

## Public Space, Public Art, and the Revolution. Reflections on Sudan's "Nile Spring" 2019 Sit-In Space

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### Abstract

Since the Arab spring in 2011, public space and public art have been progressively central to urban planning and design literature. The recent social movements and reform discourse in the Sudanese cities exhibit that public space and public art have come to the fore in the civil uprising of December 2018 and its associated sit-in space. While many studies have examined public spaces in Khartoum, only a few have looked at them from the perspective of activism and public art. Yet, the post-2018 uprising has rendered these topics critical and compelling to researchers. This research reflects upon the transformation and events in the Khartoum sit-in space during the December uprising. Our article aims to document and analyse the public art and graffiti presented in the sit-in space in Khartoum. This research tries to answer two main questions: What role does public art and graffiti play in the revolution? Moreover, how does this role influence the quality of public space in general and the sit-in space in particular? The methodology used in this article includes direct observation, interviews, and follow-up of written and photographic material from the sit-in space and online and written resources. The results exhibited in this article show that public art and graffiti played five significant roles in the sit-in space. Public art also transformed the sit-in space aesthetics and the conception of public art and how it is produced and consumed.

**Keywords:** public arts and graffiti, public space, December revolution 2018, the "Nile Spring", Khartoum, Sudan

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## 1. Introduction

The value of public space was not once so passionately deliberated on a global scale as it has been since the emergence of the Arab revolutions (Abaza, 2014). The occupy movements have drawn interest within urban design and planning about the role of public space as an arena of democratic action and political change and art as a tool of resistance. There is a need for work to be done to understand space and how it is produced and used (Beqaj, 2016). Such work is essential given the increased importance of space as a political (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 2009), social (Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 2010), and cultural (Gehl, 2007; Naamani and Simpson, 2021) domain observed worldwide. In Khartoum, anyone who can recall the city on April 6th, 2019, and the days afterward, will recollect the hundreds of thousands of people who went outside to gather in a place that was created by themselves. The revolutionary moment triggered by the occupation of the sit-in space in April 2019 was unlike any other protest action which had taken place in Sudan's modern history (Bahreldin, 2021). The occupation of the sit-in space has set up a new chapter not only in Sudan's political history but also in how public spaces are defined, produced, and appropriated. Such change would not have been possible without all the activities in the "al-Qeyada"<sup>1</sup> sit-in during the "Nile Spring," transforming a space once two parallel one-way streets into one of the most vibrant public spaces in Sudan's history.

The sit-in space occupation in Khartoum has enlightened us about a fundamental transformation in the intensity and modalities of the systems that provide and manage urban spaces (Bahreldin, 2021). These types of change are documented globally and, to a lesser extent, in the Sudanese literature. As a result, many activities and encounters have arisen aiming at keeping what is owned by the public "publicly available." These activities include various urban activism methods to reclaim public space. Nevertheless, while comprehensively performed by protesters and investigated by the literature, the function of public art in the occupied public space remains challenging and only fairly comprehended. The understanding of the role of public art in temporary urban spaces has not been offered adequate attention,

This article is situated within the current debates about public space politics and dynamism and the complexities of its production in cities during the revolution. It shapes a portion of a more extensive study on public space and politics. It profoundly builds on the ongoing, research titled "Between politics and social life: the ambivalence of contemporary urban public space in Sudan."

## 2. Objectives, research questions, and methodology

This paper reflects on Khartoum city and the sit-in space initiated by the protestors in the *al-Qeyada* area, reconnoitring the events that followed April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, when protestors gathered in the sit-in in front of the army headquarter, by the end of which numerous were killed in the chaos that ended the sit-in on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019. Through studying the sit-in space in Khartoum, this paper aims to reflect upon some of the significant public art transformations and their functions during the December 2018 revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> "al-Qeyada" is a local Arabic term used to represents the area around the Army headquarter in Khartoum

First, we discuss how people reclaim public space in Khartoum, which was decisive in making public spaces "public," allowing for making "public" art more visible and functional. Next, we focus on the role of public art during the 2018 Sudanese uprising, which seemed, at first glance, to be the latest wave of 'growing uprising in response to the current crisis of urban justice and equality in the Sudanese public spaces. The objective is to document and understand some of the public art functions that followed the sit-in space in Khartoum and analyse how they are produced and thus affect the sit-in atmosphere. This research tries to answer two main questions; What role does public art and graffiti play in the revolution? Furthermore, how does this role affect the quality of public space in general and the sit-in space in particular? Since the author could only eyewitness the last five days of the sit-in space in Khartoum, this article does not try to be ethnographic research. Therefore, the methodology underlines this research includes limited direct observation but mainly focuses on interviews and documentation of written and photographic material from the sit-in, online, and written resources.

