Walls as Interstitial Combinations: Security Infrastructure and Practices in Revolutionary and Post-Revolutionary Downtown Cairo

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Abstract
This article questions the notion of interstice through the analysis of spaces in downtown Cairo and their evolutions between 2011 and 2021. This article will focus on the walls as security infrastructure. In fact, during the Egyptian revolution between 2011 and 2013, walls were built in downtown Cairo, to create frontlines between security forces and revolutionaries. They created a geography of dichotomy, composed of a policy of zoning and a policy of emptying. However, practices of revolutionaries and residents and workers redefined the uses and the meanings of these walls, creating interstitial combinations. Walls became interstitial infrastructure between security control and political resistance, between material signs of control and memorial spaces of the revolution. This article will take the examples of graffiti and informal activities, which have already an interstitial dimension between resistance and adaptation, formal and informal. The article concludes on the evolution of the walls, which were reintegrated into a spatial manifestation of power through their beautification and their staging by an authoritarian regime in 2020 and 2021.

Keywords
Revolution, securitization, interstice, graffiti, informality, Cairo.

1. Introduction

Looking for interstices in downtown Cairo, both during the revolution between 2011 and 2013 and during the authoritarian reinforcement that happened since then, allows us to consider the different meanings of the term "interstice". According to a first morphological definition, the interstice is an abandoned, empty, or leftover space where uses and functions are still undetermined. Geographically, the interstice is associated with the margin, being outside of the projects of urban planning or outside of the physical, political or social centralities (Le Gall, Rougé, 2014). This structuralist and functionalist vision of the interstice doesn't seem to apply to downtown Cairo. Planned at the end of the 19th century by Khedive Ismael and invested as a political centre since then, downtown is characterised by a formal and dense built environment and is the subject of a strong investment by urban policies and urban planning (Abaza, 2011; Pappalardo, 2016). Downtown is a social, economic and political central space. Space for the representation of the political regime with the presence of several domestic and foreign institutions such as ministries, administrations, embassies, it's also a political space for the contestation of the regime. The Egyptian revolution, which started on January 25th, 2011 and led to the removal of the president Hosni Mubarak, took place in urban spaces in downtown such as Tahrir Square. This square has been occupied by the revolutionaries during eighteen days in 2011 (Abaza, 2016; Pagès-El Karoui, 2014; Rabbat, 2012; Ramadan, 2013).

According to a second social and political definition of the interstice, it's a crack in domination and in hegemonic norms[1]. Here, the interstice doesn't rely on a physical shape but on the nature of the practices and experiences described as subversive (Le Gall, Rougé, 2014) or on the nature of the actors often described as subaltern (Pappalardo,

1 This distinction between domination and hegemony can be found in the work of Gramsci (Gramsci, 1996). It enables to understand that norms can be imposed by practices , of coercion or repression but also by practices such as discourses, cultural, social and moral norms. We consider that authoritarian regimes embodied by different actors (police, army, etc...) and ruled by a dominant class use these different types of practices to impose their control.

2016) or marginal (Bautès, Reginensi, 2008). The interstice is a counter-power against political control or hegemonic urban planning (Le Strat, 2007) and it's also a creative power (Hatzfeld et al. 1998). In that case, the interstice is more defined as "the outcome of a composition of interactions and affections among a multiplicity of actors that coexist within a given spatial situation" (Brighenti, 2013, p. xviii). The interstice is not a no man's land but the result of territorial appropriations and negotiated interactions (Navez-Bouchanine, 1991). In both definitions – morphological or interactional – the interstice temporally and spatially conveys the idea of uncertainty and fluidity (Brighenti, 2013; Dumont, 2006).

