


Fall 2018

Rebuilding Tunisia, One Artist at a Time

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Rebuilding Tunisia, One Artist at a Time

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for *Tunisia and Italy: Politics and Religious Integration in the Mediterranean*, SIT Study Abroad

Fall 2018

Abstract

This paper argues that Tunisia's engaged artists are playing a key role in the development of Tunisian civil society and democracy. The bulk of the research is in the form of interviews with five Tunisian artists. Each artist is actively engaged in the project of building a stronger, more democratic society. Through their art, they exercise and protect the political rights won in the 2011 revolution. These artists resist censorship, powerfully and loudly exercise their right to free speech, and help Tunisian society envision a better future for itself. The five artists interviewed for this research represent the type of citizen the future of Tunisia's civil society and democracy depend upon.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank the entire SIT Tunisia team: Mounir, Amina, Rahma, and Nesrine, for their love and support all semester. My supervisor, Dr. Raja Labadi, also deserves a big thank you for helping me focus my scattered thoughts. I am extremely grateful to Farah Ben Mansour, Nidhal Ghariani, Yosr Ben Ammar, Salim Zerrouki, and Nadia Khiari for agreeing to be interviewed and sharing their time, art, and expertise.

Every artist I spoke to during this research, even those whose stories are not included in the final paper, was incredibly warm, generous, and patient with me. Each one took the time to respond to me and to try to answer my questions, even when language barriers meant that they didn't fully understand what I was researching, or even why I was in Tunisia.

Thank you also to my generous host family, who don't seem to mind that I drank all their coffee and most of their tea while writing this paper.

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Methodology	7
Farah Ben Mansour - Truth	9
Nidhal Ghariani - Rebirth	15
Yosr Ben Ammar - Fighting Censorship	18
Salim Zerrouki - Migration	21
Nadia Khiari - The Internet	23
Conclusion	24
Appendices	25
Bibliography	30
List of interviews	32

Introduction

Today, Tunisian artists wield their art as a tool of citizenship to finish what the Tunisian revolution started in 2011. In 2011, Tunisians won democracy, but they also inherited a gutted economy and a fragile civil society from the escaped First Family. President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, his wife Leila Trabelsi, and their mafia-like extended family controlled most major companies, schools, news outlets, and real estate, in addition to the legal system.¹ Because of the extent of the Ben Ali family's corruption, gigantic gaps in the Tunisian economy, government, and civil society were left in the wake of the collapse of the regime.² In the seven years since the revolution, Tunisians have scrambled to fill in those gaps by developing civil society, a democratic government and a free economy. Tunisia has a new constitution and has experienced several democratic governments since 2011.³ Civil society is experiencing a renaissance of rapid growth and development. However, Tunisia is still in a fragile political, economic, and social situation. The damage done by 23 years of dictatorship cannot be overcome in seven years. It will take years of effort to accomplish the dreams of the revolution, and some of Tunisia's artists are leading the charge.

As Tunisia works to remake itself, some Tunisian artists are combining their art and their sense of civic duty to celebrate and fight for democratic values. For the artists I interviewed, art is inseparable from values like freedom of speech, freedom of movement, individual identity,

¹ Embassy Tunis, "Corruption in Tunisia Part IV: The Family's Holdings," Wikileaks Cable: 06TUNIS1672_a, dated July 5, 2006, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06TUNIS1672_a.html.

² Dreisbach, Tristan, and Robert Joyce. "Revealing Tunisia's Corruption under Ben Ali." *Aljazeera*, March 27, 2014. Accessed October 9, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/03/revealing-tunisia-corruption-under-ben-ali-201432785825560542.html>.

³ Cenciarelli, Althea. "Tunisia, Democratic Transition and Future Challenges." *Mediterranean Affairs*. January 19, 2015. Accessed December 07, 2018. <http://mediterraneanaffairs.com/tunisia-democratic-transition-and-future-challenges/>.

fighting corruption, and improving the country for the next generation. Art has been a voice for many Tunisians to express their political disillusionment, their anger, happiness, hope, and their dreams for a better future. One of my interviewees, Nadia Khiari, described the feeling of freedom and solidarity she felt on January 14th, 2011, and in the following days of the Arab Spring: “we were living the same thing at the same time and feeling the same thing... I continued to produce political cartoons on Facebook because it was a way to breathe, but also because the comments were so funny; it was an exchange, a collaboration.”⁴ For Nadia and other artists, sharing their art online, especially when it contained political commentary, was a political act. They took their new freedom to express themselves and ran with it, so it could never be taken away again.

