

A creative Spring: North African cultural productions and the transition

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Abstract:

2011 has indisputably been a year of great change for North Africans, and the Arab Spring has been an inspiration for a wide range of cultural productions, from paintings to theatre plays. Artists in various countries used art to reflect and gain hindsight on the events surrounding them: an interesting example in “Stone from Tahrir Square” by Ashraf Foda, who collected stones discarded by protesters and asked various important figures to sign them, dealing with issues around political activism and memory. The Revolutions have also led to a greater freedom of expression, enabling artists to address issues previously considered taboos. I will look in particular at how theatre is used as an interactive forum for political debates, and I will work on a comparative basis. Theatre acts as a “mirror” for society, through which the youth can reflect on its issues and its hopes, and recent plays served as a “prelude” to the Arab Spring, by expressing the youth’s disillusion and disenfranchisement and focusing on relevant themes such as suicide, women’s rights or corruption of the authorities.

I will focus in particular on Morocco, a country who has managed to start a peaceful transition and has introduced a large number of reforms in the last ten years, and compare it to Egypt and Tunisia, who got rid of their oppressive leaders through violent demonstrations.

Introduction

Over the last 18 months since young Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi set himself alight in a revolt against government violence, corruption and poverty, much has changed in North Africa: leaders have fallen, the people have taken up to the streets and organized new elections, and at last they have been able to make democratic choices. At the same time, it is a very unstable, dangerous time for populations which never completely recovered their freedom in the post colonial era, and have long been trained to censor themselves.

For most North Africans, the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi and the subsequent revolutions that saw some of the longest standing dictators in the area finally fall were unprecedented events, but not surprising ones. After years of unrest and violence and with ever-increasing levels of poverty and unemployment, they had long been hoping for change, and the desperate act of Bouazizi was the spark that set everything alight. The situation varies hugely from one country to the next: while Libya seems to have descended into civil war since the death of Qaddafi, with different tribes and political groups fighting for power, Egypt has managed to hold its first legislative and presidential elections, with the Islamic Brotherhood emerging as a force to be reckoned with. On the other hand, Morocco has remained largely quiet. King Mohammed VI, heir to one of the oldest monarchies in the world and with the reputation of being a dynamic, reformist leader, has managed to dampen the rise of revolutionary movements such as the 20th February by offering a referendum on a new Constitution limiting his own power, and by organizing new elections won for the first time by the Islamic party *al 'Adl wa Tanmiya* (Justice and development). He is the only leader who has been willing to reach a historical compromise with the Islamists (Vermeren, 2010:373), securing at the same time his own position as head of State. The destinies of North African populations have thus taken different directions in the wake of the Arab Spring.

The case of Morocco is very interesting in comparison to Egypt and Tunisia because since King Mohammed VI took power in 1999, he has engaged in a careful, slow-paced transition, touching all areas from economy to gender equality, and he has also taken steps to reduce corruption and improve access to education. The large protests organized in the country prove that the many reforms advertised by his government

have not been as successful as we would like to think, but contrary to the situation in neighbouring countries, few have actually asked for the King to step down. He remains one of the most popular leaders in the region.

In this very unstable situation in which all possibilities are open, artists, writers and online activists have been able to express themselves in a more open, honest way, discussing their own political allegiance, their experiences of state brutality and their hopes for the future. Art and theatre have long acted as a ‘safety valve’ in the Arab world, allowing the youth to address their crippling issues and social taboos without fearing arrests and censorship. The State carefully controls what is said and written, but falls short of censorship: instead cultural productions are in many ways encouraged, and sometimes funded by the ministry of culture, offering an opportunity to keep young artists, filmmakers and theatre companies under control while giving out the message that those countries respect their citizens’ freedom of expression. Wedeen writes, referring to Syria: “permitted theatrical and cinematic parodies offer one window into a political reality that is both structured by and critical of the official order” (Wedeen, 1999: 107).

On the other hand, the Arab Spring has received a huge amount of media coverage in the West and a renewed interest for the region’s young artists, putting them under increased pressure to provide commentaries and fit within ‘Arab Spring’-themed exhibitions, as argues Kholeif (2012). It is to be said however that the cultural productions of North Africans and their engagement with society and politics largely predates and goes beyond the recent uprisings. The present essay proposes to look at different aspects of this engagement, from the need to relay a sense of frustration and the will to document and take part in the political renewal. I also want to insist on the differences between the three countries I will focus on here: Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. Although the media coined a singular name for the revolts, the “Arab Spring”, it is clear that the social and political situations in each country are very different, although similar issues such as youth alienation and the inability to express a political voice through ‘accepted’ mediums such as elections are recurrent throughout the region.

