

Disrupting Spaces and Concepts. Moufida Fedhila

Moufida Fedhila (born 1977) works between Paris, Tunis and Cairo, bridging cultures and territories. She operates in a limitless space that she constantly questions, shakes and moves.

A student of philosophy, visual arts, films and theater, the young artist produces a multifaceted and interdisciplinary work. She practices drawing, painting, filming making, photography, poetry as well as sound, installations and performances.

A wide range of media, consistent with her views of the world and of life: plural, complex, unconventional and without compartments.

Reinventing the limits

In the age of globalization and free trade, Moufida Fedhila came to the bitter conclusion of multiplying walls, whether tangible or societal. She recognizes fears related to the Other and the prevention of movement for those who are not considered citizens of the world, but parasites. People, Persona Non Grata, who must be contained, retained, pushed back or put in isolation. Her work questions the paradoxes of the modern world: Would globalization be only beneficial to commercial and financial exchanges? What about free movement of persons, cultures and ideas? Men, women and children leave their countries every day, their families, their roots, in search of a hypothetically better life. To get there, they must wait, bypass, cross, climb borders and walls. On either side of these walls, two behaviors are established: To cross it in order to survive or live in fear of the Other. The wall is a materialization of the "uninhabitable" as explained by Georges Perec: "The architecture of contempt and show off [...] the narrow, the stifling [...] the parked, the prohibited, the caged, and the locked."¹ It is also about wandering, abandonment and exile in this third dimension determined by the presence of the wall. Implicitly, the artist probes the death that fills this non-site but also its occupants wandering in a non-life suspended in time and space.

Since 2007, Moufida Fedhila interrogates this new zone initiated by the wall. A guest of Nolooco Gallery in Padua, she experimented the premises, the wall and the atmosphere generated by this alienating presence. In Padua, a wall was built in 2006 in order to isolate a neighborhood largely populated with immigrants from the rest of the city. A 3 meters high by 84 meters long metal enclosure built to supposedly curb drug trafficking and violent attacks.

In the art gallery, Moufida screened a short film, ***The Noise of Silence***, images in black and white that showed a life put on hold. The artist filmed in an extremely slow motion the surroundings of the wall. She recalls an atmosphere where tension and unease meet. The images show a traumatized and broken landscape. Fedhila produced an audio tour and a series of photographs entitled **Diary of a**

¹ PEREC, Georges. *Espèces d'Espaces*. Paris : Galilée, 2000, p.176.

Detective, I'm Blind, where an audio recording explains that she is spying on and watching the residents of the neighborhood with whom dialogue was almost impossible. All this while crossing the area and moving on both sides of the wall. The series are a response to their silence; it reports tensions and felt disturbances. They did not want to talk about a subject considered taboo since it was not assumed. In Padua, the wall was experienced as a ripping apart. **The Noise of Silence** shows the character both electric and numb of an area that is suffocating.

In addition to the video work, the artist erected on either side of the main hall, a two meters high cinderblock wall, **A Wall for Everyone**. Thus, the visitor's body is tested in the space itself, the wall that isolates the body from the rest of the part and the reality of the construction. If Fedhila concrete block wall is ephemeral, the one built in Padua is real, lasting and unbearable. The wall was a provocation to the place and set up an impression of prison within the gallery. The artist speaks of a "minimalist act" carried to cancel space. An act making a link with the external situation in order to show its absurdity and nonsense. The ineffable need of protection and reassurance in the face of irrational fears gave rise to these walls, symbols of security drift in total contradiction with global aspirations.²

Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant wrote:

None of these walls that rise all around, under various excuses, in Berlin yesterday and today in Palestine or in the southern United States, or in the laws of the rich countries, shall contain a simple truth: that the Whole World becomes increasingly home to all. [...] Every time a culture or a civilization has failed to consider the other, to think of itself with the other, to think of the other in itself, these rigid barriers of stone, iron, barbed wire, electrified fences or closed ideologies rose, collapsed, and did come back with new stridency.

