

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC PRODUCTION AND REVOLUTIONARY PROCESSES IN TUNISIA

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Abstract

Focusing on contemporary artistic production and on the case of Tunisia, the article aims to understand how some change dynamics have partially been narrated by artistic creations during the years before Ben Ali's fall in 2011. Considering how the new media and the activism of the civil society have indirectly contributed for years to the change dynamics, being "underground" and "informal spaces" for learning *social alternatives*, the idea here is to observe how the artistic production has become sometimes a strategy of resistance and emancipation especially for the youth. A part of the artistic creations had already expanded, both at a visual and at an imaginative level, the narrative spaces able to talk about alternatives, and to talk about ideas of freedom and dignity and social justice (afterwards at the core of the revolutionary processes). This interdisciplinary work, with a main anthropological approach, aims to understand how some artists, with their works, have gradually and semi-clandestinely contributed to narrate their daily life, to denounce the daily injustices and to spread an *imaginary* which has been at the core of the uprising. Among others, the lively and diversified *underground* youth or the alternative scene of young musicians, but also few artists internationally known, had expressed a dissent and a will for action that both deserve attention.

Even now, in the actual delicate and difficult phase of transition, the artistic creations, especially the artistic movements of the youth, are exemplary contexts for understanding the degrees of maintenance of the public space and of actual practices of participation.

Keywords: Contemporary artistic production , revolutionary processes , Tunisia , imaginary , resistance

Introduction

In this short contribution I'd like to focus on two main aspects. The first one concerns the attention to a serious investigation about the artistic production before 2011 in Tunisia, as being a cultural important context where some change dynamics had been expressed and narrated since several years. By means of art some actions of protest, militancy and resistance had been achieved and they might be considered among the seeds of the uprisings. Such an analysis might concern many Arabic countries but I will focus here on Tunisia, because of its social and political specificity²¹⁵ and because it was the first Arabic country able to revolt.

²¹⁵ With reference to my interdisciplinary research with a main anthropological approach, investigating the social and cultural change processes in Maghreb, starting by the daily living experiences of the youth and the identification of their informal spaces of education to "cultures for change", I focus here on the part of the research concerning Tunisia. The anthropological research on Tunisia included a first fieldwork in 2006. During the years, many other fieldworks, as well as in-depth interviews with privileged witnesses, were achieved and a fundamental part of the research on the recent revolutionary processes started in April 2011.

As anybody knows, 17th December 2010 or 14th January 2011 cannot be the dates of the real epochal change that have crossed Tunisia (and afterwards many other Arabic countries) since the change dynamic started a long time before. Actually, we have to consider several factors and several practices of resistance and daily militancy which had been acting for years and which had an impact in the long term, up to the concurrence of the “always wished” but totally “unforeseen” event of the “revolution”.²¹⁶ It has been very well analysed and debated that the new media and the civil society have constituted, for the youth, underground places for learning social (much before than political) alternatives. In other words, the new media and the civil society have functioned, for this well-educated youth, as “spaces for the construction of the change dynamic” and “spaces for learning alternatives” . The idea of this paper is to underline how, together with the new media and the activism of the associations, the artistic production had already announced this gradual process of transformation that was taking place in the society.

An attentive investigation would have shown how the artistic production in Tunisia had already expanded, at a visual and at an imaginative level, both in esthetical and in hermeneutical terms, the narrative space able to talk about revolutionary alternatives.

Besides, even now, in this critical and delicate phase of transition, the artistic creations are stimulating workshops where to experiment and to observe change dynamics.

The aim of this research is to go back to the analysis of the artistic production, especially during the years before the revolution (and at the end, up to now) in order to comprehend when some artistic creations became signs of strategies of resistance and emancipation.

In fact, an in-depth analysis shows us a whole world of video, photos, websites, installations, paintings, sculptures, graffiti, films, music, theatrical performances, offering us views “from the bottom” and intimate visions on a changing society and a changing youth. The art (that during the revolution finally appeared visibly in the street) had worked for years in an underground way, being an original way of narrating the daily lives and talking about a certain idea of beauty and dignity. Therefore, we dare affirm that some reflections about art in the context of the Tunisian revolutionary process might help to understand some wedges of these complex social and cultural dynamics.

Main Text

Exploring the possible and calling for the unforeseen by art

Several precious analyses concerning the revolutionary process in Tunisia, during the last three years, have mainly focused on the social militancy²¹⁷ and the comprehension of

²¹⁶ I will not enter now into the specific debate around the use of the words “revolution”, “revolt” or others. Instead, I would like to remember that “revolution” has been the word used by the actors themselves at the core of the change processes. In this contribution, I will often choose for the word “revolutionary processes”, stressing the point on the nature of the dynamics and the idea of very long and still on-going processes. On this debate see: Merlini C., Roy O. (dir.), *Arab Society in Revolt. The West's Mediterranean Challenge*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, 2012; Filiu J. P., *La Révolution arabe. Dix leçons sur le soulèvement démocratique*, Fayard, Paris, 2011; Lynch M., *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, PublicAffairs, New York, 2012; Gelvin J., *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012; Corrao F., *Le rivoluzioni arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori, Milano, 2011; Ben Nefissa S., Destremau B. (dir.), “Protestations sociales, révolutions civiles. Transformations du politique dans la Méditerranée arabe”, *Tiers Monde*, Hors-Série, 2011; “Révolutions: le réveil du monde arabe”, *Moyen-Orient*, n. 10, Avril- Juin 2011.

