Artivism in Tunis

Music and Art as tools of creative resistance & the cultural re: mixing of a revolution
Acknowledgments:
I would like to thank my supervisor Anders Høg Hansen for guidance.
To my parents for inspiration and encouragement.
To Nicolas for eternal support.
To Tunisian and Youth Artivists worldwide.

“We want to see Art everywhere; we want to see people expressing themselves everywhere, in every corner, in every place. You see Tunisians now...they are so closed. There is no expression, no life, and no joy.

We want to bring them to life!”

(Zwewla)
Abstract

This Thesis explores artistic activism or artivism in the context of youth in post-revolution Tunisia. During and after the Arab Uprisings, the MENA region has experienced a tendency, wherein resistance is undertaken by artivists through in situ art interventions, music, and performances that create ‘new cultural spaces’, in which cultural hybridism through the mix of urban youth subculture, communication and traditional culture, creates new contexts of authenticity. It further investigates how art and activism is used in Tunis as a tool to mirror, provoke or communicate messages that directly or indirectly deal with post-revolution themes, and which mechanisms exist in limitations of artistic freedom of expression.

It utilizes concepts of cultural resistance through theorists Stephen Duncombe and discusses the concept artivism as a hybrid term, through Aldo Milohnic. It then delineates subculture, authenticity and hybridization through various theorists and examines Artistic Freedom of Expression through the standpoint of international conventions and reports. The Thesis also analyzes artistic activism, commodification and globalization through a re-contextualization of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin.

Guiding this analysis are interrelated points of redefining Arab youth subcultures, through interviews conducted with five young Tunisian artists who combine artistic expression with political commentary and activism. I argue that a new dynamic discourse is shaped in the MENA region through the re-mixing of a cultural narrative which becomes re-contextualized locally, and therefore becomes authentic in a ‘glocal’ context. The Thesis offers analytical contribution to the field of cultural production in a Tunisian political context and adds to the research field of artistic activism.

Keywords
Artivism, Artistic Activism, Cultural Production, Post-Revolution Tunisia, Youth Subculture, Artistic Freedom of Expression.
**Resumé**

Specialet undersøger kunstnerisk aktivisme, eller 'artivism', set i lyset af unge tuneser brug af kunstneriske udtryk, i form af intervenerende performances i det Tunesiske post-revolutionære offentlige rum. MENA regionen har gennem det arabiske forår oplevet en modstands kultur, hvor kulturel hybridisering finder sted gennem et mix og remix af subkultur, kommunikation og traditionel kultur, hvilket skaber nye kontekster for autencitet. Specialet undersøger derudover hvordan kunstnerisk aktivisme bruges som et redskab til at afspejle, provocere eller kommunikere budskab, som direkte eller indirekte, behandler post-revolutionære temaer, samt hvilke mekanismer der ligger bag begrænsinger af kunstnerisk ytringsfrihed.


Analysen består af en redefinition af unge arabers subkulturer, gennem fem kvalitative interviews med unge tunesiske kunstnere, som kombinerer kunstneriske udtryk med aktivisme. Jeg argumenter for, at en ny dynamisk diskurs har udviklets i MENA regionen, som følge af et kulturelt narrativ som rekontekstualiseres i det lokale, og derved bliver autentisk i en 'glokal' kontekst. Specialet er et analytisk bidrag til feltet kulturproduktion, set i et Tunesisk politisk perspektiv, og bidrager til forskningsområdet kunstnerisk aktivisme.
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1. Introduction

This Thesis intends to research the cultural phenomenon of *Artistic Activism*, also known as *Artivism*. The study focuses on several Tunisian case-studies of community driven activism where urban art forms and music becomes the main tool for challenging societal and political conditions or raising awareness around contemporary local or global issues in post-revolutionary Tunisia. The word *artivism* is a fairly new one, and unfortunately yet interestingly, no major online or offline dictionary provides a definition. The word artivism does however for example appear in the book ‘It’s Bigger than Hip Hop’, where author M.K. Asante (2008) writes:

“The artist (artist+activist) uses her artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression - by any medium necessary. The artist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination.

The artist knows that to make an observation is to have an obligation”

(Asante, 2008: 206).

Whereas Wikipedia cites it as:

1“A portmanteau word combining “art” and “activist”, in which Frank Berganza has stated:

"When one pushes for change, socially, politically, or environmentally, by utilizing their creative ability to communicate in ways of their artistic activity, that shall be known as Artivism”.

A search on scholarly and University online library websites for ‘artivism’ presents very few results. A wider Google search also shows limited results, indicating that the word ‘artivism’ is only beginning to be used by scholars, authors and journalists. This seemingly somewhat, “new” expression is what stirs my curiosity to further unfold this concept while applying it to relevant, current cases. Street artists such as Banksy, JR and ABOVE are all considered ‘artivists’, but little focus and research has been directed at on-the-ground (or grassroots if you will) artistic activism by youth.

One could argue that artivism developed specifically since the collapse of the Berlin wall, while simultaneous anti-globalization and antiwar protests emerged and proliferated around the world. In most of the cases, artivists attempt to push political

agendas by the means of art and especially, but not only, Street Art and primarily more underground art forms.

By adding a layer of urbanity, a specific geographical, cultural and political context and a youth subculture hopefully here creates a deeper understanding of what artivism can mean today in post-revolution Tunisia, 2013. Since 2010 until today (2013), the world has already undergone dramatic changes within the political, social, economical and cultural realm. Just as dynamic as the world is, so follows culture. The anti-globalization movements that have taken place since the late 1960’s, and the merging between art and activism as a tool for non-violent protest, seems to have been given new life amidst the young people in the MENA-region, who’s influence has always been limited.

Thus, these artistic expressions coming from discontent youth mixed and re:mixed with the global financial crisis, the uprisings in the MENA-region and new communication channels such as social media - all together shape a new and interesting discourse when it comes to culture and the merging of art and activism.

2. Contextual background: Artivism in Tunisia

This Thesis combines theoretical and empirical research within cultural practice and production. The actions that are taken through artistic means and expression(s), such as a dance-intervention, in-situ Street Art or recording a track and a video for online upload to disseminate a message are seen as cultural productions.

Moreover culture in this Thesis is the study of culture as a way of life based on the definition of Raymond Williams (1979). Culture has been explained as a number of different concepts. From high/low cultures, mass cultures, Arab culture, cyberculture and so forth - yet the generalized consensus according to Williams (1979) in Bennet (2005) tends in the field of cultural studies to fall into one of two perspectives: “First, as a standard of cultural excellence, and secondly, as a ‘way of life’, whether of a people, a period or a group” (Williams, 1979, in Bennett, 2005a: 80).

Obviously, these definitions of culture only overlap in certain regards, but in this Thesis they do have a tendency to intertwine with each other, as artivism commits to a
balance between artistic expression (and production) and personal conviction, as we shall see.

The case-studies and fieldwork will be twofold: One focusing on how art and activism is used in Tunis to mirror, provoke or communicate messages that directly or indirectly deal with post-revolution themes, thereby also including the MENA region. Secondly, the aim is to dig deeper into the concept of artivism, and to analyze the mechanisms of limiting artistic freedom of expression.

The thesis intends to raise both a theoretical and practical discussion of the term and concept of artivism. A fairly new concept, it aims to provide further insight and add knowledge to the research field of artistic activism. The trend of artivism is further useful in understanding how art and development are interlinked in post-revolution countries as well as how artistic projects can contribute to social change. Furthermore, the cultural life in Tunisia post-revolution for young urban Tunisians will be examined through interviews.

The l’art pour l’art notion is long gone with the new generation, and globally we find many artivists are at the forefront to change or provoke their surroundings and inform their peers through artistic means. Artivism is a wide term that stretches from a strategic communication tool and protest to aesthetic expressions with political under- or overttones, commonly inviting the by-passers to see, hear, feel, interpret and be affected.

Music has been one major catalyst around the world providing the soundtrack for struggles globally, and the ties between music and revolution have been widely discussed and cited in medias in recent years. In the MENA region, it is difficult to see how music can be separated from the revolution, as artists and musicians were some of the first to write and perform critical songs of the regimes, some via social media networks and some live, taking the music to the streets amongst the ongoing demonstrations.

Professor of Middle Eastern History at UC Irvine and visiting professor at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University, Mark LeVine, has long researched on both music and Islam and writes in the International Journal of Middle East Studies (2012) that:
“As a mirror, music reflects society's contending forces back onto itself. Under the right conditions it also refracts them prismatically, acting as a filter and an amplifier that brings (and sometimes forces) subaltern sentiments into the public consciousness.

Music, like other art forms, can help foster and sustain social and political change”.

(LeVine, 2012: 1)

Having seen this myself first-hand in the field over the past many years, in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East it is hard not to be an advocate of music and culture as driving forces for development in youth. Thus, I do not distinguish between art and music, but simply call both visual expressions (in the shape of posters, street art, VJ’ing or otherwise) and musical expressions (DJ’ing, rapping and producing) as ‘art’. The reasoning behind this argument is that I do not view music as something outside of art, but rather a branch of art, and an artistic expression. Expression(s) in the plural is also with reasoning in regards to culture(s) and subculture(s). Although this Thesis focuses on a very small subculture and thus does not paint the full picture, it is important to also highlight that multiple cultural expressions also exist within subculture(s).

Furthermore, there is a rich tradition of protest-music; from musicians uniting against the Vietnam War, where dozens of songs were composed on the topic, as well as the later subcultures as punk music and rap - to the contemporary space of young rappers taking part in the global hip hop culture, and producing songs that speak out against the regimes of the countries in which they are based. An example of music and resistance taking the form of ‘artivism’ is during the transition in Egypt, also known as ‘Arab Spring’, where musicians such as ²Ramy Essam provided the soundtrack to the revolution, live at Tahrir Square. For the sake of clarity, this Thesis interchanges between art and activism and artivism, however holding the same attributes to the term.

² http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2011/jul/19/ramy-essam-egypt-uprising-interview
2.1 Motivation and Field of Interest

My first visit to Tunisia took place in June 2012, where my boss (the Director of the NGO Turning Tables, of which I have worked for since 2010) and I underwent a one-week partner identification trip, as we were looking into opening a so-called Turning Table Lab. A ‘Turning Table Lab’ consists of music production facilities including rap, DJ’ing, music production and videography, which are initiated by workshops taught by local instructors to marginalized youth. We began in Palestinian refugee camps in 2009, and now have permanent labs in Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia and Cambodia with upcoming labs in Haiti and Burma. We work together with local partners on the ground and external partners such as United Nations.

In 2011, Turning Tables held the first ever regional Hip Hop concert in Cairo, Egypt, located close to Tahrir Square just weeks after the demonstrations began, where we brought in artists from the MENA-region to the concert entitled Voice of The Streets. Before the concert had even commenced, the Egyptian Military shut it down. But with the help of mobile devices and social media alerts, the concert was moved to a secret location, mobilizing fans and audiences to re-locate.

The music lab in Tunisia, hosted in central Tunis by our local partner and activist-radio station ‘Chaabi’ (meaning the people), is an important step in creating inter-regional development and collaboration, and will serve as the first independent music lab open to all youth in Tunis. My own interest thus comes from years of being active in the MENA-region, especially working with Music and Youth Participation.

Therefore, this Thesis also serves as background research for my continued work as the Festival Coordinator for Turning Tables’s festival activities in both Denmark and Tunisia where the fieldwork interviews and research, guides the production of the festival and establishes a more in-depth understanding and background context for the artistic selection process and collaboration between artists from Denmark, Tunisia and the MENA region.

The mappings of Tunisian artists and their conditions are the stepping-stones for a production for the Danish “Images Festival” taking place in August 2013, in

Copenhagen and Århus with the title ‘Occupy Utopia’. Here our specific programme focus will be on Artistic Activism featuring a panel discussion, several concerts, live street art and music and video production.

4Images Festival is a reoccurring festival organized by the Danish Center for Culture and Development, and presents contemporary art and music from all over the developing world. The focus here, will be on how young urban artists, dancers and musicians, specifically rappers and electronic dj’s, use music as a tool of artistic expression to voice ideas, hopes and frustration as well as a community-based tools for social change for the youth generation.

Through the past years’ political upheaval in the MENA region, social discontent and frustration have been voiced through Hip Hop music and urban arts which today appears as a mouthpiece for a growing group of young people throughout the region and especially in Tunisia. The emergence of a youth culture based on music, and the courage to express themselves freely despite risk of retaliation by those in power, is a significant breakthrough.

The revolution which began in Tunisia with a suicide, spread through the region as experienced in Egypt, Algeria and Libya. Across the region, the revolution was inspired by the same social and economic factors, including high unemployment, poverty, decline in real indicators of development and state repression of the opposition and specifically limitations of freedom of speech and artistic freedom of expression.

But for many people in the Middle East, especially artists and writers the revolution is an unfinished, unrealized and ongoing project that contributes to the continued art appearing. Despite the economic and political transitions, cultural production boomed in the wake of the revolution(s) and continues to do so. From Street Art to in-situ dance performances to politically charged song lyrics and satirical cartoons, these artistic expressions naturally pre-exist within the region, and their novelty stems from this resistance, rendering a coherent concept of ‘popular culture’. For many, their mode of creative expression is not limited to the pictorial, but rather fuses a range of media including photography, installation and performance.

4 http://www.cku.dk/images-festival/
Furthermore, the ‘winds of Tunisia’ are crucial to further development in the region. They set the agenda for the rest of the Arab world, being one of the most modern countries in the region with a highly developed tourist sector in places like Hammamet and Sousse. As the first country to come out of the revolution with a democratic reform, it is important that it remains stable, and that it sets an example.

However, the future of the youth movement, and hence young people's freedom of speech and artistic expression, remains uncertain due to resistance from powerful political, conservative religious and societal forces as well as limited production possibilities. The potential flowering of these movements is challenged by the lack of independent platforms where young people can exercise, interact and share their enthusiasm for urban music and culture that corresponds to their own dreams and their local context.

Despite these obstacles, many young artists choose to spread their ideas and messages through music and arts and are simultaneously, aware of it or not, developing a new youth culture regionally. By using artivism to break imaginary or real borders, and create new visions for their country, one in which youth and civil society have a voice, they begin to the push buttons in which culture has an influence.

My problem area thus revolves around the following:

- How can artivism be used as a tool, to challenge or mirror societal and political issues - particularly amongst the Tunisian urban youth? And are there new conditions for artistic freedom of expression post-revolution?

2.2 Research Questions

- In which ways do artivists see that they can challenge a political, cultural or economic hegemony by utilizing artistic activism?

- How are artivists in Tunisia experiencing artistic freedom of expression or restriction of the same?

- Are there new spaces (imaginary or real) for artistic activism?
2.3 Theoretical Overview & Framework

This overview will introduce some key concepts that constitute theoretical perspectives that later underpin analytical relations in this study. These include: Stephen Duncombe’s collection of thoughts from himself and Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno on Cultural Resistance. The relationship between art and activism is then addressed using Aldo Milohnic and a discussion of art and activism in the age of globalization using De Cautier. This points to the analysis which deals with these concepts in contemporary Tunisia’s urban youth subculture with the theoretical input of Barker and Gilroy, followed by analysis and critical (re) thinking of artistic freedom of expression, glocalized cultural productions and the remixing of the cultural narrative through artivism.

This theoretical framework encompasses questions of artivism, and moves into the research field of post-revolution culture, youth subculture and questions of authenticity, globalization and hybridization. These themes are deemed as crucial to discuss in order to dissect the problem area, thereby adopting an epistemological outlook on how subjects construct knowledge within ‘their world’.

