



# UNCOMMON GROUNDS

**New Media and Critical Practices  
in North Africa and the Middle East**

**Edited by Anthony Downey**

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IBRAAZ

**I.B. TAURIS**



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# Preface

In 2011, the Kamel Lazaar Foundation responded to the urgent need for access to critical and historical texts about visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East by launching a research and publishing initiative, Ibraaz ([www.ibraaz.org](http://www.ibraaz.org)). The decision to do so grew out of a number of private and professional issues that I have encountered over the last two decades or so. Firstly, in a professional capacity, I have travelled around the region for many years and the one thing I have observed again and again is the fact that, to put it simply, the Arabs do not know the Arabs. Secondly, in a private capacity, I have been privileged to travel to many other countries across the world and to have experience of many different cultures. During this time, I have observed a further related point: the Western world does not know the Arabs. Again, cultural, political and historical indifference, for whatever reason, seems to be order of the day. I am unsure why this is the case, but it represents, for me, a missed opportunity—never more so than now, when mutual understanding and co-operation are so thin on the ground.

In setting up the Foundation, and subsequently launching Ibraaz, we sought to somehow bridge this gap in knowledge, albeit in an admittedly modest manner. The choice of visual culture as a way to address cultural indifference came out of my own knowledge of both Western and Arabic art forms. It may seem obvious to some, but visual culture is able—in my experience—to transcend the entrenched positions associated with political, religious, economic, and historical antagonisms. It can, thereafter, open up a generous level of engagement for both self-understanding and for the understanding of others. This is not to suggest we should all agree on the value of cultural forms. On the contrary, we should openly and critically analyse culture at all times. Perhaps this is the ‘gift’ of art: cultural debate is a bonding agent of sorts that promotes open discussions around similarities and, indeed, differences.

This is not, moreover, to promote an instrumentalized version of culture as a form of ‘soft power’—a move that sees culture deployed for political ends and as a way of opening up markets. On the contrary, the Foundation’s initiatives seek to promote culture as a platform for critical and creative debate about visual culture and its role in open societies. The creation of *Ibraaz* in its online version, and now in this series of books, answers to these aims; in particular, the aspiration to create a sustainable dialogue around visual culture and develop systematic forms of historical knowledge for future generations. The long-term, perhaps quixotic, goal is to effect informed levels of debate within the region and beyond. We are conscious that there is much to do in relation to this, but at least this is a step in the right direction.

Although the focus of this series is and will remain North Africa and the Middle East, this is not simply a regional issue; rather, it is a global one. For the Foundation, the promotion of visual culture in the Arab world can only be fully effected if we consider worldwide issues too. The complexities of the region are seen as a prism through which we continue to examine culture within its broader, global contexts. To this end, we are dedicated to providing a forum through research and publishing initiatives, support for exhibitions, conferences, educational seminars, and the development of a collection, that will provide an international context for the region and, reciprocally, develop regional contexts for a global audience.

We began in 2011 with an online publishing project, and we subsequently decided that a print volume—collecting online and newly commissioned essays—was necessary. It seems, despite declarations of their imminent, internet-induced demise, that printed books are still both popular and sought after. We were therefore very pleased, in this respect, when I.B.Tauris also agreed that a volume on these and other topics was not only needed, but an entire series should evolve from these concerns. The broad reach and scope of the essays and artists’ projects included here will hopefully provide ample acknowledgment of our ambition to see the region develop a better understanding of itself and—in time—for the world to better understand culture from the region. I would like, finally, to thank family and friends for their guidance on these matters and the contributors to this volume who have been so generous with their ideas and support.

## **Kamel Lazaar**

Chairman

Kamel Lazaar Foundation

[www.kamellazaarfoundation.org](http://www.kamellazaarfoundation.org)

# Notes on Texts and Artists' Inserts

A number of essays included in this volume were published as part of Ibraaz's online platform in 2012 and 2013, and therefore refer to specific cultural moments and live events as they unfolded across the Middle East. Rather than substantially revise them, we have chosen to maintain the immediacy of reactions to these events, specifically in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, and the timelines associated with them. We are grateful, however, to all our contributors for reviewing anything that has changed radically since original publication. We are also grateful to the artists included here for reviewing their inserts and redesigning them for inclusion in this print volume. The full projects, including videos and interviews with the artists, are all available at <http://www.ibraaz.org/projects> and <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews>



▲  
Wafaa Bilal, *3rdi*, year-long performance, 2010–2011.  
Courtesy of the artist.

# Introduction

Anthony Downey

In 2010, the Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal had a camera surgically inserted into the back of his head. The process involved implanting a titanium plate onto which a camera was mounted and, from the outset, his body rebelled against this foreign object by cutting off blood supply to the area. Through his own unwavering commitment, Bilal persisted with the project and for one year used the embedded camera to record one image per minute of his daily life. The results, covering a period dating from December 14, 2010, to December 18, 2011, or 369 days in total, were streamed live to a global audience via a dedicated website.<sup>1</sup> Presenting acute angles and unexpectedly vertiginous views, the images look arbitrary, distant, lopsided and yet disconcertingly intimate. The first was taken from a car in Doha, Qatar, whereas the last shows a hotel room in Jakarta, Indonesia, complete with a curtain rope framed by a window. The curtain rope, in one of the many visual allusions in this series, resembles a wrecking ball—a perhaps fitting end to a project that was brought to a close when the computer finally crashed.

Technology and new media brought *3rdi* (2010) into being and also, somewhat appropriately, announced its end. However, the concept for the work alludes to more enduring concerns that, according to the artist, arose from a need to objectively capture his past from a non-confrontational point of view.<sup>2</sup> Bilal's own past has been indelibly marked by historical events in Iraq and elsewhere over the last two decades, including the invasion of Kuwait (and the ensuing wars in his homeland); the death of his brother Haji in 2004 (killed by American forces); the subsequent death of his father (from the resulting grief); his time in refugee camps (in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, respectively); and, presently, his life in the United States (where he now teaches at Tisch School of the Arts). In conversation with Bilal, two things become immediately clear about his practice: firstly, his work, produced within the relative comfort zone of the United States, often reflects upon the conflict zones he has left behind; with the difference between the two generating a poignant creative friction.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, when he looks back on his tumultuous travels there is a keen sense of regret that he lacked the means to record those journeys in all their chaos and uncertainty. This ambition to record no doubt appeals to a broader human desire for things—be they the apparently random events of everyday life or the singularity of a tragedy—to make sense. Making sense of a past riven by conflict and uncertainty, moreover, acts as an ameliorative of sorts—a point of reference for the subject to negotiate the precariousness of life.

In its use of new media and digital platforms, *3rdi* offers a significant point of departure for any discussion of contemporary art practices in the Middle East and beyond. It also alludes to a fracturing of historical reality that, for many, has impacted upon how we understand the relative relationship of the subject to both time and space. The invasion of Kuwait in 1990, two wars in Iraq, 11 September, 2001, and an ongoing war in Afghanistan; protests across the region from 2010 onwards, subsequent upheaval in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and elsewhere; and the catastrophic destruction wrought by civil war in Syria—all of these events have arguably created a quandary in both formal representation and interpretation for artists, institutions and critics alike. How, that is to enquire, do you represent such events in a digitized visual continuum where images circulate in an apparently context free, groundless, circle of self-reference and media-based hysteria? This is not, I should observe, an attempt to rehearse the all too weary defeatism of a Baudrillardian-inspired belief in the referential bankruptcy of images and the devolved authority of reality (conflict) in the face of a simulated reality (the representation of conflict); rather, it is to argue that the last two decades—broadly commensurate with the rise of digital technology and ready access to it—has seen a dilemma in representational strategies that has subsequently found considerable purchase in the context of artistic practices, with artists being called upon (and often putting themselves forward) to make sense of events as they unfold. Furthermore, this is not a regional crisis in representation, but a global one: events today, no matter how localised, have become instantaneous in their reach through forms of digital dissemination. Visual culture, in these contexts, positions itself as a key interlocutor in, if not a precursor to, these developments and new media offers, in turn, an increasingly significant if not essential element in understanding the immediacy and contingent impact of events across global sites of reproduction and reception.

