

Street art as a transforming agent of public space in Arab World. Case study of two artistic groups in Tunisia¹

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Abstract. The public space in the Arab World has historically been controlled and seized by political authorities. This appropriation has created a deep rift between citizens and public places. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the Arab revolutions, new youth art forms have emerged liberating the arts from traditional formalism and these have been transferred to open spaces making them accessible to the people. This research seeks to explore the youth street art that emerged during the Tunisian revolution, not only as an innovative artistic trend, but also as a social movement that claims a new kind of citizenship. It aims to analyze the philosophical and aesthetic purposes of street art and its role in the liberation of public space. The methodology is based on qualitative interviews and participant observation with members of two street art groups Ahl Al Kahf and Fanni Raghman Anni that emerged during the Tunisian revolution of 2011. The results reveal that the youth revolutionary artistic phenomenon represents a new creative project and constitutes a intellectual and artistic rupture with the prevailing aesthetic practices.

Key words: Street art, revolution, public space, Tunisia

[es] El arte callejero como agente transformador del espacio público en el Mundo Árabe. Estudio de caso de dos grupos artísticos en Túnez

Resumen. El espacio público en el Mundo Árabe ha sido históricamente controlado y usurpado por las autoridades políticas. Esta apropiación ha creado una profunda brecha entre los ciudadanos y los espacios públicos. Sin embargo, desde el comienzo de las revoluciones árabes, han surgido nuevas formas de arte juvenil que han liberado las artes del formalismo institucional y los han trasladado a espacios abiertos y más accesibles a la ciudadanía. Esta investigación pretende explorar el nuevo fenómeno del arte callejero juvenil que surgió durante la revolución tunecina, no solo como una tendencia artística innovadora, sino también como un movimiento social que reivindica una nueva ciudadanía. Tiene como objetivo analizar los propósitos filosóficos y estéticos del arte callejero y su papel en la liberación del espacio público. La metodología empleada se basa en la realización de entrevistas cualitativas y observación participante con los miembros de dos grupos de arte callejero Ahl Al Kahf y Fanni Raghman Anni que surgieron durante la revolución tunecina de 2011. Los resultados revelan que el fenómeno artístico revolucionario juvenil representa un nuevo proyecto creativo y constituye una ruptura intelectual y artística con las prácticas estéticas imperantes.

Palabras clave: Arte callejero, revolución, espacio público, Túnez

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1. Introduction

The revolutionary uprising in 2011 has created a number of new youth art groups in all the cities that have witnessed popular and political movement in the Arab world. They are groups that present new and updated creative insights into the general Arab cultural framework, which rests on a hybrid philosophy that is rooted in the complicated Arab social reality and that is open to the mixed artistic styles unleashed by globalized human cultures. Today, these youth groups are drawing the features of an epistemological rupture with the dictionaries of social activism and another aesthetic one with the prevailing aesthetic patterns, sometimes with engaged silence and at other times with a showy buzz that is astonishing to passers-by. They are purely youth experiences that aroused from anger fuelled by accumulated psychological and popular defeats and grew out of squares, streets and marginalized districts to address them in another beautiful language that is seemingly complicated but incredibly simple so that they would shake their consciousness.

These groups have taken the public spaces such as the streets, squares, walls and the asphalt as a stage for their works that blend several arts like graffiti, street art, posters, plaza poetry and performing or what is called performance that mixes in its techniques the arts of drawing, filming, singing, theatrical performance, reciting poetry and pictures. These works impose themselves on passers-by with an audacity that shakes the usual social conservatism in Arab public arenas. Guy Rocher (1968) says that:

Revolution is a historical event whose time span exceeds that of the first spark.

Moreover, the effects of the changes that it makes will emerge in the long term, often in an unfamiliar and deeper way than we can imagine. (1968, p. 257)

Monitoring social change indicators is not necessarily based on the study of prominent phenomena, but it can start from simple symptoms that are considered collateral, although they entail a coherent project that can lead to a break with futile social behaviors and representations in a flexible and effective way. “Life always exists elsewhere” as Maffesoli (1998) asserts. He sees that some normal day-to-day practices by society or a group of individuals, that academics or official research institutions do not pay attention to in great historical events, may be richer in signs and meanings than outstanding and remarkable phenomena. For that reason, following Gilbert Durand (1960), he is calling for going beyond the triviality of simple phenomena and delving into its depths so that the important event can be extrapolated and the indicators of change that they embody can be devised. The interest in the creative youth phenomenon that emerged during the revolution is part of this theoretical context, which is concerned with the signs and symbols of small details in people’s daily lives.

