“Public Spaces of Memory
Contested Visualizations of Absence in Cairo”

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INTRODUCTION:

The years following 2011 witnessed the explosion and the interplay between the spectacular and the everyday, the eventful and the repetitive, violence, trauma and the carnivalesque and they have left their marks on the city of Cairo and its inhabitants. Within the context of these fluctuating emotional and political turbulences, the presentation seeks to interrogate the urban visualization of absence/presence as contested and very constitutive of the imagination of ownership of public space. It is concerned with how absence acts in multiple and conflictual ways to disrupt or anchor political meaning and memory in the physicality of urban space of the city. It is inspired, thus, by several concerns.

First, the broader concern relates to the current contestation and political turbulences after 2011, in particular the ways through which memory and narratives of the revolution and its aftermath is being inscribed, re-inscribed, contested and developed, at the heart of which is contested narration of public space ownership and appropriation.

Relatively, the concern with the modes through which this negotiated or contested meaning of memory is ascribed to the urban space of the city, in particular in public spaces. In the aftermath of the revolution the city seems to be alternating between a space of trauma and of Nostalgia.

Cairene city space is a central agent that acts on us in how we come to terms with politics of the revolution, more importantly on how we historicize, commemorate and lay claims on its future, and in times of ‘revolutionary despair’ (to use Asef Bayat’s term) as site of nostalgia or resistance, of coming to terms with losses, violence and grievances.

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Thirdly, the modes through which coming to terms with political trauma, in particular identifying with and commemoration of absent victims of violence, could and might take place.

Fourthly and more particularly is the modes through which absence is visualized in city space and is scripted into the imagination of the political, i.e. the political-spatial presence and visualization of absence.

Therefore this presentation looks – quite preliminarily- into acts of imagining and visualizing absence in urban space, and engages with a specific understanding of public space as a site of memory; or rather as a space for public memory.²

In this I will be juxtaposing two unlikely cases of different practices of visualizing absence. In both cases the figure of the martyr, and the will to visually commemorate it, is central, as well as the role played by the imagery of death, sacrifice, justice, victory and defeat. Also in both cases this visualization of memory of absence is enacted in spaces that are public.

First I look into the construction of national memorials associated with the production of theatrical space of the monumental sites in post-independence Cairo, specifically as it speaks to the politics of the spectacle and the national imagination of the state.³ These are landmarks dedicated to the state’s visual practices of aspired memorialization and legitimation that are ‘carved in stone’, immortal, and a-temporal. I will take an epitome example on how anonymous absence of the martyr is scripted into an artistic/architectural imagination of victory, patriotism, the nation, and “completeness”.

Second, I take a more contemporary focus on the less concrete, and, more elusive visualization of martyrhood in the surge of documenting the victims of violence in the Egyptian revolution via explosive practice of commemoration. These practices of commemoration through graffiti are more ephemeral. For the sake of this presentation I put forward the argument that they do not have an

imagination of immortal symbolism as an objective, but rather they seek to act as a provocation of an ethical position towards those have become absent. In this I seek to go beyond the glorification of graffiti depicting martyrs as “revolution art” even if it is. As Gaber argues; by focusing on graffiti as representative of art scene we miss other functions like the communicative⁴, or –additionally- the commemorative.

**CONTEXT OF CAIRO**

Understanding memory and visualization of absence in Cairene urban space requires a little bit of contextualization. Cairene public space (like the idea of public space in general) is paradoxical and points to broader contexts that have been shaping its nature from before 2011. While an adequate analysis of these forces is beyond the scope of this presentation it is useful to point out to some that have a bearing on the way ownership, visualization and memorialization is enacted and contested.

**FIRST, MODERNIST AMBITION AND INCOMPLETENESS:**

A city like Cairo has been historically a site for dreams of modernization, which entails -as most modernizing projects do- valuing life and making it possible. In a Foucauldian sense this entails a biopolitical ambition of controlling and governing the city, anchoring it and bringing its identity and designated memory of its historicity to light. Scholarship that looks into the colonial politics of Egypt and the Middle East look in these examples of the early modernizing projects of the city of Cairo⁵ by tracing the great transformations of Mohamed Ali

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⁵ Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha’s Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002); On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in*
and more importantly Khedive Ismail. Some examples also show a similar kind of ambition in the spatial politics of the 50s and 60s that is usually seen as an interruption or a rupture of the grand designs of the city under colonialism and instilling another.  