I interviewed five artists for this research: illustrator and architect Farah Ben Mansour, cartoonist Nidhal Ghariani, gallerist and collector Yosr Ben Ammar, cartoonist Salim Zerrouki, and cartoonist and teacher Nadia Khiari. These five Tunisian artists wield their art and their artistic spirit as tools of citizenship. For Farah, art tells the truth, even when politics does not. For Nidhal, art is a tool for rejuvenation of the self and of the state. Nadia has embraced the democratic spirit of the internet since before 2011 and became known for her anonymous political cartoons shared via Facebook during the revolution. I met some of the artists I interviewed because they are friends of friends. Others were simply those who responded to my Facebook messages and had time to meet me.

⁴ Khiari, Nadia. Interview with author. Tunis, November 30, 2018.

These artists and others like them are leading the way to a better future for themselves and for the next generation of Tunisians. I argue that for these artists, citizenship is where the artistic and the political combine.

Methodology

I defined the artists I interviewed as “engaged artists,” artists who are actively participating in civil society and whose work, or whose art, regardless of its form, contributes to the social and/or political development of Tunisia.

The interviews were semi-structured. I used the same questions for every interview,⁵ but I let conversation flow naturally. Each interview lasted an hour to an hour and a half. Often, I asked questions out of order, skipped a question, or prompted the artist for more information. The interviews were conducted in person, in cafes in downtown Tunis and in the suburb, La Marsa. I asked for verbal consent to record the interviews and to use the artists’ names in my research.

My major obstacles were time, language, and defining key terms. This research was limited to five weeks. The time constraint made it difficult to find artists, contact them, receive a reply, and interview them in time. I reached out to twice as many artists as I actually interviewed. Language was another major barrier in my research. I do not speak French and my Arabic is very limited, so I had to conduct every interview in English. This was difficult for a few of my interviewees and certainly limited the number of artists I could interview. I also had to rely on automatic Google translation of several web pages written originally in French. However, the

⁵ See Appendix I for interview questions

largest obstacle to my research was settling on definitions for key terms like, “art,” “civil society,” “politics,” “meaning,” and “truth.”

First, I’ll define “meaning,” “art,” and “truth” as they are used in this paper. I define “meaningful” art as art that was created for a reason greater than aesthetics. Meaningful art is not just decoration. It doesn’t have to be beautiful, but it does have to evoke an emotional response in the artist and/or the viewer. I adopted the definition of “art” that the interviewees gave me, because all of the artists agreed with each other about what art is and is not.

For the five artists interviewed, art is a creation that is meaningful and truthful and that is not necessarily beautiful. The creation is most often physical: like a comic book, a painting, street art. But Yosr Ben Ammar is also an artist according to this definition, because she creates space for art in Tunisian society. She creates the space in which art meets audience. Her galleries and exhibitions are carefully constructed to give art space to breathe, space to tell its truth. Yosr creates a buffer between art and potentially hostile parties, like the government, so artists and art can express their truths without the fear of censorship. I define “truth-telling” as telling one’s personal truth based on their experiences and beliefs. In other words, truth is simply the opposite of deception. Truth is what the truth teller believes to be true, not some empirically demonstrable truth.

However, “politics” and “civil society” were harder to define within the context of this research. Before starting this research, I had very vague definitions of politics and civil society. As an American, I didn’t see a clear line of demarcation between civil society and politics in my country. Perhaps that is because civil society and politics are more interconnected in the US than in Tunisia. But maybe I didn’t have clear definitions of civil society and politics because I didn’t

need to. My personal definitions don't matter as much as a Tunisian's because whatever American civil society and politics are, because of their age and size they are relatively stable, well developed, and resistant to change.

But for the purposes of this research, I had to settle on definitions of these terms, so I adopted the definitions of the artists I interviewed. For this paper, I define civil society as the activity of citizens that is outside the government and in the public sphere and I define politics as the activity related to the governance of Tunisia.

While my definitions of politics and civil society were vague, the artists' definitions were clear: politics is the childish, dishonest, greedy bickering that happens in the government and civil society is what holds politicians accountable. Not only are the two spheres separate, they are opposed.

Unlike the United States, Tunisia today is in the rare position of being able to redefine for itself terms like "politics" and "civil society." I can understand why Tunisians would fight to keep civil society and politics separate. Before 2011, civil society was weak and vulnerable to the whims of the government. When Farah Ben Mansour, my first interviewee, said that civil society is "the consciousness of politics," she was helping to create reality more than observing it.

Farah Ben Mansour - Truth

Farah is like Tunisia. She's small and unassuming, but as you get to know her you realize she's full of fierce, creative energy. Farah is an illustrator, an architect, and a designer. She grew up and studied at the Higher Institute of Fine Arts of Tunis. At university she studied architecture

and design. She loved her classes, loved the creativity within the walls of her school. But as soon as she graduated, her studies felt like a lie because architecture as a career in Tunisia is corporate, repetitive, and the opposite of what she loves about art. When we first met, she was pursuing art on the side, but to earn money she was working with a Tunisian NGO.⁶ The apolitical, uncreative reality of architecture drove her away from that career.

