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Turning a City Inside-out

On the Re-appropriation of Urban Space in Tunisia in Times of Revolt

Abstract

The spatial dynamics were difficult to overlook during the 2011 movements of revolt in Tunisia, pushing the damned in the center of public attention in the concerted effort of turning prevailing authoritarian politics inside–out. Venturing in the spatial contestation central in these revolts, the mesmerizing occupation and re-appropriation of symbolic places, such as the Kasbah Square or Bourguiba Avenue took center stage. These movements of occupation and re-appropriation of spatial power produced momentous heuristic enclaves of another order, projecting dreams of a renewed inclusive free and dignified body politic. Based on a long-term research in the field of visual arts in Tunisia between 2011 and 2017 and the combination of various postcolonial critiques, this article demonstrates the way in which violent processes of destruction preceding these processes of re-appropriation and occupation are too often overlooked. Police stations, the presidential personality cult and the private estate of the authoritarian regime are identified and treated as spatial nodes that maintain the compartmentalization and fragmentation of urban space in place. Moreover, by including in the analysis the often-omitted Islamist occupation and re-appropriation of mosques and public space contesting the ongoing constitutional political dynamics, this article elucidates why the revolutionary process failed in the production of a long aspired liberated and dignifying space, as the revolutionary re-appropriation of these symbolic nodes of power was not included in any political agenda.

The Production of Space[2]

In order to build a palace on the hilltop overlooking the Mediterranean in the northern suburb of Tunis, former Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali displaced the tomb of Hmida Bennour. Local legend says the Sufi saint haunted Ben Ali's dreams, threatening to eject him from power, just as he had been removed from his mausoleum. The myth remains opaque, but the guards of the palace witnessed amounts of incense burned and a sheep regularly sacrificed, hinting at the presence of a strong superstition at the highest level of the regime. In the summer of 2010, the palace was tagged with graffiti by activists with the numbers "26-26", referring to the postal

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account of the National Solidarity Fund which claimed to invest in developing the marginalized regions, but in reality hid the regime's corruption. Contrary to other prestigious presidential villas, the luxurious palace of Sidi Dhrif—hiding several million dollars in cash and fine jewelry—was not looted during the movement of the revolt of 2011. Leïla Abid, the magistrate in charge of the confiscated private property of regime members, struggled in vain to transform the palace into a public museum.[3]

The proposal of Judge Abid echoes the spatial dimension of revolt. Engaging with urban space as an ambiguous instrument not only of political control but also of resistance, revolt can be redefined as a violent but aesthetic process of spatial re-appropriation that contests territorialized spatial power. Frantz Fanon's 1963 analysis of spatial dynamics of decolonization in the Algerian liberation struggle serves not only as a starting point for the analysis of the spatial and aesthetic dynamics of revolt, but also for sharpening Lefebvre's critique on the Situationist process of re-appropriation (*détournement*) in the production of space. The following analysis complements academic attention given to the occupation of places with its often overlooked preceding processes of destruction and re-appropriation. It does so by looking at the urban landscape of Tunis, but also by observing other cities outside of the capital, such as Sidi-Bouzid, Kasserine, Tala or Gabes. The processes of destruction and re-appropriation are scrutinized as visual, sensible, and thus heuristic operations that temporarily puncture ways of seeing and feeling. However, any analysis which discusses the occupation of places during the Tunisian revolution would be incomplete without considering another overlooked aspect of these urban and aesthetic processes of revolt: the occupation of mosques and the ensuing grassroots Islamist activism, further contesting and occupying public space. I argue that the movements of revolt did not succeed in consolidating the production of new spaces that could safeguard the dignity to which the body politic was aspiring. To understand the tenacity of space and the consequent difficulty in the re-appropriation of territorialized spatial power and the production of new spaces, I consider the recent movements of revolt through a long-term historical lens. I intend to show that the 2011 movement of revolt already began with the liberation struggle of the early 20th century, when the body politic contested the colonial compartmentalization of urban space as this dividing process endured and transformed into a geography of fragmentation.

My research was conducted during a unique moment in the history of Tunisia. Starting from an online explorative research, I created a database of pictures, videos and texts related to the spatial aesthetics of revolt. In a second phase, I interviewed a network of directly concerned and expert interlocutors to refine my findings. These in-depth expert interviews allowed me to gather information to improve and broaden my online exploration. Every interlocutor was approached as an expert of his or her own lived experience and as a subjective storyteller. I had to pose and counterpose the different narratives in order to distill the final data I could fully rely on to make my interpretations based on my own sensible experience and my embodied immersion in the field. Unable to cover the variety of sensual experiences that structured the aesthetics of the revolutionary struggles, I gradually selected the data that related in one way or another to the visible and spatial dimensions of aesthetics. Out of this cyclical and vibrant process, navigating the capricious and sometimes unruly waves of my fieldwork, I focused solely on substantiated material that helped me to address the different aspect of the spatial diversion or re-appropriation of the authoritarian state aesthetics under scrutiny in this paper.

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3 The local legend of Hmida Bennour haunting Ben Ali's dreams was shared with me during an interview I conducted with Judge Leïla Abid, August 2017, Tunis.

The Spatialization of Power

Frantz Fanon's 1963 spatial analysis in *The Wretched of the Earth* echoes in many ways the spatial structuration of Tunisian history. The colonial world, he argues, is a motionless essentializing world divided into compartments. It reduces space through a Manicheist division into two mutually exclusive zones: the spacious area of the colonizer is forcefully and violently separated from and opposed to the claustrophobic zone of the native (41). The colonized is hemmed in, immobilized in his/her own zone. Compartmentalization further delimits the city against the Medina and the countryside. Fanon thus understands colonization as a spatial organization of immobilizing separation and static confinement that permanently keeps the colonized in place. This is achieved, not only by generating visible coercive relations, but also by embedding the resulting spatial relations in daily practices as well as bodily and affective experiences (Kipfer 705).

