



## Artivism in Action: The Power of Art in Youssouf Amine Elalamy's Work- *Drôles De Révolutions*

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<b>Abstract:</b> <i>The article examines the role of art in igniting revolutions, fostering social change, and ultimately transforming reality in Elalamy Youssouf Amine and Hejjamy Yassine's graphic novel Drôles de Révolutions. With a satirical tone, the authors explore both the hopes and turmoil surrounding the Arab Spring revolution. Through a thematic analysis of the book's central theme and protagonist, the article demonstrates how art can serve as a powerful tool for activism during times of dissent. It illustrates the concept of artivism—artistic activism—as a means of leading revolution, fueling protesters' dreams, and sketching a more vibrant, hopeful world.</i>	
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### Introduction

*Drôles de Révolutions* is a graphic novel scripted by Youssouf Amine Elalamy and illustrated by Yassine Hejjamy. The work is based on Elalamy's novel *Drôle de Printemps*, published in 2015, in which the author immerses the reader in the challenges, chaos and hopes of the Arab Spring and those involved in it. Through a series of gags, Youssouf Amine Elalamy narrates the revolutions that transformed the MENA region in 2011, in his unique style that blends realism, humor, irony, and fantasy. "Caught between laughter and tears, the reader compulsively moves from one text to the next. With minimal descriptions, just a few lines, of small details or trivialities that nevertheless speak volumes", explains the author. He continues, "we encounter characters who are somewhat schizophrenic, quirky, and tangled up in their fantasies and frustrations. Each of these portraits leaves us with a bitter laugh stuck in our throats".

The work is the result of a collaboration between a writer and an illustrator. Elalamy is the author of several novels, including *Un Marocain à New York*, *Les Clandestins*, *C'est beau la guerre* and *Big le Grand*. His books have been awarded multiple prizes and translated into several languages. Hejjamy, on the other hand, is an illustrator who has created numerous graphic novels and illustrations, and participated in art competitions. In short, the two artists have crafted a graphic novel that succeeds in yielding a myriad of emotions within the reader.

Full of dark humor, the graphic novel book features a group of people, including an artist, during a revolution time. The black-and-white comic book is about a group of characters, from all walks of life, whose lives and experiences ironically intersect at some point or another and relatively impact each other. The characters revolve around street protests against a dictator whose identity is never revealed. The event takes place in an unnamed Arab country. In this story, the lives of a lost guy who ignores how he ended up in all of this, a young woman who seeks to position herself as a martyr at all costs, a dictator with a Stalin-Kadhafi-like air, and a bookseller turned into shawarma shop owner, among other characters are governed by a dynamic of interconnected forces. In short, it is a whole little world made up of these characters.

**The Title:** The title *Drôles de Révolutions* is already a playful wordplay, offering a multitude of translations and interpretations. *Drôles* can mean both "weird" and "funny", depending on the context. In this case, Elalamy presents the character of the dictator in an ironic way, portraying him as arrogant and entitled; believing himself to be untouchable. Dismissing the demands of the masses, he dehumanizes his people, referring to them as rats, which ultimately leads to his downfall and execution. Meanwhile, the word *Révolutions* combines "revolution" and "rêve" (dream). On the surface, it refers to the revolutions of the Arab Spring, yet the deliberately altered spelling suggests a deeper connection to a world of dreams. By merging *révolution* and *rêve*, Elalamy highlights how the Arab Spring uprisings began as an ambitious, hopeful movement aimed at subverting established systems and creating a more equitable society where everyone could enjoy their rights and social justice. Over time, however, this dream-like movement became

increasingly strange, as the desired outcomes were not fully realized, and at times, events unfolded in reverse.

