

Essay

The Crisis of Art in Tunisia

The dramatic turn of events that took place around the 2012 exhibition *Printemps des Arts* at the Palais Abdelliya in La Marsa, a suburb of Tunis, marked a significant moment in the history of fine art in Tunisia. The exhibition provoked a national debate: protests and threats were directed towards participating artists from religious fundamentalists. The affair was regrettable and scandalous. It presented a certain rupture or divide between Tunisia's artistic community and religious law's continued dominance over local society. Of course, it is easy to criticise the violent response against certain artworks on show in this exhibition that were considered blasphemous, but the events surrounding the exhibition also had the potential to inscribe contemporary art within public debate and to bring to light the work of artists who are often overlooked and recognised only among a small number of amateurs and specialists. Yet, it is surprising that no critical dialogue (aesthetic or anthropological) has taken place in Tunisia around the exhibition itself and the work it contained, though there have been attempts.

Deconstructing this exhibition/event could have played two meaningful functions. The first is educational. It would have been the occasion to bring art (painting, sculpture, and the more recent techniques of photography, video and digital arts) to the foreground of public awareness by helping them decrypt the fundamentals of contemporary art; for example, by explaining what an installation or a performance is. The second purpose, of a scientific nature, would have allowed for the appreciation of contemporary art in Tunisia and could have led to the questioning of certain issues related to it: the social status of the contemporary artist, the role of public figures in developing the sector, academic training, and even the professional choices of young artists.

The parsimony of intellectual responses

Few intellectual efforts and discussions around the questions of the exhibition either accompanied or prolonged the *Printemps des Arts*, though it has been considered for some time as a crucial meeting point of the Tunisia art world. An intellectual deficit is particularly lacking in the material provided by the exhibition's organisers. Except for a relatively brief booklet (but well-conceived regardless), no exhibition catalogue was produced to support the visual experience and to crystallise the event. Unfortunately, this fact applies to most art events in Tunisia, with some rare exceptions, such as the excellent catalogue for the exhibition *L'image révélée, de l'orientalisme à l'art contemporain*.^[1]

The first international exhibition of contemporary art, *Chkoun Ahna*, organised in May 2012 at the Musée National de Carthage seemed to suffer from this same intellectual inertia. Despite an interesting 'artist talk' alongside the exhibition, led by Anthony Downey, who published a few weeks later an interesting analysis of the event.^[2] Evidently, one must pay homage to the organisers of this first manifestation, who we hope will receive the welcome they deserve. Also, if the majority of our art specialists attend this kind of event,

Nadia Jelassi,
celui qui n'a pas, 2012.
Courtesy the artist.



how many of them really invest themselves in the territory of ideas, particularly that of visual exegesis? Evidently, too few.[3] Is this due to a lack of means, of competencies, or intellectual laziness? Of course, the problem of intellectual erosion is not exclusive to the field of art, and is symptomatic of a larger, chronic crisis in Tunisia.

