

“Art is Intrinsically Revolutionary:” Post-Revolution Performance Art in Tunisia

Anne Marie E. Butler

*On January 14, 2011, after nearly a month of continuous protest against a repressive government, Tunisians celebrated the abdication of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. This article analyzes three interventionist performance works, Sana Tamzini’s *Horr 1*, Moufida Fedhila’s *Super-Tunisian*, St’art, and Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri’s *Sous mon drapeau*.¹ Performed between 2011-2012, each work catapults forward the momentum of street protest and revolution, and also requires the participation of spectators or passers-by, inviting the denotation participatory performance. The performances take up specific instances of political fallout from January 2011 and reprise them, illustrating how revolution is a continuous process. As works that do not rely on the context of a festival or any other organized art event, they mark a new era of performance art in Tunisia that coincides with the country’s continued struggle towards democracy.*

Introduction

In March 2011, a white, fiberglass cloud encompassing a group of Tunisian artists and art students wound its way through the narrow streets of the Tunis *medina*, the old city center. The performance, *Horr 1* (*Free 1*, 2011), was inspired by political sit-ins known as Kasbah I and II at that very site. The Kasbah sit-ins and the performance both occurred just a few months after the Tunisian protests of December 2010 – January 2011 that ousted dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali (1936-2019). Two other interventionist performance works, Moufida Fedhila’s *Super-Tunisian*, *St’art*, and Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri’s *Sous mon drapeau* (*Under my*

Anne Marie E. Butler is Assistant Professor of Art and Art History and Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, MI. Her primary research area is contemporary Tunisian art, within which she specializes in surrealism and performance. Her scholarship attends to issues of gender, sexuality, and queerness within the parameters of the nation-state, and the imbrication of state authority within social constructs.

¹ Artist Sonia Kallel directed another action within the scope of the performance *Horr 1*; however, this text focuses on the concept and action conceived and directed by Sana Tamzini.

flag) were also performed between 2011-2012. All three works take up the momentum of street protest and revolution by referencing specific instances of political fallout from January 2011 and then reprising them, illustrating how revolution is a continuous process. As interventionist works that do not rely on the context of a festival or any other organized art event, they mark a new era of performance art in Tunisia that coincides with the country's continued struggle towards democracy.

Like in *Horr 1*, Moufida Fedhila's *Super-Tunisian, St'art* (2011-2012) plays on Tunisia's post-revolution political climate by implicating Tunisians in the process of voting.² Meanwhile, Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri's video performance *Sous mon drapeau* (2012) also references a political action, in which a young woman climbed onto the roof of a university to defend a Tunisian flag from an Islamic extremist.³ Tamzini, Fedhila, and Ghorbel and Mhiri are all established artists who are personally invested in the democratic future of Tunisia and in the amelioration of the Tunisian art scene.⁴ That the three performances embody a visual language communicating the long-lasting struggle of revolution therefore aligns with the artists' political and artistic interests.

These performances sit at the intersection of participatory art, performance art, interventionist art, public art, and Happenings. I therefore propose the concept *participatory performance* to describe these practices. Where performance art and Happenings often feature an artist or artist group addressing an audience or public, and public art and interventionist art may not necessarily be performance, the Tunisian performances embody both the act of performing and also the goals of social and artistic impact of public and interventionist actions. Importantly, they also include the general public or a specific group in collaboration with the artists, rendering the performance participatory and collective. As Gregory Sholette remarked regarding the 2004 exhibition *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere*, "similarity between the artists in this exhibition and the historic avant-garde is a mutual interest in temporal systems of organization and public circulation rather than the traditional practice of creating discrete, fixed art objects."⁵

² *Super-Tunisian, St'art* was performed twice, once in 2011 and once in 2012. The 2012 version occurred in part on the street and in part in a gallery space. This article focuses on the 2011 performance.

³ Marie Verdier, "Khaoula Rachidi, la fille du deapeau tunisien," LaCroix.com, October 24, 2013. <https://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/Monde/Khaoula-Rachidi-la-fille-du-drapeau-tunisien-2013-10-24-1050939>.

⁴ Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artists) in discussion with the author, June 1, 2017; Moufida Fedhila (Tunisian artist) in discussion with the author, February 16, 2016; Sana Tamzini (Tunisian artist) in discussion with the author, June 3, 2015.

⁵ Gregory Sholette, "Interventionism and the historical uncanny," in *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, ed. Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA Publications, 2004): 135.

Likewise, the three Tunisian performances prioritize public practice over objecthood.

In this article I argue that these participatory performances helped to bring Tunisian performance art from the pre-revolution framework of festivals and galleries into the interventionist and participatory context that emerged post-revolution. As Laryssa Chomiak and John P. Entelis show, revolutions such as the protests known as the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 are continuous processes. They argue that in Tunisia, multiple methods of subtle state subversion were practiced for many years before culminating in the 2011 protests.⁶ Further, Charles Tripp amongst others has remarked upon the link between Tunisian protest and performative actions, as well as upon the likeness of these actions, some spontaneously performed by ordinary Tunisians, to performance art.⁷ The performances thus built upon the momentum of the revolution as performative protest. Yet scholars have thus far failed to draw connections between the revolution, the sociopolitical climate of post-revolution Tunisia, and performance art by professional Tunisian visual artists within this context. As a result of this neglect, the importance of Tunisian performance art in elucidating the post-revolution sociopolitical climate and in contributing to the expansion of contemporary art practice in Tunisia remains under theorized.

