

## Context Matters: Notes Towards the 4th Marrakech Biennale

– Holiday Powers

On September 27, 2011, I visited an exhibition at the independent space L'Appartement 22 in Rabat. Evenings in the downtown area that surrounds it—Avenue Mohammed V—are somewhat curious, as the mundane veneer of families sitting out and people taking strolls becomes mildly unsettled by the appearance of crowds. When I spent a few months in the city in 2010, like clockwork, a group of unemployed college graduates would protest in front of the Parliament. I was always surprised by the quotidian nature of these actions. Every single night the Balima Café, right across from the state building, would fill up: a truck of policemen would arrive, imbibe, and lean out of its open door to smoke cigarettes before leisurely crossing the street when they heard the protestors approach. Traffic would always stop during this period. It almost seemed to be a way of marking time—a structuring of the day. Rather than fading into the landscape, though, the protests always elicited attention from people sitting on the benches or in other cafés, their eyes trained on this daily confrontation.

That September evening, a small group of protestors came down the avenue with an enormous flag. They were protesting in favor of the current regime. The pro-government gesture was all the more striking because no one seemed to notice. Their numbers were few—matched, almost, by the policemen and military that were there to support them—and the chants quiet. As I looked up and down the avenue, people were barely batting an eyelid at the incredibly outsized flag floating down the street before coming to a stop in front of Parliament.

Then came the Mouvement du 20 Février protest. These are no longer the quotidian protests of 2010, but have taken hold in Morocco with a new vigor since they began in February, 2011. I had looked away, retreated back inside to the exhibition, and heard the sound first. The avenue was flooded with hundreds of protestors chanting, “Freedom!” and “We are the citizens!” Suddenly, everything was movement—bystanders were pulled into the protest and from every angle, more and more were streaming in to take part. I have never seen anything as visually potent as this contrast between conscientious stillness and frenzied movement, overtaking everything so that it seemed there was a rippling effect out to the edges of the street.

The protestors were not able to reach the front of Parliament, however, as they were blocked by the flag, which took up the width of that side of the avenue. A line of military men with clubs separated the sides, protecting the flag, barring the progress of the anti-regime protest. The swath of red was a visual success in its own right—any journalistic image of this enthusiastic crowd would most likely need to include that flag, purposefully or not, because it was so large, and the red so arresting. The space of protest—of what the country might look like in the future, or what the visual impact of images of this moment might be—is a highly contested one. It matters that we hold on to the specific place and context of artistic intervention.

The exhibition that I saw that evening in the midst of this protest was “Jabal, Hajar, Turâb ...” (Mountain, Stone, Earth ...), a solo show of the Moroccan artist Younès Rahmoun, curated by L'Appartement 22 founder and artistic director Abdellah Karroum. Primarily an exhibition documenting Rahmoun's *Ghorfa* (2006) in the Rif Mountains, a project I will return to, Karroum was also preparing to install Rahmoun's recent video project *Khamsa* (Five, 2008). Rahmoun uses five sticks that he keeps replacing to create new simple drawings with his right hand while he himself films the performance with his left hand. The sticks are cleaned off pieces from a rosemary tree. Rahmoun's movements are slow, almost tentative. The sticks are at first nudged into abstract forms, not even picked up off of the table. The movements get bigger: a ladder appears, then a house. Slowly,

the sticks are pushed into a star, almost by chance, before they are made into something new again. The star both calls to mind the star found on the Moroccan flag, and re-imagines that flag star as one shape of many, rather than an icon for the kingdom. In Rahmoun's own way—spare, quiet, meditative—this is a response to the political energy one can find in Morocco today, experienced viscerally directly outside the walls of this exhibition space. Rahmoun seems to suggest all the other possibilities that exist, the way in which the component pieces can be nudged and reshaped to create something that is different. The star is transformed by the artist's hand. Rahmoun is not offering a critique, attempting to lay bare a political reality—he is instead offering his own eye on this movement, and building something new.