In reaction to this political ambition, the contemporary public discourse and popular culture regards the city with a sense of betrayal and a collective disappointment. The city promises us the good life, but we are faced by fragmentation, chaos, haphazardness that is associated with the lack of political incompleteness, fragmented narratives, histories, and the lack of meaning, in short, noise that characterize the city space. Therefore, instead of the ambitious city of order and good and controlled life one is faced by a city in a perpetual crisis, which drives anxieties of city identity. (It is one way one could read a range of practices from heritage conservation initiatives, walking and documenting the city projects, to overt practices of nostalgia on social networking sites).

We know from the history of Cairo that the fixation of identity and character of the city doesn’t get ever completed, the most famous ambitious modernizing of Cairo like the Humanization of Cairo never actually happened fully. Since there is no one complete fixation of meaning of the city, then there is no complete rupture, but rather layers of accumulating narratives. This accumulation (superimposition) does not mean a necessary continuity; rather it enables urban pockets that act as sites of counter memory. Thus we have sites of contested

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memory, as well as contested criteria though which we remember, feel nostalgic or practice self/city hate.

SECOND: HOMOGENIZING/SPECTACULARIZING:

An attention to the precariously of memory of spaces stems in part from the critique of globalizing effects that creates non-places in the context of supermodernity. Here memory of space is understood closer to a place identity that place conveys, and which is obliterated by homogeneous spaces of neoliberalism. Similarly Pierre Nora claims that sites of memory are now necessary because with the rise of modernism and globalization. Within this general context politics of memory of space take a different but related root within the conscious political decision to handpick particular historical epochs the urban spaces that typify them to become worth of the label of “Heritage”. Thus processes of rediscovery of Khedival Cairo as architectural heritage corresponds to a discourse of Golden age of a cosmopolitan, pre-1952 era. Again paradoxically these could generate counter-productive policies of obliterating the particular complex identity of place by purifying it to correspond to an imagined pure spectacle of heritage. In its reduced form it becomes a suitable object of Nostalgia. Processes like these can be seen more recently in downtown, or Islamic Cairo like Al-Mo’ez Street or other ‘Islamic Cairo’ quintessential sites.

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Admits these forces that pose multiple threats to public space identity by homogenizing, or spectacularizing of historical sites for the sake of tourism; public space in everyday life appears as highly contested. Thus public space in Cairo have never been public as in open, it is only public in as much as it is contested, liberated and appropriated and re-appropriated, the same goes for public memories that get to be enacted in these spaces.

To sum up, Cairo witnessed several consecutive imaginations that expressed particular constellations of power relations that are generally incomplete. These cracks could be disruptive, but could complete the meaning of space and its memory for others, or alternatively open a new imagination of Cairo as a site of memory for someone else. This definition by negation, that is absence, indicates something important in itself, spaces of counter memory that are cracks through which politics seeps in and thus despite the trauma Cairo is an open project.

COMMEMORATION IN STONE:

The most common practice that scripts absence into a political narrative of the nation, and to visualize it in urban space is through memorials. Among them nothing comes close to bringing absence into presence as the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. A couple of decades ago Benedict Anderson opened his book by establishing the link between the practice of building Tombs and cenotaphs of unknown soldiers and the imagination of the Nation. The Unknown Soldier is uncontested; he is unknown in terms that he belongs to the nation. His own narrative and life is irrelevant since his death gives life to the nation. His anonymity is central to self-identity of the nation. His fatality is scripted into the continuity and immortality of the nation, anchoring the nation’s past and future, trauma and victory.

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13 Anderson, p. 9.
14 Anderson, p. 11.
The absence or anonymity of the Unknown Soldier to whom the memorial is dedicated appeared initially the context of the First World War to address and reflect the position of mourning and its institutional appropriation, in contexts were death could no longer be interpreted, the state attempted to give an outlet for grief\textsuperscript{15}. Thus Wittman –like Anderson- points to its integral relation to modernity:

\textit{“The Unknown Soldier was at once a representation of the body of the nation and of the human body, both felt to be ruptured, perhaps permanently, by the war and modernity.”}\textsuperscript{16}

(Reference p3)

This embodiment creates a spectacle and thus raises debates about its ritualization, and who can use it and what for \textsuperscript{17}.