While Tunisian organizations such as Association L'Art Rue (Street Art Association) have facilitated performance in Tunisia – Association L'Art Rue within the Dream City festival for over a decade, for example – this article is primarily concerned with performances by professional visual artists that took place in the immediate post-revolution era, and that were performed outside of the context of an arts festival or other coordinating body. The scope permits the close analysis of three performances in order to demonstrate changes in Tunisian performance art. I therefore argue that performance art in Tunisia has shifted from pre-revolution art performances that took place almost exclusively within the context of festivals to the post-revolution appearance of performances that are significantly collaborative, participatory, or interventionist in nature and that are also set apart from contexts in which people typically expect to see art. Considering uprisings and protests as a type of performance, the art performances act as reverberations

⁶ Laryssa Chomiak and John P. Entelis, "Contesting order in Tunisia: Crafting political identity," in *Civil Society Activism under Authoritarian Rule: A Comparative Perspective*, edited by Francesco Cavatorta (New York: Routledge, 2012): 73-93.

⁷ See Charles Tripp, "Art, power and knowledge: claiming public space in Tunisia," *Middle East Law and Governance*, 8 no. 2-3 (2016): 250-274; Rafika Zahrouni, "The Tunisian Revolution and the Dialectics of Theatre and Reality," *Theatre Research International*, 38 no. 2 (2013): 148-157; Joachim Ben Yakoub, "'Performing Self-sacrifice, Despite Everything or Despite Oneself? Embodying a Necropolitical Space of Appearance in the Tunisian Revolution,'" in *Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance*, ed. Marina Gržinić and Aneta Stojnić (Palgrave MacMillan e-book, 2018): 251-274.

of these events that provide momentum for both the continued struggle of Tunisians for democracy and the rapidly shifting Tunisian art scene.

Possibility in a New Political Climate

In January 2011, protests stemming from street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi's death called for economic and political rights under president Ben Ali's authoritarian command. The Ben Ali regime of 1987-2011 was known for widespread corruption, political injustices, and media censorship.⁸ Tunisians were surveilled in their homes and in public, and a climate of trepidation prevailed.⁹ On January 14, 2011, ongoing protests resulted in the fall of the regime. Ben Ali abdicated his office and celebration occurred throughout the country. Post-Arab Spring, Tunisians felt a new social freedom, particularly in the early days after January 14. Houda Ghorbel describes how at first, people had a feeling of "d'euphorie" and "beaucoup d'espérance, plein d'attentes" (a sense of euphoria, with a lot of hope and full of expectations). However, post-revolution reality soon led to "une grande déception vu que les changements n'arrivaient pas et que la situation s'aggravait" (a great disappointment as the changes did not happen and the situation worsened).¹⁰ Ghorbel refers in part to the economic situation in Tunisia, where inflation and unemployment remained high. Similarly, while the political arena also opened, it seemed that major structures had not changed; there was no organized, secular movement at a level of influence that could hope to supplant Ben Ali's party and the security services and state machinery of the regime remained largely intact.¹¹

Although state structures saw little change, many shifts in visual arts and culture did occur post-2011. Scholars have noted that new modes of art and a freedom of artistic expression blossomed across the region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and Tunisia was also part of this renaissance. Siobhán Shilton summarizes that "this explosion of free artistic expression [in Tunisia] spans diverse visual and multimedia art genres, including photography, painting, video,

⁸ Ben Ali received little interference from Western governments by justifying his political actions as targeting Islamists. For additional details of Tunisian political context, see Julia Clancy-Smith and Charles D. Smith, *The Modern Middle East and North Africa: A History in Documents* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), and Mustapha Kraiem, *Aux origines de la révolution Tunisienne* (Tunis: La Maghrébine pour l'Impression de la Publication du Livre, 2011).

⁹ Houda Ghorbel (Tunisian artist) Facebook messenger communication with the author, January 10, 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Tripp, 255.

sculpture, installation, mixed media, illustration and graffiti.”¹² Yet performance art, which is not frequently mentioned in scholarship on post-revolution Tunisian art, is arguably the medium with the closest relationship to protest. Both protest and public performance explicitly involve the body in public, interactive action. That the Tunisian public could access and in fact become part of these performances illustrates emergent relationships between artists and the public, and between the public and public space.

Tunisian visual art was previously confined to contemporary galleries concentrated in the wealthy northern suburbs of Tunis, antiquities museums, craft exhibitions, and festivals in enclosed spaces. Further, there are no modern or contemporary museums. As Moufida Fedhila contends “in Tunis, creative work was only exhibited in galleries. And all these passers-by weren’t necessarily going to see exhibitions in a gallery. In Tunisia art is intended for an elite.”¹³ Before the revolution, while some performance art could certainly be found within the context of festivals such as Dream City, public performance art would have necessitated governmental permission for public actions, which could hardly be obtained, and art production was further stymied by the regulation of public space through police surveillance. Public access to art in general remains limited by the location of cultural institutions and lack of government investment in its promotion.