### 3. Sudan's 2018 Revolution 'the Nile Spring'

The falling living standards, inequalities, increasing taxes, and the continuous wars observed during the al-Bahir regime have triggered massive anti-government movements throughout the country. More than nine cities in Sudan have joined the peaceful efforts of the December revolution that aims at ousting al-Bashir and the ruling party (the National Congress) from power. After four months of the nonstop uprising, protestors decided to march to the military headquarters in Khartoum to either neutralize or get the support of the military in their cause. On April 6th, 2019, protestors made it to the space in front of the army headquarter "*al-Qeyada*," starting the first mass political sit-in in Sudan's modern history. The sit-in, that lasted for fifty-eight days prior to its violent dispersed, has produced one of the most memorable multifunctional political spaces in a space that was previously a couple of parallel streets. The story of the sit-in and the activities and events that followed have been an inspiration for citizens and researchers for many decades. The diagram in Figure I shows the main events that followed Sudan's Nile Spring uprising.

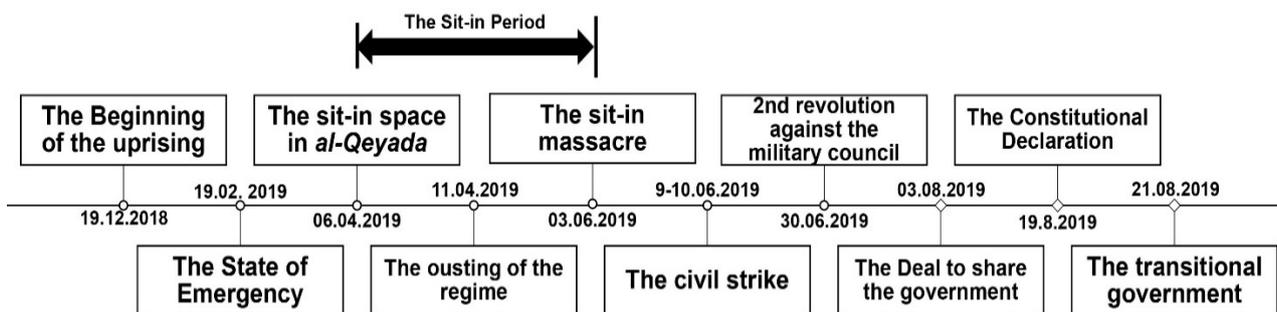


Figure I. Timeline shows the "Nile Spring" main events 2018-2019.

#### 4. How people reclaim public space in Khartoum

Khartoum is the largest and most populous region in Sudan. As a capital city, it is favoured with many services, functions, and activities other Sudanese towns do not have. The city's primacy has been questioned for decades as one of the reasons why balanced urban development in Sudan was not achieved yet (Agraa *et al.*, 1985; Ahmad, 2000; Hafzallah, 2008; Bahreldin and Hamid, 2018). The city is heavily administrative and suffers from economic decline (El-Bushra and Hijazi, 1995), increasing population (Bahreldin, Suleiman and Osman, 2014), and environmental degradation (Hamid and Bahreldin, 2013). Between 1956 and 2011, the capital region underwent four planning attempts, which did not yield fruitful results. The last is the current Khartoum Structure Plan (2018-2030).