The Urgency of Platforms

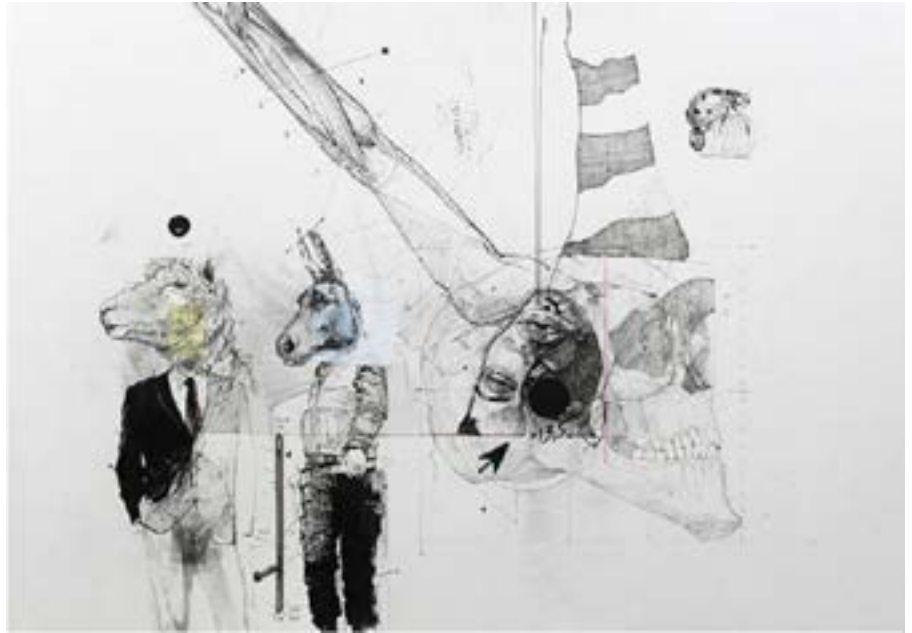
How can one hope for the field of art to be fertile in the absence of ideas and canals of irrigation sufficient enough to disseminate them? An element of thought can be found in one of the signs of good health for a discipline, which is the number of magazines that are devoted to such dissemination of ideas. Today, the facts are worrying: not a single academic review is dedicated to fine art in Tunisia. Waiting for *Founoun* to reappear (after 25 years of interruption corresponding to the reign of Ben Ali, incidentally), only the general magazine *Al Hayat El Thakafyah* attempts, with difficulty, to highlight artistic activities.

Nonetheless, some might argue that roundtables (organised by national unions, federation and associations) are a privileged site for exchange and debate. While they have multiplied since the recent revolution, these encounters are too rare to provoke any real rigour.

It is undeniable that recent symposiums, such as those organised by the Union of Tunisian artists (around the question of education and institution) or by the Tunisian Federation of Fine Art (around the viability of a Tunisian art market), were widely anticipated in these post-revolutionary times. But the abscess provoked by the contamination of politics in art, at its peak under Ben Ali's reign, is still just as painful. This is a subject that, important as it is, returns time and time again to the heart of the debate, often taking the attention away from other problems facing artists and other art professionals. Evidently, crises are necessary in order to move forward, providing they don't become sterile. And we are left with the impression of recent clashes between unions, federations and artist syndicates in Tunisia, particularly around the controversial procurement board committee at the Ministry of Culture. Is the future of art and of the Tunisian artist dependent on the generosity of public funds to that extent? We will come back to this later.

Still, a trivial point holds us back. Conferences can only be useful if they are accompanied by published proceedings (whether in print or online). We will not discuss here the scientific quality of the communications but rather two problems that limit the impact of conferences. The first is the question of accessibility, and relates to the absence of publications referred to previously. It is unthinkable that in this period of digital production we are unable to make conference proceedings available. Doesn't the Internet democratise access to knowledge? And, nevertheless, at each conference (like

Nidhal Chamekh,
Of what dream the martyrs,
2012.
Courtesy the artist.



the last conference of artists unions at Hammamet), the recurring promise to electronically publish minutes remains a dead letter. How can we hope for an art historical rigour if ideas and knowledge are not communicated, shared, discussed and criticised? Aside from certain websites, including the very promising online forum initiated by the Ibraaz foundation,[4], finding critical reflections of Tunisian art, by Tunisians, is hard work.[5]

The second problem, no less important, is that of the visibility of young researchers and their contributions. It is regrettable that the contributors of different conferences and round tables in Tunisia are practically always the same (in general, the most emblematic professors of art and associated disciplines). Why is it that young teachers and researchers (artists, historians, architects and anthropologists) are so invisible on the conference programmes? Is this due to a monopolisation of academic space, or a lack of engagement by the emerging practitioners? This generational fracture was made blatantly obvious at a recent conference organised at Hammamet, during which the younger generation rejected the intellectual and institutional hegemony of art world management.[6]

Naturally, we are conscious that the future of research takes places on an international level, and therefore what counts is that all contributions are made known in international publications. Although we don't have objective measures of the visibility of Tunisian research (for example, the number of published papers by local researchers in the major international conferences), if we just look at the various conferences that have addressed this very question, the whole of the Tunisian academic community agrees that a lot of effort needs to be made in this area.

