

Essay

Common Grounds

Artistic Practices, Civil Society, and Secular Determination in Tunisia Today

Anthony Downey

‘Doing art means displacing art’s borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as *the* political ...’^[1]

In the last year or so, a perennial issue has re-emerged in discussions of contemporary art practices in the Middle East and North Africa: what is the relationship of art to politics; or, similarly, what is the relationship of the aesthetic to revolutionary forms of activism? The confusion, intentional or otherwise, between art as a practice and art as a form of civil activism has given rise to a number of considerations, not least the role of art, if indeed it has one, in engaging civic and public space. This confusion has produced mixed results and a degree of scepticism towards opportunistic curatorial remits that co-opt art practices into the political aesthetic of revolution and, thereafter, into the service of a revolutionary politics. These curatorial gestures expose two relatively opposed positions in current debates: for some, art as activism negates the aesthetic dimension of art; whereas for others, art without activism of some sort – or at least a political inclination if not motivation – abrogates the authority of art as a form of social commentary. Neither position, I want to argue in what follows, is tenable – if indeed they ever were – and both need to reconsider the potential of a common ground between them, nowhere more so than in light of ongoing events in

[1] Jacques Rancière, ‘The Paradoxes of Political Art’, in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. By Steve Corcoran, Continuum: London (2012), pp. 134-151 (p. 149).

Faten Gaddes,
Punching-ball, 2011,
installation view.
Photograph by Adam Le
Nevez.



the region and elsewhere.

Art as a practice is always already engaged in the political, even if it is by virtue of being excluded from that sphere. In fact, in the moment of its exclusion or prohibition it can only ever be political. This is not about the blunt force that is politically-inclined forms of censorship; rather, this is about the ongoing role of creative practices in the development of forms of social engagement and the civic imagination. One of the clearest ways of acknowledging and understanding this relationship is in the manner in which art practices, which have always adopted an autonomous yet embedded role in social debates, are increasingly placed on the frontline of discussions about public and private space and who has access to it, not to mention what can be seen, said and heard within the contiguous yet divided realms of such spaces. In this context, the extent to which

visual culture has become a key site of antagonism for the forces of secularism and, for want of a better term, extremism, is all the more notable when it comes to considering what is understood by public and private space in cities across North Africa and the Middle East today, and, crucially, who gets to determine the relationship between the two.

A recent example can give some granular detail here. On June 10, 2012, in La Marsa, a city adjacent to Tunis, an art exhibition *Printemps des Arts (Springtime of the Arts)* came to an end with ugly protests from both artists who were involved in the show and protesters – largely identified as Salafis (a collective term used for the most conservative Islamists) – who became locked in increasingly acrimonious exchanges that extended to physical abuse, a running battle with local police, death threats being issued to participating artists, destruction of artworks, the vandalism of the Palais Abdellia, where the exhibition was being held, and a call for Mehdi Mabrouk, the Tunisian Minister for Culture, to resign.^[2] In the days that followed, fundamentalist voices alleged blasphemy and used Facebook to publicise what were later determined to be doctored images of works that were purported to have been in the original show.^[3] The Palais Abdellia, which had held *Printemps des Arts* for over a decade, effectively became central to the question of what could be viewed and who should have access to it – it became central, that is to observe, to any debate over civil, secular, public, religious and political space and how such spaces were engaged with and by whom. This intention had been clearly outlined in the curator Meriem Bouderbala's accompanying text for the show's catalogue, in which she wrote

In the current context, it is all about occupying cultural territory, of allowing everyone access to it and contributing to a strong democratic cultural constitution that demonstrates the strength of Tunisia's creative potential.^[4]

