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# **The Revolutionary Art**

**Street Art Before and After the Tunisian Revolution**

Nicholas Korody

7 December 2011

Art and revolution have always commingled. Often, periods of social upheaval are also periods of profound artistic experimentation. For example, the Bolshevik revolution encouraged constructivism and the daring new forms of the Russian avante-garde. Additionally, art is often used as a mechanism to incite people into action. The Cuban revolution, Chinese revolution, and Russian revolution all created unique and highly influential political propaganda.

During the Arab Spring, the series of mass protests and government-overthrows that erupted in early 2011 across North Africa and the Middle East, little was reported in the media of the cultural changes that existed. These countries were all ruled by authoritarian regimes that strictly controlled all aspects of society, including art. Tunisia was both the first country in the region to erupt into revolution and also had the shortest-lived revolution. Shortly after January 14<sup>th</sup>, the day president Ben Ali was forced out of office, the country resumed a semblance of normality. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the first articles about the art of the revolutions to make it on to the internet was from Tunisia.

On March 26<sup>th</sup>, Al Jazeera English published an article "Art challenges Tunisian revolutionaries."<sup>1</sup> The article described the work of JR, a French artist, who was posting large black and white photographs of average Tunisians over the old images of Ben Ali. However, the article failed to describe anything that was created by Tunisians. In fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan, Yasmine. "Art Challenges Tunisian Revolutionaries - Features - Al Jazeera English." Al Jazeera English. Web. 07 Dec. 2011.  
<<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/03/201132223217876176.html>>

nothing had appeared anywhere on the internet describing art work done by Tunisian revolutionaries. It began to seem like the Tunisian revolution was one of the few in history that was not followed by an artistic revolution. But then, the moment I arrived in Tunis I noticed that it had simply been ignored. Not only did this art reflect the revolution, but also it was revolutionary itself. One did not even have to pay to access a gallery to see art: the art was in the streets.

**Terminology + History**

Although in contemporary dialogue street art and graffiti represent different aesthetic ideas and concepts, they can be seen as rooted in the same artistic exercise. Namely, they both share the requirement of breaking free of both the canvas and the museum. They are an artistic movement, a new medium, and a political stance. At the same time, their nature is as old as man. That is to say, they are markings on either public or illicitly obtained private surfaces. On the other hand, building-sized murals, films, and sculpture now fall under this term. Thus, in the discussion of these artistic phenomena one must understand the fluidity of the terms and attempt to discern the context within one's own usage.

Graffiti is often used to describe varyingly developed writing, often of names, on walls using spray paint. Street art can then be used to describe all writings-on-wall that is pictorial or has a more developed intent. Although it often uses writing as well, the pieces created also often include stencils or wheat pastes, and sometimes form a developed image or mural. Street art can also be used to describe installations, videos, etc. In a sense, street art is a more open term to describe artworks that use the urban fabric as a medium. That being said, these distinctions are not clear and will often fluidly mix within even this paper. So, in some sense, any attempts at separating them are impossible or pointless. There are many complex ideological and artistic stances that exist within the nebulously defined street art movement. As one young Tunisian street artist C-RAISE said, "Street art has a message— if you do graffiti and it has a message

its street art.”<sup>2</sup> But to further understand their usage, a quick sketch of the recent history of this phenomenon may be useful.

In what can be described as the contemporary art-historical understanding of the terms, the graffiti or street art movement’s origin is often placed in 1980’s New York, Los Angeles and other major American metropolitan areas. It emerged from territorial markings of gangs (which still exists in violent contestations over urban space) to becoming a highly decorative art form. The being said, one article notes that the presence of graffiti on American cities became noteworthy around 1965. “The number of articles and commentaries on graffiti in popular magazines and the New York Times increased from only one over the fifteen-year period, 1950-64, to five in 1969, and then to forty in 1972.”<sup>3</sup> The rapid increase in the 1970s is synonymous with the development of graffiti in the inner-city. The response of indignation to this phenomenon emerged, however, primarily at the territorial conflux of the upper-class suburbs and the poor inner-city: public transportation, namely, the subway. Graffiti artists would cover entire subway cars with tags, which became a huge cost to the city governments tasked with cleaning them. These existed as territorial markings, but differed dramatically from those used by gang members to specify the delineations of the gang territory. Instead, they followed the linear conduits of the city transport— the sole mechanisms to leave the ghetto— in an attempt to discover and mark “exotic spaces” that were hard to

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<sup>2</sup> C-RAISE. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview. Tunis, November 15, 2011

<sup>3</sup> Ley, David, and Roman Cybriwsky. "Urban Graffiti As Territorial Markers." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 64.4 (1974): 491. Print.

reach. The defining characteristic of this graffiti was that they consisted of names, often in highly ornate form with serifs and curves. The majority of the artists were poor young people with no opportunity to pursue commercial art because of their socio-economic position. Through reaching seemingly inaccessible locations, the artist would achieve a sense of notoriety and possess a claim for importance and uniqueness. The spot was stamped with his name, and for one second the artist marked and celebrated his own existence despite living in a society in which it often seemed to be ignored.<sup>4</sup>

Urban graffiti quickly increased and developed. Rivalries between artists led to more highly developed styles and more daring locations. Many writers attempt to cover as many places as possible to increase their notoriety, and often the rivalries would come to a head if one artist wrote over another's piece. At first this increase in graffiti was almost universally condemned by the mainstream culture. But, within ten years, galleries and popular culture, accelerated by the success of hip hop and rap musical genres, began to accept this aesthetic. In other cities outside of the United States, similar phenomena occurred and developed. These artists inspired others across the Atlantic and the movement quickly became international.