Between 2011 and 2013, the Egyptian revolution opened a time of uncertainty and fluidity as several actors were competing for their political rights but also for the appropriation of urban spaces. This struggle was left without a clear political or urban hegemony (Armbrust, 2019). The revolutionaries were in conflict with a series of successive authorities first under the presidency of Hosni Mubarak until February 2011, then under the transition government organized by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and finally under the presidency of Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, elected president in 2012. Nonetheless, after the removal of Morsi by a *coup d'état* organised by the army in 2013 and after the election of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2014, the regime reinforced its authoritarian control through a set of repressive practices and of legislation such as the 2013 anti-protest law (Boutaleb, 2017; Guirguis, 2016). Urban securitization is also part of the reinforcement of the authoritarianism. Cement walls, checkpoints, cement blocks or barbed wires had been set up in downtown since 2011 and were maintained until 2016 (Abaza, 2013; Othmane, Stadnicki, 2015). This material and legal securitization contributed to the disappearance of contestation practices. Downtown is also characterized by processes of urban normalization and return to order, especially with the eviction of informal practices that multiplied during the revolution. Authorities such as Cairo governorate and the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for police, try to counter the uncertainty and fluidity of the revolutionary times and spaces through securitization and normalization. With the observation of the end of contestation and informal activities, one can consider that the hegemonic norm in downtown since 2013 is a norm of control materialised by security infrastructure and urban policies.

Despite the formal, dense and planned built environment, and the presence of hegemonic control materialised by security infrastructure and urban policies during and after the Egyptian revolution, this article raises the possibility of interstices in downtown Cairo. Focusing on the walls, I argue that this infrastructure constitutes the very condition of the emergence of urban and political interstices. I define the interstice as a crack in the securitization and normalization planned by urban and political authorities and enforced by security forces. I propose that looking at one dimension – morphological or interactional – is not enough to find the interstice and that the interstice appears in the combination of both materiality and appropriations by different actors. I will take two examples: the case of graffiti as a practice of political subalterns and the informal activities as practices of social subalterns.

This article relies mostly on fieldwork conducted in 2014 and 2015. An update of this work is the result of fieldwork between 2019 and 2020. I used qualitative methods such as observation while I was living in downtown Cairo and more than 60 semi-structured interviews with urban planners, inhabitants, or workers in downtown and graffiti artists. In order to study the discourse of the regime, I analysed videos and texts.

I will first discuss how the materiality and the territoriality of walls challenged the urban and political interstitiality of the Egyptian revolution between 2011 and 2013. With an interactional perspective, I will then describe how the walls became a form of interstitial infrastructure through the combination of their materiality and practices such as graffiti and informal activities between 2012 and 2015. I will conclude on the evolution of the walls that led to a disappearance of such interstices since 2016.

2. The revolution and the walls: the geography of interstitiality and the geography of dichotomy

The revolution introduced some uncertainty and fluidity in the spatial and political order in Egypt and particularly in downtown Cairo. Temporally and politically, the Egyptian revolution between 2011 and 2013 can be described as a "liminal crisis". The term of liminality was developed by Arnold Van Gennep (Gennep, 1961) and Victor Turner (Turner, 1990) about the rite of passage and applied to crises such as revolutions by Bjørn Thomassen (Thomassen, 2014). Walter Armbrust uses this term for the Egyptian revolution in his book *Martyrs and Tricksters: an Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution* (Armbrust, 2019)[2]. He describes the Egyptian revolution as a period of transition between two normative states, whose outcome is uncertain: will it be a democratic change? Will the authoritarian regime manage to keep control? The absence of a political and social hegemony results from the presence of several actors with multiple and conflicting interests. Concerning the security forces, police withdrew from the streets during the first week of the revolution (Stadnicki, 2014b) and security forces lost their absolute control over urban spaces and protests. Between 2011 and 2013, several actors were responsible for policing protests and thus for securitizing protest spaces: revolutionary security committees around the camp in Tahrir Square (Pagès-El Karoui, 2014), Ultras[3] with their experience and knowledge in clashes with the police (Gibril, 2015; Woltering, 2013), anti-harassment brigades (Amar, 2013; Boutros, 2017; Malmström, 2012), *baltagiyyas* which are thugs paid by the security forces to break the revolution, popular committees (*el-liggan esh-sharbiyya*) that protected neighborhoods with checkpoints (Bremer, 2011; Lachenal, 2012) but also police and army. Thus, the term of liminality implies the revolutionary energies that claim rights and contest power but also the authoritarian forces that try to restore order and protect the former political system[4].

