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(© M. Antonietta Trasforini)

Maria Antonietta Trasforini

Contemporary art and the sense of place. The case of Tunisia

Re-territorialisation of the culture

From the mid seventies contemporary art has been and still is, in an ongoing movement, a place characterized by an high social reflexivity where new sociality emerged, a place where artistic practices built other versions of history as forms of counter-memories or as forms of social and political resistance. Okwi Enwezor (2007: 27) defined this process as a way of «historically thinking the present». For this reason, analyzing today the relationship between contemporary art and social and cultural changes actually means analyzing a dense field of social conflict. Tunisia, as other countries involved in changes brought by the Arab springs (Dakhliya 2011; Merlini, Roy 2012), is an interesting case study which stimulates questions on the role that culture and art are playing in producing such social transformations (Ellaban 2012). Here, contemporary art and events like “Dream City”, the festival of urban art, show the social and cultural complexity of a nation involved in a revolution, which stakes – cultural, religious, social – give a key role to the action of many artists. But it also witnesses the extreme mobility and instability of a situation which suggests more questions than the answers it might give.

Art in a world of people in transit

The loss of place, namely the *unhomely* matter, considered as a characteristic of modernity, has been often taken from contemporary art as a relevant object of its reflection and practice. The *unhomely* characterising “a world of people in transit” has been both an object of contemporary artistic representation, and the condition of many artists, men and women (Papastergiadis 2000, 2005). The diasporas issue – Jocelyne Dakhliya (2006: 19) observed – is realistically and tangibly embedded in Arab countries, at the same time carrying a paradox: from one side immigration, free or forced displacement, exile have underlined the complexity in the self-definition of those countries, on the other

side a common conviction sees Islamic societies characterised by a certain cultural stillness, putting them under the sign of permanency. Furthermore we are facing a «certain feeling of [...] cultural security which seems to come from most recent artistic works: the feeling of knowing from where we come despite every breaks and every forms of displacement» (Dakhliya 2006: 19). In a word, the matter of the relation between diaspora, culture and artistic practices was a relevant issue also before springs.

The post-nomadic artist

In a context of people ‘in transit’, the character of the nomadic artist is the contemporary expression of a phenomenon we find since a long time in the history of art. If the image of the nomadic subject derives from the experience of people and cultures namely nomads, it nonetheless summarizes a critical consciousness which doesn’t follow socially coded ways of thinking and of behaving, as described in the analysis of Rosi Braidotti:

Not every nomads travel around the world. Some of the most incredible journey may be done without moving from our own habitat. The nomad state [...] is defined by a consciousness which turns over given facts: it is a political passion for transformation or radical change (Braidotti 2002: 10).

With this double meaning of displacement and critics, I use the terms ‘nomadic artist’, sometime interchangeable in a partial and approximate way with the term ‘diasporic’. In the processes and transformations which are synthetically been defined “Arab springs” we are actually facing a phenomenon which seems to reset the relation between territory and identity (Anderson 1991), suggesting a new cultural form of ‘artistic nomadism’ (actually a post-nomadic artist), represented by the native/local artist who doesn’t leave, but who stays and stays for working critically. The great explosion of creativity, languages and artistic practices occurred during and after the Tunisian revolution, from

street art to cinema, from photography to music, shows this fact (Fig. 1).

De-materialized art, ri-territorialized art and the role of new media

In the nineties and in the first decade of the 21st century – the globalization period – the art world saw a redefinition of the relation between art and places, characterized by: a growing de-materialization of the art works and the artistic practice; a diffusion of international Biennales often unrelated and disjoint from places where they take place; a real artists' migration toward international capitals of art – and the phenomenon of the artistic double residence –; a de-nationalisation of artistic movements, and finally an inflation of the international as symbolic credit (Gielen 2009: 192). In a context of diasporic conjunctures (Clifford 1997: 36; Hall 2000) new media (from internet to social networks) played a key role in setting up again the relations between place, art and identity, contributing to the creation of a cosmopolitan state through new combination of spaces of fluxes and physical spaces. Urban and metropolitan spaces are actually not removed in virtual nets, instead they are transformed by the interaction between electronic communication and physical relations, through the recombination of physical place and network (Castells 1996). As Michket Krifa (2012), curator of *Dégagements*, the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou dedicated to art in Tunisia one year after the revolution, tells:

there we had a real lack of representation [...] and all of a sudden, the image was everywhere, thanks to mobile phones, social networks, computers and Internet. In parallel with all this was another phenomenon I has never seen before and that was cartoons and drawings in the press invading the Internet. The third phenomenon, aside from virtual space, concerned the public space: finally, the street belonged to the people.