In the 1980s in France, and later in London and the United States, new concepts of graffiti began to emerge. The need for a speedier process in the face of the increasing criminalization and denigration of graffiti caused many artists to use stencils

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<sup>4</sup> Ley, David, and Roman Cybriwsky. "Urban Graffiti As Territorial Markers." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 64.4 (1974): 491. Print.

and wheat pastes. The latter is a concoction of wheat flour, sugar and water that can be used to post images. It is cheaper and stronger than glue. Both wheat pastes and stencils are much quicker to put on walls than the massive amount of time required for an elaborate tag. The time saved can be vital to avoid arrests and become more prolific. Banksy, a British street artist, and Shepard Fairey, an American artist, became well known even within mainstream culture for their clear images that often had a tongue-in-cheek message. As these and other artists became more active and prolific with their easily understood pictorial representation and art historical referencing, the mainstream art world readily embraced them.

However, this acceptance is not without controversy. For example, when Banksy held a one-man gallery show in Los Angeles, he garnered criticism and rejection from the street art movement. This reaction again occurred when Shepard Fairey marketed his art under the clothing label Obey, and then designed a campaign poster for Barack Obama. The usage of graffiti in mainstream culture, for example in a Blondie video of the 1980s, seemed to soften the original intent of the art. This is because, for many artists, the importance of street art is its intentional breaking away from the established canon of the art world, and the creation of art for the people. In the summer of 2011, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles became the first major American museum to hold a large-scale street art show, furthering this conversation about the validity and problems that occur with acceptance. Many claim that since street art is much more



understandable and has no connotations of gang-violence, unlike graffiti, it is largely an appeal to bourgeois taste. To others, the graffiti aesthetic has already become so subsumed by mass-culture that its original counterculture appeal is lost. Even in Tunisia, graffiti artists have been hired to paint signs for businesses (such as for a dance studio and for a gym in Tunis). Others find that the constant repetition of one's name is an act of egotism.

Another important dialogue within the movement is over anonymity. On one level, it is often a necessity because of the art's illegality. But also, anonymity has become an ideological stance. If the artist is unknown, then the work is free for interpretation and enjoyment outside of the realm of the governed art world. Street artists often intentionally shun the concept of celebrity-artist, typified by Picasso or Warhol, who have become consumable entities in themselves. At the same time, many street artists, in particular Banksy, have become this type of figure, and his books sell in retail stores such as Urban Outfitters.

While the movement is quite nascent in Tunisia, almost all of the themes encountered within international dialogues on street art and graffiti are present here, as well. In particular, artists engage in this constant fluctuation between a desire for legitimation by the art world and a disdain for it. Many artists derive inspiration from other artists around the world, for street art is at its core an international movement whose fuel is fed by the constant sharing of art across the internet. Some Tunisian

artists began by using Banksy stencils, others copy the forms of New York graffiti artists in the 1980s, and much contestation within the movement is centered around these themes of anonymity and “selling-out.”

For the context of this research, I will namely make three distinctions in Tunisian graffiti and street art. First, there is the tagging present on the walls of the TGM, its stations, and throughout the city. This is almost always the scribbling of names, soccer teams, or brief political or religious slogans. In this sense, graffiti is largely a territorial marker. The second distinction will be made for the more-artistically developed graffiti artists who spend longer periods of time on their pieces. These artists typically write their names, and some of the more well known include Sk-One, Zit, and Meen One. Thirdly, I will discuss a burgeoning art collective, Ahl el-Kahf, as well as interviews with the independent street artists C-RAISE, who possess strong ideological and artistic cohesiveness and intention. This collective is intentionally attempting to create an artistic movement and sees their work as part of a larger political and social effort. This latter category can be distinguished visually by its use of stencils, wheat pastes, and pictorial representation. Many artists work within these different categories and would in fact disdain them. However, my hope in separating them is to categorize their presence on the urban fabric. That being said, much of my effort will be not to separate but instead to understand them as evolving from one another in an intensely self-aware way. Everyone who writes on the walls of Tunisia is aware of the other people writing on

walls. They form opinions of one another and their art. Essentially, in documenting the various forms of urban art in Tunis and other major cities, I hope to reveal a narrative of a burgeoning artistic movement.

### **Tunisian Streets + Spaces**

Central to understanding Tunisian street art as its own entity is a discussion the unique urban morphology of Tunisian cities and the non-binary relationship between public and private space. In the international movement, intentional illegality is often a launching point; the Tunisian movement, which takes so much of its inspiration from abroad, also partakes in this dialogue but street politics are at once similar and incredibly different. To begin, the Tunisian city, exemplified in its capital Tunis,

possesses a character of pastiche. That is to say, the various historical powers that have governed the country have each left their imprint on the urban morphology. Perhaps the two most dominating influences are Islamic and French colonial; their vastly different attitudes towards urban design create a visible clash at the Porte de France. In the twisting streets of the Islamic medina, centrality figures as the defining mode of spatial configuration and all roads radiate from the Zeitouna mosque. In the French colonial new town, space and regularity were utilized to develop a European sense of order and, assumedly, dominance.

One may argue that the role of *place* in Islamic culture (something that is quite apparent by traditions such as saints' tombs, the importance of Mecca and the hajj, and the centrality of the mosque in the design of the medina) is embedded in the Tunisian psyche. Colonialism and then authoritarianism then represent extremes of displacement. That is to say, the city no longer was the right of its inhabitant but instead the domain of first a foreign entity and then a single-family authoritarian regime. Following Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the traditional dichotomy between public and private spheres (and thus, spaces) is defined by an imagined clear-cut separation of capitalist interest necessitated by scarcity<sup>5</sup>. Tunisia essentially went from monarchy to authoritarianism, and Islamic values such as hospitality almost certainly mitigated the competition over scarce resources. The creation of an essentially European city outside

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<sup>5</sup> Hardt, Michael; Antonio Negri (2009), *Commonwealth*, Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

of the traditional medina negated any possibility of a classically-conceived capitalist sense of space--- that is to say one defined by a dichotomous relationship between public and private spaces--- because it existed as an aspect of colonial hegemony.