Moreover, the revolution was characterized spatially by an urban fluidity created by the absence of the security apparatus. Informal activities, especially those performed by street vendors, multiplied in downtown Cairo. The conquest of urban spaces by these informal activities exemplifies "the contestation of public space in this period, redefining the meaning of public space and challenging the rules governing practices within it" (Nagati, Stryker, 2013, p. 44). Informal activities challenged the hegemonic vision of the authorities for the city. The neoliberal and globalized vision of downtown is embodied by the eviction of popular neighbourhoods, the exclusion of informal activities, the construction of towers for businesses, the renovation and protection of the buildings (Abaza, 2011; Pappalardo, 2016). This vision is hegemonic as the authorities try to have a totalizing action on the urbanity. In this context, informal practices were socially marginalized activities practiced by some subalterns (Pappalardo, 2018) but they spatially reintroduced a social interstice in the centre during the revolution. Moreover, as mostly governmental institutions were the ones organizing and exhibiting art before the revolution (Winegar, 2006), graffiti were also marginalized and repressed practices in Cairo before the revolution and can be define as politically subaltern practices. During the revolution, graffiti acquired visibility and centrality while they participated in the occupation of public spaces (Nicoarea, 2014).

2 For a state of art about the notion of liminality, see (March, 2021).

3 Ultras are supporters of football clubs who organize themself in association. In Egypt, the most famous groups are the Ultras Ahlawy and the White Knights which supports the two biggest egyptian teams el-Ahly and Zamalek.

4 The notion of liminality can be linked to the notion of transition between two states – here, revolution between 2011 and 2013 and authoritarian restoration - as the liminal state has to end when a new normative state is set up. We are aware of the teleological bias of such conception of revolutionary and post-revolutionary times : the moment of « restoration » is not simply « the return of the old » and can be described as « a becoming-restoration » that is never only authoritarian and stays a moment of redefinition of rules (Allal & Vannetzel, 2017). This present article is an empirical contribution of a geographer to this debate, showing how resistances to and interstices in the norms of control and securitization organized by an authoritarian regime can be find after 2013, how political pluralism can be find in ordinary practices and spaces. We are using the notion of liminality in this article for its contribution to think uncertainty and non-hegemonic moment not only between 2011 and 2013 but also after. We defend a spatially, temporally an socially contextualized approach of this notion that goes beyond a dichotomy between revolution and restoration.

Figure 1. Cement walls in Sheikh Rihan Street, next to Tahrir Square and the Ministry of Interior. Source: Monfleur, 2014.

Those practices can also be understood as part of the liminality of the revolution as they were competing with the domination and the hegemony the authorities tried to establish by restoring order and erasing the graffiti (Armbrust, 2019). As these artistic and informal activities were characterized by a temporary and shifting nature in terms of material and social appropriation of urban spaces, downtown was redefined as a space "in flux" (Nagati, Stryker, 2013).

The "liminal revolution" or the "city in flux"– and the meanings of uncertainty, in-betweenness, fluidity, subversiveness involved in them – are really close to the notion of urban and political interstice. Nonetheless, the revolution was characterized by other dynamics that counter this uncertainty and fluidity. The security infrastructure set up by the Supreme Council of the Forced Armies is one example. The army built the first wall, after the clash in Mohamed Mahmoud Street in November 2011. Between 2011 and 2013, they built several walls around ministries, protest spaces such as Tahrir Square (See Figure 1) and embassies (See Figure 2).