If *Khamsa* was created with the current political climate in mind, it is not limited to this context. This is not a nationalist piece, by any means, or a straightforward political statement. There are five versions of the performance, done in such places as Pont-en-Royans in central France, in Venice as part of Karroum's Moroccan Pavilion, and in the Rif Mountains in Morocco. Routes and possible movements are created with this itinerary of performances. Perhaps in other spaces, different aspects of this work are experienced more deeply—the role of documentation, and the way it becomes part of the performance itself, for instance. Within the very structure of this piece is a simultaneous engagement with the political movements I see from the balcony of the exhibition space, and a map of diverse connections. Speaking to a network that is much larger than the nation or the region, this work is also implicated in this context, and experienced through its framework.

Context matters. How context is framed needs to be both precise enough to explore the texture of the locale yet expansive enough to imagine its wider connections. It is with this in mind that I attempt to plot out some of the contexts of “Higher Atlas,” the upcoming exhibition of the 4th Marrakech Biennale, to root the festival in the space of exhibition—culturally, artistically, politically—as well as to imagine the larger networks that radiate outwards from here.

Rahmoun's work was on view at the end of that September week in the exhibition “Images Affranchies” (2011), curated by Brahim Alaoui as a parallel event to the Second Annual Marrakech Art Fair. Here, the artist exhibited his seven minute long film *Habba* (Seed, 2008). The video projection is of a white circle, inside of which an animation of a seed moves in space as it grows, sprouts vegetal abstract forms, and regenerates. The installation creates its own world and the viewer is transported into a meditative state, urged on by the ethereal sounds of a flute and an accordion. Rahmoun has explored different ways of showing seeds or flowers in the seven-minute long *Badhra* (2007)—also an animation about a grain—and in the 2010 installation *Zabra-Zoujaj* (Flower-Glass), a space that he created in which the viewer enters to find seventy-seven glass flowers on the ceiling. Referencing the seventy-seven branches of faith in Islam, again, these works use the central seed as a jumping-off point for other possibilities, other directions and ways to grow. In his body of work, Rahmoun often comes back to his personal experiences: identifying as a practicing Muslim, he frequently references Islam through the orientation of works or the use of specific numbers and repetition. His work is never meant to speak only to an experience of religion through the lens of Islam, though, and he is insistent about the inspirations and ideas of faith he finds in other religious practices, and in the many and varied locations in which he intervenes. “Images Affranchies” is an exhibition of contemporary Arab art. Alaoui highlights the breadth and difference between these varied works, by no means attempting to present a single-note ideology. This framework of attempting to find currents of creation that are specifically Arab, still exerts a power over how we engage with these works, how they dialog with one another.

This exhibition opened on September 29, 2011, in the Bank al-Maghrib building on the major public square Djemaa el-Fna. This square has an important history in Morocco and, more specifically, in Moroccan art history. Particularly in light of the liberatory title, the exhibition calls to mind the

iconic image of art in public spaces in Morocco, the 1969 “exposition-manifeste” in Djemaa el-Fna: the exhibition as manifest or obvious, as manifesto, as protest. In response to an exhibition by the Minister of Culture held within the municipality building in Marrakech, six artists decided to exhibit their own work on the walls of the public square. The artists, Mohammed Atallah, Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chebaâ, Mustapha Hafid, Mohammed Hamidi, and Mohammed Melehi, sought direct exchange with the larger public, rather than an experience of art within an official space with an elite audience. As Belkahia explained to me at one point, to see the official exhibition, one would have to have papers to be able to pass the guards, creating an environment of “fear and anxiety.”<sup>1</sup> The artists instead looked to create new possible relationships through their art. Djemaa el-Fna is historically a meeting place that includes people from all classes and backgrounds and appealed to the artists based on its “collective atmosphere.” In the statement released in the leftist journal *Souffles*, the artists explained that they wanted to “awaken the interest of this man (of the street), his curiosity, his critical spirit, stimulate it, so that he integrates new plastic expressions within his rhythm of life, within his daily space.”<sup>2</sup> The artists stayed with the exhibition to engage by-passers in conversation about the work.