In the last three decades, Khartoum has been branded by the scarcity of public realm and spaces that accommodate the diverse citizen's spectrum. Inhabitants are detached into social classes, reflecting in distinct spatial domains. This decline in the public realm occurs in almost all public spaces, including parks, squares, riverfront, and even neighbourhood parks. The segregation observed above makes it difficult to produce a successful public space that includes everyone. Additionally, the implementation of most of the previous plans has ignored both the distribution and the quality of these public spaces. Since the al-Bashir military coup in 1989, political power has contentiously shaped the public realm in Khartoum. Accordingly, architects and urban planners did not play an active and decisive role in developing and reshaping social, cultural, and political encounters in public spaces and squares. Most of the public spaces were symbolized or appropriated to exhibit the power of the state (Bahreldin, 2021). Public spaces that show otherwise were controlled, prohibited, or regulated. Such control was achieved through ongoing privatization, ignorance, and closure of public spaces. Examples include the closure of the "Mefroosh"<sup>2</sup> event in *Atanie* open space, which was considered by many as a domain of the freedom of public arts and culture, and the shutdown of Aziz Art Center in the "Six of April" park in 2017.

Hence, the city is rapidly ceasing to be a space for public interaction or an "anthropological space" (Bahreldin, 2021). For decades, we have observed a phenomenon of fundamental transformation in the structures that deliver and manage urban public spaces in Khartoum. These types of change are documented in the Sudanese literature fostering that Khartoum's public spaces are considered numerous and oversized (Ministry of Environment & UN-Habitat, 2014), vast and harmful (Hamid, 2016). Additionally, Khartoum public spaces are highly privatized (Bahreldin, 2005), neglected (Ahmad, 2000; Hamid, 2016), segregated (Al-Karib, 2019) and underdeveloped (Awad, 2018). Therefore, Khartoum has been re-branded by the scarcity of public realm and spaces that accommodate all citizens (Bahreldin, 2021). Consequently, the previously mentioned notions in planning and designing Khartoum public spaces have produced numerous conflicts and struggle of which space was both constituent and a container (Bahreldin, 2020). As a result, many inhabitants opt to make their cities their own by repossessing the streets and public spaces, hence reclaiming them. We value that public spaces are the location of class struggle and contestation of neoliberal programs and policies (Hutchison and Teixeira Lopes, 2016). Additionally,

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<sup>2</sup> Mefroosh is one of the most vibrant private/public spaces in Khartoum downtown. Historically, it accommodates the famous *Atanie* coffee shop, a meeting spot for many tourists and locals.

space is a domain where spatial components- materials, volumes, colours, and heights mingle with other elements such as space uses, flows, perceptions, mental associations, and systems of representation (Attia, 2011). For these reasons, understanding how those spaces are produced, appropriated, and reclaimed is essential to understand the space politics manifested in the revolution space, such as Khartoum's sit-in.

Reclaiming public space generally includes many social, economic, and spatial forces (Hou, 2010; Attia, 2011; Carmona, 2015). The process of producing public spaces and repossessing (reclaiming) them responds nicely to the Hou's spatial duality. Jeffery Hou notes that there are ultimately two kinds of public spaces: institutionalized and "insurgent" spaces (Hou, 2010). Referring to the importance of "insurgent spaces", Hou explained that public space must be "enacted" – occupied, used- for it to be genuinely public (Hou, 2010). For Hou, the act of using the space is what makes it a public and authentic space. This analogy was also shared by Kirsch (1995) who separated the space in terms of "production" and "Adaptation," in which the latter seems to be more related to social groups and communities, especially in less democratic societies. Building on this, we can observe three modalities of how public space is adapted or "reclaimed" in Khartoum.



Figure 2. Atypical organization of a group of Sitat- Ashai in Khartoum streets. Photographed by the author.

Ephemeral urbanism activities are forms of appropriation and reclamation of public space by the public. These forms can be strong engines for social change while energizing citizens to reclaim their public space. One of the typical ephemeral urbanisms in Khartoum is the various placemaking activities observed. "Placemaking" has emerged as an approach in which inhabitants transform their public spaces, boosting the connection between them and the places. Much evidence is observed in Khartoum, where placemaking facilitated public space use and sometimes even privately owned spaces such as the Atanei square in Khartoum downtown and Midan Al-moulid in Omdurman. Streets are also massively reclaimed during the month of Ramadan through the *Iftar* (the evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast). As part of

placemaking strategies, many public activities are used as tools to reclaim public space. These activities might include festivals, football matches, Sitat- Ashai (women-run makeshift street cafe), and street art.



