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## Public Space, Street Art and Communication in the Arab Uprisings

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## Public Space, Street Art and Communication in the Arab Uprisings

### Disciplines

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movements demands more detailed analysis of social, political, regional, and cultural dynamics. This said, the approach that informs this analysis allows us to consider different spaces and tactics of action and various forms of enacting and constructing identifications that speak to totalizing discourses about the self and the collective. Further analysis is needed to provide more grounded and critical theorization of the role of digital media platforms in activism and whether, or how, these platforms demand particular representational forms, to what extent they are coded within their own epistemological norms, and how they employ their own modes of address.

## PUBLIC SPACE, STREET ART, AND COMMUNICATION IN THE ARAB UPRISINGS

*Marwan M. Kraidy*

Most analyses of communication processes during the Arab uprisings have focused on social media as technological platforms at the expense of other older, or less attention-grabbing modes of communication such as public space. But as de Souza and Lipietz note in a journal forum on "The "Arab Spring" and the City," the Arab uprisings remind us that prophecies about the end of space as an important factor under conditions of globalization are exaggerated.<sup>1</sup> Going even further, Ahmed Kanna argues, following the famed French theorist of space Henri Lefebvre, that "Egyptians and Tunisians ... changed their lives largely by changing space."<sup>2</sup> Though we do not have to supplant the unfortunate technology-determinism endemic in some analyses of the Arab uprisings with an equally misguided space-determinism, evidence supports the argument that public space played a significant political and communicative role in the popular rebellions that began in Tunisia in December 2010.

This chapter offers preliminary considerations regarding the connections between public space and communication in the Arab uprisings. Public space

is understood to mean physical space that can be used, contested, and controlled by humans, and has therefore a narrower scope than 'public sphere.' Historically, in Arab and Muslim societies, 'the mosque was the premier public space in the Islamic city, the equivalent of the agora in the ancient Greek city and the public square in the medieval Western city.'<sup>3</sup> As Arab cities modernized, new urban growth that failed to connect seamlessly with historic city centers created what Nasser Rabbat called 'two poorly reconciled and heavily hybridized halves: a pseudomodern and a faux-traditional one.'<sup>4</sup> By the late nineteenth century, old, pre-modern hippodromes, which were already functioning as central squares, were joined by a new open space, the *maydan*, which, 'although sometimes doubled as an open-air marketplace or was even appropriated by the populace for public protest ... was always the privileged space of the rulers and was never considered a civic space, one that is related to the city and its citizens.'<sup>5</sup>

In the twentieth century, as nationalist movements rose against colonial masters, these spaces acquired new political meanings, and once these *maydans* had witnessed repression of nationalists, they assumed deep symbolic resonance and entered national collective memories. Revealingly, in Aden, Algiers, Beirut, and Damascus, these became known as *sabat* or *maydan al-shuhada*, or martyrs' squares. As postcolonial Arab countries entered half a century of dictatorships, both old (mosques) and new (squares) public spaces were 'denied their civic function,' though 'abrupt and violent revolts' occasionally used these spaces, meeting immediate and brutal state repression, as with the 1977 bread riots in Egypt, the 1982 uprising in Syria, and the 2000 Shi'i rebellion in Southern Iraq.<sup>6</sup> Throughout Arab history, then, public space has had important social and political dimensions.

Public spaces played a significant, and so far understudied, role in the Arab rebellions. The uprisings witnessed mosques and *maydans* working together, even if new regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, for example, appeared, for a short period dominated by Islamists, to represent the mosque taking primacy over the *maydan*. But beyond this consideration, public space is important for understanding media and communication in current revolutionary times because of the complex ways in which public space relates to communication: as a space of collective communication, a canvass for political expression, a field of embodied action, and a potent rallying symbol.

On a first level, public space has since the onset of urban civilization functioned as a space of expression for social and political opinion, which often entailed popular demonstrations and, in extreme cases, insurgent occupation

of public space. Thus, public space often acts as a space of communication and political action for multitudes. On a second level, public space acts as a surface for political communication in the form of banners, graffiti, and murals. The Arab uprisings witnessed an explosion of political graffiti that, from Benghazi to Bahrain, represented the hopes and aspirations of popular demonstrators. As possibly the oldest medium of communication, adorning walls is a low-tech, high-impact instrument of communication. In this scenario, public space is a canvass for political expression.