In light of the previous insularity of the art scene, taking art to the streets and fields of Tunisia and facilitating the participation of the public represents a significant change. Ghorbel and Mhiri note “les artistes ont choisi [la performance] parce qu’ils avaient contact direct avec les spectateurs; [ce contact direct avec le public] leur a manqué avant” (artists chose [performance] because they had direct contact with the spectators; [the direct public contact] they missed this before).¹⁴ The performance medium, which relies heavily on context, therefore maximizes the potential of these works by manifesting through the bodies of the participants interacting in a specific socio-political theater. In fact, these artists, who had previously worked in installation, ceramics, and video art, for example, expressed that they had never before thought of public performance as a possible vehicle for their artistic expression.¹⁵ According to Ghorbel and Mhiri, “avant [la

¹² Siobhán Shilton, “Art and the ‘Arab Spring:’ Aesthetics of Revolution in Contemporary Tunisia,” *French Cultural Studies* 24 no. 1 (2013): 129.

¹³ Moufida Fedhila quoted in Michèle Cohen Hadria, *Three Tunisian Women Artists: Nicène Kossentini, Mouna Karray and Moufida Fedhila*, trans. Judith Hayward (London: KT Press, 2013), Kindle Edition, Moufida Fedhila: ‘Creating is Resisting.’

¹⁴ Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artists) in discussion with the author, June 1, 2017.

¹⁵ Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artists) in discussion with the author, June 1, 2017; Sonia Kallel (Tunisian artist) email communication with the author, June 26, 2017; and Sana Tamzini (Tunisian artist), Facebook messenger communication with the author, July 5, 2017.

révolution] ce n'était tout simplement pas une option, [mais leur] vision et leurs idées sur la façon dont ils pourraient faire de l'art a changé" (before [the revolution] it just wasn't an option, [but artists'] vision and their ideas about how they could make art changed).¹⁶ The artists' new drive to enter and occupy the public sphere coincides with the momentum of street protest during the revolution and also allows them to reach the Tunisian public, representing a change in public access to visual art.

Horr 1, *Sous mon drapeu* and *Super-Tunisian*, *St'art* subvert the typical performer-audience relationship through their participatory approach; they engage the audience as collaborators in the production of the pieces' meanings. In collaborative performance, the artist is considered a "co-producer of social knowledge."¹⁷ When the collaborators also create the works, the artists' roles shift from message deliverers to facilitators; they embody how cultural action can facilitate social transformation. In participatory art, the viewer(s) must perform some action in order for the art to manifest.¹⁸ Rather than acting as performers imparting a message to their audience, Tamzini, Fedhila, and Ghorbel and Mhiri facilitate the creation of the work through collective action with Tunisians. The performances prolong the work that the revolution began as a form of performative protest. In these pieces, the audience members are no longer passive. Instead, they become a collective, a body made up of many that determines the action and meaning of the performance, and the relationship to the space where it occurs.

Horr 1: Protest prolonged

In the performance *Horr 1* (Figure 1), by Sana Tamzini, a group of individuals constitute a collective body that prolongs the goals of the Tunisian revolution: justice, equity, and freedom. Shortly after the January 14th independence and Kasbah Square sit-ins, the artist took a group of friends and art students to the streets of the Tunis medina, the oldest section of Tunis. Roughly a dozen people flowed as a group through the narrow medina streets, their torsos encapsulated in a white fiberglass structure reminiscent of a cloud in its ephemeral, gauzy fabric. The cloud enveloped the participants into one body to make a communal movement. The fiberglass construction both moved the participants and was moved by them; it confined the bodies to a limited area and shaped their collective movement, and the bodies moved the structure, paralleling how people enact protest in

¹⁶ Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artists) in discussion with the author, June 1, 2017.

¹⁷ Claire MacDonald, "All Together Now: Performance and Collaboration," in *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, ed. Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 148.

¹⁸ Nato Thompson, ed., *Living as Form* (New York: Creative Time Books and Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2012), 21.

the streets through their collective bodily presence. The fiberglass therefore not only makes visible how protesting bodies engage with spatial contexts by referencing the Kasbah sit-ins, but it also supports social change by reiterating the goals of the revolution and of the sit-ins: that communities act ethically and with a sense of shared fate. When participants and viewers are one and the same, the direction of the communal body is undertaken by all its members.



Fig. 1: Sana Tamzini, *Horr I (Free I)*, 2011. Site-specific performance.
Used with permission of the artist.

Horr I foregrounds ideals of the revolution through location choice, and therefore, as Nick Kaye proposes in regard to site-specific art, “articulate[s] exchanges between the work of art and the places in which its meanings are defined.”¹⁹ Specifically, a portion of the performance took place at Kasbah Square, the site of student populist sit-ins.²⁰ Regarding the sit-ins, Safouen Bouzid recalls, “We sensed the danger of the revolution’s reversal. That’s why we came up with

¹⁹ Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 1.

²⁰ For details of the Kasbah I and II movements, see Larbi Chouikha and Éric Gobe, *Histoire de la Tunisie depuis l’indépendance* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2015).

the idea to occupy the Kasbah, symbol of political power."²¹ The performance, like the sit-ins, enacted the ideals of the revolution through communal agreement and participation of those in attendance. The implication of the public in the performance foregrounds public political action by bridging the space and time between this performance, the Kasbah sit ins, and the performative protests of January 2011.