In 2008, Moufida Fedhila continues to reflect on the walls, territories and the movement of bodies in a solo exhibition entitled **My Island**.³ On the wall appears a cartographic work, My Island, where the world is redrawn, disfigured by building walls on both sides of the world map. The artist offers a world map developed and reconstructed from these walls of shame: Zimbabwe, Israel, the US, Italy, North Korea etc.

The work is accompanied by a silent video that chronicles the actions of each one. The goal is an awareness of the viewer-citizen of the erection of walls separating people in the 21st century, as they are tangible signs of decline. They are physical and tangible reactions of the fear of others. Moufida Fedhila made hers a singular projection of the world, American futurist Buckminster Fuller Dymaxion map (1895-1983). This projection is the result of an architectural philosophy and urban planning based on mobility and communication. Once applied to the world map in 1946, the world is seen as an island. Moufida Fedhila retained the extreme avant-garde character of Fuller's works and combined it to her concerns. In this way, the world is redistributed, upside down. North and South disappear. The notions of centers and peripheries are canceled and rethought. The walls involve a new architecture of the borders, they physically separate countries.

With this same desire to deformation of space, the artist initiates the project **Draw Me the World** (2008), where she invites passersby to trace the contours of the world. On white pages, people

² GLISSANT, Edouard et CHAMOISEAU, Patrick. 2007, p.7-8.

³ *My Island*, Centre Culturel du Colombier, Rennes, du 3 au 25 avril 2008.

she met get in a complex exercise of drawing the map as they remember it. Between extreme simplification of continents, symbolizing the world and a detailed work of the delineations, the end result is an accumulation of visions, memories and designs different each time. The artist is particularly interested in the work of memory provided by the participants.

We all have an idea of the map of the world, yet when it comes to tracing it by memory, the exercise becomes difficult. It reveals our own position; a German will put Europe in the center of the map, while an Australian, a Russian and a Brazilian will consider it otherwise. We think we know the outlines of this very familiar map, but when faced with a white sheet, the gains fade and give way to doubts. The lines are blurred and the geographical reality of the map escapes us. This project is not without reminding us of the psycho-geography developed by Guy Debord in the 1950s. This how he explains it:

*Psycho-geography would offer the study of precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, acting directly on the emotional behavior of individuals. The adjective psycho-geographical, retaining a rather pleasing vagueness, can thus be applied to the data set by this kind of investigation, the results of their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that appears to meet the same spirit of discovery.*⁴

Moufida Fedhila creates linkage between places and people with whom she dialogues. She deconstructs, de-compartmentalizes and transgresses with subtlety norms and taboos. She establishes a mutual sharing of experiences that she reformulates in her work. Confinement and mobility are placed at the heart of her artistic practice. The artist suffocates in these spaces where control, intolerance, outrageous security and isolation from each other are reigning. She confronts her own body in those places where the Other is falsely invisible because of these walls that embody not only our fears but also our inability to understand a world in motion.

Exploring the gaps

If the wall is a vector of separation and exclusion, it is also creator of links. Once erected, it establishes an in-between area where new activities and new behaviors come into play. A no man's land where passages punctuate time. Passages that create, human and material exchanges, hopes or disappointments. An area where the ambiguity is also pregnant and palpable.

Take the example of the border between Mexico and the US that Mexicans cross every day to find work. The hypocrisy of the wall is at its peak here: illegals should not pass; yet they are the ones that allow the operation of most of the factories in the southern United States. This ambivalence between need and rejection applies to other parts of the world.

Moufida Fedhila examines and questions the contradictions inherent to this third space. In 2007, she conducts an in-situ intervention by painting in white on the ground: **NOT IN MY BACK YARD**. The sentence on the ground becomes a limit, a boundary. It refers to a US movement of the same name, which aims to ensure the interests (private and public) and safety of the group. If initially,

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DEBORD, Guy Ernest. « Introduction to a critic of urban geography » in *Lèvres Nues*, n°6, 1955, p.11.

citizens gathered to counter aggressive, intrusive and harmful policies (real estate, commercial etc.) in order to preserve neighborhoods with a human face, the movement's activities are undergoing drifts related to immigration. If they accept the construction of a harmful project in their neighborhood, they will refuse allowing immigrants to work there. On one hand, they do not want strangers near them, but on the other, these same foreigners sit their children, mow their lawns, take care of their household etc... Again hypocrisy and nonsense insidiously interfere in human and material dialectics.