On a third level, public space is a field of action for human bodies. The human body, at least since the French Revolution, has been a key metaphor, prism, and instrument of revolutionary political communication. Not only is it really the 'meta-medium' that operates all other media, it is also the nexus of thought and action, of repression and resistance, and, as such, it is important to understanding the communicative role of the body in public space. Here, public space is the field of action of politicized, communicating bodies. On a fourth level, public space itself becomes rich with symbolic potency. In some countries gripped by rebellion, public spaces became symbolic of the struggle for freedom from dictatorship—think of the evocative power of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis, or the Pearl Roundabout in Manama. Here, iconic spaces become powerful tools of political communication and mobilization.

Our understanding of the communicative functions of public space cannot be complete without adequate consideration of a fifth important dimension: intersecting these four communicative domains of public space is the virtual space afforded by the internet—websites, blogs, Facebook pages, tweets, and photographic repositories—which connected material spaces together, transmitting messages across distances and between cities that then reappeared in material public spaces. The internet also served as a space of circulation and refuge for many of the artforms and messages when incumbent governments regained control of material public space. The way in which Pearl Roundabout proliferated in images and symbols after being destroyed by Bahraini authorities attempting to efface the memory of the protests being a case in point, to be discussed at length in a later section. These connections between different sites were perhaps best captured by Eric Kit-wai Ma under the rubric of 'trans-local spatiality,'<sup>7</sup> where 'spaces, with distinct subcultural boundaries and internal cohesiveness, can be integrated translocally and trans-spatially within and beyond national boundaries.'<sup>8</sup>

The remainder of this chapter explores the four ways mentioned in the preceding text in which public space acted as an avenue, facilitator, or tool of

communication in the Arab uprisings. The analysis also entails a discussion of how cyberspace intersects and expands public space. For analytical purposes, this chapter focuses on selected cases that are representative of broader trends in public space and communication in the Arab uprisings. The first section, which is mostly theoretical, discusses communication and political action in public space. The second section compares and contrasts the different kinds of revolutionary graffiti that emerged in Tunisia and Egypt, on the one hand, and in Syria, on the other. The third section compares and contrasts bodies in public space and cyberspace, paying particular attention to the cases of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and Aliaa al-Mahdy in Egypt, while the fourth and concluding section focuses on Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain as an illustrative case-study of how public spaces can themselves become potent symbols.

*Public Space as a Space of Communication and Collective Action*

Control of public space is perhaps the preeminent emblem of power in the modern era, because it is what Hannah Arendt calls 'the space of appearance,' a pre-institutional platform of political speech and action.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, control over urban streets and squares gives political actors sway over local movements of people and goods in cities. Those who exercise dominance over local space gain a degree of power as a result; they are also able to project power to national populations living beyond capital cities and central squares, who 'witness' political events on their television and other media screens. Some processes by which power was exercised in pre-modern times were invisible, represented, for example, in the process by which the College of Cardinals selected popes: the cardinals meet behind closed doors, engage in opaque deliberations, and then in secret voting, while people wait outside for smoke to waft out of the chimney—white in the case of a successful vote, black if no pope was selected. In contrast, as the British sociologist John Thompson argued, in modernity the visibility of power is essential to its exercise:

In this new world of mediated visibility, the making visible of actions and events is not just the outcome of leakage in systems of communication and information flow that are increasingly difficult to control: it is also an explicit strategy of individuals who know very well that mediated visibility can be a weapon in the struggle they wage.<sup>10</sup>

But this mediated visibility is a double-edged sword, making power holders simultaneously more powerful and more vulnerable to resistance and subversion generated by 'the uncontrollable nature of mediated visibility.'<sup>11</sup> In such an environment, control of public space makes the power of the ruler visible,

and therefore loss of control makes loss of power visible as well. Here, the communicative dimension of public space can be fully grasped only when we 'situate public space vis-à-vis other technologies in a media-saturated Arab public sphere, from television to mobile telephony. Elsewhere, I developed the notion of hypermedia space as a space of signification created by the interconnections between various media technologies, such as the internet, mobile telephony, and television, made possible by digitization and media convergence, and activated by political actors.'<sup>12</sup>

Public space is also a medium in the sense that it is integrated in the media environment, especially visual media. It is with that issue in mind that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that popular demonstrations—the most mundane act of occupying public space, however temporarily—are in effect staged primarily for television: 'one has increasingly to produce demonstrations for television, meaning demonstrations that are able to attract the interest of television workers and their categories of perception that, relayed and amplified by them, will acquire their full efficiency.'<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu's remark reflects today's conventional wisdom among many activists that, as an arena of political and social communication, public space gains its significance to a large degree through its amplification by visual media, chiefly television.

