
Focusing on art productions between 2010 and 2018, Caroline Seymour-Jorn discusses new creative works by al-jil al-jadid (the new generation) in music, theater production, and public art. The surge in new art since the 2011 revolution attempts to redefine the relationship between people, their bodies, and space. Since the ascendancy of Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi in 2014, it seems that Cairo’s creative spaces have gone underground so to speak, given the “heightened surveillance” of young activists and artists (p. 2) by the authoritarian regime. Seymour-Jorn’s publication thus is an important revelation about artistic and resistant creativity in Egypt. The book attempts to answer a few questions: How do different types of art productions respond personally and artistically to the situation after January 2011? In what ways do artists engage public issues toward specific events? How does art generate public discourse about the recent historical periods, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Mubarak’s rule, and President Sisi?

Creating Spaces of Hope comprises four chapters with an introduction and final thoughts, in addition to many illustrations of the art discussed. Of note are the artistic innovations in form and style to craft diverse and complex objects, such as musical collaborations, studio art, writing, and murals and graffiti. To contextualize the discussion about art, the introduction presents a brief background of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary cultural milieu. Tapping into recent scholarship, Seymour-Jorn adds her theorization about creativity and its role in the making of culture. Her study draws on contemporary scholarly interests, offering multiple aesthetic approaches, as well as the artists’ comments about their sociopolitical and aesthetic landscapes.

Chapter 1 looks at the emergence and establishment of Egypt’s Choir Project in 2010 through its development, up to 2018. Inspired by the Finnish International Complaints Choir, it was founded in Egypt in 2005. Its approach is unconventional: it was launched by an electronic invitation to gather for a workshop at a specific venue for a week. With the aid of director Salam Yousry and musician Motaz Atallah, the participants collaboratively created and performed the first act, “Gamahir Khafiyah” (Invisible Publics). The production was also accompanied by
an art exhibit at Cairo’s Townhouse Gallery in May 2010 (p. 31). The author analyses the Choir’s lyrical and dramatic productions. She says that in addition to expressing personal angst, the Choir voices resistant expressions vis-à-vis the social and political constraints in Egypt.

Chapter 2 explores studio art by Hany Rashed, Bassem Yousri, and Yasmine El-Meleegy. These young artists experiment with various modes of “painting, sculpture, and installation and video art” (p. 61), crossing boundaries stylistically, socially, and politically. The writer’s discussion of the works is illuminating of the art’s authenticity, diversity, and multi-disciplinarity.

What Seymour-Jorn refers to as the “new writing” emerged in the late decades of the twentieth century. This is the subject of chapter 3. The author selects two writers for her discussion: Hani Abdel Mourid and Menat Allah Samy. Both writers have experimented with a radical view of the genre of fiction. Abdel Mourid’s Ana al-‘aalam (I am the world) won the National Encouragement Prize in 2017; Samy’s flash fiction dramatizes namelessness in abstract, existential ways. Not only do these works blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional, they also recast the reader-writer relationship by inviting the reader to participate in the creative process (p. 26).

Chapter 4 focuses on street art (murals and graffiti), which began to make its appearance in Cairo, Luxor, and Alexandria from early 2011. Street art has attracted photo documentation by several journalists and scholars, who see it as resistance and a form of memorializing the people who died at the hands of the state (p. 149). Seymour-Jorn discusses two murals: The Egyptian Citizen by HeMa AllaGa and Portrait of Hisham Rizq by Ammar Abu Bakr. Both murals are on the walls of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in Tahrir Square. Both artists draw on ancient Egyptian history, art, and mythology, as well as the current atrocities by the dictatorial regimes that have ruled Egypt since the 1970s, until the time of this writing. While AllaGa’s painting references da Vinci’s Study of Human Proportions, the idealized form of the self-assured renaissance man, AllaGa’s citizen is distorted and wounded, a cartoon of a man who embodies “the injuries of the revolution” (p. 157). Likewise, Abu Bakr’s portrait of Hisham, his artist-friend who was killed at age 19 in 1914, is a memorial for the revolutionary activist and organizer. Abu Bakr views the political leaders as enemies of the people. He tells the author: “There is only one enemy, one killer. He has been there all along and he is still there now” (quoted p. 165). Abu Bakr credits the people with being the agents of the revolution. He asserts that both the revolution and the murals, new and innovative, were created by the people; the people “decide what the revolution will look like,” beyond the old boundaries and logic (quoted p. 165).

Creating Spaces of Hope is a compelling addition to the scholarship about Egypt, where the art scene is part and parcel of the people’s lives. To get an
in-depth understanding of the contemporary scene of Egypt, this book will benefit both undergraduate and graduate students in several fields.

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