We first met when my program went on a field visit to the NGO at which she worked, Jamaity, the largest NGO platform in Tunisia.⁷ She has strong political opinions and expresses them through her work with NGOs and through her work as an artist. As we spoke, one value came up again and again in her interview: truth. As Farah spoke, I heard how much she valued honesty and how frustrated she was with the dishonesty within Tunisian politics, even after the revolution. The truths that her art searches for and expresses have only become more political and more public over time.

Since she was little, art has helped Farah develop her identity and helped her determine which parts of her identity were chosen and which parts were socially imposed. Art gave Farah a voice, even if that voice didn't reach outside the walls of her bedroom, where she spent hours sketching. "As a Tunisian girl raised in a conservative society it's hard for me to speak as I please. It's hard to express myself and my feelings as they are. You can't swear, you can't say you are sad, or angry, you have to be nice. But through my art I can say whatever I want."⁸ Farah explained that people are more likely to listen to her perspective if her ideas are in the form of

⁶ <https://tn.linkedin.com/in/farah-ben-mansour>

⁷ "Launch of "Jamaity.org": The Largest NGO Platform in Tunisia." EuroMed Rights. January 29, 2014. Accessed December 05, 2018.

<https://euromedrights.org/publication/launch-of-jamaity-org-the-largest-ngo-platform-in-tunisia/>.

⁸ Ben Mansour, Farah. Interview with author. Tunis, November 17, 2018.

art. I would argue that the art separates the viewer from the artist just enough that the viewer is separated somewhat from their preconceptions and biased views about the artist. When someone sees Farah's elegant, mostly black and white illustrations about feminism, mental health, or other taboo subjects, they take those ideas more seriously than they would if the ideas were directly attached to a female voice and a female face. Some viewers who might stop listening to Farah as soon as they saw she's a woman, give her art more of a chance because it can stand on its own and speak for itself.

When I asked Farah what her definition of art is, she said, "[art] is my refuge, the place where I escape to.... It's the only truthful way to express myself. Without art I just can't breathe."

⁹ For Farah, "doing art just for the art is shit.... Everyone can do it and it has no impact." As she defines it, a work is art when it makes an impact on someone: on the artist, on the audience, or even on a single viewer. Without impact, a painting, a song, a tattoo, or an illustration are nothing more than decoration. As it turned out, this definition of art was repeated and expanded upon by every other artist I interviewed.

Farah values truth-telling, which is why she uses her art and her voice to criticize Tunisia's government. She argues that you can't lie with art because art says what the artist wants it to say. It tells the artist's personal truth. Even if the work is sarcastic, it expresses how the artist feels about a topic. It does not serve the artist to produce a work that expresses nothing or that expresses a message that isn't their own. Farah argued that art that doesn't express the artist's personal truth is not art. Cartoonist Salim Zerrouki, agreed, stating, "that's advertising and advertising is prostitution."¹⁰

⁹ Ben Mansour, Farah. Interview with author.

¹⁰ Zerrouki, Salim. Interview with author. Tunis, November 30, 2018.

Farah is completely disgusted with politics because in her view, politics is the opposite of art. It serves the politician to be untruthful because often their goal is not to produce laws in line with their beliefs, but instead to gain influence and power by advancing the agendas of those with the deepest pockets. For Farah, “art is a mirror for politics. When it looks in the mirror it sees the ugly truth of itself.”¹¹ Art and civil society can work together to hold politicians accountable, if only in the court of public opinion, and to develop a civic culture that values the truth.

This idea of art as a tool to criticize the political and to envision a better future is not a new one. Farah is a modern example of how artists have used their work to influence politics throughout history. In his article, “Art, power and knowledge: claiming public space in Tunisia,” Political Science and History Professor, Charles Tripp, argues, “Artists’ ability to present versions of the truth that seem to contradict long held and scarcely questioned beliefs, both secular and religious, has been as unsettling in Tunisia as it has been elsewhere throughout history.”¹² (Yosr Ben Ammar’s experiences will give a clear example of how the artistic, the religious, and political clashed in Tunisia in 2012.) Tripp goes on to add, “Artistic interventions in public space highlight issues for debate, but are also capable of engaging and mobilising people around such issues, touching their imaginations and helping them to see other facets of power and of themselves.”

The messages within Farah’s art, and her audience, changed with the revolution. Just as Professor Tripp said, she began to use her art to help a wider audience see other facets of power

¹¹ Ben Mansour, Farah. Interview with author.