Echoing North Africans' disillusionment and frustration on stage

Several plays came out a mere months before the start of the Arab Spring and already predicted the end of oppressive regimes, presenting angry, desperate populations and out of touch leaders. *Amnesia* by popular Tunisian theatre makers Fadhel Jaibi and Jalila Baccar is fascinating because of its prophetic value: it charts the fall of fictitious minister Yahia Yaich, who learns about his destitution of TV. It is a play concerned with memory and identity, and it is set in a country eerily similar to Tunisia: it portrays an overpowering, corrupted elite who abuses its position and refuses to engage with the population, supported by a silenced press. Amine comments, “the connections between Yahia and the ousted president Ben Ali were quite evident” (Amine & Carlson, 2011: 214). Although the events unfolded much quicker than anyone could have predicted, with the fall of Ben Ali in Tunisia followed by that of Mubarak in Egypt, and the descent of Libya, Syria and Yemen in deadly fights between the population and their leaders, Jaibi notes that the revolutions were “inexorable” (Paradou, 2011): the level of anger amongst the population was such that change was imminent. Furthermore, by voicing the disillusion of the masses, artists and theatre makers contributed to the fall of those regimes: they revealed a reality that was unbearable and untenable.

Amnesia was surprisingly performed in Tunis for two months in 2010, a few months before the death of Bouazizi, and avoided censorship, unlike Jaibi's previous play “Khamsoon”. It is interesting that the regime, probably censing the growing anger of the population, allowed the play to go on; Jaibi is under no illusion as to why his work was not censored this time around. He states that *Amnesia* was used by the government as an “alibi and shop window”¹ to show Tunisia in a favourable light, as a modern democracy respecting its citizens' freedom of speech even when they are critical of the regime. The play takes its title from the capacities of those in power to erase and re-write history, in particular by controlling the media. The society of Yahia Yaich is thus one without past and without future: symbolically the library of the main character is burnt down, destroying compromising documents but also the intellectual and cultural heritage of the country. The play uses ten actors in addition to Yahia, all dressed in black dresses and suits, and who portray mechanical, mysterious characters. They surround the fallen politician, keeping an eye on him and controlling his movements. The play is highly surrealistic, with choreographed movements and

recorded texts telling the descent of Yahia Yaich into a form of madness. It thus makes a commentary on the oppressive atmosphere Ben Ali imposed on Tunisia, with his clique controlling the country's economy and politics and forbidding the population to take initiative and to speak out, as exemplified by the tragic story of Bouazizi.

Similarly, the play *Huwa* by Driss Ksikes in Morocco toured successfully around the country and in Europe and won the National Theatre festival's Grand Prize in 2008 in Meknes, even though it is a hardly dissimulated diatribe against the King's despotic rule. It tells the story of a group of people, called "Uterriens", who are desperate to escape an autocratic ruler, referred to only as "Huwa", ('He'). The text is surrealistic and metaphorical, creating a caricatural portrait of contemporary Morocco between a repressive state, social injustice, conservatism, and media manipulations. The characters are represented hunched, crushed by oppressive atmosphere and unable to regain their dignity. In one scene, the Uterrien 1 character says: "Toi, tu as vite appris à dire "oui Seigneur" et te taire"ⁱⁱⁱ (Ksikes, 2011: 65).

Interestingly, *Huwa* never appears in the play, and only addresses the characters through the voice of his spokesman Ilan. They thus come to doubt his actual existence and their own oppression: they have been 'trained' to stay quiet and obey, hiding the traces of their anger, but they cannot 'define' their oppression. They live in a constant but subtle state of fear, without ever understanding the source of this fear. It is an interesting allegory of contemporary Morocco: while under the very repressive regime of Hassan II, the population was very aware of the limits not to be crossed in terms of political expression and resistance, King Mohammed VI has adopted a very different style. To the outside, Morocco is now a more liberal country, with new laws giving women equal status and a commission examining past human rights abuses and seeking to reconcile Moroccans with the monarchy. At the same time, recent reports by Amnesty International show abuses and harassment, in particular against journalists and activists, is still rife. This is of course highly confusing for Moroccans because the red lines are no longer clear, and there are deep paradoxes between the apparent liberalization of speech and the limitations being placed on newspapers and other media. Smith writes that "the authorities take advantage on ambiguities in the law and public opinion to exercise power without formal check or balance, exploiting, corrupting and co-opting those who serve them" (Smith & Loudiy, 2005:1097). This

