the gallery. Yet Banksy also employs art market strategies such as the creation and retailing of prints and multiples and mounts his own exhibits to sell his work. In so doing, he embraces, or at least flirts with, the structure of the contemporary art world and the expectations of its patrons. When Banksy mounted his 2006 debut exhibition, “Barely Legal,” in Los Angeles he created a spectacle that rivaled those of international art fairs and that attracted a similar set of well-heeled visitors from the arts and entertainment industries. (Wyatt, 2006) That the show also attracted its share of street artists and fans of Banksy’s stenciled graffiti highlights the complexity of his work and its impact.

While continuing to produce street art in England and abroad, throughout the first decade of the 21st century Banksy also built a thriving studio practice, creating prints and canvases that skyrocketed in value over the years. His altered Damien Hirst painting, *Keep it Spotless*, sold at a charity auction in February 2008 for \$1.8 million – a record for the artist. This high price was undoubtedly influenced by the fact that the proceeds from the sale went to charity and that the work incorporated a painting by Hirst, whose pieces regularly sell for millions of dollars. However, more typical works by Banksy still fetch in the \$300,000 - \$500,000 range at auction. (Ellsworth-Jones, 2013, Banksy) As with the graffiti art popularized in the 1970s and 80s and brought into galleries by artists such as Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat, Banksy’s work employs a style that seems to confound curatorial and critical categories while simultaneously engendering tremendous popularity among the general public and the cognoscenti of the art world. The 2009 exhibit “Banksy vs Bristol Museum,” in which the artist staged numerous interventions in the galleries of the city’s public art museum, attracted so many visitors that queues stretched for blocks during the entire run of the show, which was extended for several weeks to accommodate the crowds. The artist’s 2010 film, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, was nominated for an Academy Award in the documentary category. His monthlong residency in New York in the fall of 2013 received wide national and international media coverage and sent New Yorkers and visitors alike rushing around the city in search of each new Banksy creation.

The CNN correspondent Max Foster is generally credited with originating the phrase “the Banksy effect” in reference to increasing interest in street art seen during the years that Banksy was gathering attention and respect for his work. (Foster, 2006) The term as originally coined focused on the way in which Banksy’s increasing popularity in the “legitimate” art world paved the way for other street artists to enter the mainstream of galleries, art fairs and museums. However the Banksy effect also had a commercial aspect, as prices for Banksy’s works, as well as those by some other street artists, began to rise substantially along with the artists’ critical success. This rise in popularity and value was not universally applauded, however, and some within the street art community questioned whether Banksy had sold out and strayed too far from his roots as a graffiti artist. In a 2007 blog post Marc Schiller of the Wooster Collective alluded to an ongoing debate over whether the Banksy effect was actually a good thing for the street art movement and concluded that the benefits outweighed any negative aspects:

Like Andy Warhol before him, Banksy has almost single handedly redefined what art is to a lot of people who probably never felt they appreciated art before... The fact that Banksy’s book *Wall and Piece* is in every bookstore imaginable, including Urban Outfitters, is a statement unto itself. The fact that Banksy’s work is now selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars at Sotheby’s is a statement unto itself... There are now a

lot of people that have money and want to spend it on art. Their entry point into buying “urban art” is now Banksy. They read about Banksy selling his work at Sotheby’s and they want to be in on the action. But not many can now afford to buy a Banksy piece any more. This is actually a good thing for artists who are talented and want to make money from their art because those people who can’t afford “a Banksy” are now learning more and searching out and buying work from other talented artists who are part of the movement. (Schiller, 2007)