Moving through the streets of the medina reclaimed the public mobility that was limited under Ben Ali. It also links an old and culturally significant section of the city to the contemporary shifts that will direct the future of the country. Tamzini intended the fiberglass body to activate this political context with its presence. She explains that, "I chose the place...to be in proximity of the populist movement ... and to reach the primary population of the medina."²² As Tunisian art-historian Rachida Triki notes, the performance "materialized the ongoing revolution's space and time."²³ The Kasbah sit-ins occupied the old square with a new political agenda of equity and transparency in decision making. *Horr 1* joined in the rewriting of this space to further extend those ideals and the desires of the revolution that inspired them.

Horr 1 also renders an abstract community visible and tangible by linking the participants together with material. While the fiberglass structure appeared soft, like fabric, it in fact created a barrier that pedestrians could not pass in the narrow medina streets. The structure and the bodies unified by it acted as a stopper, halting the flow of foot traffic and then releasing it like a wave when they moved to a different street. By blocking the narrow alleyways of the medina, the performance also implicated the pedestrians, who became manifestations of public protest regulated and also released by the fiberglass body. While the regulation of pedestrians may seem to control the performance in a way that goes against the grain of revolutionary ideals, the performers holding the pedestrians in place referenced the circumstances of the Kasbah sit-ins; in a sit-in, some bodies block the passage and others try to get through. Similar to the multidirectional potential of the post-revolution moment, possibility was repeatedly foreclosed and then freed.

The performance further complicates the purpose of the medina space where bodies are expected to be in continuous motion – in transit from place to place – by controlling the foot traffic of the medina. Because both the fiberglass body and medina inhabitants are people on foot, the fiberglass structure interacts with the

²¹ "Four years after the Kasbah Sit-ins- Taking Stock of a Revolutionary Mission Confiscated," *Nawaat.com*, translated by Vanessa Szakal, February 9, 2015. <https://nawaat.org/portail/2015/02/09/four-years-after-the-kasbah-sit-ins-taking-stock-of-a-revolutionary-mission-confiscated/>

²² Sana Tamzini (Tunisian artist) Facebook messenger communication with the author, July 8, 2017.

²³ Rachida Triki, "Revolution and Cultural Mutation," *Ibraaz*, accessed June 25, 2017. <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/5>

medina pedestrians who encounter it in ways that highlight the structure and purpose of the medina, further pointing towards the importance of the location. The stop and start movement of the pedestrians affected by the fiberglass body, which has its own movement pattern and rate, activates the passageways of the medina that are designed to let bodies pass through rather than congregate.

Meanwhile, the title belies any ambiguity about the overall intentions of the artist. *Horr*, denoting free in both literary Arabic and in Tunisian dialect, indicates that the performance takes up the momentum of the revolution expressed by the Kasbah sit-ins, and attempts to articulate the liberation from tyranny felt by Tunisians. Additionally, in Tunisian dialect the feminine variant *horra* denotes a strong and capable woman.²⁴ A “strong and capable” Tunisian woman might be one who has a notable career, takes care of her family, stands up for herself and others, and participates in the revolution. Tamzini, a feminist artist who is also politically active in the growth of visual art in Tunisia, thus references women’s socio-political history in Tunisia and promotes her understandings of feminist action, including women’s abilities to represent themselves.²⁵

The number one in the title indicates that there could be more actions in the series. In fact, Tamzini intended to do further actions but was unable to actualize them.²⁶ Rather than a failure of production on the part of the artist, this apparent incompleteness should be read as an embodiment of post-revolution upheaval. It points to political projects, unfinished or delayed, that give way to new ideas or are abandoned altogether. In this way, the lack of other actions to constitute a series is an apt metaphor for the multidirectional potential of the post-revolution moment. In one way, the participants continue the project by embodying the freedom of the action and of the early days of the revolution. They also continue to question the nature of freedom and to expand upon ideas about freedoms in post-revolution times.

Sous mon drapeau: A flag in solidarity

The political upheaval following Ben Ali’s abdication allowed space for political pluralism in Tunisia, but one unforeseen result of the revolution was the increased visibility and influence of Jihadi Salafists, which threatened Tunisia’s long history of secularism. Since its inception as an independent nation-state, Tunisia has outlawed religious political parties, but the rise of the Salafists, whose interests include the creation of an Islamic state, is indicative of the striking changes that

²⁴ Sana Tamzini (Tunisian artist) Facebook messenger communication with the author, July 5, 2017.

²⁵ Sana Tamzini (Tunisian artist) in discussion with the author, June 3, 2015; Sonia Kallel (Tunisian artist) in discussion with the author, February 10, 2016.