Figure 3. Al-moulid in Omdurman, an example of privately owned space that is used for public activities and interactions. Photographed by the author.

Secondly, In the last two decades, Khartoum's public spaces have materialized as spatial domains in which revolutionary actions occur and as a political element in the production of an uprising. Cities' spaces of resistance (public spaces such as Taksim, Tahrir, Zuccotti Park, and Khartoum sit-in) may speak about an essential method of claiming public space. Various protest movements sprung up to deny, prevent or object to an action that would restrain citizens' access to public space or lifestyle. The three previous Sudanese revolutions (the December 2018 uprising, the April intifada of 1985, and October 1964) were all manifested and associated with the political reclamation of public space (Bahreldin, 2021). In 1985 intifada public spaces were highly used as spaces of resistance. Street art also mobilized the public through slogans painted on walls (Berridge, 2016). In 2018, protestors in the Khartoum sit-in reclaimed that space and appropriated it to fit their needs and functions (Bahreldin, 2021). The extreme spatial manifestation of public space reclamation throughout the December 2018 uprising has made public space a container of the revolution and a constituent (Bahreldin, 2021). Another form of reclaiming the public space in Khartoum is reclaiming Neighbourhood public space by establishing new interaction zones, such as gardens, fences and seating for adjacent residential zones. Additionally, integrating the social environment into the physical environment in specific public spaces is an excellent example of how people are taking it upon themselves to change their physical environment to make a statement of some kind that feeds into reclaiming their public spaces. In this regard, streets are increasingly used for social activities, including weddings, praying, and playing (Hamid, 2016). A slightly different version of this reclamation occurs when residents plan to develop their own public spaces. This form of reclamation is like placemaking but

involves many permanent and organized efforts by local communities that sometimes privatize the common. By doing so, citizens precede the public space privatization process that uses the underdevelopment of these spaces as an excuse for privatization (Awad, 2021).

Finally, in the post-2018 uprising in Sudan, a novel reclaiming of public space was done through the Tamkeen Removal Committee (Lagnat Izalet al-Tamkeen). This committee is a high-level committee assigned to trace and recover government money stolen by operatives of the defunct regime under their notorious drive known as Tamkeen (literally empowering themselves, the Islamists)(YH.AS, 2020). This reclamation does not necessarily relate to how people use the space but to who owns the common. In this sense, the reclamation of public space by the committee does not imply "adaptation" of public space as defined by Kirsch (1995), rather it is more to the "production" of the space. The committee has confiscated and recovered many public spaces for public ownership, including clubs, the child city (children's playground), the al-Riyadh family park, and many others.

## 5. Khartoum, and it is Sit-in Space

Khartoum sit-in in the *al-Qeyada* area represents an alternative form of public space. Positioned in a very central location within the capital region of Sudan in a place historically known as a domain that exhibits military power. The space before and after the revolution is far from being considered a public domain. The sit-in extends through multiple layers of road networks and access points. This space, which measures 27.5 hectares was the centre of various activities, and debates during Sudan's December uprising.

The accessibility of public transport to the sit-in space is quite excellent. Many transportation lines run at the edges of the sit-in extending for kilometres inside Khartoum and Khartoum North urban fabric. Protestors established three bus stops named "*Tasgut Bes*" (Just Fall, that is all) and ended up at the sit-in from the East and the West. This excellent accessibility has increased the sit-in event's visibility and impact. While it is not clear why protestors have chosen this space in particular for their sit-in, Bahreldin, 2021 argues that the sit-in represents the ongoing struggle over public space. As public space in Khartoum is increasingly becoming "representational space." The "Nile Spring" has no place to translate its demands into a physical space but the streets and some neighbourhood playgrounds. Under such conditions, it was feasible for protestors to occupy a space just a combination of parallel roads that symbolized the state power and made it their political domain and spaces of "representation."

Nonetheless, the occupation of this space has transformed it into a significant public domain. Several spatial elements were constructed as soon as protestors gained control over that space. For instance, barricades were built to protect their occupied space, open platforms and stages for public speaking and performances were constructed, and spaces for security and media rooms were prepared. Many other functions were also temporarily built, including spaces for street vendors and commercial uses, and areas for services such as toilets, drinking, and food supplies, thus creating a focal point in the vast space.

