

Women, Social Transformation and the Digital Age: Investigating the Collision of Artistic Expression and Technology in Egypt (2011 - Present)

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Abstract: The relationship between the current advancement of technology and the development of contemporary feminist art in Egypt is multifaceted and complex, especially considering the historical, social, cultural, and political changes that took place from 2011 to the present time. This paper uses open-ended interviews, and multimodal analysis to investigate how Egyptian contemporary artists have adopted new technologies to push the boundaries of artistic expression and social transformation aiming to enhance the status of Egyptian women post-2011 while still preserving an authentic Egyptian identity and traditional art techniques. The study poses the following questions: what draws Egyptian, feminist contemporary artists, interested in progressing the status of women, to new multimedia technologies, and social media? Can the digital sphere offer a safe biome to confront culturally sensitive social issues? How did Egyptian, feminist contemporary artists forge a space for voice and social change in the digital sphere, and what opportunities can it currently offer them? The research draws on the work of three Egyptian artists, Beya Khalifa (1994 - present), Dina Hafez (Unknown - present), and Deena Mohamed (1995 - present); and two organizations that use art to empower women: *Zatek*, a digital museum project that aims to empower women and encourage their political participation, and socioeconomic involvement; and *Art D'Égypte*, a privately owned Egyptian firm that supports the Egyptian arts and culture scene. The study argues that Egyptian contemporary feminist artists currently aim to re-frame the role of Egyptian women in society by utilizing art and technology as tools to re-mint the old social and cultural vocabulary to form new narratives for a “new” normal for Egyptian women. The study also maintains that digital art activism offers Egyptian women a space where they can examine the relationship between their personal and political, social, and economic narratives which can lead to a degree of social and cultural transformation and result in a positive change in the status of women in Egypt.

Keywords: Egyptian Art and Technology, Egyptian Contemporary Art, Egyptian Feminist Art and Social Justice, Egyptian Digital Art, Egyptian Art and Multimedia Technology, Art Activism.

1 Introduction

This study examines the intricate relationship between technological advancements and contemporary feminist art in Egypt, particularly considering the socio-political changes post-2011 revolution. The study aims to investigate how contemporary Egyptian feminist artists utilize new technologies to broaden artistic expression and stimulate social change, focusing on advancing the status of Egyptian women while preserving cultural authenticity and traditional art techniques. Prior research underscores the deep connection between Egyptian feminist art activism and various thematic elements, such as nationalism, women's identity, agency, resistance against gender-based violence, and negotiation with patriarchal structures [1] [2] [3] [4] [5].

Through the lens of Gramsci's [6] perspective on false consciousness, Gillian Rose's [7] multimodal analysis, and open-ended interviews, this paper investigates the following questions what draws Egyptian, feminist contemporary artists, interested in progressing the status of women, to new multimedia technologies, and social media? Can the digital sphere offer a safe biome to confront culturally sensitive social issues? How did Egyptian, feminist contemporary artists forge a space for voice and social change in the digital sphere, and what opportunities can it currently offer them? The research focuses on three Egyptian feminist contemporary artists—Beya Khalifa (1994 - present), Dina Hafez (Unknown - present), and Deena Mohamed (1995 - present)—as well as two organizations—*Zatek* (2016) and *Art D'Égypte* (2016)—that employ art to empower women. Selection criteria include the impact of their work within Egyptian art circles, exhibition success, and social media engagement. The study argues that these artists aimed to redefine the societal role of Egyptian women by leveraging art and technology to reshape established narratives, thus forging a “new” normal for women in Egypt. Furthermore, the study suggests that digital art activism offers a platform for Egyptian women to

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navigate personal, political, social, and economic narratives, potentially leading to significant societal and cultural transformations.

A literature review on the role of art activism, feminism, and digital media within the context of Egypt and the broader Middle East highlights the transformative potential of technology and digital media in advancing feminist agendas and reshaping societal dynamics in the region. Several scholars [8] [9] [10] [11] [12] have investigated how digital platforms have become critical tools that enable feminists and feminist art activists to organize, mobilize, increase agency, and raise their voices in challenging gender equality, and patriarchal constructs, and advocating and cultivating social change. Additionally, they debated the challenges and opportunities offered by digital spaces, including issues of inclusivity, diversity, and the strategic use of various forms of activism.

Amin [8] explores the theme of "digital solidarity" and examines how it expedites successful collaboration and support among feminist activists across different geographical locations. El Feki [9] discusses several instances where nudity has been utilized as a feminist art activism tool that had some success in challenging oppressive regimes and proclaiming political demands. Ismail [11] highlights how digital spaces enable Egyptian women's "digital dissidence" allowing them to organize, mobilize, and voice dissent against social injustice collectively with ease. Abdelraheem [10] investigates how Egyptian feminists and art activists utilized social media effectively during the 2011 Egyptian revolution as a platform for Egyptian feminists to take collective action against issues related to social injustice. Mahmoud [12] discusses the importance of women contributing to digital activism in Egypt. He shows how women have played a significant role in using digital platforms to advocate for social change and underscores the importance of addressing the challenges faced by women in digital spaces so that the Egyptian feminist agenda can move forward. The studies recognize challenges such as surveillance and harassment but highlight the possibilities that social media offers in enabling women to engage in collective action. Considering the studies mentioned, the goal of this research is to expand the current body of knowledge by examining how contemporary Egyptian feminist artists use new technologies to promote women's rights while still preserving their cultural heritage. The study's value is significantly enhanced by the author's open-ended interview with the founder of *Zatek*, the digital museum of women, and the rich methodological framework chosen for this inquiry.