Far from being liberated during the struggle for independence, the colonial compartmentalization of urban space in Tunisia was transformed into a "geography of fragmentation" (Kanna 364). This fragmentation is inscribed into the urban materiality and serves as part of the visual apparatus of the Tunisian state. The compartmentalization of space articulated a separation between the "New City" and the "Medina," but also between the city center and its peripheries (Ben Amor 26). To further develop and command the hinterlands on a national scale, the successive postcolonial governments have constantly redrawn administrative maps, creating and recreating new governorates, municipalities, and delegations. The fragmenting governing logics resulted in a division between the wealthy northern coastal regions and the damned interior south-western regions (Moudoud 415) that constituted one of the main grounds of the 2011 revolts (Ayeb 469). Until today, they push for unanswered demands, to be heard not only for decentralization, but also for territorial justice (Yousfi 21) and reparations (Salman 101).[4]

Akin to Morocco, the postcolonial turn towards an urbanism of control through city planning in Tunisia seems to rely on territorial techniques of power, not only with the aim of supervising and governing the city, but also to contain riots and subjugate dissent (Bogaert 24). In order to illustrate the similarity between these two contexts, I will delve into the spatial mechanisms of visual glorification of power by discussing the monumental state architecture of the Ben Ali regime and how it served to engender loyalty and facilitate obedience. Cities and their symbolic markers are restructured not only as a representational endeavor to mark the country's full adherence to modernity, but also to turn the city into a more governable space, controlling its users and reducing their capacity to mobilize and resist.

The capital of Tunisia is a rather recent construction and a good example of dominated and appropriated space. The New City was constructed by the French next to the Medina, on the swampy area between the relocated Sea Gate and the Lake of Tunis. It was constructed in the second half of the 19th century as a new center of power around the first monument to be erected outside the Medina, the French consulate, which was later re-baptized as the General Residency (Binous 26). What is now the Bourguiba Avenue was initially conceived as the Navy Promenade, the focal point of colonial urbanization linking the lake with the Medina, around which the New City emerged. It developed into a three-lined arboreal artery, reminiscent of Haussmann's Paris Champs-Elysées, baptized Jules Ferry Avenue, after the French statesman and instigator of colonial expansion. It was originally built not only as a commercial and social center, but also as a spectacular stage for military, religious, and political events, standing out as a showcase or a public vitrine for colonial power. The boulevard represented the values of the French civilizing

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4 Following authors like Nelson Maldonado-Torres and Lewis Gordon I use 'damned' as an adjective or 'the damned' as subject, as opposed to what is commonly but inaccurately translated as the "wretched" in reference to the colonial subject in the seminal work of Frantz Fanon, emphasizing the process of damnation, the act of damning and the coloniality of (not) being damned, rather than the poor and distressed state of being wretched.

mission, contrasting the winding alleys of the Medina revolving around the central Zeitouna Mosque. Haussman-style boulevards and public squares were drawn by colonial authorities with the finality of military and social control of rebellion, as a strategy to pacify and police indigenous urban populations and nationalist movements (Rabbat 199; Schwedler 231).

Reclaimed during the liberation struggle, the avenue was re-used as a space for the promotion of postcolonial power. Both the first and the second presidents, Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, put the avenue in the spotlight to show off their political, civil, and military powers. It was transformed into a highly symbolic space of authoritarian control. The strategic installation of the RCD party headquarters, the looming building of the Ministry of the Interior, the information hall of the Ministry of Information, and the omnipresent monumental personality cult made the avenue into a well-controlled space.[5] Moreover, the constant surveillance by a dense police presence made any outcry of dissent or public gathering almost impossible. The centrality of the Interior Ministry functioned as a persistent reminder of the powerful police state. The massive concrete modernist edifice was initially built by the French as the central police station of the protectorate to imprison and torture anti-colonial activists and protesters (Abdelkafi 27).

Authoritarian urban space is homogenized, sealed, fragmented and controlled by a power dispositive that keeps everyday movements in place. Fanon (115) distinguishes three different symbolic markers of monumental state architecture, as spatial nodes of power holding these lines of force together: the police station, prestigious buildings, and the presidential portraits and monuments. The police station is imbued with an institutionalized intermediary function that renders visible by its direct presence the oppressive and mutually exclusive separation, compartmentalization, and fragmentation of urban space. Alongside the police station, the prosaic erection of prestigious and grandiose buildings functions as embodiments of spatial nodes of territorialized spatial power.[6] These buildings are spectacular impositions of a deteriorating state that lacks the economic means to ensure its domination. With the erection of monuments, the regime hid its failure to bridge the spatial divisions between city and countryside, center and periphery as it turned its back on the damned interior regions. Finally, the postcolonial state stabilized and perpetuated its domination and hid its capital accumulation by setting up mundane presidential portraits and sculptures which emphasized the moral economy of its sole leader.

The 2011 revolt succeeded in defying a firmly seated police state (Aleya-Sghaier 43). When Ben Ali set Bourguiba aside in November 1987, he was serving as a general in the police force, a power base he expanded at the expense of the army. Relying on internal security and intelligence services, a regime of police surveillance was further implemented, centralized in the Ministry of Interior and supported by the party in power (fig. 1). It should be noted that the basic structure of the police state was already introduced during the French colonial period and further elaborated by Bourguiba after independence. The structures of internal security with a dual police system at the national level, coordinating both the police and the gendarmerie, follow the structure of the French internal security model. This model facilitated an exceptional centrality of the Ministry of Interior, controlling both the police and the gendarmerie in addition to the Presidential Guard, thus monopolizing the country's internal security forces (Lutterbeck 821). One of the most prestigious and grand buildings of the country is the City Hall of Tunis, situated on Kasbah Square next to the Medina.

[5] Referred to by its French initials RCD, formerly called Neo Destour, then Socialist Destourian Party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally was the ruling party in Tunisia from independence in 1956 until it was overthrown and dissolved in the Tunisian revolution in 2011.
[6] With the concept of spatial power I propose to point to the confluence of different forms of disciplinary and sovereign power as a result of processes of spatialization of power. It is however beyond the scope of this article to elaborate further on how a Foucauldian understanding of sovereign power can coalesces with disciplinary power. I therefor refer to my doctoral dissertation (Ben Yakoub, Revolting Senses 25), where I build on the work of Takashi Fujitani (24) and Lisa Wedeen (36) to propose a substantiated understanding of these spatial power relations and the cognate aesthetics of revolt in postcolonial Tunisia.

Figure 1: *Headquarters of the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior overlooking Avenue Habib Bourguiba.* CC BY 3.0, photographed by Citizen59.