²¹⁷ Veirel F., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011; Camau M., Massardier G., *Démocraties et autoritarismes fragmentation et hybridations des Régimes*, Karthala, Paris, 2009. ; Ben Nefissa S., Destremau B. (dir.), *Op. cit.*, 2011. On the Tunisian context see Camau M., Geisser V., *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, Les Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2003.

how some spaces, such as those of the civil society (women's associations, human rights' associations, students' movements, Labour Unions and many others, even the most hidden and clandestine ones) were constantly menaced by the regime and yet became spaces where people sometimes learnt what I'd like to name "cultures for change". Some other researches have underlined the role of the new media and the social networks in the change dynamics that brought to the uprisings. I actually take into great consideration all these contributions and I propose here another, more marginal, path with the aim of understanding how a part of the revolutionary processes might have found some "frames of reference" also within the artistic movements²¹⁸.

I 'd like to start by the idea of art as exploration of the "possible" and *ouverture* to the "unforeseen" or to the new and I think there are several examples of artistic creations which acted as forms of resistance to the power and had an impact, in the long term, on the individual and collective imaginary.²¹⁹ In fact, to be able to act and to achieve a strong rupture with the past we have to be able, first of all to simply imagine.²²⁰ We can find some examples of artistic productions that contributed to forge the imaginary and the "imagination of a possible or an alternative" among some Tunisian artists internationally known, who used their relationships with the international context in order to express, by their artistic works, their denunciations of the daily reality or their original points of view on the deep transformations of their society. At the meantime, we find some other examples among the so-called "alternative culture" and the *underground* artistic scenario of the youth : a form of militancy and artistic resistance which, in Tunisia, gradually occupied a place at a local and a national level.

One of the main idea at the core of this anthropological analysis is that in Tunisia we are facing more than a "revolution" some long and delicate "revolutionary processes" that had their origin in slow and underground dynamics, much before 2010 and 2011, and that have to be studied in all their complexity and their on-going nature. On one hand, in-depth anthropological researches and ethnographies were and still are very important instruments and contributions if we want to understand the daily life of the youth (their feelings, fears and desires) and their continual interactions with mobile imaginaries, new media, ways of social participation from the bottom, etc. On the other hand, we cannot forget that an intellectual and artistic rich production has been representing the daily lives of the Tunisian society during the past years, feeding people's imaginary and building narrative spaces from where the youth have drawn off images, ideas and attitudes.

The few researchers who had already studied this phenomenon²²¹ were narrating, since a long time ago, about an original and imaginative creativity of the Tunisian youth and about important processes of transformation within the population. Perhaps, we should go back to all that and deserve it a full attention.

In our European contexts, for many years, the cultural policy has not been always so serious and it has been quite difficult to have access to the daily life analysis and the life histories narrated by the rare, and yet existing, ethnographies "by those who really knew the

²¹⁸ Gandolfi P., *Rivolte in atto, Dai movimenti artistici arabi a una pedagogia rivoluzionaria*, Mimesis, Milano, 2012.

²¹⁹ ²¹⁹ Cfr. Clair J., *La responsabilité de l'artiste. Les avant-gardes entre terreur et raison*, Gallimard, Paris, 1997.

Cfr. Perrier F., "Pressentir, désirer, appeler, le peuple à venir", in Jimenez M. (dir.), *Art et Pouvoir*, Klincksieck, Paris, 2007, Burger P., "Pour une définition de l'avant-garde", in *La révolution dans les lettres*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 1993,

²²⁰ Anderson e altri

²²¹ P. Gandolfi, *La sfida dell'educazione nel Marocco contemporaneo. Complessità e criticità dall'altra sponda del Mediterraneo*, Città Aperta, Troina 2010, p.185.

spoken Arabic languages and went much beyond the threshold of the superficial”.²²² Similarly, the access to the several narrating spaces of the contemporary artistic and cultural production has been quite complicated and infrequent.

With such premises, it is meaningful observing how the Tunisian artistic production had narrated and still narrates the change processes and the thousands of small daily uprisings which slowly made up the big uprisings .But it also important to understand how this artistic production, which finally became visible thanks to the revolutionary processes, had been mainly invisible and hidden for a long time. While a main part of the European society wasn't knowing,if not partially, the philosophers, the writers, the video-artists, the bloggers, the singers, the musicians, the poets, the film-makers of Tunisia (and it happened in a similar way in other Arabic countries) , the Tunisian society was knowing them and was taking possession of their ideas, imaginary and messages

So, it might be affirmed that the uprisings finally showed us an original creativity and an artistic innovation which, together with other factors, contributed to the genesis of the change.

If we just have a look at the language used by the people during the revolutionary process, we might find slogans, shouts, national hymns, dances, chants, ancient and actual verses of poems (such as –among the others- those of the Tunisian poet Abu Al-Qasim As-Shaabi²²³, afterwards shouted in many other protest manifestations, from Egypt to Yemen and Bahrein) which are the signs of all that. In other words, the revolutionary process in Tunisia showed not only the strength and the popularity of these verses by As-Shaabi but at the meanwhile a spontaneous and young language, both civil and pacific, able to invent words and images, symbol of the creativity of the social actors within a new configuration of the society where the local, the national and the transnational cohabit.²²⁴

Now, going back to the concept of “aesthetic negativity” by Christoph Menke we know we can conceive the artistic works for their distance and their negative relation to what is not art, in other words considering the art is “ contradiction, rejection, negation”²²⁵.Here is the power of the art (a film, a music, a novel): its esthetical reason is able to go further than the ideological reasons, acting beyond the regimes of power and knowledge “Not being reality”, the art makes us understand very much about reality.

