http://egyptmonocle.com/EMonocle/public-art-ponders-if-i-were-president/

Pondering: ‘If I were president…’

Posted by The Egypt Monocle on Wednesday, June 13, 2012 · Leave a Comment

The posters read in calligraphy: “If I were president…”

BY MAURICE CHAMMAH

Cairo: Several weeks ago, an artist named Amado Alfadni began to post stickers and posters around downtown Cairo. His design was simple, with an abstract border framing a short sentence and several dotted lines. The sentence, split into two versions to address both men and women, reads in calligraphy: “If I were president…”

The dotted lines solicit whoever passes by to fill in their own answer. Alfadni had picked the stark design over others with eagles and Egyptian flags, believing that they would distract people from writing on them. He started placing them around downtown Cairo, where most public art has been found since the 2011 uprising, before traveling around the city and handing them off to people to post in Alexandria, Minya, Mansoura and Port Said.

There has been a massive proliferation of public art since the uprising of early 2011, largely due to the retreat of security forces from Cairo’s streets. Arrests for painting graffiti were common under Mubarak. “With the revolution, the ability for artists to create their work in public opened to a scale not seen before,” American artist Jenna Crowder explains, “because the policing fell away to other, more immediate concerns.”

Crowder, along with American photographer Keith Lane, organized the workshop where Alfadni developed his project. They funded their trip to Egypt through Kickstarter, an American website that allows anyone to raise money for creative projects ranging from films to books to recipes. With the funding, they flew to Cairo and

assembled a small group of artists and met three times a week over a month at the Townhouse Gallery downtown.

They studied and discussed well-known examples of publicly engaged art, like that of the Situationist International in Europe, the Yes Men in the US, and Egyptian art collective Mahatat. The workshops often involved debate about just what makes something merit the term ‘public art.’

“The topic of public art came out as a trend a couple of years ago in Egypt,” Alfadni told me. “But everything I’ve seen, whether or not it’s for the ‘public’ just moves the art from the galleries to the streets.”

Last week, nine young artists presented the projects they had developed throughout the workshop. Sparked by a few skeptical audience members, they debated definitions. “You have to make something everyone understands,” said artist Karim Abdo to the crowd of several dozen. “You have to build your art on a message to the masses.”

Alfadni disagreed. “If there’s a message,” he said, “you can’t interact with it.”

A few days later, coming back to Cairo on a train from an exhibit in Alexandria, Alfadni explained that public art without an element of interaction or participation often leads to hostility by members of the very public the art aims to address.

“Sometimes people don’t get the message, and they become aggressive,” Alfadni told me. While placing the “If I were president…” posters, he found that he had to learn how to negotiate, to ask shopkeepers where they draw the line between their private shop and what Alfadni considers ‘public space.

Even still, Alfadni had problems. One evening, guards waited for someone to write on one of the stickers, and then ripped it down. Others in Maadi berated him with questions about why he was taking pictures of the posters.

But for the most part, people eagerly responded to Alfadni’s invitation, writing all manner of messages on the dotted lines. Sometimes, the stickers elicited conversations between anonymous participants. On one, someone wrote, “I would be respectable.”

“There are no respectable presidents,” someone else responded.

“Sabahi is respectable,” wrote a third, referring to Hamdeen Sabahi, who came in third after the first round of the presidential election.

On another sticker, someone had written, “I would give it to my son.”

As one might expect, the stickers downtown and near Tahrir Square elicited more revolutionary messages, while in other areas, the mysterious writers, according to Alfadni, “talked about security and about justice.”

In Alexandria, someone wrote, “It would be a dream.” Days later, someone wrote below, “No. It would be a nightmare.”

Alfadni says the project took on a particular momentum in Port Said. On a bus, a schoolteacher approached Alfadni’s friend who was distributing the posters. He asked him for a stack of posters to give to his class at a public high school. Alfadni has no idea what the students wrote. “I didn’t keep track of them,” he told me, and not knowing seemed to appeal to him, because it means the work has taken on a life of its own. –The Egypt Monocle

American artist Jenna Crowder and American photographer Keith Lane studied and discussed well-known examples of publicly engaged art.