Revealing as it does an international horizon of aesthetic engagement that is far from regional, the undoubted role of historical conflict in Bilal's work should not be therefore over-estimated. The artists and discussions encountered throughout this volume, likewise, engage with the practices and subject of new media to explore the flux of historical events and their impact upon the global politics of representation. They often utilize, as a result, new media as a way of critically negotiating, if not realigning, the aesthetic, political, social and historical co-ordinates of their time and respective global locations. Moreover,



▲ Wafaa Bilal, *3rdi*, year-long performance, 2010–11.  
Courtesy of the artist.



▲ Wafaa Bilal, *3rdi*, year-long performance, 2010-11. Courtesy of the artist.

the use of new media in contemporary art practices across North Africa and the Middle East, indeed globally, did not emerge from an ahistorical vacuum; nor should they be considered 'new' as such. All developments in contemporary art have international and regional precedents, and it is invariably the interaction between the two that proves most interesting. In *3rdi*, for example, we can see formal and conceptual elements that stretch back to Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929, a film in which the aperture of the camera and the eye of the cameraman are often superimposed, suturing the gaze onto an animated, machine-like regime of looking. At a key moment in Vertov's film the eponymous man with the movie camera appears above a thronging crowd, his face and head subsumed into that of the camera, becoming one — in an image akin to that of the tripod-like figure of Bilal — with the apparatus of recording.

Whilst it is true that events across the extended region — including the so-called 'Arab Spring' — have informed key elements of cultural practice, for better or worse, the artists and artworks explored throughout *Uncommon Grounds* are not endemically provincial in their subject matter, nor, indeed, are they localized in their ambitions. In art historical terms the use of new media has frequently revealed an aesthetic ambition to explore the often inconsistent relationship of the subject to history, and it is precisely these inconsistencies, amongst others, that inform many of the discussions in this volume. The topographical, cultural and political complexities of North Africa and the Middle East are subsequently a prism through which to elaborate upon the widespread usage of new media. In so doing, as we will see, the practices discussed here reveal the political intransigencies and representational conundrums that mark present-day debates about the Middle East, its history, and how it will come to be understood in the future — a future where, hopefully, we no longer have to resort to using the reductive phrase 'Middle East' as a conceptual point of definition and cultural discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

If artists are going to respond to the immediacy of events, and who is to say they should not, we nevertheless need to remain alert to how the rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution is deployed as a benchmark for discussing, if not determining, the institutional and critical legitimacy of these practices. Revolution, uprisings, internecine warfare, civil conflict, and human rights, all of these points of reference have been deployed in an intensification of interest in the region and the coextensive demand that culture either condemns or defends such events and notions.<sup>5</sup> Again, this is an international rather than provincial concern, inasmuch as there remains the ever-present interpretive danger that visual culture from the region is legitimized through the media-friendly symbolism of conflict — the latter rubric being redolent of colonial ambitions to prescribe the culture of the Middle East to a set of problems that revolve around atavistic conflict and extremist ideology. Such concerns, voiced in the wake of uprisings across the region, remind us that colonial paradigms are not only far from defunct, but easily

resuscitated through an evolving neocolonial preoccupation with topics such as an (apparently) irresolvable form of atavistic conflict brought about by an equally irredeemable strain of dogmatic extremism.

To the extent that there would appear to be an ineluctable logic to these developments, it is all the more crucial that we observe how the rhetoric of revolution effects a subservience of the aesthetic to the spectacle of conflict, not to mention the claims and counter-claims of politics and the often ideological expectations of historicization. Observing the use of new and social media, **Philip Rizk's** essay conveys a monitory note to those who see recent events across the region as being somehow involved in a continuum that stretches back to protests in Europe in 1968.<sup>6</sup> Warning against the inherent spectacle of images associated with revolution, Rizk argues that the agency of the image is key here, circulating as it does in a rhetoric of revolution and owned, ultimately, by commercial agencies that profit from this circulation. For **Franco 'Bifo' Berardi**, there is a similar sense of scepticism when he considers whether new media, specifically social media, has actually, as opposed to ideally, contributed to the democratic expression of popular revolution. For Berardi, social media may not be about enhancing the space of freedom, nor the freedom to organize and protest, but, rather, the optimization of markets and forms of social surveillance that ultimately virtualize social relations and buttress an already overloaded global attention-span. It would be interesting to enquire, for example, into the market share increase in social media companies every time the so-called Facebook or Twitter 'revolution' is mentioned; as it would be to enquire into their respective market shares when news of the National Security Agency's (NSA) involvement in digital surveillance broke as a result of Edward Snowden's revelations.

If art is being increasingly positioned as 'political', 'activist', or 'revolutionary'—capable, that is, of potentially altering public opinion and reconfiguring forms of social engagement—then another investigation emerges: is it now the case that art, by utilizing elements of activist practice, not only generates social debate but also offers unique ways of engaging with these debates? Perhaps the easiest way to understand these developments, which often involve collaborations between artists and publics, is to acknowledge the manner in which culture—which has always adopted an autonomous yet embedded role in social debates—is increasingly placed on the frontline of discussions about public and private space in, say, Tunisia or Egypt. In my own contribution to this volume, 'For the Common Good: Artistic Practices and Civil Society in Tunisia', I examine how recent art practices in Tunisia, including those using installation, participation and new media, have opened up debates around what is meant by the public sphere and civil society in the context of cities that have majority Muslim populations. Implicit within this enquiry is a contiguous questioning of whether art can support a 'common good' and, if so, how do communities support such practices in turn. We alight here upon

a fundamental concern of our time: if we can all agree that art as a practice has a social value, and few would disagree with that, then what obligation, if indeed any, does society have in supporting such practices and the manner in which they recalibrate the relationships that exist between cultural development and social activism.

The sense that visual culture has become a key site of antagonism for the forces of secularism and, for want of a better term, extremism — although both terms elide a multiplicity of subject positions — is all the more notable when we reflect upon how new media and interactive, participative artworks encourage community-based actions and citizen-based forms of self-representation and enquiry. This is made explicit in **Mosireen's** 'Revolution Triptych', a collective manifesto of sorts included here in all its immediacy and forcefulness. Established during the Egyptian uprising in 2011, Mosireen is a non-profit media collective based in downtown Cairo. Initially dedicated to the documentation of widespread protests, it has since become a platform for cultural activism and exchange, supporting worldwide public screenings, open discussions, and events. The organization also provides training and technical support for citizen-based journalism that further discloses the abuses carried out by Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the way in which information has been controlled for political ends.

These concerns are taken up by **Jens Maier-Rothe, Dina Kafafi** and **Azin Feizabadi** in their collective essay 'Citizens Reporting and the Fabrication of Collective Memory'. The rise in the popularity of citizen journalism, they argue, has effected a blurring of the lines between journalism, social media and other professional fields, which could eventually contest censorship and restore a degree of transparency across heavily politicized media channels. For the authors the implications are profound, determining as they do a potential shift in how we understand citizenship, cultural practices, social participation, historiography and collective memory.