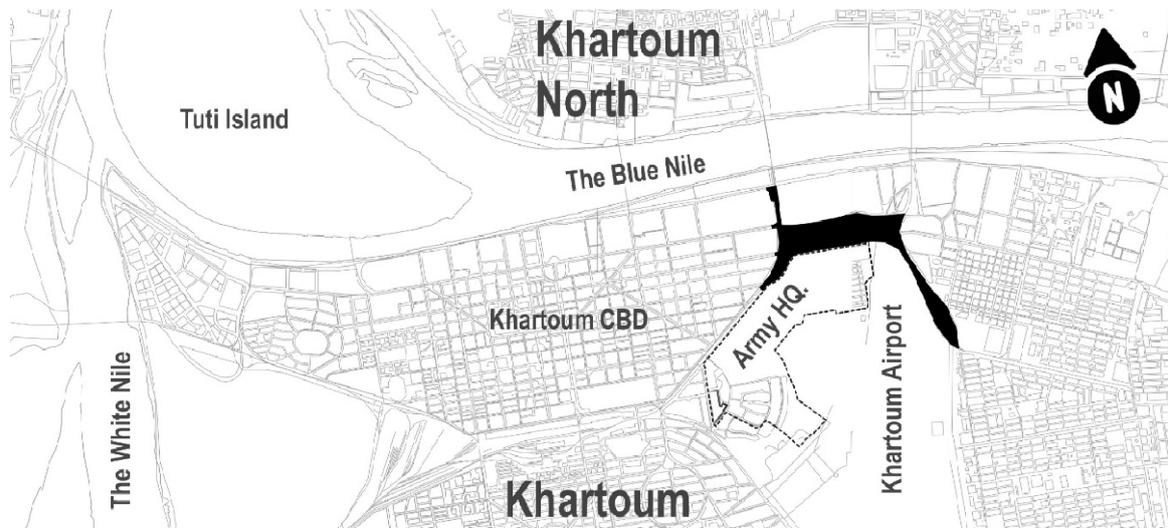


Figure 4. The location of Khartoum's sit-in within the city of Khartoum (marked with black).



Figure 5. Drone photo taken on April 6th 2019 (the first day of the sit-in) showing the floods of protestors and the boundaries of the Khartoum sit-in. Photographed by Waddah Hago.

## 6. Arts and Graffiti Symbolisms and functions in the sit-in space

The use of public art as an instrument of protest and place generation is not a new practice. Public Art artists often use public space to critique the sphere where political, social, and economic contestations occur. When the political system or government lack accountability, public or street art denotes a rebellious and populist "do-it-yourself" (DIY) attitude (Iveson, 2013). What happens during the December uprising sit-in space activities testify to the previous statement.

During the December uprising, street art was used to mock the al-Bashir regime and to express citizen demands for change. Graffiti, sculptures, murals, reliefs, and art objects are all subjects that have participated in transforming the character of the sit-in space

and other parts of the city into a fortress of beauty and political messages (Bahreldin, 2020). However, it is imperative to note that public art in the sit-in space was not only characterized by the abovementioned elements. Other innovation elements, including the open-air museum, which exhibits the loot that protestors claimed from regime soldiers during the revolution, is a unique form of public art shown in the sit-in (Bahreldin, 2020). Also, some protesters consider the cultural diversity and the gathering process in the sit-in space as art, "*with people from all over the country; the sit-in space was a gigantic social and cultural graffiti*" (Hammad, 2019).



Figure 6. The public exhibition billboard pole that exhibits the loot from the regime police and security forces. Photographed by the author.

The functions of street art and graffiti in the sit-in are ephemeral forms and drawings representing Kurt Iveson's notions of DIY urbanism. By examining 56 art pieces, from graffiti, wall drawings, asphalt sketches, and paper posters, we identified five primary public art functions in the sit-in space.