The conceptual paradigm of the Thesis follows Anthony Giddens (1976) view on inter-paradigms, where he essentially maintains that: “all paradigms are mediated by others” (Gibson & Morgan 1979: 36). Hence, the topic of interest as well as my own pre-knowledge of the field, leads me to a reflexive paradigm of sociological, cultural and media studies, which can be connected to the so-called ‘radical humanist paradigm’ (Gibson & Morgan, 32: 1979). In the tradition of the radical humanist, I also wear my glasses with a critical eye on the structure of society, the hierarchical, the capitalistic and other (cultural) power structures.

These paradigms are not viewed as fixed and restricting, but rather as interconnected and beneficial for an all-around understanding of my research topic. I will also move between micro and macro-levels, from bottom-up perspectives to policy-discussions in order to conduct an all-around analysis. A qualitative paradigm will therefore be applied throughout this Thesis, through interviews, case-study research and other chosen methodologies.
I am operating in a triangular-method, similar to a deductive method of reasoning meaning that I am beginning the Thesis with some overall principal theories and themes, such as the relation between art and activism and cultures of resistance. Drawing on that theoretical knowledge, a more in-depth discussion takes place and concepts from several theorists, scholars and journalists are included then critically analyzed. Finally, the interviews and observations are analyzed in a thematic structure and concepts re-thought and re-imagined. The knowledge that is produced however does not remain deductive, but is rather seen as a constant cycle of interpretation, based on new findings.

I have also made extensive use of reports and articles, as the current situation in Tunisia changes constantly. During my nearly one month fieldwork, many current events happened, which constantly shapes the discussion in new directions. This requires reflexivity and a desire to constantly stay updated, even after the fieldwork is finished. For these reasons, a real challenge was posed in terms of finding theoretical literature on Tunisia post-revolution. Much has been written about the Arab Spring but with a main focus on political and economic transitions or “mass social media protests” such as the ones taking place in Egypt. Tunisia has somehow slipped into the background for many scholars, perhaps due to the almost unanimous perception of the Jasmine Revolution as a peaceful, quick and effective transition.

As Marwan Bishara writes in *The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolutions* (2012):

“The overthrow of the regime of the President Zine Al-Abdine Ben Ali in Tunisia on 14 January 2011 took the world by surprise. This prompted questions as to why there had been so little awareness of the country until it surged into the headlines. Although partly a product of the country’s size and enforced absence of internal politics, this lack of knowledge of Tunisia was also indicative of a wider ignorance surrounding the region in which it lay.”

(Bishara, 2012: xi).

He argues, that most of the focus has been on other conflicts in the MENA region, such as Algeria, Libya, Lebanon, Palestine and recently Syria, but also that there has been a lack of academic focus: “More surprisingly and alarming has been the lack of

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5 Senior Political Analyst at Al Jazeera English
academic interest in the region, for whilst the media is driven by immediacy and public interest, sustained enquiry is more expected in academia” (ibid.).

Bishara’s critical viewpoint continues regarding the sometimes very one-dimensional story told of the uprisings. As he paints a picture of a story told to the world’s media: “An oppressed people who have suffered passively suddenly decided that enough is enough and, thanks to Western technology and inspiration, spontaneously rise up to reclaim their freedom, inspiring what is called Arab Spring” (ibid.).

He also points out that this is of course an overstatement, and that like most revolutions, this was one in the making for a long time. Another issue that has been widely discussed especially by media is the idea that a simultaneous “Twitter revolution” has taken place.

Bishara casts a critical eye on this in explaining that the so-called awakening was inspired by both political, community, labor and national leaders who were influenced by the experiences and successes of others around the globe who had suffered from similar challenges arising from globalization, while at the same time taking advantage of its byproducts: the information revolution. However, he claims that “crediting Facebook and Twitter with the revolution is like crediting the inventor of portable cassettes – the Dutch conglomerate Phillips – with the Islamic revolution in Iran” (Bishara, 2012: 1).

I tend to share Bishara’s views on this, as the emphasis placed on social media has perhaps been over-valued. Although no one can deny the technology revolution and popularization of social media as a tool for expression, sensationalizing the revolution due to Facebook and Twitter is to over-estimate the medium. Technology is the medium, but it is the people behind these tabs and apps that have in fact made a difference.

But a point in absence here, is also that the revolution(s) were only made possible by the high number of youth that was involved in organizing and attending demonstrations, not to mention documenting and disseminating information through social media channels. We find many similar stories in the region, from Egypt, Libya and Syria, where the youth replace violent means with creative forms of protest - to
voice their frustration through artistivist means. Young artists from all over the region have composed powerful imagery and soundscapes to the revolution such as artist Omar Offendum’s song “#Syria”, which is both a tribute to the murdered protest-singer Ibrahim Kashoush who had his vocal chords cut out, and as a message that calls for unity and peace in Syria, where the Hash Tag is a representation of the so-called Twitter-revolution. Although Tunisia from the outside seems to be the most democratic and modern in the region in many aspects, a major focus point has been on the ‘return of the salafists’ in Tunisia, alongside the continued discussions of the increasing influence of islamists, rather than on the subtle youth subcultures which are shaping and re-shaping civil society for young people by culture.

Therefore a number of online news resources have been helpful in this research such as Al Jazeera, Nawaat.org, Tunisia-Live.net, Dars.jadaliyya.com (Daily Acts of Resistance and Subversion) and Mediaoriente.com. Furthermore, research reports such as Consuming Revolution: Ethics, Art, and Ambivalence in the Arab Spring by Nancy Demerdash (2012) and Sara Shannahan and Qurra Hussain’s Rap on ‘l’Avenue’: Islam, aesthetics, authenticity and masculinities in the Tunisian rap scene (2011) along several reports on Tunisia, Artistic Freedom of Expression and Public Space and Art have contributed to a deepened knowledge.

Cultural production and political studies will undoubtedly color this thesis, as I am studying cultural productions taking place in a specific political context. Within the Culture and Media studies tradition, this Thesis also aims to examine the subject of artistivism in terms of its cultural practices (case studies), productions, and how the artists relate their art to resistance toward power structures. Understanding culture is a complex matter, and the objective is therefore not only to analyze the social and political context in which the production takes place, but also to attempt to connect it to a wider field. As Chris Barker notes: “Cultural Studies does not speak with one voice, it cannot be spoken with one voice, and no voice can represent it” (Barker, 2001: 4). It is a highly interdisciplinary field that is ever developing. Although it is not an exact science to study artistic activism, with the help of a theoretical framework, a cultural phenomenon or production can be studied in an organized way.

As such, it is relevant to the field of culture and media production, as it ‘extends’ beyond the mere study of culture, and not only analyzes but intervenes in the field of study by ‘producing’ something concrete in relation to the Thesis. On one hand this Thesis produces knowledge on a specific topic but it also leads to a cultural production afterwards, which draws on the same concepts, to which it embodies. This also corresponds to the informants (the activists) where, there is not necessarily a border between producing and consuming culture, meaning that living it and being part of an activist subculture interacts and overlaps with the product that comes out of it.

2.4 Literature Review

George Orwell once wrote, “All art is propaganda”. In his essay 7 The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda (1941), Orwell stated that: *it is impossible to divorce a person’s creative output from their political biases and ideological outlook, and that “our aesthetic judgments are always colored by our prejudices and beliefs”*. As a student of Culture and Media Studies, it is of course hard not to agree with Orwell that our subjectivity always colors the production, whether artistic or not. But the artist today is a much more complex construction which requires a modern and contemporary point of departure, in order to understand the developing concept of artivism. The label ‘artist’ is for some associated with fine arts, museums, institutions and awards – while for some an artist is simply someone who ‘produces’. The activist uses art as a *tool* for creative freedom of expression, and for the voicing of ideas.

Stephen Duncombe is a lifelong activist, professor and author of several books on the linkage between art, creativity and activism. He is also co-founder of the Center for Artistic Activism, where their mission statement reads: 8 *One thing that can help the “art of activism” is applying an artistic aesthetic tactically, strategically, and organizationally. Throughout history, the most effective political actors have married the arts with campaigns for social change.*

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In Cultural Resistance Reader (2002), Stephen Duncombe takes the reader through a variety of thinkers and theorists who have all dealt with culture and politics, in one way or the other. One aspect of what radical culture can be understood as is presented in Walter Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” (Duncombe, 2002: 67), which focuses on the conditions of the production: which Benjamin argues is the radical, rather than the culture itself. Finally, Theodor Adorno’s thoughts on true radical music culture will be discussed and analyzed.

Duncombe introduces Walter Benjamin’s ideas as such:

“Truly radical culture, Benjamin argued, was that which can “transcend the specialization in the process of production” of capitalism. In other words, radical culture erodes the line between artist and spectator, producer and consumer, challenging the hierarchical division of labor and encouraging everyone to create.”

(Duncombe, 2002: 68).

Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on the blurring between production and participation are essential for discussing what an artivist does. As previously mentioned, the artivists are not necessarily established artists themselves, but uses artistic means, or tools, in a radical way to change or highlight a situation, and thereby working within the framework of the conditions of the production. Furthermore, what gives the productions an activist approach is that civil society is not excluded from the process. Because the performance or art takes place in the public realm or forum, viewers also become participants, whether they like it or not.

Benjamin however, also holds a strong criticism on what cultural resistance actually can accomplish, as he argues that the content of culture does not mean much, as ‘today’s cultural resistance is tomorrow’s art object or commercial product’ (Duncombe, 2002: 19). Instead it is the conditions of the cultural production (how culture is produced) that is the political key.

His concepts were important because they made the artist an active agent rather than just ‘an interpreter’ or ‘a commentator’ of art. When thinking about art practices in their relation to social change, I would argue (and this also reflects my general understanding on the role of the arts) that art has agency, and that artists and art objects have the power to influence, change and promote change. This does not
exclude the fact that art and artists can still comment and critique on social reality without acting on it, yet: all art is in some way political.

In Cultural Resistance Reader we further find another Frankfurt scholar, in the work of Theodor Adorno, a radical critic of the disadvantages of popular music becoming commoditized. In an attempt to re-contextualize Adorno, the analysis looks at the concept of re-thinking music as protest, and in that way using the music as a tool rather than an instrument of commodification with the intent of capitalizing. Coming from a strong Marxist tradition, Adorno could perhaps be seen as a real pessimist in the cultural studies world. As Duncombe introduces his writings “Food, clothes, art, entertainment, lifestyles – all became things to be bought and sold. Where profit was to be made, seemingly anything could be made profitable, culture included.”

(Duncombe, 2002: 275).

What is particularly important and (still) relevant is the question that Adorno poses regarding resistant practices. For how can culture, art and music be used as tools of resistance against a dominant capitalist system, if it has been transformed into the very building block of consumer capitalism? What Adorno deems the fetishization of music, is music for purely entertainment purposes. “Real” music should shake us to the core, and has the ability to be a resistant practice in itself. As Adorno reminds us, music was banished from Plato’s totalitarian republic as it was seen as something ‘rebellious’.

“But today music, high and low, is a commodity: fragmented, simplified, popularized, wrapped in packages of respectability or rebellion, all the better to be bought and sold. Far from challenging the system, most music is part of the system.”

(Adorno, 1938: in Duncombe, 2002: 276)

Adopting such a Western Marxist view helps to grasp the crucial role of mass media and the manipulation of social and cultural experience by the ruling class elites. With concepts such as hegemony, the systemic nature of production and mass distribution’s affects on culture becomes clearer.
Duncombe himself defines what could be understood as ‘cultural resistance’, by underlining that the concept itself must be seen as flexible, as he outlines several understandings.

“First off, cultural resistance can provide a sort of “free space” for developing ideas and practices. Freed from the limits of constraints of the dominant culture, you can experiment with new ways of seeing and being and develop tools and resources for resistance. And as culture is usually something shared, it becomes a focal point around which to build a community.”

(Duncombe, 2002: 5).

Duncombe however also presents cultural resistance as political resistance, with the argument that some theorists view politics as a cultural discourse, with a set of shared symbols and meanings that people abide by. He therefore sees the act of re-writing that discourse (which is what cultural resistance does), as a political act in itself (Duncombe, 2002: 6). The very activity of producing culture has political meaning, argues Duncombe (2002: 7). As society is built around the production-consumption model, creating productions that are not specifically designed for the money-chain has a rebellious resonance as he calls it. Organizing an illegal rave or starting an underground record label is acting and creating one’s own culture, and that essentially, is politics.

Duncombe further conceptualizes how culture and resistance hold hands, and his academic bricks are helpful in defining what artivism could be, and where the link between art and activism is.

He categorizes cultural resistance in a number of ways, for example he separates between what it does and what it means. Cultural resistance creates a ‘free space’ both ideologically and materially according to Duncombe (2002: 8). It does so, via political action, which ideologically creates new language, meanings and visions for the future, and materially a space to build community, networks and organizational models. The meaning that is created through cultural resistance is the content, the form, the interpretation and the activity (Duncombe, 2002: 10). The political message resides within the content of the culture and the form it takes on, is that the political message is expressed through the medium of transmission. The message is also determined by
how the culture is received and interpreted and finally the activity is the action of producing culture, regardless of content, form or reception: the political message (ibid.)

Today, it seems artivism has a much more civilian ring to it, driven highly by civil society and individuals as well as groups whose political beliefs can be worlds apart but their tools similar. Therefore one may also question if cultural resistance is indeed the right term to link to artivism, however in the case study of young Tunisians, and particularly my interview subjects the term tends to hold validity as they are using arts to counter the dominant discourse of the ‘old’ cultural hegemony.

2.5 L’art politique?

Subversive, political, controversial, are some of the words that have often been associated with art that takes on an activist form. Since the French Revolution, and romanticism, this has been a topic within art history up to the postmodernist art of the 1960s where new art forms appeared, and social protest mingled with both music and the visual arts.

Moving from galleries and institutions into the street and public space has perhaps been the most recent revolutionary evolution of art. But even Graffiti and Street Art has gone from being highly radical to once again ‘institutionalized’ and sold to the Hollywood and art collector elite via high-profile galleries. The world’s most renown street artist Banksy sells art works at Sotheby’s for a costly price tag, and OBEY (Shepard Fairey) designed the now highly replicated ‘HOPE’ posters for the first Obama presidential campaign.

The juxtaposition between the ‘underground’ and the ‘commercial, shows that both art and activism through artistic means can mean many different things. While it may be revolutionary and new in developing regions, it has already been commoditized in Western ones.

In the book Art & Agenda, Political Art and Activism (2011), the introduction reads “Political art is increasingly appearing in countries and regions plagued by injustices and/or ruled by totalitarian regimes (Klanten et al., 2011: 5). This rings a bell of
course, with the recent art emerging from the MENA region, indicating both a change in production and distribution channels and a new desire and possibility to use art in an activist way.

Furthermore, many of the works presented by Klanten et al. (2011) have gained popularity through new media communication channels, such as blogs, vlogs and social media platforms. These channels are crucial to some artists, as some of them, such as well-known artivist Ai Weiwei are able to showcase their artwork around the world, except for in their home country. Due to strict governmental censorship laws, some artists have had to find alternative ways of showing their work. The banning of the artwork is also usually a response to a critique against the system that is curtailing artistic expression, thus creating an interrelationship between art and political statements. This leads us to the connection between art and activism.

3. Theory

3.1 Art and Activism

The question of defining artistic activism is perhaps not a question of form but a question of function. This practice cannot be determined stylistically or within the framework of a certain artistic-media field. Activist art includes the use of different practices like street interventions and performance, publishing, song writing, media and social media broadcasting, film production or organization, social action, all drawing on artistic expressions. Artistic activism can exist both as part of the mainstream but also in contexts that situate it outside of the accepted borders, or in the underground culture.