If we had analysed in depth the artistic productions during the last 10 or even 5 years before 2011, we would have found they had been powerful frames for the emotional universe of the revolutionary processes. Some artistic forms had actually cultivated new imaginative geographies where the ideas of freedom, dignity and social justice were already at the core (before becoming the three main ideas of the revolutionary process).²²⁶

Nowadays, if we think about history as a “process of sudden revolutionary instants” (as Walter Benjamin suggests us²²⁷) we might consider that a part of the population is strongly conscious of being able to interrupt again the “continuum” of the history . The artistic expression still plays a role in this dynamic, as much important as the role it played in the phase previous to 2011, even if with different modalities and frames of reference.

²²² Cfr. Mohsen Finan K., Vermeren P., “La France ne se donne pas les moyens de connaître le Maghreb”, *L'Express*, 2 Février 2011. Si veda: www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/afrique/la-france-nese-donne-pas-les-moyens-de-connaître-le-maghreb_958019.html.

²²³ Abu Al-Qasim As-Shaabi is a famous Tunisian poet born in 1909 and dead in 1934.

²²⁴ According to Mohamed Kerrou, an example of this creativity is offered by the “word-gesture-image” of the famous “*dégagé*” addressed on 14 th January 2011 to the President Ben Ali.

²²⁵ Cfr. Menke C., *the Sovereignty of Art. Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (1988), the MIT Press, Cambridge-London, 1998.

²²⁶ Gandolfi, P., *Op .cit*, 2012.

²²⁷ Benjamin W., *Tesi di filosofia della storia* (1940), in Idem., *Angelus novus. Saggi e frammenti*, trad. it. di R. Solmi, Einaudi Torino, 2006, pp. 75–86..

The possibility for the artists to promote and to spread imaginaries that might have an influence on the action of the society has been investigated in many different contexts²²⁸. Within this context, the artists should be expression of an artistic research, a movement towards spaces not yet explored and controlled, spaces open to “the possible”, and to “the new”.

In the contemporary Tunisian context, the power of the word spread by the music and by the song, for example, has been accompanied by the impact of the images multiplied by the contemporary new media. In such a way, in many occasions, the artists had become the pre-monitors or the mouthpieces (*port-paroles*) of those who were not able to speak Thanks to their autonomy in the exploration of the possible, the artists are part of a movement for themselves and for the society.²²⁹ As we know, the role of the so-called “avant-garde” is in fact to desire, to call for a change, call for an uprising, somehow hoping the society will one day give form to this call.²³⁰

Especially during the past ten years the multiplication of the artistic forms of expression (very often the informal ones) had been important traces of an “ongoing change process” or even an already “on-going revolt”. Sometimes the artistic works were forms of denunciations, sometimes they were narratives of a multitude²³¹ at the core of gradual transformation processes.

Moreover, the evolution of the modalities of representation and of the fruition of the artistic creations by the new media might be read in the perspective already suggested by Walter Benjamin in terms of “reproducibility of the artistic work”²³². He was affirming that in this dynamic of the reproducibility of the image there was a revolutionary potential power connected to the fact that the artistic work was opening itself to the mass (at that time, he was mainly referring to the cinema and to the photography, while nowadays the discourse might include the web, the social networks, the videos, the video-installations)..

While the artistic work and the multiple ways of communication were opening to the mass, the forms of resistance in daily life at an individual level were multiple, even if quite invisible to the people. At the very specific moment when an individual tactic of militancy (normally kept at the margins, such as the extreme gesture by Mohamed Bouazizi in December 2010) has been finally shared, visibly, and circulated among the multitude, it was time for change.

Multiple tactics of militancy or the role of the imagination

During the years, the opposition to the injustice in Tunisia have taken several forms, very seldom connected to the political parties and seldom with an ideological connotation, Much more often, instead, they were tied to different forms of organisation of the civil society such as associations, students’ movements, workers’ movements, etc. In other words, different forms of resistance “from the bottom”,²³³ somehow facilitated by the essential role of the social networks as forms of communicating, investigating, producing knowledge spread among the youth in daily life, more and before than in specific forms of protests. Some

²²⁸Rancière J., *Il disagio dell'estetica* (2004), ETS, Pisa, 2009.

²²⁹ Cfr. Perrier F., *Op. cit.*, 2007., pp.160-161.

²³⁰ Cfr. Perrier F., *Op. cit.*, 2007.

²³¹ Cfr. Hardt M., Negri A., *Moltitudine. Guerra e democrazia nel nuovo ordine imperiale*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2004;

²³² Cfr. Benjamin W., *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica* (1966), Einaudi, Torino, 2011.

²³³ Cfr. Veirel F., *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2011; Camau M., Massardier G., *Démocraties et autoritarismes fragmentation et hybridations des Régimes*, Karthala, Paris, 2009. See also Ben Nefissa S., Destremau B. (dir.), *Op. cit.*, 2011. On the Tunisian case see Camau M., Geisser V., *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, Les Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2003.

anthropological and socio-political researches had tried to investigate exactly this art of inventing tactics of survival and daily resistance²³⁴, underlining how the creative power of the imagination had been able to have an impact on the marginal life histories of many individuals. Many young people were daily inventing tactics to survive in the margins, in the interstices.