In contrast, while “Images Affranchies” took place on the same square, the high fee to enter was prohibitive to the vast amount of people that frequent Djemaa el-Fna. The exhibition is consciously aimed at an elite, according to Marrakech Art Fair director Hicham Daoudi. In a round table that took place as part of the fair, Daoudi explained that the entrance fee acted as a filter to keep groups of people from streaming in off the square, out of the need to protect the artworks.<sup>3</sup> While we can accept the reality that most exhibitions do charge an entrance fee, and that many exhibitions are aimed primarily—if discreetly—at an elite, it is rare to hear publicly that a fee has been chosen *because* it is prohibitively high. The “exposition-manifeste” was arguably not entirely inviting, separating the people from the artwork with metal bars, yet there is a profound shift in the ideology from the 1969 exhibition to the 2011 one, with a long winding path between them. What does it mean to liberate images—what are you liberating images from, and for whom, if there are simultaneously structures put in place to actively impede a broad audience?

Within the framework of the Marrakech Art Fair, the exhibition points to another important context within Morocco: that of the growing art market. The art scene and its exhibition politics form another contested space of what is visible, and to whom. The art market, and the burgeoning gallery scene that can particularly be found in Casablanca, in many ways seems to be encroaching on the rest of the art community. In part, this is out of necessity. There are notable independent spaces in Morocco, such as L'Appartement 22 in Rabat, L'espace 150 × 295 cm in Martil, and the cinémathèque of Tangier. In the absence of museums or sufficient funding for many independent ventures, many people look to the galleries to fill this structural gap. Recognizing the driving force of the market in the last few years, we might then ask about the decision to include works on loan from Daoudi's personal gallery, Galerie HD, in “Images Affranchies.” While Galerie HD did not have a stand in the art fair, works were exhibited in the independent parallel exhibition to the fair from both the artist that inaugurated the gallery just days before the fair, Youssef Nabil, as well as the artist the gallery plans to show this spring, Faisal Samra. These are both strong artists that added interesting interventions to the exhibition. However, the proximity between the independent exhibition and the business of the fair's director still raises questions about the role of the art market in current exhibition politics and points to another important context of artistic production that can be found in Morocco today.

I believe in the importance of engaging these multiple local contexts, and it is within these contexts that the 4th Marrakech Biennale will be exhibited. As biennales proliferate and find anonymity in white walls and the same select group of artists and curators, let us cling to these particularities of circumstance! Yet even as I believe in rooting artistic experience in sitehood, conceived more broadly than the physical place in which it is installed or created, I still think that there is a

time-lag between the concept of “Producing Identity in North Africa” and what is actually happening in the visual arts. Looking for an Arab art that can be comprehensible — as in exhibitions such as “Images Affranchies” or numerous other international examples — or for the production of a North African identity, or identities, seems to me to cut off more possibilities than it creates.

I am open to the possibility that this was not always the case. I argue that the artists involved in the 1969 “exposition-manifeste” in Djemaa el-Fna were attempting to engage if not create a specifically nation-based identity. In the post-colonial context, they negotiated between nation-based interventions and broad trans-national currents to imagine what it might mean to be modern and Moroccan. Contemporary artists in Morocco, to the contrary, are exploring different possibilities of connection and intervention. There are important particularities to the sociopolitical context of Morocco within which these projects are created and received, not to mention the specific artistic structures and history of artistic practice here. There are also cultural currents, with both similarities and important differences and tensions, within North Africa or more broadly, the Arab world. Arguably, though, the nation and the region are no longer an appropriate framework for these contemporary projects — or, at the very least, can no longer function as the exhaustive framework they once did, particularly in light of the fundamentally trans-national and trans-regional nature of many contemporary projects.

The projects that I find most exciting and which are engaging many contexts within Morocco, have moved away from the notion of national culture and identity in favor of interrogating particular spaces and in collaboration with specific, highly local communities. Many are linked in important structural ways to a series of other specific locations. My own interest in locality in contemporary art is in understanding the local contextually and relationally, in constellation with other locales. The interest in creating an understanding linked to a region or a broad population creates barriers and absolutes, rather than finding the ways in which artistic projects create routes of possibility, bringing disparate and precise locations and contexts into dialog with one another.