Before delving further into this study, it is imperative to situate the research within the context of Egyptian feminism and its historical evolution. The roots of the Egyptian feminist movement trace back to the late 19th century when the first wave of feminist writing started to appear in the Egyptian press thus giving a voice to several themes that concerned feminists: colonialism, early marriage, the lack of education for girls, and the right for political participation [13]. Similarly, some years before the 2011 revolution, feminists worked to end female genital mutilation, virginity tests, honor crimes, domestic and sexual violence, and harassment. Additionally, they worked to gain a larger percentage of political representation in government office positions. They used many strategies to achieve their goals such as participation in political parties, organizing through the establishment of NGOs and other civil organizations, consolidating awareness campaigns through the media press, and forming international networks, alliances, and solidarity groups. These themes as well as the life and struggles of Egyptian feminists inspired the art activism of the feminist art activists and the organizations chosen for this study. Their participation in manufacturing culture such as the creation of art activism, gives under-represented Egyptian women "the chance to produce their own [performative] narratives" consequently challenging the dominating culture of the ruling class.

We can thus deduce that Egyptian feminist artists have often utilized their art to navigate the cultural limitations that were imposed upon them by their historical time [14]. Feminism was a prevalent theme within Egyptian art activism from the beginning, though the specific themes have evolved. It is important to note that there is no single or universal definition of feminism, as each movement is deeply rooted in the culture, religion, time, and socio-political context of its origin [15] and therefore has unique requirements. Considering this historical and contextual backdrop, the definition of feminist art activism coined by Aagerstoun and Auther [16] appears particularly fitting for this study where feminist art activism is defined as an endeavor aiming to expose underlying ideologies or structures detrimental to women's lives, proposing alternatives to the existing status quo, and advocating for feminist principles of equality and inclusiveness. Having established the root and definition of Egyptian feminist art activism, the following section will elucidate the analytical framework employed to investigate the inquiries posed in this study.

2 Methodologies

The Three methods were chosen as a robust analytical framework for this study.

2.1 Gramsci's (1971) Theory of Cultural Hegemony

Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony [6], particularly his perspective on false consciousness provides a profound understanding of power dynamics and ideological control, which are essential for examining societal norms and

resistance. Gillian Rose's multimodal analysis [7], focusing on compositional interpretation, offers insights into the complex interplay of visual elements and their socio-cultural implications, enriching the examination of visual artifacts. Open-ended interviews provide a direct means of gathering rich qualitative data, allowing for a nuanced exploration of participants' perspectives and experiences [17]. Together, these methods offer a comprehensive approach to investigating the research questions, combining theoretical depth with methodological richness.

To start with, Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, particularly false consciousness, elucidates the mechanisms through which dominant ideologies perpetuate power. In the context of this study, Gramsci's theory sheds light on the motivation of contemporary Egyptian feminist artists to embrace new multimedia technologies and social media platforms in their endeavor to advance women's status. These technological platforms serve as avenues for challenging prevailing narratives and ideologies, potentially disrupting cultural hegemony and fostering social change. Gramsci [6] posits the existence of two consciousnesses within people: one inherent in thoughts and feelings, guiding actions within specific contexts, and another shaped by societal norms, representing a false consciousness that is absorbed uncritically [6]. Gramsci distinguishes between "common sense," inherited from society, and "good sense," acquired through critical reflection on common sense knowledge. Through a philosophy of praxis that involves recognizing and embracing contradictions within one's consciousness, the philosopher not only understands these contradictions but also positions herself as part of them, making them a cornerstone of knowledge and transformative action [18]. Therefore, providing a platform for women to delve into the social, historical, and cultural aspects of their stories, drawing from their real-life experiences to discern between "good sense" and "common sense," can pave the way for transformative action. Art activism, particularly the activism of the artists and organizations under study, provides such a space, allowing women to interrogate the relationship between personal narratives and broader socio-political contexts.

Through a Gramscian lens, we can argue that feminist art activists in Egypt, from 1952 to the present, employ a philosophy of praxis, intertwining subjectivity with art activism to foster collective consciousness among women across economic, social, political, and cultural spheres [6]. Initially, during the 1952 revolution, women primarily focused on class identity due to the legacy of Colonialism (1882-1956), aligning personal and gender identities with national identity [13]. However, in the 2011 revolution, activists acknowledged the diversity of subcultures within Egypt and the unique needs of women in each. Post-2011, Egyptian feminist art activists aimed to redefine women's societal roles, utilizing art and technology to challenge norms and promote gender equality.

2.2 Gillian Rose’s Multimodal Analysis - Compositional Interpretation Approach

Within this research framework, the second method, the compositional interpretation approach (see Table 1.1), is derived from Gillian Rose's [7] multimodal analysis. This approach enables an examination of the artwork under study through the lens of three distinct sites, each serving as a conceptual tool for analysis. The sites of an image include the site of (i) production, (ii) the image itself; and (iii) the reception of the image by various audiences which includes an analysis of how an audience constructs a way of interacting with the image. Looking at the sites of production and the image itself are part of the composition interpretation approach. Each of the above three sites has three different modalities that can help in critically examining an image [7]. The first modality is the *technological* modality which Mirzoeff [19] defines as “any form of apparatus designed ... to enhance natural vision, from oil paintings to television and the Internet,” which includes how the image is made and displayed [19]. The second modality, *compositional* modality, focuses on how the image is made including the content, color, and composition of the image. The third modality is the *social* modality which includes “the economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used” [7]. Table 1-1 (below) summarizes Rose’s compositional interpretation approach.

