

Traveling Back to Ourselves: The Maghreb as an Art Destination

– Alice Planel

The Maghreb—Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Lybia, and Mauritania—has been shaped by myriad cultures from within, and from without, as a continued site of conquest throughout history. In the nineteenth century, Sarah Graham Brown argues, European image-makers framed and pictorialized the region according to Western stereotypes.¹ Indeed, the production of postcards depicting landscapes, architecture, and people from Morocco and Algeria became a lucrative business because of their great popularity and extensive circulation. These postcards sparked the popular imagination but, effectively, did little more than concretize pre-existing exotic views of the region—in titillating images of Moresque and Berber women. Is this still the case today? I suggest that it is. My essay will begin to map artistic practices in the Maghreb while juxtaposing narratives of institutional art practices and of travel. As Lucy Lippard joyfully writes, it does not hurt that most sites of large artistic events are “destinations” in themselves. To even begin to map art produced by Maghrebi artists involves tracing the contours of different spaces and locales inside the Maghreb and abroad. These different sites are to be seen not only as cultural objects, but also as heterogeneous zones at the confluence of multi axial power relations based on gender, social status, ethnicity, and language, which audiences and artworks need to acknowledge.

The text that follows is no exhaustive list of the different artists working in the region. The selection is as much to do with personal taste, as with accidents of encounter. Indeed, information about Maghrebi artists is not easy to trace, not least because few institutions or artists have any presence online. Furthermore, I have chosen to focus my attention on practices that are informed by the themes of travel and the public space. There are presumably a number of artists and institutions who deserve to be included here but that I have overlooked—I hope to come across their work soon. I am writing from the perspective of a European and therefore concentrate on the relation between Europe and the Maghreb. I am in no place to comment on that of North America and the Maghreb.

For better or worse, encounters with the work of Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian artists begin at “home.” It is a lasting problem that Europe based émigrés are frequently chosen to represent the creative production of the Maghreb in large exhibitions that have the pretention to be inclusive of this “peripheral” region—thus innocently disfavoring local artists. Exhibitions such as “Africa Remix” (2004) and “Uneven Geographies” (2010) featured the work of figures living or working in the art hubs of Paris, New York, and London without critical engagement with this fact—a bewildering state of affairs.² Such exhibitions are exciting spectacles that have quite rightly catapulted lesser-known artists into the inner sanctum of a global art market, however, they occlude continuing problems that attend the production and reception of contemporary art from regions including the Maghreb. To suggest that these artists are representatives of their countries of “origin” is to disregard the fact that, though their work draws on a plurality of cultural narratives, their practices are firmly anchored within European terms of artistic production. Zineb Sedira (b. France, w. Paris, London and Algiers), Katia Kameli (b. France, w. Paris and Algiers), Neil Beloufa (b. France, w. Paris), Fayçal Baghriche (b. Algeria, w. Paris), Djamel Kokene (b. Algeria, w. Paris), Bouchra Khalili (b. Morocco, w. France and Morocco), Mouna Jemal (b. France, w. Tunis) or Younes Baba-Ali (b. Morocco, w. Marseille and Casablanca), have all studied in France. To place emphasis solely on their Maghrebi origins obscures much of the complexity of their individual practices. More conclusive discourse will conceive of their work as hybrid. And yet, while the term hybridity enables a cognizance of difference that is less perfunctory than multiculturalism allows, it suggests, nonetheless, prescriptive

and homogenous identity constellations. Zoulikha Bouabdellah (b. Russia, w. Paris and Casablanca), Samta Benyahia (b. Algeria, w. Paris), Latifa Echackh (b. Morocco, w. Martigny, Switzerland), Patricia Triki (b. Tunisia, w. Tunis) or Driss Ouadahi (b. Morocco, w. Düsseldorf) problematize notions of cultural inter-textuality. In so doing, their work eschews facile notions of hybridity to open up interstitial spaces that require new forms of agency from the viewing subject.³

Exhibitions such as “Africa Remix” or more recently Manifesta 8 (2010), uphold the absolute fallacy that the system of contemporary art is inclusive of all groups and regions.⁴ To the public of these exhibitions and to the greater audiences reached through websites and catalogues, there seems to be a perceptible widening of the artistic horizon to include new territories. However, artists who remain based in the Maghreb do not often benefit from the attention of large institutions and private collectors. Discourses of hybridity and multiculturalism allow governments to capitalize on their supposed acceptance of difference whilst continuing to uphold strict and prejudiced immigration laws. Although the art world is to a certain extent dependent on its own codes of practice, cultural references, and language, it remains susceptible to institutional practices that are first and foremost Eurocentric, and, increasingly, politically conservative. As much as institutions of contemporary art presume to favor critical discourse, the system is pathologically coy about exploring the political ramifications of its own inner workings.