State Interference in the Arts

Between the fifty-year-old housewife who kills time with gouaches and the fine art graduate for whom teaching is often the only viable option, it isn't easy to discern what the art scene in Tunisia really is. Evidently, this is not about describing the archetypal artist, but rather about affirming that a socio-anthropological analysis of the art scene would allow us to better appreciate its evolution, in Tunisia and in the world.

Mohamed Ben Soltane, a young Tunisian artist recently deplored the invisibility of the talents from Tunisia on a national and international scale, and pointed blame at the lack of professionalism among artists and the associations that represent them, and of state support. [7] This assertion allows us to open a parenthesis on the question of professionalization of the artist, which, particularly when organised by the state, is a far more delicate question than it would appear. In France, for example, professionalization is at the centre of a policy of growth of fine art, to the point where the state offers payment to artists for 'presentation of work to the public'. [8] But this initiative, daring as it is, responds to the alarming gap between the precarious position of young contemporary artists who have little, if any guaranteed support. In Tunisia, could the remuneration of artists be considered? Could the private sector chime in and replace the pithy contribution from the state?

In other areas of the world, public bodies are far more prudent in terms of cultural interventionism. In the United States of America, for example, there is no ministry of culture. The financing of the arts comes from an independent federal agency, the National Endowment for the Arts, created to protect the artist's freedom of expression and to ensure that the sector does not become politicised.

Although the public money (less than 13 percent of the total arts budget) seems less than those of other European countries like France or Germany, yet the American system works remarkably well. Similarly, in England, all public funding is made indirectly through the Arts Council, an independent and decentralised organisation. Not exempt from criticism, these 'liberal' visions of culture at least have the merit of limiting the perverse effects of the state's interference in the affairs of arts and culture, which Tunisia has so suffered from.

In our opinion, the most appropriate route for Tunisia would probably be intermediate; between a cultural liberalism supported primarily by private bodies (collectors, gallerists and philanthropists) and a controlled state interventionism, structuring the market and protecting artists.

Usurping Value, Legitimising Mediocrity

Let's now address the question of value in Tunisian art. This is necessarily linked to the establishment of a culture of art criticism, brought about by competent experts, but also independent ones. In Tunisia, seasoned art critics can be counted on one hand, leaving room for imposters. We talk of these usurpers of value found notably in the famous procurement committee at the Ministry of Culture, and for whom political allegiance is criteria for excellence. Those that have, for too long, financed and legitimised mediocrity, at the sake of quality and talent, are in part responsible for the lack of development in Tunisian contemporary art. Only in part, because several artists were also accomplices in this system, particularly those that were 'sponsored' by the Ministry, satisfying themselves with their forced legitimacy, parading themselves and mutually caressing their excessive egos, at exhibitions and fairs, both in Tunisia and abroad. Without forgetting the responsibility of gallerists, these 'vendors of luxury', as Moez Safta, a professor of fine art in Tunis says, more occupied with 'making money' than 'promoting new artistic tendencies and bringing art to the public domain'.[9]

But let's be clear, this is not about crippling certain artists and specialists and even less so launching a witch hunt. Especially as few of us, artists and academics together, had the courage and means of rising up against the perversity of Tunisian cultural politics before the popular uprising of 14 January 2011.

Nonetheless, for this artistic scene to truly reflect its talents some dusting must occur. And we believe that this job falls above all on artists, and that the salvation of the art scene will probably come from the audacity of engaged young artists such as Ismael Leamassi, who recently brought, along with others (for example, Nidhal Chamekh, Maher Gnaoui), original aesthetic propositions, far removed from the post-revolutionary opportunism of our days.[10]

Indeed, opportunism, has taken many forms as of late, and was particularly evident during and after the last *Printemps des Arts*, and continues to alter the quality of the Tunisian art scene. Thus, the Balkanisation of the art scene is desirable, even indispensable, in that it would result in the emergence of the artists and aesthetic languages of the future.