Table 1: Gillian Rose’s Compositional Interpretation Approach (2001, p. 33 -53)

The compositional interpretation	Claims to look at images for 'what they are', rather than for, say, what they do or how they were or are used. [The analyst] therefore looks mostly at the site of an image itself to understand its significance and pays most (although not exclusive) attention to its compositional modality .
The production of the image: Technologies	Focuses most strongly on the image itself, although it pays most attention to its compositionality. Pays some attention to its production , usually a note is made of aspects of the social modality of its production - who commissioned it, why, who painted it, and what then happened to it before it ended up in its current location. Attention is usually focused mostly on the technological

	<p>modality of the making of an image. What materials and technique [make the image] ... when and [what] knowledge of the technique helps in describing the characteristics of the work'.</p>
The image itself: its compositionality	<p>Compositional interpretation pays most attention to the compositionality of the image itself. It pays attention first to :</p> <p>Content: what does the image show?</p> <p>Color can also work to suggest an effect of distance. Color includes:</p> <p>Hue refers to the actual colors in a painting.</p> <p>Value refers to the lightness or darkness of a color.</p> <p>Saturation refers to the purity of a color.</p> <p>Focus of the artwork</p> <p>Light</p> <p>Spatial organization: The logic of figuration of an image is legislated and predicted by the spatial and temporal organization of the visual field.</p> <p>Expressive content which describes an image's expressive content as 'the combined effect of subject matter and visual form'.</p>

2.3 Open-Ended Interviews

The third method in this framework involves the use of open-ended interviews, used by researchers cited in this study and by the author with Yasmine Ibrahim, the founder of *Zatek*. Open-ended interviews, which are a subset of qualitative content analysis, emerge as a valuable instrument for systematically scrutinizing extensive datasets. Rooted in an inductive reasoning process, it facilitates the study of emergent themes and patterns entrenched within the data [17]. Several studies on the use of interviews in research stress the importance of understanding subjectivity, power dynamics, and personal experiences in molding individuals' viewpoints and realities [20] [21] [22] [23] [24]. The interviews in this study aim to explore the cultural vocabulary employed by Egyptian women to construct new narratives for a 'new' normal, leveraging the digital sphere to enhance political agency and expand their reach to broader national and global audiences. In the subsequent section of this research, the established methodological framework will be employed to examine the work of the artists and organizations chosen for this study.

3 Results and Discussion

The Three young artists—Beya Khalifa (1994 - present), Dina Hafez (Unknown - present), and Deena Mohamed (1995 - present) and two organizations, namely *Zatek* – The Digital Museum of Women, and *Art D'Égypte*. - are exemplary cases illustrating how and why Egyptian art activists, concerned with women's status, utilize technology and art to articulate their voices, particularly in addressing culturally sensitive issues.

3.1 Beya Khalifa (1994 – Present)

During French and British colonial times several orientalist photographers such as Zangaki Brothers and Aroux (1900s) portrayed colonial Egyptian women as erotic, almost pornographic, in photo postcards (Figure 1). According to Fahmy [25], through the oriental gaze, the women were shown bare-breasted and were seen as lustful with a “voluptuous temperament” as a colonial officer stated in a card sent back home [26]. As Grotenhuis [26] indicates some colonial officers were fond of sending these exotic postcards home, and mail offices did not censor them or hold the sender legally liable for indecency. The postcards “authorized mental manipulation [where]...exotic and colonial picture postcards can be seen as aesthetic manipulations” [26] where the East is symbolically constructed to be “dominated, devised to be ruled” [27].



Fig. 1: Zangaki Brothers and Aroux (1900s) *Femme Egyptienne – Egyptian Woman* [Post cards] Available at <https://journals.openedition.org/viatourism/docannexe/image/1842/img-7.jpg> and https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Hippolyte_Arnoux (Accessed Oct 1, 2021).

Khalifa, through her surreal collages, creates fantastical surreal gateways into old Orientalist photographs of Egyptian women to re-write the colonial narrative for these women [28]. In *Scare Tissue* (Figure 2), using digital photography, Beya takes one of the old colonial photographs and covers it with a surrealist entanglement of bright colors that creates the illusion of textured scar. The woman's face is only partially covered by a colorful scar, leaving the other half to display a nose - ring that brands her as "different" or "exotic". One eye is visible from behind the oversized scar, which seems to shield her from the prying eyes of foreign viewers. At the bottom of the composition, her hand appears to bear the burden of the scar, which may symbolize the hardships endured by local tribes and nations during colonial times. The artist, Khalifa, may also be alluding to the way women are often regarded in Egyptian society today, where they are sometimes criticized and judged for not conforming to traditional gender-based cultural roles.