The Kasbah is a highly symbolic space surrounded by central institutions and government ministries. This square has historically been the place of political, military, and administrative power since its foundation by the Aghlabids in the 9th century and its consolidation with the Hafsid Sultanate in the 13th century. Destroyed by the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, the fortress was partly rebuilt by the Ottomans, only to be replaced by a military casern by the French. The remaining ruins of the original Hafsid Kasbah were demolished during the construction of an underground parking, underneath Bourguiba's newly built personal palace (Abdelkafi 123). First conceived as a governmental center, but later rebuilt as the monument of Bourguiba's Socialist Destourian Party, it was transformed into the capital's City Hall by the Ben Ali regime in 1998, a function that it serves to this day (fig. 2). The architectural composition of the building—and more precisely its central balcony—hints at the Tunisians iconic image of the "Supreme Combatant" cheering the crowd in the aftermath of independence. Ben Ali added a crumbled sculpture made out of seven pillars surrounded with national flagpoles in the middle of the square, neatly spoiling the panoramic view of the balcony. Apart from this series of prestigious public buildings, the regime showed off its wealth with luxurious private property scattered in the northern suburbs of the capital, the most famous of which being the personal palace of the president on the hill of Sidi Dhrif. The family of the First Lady, Leïla Trabelsi, was known for grabbing any land in their reach to build grand villas. The overlap between property development plans and private business strategies made most urban projects more than questionable. Urban restructuration facilitates the multiplication of monumental state architecture and is instrumental to enhance the visibility of territorial power, giving a face to the state (fig. 3). This also happens quite literally, when taking into consideration the presidential personality cult (Ben Yakoub and Zemni 174).

Figure 2: *Kasbah Square (Tunis Town Hall)*. CC BY-SA 4.0, photographed by Sami Mlouhi.

Figure 3: : *Banner of President Ben Ali in Kairouan*. CC BY 2.0, photographed by Andrea Calabretta.

The internalized gaze of authoritarian rule through the ambiguous reproduction of the numerological and monochromatic personality cult, not only saturated urban space with the all-seeing eye of the regime, but also subjected the body politic through a constant reminder of expected obedience (Wedeen 36; Hibou 48; Tripp 162). Through this symbolic domination, the city's boulevards and squares were no longer public spaces, but rather regime showcases instrumentalized for the production of disciplined subjects. When disassembling the different strata of the palimpsest structure of this remarkable personality cult in its base stratum, the colonial compartmentalization can be disentangled and seen as powerfully crisscrossing and punctuating the city (Ben Yakoub, "The Last Monument" 309).

Kanna underlines the revolutionary potential of urban space and its ability to be utilized to govern and shape structural relations as much as its ability to be mobilized by revolutionary energy, aptly arguing that urban processes of revolt can be seen as a refutation of prevailing geographies of fragmentation. According to Fanon, the examination of the ordering and geographical layout of a given place is essential as it not only draws the lines of force and domination but also those on which a liberated society will be reorganized:

> The colonial world is a world divided into compartments. Yet, if we examine closely this system of compartments, we are at least able to reveal the lines of force it implies. This approach to the colonial world, its ordering and its geographical layout will allow us to mark out the lines on which a decolonized society will be reorganized (37-38).

Decolonization is thus a socio-spatial strategy that lays claim to the city and re-appropriates and transforms urban spatial relations. It moreover implies a fundamental transformation of urban space that rests on counter-hegemonic alliances between the urban and the rural, the city and the countryside, the peasants and the urban dwellers, and therefore enforces decentralization from the centers to the peripheries (Kipfer 707).

A Heuristic Enclave of Another Order

Space and place cannot be reduced to the mere backdrop of profound societal changes (Harb; Tawil-Souri 91). In the authoritarian context prior to the 2011 revolt, urban space in Tunis was continually under surveillance and was used as a platform for official state representation. While the configuration of space is one of the main instruments of spatial power, space can also be an important dimension of resistance, if not its very condition of possibility (Allal 831). The way authoritarian dynamics shape certain places thus also determines the way different groups navigate, negotiate, re-appropriate and transform these places for political resistance.

During the last decade of authoritarian rule before 2011, the Avenue was slowly being reinvested as a site of protest. Domination was not total; there were fissures in the dispositive where power escaped and could be re-appropriated. On 14 January 2011, nationwide protests converged towards the Bourguiba Avenue in front of the Ministry of Interior (next to 7 November Square) demanding the departure of Ben Ali. The spatial concentration of political power on the avenue made it the perfect space for resistance (Chomiak). Rallying in front of "the heart of a heartless regime" expressed a radical rejection of its entire power structure, especially its police-state and the will to re-appropriate the country as a whole (Allal 831). Fear changed sides. Nonetheless rapidly confined with barbed wire concentrated around the French Embassy and the Ministry of Interior, the Avenue was transformed into a real agora, re-animated by demonstrations but also by staged events, rallies, artistic interventions, and performances. One of the first unanswered demands after the president had fled was the removal of the Ministry of Interior from the Avenue.

While the police retreated from public space and protests continued, public buildings (police stations, prisons, financial state institutions, municipalities, tribunals and party cells together with their respective archives) were deliberately ransacked and set on fire. The personality cult that crisscrossed public space was spontaneously dismantled and the private property of fraudulent regime members was looted and re-appropriated. The expansion and systematization of attacks on symbols of spatial power brought about the unexpected, rapid—albeit partial—collapse of the authoritarian state (Hmed, "Si Le Peuple" 13). The insistence on "non-sovereignty. . . renouncing the face and figure of the charismatic leader in favor of the face in and of the crowd" was a key ideological feature of the initial phase of revolt (Mitchell 9).

Under Ben Ali, the relation between the police and the youth was always tense in the margins, where unemployment, drug addiction and the dream to escape constituted (and still constitute) a shared condition. Battles with the police were nothing new. Ultra-groups physically fought with police in the confined space of the stadium (Aleya-Sghaier 21; Chomiak). The acronym "A.C.A.B."[7] was already trending as a quick tag on peripheral walls. It is no surprise that the first clashes with the police occurred a day after Bouazizi's self-immolation on 17 December 2010 in Sidi-Bouzid. The first of many police stations destroyed by arson was that of Mensel Bouzeian.[8] The clash with the police-state originated in Sidi Bouzid but quickly spread to neighboring municipalities and cities. The clashes first moved to the west, especially to Kasserine, and then to the south, around Gafsa, continuing their route through the northern and southern cities before spreading to Sfax, the coastal cities in the Sahel and finally arriving in the capital.