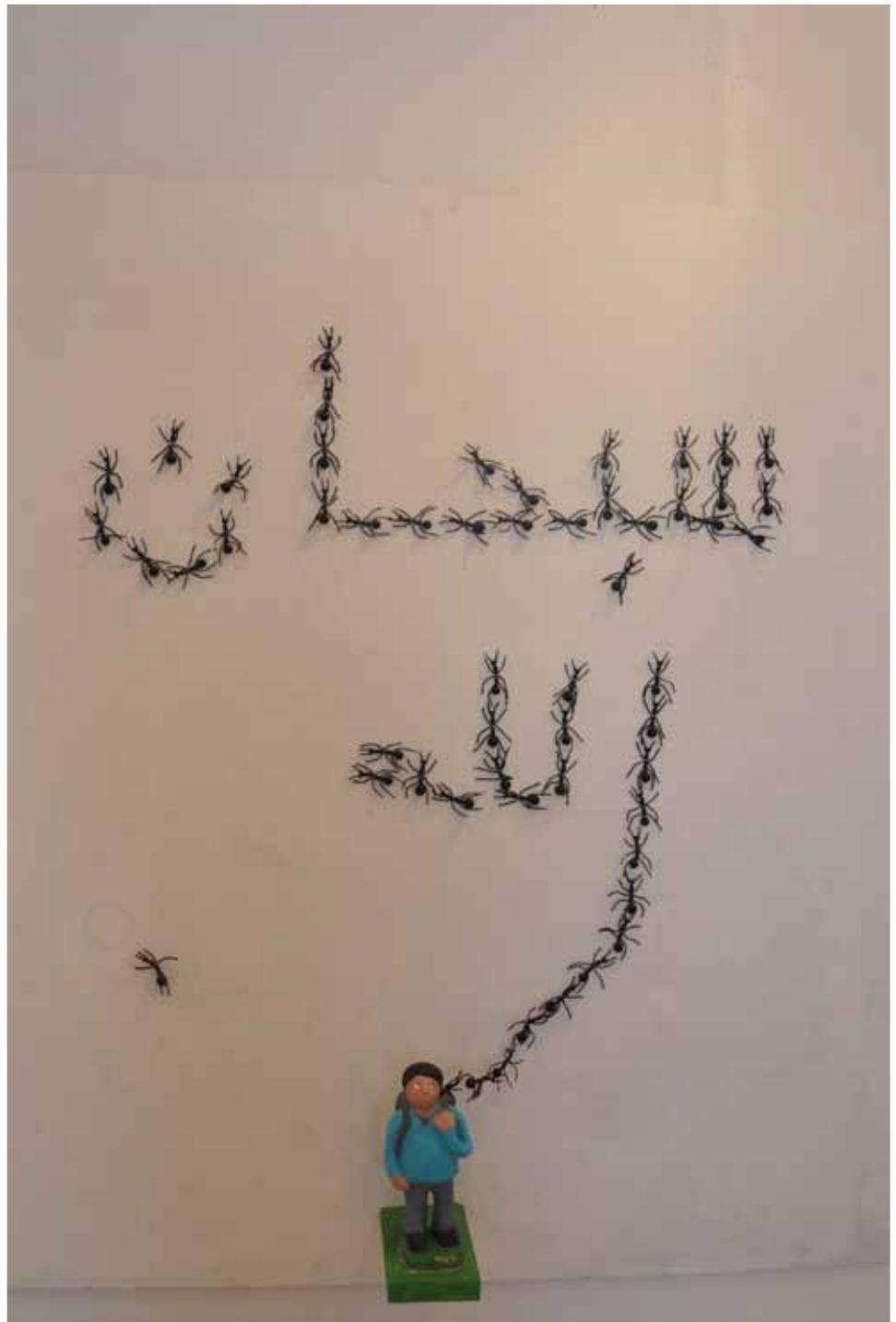
The use of terms such as <occupying> and <constitution> and, later in the text, <resistance> and <civil society> placed this text and the accompanying show firmly in the realm of the political. It also placed it in the antagonistic realm of secular self-determination. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this situation, and it is evident that both sides of the argument have been strained to mean different things to different people, culture is a political battleground in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Putting to one side its engagement with what are considered by many to be taboo subjects, the blurring here of private and public space, religious edict and secular determinism, political opportunism and civil rights, makes way for a heady mix in

[2] It is unclear at the time of writing whether or not this was a Salafi-inspired protest or a more generalised one. What is clear is that Salafites in Tunisia want to see a more prominent role for Islam in both government and society, and that in itself brings it into conflict with secular culture.

[3] For fuller details of the events and aftermath, see Rachida Triki, 'Freedom to Express: The Abdellia Affair', downloadable at <http://www.ibraaz.org/news/30> (first published 23 August, 2012), and www.tunisia-live.net/2012/06/11/artworks-and-property-vandalized-during-a-night-of-tension-in-tunis/

[4] Quoted in Rachida Triki, 'Freedom to Express: The Abdellia Affair', *ibid.*

Mohamed Ben Slama,
Sobhana Allah, 2012.
Photograph by Adam Le
Nevez.



what still remains a fraught and hard-won freedom from despotism. What becomes all the more evident, thereafter, is that for civil society to flourish in a given moment in time – and for despotism to become a thing of the past – then public space, always a site of antagonistic forces, must be protected, and access to it must be maintained for all.