The function of artivism as a cultural practice is intentional political activity in the field of ideologies, institutions and their discourses. The artistic practice itself emerges from dissatisfaction with certain social, political, economic or cultural situations and manifests itself as a demand for the allocation of social capital, equality and freedom. It extends to the broader scope of the contemporary anti-capitalism, anti-consumerism or alter-globalization movement. Artistic Activism is thus beginning to melt together in a contemporary context, within a field of ambivalent
borders between art, culture, politics and economy. This merging in activism can be viewed as the result of art and politics’ changing relationship, from l’art pour l’art to the object of art going beyond the aesthetics.

Activist art has a tendency towards developing direct communication with the audience through participation instead of communicating through an aesthetic object placed within ‘closed spaces’ such as galleries and institutions. In order to achieve interaction with the audience, different tactics must be used: from the Internet providing conditions for debate and discussion to participative street actions and art or symbolic interventions in public space.

Although most of the literature dealing with these concepts are recent, and especially in a wider geographical context, practices of artistic activism were already perceived in 2005 by Slovenian theoretician of sociology and culture, Professor, ⁹ Aldo Milohnic. He described them as gestual performatives, or specific symbolic interventions in within the material effects of macro and micro cultures in a specific historical moment. In the writings simply entitled ‘Artivism’ published by EIPCP (European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policy: 2005), he names the practice “Artivism” as a hybrid term defining the conjunction between art and activism as a form of social choreography in public space, equally implying practices that are more difficult and problematic to determine as “artistic”: these are cultural activisms, and practices that are connected to the art world.

The connection between art and activism varies from case to case. We have art activism that comes from the field of professional activism that uses artistic means in agitating the public for certain problems. Then there is art activism that comes from the field of art and is executed by professional artists, and finally the art activism being realized by the ones that act outside these fields through temporary or permanent unions with the goal of producing a dissonance in the field of social relations. According to Aldo Milohnic, the connection between activist art and the art world is purely pragmatic in its nature (Milohnic: 2005).

⁹ http://eipcp.net/transversal/1203/milohnic/en
Artistic activism whose goal is direct political action uses the relative autonomy of the artistic space in order to secure for itself protection against legal restrictions. However, this thesis does not apply in all cases of action. A large number of activists that act as artivists dismiss the connection with the relative autonomy of the art world, deeming that this position is inefficient and that it reduces political efficacy, according to Milohnic (ibid.). The difference that can be noted between these positions is based on their conditions of production. In this sense, it is possible to talk about an art activism that comes primarily from the field of social activism, that implies mobilizing artistic strategies and tactics as a means of political and social struggle within the production conditions of the industry of activism or outside the framework of this field, and an art activism that comes from the field of art but has a tendency to dissolve into social activism and is a part of the production relations in the art world (ibid.).

My interview subjects belong to several of these categories, as we shall see in both their actions and their responses.

### 3.2 Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization

Subversion is a keyword in especially Street Art and Hip Hop music. Many rap lyrics make use of metaphors in order to not only surpass censorship or criticism, but as a form of painting pictures that are relevant to the listeners, in order to understand the theme(s) of the song(s). Street Art on the other hand makes use of symbols and signs that create meaning on a meta-level. Lieven de Cauter suggests the term ‘subversivity’ is almost always a characteristic of all subcultures as: “They are fundamentally deviant, even hostile towards the dominant system or hegemonic culture.” (De Cauter, 2011: 9). Furthermore De Cauter points out that these cultures however, rarely aim to overthrow an entire political system or ideology, but they wish to disrupt it. This disruptive attitude tries to open up the ‘closedness’ of the system by what De Cauter explains as:
“It aims to create space for alterity, for deviance and drifting; a place for taboos, truths which generally must remain hidden, a space for the reality of the abject, for the forbidden, for transgression, the breaking the norms and normality, a space for nonconformity, a space for the undermining of conventions.”

(De Cauter, 2011: 10).

The dance performance as well as the street art in my case study can be classified as site-specific art or art in situ. De Cauter offers the explanation for the development and a self-critique of the term subversivity, in what he calls The End of Aesthetic Subversion and the New Commitment (2011). De Cauter argues, that not much has happened to radically shake the art world up since Duchamp, and the time of the avant-garde and subversive, is a thing of the past.

“There are no conventions and canons left to undermine and attack. That may be the reason why many recent artists make poetico-political videos, engage immediately with contemporary media culture, or why many artists now pursue in situ interventions, process-based art or community based projects.”

(De Cauter, 2011: 13).

Thus, this is a new form of art that can influence, or as De Cauter claims, ‘return commitment’ from the dissident, the intellectuals and the artists regardless of their position as an amateur or professional approach.

The linkage between art and social practice, as well as cultural production is a question of navigation, where the lines are getting ever more blurred between performance, political activism, community organizing, and investigative journalism on various platforms. The practitioners are creating a participatory art that exists and re:mixes society outside the white cube.

3.3 Public Space

Art in the public space in this research is understood as not only site-specific, but rather in terms of a dynamic, moving force that is happening right now online and offline, and is thus shaped in and by its context. Much of the art that is done is removed before it ever makes it to the World Wide Web or to spectators eyes, and in
the case of musical activism, location can have a lesser importance, as it is a medium mostly heard rather than seen.

The kind of street art that artivists produce in the public space, seeks to create an alternative to the cultural hegemonic space such as museums and well-established institutions. This relationship between the institution (the gallery, white cube etc.) and the ‘outside’ or the site-specific art, has been a dynamic debate since the late 1960s, when site-specific art emerged as an alternative to the gallery space. In *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002), Miwon Kwong associates the early site-specific works of the 1960s and 1970s with anti-idealist and anti-commercial efforts (Kwon, 2002: 33). Taking art out of the gallery into its outer environment, site-specific art began as a sort of rejection of the art institutions and galleries.

This discussion has continued to develop, and what Kwon defines as the third paradigm in modern times, is the ‘Art in The Public Interest’ concept. It is relevant for this Thesis as it deals with artists concerning themselves and their productions with questions about politics, and socially marginalized groups. The ‘Art-in-The-Public-Interest’ paradigm thus approaches the civic and local populations and their engagement, as the artists deal with daily issues that occupy the masses’ minds. The artwork or performance here is focused on the exchange and the collaboration between the artist and the audience, moving from an aesthetic function to a social function (Kwon, 2002: 29).

Previous art and activism projects that have taken place in the year after the revolution, in Tunisia are now many. However, another question that comes to mind, is who owns public space? While Ben Ali was in power, flattering portraits of him were seen on billboards all around the city as a constant reminder of his presence, and appeared as frequent as coca cola billboards do in other countries.

One of the most known artivists globally is French street artist JR. His ‘Inside Out’ project took place in Tunisia right after the revolution, where he collaborated with a number of local artists and photographers who simply took pictures of “regular”

10 [http://www.jr-art.net/fr/projets/artocratie-en-tunisie](http://www.jr-art.net/fr/projets/artocratie-en-tunisie)
Tunisian citizens. These were then blown up into massive-scaled stencils and strategically placed in abandoned buildings such as the old headquarters for the police, on billboards over Ben Ali’s face and so forth.

This is why the *Inside Out Project* is interesting in terms of occupying public space. Considering that pre-revolution, the people of Tunisia rarely saw anything else on their walls or billboards other than propaganda posters for ex-dictator Ben Ali, whereas now the landscape has shifted dramatically – suggesting that creativity has been bubbling under the surface all along, and now has found space(s) for expression.

The local population was also engaged to participate, and helped in pasting the posters all around the city, as well as invited to take their own picture for prints. Here, more than the art, the action of creating is a process that becomes just as important as the result and was a simple, yet effective way of picturing the ‘new Tunisia’. One represented by the people and not the government, police or military.

But Tunis is not only a playground for the visiting francophone; many local artists have done theirs to comment on their own society. An example of an artist who has received both praise and criticism is El Seed, who merges traditional Arabic scriptures with modern graffiti, what the artist himself calls ‘Calligraffiti’. In September 2012, El Seed painted Tunisia’s tallest minaret, in his hometown Gabes. A verse from the Quran preaching tolerance created some negative responses from religious leaders, as it was a message meant for the Salafi Islamists, who have been known to crackdown hard on artists.

While public space is much comprised of either propaganda or commercials intended to boost consumerism, artists do not only have to gain permission to perform or create art, they take risks to do so.

Electro Jay is another artist who has felt the pressure from what he believes are Salafist groups post-revolution. He could be considered a pop-artist, with his modern artwork, but the controversy lied in the title of one of his pieces. ‘La république Islaïque de Tunisie’ which translates into a combination of the words ‘islam’ and ‘laïque’ which means “secular”. The request to remove the art piece, at the opening of

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Printemps des Art fair in La Marsa, Tunisia came from the gallery owner himself after feeling ‘pressured’ to do so, as the piece was too politically engaging and might cause problems.

Meaning, for these urban artists and everyday locals alike, is constituted from lived experiences within the spaces of revolution. Street artists have come to inscribe on public walls past memories and memorials to those struggles and lives lost in the revolutions. But for the general public, the spaces on these walls have acquired profound and collective personal meaning. Murals and graffiti panels have embodied concrete memories for passerby and neighborhood locals.

That posters, graffiti, stencils and other forms of visual art have worked to build community and solidarity is apparent. Thought-provoking defacement combined with compelling visuals and gripping text provides, perhaps, the ideal medium of public dissent.

These few examples showcase the functions and limitations of artivism in Tunisia. And the recent escalation of examples indicates that the revolution spurs more artists to be active in their local and public sphere.

### 3.4 Subcultures and Globalization

Youth Subcultures are defined as spaces for deviant cultures to renegotiate their position, or to win spaces of their own, as Chris Barker writes in *Cultural Studies - Theory and Practice* (2000). A significant post-modernistic turn in culture has especially been seen in youth cultures, the MTV-generation and so forth. As Barker points out, Youth and Subculture gained massive interest during Cultural Studies ‘Birmingham School’ period with theorists such as Hall, Willis and McRobbie addressing issues of popular style, music, media and gender (Barker, 2000: 318).

Much previous research and discussions on youth subculture has emerged from Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson’s *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976), as to which Chris Barker comments (2000), that for Hall “Youth cultures are not authentic alternative spaces of resistance, but places of negotiation.” (Barker, 2000: 343).
Furthermore, Barker notes that Cultural Studies has had a tendency to explore not just ‘regular youth culture’, but also the spectacular, different, loud and avant-garde. Therefore it has also come to deal a great amount with representation, as well as subcultures as ‘maps of meaning’ or ‘a whole way of life’ (Barker, 2000: 322). As the term suggests, the ‘sub’ – connotes to a diversion of the dominant or mainstream, in this case: culture. Hence, the actual concept of subculture is only existent in its oppositional form. As Barker elaborates “In much subcultural theory, the question of ‘resistance’ to the dominant culture comes to fore.” (Barker, 2000: 322).

There is thus somewhat a juxtaposition that lies within the subculture and youth phenomenon. On one hand it is understood as a homogenous group, whose behavior is explained by a shared set of codes and beliefs. On the other hand it is viewed as resisting the hegemonic culture. Globalization further complicates this, as cited in Barker (2000) by defining what a youth subculture is. Barker argues, that youth (produced) is also understood differently in terms of spaces and places (ibid.). The commodification of subcultures through brands like Nike or through music like Hip Hop, or even through social media influence has created the somewhat now outdated term “the global youth culture”. Even though we can view for example youths in Tunisia that rap, breakdance and do Street Art as directly influenced from America and especially France due to post-colonialism, we can also witness a more chaotic, creative and hybrid subculture that starts from, and is imbedded in a local context.

In the academic paper *Rap on ‘l’Avenue’; Islam, aesthetics, authenticity and masculinities in the Tunisian rap scene (2011)* by Sara Shannahan and Qurra Hussain, a brief outline of Rap's birth is drawn:

> “Rap emerged as a child of hip-hop culture in New York’s African-American and Afro-Caribbean communities in the mid-1970s. It has been described as a form of ‘black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America ... [through] a form of rhymed storytelling’ (Rose, 1994: 2). These stories initially told of the environments in which the hip-hop movement began, and served to articulate protest against conditions on the ‘street’ where the artists lived.”

(Shannahan & Hussain, 2011: 34).
In the last 40 years US rap artists have reached enormous commercial heights, which have spread across the globe, prompting some artists and fans to proclaim the emergence of a “global hip-hop nation” (Shannahan & Hussain, 2011: 38).

As Gilroy argues in Barker (2000):

“Rap is a hybrid culture which has spread from the 1970’s of the South Bronx to the Northern parts of Siberia taking on local artistic expressions and dimensions.”

Gilroy (1994) argues that:

“These ‘emerging cultures of hybridity, forged among the overlapping African, American and Caribbean diaspora are a challenge to white western authority as well as being ways of living with and in ‘conditions of crisis and transition’.” (Barker, 2000: 334).

Naturally Gilroy’s quote should be understood in its original timeframe, before the Internet and file sharing existed and when capitalism and cultural globalization was still only progressing in some (mainly Western) regions. American Rap today for instance, is one of the biggest sub-cultures globally, and has been used ‘in the name of’ a number of brands to both ‘urbanize’ their trademark and to gain credibility. But the point being, that where rap (or other ‘deviant’ sub-cultures) were seen as resisting the dominant western culture, it is in other regions and nations seen as a ‘Western phenomenon’ (or as imitating American and European culture) and therefore resisting or neglecting their own culture.

Had Edward Said been alive today, he may have been fascinated with this new cultural form, which is partly being shaped by youth and partly by media. The stereotyped representations of the so-called Orient and especially a lack of agency placed within both young males and females, is now shifting due to young creative individuals who are taking responsibility for how their country’s future is shaped. Urban youth is more identifiable globally now, not only through broadcasting and social media channels, but also through global trends, such as artivism, which links subcultures together across regions. This globalization of youth culture has long ago become glocal. Hence, youth culture(s) are not necessarily place bound or authentic any more, but they do become re-contextualized when new events occur.
To contextualize Hip Hop in connection to today’s youth in Tunisia, and why it is such an enticing culture, we may return to Shannahan and Hussain:

“As a transnational subculture, rap has proven to be a powerful vehicle for young people as ‘the entire expressive culture of hip-hop ... resonate[s] not only with the anxiety of youthful social rebellion, but extant global socio-political inequalities as well.”

(Shannahan & Hussain, 2011: 41).

Not only does the philosophy of the culture stem from a kind of DIY, anti-violence and diverse culture. Events, releases and community action were always arranged in an artivist way. Being part of Hip Hop culture meant being active and not expecting any one else to believe in you or help you out. This is of course connected to Hip Hop as a way of life where life and art becomes one. For many youth it sprung out of marginalization and poverty, thus being Hip Hop meant self-organizing. It is perhaps therefore not a surprise why the culture echoes and blooms in Arab countries that are currently transitioning.

3.5 Artistic Freedom of Expression

In the Western world we generally view Freedom of Expression as one of the cornerstones of democracy. In recent years, it has become associated with a number of movements and events such as the Occupy Movement and ‘Arab Spring’, where women and minorities for instance are “given a voice” through new channels of communication. That voice however, is often expressed through artistic means. Art is often an open platform for freedom of speech, even in societies where that freedom is restricted. This makes art an effective tool for exposing social and political issues.