The mediation of police brutalities, including the deliberate killing of around 300 protesters during the liberation phase of the revolution in 2011, only reinforced the confrontation. Prisons were set on fire causing asphyxiation and provoking deadly riots, but also enabling thousands of prisoners to escape.[9] In Thala—one of the damned towns that endured the most severe police brutalities—Nemri Bassem occupied the first floor of the burned down police station.[10] Already unemployed since 2004, he would not leave until his right to work was fulfilled. The burnt walls were embellished with slogans and poetry written in red and black. The main slogan was an excerpt from a poem of the pre-Islamic Arab poet Antar Ibn Chaddad: "I prefer to be offered the water of death while standing up right, than the water of life while standing on my knees." An altar was installed to commemorate comrades and martyrs. The police station was transformed into a community space, a breeding ground for local artistic expression and revolutionary action. It was finally re-baptized the House of the Martyrs.

It was only after 10 January, when a video went viral featuring youngsters destroying a portrait of Ben Ali in Hammamet, that a nationwide movement took off (Chomiak). Any element of the numerological personality cult referring to 7 November, whether in the form of street names or in sculptures on roundabouts, was annihilated. Portraits were massively re-appropriated and ostentatiously torn and burned, often in front of a camera to later be shared on social media. Proposing any portrait as an alternative was generally dismissed. Nobody could be elevated as the leader of the ongoing revolution except the martyrs, Bouazizi in the first place. The singular image of the autocrat was replaced by that of the people (Khatib 21). The body politic drew strength from the visual performance of beheading, as it cleared urban space from the image of surveillance. As

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[7] A.C.A.B. is a popular acronym abbreviating the phrase "All Cops Are Bastards" commonly rendered as one letter per finger to raise a fist against police violence.

[8] The details of the clashes between the revolting youth and the police were verified through an interview with an activist active in the campaign 'I too burned a police station', August 2017 in Tunis.

[9] The experience of revolt from inside the prison is well documented in the work of visual artist Hela Ammar, see for instance her projects 'Counfa' or 'Corridors' on the artist's website, www.helaammar.com. Accessed 23 Sept. 2022.

[10] Most of the details about the burned police station in Thala were shared with me by artist Bouagila Oussama, member of a graffiti group called Zwewla, engaged in the re-embellishment of the "House of the Martyrs", August 2017, Tunis.

an answer to the *Inside Out* call by street artist JR, seven photographers traveled to make portraits of random people. The black and white portraits were then pasted in strategic places: on the façade of the burned out RCD office in El Kram, inside the rubble of the plundered police station at La Goulette, on the façade of the RCD headquarter in Sfax, on five juxtaposed burnt police cars in a vacant lot in Sidi Bouzid or in the exact spot where moments before, a presidential portrait had been forcibly removed alongside the highway Tunis-La Goulette.

Private properties of key fraudulent figures of the regime were plundered, ransacked, and burned down. Dozens of the suddenly abandoned villas of the extended Trabelsi family in the bourgeois suburbs of Tunis, Hammamet, and Sousse were targeted as they symbolized wealth, monopolization, and state corruption. The sacked villa of Houssem Trabelsi on the heights of Gammarth was the most frequented by artists. The creative process of re-appropriation began in April 2011 with *Love, Glory and Beauty*, a graffiti mural by Electro Jay and Selim Tlili, which depicted the former head of state being kicked away as a football. The trashed villa was quickly swarmed by other artists and collectives and it was renamed The House of the Revolution. The swimming pool was transformed into a bowl for skateboarding by The Bedouins, an international skateboard collective. Different activist and artist collectives mobilized in vain to demand the preservation of the re-appropriated place and its transformation into a museum.[11] Together with the villas, luxurious cars went up in smoke, sometimes to be re-appropriated into sculptures: Dozens of cars were collected daily one by one from the port of La Goulette, only to be battered, burnt, and dumped on a vacant lot on the border between the luxurious Byrsa and the more popular Kram neighborhood. Faten Rouissi rallied as many people as possible around her happening *Street Art in the Neighborhood* to artistically reinvest the mass grave of charred carcasses. The parcel, once an expropriated ground for one of the many real estate projects of the president's son-in-law Sakher El Materi, was re-appropriated into a public stage and communal public space where the neighborhood could celebrate the ongoing process of liberation.[12]

As soon as a government of "National Unity" was proclaimed after the departure of Ben Ali, people regained the streets. Demands to completely overthrow the government were pushed by damned youth travelling with the Liberation Caravan from Menzel Bouzaïane to the capital. The convoy was mobilized in order to occupy Government Square where the Prime Minister and his government held office. The highly centralized state administration around the Kasbah Square made it the perfect site for deepening popular demands. The metal barriers erected by the army to protect the entrance to the Prime Ministry were transformed into structures for makeshift tents to improvise an encampment.[13] The balconies of the Ministry of Finance—re-baptized The People's Ministry—were transformed into shelters (Hmed "Si le peuple" 11; "Le peuple veut" 81).

The occupation was an extraordinary movement bridging divisions between geographical locations, social groups, classes, and movements (Zemni 76). It was "a collective movement of self-rediscovery" which omitted the historical division between the wealthy central coastline and the damned rural interior, eventually overturning an obstinate collective self-image to demand reparations (Saidi 292). The surrounding walls of the Government Square were reclaimed and transformed into canvasses for the demands of the people. As soon as the occupation of the Kasbah ended, activist Aziz Amami launched in vain the petition "Do not Touch the Tags of the Kasbah, it's our Heritage" as the wall represented the demand of the people unmediated by party politics. Ahl Al Kahf (The People of the Cave), a self-proclaimed "aesthetic terrorist" movement of "anti-Globalist" and "anti-Orientalist" artists was born during the occupation of the Kasbah, spraying

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[11] The details of the re-appropriation of the Trabelsi house in Gammarth we verified through an interview with street artist engaged in the recognition The House of the Revolution into a museum Selim Tlili, September 2013, Tunis.

[12] The story of *Street Art in the Neighborhood* were verified during an interview with the artist who initiated the project, Faten Roussi, August 2015, Tunis.

[13] This speaking detail of re-appropriation was brought to my attention during an interview with activist Aziz Amami, August 2017, Tunis.

the face of the departed president in the streets saying: "Those who misled him are still in here".[14] The graffiti were however, quickly painted over or crossed-out by anonymous passersby as a reminder for the cathartic movement of defacement. Later, the collective of artists used the portrait of the prime Minister of the interim government Beji Caid Essebsi (later nicknamed Bajbouj) with the slogan "I can't dream with my grandfather". The collective incited the body politic to further "rebel against the traces of dictatorship". Their stencils quickly transformed the walls into mural masterpieces, challenging the raw tags and graffiti covering the walls of the revolted cities. The occupation of the Kasbah Square can be considered as a meaningful microcosm of the larger society or what, following Adam Ramadan (147), I will call a heuristic enclave of another order.