The revolutionary youth art groups are an emerging phenomenon and a unique sociological state in the modern Arab world because they seek to reconstruct aesthetic styles in public spaces through political discourse and the integration in their popular environment. Seyfeddine Jlassi, a member of Tunisian street art group Fanni Ragman Anni says that their philosophy rests on surprise, provocation and shock creation among people to encourage them to think, but they do not refuse any intellectual trends no matter how fanatic and hostile towards art they are, rather, they lure their followers to their intellectual conversation through art (S. Jlassi, personal communication, June 16, 2021). He considers that art should be a containing rather than excluding space. The use of the intellectual and artistic interaction approach is considered as one of the significant features of these youth

art groups that initiated a break with authoritarian behaviour to extend innovative and direct bridges in communication and dialogue.

2. Art and the restoration of the Arab public space

In his book on the relationship between body and space, and in his speaking about the social phenomena that emerged after the French Revolution, Richard Sennet says that the masses did not leave the streets and the public spaces. They occupied them with demonstrations, as well as with ceaseless celebratory popular events, without interruption, for at least two years (1997, p. 327).

These manifestations are represented in putting on masks and aristocrats' clothes to mock the previous political class. In this same period, street theatre emerged as individuals of common people spontaneously intend to play several authoritarian religious and political positions that people used to suffer from. Mona Ozuf (1988) attributes the extension of the mass post-revolutionary festive atmosphere to the immense psychological desire that was prevalent in Paris in 1790 to get rid of the sediments of authoritarianism in a variety of artistic and symbolic ways, demonstrating people's authority over city spaces.

For the first time, revolutionary Arab people were able to regain the public space and invade it during the revolutions. Some of the signs that were raised in many demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen with the slogans "We have liberated the streets and the arenas" express a sense of interior "colonialism" that lived with the Arab persona even after foreign colonialism had left. The Arab rebel has eagerly practised the most important liberation rituals, liberating the street from dictatorship symbols such as giant pictures and party slogans that were suffocating the cities' breaths and perching on all its spaces.

However, these spaces have soon embraced another presence that filled their vacancies with new visual artistic rituals that the Arab recipient was not accustomed to. The wall graffiti drawings - with rebels' emblems and images with intense colours decorating the walls of cities and poor districts and mocking authoritarianism figures and the performing arts shows or performance that rewrite the revolutionary events with a questioning drama in the streets and music or poetic circles eulogizing freedom and resistance have become a daily décor for many Arab places.

The artistic, critical and satirical uprising in public spaces that followed the revolutions against dictatorships can be considered as a necessary process to discharge the load of political and social repression and to get rid of the repercussions of the forbidden through artistic expression. People in Latin America and some Eastern European States had practised the same artistic written rituals after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the late 1980s. The German street artist Jonathan Meese, known by his playing the role of famous dictators in the world, considers that the embodiment and the artistic mockery of dictatorships is intended to warn newly freed people from the consequence of returning to tyranny. Moreover, the presentation of such plays in open spaces is not incidental as much as it is an effort to consolidate awareness among "the new citizen" of the importance of not neglecting the new freedom he has acquired in the streets of his city (Azimi, 2011). For decades, the Arab peoples have suffered from their uprooting relationship with the public space, as entire generations grew up on the symbolic distance that dictatorships had created between peoples and their common geographic space due to the constancy of "the culture of the forbidden".

De Certeau (1990) distinguishes between the concepts of "space" and "place". While space is "the area of incidental practices" and the walking of unknown passers-by, place is the container of social relations, history and identity; that is the container of individual and social "entity" according to Ponty (1945). The public place represents the geographical scope that establishes the intimacy of social ties and the conditions of

common living through the availability of freedom and spontaneity. Dictatorial regimes intend to deprive their peoples of the right to build the place/ entity in common public arenas in order to abolish their symbolic and effective sovereignty over the country. Therefore, they create what is called “no place” according to Augé’s term (Augé, 1992), that is, a space in which it is impossible to establish a social entity because it is only made for crossing.

Art has been the means of expression of historical reconciliation between the Arab individual and his spatial geography, and the regaining of his areas and public spaces that autocracy had confiscated for decades. Passers-by are not used to seeing their ideas and repressed political attitudes incarnated in the form of images or graffiti or poetry lines or a play on public display. Art has been a way to materialize the dream, and it has been a tool of liberation and common therapy through “the production of new revolutionary, popular and festive rituals whose purpose is the rehabilitation of public space” as Sennet (1997, p. 325) argues and therefore, restoration of social relations worn away by tyranny. At the same time, rekindling a popular and cultural memory that had in the past an intimate relationship with arenas through street arts.