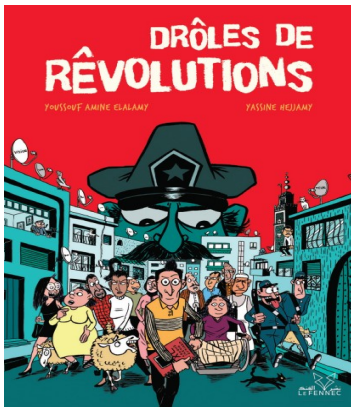


Figure 1 : Cover of *Drôles de Révolutions*

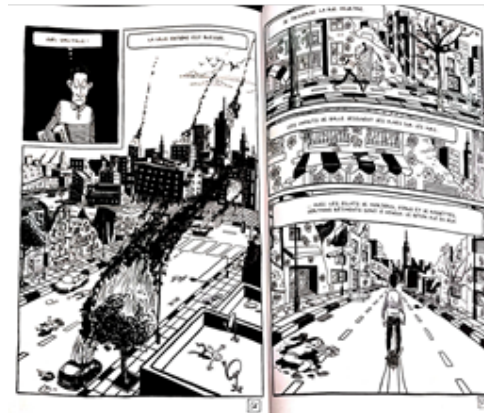


Figure 2: the artist walking in the streets after the assault on the protesters

**The Character of the Artist:** From humans of both genders to animals, the diverse characters all participate in the unfolding revolutions and the creation of a new reality. Looming over them is the ghost of the dictator, watching their every move with a sense of omnipresent control. With a look of determination, the artist leads the demonstrators, carrying his sketchbook, which he uses not only to document but also to reshape reality, drawing a vision of a brighter world (figure 1).

The artist is a central character in the events, being the first to introduce the book and the last to bring it to a close. Initially, he appears as a mere observer of the revolution, intrigued by the masses' uprising and their demands. He joins the demonstration out of curiosity, wanting to understand its scale. At the time, he was working under the dictator's command, writing songs that praised him. However, everything changed when the dictator insisted on belittling his people, calling them rats and ordering the authorities to assault them. It was at this moment that the artist chose to resign his position with the dictator and lead his own revolution, "figuratively" rallying his own people and creating his own vision of a new state.

The artist witnessed the carnage caused by the authorities' armed attack and felt compelled to reimagine the horrific scene. Having transformed from a poet into a painter, he used his art to reshape the ugliness of the revolution and rebuild the falling city through re-drawing and coloring the streets to present a more optimistic outcome for the uprisings (figure 2).

The artist takes on a role similar to that of many artists during revolutions. Often criticized for their perceived detachment or for exploiting situations, artists during this time demonstrated genuine engagement and a deep commitment to stand alongside the masses. Armed with their art, they showed that

creativity could be a powerful tool when harnessed by self-aware individuals. In fact, art became a strong form of dissent, making a tangible impact on both the people and the environment, proving its potential to drive change.

## Discussion

Throughout history, activism has consistently utilized artistic creativity as a protest strategy. While art is undeniably creative, it can also be disruptive. It is both critical and visionary, challenging the present while encouraging us to imagine the future. Artistic activism is a means to an end. It aims at social change. However, many underestimate the impact of artistic strategies. The true power of art lies in its capacity to provoke reflection and, ultimately, inspire action. Artivism emerges out of the intersection between art and social action. This term encompasses various sub-genres, including political art, creative activism, activist art, socially engaged art, and community-based art, all of which suggest that art can drive social and political change. For Duncombe (2018) artivism is a "form of activism that uses art forms as its medium of expression and change" (p.6). Engaging in any form of artistic intervention can lead to changes in behavior, a transformation in individual and collective awareness, and, over time, influence the structures and politics of the state. Once artistic expression is shared, it becomes a form of collective action (Boubia, 2015). Its purpose is to leave a lasting impact and create change by altering power dynamics. Often, it motivates people

to challenge policies or even overthrow regimes, as seen during the Arab Spring revolutions. The artistic community, particularly through street art, chose this medium to protest against the system and its injustices.

Art not only offers a framework for understanding the world but also helps individuals recognize their agency within the larger structure. Just as activists and movements cannot function effectively without considering the cultural dimension, artists cannot work in isolation from their society. Cultural change is an integral part of a broader strategy for transformation that encompasses all areas of life. This is why social movements are often accompanied by artistic interventions. Artistic activism can lead to societal change because it engages with people on a human level, using art as a form of self-expression and agency. It also highlights the importance of cultural involvement within movements and institutions. Eager to take on this responsibility, some artists leverage their talents to promote political causes, advocate for social justice, or raise awareness about environmental issues.

The Arab Spring revolutions significantly shifted public perception of art. Traditionally seen as weak, irresponsible, and ineffective in difficult times, art was often regarded as separate from politics and disconnected from societal issues. Despite numerous examples where art played a crucial role in society, many still viewed it as secondary. In 2011, art (mainly street art) became highly visible in several Arab nations. Protest and dissent were expressed through a variety of actions, including street demonstrations, public gatherings, marches, physical confrontations, slogans, banners, sit-ins, and graffiti. Artists from various disciplines joined the movement, becoming “symbolic freedom fighters” (Boubia, 2015, p.322) and generating emotional power through their artwork. While the streets and squares were occupied by protesters, the walls and surfaces were covered with graffiti. The harsh realities of arrests, confrontations, and martyrdom were softened by vibrant murals that aimed to document the revolution in a cinematic way. After 2011, as the region began to cautiously rebuild, the streets were repainted with new colors.

