# Moving Bodies in the Streets of the Heart of Tunis

## Performing Spaces of Appearance
## in a Revolutionary Context

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Tunisia 2014, almost four years ago, the people took the street and sent the autocratic ruler packing in the direction of Mecca. Local protest in the interior South of the country finally culminated in a collective choreography in front of the Ministry of the interior in the capital of the country. "Dégage!" – This collective performance of one elegant arm movement translated into one collectively enunciated word toppled the dictator and planted the seeds of a possible regime change. The performativity of bodies in the street in all their plurality laid claim and occupied the symbolic public space of the Kasbah, forming a collective body defying the established body politic, until the demand of the dissolution of the political structures in power was met. Four years later life regained a semblance of normality. However, the sudden historical transformation brought the political back in the center of the public sphere and encouraged dancers and performers to sporadic reinvest public space. These embodied artistic performances reclaiming the public tell us something about the changing political situation in the country. The altered political context moreover makes visible key political aspects and conditions of embodied artistic performances in the public space. By closely analyzing different cases of bodily interventions in public space, we hope to strengthen our understanding of the political role performances can play in a revolutionary context.

Analyzing the differences between the private and the public realm, Hannah Arendt (1958) introduced the concept of a space of appearance as a precondition for political action. Her metaphoric, transposable and volatile understanding of the polis is detached from any geographical border or physical location. A space of appearance comes about where people act and speak together to organize politically. Spaces of appearance are not tied to a location but brought into being

by political action and speech, and thus always have to be recreated anew wherever individuals gather and deliberate together politically. This recreation occurs where and whenever bodies are together through the performance of deeds or the articulation of words. A space of appearance depends on political power to exist, but at the same time generates and perpetuates power by its coming into being. It disappears as soon as it arises, whenever the gathered bodies finish to act and deliberate public matters. This volatile interpretation of the public realm was useful when analyzing the American Revolution. Judith Butler (2011) reworked this understanding of the public sphere to sharpen her political analysis of the Occupy movements that followed the revolutionary assemblies in North Africa and the Middle East.

The main argument that will be brought up throughout this contribution is that a space of appearance is not something that happens spontaneously in a revolutionary context, when people gather through action and speech, but that it is something that can consciously be brought into being through performance. When looked at through the lens of performance studies, political events, such as revolutions, don't happen spontaneously. Politics are directed and performed. I will illustrate throughout this paper that, while a space of appearance can appear unscripted, they have a particular dramaturgy and draw their actions and discourses from a repertoire or contribute to a newly constructed repertoire, through a structured script, choreography and mise-en-scene. Performance studies broadens the concept of theatre from the realm of aesthetics to that of social and political science, which allows the application of performance theories to the analysis of inter alia political performances (Schechner 2002). This broadening has been productive for the analysis of the Egyptian revolution (Alexandre et al.) and to a lesser extent for the Tunisian one (Zahrouni 2013). The following analysis on the intersection of performance studies and political philosophy allows us to grasp performative aspects central in the volatile dynamics of spaces of appearance. The argument that I will further develop is inspired by a presentation by Anne Breure, in which she analyzed two performances to elaborate her understanding of a space of appearance: *Standing Man* in Taksim Square in Turkey during the recent wave of protest in Turkey, and *The Appearance* (1976), a performance by the artists group Collective

Actions, located in the Soviet Union.[1]

The revolutionary dynamics in Tunisia also convinced artists and dancers to invest the streets with nothing more than their body. Notwithstanding the problematic universalistic political stance that has slipped into its promo campaign, the upcoming documentary directed by Maxime Avon, *Ceci est mon corps*, is a testimony to this bodily and artistic re-investment of public space. Not only different individuals put their bodies in danger in the streets of Tunisia, but also different collectives such as Danceurs Citoyen or Fanni Roghman Anni do so (Ben Yakoub 2016). The findings further elaborated in this article echo these individual and collective initiatives but are mainly based on an intensive participatory observation during a Euro-Mediterranean artistic training late in 2014 in Tunis, organized by the Fai-Ar, the European Center for Artistic Training in Public Space and the L'Art Rue Association, initiator of the Dream City Biennial of Contemporary Art. The research-oriented but practice-based training was initiated in the local context of Tunis' medina on the theme of "Conflicts and Resistance: The Artist Citizen and the Tunisian Public Space". Artists studied public space in its relation to pictures and images, materiality, voice and sound, dramatic writing and staging, the body and movement. As I did in my participatory observation, in this article I focus on the body and movement in public space. I will gradually develop my argument relying on my lived, embodied and shared experience with other participants of three illustrative performances initiated during the artistic training. Looking at these three performances, I clarify in what follows not only the politics behind these artistic performances in the revolutionary Tunisian context, but also how spaces of appearances can be brought into being by performance.