It would not be controversial to argue that the mass of human bodies in Tahrir Square was witnessed by the majority of Egyptians, who live farther away than the line of sight from the square, via television, and to a lesser degree via other media screens, from laptop computers to smart phones. In this case, then, public space operates as a media platform among multiple others in hypermedia space. Indeed, Egyptian demonstrators in 2011 developed creative tactics to attract and hold the attention of local and international media outlets, ranging from pots and pans worn on their heads as grotesque looking but nonetheless effective protection against projectiles, to English-language slogans and jokes, to mass body movements.<sup>14</sup> Tawil-Souri argues that media globalization had already transformed the connection between media and public space in Egypt by the onset of the revolution, resulting in what she called 'a shifting spatiality' in which,

the conjuncture of media and mediated events ends up "collapsing" the spatial reach of the regime. The collapse is both metaphoric and material, involving political weakening, changing economic flows, and a shifting geographic manifestation of power.<sup>15</sup>

One of these shifts, the loss of control of geographic space by states, enables public space to operate as a platform for political communication, to be analyzed in the next section.



ment emerged as a relentless opponent the Tunisian creative community, graffiti artists reacted to the rise of the Salafis as a force in Tunisia's sociopolitical life. In one famous incident, leading graffitist eL-Seed painted large-scale graffiti, mostly Qur'anic style inscriptions which he labeled 'calligraffiti,' on the minaret of the Jara mosque in Gabès, one of the tallest in Tunisia. A thirty-one year old Tunisian who grew up in France and learned graffiti there, eL-Seed claimed that he was 'reacting to clashes between hardline Islamist Salafists and artists at an art fair in Tunis in June that showed works the Salafists believed were insulting to Islam.'<sup>24</sup> His view was that both groups were intolerant, and, against that backdrop, he defined his act as an attempt to bring both worlds together.

Just as the 1910–1920 Mexican Revolution spawned one of the world's most distinguished muralist traditions, the Arab uprisings may have long-lasting ramifications for Arab art. This can be glimpsed in Tunisia, where the uprising appears to have shifted the locus of the art scene from the bourgeois art of the museum and the plutocracy's salons, to the *art engagé* of public space. 'The revolution allowed the development of other forms of street art (different from vandal art) and other marketing opportunities. Sk One now sells paintings, draws on trainers, and designs logos. He hopes that the new government will create spaces dedicated to "ornamental" graffiti in order to show what he can do freely and legally.'<sup>25</sup> In this sense, revolutionary public space acts as an incubator of aesthetic and stylistic innovation and experimentation, the impact of which may outlast the Arab uprisings.

In contrast to the relatively bloodless popular rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt, the violent nature of the Syrian uprising, in combination with the porous Lebanese–Syrian border and the fact that Beirut became a de facto refuge for hundreds, if not thousands, of Syrian activists, meant that Beirut walls were blanketed with Syrian revolutionary graffiti. Analytically, then, Beirut can be approached as a proxy for Damascus that enabled the collection and analysis of a wide gamut of political expressions on actual city walls without incurring the significant safety risk inherent in field research in Damascus.

The protracted violence of the Syrian uprising as it devolved into a civil war may explain why stencil graffiti appear to be the dominant type of graffiti coming out of Syria, as opposed to free-style and muralist graffiti spawned by the Egyptian and Tunisian rebellions. Free-style graffiti consists of writing and painting over a surface, and Arab free-style typically consists of words or brief sentences of stylized Arabic font with color under- or overtones. Murals, like the ones on Mohamed Mahmoud street in Cairo, are much larger and are

typically dominated by visuals and colors, as opposed to text. In contrast, stencil graffiti consists of spraying paint over a pre-cut frame—the stencil—typically made of cardboard.

The stencil format is particularly well-suited to revolutionary activism because it enables the efficient production and dissemination of speedy political messages. Because they are physically small, with most stencils ranging from half the size of a regular sheet of A4 printer paper to double that size, stencils frame brief, hard-hitting political messages. They typically include a well-known visual element, which could be a geometric shape, the face of a leader, or a cutout of an animal, with a textual commentary. Because of this simplicity relative to the far more complex murals, stencils can be painted with high levels of speed, which is an added advantage in a situation where authorities may be on the look-out. Activists can appear, spray a stencil, and disappear within minutes. Because stencils are physically contained within a geometric, typically rectangular, frame, they can be reproduced rather easily. In fact, stencil designers have often uploaded their creation online, offering them to activists throughout the Middle East, and beyond, who print the designs, recreate the stencil, and reproduce it on the walls of their city. Because of the attributes of simplicity, speed, and circulation, stencils have the ability to encapsulate important issues and communicate them broadly in public space.