If we can talk cogently and consistently about collective memories and the call to action brought about by social media, as but one example of new media, there is a simultaneous need to focus on the micro level of such developments: the site of the performative self as a contested means of being in the world. For **Nat Muller**, social media platforms are the realm of body-free interaction and the performative promotion of the self. Focusing on *33 Rounds and a Few Seconds* (2012), a work by Lebanese playwrights and visual artists Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh, Muller details how the disembodied hyper-presence of social media confronts us with the ultimate form of absence; namely, death. In a move that explicitly reconstructs an absent subject through the use of new media, *33 Rounds and a Few Seconds* is devoid of human actors; it therefore produces an uncanny mirror of the performative forms of self virtualization implicit in social media.

In the specific environment of Turkey, **Derya Yücel** further examines the collective element implied in social media and argues that digital practices have, in part, released art from its status as an object and thereafter expanded the scope of its sociopolitical import. For Yücel, who is careful to note how historical events impact upon contemporary practices and the ideal of collectivity, social media represents both an unprecedented platform for social activism and a means for artists to engage in forms of institutional critique that were until recently unavailable to them. In **Hamzamolnár's** joint contribution, a series of similar points are addressed in an inquiry into how recent events in Egypt and elsewhere not only pose new levels of pressure for artists and citizens alike, but reveal a perennial consideration: do artists living in a perpetual state of crisis have more responsibility to act—through their practices or otherwise—than those who live under 'normal' circumstances? This question is of course moot—artists do what artists do—but it is not so easily dismissed if we consider how pressures from international institutions and global curatorial preoccupations seem to call for artists to be more socially and politically active if they are to be considered legitimate in both revolutionary and post-revolutionary contexts.

The co-option of revolutionary images, by institutions and curators alike, are also central to **Maxa Zoller's** analysis of what the 'market' does to images of revolution. This enquiry is directed to artists working in the wake of revolution in Egypt and also the commercial appropriation of revolutionary images. The uncritical market co-option of such images, and the literal use of revolutionary images by curators and art institutions, reveals how imagery can become not just redundant but reactionary; a force for conservatism that disavows any attempt to self-reflexively critique how images are deployed to 'market' products and art alike. As **Omar Kholeif** usefully proposes, the art produced with the so-called Arab world also has its own generative conditions of production and reproduction that extends beyond engaging with the curiosity of international cultural brokers, who are more often than not interested in such practices only insofar as they answer to often limited institutional concerns—a common refrain throughout this volume.

There are, needless to say, broader philosophical concerns to be examined here that further interrogate any easy dissociation of the aesthetic from the political and, in turn, any cursory co-option of the former by the latter. Throughout **Dina Matar's** concise and insightful reflection on the politics of aesthetics in the digital age, she notes that artistic and political practices have been increasingly shaped with digital platforms in mind. In both instances, these platforms produce and make visible alternative modes of social and political engagement. Matar argues that we can only fully develop critical arguments about new media if we examine the synthetic, cultural, social, political and historical dynamics and materiality of digital transformation. This call for historicization is crucial to any analysis of contemporary art practices

across the region, recalling as it does the imperative that such developments are not seen in a conveniently ahistorical light but as embedded events with their own internal, if not localised logic.

In a series of key essays presented here, historicization and its contexts forms the basis for discussions of how new and social media have reconfigured artistic practices and how artists have, in turn, defined the ways in which new and social media interact with social spheres. For **Sheyma Buali**, the digital can often mask the elemental and quotidian elements of revolution in the name of its own internal aesthetic, one that emerges in so-called 'revolutionary art' and the popularity of exhibitions across the world that address the 'Arab Spring' or, indeed, revolution in general. Viewers, in turn, have become accustomed to the digitized, highly aestheticized, spectacular images of emotive events, so much so that the reality of political processes in flux can be forgotten or occluded, and this despite the latter's radical interrogation of what it is to represent such events in the first place. For **Nermin Saybaşılı**, in an essay that foregrounds the more obviously formal elements of new media, the digital world can indeed act as a potential site for forms of freedom (by triggering a collective aspiration for meaning), but it can also, alternatively, alienate individuals from what lies directly in front of them. Digital media can produce, in sum, absence as a predicate to a radical, albeit simulated, virtualized presence. With these points in mind, Saybaşılı focuses on how the digital voice in audiovisual artworks maps the performative and temporal elements involved in artistic production. Interrogating the technological regime of inherent reproducibility that underwrites digital media, these and other essays explore the degree to which it offers a productive 'democratisation' of visual culture or merely, as some have argued, capitalises upon the affect of immediacy at the expense of depth and engagement?

This line of enquiry is continued in **Maymanah Farhat's** 'New Media and the Spectacle of the War on Terror'. Examining a selection of works from Jacqueline Salloum, Hamdi Attia, Nida Sinnokrot, Wafaa Bilal and Rheim Alkadhi, Farhat explores how they each contest, through the appropriation of imagery, the spectacularization of conflict in the wake of the so-called 'war on terror'. Through co-option, quoting, appropriation, interactive performances and online platforms, the artists examined in this essay thwart the inner workings of the spectacular and its digitization. For **Laura U. Marks**, in her perspicacious essay on 'glitches' in new media, it is the fallout in representation, rather than the reproduction or appropriation of images *per se*, that becomes key to these complex discussions. Marks observes that the initial urgency with which videos of unrest and revolution were recorded, uploaded, and downloaded ultimately relied on forms of digital compression that produced conspicuous glitches. These glitches, she argues, were subsequently registered as a problem—a conflict in communication and interpretation—and not necessarily explored for their expressive qualities. For Marks, it is precisely



▲►  
Roy Dib, *Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear*, 2012.  
Copyright and courtesy of the artist.



this expressiveness that needs to be explored. Discussing works from Roy Dib, Gheith Al-Amine, Rania Stephan, Roy Samaha, Ahmed Kamel, Tariq Hashim, Kareem Lotfy and Ahmed Elshaer, Marks writes that,

Glitch is a regular occurrence in countries where electricity is undependable, where sudden power outages interfere in the electronic production of screen outputs ... Many artists in the Arab world explore the aesthetics of low-resolution video as a metaphor for selective memory and forgetting, an examination of archives and a direct indication of practices of copying, pirating and making do with inferior copies.

Again, there is a sense here that artists are exposing the fault-lines in representation that have emerged in new media as a way of critically engaging with the aesthetic, political, social and historical moments out of which these practices emerge.

In his examination of events in Syria, **Tarek Khoury** argues that the digital can also reveal other more easily overlooked aesthetic paradigms. In the proposal that video activists in Syria today are also 'capturing one of humanity's most fundamental forms of communication—handwriting', Khoury argues that these handwritten placards and street graffiti reveal a lineage between traditional forms of communication and the aesthetics of new media. This issue of digital memorialization re-emerges in **Amal Khalaf's** reading of images associated with Manama's Pearl Square, the locus of short-lived protests in Bahrain in early 2011. For Khalaf, the subject of civic responsibility and responsiveness is located not so much in practice, to begin with, but in an object: Bahrain's demolished Pearl Roundabout, or *Dowar al Lulu*, a key site that became famous in the international media as the symbol of the Gulf State's answer to the 'Arab Spring'. Today, Khalaf argues, Lulu has become a powerful symbol for thousands of people recasting their ideals in the monument's image: as a 'public space', or *midan*—Arabic for civic square—it no longer exists as a physical 'thing' but, rather, lives on digitally as an image-memory.

The image-memory and its performative unpredictability is examined in **Annabelle Sreberny's** occasionally amusing, if not astonishing, exploration of a phenomenon that draws on the physical reproduction (and subsequent online dissemination) of a cardboard cut-out of Ayatollah Khomeini. Forming the centre-piece of a ceremony on February 1, 2012, this cardboard cut-out, in its outsized, misguided venture to represent the Ayatollah's triumphant return to Tehran in 1979, is a bewildering attempt to apparently counter the virtualization/death of a subject through the, admittedly contradictory, formal use of digital, reproductive media. The cut-out *is* the Ayatollah incarnated for the purposes of these events and, in all its stoicism in the face of such an ignominious resurrection (and the manner in which it went viral), it references,



▲ Roy Samaha, still from *Transparent Evil*, 2011. 27 minutes, HD video. Images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Tanit.