Indeed the Wooster Collective itself, a collaborative that “showcases and celebrates ephemeral art placed on streets in cities around the world” through its website, books and public lectures, arguably owes at least something of its own success to the Banksy effect. The Wooster Collective was founded in 2001, launched their website in 2003, and achieved public and critical acclaim for their 2006 street art show, the 11 Spring Street Project, following a timeline that parallels Banksy’s rise to prominence in the contemporary art scene and his commercial success. Indeed, “Barely Legal,” the show which launched Banksy’s career in America, was held in Los Angeles in September 2006, just months before the 11 Spring Street Project took place in New York. Shepard Fairey, the American street artist who would garner fame as well as criticism for his 2008 portrait of President Barack Obama, was building a career and a following throughout the decade as were artists such as Faile and Pure Evil, street artists who have achieved commercial success by translating their style to formats such as prints, graphic design and album covers. In addition to the “Banksy vs Bristol Museum” show, several other major museums featured exhibitions of street, or urban, art. These included a 2008 show of commissioned street art at the Tate Modern, a 2009 survey of the work of Shepard Fairey at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and “Art in the Streets,” a 2011 exhibition at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. The Wynwood Walls complex in Miami, which mixes high-end bars and restaurants with commissioned street art, sprang up in 2009, the brainchild of a local property developer. The warehouse complex, located just blocks from the heart of Art Basel Miami and supported by sponsors such as American Airlines and Heineken Beer, firmly established the nexus between street art, the global art scene, and commerce. In what might be cynically seen as a bid for authenticity, the project brought on as a contributing artist Martha Cooper, the legendary photographer of New York graffiti art in the 1970s and 80s. However Wynwood Walls, with its international crowd of art lovers, is a far cry from the train sheds and abandoned rail yards where the artists whom Cooper originally chronicled practiced their craft. For some, the existence of a place like Wynwood Walls symbolizes a negative side of the Banksy effect: the taming and gentrification of street art in such a way that it becomes almost completely divorced from its true urban roots.

1.1 The Banksy Effect and Street Art in the MENA Region

The proliferation of street art in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly during and in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011, has been widely documented through social media, websites and several published photo essays. To speak of the Banksy effect, whether seen as a positive or negative development, in a context of war, political upheaval and loss of life may seem to trivialize the important role that street art has played in liberating the voices of the people of this region during times of revolution and change. I argue, however, that an exploration of the Banksy effect in the MENA region can offer a useful lens through which to

consider the emergence of street art as a means of popular expression and the different ways in which it has been generated and used in different countries. The Banksy effect as I use the term here refers to the increasing popularity and acceptance of street art, the commercialization of street art, and the use of a particular style (stencils) associated with Banksy and employed specifically as a vehicle for political and social protest. I look at three examples of countries in which street art has been intentionally deployed as a vehicle of political protest or as a means to generate tourism in the face of political unrest: street art in the Palestinian territories; street art in Egypt, particularly Cairo; and the Djerbahood project in Tunisia. In each case I briefly discuss the way in which street art is created and received in the area and then offer some observations on how the Banksy effect may be at play in that particular context.

2. Banksy in the Palestinian Territories

The Palestinian territories present a unique example of a possible Banksy effect on street art in the MENA region as they are the one location in the region where Banksy himself has produced work. During Banksy's 2005 trip to the West Bank barrier, or separation wall, between Israel and Palestine he painted a series of nine images that called attention to the wall's function of, in his words, "turn[ing] Palestine into the world's largest open-air prison." (Parry, 2005) These ranged from a simple stencil of a girl holding a bunch of balloons which lift her off the ground in an apparent attempt to float over the wall, to more visually complex trompe l'oeil paintings which seemed to open the wall onto a vista of sandy beaches and palm trees. Banksy reported that he was harassed at least once by an Israeli soldier who encountered him while painting and on his website shared a conversation with a Palestinian man which has been often repeated in discussions of the Palestine project:

"Old man: You paint the wall, you make it look beautiful.