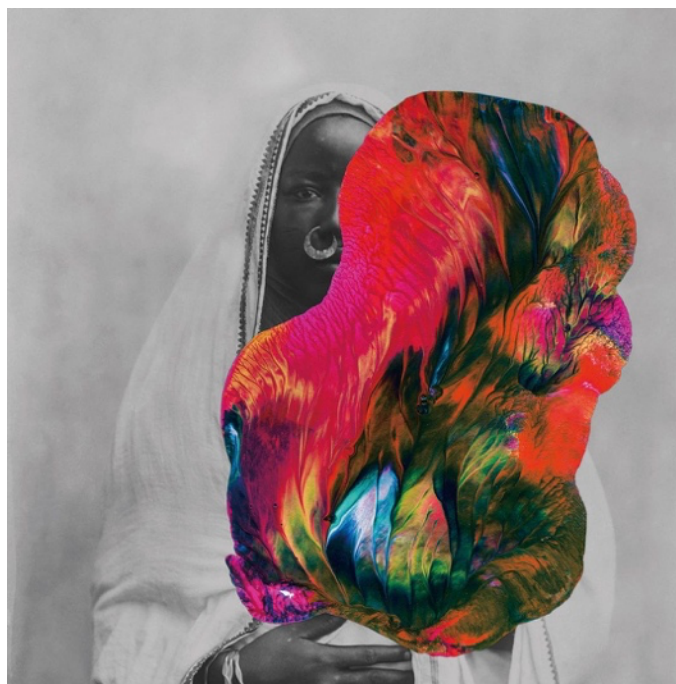


Fig. 2: Beya Khalifa (2019) *Scare Tissue* [digital multimedia], Available at <https://scoopempire.com/this-egyptian-digital-collage-artist-will-blow-your-mind-with-her-work/> , (Accessed on August 20th, 2022).

In one of her digital photographs, named *Oppression III* (Figure 3), Khalifa depicts a man dragging four women who are piled onto a cart pulled by a donkey. The man seems to be pulling the women by a stretched piece of cloth that covers his face and the faces of the women, making them unrecognizable. However, the cloth used by the man is well-known to those who are familiar with Egyptian culture and practice, as it is the same material used to set up large tents for traditional weddings and funerals among the lower and middle classes. Khalifa's clever and modern manipulation of the cloth turns it into a symbol that suggests to the viewer that patriarchal power continues to shape the laws of the private sphere, as women in many areas of family law remain under the guardianship of men from the day, they get married until they pass away.

Since its inception, Egyptian feminists have recognized the significance of gaining agency in the private sphere to achieve true empowerment in the public sphere. They understood that personal status laws, particularly regarding polygamy and divorce, remain deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms, persisting to the present day. Lack of real power in the private sphere often leads to a failure to win true agency and power in the public sphere [29].



Fig. 3: Beya Khalifa (2019) *Oppression III* [digital multimedia], Available at <https://scoopempire.com/this-egyptian-digital-collage-artist-will-blow-your-mind-with-her-work/>, (Accessed on 20th August, 2022).

When asked about why artists are attracted to new digital art and the opportunities it offers for artists to voice opinions about sensitive feminist social concerns, Khalifa stated:

I think art gives us an amazing opportunity to explore the contemporary conversations being had on a massive scale.....We're constantly consuming art, movies, books, and music so you'd be hard-pressed not to be inspired by the work of other artists. I can't discount political and societal affairs, either. I love thinking about how these discussions can

be visually rendered and played around with, and I find that process super inspiring and important for myself. People seem very taken in by digital and analogue collages that offer structure and concepts within their abstraction.

Using different forms of technology and a variety of approaches, digital art allows artists to compose appealing art that is paint-free, yet it has vociferous visual effects that leave an impact on the viewer. Khalifa concurs that the use of digital art is growing in popularity in the Middle East in general. She states, “I do feel an influx of young artists cropping up in the Middle East, breaking away from traditional art forms and tackling societal and cultural issues through contemporary art” [30].

3.2 Dina Hafez (Unknown – Present)

Along similar lines to Khalifa, designer, and artist Dina Hafez, through a feminist lens, aims to decolonize the oriental gaze at Egyptian women by concentrating on the historical lack of focus on women’s accomplishments in documented modern Egyptian history. In an attempt to further investigate the meaning of colonialism to Egyptian women, Hafez has also redefined the meaning of the word. To Hafez, colonialism refers not only to past British and French colonial powers but also includes local powers that control what is culturally appropriate and socially acceptable for modern-day Egyptian women. Local powers play an influential role in determining who writes history, and who is allowed to interpret the religious and the cultural canon. Hafez produces vibrant contemporary mixed-media artworks that blend digital art, graphic design, photography, and traditional crafts to explore feminism through lenses of history and culture. She believes that “heritage is not primarily about the past – it is about the present. Heritage harnesses the power of the past to lay the foundation of present social and cultural relations today” [31].

In an interview for *Women of Egypt Magazine*, an online publication that aims to empower women, Hafez states:

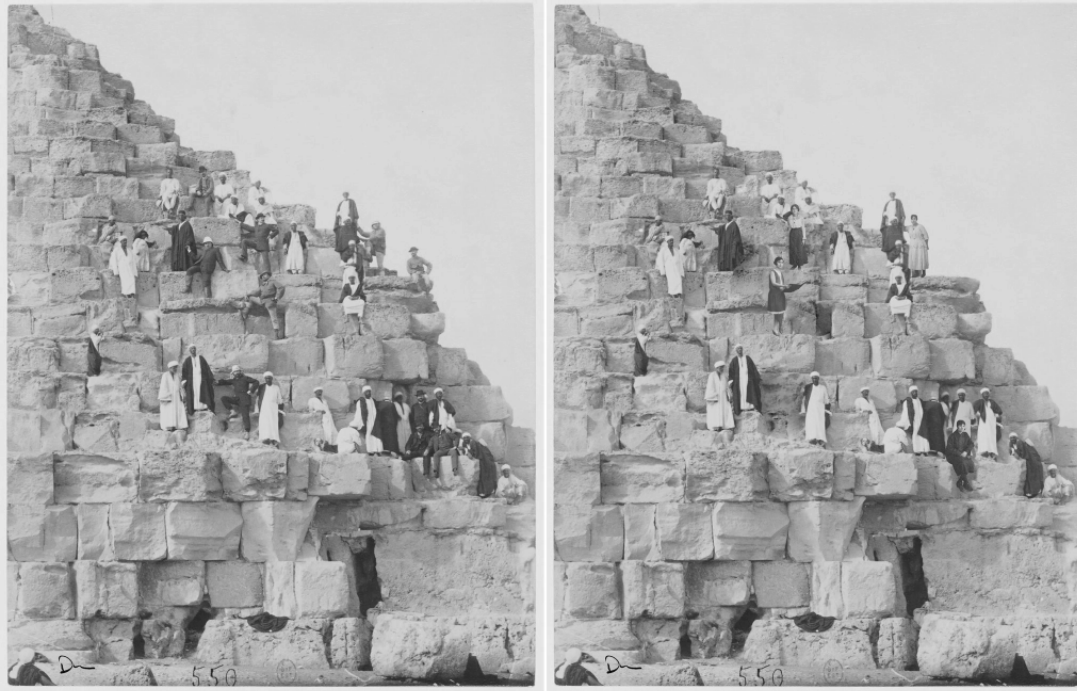
Egyptian heritage has been colonized for so long, it might still be, at least partially. Coloniality is in many different ways more present than past. Initially, decolonization referred to the process former colonies underwent to free themselves of colonial supremacy. Today the term has become much more than that: a philosophical, moral, social, spiritual, and also activist call that points to the fact we are still subject to the ideology of colonialism. The notion of “who’s heritage is it?”, who takes the decision of what’s heritage and what’s not, who determines how we contribute to a renewal of the canon with stories and reference frames that have been systematically erased from it? These are all questions that are not exclusive to the Egyptian context and are shared on a global level. However, the discussion in Egypt is limited to only a few.... I believe it’s a good start to ask questions and not necessarily have the answers. How do we change the focus, how do we alter our perspective? Creating dialogue at this stage is the way to move forward to involve all members of the community. Art is one of the ways to trigger people’s curiosity and create room for multiple perspectives and narratives. [31]

Women of Egypt (WOE) highlights the accomplishments of successful women who rise against all odds to encourage others in the same shoes. The magazine also publishes statistics about women's issues or the laws that discriminate against them and their impact since “loud misogynist voices had been trying to convince women that they have gained all their rights and, sadly enough, women had started believing that.” [31]

Dina worked on three projects that aim to re-write the history of Egyptian women and empower them: *Women Ascending the Pyramid*, *My Name Is*, and *Unfamiliar Face*. Her work focuses on giving Egyptian women ownership of their past. In (Figure 4) *Women Ascending the Pyramid*, she re-writes the oriental narratives of Egyptian women using oriental photography. Hafez recounts that she often felt offended by the oriental photographer’s depiction of Egyptian women to attract British and American tourism to Egypt. The women were often used as “props on a stage” and were “either sexualized to serve fantasies of the “harem” to the West, or they were portrayed as exotic objects dressed up in traditional clothing” [31].

As part of her project, she takes Facchinali Bienameno (1839-1895) orientalist photograph of men ascending the pyramid and digitally re-creates it to include women travelers and Egyptian, local women whose presence and role were not acknowledged or documented in the original photograph. The women in her digitally engineered photographs are strategically placed in the middle of large groups of men in the composition thus becoming the center of attention in each group [31]. Hafez explains her reason for her project stating:

I am reclaiming part of my heritage which is often told by Westerners. You reclaim something by taking ownership, by telling your narrative of the story, and by not being a passive recipient of whatever is told or given to you. I work with these photographs because I want to because I can, and because they are part of my history as an Egyptian. This sense of entitlement has not always been there for me, it’s a process, and when you get there, it feels liberating to finally take matters into your own hands. [31]



Ascensione d'elle Piramidi by photographer Facchinelli Beniamino (1839-1895)

Women Ascending the Pyramids - Digital manipulation by Dina Hafez, 2020

Fig. 4: Hafez, D. (2019) *Women Ascending the Pyramid* [digital multimedia], Available at <https://womenofegyptmag.com/2020/12/22/dina-hafez-decolonizing-heritage-through-a-feminist-lens-one-bead-at-a-time/> (Accessed on 14th August 2022).

In (Figure 5) *My Name Is*, Hafez lends names to anonymous women in vintage oriental pictures and old photos. She aims to give them a life story to include them in an unwritten history of Egypt.



Fig. 5: Hafez, D. (2019) *My Name Is* [digital multimedia], Available at <https://womenofegyptmag.com/2020/12/22/dina-hafez-decolonizing-heritage-through-a-feminist-lens-one-bead-at-a-time/> (Accessed on 14th August 2022).

In *Unfamiliar Faces*, Hafez takes seven portraits of anonymous Egyptian women and digitally manipulates them then she adds a display of vibrant design and shiny colorful beads illuding to the traditional arts and crafts that many Egyptian women produced in the past. Hafez attempts to direct the viewer's gaze so that they would ask the questions: how and why were many women's stories ignored, silenced, and excluded from Egyptian history? Hafez explains, "When people ascribe faces to names, the women in the pictures transform from being "objects" in an image to "human beings" with stories" [31].

