MAD MA

Underground com

By Jonath

On a humid Cairo evening, in fall 2014, a hundred comics lovers wearing sneakers and graphic T-shirts smoked cigarettes outside Factory Space, a popular venue operated by one of the city's few contemporary art galleries. When a blue hatchback pulled up at the entrance, they instantly recognized one of the passengers: Mohamed Andeel, a twenty-nine-year-old cartoonist and satirist whose status updates on Facebook reach 60,000 mostly left-leaning Egyptian millennials. The crowd was there to celebrate the release of the twelfth issue of *Tok Tok,* a zine that Andeel founded with four other graphic artists. The zine's first issue appeared in 2011, two weeks before the popular uprising against President Hosni Mubarak began, and launched a politicized comix movement in Egypt, much as *Mad* and *Zap* did in the United States a half-century ago. After joking with the crowd, Andeel mounted the stage and began clicking through a slideshow of his greatest hits. One depicts Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt's president, at his desk, blithely contemplating his country's position in the world. An assistant appears: "Sir! Sir! What are we going to do with the trash, the traffic, electricity, hospitals, security, wages, judiciary, and the future? What will we do with all the ignorance?!" The president replies, "Increase ignorance." For the new cover of *Tok Tok,* Andeel had drawn a millennial and a traditionally dressed older man in conversation, seemingly bridging an ideological gap—rare in Egypt these days, where thousands have been imprisoned for alleged affiliations with the banned Muslim Brotherhood or with secular opposition movements.

Egyptian political cartoons date back to the 1880s, and Arabic-language versions of *Mickey* and *Superman* have been popular since the mid-twentieth century. The first Egyptian graphic novel for adults, however, was published only in the past decade. The authorities, upset by the book's nudity, obscenity, and anti-regime attitude, raided the publisher. The incident galvanized a generation of young artists, many of whom are now creating subversive comics that stand in contrast to the sloppy and tired work of state-aligned cartoonists at the national newspapers. Andeel lampoons the government incessantly, though he is proudest of gags that address social issues such as homophobia or the disenfranchisement of the poor. "I don't want my work to be only interesting because of dictatorship, because this is again giving dictatorship so much size and importance," he told me. He brushed off the risks of insulting the president, which is prohibited by the country's penal code, and said he preferred to draw attention to his artistic style—simple outlines filled in with the appealing color palette of Matt Groening and offset by vulgar slang. "My work looks nice and cute," he said, "but talks about things that are dark and terrible."

Andeel published his first cartoons in high school, then worked for an opposition weekly that printed some of the earliest biting caricatures of Mubarak. During 2010, he drew daily cartoons for *Al-Masry Al-Youm,* a popular independent paper, in which he lambasted the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the interim government that ruled Egypt after the 2011 revolution. When the Muslim Brotherhood came to power, with the 2012 election of Mohamed Morsi, Andeel didn't break stride. In his cartoons, President Morsi contemplates a city in flames ("I feel that there is something wrong"), accosts a citizen ("Love me already!"), and reaches his arms out to seize a miniature Cairo skyline ("It's all mine"). After Morsi was overthrown by the Egyptian military, a year later, Andeel turned his pen on the generals. Amid a violent clampdown on dissent, he continued to crack jokes about the authorities' impunity. Two days after Morsi's ouster, Andeel published on Facebook a cartoon in which a military officer points his gun at a bearded man wielding a stick. "I am killing him because he is a terrorist," says the officer. The bearded man replies, "I am a terrorist because he is killing me." By early 2014, Andeel had left *Al-Masry Al-Youm* to join the writing team of *The Program,* a faux-news comedy show hosted by Bassem Youssef, who is often called "Egypt's Jon Stewart." But the television network pressured Youssef to tone down his jokes, and he eventually canceled the show in June 2014, shortly after the presidential election.

GAZINES

ıics come to Egypt

.an Guyer

On Cairo newsstands, cartoons that mock Sisi remain scarce. Andeel now regularly contributes to the Web news outlet *Mada Masr,* the only local platform that is willing to print his most polemical work. In November, it published a cartoon he drew of a giant Sisi standing on the back of a minuscule everyman; the big-eyed president proclaims, "Endure for Egypt." After Andeel took his antimilitary barbs online, his audience grew rapidly. (*Mada Masr*'s website uses captions to translate the comics into English so that the works can reach a global readership.) But his surge in popularity was quickly followed by intimidating messages from Islamists and, not surprisingly, supporters of the regime. Vitriol on Andeel's Facebook wall suggests that trolls are combing through his old posts and uncovering personal information. The Egyptian Interior Ministry has started to monitor online conversations; in November, military intelligence detained his colleague Hossam Bahgat, an investigative reporter at *Mada Masr.* Why hadn't state security knocked on Andeel's door? "They are too lazy, and it's too hot," he said with a laugh. In truth, Andeel may be lucky that the authorities put more effort into curbing broadcast media that reaches millions than online news that reaches thousands. "There are things you can say on the Internet that you can't say on a TV show," Andeel said. He likened satire in Egypt to a chess game. "You're attacking here. You're defending here. You're moving up."

The biggest challenge facing young comic artists in Egypt right now is not suppression or intimidation but economic stability. To make a living, Andeel writes television and movie scripts—he's currently working on a zombie-comedy flick. *Tok Tok,* which is at work on its fourteenth issue, also faces an uncertain future—its funding, which was provided by the European Union, ran out at the end of 2015. The cartoonists have been drafting business plans, an endeavor that doesn't attract the same international media attention as their art. "We all have lives and wish our lives wouldn't be threatened by poverty or the possibility of failure," Andeel said. "I hate when people see cartoonists as exotic—the expression of freedom fighters in the Middle East." Yet freedoms continue to contract, and in December state authorities shuttered the Factory Space and its adjoining gallery. At the Factory Space in 2014, I sat in the front row beside Andeel's mother as he projected one of his works for *Al-Masry Al-Youm* onto the wall. The cartoon was from September 2013, the height of Egypt's pro-military furor. Egypt is often depicted as a dignified Cleopatra, but Andeel had drawn a giant woman wearing a long black galabia who was reclining on the Cairo skyline. A man gazing up at her says, "O Egypt, arise and prepare yourself," a nationalist slogan taken from a popular song. Mother Egypt replies, "Enough, asshole." *Al-Masry Al-Youm* printed Mother Egypt's retort as "Shut up already." *Mada Masr,* which put the cartoon on T-shirts, was less strict: it only blurred the word "asshole." ■