For example, Younès Rahmoun’s series *Ghorfa Al-Anâ/Hunâ* is directly inspired by the *ghorfa*, or room, beneath the stairs of Rahmoun’s family house in Tétouan, which he used for many years as a space for work and meditation. In each iteration of the series *Al-Âna/Hunâ* (Now/Here), which began in 2006, the room is reconstructed on a one-to-one basis. Each version responds to the particularities of the specific environment with varied materials and forms, often in consultation with a local community, in places including France, Singapore, Amsterdam, Douala, and Rabat. Rahmoun creates spaces for meditation and reflection and has undertaken a lengthy project exploring the documentation of the fourth *ghorfa*, a permanent stone *ghorfa* in Beni-Boufrah in the Rif Mountains. Each *ghorfa* exists on its own, yet is understood within the series, connecting diverse communities and locales.

In the 3rd AiM Biennale exhibition (now Marrakech Biennale), Rahmoun explored how to connect a room in the Palais Bahia in Marrakech to the Rif *ghorfa*. This *ghorfa* was made in 2007 of stone, with the help and consultation of community members, the Youth House, a stonemason, and his assistants.<sup>4</sup> Directly surrounding the *ghorfa* are three trees Rahmoun planted with children in the community: palm, fig, and olive, calling upon Mediterranean culture as well as Qur’anic references. The extant environment has also been integrated into the work, based on the paths to and from the *ghorfa* that Rahmoun recommends. The piece exists as a site of deliberate artistic intervention, and has also become integrated as a useful space into the community. Situated outside the village near fields where people work, the space is used to keep lunch in the shade or as a place to rest in the afternoon. For the biennale exhibition, Rahmoun brought material from the site of the project, such as sand and stone, and documented the work with these traces, and with drawings. Rahmoun continues to develop these ways of using documentation to create connections to the

ghorfa in the Rif, already linked in a constellation of international ghorfas, as in the 2011 exhibition at L'Appartement 22.

Curator and critic Simon Sheikh argues that today, we understand place equally through its possible and impossible connections to other places as in the originality of the place itself.<sup>5</sup> The previous edition of the Biennale, “A Proposal for Articulating Works and Places,” curated by Abdellah Karroum, attempted to explore the ways in which contemporary artists are creating new or possible routes and connections, in dialogue with the specific location and context of Marrakech itself. Biennales are based in the tensions between the needs, interests, and desires of the local and global—or, at least, international arts publics. Expanding upon the idea of the local in a constellation with other locales through exhibition practices that highlight these relationships offers a means to avoid privileging—if not fetishizing—an essentialized notion of the local in direct contrast with the global. Sheikh, writing on the structure of the biennale, continues: “Biennials are not only part of the present, but also always the past, in forms of the previous editions of the particular biennale itself, art history in general, and naturally, the history of the place, with its contestations of space, cultural hegemonies, forgetting and remembrance of struggles past.”<sup>6</sup> This new edition of the biennale is situated in the midst of many points of active contestation in Morocco, even if these are not visible on the immediate surface of the exhibition: claims of political visibility, the encroaching art market, an international tendency to box creation into a regional identity. As a young biennale—this is the fourth edition of the festival and only the second time that it is using the title “biennale”—it is also important to think about the history of this particular structure.