The Monument of the Unknown Soldier in Cairo was designed by Sami Rafi’, academically trained in set design, not sculpture. His proposal was the winning proposal in a competition to designate a memorial by President Sadat. Work on its construction started in 25\textsuperscript{th} of May 1975, by construction tycoon Othman Ahmed Othman’s the Arab contractors, and it finished September 15\textsuperscript{th} 1975. And was inaugurated on October 6\textsuperscript{th}, 1975.\textsuperscript{18}

During that year it was reported on by artist Bikar who was a member of the commission, and fans of Rafi’ have termed either him or the monument as the fourth Pyramid. The monument was designed to be a hollow pyramid, with he symbolic names of 71 martyrs in Kufi calligraphy linked and forming the effects of building blocks. It is 33. 64 meters high, the four walls are 1.9 meters thick, ad at base they are 14.30 meters.\textsuperscript{19}. The artist opted to take the outer structure of the pyramid shape, and keep it hollow for air and light to infiltrate. Here symbolizing

\textsuperscript{16} Wittman, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{18} http://elbadil.com/2015/05/27/
\textsuperscript{19} http://www.ahramdigital.org.eg/Community.aspx?Serial=1438125
immortality is unmistakable\textsuperscript{20}. The choice of pyramid suggests temporal continuity from ancient to modern times.

In part the monument doesn’t only symbolize a tribute to the unknown soldiers, but also marks a signal of a particular political ambition of the post-independence state to represent a particular image of the nation, that is hierarchical, victorious, immortal and modern. The monument’s construction combined technical and engineering expertise of then the ministry of housing under construction tycoon Othman Ahmed Othman, and used the expertise of a civil engineer expert in bridge construction to deal with the embossing of the names on the monument.

The monument was constructed in the then newly constructed Nasr City, a neighborhood owing its inception and planning to the 1952 regime, named after victory, designed according to the ‘latest theories of urban planning’, had quite a high modernist mode of operation spear headed by Sayyid Koryem and Mahmoud Riyad. Two main figures in modernist architecture and Urban planning.\textsuperscript{21} Built on former military land, the neighborhood adopted the modernist conceptions of large thoroughfares fit for spectacularizing the developmentalist force of the new revolutionary state. The monument was built on a massive Avenue “victory road” that acted as the site for military marches, with a platform from which officials would be able to watch the parades. The marches stopped after Sadat’s assignation while the monument retained its commutative function. Currently the avenue retains its function of circulation and it is one of many congested traffic thoroughfares where the monument acts as a background of traffic stuck commuters in their cars.

As it is well known, Sadat was assassinating in front of that same monument while watching a military parade in the memory of the victory of October 3\textsuperscript{rd}, a quite ironic and symbolically charged happening, that had the potential to disrupt the meaning and the spectacle of commemorating victory. His family quickly

\textsuperscript{20} www.alquds.co.uk/?p=354074
decided that he would be buried in the monument of the Unknown Soldier, now Unknown no more.

I argue that while anonymity and the emphasis on abstraction in the modern design on the monument potentially created the whole site of memory as potentially open for interpretation and affective association. Despite the fact that location, form and function of the site gears more to the theatric of formal spectacle rather than a site of grief on mourning. With the assignation incident and the decision to close the meaning of the site with the burial of the head of the state, its meaning and relationship witnessed a closure and was scripted as a site of the memory of the state and official politics.

As Wittman argues, the absence/void created by the anonymity of the Unknown Soldier creates a gap, an open and indefinable meaning of sacrifice and heroism. This gap is to be filled by an abstract and immortal imagination of the Nation, as it happened though the gap was filled by ascribing the nation to the body of Sadat, literally the Tomb of the unknown Soldier became the site of assignation, and the burial of his body in the same site serves to fixate the disruptive political connotations that would have surrounded the monument 22.

**COMMENORATION ON STONE:**

In the case of the Unknown Soldier, the figure of the martyr is initially anonymous despite the presence of 71 symbolic names, and the monument is an abstract symbol of a popular base rising to the panicle of the victory. Only after the assassination of the president, does the tomb have an occupant; the aim of this occupancy is to again script it to the visualization of the nation and overcoming the trauma of a symbolic televised assassination.