We can consider a few stencils of the Syrian revolution; for example, a series of stencils that appeared on Beirut walls in the spring of 2011. These were slightly larger than an A4 sheet of paper, and were typically sprayed in black or dark blue ink on light colored walls. One of them issues a tongue-in-cheek apology written in Arabic. The message message framed by a pyramid reads: 'Apologies for the bother; we are building a country.' This graffiti addresses people who may be sitting on the fence as far as their political stance on the Syrian revolution is concerned, or who may be annoyed by demonstrations and the disruption of their business (these were the early days of the Syrian uprising, before it turned into a bloody civil war with an escalating body count). The visual motif of the pyramid emphasized the notion of 'building' a country on solid foundations. Several other stencils featured the customary fist raised by revolutionaries, projecting strength and decisiveness. One of the most widely circulated stencils throughout the Arab uprisings was 'Be with the Revolution,' an exhortation to take sides in a life-and-death struggle. What they lose in complexity, stencils make up for with their brief, hard-hitting messages.

In sum, revolutionary public space has hosted a wide array of revolutionary street art, from large, arresting murals, to smaller stencils with hard-hitting

political messages. In an Arab world having gone through a decade of mushrooming 'media cities' in Dubai, Amman, Cairo, and elsewhere, the Arab uprisings made it clear that cities themselves could act as media.<sup>26</sup> As the following section demonstrates, public space and cyberspace can also act as media for bodies communicating political messages.

*Public Space as the Field of Action for Politicized, Communicating Bodies*

Existing research on the French Revolution of 1789 and the Egyptian Revolution of 1919 reveals that the human body performed a central role in revolutionary representation of self and other in public spaces.<sup>27</sup> Politicized bodies haunt public space and cyberspace in the Arab uprisings. Indeed, when Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated to protest repression and marginalization in Tunisia; when Aliaa al-Mahdy posted nude pictures and transgressive text on her 'A Rebel's Diary' blog in Egypt;<sup>28</sup> and when peaceful Syrian protestors demonstrated bare-chested to prove they were not concealing weapons, they all used their bodies in public space in brazenly political behavior and communication that broke social taboos and transgressed political red lines, imbuing public space with political meanings.

Scholars of alternative media remind us that the 'story of radical media ... is all too often one of survival ... in the face of vehemently, sometimes murderously hostile authority.'<sup>29</sup> Under life-threatening conditions such as those in revolutionary Egypt and Tunisia, and especially in Bahrain and Syria—the latter being one of the most dangerous places on the planet to be a political activist—insurgents use the most basic media to openly defy deadly foes. In such situations of existential threat and resource scarcity, the human body, acting in public space or cyberspace, is the basic tool of political contestation.

Considering communication during the Arab uprisings through the prism of politicized bodies acting in space heuristically enables a full consideration of the twofold articulation of, first, public space with cyberspace, and, second and in parallel fashion, of the 'material' domain of the rough-and-tumble of street politics with the 'discursive' realm of symbols, ideology, and meaning. From this perspective, a consideration of bodies in public space compels us to take some distance from media-centric narratives of the uprisings. First, as I argue in *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*, the body is the master operator of all technologies, the primary tool of communication aiming towards revolutionary change.<sup>30</sup> Second, understandings of the body are indeed constructed through discourse, but the body is also an

instrument for action that is not always necessarily captured by discourse, and even when such a capture occurs, it is rarely complete. Even after decades of neoliberalism, authoritarianism, corruption, and political dependence on the United States, Egypt and Tunisia witnessed citizens putting their bodies in harm's way for political gain. Bodies-as-subjects self-immolated, posed naked, sprayed graffiti, enacted street theater, confronted police and regime goons, and occupied urban squares and boulevards. They were women and men who challenged prevailing regimes of truth and power, moving their bodies from a condition of passive dissatisfaction to a posture of active resistance. In sum, human bodies in a revolutionary context perform politico-communicative tasks via visibility, movement, and/or action in public space.

In the late morning of 17 December 2010, a young Tunisian vegetable and fruit vendor walked to the front of the local government office in the town of Sidi Bouzid, drenched himself with paint thinner, and set himself ablaze. Though heavily burned, Mohamed Bouazizi survived his self-immolation, and died in his hospital bed eighteen days later. Before he died, a photograph of an unrecognizable Bouazizi in his hospital bed, with Tunisia's erstwhile dictator lording over him in a clearly insincere show of concern, made the rounds of international media. Ben Ali's act of contrived contrition was forced upon him by the fact that Mohamed Bouazizi not only set himself on fire, but set into motion the Tunisian uprising, and, in turn, the Arab uprisings. By appearing at Bouazizi's bedside, the dictator was trying to placate his rebellious people, as well as exert power over a debilitated body. In essence, Bouazizi's action forced a dictator into a highly choreographed political and communicative recognition that Bouazizi's action had serious repercussions for the regime's governance ability.