“A Proposal for Articulating Works and Places” opened November 19, 2009 and closed January 19, 2010. The majority of the exhibition was located in the Palais Bahia, as well as other venues including the Théâtre Royal, the film school ESAV-Marrakech, and the Dar Al-Tifl orphanage. The curatorial concept of the exhibition attempted to, in Karroum’s words, “transform the exhibition places into a place of immediate memory, of that which happens elsewhere, of the place of the work.”<sup>7</sup> The project engaged the notion of place in two ways: by attempting to connect the production spaces with the exhibition space as well as through the larger idea of what it means to belong to a place. As Karroum explains, the exhibition space is meant to function as a meeting point to document the works in their initial location. The artworks were selected for their connections in Morocco and other places as larger projects, rather than solely objects to exhibit. Similarly, for Karroum, the exhibition itself was a project, not an event, and the project was larger than what could be held in the institution of a biennale or museum, making it a biennale in time, in being every two years, more than in format.<sup>8</sup>

That being said, although the exhibition was not based in site-specific installation, this was a biennale more than just in name. It was an international exhibition related to an arts festival that, as many biennales do, engaged with the larger city by inhabiting multiple spaces, both public and private. The curatorial concept of emphasizing the site of creation in contrast to or in connection with the site of exhibition, allowing a reading of the local itself as a node in a network, does however set this particular biennale exhibition apart. Rather than focusing on the physical specificity of the exhibition hall or the essential locality of Marrakech, the exhibition is re-imagined as a meeting place of multiple locations. It created a point of both memory and translation of other places, presented simultaneously. Marrakech became in this way a contextualized locale, a point from which to view the larger constellation of other locales. It is a compelling notion for a biennale exhibition to present itself conceptually not as the meeting of global and local but as a contextualized series of localities.

Moreover, the works selected engaged with politically salient questions that remain important within Morocco, particularly of borders and migration. For example, Isaac Julien and Francis Aljys both situated their installations within real events through documentation provided as part of the work, displaying newspaper stories or statistics alongside their own interventions. Given the tension surrounding the Straits of Gibraltar, the questions generated are clearly situated within

the Moroccan political climate, yet it is also interesting to consider what it means to site works on borders within the Marrakech Biennale. Julien is a British artist and filmmaker, born in 1960, whose installations often attempt to create counter-narratives to mass media. His 2007 work presented in Marrakech, *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats*, is the third in a larger trilogy of works. The work was shown alone in its three-screen installation in the dramatic, unfinished Théâtre Royal, the main venue for the 4th Marrakech Biennale. All three works in the trilogy deal with migration and globalization. This particular installment considers illegal migration across the Mediterranean, particularly from Libya to Sicily.<sup>9</sup> The movement of physical bodies is accompanied by abstracted personal stories in this installation, in which it is unclear how many people make it to the other side.<sup>10</sup> Though stunningly beautiful and lushly stylized, the installation movingly points to the perils of illegal migration. In comparison, Francis Alÿs offers another take that is more precisely located in the Straits of Gibraltar. Alÿs was born in 1959 and lives and works in Mexico City. The first experimental version of his project “Don’t cross the bridge before you get to the river,” produced between Tangier and Tarifa, was exhibited in the Palais Bahia as documentation of a project from 2008. As Alÿs describes it, “a line of kids with shoe boats will leave Europe towards Morocco while a line of kids with shoe boats leaves Africa towards Spain. The two lines will meet on the horizon.”<sup>11</sup> In this multi-screen installation, the children walk into increasingly out-of-control waters. Alÿs locates the project within the paradox of the global economy in comparison with increasingly tightened borders.

I am interested in situating these works not just within Morocco, but more precisely within the exhibition, as an alternative to the redemptive narrative of international cooperation offered by the biennale structure. Simon Gikandi argues that the discourse of cosmopolitanism in the post-colonial world requires a contrapuntal narrative of statelessness. He writes, “The refugee is the Other of the cosmopolitan; rootless by compulsion, this figure is forced to develop an alternative narrative of global cultural flows.”<sup>12</sup> Within the international framework of a biennale is an implicit claim to cosmopolitanism, to effortless multi-nationality, which is set in stark contrast to Julien’s depiction of illegal migration and Alÿs’s imagery of the tense border. Neither of these projects were conceived specifically for the exhibition and were by no means making a deliberate statement about the structure of biennales. Yet reading these works about illegal immigration and the reality of the political situation in Morocco against the structure of the biennale highlights another context in which to situate the new biennale exhibition. Viewers of these works in Marrakech included the flow of art professionals across the Mediterranean, the majority of whom did not require visas. A similarly international audience will arrive for this edition. The 2009 installations both point to the illegal counter-flow into Europe, where visa requirements are quite strict for many non-European nationalities, including Moroccans, a reality that has effects on artistic production and the artistic community here. Effortless internationalism cannot be taken for granted in light of the inequality of free movement.

