



PRESS RELEASE:

Fighting Walls: Street Art in Egypt and Iran

Urban walls form the skin of a city, communicating its values - from nationalistic state-sponsored messages, to the perspectives of the people. *Fighting Walls: Street Art in Egypt and Iran*, an exhibition at New Art Exchange, Nottingham, examines street walls in Tehran and Cairo, and how they have been appropriated by a new generation of socially engaged graffiti artists. The exhibition represents over 100 artworks, ranging from activist graffiti to governmentally commissioned murals - each intervention mirroring underlying currents within these unique societies.

For the first time, *Fighting Walls* brings together the graffiti of Egypt and Iran - two contexts that are unique, yet share a history of social uprisings that have led for walls to function as communally curated message boards. Whilst murals and urban art in the west has been well documented over the last decade, this New Art Exchange curated exhibition celebrates the work of street artists working in dramatically different contexts; where political orders impinge democracy and freedom of speech, and where artists face extreme repercussions, including prison sentences, for expressing their views on the walls of the city.

Melanie Kidd, Director of Programmes at New Art Exchange (NAE) reflects on why the exhibition is ground-breaking and of considerable social importance when exhibited in the UK:

“Through thought-provoking and often beautiful imagery, Fighting Walls creates a refreshing and accessible means of connecting with the political struggles facing the people in both Iran and Egypt; important narratives that can be lost on the west, as we become numb to the onslaught of media coverage of the Middle East. Fighting Walls also celebrates new and non-Eurocentric aesthetics in street art, and through presenting the show in a contemporary art space, we’re acknowledging the relevance of an art form often marginalised as less significant than Fine Art practice. Most significantly however, Fighting Walls celebrates the bravery of those that continue to take to the streets to campaign for justice and change on behalf of the people, markedly defining the role of artist as activist.”

Fighting Walls takes the form of an immersive installation of large-scale photography, mimicking the street art’s original urban settings. Through considering a broad range of city walls, *Fighting Walls* merges social commentary, visual culture, as well as more traditionally defined art practices. The exhibition examines urban walls since Iran’s 1979 revolution, when walls became spaces for message sharing among the people, trusted over monitored and controlled media. Similarly, in Egypt during their 2011 revolution, walls once again represented an accessible and democratic way for citizens to engage in public debate. Even with the emergence of social media, graffiti allows for anonymous and untraceable message sharing. Both Egypt’s and Iran’s appropriations of urban walls emerged from a sense of urgency and defiance, drawing people to the streets where they are visible and active.

Fighting Walls describes a struggle of ownership over urban sites, as authorities and rebellious individuals both use the walls to express their social ideals, often editing one another. Post revolution, Iran's government responded to the newfound social importance of urban walls by curating its content, commemorating war heroes or reiterating revolutionary values. Since 2004, Iran's government-funded Beautification Bureau have commissioned large-scale murals depicting serene nature scenes that borrow from Surrealism's visual language, in attempt to regenerate Tehran. Yet the murals are often modified by unpermitted street artists, challenging the idealism it conveys. Street art in Egypt also responds to authority, for example, temporary military blockades are often graffitied to protest their existence and the negative impact they have on residents' life. Examples within the exhibition include a barrier painted yellow with a smiling face, or painting with the view behind the blocked wall, finding the positive in an unideal situation.

The exhibition celebrates the power of creativity in challenging the status-quo through the often unheard story of street art in Egypt and Iran. It presents graffiti art, not only as a form of social protest, but also as a voice and a creative language which addresses the masses. This socially-engaged art form provides genuine insight into two unique cultures, representing the ideals and concerns of the people.

Exhibition Details

Fighting Walls: Street Art in Egypt and Iran

Launch Event: 30 September 2016, 6pm - 9pm

1 October - 18 December 2016

New Art Exchange, Gregory Boulevard, Nottingham, NG7 6BE

Editor Notes

A selection of images can be downloaded from Dropbox: <http://bit.ly/2csBXG4>

For further images and to arrange interviews/photo opportunities contact Laura-Jade Vaughan: laurajade@nae.org.uk, 0115 924 8630

About New Art Exchange

A contemporary art space committed to stimulating new perspectives on the value of diversity within art and society. New Art Exchange is the largest space in the UK dedicated to culturally diverse contemporary visual arts, and is rooted in the community with a strong history of working with minority communities. Past exhibitors include: Yinka Shonibare, Zarina Bhimji, John Akomfrah, Rashid Rana, Zineb Sedira, Nari Ward, Christian Marclay and Elizabeth Price (British Art Show 7), Leo Asemota, Raghu Rai, Lindsay Seers, J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere and Hetain Patel. NAE's mission is to raise the impact, profile and development of culturally diverse contemporary visual arts and artists in a global context by: nurturing and promoting creative talent locally and worldwide, creating thriving creative businesses, and engaging minority ethnic communities as audiences and patrons of art.

New Art Exchange receives support from Arts Council England as a National Portfolio Organisation.

Fighting Walls has been produced in partnership with the publication, *Walls of Freedom*.