3. Street art in the Arab popular memory

There are still a few remains of popular street art in the Arab culture. They are represented in the rare scattered performances here and there across the Arab world such as the popular theatre performances “Kawlia – Gypsies”, “Karagöz” and “shadow plays” that were the cause of other theatrical forms such as “Farce”, “Sammah”, “God glorification parties” and “Moulawia” in the Middle East and “halqa theatre”, “box of wonders”, “praiser”, “storyteller” and “Ismail Bacha” in the Maghreb (Khalil, 2007). There were also acrobatic performances, and storyteller’s rings that are still organized in some public squares, such as “El-Fnaa” square in Marrakech.

As for street theatre, Fadhel Khalil (2007b) stresses that the beginning of its appearance in Arab history dates back to the fourth hijri century. There were groups of individuals known as “mascots”. And they were performing in the courtyards a kind of performance of sarcastic acting that is not without satire and laughter. Until the late 19th century, popular street arts were numerous, diverse and extended throughout the Arab world. In fact, Sham and Egypt’s cafés were home to Karagöz shows. The courtyards of the Maghrebian cities were filled with storytellers, puppet and “box of wonders” shows.

Throughout its history, the Arab popular street arts have established a special relationship between the population and public space. They were sweeping through the courtyards and the streets and establishing the concept of joy through improvisational and polarizing performances across the art of story-telling, relying on the tools of fun, entertainment and satirical criticism.

Starting from the late 19th century, popular arts have started pulling out of Arab streets and their ties with the public space and people began to break off since the beginning of the modern Western theatre’s sweeping patterns of local performance and the spread of theatres in all Arab countries. The concept of “the public” started to substitute the concept of “the mob” in relation to art. With the establishment of post-independence regimes, Arab artistic creation underwent a process of “institutionalization” of all arts, which had led to, on the one hand, the authority’s control over it and, on the other hand, it fell under the influence of Western stylistic patterns and traditions. This might represent one of the reasons for the absence of a real local renaissance. Salman Ktaya describes this dilemma in the world of theatre as he says:

All these experiences were influenced by two factors, the first is the imitation of the European theatre, and the second is pleasing a certain class of society, and it is not

the working class, so these artists could not create an authentic theatre. (1972, p. 23)

In the modern Arab period after independence, the authority has dominated the paths of creativity, tightened control over its contents, distribution and illustrations, codified spaces and times of performances and festivals, and established a purely consumerist spectacular relationship of art. It has also employed it for official political usage. As far heritage and direct spontaneous folklore are concerned, there is little room for it in the concept of modern art; it has become a more cultural folklore oriented to tourism consumption than a vital social space. Consequently, the Arab peoples have become disillusioned with their geographical and creative environment as well as their collective memory under the pressure of street censorship as “the violation of the spatial space of any culture means the violation of the depth of its existence” (Zannad, 1984, p. 206).

Under dictatorship in Tunisia, there was a strict control over the creator and the street, as the artist was obliged to present his work to the Ministry of Culture prior to the presentation. There was also a law prohibiting artistic performances in the streets and public spaces unless they were organized by the regime. The authority was afraid of any spontaneous artistic performance and of improvisation because it would escape censorship. The suppression of freedom of expression and creativity led to the emergence of rebellious artistic youth experiences in the late 2000s, working on the margin of official spaces and taking it on itself to reconnect the popular artistic memory with public spaces. These artistic youth movements coincided with the beginning of the introduction of modern means of communication and social networks. At the beginning, rap groups emerged in marginalized popular circles and they were a shock to society and the political system because of their insatiable criticism of dictatorship, political corruption and marginalization features such as clandestine immigration, drugs, impoverishment and unemployment. These groups are characterized by the use of a purely popular language, which is far removed from embellished rhetoric, obscene words and insults that reflect a violent reaction against mainstream political violence.

In conjunction with the rap songs, graffiti art groups that appeared at the beginning in Palestine and Lebanon, where manuscripts and posters accompanied ongoing conflicts either the Arab-Israeli conflict or Lebanese civil war (Al-Hourani, 2012), then, they extended to Cairo and Tunisia, despite the strict control on public spaces.

In order to keep up with and contain this new youth phenomenon, the official authorities in some Arab countries have attempted to organize special street arts festivals such as “the City of Dreams” festival which took place in Tunisia in 2007, “the Workshop” festival in Egypt in 2008 and the festival of “Art Colors” in Marrakech in 2010. These festivals, which host various artistic events such as painting, outdoor theatre, singing and puppet theatre, aim to animate the public space under the control of the Authority from a purely tourist and entertaining perspective.