²⁶ Sana Tamzini (Tunisian artist) Facebook messenger communication with the author, July 5, 2017.

confronted Tunisians. The Salafist movement in Tunisia lost popularity after only a few years, but during and since this brief period, Tunisia experienced political change that continues to have long lasting repercussions for multiple socio-political situations.²⁷

For the women of Sejnane, a small town not far from the north coast of Tunisia, the resistance of the Salafist influx is crucial to the progression of democracy in the country.²⁸ Celebrated as a representation of excellence in Tunisian artisanal production, their unique style of pottery is known throughout Tunisia and elsewhere by the oatmeal color of the clay, the shape of the pieces, and the glazing techniques.²⁹ The practice is passed through generations of women in Sejnane, known as *les potières de Sejnane*, who are considered preservers of artisanal processes and thus cultural traditions.³⁰ The mere presence of Salafists disrupted the creation of artisanal and culturally significant pottery by threatening its cultural value and the production process. If the women were too afraid to make their craft for an extended period, their technique and ability to pass on knowledge might suffer. The women artisans also provide the main economic revenue for the region and the presence of Salafists prevented the tourism upon which Sejnane relies. Thus, it was an issue not only of cultural heritage and pride, but also one of economics. The Salafist presence in Sejnane threatened the core of Tunisian values as understood by the artists and the artisans alike. It indicated the potential for reversal of the revolution, as the artists and artisans saw it. Like the Kasbah sit-ins, the performance at Sejnane spoke against this regression.

The attempted placement of a Salafist flag at the University at Manouba resonated as a visual reminder of the Salafist presence in Tunisia. On March 7, 2012, a Salafist man climbed onto the roof of the university with the intent to replace the Tunisian flag that was flying there with a Salafist flag. A young woman, Khaoula Rachidi, climbed onto the roof as well to prevent the Salafist flag from being hung. Her intervention was considered an act of heroism in defending the ideals of the revolution.³¹ Ghorbel and Mhiri were likewise moved by Rachidi's actions, which aligned with the Sejnane artisans' response to the Salafist presence in their community.

In *Sous mon drapeau* (Figure 2), *les potières de Sejnane* represent themselves as well as nodding towards Rachidi. When Ghorbel and Mhiri discussed facilitating a response to the flag incident with the artisans of Sejnane, the women were

²⁷ Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artists) Skype video communication with the author, June 1, 2017.

²⁸ Francesco Cavatorta, "Salafism, liberalism, and democratic learning in Tunisia," *The Journal of North African Studies* 20, no 5 (2015): 770-783.

²⁹ Nozha Sekik and Adnan Louhichi, *Les potières de sejnane*, (Tunis: Finzi Editions, 2007), 3-7.

³⁰ *Ibid*, xvii.

³¹ Verdier.

eager to contribute. During this performance, many different bodies congregated under the flag that merged them into one. There were more women than were able to fit under the flag at once, but they traded places while they marched to allow everyone to participate. Many women brought their children along, and, upon seeing their mothers march under the flag, they also wanted to be involved. When the women finished, the children reperformed the procession, binding them to a communal expression of hope for Tunisia's future.³²



Fig. 2: Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri, *Sous mon drapeau (Under my flag)*, 2012. Performance and video documentation. Used with permission of the artists.

Sous mon drapeau further establishes new relationships between artists, performances, and publics. By creating one flag under which a large group of people could congregate, Ghorbel and Mhiri enabled the women artisans to engender the collectivism of the Tunisian people. The cloth not only functions as a flag, but as a piece of clothing that clothes one body, thereby visualizing the shared experience of Tunisian protesters who acted as one body while occupying public spaces during the revolution. As Mhiri expressed, “être toujours ensemble sous le même drapeau est un symbole de solidarité” (to always be together under the same flag

³² Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artists) Skype video communication with the author, June 1, 2017.

is a symbol of solidarity).³³ Like the fiberglass structure in *Horr 1*, the flag unifies the participants as one entity. When the women artisans of Sejnane wear the Tunisian flag, they achieve a specific collective moment, one that is distinct from but still aligned with the struggle of the revolution and the incident at Manouba, as well as with their artisanal collective and the work through which they have achieved a remarkable independence. The new moment pulls from these occurrences and responds to them, not with a direct answer, but with a rewriting that speaks to possibility that Tunisians felt in those early days of 2011 when, after years of frustration and repression, new potential for democratic engagement emerged.

Ghorbel and Mhiri directed the women to congregate under the flag and walk across the field, but as the women marched, they spontaneously started to sing the chorus of the Tunisian national anthem: “ḥumāt al-ḥimá yā ḥumāt al-ḥimá (O defenders of the homeland).”³⁴ These words and variations thereof were also sung and chanted when the Tunisian people took to the streets to protest.³⁵ There, the words contributed to the overall outcome of the revolution; the singing of the national anthem as well as the use of the flag as a symbol of Tunisian pride were a part of the euphoria on January 14, 2011. The spontaneous act of singing indicates that the impact of the performance is not merely abstract, but that the performance is actualized through its significance to the participants; their bodies become more deeply invested in the performance through the physicality of their vocalizations.

While national anthems are sometimes regarded as unquestioningly patriotic and in the service of the state, for these women, the words embody a cultural nationalism that stands apart from loyalty to a particular government and that is rooted in cultural practices that are tied to a land and a people. The anthem indicates liberation from a repressive regime and the continuance of the ideals of the revolution. As Ghorbel and Mhiri explain, that the song is repetitive and circular like walking, like the flag that is unbroken.³⁶

It is not necessarily the literal meaning of the national anthem itself that the women highlight but potentially a sentiment that speaks of their relationship to the land and their role in the performance action as symbolic of defending the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Michael Bristow, ed., *National Anthems of the World* (London and New York: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2006), 559.

³⁵ Mohamed-Salah Omri, “A Revolution of Dignity and Poetry,” *Boundary 2* 39, no. 1 (2012): 138.