Tunisia was under dictatorship until the recent ‘Jasmine revolution’ when a young street vendor set himself on fire in protest (December 2010). Since then, many young artivists have organized themselves to express an alternative view and to present art that is critical of the government. This new artistic freedom of expression provides a unique moment in history, and is still under development.

Whereas Freedom of Expression has long been a buzzword worldwide, it is only recently that artist’s rights to artistic expression are beginning to figurate on the
global map. ¹³For many years the focus was typically on writers, journalists and more recently in the West, political cartoonists.

With organizations such ¹⁴PEN International, which defends the rights of writers worldwide and initiatives such as ¹⁵ICORN: safe havens for writers who must take exile due to threats due to their work (their expression), it is clearly a permeating issue. What this ‘trend’ also tells us, is that being creative and speaking openly today can have serious implications. With emergent initiatives such as ¹⁶Artsfreedom, focusing solely (as the first-ever) on the attacks on artists, it tells a rather grim story of censorship, attacks, threats and even murder.

According to ¹⁷Artsfreedom; a total number of 186 cases of attacks on artists and violations of their rights have been registered. The cases include 8 artists being killed, 16 imprisoned, 1 abducted, 5 attacked, 15 threatened, 37 prosecuted and 37 detained, as well as 67 cases of censorship” (from the report Violations of artistic freedom of expression in 2012, published February 1, 2013). The statistics are based on reports covering violations of artistic freedom of expression published on artsfreedom.org between 20/3/2012 – 16/1/2013 and includes incidents taking place during 2012. The publication offers a glimpse of the situation for artists worldwide in 2012 and includes cases in more than 50 countries across the fields of dance, film, music, theatre, visual arts and literature.

Here, we in fact see that the highest number of killings, imprisonment, detainees and prosecuted artists reported, are in the field of music. Naturally, geographical spread is a factor for example Afghanistan would have many cases, as the Taliban ban all music. Nevertheless, we find a total of 6 stories of arts violations from Tunisia, indicating that the issue of artistic freedom of expression in 2012, just one year after the revolution, is grave.

¹³ see for example: http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/d/danish_cartoon_controversy/index.html
¹⁴ http://www.pen-international.org
¹⁵ http://www.icorn.org
¹⁶ http://www.artsfreedom.org
¹⁷ http://artsfreedom.org/?p=4595
In a constantly increased globalized world – not only commodity and goods cross borders via trade agreements and commercial import and export – but the cultural capital flows freely, most of the time. However, during Ben Ali’s dictatorship, a strong censorship was applied. He blocked the access to foreign newspapers that were criticizing the government as well as all online access, and cracked down hard on artists, journalists and other intellectuals who expressed their discontent.

Since the Revolution, the Internet is completely free, and people can now access sites like Facebook and YouTube and print media to some extent, without fearing repercussions. However other forms of regulations are now taking place by law or by religious means to trial, jail or attack artists who are viewed as dissidents.

In the ‘Global Voice’ s article: 18 State of freedom of speech in Tunisia in 2012 the author Afeef Abrougui writes “Despite (these) positive steps from a country which once was an “internet enemy”, activists remain particularly concerned about the absence of an investigation into internet surveillance and censorship during the former regime” (2012). Tunisian Internet users also remain at risk of judicial prosecution. “In March, 2012, Ghazi Beji and Jabeur Mejri were convicted to seven and half-years in prison over the online publication of content offensive to Islam” (ibid.)

Although 118 countries (Tunisia being one of them) have signed and ratified the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which also includes demands on nations to respect artistic freedom of expression, many artists and communities have had to find alternative distribution channels to spread their cultural productions due to state censorship or regulation.

Recently, The UN has begun to react to these violations, as an in-depth special report on the right to artistic expression and creation has been formulated for the first time.

Programme Manager of Artsfreedom Ole Reitov, who has worked as a consultant to the UN office during the preparation of the report said:

19 “The issue of artistic freedom is crucial to any nation. It is not ‘just’ about the artists’ rights to express themselves freely, it is also a question of the rights of citizens to access artistic expressions and take part in cultural life — and thus one of the key issues for democracy”.

19 http://artsfreedom.org/?p=5311
To not respect freedom of artistic practice and expression is a breach of human rights. What is important to remember, is the very power that art holds in itself:

“The protection of artistic expression is just as important for the development of democracy as the protection of media workers. It is frequently artists who — through music, visual arts or films — put the ‘needle in the eye’ and strike a chord with millions of people, some of them unable to read and with no access to express themselves.”

(Ole Reitov: ibid.).

Yet conservative forces endanger the future for artistic freedom. The moderate Islamist party Ennahda came into power in October 2011 after the first free elections in Tunisia’s history. Since the shift in power, secular forces and supporters of liberal and free rights in Tunis have expressed great concern, over the attempt to introduce a new constitution, instead of the current law from 1959, which has been considered one of the most secular and equal laws in The Middle East.

The victory of Ennahda also caused concern for organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International regarding Tunisia’s draft constitution, commenting that: In the past year, freedom of expression has been under attack and women's rights undermined in Tunisia. It is therefore crucial for the new constitution to fully protect these rights.

Concerns were mainly surrounding the text containing ambiguous provisions that fail to uphold international human rights standards, and what Amnesty called “vague or ambiguous wording in several clauses and that "some human rights guarantees are not fully defined.” (ibid.).

Human Rights Watch released their World Report 2013 on February 6\textsuperscript{th}, on the assessed progress of human rights during the past year in more than 90 countries, including an analysis of the aftermath of the Arab uprisings further adding that one of the clear issues is the prosecution of nonviolent speech offenses and cites attacks on activists, journalists, intellectual and political figures. A polarisation between Ennahda and the secularist opposition, including elements of the former regime, has

\textsuperscript{20}http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/68099
\textsuperscript{21}http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/06/tunisia-slow-reform-pace-undermines-rights
grown as the finalization of a new constitution has been delayed and political and social tensions have deepened. 22 A recommendation for Tunisia’s new draft constitution was also released on May 13, 2013 wherein several points are criticized such as: the unclear definition of the limitation of freedom of expression, assembly and association, which can be limited by the government particularly for the protection of the “public moral”.

23 In fact, Tunisia has a historic background of being a secular state, which dates back to more than 50 years with the first President, Habib Bourgiba after the independence from France in 1956. It is therefore a worrying ‘backwards’ development in Tunisia.

4. Methodology

4.1 Methodological approaches

The data for this Thesis comes from research conducted in Tunis during March 2013. Many initial contacts were established in advance alongside preparations for the Turning Table Lab setup. Following initial contact through online mediums, I used snowballing methodology in order to meet other informal and formal contacts. Overall five semi-structured interviews were conducted, whereas three are fully transcribed. The reason for not transcribing and attaching the remaining two to the appendix, is that they were of a less formal character and involved mainly background information on Tunisia’s current state for activists and general discussions on everything from politics to economy.

Focusing on the ‘urban youth activist environment’ is a conscious choice based on the idea that cultural resistance takes place outside the box, the white cube and the established scene. I am interested in the radical cultural production that takes place in the public realm, that takes a risk to get a message across and that is driven by the civic youth in Tunis. The point of departure that urban sub-culture offers a genuine resistance is the underlying hypothesis that many artists and youth have played an

22 http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/13/tunisia-revise-draft-constitution
22 http://politiken.dk/udland/ECE1430119/moderate-islamister-staar-til-sejr-i-tunesien/
important role in the uprisings all over the MENA region. With the median age of 29 years old in Tunis (as of 2010), this generation is likely to push change forward.

Taking into consideration that political, social and cultural turmoil blossomed once again during the fieldwork; the choice to use semi-structured interviews was not only a decision based on methodology but also due to the need to stay flexible during my fieldwork. In order to ask some questions that may challenge the artist’s ideas, as well as ‘sensitive’ questions regarding politics, culture and censorship I decided that a traditional interview would only create distance, instead of the conversational method which is less formal, but just as informative.

Inspired by Steinar Kvale (1996), I see these conversations or interviews as dialogues where my formulations of questions contain personal opinions and observations. But also certain questions that shape the outcome of the interview and the answers received. This hermeneutic approach to the interview is regarded as a process that takes place within the conversation and thereby creates new meaning. It is important to underline that the intention of the fieldwork is not to get definite answers or readings from the interviewees. Rather they are chosen and serve as a small representative for a cultural phenomenon or tendency currently taking place, which this Thesis aims to map.

In terms of methodological approach, Michael Pickering offers refreshing insight on the lack of methods within cultural studies, and the somewhat problematic situation of having to ‘borrow’ from other fields such as sociology and anthropology:

“For one reason or another, cultural studies have been lax in thinking about methods, and so failed to engage in any breadth with questions of methodological limit, effectiveness and scope in cultural enquiry and analysis.”

(Pickering, 2008: 2).

Pickering suggests an interdisciplinary academic approach, where the philosophy is pluralist, and encourages mixed methods taking a more eclectic approach to research topics, rather than confining research activity to a single method (Pickering, 2008: 4). Furthermore, Pickering builds on Angela McRobbie’s call for a return to sociological

questions in cultural studies (McRobbie: 1997) as Pickering writes: “…specifically what she calls the three E:s, the empirical, the ethnographic and the experiential.” (ibid.).

On experience, Pickering notes that it has never quite been accepted as valid data, underlying the natural subjectivity:

“The first point to make is that experience is never pure or transparent. If experience is to be used to provide evidence and gain insight into everyday cultures, and if ideas about it are to inform research practice and modes of analysis within cultural studies, what is gathered in the name of experience cannot simply be presented as raw data, or regarded as offering a direct expression of people’s participation in different cultural fields.” (Pickering, 2008: 19).

Pickering speaks of a narrative rather than a “lived experience”, as experience always involves interpretation of perceptions, feelings and actions that are meaningful. Although semi-structured interviews are generally regarded as the most fitted for gaining insight into the ‘lived experience’, Pickering makes a valid point: it is important to remember in regards to my informants, that it is unrealistic to make any kind of general statement about the urban youth culture or artivism in Tunisia, or to validate the ‘meaning’ of a truly ‘lived experience’ through these interviews. At best, a sample of current ideas and experiences of the subjects can be extracted and analyzed. Therefore, a narrative that comes to life by contextualization is more appropriate in this case.

Instead of systematizing and sterilizing the interview process as to reduce interview interaction, this study inquires into the epistemological nature of interviews – as social events, what kind of knowledge can they generate? Interaction between interviewer and interviewee is a fundamental aspect of interviewing, and interviewing ultimately shapes what is said. The literature on interviews has also developed, and interviews are now commonly understood as collaborative and communicative proceedings evolving around their own norms and rules (Kvale, 1996: 5-6). Focus should therefore not only be centered on what is said, and the information it brings about, but also on the interactive elements in the interview.
The point of departure for the interview was to make the interviewee as comfortable as possible in terms of setting, access and communication. At most possible, the interview would be conducted in an environment in which they normally moved within, however this resulted in a lot of distractions from friends or family members who did not respect for example a closed door, which meant I had to ask several times that the interview continued in a more quiet environment. Aside from that no major distractions were encountered, I was however aware that some of the questions were sensitive. Therefore, those types of questions typically came towards the end of the interview, in order to slowly build up confidence and increase the comfort of the informant. For the interview to have a conversational form as dialogue, I also expressed my own opinion on several questions and responses in order to position myself more subjectively, and not simply as an interviewer. This naturally can also have side effects including the possibility of the informants either holding back information or avoiding questions by taking on a more collegial tone.

The interview guide was constructed in both English and French in order to accommodate the interviewee. Having had only corresponded with possible informants online, I wanted to make sure that my informants felt comfortable enough to answer the questions in either English or French. French is and has been taught as a compulsory language from elementary school in Tunisia, however depending on social class, access and education the vocabulary strength may vary. One of my informants sometimes had to stop answering the question (in French) to answer in Arabic and here I had the benefit of assistance from the other informant to help me translate directly from Arabic to English.

4.2 Doing Sociological and Ethnographic Fieldwork

In Pickering (2008), Aeron Davis theorizes on a method of a combined sociological/ethnographic approach to cultural production by observing and documenting cultural agents in their own spaces. They are typically micro-studies that involve both ethnography and qualitative interviewing, most commonly in the form of limited participant-observation (Davis 2008: 58).

25 Please see appendix: 9.1 and 9.2
26 Senior Lecturer and Director of the MA in Political Communication at Goldsmiths University.
The researcher here seeks to discover the practices, processes and social interactions of professionals producing culture. Furthermore Davis stresses the importance of understanding and adjusting the scale of the research. Here, it is up to the researcher to choose which participants that can adequately speak on the subject. For example, one should ask at what scale is a sample sufficient?

“Is the study focused on an entire cultural industry, an aspect of that industry, a subculture or a specific case-study example? If a case-study approach is adopted, then a set of potential participants is limited and easily identified. A good case-study will aim to deal with a range of candidates that can offer alternative perspectives.”

(Davis, 2008: 59).

Davis then underlines the importance of making and maintaining contact with the interview subjects, which is self-explanatory yet crucial when gaining access and trust within a more radical object of study.

Good access is certainly the key to success in any qualitative studies, and due to the nature of my work, and a somewhat longer stay in Tunisia, this was relatively easy. I have chosen Davis’s guidelines for my interviews, as the nature of the subject and the informants were sometimes delicate. Thus a structured method has been chosen to achieve the best possible frame for the interviews. One month in the field out of a total five allows for a more ‘thick description’ (see Geertz: 1973) and for regular daily observations.

Also, the interviews were conducted via the interview guide, however I quickly discovered they needed adjustments depending on the informant. Some spoke very eloquently and the interview sometimes surpassed the one-hour time frame by 30-40 minutes. The decision was to keep the tape rolling and continue speaking on the topic without any specific interview questions. This adds to the concept of writing a thick description, by letting the informants tell their story. The transcriptions are based on the interview guide, but with extended questions along the way. This technique also meant that certain themes started to emerge from the conversations. One theme that kept re-occurring, even during informal meetings, was the question of the cultural life (or lack thereof) in Tunisia. I therefore decided to hold on to the thematic approach, and thereby sectioning and extracting some frequent themes into the analysis.
Braun and Clark (2006) developed such a qualitative, thematic analytic method for: Identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail.

However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79).

Although the method was originally intended for ethnographic interviews in psychology: “Generally a theme can be said to capture something important about the data in relation to the research question and represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.”(Braun and Clarke, 2006: 82).

To return to Davis (2008), this type of interview and data collection presupposes that the hypothesis and theories evolve with the research (Davis, 2008: 65). This way of working has proved to be the beneficiary in regards to a constant re-thinking of research questions and of the knowledge that is being produced. However it also poses a critical question and calls for self-reflexivity of the researcher.

On interview strategy, Davis writes that:

“Contacting people involved in particular social groups or subcultures may be quite different. This may be more about personal contacts and gaining trust. It can work best through shared online spaces or talking to people directly at events. The research objectives may be similar but the practical approach is not.”
(Davis, 2008: 64).

Because of my research preparations for the music-lab workshop in Tunisia, I had a relatively good idea of who I wanted to interview, or at least in which urban categories such as rap, street art, dance and the organization of urban events, festivals or other cultural production. Here, Facebook was a tremendous source for locating people. My previous experience in the Middle East region has been that young people use Facebook as their primary communication and do not necessarily hold e-mail accounts. Furthermore, when messaging the people I wanted to interview the Facebook mail consisted of a relatively short message designating the research, why I was coming to Tunisia and embedded links included to Turning Tables and our local
partner Radio Chaabi, as well as the purpose of the interview and why I was interested in talking with them.