The revolutions have been a decisive opportunity to give a qualitative and historical leap to street art in the Arab States. The revolutionary momentum led to freedom from fear and to joining all popular movements and their demands for freedom, dignity and employment. Public spaces and walls are transformed into a stage to express celebration of the revolution or motivation for uprising and rebellion. Through graffiti, the revolting young people expressed their political concerns and presented image and language texts that are both critical and harshly satirical of the regime and its symbols. The revolution in Tunisia gave rise to performance art groups, which swept the public space and roamed freely between districts and cities, expressing a return to reconciliation between the people and their geographical location. In a categorical rupture with art forms in circulation or

those sponsored by the official authorities, street art groups in Tunisia declared themselves to be artistic resistance movements.

The youth street art groups deserve to be studied and analyzed as a phenomenon that reveals signs of change that stem from, and are rooted in, the popular environment and are not subject to any meta-authority whether it is artistic or political. This gives it its activity a revolutionary character and makes it apt to be a vanguard movement in the cultural and sociological sense of the term. This is the main hypothesis on which this research is based and which leads us to pose these questions:

Do these groups represent an artistic, political or social phenomenon? Do they represent a state of liberation revolting against behavioural regulations and rules as well as the prevailing intellectual patterns in Arab culture? What are their main propositions with regard to the concepts of art, the change, political protestation, spectacle and the public space? Are they a transitory phenomenon that is doomed to vanish, or are they a foundational state that is coming into being that could contribute to social transformation?

4. Methodology

To investigate the phenomenon of street art in post-revolutionary Tunisia, qualitative interviews were conducted with Seyfeddine Jlassi, founder of the street art group Fanni Raghman Anni and Elyas Al Majeri, founder of the graffiti group Ahl al- Kahf.

The questions focused on four analytical categories: 1. The innovative aspect of their aesthetic projects, 2. The political content of street art, 3. The redefinition of the concept of public space after the revolution, 4. The public's reaction to this new form of art. The interviews were conducted during a research stay that took place from 10 June to 10 July 2021 in Tunis and took place during five meetings organized with the interviewees separately in the capital. The stay is part of the European research project Trans-making Art/culture/economy to democratize society; research in placemaking for alternative narratives. In addition, using the technique of participant observation, we have accompanied these groups during their artistic activities in the streets of the working-class neighbourhoods of the capital Tunis. The accompaniment of the group Fanni Raghman Anni took place on June 27 in the Avenue Habib Bourguiba and Rue de Marseille in the capital and the accompaniment of the group Ahl AL-Kahf took place on 3 July in the streets of the popular Ben Arous neighbourhood on the outskirts of the capital.

For additional information on the experience and the artistic, social and political positions of these groups, we have reviewed the documents published on their official Facebook pages, and we have also consulted several videos and images published on social networks and in the local and international press.

Fanni Raghman Anni, that means I'm an artist against my will, is a street art performance group whose was created on 25 August 2011, after the Tunisian revolution, by students and unemployed people. As stated in its founding declaration published on its official Facebook page (Fanni Ragman Anni, 2021), they present shows that "bring together a mix of arts through the theatre and the passion for fine art the sensation of music down to poetry and literature". These shows are brought together in a different form than usual in a place where all these artistic styles are born; the street". In the same statement the group expresses its revulsion at the exclusion suffered by artists and creators in marginalized neighbourhoods and motivated by its adherence to the right of citizenship and the defence of the freedom of creativity has chosen an approach that promotes the freedom of creators.

Ahl Al-Kahf is a graffiti street art group created in 2010 by three young artists. The revolution was the right moment to launch their project, which has expanded with the accession of other young people who started to do artistic activism and street aesthetic experiments through graffiti. Through these actions, the group is restoring its right to

public space. All members sign their street drawings with the name of the group, and nobody knows who is the author of each graffiti. This approach is based on the idea of the freedom of art, which the group keeps away from the concepts of authorship or ownership.

5. Results

5.1 The rebellious street art groups: its characteristics and treatises

5.1.1 Youth phenomenon

These two groups have a number of characteristics that distinguish them from the groups that were found in earlier historical periods in the Arab region. First, they are a purely youthful artistic phenomenon, involving the age group between 12 and 25 years. They express a new youth culture that reflects the project of a segment of a new generation that makes up one third of the population pyramid in the Arab region. Most members of the groups have a solid academic training as well as distinctive qualities. Besides having a variety of artistic abilities such as acting, dancing, performing, embodying and photographing, they possess high intellectual potentials that could make them elite. Most of them are pupils or university degrees holders graduated from fine arts schools and other disciplines.



Figure 1. Young and educated artists (Photo courtesy of the group Fanni Ragnman Anni)

These young people hold a clear vision and open intellectual project that serves as a background for their work, but does not define its horizon or its profile. It is the moment of direct spontaneous performance and getting in touch with people that crystallizes their artwork as they connect reality to creativity without distance or medium. Street art groups flourished and grew up with the computer and modern communication technology, speaking its language and sometimes using it in performances when necessary. They are using multimedia and social networks for political struggle. They contributed to the revolution as a youth revolting force and as a creative energy, transforming suffering into a line of poetry, complaint into a slogan and nonsense into rhetoric.