³⁶ Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artists) Skype video communication with the author, June 1, 2017.

region from Salafist influx.³⁷ The singing points to the women's feelings of community when they joined against the Salafist cooptation of their town. The residents are, as Ghorbel and Mhiri describe, "animées par l'amour du même pays" (animated by a love of the same land), recalling the fusion of diverse individuals necessary for revolution.³⁸ It is apt that with their hands – their bodies – the women mold their crafts from the earth of the land they later embody through their marching. In this performance, the women make connections between their bodies, their voices, and Tunisia, expressing pride in their self-liberation. Here, the bodily presence of the artisans of Sejnane, song, and the iconography of the Tunisian flag, taken together, indicate that the inhabitants of the region defy both repressive governance and the influx of radicalism.

Sous mon drapeau demonstrates that, as during the revolution, the women of Sejnane again stand ready to direct their own political futures. As the women marched and sang, they replicated their involvement in the collective Tunisian effort of revolution, and also, by making their own bodies a living flag, embodied the moment where a young woman defended the Tunisian flag. In *Sous mon drapeau*, the women artisans of Sejnane create new meaning for the Tunisian flag by recontextualizing it as a vehicle through which a collective body expresses its rejection of extremist ideals and its pledge to the future of Tunisia. They constitute their own context by singing the national anthem, and thereby imbue the performance with the significance of the revolutionary struggle, the action of the young woman and the flag, and the relationship between these events and Sejnane's residents.

Super-Tunisian, St'art: A satire on democracy

Moufida Fedhila, a filmmaker who has also produced photographic and installation works, performed *Super-Tunisian, St'art* (2011 and 2012) (Figure 3) to satirize the notion that Tunisia's problems could be fixed through elected leadership. In July 2019, Beji Caid Essebsi, the first freely elected Tunisian president since the revolution, died. In the September 2019 election, a field of over twenty was narrowed to two who went to a runoff when no single candidate gained more than fifty percent of the vote. The two candidates, Kaïs Saïed and Nabil Karoui, could each have threatened Tunisia's democratic future, replicating the metaphor that Fedhila enacted in her performance eight years earlier. While Karoui has been indicted on charges of money laundering and ran his campaign from prison, Saïed supports capital punishment, unequal inheritance between men and women, and

³⁷ In a 2012 incident that mirrors this use of flag and song, when Islamist protesters threatened a public theatrical performance, the actors responded by waving the Tunisian flag and singing the national hymn. Ben Yakoub, 271.

³⁸ Houda Ghorbel and Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artists) Skype video communication with the author, June 1, 2017.

the continuance of Article 230 of the Penal Code, under which LGBTQ Tunisians may be imprisoned for three years. While Saïed ultimately won the election, for many progressive Tunisians, neither candidate represented a path forward. As Fedhila satirized years earlier, voting for elected leadership in Tunisia in hopes of changing systems of corruption and inequity is akin to putting ballots that will never be counted into a box that will never be opened.



Fig. 3: Moufida Fedhila, *Super Tunisian, St'art*, 2011 and 2012. Performance. Used with permission of the artist.

In *Super-Tunisian, St'art*, Fedhila paraded up and down Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the main thoroughfare of downtown Tunis and major site of protests, dressed in superhero tights and a cape. Her costume included iron-on letters that read, "Save Yourself. Vote for Super Tunisian" and she carried a handwritten cardboard sign with the words "Super Tunisian" written in English and in Arabic.

However, French and Arabic are the official and common languages of Tunisia, and until recently, English in Tunisian schools was taught only as a second foreign language for students who wished to gain scientific and technical proficiency. Additionally, most media continue to be in Arabic or French; newspaper articles and radio programs are very rarely in English.³⁹ While with enhanced English instruction, the advance of the Internet, and the globalization of media culture younger generations speak more English than ever, many working-class people as well as people who attended grade school before the 2000s speak or read limited English, or none at all. Given the location of the performance, on a busy downtown street where many non-English speaking Tunisians would be on foot and thus encounter Fedhila, the English text speaks not to the people on the street, but as a critique of Western-style democratic processes adopted to Tunisian politics, such as Tunisia's electoral system.

Another part of the performance that critiqued Tunisian democracy featured Fedhila asking passers-by to "vote" by depositing a piece of paper into a makeshift ballot box. The performative act of placing ballots that do not elect political candidates into a ballot box that is part of an art performance rather than an act of civic engagement at a real polling place reads as commentary on the futility of voting in Tunisia. Here, Fedhila references Tunisia's abysmal past record on elections and the ascensions of its former presidents to office, as well as the October 2011 election that would take place a few months after the performance.⁴⁰ As Fedhila contends "Ben Ali had instilled this feeling of having no existence as citizens in Tunisians. My mother or I could have a member's card for his party without asking for it, and other people could go and vote in our names and give him our votes!"⁴¹ Even before Ben Ali took office, Habib Bourguiba, the first president of the newly independent nation, instituted a governmental structure that gave more power to the office of president than to the Tunisian judiciary or legislature.⁴²

Importantly, Fedhila utilized the locale of a busy Tunisian street. As Nato Thompson describes, "the streets have long embodied the public sphere: a space where the entire citizenry can participate democratically and freely."⁴³ Yet *Super-*

³⁹ Salah Mejri, Mosbah Said, and Inès Sfar, "Plurilinguisme et diglossie en Tunisie," *Synergies Tunisie* 1, (2009): 53-74.