But Balkanisation does not necessarily signify disunity. Particularly in these uncertain times in which liberty of expression is fragile, and solidarity indispensable more than ever.[11] Rather, it underpins to the need to listen to alternative voices, which differentiate themselves from the monolithic artist community. And this is even more true when we hear this same community complaining about the autocratic regime, when it functions, even today, in a vacuum, with its own codes, which one must abide by if one hopes to be recognised and legitimised. In summary, a community which criticises the elite, although the way it functions is purely elitist. Perhaps this explains

why the Abdelliya Palace, the focal point of the exhibition *Printemps des Arts*, often appears more like an ivory tower than a bastion of contemporary art.

The Neo-Orientalist Temptation

We have to say that the Abdelliya crisis brought fame to several artists and their pieces, which were judged ungodly, bringing to the public domain objects and expressions of Islam. The way these were received, more violently than the rest, was joyfully portrayed in the national and international press, and allows us to pose the question of neo-orientalism, which a significant part of Tunisian art and more generally Arab/Islamic contemporary arts seems to answer to. By neo-orientalism, we mean this post-cold war cultural trend embraced by the European and American intellectual elite, which re-actualises and revisits traditional Oriental themes by associating them with an imperious struggle for democratic and modern values.

Within the neo-oriental discourse, the Islamic Orient constitutes the line of separation between modernity and archaism, where Islam is voluntarily reduced, simplified, condemned to immobility and authoritarianism, contrary to a dynamic, modern and emancipated Occident.[12] Neo-oriental manifestations operate at all levels: political, media, intellectual and academic circles. And art does not escape from it either. The veiled woman, the bearded fundamentalist, stoning, and more generally, the Islamic threat, are as much dimensions of Islam (in the most reduced forms), as they are represented in the incriminated artworks of Abdelliya.

Let us take, for example, the Abdelliya's imposing installation *The Ring* (2011) by the Tunisian artist Faten Gaddes. It was focal point of the exhibition, but also of the fundamentalist responses that followed the event. This installation comprises four punch bags at the centre of a boxing ring, which contains the portraits of four veiled women

Youssef Nabil,
Natacha Sleeping.
Courtesy the artist.



(veiled, not by cloth, but by their own hair), along with the symbols of the three major religions. This piece is designed, according to its creator, to express the anger the artist has about repeated threats against secularity and the identity of Tunisian woman. But beyond the legitimate sentiment that it inspires, one must examine, in this aesthetic proposal, the recurring and Manichaean celebration of the feminine body as sensual object, confronting two models: that of the modern Occident, secular and respectful of the feminine condition, and that of Islam, retrograde, archaic and an enemy of femininity.

So, this sensual *mise-en-scène* of the female form, active in classic orientalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is then revisited in the neo-orientalist discourse, which substitutes the woman in the harem with a veiled woman. Nonetheless, this renewal clears itself of its colonial imprint, being no longer the work of western artists (like Delacroix and Ingres) but that of the native artists themselves in the role of neo-ambassadors of western modernist values. In this new visual paradigm, the representation of the veil, as manifest object of the subjugation of women by males, which 'defies modern relations between men and women,'[13] becomes the symbol par excellence of anti-modernity and the negation of female emancipation (as defined by the west). Although the status of Tunisian woman is (for the time being) far from that of Afghan woman, certain incriminated pieces at Abdelliya maintained the neo-oriental fantasy of this rampant and liberty-killing Islam, offering us some of its most common elements: burqas, niqabs and stoning.

A subsidiary question is whether the curation of the exhibition (centred as it was on *The Ring*, so ideologically charged), was the result of a logistical obligation (in view of its size) or an artistic choice by the organisers. Certainly, the piece had just been exhibited at the Institut du Monde Arabe (IMA) in Paris, during an exhibition dedicated to the 'Arab Spring', and as such bore the label of 'quality'. But the sudden passion for contemporary Arab art that we have seen at other events such as the Venice Biennale of 2011, was judged opportunist, even worrying, by certain observers. As such, the results of the *Printemps* exhibition have been, incidentally, tainted in the eyes of some critiques. Eric Loret, journalist and critic at *Libération*, deplored that the exhibition had privileged 'the discourse around archaic liberation (women, homosexuals, speech, religion) to the detriment of doubt, of questioning and the less visibly oppressed.'[14] More radically, Valérie Sasportas, journalist at *Le Figaro*, went as far as to say that instead of 'something crazy [...] what we see does not inspire revolt, does not surprise. What a pity!'[15]

Conclusion

Is it a coincidence that during the *Printemps des Arts* in Tunis, another exhibition was taking place at the IMA on the theme of the naked body in Islamic arts, the other neo-oriental theme of

Maher Gnaoui,
SSDD.
Courtesy the artist.