is perfectly represented by Ksikes: in one scene in particular, one of the characters describes finding an increasing number of anonymous writings scribbled on the city's wall, expressing anger and a will to escape; his job is actually to erase these marks which are a form of resistance against the regime of Huwa. He says: "Il me reste quatre-vingt-dix-sept doses d'eau pour effacer les traces de la colère sur les murs d'Utterus. Ca n'arrête jamais. Dites à IL qu'on n'a plus le temps de plaisanter, que les tags se multiplient"ⁱⁱⁱⁱ (Ksikes, 2011: 17-18). There is thus a sense of growing anger and imminent change: what will happen when Huwa cannot contain the frustration of his people anymore?

All characters of the play in fact follow their duties without questioning them and without stopping even though they are deeply unhappy. According to Ksikes, it is thus the population's complacency that has allowed their rights to be abused. The play alternates between French, Arabic and local *darija* (Moroccan dialect), highlighting the power relationships between the languages: it pokes thus at the ceremonial Arabic used by officials and by the media, far removed from the dialect spoken by the youth. This use of language is similar to that of Jaibi's *Amnesia*, in which the voice-over of the disgraced politician is recorded in classical Arabic. It highlights the distance between the population and their leaders: they don't speak the same language, they don't inhabit the same reality. Performing in local dialects is actually a form of cultural resistance in itself, as those languages do not carry the same prestige as Arabic and French, spoken by the elites of the Maghreb. The directors thus show their will to address the population directly, in their own language; it also highlights the arrogance of the power, making pompous speeches and promises without any regard for the people's suffering.

Both Jaibi and Dabateatr also insist on their status as Moroccan and Tunisian citizens, trying to document the daily lives of North Africans and to resist by depicting the difficulties they face. Those issues are not all political: there are several social factors that heavily contributed to the sense of disenfranchisement of the younger generation and accelerated the spread of the protests throughout the region. In particular, high levels of unemployment and lack of opportunities, as well as the conservatism of societies which frown upon pre-marital relationships but prevent young people from getting married before they are economically stable and independent, have created a sense of hopelessness and loneliness for many young people who are unable to leave

their parents' house and start a life of their own. Pillar notes that "for young men in Egypt for example, not having a steady job and income also means not being able to marry" (Pillar, 2011:10). The average age of marriage is now much later than previous generations throughout North Africa, and sexual frustration can play an important role in fuelling the anger of the youth.

Mama Tsbahi ala Kheir, presented at the National Theatre festival in Morocco in 2010 by Rabat-based company Toqous 4, is an adaptation of 'Night, Mother by American playwright Marsha Norman. The play in many ways forewarned us of the growing anger among the youth, presenting a single mother who is living with her mother, with no opportunities of making her life better and gaining independence from a constricting environment. Having decided after much thought to commit suicide, she calmly discusses her issues with her mother, preparing her for what she is about to do. It is the rational manner with which she discusses her choice and organized the house in preparation for her act that is chilling for the audience: she has deemed her life as not worth living, and has no hope that her situation can improve. Suicide has increased amongst young North Africans in recent years, but it remains a social and religious taboo. The public "suicide" of Mohammed Bouazizi however had wide implications, and was such a desperate act that it couldn't remain unanswered. Similarly, the young woman presented in the play, which director Essounani presented as a young Moroccan, wearing a turban covering a hair and speaking the Moroccan *darija* (although he made few alterations to the original texts and kept foreign references to Christianity and American popular culture), is a character that many can identify with. *Mama Tsbahi ala kheir* is a very moving play because the main character is in such a desolate situation that even the thought of suicide doesn't phase her: she sees it as her only option to escape a life that has nothing to offer her anymore.

Laila Soliman is one of Egypt's most daring young directors: she directed an adaptation of the play *Spring Awakening* in Cairo in early 2010, from Frank Wedekind's text. Transporting the narrative to contemporary Egypt, she addressed some of the taboos crippling society: she explored the issue of sexuality, focusing on teenagers entering puberty and touching upon very sensitive themes such as

homosexuality and precariousness. The play criticizes the conservatism and hypocrisy of Egyptian society: although young people are not expected to have relationships outside of marriage, there is a high level of unemployment and precarity that prevents them from getting married and starting their own family, because of the high prices of the wedding and housing (Assad & Barsoum, 2009:67). Soliman researched the play intensively and used many interviews with teenage girls from the Egyptian countryside, projecting some footage during the play. An older play by Soliman, called *Ghorba, Images of Alienation* (2006), also looks at the situation of the Egyptian youth and their relationship with an idealized West, which she created through a process of improvisation with her actors. In particular, the play discusses issues surrounding corruption and the desire of a part of the youth to escape their situation physically or symbolically: a young woman for example talks about her search for a foreign husband who she hopes would give her status and respect amongst society. These two plays suggest the need for a social, sexual revolution as well as a political one; in particular, less expectations need to be placed upon young men so that they can get married more easily and gain a status in society, and the issue of sexual harassment against women needs to be addressed.

