

Dossier Printemps des Arts, Tunisia, 2012

Provocation, transgression, subversion? Where do we situate the lines which separate the “sacred” and the cultural?

By Wafa Gabsi

Understanding the society in which we were born and where we live became our need. We are in it and it is in us. We want to find as below the ruin of our "lost" chair. We do not want to forget what we know of it even if the revolt had set up a story that denied our paths ... poetically narrated the artists of the “Printemps des Arts” Art Fair. Lying in silence, the voice of Art has thus been raised.

June 10, 2012, a state of melancholic loss settled in Tunis. Censorship is the cause. The country was dipped in a religious and identity magma ripping up in a foggy conflict, confusing two concepts: the cultural and sacred. Observing the facts, the causes (excuses) are "due" to the Spring Arts Festival. A contemporary art fair that was the right target to create a controversy, spreading disorder in the perfect equation of a desecration of sacred through some artworks which were deemed blasphemous: "The current debate about legitimacy of religious or political, judging what is offensive or not in an artwork, has obscured the plight that many artists implicated in this unfortunate adventure are currently living" ¹says Rachida Triki².

Indeed, the sequence of events began when "a bailiff took photos of some exhibited works to show them off in a mosque held by extremists, saying that these violated the sacred. Pro-Islamist Facebook pages then made a montage of some paintings considered as blasphemous (a bearded man caricature, a female busts stoned to death installation, ants coming out of the backpack of a pupil to form the sentence "glory to God" (...). From then, it's the snowball effect: fanatics attacked the Abdelliya Palace which hosted the event, destroying and burning artworks, appealing to murder of the artists were thrown, private and public property were burnt, confrontations between police and extremists

¹ Triki, R. (2012). « Halte à la dérive ». Tunis

² "Rachida Triki is a philosopher, art historian, and art curator, currently full Professor of Philosophy at Tunis University specialized in Aesthetics. Dr Rachida Boubaker-Triki graduated from University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne in 1971. Then she worked on a thesis about Aesthetics and politics at the renaissance directed by Pr. Hélène Vedrine. In 1983 she obtained her PhD from University of Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne. In 2001 she obtained a Habilitation in philosophy from Paris 8 University under the direction of Pr. Patrice Vermeren. Currently she is full Professor of Philosophy at Tunis University. She is also founder and president of the Tunisian Association of Aesthetics and Poetics (ATEP), vice President of the International Association of Poetics (SIP), member of the Executive Board of the Euro-Mediterranean association for Art History and Aesthetics (AEPHAE), and delegate in the Executive Board of International Association for Aesthetics (IAA). She has organized numerous international meetings on the contemporaneous problems of the creation in Arts, and has published books and articles on the subject. She is also a member of editorial boards of "Recherches poétiques" and "Art'in".

She is also an Art critic and a Curator specialized in North African Art. In 1994 she has co-produced a series of 24 documentaries about the Tunisian painters in their workplace. She also has been the curator of numerous international art exhibitions in Europe and Africa." URL : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rachida_Triki

occurred. We deplore dozens of wounded and even a death in the ranks of the Salafists troublemakers... "3

Caught in this collective hysteria, between oriented interpretation of certain representations and image manipulation on the Internet, anti-democratic currents were thus mobilized to set up a state of terror within the country. Several forms of aggression against artists were recorded. Sadly, neither reactions nor emergency measures by the authorities have shown support. The State commitment was almost weakened and even absent. Facing this silence, the art critic Rachida Triki is outraged: " in a constitutional state, it is unacceptable that citizens, artists that are mostly art teachers in this case, are not delivered to the mob justice, but constantly fear for their lives and those of their children just because they have participated in an art fair whose three artworks were deemed "officially" suspicious. It is sad to remind that similar situations only existed in the worst times of History: in a recent past during the dark years of Algeria, it is in this same carelessness of the authorities that has started the artists and intellectuals' extermination. So far, the cultural scene is still getting better with difficulties. Even if according to some, we should not unduly be alarmed by these threats whose perpetrators must be identified and tried, it still remains that their consequences will have serious impacts: prejudice and injury of artists and also of young people who intend to be creators, an image of Tunisia which is far from corresponding to the reality of its society, cultural life slump, constant fear for freedom of expression ...»4