That being said, the exchange of capital transformed Tunis, as it did the rest of the world. David Harvey, a New York University geography professor and one of the world's foremost proponents of the Right to the City, expounds it from Henri Lefebvre's original articulation. In his essay of the same name, he declares, "The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights."<sup>6</sup>

In discussing this enforced "neglect" he begins with the example of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris and its transformation under the second Napoleon. The emperor, burdened by massive unemployment and excess capital, hired Baron Haussmann to undertake an urbanization project on the scale of which the world had never yet seen. The rebuilding

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<sup>6</sup> Harvey, David. "The Right to the City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27.4 (2003): 939-41. Print.

of Paris would absorb tremendous amounts of capital and labor, invigorate the economy, and serve as a mechanism of “social stabilization,” by consuming all leisure time of the workers. Haussmann proceeded to bulldoze Parisian slums and winding neighborhoods; in their wake, he erected grand arcaded avenues and sculpted “the City of Lights.” This city became the center of culture for the newly emerged bourgeois class. And the main focus of his massive avenues was consumption: literally through shopping, but also of parks, museums and sights. In essence, he created the first city that became an object of consumption in itself.<sup>7</sup>

This usage of urbanization as a terrain for the expenditure of surplus capital and labor has become a pattern visible repeatedly throughout history. After the incredible industrial build-up of the Second World War, the United States faced an impending crisis like Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The entire country subsequently experienced massive urbanization projects. New York City under the megalomaniac planning director Robert Moses experienced this in a particularly dramatic form. Today, the mega-projects of Dubai and Abu Dhabi are extreme examples, in their degradation of the environment and unjust social practices, of this same paradigm--- this time, to absorb the excess oil wealth. Techniques used by the governments always include direct appropriation of space; the expropriation of slums in the name of civic improvement in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris, eminent domain in the United States, or in Tunisia

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<sup>7</sup> Harvey, David. "The Right to the City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27.4 (2003): 939-41. Print.

the limitless power of the ruling family to seize property. Interestingly enough, Harvey also notes that these projects also tend to be followed by periods of unrest. Faced with a vacuum of employment opportunities and surrounded by a foreign city, workers take to the streets in what can be read as a symbolic attempt to reclaim their former city.

This occurred after Haussmann with the Paris Commune, in America and France with 1968, and, possibly in Tunisia.<sup>8</sup>

Still, the profits earned through processes of urbanization have, in certain periods, been partially redistributed through socialized governmental bodies. However, since the 1960s, the advent of neoliberalism and its enforcement of privatization internationally through such organizations as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have led to greater accumulation of capital by a smaller and smaller elite. In Tunisia, this phenomenon was even more drastic with almost all revenue generated by urbanization projects being kept within the Trabilsi family. Additionally, these projects— such as the building of massive hotels— were done almost always to generate tourism. In other words, Tunisian urbanization was almost exclusively for the benefit of foreigners. Policing and administration enforced this pattern. For example, graffiti (almost always that of the soccer fanatics) disappeared from the street almost as soon as it was put up. The Tunisian city under authoritarianism became a commodity

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<sup>8</sup> Harvey, David. "The Right to the City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27.4 (2003): 939-41. Print.

whose façade was constantly maintained in order for its consumption by foreigners. Behind this façade the real city, inhabited by Tunisians, lay neglected and decayed.

This process can be understood as one of drastic alienation for urban residents from their cities. However, it also existed outside of the traditional denotation of the urban. As Harvey writes, capitalist urbanization effectively encompasses all physical space through “phenomena ranging from agribusiness to second homes and rural tourism.”<sup>9</sup> Desert towns from Tozeur to Matmata exist almost entirely as stop-over destinations for tourists who can experience “rural” Tunisia as a phantasmagoria of idyllic Bedouins and camel-rides. From their air-conditioned hotel rooms to their air-conditioned buses to the hour-long camel-ride itself, the tourist experiences Tunisia as one chain of images and events, perfectly designed to give a “feeling” of Tunisia, drastically different from the lived experience of the local who is forced out of economic need to don imagined “traditional” costume. One does not experience such locations as unique spaces but instead as one totality of sequences from the medina of Tunis to the desert oases. Place and space become blurred to those who possess the capital. Those who do not still reside within unique senses of place, but they cannot change or control them because that could threaten the image of Tunisia required for tourism to exist. After centuries of imperialism and colonialism, Tunisia under authoritarianism enabled the continuation of foreign control over its own country (its own physical land

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<sup>9</sup> Harvey, David. "The Right to the City." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27.4 (2003): 939-41. Print.



and space) through these processes of neocolonialism. Thus, any attack on the white washed perfection of this imagined Tunisia becomes political.

But the Ben Ali regime aimed to suppress this, and more, with the creation of a pervasive psychological climate of fear. Rumors of secret police precluded open dialogue on the street, in cafes, and all over places that traditionally serves as bourgeois public spheres.<sup>10</sup> By reclaiming the physical environment, artists help initiate possibilities of imagining the whole of society liberated from the control of a single political entity. While describing the early formations of the group, one member of Ahl el-Kahf explained the intensity of the authoritarian regime. Ben Ali was not explicitly anti-graffiti (and tags and graffiti existed during it, although they were quickly covered up), but anything of a political nature was repressed. He recalled that in December of 2010, him and few other friends, inspired by the international street art movement, decided to make political art. However, when one of his friends was arrested for making a blog critical of the Ben-Ali regime, they quickly ceased their efforts. A few months later, they resurfaced during the second Kasbah, the political movement that occupied the space in front of major government buildings. Many of them are communists or anarchists and participated in it for this region. However, it was also there that they began to put up their first stencil images--- the faces of Ben Ali and his successor Mohammed Ghannouchi. The latter was in fact the reason behind the second Kasbah,