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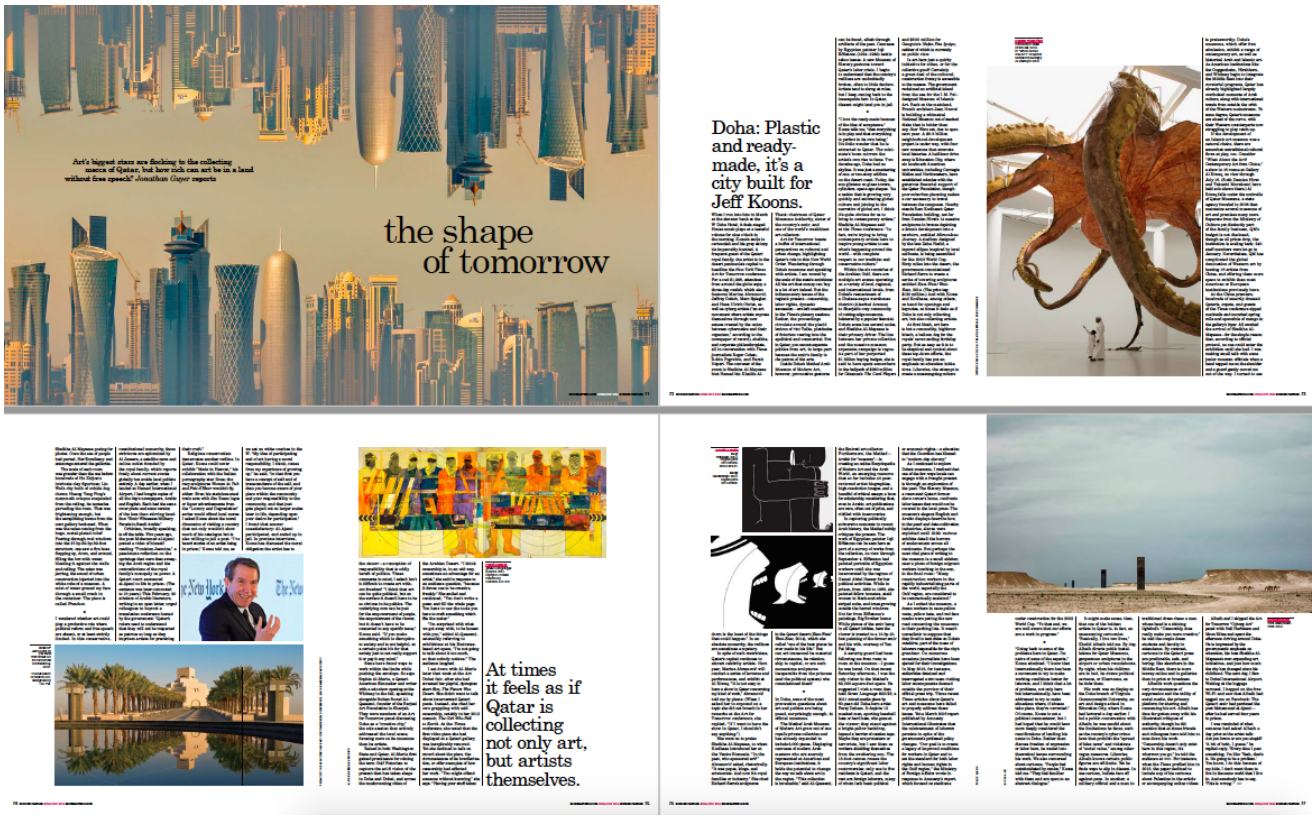
Qatar: The Shape of Tomorrow

BY JONATHAN GUYER,
MODERN PAINTERS | JUNE 2016



Doha: Plastic and ready-made, it's a city built for Jeff Koons. When I run into him in March at the elevator bank at the W Doha Hotel, it feels staged. House music plays at a tasteful volume for nine o'clock in the morning. Koons's smile is cartoonish and his gray skinny tie impeccably knotted. A frequent guest of the Qatari royal family, the artist is in the desert peninsula's capital to headline the *New York Times* Art for Tomorrow conference. For a cool $1,995, attendees from around the globe enjoy a three-day confab, which also features Marina Abramović, Jeffrey Deitch, Marc Spiegler, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, as well as cyborg artists ("an art movement where artists express themselves through new senses created by the union between cybernetics and their organism," according to the newspaper of record), sheikhs, and corporate philanthropists, all in conversation with *Times* journalists Roger Cohen, Robin Pogrebin, and Farah Nayeri. The convener of the event is Sheikha Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani: chairman of Qatar Museums Authority, sister of the country's emir, and one of the world's wealthiest art collectors.

Art for Tomorrow boasts a buffet of international perspectives on cultural and urban change, highlighting Qatar's role in this New World Order. Wandering through Doha's museums and speaking with artists, I am wowed by the scale of the state's ambitions: All the art that money can buy is a lot of art indeed. But the inflammatory issues of the region's present—censorship, labor rights, dynastic succession—are left unaddressed in the *Times*'s plenary sessions. Rather, the proceedings circulate around the placid lexicon of TED Talks, platitudes of futurism veering into the apolitical and commercial. But in Qatar, you cannot separate politics from art, in large part because the emir's family is *the* patron of the arts.

Inside Doha's Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, however, provocative gestures can be found, albeit through artifacts of the past. Canvases by Egyptian painter Inji Efflatoun (1924–1989) tackle taboo issues. A new Museum of Slavery gestures toward Qatar's labor crisis. I begin to understand that the country's redlines are undoubtedly broken, often to little fanfare. Artists tend to shrug at rules, but I keep coming back to the inescapable fact: In Qatar, dissent might land you in jail.

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"I love the ready-made because of the idea of acceptance," Koons tells me, "that everything is in play and that everything is perfect in its own being."

It's little wonder that he is attracted to Qatar. The mini-state's boom mirrors the artist's own rise to fame. Two decades ago, Doha had no skyline. It was just a smattering of one- or two-story edifices on the desert coast. Today, the sun glistens on glass towers, cylinders, space-age shapes. "As a nation that is growing very quickly and embracing global culture and joining in the narrative of global art, I think it's quite obvious for us to bring in contemporary artists," Sheikha Al-Mayassa said at the *Times* conference. "In fact, we're trying to bring contemporary artists here to inspire young artists to see what's happening around the world...with complete respect to our tradition and conservative culture."

Within the six countries of the Arabian Gulf, there are multiple art scenes operating on a variety of local, regional, and international levels, from Dubai's reenactment of a Chelsea-esque warehouse district (Alserkal Avenue) to Sharjah's cozy community of cutting-edge museums, bolstered by a popular biennial. Doha's scene has several nodes, and Sheikha Al-Mayassa is their primary driver. The line between her private collection and the massive museum expansion campaign is vague. As part of her purported $1 billion buying budget, she is said to have spent somewhere in the ballpark of $250 million for Cézanne's *The Card Players* and $300 million for Gauguin's *Nafea Faa Ipoipo*, neither of which is currently on public view.

Is art here just a quirky initiative for elites, or for the collective good? Certainly a great deal of the cultural-construction frenzy is accessible to the masses. The government reclaimed an artificial island from the sea for the I.M. Pei– designed Museum of Islamic Art. Back on the mainland, French architect Jean Nouvel is building a whimsical National Museum out of stacked disks that is bolder than any *Star Wars* set, due to open

next year. A $5.5 billion neighborhood-development project is under way, with four new museums that excavate local histories. A half-hour drive away is Education City, where six landmark American universities, including Carnegie Mellon and Northwestern, have established colonies with the generous financial support of the Qatar Foundation, though poor suburban planning makes a car necessary to travel between the campuses. Nearby stands Rem Koolhaas's Qatar Foundation building, not far from Damien Hirst's 14 massive sculptures in bronze depicting a fetus's development into a newborn, entitled *Miraculous Journey*. A stadium designed by the late Zaha Hadid, a layered ellipse inspired by local sailboats, is being assembled for the 2022 World Cup. Sixty miles into the desert, the government commissioned Richard Serra to create a series of towering sculptures entitled *East-West/West-East*, 2014. (The price tag: $120 million.) And with Koons and Koolhaas, among others, on hand for openings and keynotes, at times it feels as if Doha is not only collecting art, but also collecting artists.