Artists who live and work in the Maghreb or who are originally from the region often make migration the theme of their work. Kader Attia’s (b. France, w. Paris, Berlin and Algiers) *Rochers Carrés* (2009) focuses on the use of architecture to control public space—in the port side of Algiers—and a yearning for European shores among young men. Latifa Echackh addresses institutional racism to do with anti-immigration policies in *O-I VISA (alien of extraordinary ability)* (2005). Atef Berredjem’s (b. Algeria, w. Algeria) installation *The Raft of Lampedusa* (2009) illustrates the danger of migration and nods to Géricault’s sensationalist painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818), thus grounding the daily fatalities that occur between the coasts of Europe and Africa within art historical discourse, and by extension the institution of art. Bouchra Khalili maps migratory patterns, within Zineb Sedira’s work further presents the Mediterranean as a liquid border in *Saphir* (2006) *Middle Sea* (2008) and *Floating Coffins* (2009). Zinedine Bessaï (b. Algeria, w. Algiers) maps with ruthless wit the support network which Harragas—a nickname for migrants—depend on in *H-out* (2010). Adel Abdessemed’s (b. Algeria, w. Paris) *Bourek* (2005) or *Telle Mère tel Fils* (2009) encapsulate the experience of artists who, exhibiting internationally, crisscross the world in jet planes and routinely travel through borders with great ease.⁵ It remains difficult or impossible, however, for certain artists to travel. Indeed, geo-political issues exist within the very framework of the international art world, but go near undetected. Strict and lengthy visa requirements, partly due to continuing diplomatic tensions, are discouraging for curators and art buyers thinking of traveling to Tunisia, Algeria or Lybia, while artists and curators from these countries see their application is to travel rejected time and again. Both the curator Nadira Laggoune Aklouche and Bessaï, were refused visas and could not attend the recent exhibition “New Cartographies” at the Cornerhouse in Manchester (UK), to which they contributed. The inability to be mobile, within the context of an art world in perpetual flux, both geographically and theoretically, is a huge disadvantage. Not only is it necessary for artists to enter into a dialog with other practices outside of his/her locality, but the artist needs to forge contacts and relations with different people and institutions in order to be exhibited. Furthermore, in today’s context, artists are also called upon to enter into cultural discussions around their work or around broader issues. Whilst this may not inform their practice, it contributes greatly to the development of their career. We need to move away from “hybridity” and “global art,” towards an understanding of artistic production and reception that recognizes multi axial power relations as audiences and art works attempt to travel between different geographies.

The hybrid idea is based on a positivist conception of culture that ignores the interplay of economic and geo-political forces. The disabled flags in Mounir Fatmi's (b. Morocco, w. Tanger and Paris) *G8 The Brooms* (2004) seemingly reflects underlying political realities that the hybrid notion ignores. Maghrebi culture and that of Europe or North America hold different economic and cultural weights, generating differences that are historically grounded. The heritage of colonialism and the process of decolonization continue to inform the narratives upon which our reading of art is dependent. Indeed, our perception of the visual hinges upon a complex web of second hand experiences or post-memories. In other words, when visiting art events in the Maghreb or viewing "Maghrebi" art at home we travel between territories—geographic and artistic—that are culturally and historically determined. Societal issues rooted within immigration, the discourse of the veil in France, residual effects of 9/11 and the war on terror, as well as rising populist discourse, all contribute to shaping the ways in which we view art from the Maghreb, as well as the work of artists who "originate" from the region. In *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art and Place*, Lucy Lippard writes that we become tourists to escape to "somewhere else" or to experience the "other."⁶ This is not necessarily objectionable. That a growing demographic of art audiences travel to far-flung regions to view work is a positive trend. However, as we do so we are, in effect, enacting narratives imbedded within our own culture. Just as nineteenth-century audiences were titillated by images of an imagined Orient, we continue to project our desires and prejudices upon visions of the "somewhere(s) else" signified by Maghrebi art—without this process being malevolent. Samuel Herzog outlines the dichotomic aspect of our relation to contemporary work from "new" art territories. On the one hand, contemporary art has, he writes, become a universal methodology despite its intrinsic variety. Indeed, I would argue that few artists who do not deploy contemporary processes in their work are accepted into its fold. On the other hand, to calm our intrinsic mistrust of non-occidental art, Herzog asserts, we search for the expression of traditional values: we are thankful when an artist makes explicit reference to his/her country of origin. Herzog's comments are somewhat hyperbolic, however. Non-occidental art which is critical of political situations "elsewhere"—whether or not the artist remains in the country of origin or not—are favored by public, critics, and the market.⁷ Indeed, we give precedence to artists whose discourse is concomitant with that of our media, governments, and neo-liberal economies.