It is worth asking, before we proceed further, what is meant by civil society in, say, Tunisia or Egypt today, and how the term is being used. We may also want to enquire into the relationship between civil society, public space and art practices in countries where civil society has been largely absent as a social force. Civil society, in the broadest sense, is composed of voluntary social relationships, civic and social organisations, and other institutions that are relatively distinct from government and profit-led organisations or privately-

funded initiatives. For my purposes, civil society is also understood in terms of being a community-based and community-organised activity that is not undertaken by either government or commercial, for-profit businesses. In perhaps simplistic terms, civil society is therefore often contrasted to state control and is seen as a bulwark against the excesses of the state. The absence of civil society and its institutions is likewise understood to be indicative of an authoritarian state and it is notable that throughout the Middle East and North Africa the ascendancy of despotism seemed to be realised through the de-legitimisation and marginalisation of the institutions associated with civil society. Clubs, community organisations, men's groups, women's groups, non-governmental organisations, private voluntary organisations, sports groups, environmental activists, cultural groups, religious organisations, social enterprises, academe, activist groups, charities, support groups, trade unions, artist's groups, art institutions, and community-based art projects – all form the bedrock of civil society, and all were often placed in precarious relationships to state edicts and governmental control, if not outright proscription.

In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, forms of civil renewal are emerging that are not necessarily associated with the right to vote, the latter seen in the west, if we can use that term, as a sign of a democratic order. These ideals of civil renewal involve active citizenship and the strengthening of community bonds through the emergence of civil and community-based groups and activities. Shows in public institutions, of which there are few, are representative of this emergence – and reactions to them are testament to the sense that what is at stake here is a common ground upon which to voice debate, entertain disagreement and engage in discussions about public and private space, the rights of the individual, and freedom of expression – all of which are and remain critical to the commonweal of a given social and political order. Politics, to remain healthy, needs dissent and disagreement, which can be both entertained in public space and can, equally, realign the very parameters of that space. Dissent, in the sense that philosophers such as Jacques Rancière uses it, is the political materialisation and manifestation of the people. Dissent has to be thereafter policed, structured into, and contained within a symbolic order that is premised upon a <distribution of the sensible> that asserts consensus through a prefiguration of the conditions of intelligibility, the effectivity of thought, the subjectivisation of the political subject and, perhaps crucially, the relationship of the subject to knowledge itself in any given social order. A prohibition of what is and what is not admissible within a given public space is a distribution (policing) of a given sensible and social order. It is a form of partitioning that has at its heart a paradigm of consensus based upon modalities of exclusion and inclusion within which forms of political subjectivisation are policed and, of course, out-lawed. It is dissensus that brings politics proper into existence by splitting this shared experiential world (consensus) of a community. And that experiential world is very much implicated in the distribution of a sensible order that includes the aesthetic and the forms that creative practices can and cannot assume in a given order.

For dissent to emerge, public and civil space need to be understood as sites of provisional inhabitation. None of which is to say that civil society and civil space as it is understood in, say, Britain or France, can be transposed to Tunisia or Egypt in a wholesale call for the emergence and sustainability of public and political dissent. This is the same order of delusion that promotes western-style <democracy> in the region as the only possible solution to what have been decades of cultural, political, social and economic malaise.^[5] However, community-based, co-operatively-inclined, non-state funded, and not-for-profit organisations, in whatever form they take, are crucial to the development of a common good and common ground upon which a social and political order can fully emerge in all its potential to actualise real change through forms of disagreement and dialogue.^[6] And it is precisely that form of social ordering that has been either absent in the region or placed under continued threat, both in a pre- and post-revolutionary setting.

Writing in *The New York Times*, Anthony Shadid noted '[t]he challenges before Tunisia's year-old revolution are immense—righting an ailing economy, drafting a new constitution and recovering from decades of dictatorship that cauterized civic life'.^[7] Shadid's analysis of the problems facing the emerging political system in Tunisia, one of the last of his dispatches before his death in February 2012, not only highlights the ongoing and vexed dynamic between constitutional rights and freedom of expression – which are increasingly strained in discussions concerning the role of religion in governments and societies across the region – but also observes how civic, or civil, society was effectively eviscerated in the country under the previous despotism of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and his murderous flunkies. Elsewhere in Shadid's analysis, he quotes Abdelhalim Messaoudi, a journalist at Nessma TV that had broadcast the film *Persepolis* and incurred the wrath of fundamentalist groups for his troubles. Messaoudi, who was attacked in the aftermath of showing the film, noted, '[c]ertain Islamist factions want to turn identity into their Trojan horse [...] They use the pretext of protecting their identity as a way to crush what we have achieved as a Tunisian society. They want to crush the pillars of civil society'.^[8] Culture is increasingly positioned,

[5] I borrow this notion of malaise from Samir Kassir's *Being Arab*, Verso: London (2006, orig. 2004).