Hafez's artwork "Unfamiliar Faces - Yasmak Woman" integrates digital media with traditional beading and crafts, as depicted in Figure 6. The piece portrays a woman veiled in white, a symbol of tradition, yet deviates from conventionality by incorporating vibrant designs onto the veil. Unlike the typical opaque veil, hers reveals her mouth, suggesting a departure from silence toward vocal expression. Her gaze extends beyond the viewer, indicating a forward-looking perspective. Additionally, the backdrop features traditional golden embroidery reminiscent of confinement, evoking associations with prison camp wires or gilded cages. Hafez's artistic approach intertwines Egypt's rich history of crafts with contemporary digital photography, aiming to reignite women's appreciation for traditional techniques while fostering an interest in digital art.



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Fig. 6: Hafez, D. (2019) *Unfamiliar Faces -Yasmak Woman* [Multimedia], Available at <https://womenofegyptmag.com/2020/12/22/dina-hafez-decolonizing-heritage-through-a-feminist-lens-one-bead-at-a-time/> (Accessed on 14th August 2022)

Digital art has proven to be an invaluable tool for Khalifa and Hafez in their exploration of orientalism and the often-overlooked voices of women throughout history. Through digital mediums, both artists have been able to reimagine and reinterpret traditional narratives, shedding light on the silenced experiences of women. This innovative approach allows them to challenge and deconstruct Orientalist tropes while providing a platform for marginalized voices to be heard and acknowledged in contemporary discourse.

3.3 Deena Mohamed (1995 – Present)

Deena Mohamed is another example of a feminist art activist who has used technology and social media to create a voice that has resonated far and wide in the last four years. Mohamed is a comic artist, illustrator, graphic designer, and graphic novelist who discusses in her digital comics themes such as sexual harassment, corrupt police officers and clerics, and Western feminism which she feels does not represent women in the Middle East whose identity is rooted in religion and nationalism [32].

Mohamed's first viral webcomic, *Qahera* (or Cairo, and it could also mean the conqueror or the vanquisher) was published in 2013, and it tracks an Egyptian superhero who remains nameless and resolves to combat social issues faced by many Middle Eastern women [33]. In (Figure 7) *Qahara*, Mohammed depicts the nameless, covered superhero as she protects a girl from an incident of gang rap. The superhero who stands next to the crying girl dressed in culturally appropriate clothes is using her super-powerful arm and sword to ward off a large crowd and protect the girl. Mohamed is referring to an incident where "a young woman was brutally gang-raped in subway station ... and subjected to humiliating

examinations” at the hands of skeptics. Additionally, “She was [later] beaten once more by her own dishonored family” [33].

In (Figure 7) Mohamed objects to incidents where the victim becomes the culprit often blamed for her demise because she was out of her house at what is culturally considered a late hour for a respectable woman, or because of her supposedly inappropriate attire which she is told has probably instigated the attack in the first place.



Fig. 7: Mohammed, D. (2013) *Qahara* [digital media], Available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/12/11/egypts-women-fight-back/> (Accessed on 1st, Sept 2022).

Although *Qahra* was a success, Mohamed is more known for her graphic novel trilogy *Shubeik Lubeik* (Your Wish is My Command) for which she received the Grand Prize at the Cairo Comics Festival in 2017. The trilogy recounts the story of three wishes offered to three characters trying to achieve their dreams in a class-conscious society. In its second printing, the novel was published by a local publishing house after the first edition was published by Mohamed using personal funds. A year later, the novel was translated and successfully published in English by Penguin Random House. The main characters are Aziza, Nour, and Shokry.

Aziza learned early that life can be hard, but when she loses her husband and manages to procure a wish, she finds herself fighting bureaucracy and inequality for the right to have—and make—that wish. Nour is a privileged college student who secretly struggles with depression and must decide whether or not to use their wish to try to “fix” this depression, and then figure out how to do it. And, finally, Shokry must grapple with his religious convictions as he decides how to help a friend who doesn’t want to use their wish. [34]

After her positive experience with art and technology, Mohamed contends that digital art is invaluable since it is “accessible to a lot of artists more than traditional art and it encourages people to share and learn more”; moreover, she explains that in Egypt “there are now free programs and free tutorials that allow Egyptian artists to create art and share with the world immediately” [35]. Additionally, she admits that “digital art can also encourage people to see the art in everything they consume, not just in paintings and sculptures but can be also in online posts, street murals, book covers, Infographics and animated cartoons” [35]. Aligned with her advocacy for women's rights, Mohamed collaborates with notable entities such as *Google*, *UN Women*, *Harrassmap*, and *Mada Masr*, utilizing digital art to combat sexual harassment and promote gender equality. She also contributes to the *Comics for Youth Refugees Incorporated Collective* (CYRIC), producing culturally relevant comics for Arabic-speaking refugee children [35].

Mohamed's accomplishments thus include the publication of her book *Shubeik Lubeik*, as well as the creation of the viral webcomic *Qahara*, earning her recognition from prominent media outlets like BBC, Foreign Policy, the Times, and Al Arabiya. *Qahara*'s impact was acknowledged by the Washington Post, which named Mohamed among the “five women changing the world for the better” on International Women's Day in 2017 [36]. The convergence of digital media and art has empowered Mohamed to advocate for women's rights on both national and international platforms, providing a conducive environment for discussing sensitive political, economic, and social issues.