New media didn't invent relations but they empowered them, emphasizing the concrete actions taking place in the physical space, through an enlargement of the 'social walls' of the city (Fig. 2) (Meyrowitz 1985; Sergi 2011) and through an uncommon sight's pragmatics, according to the definition of the cinema critics blogger Tahar Chikhaoui (2012):

camera became a weapon [...] revolution hasn't been done away from sights, we made it through the sight of a multitude of unknown young peo-

ple who, with their cameras, taped everything they were doing [...]. Arab revolutions are the first great manifestation of a sight's pragmatics. This abolition of distance does not stand for art, but it has been possible.

If the role of new media during Arab springs has been fundamental, giving legitimation, communication, organization and visibility to riots, the construction and consolidation of a cosmopolitan artistic identity, made through media, has been not less relevant – even though less explored.

Art and diasporic conjunctures

The issue of uprooting and exile is explored from more than one nomadic artist. In the diaspora's panorama, the nomadic condition of the Arab artist is represented by the Lebanese Mona Hatoum, the most famous artist in the international context, who's living in London and Berlin. Her work is focused on *Unheimlichkeit*, on disorientation, on the non-nostalgic elaboration of the distance between places, objects, bodies and voices which once were home. In the movie *Measure of distances* (1988) the mother's body suggests 'a complex overlapping of cultural resounds'. Over the English speaking monochord voice of Hatoum, writing to her mother, lively voices of Arab women produce a sound creating cultural, spatial and linguistic distances. Familiarity and extraneousness, contiguous and incompatible, combine with each other (Said 2000), showing a dialogue challenging the stillness of national identities and collective memberships (Demos 2009: 79). The two suitcases of *Traffic* (2002), linked together with the artist's hair, summarize the condition of nomadic and diasporic artist. It evokes the visible or clandestine paths of forced migration, a journey where the whole life is packed in a case, and the physicality of linkages which don't break even when parted away. While Mona Hatoum sees diaspora from a metaphoric perspective, two other artists see it as a metonymic, with the physical body used to represent the exile. The Albanese Adrian Paci, today living in Italy, tells his nomadic condition through a work/sculpture which takes the shape of a small monument and a proper self-portrait: the naked artist carrying the roof of his house on his back (*Home to go*, 2001). The Kosovar Sislej Xhafa, today living in New York, in *Komt* (2007), creates a work-synecdoche where a pair of worn out leather boots, which seem to still carry their owner feet, have wheels under their soles which make them fast slide away.

Local vs Diasporic

If Mona Hatoum is the Arab nomadic artist *par excellence*, what we are now witnessing in the Tunisian art world ‘after’ the Arab spring, is a phenomenon we might call re-territorialisation of art, contrasting the abstractness – also ideological – of global culture and above all of globalized art, a kind of *revenge of geography* (Kaplan 2012) working also in the art world. Introducing her vast work on contemporary artistic production in Islamic countries, Jocelyne Dakhli (2006: 21) recognized two typologies of artists: the *local* artist, however professional, who often studied abroad, working in difficult and often invisible conditions (for whom ‘working inside the country was of capital importance’ – Ben Soltane 2011), and *diasporic* artists, with their privileges and their awards in the western art market. But the author warns against an easy opposition between Local-Authentic *vs* Diasporic-Inauthentic/Excentric. This hiatus is partially disappearing, because the local artist is getting a new visibility, consistency, and a non-isolated profile (Ben Soltane 2012). The protagonist artists of the Arab spring establish a totally new relation with space. They intentionally stay with their culture, claiming this choice, re-locating an artistic identity after censorship and the cultural pauperism carried by the Ben Ali’s regime, trying to overcome the distance between art and political commitment:

I know artists who have nothing to show because they say they don’t have enough distance, and others who say they feel more like citizens now than artists. And then there are others that say they are citizens and artists, and are at the service of each other without quashing one another (Krifa 2012).