Regions such as the Maghreb are seen to have lost out on the experience of modernism that would have enabled a revolution of thought, and thus of visual practice. Within Western Europe, the history of art brings legitimacy to contemporary practices based on notions of the critical involvement of generations of artists. The Middle East, which the Maghreb is often lumped with, on the other hand, continues to be perceived as politically backwards. However, whilst it remains that colonization hindered the development of independent "indigenous" art forms, the process of decolonization saw the advent of national identities which the visual arts gave form to. It will be interesting to see to what extent the Arab Spring changes the discourse around contemporary art from the Maghreb and the Mashrek. The myriad events grouped under this umbrella term were accompanied and even preceded by artistic projects critical of the political status quo—such as that of the Tunisian artist Nadia Jelassi's (b. Tunisia, w. Tunis) *Retourner sa Veste* (2010). The use of social media and crowd participation that epitomize the Arab Spring have inspired political processes since.⁸ Artists from the Maghreb and the Mashrek who have made these forms of expression their own are at the forefront of specific and new forms of political and artistic discourse. Through the use of contemporary forms of communication and materials, artists from the Maghreb and the Mashrek demonstrate the relevance of practices that, while specific to the realities of the region, are intrinsically contemporary.

In the Maghreb, new forms of artistic practice such as installation, performance or video remain abstruse for national institutions and for the population at large. Artists therefore meet with

administrative difficulties at every stage of such work's development. Despite the success of the first stage of "Intra Muros," Amena Menia's (b. Algeria, w. Algiers) compelling project remains mostly at the stage of conception because of a succession of administrative hurdles. In Lybia and Tunisia, the political situation led to the art world withdrawing into itself. Rachida Triki demonstrates, however, that contrary or even inauspicious cultural policies have paradoxically encouraged a young generation of artists in Tunisia to develop ingenuity, commitment to their practice, and approaches that intercede directly within the fabric of society. The project "Working for Change," first held in Venice during the 2011 Biennale and which featured the work of Batoul Shimi (b. Morocco, w. Martil, Morocco), Younès Rahmoum (b. Morocco, w. Tétouan, Morocco) and Karim Rafi (b. Morocco, w. Tanger), similarly demonstrates a desire to act within the very fabric of society. Curators and artists decry the absence of financial support for contemporary art, and the lack of a local art market in the Maghreb. Nevertheless, there has been a marked increase in the number of institutions dedicated to the promotion of contemporary art. In 2008, the MAMA opened in Algiers and has since organized numerous exhibitions as well as le FIAC—as opposed to la FIAC in Paris. In Morocco, L'Appartement 22, Radioapartment22, Dar Al-Ma'mûn residency and center, the Cinématique de Tanger under the helm of the artist Yto Barrada (b. France w. Tanger and Paris), the Marrakech Art Fair, and the Marrakech Biennale (formerly Arts in Marrakech Biennale) have been instrumental in attracting attention to the region, and in promoting local endeavors during conferences and art events abroad. In Tunisia there are a group of dynamic galleries such as the Galerie ARTYSHOW, El Marsa, and Kanvas that show the work of contemporary artists. In the absence of official support, the Arab Tunisian Bank and the Banque Arabe Internationale de Tunisie have become important players within the Tunisian art scene. The artist Halim Karabibene (b. Tunisia, w. Tunis) through his practice, and with wit and caustic humor, tries to exert pressure on the government to open a museum of modern and contemporary art in Tunisia.

Albert Camus writes that traveling is a grand process that brings us closer to ourselves.⁹ The issue here is to be aware of this very process of traveling to ourselves. The act of viewing art, in effect, should be recognized as an act performed according to cultural narratives, post-memories, and geopolitical or economic pressures.