Self-immolation in public space is a fundamentally communicative act that operates on multiple registers. First, self-immolation is a powerful means of communication. As Michelle Murray Yang argues, 'self-immolation is a powerful rhetorical act that utilizes self-inflicted violence as a means of performing a visual embodiment of violence done by an "other."<sup>31</sup> Second, as Michael Biggs argues, there is an implicit communicative bargain inherent to self-immolation, where persons engaging in this ultimate act depend 'on the public's understanding of their obligation to respond.'<sup>32</sup> In other words, self-immolation is a performance executed for an audience. Third, and as a result of the second point, self-immolation is designed less to annihilate one body and more to exhort other bodies into political action. In her analysis of self-immolation in the contexts of the Vietnam and Iraq wars, Yang echoes this



point, writing that 'instead of opening potential sites for suspension and intervention, images of the dead can be positioned to create rhetorical spaces for potential agency and action through asking the "what now?" question.'<sup>33</sup>

If a state's sovereign power is ultimately about the ability to deploy violence and make life or death decisions about the people living within the confine of that sovereignty, then Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in front of a government building in Sidi Bouzid is a direct challenge to sovereign power enacted by a human body in public space. As Jacob Uzzell argues, via Michel Foucault, 'burning one's own body alive is a means of rejecting the bio-political domination by the sovereign, which is achieved through the discipline of the body.'<sup>34</sup> Connected to this, the fact that Bouazizi's photograph in his hospital bed with Ben Ali visiting became an iconic representation of the event vindicates the ability of Bouazizi's body to compel Ben Ali's body to come to the hospital—what Uzzell, after Achille Mbembe, described as Bouazizi's 'necropolitical power,' i.e. the ability of his body, through death, to compel political action by other bodies.<sup>35</sup>

Bouazizi's act may not have had any impact beyond his immediate entourage were it not for the swift dissemination of narratives and photographs about his action, including his picture with Ben Ali in the hospital and Bouazizi's portrait that adorned signs and banners in subsequent Tunisian demonstrations. His picture with Ben Ali features Bouazizi in the foreground, totally wrapped in gauze with the exception of his mouth, his head at the bottom right of the photograph, with Ben Ali and two other officials standing in the top left corner, surrounded by four doctors and nurses. It was as if Bouazizi was bearing the pain of the entire Tunisian population, his charred body authenticating their suffering under the dictator. The bandages accentuate Bouazizi's suffering by reflecting the radical medical care that he needed and also by suggesting that his burns would be too shocking if witnessed uncovered. The picture's heavy circulation across various media platforms worldwide reinforced its status as iconic of the foundational moment of the Tunisian rebellion and the ensuing series of uprisings.

If Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation demonstrates how an embodied political statement in public space reverberates translocally across various media, public spaces, and indeed countries, Aliaa al-Mahdy's posting naked pictures of herself on a blog proves that the reverse is also true: bodily speech-act can migrate from cyberspace to have real-life consequences by triggering heated debates, affecting political events, and revealing latent red lines in social norms and political ideologies in the supposedly non-ideological Arab uprisings.

In October 2011, ten months and one week after Bouazizi's self-immolation, the blog *mudhakkarat tha'era* (diaries of a rebel) appeared online, featuring the photograph of a young woman, facing the camera, naked, wearing only stockings, red shoes, and a red flower in her hair, with her right leg resting on a stool, revealing her pubic area. The caption 'Nude Art' topped the photograph but underneath is a paragraph that purports to reveal the blogger's intention:

Put on trial the artists' models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity, then undress and stand before a mirror and burn your bodies that you despise to forever rid yourselves of your sexual hangups before you direct your humiliation and chauvinism and dare to try to deny me my freedom of expression.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to another photo of the woman, there is one of a man sitting naked on a wooden chair, left arm under the chin à la Rodin's *Thinker*, holding an acoustic guitar, and on the right side of the screen, we see the same woman in a brown sweater and matching plaid skirt, a book bag on her left shoulder, arms clasped, standing under a sign that reads 'Waiting for Freedom Square.' Below it is a sign of women's empowerment, the female symbol with a naked woman's bust and raised fist. Underneath, still in the banner, is an Egyptian flag, with the usual red band at the top and black band at the bottom. The middle white band, however, is filled with eighteen symbols for as many religious beliefs, with the caption *al-'elmaniyya beya al-hall*, 'secularism is the solution,' a counterpoint to the Muslim Brotherhood's oft-repeated motto, *al-islam huwa al-hall*, or 'Islam is the solution.'<sup>37</sup>