This anxious and even oppressing debate takes place in a climate of "occupation" of the cultural terrain and gives rise to the question of religious or political legitimacy on one hand and the legitimacy of art on the other. In this context, it seems necessary to analyze the entanglement and/or opposition of culture and the sacred. Two artists participating in the "Printemps des Arts" event have responded to these questions:

Wafa Gabsi: The "Printemps des Arts" affair was a major case of censorship. In transgressing the "prohibition" to think that seems to be the norm imposed on Arab societies, the artistic equation represents the node of religious repression that disturbs the relations between the sacred and the cultural. Could you explain these ideas?

Héla Ammar*: This affair reveals two things: That the sacred still represents a red line not to be overstepped for a large segment of society. The problem is that if freedom of expression and creativity is limited by the sacred, this notion of the sacred can be subject to various interpretations, from very broad to very restrictive and there are no authorities who are fit to provide such interpretations. Thus, the acceptance of the "sacred" as a limit would open the door for all kinds of censorship and serve as a pretext to muzzle the Tunisian art scene.

³ Collectif tunisien pour l'art, la culture et les libertés.(2012). « Call for support to Tunisian Artists ». URL: http://www.petitions24.net/appel_a_soutenir_les_artistes_tunisiens_call_for_the_support_of_t

⁴ Triki, R. (2012). « Halte à la dérive ».

Moreover, the sacred is often interlinked with popular beliefs and as we have seen in this affair, public opinion is easily manipulated. By playing the card of religious sentiment and Muslim identity, certain people have succeeded in placing the artists in the category of unbelievers and condemn them as such. The religious repression that is born out of ignorance and frustration is the reason for the clash between the cultural and the sacred. Our government has failed their responsibilities by condemning the artists and places them back-to-back with the extremists and manipulators.

Moufida Fedhila* adds: The events of “Le printemps des Arts” is a real manipulation of public opinion with false speech in order to exploit the art and artists in the light of a policy of repression and fear. So, it creates censorship!

Censorship is not new. In the hands of political or religious powers, censors exercise a power of control over thinking and habits. The power of art and its abilities threaten these censors and push artists towards resistance and transgression. Everything that breaks with the past or offers a new vision of the world will always be misunderstood, prohibited, banned. The history of art shows abundant examples of this.

Over the centuries, authorities have claimed the role of controlling what was said, what was done. These authorities, religious or political, have intervened even in areas that were outside of their competence. Religion accords itself the right to control and allows itself to intervene in areas that are outside of its competence.

We are not in a country that proclaims “Chariaa” yet. We improvise. We try to circumvent the ban, to transform, to stage. At a historical moment, cultural and political revolution is underway against all forms of flood and crisis.

WG: Cant’ Art be transgressive? What is his contribution? Do you think it could add something to the Tunisian company?

MF: Before we talk of transgressive art in a society that tramples in its draft democratic society, creative freedom is threatened in its most elemental form. Being an artist threatened with death despite the fact that my performance and my drawings at Spring Arts Festival has not had to deal with cause of religion, I wonder how art could come to citizens in their quest for a life and worthy of a society of equal opportunities? This is a community project where the act of creation must first work to change attitudes and make them think about the relationship to religion.

A transgressive art in a society of law could help but not with a government unable today to protect these citizens while leaving violence and incitement to murder commonplace.

HA: I believe in freedom of expression and I think it is unique and indivisible. The artist expresses himself through his work, his world view, but also his doubts, his fears and apprehensions. Several artists involved in this Art Fair including myself, have dealt with subjects related to the actual facts (events) in Tunisia, namely the social divide, the rise of Islamism in Tunisia, the upsurge in violence and fears arising on the status of woman.