Before I start developing my argument, I want to emphasize that more than a festival, L'Art Rue, being the structure behind the Dream City Biennial of Contemporary Art in Tunis, is becoming a unique art school in Tunisia. It is a space where reflection on form is complemented by theories and practices engaging with ongoing political changes. This necessary reflection is found only rarely in the official institutions of fine arts in Tunisia.

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[1] Anne Breure presented her findings at the international conference "Performing protest: Re-imagining the good life in times of crisis, 08/05/2014 in KU Leuven

**Three Different Spaces of Appearance**

In November 2014, the artistic training took center stage in the heart of Tunisia, the medina of Tunis. An important part of this training revolved around the corporeality of art and body performance in public space. The aim was to develop an artistic performance in situ, by a lived understanding of the historical area. A group of eight artists researched possible ways to perform in the everyday reality of the medina. Through reflective interaction with the urban surroundings, possible points of resistance and conflict were discovered, creating a relational and shared exchange with the inhabitants, users and passers-by. This re-shuffled, at least for a moment, the given sensibilities in the medina's public space. In the first stage, the training started by an individual understanding of conflict and resistance in one's own body and self. A holistic understanding of one's self, rather than as an artist, was central, bringing the body and spirit into balance, being aware of his/her internal points of resistance and conflict. This was achieved by different individual meditative, reflective and physical exercises. In the second phase, the performers had to interact with and connect to the points of conflict and resistance of other performers to form a collective body. Finally, the performers had to organically connect with the medina's body, first through their own individual body, and then across their new collectively formed body. Through this interaction they had to find possible points of conflict and resistance in the body of the medina. In what follows, we focus on three specific artistic performances in Tunis' medina, each with a political nature that will be revealed through a better understanding of the volatile dynamics of a space of appearance. I will analyze the political layers of these three performances as spaces of appearance brought into life by artistic interventions in Tunisia's 2014 revolutionary context. I start with an analysis of a contagious silent face-to-face, followed by a performance of one woman walking alone but possibly supported and embraced by the city, and finishing with a citizen march where forty performers walk together as one body. By analyzing these three cases as performed spaces of appearance, I will reveal the underlying political layers.

**Face-to-Face**

Two performers walk to the center of the medina. One of them sits on a chair next to the Zaytuna Mosque, the country's main mosque, waiting for a stranger

to join for a silent face-to-face, to look straight in each other's eyes for as long as possible. As Arendt stated: "Where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly," a space of appearance comes into being. One body appears to others and vice versa.  By performing in the street and looking closely and slowly in the eyes of a stranger, one gains unconditional self-recognition. The notion of mutually constitutive agency, the role of the other in the constitution of the self, is central to our understanding of the fundamental ethical aspect (Tripp 2013) of a space of appearance. Regardless of who we have in front of us, the self does not only appear *to* the other as the other appears *to* the self, the self also appears *for* the other as the other appears *for* the self. The body establishes an inherently altruist perspective that the self cannot contain (Butler 2011), dispossessed of the self, bound together through a constitutive self-displacement (Butler and Athanasiou 2013). When two strangers look in each other's eyes for a certain moment, a unique space of appearance emerges between them that defies the temporality and spatiality of the public square next to the Zaytuna mosque. As a result, a few of the passers-by were affected and also started to perform a silent face to face. The square transformed into a collective body contained by a concatenation of unconditional appearances to and for others, that interrupted, in a very gentle way, the daily rhythm, the heartbeat of the medina. The absence of speech for the coming into being of the face-to-face performance, but also of the two following performances, can be understood in corporeal terms. Through a persisting exposure the body can 'speak' and signify politically. By the disruption of the daily rhythm and rituals in public space the body silently demands its fundamental right to be there, its right to have rights (Butler 2011). The originality of the dispositive can be questioned, harking back to Marina Abramovic's performance *The Artist is Present* where the artist looked in the eyes and engaged in an energetic dialogue with a suddenly individualized and personalized audience, achieving a shared luminous state of being in the atrium of New York's MoMa. Whereas Abramovic wanted her performance to become life itself, Tunis' artists wanted the life in the medina to become a performance that changed, for just a moment, the way one looked at the other.