At first blush, art here is but a commodity, highbrow kitsch, a balloon dog for the royals' never-ending birthday party. But as easy as it is to be skeptical and cynical about these top-down efforts, the royal family has put an emphasis on education initiatives. Likewise, the attempt to create a museumgoing culture is praiseworthy. Doha's museums, which offer free admission, exhibit a range of contemporary art, as well as historical Arab and Islamic art. As American institutions like the Guggenheim, Hirshhorn, and Whitney begin to integrate the Middle East into their curatorial programs, Qatar has already highlighted largely overlooked moments of Arab culture, along with international trends from outside the orbit of the Western mainstream. To some degree, Qatar's museums are ahead of the curve, with their Western counterparts now struggling to play catch-up.

If the development of an Islamic art museum was a natural choice, there are somewhat untraditional cultural flows at play, too. Consider "What About the Art? Contemporary Art from China," a show in 16 rooms at Gallery Al Riwaq, on view through July 16. (Both Damien Hirst and Takashi Murakami have held solo shows there.) Al Riwaq falls under the umbrella of Qatar Museums, a state agency founded in 2005 that maintains several museums of art and promises many more. Separate from the Ministry of Culture yet distinctly part of the family business, QM's budget is not disclosed, though as oil prices drop, the institution is scaling back; 240 staff members were let go in January. Nevertheless, QM has complicated the global domination of Western art by hosting 16 artists from China, and offering them more space to exhibit than most American or European institutions previously have.

At the China premiere, hundreds of smartly dressed Qataris, expats, and guests of the *Times* conference sipped mocktails and munched spring rolls and spoonfuls of mango in the gallery's foyer. All awaited the arrival of Sheikha Al-Mayassa—for the simple reason that, according to official protocol, no one could enter the exhibition until she had. I was making small talk with some junior museum officials when a hand tapped me on the shoulder and a guard gently moved me out of the way. I turned to see Sheikha Al-Mayassa posing for photos. Once the sea of people had parted, Her Excellency and entourage entered the galleries.

The scale of each room was grander than the one before: hundreds of Hu Zhijun's

intricate clay figurines; Liu Wei's city built of oxhide dog chews; Huang Yong Ping's mammoth octopus suspended from the ceiling, its tentacles pervading the room. That was frightening enough, but the earsplitting booms from the next gallery beckoned. What was the noise coming from the huge, metal-plated cube? Peering through oval windows into the 27-by-39-by-39-foot structure, one saw a fire hose flapping up, down, and around, filling the box with water, blasting it against the walls and ceiling. The noise was jarring, the sound of urban construction injected into the white cube of a museum. A mist of water grazed my face through a small crack in the container. The piece is called *Freedom*.

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I wondered whether art could play a productive role where political reform and free speech are absent, or at least strictly limited. In this conservative, constitutional monarchy, those strictures are epitomized by Al Jazeera, a satellite news and online outlet founded by the royal family, which reports freely about current events globally but avoids local politics entirely. A day earlier, when I landed at Hamad International Airport, I had bought copies of all the day's newspapers, Arabic and English. Each had the same cover photo and some version of the less than stirring head-line: "Emir Witnesses Military Parade in Saudi Arabia."

Criticism, broadly speaking, is off the table. Five years ago, the poet Mohammed al-Ajami posted a video of himself reading "Tunisian Jasmine," a passionate reflection on the uprisings that were then sweeping the Arab region and the contradictions of the royal family's monopoly on power. A Qatari court sentenced al-Ajami to life in prison. (The sentence was later commuted to 15 years.) This February, 20 scholars of Arabic literature, writing in an open letter, urged colleagues to boycott a translation conference hosted by the government: "Qatar's rulers need to understand that they will not be respected as patrons so long as they imprison artists for practicing their craft."

Religious conservatism demarcates another redline. In Qatar, Koons could never exhibit "Made in Heaven," his collaboration with the Italian pornography star Ilona; the racy sculptures *Woman in Tub* and *Fait d'Hiver* wouldn't fly, either. Even his stainless-steel train sets with Jim Beam logos or liquor advertisements from the "Luxury and Degradation" series would offend local mores. I asked Koons about the moral dimension of visiting a country that not only wouldn't show much of his catalogue but is also willing to jail a poet. "I've heard stories of an artist being in prison," Koons told me, as we sat on white couches in the W. "My idea of participating and of art having a moral responsibility, I think, comes from my experience of growing up," he said, "in that first you have a concept of self and of transcendence of the self, and then you become aware of your place within the community and your responsibility to the community, and that just gets played out on larger scales later in life, depending upon your desire for participation." I found that answer unsatisfactory: Al-Ajami participated, and ended up in jail. In previous interviews, Koons has discussed the moral obligation the artist has to the *viewer*—a conception of responsibility that is oddly bereft of politics. These comments in mind, I asked: Isn't it difficult to create art without freedom? "I think that art can be quite political, but on the surface it doesn't have to be so obvious in its politics. The underlying

core can be just for the empowerment of people, the empowerment of the viewer, but it doesn't have to be connected to any specific issue," Koons said. "If you make something which is disruptive to society and is not helpful, at a certain point it's for that society just to not really support it or pay it any mind."

Some have found ways to work within the limits while pushing the envelope. So says Sophia Al-Maria, a Qatari-American filmmaker and writer with a solo show opening at the Whitney in the fall, speaking alongside Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah. They were members of an Art for Tomorrow panel discussing Doha as a "creative city," the sole session that actively addressed the local scene, focusing more on its museums than its artists.

Raised in both Washington State and Qatar, Al-Maria first gained prominence for coining the term Gulf Futurism to capture the sci-fi vision of the present that has taken shape in Doha and Dubai, and across the mushrooming cities of the Arabian Desert. "I think censorship is, in an odd way, sometimes an advantage for an artist," she said in response to an audience question, "because it forces one to be creative, frankly." She smiled and continued, "You don't write a poem and fill the whole page. You have to use the tools you have to craft something which fits the meter."

"I'm surprised with what we got away with, to be honest with you," added Al-Qassemi, ostensibly referring to exhibitions at his Emirates-based art space, "I'm not going to talk about it too much, so that nobody notices." The audience laughed.

I sat down with Al-Maria later that week at the Art Dubai fair, after she had screened her playful, dystopian short film, *The Future Was Desert*. She didn't want to talk about incarcerated Qatari poets. Instead, she cited her own grappling with self-censorship, notably in her 2012 memoir, *The Girl Who Fell to Earth*. At the *Times* conference, she noted that the first video piece she had displayed at a Qatari gallery was inexplicably removed. Yet she declined to talk on record about the piece, the circumstances of its bowdlerization, or offer examples of how censorship had affected her work. "You might offend someone without knowing," she says. "Having your stuff taken down is the least of the things that could happen." In an absolute monarchy, the redlines are sometimes a mystery.

In spite of such restrictions, Qatar's capital continues to attract celebrity artists. Next year, Marina Abramović will conduct a series of lectures and performances, and exhibit at Al Riwaq. "It is not easy to have a show in Qatar concerning my kind of work," Abramović told me by phone. (When I asked her to expound on a topic she did not broach in her remarks at the Art for Tomorrow conference, she replied, "If I want to have the show in Qatar, I shouldn't say anything.") She went on to praise Sheikha Al-Mayassa, to whom Koolhaas introduced her at the Venice Biennale. "In the past, who sponsored art?" Abramović asked, rhetorically. "It was popes, kings, and aristocrats. And now it's royal families or industry." She cited Richard Serra's sculptures in the Qatari desert (*East-West/ West-East*, 2014), which she called "one of the best pieces he ever made in his life." But can art transcend its material circumstances, its relation- ship to capital, or are such momentous sculptures inseparable from the princess (and the political system)

who commissioned them?