[6] It is crucial that I offer here, however provisionally, a degree of distinction between so-called Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the institutions of civil society. NGOs often contribute to the stabilisation of civil society in post-conflict countries. However, civil society itself cannot entirely rely upon NGOs to further expand the realm of the civic. Whilst this is not necessarily the best place to go into these debates, it is notable that the majority of NGOs began as humanitarian vehicles in the area of economic development, but have quickly extended into social and political spheres. This has given rise to a series of criticisms when it comes to examining how such organisations can effect neo-colonial cultural and political agendas and become conduits for the international regulatory systems of global capitalism. For a fuller discussion, see Tina Wallace, 'NGO Dilemmas: Trojan Horses for Global Neoliberalism', in *Socialist Register*, vol.40 (2004), pp. 202-219.

[7] Anthony Shadid, 'Tunisia Faces a Balancing Act Of Democracy and Religion', in *The New York Times*, January 31, 2012, p. A1.

[8] *Ibid.*

Nadia Jelassi, *Celui qui n'a pas...*, 2012.
Photograph by Adam Le Nevez.



by its supporters and detractors alike, as the forum within which these debates will persist, and it is cultural practices that have inevitably become contiguous with the emergence of public space, dissent, disagreement, and their role in sustaining civil society.

Speaking after the events surrounding *Printemps des Arts* at the Palais Abdellia in June of this year, Mehdi Mabrouk, the Tunisian Minister for Culture, reportedly said the following: 'It's enough for art to be beautiful, it shouldn't be revolutionary, it should be nice'. This statement, from a Minister of Culture no less, betrays a simplistic attitude towards art as a practice that borders on foolishness. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring its content further because it also goes to the heart of the matter concerning the politics of culture and its imbrication within civil society. In suggesting that artists, be they revolutionary or not, should steer away from the political realm,

Mabrouk is actually making a case for the opposite: in arguing that art has no place in politics, he is explicitly politicising art and bringing it into the political sphere. What could be more political than placing a sanction on an activity within a given social order? If art has no place in the political sphere, as Mabrouk suggests, and should thereafter maintain a quaint indifference to, if not aloofness from it, he is attempting to bar art from the political sphere and explicitly highlighting the fact that art is not only always already politicised in these debates but is also – consciously or unconsciously – questioning the very boundaries of art and its engagement with social and political issues. Doing art, to paraphrase my epigraph, is to displace and extend the boundaries of art. In this instance, art as a practice, considered a private pursuit with a public dimension, extends into debates around civil society and thereafter displaces its borders of engagement to include discussions around public space and access to such space. If art is indeed increasingly positioned as ‘political’ by virtue of being denied a role in the political, it is obvious that it is considered capable of potentially altering opinion, not to mention reconfiguring engagement with various communities. Inherent within Mabrouk’s off-hand and imprudent remark is an often occluded but nonetheless potent counter-proposition that alerts us to art’s potential to effect social debate in a country such as Tunisia.

We may want to pause here and reflect upon the extent to which art as a practice not only engages with relations of power – including the power to determine and police what is public and private space – but the extent to which it can also realign these determinations of public and private. If we can argue that politics is reflected in the sum of power relationships that exists in a given sociopolitical order, then any reflection upon that order or broadening of those relations effects a change in the way in which we view and engage with the political. And that, in and of itself, is a political act: to change how people engage, what they see, how they interact, and what they hear, can only ever be a political gesture. Thereafter we must observe that the very realm, if not innate power of the political, for many, is the ability to determine what is and what is not political as such, just as Mabrouk had attempted to do in his proscription of art from the political realm. Any expansion or retraction of the political order, and who has access to it, is an interjection into the syntax and logic of meaning and sense. It is an interjection into the very heart of what it is to think about the political and one’s role in it, not to mention the normative rules of determination to which an individual is subjected within such an order. In the moment of redefining the sphere and realm and scope of the political, and the core debate about what constitutes public, private and civil space within that order of the political, new forms of subjecthood, in sum, can be articulated, as can new forms of protest.^[9]

[9] The political subject, for Rancière, challenges the ‘symbolic structuration’ of the community that abolished dissensus in the first place and is thereafter engaged in a process of non-identification with the distribution of the sensible in which he or she finds themselves. Subsequently, non-identification with a given order becomes a moment of instantiating political subjectivity as it introduces dissensus, the latter a disagreement with the established framework of perception/distribution of the sensible that effectively ushers in, as opposed to consen-