Bearing witness to the Revolution

The Arab spring started with the image of young Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolating in front of the governor's office in the city of Sidi Bouzid, out of complete despair after his work tools (he was a street vendor) were confiscated. He was then filmed in hospital as he laid injured, while the medias broadcasted the president's visit to him and his family, and interviews of his mother during which she described the humiliation and violence inflicted upon her son by the local authorities. The wave of revolution thus started in a small Tunisian city, with the desperate, public act of Bouazizi acting as a catalyst setting the whole region on fire. Suddenly, massive demonstrations were taking place in Tunisia, asking for the departure of corrupt Ben Ali and his family, who were running the country as a mafia. The media, both official and unofficial, played a massive role by reporting Bouazizi's story and then showing the demonstrations and riots as they gradually spread throughout the country, and then to the whole region. Howard and Hussain (2011: 36-37) give a detailed account of

how the news of Bouazizi's immolation and update on his situation spread through informal networks and digital media (blog posts, networking websites); they conclude: "Thanks to these technologies, virtual networks materialized in the streets" (2011: 36). The success of the Revolution thus rests on the fact that Bouazizi's self-immolation was a public, theatricalized action, enacted on the streets, with an audience that was then shocked into taking action, and whose demonstrations were then broadcasted to wider audiences who also took to the streets as answer. Internet and social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter in particular played a very important role in relaying information and helping demonstrators to organize themselves and connect with different groups: Teague notes that they "allow for the quick and relatively unregulated sharing of information"¹. In many cases when official medias were shut down or avoided reporting events that could affect the government's image, videos were posted on Youtube, showing the reality from the streets. The people thus took control of their image and became actors, telling their stories in their own words and uploading them on the Internet for millions to see. Some of the videos of the 20th February movement uploaded on Youtube actually show demonstrators wearing masks and performing skits, further blurring the limits between reality and fiction.

For us watching the events of the Arab Spring unfold from afar, the artistic creations of young North Africans are particularly useful because they provide a form of documentation from inside, made by those who took part in the protests and witnessed the demise of their leaders. This need to tell their story often came at a high price: a piece by Egyptian video artist Ahmed Basiouny shows scenes from Tahrir Square, shortly before he was shot dead as he was filming the demonstrations. His video documents the uprising in all its spontaneity and brutality. It doesn't seek to make any commentary or present the events under a specific light: it is simply a testimony from a young Egyptian man, rather than from an artist, trying to make sense of what is happening around him and to relay the truth of this experience.

The will to act as a witness despite media censorship and to be a part of a revolutionary moment thus led a large number of North African artists to work on the events unfolding around them. Ashraf Foda, Saudi artist of Egyptian origin, created

¹ Michael Teague, 2011, "New Media and the Arab Spring" in *Al-Jadid*, <http://www.aljadid.com/content/new-media-and-arab-spring>

an installation entitled “Stone from Tahrir Square”, in which he used pebbles collected from the now infamous place, which he then asked Egyptian public figures to sign. Created in 2011, the artwork gives us a sense of the extraordinary events that have taken place, and they show the level of hindsight shown by Egyptians: they are well aware that it is a crucial part of their history unfolding before their eyes, and that the whole world is watching them. “Stone form Tahrir Square” transforms those collected stones into historical artefacts of great value; they are a symbol of the freedom finally acquired by Egyptians and by extension, to the whole of North Africa. The piece is presented in a very simple way: each signed stone is exhibited separated, resting on smaller pebbles and protected by a glass box. The personalities who signed the stones are very varied, but all played a key role in the uprisings: Hafez al Mirazi, a journalist working for Alarabya and Amr Moussa, a presidential candidate amongst others. Messages have also been written by the signees. Al Mirazi wrote “ We shall overcome” on his stone, Moussa and musician Ammar el Sherei both say “Long live the revolution”, showing the widespread support for the youth of Tahrir Square beyond political and class divisions. The choice of using stones as a starting point also echoes the Palestinian Intifada and thus resonates with the recent history of the wider area. It is a symbol of popular resistance against the state, reminding us of the story of David who killed Goliath with a single stone. The hopeless, alienated masses thus finally recover their freedom by taking on their all-powerful leaders, throwing stones to the army and police members.