First and foremost, street arts showcase a platform to communicate and receive direct and indirect messages. Public art can explore ideas and concepts, promote a specific political viewpoint, challenge assumptions, and support causes. Through public arts, protestors created vibrant messaging platforms that send and receive several types of messages to multiple recipients/senders (Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 7

Figure 10). The messages are political, social, cultural, and even messages that help them organize and manage their sit-in space. This powerful messaging platform also targeted those reluctant citizens that did not get involved in the uprising. The art-oriented messaging platform also seems to have targeted local and international communities. The language used in most of the graffiti and public arts exhibits the revolution known slogan "*Freedom, peace and justice.*"

While the function of art as a messaging platform is not novel to the Sudanese public art as it was used in the April intifada in 1985 in Sudan (Berridge, 2016), its impedance in the Khartoum sit-in is different in many ways, one of which is the extensive use of social media as an alternative public art platform. This was generally manifested through Facebook and Twitter during the uprising and a web page after the sit-in was dispersed. For instance, the Sudanese artists have inaugurated a webpage with many sit-in artworks<sup>3</sup>. The internet and social media have thus expanded the spatiality of the sit-in beyond the physical space. Internet impacted the sit-in public art functionality by providing an efficient messaging platform that boasted the messages of the revolution to the global recipient. The public is no longer country-specific but globally defined (Gamman, 2019).



Figure 7. The work of Galal Yousif urging protestors not to leave the sit-in until freedom, peace, and justice are achieved. Photographed by the author.

To accentuate on the use of public art as a messaging platform it would be crucial to dive into some examples and observation of this function. The messages that are sent through art activities in the sit-in space transcend beyond space and time of which it was created. Some message in the sit-in reacted to issues that occur in the past or ongoing issues, hence providing a visual source of history and everyday life. For instance, the graffiti in Figure 6 by Eisra Awad speaks of the role the women played in the different stage of the revolution. This role extends beyond the December 2019 uprising (Adlan, 2019). Other reacts to issues that occurs hundred kilometers from the sit-in space, thus, extending the spatiality of the public art and the sit-in space.

<sup>3</sup> In late 2019, the Sudanese artists launched an exciting website that documents many of the murals and artwork of the sit-in. it can be accessed at <https://sudanrevolutionart.org>

One of the clear observations regarding the sit-in art is the extensive use of written statement along the artwork. We assumed artist realizes the gap between the art they produce and the public, thus tried to bridge it through injecting written statement into their artwork. But it would perhaps be a misguided assumption as Gamman argue that the use of text is to ensure the clarity of messages delivered (Gamman, 2019). Another observation on this section is that the language used in many morals and artwork is not common to the public. While the graffiti expresses to the spectrum of protestors, the terms used are generally utilized by the youth. These expressions portray the impedance of the strong youth participation in the revolution (Adlan, 2019).



Figure 8. A graffiti by an unknown artist that shows the strength of the revolution by transforming chains into a new peaceful Sudan. Photographed by the author.

Words like “*Sabinneha*” and “*deseis*” which stands for “we will stand strong” and “that is good” respectively are highly used in the moral and graffiti from one side, and the sit-in space in the other. The previous two word are known to be used among the youth community in Sudan.

Secondly, street art and graffiti provided a platform for collective memory through the documentation of the events of the revolution. Numerous artworks in the sit-in and around the city recorded most of the daily activities of the revolutions. Some of these events include 1) women's participation in the uprising; 2) those who have fallen during the “Nile Spring”; 3) the cultural diversity of the sit-in; 4) the slogans chanted during the revolution; 5) the support protestors received from the lower-rank army officers in the sit-in; 6) and the peacefulness of the uprising.



Figure 9. One of the most famous graffiti exhibits the face of the revolution martyr painted on the walls of the University of Khartoum. Photographed by Ali Gaffar.



Figure 10. A graffiti by Eisra Awad documents women's participation in the revolution. Photographed by the author.

Thirdly, public art plays a decorative role in the sit-in space and the barricades. Protestors compete against each other to make the sit-in space and the barricades look beautiful through art and decorations. The decorative art patterns observed in the barricades generally show a blend of diverse Sudanese cultural patterns (Adlan, 2019). This type of art, especially connected with barricades, is as dynamic as the barricades themselves. The art contents keep changing as the barricades move from one place to another.



Figure 11 Photo shows some of the art and decoration at the "Al-Simood" (boldness) Barricade northwest of the sit-in. Photo courtesy of Ali Gaffar.