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<sup>10</sup> Habermas, Jürgen (German (1962) English Translation 1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Thomas Burger, Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press

as its participants viewed him as an extension of the former regime. And this is the moment that can be seen as the birth of the intentional street art movement.<sup>11</sup>

### **Timeless Graffiti: Religion + the Calligraphic Tradition**

While street art and western-style graffiti are new phenomenon on the Tunisian cityscape, it can be claimed that the tradition has much older roots. Stone, aka Don Karl, a graffiti writer and scholar writes, "...The Arabic, Latin, Greek and Hebrew alphabets all have the same mother: the Phoenician alphabet, which was developed and used 3000 years ago in today's Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. Thus, graffiti in the sense of "write your name and leave a mark on a wall" existed in the Orient long before anyone in the Occident even learned what writing was."<sup>12</sup> In fact, throughout much of

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<sup>11</sup> Anonymous former member of Al el-Kehf. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview. Tunis, November 17, 2011

<sup>12</sup> Zoghbi, Pascal, Don Karl, and Joy Hawley. *Arabic Graffiti*. Berlin, Germany: From Here to Fame Pub., 2011. Print.

the interior of Tunisia and in more conservative coastal towns such as Bizerte, one can see examples of religious graffiti almost everywhere.

In particular, the town of Sidi Bouzid, the origin point of the revolution, is filled with religious graffiti. Next to where Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself are large messages scrawled in Arabic proclaiming, among other things, “Allah Akbahr,” or “God is Great.” Interestingly, these messages are juxtaposed by little stencils of a hammer and sickle or Che Guevara’s portrait, providing insight into the fierce ideological battle currently raging in Tunisia. According to Don Karl, even contemporary Muslim “graffiti artists” tend to put the message before the traditional (and egocentric) of writing ones name and getting fame for it.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons for the prevalence of this type of graffiti is the long tradition in Muslim societies of using Arabic calligraphy as a form of decoration. “Originally conceived to represent the holy scriptures of the Koran, the Arabic script became an emblem of the Islamic religion, and therefore, its perceived beauty and reproduction became a matter of religious piety.”<sup>14</sup> Additionally, according to strict interpretations of the Qu’ran, figurative depiction is forbidden and idolatrous. Thus, the reconfiguration and ornamentation of the script became an important tradition within Islamic culture. Adorning mosques, shrines, and even the human body in the form of henna, Arabic calligraphy is ubiquitous in North Africa and the Middle East.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès, Ibid.

Additionally, notably in cities that are not *major* tourist destinations such as Bizerte (in contrast to Sidi Bou Said), hands of Fatima and little scribblings of Arabic verses cover the medina walls.

Hassan Massoudy, an Iraqi calligrapher, finds an innate connection between the arts of calligraphy and graffiti. He describes the similarity of flow between ink and spray paint. He writes, “Obviously [calligraphy and graffiti] both are about the use of letter and their alphabets, and their center of gravity is the beauty of writing. For both, a letter is more than just a letter and they fill them with emotions. The use of empty space and composition within this space is something else they have in common.”<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, this connection has led to the development of a neologism, calligraffiti. It refers to graffiti artists who use Arabic letters and work within the calligraphic tradition. Invented by the Dutch artist Niels Shoe Meulman, aka Shoe, the practice blends all forms of calligraphy (Arabic, Japanese, Chinese, etc) with graffiti, which he defines as “the art of getting your (pseudo) name up in an urban environment.”<sup>16</sup> The word has been appropriated and used by Tunisian artists such as Meen-One.<sup>17</sup> Also, both C-RAISE and Ahl-Alkahf uses Arabic calligraphy for its emblem. Zed, another artist, often writes his messages in script. One of the most interesting aspects of Tunisian street art is the dual usage of both Arabic and Roman alphabets,

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<sup>15</sup> Zoghbi, Pascal, Don Karl, and Joy Hawley. *Arabic Graffiti*. Berlin, Germany: From Here to Fame Pub., 2011. Print.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.calligraffiti.nl/what-is-calligraffiti>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/meenone.calligraffiti?sk=info>

which reflects the fluidity with which their creators switch between Tunisian Arabic, French, and even English.

### Soccer Fanatics

Most Tunisian graffiti is concerned with the national obsession: soccer. Most tags exhibited on the TGM stations and throughout Tunisia represent teams, which are written as a sign of pride. C-RAISE explained that many of these tags are written by young men aged around 12-13 who are paid by older enthusiasts (in the early 20s).<sup>18</sup> This is because a minor cannot be charged for doing graffiti and both the Ben Ali regime and the current police force focus almost all their anti-graffiti effort on this type. This type of tagging is by far the most dominant in the urban morphology and thus the most-well known. Like in much of the world, many people deem it an urban blight. On 22 September 2011, a blurb in *La Presse de Tunisie*, described a visible increase in graffiti an the efforts of municipalities to clean-up graffiti and thus give the cities back their “charm.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> C-RAISE. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview. Tunis, November 18, 2011

<sup>19</sup> *La Presse de Tunisie*

It is also interesting to note that many of the tags are those of “Ultras.” Ultras are soccer fanatics, originating in Europe but known throughout the world. They often cause fights in soccer stadiums and sometimes bring those fights to the streets. In fact, they possess a strong political ideology, although it is not a politics known in campaigns or elections. One of their tags, present even in Tunis, is “A.C.A.B.,” or “All Cops Are Bastards.”<sup>20</sup>