¹² Tripp, Charles. "Art, Power and Knowledge: Claiming Public Space in Tunisia." School of Oriental and African Studies. March 2016. Accessed December 7, 2018. [https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/22221/1/Tripp Art, power, knowledge MELG Article FINAL draft March 2016.pdf](https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/22221/1/Tripp%20Art,%20power,%20knowledge%20MELG%20Article%20FINAL%20draft%20March%202016.pdf).

and of themselves. What had begun as a personal and private form of liberation, became social and political as she began to share her work on social media, respond to current events, and collaborate with other artists. “I used to hide my art, only do art about myself and my feelings. After 2011, it [wasn’t] only me, everyone could express themselves, and loudly. [Now,] I don’t only draw for myself, I do art for all women. I believe we all share the same struggle, especially in Tunisia. [My art] is not just liberating for me, but also for them.”¹³ The revolution gave Farah room to grow as a person and as an artist. It gave her room to think and express herself without fear, and the shared struggle inspired Farah to reach out to other people more than she had before.

The free speech and free press that came with the revolution also exposed a side of Tunisia that Farah hadn’t known existed. For example, Farah realized her understanding of the struggle for women’s rights was shallow and privileged. Coming from an upper middle class family, living in Tunis, she didn’t realize the extent of the poverty in the rural, inland region of the country. She hadn’t known before how much extra pressure girls in the South were under to leave school and support their families at home.¹⁴ With greater knowledge about her country came greater meaning for her art. She pushed herself to become more social because, “we are all powerful if we are in a group.”¹⁵ Before the revolution “I was so introverted and wasn’t very empathetic; I didn’t like to be around people.... But now I think that working with people, living with people, being in life with people, it’s amazing. The revolution allowed me to see that there’s not only me, my family, my friends and my environment.” Her sense of self and the role her art

¹³ Ben Mansour, Farah. Interview with author.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

plays in society expanded. With greater awareness of the struggles within Tunisia and greater support from like minded artists and friends, Farah focused her artistic abilities and her voice as an artist on civil society and helping it grow.

After the revolution Farah also realized that her adolescent art hadn't been as truthful or as free as she had thought. She realized that even in her bedroom, in private, her art had been self-censored. "I used to censor myself. I used to be afraid." She held herself back from fully exploring the confusing, powerful, sometimes dark feelings she felt growing up. She was afraid to draw about taboo questions she had. For example, "what if I was gay, what if I was a boy, what if I want to die."

In 2017, Farah was featured in the documentary "Borders and Promises."¹⁶ The film is the most public way Farah has combined her artistic and political identities to date. According to official promotion of the film:

"Fatima, Farah and Haya are three artists from across the Arab World; marginalised by patriarchy, stifled by censorship, and divided by borders. They are, however, united by creativity, energy, and their desire for real change. Now, they come together for the first time in Barcelona, away from home. Borders and Promises follows these women as their lives and art are woven together while struggling to have their own - and countless other - voices heard."¹⁷

¹⁶ Appendix III

¹⁷ "Borders and Promises." HIFF: Haifa Independent Film Festival. March 26, 2018. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.haifaiff.com/film-program-2018/borders-and-promises>.

In “Borders and Promises,” Farah meets with the two other artists in Spain and they realize that their voices are stronger together, their thoughts are more lucid together, and their art has more impact together. The intensely introverted, largely silenced, isolated Farah of pre-2011 is gone. Today, Farah is an artist actively engaged in protecting Tunisia’s new right to free speech. Her art, the artistic community, and the revolution have transformed her from a person just living in Tunisia, trapped by repression, to a citizen with the power to influence her country’s future for the better.

Nidhal Ghariani - Rebirth

Nidhal was the second artist I interviewed and became an important contact for me. He has been well connected within the art community since before the revolution. Mentioning his name gave me credibility when approaching other artists, like Nadia Khiari and Salim Zerrouki. The theme I pulled from Nidhal’s interview was “rebirth.” He remade himself and his career after the revolution and since then has been nurturing the next generation of Tunisians through his comics and art workshops. As an artist and as a citizen, Nidhal is helping Tunisia be reborn.

Nidhal completely changed his career because of the revolution. Before 2011, he had gone to school for computer science and was working in that field, only drawing as a hobby. As he describes it, art “was just a tool to amaze our friends during a dinner by drawing on napkins.”

¹⁸ This changed for Nidhal in 2011. One of his major influences during the revolution was fellow cartoonist Nadia Khiari, who drew her daily reactions to the revolution. Inspired by the honesty of Nadia’s work, he followed suit. For Nidhal, the revolution represented a “new start in my life,

¹⁸ Ghariani, Nidhal. Interview with author. Tunis, November 17, 2018.

a chance to use art as tool for communication and exchange.”¹⁹ On January 14th, 2011 Nidhal created the Facebook page ERevolution,²⁰ to share his own political cartoons. Like Farah, Nidhal values truth telling. That value, combined with the events of 2011, spurred him to make major changes in his life and work.