So we have played our role of artists involved. Because this role is precisely to address the problems of society by provoking questioning and awakening consciences. Provocation, transgression or subversion are as many ways to express themselves and play this role. Contrary to the assertions of our Minister of Culture, art does not have to be beautiful and it is revolutionary in all cases, if not more to my sense of art but decoration.

WG: Do you think in the future the world of art and civil society will be more vigilant and / or more willing to mobilize?

HA: The closing day of the "Printemps des Arts" and following the first threats, there was a strong mobilization to support the artists. However, after the violence that shook the greater Tunis and who apparently was based on the infringement of the sacred, which we have been unjustly accused, the reactions of civil society were rather timid. Indeed, few associations, organizations and parties have given their unconditional support to the artists. This is particularly regrettable because civil society is the only bulwark against the creeping darkness. If it turns out it shrinks the pretext of violation of the sacred, the game will be permanently lost. Having said that steps have been initiated by the artists to defend their interests and contacts were established with civil society and various international organizations liberties. Ago at a time when I speak, several outbursts of solidarity with our cause.

MF: The current situation in Tunisia is alarming and should not be taken lightly! Everything can change in a repressive dictatorship and fundamentalist religion that takes hostage. Only civil society, by its historical commitment and strength of artists and intellectuals who think and integrate a sick society's cultural and political abandonment, can defeat the will of a new form of censorship and tyranny!

Biographies

***Héla Ammar:** Héla Ammar joins in the lineage of these artists' new generation arabic women whose approach often expresses an internal, social and cultural duality in their quest of identity. Born in June 1969, she lives and works in Sidi Bou Said (Tunisia). She is directly inspired of her daily experiences, her life, of the way she communicates to bring her vision on subjects such as the image and the feminine identity in the Arabic Mediterranean cultures. Taking advantage of her meetings, she continues to intersect the individual to society and to confront their legitimate aspirations with their reality at once cultural political or social.

Her work has been shown in various international art fairs including Marrakech Art Fair 2010, Dream City Tunisia 2010, ArtDubai 08, ARTMAR2007, Biennale de Barcelone, Spain 2007, ArtParis-AbuDhabi 2007, Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi, UAE, Salon International d'Art contemporain, Grenoble 2006, Montreux Art Gallery 2006, Rencontres d'Art contemporain, Genève2005. So far, her work has been the subject to many articles and comments in Tunisian and foreign publications.

***Moufida Fedhila:** Moufida Fedhila born in Tunisia (1977). Works in Paris and in Tunis. She graduated from the École Européenne Supérieure d'Art de Bretagne. Moufida studied philosophy at the Sorbonne University and theater at the University of Caen before moving to Paris to be trained in film directing.

She practices as well drawing, painting, cinema, photography, and poetry as sound, installation and performance. A wide pallet of media, which is in adequacy with her conception of the world and life: plural, complex, anti-conformist and de-compartmentalized.

Her work often involving the participation and the presence of the spectator, examine the tension between politics and poetics.

Wassim Gozlani: Wassim Ghozlani is born in 1986 and works regularly both in Tunisia and abroad. Founder of the first Tunisian platform for the promotion of photography, www.shutterparty.com, in which he manages the publication and the technical coordination. He is responsible for the organization of the Photo Club of Tunisia - a year-long assignment. He collaborated, during a workshop with renowned photographers as Josef Koudelka or Patrick Zachmann, Magnum Photo, he will be confronted by them in the wisdom of his approach and the quality of his creations. In 2011, he obtains the special mention of the jury for the Prize Arte/Cutlog on the occasion of the Parisian week dedicated to the contemporary Art. Wassim Ghozlani can already claim countless exhibits throughout the world (Brazil, Slovenia, France, Tunisia...) with pride.

Author: Wafa Gabsi is Pd-h researcher in the University of Paris1, La Sorbonne. She is currently carrying out doctoral research on Contemporary southern Mediterranean artists on the international circuit of art and cultural globalization. She has published writings on different journals and publications in Berlin, Paris and Tunis.