Art is now recognized as a universal form of soft power, whose influence can often be just as effective, and sometimes more efficient, than traditional hard power. Barthes (1993) introduced the concept of ‘affect’ when analyzing the power of cinematic and photographic imagery. Affect, or emotional impact, has the ability to stir people and give art its potency. It is this emotional resonance that makes certain artworks more successful and influential than others. During the Syrian war following the Arab Spring revolutions, many Syrians fled the conflict, crossing perilous seas in search of a better life. Hundreds became homeless and stateless, risking their lives to escape the violence. The haunting image of lifeless bodies washed ashore, mainly toddlers, shocked the world and had the power to stir the global consciousness and spur action. Similarly, activism can be evaluated through its emotional effect. Art seeks to disturb and provoke, opening up new perspectives and avenues for intervention, even though its impact is not always as direct or evident as other forms of activism. Art conveys messages that emotionally engage the viewer or shift their perception, and its true power lies in its ability to evoke affect.

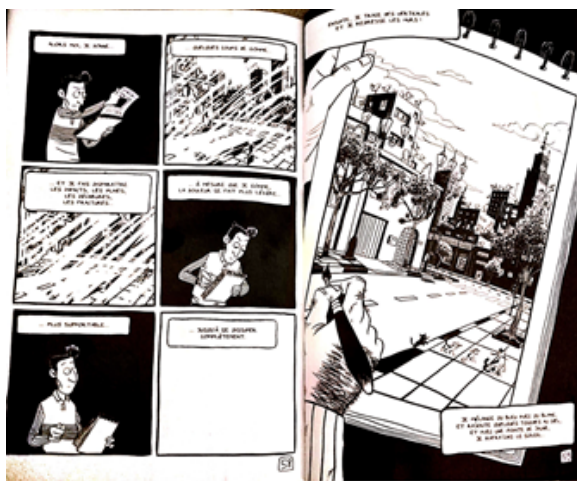


Figure 3: The artist re-drawing his city after the downfall of the dictator



Figure 4: the last page of the graphic novel

Back to Elalamy and Hajjamy’s book, the artist used the eraser to efface the world they once lived in under the rule of the dictator, choosing instead to sketch and envision a new one (Figure 3). The artist delivers a



monologue, explaining that with a simple flick of the eraser, the impacts, injuries, and ills of the old world, all, could be erased. Even pain, he suggests, can be made more bearable than nonexistent with an eraser in hand. The artist then uses his pencils to rebuild and straighten the walls, creating a cleaner, tidier, calmer, and more pleasant environment. He ultimately applies a vibrant palette of colors to repaint the city, infusing it with life and energy, erasing the monotony of the black-and-white reality that had persisted throughout the entire book.

The use of color is symbolic, washing away the gloom of past events and revitalizing the urban landscape. It sets the tone for the new world that awaits the characters. In the final scene of the book, the street appears to have come back to life after the recent bloody events. "On my canvas, life has regained its colors," the artist says, marking the conclusion of his role in the revolution (figure 4). The book shows how art can alter decay, decline and destruction into a better, clearer and more colourful reality. In this final scene, the artist, creatively used his brushes to paint the colourless life into a livelier colourful one. In the artist's vision, characters regain a new life and happy faces in a more liveable city. Even in real revolutions, street art coloured the dark situation, lightened the heavy reality and rekindled the bullet-penetrated walls of the city.

In sum, *Drôles de Révolutions*, is a dream-like satire that depicts the drastic change that a revolution can create in the places and lives of those who live it. It shows how revolution can be the dream of a group of people to end a current situation and initiate change. Each character has found themselves in the middle of the revolution and has seen their lives transform. The final three pages of this comic book encapsulate the role art played during the 2011 revolutions. The artist stood alongside the demonstrators, uniting with them to change their reality and bring about social transformation. The colorful murals breathed life into the once-dead walls and gloomy streets that had witnessed the uprising of the masses.

## Conclusion

This article creatively illustrates the way art, goes beyond aestheticism and urban beautification. Art is shaped by political, social, and economic dynamics that interact to make change and sometimes create a final visual artwork displayed on our streets and walls (the case of street art). Through their graphic work, Elalamy and Hejjamy were successful in displaying the role of the artist in reporting, documenting and even influencing their surroundings. Not only that, but artists might even create a new world, a more creative one, for people to live in.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares "No conflict of interest".