▲ Roy Samaha, still from *Untitled for Several Reasons*, 2003. 12 minutes, SD video. Images courtesy of the artist and Gallery Tanit.

albeit unintentionally, 'the immense power of a satirical image to deconstruct a hegemonic discourse ...'. Again, we are well served here to remember that representation, be it digital or otherwise, has a tendency to reconfigure the relationship between history and politics in often unexpected ways.

In amongst these pertinent issues there is one that underwrites a number of discursive elements in this volume: what effect, if any, do artists have on their social and political environments? In their appeal and broad reach, can artists, to put it bluntly, engage constituencies beyond the art world? This topic is no doubt the subject of another book, but it needs to be raised if we are to fully engage with new media and critical practice as components in social and political orders. These questions find purchase in **Timo Kaabi-Linke's** essay, where he argues that artists, writers, actors, choreographers and filmmakers must find subversive ways to undermine governmental restrictions and extra-governmental repressions if they are to engage in a broader discussion about the role of, for example, religious freedom and cultural expression. These debates are all the more germane in countries that have achieved hard-won freedoms at the expense of subsequently withdrawing similar freedoms from others.

In relation to critical practices and new media, the coalition of international artists working under the name **Gulf Labor** was set up to ensure that the rights of migrant workers are protected during the construction and maintenance of museums in Abu Dhabi.<sup>7</sup> In May 2009 Human Rights Watch published a damning report on labour conditions in Abu Dhabi and the widespread abuse of migrant labourers, including forced labour, the confiscation of passports, the withholding of wages, and working conditions deemed unfit, if not fatal, for many. In March 2012, despite noting improvements since the beginning of their involvement, Gulf Labor observed continued failings across a number of areas in relation to the building of Saadiyat Island, the location of what will eventually be the world's biggest cultural district, featuring the largest Guggenheim Museum to date, an outpost of the Louvre, a Zaha Hadid-designed arts centre and concert hall, and a New York University campus. The precarious nature of global labour is not only a situation to be investigated by artists, but also, it appears, a structural necessity for elements of the art world to continue to develop and capitalise upon structural investments in culture.

Contemporary artists across North Africa and the Middle East today are not only developing the critical field of new media, but also suggesting alternative platforms for social and political engagement. In an attempt to rearticulate the relationship between artistic practices and art as activism (not to mention art and its apparent relationship to politics), whilst also addressing new and social media, this volume nevertheless abides by one relatively clear point: art as a practice — inasmuch as it is about what can be seen, said and heard in a given social order — is always already political. The overall focus of this book is accordingly not so much on the role of artists as activists — a role

that can be readily co-opted into the often divisive, issue-led world of political activism—as it is on how artistic practices expand the very notion of cultural engagement, political activism, popular protest and social participation. To this end, and whilst the essays collected here are varied in tone, register and content, the concerns are broadly similar: how does new media, in its relatively nascent practices and dispersed networks, produce social formations and evolving ways of reimagining the often prescriptive and reductive rhetoric of political, historical and cultural debates? Finally, can cultural production, in opening up how we understand (or fail to understand) the world in which we live today, not only reflect upon existing events but offer ways for communities to engage in discussions about the meaning and undoubtedly profound impact of those events on their lives and futures?

1. See: <http://www.3rdi.me>.
2. See: <http://wafaabil.com/thirdi/> (accessed 24 November 2013).
3. In other works, such as *Domestic Tension*, 2007, Bilal subjected himself to a constant barrage of paintballs, covering in a room for 30 days trying to avoid 60,000 random shots from a computer-controlled paintball gun (which was in turn controlled by online participants who could direct the gun).
4. I have addressed the issue of regional topology and the politics surrounding cultural practices elsewhere. See 'Beyond the Former Middle East: Aesthetics, Civil Society, and the Politics of Representation', *Ibraaz*, June 1, 2011. Downloadable at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/8> (accessed February, 2014).
5. A far from comprehensive listing of recent exhibitions that sought to reflect upon artistic practices through the prism of revolution would include *Creative Dissent: Arts of the Arab World Uprisings* (Arab American National Museum, USA, 2014); *Bamako Encounters: Arab Spring* (Bamako Biennale of African Photography, Mali, 2012); *Culture in Defiance: Street Art from Syria's Uprising* (Rich Mix, UK, 2013); *Culture in Defiance: Continuing Traditions of Satire, Art and the Struggle for Freedom in Syria* (Prince Claus Fund Gallery, 2012); and *View From Inside* (Fotofest 2014 Biennial, USA, 2014).
6. There were also many attempts during the Egyptian revolution to compare the occupation of Tahrir Square with other occupations in New York and London. Occupy London were *in situ* next to St Paul's Cathedral from 15 October 2011–14 June 2012. Occupy Wall St began its occupation of Zuccotti Park in New York's financial district on 17 September 2011; it was forcibly ended on 15 November 2011. Both events occurred during uprisings in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. To this end, comparisons seemed opportunistically allusive rather than analogical. More specifically, it may have been to do with a simple degree of simultaneity rather than a confluence of concerns.
7. Amongst the artists involved in Gulf Labor are Haig Aivazian, Shaina Anand, Ayreen Anastas, Doug Ashford, Doris Bittar, Tania Bruguera, Sam Durant, Rene Gabri, Mariam Ghani, Hans Haacke, Brian Holmes, Rana Jaleel, Guy Mannes-Abbott, Naeem Mohaiemen, Walid Raad, Michael Rakowitz, Andrew Ross, Gregory Sholette, Beth Stryker, Ashok Sukumaran and Murtaza Vali.



# **For the Common Good?** Artistic Practices and Civil Society in Tunisia<sup>1</sup>

Anthony Downey

**Doing art means displacing art's borders, just as doing politics means displacing the borders of what is acknowledged as the political ...**

*Jacques Rancière*<sup>2</sup>

**The job of civil society is to launch genuine debate on political, economic, and cultural emancipation, and to avoid superficial and unproductive polarization.**

*Tariq Ramadan*<sup>3</sup>

On 10 June 2012, in La Marsa, a city adjacent to Tunis, the art exhibition *Printemps des Arts* (*Springtime of the Arts*) came to an end amidst ugly protests from artists involved in the show and protestors—largely identified as Salafis (a collective term used for the most conservative Islamists)—who were offended by the content of some of the works on display. The two groups became locked in increasingly acrimonious exchanges that extended to physical abuse, a running battle with local police, death threats, destruction of artworks, the vandalization of the Palais Abdelliya, where the exhibition was held, and a call for Mehdi Mabrouk, the Tunisian Minister for Culture, to resign. In the days that followed, protestors alleged blasphemy and used Facebook to publicize what were later determined to be doctored images of works in the original show.<sup>4</sup> The clashes with police represented the single largest show of public unrest since the revolution in Tunisia, and the Palais Abdelliya, which had held *Printemps des Arts* for over a decade without much by way of previous controversy, effectively became central to the debate around what could be displayed in a public space and who could have access to it. It also foregrounded a question that has become central to every discussion around political freedom and self-determination: who controls civil, secular, cultural, public, religious and political space in modern-day Tunisia?