**Walking Alone**

One performer walks alone, by herself, lost in her own rhythm, moving consciously step by step, embracing the urban body in search of shared points of conflict and resistance. The notion of mutually constitutive agency gets a slightly different interpretation here. The performer feels the movements of the medina inside him/herself, incorporating the city's rhythm and becoming a true citizen. Like the other, strangers and passers-by become part of oneself in the face-to-face performance, the urban body becomes an essential element in the constitution of the self when walking alone. This fusional and meditative appropriation of the city reminds us of the performance of Lee Kang-Sheng in the trilogy *Walker*, *No Form* and *Diamond Sutra*, where the visual artist Tsai Ming-Liang re-enacts the pilgrimage from China to India made by the Buddhist monk Xuanzang in the seventh century. With the same Zen attitude, performers meditatively challenged the different urban temporalities, rituals and the different rhythms and pulses of Tunis' historical center, with their own heartbeat, slow and deep breath, with their own vulnerable body, step-by-step. As in the face-to-face performance, the walker makes a space of appearance come into being in the medina's veins; in addition, doing so accentuates the performance's fragility. The performer puts her body in danger by appearing *for* anonymous passers-by. The slow contemplative and vulnerable posture of the performer raises the question of who is (not) supported to appear for one another (Butler 2011). Bodies can only act and speak when they are supported by their biology, ecology and sociability and when they are supported an alliance enacts the social order by the own modes of sociability of the newly found alliance. Walking and getting lost alone in the medina's labyrinth at a counter-intuitive pace accentuates the impossibility of life without material support and the inherent social relations of care it implies. One performer (generally a man) can spontaneously get a pat on the back, a cigarette, or offered tea or pastry. He can be embraced by the city, while the other (generally women) can be laughed at and ridiculed, or spat at. She can even be hassled and harassed by the city. It is beyond doubt that the fragile posture of the performer needs bodily solidarity of passers-by to secure and protect her from possible risks and violence in a space with certain (gendered) power relations. The performance of one (wo)man walking emphasizes the bodily essence of the struggle for support and the impossibility to walk alone. It is a struggle for what the body requires, and what

Still from *The Walker* (c) Tsai Ming-Liang



*Walking Alone* (c) Dream City

the body can do to live and go forward. It is a struggle to hold bodies together and give them power to act collectively with or against certain power relations. It strongly relates to the sill prevailing inequalities in how bodies are supported in the world (Butler 2011).

**A Citizen's March**

Friday, by the break of dawn, a couple of hours before Jumu'ah prayer, a collective body of forty performers gathered in the street connecting the Zaytuna Mosque with the Kasbah, the square that contains Tunisia's Finance Ministry and Office of the Prime Minister, which was symbolically occupied during the Revolution. Where the performers before had walked alone at their own pace, they are now aligned and support each other to act collectively. The body of forty interdependent performers went down slowly, centimeter by centimeter, in absolute silence.