Since 2011 he has focused on inspiring and supporting the next generation of Tunisian artists. He helped found the Tunisian comic book series Lab619, which has served as an incubator for emerging artists. Each issue is a collection of short comics by different artists. Most of the comics address issues of politics, identity, revolution, and migration. Lab619 is the first Tunisian comic series meant for an older audience. The series is groundbreaking in other ways too. It is written in multiple languages: French, English, formal Arabic, and Tounsi. Tounsi, the Arabic spoken in Tunisia, is rarely written in formal contexts and is not taken seriously in Tunisian schools. But in Lab619, Tounsi is not just used, it’s celebrated. Publishing a series in Tounsi is an artistic choice and a political act. Lab619 honors Tunisia and what it means to be Tunisian, at the same time as it points out Tunisia’s weaknesses and calls for social and political change.

Nidhal also had a toddler in 2011, so the revolution gave new purpose and energy to his desire to make a better world for his daughter. He teaches workshops in schools and in prisons to help young people process their thoughts and feelings through art. Since 2016, he has focused more on helping young people develop their art than on producing his own cartoons. His daughter and his students inspire him to remember being a child with boundless creativity.

¹⁹ Ghariani, Nidhal. Interview with author.

²⁰ ERevolution, "ERevolution Facebook Page," Facebook, Last Updated May 19, 2018. Accessed December 6, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/eRevolution.tn/>.

Nidhal is parenting the next generation of artists and he's parenting Tunisia itself. Since 2011, Nidhal has done his part to birth a new, stronger civil society in Tunisia.

Without a young population of motivated, educated, working, and civically engaged Tunisians, Tunisia's civil society can't develop. Tunisia can't build a successful democracy or civil society without the help of citizens untainted by years of the culture of dictatorship. That means each young Tunisian is vital to Tunisia's future. However, thousands of young Tunisians are locked away in Tunisia's broken prison system. Nidhal's workshops in prisons (in which interviewee Nadia Khiari also participates) are a poignant example of how he is investing in Tunisia's youth, even those locked behind bars.

In Tunisia, "three out of four prisoners are detained on suspicion of or conviction for minor offences : theft (31%), drug consumption or dealing (26%) and other minor offences (17%) in particular dishonoured cheques."²¹ Because of Law 52,²² Tunisia's draconian drug law, many Tunisian youth have served a year or more in prison for getting caught with a single joint.²³ When those incarcerated are freed, they will either help or hinder Tunisia's democratic development and through art workshops, Nidhal tries to inspire them to help.

In the prison workshops, art allows the participants to tell their stories, helps them feel heard and process what has happened to them. At the end of each workshop, the participants have their own comics published in the prison newspaper. Though art can't free the participants physically, Nidhal argues that "art is a way to reach freedom mentally. I want young people, the

²¹ "Tunisia: Offenses and Sentences." Prison Insider. October 2017. Accessed December 05, 2018. <https://www.prison-insider.com/en/countryprofile/tun-2016?s=l-integrite-physique#l-integrite-physique>.

²² "Tunisia Votes to Relax Harsh Cannabis Law." The New Arab/Al-Araby Al-Jadeed. April 26, 2017. Accessed December 6, 2018.

<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/4/26/tunisia-votes-to-relax-harsh-cannabis-law>.

²³ "Tunisia Votes to Relax Harsh Cannabis Law." The New Arab/Al-Araby Al-Jadeed.

young generation, to find this freedom.”²⁴ When those incarcerated finish their sentences, it’s important for society that their minds are freed as well. Tunisia needs citizens who are free of the self censorship that Farah experienced during the dictatorship. Rebuilding a country, nurturing a young civil society, those things take minds open to new and creative ideas.

Nidhal argues that art is never finished, that its meaning can evolve based on the viewer’s interpretation. At the beginning of our interview Nidhal laughed and said, “generally [the viewer’s] understanding is way more interesting than my initial idea.”²⁵ As a nod to this belief, the lines of his artwork rarely connect. The circles aren’t closed, the lines peter off, and the drawings are left with an intentionally unfinished look.²⁶ Nidhal’s art isn’t just open to interpretation, it embraces it. Nidhal embraces and encourages evolution in his art and in his country. Just as art is never finished, building a better future for himself and his country is a project that is never finished.

Yosr Ben Ammar - Fighting Censorship

Yosr Ben Ammar is also investing in Tunisia’s social, political, and artistic future, but her investment is more literal. Speaking with her and seeing her home (an art gallery and studio in itself) showed me the broader reality of how engaged Tunisian artists reach their audience and achieve success. Yosr uses her wealth to support emerging Tunisian artists, many of whom produce radical, political art. Yosr hasn’t created art herself since she was an adolescent, but I still consider her an artist. She has the same artistic spirit as the other interviewees. She values

²⁴ Ghariani, Nidhal. Interview with author.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Appendix IV for example of Nidhal’s artistic style

art not simply for its aesthetic value, but for the messages it conveys and the emotion it contains. If I hadn't included her interview, a large gap would be missing from the story of what it means to be an engaged artist in Tunisia. To be known and to have an impact as an artist, it takes more than a society with free speech and individual talent. It also takes luck and resources. Though civil society has grown and matured since 2011, funding for the arts, especially local funding, is still hard to come by.²⁷ Yosr is one of the few Tunisians with the resources and the desire to fund young Tunisian artists and win them international exposure.

