

Art in Tunisia: A Visibility in the Making

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One of Tunisia's paradoxes is that it is among the wealthiest African countries economically, and the most socially stable, but is also among the least visible from a cultural point of view. This invisibility is reaching worrying proportions when we speak about contemporary art.

If North African artists have been recognised within the African and international scene, such as the Algerians Adel Abdessemed and Zineb Sédira, the Moroccans Mounir Fatmi and Yto Barrada, and the Egyptians Moataz Nasr and Ghada Amer, in Tunisia it is difficult to speak of two artists who have achieved a comparable reputation. Even if North Africa is not very well represented in the catalogued events of 'contemporary African art', Tunisia registers a significant absence in comparison with its neighbours.

It is therefore interesting to question the reasons for this absence. We can suggest some possible reasons for this. However, the purpose of this paper is rather to give an account of recent changes within the Tunisian artistic scene, changes which suggest an improvement in terms of the quality and quantity of representation of Tunisian artists at a regional and continental level.

Hypotheses

One of the hypotheses to explain the non-visibility of contemporary Tunisian artists within the international art scene would be, as recently claimed by the Tunisian artist Feryel Lakhdar, that Tunisian artists are content with the small market of local art that enables them to live and that does not encourage them to face a world of international contemporary art, that is difficult to break through and of which they do not know the codes and the customs.

Tunisian artistic production is orientated towards the local market and in the absence of art foundations, collections and private or public contemporary art museums, this serves to limit art's role to 'decorating' homes. This places it outside the parameters of international contemporary art.

The other hypothesis concerns the mobility of Tunisian artists. Indeed, integrating into the international circuit of contemporary art involves a mobility that Tunisian artists probably do not have in comparison with their African or Arab counterparts.

Recent dynamism of Tunisian contemporary art

Let's come back now to our purpose in order to provide some evidence of recent dynamism in the Tunisian artistic scene and probable change in the visibility of Tunisian artists internationally. The art gallery Millefeuilles has achieved a season of some quality, particularly in progress with drawing and engraving. This gallery has already practically

closed her program until 2013 and this goes to show the number of artists who wish to exhibit in this space. The same goes for the small gallery Artyshow. Other art galleries have mapped out their programme of exhibitions for 2011 well before the beginning of the season, which was not the case two or three seasons ago (apart from a few well-known galleries that do not exceed the number of five). This denotes some seriousness and professionalism on the part of artists and gallery owners as well as a good market situation for local art.

Amidst the most reputable galleries of art, two made great strides during the 2010 season. First, Galerie El Marsa which extended its exhibition space, making it as the most spacious and professional private gallery in the country. This gallery is well connected to the United Arab Emirates' networks where it sells at high prices the works of some Tunisian artists and takes advantage of the booming art market. Khaled Ben Slimane's exhibition at Galerie El Marsa has been one of the most important events of the season. Ben Slimane is the best known Tunisian ceramicist, he was acclaimed as the best ceramicist in the world by a German museum in 2004. His large works (2m x 2m) have sold for 40.000 Dollars, a record for a living Tunisian artist.

The gallery Le Violon Bleu, situated in the northern suburb of Tunis, which has a subsidiary in London, has attracted a lot of attention this year for planning an exhibition of contemporary Arab art with names as prestigious as Moataz Nasr, Adel Abidin and Dena Al-Adeeb. The space of the gallery has been transformed to receive these artists' videos and installations. The bold innovation of this exhibition within the rather classic Tunisian artistic scope, made many gallery owners think, and they now feel obliged to follow regional and continental opportunities even though there is not yet a market for this type of work.

To resume with the galleries, we must underline the work of the Kanvas Art Gallery that has specialised in the exhibition of young artists. This young gallery has been chosen to participate to the last fair of contemporary art in Strasbourg. It has been the only gallery representing the African continent and the Arab countries.

On another level, we must underline the interest that art starts to arouse in the Tunisian society. This interest has been tangible for several years. Visual art enjoys less interest than theatre or music but is gaining ground. Indeed, the banks (the Arab Tunisian Bank and the Arab International Bank of Tunisia) organise exhibitions and competitions of numeric arts, and the restaurants (Le Golfe, Le Gavroche, Villa Didon, Le Cap) have recently presented exhibitions in their premises. This shows that art is no longer confined to a small circle and is open to society.

Finally, we must point out two major events. The program "Dream City", a multidisciplinary project including contemporary art, music, theatre, and poetry that will seek to revive the old town of Tunis through installations in-situ. The second edition of this event will take place from the 13th to the 16th of October 2010. It includes about thirty artistic propositions that will be done in chosen areas by artists in the old Médina of Tunis (coffee shops, Moorish Baths, restaurants, street alleys, homes, etc.)

The other initiative to remember is the corporate patronage organised by a group of private industrial businessmen which created a space for contemporary art exhibitions La Boîte. This space chooses two artists per year who are going to carry out an artistic proposition that La Boîte will produce and exhibit in its gallery.

A scheduled visibility

The landscape that we have just drawn seems idyllic. It must not conceal the problems for they exist. In Tunisia, we are in the habit of saying that everything goes bad, that nothing moves, etc. However, if we distance ourselves from it to look further afield at our artistic landscape, then we will be able to see that the picture is not so bleak and the situation of our art may even be stimulating, even promising. We are not saying this to shower ourselves with compliments. Therefore, let's try to see why it is promising.

A good proportion of Tunisian cultural operators complain of the lack of means. There are no funds deriving from the State to encourage contemporary art, there is hardly any money coming from overseas. This situation, seen as being negative, can also have its advantages. Actually, it guarantees a kind of independence and a certain freedom. The artistic landscape is building itself step-by-step, with little means but with choices that have been met. The creation remains therefore connected to the public and the market, for the art cannot totally be an export enterprise!

This leads us to believe that the coming years will be favourable for the international visibility of Tunisian artists and that there is a generation which is presently reaching its maturity. This generation does not come on its own but has behind it hundreds of years of art history as well as three or four generations of talented Tunisian artists. There is a story of rich art in Tunisia. It is awaiting those who would wish to write it.

Regional and continental visibility has already begun. Its culmination is the second price (Ex-Aequo) won at the last biennial of Dakar 2010 by the young Tunisian photographer Mouna Jemal Siala. On the other hand, a significant number of Tunisian photographers have participated for many years in the Biennial of Photography of Bamako. Michket Krifa, a Tunisian commissioner of exhibitions has been appointed head of this prestigious biennial since the last edition.

Another important point concerns the schools of art in Tunisia. They have multiplied and despite the decrease of the general level of teaching, educational training remains worthwhile. There are about twenty schools of art and design between the public and private sector.

To sum up, let's therefore say that the situation of the art in Tunisia is at a crossroads. The Tunisian artistic landscape has a solid foundation, it keeps a connection with its society and this suggests an international opportunity which is met and considered. This pending opportunity could come with a guarantee of autonomy and permanence in an international circuit of contemporary art that finds it difficult to recover from its hegemony.

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