In the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions Ultras were known as some of the first to cause confrontations between police and protestors, and were often armed with Molotov cocktails and other homemade weapons. Rabab El-Mahdi, an assistant professor of political science at the American University in Cairo, told Al Jazeera, “Since the Ultras were created, they were always targeted by state security. They are seen as a mob or as hooligans, so they developed skills that none of the middle class was forced to develop. Plus they come from backgrounds where such skills are needed on daily basis just as survival mechanisms.”<sup>21</sup> Essentially, the politics of the Ultras is one of fierce indignation at oppressive authority, and a willingness to engage in direct and violent confrontations. Similarly, another common tag is that of the Torcidas, which refers to Brazilian informal or formal soccer organizations that are similar to Ultras in their zeal.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/11/201111284912960586.html>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/11/201111284912960586.html>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.organizadasbrasil.com/>

### **Graffiti + the Jasmine Revolution**

Throughout Tunisia, walls are covered with political messages. On the TGM in the northern suburbs of Tunis, one can see crudely drawn images of Che Guevara next to “Anti-Imperialisme.” On walls in nearly every *quartier* of the country are tags screaming “Dégage RCD!” In La Goulette, one of the most notable political slogans I noticed was “Pouvoir à la Peuple.” During the days of the revolution, graffiti like this became ubiquitous. Afterwards, the mentality and some of the tags themselves remained on the country’s white walls.

Some of the most striking examples are on former RCD, Ben Ali’s ruling party, headquarters and other government buildings. In downtown Tunis, the headquarters was ransacked and covered with slogans like the ones described above. In Sidi Bouzid, the walls near where Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself are now covered in graffiti. As I mentioned before, some are religious, some are political, and some merely serve as reminders of those who perished fighting against the regime. In El Kef, the RCD headquarters was transformed into a veritable museum. With various degrees of technical prowess, young Tunisians copied Banksy stencils and transformed them to fit

the Tunisian revolution. All over the front facade of the building are slogans, names, and happy celebrations of the country's revolution.

During the second Kasbah, graffiti covered the government buildings that serve to delineate the courtyard that rests just outside of the medina of Tunis. C-RAISE participated and explains, "It was an essential part of reclaiming the space and letting people know what we were doing. We wrote our messages on the walls."<sup>23</sup> Kasbah II, which served as a platform for activists to continue their revolutionary aims, was colored with spray cans.

Throughout the country are the remains of the Trabilsi family mansions. The ruling family was infamous for seizing any land they desired and building on it monstrously gaudy palaces. One of the President's nephews constructed his in Gammarth overlooking the sea. After the revolution, the mansion was looted and desecrated. Subsequently, graffiti artists covered it with their art. In particular, Sk-One, Meen-One, and Willis (a cartoonist who has started drawing her cats on walls) are heavily present. For the most part, the messages are not explicitly political, but the very act of retaking land that was originally stolen from the people (and constructed with, essentially, stolen money) is a political act.

In front of the Carthage Acropolium, two burned out cars, reputedly belonging to a member of the Trabilsi family, have been covered with graffiti and rest on pedestals.

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<sup>23</sup> C-RASE. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview. Tunis, November 18, 2011



Plaques attached to their bases read: "Memorial to the 14<sup>th</sup> January Revolution." While the artists are unknown and probably do not even consider themselves artists, these memorials represent that graffiti became an essential aspect of the collective visual memory of the revolution.

It is important to note that political graffiti has occurred in almost every social upheaval of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From Berlin to Santiago, activists and protestors have used the walls of the city to prominently display their messages. One of the most notable examples is during the wildcat strikes in Paris during May 1968. This infamous month saw the Sorbonne covered in revolutionary slogans. Inspired by the Situationist International, a revolutionary political and artistic movement, young students scribbled "Travaillez-Jamais!," "Sois Jeune et Tais Toi!," and other memorable slogans. Without a doubt, Tunisia falls into this tradition. During periods of revolutionary struggle, people write their politics on the walls--- for everyone to see.

## Graffiti for Sale

Many Tunisian graffiti writers paint in a style reminiscent of New York graffiti in the 1980s. This largely consists of letters rendered in a highly ornamental and illusory way. Some of the words seem to pop out of the wall itself; by using shading and lighting techniques— trompe l'oeil, as it is called in art history textbooks— the artists form two-dimensional sculptures. Often their pieces are brightly colored and contain cartoonish figures. Other times, they consist of elaborate configurations of Arabic script. Almost always, the pieces are their names

The two most famous artists are Sk-One and Meen-One. On his facebook page, Sk-One describes his work:

"[I] use a process that might seem iconoclastic and even off-putting to some purists in the field. But seeing [my] work, one discovers a happy childish mix of colors: lime green, sky blue and turquoise, pink... The mixing of certain processes is perhaps the coup. Without any pretension to the message or philosophical thought, [I] please all. My work depicts the characters straight out of the world of comics and 3D animation; it combines subtly sensual curves and Oriental art, expressionism and graffiti art."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Sk-one (Tunisian Graffiti Artist) - Info." *Facebook.com*. Web. 03 Dec. 2011.  
<<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Sk-one-Tunisian-Graffiti-Artist/110963695625071?sk=info>>.

Meen-one also calls his art "Calligraffiti," referencing his combination of graffiti and traditional calligraphy.<sup>25</sup>

Their fame, in comparison to other Tunisian artists, is partially attributed to the amount of time that they have been working. Meen-one has been making graffiti since 1991.<sup>26</sup> But perhaps much more important is that they were both part of a show at the La Marsa gallery ArtyShow even before the revolution. The gallery is owned by Jerome Benoît, and consists mostly of rugs, t-shirts, and books for sale. The walls of the bottom are covered with their tags and with the cartoons of other artists. The space has served as a meeting place for them and other Tunisian graffiti artists. Many of them have since formed the collective "Z.I.T.," or Zombie Intervention Tunisie.