Another piece by a young journalist used testimonies as a basis to investigate the relationship between memory and history. Sundus Shabayek created a performance piece using traditional storytelling techniques, called *Tahrir Monologues*. She collected stories from witnesses and participants and created a play in which 20 performers take the stage to discuss their personal experiences, thus challenging the limits between fiction and reality. The audience reacted positively to the play, applauding the performers and singing at the end of the play in a celebratory atmosphere: *Tahrir Monologues* documents the bravery of these ordinary citizens who fought for their freedom and lived to tell the tale. In a short video advertising the play^{iv}, the actors state that they felt the need to tell their stories because they would not be reported “in the papers” or “in history books”, and because they believe the events should never be forgotten. Although most of the participants were protesters and

recall fearing for their family and the brutality of the soldiers, Shabayek also presents a soldier telling his version of the events and stating “Even if your own Dad is standing in front of you and you receive the order to fire, you should fire”. The point of view of the soldiers, who are also young citizens with their own political ideals and were asked to fire on their fellow citizens, has largely been ignored, however in Tunisia in particular, it is the refusal of the army to fire on the population they were meant to defend that accelerated the fall of the regime. It is thus interesting that amongst the memories of the participants feature the story of a soldier.

Since the Arab Spring, fiction has been replaced by an interest for documentary artworks reflecting on the current events, exacerbated by the art world organizing a variety of exhibitions on the events and looking for young artists to showcase. There is a very short period of time between the start of the uprisings and the opening of those exhibitions that tried to capture a sense of emergency to draw in visitors. Artists thus didn't have the opportunity to create more reflective pieces, benefitting from their hindsight: many artworks are raw representations of what they witnessed, without them being able to fully make sense of the significance of the events. The Shubbak festival in London, dedicated to Arab culture and including events specifically on the Revolution, opened in July 2011, merely 5 months after Mubarak stepped down and while the area was still in shock and turmoil.

Art as a political Outlet

Prior to the Arab Spring, North Africans and Arab artists whose work is shown in the West were wary of creating political works, for fear of alienating a part of their audience. Since the events however, there has been a renewed interest for artworks depicting the reality of those artists in all its complexity: they now have a stage to express their political ideals, their mistrust of their political leaders and their sense of disenfranchisement and disillusion. Reedah al Saie of the Mica Gallery in London notes that “there is an appetite to understand the context of the uprisings, and there's a real flourishing of work that 's more edgy” (Batty, 2012, The Guardian). The gallery organized an exhibition dedicated to the Arab Spring, called “From Facebook to Nassbook”, and showcasing the works of various artists of the region. Khaled Hafez's piece was one of the most fascinating: he is one of the most important Egyptian artists

of today, and his painting was one of the most political. His piece *Tomb Sonata in 3 Military Movements: the Sniper* shows the figures of armed soldiers as if they were about to fire. The painting was actually made a few months before the start of the revolution but it already addresses the issue of military dominance and violence in modern Egypt; the piece's title "the Sniper" also suggests that far from protecting Egyptians, the soldiers are actually using them as targets. It is a very layered painting, using symbols of Ancient Egypt and representing miniature soldiers in different position as if they were themselves hieroglyphs. The parallel between Ancient and contemporary Egypt is interesting: one way of reading it would be to assimilate Mubarak's regime to the Pharaoh's rule. Part of the image is composed of small coloured squares, as if it had been pixellated. Yet again the artist questions media representations of the country.

Moroccan Zakaria Ramhani's work, featured at the Sharjah Biennial is particularly striking: he painted a portrait of Mubarak called *Bye Bye Hosni*, presented as a poster being taken down by a protester. It looks at the overpowering presence of Arab dictators whose portraits are reproduced everywhere as if they were keeping a constant eye on the population. By taking the poster down, Egypt symbolically recovers its freedom, its choice. Tellingly, the youth wears a shirt with a 'like' symbol taken from Facebook, emphasizing the role of Internet and social networking in the organization of the protests. The image of the young man appears to be torn as well: Ramhani comments that: "it shows that one revolutionary is removed by the next who doesn't agree with his ideas" (quoted in Smith, 2011). In the context of the current elections, it shows a country deeply divided between those who supported the previous regime and those who opposed it. The portrait of Mubarak is actually made of Arabic words rather than brush strokes: the painting thus also represents the demise of a specific discourse, a specific view of the world favouring the elites.