From its plastic developments on space, the boundaries and movement of bodies, Moufida Fedhila was interested in those who cross limits, prohibitions and restrictions imposed on them in an attempt to gain freedom. **Mediterranean** is a short film about the maritime journey of a group of Tunisian heading to Italy. On a fragile and precarious rubber dinghy, nine men face death to attempt a crossing of the Mediterranean and reach the Italian coast. Moufida Fedhila asked one of them to film the trip with a mobile phone. The man took a big risk by capturing those moments on the makeshift raft. We are immersed with them on this journey of survival.

Moufida Fedhila expresses her intention to visit these passageways and to meet refugees who, once they have left their country of origin, live in areas of survival detention centers or refugee camps where they no longer have any rights. In April 2011, she traveled to the border between Tunisia and Libya, where she met refugees from Libya, who did not know where to go. Go back? Stay? Go somewhere else? She writes:

It is about creating new places and try to build something there. At Ras Jdir, on the border between Tunisia and Libya, I went to meet the refugees who had to face their uncertain future, stuck between two impossible returns; the return to their homes, ashamed to be forced and the return to a host country at war. I took photographs of them and I exchanged with them Polaroids, leaving the trace of an in-between, neither outside nor beyond geography.

"Space is only a" horrible outside-inside "that Moufida Fedhila explores unabated. In-between spaces where crucial issues are played out and are growing. Through topics such as migration, the artist explores our relationship with territories, borders and movement. She gives an utmost importance to the relationship between bodies (Her body) and space, places travelled and between presence and absence. Issues she explores in her photographic work. The series **Out is Dead** (2008) examines the possible relationship between urban spaces, its signage and those who pass through it. Its objective literally dives into the city and clings to the bodies of bystanders that appear as points. Points that become living landmarks in a dehumanized environment, marked, controlled and sanitized. The bodies incarnate mobility, crossing and time. An impression reinforced in the **Avalanche** series (2011), where bodies are moving like ghosts in unmarked spaces. Moufida Fedhila captures the translation and the wandering of bodies that seem to have no destination. Here the movement of bodies traces space. These black spots scattered in luminous areas, seem to merge with the infinite and with death.

Democratic fiction and political illusion: Super Tunisian

To embody Super Tunisian appeared as evidence and as a need both artistic, social and political. Deep in the heart of Arab revolutions and especially the Tunisian one, that initiated the movement, Moufida Fedhila has first lived it behind the screen, surfing the social media where the mission was to go around propaganda and official media by posting many videos, photographs and information. Since January 2011, Moufida Fedhila was going back and forth between France and Tunisia to observe a partially liberated society in crisis.

Tunisians who have known only the dictatorship of Ben Ali suffered formatting and censorship of ideas, images, information and culture. Only learning and amazement (in the philosophical sense) lead to thinking, criticism and realizing. Moufida Fedhila wanted to bring art to the streets. For that she chose to disrupt and provoke. So far, art was confined to official places, isolated and reserved for a social elite. Art was not accessible to everybody. The character of Super Tunisian has the ambition to awaken civic, political and artistic awareness. But also to ask questions about the place of art in a society that is learning to express itself. "My intention is to criticize these institutional and non-free spaces, the grip on an art that tramples and lacks significant criticism. Art is a necessity, it is inherently revolutionary⁵. "Super Tunisian gives the street a say. Transformed into a true agora, the street has become the focus of her attention. It has become a field of investigation that is still plagued by censorship, frustrations and dislocated freedom.