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In Doha, some of the most provocative questions about art and politics are being posed, surprisingly enough, in official museums.

The Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art grew out of one royal's private collection and has already expanded to include 8,000 pieces. Displaying canvases of modern Arab masters who are scarcely represented at American and European institutions, it holds the potential to change the way we talk about art in the region. "This collection is invaluable," said Al-Qassemi, the Emirati art collector. Furthermore, the Mathaf—Arabic for "museum"—is creating an online Encyclopedia of Modern Art and the Arab World, an emerging resource that so far includes 40 peer-reviewed artist biographies, high-resolution images, and a handful of critical essays; a boon for scholarship considering that, even in Arabic, art publications are rare, often out of print, and riddled with inaccuracies.

In capturing politically subversive moments in recent Arab history, the Mathaf subtly critiques the present. The work of Egyptian painter Inji Efflatoun can be seen here as part of a survey of works from the collection, on view through September 4. Efflatoun had painted portraits of Egyptian workers until she was incarcerated by the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser for her political activities. While in prison, from 1959 to 1963, she painted fellow inmates, staid women in black-and-white striped suits, and trees growing outside the barred windows. Not far from Efflatoun's paintings, Big Brother looms: While photos of the emir hang in all Qatari lobbies, here the viewer is treated to a 10-by-10- foot painting of the former emir and his wife, courtesy of Yan Pei Ming.

A security guard had been following me from room to room at the museum—I guess he was bored. On that recent Saturday afternoon, I was the only visitor in the Mathaf's 59,000-square-foot space. He suggested I visit a room that held *Street Language #22/23*, a 2011 mixed-media piece by 60-year-old Doha-born artist Faraj Daham. It depicts 12 masked men, sporting baseball hats or hard hats, who gaze at the viewer; they stand against a bright-yellow backdrop, beyond a barrier of caution tape. Maybe they are protesters or terrorists, but I saw them as workers shielding themselves from the sweltering sun. The 13-foot canvas rouses the country's significant labor controversies; only one in five residents is Qatari, and the rest are foreign laborers, many of whom lack basic political or economic rights—a situation that the *Guardian* has likened to "modern-day slavery."

As I continued to explore Doha's museums, I realized that one of the few ways locals can engage with a fraught present is through an exploration of the past. The Slavery Museum, a renovated Qatari former slave owner's home, confronts labor issues that would not be covered in the local press. The museum's elegant English and Arabic displays describe how, in the pearl and date-cultivation industries, slaves were exploited until 1929; various exhibits detail the horrors of enslavement across all continents. But perhaps the most vital piece of writing in the museum is a small sidebar, near a photo of foreign migrant

workers lunching in the sun, in the final room: “Many construction workers in the rapidly industrializing parts of the world, especially the Gulf region, are considered to be contractually enslaved.”

As I exited the museum, a dozen workers in neon-yellow vests, yellow hats, and red face masks were paving the new road connecting the museums to their parking lots. It wasn’t unrealistic to suppose that they lived in tent cities on Doha’s outskirts, part of the mass of laborers responsible for the city’s grandeur. On numerous occasions journalists have been ejected for their investigations. In May 2015, for instance, authorities detained and interrogated a BBC team visiting labor encampments deemed outside the purview of their official press trip. Three recent *Times* articles about Qatar’s art and museums have failed to properly address these issues. Yet a March 2016 report published by Amnesty International illustrates that the mistreatment of laborers persists in spite of the government’s professed policy changes. “Our goal is to create a legacy of improved conditions for workers in Qatar and to set the standard for both labor rights and human rights in the Gulf region,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote in response to Amnesty’s report, which focused on stadiums under construction for the 2022 World Cup. “To that end, we are well aware that our efforts are a work in progress.”

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“Going back to some of the problems here in Qatar, I’m naive of some of the aspects,” Koons admitted. “I know that internationally there has been a movement to try to make working conditions better for laborers, and I think that a lot of problems, not only here but internationally, have been addressed to try to make situations where, if abuses take place, they’re corrected.” Of course, Koons is not a political commentator, but I had hoped that he would have more deeply considered the ramifications of lending his name to Doha. Rather than discuss freedom of expression or labor here, he waded into theoretical issues surrounding his work. We also conversed about cartoons. “People feel unintimidated by comics,” Koons told me. “They feel familiar with them and are open to an abstract dialogue.”

It might make sense, then, that one of the boldest artists in Qatar is, in fact, an unassuming cartoonist. “Basically, I live two lives,” Khalid Albaih told me. By day, Albaih directs public installations for Qatar Museums, gargantuan sculptures in the airport or urban roundabouts. By night, when his children are in bed, he draws political cartoons, or Khartoons, as he dubs them. His work was on display at the Doha branch of Virginia Commonwealth University, an art and design school in Education City, where Koons had lectured a day earlier. I led a public conversation with Albaih; he was candid about the limitations he faces, such as the country’s cyber crime laws that prohibit the “spread of false news” and violations of “social value,” among other vague measures. Likewise, Albaih knows certain public figures are off-limits. Yet he finds ways to slip in dissent. In one cartoon, bullets face off against pens. In another, a military official and a man in traditional dress chase a man whose head is a shining lightbulb. “Censorship does really make you more creative,” he told the couple dozen students and faculty in attendance. By contrast, cartoons in the Qatari press are predictable, safe, and boring; like elsewhere in the Middle East, there is more leeway online and in galleries than in print or

broadcast.

Albaih's work questions the very circumstances of suppression and the utility of social media, the primary platform for sharing and consuming his art. Albaih has thus far gotten away with his illustrated critiques of authority, though he did mention that at times friends and colleagues have told him to tone down his work. "Censorship doesn't only exist here in this region, it's wherever you go," he told the audience at VCU. For instance, when the *Times* profiled him in 2013, the paper declined to include any of his cartoons about Palestine in the article or accompanying online videos.

Albaih and I skipped the Art for Tomorrow "Cyborg Art" panel with Neil Harbisson and Moon Ribas and spent the afternoon driving around Doha. He is impressed by the government's emphasis on education, his boss Sheikha Al-Mayassa's ever-expanding art initiatives, and just how much the city has changed since his childhood. The next day, I flew to Dubai International Airport. Waiting at the luggage carousel, I hopped on the free Wi-Fi and saw that Albaih had tagged me on Facebook: The Qatari emir had pardoned the poet Mohammed al-Ajami— after he had served four years in prison.

I was reminded of what someone had asked Albaih a day prior at the artist talk: Are you brave or are you stupid? "A bit of both, I guess," he replied coyly. "Every time I post something, I'm like 'Yeah, that's it. It's going to be a problem.' You know, I do this because of my kids. I don't want them to live in the same world that I live in. And somebody has to say, 'This is wrong.'"