"Z.I.T" consists of Sk-One, Meen-one, Willis, the website-builder Amine Lamine, and many other artists. For the most part, they care little for anonymity (Sk-One prominently displays his name on his facebook page), and are willing to make money. Through ArtyShow, they have been featured in more galleries throughout Tunis, including Milles Feuilles in Marsa Plage, and gained attention broad. One of Sk-One's canvases costs 700 dinars.

While their art has a political edge to it (largely in the fact that it covers the former mansions of the Trabilsi family and also some members have created posters encouraging people to vote), some of their pieces include phrases such as "zero

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<sup>25</sup> "MEEN ONE Tunisian Graffiti." *Facebook.com*. Web. 27 Nov. 2011.

<<https://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=95542384324>>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/meenone.calligraffiti>

politique.” On the other hand, Meen-One contributed to a large board that had the messages of hundred of Tunisians painted on it during the revolution. In one interview, he said “The revolution didn’t make a big difference to life before or afterward in my eyes; I think it’s the same situation – democracy and freedom didn’t (and don’t) exist and we must continue working to create it – even now the political system is lying!”<sup>27</sup>

Some artists, including C-RAISE and members of Ahl el-Kahf disdain them for “selling out.” In one conversation, C-RAISE said, “Sk-One, Meen— I hate them. They bring graffiti from Europe. People look for hours until finally figuring out its just a name. I mean what the fuck is that? People won’t get anything out of it... it’s just ego.”<sup>28</sup> He continues, “They’ll take pictures of their pieces and put them on Facebook. Maybe they hope some girls will be impressed by it. I mean you should have to go out in the street to see it. You should discover it on your own when discovering the city.”<sup>29</sup> Additionally, when “people give you money to do something that they want--- that’s slavery.”<sup>30</sup> They criticize these artists for accepting payment to paint walls. Sk-One, for example, worked with the U.S. Embassy during a street art and rap music festival at a skatepark in La Marsa.

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<sup>27</sup> "TAKE THE POWER BACK | Art and Magazine | The Motion Online." The Motion Online | Music, Arts, Technology, Current Affairs. Web. 05 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.themotiononline.co.uk/2011/09/power/>>.

<sup>28</sup> C-RAISE. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview. Tunis, November 15, 2011

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

On the other hand, many Tunisians have become introduced to graffiti through artists such as Sk-One. In part, this is because of the work of Amine Lamine, member of Z.I.T. and founder of Graphik Island ([www.graphikisland.com](http://www.graphikisland.com)). He created the website on January 4th, 2011, ten days before the Tunisian revolution. After studying for several years in Paris, he noticed the presence of websites and magazines documenting underground music and art scenes that did not exist in Tunisia. The purpose of his website was to discover and highlight such scenes in his home country, and, in the process, increase their visibility.

“Before the revolution graffiti existed but it was quickly covered up. Now, it is becoming easier and we see more and more artists. Still, very few Tunisians understand it. It is so new here that it requires new mediums to make it understood.”<sup>31</sup> To him, Tunisian graffiti and street art is still rather unsophisticated. By publishing the art and names of other artists, he hoped that people can become inspired by their work and the movement can develop.<sup>32</sup>

He chooses artists based on what he perceives as a unique style and ability, and helps to find walls, which can be painted on--- a very difficult task. He believes that street art can be put in a gallery or be paid for, as long as it increases the understanding

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<sup>31</sup> Amine Lamine. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview. Tunis, November 30, 2011

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

of the art. However, the street must “remains the main source of inspiration.”<sup>33</sup> To him, the differences between street art and graffiti are stylistic, and questions over anonymity and profit are personal.<sup>34</sup>

Him and his friends were involved with graffiti before the revolution, but it helped graffiti because it lessened the degree of police control over the street. The graffiti that occurred during it also helped increase awareness of the medium. Still his views reflect those of his graffiti artist-friends: street art and politics are separate. Art should be an expressionist and creative experience. When asked about the future of the movement in the face of the increasing conservatism of Tunisian society, exhibited by the election of Ennadha amongst other things, he remains optimistic. “That is one of the reasons I am trying to increase awareness of street art and underground culture. We must build and strengthen our own cultures of opposition.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

## New Attempts

Perhaps because of the increasing influence of these graffiti influences, more young Tunisians are trying their hand at the art. One young artist, who goes by Dr-Bago Yassine on Facebook, told me he started because of his affinity for hip-hop culture. "I am not a rapper, or a DJ, or a beatboxer. I am a simple graffiti writer, trying to pass on a message to my people and to others."<sup>36</sup> He began during his first years of college when other friends first experimented, as well. "I never went to art school--- my school was the streets. It was my inspiration. I am also inspired by my homies and how my people live (happiness and unhappiness, sacrifice, poverty, joy, and always unemployment and marginalization)."<sup>37</sup> He has also found inspiration in Tunisian street artists such as Sk-One, who is "living his dreams," and some of his graffiti artist friends.<sup>38</sup>

Yassine describes his art work as not overtly political, or at least not related to politics in the sense of elections of parties. He says his work is concerned with themes of brotherhood and solidarity. He discusses the importance of breaking down borders to create a more connected world. "I attack the world that darkens the life of young Tunisians and obscures freedom of expression."<sup>39</sup> This political mentality is reminiscent of another young Tunisian graffiti artist and tattooist, who goes by

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<sup>36</sup> Dr-Bago Yassine. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Online interview. Tunis, December 2, 2011

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Designeur Designe. He told me that his work is mostly concerned with pan-Arab themes against imperialism. In particular, he uses images of guns and bombs to refer to the Palestinian struggle against Israel.<sup>40</sup>

Yassine also expressed the difficulty of being a graffiti artist in Tunisia. “Me and my friends are very poor. We can’t paint in all the colors we want, or make our art look like we want it to because paints are too expensive.” C-RAISE explained to me in detail how difficult it is to find supplies in a country where graffiti is not yet considered an art form. Almost all spray cans are those used for painting objects like bicycles, so the color range and quality is very limited. Additionally, paint is expensive (around five to fifteen dinar a can), and the nozzles do not provide the type of precision desired. In contrast, European graffiti artists can find spray cans and nozzles designed for graffiti art. C-RAISE told me dreamily of a new type that is clear during the day and phosphorescent at night. Stencils are also hard to create because sheets of clear plastic are expensive and hard to find. C-RAISE has a pharmacist friend who steals x-rays for him, instead. For stickers, he uses scraps of vinyl he procured from his days working for an advertisement company putting up publicity sheets. He uses shoe polish instead of ink for drawing.