This also gave the respondents a possibility to look at my profile, my previous work, my pictures and much more – allowing them to evaluate me first and then agree to an interview or not, whereas they then agreed to the interview and added me as a “friend”. This has both advantages and dis-advantages. For me, it turned out to be a plus as most likely the informants identified with my work, and therefore accepted to be interviewed, as none of them rejected to be part of my study. Since a lot of the people that I made contact with had already heard about me, and the purpose of my stay in Tunisia, this helped build confidence and credibility in me as an interviewer. This is risky business however, as it could have easily been the other way around, hence the benefit of the more ‘anonymous’ e-mail enquiry.

Doing this sort of internet-ethnography certainly presents challenges, for example in terms of how the researcher can ‘move freely without being seen’. As Dhiraj Murthy (2008) reminds us:

“For the ethnographer, the internet should never be read as a ‘neutral’ observation space as it always remains a fieldwork setting and, as such, a researcher’s data selection and analyses are always biased by agendas, personal histories, and social norms.”
(Murthy, 2008: 840).

Social networking sites such as Facebook can be useful in the initial mapping, not only in terms of doing the initial ethnography research by observing “invisibly”. “They are “virtual ‘gatekeepers’ with chains of ‘friends’ who are potential research respondents.” (Murthy, 2008: 845).

Although I had ethnographically immersed myself into the home, work and private life and thoughts of my respondents, I was able to get a more varied picture and a further understanding of what their views were via their Facebook pages. For example, many of my informants voiced their opinions on political issues in Tunisia and worldwide. By posting images, caricatures and quotes with certain messages, it constructs a limited, yet accurate “first-hand-impression” virtually. It also allowed me to see and thereby “judge” their work in order to make the decision whether they could possible be viewed as artivists or not.
As Murthy explains:

“Like any other data source, social networking web sites should be treated in a nuanced or layered fashion. When considered alongside other data (e.g. inter-viewing), the sites can provide unique in-depth autobiographical accounts of scenes and respondents”

(Murthy, 2008: 846).

It should be said however, that many young Tunisians who work consciously with the mixing and re:mixing of politics and art are cautious of meeting strangers, and there is a general suspiciousness against journalists and other Westerners. Much of the suspicion comes partly from having lived under the constant eye of the ‘Big Brother’ during the Ben Ali regime, which monitored the physical space and the online presence for years. And partly due to the new increased surveillance and presence of police everywhere, which has resulted in many stories about artists disappearing in the middle of the night, accused of using drugs as a way to criminalize them for their use of freedom of expression.

I am also consciously seeking answers from which I can draw data from, for the later cultural production (Images Festival), simultaneously while seeking a deeper understanding of how art is used in Tunisia in an activist manner. The room in which the research takes place, is an urban room amongst youth, therefore the context of the observations and interviews naturally influences the setting and the mood of the conversations.

4.3 Artivism and Cultural Practice(s) in the field

My research in the field consists of both “experts” and “practitioners”. My focus on the practitioners is found in the in-depth interviews which allow the artivists to give their perspective, whereas the “expert” meetings have been less formal and not always recorded, but rather taken shape in the form of observing, listening and discussing ideas and concepts freely. One month spent in the field is a relatively long time for observations, taken into account the total length of the research period (6 months). Daily general observation notes has thus been taken, yet only extracted if they were useful or relevant for my specific research design. The experts further serve as a great resource for widening my own perspective in a number of Tunisian discourses, such
as human rights, political relations, governance, history and so on. Also, the ‘experts’ perspective exists in a different cultural and political sphere, aiming to balance and widen the scope, as well as provide me with a wider context.

Overall, the aim is to gain a close familiarity with a given group of individuals within this certain (sub) culture, as well as their practices through an intensive involvement with people in their cultural environment. This is usually the characteristic of participant observation research, conducted over an extended period of time. The methodological choice is to observe certain people, certain places and certain activities based on the insight that the study must be limited in order to extract any valid answers in a short time span.

4.4 Informants

**Chouaib Cheu**, Co-founder and Director of ART SOLUTION.

Art Solution is a contemporary dance collective and non-profit organization based in Tunis. Created in June 2011, they have already arranged several International dance competitions, a conference and public art interventions in the form of dance. They recently received international media coverage over their public interventions with a dance performance called *Je danserai malgré tout* (I will dance despite everything), which are staged performances of unexpected dancing in public spaces, much in the same spirit as ‘Flash Mobs’.

One news media describes the phenomenon in the following way:

> With the assassination of Chokri Belaid, violence has returned to the streets of Tunis. Conservative Islamist forces target artistic freedom. But an initiative of young Tunisians now reclaims the streets. Their weapon is dance.

Art Solution’s mission statement further reads: *We support talent by providing resources, counseling and support. We try to reduce violence through building confidence and breaking prejudice. We are concerned with children and female inclusion in society through cultural activities. Our ultimate aim is to provide cultural opportunities for people in*
order to improve their communities and bring a change into their lives. Our work empowers people in the sense that it gives them access to different resources, share experiences and acquire new skills that will turn them into professionals’.

30 I witnessed first hand, how Youtube videos popped up in my inbox on Facebook in the beginning of February 2013, from the organizers and dancers of Art Solution, after making a few stories in national and international newspapers in the weeks following, which was then also picked up by Swedish newspaper 31 Dagens Nyheter, reporting the same story (25/2-2013). The video starts in a public square by one dancer moving freely to the sound of two traditional drum-players, and as the crowd starts to gather more dancers perform, finally resulting in the crowd participating in the dancing – from elderly women in headscarves to young teenage boys, the crowd becomes increasingly loud clapping and dancing along. The performance then finishes and the crowd quickly dispatches, similar to how flash mobs occur.

**WMD, Rapper and Radio host**

Mehdi ‘WMD’ is a rapper from Tunis who uses social media extensively to get his music promoted and his message across. He has been very active during and after the revolution, spreading a message that encourages the people of Tunisia to unite regardless of class or social and religious background, to stand up against the regime. Furthermore, he raps in both English and Arabic which gives an advantage in terms of understanding his lyrics. WMD also hosts a weekly radio show at one of the major post-revolution radio stations *Radio Kalima* featuring ‘underground’ hip hop from the region and abroad, and he uses the air time to discuss current issues regarding music and culture in general. At the time of the revolution he released 32 “Dignity Revolution” in English, over a dark ‘hardcore’ beat sharing his views on the revolution, which as he explains was a strategy for him in order to speak freely, as it was not written in Arabic and disseminated on Youtube and Facebook.

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30 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OfWQ2GaVHg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OfWQ2GaVHg)
32 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7l4nWZWQbIk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7l4nWZWQbIk)
The anonymous collective Zwewla (or Zwawla), meaning "the poor" in Tunisian Arabic, is composed of workers, unemployed young people, students and artists. Many of the members were doing graffiti and Street Art before January 14th (the revolution), but it was after the elections that Zwewla came together, as they felt politicians did not keep their word to the youth and the poor about improving their conditions, but instead divided into right and left political camps and focused on other issues. This is also the purpose of their art, exposing social problems through political messages and imagery that is connected to the revolution, they also tag and sign off their pieces with a “Z” a reminiscent of Zorro, who fought against the tyrants and defended the helpless.

33 Tunisia Live reported the arrest of two members Oussama Bouagila (25) and Chahine Berriche (23) of the activist street-art group Zwelwa, on November 3, 2012 in the southern town of Gabes, as they wrote slogans on a University wall. The graffiti claimed that the revolution was highjacked by the new ruling Islamist party Ennahda (post-revolution), by writing sentences such as: Where are the rights of the poor? And ‘The revolution is not a revolution of secularism or Islamism. It is rather the revolution of the poor’. The pair has been on trial since December 4, 2012 charged with ‘spreading false messages harmful to public order’, which could land them with five years in prison. According to the news site Tunisa Live: “The graffiti artists have been charged with “disrupting public order” under Article 121 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes the publication, distribution, or sale of information that detracts from public order or public morals.”(ibid.). Their trial was then rescheduled several times until my own visit to Tunis, to 27 March 2013.

34 According to Counsel Bochra Hmida Haj, which is one of five councils for the defense of artists, there is no law against graffiti in Tunisia, but the penal code is regularly exercised to crack down on artists. At a press conference on December 1st, 2012 Zwewla requested that the proceedings be lifted. Bochra Hmida Haj further commented that the government tried to stifle artistic expression, and are threatening

artists with law and justice, just as Salafists have threatened in the name of religion. The pair appeared before the Court of First Instance of Gabes, Tunisia on March 27, but the trial was postponed to April 10, 2013.

Supported by more than 7000 users on Facebook, a group openly took position to defend the two members, along with a network of activists and organizations of civil society. A rally in support was held in Carthage and the online campaign, called "Graffiti is not a crime", brings together over 2000 members on Facebook. Zwewla are very active posting images, quotes, videos and artwork daily, putting together short films from pro-Zwewla demonstrations such as the one taking place during the International event ‘World Social Forum’, where a range of supporters from all ages gathered.

Several human rights organizations such as Amnesty International has made condemning statements, and stated that they believe that the Tunisian authorities repeatedly resort to Article 121 of the Penal Code to suppress freedom of expression, just as the former regime of Ben Ali did.

The trial for the two young artists was postponed to March 27th, 2013, a few days before I was due to return home. Oussama called me the next day and explained the sentence would take weeks to arrive, and “finally” on April 10th they were sentenced to a fine of 100 Tunisian Dinar and no prison sentence. News that was not only positive, but also interesting in terms of indications that massive pressure from national and International groups had paid off.

Teezy Che & Kader Grugewi, Dancers and Street Performers

The two young dancers staged a performance piece during the demonstrations that arose due to the assassination of the (leftist) oppositional politician Chokri Belaid. Their dance performance functions both as an performance that is extremely site specific, taking place in a side street of Avenue Habib Bourguiba and as an intervention, taking over public space. Their piece holds even more symbolic value as

37 http://www.timeslive.co.za/africa/2013/01/23/drop-charges-against-tunisian-graffiti-artists-amnesty
38 https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Diczji-Dv6w
no layover music has been added to the production, they dance to the background sounds of protestors shouting, continuing even if they are showered by teargas canisters flying over their heads, until the gas provokes illness.

The performance was meant as homage to Chokri Belaid, who was not afraid to speak out, regardless of pressure. The title “Feel it, do it” was inspired by taking immediate action and not being afraid of the consequences, showing that young people are capable of non-violent protest. Finding their video online, made me determined to interview them as soon as possible.

Since my sources are all individuals with their own subjective opinion, I was also interested in reaching out to others in order to get a more varied picture of what the current events that have transpired means in the larger perspective, culturally, politically, economically and socially. I therefore set up two informal meetings.

4.5 Informal meetings and Observations

When I returned to Tunisia in early March, I was met by a different landscape just 8 months after my previous visit. The ‘Champs-Elysées’ of Tunis and the location of Ministry of Interior Affairs: the grand Habib Bourgiba Avenue had been covered in barbwire, tanks rolled the streets and security police with rifles were visible on every corner. As one of my contact persons told me, the security had been even more increased after an attempt bombing of the French consulate, the assassination of Chokri Belaid and yet another young man set him self on fire in protest due to the lack of employment, all in the course of several weeks before I arrived. A chilling reminder of that same situation in which a self-immolation had set off the revolution in 2010.

My contact person, Kerim Bouzouita, works for United Nations Populations Fund and is an Associate Professor with ESEN Tunisia and Loyola University of Chicago. Kerim is also a journalist and is currently writing a PhD on the underground culture in Tunisia as well as on artistic freedom of expression and was thus a valuable source for information and the exchanging of ideas on location. Kerim shed light on how important the ‘hactivism’ culture had been for Tunisia during the censorship of the
Internet. Being able to surpass proxy servers in order to blog and vlog on topics that were important was for a long time the only way to share opinions. Kerim also explained that the reason why artists are so targeted in his opinion is because they are ‘outside the system’. People who do not belong to any political parties or are associated with religious or political groups are harder to account for and sometimes also harder to trace, and thus many artists have remained anonymous even after the revolution for fear of safety.

Jerome is a Franco-Tunisian who has lived his entire adult life in Tunisia, and started the blog http://www.yakayaka.org - an online source of nearly all political caricature coming out of Tunisia. He also owns a small art gallery in Tunis where he tries to exhibit artists that have been deemed provocative. 39 His wife Nadia, a Tunisian woman in her thirties, writes and draws the very popular satirical “Willis from Tunis”, a cat that represents Tunisia’s conscience. She tells me that she has been threatened many times by the salafists, but that drawing the cat in itself is a bit like therapy. By using humor she tackles sensitive issues through the different situations that Willis lives through and as long as things do not improve, Willis will be around.

Yakayaka also report on stories concerning limitations of artistic freedom of expression, and as Jerome told me over a rendezvous in one of Tunisia’s few ‘modern’ bars, he does not see the conditions improving any time soon. He explains that, in one way popular culture is beginning to seep in where it wasn’t before – after five decades of dictatorship and colonialism, people are beginning to open their minds through popular culture, and that it is stimulating them to interpret what they are going through. On the other hand, the conditions for artists have become increasingly dangerous due to Salafist and other conservative groups who are now intervening in not only the public debate, but in the public space where many artists work. Many artists did not accept donations from Ben Ali’s regime, and they do not accept them from institutions such as Ministry of Culture, which leaves them with very limited funding opportunities. Instead, many go through foreign cultural instances and embassies in order to work without restrictions or censorship.

39 see appendix: 10
Finally, my daily talks with our partner organization’s members from activist independent youth radio, Radio Chaabi which reports on current events, culture and youth issues was a great source to getting the freshest news about what was happening on the cultural scene.

Thus much of the unofficial meetings in the very beginning stages of the fieldwork were crucial for an increased macro-perspective of Tunisian politics, culture and subcultures. Furthermore, one door opened another almost automatically after meeting some of these key informants, meaning that other potential observations and meetings as well as interviews became more accessible by introduction from my unofficial informants.

4.6 Research Ethics

Art has a long history of creating debate and provocation, and it is therefore no wonder that art and political activism become more and more intertwined in order to create attention on various issues. I was aware that not everyone would be interested in sharing his or her opinions on the matter. The ethnographic research taking place in Tunisia, posed as the biggest ‘danger’ as I worked and observed in the field simultaneously. It was thus important to not only address and make the purpose of research clear to the informants but to any one who may be present as well as guarantee their confidentiality.

Furthermore, this research will build and develop a basis for the artistic programme of the Turning Tables ‘Artistic Activism’ section of the Images Festival, which puts the researcher in a critical balance between ‘work’ and research.

In terms of my involvement, I intended to keep a moderate participation position, as to maintain a balance between "insider" and "outsider" roles as a researcher, and yet allow for a good combination of involvement and necessary detachment to remain objective (Hong & Duff, 2002: 191). This requires awareness that participants may act differently or put up a facade that is in accordance to what they believe I am ‘looking for’. 
As with any form of research dealing with human subjects, the researcher must ensure ethical boundaries are never crossed by those conducting research or the subjects of study. The researcher must have clearly established boundaries before the onset of the study, and have guidelines in place should any issues cross the line of ethical behavior (ibid.) One of the issues would be if the researcher is studying a population where illegal activities may occur, as in a sense I did. Another point to make, is to remember our own role as researchers in the field, meaning that as much as we look at our research subjects as a way to extract data, we must be aware of the fact that they may “use” us to spread a certain message. Although my informants appeared to be very genuine, as much of their actions and the repercussions they have suffered prove, one must not forget the context of power-relations between a Western researcher and a practicing cultural or artistic activist who is constantly searching for platforms to voice their opinions.