NIEMAN REPORTS

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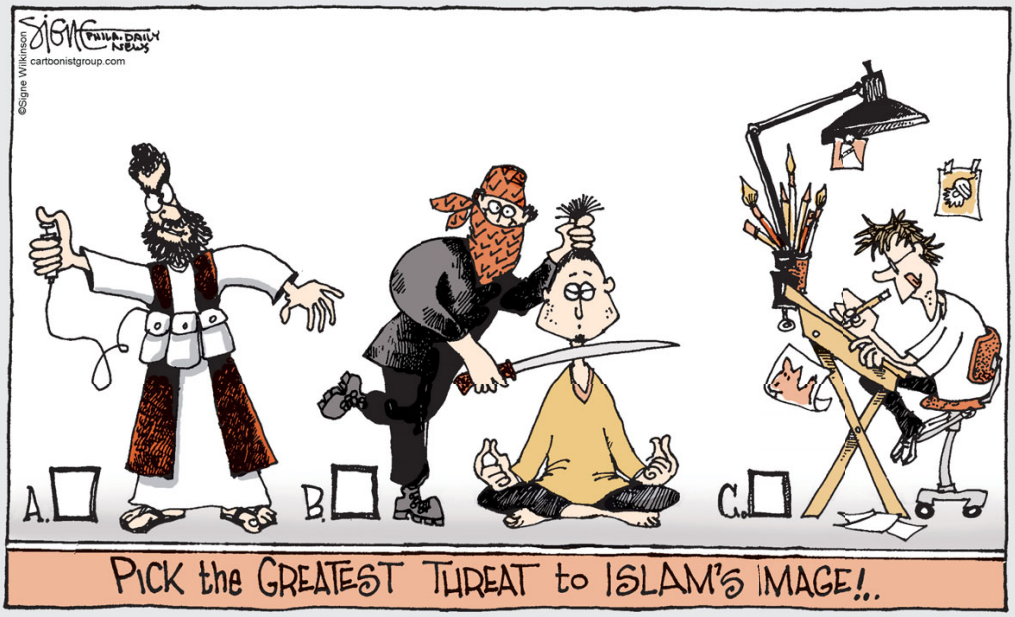
The Offending Art

Political cartooning after Charlie Hebdo

THE OFFENDING ART



Philadelphia Daily News cartoonist Signe Wilkinson offered a multiple-choice test in 2010

Political cartooning after the Charlie Hebdo attacks

BY JONATHAN GUYER

A black-robed, bearded figure hovers above Europe sprinkling drops of water, or maybe seeds, from a heart-shaped pouch. A white aura illuminates him against a starry sky, but his feet are rooted firmly in the earth. The title of this cartoon reads: "Prophet Muhammad."

The Palestinian newspaper Al-Hayat al-Jadida published the drawing in February. The next day Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas ordered an investigation into the image and its creator, Muhammad Sabaaneh. Abbas, who after the Charlie Hebdo attacks three weeks earlier had joined world leaders in a march against terrorism and in support of free speech in Paris, described the cartoon's publication as "a terrible mistake" and stressed that "sacred religious symbols, especially the prophets and messengers" should be respected.

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Palestinian Authority police questioned Sabaaneh, who apologized for the drawing and explained on Facebook that despite the title the robed figure was not intended to be a depiction of Muhammad, forbidden by Islamic authorities, but "a symbolic figure for Islam and the Muslim's role in spreading light and love for all humanity." Al-Hayat al-Jadida launched an inquiry, too, briefly suspending Sabaanah and other staff involved in the cartoon's publication, and issued its own apology.

Sabaanah, whose satirical illustrations have criticized everything from Palestinian political parties to the Israeli occupation, had been in trouble before. In 2013, Israeli authorities sentenced him to five months in prison because one of his cartoons appeared in a book published by his brother, Thamer Sabaaneh, a member of Hamas, the Palestinian resistance movement governing Gaza that Israel considers a terrorist organization. A few years earlier he received a series of death threats from Hamas members, because of his caricatures of Hamas senior political leader Ismail Haniyeh.

"We should oppose everything that is forced on us, by governments or dictatorships or the authority of religion," says Sabaanah. And as for respecting religious symbols, Sabaanah claims that's exactly what his cartoon was intended to do: "The way to defend Islam is through art. When Islam is criticized through art, we should respond through art."

Sabaanah's experience illustrates just how complex and contested political cartooning remains after brothers Said and Chérif Kouachi killed 12 at the offices of French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo on January 7. The Paris attacks brought fresh urgency to longstanding questions around the limits of free speech, the role of satire as a form of dissent, and the relationship between political cartooning and journalism.

The Charlie Hebdo murders, and an attack aimed at Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks, who had drawn images of the Prophet Muhammad many Muslims considered offensive, a month later in Copenhagen, focused attention on the threat to Western satirists. But political cartoonists around the world are at risk.

IN THE POST-CHARLIE HEBDO ERA, POLITICAL CARTOONING REMAINS A COMPLEX AND CONTESTED PURSUIT

In Turkey in 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was then prime minister, brought a criminal complaint against cartoonist Musa

In 2013, when the pope stepped down, Kevin Siers of The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer mused on possible replacements

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Kart, who in the midst of a corruption investigation into Erdogan's inner circle depicted a hologram of Erdogan standing watch as thieves stole money from a safe. Lawyers sought nine years imprisonment; Kart was acquitted but Erdogan has appealed. In Ecuador, one of the best-known cartoonists in Latin America, Javier Bonilla, whose pen name is Bonil, is accused of "socioeconomic discrimination" for mocking the stutter and questioning the suitability for office of Agustin Delgado, a congressman from President Rafael Correa's ruling party. In Singapore, the government charged Leslie Chew with sedition for the cartoonist's criticism of state discrimination against ethnic minorities in his strip "Demon-Cratic Singapore." And in Malaysia, Prime Minister Najib Razak's government also accused cartoonist Zulkiflee Anwar Haque, known as Zunar, of sedition, for a cartoon criticizing a corrupt judiciary. "He points out corruption," says John A. Lent, editor in chief of the International Journal of Comic Art, of Zunar. "He's what a political cartoonist is supposed to be: a watchdog on government."

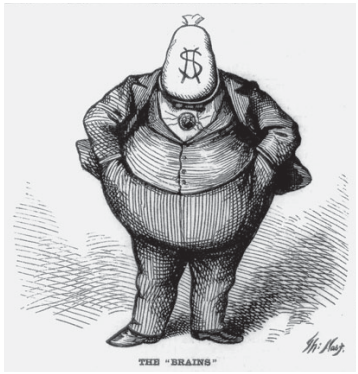
In Jonathan Shapiro's 2015 cartoon, South Africa's leader kept smiling despite the nation's woes

Political cartoonists have long served a watchdog function. In the 1870s, Thomas Nast's caricatures of William M. "Boss" Tweed in Harper's Weekly went a long way toward helping topple Tammany Hall's crooked political machine, which siphoned some $6 million from public funds. The New York Times had published a series of investigations into Tammany's extortion, but it was Nast's caricatures, including one of a corpulent Tweed with a money bag for a face, that emboldened the public outcry against the crooked boss's malfeasance.

Tweed's furious plea—"Stop them damned pictures. I don't care so much what the papers say about me. My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures!"—may be apocryphal but it nonetheless aptly describes the task of the political cartoonist. "Our job is to create either some doubt in your mind about an issue or create a discussion," says Christopher Weyant, a cartoonist whose work has appeared in The New Yorker, The Hill, and on the cover of this issue of Nieman Reports. "We want you to think. We want you to react."