Exhibitions and other events in the Maghreb that showcase work from around the globe, must sustain an extensive discourse with local artists, cultures, and populations. Whilst exhibiting local artists provides a necessary *mise en abîme* of local realities, it is interesting to juxtapose the work of established artists from international art circuits with that of local artists. Neither process, however, automatically fosters inquisitive or conclusive dialog between traveling audiences and local realities, or even between the local audience and the art event. To pursue discourses beyond the frame of contemporary art increases the chances of fostering flexible and critical approaches that can truly interact with local realities in a self-cognizant way. Contemporary art systems resist profound criticism. The Marrakech Biennale has the opportunity to avoid a narrowing discourse by encompassing art, cinema, literature, and debate. What of the artists who travel to Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, or Lybia to exhibit or create work? Asking artists to travel extensively throughout the Maghreb is not feasible, but realizing that the ways in which cultural narratives pre-determine our reception of quotidian experiences as we travel is invaluable. Lloyd argues for the interactive nature of the relation between producer and spectator at a given moment and in a given location, which conditions the meaning of the work of art.¹⁰ Indeed, I owe much to Lloyd's conception of the relation between diaspora, performativity, and memory in arguing that we locate what we see through an embodied experience of personal and second hand memories. If emphasized and mediated, performativity encourages us to consider the materiality of the art object while giving meaning to it. To think of production and reception as performance does not imply that meaning is pegged

to the art object through complex metanarratives, but that meaning can be made in the present in the act of making and in the act of viewing. In other words, to think of performance as action. Paul Connerton, and Maurice Halbwachs before him, emphasize the role of habitual memory.¹¹ In the context of the art exhibition these theories demonstrate the relevance of cultural mediation and architectural space in communicating with a local and global audience. For example, Maghrebi architecture is predominantly colonial, and entering into a direct discourse with this architecture can help map a more cognizant practice of artistic reception. Amena Menia's work in Algiers is emblematic of the importance that cultural narratives and habitual experiences of an urban space have on giving meaning to art and architecture.

Lippard remarks that this “elsewhere” we travel to is home to another community. Perhaps we need to be reminded of this as we, the cultural tourists and art professionals, descend upon another place with our baggage, philanthropic sentiment, and expectations, ready to be fulfilled and to fulfill. The Maghreb is a destination that is deeply heterogeneous, while our relation to it can only ever be culturally, historically, and geo-politically determined. It is the theater of an ebullience of history and contemporary cultural and artistic practices, which contribute to a complex discourse with societies and with politics, locally and globally. As we jet back and forth between Europe and the Maghreb, we must do so with humility and the recognition that geo-political issues hold weight, even in the art world.

- 1 Sarah Graham Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860–1950* (London: Quartet, 1988).
- 2 “Africa Remix, Contemporary Art of a Continent (2004–2007),” Düsseldorf, London, Paris, Tokyo and Johannesburg; “Uneven Geographies, Art and Globalisation,” (2010), Nottingham Contemporary.
- 3 In contrast, “Unerwartet/Unexpected, From Islamic Art to Contemporary Art” (2010) Bochum; “DisORIENTation” (2003) Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; and “Taswir: Pictorial Mappings of Islam and Modernity” (2009–2010) Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin; attempt to map, more or less successfully, the specific journeys of the artists exhibited.
- 4 Manifesta 8, In Dialogue with Northern Africa (2010–2011), Murcia, Spain.
- 5 I could not continue without stating that Adel Abdessmed's work resists such an easy interpretation. Abdessmed's crushed and mangled fuselage, further represent the thwarted movements of today's world.
- 6 Lucy Lippard, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art and Place* (New York: New Press, 1999).
- 7 Samuel Herzog, “Art Locale: Perception Globale” in *Créations Artistiques Contemporaines en pays d'Islam, Des Arts en Tensions* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2006), 567.
- 8 Rachida Triki in an article due to be published in *Diptyk*, No. 12 (2011), writes of the performances *Art dans la Rue* (2011) by Faten Rouissi and *Horr 1* (2011) by Sonia Kalel and Sana Tamzini.
- 9 Albert Camus, *1913–1960: Carnets Vol. 2* (Gallimard: Paris, 1962).
- 10 Fran Lloyd, *Displacement and Difference, Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora* (London: Saffron Press, 2000).
- 11 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Maurice Halbwachs, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).