Fourth, public art was used to appreciate and stimulate the country's history, and the appreciation of Sudanese identity as an alternative that transcends years of heavily promoted religious identities (Figure 12). Sudanese who made history in the past were summoned into the sit-in space through graffiti and public arts. An excellent example of this is the queen of the Nubian Kingdom of Kush, named "Kandake," who represents the active women's participation in the uprising, and the Nubian pharaoh *Taharqa* (690–664 BC), who ruled Sudan and Egypt during the twenty-fifth dynasty. The images of the "Kandake" were not only drawn but summoned through the daily practices as the protestors started to call any women participating in the uprising as a "Kandake." Finally, Similar to what happened in Tahrir square during the Arab spring, street artists also supplemented the work of many social media platforms in producing public knowledge and criticizing the regime (Main, 2014). Arts was extensively used as a social media tool and as an educational instrument to raise awareness about the protestor's cause and protestors' abilities to express their ideas through graffiti and drawing. Several art workshops and graffiti events were carried out during the fifty-eight days of the sit-in, teaching and improving protestors' abilities to produce art and express their ideas in the graphic.



Figure 12, A graffiti that exhibits the diversity of the protestors in the sit-in space. Unknown artist. Photo courtesy of Ali Gaffar.



Figure 13. Shows the outcomes of participatory art and graffiti ideas displayed in the sit-in before their transformation to the sit-in walls and floor. Photograph by Ali Gaffar.

## 7. Discussion

The role of public art and graffiti in the sit-in serve multiple purposes, often simultaneously: to send messages, to invoke feeling and memory, to beautify the space, to appreciate the history, to educate, to honor important persons and events, to perform as a instrument of political or social publicity, to document everyday life, and to represent a community's culture. In addition, public art in the sit-in was also an esthetic therapy. A therapy from what (Irvine, 2012, p.03) called "*dysaesthetic of urban controlled commercialized visibility*." This function may bring the public art in the Khartoum sit-in to become an act of emancipation by giving the public the space and the tools to understand the social, political, and cultural products around them (Alnaji, 2020) or by providing new ways of seeing reality.

Public art in the sit-in has also shortened the distance between the art producer (the artist) and the art consumer (the observer). It also did the same between the individual and the society (Gamman, 2019). The observer becomes a co-producer of artworks through the public participation observed in sit-in public art (Bahreldin, 2021). The sit-in has also challenged the central dominance of the neoliberal and private domain in controlling cities' visual expression, including advertisements and billboards. An excellent example of this is the transformation made by the protestors for the massive advertisement billboards in the sit-in, which turns out to be the symbolic sit-in museum that exhibits the loot claimed by the protestors along many other messages shown in Figure 6.

The sit-in public art express various challenges and issues vital for protestors. For instance, art and graffiti in the sit-in speak about history, the divide among society, justice issues, gender challenges, and environmental challenges (Adlan, 2019). Through public art, the sit-in public sphere managed to capture topics related to the revolution and the country's problems in general. Hence, public art becomes a tool for social criticism and perhaps a method to release the protestors' anger. The art and graffiti in the sit-in may have changed the notion of what art is. The revolution seems to have "liberated" art from being understood as a commodity produced and consumed by a particular group of people in exclusive art galleries; to a product produced and exhibited on the streets (Sari, 2019). Various scale art and graffiti pieces managed to stimulate the imagination and encourage people to create and explore them in perhaps the most significant open-air art exhibition and workshop in Sudan's history. The sit-in space was the ultimate space for both the production and consumption of Art. The sit-in artwork has shattered the walls of fear, taboos, and apprehension constructed during the al-Bashir regime, replacing them with these beautiful artistic alternatives, graffiti, and arts that speak of liberty and freedom. Before the revolution, "*street art and graffiti were only for the homeless; therefore, they lacked techniques. The revolution pushed the limits of public and street art by inserting both the meaning and the technique in the process*" (Afifi, 2019)). Besides, The importance of public art in the sit-in space comes not only from the look and the materials, but it is also capable of creating a sense of community through art-making. The revolution makes art production a collective endeavor through which the community participates in producing and enjoying the product. This collaborative art production is what makes art "public." We understand that urban squares are vital for employing individuals in a meaningful social hierarchy (Turner, 1970: p19). These spaces are therefore characterized as being carefully designed and planned to reflect that square's power relationships. However,

with its undefined edges and poor connectivity, the sit-in space does not belong to this category. The very forces that contributed to shaping Khartoum city urban space fragmentation gathered together to create an alternative form of public space that is produced and driven by the revolution in a way that challenged the existing mechanism. Different political parties, religious and social groups, cultural groups, and even some of those who were fighting against the government gathered in one space, protesting and producing art and graffiti that spoke of freedom.