When places with a high concentration of power are occupied, they transform into meaningful places of dissent. These occupations can be discerned as a form of micro-politics that redefine not only the placeness of the occupied square but also the distinctive ethical relations and value system they represent. They can transform a place into "an enclave of another order" (Ramadan 146). As these processes of redefinition radiate outside the occupied places through different mediations, the mere presence of previously damned subjectivities in the centre of these occupied places have the potential to puncture state sovereignty. Therefore, considering the occupation of places such as the Kasbah Square as a microcosm of the larger society can offer insights into the transforming subjectivities, the outline of possible political orders that the revolution prescribes (Abourahme and Jayyusi 628; Sadiki 19; Saidi 292).

Processes of revolt can transform public spaces into heuristic enclaves of another order, cut off from the contested authoritarian state. As the physical characteristics of space intersect with their representation (Schwedler 231), the dynamics of occupation are not merely physical, but also visual and sensible operations (Mitchell 21). The ebb and flow of aesthetic practices claiming and reclaiming ideological marked territory emphasize the dynamic character of revolt (Abaza 131). As urban space is constantly transformed through the interaction with its physical, social and aesthetic elements, the re-appropriation of these urban places has the power to generate new meaning and to render political demands visible. The places that are occupied not only open up physically, but also become heuristic spaces that can produce knowledge about ongoing historical transformations. They transform into spaces where the powerless can make history through a re-invention of the political.

Two important obstacles can be distinguished when considering the relation between the aesthetic practices in the recent movements of revolt and urban space. First, as described above, peaceful occupation is often overemphasized, at the expense of its fundamental precondition, as the violent destruction of spatial nodes of power that serve to keep the structure of urban space in place. These violent and destructive gestures are not only instrumental to the intensification of the ongoing protest, but they additionally disrupt the power imbued in the targeted state symbols. The body politic indeed produces a new public sphere, turning the message of protection/surveillance against itself, generating new ways of seeing and feeling (Abaza 133). However, the destruction of police stations, the defacement of the omnipresent state portrait, the obliteration of public sculptures, and the destruction of luxurious private villas of regime members always preceded these processes of occupation and re-appropriation which altered the distribution of the visible.

Second, and as I will further demonstrate, whereas the liberation phase led to the spontaneous disruption, occupation, and re-appropriation of monumental state architecture, the following constitutional phase led to a continued spatial contention which was, instead, motivated by new various Islamist ideologies. However, in contrast, this new spatial contention did not target monumental state architecture. Indeed, in addition to the occupation of central public spaces,

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[14] The link between the Kasbah occupation and the emergence of street art during the 2011 revolt was emphasized during an interview with artist Elyes Mejri, one of the founding members of Ahl Al Kahf, November 2017, Paris.

violent attention was directed towards urban spaces that hosted aesthetic practices, which directly challenged a certain interpretation of the sacred. Furthermore, Islamic spaces of worship such as mausoleums were beleaguered. The lack of public support for the continuation of spatial contestation widened the ideological discord between Islamism and Modernism, paving the way for a reconfigured old regime to regain control over public space.

The Possibility of Islamist Re-Appropriation

The Kasbah occupation compelled the provisional government to resign, and some of its institutions and the party-state to dissolve. The surrounding walls of the square were whitewashed by the city council. Barricades and barbwire obstructed the square. Security forces were closely monitoring again, preventing further political actions. The occupation also led to the announcement of free elections for a constitutional assembly, as it had the first republican constitution abrogated. The outlines of the electoral debate were drawn by two events: the showing of the documentary *Ni Allah Ni Maître* (*Neither Allah nor Master*) followed by that of the animated film *Persepolis,* both of which I will describe in detail below. The discussions of dignity and regional reparations were pushed back by debates surrounding the limits of regained liberty. While the revolutionary process was being institutionalized through the parliament, grassroots Islamist movements asserted their presence in public space by taking control over different mosques, demonstrating martial arts, organizing collective praying sessions, *Dawah*, or selling Islamist paraphernalia in the streets (Merone 76). Events deemed blasphemous such as book fairs were attacked, alcohol repositories, bars and hotels were burned down and the national flag desecrated (Ben Yakoub, "Colouring Outside" 33). These incursions did not stop after the election of the Islamist Nahda party but continued with the mediatized raids on El Abdelliya palace and the US embassy. Particularly surprising was a systematic trend of ransacking and burning dozens of mausoleums spread over the country.

The first incident occurred during the solidarity event "Hands off my Creators" at the CinemAfricArt held in June 2011 in Tunis.[15] Ironically, the event was organized by the Lam Echaml Federation against growing hostility of Islamists towards artists such as filmmaker Nouri Bouzid. The reason for the offensive was the projection of *Neither Allah, nor Master*, a documentary criticizing alleged Muslim hypocrisy during Ramadan. In an interview with Hannibal TV, the director of the film, Nadia El Fani, stated her right not to believe in God, which infuriated social media, resulting in personal death threats and a hundred demonstrators charging with a black standard on the AfricArt. The body politic forced their way through the entrances, blowing apart the glass front door, which caused damage to the reception desk and the cinema hall. The AfricArt did not open its doors again at the same venue, but continued its program a couple of streets down the avenue in Le Rio. When the controversy settled down, the director changed the title of her film into *Laïcité Inch'allah.*

Whereas in the first confrontations artists mobilized to defend their creators, in the following strife, Islamists mobilized to defend their creator. After Nessma TV aired *Persepolis*, an animated film notorious for a scene in which God is depicted, hundreds of Islamist activists converged towards the television station, but police prevented them from destroying the headquarters. A group of 144 lawyers filed a complaint against Nabil Karoui, the attacking director of the station, considering the broadcast a blasphemous attack, which offended the sacred values of Islam and common decency. Dozens of Islamists gathered outside the courthouse, while another crowd damaged the home of Karoui. Although civil society and most political parties condemned the assaults, concerns were voiced about the provocative nature of the film, emphasizing the necessary respect

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[15] The details of the incident at CinemAfricArt were verified during an interview with social media activist Soufiane Belhadj, September 2013, Tunis.

for religious sensitivities in order to preserve social peace. A significant part of public opinion condemned the broadcasting, witnessing the proliferation of petitions mobilizing against Nessma TV, re-baptized Neqma TV (Curse TV). The trial finally took place on World Press Freedom Day in 2011, sentencing the station to 2'400 dinars damages for disturbing public order and violating prevailing morals.