I interviewed Yosr in her home in Gammarth, a wealthy suburb of Tunis. Her home was large and every room showcased different artworks, mostly by Tunisian artists. Standing in her living room, I got a sense of what Yosr values in art. Yosr values democracy in art, her walls featured both prominent and unknown artists, different mediums, different sizes of works, different themes. Some of the works were made of expensive materials, some were collages made with everyday materials. Her living room said to me: "artists from everywhere should have access to an audience, no matter their personal resources and funds." The living room also represented democracy in audience. Some of the art was just beautiful, but much of it was political and depicted adult themes, like violence and sex. For example a huge, violent interpretation of Leonardo Da Vinci's, "The Last Supper" filled most of the wall behind the couch.²⁸

Everyone who enters Yosr's home sees the diverse artworks of the house's entryway and living room. Yosr explained that her young children play in all parts of the house. She laughed

²⁷ Triki, Rachida. "Tunisia: An Art Scene in Renewal." *Memory, Place, Desire: Contemporary Art of the Maghreb and Maghrebi Diaspora*. 2014. Accessed December 6, 2018.

<http://exhibits.haverford.edu/memoryplacedesire/essays/tunisia-an-art-scene-in-renewal/>.

²⁸ See Appendix I for photo of the art displayed in Yosr's living room

and said she intentionally placed small, brightly colored, less dramatic works on top of the “Last Supper” interpretation in the white spaces of the composition to draw the eye and “ease in” her children’s friends, who are not accustomed to seeing art in all its forms as her children are. She doesn’t hide art the art from her children; she doesn’t censor her home.

Yosr’s private life mirrors her public resistance of censorship. She was one of many gallerists targeted during the annual Printemps des Arts Fair in 2012. The show ran without incident for ten days, but on the last day disturbances caused by Salafists, Tunisian Islamic extremists, thrust the show into the international spotlight. Islamists demanded that artworks in several galleries be taken down, including works displayed in Yosr’s gallery. Yosr recounted that “a man entered the gallery on the last day of the show and ordered me to take down some of the works on display. He said the works were offensive to Islam. He said, ‘if you don’t take them down by tonight I will come back and burn them.’”²⁹ Yosr refused to comply with his demands, as did the other gallerists he harassed. Salafists converged on the art fair, vandalized several works, and incited riots.³⁰ Even the Minister of Culture at the time, Mabrouk, officially responded to the incident on national television. As Yosr remembers it, he opened the catalog of the art show on television and derided the artworks saying, they are not art. He said many of the works were not beautiful, and art should be beautiful. Yosr laughed incredulously as she told me about his words. “How can he say something so stupid like that? How can he say this after the revolution?”³¹ She then got very serious and told me men followed her home from her gallery for

²⁹ Ben Ammar, Yosr. 2018. Interview with author. Tunis, November 27, 2018.

³⁰ Jurich, Joscelyn. "Revolution Hasn't Changed Artistic Censorship in Tunisia." Hyperallergic. January 22, 2013. Accessed December 07, 2018.

<https://hyperallergic.com/63757/revolution-hasnt-changed-artistic-censorship-in-tunisia/>.

³¹ Ben Ammar, Yosr. Interview with author.

weeks after the incident. “I had to drive in circles to lose them so they wouldn’t find my home.”³² But she didn’t stop showcasing and supporting political art and artists. If anything, I think the experience in 2012 made her more determined to fight censorship of all kinds.

Yosr values truth telling and investing in Tunisia’s future like Farah and Nidhal. She embodies these values in her work and her home by exercising her free speech and fighting censorship. Yosr is helping shape a society in which the boundaries around what is and isn’t appropriate are less restrictive. She’s fighting for a truly democratic Tunisia in which all citizens, but especially artists, have complete freedom to express themselves.

Salim Zerrouki - Migration

I pulled the theme “migration” from Salim’s interview for two reasons: his personal migration to Tunisia and his artistic focus on the current migrant crisis in North Africa.

