# Witness and trace: January 25 graffiti and public art as archive

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*Graffiti writing is one of the easiest and most efficient ways for individuals and opposing groups to register political dissidence, express social alienation, propagate anti-system ideas, and establish an alternative collective memory. (Chaffee, 1990, 127)*

The desire to witness and to leave a trace is an essential part of being human; to leave some evidence representing our part in events large or small. The public expression of an opinion, a value or solidarity with others can be conveyed in the creation of public art or graffiti, by raising a placard, by Tweeting, blogging or carrying out other forms of online activism. It is about having a voice and perspective that connects us to bigger societal movements and events; a voice that has often been marginalised in the re-telling of our stories by historians, journalists and others. However many of these forms of communication have traditionally been regarded by archivists, librarians and museum curators as 'ephemeral' and therefore of a lesser value to more formalised and structured methods of recordkeeping as is found in the official files and volumes of governments and corporations. Their ephemerality is, however, not just in the perception of the memory professionals - it is a reality in the sense that these traces are often fleeting and unavailable for future review; Twitter has no inbuilt back-up functionality; placards are collected up and destroyed; graffiti is washed away. And this leaves us with a tension and an unease, what Jacques Derrida has termed "archive fever" (Derrida, 1996, 12); our desire to carry on knowing that a trace of our experience will exist to allow us to remember, but at the same time the uncertainty that such a trace will be preserved or may in fact be actively removed in an act of politically driven memory vandalism.

The graffiti glowed brilliantly from the minds of Egyptians who joined in the revolution.

This is the voice of Egyptian artist and intellectual Ahmad al-Labbad, speaking to Al Akhbar English journalist Sayyid Mahmoud about Tahrir Square and the streets of Cairo during the January 25 revolution as "the largest open art exhibition the world has ever known" (Mahmoud, 2011). For Labbad, the graffiti, symbols and placards were the only accurate log of the revolution that truly reflected the people's experience. He marvelled at the explosion of free expression and creativity that came from "ordinary citizens". However Labbad's project became a case study of the conflicting urges for memorialisation and trace removal or "memory killing", which exists at the heart of Derrida's concept of archive fever. Labbad: "I imagined that the revolution would spur us to

reconsider the value of the idea of accumulati. It is unfortunate that Tahrir Square was subjected to a frightful operation that erased the artifacts of the revolution. The removal of all the paintings and writings that appeared in the seventeen days prior to Mubarak's stepping down were done under the pretense of cleaning up. Magically, all forms of graffiti were removed from the walls. Thus, under the charge of 'beautifying the city', the authorities launched an attack on history."

Fortunately before the "clean up", Labbad had not only photographed the works but also categorised them according to their subject and date. What he did was organise these traces so that that their content was preserved and so they were related to one another and to the broader societal events which they recorded; he was creating a recordkeeping system.

Recordkeeping is about the nexus between power, accountability and the record as evidence. When a *trace* becomes a *record* by virtue of being part of a *recordkeeping system*, it assumes a new identity - one which brings with it greater power and possibility for societal understanding, reform and reconciliation. Recordkeeping of graffiti and public art as an expression of the people's political claims has nothing to do with highly regulated administrative processes as seen with traditional government or corporate recordkeeping. The "warrant" or recordkeeping requirement is not so automatically understood, nor are there systems in place capable of adequately capturing and contextualising the records. As Sue McKemmish noted in 1996 in her reflections on personal recordkeeping, "there is a pressing need to explore the functional requirements for postcustodial archival regimes that can ensure that a personal archive of value to society becomes an accessible part of the collective memory." (McKemmish, 1996, 45) In the years since her call, however, the focus amongst recordkeeping professionals has remained largely fixed on organisational recordkeeping.

And yet these less formal and more personal forms of recordkeeping demand our serious attention. We stand at a point in time where the personal, community and political archive is easier than ever before to form and disseminate quickly using technology. Importantly, these archives reflect their context in ways that are acceptable to the actors in the events - the protestors and the victims of oppressive regimes - rather than simply adopting standard contextual frameworks from institutional archives. If we accept that the formation of an archive is a political act, then it is easy to see how important is this adjustment to the balance of recordkeeping in society in times of crisis. Official archives contain the viewpoint of the oppressor and then the overthrown. The view of the masses as expressed by their art and slogans is both their response to official force and expression of their own demands, and must also persist. Derrida again: "By ingesting people's stories we make the archive — already a place of memory and mourning — into a place of understanding, of forgiving, of reconciliation." (Hamilton, 2002, 54)

This notion of ways of making and keeping evidence from more than one perspective where there are significant power and cultural differences is

captured well in a story reproduced by noted recordkeeping thinker Chris Hurley in an article he wrote in 2005 on the concept of parallel provenance: "It happened at a meeting between an Indian community in northwest British Columbia and some government officials. The officials claimed the land for the government. The natives were astonished by the claim. They couldn't understand what these relative newcomers were talking about. Finally one of the elders put what was bothering them in the form of a question. 'If this is your land,' he asked, 'where are your stories?' " (Chamberlin, 2003, 1) The graffiti of Tahrir Square are a version of the Egyptian people's stories from those tumultuous days. It is only right that they are protected and shared.