Me [Banksy]: Thanks

Old man: We don't want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall, go home." (Parry, 2005)

While many critics have written approvingly of Banksy's choice to embed art commenting on the Palestinian and Israeli divide directly at the physical site of that divide, this quote represents another, and not unusual, opinion of any attempts to beautify the separation wall. That Banksy himself shares the exchange may act as an acknowledgement of the complicated responses surrounding his politicized imagery and to give space to dissenting as well as supporting voices. Nonetheless, the Palestinian man's derision deterred neither Banksy nor the many international street artists who came to Palestine in the wake of Banksy's visit to make their own mark on the separation wall. Of course, Palestinian street artists as well became active contributors to the growing body of work on the separation wall and the relatively blank canvas that Banksy encountered in 2005 has today become a palimpsest of overlapping and sometimes competing images commenting on the conflict and the restrictions placed on Palestinian citizens.

Banksy returned to Palestine on two other occasions after his 2005 visit. In 2007 he and several international and Palestinian artists created a number of new paintings in Bethlehem. In addition to the new street images, Banksy also organized Santa's Ghetto, a temporary exhibition and sale

of works by various artists that was set up in Bethlehem's Manger Square, next to the Church of the Nativity. The Santa's Ghetto concept was six years old by that time; since 2001 Banksy had created a pop-up gallery with the same name in London each December to sell affordably priced works by himself and other urban artists. (Brown, 2006) By 2007 the annual shop had become so well-known and popular that its removal to Bethlehem received substantial attention from the UK and international press. The Bethlehem iteration of Santa's Ghetto is a clear example of the Banksy effect in operation. Banksy's own participation in the event did much to encourage attention and the success of the operation relied on the fact that the artist had already capitalized on his growing notoriety and popular appeal to set up a successful model in London. Importantly, the shops in both London and Bethlehem included not only works by Banksy himself but featured a number of street and urban artists who were able to find an audience and market for their work through Banksy's name. If you wanted to buy one of the works on display in Bethlehem you had to do so by placing a bid on site at the pop-up gallery. As one of the participating artists, Peter Kennard, wrote "This was important, because Bethlehem is being starved of its tourist trade as visitors are bussed in to see the Church of the Nativity and bussed out an hour later back to Israel. All proceeds from the sale, which exceeded \$1m, went to local charities." (Kennard, 2008)

While the Banksy effect, along with the political commitment of Banksy and a group of like-minded artists, appears to have generated a positive result in the case of the Santa's Ghetto project, his work in Palestine subsequently became embroiled in a controversy that arguably also had its roots in the Banksy effect. In August 2011 the Keszler Gallery opened an exhibition in Southampton, New York that included two Banksy works that had been removed from their original Bethlehem locations. The works, referred to as "Stop & Search" and "Wet Dog," had been created during the 2007 visit and removed from their original locations shortly thereafter. The two works were never authenticated by Pest Control, the PR arm of the Banksy operation, and the gallery came under substantial scrutiny for how they were acquired and criticism for putting them up for sale. (Corbett, 2011) Writing in the British newspaper *The Independent*, Guy Adams summarizes the controversy "The debate highlights the problems that emerge when the soaring contemporary art market turns what some view as petty vandalism into a prized commodity. These days, Banksy pieces can fetch as much as \$1.9m, meaning that his public works are often thought to be worth more than the building they originally graced." In short, the Keszler show highlights a negative outcome of the Banksy effect.

Banksy's most recent project in the Palestinian territories was undertaken in Gaza in early 2015 when he apparently snuck into the city through a network of tunnels in order to paint four new works, including a text only piece that reads "'If we wash our hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless we side with the powerful — we don't remain neutral.'" While his intention to draw attention to the plight of the citizens of Gaza appears genuine, Banksy retains a sense of irony and humor with comments such as this, referring to a painting of a kitten playing with a ball of rusted wire, "I wanted to highlight the destruction in Gaza by posting photos on my website – but on the internet people only look at pictures of kittens." (streetartnews.net) Only a few months after the works were created, however, the greed and opportunism that sometimes follow Banksy's work appear to have surfaced in Gaza. In April various news outlets began to report that the family on whose abandoned house Banksy had painted the work *Bomb Damage* had sold the piece (painted on a wooden door) to a local artist for just \$175, not recognizing the

work's potential value. The painting was subsequently confiscated by the police and is being held while the ownership dispute is adjudicated. The incident may reveal both a positive and negative aspect of the Banksy effect. The artist who purchased the work, Belal Khaled, has himself adopted a street art style in his altered photographs of rockets detonating in Gaza. When confronted about the purchase of the recent work, he claimed that his motivation was "to protect the Banksy mural from neglect and that he had always wanted to own something from the renowned street artist." (rt.com) However, the incident also highlights the fact that as prices for Banksy's work have risen people have used questionable means to acquire them.