Their mission is to probe reality and capture its obsessions and turn them into a creative roar and an engine for social change. Most of them have extensive knowledge on modern philosophical currents and aesthetic schools and their currents. They blend its complex ideas with the simplicity of the ordinary citizen, making, therefore, a hybrid mix that extends a third way between theory and reality. Many of these groups have become spontaneous training “schools” for young people as they attract their peers to them because their works move the dormant in them, provoke an epistemological and aesthetic concern

for them and invite them to participate in the experience without permission. “We are a group open to all who wish to practice and experience with us”, says Seyfeddine from Fanni Raghman Anni group. It is through practice, exchange and discussions that the new elements acquire an intellectual training and artistic experience and craftsmanship that make them wish to discover and exploit their creative energies.

They have all the characteristics of cultural “elite” despite their young age. However, they adopt with awareness and pride their popular “identity”, having an aversion to all vocabulary of superiority and distinction over the public, the illiterate, the poor, the marginalized, the forsaken and the hard-working. Their attitudes about art and life reek of Realism School’s treatises on art, Trotsky’s artistic vision and André Broughton’s conclusions about art and social revolution.

5.1.2. Intellectual vision and creative project

Their strange and unfamiliar names carry the background of their aesthetic philosophy and readings of art and causes; a novelty and exception that reflect an in-depth in crystallizing the conscious concept of the self. Seditious titles that are not a matter of chance, as they were chosen to elicit curiosity and wonder: Why “I’m Artist Against My Will” and “Ahl Al-Kahf”, then?

Seyfeddine Jlassi states that the name of the group itself constitutes a deliberate trap in which anyone who has spoken or read it falls. This trap reduces the group’s philosophy and goals: everyone who says the name will implicitly admit that he is artistic against his will. This is an involuntary involvement in a project that aims at making all people without exception creative and artists: “Art is not restricted to a selected elite. It is not the exclusive preserve of a particular class, privileged persons or extraordinary geniuses. All people are creative and artists if they believe in their potentials, but most of them do not completely recognize that.” Therefore, they detest the official definition of art that is promoted as a scene consumed by the recipient in an upper and one-way relationship that goes from the artist to the recipient. The group’s philosophy consists in violating this unilateralism and proceeding in the opposite direction. For instance, instead of being a spectacle material that is displayed in museums and closed theatres and directed to the rich who move about to watch it and pay for it in a kind of trade-offs and luxury relationship, art is offered free of charge in the streets to people who are “forced” to watch and interact with the improvised work and reminded that they are also concerned with art and they can be creative.

As for the Cave People, they have made the name of their group as a symbol that links the religious imagination inherent in the term with the creative concern that drives them as they have been searching in “the city caves for the aesthetic terror”, as their statement states. The cave is a metaphorical image of the social segment that on the margin: “We prefer to share drawing with the children, the foolish, the wretched, the drunkards and the roisters (...), because those are the cave people.” (Ahl Al kahf, 2021). Through its name, the group proclaims its belonging to the margin, crystallizing via this concept its critical vision of a social system based on exclusion and stereotypical upbringing. The suffering associated with the outcast in society is the creativity material from which they draw the moment of knowledge and creation. “Art does not come from theories, it generates them,” as they stress in their charter statement.



Figure 2. Graffiti conceived as the free art of protest (Photo courtesy of the group Ahl Al-Kahf)

The issues adopted by the two groups converge in many aspects in terms of subjects and the way they are raised. Causing the shock is a tool to address people's minds by inducing their feelings and undermining their perceptions. Ahl Al-Kahf (The Cave People) practice a linguistic torture game that disturbs the overused terms that media have kept employing when they declare the "Ahl Al-Kahf Movement to be a group of terrorist networks that practise and spread aesthetic terrorism." Fanni Raghman Anni, however, seeks confusion and causing awe in people by enabling them to perceive their real images on the mirror; "We are giving them tools that would enable them to wake up from the habituation coma that generates satisfaction. We want them to move, to get angry and to revolt. We want them to resist", says Seyfeddine Jlassi. As for the concepts of pain and suffering, they are fundamental pillars in the view towards art. Fanni Raghman Anni group believes that they are not producing art in the common sense of the word, but rather "pain". It is the expression of this feeling that adds a genuine aesthetic to reality and not a fake aesthetic that trivializes pain and substitutes it for the unclear finality "pleasure for pleasure". However, Ahl Al kahf group consider themselves "a pandemic spreading through infection" because it starts from the caves to paint a bright spot in their darkness: "Close your eyes, rub them with your fingers. Those bright spots in the dark are the achievement of The Cave People" (Ahl Al kahf, 2021[Facebook page]).