Through infrastructure, the army and police took back and occupied downtown Cairo, creating a heavily securitized space. Gates, checkpoints and barbed wires com-

Figure 2. Cement walls around the American embassy, next to Simon Bolivar Square. Source: Monfleur, 2014.

pleted this securitization (See Figure 3). Strong constraints, the walls contributed to displace demonstrations and sit-ins in more peripheral neighborhoods, such as Nasr City where the Muslim Brotherhood organized a sit-in in Rabaa el-Adawiya and Nahda squares (Stadnicki, 2014).

The walls were first built along the frontlines of revolutionary protests and clashes between security forces and revolutionaries. Between 2011 and 2013, they created a boundary between securitized spaces, which were controlled by security forces and spaces of protests considered as dangerous. They produced spatial segregation between a protected inside and a contested outside (Abaza, 2013). These dichotomies were set up clearly to counter the fluidity of the revolutionary risks. During interviews conducted in 2015, several inhabitants and workers[5] described the walls as borders:

> "Those walls are used to intensify, to increase the borders of the authority, to eliminate people in the street, to securitize public spaces, to put people under siege."[6]

5 The persons interviewed and quoted in this part of the article are mostly former revolutionaries and/or against the government of Sisi. They are part of a middle class and are mostly men. Each of them is anonymized for security reasons.