3. Revolutionary Street Art in Egypt

The street art produced in Egypt, particularly in Cairo, during the 25 January 2011 revolution has received more attention than that produced in other countries during the Arab spring. This may be due in part to the fact that Egypt was relatively accessible to outsiders shortly after the revolution and to the fact that a number of Egyptian scholars and journalists have themselves chosen to comment on the street art produced at that time. The attention may also stem from the novelty of the street art that emerged during the revolution. As Mia Gröndahl writes in her book *Revolution Graffiti: Street Art of the New Egypt*, prior to the revolution "The Egyptian youth didn't write without permission on public surfaces. The wide spectrum of street art—individual tags, stencils, pieces, and murals—that usually belong to an urban landscape, had escaped Cairo." (Gröndahl, 2012, p. ix-x) Gröndahl goes on to quote Egyptian street artist El Teneen on his experience of the opening up of public spaces to visual forms of comment and protest:

"It was the first day we actually took control of the [Tahrir] Square. There was a large portrait of Mubarak, and Ganzeer sprayed 'Down with Mubarak' on it, something I had always wanted to do; and after that we continued to put our mark on the walls around the Square. The protesters hadn't seen graffiti before; the idea of writing something in a public space was new, but they liked it." (Gröndahl, 2012, p. 43)

Lina Khatib of Stanford University notes that the use of street art in the 25 January revolution was particularly significant in that it "made visual expression a key tool in political protest, catalysing the use of street art in other revolutions that followed in the Arab world, such as in Libya and Syria." (Khatib, 2013, p. 299) The images have various subjects and references: political leaders, martyrs of the revolution, democracy and voting, gender rights and more.

The street art that emerged in Cairo at this time can be categorized by style as well as by theme or subject. Styles included simple stenciled works that functioned almost as logos, free-form paintings that often occupied large surfaces, and text-only works that looked more like the traditional tags found in urban locations throughout the world. Some artists and protestors also adopted the poster and sticker technique popularized in the United States by Shepard Fairey; these artists sometimes directly copied Fairey's designs, including his signature "Obey Giant" character. Some of the street art referenced historical Egyptian motifs, such as King Tutankhamen and ancient tomb paintings, while other images seemed to go in their own direction; these often expansive and complex murals are reminiscent in scope, if not skill, of works created by Mexican muralists of the mid-20th century. Aesthetically speaking not all of the street art is very good, but it is important as a record of the struggle for political change as

well as the development of an artistic genre that had previously been virtually absent from the visual culture of contemporary Egypt.

It is in the stenciled works that we see the greatest impact of Banksy's style on the street art of the revolution. These works sometimes directly referenced Banksy stencils—his image of a young girl frisking a soldier that first appeared in Bethlehem was copied on a Cairo wall, for example—and other times relied for their effect on the same kind of simple but immediately identifiable and critical message that Banksy's smaller stencils carry. This visual similarity merits investigation as an example of the international reach of Banksy's work, particularly in the MENA region. Two particularly compelling examples of the effective use of stencils are the recurrent motif of the blue bra found in street art throughout Cairo and the image of Nefertiti wearing a gas mask which is found in stencils as well as on stickers and posters.