3.4 Zatek – The Digital Museum of Women

The Museum of Women *Zatek* is an online digital institution dedicated to advocating, documenting, and exhibiting

Egyptian women's history and contemporary challenges [37]. Since its inception in 2016, the museum has equipped women with digital art skills, including photography, digital video and audio production, and graphic design, aimed at capturing women's roles in Egyptian daily life. Moreover, it supports female artisans and craftspeople in expanding their businesses through digital marketing and social media outreach. The museum's thematic focus encompasses education, professional training, gender equality, civil rights, and research into women's lives in Egypt, with a primary objective of leveraging art and digital technology to enhance women's political, social, and economic participation in the public sphere of Egypt and Arab-speaking countries [37].

Yasmine Ibrahim, the founder and CEO of the *Zatek* Digital Museum, provided insights into the transformative role of digital art in the lives of Egyptian women during her open-ended interview with the researcher conducting this study. Ibrahim, a Cairo University law graduate with a background in research, developed a passion for women's rights following the 2011 revolution. Her involvement in a research project examining women's historical participation in the Egyptian public sphere from the year 1500 to 1700 revealed significant knowledge gaps, prompting her to delve deeper into historical archives. Pursuing a master's degree in art and heritage documentation, and with the help of several grants from NGOs, Ibrahim established the digital museum for women to preserve the heritage of Egyptian women's handicrafts and their contribution to national identity.

Through interviews and documentation, Ibrahim uncovered the challenges faced by women in marketing and selling their products, prompting her to expand the museum's mission to empower women through research and advisory services utilizing digital art, marketing strategies, and social media platforms. This initiative has led to the implementation of various projects aimed at supporting and uplifting Egyptian women. Two projects in particular "Tasmim" and "Raising your Voice" were fruitful.

The inaugural initiative of the museum, dubbed "Tasmim," derived its name from the Arabic word for "design," signifying a determination to overcome obstacles. Led by Ibrahim and volunteer trainers, the project extended its reach to remote locales, including small towns and villages, stretching as far as the oasis towns in the Western Desert and Aswan in Southern Egypt. "Tasmim" aimed to empower women through workshops in digital photography, marketing, and social media, to enhance their sales. Participants' feedback underscored significant sales increases following the acquisition of new digital art and social media skills. Notably, rural women exhibited heightened enthusiasm and eagerness to engage in the workshops compared to their urban counterparts, attributing this disparity to the genuine support demonstrated by volunteer trainers and the novel opportunities presented by the workshops, which were previously inaccessible outside of Cairo and often financially prohibitive. Moreover, the workshops provided a rare opportunity for rural artisan women, typically confined to their homes, to temporarily break free from their domestic roles and engage in skill-building activities. Ibrahim employed a dual approach to promote the workshops, leveraging personal connections with community leaders and local NGOs to disseminate information and encourage participation among women in the targeted areas. This grassroots strategy fostered trust and facilitated organic engagement within the communities, resulting in a successful outreach effort.

The Museum's second endeavor, titled "Raising Your Voice," aimed to empower young women through photography and filmmaking workshops, providing a platform for female artisans to voice their challenges and concerns. The project encouraged aspiring filmmakers to create films spotlighting women in their communities, particularly those grappling with issues within the handicraft industry. Initially launched in Cairo, the project observed a predominance of male participants, prompting a strategic shift to actively engage women not only in the capital but also in smaller towns. Free workshops spanning three months were offered, covering digital photography, marketing, and filmmaking. Despite the demanding nature of the program, rural women demonstrated remarkable commitment, with the majority completing the course. Each workshop accommodated eighteen to twenty students, culminating in the production of a film—a graduation requirement. To maximize impact, the museum collaborated with various cultural and community centers, churches, clubs, and NGOs to screen the films across diverse venues, aiming to raise awareness and garner support from decision-makers to assist craftswomen and their enterprises.

A screening of the film was always followed by a Q&A session to encourage public conversations about the issues discussed in the film. As Ibrahim proudly states:

You can say for sure that the girls who you see at the end of the course are completely different from the girls who attend the selection interview to reserve seats in the free training program, I mean different in terms of confidence, professionalism, digital skills, and abilities. I remember a girl who was super shy and beet-red in the selection interview, and you should have seen her during the discussion of her films after the screening. She was a wild beast of knowledge on stage.... I felt that in a few more seconds she would tell the examiners ..bring it on baby.. I can answer more of your questions.

Most films were also viewed by communities of craftswomen to get their feedback on how accurately represented they felt. This step was essential since in the past filmmakers were often accused of stereotyping and misunderstanding the

reality of an artisan's life. As a result of these initiatives, many young women who completed their training successfully got entry-level positions in media companies or local television networks. Following each project, volunteers at the museum collected data and documented success stories. Unfortunately, after COVID funding and volunteer interest have decreased, additionally, it is increasingly becoming harder to get permission to film in public spaces and to raise funding for the project.

3.5 Art D'Égypte

Another organization that helps to transform the community through art is *Art D'Égypte*. Established by Nadine Abdel Ghaffar, the private Egyptian enterprise is dedicated to nurturing the country's arts and culture sphere, aiming to bridge the divide between Egyptian artists and the global community while supporting emerging talents and those with limited resources to showcase their work locally, regionally, and internationally [38]. With a mission to safeguard Egypt's heritage, the organization endeavors to present diverse perspectives of the nation to the world. Additionally, *Art D'Égypte* conducts complimentary lectures and community engagement initiatives targeting youth, particularly in impoverished neighborhoods adjacent to heritage sites in Old Cairo, striving to foster a sense of cultural belonging, and ownership, and promote site sustainability among underprivileged young artists [38].