Reactions provoked by the Charlie Hebdo attack come at a time when satirists are increasingly seen as sources of news, especially by young people. A 2012 Pew survey found that about 80 percent of "The Daily Show" and "The Colbert Report" viewers were aged 18 to 49, compared to only 40 percent of network evening news viewers. Twelve percent of adults surveyed by Pew in 2014 said they received news from "The Daily Show" in the previous week, putting it on a par with USA Today and The New York Times. Another 2014 study, this one by the University of Delaware, showed that viewers of the "The Daily Show," "The Colbert Report," and John Oliver's "Last Week Tonight" were much more familiar with net neutrality laws than viewers of mainstream networks.

The icons of American political satire—Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert—may be moving on, but new satirists and satirical outlets are appearing to take their place. John Oliver's show, "Last Week Tonight," has stormed HBO as well as YouTube, where his channel boasts nearly 1.5 million subscribers. The Huffington Post is launching "The HuffPost Show," a weekly Web-only satirical news program that will stream online in prime time. In the U.K., satirical puppet show "Newzoids" is being viewed as a successor to the classic '80s program "Spitting Image," which skewered the Margaret Thatcher government. And the Web is creating new spaces for the distribution and debate of political cartoons. "The fact that comedians are becoming main sources of news only tells you what a failure our media outlets are," says Bassem Youssef, who last June discontinued the satirical Egyptian TV show he hosted as tolerance for dissent in the country shrank. (For more from Bassem Youssef, see "The Joke Is Mightier Than the Sword" on page 37.)



In 1871, Thomas Nast's drawing of "Boss" Tweed fueled outrage over corruption

In many countries in the Middle East, tolerance for satire has decreased since the upheavals of the Arab Spring. Consider the case of Syria's Ali Ferzat, one of the Arab world's most prominent political cartoonists. For decades, the Hafez al-Assad regime tolerated his veiled visual barbs, published in the state-run newspaper Tishreen. After al-Assad's son Bashar took power in 2000, Ferzat launched the satirical newspaper al-Domari. But in 2011, the first year of the Syrian uprising, members of the regime's masked security forces kidnapped and beat Ferzat, dumping him on the road to the airport with two broken hands. Ferzat's

colleague, Syrian cartoonist Akram Raslan, has been missing for nearly two years. "I survived an assassination attempt," says Ferzat, who just days before his abduction drew a caricature of a lanky Assad hitching a ride with Libyan autocrat Muammar el-Qaddafi, "so freedom does not come for free."

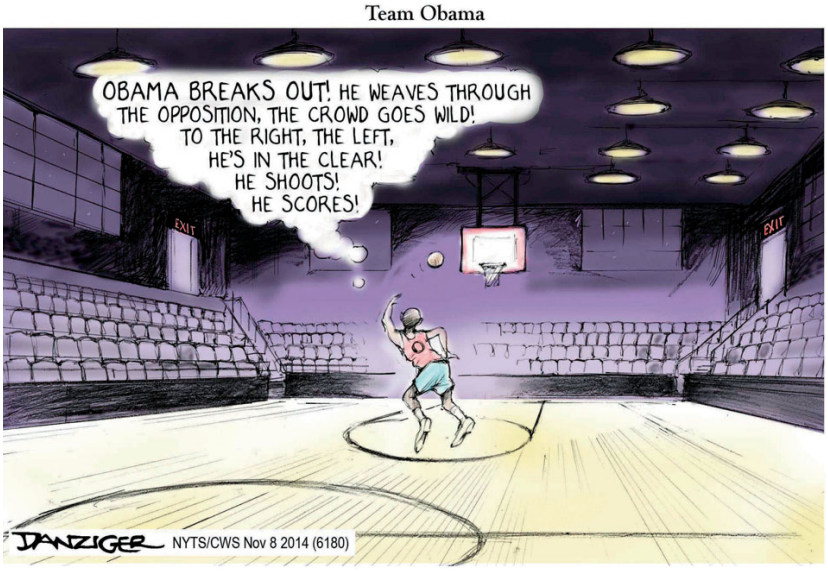
For Ferzat, the price of freedom has been exile. He now lives in Kuwait, where he draws for the pan-Arab daily Al-Quds Al-Arabi. Iranian cartoonist Nikahang Kowsar has also opted to work outside his home country. Back in 2000, Kowsar drew a cartoon of a crocodile choking a reporter with its tail. In Farsi, "Professor Crocodile," as the reptile was labeled, rhymes with the nickname of Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, then one of the country's top clerics. Kowsar ended up spending six days in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison and was charged with insulting a religious figure and undermining national security. In Iran, Kowsar says, "We have freedom of speech; we don't have freedom *after* speech. You are free to draw a cartoon, but you are arrested the next day if they don't like your cartoon."

The intimidation continued: Kowsar's phone was tapped, his e-mail hacked. Subsequent death threats pushed him to Canada and then to Washington, D.C. After leaving Iran, he founded Toonistan.com, a cartoon-oriented social media platform, and Khodnevis, an alternative Farsi news source that prominently features cartoons.

In Iran in 2000, Nikahang Kowsar's drawing of a crocodile strangling a journalist raised a furor

Kowsar notes that, despite the risks, political cartooning is alive and well in Iran, with more illustrators addressing touchier subjects, like poverty and water shortages, largely online.

Ahmed Benchemsi, a native Moroccan who founded and edited the best-selling Arabic news weekly Nichane, has followed a similar path. Benchemsi left Morocco after advertiser boycotts depleted the magazine's finances. He now edits and publishes Free Arabs, an online outlet he co-founded in 2012, while at Stanford University. Free Arabs has featured over 500 bloggers, including an array of secular and progressive voices from the Middle East, and gives pride of place to political art and satire. It also produces "The Fatwa Show," a Web video series lampooning Islamic clerics, and "The Horrific 4," a collection of sardonic columns mocking fears around taboo topics like "the Jew," "the Atheist," and "the Independent Woman." "The first thing to do if we want the Arab World to go forward is to look at ourselves in the mirror and criticize what deserves to be criticized," says Benchemsi.



Syndicated cartoonist Jeff Danziger took aim in 2014 at President Obama's style of governing

The web has enabled Kowsar and Benchemsi to engage new audiences and sidestep both censorship and self-censorship, as it has for Wang Liming, a Chinese cartoonist better known as Rebel Pepper. Wang began publishing his cartoons via microblogging services in 2009, accumulating over 1 million followers. But a year later, when he decided to quit his post at a Shanghai advertising company to focus full time on drawing, he discovered no Chinese publication would run his work. Each time the government shut down one of his microblog accounts, he opened another, something that happened 200 times. "Even some of my readers were detained because they shared my cartoons," he says. He now lives in Japan and publishes exclusively via social media accounts.

While in Japan last summer, he mocked the mainland government for busing in demonstrators to a counter-protest against the democracy marches then taking place

TOP: NIK KOWSAR BOTTOM: DANZIGER/CARTOON ARTS INTERNATIONAL/THE NEW YORK TIMES SYNDICATE
OPPOSITE: MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY/REUTERS

in Hong Kong. He shared a cartoon of red-faced Chinese citizens—all dressed the same, some holding Chanel and Prada shopping bags—walking on their knees; a woman holding a portrait of Mao yells, "Let's show Hong Kongers what it means to kneel for your country."