5.1.3. Breaking with concepts

These two groups rely on a philosophy based on a deliberate and well-knit mixing of the used terms, systems and patterns of communication. In terms of the concept of space, they consider it as essential for its high symbolism and importance in establishing art formula and its relationship with people. "The street is our home", confirms a statement of Fanni Ragnman Anni. It is the natural cradle for the birth of the artistic event where "we find pain", as seen by Seyfeddine Jlassi. He adds that artistic production in official spaces is subject to programming pressures and prior demand, while for them it is the street that suggests themes and work pattern instantly. The Ahl Al-Kahf group, for its part, sees the street as a stage for creative performance that is mixed with the taste of real life, and that it is common property of all people (A. Majri, personal communication, June 27, 2021). Therefore, they consider the artwork an incomplete achievement, rather open and subject

to addition by all curious passersby. That is why they address them by saying “if you go through a street and you find on a wall one of the works by Ahl Al-Kahf put on your signature. Art is said to derive its value and price from the signature.”



Figure 3. “The street is our home” (Photo courtesy of the group Fanni Ragnman Anni)

This open view of spatial space is parallel to a similar critical reading of the temporal dimension. In fact, street art, which relies on surprise, does not tolerate the time calendar and the programming logic. The members of Fanni Ragnman Anni feel an absolute creative freedom because they do not engage in the official cultural context, and they do not adhere to its timing. Improvised performance comes without permission and grows upwards with each “performance”. However, they admit that it is the pattern of events in the street that dictates that they should attend and perform in specific public places, when there is a demonstration or when there are strikes and sit-ins. The streets of Tunisia have not calmed down for one single week since the revolution outbreak, and their artistic presence in these demonstrations all over the marginalized regions in the country is to meet the concerns, struggles and demands of the street. With regard to the temporal value of the creative work of Ahl Al-Kahf, it is highly related to the spatial dimension.



Figure 4. Street art graffiti in the marginalized neighborhoods (Photo courtesy of the group Ahl Al-Kahf)

The vast space makes art open to collective experience, which transforms it into “public art”. The group, therefore, addresses an open invitation to everyone to practice art and get used to displayed works: “Ahl Al-Kahf ’s work is only 24 hours long. We ask you to ruin it, refine it, torment it or rearrange it.” Street art groups use time and space as fundamental pillars of freedom of expression and creativity. They do not have a specific location, but they move like nomadic tribes from one district to another and from one village to another, roaming the space without passports. “The space of creativity,” as Deleuze (1987) says, “changes as much it is more fertile. Movement, displacement and flight from the place of origin makes creativity with more momentum and freedom.” (Le Moine, 2005, p. 347).

5.1.4. Undermining the forbidden

The practice of street art is swimming against the current, but with full awareness and commitment to the consequences of this choice. “Our artistic approach requires great sacrifices that cannot be compared to the sacrifices of the official artists”, says Seyfeddine Jlassi. It carries the reform project on its back: “We are revolting against the view,” referring to combatting the pathological aspects of certain practices and phenomena related to the relationship between perception and image in Arab culture; the perception as a social value position and the image as embodiment and possibilities of appearance and spaces of revelation in public space. The prevailing visual culture is burdened with taboos that make people lose the fundamentals of their deep intellectual consciousness and high aesthetic sense. For this reason, these groups face, in the street, a whole heritage of forbidden issues in optics, relations with the body and women’s presence; issues that sum up all taboos of Arab culture for centuries.

Jlassi goes on saying that the body is psychological complex for the Tunisian. Compared to other cultures, it can be said that the Tunisian evades his body and avoids both talking about it and facing it. As a group, they try to work on many paradoxes, such as the ones that make the Tunisian feels ashamed of his body in some urban spaces, while being bold in others such as the beach, swimming pools, sports areas or entertaining places. As a group, they try to engage in many paradoxes, such as making Tunisia feel ashamed of its body in some urban areas, while being bold in other public spaces, such as the sea, swimming pools, sports spaces or entertainment places. That is why they are engaged with and for the body in an attempt to “rehabilitate” it in order to overcome the dormant complex in it, which is the core of corrosion in the social relations network. To achieve this, the group consciously seeks to reduce the space of the text to leave room for physical expression in artistic performance in the street.