**“To Create is to Resist”**

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<sup>40</sup> Designeur Designe. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Online interview. Tunis, December 3, 2011



“Ahl el-Kahf was born during the sit-in of Al Kasbah 2. It started as an anonymous and revolutionary form of art and expression. Basically, [we created] messages [that] reflected common social demands, criticized political frauds and systematic control. For example we wrote, ‘Those who mislead him are still in here’ under Ben Ali stencils, as well as other stencils we conceived and some of Banksy's works.”<sup>41</sup> Originally built around a core group of three artists, the group has since grown and changed membership. They count members in Tunisia, France, Italy, and Vienna. Some of them create street art, another focuses on electronic music, and one is interested in web design. In an interview, one member explained, “Academically speaking, I do not know how to define our art, because it is not only to paint or tag or graffiti... it's a mixture. We want to implement all possible forms of expression.”<sup>42</sup>

At its core, Ahl el-Kahf is based on a concept of “revolutionary art,” different from “art of the revolution,” which to them contains commercial connotations (ie. the sale of Che posters, the consumption of a “revolutionary aesthetic”). Their work is deeply infused with their own need for philosophical inquiry. “On the theoretical side we were inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Antoni Negri, Giorgio Agamben, and Edward Said. In particular, the idea from *A Thousand Plateaus*

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<sup>41</sup> Anonymous member of Ahl el-Kahf. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Online interview. Tunis, December 5

<sup>42</sup> *AUT\*AUT*. Web. 22 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.autautpisa.it/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1212>>.

(Deleuze) on forms of resistance beyond [our current] capitalist time. We call what we do 'alternative communication,' or [more] precisely resistance."<sup>43</sup>

The name refers to an old myth that is found in all three Abrahamic tradition. It tells of a group of young people who flee from a despotic king into the refuge of a cave. Inside, they fall asleep for hundreds of years. The group understands the story as a metaphor for the cultural awakening need by a society that has been under dictatorial rule for most of the last century, and for a global society imprisoned by the abstract forces of capital exchange. "We are trying to create our own temporality... we are trying to become a culture of resistance."<sup>44</sup> For the most part, they believe in anonymity. When some of the members release their names and images in an interview, my friend in the group left. They never take money for their work, but he also took issue when they accepted supplies to paint a wall. All conversations within the group are extremely political and they believe in continuous self-examination.

"The relationship between art, resistance and politics is crucial. Politics for us is not based off of democracy and parliament, but the politics of the *bios*, life. We consider art as a form of resistance against forms of power and domination... So to make art is to make politics. To make street art is to choose to work in the streets and not in the

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<sup>43</sup> *AUT\*AUT*. Web. 22 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.autautpisa.it/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1212>>.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*.

galleries. This is in itself a political choice. We choose who we want to address and how. We work against the invasion of advertising images and words.”<sup>45</sup>

In this sense, they are profoundly influenced by the Situationist notion of *détournement*, which they acknowledge. Created by Guy Debord, *détournement* is the practice of changing the context of images to invert their meaning. In particular it is used on advertisements and comic books. Simon Sadler, a professor of architectural and urban history at the University of California Davis explains its revolutionary implications, “What if spectators transgressed the rules of consumerism by stealing and redistributing its products and images, for themselves, making good its vacuous promises of a better world?”<sup>46</sup> Within their work, this practice can be seen in stencils that invert the classic Coca-Cola logo to read, “Enjoy Capitalism.” This stencil can be found on Rue Palestine in downtown Tunis, as well as on a number of their large murals throughout the country. Additionally, they have used old propaganda newspapers from the Ben Ali regime as backgrounds for their art.

To further understand the complex ways with which they are attempting to create a “revolutionary art,” it is helpful to describe the pieces themselves. One night I met one member at the clock tower on Avenue Bourguiba. He took me down the poorly-illuminated Avenue de Carthage and told me that at night this neighborhood can become unsafe. We passed broken and boarded up buildings until finally we reached a

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<sup>45</sup> *AUT\*AUT*. Web. 22 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.autautpisa.it/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1212>>.

<sup>46</sup> Sadler, Simon. *The Situationist City*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT, 1998. Print., 19

giant paint warehouse. Abandoned for years, it eventually lost its roof and has since become a local drinking spot. Inside, he greeted a man doing just this and then waved his arms. Around us were massive murals, all intricately conceived and executed. There were portraits of philosophers, political slogans, and words repeated over and over again to form one cohesive image. He explained that they were trying to make a giant museum. A museum made of the street, itself. Anyone would be free to visit and they could have concerts, sculptural exhibits, anything they wanted.<sup>47</sup>

We then left and took the metro to near the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. They had done another mural there, near to where all trains passed. They designed it around an existing hole, out of which they painted dozens of ants. It also included a series of portraits and quotes from each of the philosophers. He told me they painted it during the day and were stopped by the police. However, the police, like the rest of Tunisian society, is completely unaccustomed to this type of graffiti. He told me they almost always associated graffiti with the tags of soccer teams. They let them paint, and even watched, unaware that this too was graffiti. He told me that since street art is so new in Tunisia, few people even know what it is. This gives the possibility for them to form their own judgments of it, but also creates even more responsibility for the artists to create intelligent work.