⁴⁰ As Emma C. Murphy summarizes, potential political opponents during the Ben Ali regime were eradicated while elections were characterized by fraud. See Emma C. Murphy, "The Tunisian Uprising and the Precarious Path to Democracy," *Mediterranean Politics* 16 no. 2, (2011): 299-305.

⁴¹ Fedhila quoted in Hadria.

⁴² Stephen J. King referenced in Chomiak and Entelis, 76.

⁴³ Nato Thompson, "Trespassing Relevance," in *The Interventionists: Users' Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, ed. Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette, (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA Publications, 2004): 17.

Tunisian, St'art exposes a particular irony of Tunisian citizens' participation in democracy: that by participating in a democratic act such as voting, Tunisians in fact participate in the continued distortion of democracy by their government. By asking passers-by to cast votes that indeed count for nothing, Fedhila seems to propose that participating in Tunisian democracy further enables the continuance of a false democracy. However, the use of the street as a space within which to participate in an art action offers a potential countermeasure to the satire with which Fedhila imitates Tunisia's superficially participatory democracy.

Super-Tunisian, St'art is not purely a critique; by choosing interventionist, participatory performance as the medium through which to convey her message, Fedhila enacts the potential of art to create social change. The act of voting in vain may resonate with those who participated by replicating their actions in a real election and then exposing the potential futility of the act. In regard to this performance, she states that, "l'art est une nécessité. Il est intrinsèquement révolutionnaire" (art is a necessity. It is intrinsically revolutionary), and that with this performance she also critiques institutions, such as the Tunisian state under Ben Ali, that stifle critical art.⁴⁴ Fedhila also demonstrates her view of art as a catalyst for change with the title of the performance, in which "St'art," a portmanteau of street and art, is also a homonym for start. Fedhila thereby links art to revolution with performance and with language.

Performance Now

Tamzini, Fedhila, and Ghorbel and Mhiri are not the only Tunisians to embark on public performance art in the post-revolution era. As Joachim Ben Yakoub demonstrates, the collective Fanni Raghman Anni (*Art in Spite of Myself*) and the dance group Danseurs-Citoyens (*Dancers-Citizens*) have each used interventionist actions to disrupt Tunisian public life.⁴⁵ A youth-run group for social change, Fanni Raghman Anni's use of performance tactics as part of their platform indicates how the landscape of art and culture may be changing to include more interventionist and public tactics. The group's mission further highlights how some Tunisian youth are active in democracy and participate passionately in directing the country's future.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, one of Wadi Mhiri's recent performances, *Le Passage* (2019) (Figure 4), a site-specific performance in Djerba, Tunisia, can also be conceptualized as participatory performance. Although it was part of the festival *See Djerba*, again reinforcing that Tunisian performance often takes place within such

⁴⁴ Moufida Fedhila (Tunisian artist) in discussion with the author, June 7, 2015.

⁴⁵ Ben Yakoub.

⁴⁶ "Despite Attacks, Performance Artists Bring Activism to Tunisia's Streets," *VoiceProject.com*, January 30, 2015. http://voiceproject.org/post_news/performance-artists-bring-activism-tunisian-streets/

organized contexts, the performance used the Sidi Zitouni mausoleum cultural site, specifically the Cupola of Shadows that was historically a place of treatment for mental illness, to invoke cultural resonances between the site and the participants.



Fig. 4: Wadi Mhiri, *Le Passage*, 2019. Photo by Martina Stella, used with permission.

The performance itself likewise addressed themes of memory and ritual, through participation, where spectators who entered the performance space later became part of a ritual by helping to sew amulets onto Mhiri's robes.⁴⁷ The

⁴⁷ Wadi Mhiri (Tunisian artist), Facebook video chat with the author, October 1, 2019.

participants transposed their memories to Mhiri by affixing the amulets. By asking the spectators to participate in the creation of a garment, Mhiri facilitated a physical connection between the spectators and himself, and the materials in the performance. As they moved through the mausoleum, encountering Mhiri and participating in the creation of his garment, the spectators generated the performance by acting as link between Mhiri, the site, and themselves through a ritual of touch and movement. The contrast between the tangibility of the amulets and the ethereality of the site is mediated by the actions of the participants who place their memories into the amulets, giving form to the interweaving of different Tunisian lives across time and space.

Hela Lamine's *Blue Iftar* (Figure 5), produced independent from a festival or gallery context, represents another recent work that points to the continued development of participatory performance in Tunisia. In June 2019, during Ramadan, Lamine facilitated a participatory work that commemorated the 2018 sinking of a migrant vessel carrying Tunisians to Italy.