Predictably, Aliaa's provocative act led to an uproar, with various actors in Egypt's post-Mubarak, pre-election political scene rushing to score political points off her back, some going as far as calling for capital punishment in the name of religion. The left-leaning chattering classes interpreted al-Mahdy's action as a strategic blunder of monumental proportions—one that would surely give momentum to the Muslim Brothers' electoral drive. Some also invoked prevailing social values against seeing unclothed bodies.<sup>38</sup> One tacit assumption in some critiques was the notion that unveiling or exposing the human body in public space is an anathema to Egyptian society. As many critics have argued, the female body has a long history of being sexualized in the Arab world and particularly in Egypt. Egyptian magazines in the first half of the twentieth-century did not shy away from showing female bodies suggestively: as early as 1926 in the Egyptian magazine *al-Fukaha*, for example, 'sexy women sold the magazine.'<sup>39</sup> In the past few years, Cairene public space has become a frightening place for women, as Cairo became notorious for rampant sexual harassment. As Maya Mikdashi argued:

The idea that female bodies are sacrosanct, and that somehow they are "protected" from overt sexualization in Egypt is false. Contrary to what many of Aliaa's detractors and what many commentators on the Arab world have said, female bodies have long been the site of struggle, interrogation, harassment, and commodification throughout the region. In particular, Cairo is famous for being the premiere public ass-pinching, breast-grabbing, and body-rubbing capital of the Arab world. The fact is that a woman (unveiled or not) cannot walk down a crowded Cairene street or take a public bus without expecting, and thus constantly guarding herself against, sexual harassment.<sup>40</sup>

Against that backdrop, Aliaa al-Mahdy's action can be understood as a reclamation, however provocative and sensationalistic, of public space via cyberspace. Aliaa's invocation on her blog of 'Freedom Square,' a fictive public space that she claims to be awaiting, with photos of clenched fists demanding political rights, provides additional evidence that public space is a fundamental issue in al-Mahdy's speech act. If, as Nilüfer Göle argues, in Muslim societies 'women's corporal visibility and citizenship rights constitute the political stakes around which the public sphere is defined,'<sup>41</sup> then Aliaa's action has high stakes indeed. Though the female body clearly takes center stage in the 'nude blogger affair,' the issue in fact invites us to consider human bodies—not only women's—as instruments of political contestation in public space.

Aliaa's jolt into Egyptian public discourse can be understood as an example of what I elsewhere called a performative-contentious model of the public sphere, one where the gendered human body is at once a medium of expression and a symbolic battlefield.<sup>42</sup> By accounting for modalities of public communication outside of the historically normative, elitist, masculine, cerebral, and deliberative norms of public discourse, this is a more inclusive model of the public sphere. Against that model, *bien pensant* journalists tend to invoke an ideal-typical Habermasian rationalist-deliberative ideal of the public sphere, as this *al-Abram* journalist does when he addresses Aliaa, rather patronizingly:

we disagree with the style of presenting this thought. A leader of rebellious thought against society's view of women is Nawal al-Sa'dawy but she said that she was "against veiling women and also against laying women bare; I am in favor of respecting woman as a rational being that can neither be veiled nor laid bare."<sup>43</sup>

Feminists like al-Sa'dawy, in this reading, are acceptable because they abide by the rules of participation in public space via reasoned, disciplined, and cerebral speech. In contrast, Aliaa al-Mahdy's radical speech-act falls outside of the spectrum of acceptable participation, barging in public space through

cyberspace, because it uses, what the communication theorist John Durham Peters reminds us, 'the mother of all media, the body.'<sup>44</sup>

Communicating politically through one's body, rather than through 'safer' media, reflects a radically superior commitment to one's cause because putting one's body in harm's way reflects far higher stakes. One columnist in the pan-Arab daily newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi* made an explicit connection between Aliaa's act and the more overtly political uses of the body in the Arab uprisings when he wrote:

Aliaa, by the simple fact of displaying her nudity, is trying in her bold way to raise questions that embarrass society in its most embarrassing locus, which is the example of youths that direct their bare chests to bullets, and leaving their bodies exposed does not only receive bullets from the government alone but also from society. This is an act that to many may appear like madness, but in madness, sometimes, there is a lot, a lot of reason.<sup>45</sup>

In the preceding text, the author connects Aliaa's act to treacherous public spaces of the Arab uprisings, where activists of all stripes risk injury or death. Taking into account that 'studying how words and bodies interact in and with place allows us to see social movement rhetoric from a new perspective,'<sup>46</sup> the public bodily acts of Mohamed Bouazizi and Aliaa al-Mahdy, in which bodies, words, and spaces interact, offer us a refreshing vista on public space not only as a canvas for political expression, but as a field of high-stake action for rebellious bodies.