Art has also allowed a young generation of voiceless, silenced North Africans to reclaim their freedom of speech and express themselves, in contradiction with what had been reported in the Western medias about their countries. Many assumed that they were a generation that had abandoned politics: many surveys show that a large percentage of the youth in the area has never voted. As shows the success of initiatives such as Dabacitoyen ("citizen of now"), a monthly art festival organized by Dabateatr in Rabat, it is not the case: young people do not see the voting process as

having any impact on their daily lives or as a potential solution to their problems, but they are well aware of political issues in their countries. Lindsey adds: “The uprising has also, not surprisingly, led many artists to explicit political engagement” (Lindsey, 2012). By using the revolution as an inspiration, and very aware of the attention political pieces will receive, artists create works that directly criticize the falling regimes or their apparatus, and denounce the violence unleashed upon the unarmed populations. They are not only witnesses, they are active participants of the revolution, and the revolution also acts on a cultural level. Yemeni artist Atiaf Alwazir writes: “Visual art will no longer be just for artists and elites like it was, it will also be connected to the people, as there are at least three art exhibits at the square” (quoted in Batty, 2012). It is fascinating to see art and theatre deserting museums, galleries and other designated spaces, in which the audiences is usually expected to remain silent and passive: it shows a youth that is desperate to construct its own artistic sphere as well as a new political system. As Alwazir comments, North Africa needs an art scene from and for its citizens, representing their realities and easily accessible.

Theatre is particularly interesting in the context of the revolution because it becomes a re-enactment of the scenes and acts as a mirror. Beneficiating from a residency at the French Institute since 2009, Dabateatr’s monthly *Daba citoyen* festival has an open stage policy, inviting a wide range of artists to perform during a week packed with various events and shows. It also provides them with a laboratory, where they can test new ideas and receive feedback. One of the most successful events of the week is generally *L’khbar fil masrah* (“the news in theatre”), a series of satirical skits using current news as inspiration, followed by debates with audiences on those issues, and on the role of theatre as a place of social activism and discussion. A recent edition of *Daba citoyen* have used the Arab spring as inspiration. In February, the festival was dedicated to Tunisia, with one skit in particular presenting four men who sit together in the *hammam* while the streets outside resonate with demonstrations. The shows thus allow the audience to get some hindsight on the revolutions affecting their neighbours and threatening to destabilize their country: it is in many ways essential that various views are discussed freely, in the safe realm provided by the stage. For the ‘Tunisia’ edition of the festival, a debate was also organized with internet activists such as Ali Anouzla from the popular website Lakome, Nizar Benamate, a blogger

and journalist part of the 20th February movement, and the writer behind the popular blog “Big Brother”. The event was very animated, by members of the public questioning the speakers’ integrity and objectivity. The director of the company, Jaouad Essounani, was present, directing the debate as he would direct a play, and playing the referee between the audience and the participants. The company thus has a very multidisciplinary, interactive approach, constantly experimenting with new mediums and offering young Moroccans a locus of free expression and debate.

Jean Duvignaud, a French theatre sociologist, made several connections between Revolution and theatre in his book “the Sociology of theatre”, in which he looks at the case of the French Revolution in 1789. He describes revolution as a form of theatre performance that has spilled from the stage onto the streets, writing that revolution is in itself a theatricalization (Duvignaud, 1965:417). Here, the demonstrations become a rupture, a sign of anarchy: performance was confined to the stage, acting as safety valve for the youth to enact their anger, but it has now invaded the streets, breaking the rules. In the specific case of the French Revolution, Duvignaud describes a theatre scene that was behind history and was not able to transform itself to serve the needs of the people; theatre at that time was mainly bourgeois entertainment, inaccessible for the masses. Theatre, during the French Revolution, thus remained silent. On the opposite, North African theatre pledges to serve and accompany the people: companies such as Dabateatr and Jaibi’s Familia Productions try to make their work more accessible, in particular by keeping the price tickets low and giving discounts to students. Dabateatr describes itself as an “elitist theatre available for all”², proving their will to provide quality, thought - challenging plays without alienating the poorest or less educated parts of the population. Of course, we could question that fact that most of those companies are based in the capital Rabat, Tunis or Cairo, and their members are usually university graduates from the middle classes: can they really claim to speak in the name of all North Africans? It is also interesting that in Morocco for example, those young theatre makers are often close to the 20th February movement, that organized many of the demonstrations and calls for radical change; similarly in Egypt, director Sundus Shabayek had a very active role online organizing protests and rallying support. The boundaries between political theatre and

² See Ayla Mrabet, 2009, “Culture. Coups de theatre.” in *Tel Quel*: http://www.telquel-online.com/407/mage_culture_407.shtml

propaganda are thus blurred: when does theatre stop challenging the status quo, and becomes only a tool to campaign for the companies' political ideals? This is one of the issues that emerged during the *Dabablog* event dedicated to the Revolutions, with all the participants defending the same opinions, and accused by the audience of being partial.