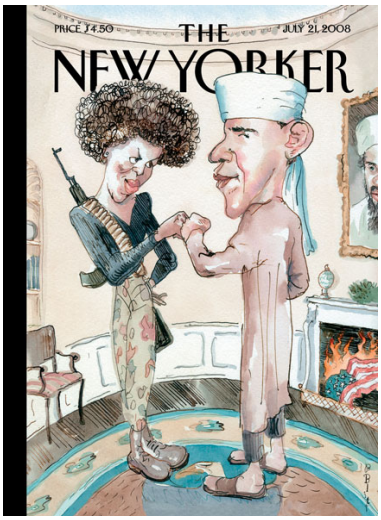
A website linked to the Communist Party newspaper The People's Daily and its sister publication Global Times, as well as other outlets, labeled Wang a "pro-Japan traitor," and a fresh batch of his microblog accounts was shut down. Fearing for his safety, Wang decided to remain in Japan, where he continues to draw cartoons and share them online. "I decided to throw away self-censorship," he says of his decision not to return to China. "It is such a wonderful feeling that I can create cartoons freely."

South African cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro, better known as Zapiro, has decided to stay put, despite death threats he received for a 2010 cartoon depicting the Prophet Muhammad on a psychiatrist's couch saying, "Other prophets have followers with a sense of humor!" Tolerance for satire is a pretty good indicator of the general health of a democracy, according to Carol Hills, global cartoons editor at Public Radio International's "The World." "Repressive governments don't tend to have a sense of humor," she says. But even in democracies there are red lines cartoonists cross at their own risk.

DESPITE DEATH THREATS, ZAPIRO HAS NO PLANS TO LEAVE SOUTH AFRICA

Zapiro got in trouble for his cartoons of South African President Jacob Zuma, whom he always renders with a showerhead sprouting from his scalp, a reference to Zuma's 2006 claim that showering after unprotected sex minimizes the risk of transmitting HIV. Zuma made the statement in court, prior to being elected president, while on trial for rape, a charge of which he was acquitted. Zuma currently faces corruption charges for allegedly spending some $20.5 million in public funds on his private home.

Zapiro has chronicled it all in his cartoons. In one 2008 drawing, he depicted Zuma preparing to have sex with a blindfolded Lady Justice, who is restrained by men wearing shirts labeled with the logos of various South Africa political groups. "Go for it, boss," one of the men says. Zuma sued the cartoonist for defamation, but dropped the suit in 2012. Zapiro continues to depict Zuma with a showerhead sprouting from his scalp. "I've got this platform to be controversial, to be irreverent, to be rude ... and to help people see things in a different way," he says. "In most instances, the kind of intimidation that I might feel from politicians or their henchmen just emboldens me."



Barry Blitt's cover for July 21, 2008 depicted innuendoes about the Obamas

"Punching up"—ridiculing the powerful rather than kicking people who are already down—is one of the unwritten rules of political cartooning. For some, Charlie Hebdo's satirical style seemed to be "punching down," more about demeaning specific religious or ethnic groups rather than dismantling discrimination and prejudice. "We're a nation without heroes," says Khalid Albaih, a Romania-born Sudanese cartoonist based in Qatar, referring to people in the Muslim world. "The only hero for a lot of these people is The Prophet ... When I look at Charlie Hebdo, I don't understand the

FOR SOME, CHARLIE HEBDO SEEMED TO BE MORE ABOUT DEMEANING GROUPS THAN DISMANTLING DISCRIMINATION

In August, Chinese cartoonist Wang Liming lampooned pro-Beijing protesters in Hong Kong

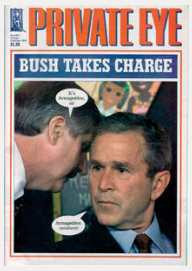
TOP: ©2008 BARRY BLITT & THE NEW YORKER/CONDÉ NAST ARCHIVES. USED BY PERMISSION.
BOTTOM: REBEL PEPPER

SAYING IT WITH SATIRE

Around the world journalists and cartoonists take aim at the powerful through satire. As is the case with Private Eye and The Clinic, the satirical humor is sometimes accompanied by first-rate investigative reporting.

— LAURA MITCHELL, JONATHAN GUYER, AND TARA W. MERRIGAN

The Onion, U.S.
Founded in 1988 by two college students, satirical newspaper The Onion stopped its print edition and has been online-only since December 2013. It has often done daring satire on sensitive subjects, but it also has angered some with its treatment of traumatic events. In 2011, The Onion published a spoof news story reporting that Congress had taken schoolchildren hostage, portraying John Boehner holding a gun to a child's head. In several instances, media outlets and politicians have mistakenly cited its satirical reporting as fact.



Private Eye, U.K.
Since 1961, British magazine Private Eye has been offending readers and attracting libel suits with a mix of satirical columns and cartoons, faux news reports, and genuine investigative reporting. Offense was so great to its cover following Princess Diana's death in 1997 that some stores refused to sell the issue. The magazine's post-9/11 cover, headlined "Bush Takes Charge," mocked President George W. Bush's response to the attacks. It depicted an aide informing Bush of "Armageddon" and him responding, "Armageddon outahere!"

The Clinic, Chile
Born out of frustration with mainstream media's timid coverage of former Chilean President Augusto Pinochet's arrest at The London Clinic in 1998, The Clinic started out as an underground pamphlet but evolved into the country's leading satirical magazine. Crude humor and photoshopped images grab as much attention as The Clinic's sharp investigative reporting, such as a special issue on Pinochet's reign of terror. In 2010, The Clinic beat back a boycott by conservative Catholics, angered by The Clinic's criticism of the pope.

Andeel, Egypt
In Egypt where "insulting the president" is illegal, cartoonist Andeel pushes boundaries. After military leader Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ousted President Mohamed Morsi in 2013, Andeel's editors at the popular daily Al-Masry Al-Youm grew reluctant to publish his cartoons. So he took them elsewhere—to his Facebook page, the independent online outlet Mada Masr, and Tok Tok, an alternative comics zine he helped launch in 2011. "You have to make sure your work is strong and speaks for itself," says Andeel, "and you can stand an argument."

concept. You're just calling people ignorant and inciting violence, for absolutely no reason at all."

Nicolas Vadot, vice president of Cartooning for Peace, an organization founded in 2006 by French cartoonist Plantu after violent protests prompted by caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper, offers a different reading. The aim of the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists "was to put criticism about Islam on the same level as criticism of other religions," Vadot says. "They were always punching up rather than down. They never made fun of regular people praying or going to the mosque (or rarely). They mostly made fun of those who use religion to gain power and threaten others."

While the pressures on cartoonists working under repressive regimes may be largely political, in the West those pressures can also be social and economic. Like other journalists, political cartoonists have been laid off as legacy titles retrenched after the twin shocks of the financial crisis and the collapse of old business models.

Mark Fiore, whose Web animations for the San Francisco Chronicle's website won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning, suggests one reason newspapers have slashed space for cartoonists is reluctance to offend advertisers. Online, Fiore feels less fettered taking on big oil firms like Shell and Chevron or big banks like Citigroup. "A lot of it revolves around fear," Fiore says. "It's not always fear of violence. It's fear of losing money in some cases, too, fear of stirring people up and offending people."