A political tension between the individual and the collective body emerges, connecting with a specific situation in Istanbul near the contested Gezi Park in June 2013. After a weekend of clashes between protesters and riot police, Erdem Gündüz returned to the Taksim Square. He stood still, motionless and silent, staring stoically at a giant portrait of Kemal Atatürk for eight hours. Little by little, one by one, people stood by him until they formed a crowd of 300 standing women and men. Having attracted a few too many people, the crowd was dispersed by the police. By the next morning, this passive act of resistance spread across the country through #duranadam (#standingman) and became an inherent part of the repertoire of the Gezi protest. Dozens of performing bodies supported each other to act collectively; by doing so, they fused into one mass, one collective body that convincingly challenged the loud and hectic daily life in the medina's main arteries. In this way, the space of appearance created by the performance made visible and audible the tension that underlines the inherent political dimension of a space of appearance. The formation of a space of appearance is itself dependent, not only on the material and human support that is necessary for its formation, but also on the power that conditions a collective struggle and defines the spatial restriction and allocation of who may appear for whom.  History, its material structures, its established architecture and topographies of power are not only fought over, it also acts upon the possibility

of the coming into being of a space of appearance (Butler 2011). It is in this condition that the political poetry of the performance comes into play. The simplicity, openness and unconditional nature of the performed space of appearance underlines its political potentiality, inviting life outside established and legitimate political structures, the life of the disenfranchised saturated in power relations, to appear. In the Tunisian context, the lives of dispossessed people, the precarious that occupy the proper place of non-being (Fanon 1961), the life of the wretched whose life is a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death (Fanon 1961), are the lives of a potential *haraga*, who burns his papers and risks his life crossing the sea to Lampedusa, or of a potential *jihadi*, who as a radicalized youth goes to the Middle East to fight a bloody war, or of a potential *Bouazizi*, the forlorn person without future perspectives, who commits suicide.[2]

## Conclusion

The core of the reflective practice during the artistic trainings was to re-imagine the urban life of the medina and to support each other in potential processes of conflict and resistance. Thanks to an intensive and thorough embodied participatory observation, I gained practice-based insights into the concept of a space of appearance. Both the process of urban re-imagination and my understanding of a space of appearance were elaborated throughout three different performances that rendered visible four key political aspects of embodied artistic performances in public space. The first aspect of a space of appearance is its mutually constitutive agency, as the fundamental ethical and inherently altruistic aspect of a space of appearance. The volatile locus of a space of appearance lies in between people. This key aspect opposes normative illusionary individualism and pushes forward an unconditional relational and interdependent subjectivity. Secondly, the silence in the performances reminded us that speech could be understood in corporeal terms, through the productivity and performativity of the body. The third key aspect regards the fragility of a

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[2] In "Enduring Class Struggle in Tunisia: The Fight for Identity beyond Political Islam." Fabio Merone (2014) gives a deeper understanding of this relatively new radical Islamic subject coming from the disenfranchised lower classes in Tunisia.

space of appearance and raises the question who is, but moreover who is not supported to appear for the other. Human action is always supported action. The impossibility of life without material support and the inherent social relations of care it implies, makes visible and tangible certain given power relations. The struggle for support expressed by vulnerable bodies walking alone in the streets, reminded us of the paradoxical situation that one cannot act without support, but at the same time must struggle for the support that allows one to act. Finally, the fundamental political dimension of a space of appearance, namely the power relations that are at play in the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of who may appear for whom. Political power is not only contested when bodies gather in the streets, it also influences the possibility of the appearance of a public realm. Moreover it is political power that keeps the potential space of appearance between bodies in existence. Can someone whose life runs outside normative political, social and economic structures appear when a space of appearance comes into being? What about the life of the dispossessed, the wretched, the haraga, jihadi or potential Bouazizi, saturated in power relations? A space of appearance between people that can be brought into being by artistic performance has the potentiality to momentarily interrupt and challenge the obvious normativeness in a given historical moment, but it lacks political power to keep the ephemeral space between acting bodies in existence. A condition then to perform a space of appearance is first and foremost to subordinate the artist in favour of the citizen inside oneself. To understand the political role art can play in a revolutionary context one should understand a citizen not as an autonomous individual with certain norms and values who is part of a well-delineated community, but rather as a supported and relational body who is interdependent and supported to inclusively incorporate the life of the city inside him or herself, without jeopardizing his or her visibility, which includes the potentialities and agency of the dispossessed as actors of the change necessary to prevent their condition of non-being, longing for utopia through a collective and shared but temporarily visible dream.

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