Figure 5. Art to liberate the body (Photo courtesy of the group Fanni Ragnman Anni)

As for the criticism of body suppression mechanisms, the Cave People's vision turns over to the readings of Michel Foucault which raised the dilemma of the relationship of power to the body in the context of what he calls "sex technology" as well as "the official mechanisms for the control and the taming of individual bodies" represented in the institutions for the production of medical, religious, political, cultural and pedagogical knowledge (Foucault, 1997). All these institutions seek to adapt social relations to serve the interests of the prevailing economic and political regime by taming the body and making it submissive through taxonomic concepts that define what they see right and strong and what they regard as improper. These methods, which are used by the authority as an instrument of control, exclusion and punishment, lead to pathological phenomena that are stored up by the individual's body and suffered by the social body as a whole.



Figure 6. Art to liberate the body (Photo courtesy of the group Ahl Al-Kahf)

6. Breaking with the concept of public decency

Ahl Al-Kahf addresses the Head of the State as a metaphorical image and a symbol of all these powers:

Please, Mr. President (...), what you call civilization, has deprived you of the sense of smell. It has been repressed, Mr. President. Where is that simple, sensual life? As for me, I am proud of being a dog, aren't my senses still alert? (Ahl Al-Kahf, 2021[Facebook page]).

This group builds on a vision in which the experience of art is fused with the aesthetic of sex without taboos or visual investment. According to them, it is “sex without temptation icons.” Attempts to free the body from the prior condemnation of social view continue, using visual instruments, posters and images that epitomize the dysfunctional positions. It also uses the metaphorical images that are permitted by language through graffiti writings. Liberating the body from chains also means the liberation of language from its sexual taboos as they express in the language of the marginalized and their vocabulary, which is not subject to what is known as shame or public decency. They dare to include the body at the heart of urgent social concerns using direct words: “We paint with semen, or with blood, or with dirt dough: the sweet is only born of sweat” (Ahl Al-Kahf, 2021).

5.1.5. The new aesthetic tools

They do not use lights, decoration materials, hairdressing tools, or common sound effects in art performances. The tools used by street art groups are in line with their anti-prejudice vision towards art that visualizes creativity or the tools to accomplish it. They want an art in the streets crystallized through real-time achievement, as well as through the interaction with passers-by. “When we go out on the street, we only carry clothes and we use these accessories available in the street. All our tools and all the topics that we raise are found in the street.” For example, a passer-by's shoe or a hat worn by a woman or a school bag carried by a child can be transformed into an artistic performance instrument. So, it is hard to predict in advance the quality of the performance or when it is done; “the police do not even know about our equipment”, as Ahl Al-Kahf says. But they do not hesitate to use multimedia and technological means in some shows. Isn't that a contradiction?



Figure 7. Art to liberate the body (Photo courtesy of the group Fanni Ragnman Anni)

7. There are no borders between art and people

These groups consider modern means of communication as a natural extension of their skills and artistic expression because, on the one hand, they were one of the tools that contributed to their theoretical and technical formation by informing them about the experiences of street art groups in other societies in Europe, Latin America and Arab countries. On the other hand, these means respond to their treatises about the need to mix a number of arts in a single show through multimedia technology. In fact, they do not believe in the separation of arts. The theatrical text itself is music, prose and dramatic dance. The artist must be holistic and able to move between all these genres brilliantly. Seyfeddine does not deny his influence by the Experiment Art School and the School of Dadaism, which believes in the liberation of the artist from all the aesthetic ties in circulation and his dealing with social norms in a manoeuvrable manner that causes surprise through comedy, creativity, provocation and departure from the ordinary. The artist is required to be rebellious and socially non-compliant and to be able to be creative in all possible means and seek all kinds of freedom. Through the new aesthetic tools, these groups move away from the sham of what they call official art and break away from its aesthetic rituals labelled as “formal taste” and tied to closed and bourgeois space. Until now, after the revolution, these groups have refused to adopt official paths to participate in the events, despite the numerous invitations from the Ministry of Culture and the Superintendency.

5.1.6. The recipient and the “shock of creativity”

The Arab considers public space to be the property of the ruling authority. Therefore, interactions with street art are often overshadowed by weirdness, awe and surprise. Brecht says: “We should not despise the receiving public’s understanding ability, by watching, it is possible to promote the level of both the artist and the recipient” (1958: 108). This statement confirms the concerns that haunt the members of Fanni Raghman Anni, prior to each performance, about the possibility that the public might reject or not comprehend messages. They feel failed and frustrated if passers-by do not react with their performance and provocations. They also measure their success with the depth of the shock they make to the recipient.