6 Interview with an inhabitant in downtown, conducted

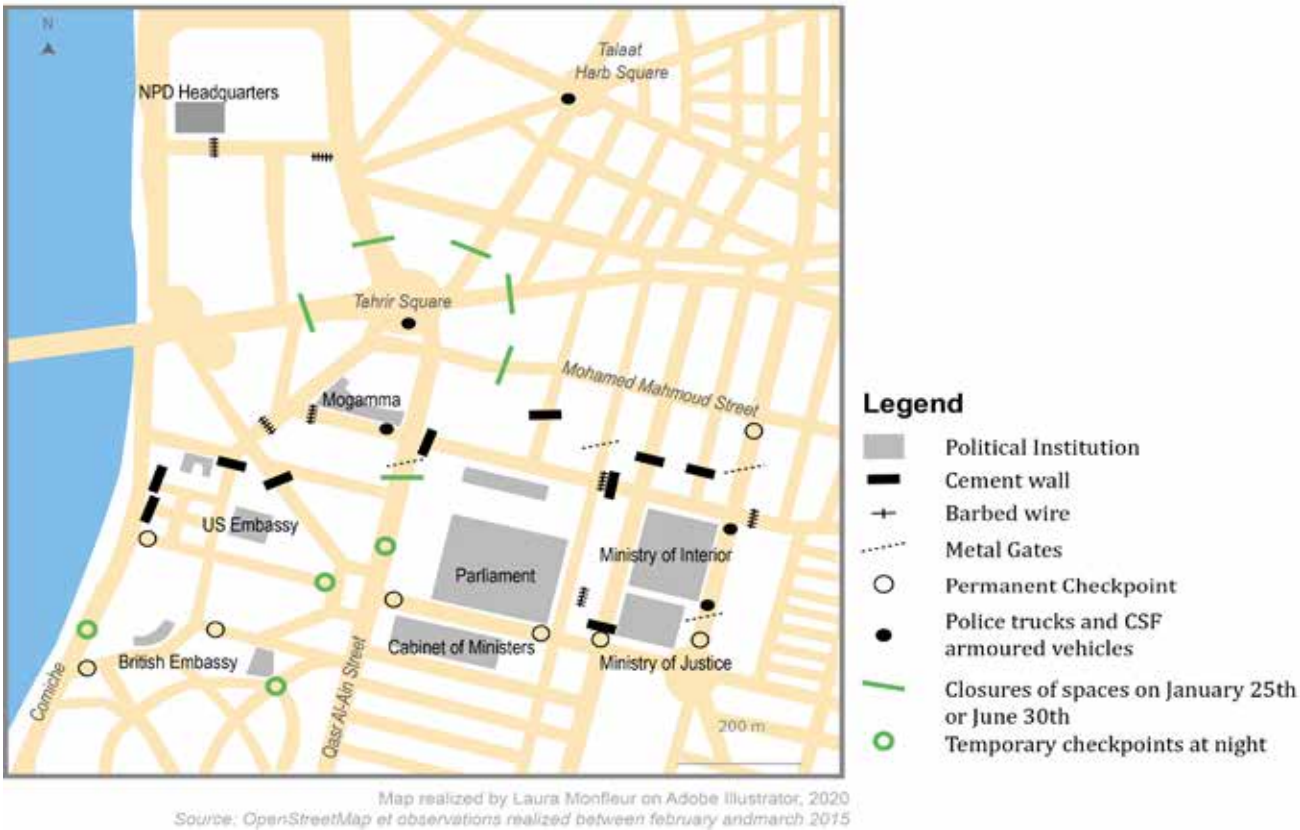

Figure 3. Security infrastructure in downtown Cairo in 2015. Source: Monfleur, 2020.
Data: OpenStreetMap and personal observations realized between February and March 2015.

Others were comparing the walls to the borders and hot spots during wars such as the Berlin Wall[7]. The space around the Ministry of Interior was compared to the Green Zones in Bagdad[8]. These quotes show how the residents had a strong perception of the dichotomy created by the walls, even after the demonstrations and the fights during the revolution.

In fact, after 2013, the walls were progressively reified and became fortifications for some political institutions such as the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice or the American embassy. The material securitization was extended to the streets surrounding the buildings. The walls created a no man's land around those political institutions, producing a disconnection in the everyday flux in the city (See Figure 4). An urban planner described spaces around the walls as "no-go-zones"[9]. The emptiness of the space was a territorial strategy of dispossession of space against protest practices. The authorities emptied spaces to better securitize them and produce buffer zones. With the walls, securitization goes through a policy of zoning – creating a territorial limit and segregation between spaces - and a policy of emptying – producing a spatial void around political buildings.

in Cairo in March 2015.

7 Interviews with an architect in February 2015 and with an inhabitant in March 2015, conducted in Cairo.

8 Interview with an urban planner working in downtown, in February 2015, conducted in Cairo.

9 Interview with an urban planner working in downtown, in February 2015, conducted in Cairo.

Figure 4. The walls as a policy of zoning and a policy of emptying: territorial limit and spatial void in Mansour Street, leading to the Ministry of Interior. Source Monfleur, 2014.

3. Graffiti, informality and the walls: interstitial combination of practices and infrastructure

Looking at the leftover space is not enough to understand the interstice. This spatial void is part of the securitization and the geography of dichotomy. Nonetheless, it creates a functional indetermination and an uncertainty in the uses of this security walls and the space around them. After their construction and their role of frontlines during clashes, they can be spaces of possibilities: strong constraints for political practices, they were also support for other practices since 2012. These practices can divert the security role and norms of the infrastructure.

The interstices that I describe rely on the combination of three factors: a specific spatial and material context that open potentialities, the interactions and practices of different actors who actualize these potentialities and the symbolic meanings that embody those practices that challenge a dominant norm. The interstice is "a phenomenon 'on the ground', a 'happening", a 'combination' or an 'encounter'." (Brighenti, 2013, p. xviii) that appear in the folds of the material, interactional and symbolic dimensions of space (Hatzfeld et al., 1998).