As the journalist Soraya Morayef has noted, a number of street artists in Cairo, both men and women, used their work to focus specifically on issues of women's rights and to condemn violence against women in Egyptian society. (Morayef, 2013, *Women in Graffiti*) One of the iconic images of such violence that emerged from the Tahrir Square protests is that of the so-called "girl in the blue bra," the female protestor whose beating at hands of military police was documented in video and still photographs. The blue bra rapidly emerged as a symbol for street artists, a kind of shorthand reminder of the brutality of the regime and particularly of its mistreatment of women. In some works, the blue bra itself was simply stenciled as a stand-alone signifier of both a particular act of violence and of the systemic inequities faced by Egyptian women. In others, artists used a free-hand style to represent the act of the beating as captured in the most widely circulated photos of the event. The stenciled works may be seen as more in keeping with Banksy's style in terms of both their creative presentation and their reliance on a single motif to make a point. The freehand works, however, are embedded in an alternative style of Egyptian revolutionary graffiti, one which exhibits a more narrative quality.

Another image that seems to employ strategies from contemporary international street art—Banksy's stenciling combined with Shepard Fairey's use of stickers—while also connecting with Egypt's history is that of Nefertiti with a gas mask by the graffiti artist Zeft. This is a seemingly simple subject that carries complex layers of meaning. The figure can be read as a symbol of Egyptian women's resilience and commitment to the revolution, standing alongside the men of Tahrir and facing the same dangers, such as tear gas attacks. The graffiti image was then transferred to a poster format by the artist, who added symbolic spatters of blood to symbolize the assaults against women in Tahrir and beyond. (Morayef, 2013, *Women in Egypt*) The image is thus complicated by adding imagery alluding to women as victims of male aggression and sexual assault and was appropriated by activists for women's rights in Egypt and beyond.

The commercial aspect of the Banksy effect on Egyptian street artists is not yet entirely clear. Some writers on the topic, such as Morayef, see a burgeoning interest in this art following the revolution:

"Cairo's street artists today are being sought after by art galleries, cultural institutes, international art exhibitions, advertising companies and many more. Some have gone on to create art for magazine covers, others have exhibited in Europe, and others have seen their

stencils recreated on t-shirts that are worn by the young revolutionary segment of Egyptian society.” (Morayef, Street Art)

Indeed, Ganzeer, the artist who sprayed “Down with Mubarak” across the dictator’s Tahrir Square portrait in 2011, had a solo exhibition at New York’s Leila Heller Gallery in early 2015. The urban art gallery Station 16 in Montreal has featured a number of Egyptian street artists and recently released a limited edition print by the artist Shehab. The print, titled *No to Stripping the People*, features the iconic, stenciled image of the blue bra. It is worth noting, however, that works by these artists are not commanding high prices: Shehab’s print, for example, retails for approximately \$120.

Critic Giacomo Crescenzi sees a more complicated picture surrounding Egyptian street art, one in which the attention paid to the genre may be obscuring other contemporary art activity in Egypt and giving a false sense that the art market there is healthy and growing. Additionally, Crescenzi questions whether the perceived exposure given to Egyptian street art is really as substantial as suggested. Writing on the website egyptianstreets.com, Crescenzi draws attention to the problems faced by contemporary artists in Egypt:

“Despite the fact that street art is only one small component of the art scene in Egypt, this newly found media interest may have had a positive impact if the public interest was translated into concrete opportunities for street artists as representative of a new era for art in Egypt, but very little has been done to this date...If so much media attention is reserved to Egyptian street artists why is no one compelled enough to bring their work where art is being made today? And what about the majority of Egyptian artists who have nothing to do with street art? Why haven’t they been empowered as representatives of a culture that needs to soften its politicization?” (Crescenzi, 2013)

Crescenzi goes on to address the absence in 2013 of Egyptian artists at two significant events in the region: Art Dubai and the Sharjah Biennial (at least one Egyptian artist is represented in the 2015 edition of the Biennial). Crescenzi raises legitimate and important questions about the true impact of the attention received by the street art of the revolution, questions which suggest that the potentially positive aspects of the Banksy effect on Egyptian street and Egyptian contemporary art more generally have not been fully realized.