Islamist activists also re-occupied the Bourguiba Avenue. Following confrontations between Islamists demanding the implementation of the *sharia* during the newly proclaimed Day of the Holy Quran and artists simultaneously demanding theatre during *World Theatre Day*, the Ministry of Interior decided to ban all demonstrations on the main avenue.[16] During the following national day of the martyrs on 9 April 2012, activists defending the "martyrs of the revolution" tried to occupy the avenue but clashes erupted with the police. Before the ban was repealed, a social media event L'Avenue Ta9ra (The Avenue reads) gathered hundreds of indignant students for a silent read. Indignation culminated in the *Manifesto of Tunisian Intellectuals* where the Nahda party was accused of collaborating with "extremist Salafists."

A final confrontation occurred on the last day of the 10th annual Springtime of Arts' Fair in June 2012 at the El Abdelliya Palace in La Marsa when a notary official ordered the withdrawal of two artworks judged blasphemous.[17] Despite lacking an overall theme, the fair hosted many different artworks engaged in provocative self-orientalizing aesthetics and straightforward visual criticism of Islam. The court bailiff spread falsified photos of the exposed artworks via the local mosque and social media, resulting in an infuriated crowd in front of the Palace that was nonetheless outnumbered by those gathering in solidarity with the artists. The police dispersed the crowd, but did not prevent the former group from later vandalizing the art fair. An installation in the fair's courtyard, *The Ring* by Faten Gaddes, was set on fire. The walls of the Palace were marked with the slogans: "Let God Be the Judge", "Tunisia is an Islamic State", "With the License of the Ministry of Culture, the Prophet of Allah gets Insulted" or "Hey you Infidels, Nahda, El-Tahrir and Salafist are Brothers". The indignation rapidly escalated, riots erupted with protesters setting fire to courthouses and police stations which lead to the imposition of a nightly curfew across seven different regions. The turmoil resulted in dozens arrested, hundreds wounded as well as one death.

The art fair was condemned by various officials. The Minister of Culture, Mehdi Mabrouk, held artists accountable, stating that "art shouldn't be revolutionary, it must be beautiful". The Nahda Party proposed a bill in the Constituent Assembly to criminalize the mockery of sacred values, which laid the foundation of Article 6 of the new constitution that defined the relation of the state to religion. Houcine Laabidi, then imam of the Zitouna Mosque, declared all participants apostates whose blood could be spilled. Consequently, dozens of artists received personal death threats. Two of the artists were brought to trial for disturbing public order and offending decency.

Solidarity campaigns proliferated both online and offline. The artist El Seed engaged in a reconciliatory expression by reinvesting the minaret of the central Jara Mosque in his hometown of Gabes with a graffiti inspired by the Qur'an verse "Oh humankind, we have created you from a male and a female and made people and tribes so you may know each other" (fig. 4).

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[16] The details of the conflict that emerged during World Theatre Day were verified during an interview with actor and cultural worker Moez Mrabet, August 2017, Hamamet.
[17] The details of the Abdelliya-affaire were verified through interviews with participating artist Faten Gaddes (September 2013, Tunis) and curator of the 10th Springtime of Arts' Fair Luca Lucattini (August 2015, Tunis) and the two artists who were brought to trial for disturbing public order and offending decency, Nadia Jelassi (September 2013, Tunis) and Mohamed Ben Slama (August 2017, Tunis).

Figure 4: *Jara Mosque, El Seed.* CC BY 2.0, photographed by Ouahid Berrehouma.

Nevertheless, on the 11th anniversary of 9/11, a trailer for *Innocence of Muslims* was released online on social media. It was the latest in a long line of controversies sparking worldwide outrage, from the Rushdie affair, the Muhammad cartoons controversy, to the Charlie Hebdo satiric drawings and the insulting films *Submission* by Van Gogh and Hirsi Ali and *Fitna* by Wilders (Allen and Isakjee 1859). In Tunis, about two thousand protesters stormed into the US embassy, which resulted in a clash between security forces and protesters. The sky above Berges Du Lac turned black, as an annex of the embassy and the neighboring American Cooperative School were looted and torched. The black standard was hoisted on the flagpole of the embassy. Surrounding walls were tagged with slogans such as "Dirty American, Loving Mohamed," "Tunisia Jihad," "God is Great" and the Islamic creed "There Is Only One God and Mohamed Is His Messenger." The intervention of security forces resulted in the death of four protesters, ninety-one injuries and dozens more arrested, of whom twenty were brought to trial and charged with committing premeditated attacks organized by an armed gang. The controversy pushed the Nahda party to publicly distance itself from the protesters and announce a definitive rupture with the Jihadi-Salafist movement, previously formalized as Ansar El Charia.

Finally, in 2012 and 2013 a systematic but unclaimed destructive wave targeting Sufi shrines spread over the country. The first attacks affected sacred monuments in smaller localities, such as the mausoleums of Sidi Bou Mendel in Hergla or Sidi Abelkader in Menzel Bouzalfa. The attacks quickly spread to more renowned mausoleums such as Sidi Sahbi in Kairouan, and to important shrines surrounding the capital, such as El Béji in Sidi Bou Saïd and Saïda Manoubia in Manouba. In addition to the priceless manuscripts they contained, these sites played an important spiritual, ritualistic, religious, and social role in society. The place that these Islamic shrines thus occupy shapes the country, not only geographically but also socially (Khlifi). It must be noted that the Ben

Ali regime managed to co-opt "maraboutic" space by rehabilitating different mausoleums to counter political Islam (Werenfels 291). Even though the Sufi cult was strongly aligned and instrumentalized by the Ben Ali regime, an important part of society still believes to be protected by the benevolence of the saints. The strategy to destroy these sites of Muslim worship further delegitimized the violent contestation of Islamist activists.

