

Moufida Fedhila, *Tectonics Utopias*, Paris, 2015

By Michèle Cohen-Hadria

At a time when the "Arab Springs" have shown the difficulty for citizens of Tunisia to shift from democratic aspirations to their application in political reality, the work of Moufida Fedhila resonates as a deep and knowledgeable reflection. Indeed, from the aftermath of these legitimate effervescences, the artist, refraining from any naiveté showed vigilance and caution about the prospects of the announced social changes. Mutations that in fact, could be only accomplished through the empirical and circumstantial crossing of successive thresholds.

By underpinning the concepts she places at the foundation of her works by as many documentary elements which can be said to belong to an "explicit connection with the changes of methods in the field of natural science (...)" (Umberto Eco) (1), Fedhila is one of those artists-researchers whose work is characterized by synthetic and challenging plastic thoughts. The resources she draws from, come from various fields: Architectural, when she relies on American architect Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983) Futuristic theories, with particular inspiration from his singular Dymaxion map, (Dynamo maximum voltage), which is a projection of the world, not spherical, but somehow "unfolded" and exempted from these ethnocentric cultural representations that induce to set the North up and the south down of a world map.

Moufida Fedhila also contributes to a series of concerted reflections, projecting the development of international art networks regarding the South of the world in particular and promoting artistic exchanges South / South (instead of those too often invoked, North / South).

Her work takes much into account the emergence of new civil societies, encouraging the viewer, following playful programs, to replay performances presented in the public space. A public space turned into a "public sphere". A sphere of debate and deliberation, where her performances evoke in many aspects Umberto Eco's analysis in "The open work", by which art is a partition that can be played and appropriated by all.

The artist's humanistic speculations thrive on texts from contemporary philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Paul Virilio, as well as those of the fathers of ancient Greece, forerunners of the democratic model. Scientifically, she will point out, in the conceptual upheaval, that the quantum mechanical theories produced on a Newtonian perception of the world, a metaphor for deep social issue and possible questioning.

As a female subject, Moufida Fedhila presents, without campaigning too radically, the exemplarity of a women citizen participation, not in Tunisia, where the woman is certainly not - since president Bourguiba's era - at her first struggles. Rather, for Fedhila, it is a natural commitment, exercised through healthy performative audacity to induce lucid and analytical thinking. She will play, in person, on Habib Bourguiba Avenue, opposite the Municipal Theatre, unifying place of popular uprisings in Tunis, in an inaugural performance not lacking either irony nor especially constructive expectancy ("Super-Tunisian\_Star't" in 2011)

### **SYMBOLIC PERFORMATIVITY**

At the time of Tunisian popular uprising, started in 2011 from the inner regions of the country, the capital city of Tunis found itself besieged by a democratic impulse and a unanimous desire to speak out, which in a few days transformed the capital into a

feverish agora. The artist asked herself what place could be found, in the heart of such excitement, for Tunisian artistic creation, that was bullied for so long under the Ben Ali regime. For her, the life of the city could not expect social changes only from politicians. Indeed, artistic creation is capable of irrigating it in a vascular way through its scouting views.

But the notion of performance had to be assimilated by a people kept so long in an induced and internal captivity, characteristic of tyrannies. Thus, in that hour of jubilation, the medium of performance seemed likely to provide an adequate response to her questioning, because of its ephemeral, random and solar theatricality. Spontaneous but controlled, she could also come forward to meet these thousands of citizens who took to the streets in order to experience a profuse and sincere speech. An equal "taking over of free expression", which was offered here as civic maieutics through which Fedhila invited her fellow citizens to a playful and speculative voting experience.

Incredulous to demagogic speeches that were so common in that turbulent period, the artist preferred to sharpen her critical thinking, only weapon for the free minds, by setting in abyss the messianic expectation implied by the election of a president or a party that was allegedly providential ... ("Super-Tunisian\_Hors Limit" 2014). So she will force the line by deliberately offering the character of a president invested as Super Man, to whom will soon echo citizens she promoted, not without wry humor, to the rank of "Super Tunisians" (Super -Tunisian\_Extra Time and Super-Tunisian's in a fix, she 'is calling is on luck, 2012).

Performance such as "Super-Tunisian\_Star't" in Tunis in 2011 or "Everything's Gonna Be Alright" in Sousse in 2014 invited as many volunteers as possible in the public space of Tunisian society, which presents, on a par with other countries in the Maghreb and the Mashreq, significant population growth whose resultant is seen through a predominantly young population. It is in this kind arena of Tunis that Fedhila encourages young people to a civic simulation by offering them to write a new constitution whose publication in the aftermath of these political upheavals was coming forward slowly. However "competing" seems to be a general term and we prefer, in the words of Umberto Eco, words such as "reinvention" and "consumption" shared with the artist (2).

Conscious that art could appear to the unprepared population, at least as new as the democratic exercise, Fedhila handed explanatory notes to passersby, who sometimes enthusiastic and sometimes perplexed, responded with spontaneity. The artist later elaborated a series of operational programs modeled on popular games and sports like football, through which emerged questions on how citizens after twenty three years of oppression, will be able to rebuild.

## **LINGUISTIC AND SEMIOTIC EXPLORATION**

However, these operational programs, which encouraged her fellow citizen to emerge from a long political and civic winter, are only one side of Moufida Fedhila's research.

Indeed, the artist is not afraid to probe a complex linguistic continent that may lead to some "empty" semantics.