However efforts such as Labbad's to organise and contextualise such records is not all that is required. The question of access to any such new form of archive where it has been formed in the midst of regime change is, of course, vitally important. As the historian in charge of the National Archives of Egypt's Committee to Document Jan 25 project, Dr Khaled Fahmy, has said: "The question of access to information and archives is political, because reading history is interpreting history, and interpreting history is one way of making it. Closing people off from the sources of their own history is an inherently political gesture, and equally opening that up is a political — even revolutionary — act." (Shenker, 2011). By placing community-formed archives like Labbad's online as quickly as possible we allow for use, participation in and contribution to the archive by the widest possible range of affected people and groups. This kind of accessibility is essential for reconstruction and healing, as well as for a realignment of the balance of power between people and the state.

Online access to these archives is a gift but it is also important to remember how the use of technology to capture and share these traces of the revolution helps shape the very nature of not only the archive but the memory/reality of the events in our minds now and into the future. In *Archive Fever* Derrida observes how the use of technology can change the nature of the "archivable event": "What is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way" (Derrida, 1996, 18).

Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine a more different experience of an archive if you compare a visit to The (UK) National Archives in Kew or to the National Archives of Australia in Canberra to view World War I dossiers or shipping lists, as compared with visiting 25Leaks.com to view documents seized by protesters from state security headquarters in Cairo in the aftermath of Mubarak being ousted, or www.tahrirdocuments.org, which provides scans of dozens of printed leaflets that were circulated in the streets during the anti-Mubarak uprising, from religious tracts to lists of political demands. These are "special purpose" archives, created in response to very immediate needs, and which put up few to no barriers (administrative, physical or otherwise) between people and the information, aside from the need to access the internet.

Labbad's work, 25Leaks, Tahrir Documents and many other examples of alternate archives from the Arab Spring and elsewhere show us how technology, free flow of information and generational change have created the impetus for

people to participate in the recordkeeping process to form archives that show and confirm their experience. As Andrew Flinn notes in his discussion of community and independent archives, the collection and preservation of such materials is about their use for "...political and educational purposes, either as tools in contemporary struggles, or to remember and commemorate past lives whose achievements were disfigured by trauma and discrimination, or to combat the alienation and disempowerment of those, particularly the young, denied access to their own history." (Hill, 2011, 151)

Such participatory archives serve as important counters to those formed by business or government recordkeeping, with the state or corporations controlling what evidence is made, kept, destroyed or revealed, through the filter of their political, economic and moral values – and often with governance around such processes that is closed, discouraging society's gaze. These new forms of archives are no longer relegated to the category of ephemera in institutional libraries and archives, or are dismissed as only "fragments", but rather are contextualised, shared, open and dynamic - and available in a time and (online) space that maximises their power to effect change.

The rise of such community and politically driven archives forces those of us working as recordkeeping professionals / archivists to reflect on our professional theory and practice, to see what it is in essence that we bring to the keeping of records that is useful in this new and broader world of memory keepers. How can we provide frameworks to assist in the connecting up of these many disparate archives, or how we can help interpret them? Importantly, how can we cast off some of our preconceived notions of ownership and control to facilitate participative archives allowing more of the people's experience to enter the collective memory of the Arab Spring? Perhaps it is by taking inspiration from people like Ahmad al-Labbad and the archive of public art that glowed so brilliantly from the minds of the Egyptian revolutionaries.

- National Archives of Egypt's Commission for Documenting the January 25th Revolution: http://jan25.nationalarchives.gov.eg/

- Tahrir Documents: http://www.tahrirdocuments.org/

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## About the author

**Cassie Findlay** is the Project Manager, Digital Archives at the State Records Authority of New South Wales (Australia). She is responsible for delivering the digital archives infrastructure and processes for accepting, preserving and making available digital state archives of the NSW Government. Cassie has a chapter on digital recordkeeping in the current edition of the Australian Society of Archivists' textbook *Keeping Archives*, and is a co-founder of the recordkeeping and archives discussion group "Recordkeeping Roundtable". Cassie is particularly interested in transparency and open government, the politics of recordkeeping, and the role of records and archives in the defence of human rights.