The intention to provoke debate about cultural and political space had been clearly outlined in the curator Meriem Bouderbala's accompanying text for the show's catalogue, in which she proposed that '[i]n the current context, it is all about occupying cultural territory, of allowing everyone access to it and contributing to a strong democratic cultural constitution that demonstrates the strength of Tunisia's creative potential'.<sup>5</sup> These lofty sentiments display a degree of naivety: the use of terms such as 'occupying' and 'constitution' and, later in the same text, 'resistance' and 'civil society', placed *Printemps des Arts* firmly in the realm of Tunisia's political turmoil. The subsequent reaction from protestors was therefore inevitable—and, indeed, seemed to be part of the avowed intention behind the show.<sup>6</sup> Tunisia, under the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who had ruled for 34 years until his ignominious departure in 2011, had not seen much by way of contemporary art events and certainly none that had addressed issues around secularism, human rights, freedom of expression, gender, repression and the female form.<sup>7</sup> Controversy was bound to ensue insofar as *Printemps des Arts* was placed in an antagonistic realm where debates about public space and secular self-determination were key to any political narrative of post-revolutionary Tunisia. Whatever the rights and wrongs of this situation, and it is evident that both sides of the argument have since been strained to mean different things to different people, culture is a political battleground in post-revolutionary Tunisia.

In the days following the attacks on the exhibition, it was announced that the Palais Abdelliya would be closed down as a cultural venue. On *Tunisia 1*, a national evening news programme, Nouredine El Khademi, the Minister of Religious Affairs, accused the artists of insulting Islam and called upon Tunisians to defend their religion. Following violence across a number of towns and cities, in the wake of such an incendiary call, dawn to dusk curfews were imposed. If a further sense of what is at stake in the practices and institutional contexts of culture in modern-day Tunisia is needed, we need look no further than the unhelpful interjection by the Imam of the Zitouna mosque in Medina of Tunis, Houcine Laabidi, who explicitly called for the death of all the artists involved in the exhibition.

Putting to one side *Printemps des Arts'* engagement with what are considered by some to be taboo subjects, the combustive mix of political opportunism and civil rights focused further attention on what still remains to this day a fraught and hard-won freedom from despotism in Tunisia.<sup>8</sup> The events surrounding *Printemps des Arts* highlight a key sociopolitical element in the post-revolutionary landscape of Tunisia, a factor that is crucial to understanding fundamental aspects of what is happening in other countries that underwent revolution across the region: we are effectively witnessing the re-emergence of institutions associated with civil society. If we understand civil society as an attempt to reconcile public and private mores without resort to state control or governmental decree, then these open, often rancorous

confrontations are not only inevitable but, in the name of free speech, necessary. Nevertheless, the events outlined above also direct us to a core element in visual culture: it produces mini-publics, debates and audiences that, in turn, form part of larger organizations and informal social networks that are an indelible part of civil society and the public sphere. And this fact, for interim governments unused to the manifestation of civil society, produces both suspicion and occasional kneejerk reactions to cultural events.

Across North Africa and the Middle East, forms of civil renewal are emerging that are not necessarily associated with the right to vote, the latter seen in the 'West'—if we can still use that term with any degree of critical purchase—as a sign of a democratic order. These ideals of civil renewal involve active citizenship and the strengthening of community bonds through nascent civil and community-based groups and activities, of which cultural practices are but one element, albeit an important one. For writers such as Tariq Ramadan, the emergence of a stable, functioning 'civil state'—a phrase being promoted by a number of Islamist movements across the region—and responsible governance, in the wake of uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, is coterminous with the emergence of a robust civil society.<sup>9</sup> Without it, Ramadan argues, there can be no emancipatory politics as such. Moreover, without the institution of civil society and forms of civic engagement, the momentum and promise of the various uprisings across the region cannot be sustained. In this context, Ramadan argues that '[a] genuine, tangible process of reform, democratization and liberation cannot take place without a broad-based social movement that mobilizes civil society as well as public and private institutions'.<sup>10</sup> The democratization and emancipation of the Middle East and North Africa depends on the mobilization of civil society, Ramadan argues further, and the key task for Arab civil society is to promote opposition platforms that allow for pluralism.

We turn here to a decisive, two-part question: what role does culture have in the development of civil society and, secondly, can artistic practices negotiate the public sphere, invite participation in cultural issues, and thereafter strengthen the bonds of civil society by inviting voices and agents into the debate about cultural pluralism? Before fully answering this question, we need to address a number of interrelated caveats. For one, civil society may be an arena of contestation within which public concerns are played out, but, as we will see, it is equally a site of exclusion and exclusivity—only certain voices can be heard in the context of any given social sphere, despite claims to the contrary. The contestation between rival groups involved in the uproar surrounding the *Printemps des Arts* affair attests to this sense of contestation. Secondly, to suggest that art as a practice and the cultural institutions it supports, and is in turn supported by, should somehow add to a common good or the goal of civil society is to entertain that most cherished of neo-liberal, state-sponsored ideals: the instrumentalization of culture so that it



▲ Hela Ammar, *Revolution*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.





▲  
Héla Ammar, *la liberté appartient au peuple: Freedom Belongs to the People*, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.

is answerable to the narrow political priorities of a given moment in time.<sup>11</sup> To these, we must add one final caveat: to promote the development of civil society as an ameliorative to the social and political unrest occurring across the region is misguided if we understand the latter only in terms of being a Western import into the region. If we are to fully explore how culture can contribute to a common good that is not simply a function of the state, the outcome of religious edict, or the self-serving logic of the market, we need to explore what exactly is meant by civil society across North Africa and the Middle East and how, importantly, this term is understood in the context of cities that have a majority Muslim population. Whilst advocating art and its institutions as a key factor in the development of civil society across North Africa and the Middle East, moreover, it is crucial that we consider how such practices can both support and equally question the parameters and effectiveness of civil society in countries where it has been largely notable by its absence and, in some cases, widespread proscription.

- 1 -

Civil society, in the broadest sense, is composed of voluntary social relationships, civic and social organizations, and other institutions that are relatively distinct from government and profit-led initiatives. Clubs, community organizations, men's groups, women's groups, non-governmental organizations, private voluntary organizations, sports groups, environmental activists, cultural groups, religious organizations, social enterprises, academe, activist groups, charities, support groups, trade unions, artists' groups, art institutions, and community-based art projects—all form the bedrock of civil society. In perhaps simplistic terms, civil society is therefore often contrasted with state control and is seen as a bulwark against the excesses of the state and the short-termism of market forces.<sup>12</sup> Understood as a field that exists within social orders but detached from the state (and the market), civil society therefore allows for a community to independently represent itself culturally and politically as a social body—and this is crucial to any discussion of artistic practices in Tunisia today and their impact on social, political and cultural orders. The site of self-identification and public discussion, civil society is a dynamic space: an informal site where social movements develop and call into question the values and ideologies of a given political order. Developed within the context of civil society, these social movements are invariably the expression of common concerns and, moreover, the expression of a collective will towards new forms of self-identification. During times of either state repression—when open, public discussion and disagreement are outlawed—or when markets privatize public space in the name of private interests, civil society invariably struggles to find a foothold, as do the voices and self-determinations of communities.<sup>13</sup> As a form of symbolic structuring that generates

new identities and collective values, civil society produces sense-making and forms of self-identification; they act, in sum, as autonomous spaces that promote participation in society and its structures.<sup>14</sup>

In the wake of the events surrounding *Printemps des Arts* at the Palais Abdelliya in June 2012, Mehdi Mabrouk, the Tunisian Minister for Culture, reportedly said the following: 'It's enough for art to be beautiful, it shouldn't be revolutionary, it should be nice.'<sup>15</sup> This statement, from a Minister of Culture no less, betrays a simplistic attitude towards art as a practice that borders on foolishness. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring its content further because it also goes to the heart of the matter concerning the politics of culture and its imbrication within civil society. In suggesting that artists, be they revolutionary or not, should steer away from the political realm, Mabrouk is actually making a case for the opposite: in arguing that art has no place in politics he is explicitly politicizing art and bringing it into the political sphere, albeit in terms of prohibition. What could be more political than placing a sanction on an activity within a given social order?<sup>16</sup> If art has no place in the political sphere, as Mabrouk suggests, and should thereafter maintain a quaint indifference to it, art is irrevocably politicized. Doing art, to paraphrase my epigraph, is to displace and extend the boundaries of art. In this instance, art as a practice, considered a private pursuit with a public dimension, extends into debates around civil society and thereafter displaces its borders of engagement to include discussions about public space and access to such spaces.