'unveiling', diametrically opposed to that of 'veiling'? Probably not, as we believe that many gallerists and curators are looking to satisfy these stereotyped needs that exist on the international market *vis-à-vis* the Arab artistic creation, particularly in this revolutionary period. And this sentiment is all the more exacerbated by an exhibition, which took place at the end of 2012, again at the IMA, on Western iconography surrounding 'The Arabian Nights'. [16]

By extrapolation and without adhering to conspiracy theories, can we imagine that the Abdelliya crisis was created by the promoters of the event, knowing as we do that contemporary art, at times, feeds from scandal? It is a question that deserves some consideration, in view of the disastrous consequences (revolt, arson, curfews) that the art of scandal has provoked in Tunisia.

Whatever the case, there is no doubt that many actors of this manifestation enjoyed the sound made around this exhibition, which is logical in itself, considering the invisibility from which the local scene suffers ordinarily. Aside from the fact that the 'Salman Rushdie syndrome' is too frequently evoked in wanting desperately to invent a destiny of 'endangered species', the residual image of a social, elitist and opportunist scene left by the actors of the Abdelliya to the public has only become more accentuated.

Despite some artistic opportunism, voices raised against this state of affairs called on alternative artistic choices. One of the most audible was that of Rachida Triki, philosopher and art critic, who said with lucidity that

...one must also avoid the pitfalls of focalising on the Arab woman, on the image of the veiled woman, a recluse. It's a cliché which sells well but it is very wrong. I'm not open to art which depicts veiled women and calligraphy, and which plays

at the same time on fantasy.[17]

We share this opinion, and the facts we invoked earlier show that this fantasy continues to be maintained. So, beyond the stereotypical responses, what are the perspectives open to Tunisia's contemporary artists that might allow themselves distance from the dictum of the international market?

We will conclude this discussion with the relationship that the Tunisian artist has with contemporary art, and the choices he or she operates in its creation. In the debate on contemporary production in Tunisia, two postures emerge on the question of artistic choices. The more radical is that of a diatribe which recently appeared in a national daily, against the legitimacy of the concept of contemporary art, and this in reaction to the relatively pretentious comments made by the creative director of the last *Printemps des Arts*.^[18] In this posture, contemporary art is considered to be a hermetic artistic genre, usurper of the contemporary, which reduced the vast field of arts to conceptual and minimalist art, and which institutionalises spectacle and the sensational to the detriment of their aesthetic value.

The other posture manifests itself in the profusion of digital art, which is more accessible, notably with the explosion of photography observed in Tunisia after the 14 January 2011, which overshadows more 'classic' media such as painting and sculpture. Pondering further, Rachida Triki avoided nonetheless the sterilisation of contemporary creation, particularly in Tunisia, by saying, in relation to the formatted use of new media such as video and photography that

...the contemporary signifies above all else being in its present, in its actuality and at the same time producing something remarkable in an engaged manner, without following fashionable postures...in Tunisia and Morocco, a whole generation of interesting painters are no longer visible. Some have changed mediums to make videos or installations which aren't as good as their paintings.^[19]

According to Triki, what counts is that sincerity prevails in the field of aesthetics. Let's hope this advice will echo loudly in the minds of Tunisia's contemporary artists.

[1] Exhibition co-commissioned in 2006 by Meriem Bouderbala, a Franco-Tunisian artist and curator. Catalogue at meriem.bouderbala.free.fr.

[2] Anthony Downey, 'Where to Now: *Chkoun Ahna* at the National Museum of Carthage, Tunis, 2012', *Ibraaz*, May 2012, <http://www.ibraaz.org/news/16>.