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<sup>47</sup> Anonymous former member of Al el-Kehf. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview. Tunis, November 17, 2011

“Resistance is also against repressive power in aesthetics. Resist the standards that art imposes. This means demystifying the canons of beauty, try to work also with the spots, with the holes in the wall.” Their art uses many different techniques at one; it is constructed out of a pastiche of words and images. One member explained to me, “We think that strictly figurative art is an old and used form of expression. We explore forms, messages and symbols. We try more to create a call for a thinking and not just one simple message.”<sup>48</sup>

In this sense, they recall the Deleuzian notion of a rhizome. He writes:

“The rhizome is altogether different, a map and not a tracing. Make a map, not a tracing. The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome. What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real. The map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious. It fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages on bodies without organs, the maximum opening of bodies without organs onto a plane of consistency. It is itself a part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall,

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<sup>48</sup> Anonymous member of Ahl el-Kehf. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Online interview. Tunis, December 5, 2011

conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.<sup>49</sup>

That is to say, an art that is truly of *resistance* to the mechanisms of power embedded in our society must not *dictate*. Revolutionary art is not to be a propaganda poster like those from the Soviet Union. It should be a map that leads the viewer to his own personal revolution. "We believe in the fact of becoming revolutionaries. And today we try to encourage youth to continue the struggle until our demands are met!"<sup>50</sup> This also follows the work of Negri and Hardt who argue that art can become revolutionary by forcing the viewer (and artist) to break through the perceptual structures that prevent us from understanding our repressive and nihilistic times.<sup>51</sup>

But their work also exists outside of a theoretical realm. "The horizon of the revolution is not only a transition to democracy: the elections. The revolution was (and is) very clear demands: social justice, right to work, the equal treatment of all regions, against corruption. We reject the idea of the label of the 'revolution of January 14,' that ignores the prior struggles in Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine..."<sup>52</sup> In that aim, they have created works throughout the country. In Djerba, for example, they converted the

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<sup>49</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987. Print.

<sup>50</sup> *AUT\*AUT*. Web. 22 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.autautpisa.it/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1212>>.

<sup>51</sup> Negri, Antonio, and Max. Henninger. "Art and Culture in the Age of Empire and the Time of the Multitudes." *SubStance* 36.1 (2007): 48-55. Print.

<sup>52</sup> *AUT\*AUT*. Web. 22 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.autautpisa.it/modules/news/article.php?storyid=1212>>.

façade of an old movie theater into a giant mural. On a low wall in front of it, they painted a mural of Gilles Deleuze. While I was taking a picture of it, an old man casually pointed his thumb at the painting and told me, “This is art. This is not cliché.”

Likewise, I have been told that reactions towards their work are often good. In fact, I asked one member if Salafists have ever given him trouble about street art, in particular his usage of pictorial representation. He admitted that Salafists were the hardest to convince. He told me that once he was in Sidi Bouzid doing a big mural. A group of conservative Muslim men began to tell him it was forbidden, but after talking with them patiently and openly for a long while, they even invited him over for dinner.<sup>53</sup>

I then asked him if he was afraid of Ennadha, the moderate Islamist party that recently won a landslide victory in Tunisia’s first elections (he did not vote in the elections, considering them a scam that ignored the real *political issues* of poverty and social justice). He looked at me seriously and said, “I’m not scared of Ennadha. They have their politics. We have the streets.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Anonymous former member of Al el-Kehf. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview. Tunis, November 15, 2011

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous former member of Al el-Kehf. Interviewed by Nicholas Korody. Personal interview Tunis, November 15, 2011.

## Conclusion

What can be called revolutionary art? Certainly, not every painting created in Tunisia after the revolution is worthy of this title. It seems evident that, to begin, it must reflect the profound changes that accompanied the overthrow of the government. But does that alone make it revolutionary?

Art can be revolutionary in two ways: content and form. The former refers to the acts that serve as revolutionary techniques. In this sense, graffiti is almost always a revolutionary reappropriation of public or private space. The latter suggests the direct usage of revolutionary ideas and slogans. That being said, the revolutionary propaganda of Maoist China, for example, can quickly be deemed non-revolutionary and even repressive. Because they were propagandistic, they served as hierarchal and didactic impositions of information on others. This begs the question of what is revolutionary: anything that involves a dramatic political change or something more.



The graffiti of the Tunisian revolution always possesses a revolutionary character in form. That is to say, it existed as a reappropriation of authoritarian-controlled property. It is also notable in that it is the only art form born out of the revolution. While a few artists existed in Tunisia during the Ben Ali regime, their work was quickly covered up and few people knew about the art form. Since the revolution, it has grown massively. Every time one enters into the city, new stencils and pieces can be found. On Amine Lamine's website is a new video entitled #Tag Tunis, that shows two young artists putting up stencils around the city and its suburbs. Additionally, the relationship between graffiti and revolution is now forever tied. At the Bardo sit-in that is occurring right now, graffiti artists have created large banners and stencils are everywhere. A few weeks before, at the Occupy Tunis protest, graffiti writers covered a park in anarchy symbols.

In its most sophisticated form, Tunisian street art, specifically that of Al el-Kahf, is revolutionary in both form and content. It takes the street away from capitalist interest and turns it into a museum. Instead of forcing messages on people, it suggests authors to read and quotes to ponder. It enables one to experience a personal revolution, while also reflecting the aspirations of the Jasmine revolution. And, it is in this sense that street art can be considered the first truly revolutionary art.

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