Figure 8. Art to liberate the body (Photo courtesy of the group Ahl Al-Kahf)

8. Graffiti that narrates the police repression

Their show in Sousse (Tunisian town) in the spring of 2011 achieved the desired goals, with people interacting with the performance and engaging heavily in the creative game. Through practice and experience, the group also gained expertise in knowing the social affiliation of individuals through their interaction with artistic performance. Group members often meet after each performance to analyse and discuss the way people reacted to their shows, which is an important epistemological window on the society for members who are still young. Jlassi says that they do not want to be famous, but they want to “transmit their pain to people.” They are thrilled that their performances also attract many children, interest them and even make them react boldly and ask many questions. Members of the group think that they have provided this young generation with the opportunity to see a different art from they have been used to watch on television. They have also enabled them to see artists performing freely in the streets and public spaces; something the younger generation and earlier generations had not lived.



Figure 9. Art to liberate the body (Photo courtesy of the group Fanni Ragnman Anni)

9. Other art that is not shown on TV

They compare their shows to visual scenes or video footages, for if people keep in their memory one or two images of this video, they would consider themselves to have achieved the desired goals, because each individual can transmit these scenes to his family and acquaintances and, therefore, he becomes an indirect actor in his surroundings. This alternation among people is called “invisible theatre.” The group’s first aim is to get in contact with people and encourage them to get involved in change. They want to undermine the vision that people are accustomed to that art is not their concern only as spectators and consumers. For this reason, they ask official artists to “stop art production because they have transformed it into a substance for consumption”, hoping that the sons of the marginalized districts will take over the artistic creation because they have a cause and the first to ignite a revolution.

6. Conclusion and challenges

The research has led to some conclusions, which in turn given rise to further questions. We are in front of a new phenomenon at the beginning of its existence. It needs sufficient time to mature and evolve as an experience with integrated artistic build-up and modalities that can be studied and more carefully mapped.

1. Contemporary street art reflects two conflicting movements; the break with the traditional concept of street art in Arab culture, which did not carry an ideological view or

an alternative social project, because the street used to be the natural space for these expressions given the absence of cultural industry and theatres, while contemporary street art holds an integral view of creativity, art, the public, space, time and diverse social issues.

2. Revolutionary street art has a holistic view towards arts as they are inter-related expressions that cannot be separated or exploited in closed consumption spaces, as well as a holistic view towards human issues in which cultural, political, economic and social dimensions are integrated. Art, according to the perception of these groups, is life in all its dimensions, momentum, pain and contradictions. It dwells in the public space where social life is practised. It is also part of the organic relationship between the human being, geographic space and collective memory. In this sense, it should not be confined to a “privileged” social elite, but should be made available as an expressive and aesthetic practice for all people.

3. Street art, in its Arab revolutionary version, is a cry of rebellion against oppression and social, political and economic problems, and is an ironic movement against the corroded icons that have been installed in the culture of political and social tyranny. Since its appearance in the public areas, street art has been a source of embarrassment and perturbation for the former tyrannical authorities that have tried to silence it and for the new authorities, which have begun to feel the burden of its fierce criticism.

Moreover, many aspects related to the challenges presented deserve further study.

The first challenge: settling the phenomenon in the local social context since we cannot talk about the existence of a founding phenomenon from the perspective of social change unless people embrace these artistic forms and their treatises and incorporate them into their daily practices and cultural habits. Arab street art groups are still in the first phase of trying to link ties with people in the street. It is too early to say that they are in the process of establishing a new art school because they need theoretical and practical tools to develop the heritage of street art in its local cultural framework. In order to accomplish this task, they need to identify the factors that link the Arab person to his artistic heritage on the one hand and to his public space on the other.

The second challenge: strengthening innovation in the public space and the important issue of establishing the experience of street art, which is subject to other social and political factors beyond its scope, cannot be ignored. It concerns the dilemma of defending and preserving of the freedom of public space, which constitutes the performance stage of these groups and the foundation of their social and political philosophy. Freedom, as Arendt puts it, “needs a space that is politically guaranteed to appear and be practised” (1958: 263). She adds that performing arts require a public that interacts with creativity in an open, free and politically protected space called “appearance space.” It is this latter that can allow “full appearance” that produces a collective gathering around a project of speech and practice. The question at hand is: To what extent will Arab peoples succeed in transforming the public space, places and streets into a free, creative and democratic space amid political bickering and conflicts of ideological possession of public space currently taking place in several Arab countries?

The third challenge: in the face of a discourse that rejects creativity, street art is experiencing the greatest challenges after the Arab revolutions; its confrontation with some of the fundamentalist religious currents that prohibit arts and seek to impose their presence and strict values in public spaces using violence. This phenomenon is a source of great concern in the artistic context, as it is a serious indicator of the return of dictatorship in a more radical religious form. In this context, we conclude with some crucial questions:

What will be the future of revolutionary street art amidst frequent changes, social unrest and conflicts over “the emerging space”? Would the Arab peoples finally adopt the concept of freedom of public space and freedom of creation and protect it from any kind of

ideological hegemony, or would they adopt proposals that would reproduce the authority of control over the public space?

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