- [3] Despite the rare exceptions, we need to cite the remarkable open letter addresses to the Ministry of Culture, by Imed Jmail, teacher at the Institut des Beaux-arts de Tunis, at <http://tunisocentrique.wordpress.com/2012/07/05/lettre-ouverte-a-monsieur-le-ministre-de-la-culture-parimed-jmaiel> or the excellent piece by Hama Hannachi, journalist at *La Presse*: www.lapresse.tn/15062012/51341/cachez-moi-cet-art.html.
- [4] The Ibraaz Foundation for culture and arts recently launched an electronic space for reflection on questions surrounding North African and Middle Eastern artistic and cultural creation, Ibraaz.org.
- [5] We must also recognise the excellent tunisiartgalleries.com, a mine of information of arts in Tunisia, and shutterparty.com, consecrated to photography in Tunisia.
- [6] Gilles Dohès, 'Congrès à Hammamet - La place de l'art dans la Tunisie post révolution', *Le Temps*, 25 January 2012, <http://www.letemps.com.tn/article-62826.html>.
- [7] Mohamed Ben Soltane, 'Souffle de liberté', Virtual exhibition, *Nafas Art Magazine*, September 2001, http://universesinuniverse.org/eng/nafas/articles/2011/breath_of_freedom/souffle_de_liberte.
- [8] Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, '15 mesures pour les arts plastiques', 11 October 2011. Press release at http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/content/download/13993/119065/version/4/file/DP_Artsplastiques.pdf.
- [9] 'Le marché de l'art en question : Le chaos est-il créateur ?', from *Réalités*, 25 January 2006, <http://www.jetsetmagazine.net/culture/revue,presse/le-marche-de-lart-enquestion--le-chaos-estil-createur.21.740.html>.
- [10] This refers to the exhibition entitled *Politiques*, organised by the Centre National d'Art Vivant in 2012 in Tunis by a group of young Tunisian artists. We are convinced that this type of aesthetic proposal will reignite the Tunisian art scene. The excellent text about the exhibition by Ismael Leamassi can be found at <http://universes-inuniverse.org/eng/nafas/articles/2012/politics>.
- [11] We are referring to the scandalous pursuits for 'disturbing the peace' made by the state against Nadia Jelassi and Mohamed Ben Slama, two artists exhibiting at the last *Printemps des Arts*.
- [12] In relation to neo-orientalism, we invite you to read the brilliant essay 'Lénine and Djellaba, neo-orientalism and critique of Islam' by Olivier Moos, researcher in social science and specialist in Islam and its reception in the contemporary world. www.religion.info/pdf/2011_08_moos.pdf.
- [13] Olivier Moos, *ibid.* p.28.
- [14] Eric Loret, 'Tunisie : dégage de raison', *Libération*, 2nd February 2012, <http://next.liberation.fr/culture/01012387401-tunisie-degage-de-raison>.
- [15] Valérie Sasportas, 'Dégagements...la Tunisie, un an après', *Le Figaro*, 6 February 2012, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/2012/02/06/03015-20120206ARTFIG00609-degagements-la-tunisieun-an-apres-a-l-ima.php>.
- [16] The exhibition entitled *Les Mille et Une Nuits* will take place

from 27 November 2012 to 28 April 2013 at the Institut du Monde Arab. See imarabe.org/exposition-ima-6415.

[17] Virginie Andriamirado, interview with Rachida Triki, *Africultures*, 20 July 2010, <http://www.africultures.com/php/index.php?nav=article&no=9607>.

[18] Sami Ben Ameer in an article entitled 'Le Revers de la médaille' (July, 2012), reacts with force against the comments of Franco Pirrelli, artistic director of the *Printemps des Arts*, contained in the editorial of the catalogue. Franco Pirrelli had announced, with a vaguely pompous tone that the last edition of the *Printemps des Arts* would give a privileged place to art work, a space which had previously been vacant, according to him. See <http://www.lapresse.tn/04072012/52191/le-revers-de-la-medaille.html>.

[19] See note 17.

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