Course à Ikhobza (a colloquial expression in Tunisian dialect that could be translated as “the bread race”) is the key metaphor Hamza Meddeb has used to describe the daily anxiety that the majority of the youth population felt during the years and months leading up to the revolution. Through field research, he revealed that the youth had adopted many survival tactics. Faced with an authoritarian, clientelist, corrupt power, they tried to “implant themselves in the interstices, in the minimal margins left open by power,”²³⁵ clearly hoping to “*jouer le pouvoir*,”²³⁶ make a power play by strategically embedding themselves into the web of the informal economy, for example, using creativity and ingenuity. In this context, Meddeb identified a youth capable of reacting, rather than succumbing, prepared to recreate the minimal spaces left free from authoritarian rule. It was a youth that appeared ready and willing to reinvent the most marginal spaces available to them. But if on one hand the most excluded and marginalized were the first to “race” to invent spaces of action for “the bread race,” on the other hand, after a while, many other young people chose their own personal “*course à Ikhobza*” by migrating. Still, altogether the focus was on a race, a take-off: the system had forced them to take on precarious work and they reacted with various races for survival²³⁷.

So, we find tactics of resistance and militancy in the marginal spaces of daily life, we find several tactics of resistance in the field of the artistic creations: in both the imagination plays a fundamental role. The fieldworks, in both cases, show a component of creation, original inventiveness, and imagination²³⁸.

As we said before, the contribution of the rare but serious anthropological researches is fundamental to understand the change process while it is growing and moving. At the same time, as we would like to stress the point again on the contribution of the artistic production in understanding social and cultural processes, underlining the Bakhtin’s concept of the “dialogic imagination”²³⁹ or “*indexical utterances*” (evoked by Hamid Dabashi). According to this, by means of the “dialogic imagination” we take into account some others’ words and images, giving them a new meaning.. That’s why reading contemporary literature and contemporary poetry in local Arabic dialects, as well as watching documentary films and fiction films, listening to contemporary music and songs, might be very useful for the understanding of the anthropological context of a society.²⁴⁰

Within this perspective, Hamid Dabashi thinks that the poets, the writers, the filmmakers, the singers, the musicians, have been somehow the “theoreticians” of the

²³⁴ Cfr. ²³⁴ Hibou B., *La force de l’obéissance. Economie politique de la répression en Tunisie*, La Découverte, Paris, 2006. Camau M., Geisser V., *Le syndrome autoritaire. Politique en Tunisie de Bourguiba à Ben Ali*, Les Presses de Sciences Po, Paris, 2003.

²³⁵ H. Meddeb, L’ambivalence de la course à “el khobza”. Obéir et se révolter en Tunisie, in “Politique Africaine”, 121, 2011, pp. 35-54.

²³⁶ M. de Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien. Arts de faire*, Gallimard, Paris 1980.

²³⁷ Gandolfi P. “Spaces in migration, daily life in revolution” in *Spaces in Migration. Postcards from a revolution* (ed. by) Garelli, G., Sossi, F., Tazzioli, M., London Pavement Books, 2013, pp. 7-26.

²³⁸ Cfr. Gandolfi, P. Quali diritti? Il diritto di trasgredire e il diritto di re-inventare la propria storia. Frammenti di storie e di inedite rivoluzioni in Maghreb, “Deportate, esuli, profughe”, 18-19, 2012, pp. 245-256.

²³⁹ Cfr. Bakhtin M., *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, Austin University of Texas Press, Austin-London, 1975.

²⁴⁰ See among the others, concerning the films and their possible capacity of narrating about a changing society: Silvestri, R. “Il cinema dei ragazzi Tahrir” in *Micromega*, n.6, 2012, pp.40-54.

revolutionary processes. On my behalf, I believe they were mostly the “porte-paroles”, the voices of many other young people, and they did it because they are what they are: simply artists. They narrated their own desires, their own fears, their own dreams and many people had the same desires, fears, dreams. Quoting Mark Levine’s excellent research on the Muslim youth and the pop occidental culture (regarding many different Arabic countries), which was a rare investigation on the fruits and the contradictions of the encounter of the occidental influences, the Arabic-Islamic culture and the local cultures²⁴¹, it has to be underlined how he very well showed that the young musicians at the core of his research were the interpreters of what, in 2008, he called a sort of an already on-going “revolution”. That’s why looking back at these multiple forms of expression and resistance, which were acting since several years, might still help in reading the previous processes within a longer and wider change process and also reading the on-going processes, even if with all their indefiniteness and incertitude, in balance between shouts and whispers, urgencies and silences.

Artistic resistance and the encounter of different forms of militancy

Some of the artists have contributed to forge an imaginary and to shape an imaginative power of the Tunisian people. We can find two forms of artistic militancy: the artists who were educated as artists in Tunisia or abroad, they gained a certain international success and they were able to make advantage of their competences and of their international relationships in order to propose their narrative of the reality. Their views used to be intimate ones, revealing aspects of the daily life not necessarily observed and narrated by their many “political correct” colleagues. Sometimes, they were views of contestation, criticism and dissent, sometimes they were rare and unprecedented views on questions shocking and transforming the society. Quite often, they were point of view of an elite who was using a sophisticated language and moving among the institutional mechanisms of the fruition and diffusion of the art (art galleries, public halls for projection and exhibitions, mainly aimed to an elitist audience.²⁴²

The other form of artistic militancy was represented by the youth of the “alternative culture”, acting in the artistic scene since several years and especially during the very last five years, and moving among the underground dynamics and the new media. Their language used to be incisive, popular, explicitly referred to the censorship, the corruption, the clientele, the state of policy, the daily violence committed by the regime, the unemployment, and the misery of a huge part of the society. This youth used to denounce the injustice and the excessive use of power, but also used to express a wish and a will for change “from the bottom”²⁴³.

During the phase of the revolution, not only these two different forms of artistic militancy came together, but they also met other forms of militancy and resistance promoted by workers, students, women, unemployed youth and many other citizens.