Following her speculations, and after uncompromising linguistic and semiotic dissections, there is a vacancy of senses or "halo of uncertainty" (Umberto Eco) surrounding the void left by a place that usually awards the standard symbols and emblems, and that Fedhila dismissed. This attention to myths and social imaginary lead

her to a breakdown of the Tunisian flag whose symbols are so internalized by the community, they appear "naturalized" (Bourdieu), which, like in all representations, was mostly set on the basis of an unthought-of doxa.

"In You we trust" (2011-2012) showed the installation of six aligned Tunisian flags, the central circular emblem had been hollowed, therefore emptied of the red cloth, thereby releasing a "vacancy" of meaning, that the artist conceives as preexisting to the formation of any institutional representation. It is in this gap of language - where Moufida Fedhila sees a crossroad - in which these national imaginaries could, beyond the legitimacy of their story, replay a kind of primal scene, suggesting if only for a moment, a total exemption from social or symbolic requirements

### **SOCIAL BODY, WORLD BODY**

From the political analysis of her native Tunisia, Moufida Fedhila expands her vision for global considerations. Yet going out of the borders of Tunisia, and the Maghreb, do not take her that far away. Indeed, the historical impact of the 20th century marked by the dominance of Western countries in southern Mediterranean, are felt acutely through post-colonial migration issues observed everywhere in Europe.

It was in Padua, Italy, that the artist had to detect palpable effects of economic globalization, discovering little city pockets leading to a shameful apartheid exerted on migrant workers. Against any clinical statistics, the body of these migrants seems to inversely represent the crucial vector of men in search of employment and becoming hostages of unequivocal economic changes.

At the Noloco Gallery (which means non place), the artist replays these separations and fragmentations linked to as many exiles and rejections, building a brick wall of an intense electric blue, reminding people that other scandalous walls exist in the recent history of the world. In Palestine, Mexico, Africa ("A Wal for Everyone" (2007) ... These segregationist patterns spreading in western cities like anti-social islands are nothing but the results of European imperial conquests. But they also symbolize the microcosm of a globalized world, characterized by a North / South divide historically unequal.

With "My Island" (2007), the question for Moufida Fedhila is to know where these hostile "walls" are decreed to these wandering body and which entity institutes them unofficially. Geopolitics and globalization seem to touch each other, like tectonic plates ultimately identifying a risk of social explosion. This question torments the artist, who knows that globalization is the effect of late capitalism whose systems are not as open as they say, whose Eldorado gives no access to wealth and well being.

In "Draw Me from the World Memory (2008-2013), Fedhila exhibits the modeling of continents sliding and stalling, through proposals of open and relieved spaces, where Western powers seem to inversely close on themselves, like in loops, like in an island ... Driven by the thrust of these utopian tectonic plates, these maps come in soft, loose sketches, suggesting the drift of a global world represented by deafness and a colossal "insularity".

A concept opening on an increased awareness of negative heterotopias, swarming in a world of powers, democratic indeed but with antithetical variable geometries and great human Utopias (3) .. In contrast, these inventive mappings, restive to any Newtonian lock ups, sends us back to the metaphor of a Greek nomos, understood as a "boundless space". (4)

### **AN EXPLORATION OF PROCESSES**

We will notomice f Moufida Fedhila's quest, these approaches based on processes that are causing socio-political phenomena and whose impact is undeniable on individualities. In a global world, agitated by a series of wars and intolerance, run by former colonial empires whose security obsessions lead to xenophobia and stubborn prejudices as shown by Edward Said, migrants from the South have certainly bad press.

We should remind everybody that these borders were born of imperial partitions drawn by Western powers after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and whose design was based on strategic plans still operative. Looking closely at these security and territorial systems born from Nation – States – State systems "hardened" according to Gilles Deleuze and far removed from "soft" systems of ancestral primitive tribes (5) - the artist tracks down an inner fetish related to national and religious emblems, as much as a regression to nationalism and orthodoxy which, in times of crisis, offer their false relief identifications. At the end of theses analysis, the artist is not afraid to reach linguistic "emptiness" or a conceptual "vacancy", because she knows that this lack of senses temporarily eclipses what she calls a field of possibilities. ..

In fact, Fedhila does not revolt against a political or religious history. Politics, that is understood here in the broad sense serves her as an experimental field, as a developer and pretext to consider creative behaviors that can offer human alternatives. Only utopia as a heuristic approach, would be able to develop such a project.

Thus Moufida Fedhila sees in politics a kind of passageway for citizens ... and the restricted angle she adopts here (to use the terminology of researchers) is less frontal criticism of these systemic history groups that observation of the same way people who pass by ... in other words, the artist focuses mainly on observing a slow change in beings - and their exchanges – Just like alchemy evolving in a global athanor, where she perfectly identifies the levers and springs of our contemporary global societies.

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1. Umberto Eco, « *L'oeuvre ouverte* », Ed. Seuil, Paris, 1965, p. 10, Chapter 1. *The poetic of the open work*, p.15-37
2. Op. cit. p. 11
3. Foucault, « *To monotor and to punish – The Birth of prison* », Ed. Gallimard, Paris, 1975, p. 228-264
4. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, « *One thousand sets - Capitalism et Schizophrénia 2*», Ed. de Minuit, Paris,1980, p. 600.  
Chapitre 14 - 1440, *Le lisse et le strié*.
5. Op. Cit., p. 254- 256, Chapitre 9, 1933 - *Micropolitics and segments*.  
p. 254- 256, Chapitre 9, 1933 - *Micropolitics and segments* .