Using extremely complex languages both from a technical point of view (video, photographs, paintings, multimedia) and from a contents point of view, or by using artistic languages as those grown in the emergence of revolutionary events (like documentary or street art), Tunisian artists eventually gave a new cultural depth to artistic practices which globalization tends to flatten and to trace back to local stereotypes, to be spend on the international art market. The original elaboration of tradition often doesn’t match the expectations or demands of western art worlds gatekeepers with regard to the Arab artist’s stereotype (Ben Soltane 2011). The movie *Le printemps Arabe* (2010) by Nicène Kossentini, for instance, represents a reworking of traditional language, rethought under the light of great social changes and of new revolutionary ‘or-

der/disorder’. On this movie Michet Krifa (2012), who have shown it in Pompidou’s exhibition, stated:

When Kossentini borrows the visual effects of Islamic ornament, it’s because she is playing with a fragmented visual that has meaning, and because that visual has an Arab-Islamic connotation. It’s like several atoms attached to one another. At the end of the video, this is precisely what happens; it fragments, so it does have a meaning and it is not gratuitous.

What does the western art world expect from the Arab artists of springs? It’s expecting a political and revolutionary art, with stances on veil or terrorism, for instance:

The gatekeepers in the Northern countries are more interested in an artistic production from Southern countries that would comfort them with what they think is “good” contemporary Arab art [...]. This production corresponds to stereotypes that have found a new skin following postcolonial history. Indeed, the Islamic veil, the Arab woman depicted as oppressed, Islamic terrorism, and war constitute the subjects that facilitate access to international visibility for artists from the region. Many of the artists who have obtained a certain notoriety complain about this phenomenon which excludes part of their artistic production. The Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi even speaks of a *hidden demand* when he evokes the attempts by Western decision-makers who invite him to prepare an artwork (Ben Soltane 2011).

An hidden demand which is often directed to a form of visual exoticism (Krifa 2012). The Tunisian artist Meriem Bouderbala, already in 2003, claimed for the artists of the southern Mediterranean, a path not acquiescent to dominant discourse of art market or the quiet of impossible returns to tradition, tracing a project toward a *devenir minoritaire* inspired to Deleuze.

Art in Tunisia and the sense of place

Given the capacity of re-territorialised art of absorbing and re-elaborating culture and languages, it certainly is a form of hybrid art, if with *hybrid* we mean, as Hall suggests (2003: 188), the connection between local identity and transcultural dimension. This art which ‘stays’ and ‘cares’ for places and for the relations which constitute them, often declares its political stances. It also takes the form of inquires, critically questioning its culture using forms

and instruments which are used in ethnographic or anthropological research: from videos, to photographs, to interviews, until the use of material culture's objects as transitional objects.

In the context of Tunisian re-territorialised art there are many women artists which reflect on memory, on private and public places, using everyday language focused on affection, on the desire of producing or reproducing 'home' as a net of relations (Moorti 2003; Triki 2012). As Rachida Triki affirms on Tunisian art scene:

Since the 1990s, the Tunisian contemporary art scene saw the emergence of a remarkable creativity in the work of young women artists. By using many different media they try to express personal or socio-cultural experiences. It is also a demographical factor. These artists are usually graduated from Art Schools which have much more female than male students (Triki 2010).

In her participated work intitled *Tisser la medina* (Weaving the medina) and presented in "Dream City" (2012), tunisian artist Sonia Kallel explores a public space and his erased memories of traditional crafts. She weaved links between medina's inhabitants, streets and squares, souks and houses, opening to the "Dream City" public the unknown world of those who still weave, the silk craftsmen and their almost lost ability, as a form of a cultural intangible heritage ("Dream City" 2012 : 40).

Nicène Kossentini explores her family photos bringing back the plot of her familiar and cultural origins. In her *Boujmal* series (2011) (Fig. 3) some black and white portraits of the mother, representing different life stages, shade in the horizon, which is traced by sharp graphics of Arab writing. In an old childhood picture of her mother, used for the short video *Revenir* (2006) (Fig. 4), she made a disturbing discover, like an Antonioni's *Blow up*. Zooming the image she finds a figure in the shadow, beyond a group of smiling children in first row. There's a little girl 'removed', excluded, a small intruder, perhaps too poor to be pictured in the photo or excluded for other mysterious and undiscoverable reason. This image is in someway unbearable and seems to announce a disaster due to this exclusion.

Another French-Tunisian artist, Patricia Triki, who's living since a long time in Tunis, builds stories of and with people photographed in the streets, twisting relations and accounts strongly connected to place (*Serie Sabrina*). She also interpreted the urban landscape of Tunis transforming it in an extreme pop scene, scattering around the city, during the urban art event "Dream City" (2010) (Fig. 5).

Her fake commercial posters hidden among urban landscape of communication escaped from censorship and brought a denouncing logo together with a declaration of freedom: free art.