After the revolution in Tunisia, the interest of the international art exhibitions focused to the artistic dynamic that had finally become visible to everybody. Some of the art curators

²⁴¹ Cfr. Levine M., *Rock the casbah! I giovani musulmani e la cultura pop occidentale* (2008), Isbn edizioni, Milano, 2010; See also Gandolfi P., *La sfida dell’educazione nel Marocco contemporaneo. Complessità e criticità dall’altra sponda del Mediterraneo*, Città Aperta, Troina, 2010, in particolare pp. 194-199.

²⁴² See the festivals of cinema and the contemporary art exhibitions trying to open themselves to a wider audience. See for instance *Le Printemps des Arts*, in La Marsa/Tunis and the Contemporary Art Biennial *Dream city-L’art rue*, Tunis. www.lartrue.com; www.dreamcitytunisie.com. See the special issue of *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo* concerning Arts and Revolutions in Tunisia. AAM Anno XVI (2013), n. 15 (1)

²⁴³ Cfr. Gandolfi P., *Op. cit.*, 2012.

were stressing the point on a phase of artists' "engagement"²⁴⁴ following the so-called "degage!" phase. But, as we have already partially observed, most of the observers forgot that processes and forms of engagement were already occurring since several years. The point to stress once more is that for a long time these forms of "engagement" had been underground, informal, hidden, marked by the fear of the censorship, the menace of the torture, the violence of the police's reaction to any explicit form of denunciation. It would be difficult to mention here all the rappers, rockers, metal singers who had worked clandestinely in the very recent years in Tunisia and who tried, in all manners, to bypass the censorship and the controls, by using the web, the social networks, the use of informal spaces, the improvised recording studios, and so on. Nowadays, rappers' names such as El General, Balti, Psycho-M, Lak3y and many others are well-known even abroad. But the young people who were writing songs and music (declaring the injustices, the unfounded violence, the daily corruption, but also expressing their desires and dreams for a future of human dignity) were much more numerous. An analyse of their songs clearly show it. As an example we suggest to read the texts of Armada Bizerta, a group of rappers who use to sing since 2008 for a critical attitude, for the necessary wakening of the youth face to the reality, declaring the violence of the police, calling for a continual revolution (even after the revolution) and a constant resistance to the abuse of power and the lack of rights.

As the Tunisian poet Tahar Bekri has well stated, the very first revolutionary process was a "popular movement"²⁴⁵, whose origin was at the periphery, at the margins of the country.²⁴⁶ Similarly, those who were accompanying and promoting the change process, also among the artists, were mainly the not recognised and not institutionalised ones, the informal and the marginal ones. If the artists appeared and were extremely active during the revolution it is because they were always present and they had been active since a long time, even if marginally and clandestinely. Many artists debated and wrote diaries day by day during the revolution, posting their commentaries and their artistic works on the web. But they did not appear from nowhere. They were marginal, but existing.²⁴⁷ Many artists had soon expressed their solidarity to the "street" with a manifesto published on 13th January 2011. But much more than this, they were finally giving life to (up to then marginal) spaces of expression and they were giving visibility to a "counter-culture" remained informal and auto-produced up to that specific moment.

Among the most famous cases, the rapper Hamada Ben Amour, *El General*, who on 6th January 2011 was arrested after having posted his song "*President, your people is dead*", a sort of open letter to Ben Ali, inviting him to go and visit the unemployed, the youth living in the little villages of the south and east of Tunisia. In few hours the demand for his liberation was everywhere on the web, with many other extracts of his songs against the police's use of violence. But this was only an iceberg of a very large movement spread all among young

²⁴⁴ « Dégagements...La Tunisie un an après, Exposition d'art contemporain, IMA de Paris, du 17 Janvier au 1er Avril 2012" ; *Courrier International*, Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, 2012, pp. 3-4. The reference is specifically to Michket Krifa.

²⁴⁵ Interview to Tahar Bekri in Slimani L., "Les artistes disent 'vive la révolution'", *Jeune Afrique*, 03 Février 2011. Si veda: www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAJA2612p082-085.xml0/.

²⁴⁶ Cfr. Gandolfi P., *Op. cit.*, 2012.

²⁴⁷ Some of them, such as the poet Sghaier Ouled Ahmed or the comedian Bendir Man, tried to follow and to comment every single act of the revolutionary process posting their diaries and their artistic works. Among others, Nadia Khiari was following the events day by day with his ironic character of a comic strip *Willis from Tunis*, (Cfr. Khiari N., *Willis from Tunis. Chroniques de la Révolution*, Simfact, Tunis, 2011) and the artist _z_ was posting his drawings before and during the revolution. Concerning the subject see also Magnier B. (dir.), *Rêves d'hiver au petit matin, les printemps arabes vus par 50 écrivains et dessinateurs*, Elzyad, Tunis, 2012

musicians who had been singing their desires and dreams for many years.²⁴⁸ Those auto-produced (and mainly not visible to the big audience) young artists were expressing themselves mainly thanks to internet and were acting semi-clandestinely for a long time, creating imaginary, spreading ideas, debating ideals in a simple and direct manner, accessible to everyone and first of all to the youth itself. For long time, the creativity and the artistic engagement were mixed with informal means and anonymity as an answer to the repression and the censorship. So, for example, one of the now most famous Tunisian graffiti artist *SK-One* when organised his personal exhibition (*Evasion urbaine*) in 2009 was still hidden his personal identity. He gained a visibility only in 2011 when he occupied the Kasbah with many other people in winter 2011. *Meen-One* and *El-Seed*, other young taggers, use to talk about the repressive system of vigilance during Ben Ali's government and how they were obliged to keep themselves at the margins. The *Hip Hop movement*, as well, was systematically censored in *Facebook* and was obliged to search for alternative spaces of expression. After Ben Ali's fall, these young artists were able to express in a freeway what they had previously shouted, sang, designed, written with the precise ability of bypassing the many obstacles and prohibitions imposed by the government. For the first time, after 2011, they were asked to tag some public walls and they were called by the municipalities or other social actors. So, for example, El Seed, a Tunisian artist who had lived many years in France, was called to achieve some of his works - at the interstice of Arabic calligraphy and graffiti - on the wall of the main square in Kairawan, evolving the young inhabitants of the town in achieving the work. Few months later, he was called to draw on the minaret of Jara Mosque, in Gabes, writing one of the most tolerant and open-minded verse of the Koran, the one who invites people to know each other, especially when they find themselves among different people, different populations, differences of all kind.²⁴⁹