Working from an epistemological framework for the analysis, I am moving from a priori knowledge that I already posses of the region and of the youth subculture(s) to a posteriori knowledge that has been acquired through empirical work combined with a more in-depth theoretical knowledge. When designing the research questions for the interview guide, certain a priori knowledge and beliefs were both reinforced and contested by the respondents. It is this posteriori that provides the experience of the informants and thereby several propositions which is the basis of the analysis.

In regards to cohesive themes in interviews, some themes started emerging in the discussion regarding the practice of art and activism and how it is connected to both politics and culture. Therefore the interview statements, which are hereunder reviewed and analyzed, are structured by thematic similarities rather than by order of informants or when the interviews were conducted.

In conclusion, the conditions and techniques of ethnographic fieldwork impose many challenges to the goal of providing an objective picture of a cultural reality. All the information that contributes to the ethnography is filtered through the researcher's impressions and his/her biases within theoretical orientation, research strategy, social status, and individual background and personality. Furthermore biases are inevitable in doing fieldwork and particularly an accurate sampling.
As Davis (2008) explains, working with a small number of informants, there is a difficulty in guaranteeing that the interview information collected is fully representative of experiences or even taps into a predominant cultural perspective. Therefore: “Skewed (non-representative) sampling has to be accounted for.” (Davis, 2008: 68).

5. Interview Analysis of Case Studies

The analysis of the interviews conducted is here divided into research themes rather than informants. The Thesis’ research questions served as overarching themes for the interview guide, and further themes emerged throughout the interview.

5.1 Towards a new cultural life – whose space is it anyway?

If political and financial matters spurred the Tunisian revolution, for many young people, 2013 is about a ‘cultural revolution’. For many young Tunisians, including my informants, they claim that a cultural revolution is the only way towards any ‘real changes’. The political landscape and many decades of culture being presented by the elite for the elite and regulated by a dictator, has had a lasting impact on the somewhat sleepy cultural life in the city’s capital, Tunis.

As one of my informants Teezy explains:

“There is no more money for culture in Tunisia. We have a Minister of Culture who doesn’t do anything for the people. In a way there was more culture before everywhere…music, theatre and artists could live or maybe get some airplay if they were well connected with the royal family – but now, we have to fight even harder, to be independent, and to make a new cultural life in Tunisia”.

(Interview 2: appendix 9.5)

And Oussama from Zwewla tells me:

“To kill arts, that’s what they want…I mean the government. Before, even artists everyone has been scared of the government, even now we don’t talk about the

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40 Teezy and other informants claim that most major medias and broadcasting in Tunis are owned by royal family members
government. But something changed inside the artists…and inside the society.”

(Interview 3: appendix 9.6)

There is an extreme need for culture amongst the youth, and they thirst for it even in the city center and its surrounding ‘cultural capitals’ such as La Marsa, Sidi Bouzid and Carthage. It is a country without access to the type of culture, which moves beyond entertainment or educational purposes – but also serves a source for intellectual thinking. Culture is needed to as serve as a tool for analysis of current social and political issues played out in their own country, but also as a mental escape into ‘other places’.

One may ask what art can accomplish, and if it is not naïve to focus on artivism as a real catalyst for social change. But culture in a society fills an immensely important role, especially in times of crisis. Civil society does not have access to political and financial equality, intellectually or systemically. For their voice to be heard, another communication channel is needed – furthermore art, music and community is what holds society together. It seems that this is absent in todays Tunisia as the 21-year old dancer Kader tells me:

“Public reactions have not changed, before or after the revolution, people are the same – we are a country without art. We need an Art Revolution to change things. For example when you watch Tunisian television, you don’t see artists you only see famous people, who are working to be more famous and more paid just to say “Ahh this is a good country, I love it”. They say stupid things. This is not the real Tunisia. I think that artists are really from the street, but they are neglected in this country”.

(Interview 2: appendix 9.5)

Teezy agrees and overall feels that not much has improved:

“There is no artistic freedom of expression…because rappers go to jail every week, Chokri Beladi was killed and TV is still censored and state-monitored. The only difference now is that we have free Internet.”

(Interview 2: appendix 9.5)

As mentioned, my interview subjects talked about ‘la revolution culturelle’ as one of the key factors in building a new Tunisia post-revolution. They were also under the impression that the Minister of Culture merely served as a symbolic figure that did not
have any influence politically. In *Culture, State and Revolution* (2012) Pahwa and Winegar discuss the relationship between cultural policy and the industry post-revolution. The revolution(s) have brought on new challenges as well as new opportunities to the cultural industries. As a flurry of articles has shown from the region in 2011 until now, a tremendous increase in protest art, in-situ interventions and other indie productions have flourished, and thereby a new, alternative cultural scene is beginning to take form. This naturally changes the way cultural policies have been previously shaped.

“Changes in the cultural scene are not simply a barometer of broader political and economic change, but part and parcel of it, particularly in countries with strong, centralized ministries of culture, such as Egypt, Syria and Tunisia. In these places, the dominant state ideology poses culture as a path to progress and enlightenment.”

(Pahwa & Winegar, 2012: 2).

They thus claim that there is an underlying structural transformation of the relationship between arts and the state, and that in this moment of opening, cultural producers, intellectuals and politicians are asking foundational questions about the role of government in the field of culture and vice versa. But whereas Western artists and institutions have often benefited from cultural state subsidies, assuring that arts and culture are not controlled solely by the market powers, worries in other regions is that it in fact gives Cultural Ministries the power to pick and choose according to their own agenda. As Pahwa & Winegar claim: “Others counter that the state has an interest in supporting art that fits a political agenda or that state employees direct funds to their own art and that of friends and relatives” (ibid.).

This was of course the case in Tunisia during Ben Ali, and now there are new concerns, also regarding the influence of Ennahda and the continuing religious pressure to only support arts that ‘do not offend’. Therefore a paramount concern for Tunisian artists, and likely for other artists in the region, is the relationship between religion, culture and state. For those who are secular-oriented or just opposed to these blurry lines, the crucial function of ministries of culture is to combat conservative interpretations of Islam, draw out corruption and see competent leaders in place who themselves love and respect art.
But outside of the ministries, the revolution(s) have caused new cultural productions to flurry causing the cultural politics of the Middle East economy to have to take a second look in the mirror. New civic voices are rising alongside artists’ where alternative critiques of the regimes or governments flow (somewhat) freely on social media. By actively participating as citizens through cultural means, whether they are the artist or the audience, it is a way to enter into a dialogue by engaging in public space and through online forums.

For Duncombe, the recipe of becoming a ‘successful creative activist’ lies in dialogue, humor and non-violent actions, combinations that can sometimes be difficult to achieve in the midst of a revolution. Furthermore the role of the artivist and culture is seen as: “Full of contradictions, culture is shot through with both revolutionary and reactionary tendencies. The job of the revolutionary is to untangle this mess and extract a culture of resistance” (Duncombe, 2002: 9).

Although applicable to some degree, what Duncombe and the teachings of Center for Artistic Activism falls short in, is the lack of examples that stretch beyond American or Western European examples, a common complaint within academic literature. Artivism becomes something quite different in places where people have the choice to become artivists, can afford material, have networks of support and even get credited for their work in magazines or add it to their Curriculum Vitae’s. Artivism beyond that is based on desperation to change things, and thereby using the few tools that are available. Theorizing from a Western perspective has its implications, as the local context of the cultural expression needs to be taken into consideration.

A common complaint in Northern Africa nowadays is that the politicians hardly bother to address the economic situation, which used to be the main issue of the protests. This is rather common for revolutions. It may sound nice to do away with all the old corrupt people and structures, but by doing so you create a vacuum that is filled by opportunists and political organizations that push their own agendas.

“The ironclad grip of many countries’ centralized ministries of culture (e.g. Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, etc.), with their dogmatic state ideologies, continues to obstruct free cultural expression. Though it is precisely at such moments when a populace begins to actively
reconsider, remember and record their histories – their origin stories and their future self-definition.” (Demerdash, 2012: 8).

As it turns out, Zwewla believe that by exposing issues such as unemployment, they have created many enemies in the system.

“In Tunisia after the revolution today you can express yourself and problems of human rights, freedom of expression but you cannot expose social or economic problems. When you talk about the system or unemployment, you face jail.”

(Interview 3: appendix 9.6)

5.2 If you dance in the streets, you go to jail

The right to a platform, and the battle for public space is very real in Tunis, as my interview subject Kader Grungewi tells me:

“When I started dancing, we really danced in the streets like in front of a café or so, but if you dance in the streets in Tunisia you go to jail. I don’t know why, but all public dancing is banned. For example if you want to make a Flash Mob, you need permission from the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Culture and the military and the police too! And they choose who can work on it, how do you make it and when and where.

There are too many rules, so you cannot express anything – and if you do not respect the rules they come and stop the show.”

(Interview 2: appendix 9.5)

The question of in situ art interventions is also highly relevant for the Zwewla collective. As Oussama explains:

“There are no new physical spaces, we do not believe that art can only be done in a standardized (conformed) space – we target the poor and the poor do not move in these spaces. Regarding those ‘real spaces’ where everyday people move (outside the white cube). Even before and after the revolution, these everyday people find this kind of street art creative and appealing – they find something positive in this everyday kind of art.”

(Interview 3: appendix 9.6)

If these performances (or interventions) were moved to a confined space, they would not make sense. In situ refers to works of art, which are made specifically for a host
site, or a work of art that takes into account the site that it is to be installed, displayed and exhibited. There is something about an in-situ performance that can make it intangible and hard to ‘preserve’ compared to those cultural productions that take place within spaces designed to attract visitors. For my interview subjects however, it seems to be a conscious choice based on the desire to work independently.

As Kader explains why he left the safe cradle of the institution:

“I danced since I was 7 years old and I danced in the academy for one year, but…dancing it’s from the streets. When you are dancing in the academy you don’t feel anything. You have some good shows, good public, good conditions and you are really more paid and everything is ok – but you don’t feel nothing. Everything starts from the streets.”

(Interview 2: appendix 9.5)

It seems that for Kader, the streets and artistic expressions are related to concepts of authenticity. Kader’s interpretation of what the artist’s role is one that works in the ways of an activist. He/She does not appear on TV programs or perform at opening receptions for government officials. This “real” type of artist works without limitations and uses the city and the streets as a backdrop for art and expression.

“We have to cross the line between art and activism, you see? Many of our friends are not respected because they dance, some of them were in jail just for dancing, so when we dance we take an action…we know the risks we take. Before, we had dance performances everywhere but the police is more hard now, and they act on their own. I think that artists are people who do not just smile and befriend the government; this is why they are a threat”.

(Interview 2: appendix 9.5)

And as Ali remarks on why Zwewla consider themselves artivists:

“Regarding artivism…I think we are artivists because of the way that we use art. We don’t belong to any NGO or Governmental organization or political party. But we deliver our message through art. Not l’art pour l’art, but for the message. We don’t care about getting our name out on the streets, and we don’t want to limit ourselves to just one type of art. We go in the streets and express ourselves,
we scream, we talk and make noise (taps on make-belief drum) in the street, on social networks everywhere. The point is to make people think.”

(Interview 3: appendix 9.6)

5.3 More than Explicit Content – Parental Advisory

Mehdi ‘WMD’ begins the interview by recalling to me, where he was on the day of the revolution:

“On January 14th, I was with other artists in front of the Interior Ministry, it was cool because people just united for one cause. We were blocking cars, making blockades, demonstrating and making noise together. For two days we were like freedom fighters. We ruled! The following days are just black days to me. This is when people started dividing and people went into different political camps, Islamist, left and right. So, when I write lyrics: I try to say that this Government is trying to divide us but we have to not care about people’s religious or political beliefs, first we are Tunisians.”

(Interview 1: appendix 9.4)

Mehdi has a view that I have encountered many times among rappers in Lebanon, Jordan and Egypt. Many rappers see themselves and their role as ‘truthsayers’, implying that the general masses need to be informed and unified. Authenticity is also something that occupies WMD. As Shannahan and Qurra define it:

“A recurring theme in hip-hop culture and its observers is the importance of keeping it real, of authenticity, of artistic integrity. The intersections between integrity as an artist and authenticity as a lyricist have been cited as key aspects of being successful in hip-hop.”

(Shannahan & Hussain, 2011: 42).

WMD’s own opinion is clear:

“But the good thing is now, even if we do not have a ‘real hip hop audience’, things are getting better I have to say. Now you have Street Art on the TV and I have my show where I play no bullshit commercial songs, only real rap on Kalima FM. Rap started in the early 90’s here in Tunisia, so it has been around for a long time.

But only now we have DJ’s and rappers and shows, things like that.
I don’t know why, but in Tunisia it’s like people do not have the will to build things. Even the rappers who make money from music, they don’t invest into the culture..they buy a house, take a vacation, but no money comes back into the scene.”

(Interview 1: appendix 9.4)

It seems that WMD is severely disappointed with the lack of enthusiasm and engagement from his local scene. What is real talk then on the global stage? In Tunis, it seems, real talk has to resonate with contemporary social realities. His lyrics as WMD explains, respond to local and global realities. In this sense, rap can provide a forum for protest; against national, international and transnational political events and trends, yet as a form of resistance it remains within the limits set by the nation state.

“And the new government is not taking measures to re-build or re-structure the culture. They are just fighting the opposition…the Ministry of Culture I think he hates Hip Hop! Art is a threat to them, especially rappers. Part of the revolution is Hip Hop you know...So they try to strike that down, so things won’t happen again. “

(Interview 1: appendix 9.4)

For WMD, the constant use of ‘revolution’ by rappers is fatiguing:

“I don’t focus on the buzz topics like the revolution just to make a hype you know? A lot of rappers now make songs about the revolution just to get famous. In the US probably, a commercial song on the radio has lyrics about, excuse the term, “bitches” and money and cars, and alcohol. But in Tunisia, a commercial song now talks about the revolution or social issues.”

(Interview 1: appendix 9.4)

During our interview, his phone rings and he excuses himself since he really must take the call. Two days earlier, a rapper and his film-production crew have been arrested, but Weld El 15 (the rapper) has managed to run off into hiding. He tells me that a radio show just called to get his opinion, and he has told them that this sort of harassment should not be tolerated in Tunisia.

“I am for all freedom of speech. But when it comes to the law it is very ambiguous. He (Weld El 15) said that ‘police men are dogs’, that’s why they are after him. Ok, you arrest him and the people who are just part in the video..like the girl in the video, she is just acting in the video and she has now been taken to jail.
And they put up mug shots of them on Facebook! The police even! Weld El 15 is afraid because he received death threats before, so that is why he is now hiding. But I think there will be more of this you know, it’s like the Berlin Wall. Some things just cannot be undone, and now we have crossed this barrier and we will continue to do so, no matter what the government does.”

(Interview 1: appendix 9.4)

I asked WMD if there were similar cases before the revolution and he explains:

“Well, there was one who was arrested. He told me that when he came to the police office, they sat him down and listened to his music with him and each sentence they pressed pause and asked: Why did you write that? What do you mean by that? You never write this, you never write that and then he was released, but he was banned from public shows!”

(Interview 1: appendix 9.4)

I am curious to know how this kind of censorship procedure takes place and WMD tells me:

“During Ben Ali, they were listening to your phone calls, there were agents and the Internet police! And now, the Minister of Education watched 41 ‘The Harlem Shake’, some which were taking place in high schools and the director of the school…I don’t know what happened to her, but there were some sanctions. What the hell!? I mean, police officers are watching videos on youtube..real crimes are happening in the streets, what are you doing man?!”