If a government, be it the relatively pragmatic An-Nahda movement, who took over from Ben Ali's regime, cannot guarantee the freedom of its people to protest and voice dissent in the name of self-expression and self-determination, then what is its function other than control and the normalisation of modes of subjectivity within a political order? Art, in the political sphere, can realign the order of thinking and hierarchies of thought that prescribe that very sphere and, likewise, freedom of expression and modes of self-determination. Mabrouk, paradoxically and no doubt unintentionally, is making the most explicit case for the fact that art is indeed implicated within a given political, social and civil order, especially if we consider that political order to be a site of dissenting and competing voices. Mabrouk is therefore right to suggest that art should not partake in the political or revolutionary inasmuch as it is obviously the one force that he and the government have no control over and are therefore perfectly within their remit – if they adopt autocratic forms of governance – to be afraid or suspicious of it. Art, in short, is revolutionary: it pre-figures not only horizons of engagement and imaginative possibility but also the potential ground for forms of self-determination within a given social order. It likewise provides the parameters for a debate on the very ideal that underwrites secular and religious views on what matters in contemporary Tunisia today: who controls public and private space and ordains what can be said, seen and done within those spaces. These, lest we forget, were the very issues that predicated the revolutions that we have seen erupting across the Middle East and North Africa since at least December 17, 2010.^[10] This returns us to a very basic observation: art and culture have always contributed to the commonweal of civil society and the health of societies in general. A flourishing culture is a sign of a flourishing society. (I would draw attention here to the Greek origins of the term 'happiness' which is *eudaimonia*, meaning flourishing). Support for art and culture, it follows, is therefore support for the development of a healthy and sustainable form of civil society where debate and dissent can be entertained – the very forms of civil society that are still largely absent throughout the Middle East.

Which brings us to a decisive question: what role will culture play in the formulation of civil society, not to mention the sphere of the socio-political, in countries where dissent can still result in imprisonment or worse? What place do cultural organisations have in the Middle East, we need to also ask, if it is not to express and give form to the concerns and visions of their environment, in the

sus, politics proper. Rancière writes: 'Through the process of subjectivization, political subjects [le Sujet politique] bring politics proper into existence and confront the police order with the heterology of emancipation'. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Continuum: London (2004), p. 90.

[10] It was on this date that Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed Tunisian residing in Sidi Bouzid, a small town south of Tunis, was slapped in the face by a municipal official and had his wares confiscated as he attempted to make ends meet by selling vegetables from a cart. This slap translated into an unforgiving act of self-immolation and thereafter into a conflagration that has brought with it both unforeseen freedoms and brutal repression in equal measure across the region. I have written elsewhere on this event, in 'Beyond the Former Middle East: Aesthetics, Civil Society, and the Politics of Representation', downloadable at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/8>, first published June 1, 2011.

first instance, and to subsequently promote a degree of introspection when it comes to the broader social, political and historical structure of those environments? The moment for supporters of the arts to develop new strategies for supporting the common good, common ground, and communal-based practices of art as an institution have never been so needed or indeed welcomed as they are now in the context of, for example, Tunisia, where civil society – of which artistic practices and institutions are an indelible part – is precisely that which is under threat after what for many must have appeared an interminable hibernation. Art as a practice, by way of a conclusion of sorts, can change how a social order looks at itself and understands its bonds of community or indeed differences within that community. This, for some, is the import of the aesthetic: the effective reconfiguration – through artistic practices – not only of what can be seen, said and heard, but who gets to see, say and hear in the first place.

I want to return to where we more or less began and end with a quote from Rancière, who proposes that «[t]here exists a specific sensory experience – the aesthetic – that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community».^[11] Artistic practice opens up a horizon of future possibility within which civic imagination can flourish and art as a practice contributes to the forms that civic space takes whilst, in turn, sustaining it through the modalities of engagement that can be expressed within such space. To this end, support for the vectors of possibility and potentiality in cultural practices and the way in which they are always already involved in the context of (and support for) civil spaces, dissensus, and debate, is not only needed but essential to the success and commonweal of the political sphere too. Politics needs culture if it is to reflect and sustain the ambition of its people towards forms of historical self-determination. Politics and culture, therefore, need a common ground for both to be sustained. This is not, finally, about art as a form of political protest (an all too easily co-opted cultural paradigm), nor is this to confuse the artist as protester (or vice versa); rather, this is about the potential of art as a practice to open up horizons of possibility for civic imaginations to emerge and be thereafter supported within a community-based network of social relations that includes but is not precluded by the political.

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