The graffiti artist *SK-One* had to learn graffiti by watching videos on the web, while in 2012 he was able to involve young people helping him in realising graffiti and learning from him. Some others, such as *Meed-One*, started their work as self-taught persons and then moved to the Fine Arts Academy in Tunis. A similar experience belonged to *Armada Bizerta* (from Bizerta), a rappers' group who begun totally informally and then moved to the Fine Arts Academy. They used to sing the right to freedom, the repression of the artists, the youth's marginalisation, the corruption, the unjustified violence of the police²⁵⁰ and the examples of the artists belonging to the alternative culture might be multiplied.

Face to the freedom of expression that followed the end of the regime, many were the reactions of those who had used the art to talk, to protest, to denounce. For example, the photographers who had known an official repression reacted occupying the public scene and often putting photos of common citizens on the public walls.²⁵¹ Hicham Driss achieved a serial of portraits of ordinary man and women calling it 404, with reference to Ammar #404, the name given by the youth to the huge censorship acting in the web during the regime and able to obscure every minimally "suspected" website or blog.

²⁴⁸ Among the others: *Festival de la culture numérique de Carthage* since 2006 and *Journées cinématographiques de Carthage* since 26 years

²⁴⁹ Chapter 49 of the Coran, Verse 13 "O mankind! We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know and honour each other". Cfr.

²⁵⁰ See the translations of the songs and the in-depth interviews with the rappers in Gandolfi, P. *Op.cit*, 2012. (Add extracts in the text or in the notes)

²⁵¹ See among others, the project *Artocratie*. Bouali H., "Chronique déchirée. Vox populi Vox Dei". Si veda: www.du-photographique.blogspot.it/2011/03/chronique-dechiree.html. See also Gandolfi, P. *Op.cit*, 2012

Wassim Ghozlani, a self-taught photographer, who used to make photos since 2009 and created the first portal dedicated to photography., affirms he had chosen photos during Ben Ali's time because he had many things to say and debate, but there wasn't a way to do it in a public way. So, as he said, he was using photos as a sort of "camouflage" and a sort of therapy in the meanwhile.²⁵² Once he found himself in a different situation, after the regime had fallen, he felt he needed to keep himself in a sort of "participant observation". Before, he used to propose some "postcards from Tunisia"²⁵³ showing by photos a reality of the society, very far from the stereotyped images sold to the tourists. His portraits represented miners' faces, the beauty of the nature in the most marginal and forgotten small villages of the country, the abandoned walls and buildings, the heavy life of the shepherds and so on. It was his own personal way, as he told us, "to make images circulate" and "make ideas move" at the same time.

Another blog of a photographer who used to say his opinion by photos is *Le Blog du Photographique* by Hamideddine Bouali. His exhibition "Révolution à la tunisienne...Le fil rouge". was one of most beautiful photographic works on the revolution, partially published in the book *Dégage. La révolution tunisienne*, where photos and texts are in perfect balance²⁵⁴.

While, on one hand, there was the dynamic of this young artistic production representing an informal counter-culture or alternative culture, on the other hand there were some artists, expressing courageous views and witnessing the widespread malaise of the society. The poet Ouled Ahmed²⁵⁵ was one of them: a real counter-current artist, a provoker, an agitator of ideas, who used to sing and to write calling for "a coming revolution"

Tahar Bekri²⁵⁶, a famous Tunisian poet living the exile, was one of the most important voices of the contemporary cultural context and used to assume clear positions on the social and cultural processes in Tunisia. Painters such as Ali Belkadhi²⁵⁷ or Mohamed Ben Slama²⁵⁸ were expressing the rage and their frustration in several of their works. Ben Slama, a self-taught artist, used to paint peculiar beings (between the humans and the animals, the real and the fantastic) representing the ambiguities of the society and the inner feelings of the author himself. In a mixture of anxieties and hopes. Mohamed Ali Belkadhi (Dali) used to work with photos, installations, paintings. In 1998 had presented a famous work titled "a drink for doing the revolution" using 60 bottles with the printed image of Che Guevara on their glass. It was showed in the independent Art Gallery-Bookshop *Mille Feuilles* in La Marsa/Tunisi and the police arrived immediately Among the many others who we could mention, we find Ymen Berhouma²⁵⁹, a self-taught person, experimenting with collage e décollage and offering a very intimate work of personal introspection²⁶⁰ that was exhibited in few independent art galleries

²⁵² See also further interviews to Wassim Ghozlani on *Arte-Arte en révolution(s)*. www.monde-arabe.arte.tv/country/tunisie/.

²⁵³ Wassim Ghozlani presented a part of his work "Postcards from Tunisia" in the exhibition *Dégagements...La Tunisie un an après* at the IMA in Paris n January- April 2012.