Both the occupation of the Kasbah and the ensuing Islamist re-appropriation of public space show that existing spaces do not outlive their original purpose by themselves, nor do spaces become vacant or susceptible of being re-appropriated by themselves. The fundamental precondition for the re-appropriation of urban space is the violent disruption of spatial nodes that keep spatial power in place. The violence by which power is territorialized is claimed and spontaneously re-directed to the places that delineate the geography of compartmentalization or fragmentation. As stated by Fanon: "The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world. . . will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he [sic] surges into the forbidden quarters" (40). The fierce disruption of these strategic places and symbolic markers is not the consequence of the implementation of an explicit strategy, but rather the result of a collective cathartic release that engenders a spontaneous transgression. Again, in the words of Fanon: "To wreck the colonial world is henceforward a mental picture of action which is very clear, very easy to understand and which may be assumed by each one of the individuals which constitute the colonized people" (40-41). Confronted with these spontaneously liberated places and torn between the contradictory desires of complete destruction and re-use, the third option of re-appropriation emerges (Petti et al. 24).

This last option of re-appropriation strongly resonates with Lefebvre's spatial and critical reading of the Situationist concept of *détournement*. Lefebvre contrasts *détournement* with the idea of appropriation and domination of space, as "a non-negotiable part of any revolutionary agenda" (167). When re-appropriated, the original purpose which determined the forms, functions and structures of an existing space, are put to use in a fundamentally different way. However, Lefebvre underlines the limited productive aspect of re-appropriation. He warns us that it is often merely appropriation, not creation; "a re-appropriation which can call but a temporary halt to domination" (168). It is thus necessary to see the urban and aesthetic processes of revolt as a continuous effort. Re-appropriation does not automatically lead to the production of space. It is a precarious accomplishment, easily challenged by further violence. Through the re-appropriation of space existing hegemonic structures and what they represent are blasted, but "what is left or reterritorialized is not necessarily bereft of repressive power. New and old regimes alike seek to (re)gain control over such spaces" (Schweddler 232).

Game (Not) Over?

The emergence of Islamist activists did not prevent the spontaneous national dialogue from being expressed on different walls in public space. Witness to this stubborn endurance is the proliferation of politicized street art collectives such as Zwewla, Molotov, or Feminist Attack. The indignation directed against the occupation and contestation of urban space by Islamist activists gained momentum in the summer of 2013. After military fights with Jihadi cells in the mountains on the Algerian border escalated and the political murder of leftist opposition leaders Chokri Beläid and Mohamed Brahmi, the country fell into a nationwide deadlock during which the Salafi-Jihadi movement Ansar Al Charia was outlawed. The Rahil-campaign, occupying the Bardo square in front of the Constituent Assembly, demanded the dissolution of the Assembly and the destitution of the Troika government. Fearful of an Egyptian scenario, Nahda invested in a counter-mobilization at the Kasbah Square. Even if Nahda party offices were violently targeted, the government accepted a plan to step down. This plan was negotiated by what came to be known

as the Quartet, paving the way for the formation of an interim government, the completion of a new constitution, and the first free and fair presidential election which eventually laid the first stone for the re-emergence of the old regime.

In the run-up to presidential elections in November 2014, two street artists painted a giant portrait of the upcoming president Beji Caid Essebsi with the baseline "I love Bajbouj" at Barcelona Square in Tunis. Essebi's Nidaa Tunes party eventually won the elections with an anti-Islamist security oriented agenda. Even after three lethal jihadi attacks, the party succeeded—through an unexpected coalition with the Nahda party—to maintain control over public space during the post-revolutionary phase, slowly reintroducing the symbolic power subsumed in the postcolonial imagery of the *Father of the Nation*. After protest rose up again in the region of Kasserine due to unfulfilled employment promises by the government in January 2016, the president addressed the people on public television, from the same setting as Bourguiba's speech that contained the bread revolts in January 1984. Two months later, the equestrian statue of the "Supreme Combatant," once displaced by Ben Ali to the port town of La Goulette, made its way back to Bourguiba Avenue. Also in Monastir, a restored equestrian statue with Bourguiba wearing a traditional straw hat was installed in front of the presidential palace. Additionally, a modest personality cult formed around the new president during the commemoration of the seventeenth anniversary of Bourguiba's death, as local authorities decorated Monastir with two giant portraits of President Essebsi himself.

Different artists and activists criticized the politics of the "re-bourguibisation" of public space, unbefitting the context of growing marginalization and regional division. Less than one year after its inauguration in March 2013, the public bust of the *Father of the Nation* on the Bourguiba Esplanade in the seventh arrondissement of Paris, was anonymously vandalized with red paint. Also in Tunis, the reinstalled equestrian statue was tagged with the phrase "Your Children in Your House", a direct message to the president not to favor his son Hafedh's ascension as head of Nida Tunes and to leave the old nepotistic structure of the regime. Ghassan Bouizi, head of the General Union of Tunisian Students, was eventually arrested for vandalizing the statue and accused of an offense against the head of state. Under the title "One of the Most Important Achievements" Malek Feki uploaded a series of digitally altered images of the concerned equestrian statue, so it salutes from atop a mountain of garbage in the city center, in the middle of a street blocking the way of a congested bus, on the roof of a concrete container school, somewhere in a desert behind a hungry Bedouin family, or as a passive witness to flooded streets.

Driven by the will to prevent a possible return of the old regime, the "I too burned a police station" campaign was launched in 2014 as criminal charges were announced against 130 activists who had violated state property in the revolution of 2011.[18] These charges were often made against young activists who protested with the families of the "martyrs" and those injured in the revolution demanding justice, accountability and compensation for those killed or injured by the police forces during the revolution (Antonakis-Nashif 131). Despite enduring protests pushed by the same grassroots movement, since 2015 renamed in "I do not forgive," the parliament approved the Economic Reconciliation Act giving amnesty to those accused of financial crimes under the authoritarian state. Further protest was discouraged as the Kasbah became a fully militarized, policed zone. A permanent fence privatized the public square in front of the Ministry of Finance. Behind the barrier only the water of a prestigious fountain circulates to welcome the fancy cars of political representatives visiting the ministries. Avenue Bourguiba too is under the control of the police. Traffic can no longer pass in front of the Ministry of Interior and Independence Square is occupied by the military. Barbed wire, piled sandbags, concrete bumpers and several tanks occupy half of the surrounding streets to protect the French embassy.

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[18] The details of the campaigns were retrieved from interviews with two activists engaged in the campaign *I too burned a police station* (August 2017 Tunis) and *I do not forgive* (August 2017 Tunis).