### *Iconic Public Spaces as Symbols of Political Struggles*

In some instances, public spaces assume a symbolic importance disproportionate to their actual material scale. Martyrs' Square in Beirut, for example, is hallowed ground in Lebanese memory as the space where a group of nationalist politicians, intellectuals, and journalists were hung by Ottoman authorities in 1916. This is one of the reasons why some Lebanese were aghast when al-Hariri transformed the square by building a monumental mosque and keeping the center of the square as a gigantic empty lot that occasionally functions as parking space. The square was re-imbued with symbolic capital during the 2005 Independence *Intifada*, when hundreds of thousands of Lebanese demonstrated in the square against Syrian hegemony over their country.

Some public spaces' symbolic resonance reaches so deep that these public spaces become symbols representing entire political struggles. Perhaps no public space in Arab uprising countries has proven as iconic as Pearl Round-

about in Manama, Bahrain, the central gathering space for thousands of Bahrainis in their ill-fated uprising against the rule of the Al-Khalifa. As Amal Khalaf makes it clear, this symbolic resonance essentially turned Pearl Roundabout into Pearl Square, achieving the impossible task, albeit symbolically, of squaring the circle. After it was razed to the ground by security forces in order to deprive demonstrators of vital space, the roundabout, affectionately known as Lulu (Pearl), had 'many afterlives.'<sup>47</sup> In Khalaf's own words:

In its death, the Pearl Roundabout took on a life of its own, becoming the symbol of a protest movement; the star of tribute videos and video games, the logo for Internet TV channels and the subject of contested claims, rebuttals and comments wars. These manifestations of the roundabout—multifaceted, changing and often contradictory—produce a haunting rhetorical effect, instigating debates fuelled by images of past and on-going violence in Bahrain's history. In its afterlife, Lulu continues to act stubbornly in resistance to the state, despite the government's attempts ... Today, Lulu is a powerful symbol for thousands of people recasting their ideals in the monument's image: a "public space," or *midan*—Arabic for civic square; one that no longer exists as a physical "thing," but rather, lives on as an image-memory.<sup>48</sup>

An already symbolically important public space clearly gains in symbolic significance once it is physically obliterated. Here, the 'alternative' cyberspace contributes greatly to the iconic survival, symbolic amplification, and translocal circulation of the symbol. Uploaded online by Bahraini activists, stencils of Pearl Roundabout were printed out by activists in other Arab capitals, like Beirut, who in an act of transnational solidarity with their Bahraini brethren, and devastated by the destruction of their gathering space, sprayed the stencil on the walls of Arab capitals. Khalaf concludes:

As the Bahraini uprising continues, two years after the Pearl Roundabout was violently erased, Lulu has taken on a mythical status. And as we circle the roundabout like lost satellites, we bear witness to the multiple manifestations of this politically-charged monument both as a physical, exploding object, and as an explosion of digital files.<sup>49</sup>

The survival of a destroyed cement structure in the form of digital bits testifies to how destruction at the hand of the government, a self-harming action since it annihilated a national symbol, in effect amplified the symbolic potency of a public space once thriving with political activity. Even before the regime destroyed the roundabout, Bahraini rebels had shown how 'social movements have ... relied on the rhetoric of places themselves by holding protest events in particularly meaningful places.'<sup>50</sup> Not content to destroy the monument itself, Bahraini authorities proceeded to cleanse the Bahraini public sphere from any representation of Pearl Roundabout, going as far as taking

all 50 *fiils* coins, which feature the roundabout, out of circulation, in addition to pulling out of the market all postcards and tourist souvenirs featuring the pearl. With each action to make the roundabout disappear, it proliferates further in digital form, gaining symbolic potency.

The destruction of a physical public space paradoxically made that public space an eternal symbol of the Bahraini uprising, a spectacular embodiment of what Danielle Endres and Samantha Sendra-Cook called 'space as rhetoric.'<sup>51</sup> The art critic W. J. T. Mitchell argues that the trope of occupation,

the figure of *occupation*, is ... the verbal-visual image that unites the revolutionary movements from the Arab Spring to Occupy Wall Street. OWS was inspired, not by the Arab Spring's objective of overturning dictatorships and establishing democratic regimes, but by its strategic deployment of the rhetoric of space and the tactics of occupation.<sup>52</sup>

Clearly, public space itself, and representations of it, can become highly charged symbolically, resonating with people engaged in political struggle not merely as a platform for political communication, but as a rich and resonant message in its own right.