Salim was born and grew up in Algeria. His parents supported his art and he studied in art school in Algiers. However, though his family and his professors believed in art and believed in free speech, the rest of Algerian society felt stifling to Salim. Even though Salim was born in Algeria, I consider him an Algerian-Tunisian artist. He never expected to live long term in Tunisia, but after a short visit for work he fell in love with a Tunisian woman and perhaps with Tunisia itself. Salim has lived in Tunisia for over a decade and he intentionally stays in Tunisia because his artistic values and style fit with those of the Tunisian art community and society. His cartoons are often political and controversial. Like Nidhal and Nadia, Salim uses humor to expose government hypocrisy, to resist Salafist influence in Tunisia, and to posit a vision of the

³² Ibid.

future. They would not be accepted in Algeria. Salim is proof that being a Tunisian artist is about more than birthplace. It's about spirit, choice, and aspiration as well. Like many Tunisians, Salim understands how it feels to desperately want to leave one's country to seek a better future. He dreamed of leaving Algeria since he was a child. He knows Tunisia is far from perfect and he understands why so many Tunisian youth feel they have to leave by any means necessary. But he's decided Tunisia is worth fighting for and, through his art, he inspires young Tunisians to stay in Tunisia and fight for its future.

Salim has contributed to several issues of Lab619, including the special issue that focused on the theme of migration. What started as a Tunisian project has expanded to include artists from Algeria, Egypt, and France. This evolution is something Salim wholeheartedly agrees with. As he puts it, "I don't believe in borders."³³

Currently, Salim is creating his second book of political cartoons. The book will center around "different aspect of clandestine immigration." He has a lot to say about the tragic loss of thousands of migrants in the Mediterranean these past few years. He asked me, "you have an idea about how many young people die in the Mediterranean every year? Too many. It's a big problem created by the UE and maintained by them also."³⁴ He couldn't tell me many details about the book because it's still in the early stages of development, but when it is published it's sure to be groundbreaking for North Africa as a whole.

Salim is fighting to create a Tunisia that Tunisian youth won't want to leave, but at the same time he's fighting for a Tunisia that people are free to leave. He believes in Tunisia. He

³³ Zerrouki, Salim. Interview with author. Tunis, November 30, 2018.

³⁴ Zerrouki, Salim. Interview with author.

believes in its democratic project. But he also reminds us all that part of living in a free society is being able to leave it.

Nadia Khiari - The Internet

Nadia Khiari fully embraced the political power of the internet after Ben Ali's final speech to the Tunisian public. In his speech, Ben Ali asked for citizen input on political, social, and economic issues. He promised to "multiply the spaces of expression of concerns and expectations of citizens."³⁵ As Nadia watched his speech broadcast live on television, she knew everything he promised was "bullshit." But, "he said he wanted to hear what we had to say, so I was like, 'okay, let's go.'"³⁶ On, January 14th, 2011, Nadia uploaded her first political cartoons to Facebook.³⁷ "I dreamt before of drawing political cartoons, but I never could. Why? Because I didn't want to go to jail."³⁸ Nadia's political cartoons spread rapidly over social media, inspiring others, like friend Nidhal Ghariani, to use social media to speak their truths, too.

Nadia first published political cartoons via the internet in 2011, but she learned to believe in the internet's democratic potential years before. Because of the internet, Nadia made artistic friends and contacts anonymously before the revolution. Though the internet was monitored and sites were censored during the dictatorship, it was still a refuge for dissenters. Tunisians used VPNs to hide their identities from the government while online³⁹ and political artists hid behind

³⁵ El Abidine Ben Ali, Zine. "Tunisia: Speech by Ben Ali." Al-bab.com. August 4, 2015. Accessed December 09, 2018. http://al-bab.com/albab-orig/albab/arab/docs/tunisia/ben_ali_speech_10012011.htm.

³⁶ Khiari, Nadia. Interview with author.

³⁷ See Appendix VI for Nadia's first political cartoons

³⁸ Khiari, Nadia. Interview with author.

³⁹ McTighe, Kristen. "A Blogger at Arab Spring's Genesis." The New York Times. October 12, 2011. Accessed December 07, 2018.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/13/world/africa/a-blogger-at-arab-springs-genesis.html>.

pseudonyms and drawn characters to try to avoid arrest. For Nadia, the revolution allowed her to meet in real life friends that she had known for years. “From January to October 2011 was the most difficult and most beautiful period. I met people I’d known anonymously, we felt free after 23 years.”⁴⁰

The internet is an expansion of public space that every country must contend with. Nadia is leading the way when it comes to using the internet to build community, celebrate civil society, exercise the right to free speech, and resist censorship of any kind.

Conclusion

Through this research I set out to better understand the connection between the art world and the political world in Tunisia. I interviewed five artists who combine their art and their political values to be the best citizens they can be. It’s citizens like these artists that the future of Tunisia depends upon. For these artists, art frees their minds to think beyond today’s problems and imagine solutions to reach a better future. Art gives them the hope they need to continue their work within civil society. Tunisia needs citizens who have hope for its future. Through art, these artists inspire themselves and their fellow Tunisians to invest time, money, and love in their country. “As citizens, [artists] too have their own agendas, visions for the future of Tunisia and fears about the direction in which it may be heading. As artists, however, they have the capacity to make these concerns visible, projecting a set of ideas, fears and ambitions into public space.”⁴¹ Farah, Nidhal, Yosr, Salim, and Nadia are powerful. Art has helped them believe in their own power as citizens and it’s through art that each of them is empowering other Tunisians

⁴⁰ Khiari, Nadia. Interview with author.