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Conclusion

Urban space can be an instrument of political control, as well as of resistance and revolt. Any place can be imbued with spatial power, but no place is immune to its inherent ambiguity. As power can be territorialized, its territorialization can also be re-appropriated. I have endeavored to show that these practices of re-appropriation are not merely symbolic processes, but visual, sensible, and thus heuristic operations through which fundamental political questions can be answered beyond ideologically staged opposition. Considering in detail the urban and aesthetic processes of revolt, I have sought to show how Tunisia's self-image was turned inside out, installing the damned in the center of social preoccupations, puncturing state sovereignty. Through a spatial analysis which moves beyond the mesmerizing occupation of places such as the Kasbah Square, this article considered the *longue durée* of these urban spaces to assess the tenacity of these contested sites and places. These tenacious locations can, in the context of the contested Ben Ali regime, be discerned as stratified spatial nodes or meeting points keeping the compartmentalization of spatial power (police stations, state sculptures and portraits as well as grandiose palaces and monuments) in place. The re-appropriation of the fragmented monumental state architecture can be recognized as the continuation of a liberation struggle that contested colonial spatial compartmentalization. This confirms my suggestion that these stratified places neatly crisscrossing urban space do not outlive their original structure by themselves. My inquiry thus underlines that the fundamental precondition for the re-appropriation of urban space is its violent disruption, as violence was in the first place contained in the way spatial power was territorialized. However re-appropriation can only temporarily stop domination, underlying the limited productive or creative aspect of re-appropriation. The revolting body politic did include the urban and aesthetic processes of revolt and its constitutive gesture of re-appropriation as a non-negotiable part of their revolution. It is a powerful process that can generate new ways of seeing and feeling. It can structure the construction of another world, only if what is re-territorialized during the process of re-appropriation is bereft of repressive power and therefore if the process of re-appropriation consolidates the new spaces it produced. It is difficult to say if the production of a space where the spirit of non-sovereignty would have materialized could have prevented the sacrifice of the assembled body politic and thus sentinel the dignity and liberation of the people. It is even more difficult if not impossible to say if Islamist activists would have been as successful in mobilizing the damned through the occupation of the mosque and if they would have turned violent as they did during the constitutive phase of the revolution. Or if the old regime would have regained control over public space in the same way as they did now. Only history will tell if the current contestation of the renewed Bourguibist imaginary can be interpreted as a premonition for a longer process of spatial contestation. Let alone if this new wave could ever result in the production of a sustainable space that can accommodate the demands for dignity, liberation, and reparations, and thus prevent a further escalation of violence.

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Biography

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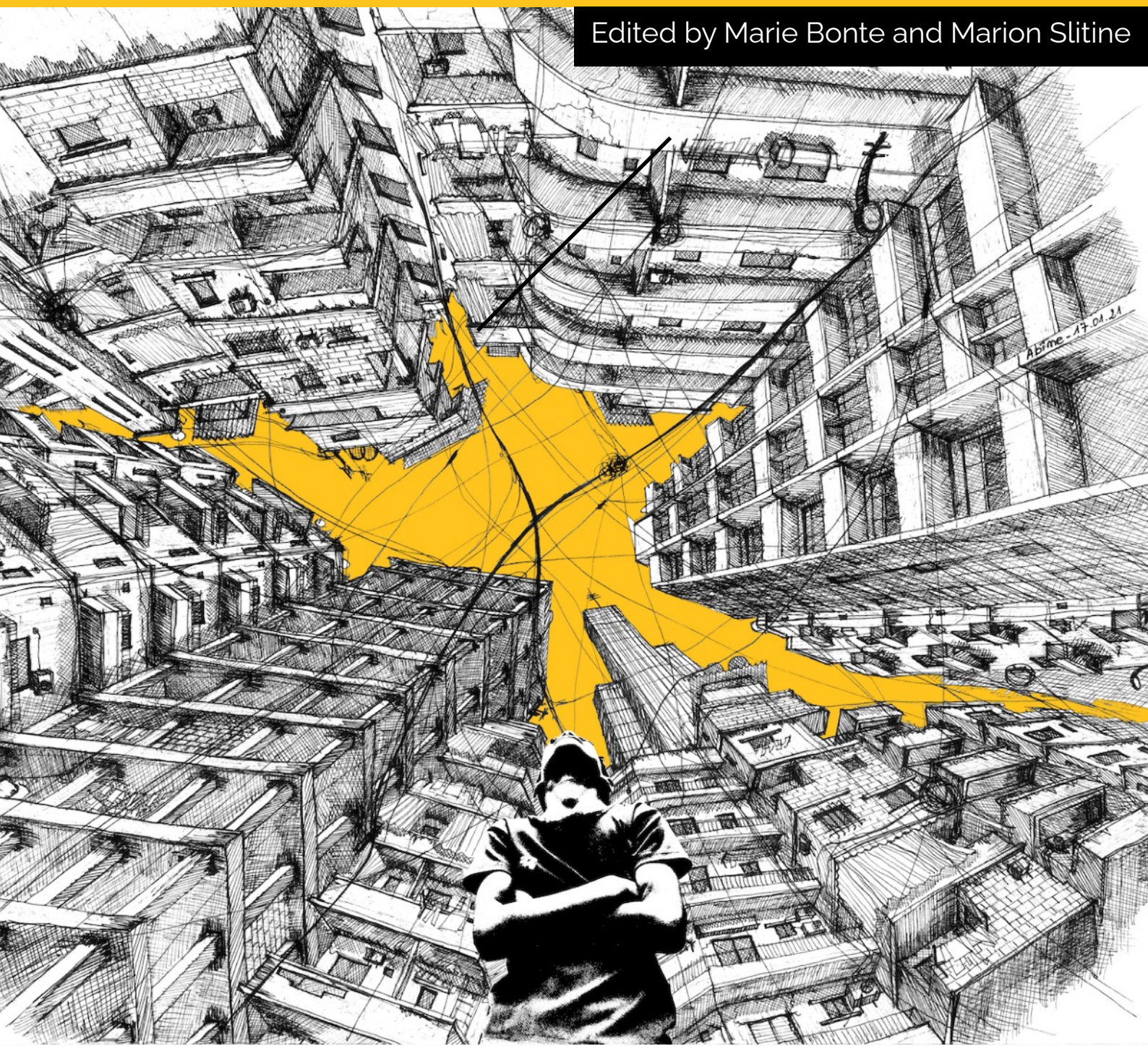
Manazir مناظر Journal

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Ce que l'art fait à la ville en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient

Pratiques artistiques, expressions du politique et transformations de l'espace public

Edited by Marie Bonte and Marion Slitine

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