### Conclusion

This chapter has explored four ways in which public space articulates political communication in revolutionary times: as a space for political action and communication, as a canvas for political expression, as a field of action for politicized bodies, and as a symbol of political struggle. These four registers are intersected by a fifth dimension—cyberspace—which interacts dynamically with public space. Indeed, as we saw in the cases of Mohamed Bouazizi, Aliaa al-Mahdy, and Pearl Roundabout, public space and cyberspace are at once mutually reinforcing and reciprocally constraining. By highlighting these dynamics, this chapter hopefully puts forth a convincing case for the importance of public space and communication in the Arab uprisings.

The receptivity of public space to various kinds of communication bears upon the broader issue of modernity. In developing his cultural theory of modernity, the philosopher Charles Taylor writes that modernity

involves the coming to be of new kinds of public space, which cannot be accounted for in terms of changes in explicit views, either of factual belief or normative principle. Rather, the transition involves to some extent the definition of new possible spaces hitherto outside the repertory of our forebears and beyond the limits of their social imaginary.<sup>53</sup>

From this perspective, a focus on public space enables an analysis of the Arab uprisings as recent episodes in the longstanding battle for the elaboration of Arab modernity, a historically resonant and continuously salient social and political issue in Arab public discourse.<sup>54</sup>

Following this line of argument gives us some background to understand the role of the body in the uprisings—a public space issue *par excellence*. After all, the controversy around Aliaa al-Mahdy (and subsequent uproar about Amina Tyler and other nude Arab women activists) stems not from her posing naked, but from her displaying her naked body in public, via cyberspace. The fact that most condemnations of her action focused on her naked body, and not on her strong political message, reveals the importance of sexuality in the Arab public sphere, which in turn leads us back to the convoluted elaboration of Arab modernity. Indeed, sexually suggestive bodies have become visible online, on television, in magazines, and in outdoor advertising in the Arab world, triggering reactions that vary from the merely judgmental to the repressive. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault claims in his classic *The History of Sexuality*, sexual repression in fact re-asserts the centrality of sexuality in modernity: ‘what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*.’<sup>55</sup> Following this line of argument, one can conclude that scandals like Aliaa al-Mahdy are in fact symptomatic of an internally contested Egyptian/Arab modernity, and not, as some commentators argued, revealing of resistance to ‘modernity’ under the banner of ‘tradition.’ The polemic reflects modernity’s biopolitical imperative—in the Arab world and elsewhere, bodies, especially but not exclusively women’s, must be constantly managed, governed, and controlled.

This brings us back full circle to how the two quintessential Arab public spaces, the mosque and the *maydan*, relate to each other and to modernity. In Rabbat’s words, the two spaces together grapple with ‘the kind of synthesis that modern Arab culture has been searching for for some time: how to reconcile a heritage overloaded with strong notions of identity and particularity with a modernity that is essential for contemporary life, but is nonetheless imported, sometimes imposed, and allegedly manipulated in ways detrimental to indigenous self-expression.’<sup>56</sup> Public space communication in the Arab uprisings entailed indigenous activists putting forth locally resonant issues and struggling to define these issues for themselves, their political opponents, and the population at large. One of the most important ramifications of public space is the extent to which the Arab uprisings have remained a collective

revolutionary undertaking, for even as media institutions, mostly foreign but some domestic, tried to put heroic faces on the uprisings—think of Wael Ghonim—the rebellions have remained collective and popular. As a result, in Mitchell’s words, ‘the iconic moments, the images that promise to become monuments, of the global revolution of 2011 are not those of *face* but of *space*; not figures, but the negative space or ground against which a figure appears.’<sup>57</sup>

As of this writing, Arab countries are convulsing in increasingly violent conflicts, from the raging civil war in Syria to the Saudi aerial bombing of Yemen. In several capitals of the Arab uprisings, where the forces of counter-revolution now have the upper hand, public space and its use continue to be a bone of contention. Increasingly, whether in Bahrain, Egypt, or Syria, the simple act of walking in groups in public space is met with swift repression. The Egyptian government instated an anti-demonstration law to use as a repressive legal tool to remain in control of public space, and arrested and imposed harsh prison sentences on activists who dared participate in demonstrations. One of them, the activist Sanaa Seif, has been immortalized in murals by the Luxor artist Ammar Abo Bakr. As her physical body languishes in jail, its representation in paint reminds us that public space—how and by whom it is controlled and struggled over, as well as how and by whom it is used and for what purposes—remains a critical issue as we endeavor to understand the role of communication in contentious politics.