In other words, here both the absence of the figure of the anonymous martyr of the war and the later absence of the president who ordered the construction of the

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22 Wittman argues that the indefinable meaning of suffering and sacrifice, attracted fascism in Italy and this gap that was opened was filled by Mussolini’s body. Laura Wittman, *The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier: Modern Mourning, and the Reinvention of the the Mystical Body* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 14.
monument are fused together is the official, national visualization of different notions of martyrdom and sacrifice for the nation. Since the ultimate sacrifice worthy of that kind of commemoration is when it is associated with a unity of cause or principle like Anderson tells us.  

Opposed to this fixity of meaning of absence in urban space, the revolution and its aftermath brought in an explosive spatial and temporal trauma of violence, resistance, death, and absence. Attention to the means through which inhabitants of the city have death with and survived these turbulent events and have incorporated them into their everyday life is has been quite limited to journalistic reportages and initiatives the work with and focus on the families of the victims/martyrs, with-perhaps- the exception of work focusing on victims of sexual assault. With the volatile four years, comes in the possible questions of memory and narration of events that are severely contested, and ultimately always unfolding. Commemoration in the mode explained earlier indicates a sense of closure or finality or completeness, which has been problematic in the four years of the revolution. Besides, closure, commemoration and mourning is problematic when older forms of heroism become empty or detached, at the same time where people need to make sense of and ascribe meaning to death.

Nevertheless, since 2011 the question of the memory of the revolution is has been quite present. Absences and death quickly took on the understanding of ‘martyrdom’, which also indicates ‘witnessing’, yet despite all the efforts of narrating and archiving the revolution, absence retains its ambivalence and disruptive effects. Urban voids or visualizations of absence like the graffiti and murals dedicated to the martyrs of the revolution, remain voids as a demand for justice rather than representative street art, as the rising interest in ‘revolutionary graffiti’ tend in a lot of time to frame it.

In a previous project conducted last year, I got the chance (as part of team) to interview a neighborhood based group of young people who documented those who were victims of violence’s in the summer of 2013\textsuperscript{26}. This is specific case is significant since those who are absent now from their neighborhoods were victims of civil violence (allegedly MB marches clashed with residents of the neighborhood) and thus their claiming and framing is ambivalent since they do not fit one of the more dominant frames of martyrhood that evolved post 2011 and post 2013, that is the martyrs of/for the revolution whose absence is to be blamed on the state, or current local discourse of the martyrhood of state representative as they fight “terrorism”. The victims fit none of these two narratives, and thus belong neither to the revolution nor counterrevolution, at best they are seen as part from a neighborhood that is regarded as “honorable citizens” Mowatneen shorafaa’, that is a term used pejoratively by young revolutionaries.

I am using their particular case here to harness their peculiar ambivalent position of absence, even though this ambivalence infiltrates most practices of commemoration of the victims of violence in the revolutionary years of Cairo. The neighborhood’s few graffiti art practitioners are not the –now- well known names of Alexandria and downtown, and they are not artists by profession. While interviewing them they expressed that they only wanted to attempt to narrate the revolution, but could not, because now it is a long history. Besides the panel that has the names and faces of those who died, there are panels that quote politicians and reproduce front pages of newspapers. It is an attempt to include the neighborhoods martyrs in the broader narrative of the revolution they felt they were being cut away from. Mona Abaza notes how the downtown Graffiti in Mohamed Mahmoud Street acts both as “memorial spaces” and spaces of visual narratives of the revolution and its enemies\textsuperscript{27}. After they did their panels,


sometimes relatives of the deceased would ask for the graffiti stencils to reproduce it in the neighborhood perhaps closer to home. This is not only an artistic expression. The face of the martyr is initially depicted on a main street where everyone can see it but then it gets borrowed and depicted closer to his home. It is also and foremost an act of commemoration, of visualizing absence in space and of preserving and narrating a story of death (even in its incoherence’s and inaccuracies) to overcome a traumatic event.