²⁵⁴ Bettaieb V. (dir), *Dégage. La révolution tunisienne. Livre-témoignages*, Editions du Layeur, Tunis, 2011

²⁵⁵ Ouled Ahmed (Sidi Bouzid ,1955) published his first work *Nashid al-Ayam al-Sitta*, in 1984. His militant poems have been translated in many languages.

²⁵⁶ Tahar Bekri (Gabes, 1951) lives in Paris, writes in Arabic and French See: www.transfinito.eu/spip.php?article1229

²⁵⁷ Mohamed Dali Belkadhi (1952) explores several fields of the artistic creation such as the cinema, the theatre, the photography, the video-installations, the paintings.

²⁵⁸ Mohamed Ben Slama (Tunisi, 1974) lives in La Marsa, working among sculptures, paintings, installations.

²⁵⁹ Ymen berhouma borns in 1976 and take part into exhibitions since 2006.

²⁶⁰ Ben Soltane M., "Breath of freedom. Tunisia", *Nafas Art Magazine*, Settembre 2011. See: www.universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2011/breath_of_freedom.

during the years ²⁶¹ . But here again the quoted artists are only few examples and the names might be much more numerous.

Regarding the role of the independent galleries, we might remember that, in many fields of the art, the pressure of the censorship, the circle of the official art galleries and the logic of the public subventions was so deeply tied to the favouritism that many artists had to be very strong and determined to bypass the obstacles, the intimidations and the menaces. Many of them had to struggle a lot and to persist, when they intended to achieve and to show their work. By this way, the film “Cinecittà” (2010) by Brahim Ltaief²⁶² (produced without any public money) is an ironical history of some young people who have a project for a film that does not obtain the subventions of the Ministry of Culture because the story they narrate and the image of the Tunisia they propose in the film is too far from the politically correct one, wanted by Ben Ali. Actually, the demands for financing, during the regime, had been a huge problem for many young film-makers and other artists, who were therefore obliged to auto-produce themselves, sometimes using the web facilities or inventing new modalities of producing their own works. At the meantime, the challenge for some filmmakers already known abroad was to invest in foreign money to narrate what was actually going on every day among them, bypassing the boards of censors and all the prohibitions simply aimed to kill creativity..

Making of (2006) by Nouri Bouzid²⁶³; is one of these examples. The difficult and controversial film is the story of a young boy living in the suburbs of Tunis, who loves the street dance and the graffiti and finds himself confronted to the authorities (the father, the school, the police). The young guy would like to travel to Europe but he will be intercepted by some religious extremists who want to use his rage for a terroristic plan. The film will also show the real story of the actor disputing with the filmmaker because he feels shocked: he was chosen as main actor in the film for his ability in dancing and he suddenly found himself in a story suggesting that the dance might be a pity for certain religious approaches. The film maker will choose to keep in the same film the sequences of the fiction and the ones of the documentary (the real dispute between the actor and the film maker). The result is a very difficult and delicate film, not well welcomed nor by the religious extremists nor by the intellectuals (even if it won the Golden Tanit at the Festival of Cartage for the artistic quality and the actuality of the questions proposed). An example, as we can observe, of an independent production and of the strong will to tell an original and intimate story concerning some ongoing socio-political and cultural processes daily lived by the youth, only apparently invisible, for sure hardly narrated and yet that would have totally emerged just few years later.

Sometimes the views and the stories proposed at the cinema are less explicit, but not less powerful. . Mohamed Zran²⁶⁴, for example, shows the intimate feelings of the people, the silences, the ordinary life of the small Southern town called Zarzis in “*Vivre ici*” (2009) and it is able to narrate the atmosphere of the Tunisia under Ben Ali, bringing to the screen daily life histories and minuscule signs of ordinary people to feel being at the limit, on the margins, in a condition of exasperation. The same artist few years before had achieved “*Saadia*” a film on the Tunisian youth living in the misery, at the margins of the society, in the periphery of the capital. A film that gained a great success among the public, who found in it a story such as those of their own life. Many independent projects, as well as many manners to bypass the prohibitions and obstacles to bring them the original artistic projects to an end. Among the

²⁶¹ Among the independent art galleries in Tunisia: El Teatro, Espace d'art Mille Feuilles, Kanvas Art Gallery, Galerie Ammar Farhat.

²⁶² Brahim Ltaief (...) is a film-maker internationally known, personally engaged in projects of education and financial aid for the production of the young film makers' first works.

²⁶³ Nouri Bouzid (Sfax, 1945) is a Tunisian film maker internationally honoured.

²⁶⁴ Mohamed Zran (Zarzis, 1959) was presented in several international film festival with *Le Prince*(2004) , *Le Chant du Millenaire* (2002), *Essaida* (1996)-.

many artists who had to face the boards of the censors there were not only the filmmakers, but also the theatre producers.

Habib Bel Hedi, for example, tells us about how many times he had to face the censorship on his audiovisual and theatrical works. The censors demanded 300 cuts for the work *Corps Otages* by Jalila Baccar. Similarly, the work *Amnesia* by Fadil Jaibi and Jalila Beccar, again produced by Habib Bel Hedi, before being presented abroad, was very much censored in Tunisia. The producer tells us how he was able to apparently answer to the request of censorship, while he was achieving only apparent and minor cuts, thus succeeding in saving the specificity of its work ²⁶⁵ The possibility of finding such kind of works, even after such a strong action of the censorship, was also due to the notoriety of the artists at an international level. In fact, letting this kind of dissident and provocative theatre be produced and be alive in the Tunisian context was also a strategic ability by Ben Ali's government to formally appear democratic and to publicly avoid scandals. At the meantime, the artists were not covered at all by the national media when presenting their work in Tunisia and they were not allowed to go and to present their works in other towns except for Tunis. Therefore, another hidden and incessant censorship, even after the formal and apparent consensus and approval to show the work to the public.