Biennale exhibitions require the translation of the superstructure of the biennale within the specific needs and extant structures of each iteration. The structure of any biennale is placed into an existing cultural, social and political culture and therefore will not—cannot—be realized in the same way in multiple localities. The location exerts its own force on the works that are exhibited. In Faouzi Bensaidi’s experimental installation for the 2009 AiM exhibition, based on images that were shot but never used for his feature film *WWW, What a Wonderful World*, paper planes fly at two towers of television screens. At the far end of the room, two lit fluorescent bulbs lie on the metal frame of a bed. In front of the television screens are two life-size cast bodies in a tank of live fish. The stray cats that can be found throughout Marrakech were prevalent in the Palais Bahia, and at the opening of the exhibition, the remains of some of those fish could be found in the courtyard, where cats had dragged them and eaten them out of the installation. The power and importance of

Bensaidi's installation is of course not related to this small anecdote, yet it simultaneously provides an image for the way in which location—in all of its cultural, physical, and social iterations—creates a rich and sometimes unexpected lens through which to engage artistic production.

Carson Chan and Nadim Samman have proposed an exhibition based entirely in site-specific installation. The artists will be coming from throughout the world to investigate the space in Marrakech, and create their installations in situ. They have proposed “Higher Atlas” as a cartography of the beyond, considering that we engage what is beyond us—no matter how close or far—from where we are standing. They have left the concept of site broad, whether it is in the physicality of the space itself or in the broader site of politics, culture, and history in Marrakech. The exhibition comes at an interesting time. How we describe the space, the context, the moment, is highly contested, within the realms of politics and exhibition politics, the growing art market and the ways in which art is framed. I have attempted to plot out the vectors of these sometimes overlapping, sometimes sparring concepts that create the context from which we might engage this project. It is not a matter of producing or describing a regional or national identity, though. Instead, following the lead of many young artists that are working within Morocco today, I am interested in trying to understand the exigencies of this context, of this site, opening it towards the many possible constellations of connections that exist.

- 1 Farid Belkahia, interview by the author, July 30, 2010, Marrakech, Morocco.
- 2 Mohammed Ataalah, et al., “Action plastique: Exposition Jamaâ l'fna, Marrakech,” *Souffles*, no. 13–14 (1969): 45–46.
- 3 “L'impact des foires et des biennales” (talk moderated by Roxana Azimi, Palace Es Saadi, Marrakech, Morocco, October 2, 2011).
- 4 Cécile Bourne-Farrell, “Ghorfa: Now/Here,” Curators Abdellah Karroum & Eline van der Vlist, *Younès Rahmoun: Ghorfa, Al-Âna/Hunâ* (Paris: Editions hors'champs, 2009), 6.
- 5 Simon Sheikh, “Marks of Distinction, Vectors of Possibility: Questions for the Biennial,” *Open* 16, (2009): 75.
- 6 Ibid., 75.
- 7 Abdellah Karroum, “A Proposal for Articulating Works and Places,” <http://www.works-and-places.appartement22.com/spip.php?article1>.
- 8 Abdellah Karroum, email messages to author, May 10, 2010.
- 9 See <http://www.isaacjulien.com/installations/westernunion:smallboat>.
- 10 Abdellah Karroum, “Isaac Julien,” <http://www.works-and-places.appartement22.com/spip.php?article23>.
- 11 Abdellah Karroum, “Francis Alÿs,” <http://www.works-and-places.appartement22.com/spip.php?article2>.
- 12 Simon Gikandi, “Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality,” in *Rerouting the Post-colonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*, ed. Janet Wilson, et al., (London: Routledge, 2010), 26.