If art is indeed increasingly positioned as 'political' by virtue of being denied a role in the political realm, it is obvious that it is considered capable of potentially altering opinion, not to mention reconfiguring engagement with various communities. Inherent within Mabrouk's offhand and imprudent remark is an often occluded but nonetheless potent counter-proposition that alerts us to art's potential to effect social debate in a country such as Tunisia. Exhibitions in public institutions, of which there are few, are representative of emerging communities, and reactions to them are testament to the sense that what is at stake here is a common ground upon which to voice debate, entertain disagreement and engage in discussions about public and private space, the rights of the individual, freedom of expression, the (often expansive) meaning of the term 'sacred', secular determinism, the role of religion in the workings of state, the need for good, responsible and responsive governance and the principle of rational self-interest in the context of the common good. And central to this is the role of culture in fostering a sense of identity as well as opening up debates about the logic of civic and political imaginations. Art, in this instance, can re-imagine that which often remains unimaginable in political terms.

In March of 2011, a year or so before the events described above, and three months after Ben Ali had been forced into exile on 14 January 2011, a street-based artwork was conceived by a number of artists under the title *Inside Out: Artocracy in Tunisia*. The event featured the portraits of 100 Tunisians—deemed, for want of a better word, ‘ordinary’—placed in prominent positions around the city of Le Kram, a town situated between the port of Tunis and Carthage. The images were posted in places where portraits would have previously hung of the former (and by then disgraced) president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. One of the photographers involved, Marco Berrebi, was reported as saying that *Inside Out* was about giving people the freedom to debate the photographs and to come to their own conclusions.<sup>17</sup> Implicit in the term ‘artocracy’ we find an interesting combination of aesthetic practice and democratic self-determination that is no doubt a key element in the project overall: the foregrounding of art as means to self-determination or, at least, a form of civil self-organization.

In the project, moreover, we can see an aesthetic gambit—the positioning of images in a public space—with a view to provoking debate. *Inside Out* would also appear to be concerned with occupying cultural territory and allowing access to it through images and symbols, an intention that re-emerged in the essay by Meriem Bouderbala, quoted earlier, which accompanied *Printemps des Arts* in 2012. However, interestingly, the first incarnation of *Inside Out*, in the town of La Goulette, a suburb north of Tunis and not far from Le Kram, was met with a less than sympathetic response when local people angrily objected to it and the project was abandoned. Furthermore, posters pasted on the Porte de France in central Tunis were summarily torn down. The former incarnation of this project in La Goulette, despite government authorization (and therefore tacit support for the promotion of cultural production within the context of civil space and public debate), would appear to highlight the sensitivities surrounding the use of public space—who has the right to use it and who is barred from using it—that formed one of the key areas of outright protest in Tunisia in the early part of 2011. Although the precise reasons for the defacement of the original posters remain obscure (and could have had more to do with the legacy of covert surveillance procedures in a former police state), such reactions highlight the fact that visual culture remains a potent topic for the population of Tunisia as a whole, and not just for so-called extremists.

Whilst the Palais Abdelliya affair was largely focused on the private space of an art institution (which the public could enter), *Inside Out: Artocracy in Tunisia* was very much about public, civil space in which a cultural project was staged. Public and private rub up against one another here in forceful and unpredictable ways and this is perhaps part of the problem with developing civil society in general: the opposition between public morals and private beliefs is precisely what civil society sets out to accommodate, but this is



▲ Héla Ammar, *Sidi Bouzid*, 2011. Courtesy the artist.



▲ Héla Ammar, *La Marsa*, 2011. Courtesy the artist.

only possible if the space produced answers to a common good that benefits all. The common good must remain precisely that: common to all. What both events exposed is the manner in which artistic practices, in their ineluctable relationship to civil society and public space, are firmly on the frontline of key constitutional and political debates, regardless of the subject matter being addressed in actual artworks or practices. What *Inside Out: Artocracy in Tunisia* highlighted, intentionally or otherwise, was the fact that civil society cannot be controlled by culture—nor the state or the market for that matter—but remains a site of antagonistic and agonistic forces that do not necessarily yield to the liberal ideal of consensus. In the historical absence of civil society, its emergence can provide potential flashpoints even for those who actively support it as a welcome development for countries emerging from decades of despotism.

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In its proposition of a collective, mutually engaging and shared sense of the social sphere that works in the name of a common societal good (and, thereafter, for the common good of the many and not just the few), the term civil society increasingly indicates public activities that include but are not limited to political self-organization, community-based action, a concern for human rights, quality of life, and the collective expression through cultural events.<sup>18</sup> This ambition has become a key component for a number of art institutions across North Africa and the Middle East that actively promote the relationship between artistic practices and civil society. I would note here, in particular, Christine Tohme's articulation of the goal of Ashkal Alwan, a leading arts organization based in Beirut. As Tohme observes,

I am interested in creating civic pockets. We have lost our public spaces today because the control over such spaces is unfortunately decided by the victor—the victor always dominates public space. It is always the winner who controls the space. I am interested in these small pockets that exist outside of the system and outside of the public spaces where national discourses dominate; where you find a seepage between the artistic and the civic.<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere, Dar al Ma'mûn, based in Marrakech, foregrounds questions of public space and civil society in their programme and institutional dialogues.<sup>20</sup> Returning to Beirut, the arts organization Zico House similarly promotes itself as a civil society organization for culture and development. In Iraq, the Ruya Foundation for Contemporary Art (RUYA), the commissioners of the official Iraq Pavilion for the 55th Venice Biennale, likewise places prominent emphasis on creating 'a network of intercultural events that can contribute to the development of civil society in Iraq'.<sup>21</sup>

This is admittedly a cursory overview of organizations that foreground the relationship between visual culture and civil society across the Middle East, and we should note that the terms civil society and civil space are not necessarily being used as a counterpart to how they are understood in, say, Britain or France; nor is there a suggestion that civil society can be transposed to the region as a guarantor for the emergence and sustainability of public space for debate and disagreement. To suggest as much is of the same order of delusion that promotes Western-style 'democracy' and consensus in the region as the only possible solution to what has been decades of cultural, political, social and economic malaise.<sup>22</sup> However, community-based, cooperative-inclined, non-state-funded, and not-for-profit organizations, in whatever form they take (be they cultural or otherwise), are crucial to the development of a common ground upon which a social and political order can fully emerge and actualize real change through forms of disagreement and dialogue.<sup>23</sup>

When the term civil society is applied to Muslim countries, however, it is often viewed as a form of Westernization that is both secular and anti-religious. For Hanan Hanafi, this generalization merely confuses the issue: whilst the concept of civil society is indeed a Western one (and focused on individual relations within the public sphere), most of its key features are to be found in both Islamic ethical theory and Islamic institutions. The appeal to civil society needs to be thereafter understood alongside the reformist, modernist legacy that was successively quashed by despotism and, increasingly, extremism in the region.<sup>24</sup> 'Islamic theory and practice', Hanafi proposes,

sustain a number of legitimate groupings existing between the state and the individual. These groupings are endowed with their own sphere of autonomy, free from government intrusion, which made Islamic societies historically far less monolithic and undifferentiated than some Western stereotypes of a theocratic society would allow.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, for Tariq Ramadan, continuing on from his argument as previously outlined above, civil society allows for an active engagement with Islamic heritage:

As Arab societies awaken, as peoples achieve political liberation, to invoke Islam needs to liberate minds through the acquisition of knowledge, autonomous rationality, critical thinking and freedom of thought: the very definition of pluralism, responsible citizenship, and of civil society that functions as an interface between institutions and the state.<sup>26</sup>

Amongst the institutions addressed by Hanafi are ones that effectively operationalize the actual concept of civil society. The wielder of power (variously the *imam*, *khalifa* or *sultan*), for example, was always attended by the *'ulama*: those charged with interpreting the intention of the law (*shari'a*). That this process was open to abuse is undoubted; however, in theory, the *'ulama* were intended to be independent of political authority and thereafter able to maintain the checks and balances needed to curtail power if necessary. Implied here is the informal bulwark needed—the safety net between the power of the state and the individual—if civil society is to emerge as anything more than an abstract ideal.<sup>27</sup> To these already potent elements, Hanafi also addresses the *diwan al-mazalim*, a small claims court of popular appeal, and the *mazalim* court, to which any Muslim can appeal if an injustice has been done to him by a rule or the ruler's agent. It is notable how the event that ignited the uprisings across the region in December 2010 was arguably caused by the very absence of courts of civil appeal such as the *diwan al-mazalim*. The event in question involved the actions of Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed Tunisian attempting to make ends meet by selling vegetables from a cart, who was subsequently harassed and slapped in the face by a municipal official, had his wares and scales confiscated and who, when denied a fair hearing to air his grievances, committed himself to an unforgiving act of self-immolation. The conflagration that followed has been well documented and its effects are still unfolding across the region.<sup>28</sup>

Suggesting that civil society has an objective and verifiable place in Muslim society today is to note, alongside Hanafi, that the threat to civil society is not related to Islamic definitions of the idea *per se*, but to the historical legacy of despotic governments and an over-zealous determination of who has the right to speak—when, where and to whom—in the context of public space. It is precisely the call for reform and pluralism that started the uprisings across the region after, as noted, decades of cultural, political, social and economic malaise. One further feature of that malaise was the effective subjugation and outlawing of the institutions, cultural or otherwise, associated with civil society. Hanafi observes that the failure of Islamic modernism and secular nationalism, not to mention the ideal of pan-Arabism, has effectively played into the hands of fundamentalism and the forces of conservatism.<sup>29</sup>

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If we can argue that politics is reflected in the sum of power relationships that exists in a given sociopolitical order, then any reflection upon that order or any broadening of those relations effects a change in how we view and engage with the political. And that, in and of itself, is a political act: to change how people engage, what they see, how they interact and what they hear (and indeed fear), can only ever be political in its effect. Thereafter we must observe that the innate power of the political, for many, is the ability to determine what is and

what is not political as such, just as Mehdi Mabrouk attempted to do in his proscription of art from the political realm in the wake of the furore surrounding *Printemps des Arts*. Any expansion or retraction of the political order, and who has access to it, is an interjection into the syntax and logic of producing meaning and sense. In the moment of redefining the realm and scope of the political, and the core debate about what constitutes public, private and civil space within that order of the political, new forms of subjecthood, in sum, can be articulated, as can new forms of protest.<sup>30</sup>

So, what role will culture play in the formulation of civil society, not to mention forms of civil protest, in countries where dissent can still result in imprisonment or worse? What place do cultural organizations have in the Middle East when it comes to the broader social, political and historical structure of those environments? I want to return to where we more or less began and end with a quote from Rancière, who proposes that '[t]here exists a specific sensory experience—the aesthetic—that holds the promise of both a new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community'.<sup>31</sup> Artistic practice opens up a horizon of future possibility within which civic imagination can flourish. Indeed, art as a practice contributes to the forms that civic space assumes whilst also engaging with public space through various modalities of engagement and resistance. To this end, support for the potentiality inherent within cultural practices and the way in which they are already involved in the context of (and support for) civil society is not only needed, but remains essential to the success of the political sphere. The need for supporters of the arts to develop new strategies for supporting the common good, common ground and communal-based practices of art as an institution has never been greater than it is now in the context of, for example, Tunisia, where civil society is precisely that which is most under threat after what for many must have appeared an interminable hibernation. This is not, finally, about art as a form of political protest (an all too easily co-opted cultural paradigm), nor is this to confuse the artist as protestor (or vice versa). Rather, this is about the potential of art as a practice to open up horizons of possibility for civic imaginations to emerge, and be thereafter supported within a community-based network of social relations that remain independent of the diktats of politics, the edicts of religion and the deterministic, often divisive, rationale of the market.

1. This essay is an extensively revised and extended version of two earlier essays: 'Common Grounds: Artistic Practices, Civil Society, and Secular Determination in Tunisia Today', published in *Ibraaz.org* and *ArteEast.org*. Available at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/45/> (accessed 21 December 2013); and an essay co-published with *ArteEast* in *ArteZine*, guest edited by Ceren Erdem and entitled 'ANEW: Retelling the Stories of The Past and The Future'. Available at <http://arteeast.org/pages/artenews/ANEW/1549/> accessed 21 December 2013).
2. Jacques Rancière, 'The Paradoxes of Political Art', in Steve Corcoran (ed. and trans.), *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (Continuum: London, 2012), pp. 134–51, p. 149.
3. Tariq Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening: Islam and the New Middle East* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 159.
4. The question of how blasphemy and the accusation of apostasy is stifling and delegitimizing critical and political debate across the Muslim world has been examined by Paul Marshall and Nina Shea in their comprehensive volume, *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes Are Choking Freedom Worldwide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2011 passim. Marshall and Shea argue that the accusations of 'blasphemy', 'apostasy' or 'insulting Islam' are deployed with increasing regularity and results, by both authoritarian governments and extremist forces in the Muslim world, to stifle debate and consolidate power. Interestingly, they argue, this is not just aimed at internal opposition groups and religious minorities, but external events, such as the furore in 2005 over the cartoons, drawn by Danish national Kurt Westergaard, satirizing Islamic terrorism.
5. Quoted in Rachida Triki, 'Freedom to Express: The Abdelliya Affair', first published 23 August 2012. Available at [www.tunisia-live.net/2012/06/11/artworks-and-property-vandalized-during-a-night-of-tension-in-tunis/](http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/06/11/artworks-and-property-vandalized-during-a-night-of-tension-in-tunis/). <http://www.ibraaz.org/news/30> (accessed 21 December 2013).
6. It is unclear at the time of writing whether or not this was a Salafi-inspired protest or a more generalized one. What is clear is that Salafites in Tunisia want to see a more prominent role for Islam in both government and society, and that in itself brings it into conflict with secular culture. For fuller details of the events and aftermath, see Triki, 'Freedom to Express: The Abdelliya Affair'.
7. This reading of certain elements in the show, specifically Faten Gaddes' prominently displayed *The Ring, 2011*, is supported by Farah Makni Hendaoui, a researcher and exhibitor in *Le Printemps des Arts*. For full details, see: 'The Crisis of Art in Tunisia', *Ibraaz*, 28 August 2013. Available at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/73> (accessed 2 January 2014).
8. On 6 February 2013, the Tunisian opposition politician Chokri Belaid, leader of the secularist Democratic Patriots Movement, was shot dead outside his home in Tunis. Later that year, on 25 July, another opposition leader, Mohamed Brahmî (leader of the nationalist Movement of the People Party), was assassinated in Tunis. Whilst this does not necessarily augur a return to despotism, it does not bode well for the freedom of speech and political opposition parties in Tunisia. On 26 January 2014, however, the Tunisian National Assembly signed into law a new constitution that is widely seen across the region as the most progressive.
9. Ramadan is explicit in this context, arguing that 'under no circumstances must the expression of civil society be stifled; elected representatives must hear its demands, and the field of politics itself must be open to constant ethical questioning: the essence of good governance (*alḥukm ar-rāshid*). See Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 118.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
11. It is notable that, under the rubric of neoliberalism, the accountability of government—its responsibility to provide adequate welfare services and support for culture—is devolved to the rhetoric of citizen empowerment, inclusion, enfranchisement, choice and compulsory voluntarism, all terms that find a comfortable degree of cross-over in the rhetoric associated with so-called 'relational aesthetics' and a substantial amount of collaborative- and participative-based work. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Anthony Downey, 'Towards a Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics', *Third Text* 21/3 (2007), pp. 267–75.
12. Defined by Antonio Gramsci as 'society minus the state', civil society is coterminous with a vigorous social order, if not democracy, and suggests the absence of repression, be it in the form of state tyranny or subjugation to the market: 'between the economic structure and the state with its legislation and coercion, Gramsci suggests, 'stands civil society'. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 209.
13. For Jürgen Habermas, one of the key theorists of civil society, the latter is largely defined as a series of 'associations, organizations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere'. Civil society, in this context, 'institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres'. See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1996), p. 366.