4. The Djerbahood Project

The small Tunisian island of Djerba is a quiet place known for its beach resorts. Although numbers of tourists pass through those resorts each year, few travel to any other destinations on the island, limiting the benefit that tourist spending brings to the community. That may be changing in the small town of Er-Riadh, previously known primarily for housing the oldest synagogue in Africa, but now receiving international attention as an open-air street art museum featuring works by 150 international artists. The project, called Djerbahood, was initiated by Mehdi Ben Cheikh, and completed over the summer of 2014. The French-Tunisian Ben Cheikh is the founder of Galerie Itinerrance in Paris, a gallery focused on street art. According to Ben Cheikh “What I would like to do is talk about the Arab world in a different way, a positive way” and the Djerbahood project helps to foster that conversation. (Stone, Bubriski, 2015) The artists

whose work is included in the project range from the well-known to emerging talent. Some, such as the French-Tunisian artist El Seed, whose calligraphic works have been shown throughout the Middle East, are familiar with the region; others came from locations as diverse as Europe, Central and South America, and the United States and adapted their usual styles to fit the architecture and character of Er-Riadh. Several residents of the village have cited the opportunity to meet and interact with artists from such diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds as a benefit of the project. (Hossenally, 2014)

The Banksy effect is at play in the Djerbahood project in several ways, beginning with the existence of a gallery devoted to street art that could summon the financial resources and permissions needed to launch such a large-scale art project. The scope of the Djerbahood project is closer to that of an international art fair or biennial than to a typical exhibition of street art. Certainly the particular economic and cultural conditions of Er-Riadh contributed to the success of the project but Ben Cheikh also needed to obtain financial support from private sources for the project, which does not generate any revenue from merchandising and which financially supported the participation of at least some of the artists. To do this requires an acceptance of street art as a legitimate means of artistic expression—not as graffiti or vandalism—that arguably did not exist before Banksy primed the international art community for the support of this genre. The support given by El Seed to the project was also of great importance. In terms of critical acclaim and exhibition opportunities the Tunisian street artist might be considered the Banksy of the MENA region. His work has been commissioned in his native Tunisia as well as in the United Arab Emirates and beyond the Middle East in locations as diverse as Brazil and Paris. He credits the events of the 2011 Jasmine revolution in Tunisia with opening the space for he and other street artists to create work in that country, despite the fact that graffiti is still officially considered a crime by the government.

Despite the positive hype surrounding the Djerbahood project, a critical question remains. Writer Christine Petre has posed this on the website middleeasteye.net: “Can an open-air graffiti museum lure tourists back to Tunisia?” (Petre, 2015) While many articles commenting on the project either claim or suggest that it will, actual statistics are hard to come by. The March 2015 attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis, in which 17 tourists were killed, is likely to further dampen an already shaky tourist trade. Meanwhile, Djerbahood remains a young project with great potential; ideally, the organizer, artists and village will be able to capitalize on a continuing international interest in street art to eventually reap the rewards of this substantial effort.

Conclusion

In the past several years, the practice of street art in the MENA region has emerged as an important social, political and cultural tool and means of public expression. While the diverse circumstances faced by countries in this region make it impossible to identify a single style or function for street art in the Middle East and North Africa, there are themes that are shared across countries. In addition to the use of street art for political expression both during and after the 2011 revolutions, the genre has evolved for many cities and countries into a means to generate and sustain a tourist economy and to establish a presence in the international art community. The Banksy effect, with its positive and negative connotations, is one useful construct through which to view and analyze the development of a street art culture in the

MENA region. The rising acceptance and popularity of street art will likely result in increased attention and some commercial success for artists in a region that is still often marginalized in the global art market. However, the attention of that market comes with its own risks and one of those is the possible co-opting of street art for commercial and touristic purposes, representing a departure from its intensely political and emotional origins. While the future for street art in the MENA region remains unclear in some respects, there is no doubt that the work of established and emerging street artists will form a critical element of contemporary art in the region for years to come.

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