First of all, the artistic practices on the walls produced an infrastructure in-between a revolutionary geography and a security geography (Abaza, 2013; Lennon, 2014; Nicoarea, 2014). Several artists such as Ammar Abo Bakr, El Zeft and Nazeer launched the project "No walls" in March 2012. They painted *trompe-l'oeil* on the walls, recreating the continuity of the street. This collective initiative organized unauthorized happenings next to the painted walls, inviting revolutionaries to gather around music and the graffiti. According to one of the artists of this initiative, they wanted to create a space of protest in urban spaces, showing that these don't only belong to security forces. These events enabled to build a common space around the walls that became support of a fully but yet temporary revolutionary public space:

> "[…] we invite people to occupy the area and to share with us the event. There was music. First to say we still have this place and we can do what we want. It's part to celebrate occupying this place first. The second to tell the people about these walls."[10]

These graffiti can be described as heterotopia (Foucault, 1984; Klaus, 2019; Kraidy, 2013) a space of otherness in its physical, symbolic and political dimension[11]. It enables the juxtaposition of spaces that seem to be incompatible otherwise: here, the walls and the continuity of the street. The graffiti creates a blurred line in the dichotomy created by the walls and challenge the securitization. It constitutes a resistance by the imagination, as one of the inhabitants in Cairo underlines:

> "They tell the government that our imagination and our dreams is behind the walls. It's not the physical or material space that ends our dreams."[12]

This heterotopia can be more permanent than the performance or even the presence of the graffiti in the physical space, especially when the graffiti is anchored on the collective and revolutionary memory. This memorialization goes through social networks (Carle, Huguet, 2015) and books published by the artists themselves, that became archives (Karl et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, these practices show how the walls remained strong constraints for the revolutionaries. In fact, in the first months following the walls' construction, revolutionaries tried to destroy them by removing some of the cement blocks, while the security forces were building them again. In this game of constructions and destructions (Abaza, 2014; CEDEJ, 2013), the revolutionaries lost most of the time, removing one block in several hours while the security forces were building them more rapidly. These practices of leaning on the walls instead of destroying them show a modification of the repertoire of collective actions against the walls towards more temporary and reversible practices – the graffiti can be repainted on, or erased – which Omar Nagati and Benedicte Stryker called "soft interventions" in their book *Archiving the City in Flux : Cairo's Shifting Urban Landscape since the January 25th Revolution* (2013, p. 13).

More than a simple border, or cut, in urban spaces, the wall is a contested support and become an interstitial infrastructure that bears contrasted and conflicting imaginaries. Its polyvalence stems from its use by both the security forces and protestors. In the case of the artistic events and the graffiti, the practices were fully part of the repertoire of revolutionary action, so much that walls gained an interstitial dimension. In the case of the informal activities, the practices themselves bared the interstitial dimension, as they were challenging the security function of the walls without cancelling it.

If the street vendors were mostly absent from the streets in downtown in 2015 after their evacuation by the security forces and the governorate, informal parking lots were established in the *cul-de-sac* formed by the walls (See Figure 5). This practice relied on the wall and gave another function to the walls and the emptied space in front of them. They challenged the normalization of downtown. The

10 Interview with a graffiti artist who participated in the project « No walls », in March 2015, conducted in Cairo.

11 Walter Armbrust defines the heterotopia as « a spatialized formulation of liminality » (p. 1). In our case, we adopt an approach that combine an account both on temporality and spatiality.

12 Interview with a dweller in Cairo who goes to downtown often, in February 2015, conducted in Cairo.

Figure 5. Informal parking lot in Mansour Street. The wall in the figure 4 is in the background. Source: Monfleur, 2015.

fact that these informal activities were maintained in 2015 in the most securitized spaces in downtown Cairo while other activities, such as street vending, were evacuated in the other streets seem to be a paradox. Nonetheless, the dynamics were different: the street vendors were blocking the everyday mobility while the parking lots remedied to the lack of this service in downtown Cairo[13] using a dead space.

In-betweenness characterized these activities that were not politically subversive and not part of a protest geography. First, they are in between eviction and tolerance from the authorities. In fact, the people in charge of parking and supervising the cars often gave some money to the policemen to maintain their activities. Secondly, they were in between constraint and resistance in the post-revolutionary period. Rather than pure resistance, this practice of appropriation was instead an adaptation and negotiation. It constituted a "quiet encroachment" on the security control of public spaces (Bayat, 2009). In that case, this practice was itself interstitial. They produced a space around the walls that is an in-between: between control and tolerance, between constraint and resistance. The space around the walls was not completely controlled by security norms and function. It was a negotiated space between informal actors of the parking and formal actors of the security.