Theatre remains a space where both actors and their audience are able to speak freely, allowing a freedom of expression that is often restricted outside and in the media. In Morocco as well as other North African countries, such as Tunisia with the play "Amnesia", theatre successfully addressed the issues behind the Arab Spring and played an essential role as the events were unfolding, providing commentaries and hindsight as well as galvanizing the youth into action. The different states are very aware of the power of theatre and the threat it can become for their authority: Amine and Carlson note that in Tunisia, "theatre was the only cultural form subject to censorship under the law" (Amine & Carlson, 2012: 212) until 2011. In Egypt, censorship is accused of making the theatrical arts fall into disregard: Hanaa Abdel Fattah writes that censorship, both coming from the government and from religious authorities, is "one of the main reasons behind the limitations of contemporary theatre" (Abdel Fatah, 2011). The images broadcasted of TV of the masses protesting and breaking the imposed curfews thus instilled a sense of hope and freedom that benefited artists and theatre makers who had been silenced for years.

In Egypt, theatre companies took the protests as an inspiration very early: Masrah al-Huriyah (Freedom theatre) and Masrah al-Maqhurin (theatre of the oppressed) have both performed plays trying to make sense of the disorders spreading through the country, and some plays were actually performed during the Revolution. Ursula Lindsey writes about the Al-Fann Midan festival where the company presented a series of skits, performed on Abdin Square. The performances thus left the theatre spaces to take over public squares, attracting new, younger audiences. The limits between artists and political activists thus become blurred as political affiliations are clearly announced: Lindsey writes that the revolutions have "led many artists to explicit political engagement". The Arab Spring has undoubtedly helped instil a sense of political consciousness in the youth of North Africa who now seek any medium to express themselves and to broadcast their opinions to the world. Art is one of them, but the number of young bloggers who write about their lives, their experiences and

try to address taboo subjects, benefiting from a more favourable climate as well as from the anonymity offered by the Internet is astonishing: Social medias played an important part in the organization of protests, and ultimately in the success of the uprisings.

Women Emancipation through artistic expression

The Arab art scene is largely dominated by male artists, but there is also an increasingly number of young women adding their voices to the representations of North Africa and the Middle East. Many women took part in the uprisings, organizing in some cases separate demonstrations. Online activists such as Lina Ben Mhenni in Tunisia or Asmaa Mahfouz in Egypt, a young woman who posted videos on Youtube and Facebook calling people to protests, showed as much bravery and initiative as their male counterparts. The issue of Women's rights is also a recurring issue: North African women have regularly taken part in protests over the last decade to ask for their right to be respected. The situation of women however varies a lot in the different states of the region: Tunisia was widely assumed to be one of the most liberal and progressive countries in the Arab world, with the Majalla (Personal Status Code), promulgated in 1956, giving women equality on many levels. Charrad writes that "the code gave greater individual rights and responsibilities to women in the family and by extension in the larger society. It decreased considerably the legal control of male kin over women in marriage" (Charrad, 2001:235). The Majalla also outlawed polygamy and repudiation, and the need for a matrimonial guardian (*wali*) to give the woman in marriage, as stated in Islamic Law, was abolished. The 2004 reform of the Mudawana in Morocco took similar measures, if less drastic. In Egypt, women are supposedly protected against discrimination and violence's by the law, but this is not enforced. El-Azhary Sonbol writes that: "in practice, however, women face gender discrimination in many aspects of their lives, and their personal security is threatened by both state and non-state actors" (el-Azhary Sonbol, 2005: 73). The Arab Spring thus carries high stakes for women of the region, and several female artists have create pieces looking at the events from their own points of view.