(Interview 1: appendix 9.4)

Activism is usually organized surrounding current affairs, which requires quick action just as with my interview subjects WMD, Dancers Kader and Teezy and Zwewla who all acted quickly after the Weld El 15 arrest and the assassination of Chokri Belaid. This ‘immediate’ way of working to create something on short notice that comments or challenges a current affair is an activist way of working. With the Weld El 15 affair, what was perhaps most surprising was how quickly people organized themselves in order to put pressure on the judicial system. I attended their first meeting after the arrest, and rappers were amongst half of the group that had met in the middle of a public park (something which I interpreted as a ‘safe meeting place’). Others were activists, journalists and other young supporters who wanted to help.

41 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Shake_(meme)
I was highly impressed how these young people came together, from all walks of life, to not only discuss what they could do and which networks they could reach out to, but in fact they discussed with the lawyers regarding which type of campaign should be initiated and which sort of discourse to use for public statements and communication. People were clearly upset and extremely outraged that a colleague had been charged, and his co-stars apprehended and exhibited in such a degrading way.

6. Analysis

6.1 Rethinking Arab Youth Subculture(s)

Turning Tables’ own local cultural production was a music video and a track that was produced in the course of a week together with Radio Chaabi in Tunis, and proved to not only be a time-challenge but a matter of security as one of the featuring rappers was in hiding from the police. The video was uploaded on YouTube March 16th, 2013 and reached 10,000 views within the first week. A small production with a wide impact, showcasing Tunisia’s talent which has long been neglected or inaccessible due to difficult production conditions and limitations of online distribution.

On the one hand the underdeveloped cultural industry in Tunisia means that artists have yet to cross into the globalized commercial industry, perhaps allowing more space for artistic expression. On the other hand, creative control does not equal distribution platforms beyond the online medium, as years of regulation and censorship essentially means limitations for artistic expression.

We can thus speak of a glocalized tendency, where the resistance undertaken by artivists creates ‘a new space’, in which cultural hybridity through the mix of urban youth pop-culture, mass communication and traditional culture creates a context in which these artists can create their own authenticity. This in turn, creates a dynamic culture in which art and activism can join hands without necessarily labeling it as

42 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdJ1FJfHrI
‘artivism’. Perhaps what we are witnessing is a new type of youth pan-Arab sense of community, one based on shared experiences with common desires for social and political change.

Hip Hop was always a subversive genre, and has transformed into a universal medium for social and political expression for the young, the marginalized and the dissident, which is precisely why it has attracted so many in the Arab world who feel underrepresented and forgotten by their governments. Also, there is a way of being able to express revolutionary lyrics through a more or less unfiltered channel, since record companies have yet to embrace the genre, as in America or Europe. A blessing in disguise, one could argue as this lack of commercialism also provides a platform for increased freedom of expression.

As Mark LeVine argues in the article ‘The New Hybridities of Arab Musical Intifadas’ (2011) in E-zine Jadaliyya:

“What previously had given art such aesthetic, and thus social power by highlighting its singularity, irreplaceable and incommensurable value, was for all practical purposes lost, because of the commercialization of the music industry in the twentieth century.”

(LeVine, 2011.)

Hence, a lack of commercialization ultimately means more creative control. Also, years of ideas and creativeness have found a way to be heard. Regular youth and other people now have a voice that ‘speaks on behalf of them’, this is crucial in understanding why Arab Hip Hop has indeed been important for the revolution in the region. By crossing the imagery of ‘Zwelwa’ in the street, or watching a music video from rappers like WMD or seeing young people dance freely in the street, hope for future generations become more tangible.

T.W. Adorno may have been torn on this issue today as on one hand he may have critiqued the music and revolution working side by side, and in that sense viewing Hip Hop as not only standardized and banal, but also an illusion subsequently, these productions circulate for an audience to consume and for companies to exploit. On the other hand, Adorno may have adored the anti-commercialized perspective of this form of artistivist expression, with complete control and as a form of resistance against the elite hegemony.

As Levine delineates, whether Adorno would have accepted it or not:

“The self-reflexivity and willingness to critique society by its own referents that have characterized the best exemplars of extreme metal and political hip-hop are legitimate heirs of the tradition of critical engagement that have defined Adorno's oeuvre and that of his Frankfurt School colleagues” (ibid.).

Levine points out that artists in these subcultures have used their music as tools of illuminating the system, and move beyond pure entertainment and towards a more living embodiment of an aesthetic politics that Adorno saw necessary to ‘shake and awaken’ the minds of the population.

Thus, these kinds of cultural productions have various functions. Music is not simply listened to. Rap music is the voice of the oppressed, and the voice of the youth who dare to speak out. It is also a glocalized voice; a narrative of a global youth subculture consumed and produced in a local context. For the youth, the production of Hip Hop is not reduced to imitation; rather it is studied and re-produced in a different way. An important point to make, is that many of these artists do not listen to overly commercialized ‘bling-rap’ such as 50 cent or Lil’ Wayne, rather they listen to politically charged rap such as Immortal Technique, Mos Def and Brother Ali – expressions which are inherently related to protest and resistance.

Misrepresentations of Hip Hop culture has led a great deal of the world to view it as either something highly political and aggressive (Public Enemy) or as something ultra-commercial and misogynistic (50 Cent). The media representations of expressions within Hip Hop which are neither of those genres are few, therefore all the more important for young Tunisian activists to shape this discourse by themselves and present alternative images of Tunisian youth anno 2013. These ‘new’ subculture identities are not subsumed under any dominant ideologies or political narratives, they are rather hybridized and does therefore not reinforce them.

Interestingly, Adorno lived until the end of the sixties, yet he made no attempt at analyzing anything but traditional or classical music surpassing rock, soul and jazz.
When he does discuss other genres like Jazz, he slams it down for being ‘vulgar’. Ironic in a sense as Jazz music was once resistant in itself.

Returning to Walter Benjamin, the musical genres address a problem, which Benjamin saw within what he called the “aura” of the artwork (Benjamin: 1936). What Benjamin means by aura is the work of art's aesthetic value gained through its uniqueness. Before the ability to reproduce art, the value was instilled into it because it was the only one of its kind. Benjamin believed that with modern mass, what he terms “mechanical” production and circulations of art, “the aura” that previously had given art such aesthetic, and thus social power by highlighting its value, was for all practical purposes lost. Art loses its meaning as ritual through the loss of aura, or authenticity (Benjamin in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: 1936 in Duncombe, 2002: 74).

The loss however for Benjamin was a positive development, as it has the potential to open up the politicization of art, and it allows for us to raise political questions in regards to the reproducible image, and such liberated art would bring on new visions.

Benjamin’s concerns were with mass art, and that modern reproductive technology in the realm of mass entertainment, art and film alters the cultural landscape, where there are basically two ways of viewing art: one is the private viewing of original art and the other a communal or kind of mass viewing for example of films (ibid.) This concept could also extend to music and other art forms, and is essentially a question of access. Although published over sixty years ago, and technology having been revolutionized and democratized (or commoditized) to some extent, it still holds relevance.

Film as a medium is more democratic rather than going into a museum, as Benjamin saw the museum setting as more aristocratic and thereby excluding.

By music and film becoming popular art and today accessible through a variety of channels, primarily online – there has been a democratization on a micro-level for Tunisia’s youth.
Although Adorno and Benjamin’s arguments are not always aligned, both saw the power of the mass-produced commodified cultural production, whereas Adorno remained a fiercer critic throughout. As Levine reflects:

“What seems clear is that, at least in the Middle East and North Africa region, in the years leading up to the current revolutionary moment, the growing popularity of metal and rap music represents a return of the aura to local music scenes.”

(Levine: 2011).

Hence, Benjamin and Adorno would agree that an ‘original’ aura has remained within the works of art, even in the mechanical/industrial age, as it becomes visible in these case-studies from Tunisia and the surrounding region. As Levine explains:

“In the age of digital reproduction the largely uncommodified and still sub and counter-cultural hardcore metal and rap scenes have witnessed the return of the aura that Benjamin argued was largely lost—or at least lost to view—with the onset of the era of mechanical reproduction and industrialized/commodified circulation and consumption over a century ago. And this return of the aura has made the scenes that much more powerful and meaningful to their followers.”

(ibid.).

6.2 Re-mixing the Revolution: “Think global – act local”

Although Adorno and Benjamin make valid points, some of their views are rather monolithic in regarding pop culture as inferior, and contaminated aesthetically and politically, and deny the effect of popular culture politics. In their defense, they may have been overwhelmed today with the mash-up of cultures, the underground and the commercial and the radical thought that the audience actually are able to navigate this system, interpret it and build identities around globalized culture. It remains however, that such a black and white view of pop-culture is an oversimplification of its means. Although highly commoditized, we find that culture can provoke social change, political change and individual change. The point of course also being that consumers today are choosy on what culture, art, music and film they decide to consume, something that the cultural industry continuously battle each other over.
Adorno saw consumers as completely without agency, and disregarded how cultural products were received and more importantly, used. The narrowness of his vision and the fact that some of his ideas are tied closely to the historical situation he was living and writing in makes them difficult to apply to today’s situation. However when we look at music and other cultural forms as sites of conflict, it is good to have Adorno to remind us on whose side the big battalions are lined up.

What is further interesting is that an art market is beginning to appear for the ‘revolutionary art’ emerging, especially in the Gulf and Saudi-region, where galleries and curators begin to run themes surrounding the Arab Spring, as are Rap records with compilations featuring ‘The sounds of the revolution’. This is precisely the sort of commodification that Adorno talks about, and reproduction that Benjamin points to. Perhaps it is only a matter of time before Tunisian artivists indeed are offered ‘spaces of capitalism’.

As Demerdash notes:

“When crossing into the world of the art market, the notion of revolution gains a different buzz-worthy currency, frequently at risk of being reduced to a commodity.“

(Demerdash, 2012: 17).

And as she curiously points out:

“Regardless of patterns of consumption or curatorial (mis) framings, contemporary Arab artists today represent a newly formulated avant-garde.”

(ibid.).

But the hybridization that is taking place is also a sort of ‘remix culture’ that exists through a cultural globalization, re-interpretation and re-distribution and perhaps the biggest change since Adorno’s days. Creating a track in today’s Tunisia which features political or social statements, is an act if resistance in itself. Although these artists may copy and borrow signs, symbols, imagery and performance from the Western urban subculture, it becomes re-contextualized because the action in itself has different meaning locally. To put it bluntly: artists and activists in the West enjoy a freedom where the worst curtailing of artistic expression happens through a censor sticker. For young Tunisians, it is jail or physical attacks, poverty, alienation from
society and sometimes family. This dichotomy is not simple of course, and it is easier said that done to be inspired by the global and act on the local. Regardless, during the last decade in which Hip Hop culture and other subcultures have emerged in the Arab world, the closed political systems have been fueling these scenes to become sites of subcultural or even countercultural productions.

The music produced here has become the very antithesis of the popular commercialized and corporate ‘habibi-music’, which dominates the region. Parallel to how other subgenres emerged in the West such as punk and old-school rap, the themes dealt with here are not dissimilar – they are simply treating local and regional issues. Today many deem this old-school Western music (Rap, Punk) as the authentic music, often crediting and connecting the genres to ‘a time when things were different, and when people acted politically’. Whether we have become increasingly apolitical or simply “changed our music taste”, what is interesting is the link between authenticity and revolt.

In all the interviews conducted, the question of authenticity seemed to pop up. The search for authenticity in youth resistance subcultures can in many ways seem bipolar. As Barker puts it:

“Capitalism is the stated target for resistance yet our discussion of youth culture has suggested that none of young people’s cultural texts, symbols and artefacts are outside of capitalism. As bricoleurs of commodities, young people are immersed in, not separated from consumer capitalism and mass media.”

(Barker, 2000: 343).

In spite of their ambivalent position caught in between the local public square and the global, capitalizing, trendsetting gallery and biennial scene, arts of the Arab Spring remain a locus for solidarity; they are the agents of responsibility and socio-political change.

6.3 The revolution will be live

The research field of artivism is still rather limited. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe offers a view on artistic activism and the political field as a hegemonic space.
Although much of her writing in *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces* (2007) is quite radical with an obvious critique of capitalism and neoliberalism as such, she points out some perspectives, which are useful for a discussion. Firstly, Mouffe does not separate non-political and political art, just as this Thesis states: art always exists in a political context. Secondly, Mouffe explains:

“Critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.”

(Mouffe 2007: 4-5).

Mouffe argues that this challenging art has especially recently played an important role in constructing new subjectivities. She also views it as a tool for radical changes. Although she does not mention social change through art, she does hint at the political and economical factors:

“I submit that to grasp the political character of those varieties of artistic activism we need to see them as counter-hegemonic interventions whose objective is to occupy the public space in order to disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character.”

(Mouffe, 2007: 6).

Artistic expressions in the public space in Tunisia are not necessarily capitalistic, they are rather non-existent, yet there is a hint of resonance in the objective to occupy spaces to disrupt the images that the government is trying to distribute.

When Zwewla combine in-situ art interventions made up of political images with demonstrations or when Kader and Teezy dance publically despite restrictions: they are challenging the narrative of Tunisia, which the government tries to paint. By showcasing that the youth are creative, angry, educated, secular or liberal. This diversity challenges the hegemonic, or utopian ideas of what Tunisian youth are “supposed” to be.

Agonism is a concept developed by Chantal Mouffe, which deals with the public space, and creating a political room, which embraces both differences and conflict, instead of a total consensus. The agonistic democracy is a system where people of different beliefs accept their diversity of opinions. This concept can be useful in
conceptualizing the space in which artivism takes place. The main point of her analysis is that, what she calls the *Political*, has to do with the dimension of the conflict: a conflict that cannot find a resolution through dialogue and that cannot be eliminated is an antagonistic conflict, i.e. a conflict to which there can be no rational solution.

But there is another way in which this antagonistic conflict can express itself and this is in the form of agonism; in that case you have parties who, instead of treating their opponents as enemy, treat them as adversaries, which means that there is a recognition of the legitimacy of the demands of the Other. Accepting differences is the form of expression of agonism, which is of course closely linked with a democratic society. What Mouffe argues is that, the main task in a democracy is not to reach consensus but to manage what she calls ‘dissensus’.

Of course Mouffe on one hand often refers to a division between left and right, something that cannot be directly transferred to “artist” and “government”, as we cannot assume all artists are leftists and vice verse. But in terms of Tunis we could see these spaces slowly transforming from antagonistic (pre-revolution) to agonistic (post-revolution) in a sense, because political standpoints are uttered and contested. This becomes apparent in the ‘Arab Public Sphere’, where the artists’ engagement lies with the notion of a revolutionary site as a place of negotiation, artistic expressions and political struggle.

Mouffe argues that the emphasis on consensus has undermined the capacity of political and social actors to articulate dissent in ways that are necessary to democratic life. In a sense, she claims that if an agonistic form of politics is not adopted and if no responsibility for different conflicts and struggles are taken, then when these conflicts erupt, they erupt in violent form. This is of course, the consequence of revolution(s). Much too long had there not only been an antagonistic form of governance, but the voices of the dissidents have been oppressed.

In an interview with Greek webzine *www.re-public.gr*, Mouffe makes an interesting statement that in fact does correlate with the current situation in Tunis and the MENA region:
To come back to the case of the banlieues in France or the uprising Greece, it is precisely because those young people had no channel, no institution, no form in which they really could have their voices heard. They are completely excluded from politics. It is then entirely understandable that when they want to express themselves, they do so in ways that are antagonistic. I think that we will probably see more and more of these phenomena because of the growing population of young people who don’t feel that there is a place for them to voice their concerns.”