By commemoration on walls, specifically if done via neighbors or family, mourning and grief resists its confinement as only a private matter, it is depicted in public space. Based on this, visual commemorative acts like depicting martyrs in graffiti on Walls could be interpreted as visualization of traces of absences that demand an ethical reaction. Because retribution has not been achieved, these are remnants, and traces, that are ephemeral, illusive, and disruptive and remain incomplete and open waiting and demanding for justice that will complete the meaning of their absence. This openness is innate in their production and presence, unlike the abstraction of absence and the fixity monuments like the Unknown Soldier imply (even if it is to be disrupted in the ways they are reacted to or received). Here commemoration does not necessarily aim for immortality since it chooses quite a temporal and transient medium, nevertheless because the meaning of their death has not witnessed justice; these sites become revered as guarantees and they retain a position in the public memory of the city space, a position that demands at least recognition, and documentation of absence.

CONTESTATION OF REPRESENTING ABSENCE:

Because the meaning of absence of those who have been witnessing the revolution is ambivalent and lacks finality, commemoration of the martyrs of the revolution becomes a highly volatile and contested matter. On one hand it could signal a readiness to come to terms with loss when it is too early, on the other it could be an appropriation of public of space to make absence visual in city space.

This volatility is primarily evident in the state’s inability to memorialize the martyrs for example in Tahrir Square. This remained remained locked in the realm of ‘the plan’ that never materializes, and became a subject of the architectural competitions, leaving the space without a memorial signifier. An absence commemorating absence. The only active attempt was erecting a mediocre “temporary” as a place holder; that was to be defiled and broken down the same night. The place holder remained till it was replaced with Flag pole, the bare minimum representation of nationalism.

Empty symbols as urban space-holders do not come as surprising. The centre of Tahrir square remained empty for a considerable time save for a granite pedestal. The pedestal stayed waiting for a statue that never went up or for another that was never made. This symbolic void though was filled with contestation in the 1970s, particularly the 1972 students’ sit-in. The contestation was intense enough to ascribe its own symbolism of a “granite cake” on a pedestal without a statue. Later the granite cake was simply led into oblivion, when the performativity of the space of Tahrir was stripped away and re-inscribed as ultimate space of circulation with constructing the underground station that is now, ironically, closed indefinitely.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS:**

**PUBLIC SPACE AS SITE OF MEMORY**

In the aftermath of the revolution the city seems to be alternating between acting as a space of trauma and of Nostalgia. Cairene city space becomes an agent that acts on us in how we come to terms with politics of the revolution, more importantly on how we historicize, commemorate and lay claims on its future. And in times of “revolutionary despair” (to use Asef Bayat’s term) it is not only a
site of nostalgia or resistance, but also a site of (attempting) to come to terms with losses, violence and grievances.

In this presentation I have drawn theoretical resource from both Edward Cassey’s conception of public memory and their relationship to space, as well recent scholarship that is interested in the importance of absence in the present. In this paper I have preferred to look at public space as spaces of public memory, where visualizing absence feeds into practices of mourning, symbolism, commemoration and political narratives of identity. I put forward that in agreement with most recent scholarship artistic commemoration points to forces of contestation over public space, nevertheless I argue that by looking at these as avenues through which imagining and visualizing absence in urban space happens, could animate for us broader questions of public space as a site of public memory and political narrative and imagination. By contrasting two examples of two distinctive practices and bringing them together further questions that pertains the understanding and relationship of death, martyrhood, nation, and patriotism and the state are brought to fore.

In the case of the Unknown Soldier, the figure of the martyr is initially anonymous despite the presence of 71 symbolic names, and the monument is an abstract symbol of a popular base rising to the panicle of the victory. Only after the assassination of the president, does the tomb have an occupant; the aim of this occupancy is to script it to the visualization of the nation and overcoming the trauma of a symbolic televised assassination.

In other words, here both the absence of the figure of the anonymous martyr of the war and the later absence of the president who ordered the construction of the monument are fused together is the official, national visualization of different notions of martyrdom and sacrifice for the nation.

By contrasts, since 2011 the question of the memory of the revolution is has been quite present. Absences and death quickly took on the meaning of ‘martyrdom’, which also indicates ‘witnessing’, yet despite all the efforts of
archiving the revolution, absence retains its ambivalence and disruptive effects. Urban voids or visualizations of absence like the graffiti and murals dedicated to the martyrs of the revolution remain as a demand for justice rather than representative street art.