Nermine Hammam, an artist based in Cairo, is arguably one of the most successful females of this movement, working with a large variety of mediums from paintings to

photography. Several pieces address the Arab Spring: her *Upekkhra* series (2011) contains representations of Egyptian soldiers and policemen in an idyllic, mountainous landscape, surrounded by bright flowers. The contrast between the apparent calmness of the scene and the violence of the TV broadcasts, both involving the same uniformed men, is striking. The Egypt Hammam portrays is picturesque, with its green valleys and snowy mountains, with the soldiers smiling and posing for the camera. Her work deeply challenges our ideas of representation, and the role the media play in hiding the reality. Gender plays an important part in this series: Hammam comments that she intended to reveal the vulnerability of the young men behind the police and army uniforms^v, men whose sense of themselves is challenged with the erosion of the patriarchal system. Without the symbols of power and violence that they carry, such as the tanks and the guns, these are ordinary young men facing the same identity crisis, the same issues as other young North Africans.

At the same time, the images also make us question the polished public image of the fallen regimes, the apparent 'democratic' elections which were held regularly and the closeness with the West: the leaders of the region, in particularly Ben Ali, were presenting themselves as liberal and Westernized, promoting secular values, and were perceived as a last bastion against the Islamists (Vermeren, 2010: X). Few dared to question the allegations of human rights abuses and corruption surrounding them. In Hammam's pictures, the smiling soldiers hide a terrible reality: we can imagine the youth of Egypt fighting for its dignity, against those very men represented here. Hammam's work is generally nostalgic, reflective; although the artist describes herself as not political, this recent series shows that making art in the context of the revolution is necessarily political: as a woman living in Cairo, as an artist and journalist, she is a witness whose testimony is highly valuable.

Tunisian artist Rym Karoui took part in the Dubai Biennial in 2011 and created an installation called the *Revolution-virus* about the uprisings and the role of the media and the Internet. Playful and innovative, she represented the events as a series of red 'bugs' invading the country and spreading through the region. It thus highlights the role of social networking in particular, which helped the youth get support and organize protests. It also offered them a window onto the outside, a place where to could vent their frustration and relay their testimonies of the situation. The 'bugs' can symbolise this alienation of the youth and their need for change, which developed

quickly from city to city before taking over Tunisia and the neighbouring countries. On each one, Karoui wrote words such as “Facebook”, “Help”, “Freedom”, “Dégage” (‘get out’) or “Game over”, capturing the main themes and slogans of the protesters. Facebook indeed played an important role, probably more than other social networking websites. Teague writes that the events have been described as “Egypt’s Facebook Revolution”, becoming popular with the youth because it allows for “quick and relatively unregulated sharing of information” (Teague, 2011), which proved very useful in heavily censored countries. Karoui’s aesthetics is feminine and imaginative; her artwork is one of the only pieces to look at the revolution in a light-hearted, hopeful manner. It is a political piece in the sense that it relays the demands and slogans of the revolutionists, but it offers the viewer multiple readings, letting him reach his own conclusions.

Conclusion

There has thus been a wealth of artworks from female artists and theatre makers presented in international exhibitions and providing a commentary on the revolution. Although there are now more opportunities for women to study and have a career in the arts, it is to be said that it remains a very masculine world, and they are not usually representative of the women of the region: they have more access to funds and education, and usually come from middle classes rather than working backgrounds. Art has played an important role as a space for free expression, both before and after the Revolutions, and as a way of documenting and keeping traces of the events. However, we need to look at North African’s cultural productions in a wider context of globalization and social transition rather than trying to categorize them as political or revolutionary artists. Kholeif writes: “the art scene in the Arab world continues to remain generative in different ways and extends beyond engaging with the curiosity of international cultural brokers, who are interested more often than not in being part of a conversation about endless hope and change” (Kholeif, 2012). Their art is useful as a marker of their times, as a way of capturing the moods of a generation, but most of the artists we have looked at here have been practicing for several decades: they will still play an important role in the years to come, accompanying the slow process of democratization of the region.

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ⁱ See interview of Jaibi, 2011 in *Le Temps*, <http://www.letemps.com.tn/article-52604.html>

ⁱⁱ “You learnt very fast to say “Yes my Lord” and to stay quiet” (my translation)

ⁱⁱⁱ “I have 97 doses of water left to erase the traces of anger on the walls of Utarrus. It never stops. Tell HIM that it’s not the time for jokes anymore, that the graffiti are increasing” (my translation)

^{iv} “Tahrir Monologues: The idea”
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtyhaPi3tsk&feature=youtu.be>

^v See interview by Paola Frangieh, 2012, “Je questionne la réalité”, in *Le Soir*, <http://www.lesoir-echos.com/je-questionne-la-realite%E2%80%89/culture/52155/>