Patricia Triki again, with her photos on *Checkpoint* (2011) (Fig. 6) taken during revolution, shows how one can protect oneself following the loss of law enforcement and, at the same time, she underlines the solidarity occurred during the revolution days. And about that period she said:

C'est vrai qu'assez rapidement je suis sortie dans la rue pour faire des photos et surtout garder des traces. C'était comme enregistrer des images, des petites preuves de manière neutre et sans jugement. Après la révolution, les autorités s'empresser à chaque fois d'effacer, de décaper les slogans et les tags sur les murs. Je voulais aussi appréhender et expérimenter les nouvelles limites permises dans l'espace public. Constaté si je pouvais photographier librement et créer sans contraintes dans la rue. Une fois, je faisais des collages avec des amis sur les murs de la ville et un homme nous a dit : « Avant vous pouviez pas faire ce que vous faites. Profitez-en maintenant parcequ'après on ne sait jamais ! » (Bruckbauer et Triki 2012 : 26)

In the works of those three artists, a key role is played by the reflection on relations, place and public/private space, using video or photographs in a different individual way but always as a narrative and metaphorical language.

Instead, other two artists use photographs in a metonymic bodily way. The photograph Hichem Driss shows the physicality, power and the vitality of censored bodies in a series of pictures of Tunisians of every ages, genders, sexual preferences and skin colours. They narrate a multicultural nation and their diversities, in a work entitled by contrast «Ammar #404», which is the coded name used by young Tunisians to call the internet censorship.

Halim Karabibene, an ironic and theatrical Tunisian artist, is nomadic and multidisciplinary, as Mahmoud Chalbi defined him, who builds through his body and others' Tunisians artists, critics, art dealers, a proper don quixotesque army (Fig. 7). They defend and claim with their pots the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Tunis, which 'is not there'. Since January 2011 – the month of the escape of Ben Ali – the pot becomes the armour of this extravagant struggle committee. «It's a piece bearing a very strong statement, saying that artists are here, they are armed and they must not be ignored» (Krifa 2012).

“So where is the Artist?”

As art has become «a useful interlocutor in engaging with the concept of geography», art can also «unravel how geography as an epistemic structure and its signifying practices shape and structure not just national and economic relations but also identity constitution and identity fragmentation» (Rogoff 2000 : 10). The apparently superficial question “So, where is the artist?” (Papastergiadis 2008: 376) actually recalls a reflection on space, which goes beyond the spatial, cultural or temporal concepts embedded in art as site-specific, thus linked to a place (Papastergiadis 2008: 369). It’s also, in fact, a methodological matter which questions who’s talking about art and who’s analysing it, also we who are talking about it right now: «The task of the writer is not only to reflect on art but also to see how a representation is both transformative and constitutive of subjectivity» (Papastergiadis 2008: 375).

The revolution wasn’t just about Bouazizi’s immolation and cries of ‘dégage, dégage!’ (‘out, out!’), Krifa stated (2012). It’s also a thought process, a series of values and choices made by society, and artists are conscious of all of this.

Art space, and the works of many artists, today in Tunisia, are located in that field Foucault defined *heterotopy*, that is “the place other” and which Pratt (1992: 7) and Clifford (1997: 192) defined as “contact zone”. What does this mean? They are spaces open on other spaces, the function of which is to let spaces communicate between each others. Not only physical spaces but also metaphorical ones, creating contradictory movements and connecting cultures, subjects, stories, points of view. In those places, not only new significant are created, but also new subjectivities. Is the space that Okwi Enwezor (2012) – referring to transformations taking place in Arab societies – defines as *Civic*, that is a place of subjectivization:

[...] conceptually, this is the space in which arts and culture actually belong, not in the realm of the state, not in the realm of the market, not in that of the family. Art is on the other side, it is on the side of the *civic*, and what I’m trying to point out is how the projects of curators and artists in these societies become the key places where these values are raised. It is not that artistic projects or activism is set up in opposition to the state, because it is very easy to suffocate. But it can be subversive inside the body of the state [...]. And this is what is going on, because if they are getting people to think freely without necessarily being

“activist”, then they are enabling a subjectivization that cannot be repressed (Enwezor 2012)

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Fig. 1 - *Graffiti on the Tunis Medina's wall* (September 2012) (photo M.A. Trasforini)



Fig. 2 - Picture on the wall, Tunis Medina (September 2012) (photo M.A.Trasforini)



Fig. 3 - Nicène Kossentini, *Boujmal*, 2011 (Courtesy Nicène Kossentini)