The occupation of the sit-in space broke open courageous new spaces for Sudan artists. They, in turn, open a new arena for political discourse. This double-layered process exemplifies Albert Einstein's words, "The Revolution introduced me to art, and in turn, art introduced me to the Revolution." Street arts and graffiti in the sit-in space are thus an evocative form of placemaking, extending from pure resistance and contestation to public space beautification. Public arts in the December revolution might have challenged the traditions of the past in favour of future possibilities.

To conclude, it is crucial to acknowledge that the public art and graffiti, which unveiled the rays of public criticism and oppositional voices, are perhaps unmatched in Sudan's modern history (Bahreldin, 2020). Despite that, the authorities began to clear the artwork and graffiti after the dispersed the sit-in space. However, the socio-political fabric of Khartoum has been irreversibly marked by the contest between physical control and destruction and the remarkable stream of creative expression as manifested in public art and graffiti after the sit-in. This contest does not seem to end soon.



Figure 14. Public art after the revolution still exhibits the revolution's slogan. The photo was taken at Sudan University Tunnel in August 2019 after the sit-in. Photographed by the author.

## 8. Conclusions

Public art in the Khartoum sit-in was a post-occupancy critique of public spaces. The functions played by public art turned the sit-in space into the "site" and the "instrument" of the revolutionary struggle. The "site" is explained by where protestors practice their activities; the "instrument" is the tools (functions) used to express the protestor's cause regardless if that function is related to the revolution or public life.

For decades, art galleries in Khartoum have been owned, run, and exhibit the ideas of particular social and economic classes. The sit-in, perhaps temporarily, has ended years of control over art and graffiti and provided an alternative form of how public art should be produced and consumed in a public space. The question at this point is whether this alternative form of art production and its associated functions signals a paradigm shift in public art practice. Evidence of the spread of revolutionary public art and graffiti throughout Khartoum is observed. It is no longer surprising to see public walls – even those of military and administrative function – bombarded with beautiful graffiti expressing this transformation powerfully. Yet, it remains to be seen what post-uprising may offer Sudan's public spaces as the uprising is still ongoing with alternative spatiality. Even though many public spaces in Khartoum today are still spaces of expression and resistance, other spaces (especially city-level public spaces) that were used by the revolution in Khartoum regress to their original uses (including the sit-in). This echoes what was observed in the Lebanese 2019 and Tunisian 2011 uprisings (Sinno, 2020). While Sudan's December revolution beautifully showcased the importance of public arts in public spaces, this impedance has unfortunately faded over time.

Additionally, the idea of "public art" itself, as observed in the sit-in - which involved the public in the process of making the art - seems to have regressed to becoming "art in public," where art is still produced and showcased in public spaces but without the public contribution. This observation leads us to the question of who the public in public art is. Such a question is yet to be answered in the case of Khartoum public art practices. The functions of the public art exhibited in this article have provided a critique of issues beyond the revolution. Using public art to diagnose issues in the city is new to public art in Sudan. It's not massive, but a leap in the right direction.

In conclusion it's important to recall our two research questions, the role of public art and graffiti in the revolution? And how this role affects the quality of public space in the sit-in space. The findings of this article showcased five main functions that public art played during the sit-in period. Public art provided a messaging platform for protestors; it became the collective memory of the revolution; it decorated and beautified the space; it stimulated the country's history and identity; it produced human knowledge and education. Moreover, it creates a sense of community and community ownership. Also, public art has significantly changed the appearance and experience of both the sit-in space and the city of Khartoum at large, signalling a wake-up call to professionals, including city designers, social engineers, and art-makers, concerning their role in the city and society. Finally, public art demonstrated the collective work and participation in the sit-in space, confirming that public art does empower citizens. Through public art, the sit-in space has become a catalyst for social change.

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