To illustrate, in 2022, *Art d'Égypte* brought together groups of female artists who utilized many mediums such as photography, digital collages, video, and sculptures to display their work at an exhibition called *Ma'arad-ha* or (An Exhibition for Her) to celebrate "International Women's Day on March 8, Egyptian Women's Day on March 16 and Egyptian Mother's Day on March 21. *Ma'arad-ha* included pieces from 16 local artists in an open gallery space in downtown Cairo" [39]. Abdel Ghaffar states:

This exhibition provides an opportunity for Egyptian female artists to display their latest works and creative ideas, and to emphasize that their creative superpowers will always help them fight for the freedom of expression.[39]

Thus, Artists like Khalifa, Hafez, and Mohamed utilize digital platforms to creatively reimagine conventional narratives, shedding light on the silenced stories of women. Similarly, organizations like *Zatek* and *Art D'Égypte* employ multimedia technologies and social media to empower women and address societal issues. *Zatek* offers workshops in digital art skills, supporting female artisans and documenting women's roles in society. Through initiatives like "Tasmim" and "Raising Your Voice," *Zatek* amplifies women's voices and addresses the challenges they face. In the same manner, *Art D'Égypte*, led by Nadine Abdel Ghaffar, provides platforms for female artists to showcase their work, fostering cultural belonging and advocating for freedom of expression. These initiatives demonstrate how digital art and social media serve as avenues for Egyptian feminist contemporary artists to advocate for gender equality and social change. Despite challenges, these efforts continue to empower women and contribute to societal transformation in Egypt.

4 Challenges and Limitations

Although successful, Egyptian feminist artists still face several challenges when it comes to using technology for social change. These challenges include historical legacies, cultural sensitivities, patriarchal power dynamics, limited access to resources, legal constraints, and the need for cultural ownership and representation. Feminist art activists continue to grapple with colonial legacies even today. Western media portrayal of Middle Eastern women often continues to perpetuate the stereotypes and objectification reminiscent of the colonial era thus hindering efforts to redefine feminist art narratives [26]. Also, despite efforts to reclaim narratives through digital art, there remains a risk of inadvertently offending cultural sensibilities, particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as gender roles in Egypt. Additionally, in traditional and contemporary settings, patriarchal structures continue to influence laws and societal norms, limiting women's agency and perpetuating inequalities both in the private and public spheres [29]. Furthermore, women's contributions and achievements have been historically overlooked or silenced, posing challenges in redefining historical narratives to include their perspectives and experiences.

In addition, As Yasmine Ibrahim of *Zatek* has explained, access to technology and resources may be limited, particularly for marginalized communities, potentially excluding voices from the digital art conversation. Also, artistic expressions addressing sensitive social issues, such as sexual harassment and gender inequality, may face censorship or legal repercussions, and restriction of freedom of expression and activism. Most importantly, as Hafez mentioned, reclaiming narratives requires navigating power dynamics, claiming cultural heritage, and controlling representation, which are most controlled by local and global powers making it difficult for the artists to claim cultural ownership and affect cultural and social narratives. Also, incorporating traditional techniques and crafts into digital art while addressing contemporary issues necessitates a delicate balance, as artists seek to bridge past narratives and create modern narratives while preserving the authentic spirit [31]. Despite successes in creating impactful artwork, gaining visibility and recognition on national and international platforms remains a challenge, limiting the reach and influence of feminist art activism. Finally, we must admit that while present-day digital platforms offer opportunities for engagement and dialogue, there is a need

5 Conclusions

This paper explores the intersection of digital art and feminist activism in Egypt, drawing on Gramsci's notion of false consciousness, multimodal analysis, and the use of open-ended interviews. It investigates why contemporary Egyptian artists turn to new multimedia technologies and social media to progress women's status, and whether the digital sphere offers a safe environment to confront sensitive social issues. It argues that art activism provides a space for women to examine their personal and political narratives and distinguish between "common sense" and "good sense", potentially leading to positive social change. The study highlights the work of artists like Beya Khalifa, Dina Hafez, and Deena Mohamed, as well as organizations like *Zatek* and *Art D'Égypte*, in empowering women through digital art activism.

Interviews with feminist art activists and analysis of their work using the methodological framework for the study reveal that the digital sphere offers new avenues for exploring contemporary conversations and discussing political and social issues visually. It attracts artists by providing new structures for discussing sensitive topics in abstract ways and offers accessibility to a wider range of artists compared to traditional art forms. Furthermore, digital art allows for impactful visual effects that leave a lasting impression on viewers and encourages people to analyze art in various forms of media.

Feminist art activists forge a space for voice and social change in the digital sphere by re-minting historical narratives, rewriting history to include women's perspectives, and reclaiming their heritage. Organizations like *Zatek* and *Art D'Égypte* support women in this endeavor by providing funding, exhibition opportunities, and workshops in digital art and filmmaking. The paper also raises questions about the impact of digital art on traditional art production and training, as well as the potential for an increase in feminist art activism in Egypt. It considers the future of organizations like *Zatek* considering Egypt's economic challenges. Despite criticisms of digital art, its acceptance in museum exhibits and increasing popularity suggest a promising future for feminist art activism in Egypt.

In conclusion, the collision of artistic expression and technology in Egypt offers women opportunities to participate in rewriting history, expand their skills in digital technology and social media, and address the social, economic, and cultural issues they face.

6 Recommendations

The research recommends further studies on the impact of digital art on traditional art, examining the sustainability of supporting organizations, and investigating the effectiveness of digital art activism in addressing present-day societal issues, especially considering today's social, economic, and cultural challenges.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The author, Dalia Rehab certifies that she has NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript

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