Fig. 4 - Nicène Kossentini, *Revenir*, 2006 (Courtesy Nicène Kossentini)

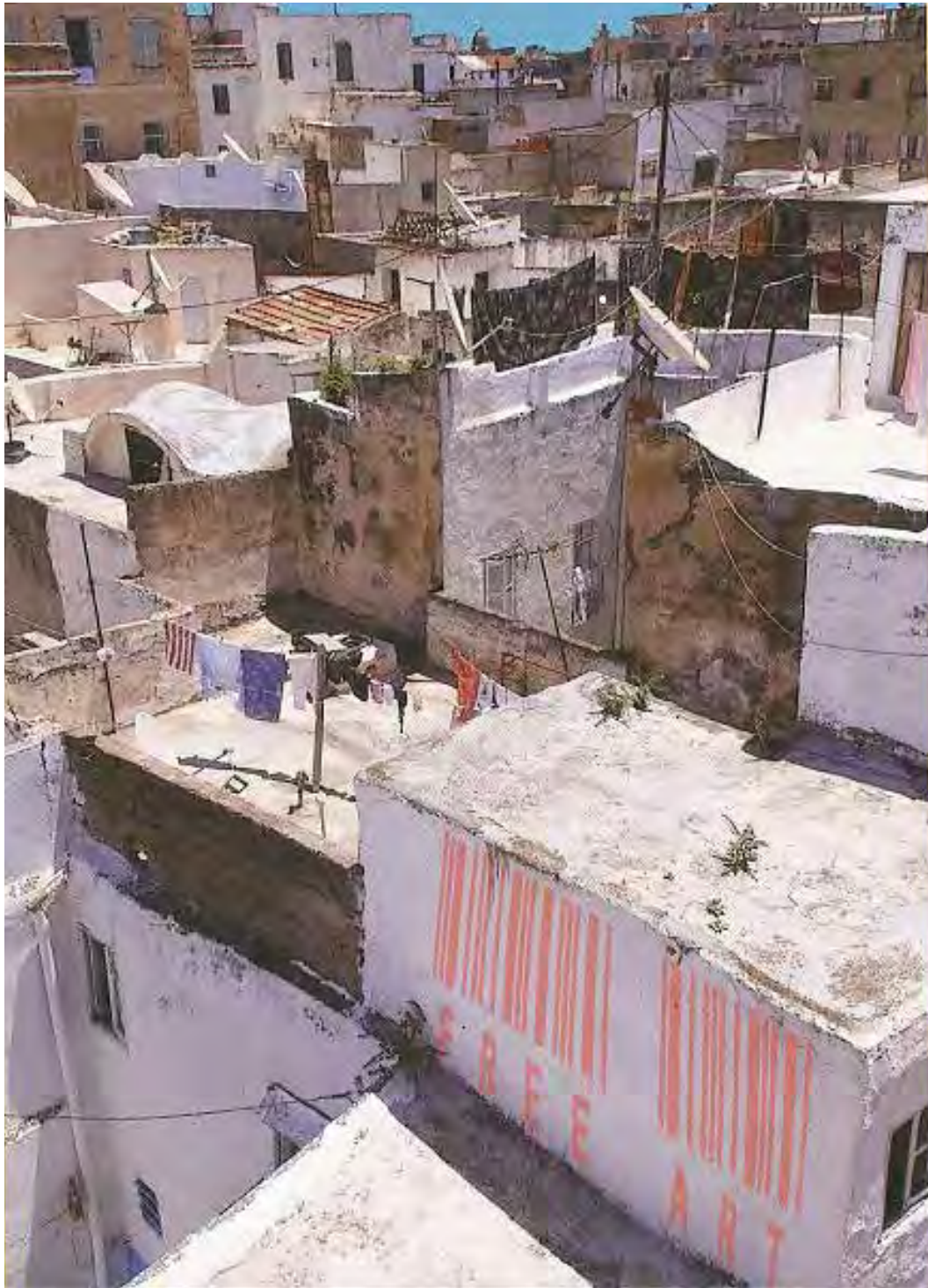


Fig. 5 - Patricia Triki, *Free Art*, 2010 (Courtesy Patricia Triki)



Fig. 6 - Patricia Triki, *Checkpoint #2*, 2011(Courtesy Patricia Triki)



Fig. 7 - Halim Karabibene, *Comité Populaire pour la Protection du Musée National d'Art Moderne et Contemporain (Mnamc) de Tunis - Soldat N°1 - Janvier 2011* (Courtesy Halim Karabibene)