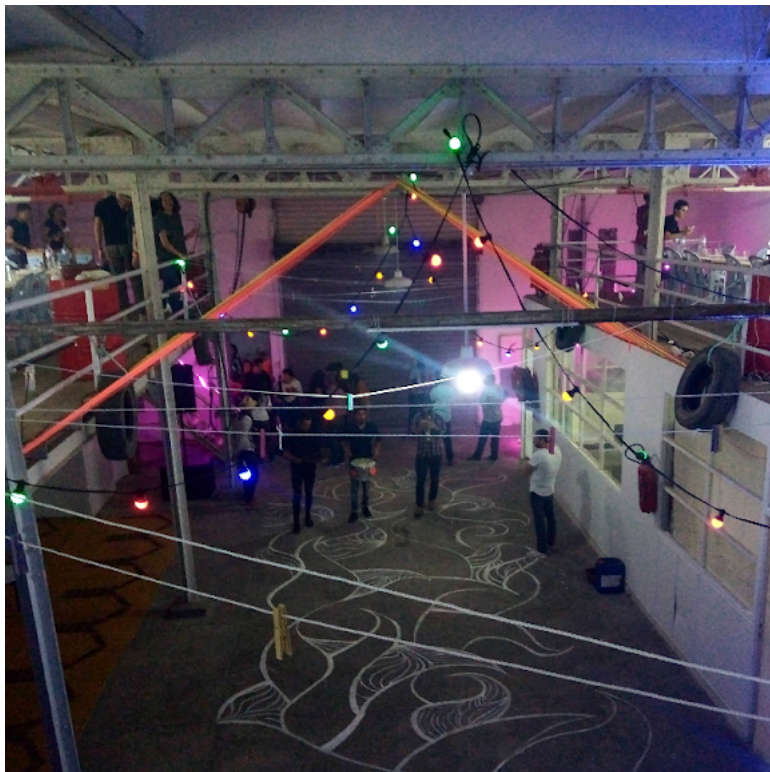


Fig. 5: Hela Lamine, *Blue Iftar*, 2019. Used with permission of the artist.

Blue Iftar was a day-long experiential and participatory work where attendees visited different sites in downtown Tunis that highlighted Tunisia's long, complex, and sometimes difficult relationship with Italy. The participants experienced short, site-specific performances at each location and finally arrived at the *iftar*, the Ramadan dinner in which observers break their fast after sunset. The space in which the dinner was held invoked a boat, placing the participants within the scene of the sunken vessel. At dinner, the participants were further implicated in the sinking of the vessel when they were presented fish to eat; the kind of fish that ate the bodies of the migrants. Through the act of eating, those that had been observers of performance throughout the day became participants whose actions constituted the finale of the performance.

Actions by Fanni Raghman Anni and new performances from Mhiri and Lamine demonstrate that the participation of spectators and intervention in the public sphere continue to come to the fore within Tunisian performance art's continuously shifting post-revolution landscape. Although the use of institutions such as galleries and festivals to facilitate performance art remains frequent, the participatory performances from 2011 and 2012 engendered the more open scene that today characterizes Tunisian performance art.

Conclusion

The relationships between revolution and performance are not accidental. Both *Horr 1* and *Sous mon drapeau* manifest through bodies acting as one cooperative unit, while *Super-Tunisian*, *St'art* remarks upon potential scenarios in the aftermath of revolution. The performances from 2011-2012, as well as the two from 2019, each evoke site specific intervention, in which, as Margus Tamm describes, the art is "actualised in wider public dialogue while in contact with a specific place and the community that daily uses that place."⁴⁸ Each performance also requires collective participation, whether by requiring individual bodies to move and work as a collective or by facilitating the participation of a group, as in where Fedhila's performance acts as a metaphor for individuals who become a group through the need to make a collective decision. Yet the individuals who make up these tangible and metaphoric bodies are not beholden to explicit directions from the artists. Correspondingly, all three performances balk at traditional art hierarchies in several crucial ways. They are not necessarily produced for any audience, since those that would be the audience members become the participants, and additionally, none have the primary purpose of producing a gallery object. The fiberglass cloud and the flag further confuse the art-as-object relationship because although

⁴⁸ Margus Tamm, "Place and Interventionist Art," *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 23, no 1-2 (2014): 117.

objects help the performances to convey meaning, the performances that use them are not tangible.

In some performance art, the artist's body becomes the artist's material, but in these works a collective, resident-based body serves as the material. *Horr I* and *Sous mon drapeau* are conceived in part or in whole by artist teams, enriching the collective ideal, and further recasting the individual artist as having shared rather than exclusive responsibility for the work. In *Super-Tunisian*, *St'art* the group is abstracted, but is nonetheless composed of individuals acting collectively. These works incorporate the participants into one through different materials, where the bodies that think individually yet act together enact the ideals of the revolution in that a collective goal is achieved through bodies participating in protest. In *Horr I*, the fiberglass cloud is an enclosure inside of which separate bodies act cohesively to direct the path of the unit. The flag in *Sous mon drapeau* functions similarly, joining disparate parts into a united element. Meanwhile, the materials of voting ballots, amulets, and food in *Super-Tunisian*, *St'art*, *Le Passage*, and *Blue Iftar* each create a haptic experience through shared touch of objects and food.

The presence of public, participatory performance art in Tunisia is one indicator of changes in the Tunisian socio-political landscape as well as shifts in contemporary Tunisian art. Performance mediums that are able to involve the public in social and political engagement like never before embody revolution and protest as ongoing social processes. In each performance, the participants' bodies represent Tunisians as a collective; the participants in the revolution, and the ripples of action, interaction, and potentiality that extend from the revolution as a continuous process of social and political remaking.



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