14. Habermas is key here to understanding the role of aesthetics in the development of public and civic society. In *Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, he argues that the development of the field of literary criticism and aesthetics, from the late seventeenth century onwards, effected a space for citizens to think and act independently. It was this independence of thought, Habermas argues, that further promoted self-reflection on the nature of political action and what it is to be a political agent. See Jürgen Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), passim.
15. See 'Tunisia: Artists Under Attack', <http://artsfreedom.org/?p=1439>, 22 June 2012.
16. The aftermath of this affair in Tunisia has had further repercussions that are still subject to scrutiny and debate. In a letter dated 13 September 2012, Human Rights Watch addressed members of the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly who had just released a draft constitution made public by the National Constituent Assembly on 8 August 2012. In the letter, the authors noted that although the draft Constitution upheld 'many key civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights', including 'freedom of movement; freedom to assemble and associate', the articles contained therein also undermined basic human rights, including 'freedom of expression, women's rights, the principle of non-discrimination and freedom of thought and conscience'. On the explicit subject of freedom of expression, the letter argued that 'Article 26 of the draft constitution provides that freedom of opinion, expression, information and creation is guaranteed and can be limited only by laws designed to protect the rights of others, their reputation, security and health. However, draft article 3 threatens freedom of expression by stipulating that "The State guarantees freedom of belief and religious practice and criminalizes all attacks on the sacred." This provision, which defines neither what is "sacred" nor what constitutes an "attack" on it, opens the door to laws that criminalize speech.' These concerns have very real and verifiable effects in a country where social and civic space—within which culture thrives—has become an increasingly charged venue for protest and community-based forms of self-organization.
17. For more information on the project see Yasmine Ryan, 'Art Challenges Tunisian Revolutionaries', Al Jazeera. Available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/in-depth/features/2011/03/201132223217876176.html>.
18. These concerns have been mirrored in political calls for the reinforcement of civil society as a bulwark against the remit of neoliberal ideology and the apparent ascendancy of the market. George Yúdice, for one, sees this as central to the shift in political focus for movements involved in revolutionary reform. Yúdice writes: 'Civil society has become the concept of choice as many movements for reform and revolution have been chastened by the eviction of socialism as a political alternative, at least for the near future. The current dominance of neoliberalism—the set of policies that include trade liberalization, privatization, the reduction (and, in some cases, near elimination) of state-subsidised social services such as health care and education, the lowering of wages, and evisceration of labour rights – has contributed to the left's shift in political attention from the takeover of state power (which in many cases has not resolved the question of sovereignty) to issues of civil and human rights quality of life.' See George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 5.
19. See 'Home Workspace: A Conversation between Christine Tohme and Anthony Downey', 2 May 2012. Available at [www.ibraaz.org/interviews/24](http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/24).
20. Omar Berrada, the director of the library and translation centre at Dar al Ma'mûn, suggests that 'the questions of public space and of civil society have been with us since the beginning, as we were trying to avoid creating a mere retreat for artists, a luxurious ivory tower for intellectuals in the middle of nowhere—precisely because the countryside is not "nowhere".' His response was part of a larger survey of institutional contexts and the role of art in the development of civil society across the region. The survey was carried out by Ibraaz and all responses can be read at: <http://www.ibraaz.org/platforms/3>, 2 May 2012 (accessed 4 January 2013).
21. RUYA is officially registered by the Iraq Commission for Civil Society Enterprises, and its mission statement in full reads: 'The foundation's [RYUA's] initial goal is to promote culture in Iraq at a time when priorities are focused elsewhere, and to build a platform that will enable Iraqis in the arts, the young in particular, to benefit from, and participate in international events. In addition to supporting local projects, its aim is to create a network of intercultural events that can contribute to the development of civil society in Iraq. It is also committed to nurturing a multicultural dialogue through the arts.' See <http://ruyafoundation.org/mission/> (accessed 4 January 2013).
22. I borrow this notion of malaise from Samir Kassir's *Being Arab* (London: Verso, 2006 [2004]).

23. It is all the more crucial here that I offer, however provisionally, a degree of distinction between so-called non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the institutions of civil society, especially as both can become confused and NGOs offer much by way of support for cultural activities. NGOs also contribute to the stabilization of civil society in post-conflict countries, but civil society itself cannot entirely rely upon NGOs to further expand the realm of the civic. Whilst this is not necessarily the best place to go into these debates, it is notable that the majority of NGOs began as humanitarian vehicles in the area of economic development, but have quickly extended into social and political spheres. This has given rise to a series of criticisms when it comes to examining how such organizations can effect neocolonial cultural and political agendas and become conduits for the international regulatory systems of global capitalism. For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Tina Wallace, 'NGO Dilemmas: Trojan Horses for Global Neoliberalism', *Socialist Register*, 40 (2004), pp. 202-19.
24. Hanan Hanafi, 'Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society: A Reflective Islamic Approach', in Simon Chambers and Will Kymlicka (eds), *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 171-89.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
26. Ramadan, *The Arab Awakening*, p. 91.
27. Hanafi lists a further series of subsidiary institutions which are intended to bridge the executive power of the *imam* and the judicial authority of the *ulama*, including the concept of *hisha*, which protects the individual against monopolization in market places and usury. Other institutions, including *awqaf*, a form of religious endowment to scientific, literary and academic foundations, allows individuals to endow scholarships, schools, publications and universities without government interference.
28. I have written elsewhere on this event, in 'Beyond the Former Middle East: Aesthetics, Civil Society, and the Politics of Representation', 1 June 2011. Available at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/8>.
29. When Islamic movements were delegitimized as component elements of civil society, in the wake of secular, nationalist state formation, they turned their attentions to mass media, labour unions, professional associations and NGOs. 'Elements that are not allowed to compete for popular support within civil society will inevitably become as averse to the values of civil society as those who suppress them. It is hardly surprising therefore that fundamentalist groups employ the traditional accusation of anathema, false innovation, and heresy against artists, thinkers, writers, professors ...' See Hanafi, 'Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society', pp. 186-7.
30. The political subject for Rancière challenges the 'symbolic structuration' of the community that abolished dissensus in the first place and is thereafter engaged in a process of non-identification with the distribution of the sensible in which he or she finds themselves. Subsequently, non-identification with a given order becomes a moment of instantiating political subjectivity as it introduces dissensus, the latter a disagreement with the established framework of perception/distribution of the sensible that effectively ushers in, as opposed to consensus, politics proper. Rancière writes: 'Through the process of subjectivization, political subjects [*le Sujet politique*] bring politics proper into existence and confront the police order with the heterology of emancipation.' Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, , 2004), p. 90.
31. Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy', *New Left Review* (March/April 2002), pp. 133-51, p. 133.