Writing for the Creators Syndicate, Ted Rall, a Los Angeles Times cartoonist whose work appears in papers across the country, attributed the decline of print cartooning to a perception that cartoonists are not serious journalists. "Corporate journalism executives view cartoons as frivolous, less serious than 'real' commentary like columns or editorials," Rall wrote. He noted that gunmen could never kill four editorial cartoonists at an American paper, as the Charlie Hebdo attacks did, because none of the papers have two, let alone four cartoonists still on staff.

Signe Wilkinson at the Philadelphia Daily News says she and her fellow cartoonists

provide important entry points into complex stories. "I completely rely on the reporting of everyone else, not just at my papers but in the entire profession," she says. "I certainly don't know as much as a specialist in any of the fields, but neither do our readers. Cartoons are sort of an interface between hard journalism and the opinions where most people live." And that's an interface worth preserving, according to Ellen Clegg, interim editorial page editor at The Boston Globe: "At their best, editorial cartoons are satire in the classic sense. They provoke an immediate, visceral reaction. And when you add in the fact that online publishing is a highly visual medium, editorial cartoons are an important part of the mix."

Jeff Danziger, a cartoonist whose work is distributed by The New York Times Syndicate and who has published 11 books of editorial cartoons, believes "American cartoonists have become victims of political correctness"—at least when it comes to hot button issues like race relations or immigration or war in the Middle East. He cites last year's Thanksgiving cartoon by

Jen Sorenson's 2014 cartoon for Fusion contrasted fears about contracting Ebola with the lack of urgency around global warming

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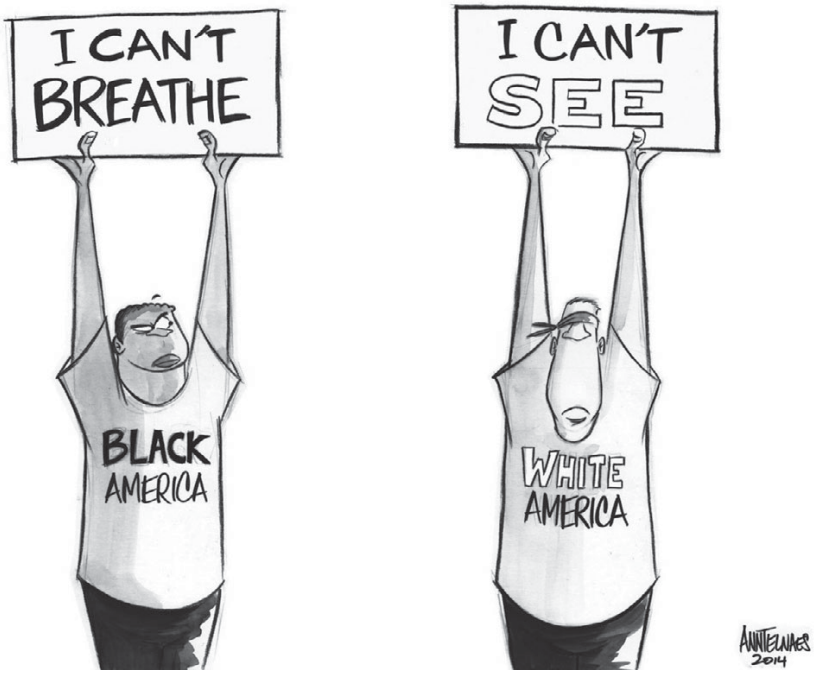
Gary Varvel in The Indianapolis Star: The family patriarch, holding a turkey on a platter, welcomes everyone by saying, "Thanks to the president's immigration order, we'll be having extra guests this Thanksgiving," as three people, including a dark-mustachioed man, climb in through the window. Bloggers called the cartoon racist for its depiction of an immigrant who appeared to be Latino. The Star took down the cartoon from its site, and executive editor Jeff Taylor apologized, saying the paper "offended a wide group of readers" and erred by publishing it.

Another case in point is Barry Blitt's 2008 New Yorker cover showing Michelle Obama, outfitted as a 1970s black power radical, and Barack Obama, dressed in traditional Muslim attire, exchanging a fist bump in the Oval Office; an American flag burns in the fireplace below a framed portrait of Osama bin Laden. During the presidential campaign, political opponents depicted Obama as un-American and a secret Muslim. New Yorker art editor Françoise Mouly wanted a cover that encapsulated the tensions, and asked Blitt to give it a try. "All those innuendoes, can't you do something with them?" she remembers asking Blitt. "All of it was being said, but just not being shown as a picture."

Intended as a mockery of Republicans' characterizations of the Obamas, the illustration was interpreted literally. The Obama campaign and many New Yorker readers criticized the cover. But, for Mouly, the illustration was a turning point: "It held up a mirror to what the country as a whole was doing, making visible the very dangerous insinuations and innuendos, and providing a vaccination—to take a drop of poison but put it in a place where we could all look at it and deal with it." Says Blitt, "Finding the line and putting one foot over it … makes you reflect on your taboos and where they come from and what things we wouldn't say and why."

BARRY BLITT, A COVER ARTIST FOR THE NEW YORKER, FINDS THAT CROSSING A LINE "MAKES YOU REFLECT ON YOUR TABOOS"



***Washington Post* cartoonist Ann Telnaes commented on the post-Ferguson racial justice debate**

The Web may be more welcoming to political cartoons that cut closer to the bone as well as offering cartoonists the opportunity to push the form itself further. Jen Sorensen, a nationally syndicated illustrator who has also drawn for The Nation and The Austin Chronicle, heads the daily comics page on Fusion, a website geared toward millennials. The outlet publishes cartoons on issues important to young people, from unemployment to homelessness to marijuana legalization. One of Sorensen's latest comics is a graphic novella treatment of a woman who talks about having been raped in college. "It certainly feels like I'm freer to publish probably more controversial subjects in Fusion than I would in a daily newspaper that's trying to be very safe and non-controversial," says Sorensen.

Ann Telnaes, who trained as an animator and worked for Walt Disney Imagineering, brings a digital native sensibility to her animations, illustrated GIFs, and Vine videos on The Washington Post website. And she's upbeat about the potential for political cartooning in the digital age: "Depending on my idea, I choose the best medium for it, which is a whole different opportunity open to editorial cartoonists now." In response to reports that Hillary Clinton used her private e-mail as secretary of state, Telnaes published a GIF of the potential presidential candidate digging her own grave; the headstone reads: "Hillary 2016."

Last July, as Israel pounded Gaza in retribution for rocket attacks, resulting in the deaths of seven Israeli civilians and over 1,400 Palestinian civilians, according to the U.N., Telnaes produced an animation showing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu punching a baby while staring at a masked militant, all of which played out against a soundtrack of staccato thuds. Telnaes received sexually violent and misogynistic e-mails in response to the cartoon.

For Christopher Weyant, political cartooning provokes such strong reactions because it has a kind of primal force, in part because of its ability to condense complex issues into simple yet potent images. "Our targets are always those who have power and especially those who are using their power unjustly," he says. "If you're walking on the edge of those boundaries, that's a good place to be."

For the Philadelphia Daily News's Wilkinson, the most effective political cartoons may initially provoke outrage and condemnation but ultimately promote dialogue, an exchange—in comment strands, on letters pages, at kitchen tables—through which "people actually start talking about it and both sides soften up a little bit. The cartoon isn't the end. The cartoon is almost the beginning." ■

With reporting by Jieqi Luo, Tara W. Merrigan, Laura Mitchell, Jonathan Seitz, and Eugenia Williamson