13 The lack of parking lots was mentioned in several interviews in 2015 by the inhabitants and drivers. Between 2019 and 2021, this issue is still mentioned by interviewees.

In both cases, the interstice is not a void or a no man's land but is the subject of negotiated or conflicting appropriations and territorial marking. This practice challenged or diverted the security function of the walls and their territorial mode of operation such as a policy of zoning in the case of the graffiti and a policy of emptying in the case of the informal parking. It was not only subversive but was in between constraints and resistances. It didn't replace the security norms and functionality of the walls but work with them.

In its spatial dimension, the interstice has a political and normative ambiguity and uncertainty. In its temporal dimension, temporary and shifting appropriations describe the interstice. We can best describe this through the idea of spatial and temporal contingency. The interstice is not known in advance but created in the combination of spatial materiality, unexpected and unplanned practices and the norms carried by those practices. But this interstitial combination is precarious and can be undermined if one of the elements changes or disappears.

Conclusion: after 2016, the end of the interstice ?

In 2014, the army tore some of the walls down, because the closure of the streets prevented the normal and everyday flow of the city. Later on, metal gates in the color of the Egyptian flag replaced some walls (see See Figure 6). These gates could be opened and closed in case of protests and could be used pre-emptively against protests. When the Ministry of Interior, main securitized institution, was removed from downtown and displaced during 2016 in the periphery of Cairo, in New Cairo, the walls and the gates were removed as well. Only the walls and the gates around the American embassy remain in Garden City. A gate is still in Falaki Street but always open.

Figure 6. A gate replaced the wall in Qasr al-Ayni Street, leading to Tahrir Square. Source: Monfleur, 2015.

The removal of material infrastructure did not imply a desecuritization in downtown Cairo. Security control is even higher, as the security forces establish temporary checkpoints in specific spaces such as the main squares (Tahrir Square, Talaat Harb Square). It also heightened during particular moments such as January 25th, the anniversary of the beginning of the 2011 revolution. With the removal of the walls came the removal of the support for the graffiti that were constantly erased by the authorities but also painted over by artists. The informal parking lots have been evacuated as an official and underground parking lot was built in Tahrir square. A private security company controls the entrance in this parking.

The fact that the securitization is more volatile, more flexible, and more temporary prevents interstitial practices to appropriate tools and spaces of security. The remaining walls around the American embassy in Simon Bolivar Square has been recovered by hieroglyphs in 2020 and 2021, first by the students in Fine Arts of Helwan University (See Figure 8) and then by the authorities (See Figure 7).

Figure 7. Wall around the American embassy in Simon Bolivar Square in 2021: hieroglyphs made by the authorities for the Golden Parade of the Mommies in April 202. Source: Monfleur, 2021.

Figure 8. Wall around the US embassy in Simon Bolivar Square in 2021 with the hieroglyphs made by the students of Fine Arts Faculty of Helwan University in 2020, screenshot of the live of the ceremony of the Golden Parade of the Mommies. Source: Ruptly, video You Tube, 3rd of April 2021.

The regime used the walls in the Golden Parade of Mommies in April 2021. This event was a long parade where the mommies were transported between the National Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Tahrir Square and the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Fustat. This event was broadcast online and on television. It was staged in a way that promoted and legitimated the authoritarian regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. It's the glorification of a mythical past showing how the Egypt of Sisi is strong, as was the Egypt of the Pharaohs. The walls with the hieroglyphs were part of this staging (See Figure 8). With this beautification, the remaining walls seem to belong completely to the geography of a political power, and are not interstitial combination anymore. This political power tries to legitimate itself as a strong regime and glorious nation while it continues to repress the population and securitize urban spaces.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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