Moufida Fedhila studied the street for three weeks before embarking. Since January 2011, Tunisia saw a major crisis with an unprecedented context that led her to act in new ways: to intervene in the street, closer to the people. She offered them **Performance St'art**, the first street performance in the history of Tunisian art. What was fully embraced in Western collective imagination was a novelty in Tunisia where performance art did not exist. The artist accompanied her action with a text and a dialogue with the public. The artistic event, which began May 12, 2011, was set in front of the Municipal Theatre of Tunis, then spread all along avenue Habib Bourguiba for one hour. Dressed in the whole Superman range, with a placard that said Super Tunisian (in English and Arabic), Moufida Fedhila invited passersby to vote for Super-Tunisian, which she presented as the superhero, savior of Tunisia, Following is Super Tunisian program:

Super Tunisian features:

- *A super-strength that enables him to overcome all the political forces and create a Super Country.*
- *A super-vision to anticipate the unseen attacks of obscure forces in every dead-end situation and to see around dictatorships.*
- *A super-speed that allows him to go beyond rental cars honking in the middle of the night (Propaganda ritual introduced by Ben Ali throughout his power, of cars honking in the streets following each of his speeches).*
- *A super-memory that allows him to remember the repression of a glorious past. To speak all kind of obscure languages and quickly assimilate those he has never learned.*

Moufida Fedhila said: "It was a deconstruction process in facing a political power which claims to hold the miraculous solution, the plan that will save the country from confusion and scheming."

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Moufida Fedhila, June 2011.

Fiction allows the artist to address the essential and crucial issues. She added: "The democratic illusion tends to destroy the political illusion and to self destroy".

Democratic power is an unfeasible fiction that institutionalizes the gap between desires and reality. "The artist hands a strong message to her interlocutors: personal and collective grip is necessary to give rise to a form of critical opposition, built and relevant.

It is worth stopping on the course of the performance. The artist invited a Tunisian TV channel to film **Performance St'art**. Public reception has been excellent until the TV crew was gone. Once the cameras were out of sight, a group of men appeared, and without seeking to understand the action, assaulted the artist and her companions. The sign was torn and a camera stolen. In these attacks, Moufida Fedhila responded by simply clapping hands, ridiculing and mocking her critics. These men were stirring up trouble for the police who was perpetuating insidious censorship and fear in the streets and in the press⁶. The attack put an end to the performance, it was indicative of the surrounding climate and the crisis faced by Tunisians daily. Super-Tunisian is a stirring of conscience both peaceful and political criticism. Moufida Fedhila continues to develop this concept by making a series of portraits in the streets of Tunis, where passers (men, women, children) are invited to bring the super-Tunisian panel to become in their turn. Super Tunisian is a conscience agitator, both peaceful, political and critical. Moufida Fedhila continues to develop this concept by making a series of portraits in the streets of Tunis, where passersby (men, women and children) are invited to carry the super Tunisian sign to become it themselves.

Moufida Fedhila presents herself to the viewer as a citizen of the world. A world she sees as conceived by Edouard Glissant: an archipelago where each island communicates and exchanges with another. A system of rhizomes centered on the human vector. A world she tells us about through her crossings and encounters. Her work reflects the flaws of globalization in which interfere hypocrisy, absurdity, fears, contradictions and ambiguity. These faults, she experiences and questions, are the basis of her thinking. Moufida Fedhila is truly a cultural "exote" as defined by Victor Segalen. She is part of an artistic movement where artists carry and transpose their cultural specificities in order to transcend them. These are "exotes" on which Segalen wrote: "one who, born traveler in the worlds of wonderful diversity, feels the flavor of diversity".⁷ Artists in exile belonging to cultural Diasporas, scattering their arts over continents and claiming themselves of the "aesthetics of various" developed by Victor Segalen. The very concept of the "aesthetics of diverse", far from that of cultural roots, is at the heart of debates run by intercultural artists. Moufida Fedhila is a cultural and political "exote" that constantly goes to the diversity of the world that gives her endless enrichment.

Julie Crenn.

⁶ An article on *La Presse Tunisienne*, « 'Performance St'art de Moufida Fedhila » written by Narjès Torchani was censored.

⁷ SEGALEN, Victor. *Essai sur l'Exotisme : Une Esthétique du Divers*. Paris : Fata Morgana, 1978, p.29.