These two different forms of militancy in the field of the artistic creation met for the first time during the revolution. At the meantime this double artistic militancy met the militancy of the students, of the women, of the workers, of the unemployed, and so on. In other words it met the militancy of the activists and that of every single citizen who was resisting individually in his daily life there were many movements inside the revolutionary dynamic. One movement made the young artists of the underground scene meet the artists of another generation and another education, another movement made the artists meet other forms of militancy. Finally a movement permitted the encounter among different forms of militancy and different generations, at once.

Facing the delicate phase of transition, observing the artistic context as a workshop

In this final part of the contribution, I'd like to focus, even if quickly, on Tunisia after the first political elections and during these last couple of years, with the aim to observe how in a country marked by instability and difficulties at a political and social level, the actions of few Islamic extremists –even if a minority of the population- has occupied the public spaces, intimidating some vulnerable sectors of the society such as students and teachers at university, women, and artists. Within this frame, it might be important to go back to the nexus between art and Islam as well to the link between art and Islamic extremism ²⁶⁶, in order to understand how the artistic context might be differently interpreted by the social and political actors within the on-going change dynamics ²⁶⁷. Moreover, the observation of the artistic context still permits to understand how it is representative of a menace to the rights and to the human dignity which concerns many more citizens than the only artists themselves. As a matter of fact, the main question for everybody is the maintenance of the public space and the possibility of acting by means of daily participation practices.

²⁶⁵ Cfr. Slimani L., *Op. cit.*, 2011.

²⁶⁶ Cfr. Naef S., *Y-a-t-il une question de l'image en islam?*, Théraèdre, Paris, 2004.

Benlabbah R., *L'interdit de l'image dans le judaïsme, le Christianisme et l'Islam*, Editions Aini Bennai, Casablanca, 2008, pp. 64-65. Grabar O., *Penser l'art islamique, une esthétique de l'ornement*, Albin Michel, Paris, Irwin R., *Islamic Art in context*, Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 1997; Grabar O., *Arte islamica: formazione di una civiltà* (1973), Electa, Milano, 1989. See also Rieffel V., *Islamania. De l'Alhambra à la burqa, histoire d'une fascination artistique*, Beaux Arts, 2011 Cfr. Rodinson M., *Il fascino dell'islam* (1980), Dedalo, Bari, 1988.

²⁶⁷ See in Chapter n.5, Gandolfi. P., *Rivolte in atto .Op.cit.* ,2012,pp. 81-108.

Nowadays, the difficult dynamics and the delicate tensions in Tunisia make us wonder about the necessity of keeping in mind the past and the trauma²⁶⁸ collectively lived and shared by the population, with the aim of going towards a future far from the past and far from any other forms of use of the power that might reduce the public space and the new acquired practices of participation.

That's why it's not by chance that, together with many students, intellectuals and university professors, the artists were often verbally and physically menaced by some members of the religious extremist movements. The artists' will to express their original idea of beauty hardly cohabits with a monolithic and rigid vision as the one claimed by the religious extremists, who consider the art as immoral and somehow in competition with the Divine Creation. But it has to be underlined that the condemn of the art in an Islamic context is a fundamentalist drift.

It might be sufficient to remember what happened on the occasion of the art exhibition *Les printemps des arts* at the Palace Abdallia in La Marsa-Tunis(in June 2012),when some religious extremists not only condemned but also defaced and vandalized some paintings or when other groups of religious fundamentalists tried to interrupt the screening of films such *Ni Allah ni Maitre* (by Nadia el Fani) or *Perspepolis*,(in 2011). Many other occasions followed during 2012 and 2013.

In other words, it is not only a matter of revolutionary forces and counter-revolutionary forces, but the real core of the question is the maintenance (much before than the enlargement) of the public space by those who are at the government.

Therefore it might help to have an in-depth view at the artistic creations and movements, because they are workshops for experimenting new social and cultural dynamics and they are important spaces, among the others, for understanding the question of acting in the *public space* and acting by *participation practices* which are at stake, in daily life, for all the citizens.

Conclusion

An in –depth analysis of the contemporary artistic production in Tunisia, especially during all the years before 2011, shows that it had expanded creative horizons able to imagine revolutionary alternatives. A whole imaginative geography around the ideas of freedom, dignity and social justice has spread among a well formed youth. An attentive investigation shows how the artistic production in Tunisia had contributed, both in esthetical and in hermeneutical terms, to propose intimate views “from the bottom” on a changing society but also to create some *narrative spaces* able to talk about the new, the alternative, the unforeseen.. So, some artistic movements (mainly, but none only, the young *underground scene*) contributed to forge an *imaginary that was at the core of the uprising*.

Besides, even now, in this critical and delicate phase of transition, the artistic movements are stimulating workshops for experimenting change dynamics.

The art is a demand for beauty and after Januray 2011 during these last years, certain ideas of beauty and dignity pose questions around which ideas are at the base of the society we want to build. All that poses questions also to the fine interrelations among aesthetic, religion and forms of resistance. Therefore, we dare affirm that some reflections about art, in the long terms, in the context of the long and still on-going Tunisian revolutionary processes, might help to understand some wedges of the complex dynamics

The artistic creations and movements might be exemplary contexts, among others, to face the question of acting in the *public space* and acting by *participation practices* which are at stake, in daily life, for all the citizens.

²⁶⁸ Cfr.Rancièrè J., *Il disagio dell'estetica* (2004), ETS, Pisa, 2009.