⁴¹ Tripp, Charles. "Art, Power and Knowledge: Claiming Public Space in Tunisia."

as well. I believe citizenship is not just something one has, it's something one does. A citizen is active, not passive. These five Tunisians not only exemplify what it means to be an active, engaged artist, but what it means to be an active, engaged citizen.

Appendices

Appendix I

Interview Questions

1. Artist's background:

When and how did you become an artist?
What inspires you?
Does your family support you being an artist?
Where did you grow up/where did you go to school/how old are you?

2. Tunisian art community:

What are its strengths?
What are its weaknesses?
How has it changed since the 2011 revolution?

3. Art and politics/civil society:

What's your definition of art?
What are your definitions of politics and civil society?
Do you see a connection between art and politics? If so, how would you describe it?
Are you engaged in society/politics? If so, how? Does that engagement affect your art?

4. Post Jan 14th, 2011:

Would you call what happened on January 14th, 2011 a revolution?
Do you think it succeeded?
Did the 2011 revolution change the way you thought about art and did it change your art?
If the 2011 revolution hadn't happened, how would your life be different?

5. Career:

What part of your artistic career are you most proud of so far?
Do you collaborate with other artists?
Is it hard to be an artist in Tunisia? If so, why?
What role will art play in your future?
What role might art play in Tunisia's future?
If you are more successful now than before, did your art change with success?
If you could give your younger self advice about art, what would it be

Appendix II



One wall of Yosr Ben Ammar's living room
Photo taken by author

Appendix III



Promotional poster for the documentary, "Borders and Promises," designed by Farah Ben Mansour and posted on her Instagram account

Appendix IV



On the left is an example of Nidhal Ghariani's work on his Facebook page ERevolution. This is a clear example of how Nidhal rarely connects the lines of his drawings to each other, relying on the suggestion of shapes and ideas and leaving room for interpretation.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/eRevolution.tn/>

Appendix V



Lab619 Issue 9, Special Issue: "Identity(ies)"



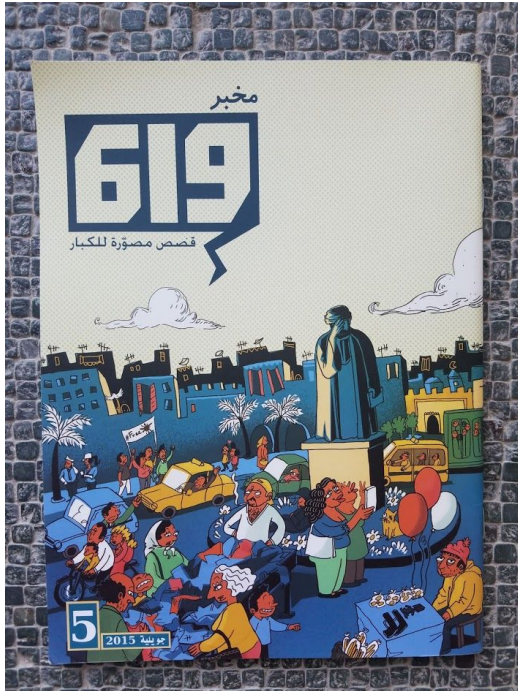
Lab619 Issue 2



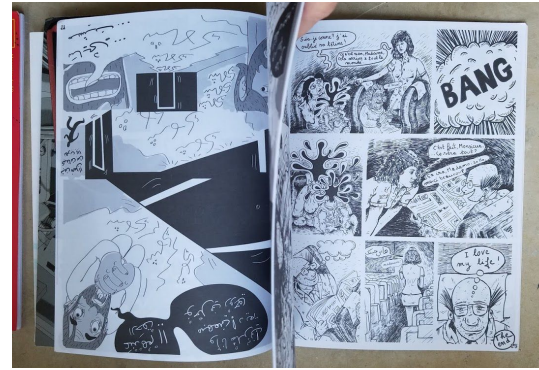
Lab619 Issue 4



Lab619 Special Issue: "Migration"



Lab619 Issue 5



A look inside Issue 4, one half of the issue is written in French and the other in Arabic

These issues of Lab619 were gifts from Nidhal and Salim. Photos taken by the author.



<http://files.campus.edublogs.org/blogs.cornell.edu/dis/t/b/596/files/2012/06/antsc174-t2p7w7.jpg>



https://www.ibraaz.org/usr/library/images/main/essay_01tunisia0813.jpg



https://www.dw.com/image/16024070_304.jpg

Appendix VI



Nadia's first political cartoons published on
Facebook

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/willis.fromtunis>

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