(Mouffe, 2009)

Mouffe also argues for the term (or rather return) of passion in politics. What she means by this is that, when people act politically, they are moved by the interests with an affective dimension (Mouffe: 2002). Mainly criticizing the liberalists and the dominant political theory she deems as ‘rationalism’, Mouffe seeks to enforce that the basis for true democracy does not lie in consensus, but rather in differences coexisting in an agonistic public space.

7. Conclusion: to make an observation is to have an obligation

As the introductory quote states, this is the role of the artivist. Indeed, observing what happens around us can be a camp-divider; some go through life as pure observers and some intervene to change what they see around them. This obligation, not by force, but by passion, lies within all of my interview subjects. They represent a small group of young Tunisians who feel obligated to change their country, and to change it with art. Whether it is by dancing, painting, rapping, organizing or demonstrating.

At best, this Thesis therefore provides a window into a young movement of artivists who combine cultural expressions and productions with political awareness. One may say that my informants at least live up to M.K. Asante’s vision of the kind of obligation that is implied in being an artivist. They react quickly with non-violent means of artistic expression to communicate, resist and re-mix. What subcultures can show us is that although ‘punk’s dead’, new hybrid forms are taking place in revolutions that are still being shaped. Some of these cultural productions are in-situ

44 http://www.re-public.gr/en/?p=2801
interventions which exist physically only in the moment or later to be materialized through online platforms. My interview subjects all ‘produce’ culture and media productions to revolutionize their local society.

Although the Urban art and Hip Hop scene in Tunis is yet but a teenager now, one who is experimenting through subcultures; adolescence will soon come. And when it does, it is up to these artivists to create something sustainable. For a cultural scene to bloom in Tunis however, cultural policies and financial and political measures need to be taken, artistic freedom of expression to be respected and cultural diversity embraced. Things, that even the West still struggles with. The arm’s length principle is not guaranteed in many countries worldwide, placing the state bodies in a more direct ‘sponsor role’, demanding and shaping the outcome of what art is “supposed to be”. This in turn has provoked new movements and expressions in the public space, such as artistic activism. Revolution (the Arabic al-thawra) has thus come to signify an epistemological shift in the way that the workings of the world and artivism are perceived and understood.

In an ideal world, art opens up difficult topics and breaks stereotypes and taboos. Cultural activities make people resilient and can help heal wounds and give a voice to the voiceless. Culture enables us to record people’s stories for future generations and thus helps to prevent conflict in the future.

Yet culture is usually the first to be de-prioritized in times of crisis and conflict (financial or political), but what it indeed shows us is that the creative forces that lie within culture, and the ‘prism’ of society’s reflection, opens a new space in which the youth not only express and reflect, but shape.

This Thesis has analyzed the term artivism in a glocal context: from bottom-up perspectives of young Tunisian artivists to top-down discussions on the influence of state over culture, artistic expression, post-revolution culture, youth subculture and questions of authenticity, globalization and hybridization. It has looked into culture as a way of life and in practice, and arrives at a conclusion that understanding not only cultural trends but also their social, political and economic context is crucial in order to understand culture as production.
As previously mentioned, the posteriori is not necessarily the objective truth, however there are some facts. Such as the trial against Zwewla who are judged under the blasphemy law, and rappers and dancers who are threatened or charged with jail sentences, while many more live in hiding, fearful of what may happen to them if they speak out. Thus the picture that begins to unfold is in fact that although new spaces (post-revolution) are being claimed and re-claimed: It is dangerous to be a young artivist in today’s Tunisia.

It seems that revolutionary aesthetics occupy ambivalent positions. Just as these emergent cultural practices operate as active political agents in shifting relations of power, they are at risk of being consumed and commodified by markets, just as Adorno and Benjamin foresaw.

However, a re-contextualization is also taking place, through the re:mixing of the narrative of the youth in Tunisia. Authenticity and meaning are produced through artivism in the streets, and while the revolution was only briefly televised, it continues to develop, live.
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9. Appendix

9.1 Interview Guide English

1. How old are you/What is your name? (Free to not answer)

2. What have you done the past year besides rapping/dancing/organizing/street art?

3. What kind of projects have you been involved in?

4. What happened before/after the revolution for art - is there a difference in the cultural scene before/after?

5. Do you consider yourself an artivist? Where is the border between art and activism?

6. How do you organize yourself?

7. Why have you chosen the artistic activist approach?

8. What kind of responses have you met? Positive/negative?

9. Post-revolution: Would you say that an artistic revolution has taken place?
10. What are your motivations for using artivism – what does it do? Does it create debate? Is it a creative strategy?

11. How are you experiencing artistic freedom of expression – or the restriction of the same? Are there new conditions for artistic freedom of expression?

12. Are there new spaces for these kind of events/actions in Tunis?

13. In what way does dance/rap/organizing/street art function as an activist tool?

14. Have you met any resistance/experienced censorship?

9.2 Interview Guide French

1. Quel âge avez-vous / Quel est votre nom ?

2. Qu'avez-vous fait de la dernière année en plus de la rap/danse/organization/street art?

3. Qu'est-ce qui s'est passé avant/après la révolution de l'art? Y at-il une différence dans la scène culturelle avant/après?

4. Après la revolution: Diriez-vous que une révolution artistique a eu lieu a Tunis?

5. Vous considérez-vous un artiviste? Où est la frontière entre l’art et l’activisme?

6. Comment pouvez-vous organiser vous?

7. Pourquoi vous-avez as choisi l'approche activisme artistique?

8. Quel genre/type de réponses avez-vous rencontré? Positif/négatif?

9. Post-révolution: Diriez-vous que la révolution artistique a eu lieu?

10. Quelles sont vos motivations pour l'utilisation artivisme - que faut-il faire? Est-il créer un débat? Est-ce une stratégie créative?

11. Comment allez-vous voir la liberté d'expression artistique - ou la restriction de la même chose? Y at-il de nouvelles conditions pour la liberté d'expression artistique?

12. Est-qu'il ya nouveaux espaces de ce genre d'événements/actions à Tunis?

13. Comment fonctionne la danse/le rap/l’organisation/le street art comme un outil artiviste?
14. Avez-vous rencontré aucune résistance ou censure?

9.3 Transcribed Interviews

9.4 Interview 1: Conducted in Tunis with WMD, 10/3-2013.

WMD: I have been rapping for like 8 years and I’m now 31 years old (pauses). I’m ooold! (laughs).

Anyway, for me, nothing has changed much – due to what I could call a language barrier, because I started listening to American Hip Hop, I didn’t even understand what they were saying but I was in love with the groove and the flows and the beats.

Like, your voice is the musical instrument so that is what I focus on. But I just started rapping in standard Arabic, not even Tunisian dialect, but the “old” Arabic, but the point is that I want to reach out to as many as possible.

I don’t focus on the buzz topics like the revolution just to make a hype you know? A lot of rappers now make songs about the revolution just to get famous. But for me an artist should not try to look for ways to please the crowd – I am an artist first, you accept me or not.

Tilia: You mean like El General and others?

Mehdi: Yeah, I mean what we say in Arabic is that “they jump on it” you see? Anyway the news do not show the real revolution here, the revolution is live – it’s not televised (makes reference to Gil Scott Heron). Ok, let me tell you something: You mentioned El General? He is from Sfax (southern Tunisian city), there was a rapper there who spoke about these topics long before. He made a song called “Monsieur Le Président”, but nobody paid any attention to him. Then, during that situation the opposition or I don’t know who, wanted to jump on something to you know...So, the cops started searching for him (El General) he went to jail and he became a symbol. But also I know groups like Armada Bizerte who talked about the music of the revolution before January 14 (the revolution) and nobody looked at them. So, El Général has nothing to do with the revolution.
Also, he’s been invited lately to a show where he spoke badly about opposition leaders…he is a young guy. I think he’s got a good will, but when it comes to knowledge he is unaware politically from A to Z.

In the US probably, a commercial song on the radio has lyrics about, excuse the term, “bitches” and money and cars, and alcohol. But in Tunisia, a commercial song now talks about the revolution or social issues. But I think music can change things still…Rap has power because it is words. Just look at politicians their words can influence the world.

And now they want to arrest Weld El 15, why? Because he uses words that hurts them. Words that might change the views for some people against the police institution of the government. So words might hurt and words might uplift.

Like Balti (*Tunisian rapper*) you know, he was working for the old government! Then he released a track that was anti-government and people of course were outraged. So what he did instead was to make songs about poverty in Tunisia (*WMD shakes his head*), talking about social problems and getting on the radio.

_Tilia: I see, but how can an artist like that gain any kind of credibility and get airplay after having totally contradicted himself?_

_WMD: The radio that has monopoly here, that’s why. The biggest radio station is Mosaique FM. Balti has friends there (pauses) so with money you can get exposure._

But the good thing is now, even if we do not have a ‘real hip hop audience’, things are getting better I have to say. Now you have Street Art on the TV and I have my show where I play no bullshit commercial songs, only real rap on *Kalima* FM. Rap started in the early 90’s here in Tunisia, so it has been around for a long time. But only now we have DJ’s and rappers and shows, things like that. I don’t know why, but in Tunisia it’s like people do not have the will to build things. Even the rappers who make money from music, they don’t invest into the culture…they buy a house, take a vacation, but no money comes back into the scene.
And the new government is not taking measures to re-build or re-structure the culture. They are just fighting the opposition…the Ministry of Culture I think he hates Hip Hop! So, I have to thank you for coming here and doing this workshop. We need to invest in local things…Hip Hop is supposed to be a positive movement!

Tilia: So do you consider yourself an activist?

WMD: Well, I try to do (erhm) like, on January 14\textsuperscript{th}, I was with other artists in front of the Interior Ministry, it was cool because people just united for one cause. We were blocking cars, making blockades, demonstrating and making noise together. For two days we were like freedom fighters. We ruled! The following days are just black days to me. This is when people started dividing and people went into different political camps, Islamist, left and right. So, when I write lyrics: I try to say that this Government is trying to divide us but we have to not care about peoples religious beliefs or political beliefs, first we are Tunisians.

I also make videos to show the context, to show that Rap is an art form, that’s all. Most people here, I mean 2 million used to support the old government so of course there are issues…

(Phone rings and WMD takes the call. When he hangs up he tells me that a radio show just called to get his opinion on the arrest of the rapper Weld El 15 just two days before our interview is conducted. He also tells me he has just told the radio that this sort of harassment should not be tolerated in Tunisia.)

WMD: Anyway, I am for all freedom of speech. But when it comes to the law it is very ambiguous. He (Weld El 15) said that ‘police men are dogs’, that’s why they are after him. Ok, you arrest him and the people who are just part in the video, like the girl in the video, she is just acting in the video and she has now been taken to jail. Weld El 15 is afraid because he received death threats before, so that is why he is now hiding. But I think there will be more of this; you know it’s like the Berlin Wall. Some things just cannot be undone, and now we have crossed this barrier and we will continue to do so, no matter what the government does.

Tilia: So, there must have also been rappers during Ben Ali that were critical of him?

WMD: Yes, there are some rappers who have guts you know (erhm)…
Tilia: And what happened to them?

WMD: Well, there was one who was arrested. He told me that when he came to the police office, they sat him down and listened to his music with him and each sentence they pressed pause and asked: Why did you write that? What do you mean by that? You never write this, you never write that and then he was released, but he was banned from public shows!

Tilia: But how did they even find these people and their music?

WMD: During Ben Ali, they were listening to your phone calls, there were agents and the Internet police! And now, the Minister of Education watched ‘The Harlem Shake’, some which were taking place in high schools and the director of the school…I don’t know what happened to her, but there were some sanctions. What the hell!? I mean, police officers are watching videos on YouTube come on, real crimes are happening in the streets, what are you doing man?!

Art is a threat to them, especially rappers. Part of the revolution is Hip Hop you know...So they try to strike that down, so things won’t happen again. Basically this extends to media, because after the revolution the Government took over the biggest TV channels, which used to be run by the ex-President’s family. That way they can also control what comes out.

I never had any problems myself, maybe because I use a lot of imagery and metaphors and I avoid some words to not be caught. I use words ‘in between the lines’ so there is no doubt what I mean, but it can be interpreted in many ways…this is my creative strategy.

Like with the case of Zwewla, I mean it’s just crazy that they are accused of causing interior damage to the country! Like they were terrorists! I mean if you are they guy who came up with this, you must really not want to serve the people in your country. It’s another big strike for freedom of expression.

For the moment I’m neutral politically, I mean I used to go and protest a lot but now I don’t have much time today, but still I go out with other collectives and try to help to
spread the word. The problem with public space here is that if you want to organize an event you need so many permissions. You had to go to the Royal Family before the revolution and ask for money and their blessing. Now, you can do things more freely but still, you need to raise all the money by yourself. It’s very expensive for independent artists like us to rent a place, pay the artist and get security.

But even cultural institutions, you need connections and they are just not willing to include culture and art coming from the streets. They see it as a threat. It’s getting on my nerves actually…and sometimes I say things on the radio I probably shouldn’t but…yeah.

9.5 Interview 2: Conducted in Tunis with Kader and Teezy, 14/3-2013.

Kader: I have been dancing for 7 years (I’m 21)
Teezy: I have been dancing most of my life as far as I can remember, but only seriously for about 5 years (I’m 25)

Kader: Last year we did some Flash mobs, as well as some shows in the Theatres, on the streets and in schools sometimes.

Tilia: Have things changed in the dance scene after the revolution – have they improved?

Teezy: There is no more money for culture in Tunisia. We have a Minister of Culture who doesn’t do anything for the people. In a way there was more culture before everywhere…music, theatre and artists could live or maybe get some airplay if they were well connected with the royal family – but now, we have to fight even harder, to be independent, and to make a new cultural life in Tunisia

Kader: It became worse. Because of the new minister, no money for culture or arts.
You can’t make a show without having some friends in the Minister…

Tilia: To get funding you mean?

45 Oussama and other informants claim that most major medias and broadcasting in Tunis are owned by royal family members
Kader: We don’t really want the money, to make our show to express to people, to the teenagers, and we are not dancers like you see on TV – we are just dancing and trying to express ourselves.

Tilia: So how do you organize yourself?

Teezy: Sometimes we get a little bit of money for performances, but mostly we feel something, or we have something we want to create to we need to say something – we just do it.

Tilia: So you cannot make a living from dancing?

Kader & Teezy: Living from dancing in Tunisia? (laughs) No, no! If you can live from 15 Euros then yes maybe (laughs).

Tilia: So, after the revolution, there have been a lot of videos on YouTube coming out from independent artists and activists – because the Internet became available for all and free again?

Kader: Yes, because before the revolution – 80% of Tunisians did not know what YouTube was…it was state controlled, we needed proxy’s and hacking codes to view videos on YouTube from Tunisia, and you can’t make your own video on YouTube.

Tilia: So do you feel now, that there is a new platform for artists – and do you view yourself as an artist?

Kader: Maybe, we’ll see it depends what happens in the next years. We are not real artists yet…we are trying to be artists. You know, we want to say our own words without speaking, this is why we dance.

Tilia: But the reason why you dance, for example in public, I mean some dancers might go the more traditional route – through dance institutions and academies, so why do you choose to work in the public space and on the streets?

Kader: Ok, for me- I danced since I was 7 years old and I danced in the academy for one year, but…dancing it’s from the streets. When you are dancing in the academy you don’t feel anything. You have some good shows, good public, good conditions
Tilia: So, the video that you two have made during the demonstrations, what were the thoughts behind that?

Teezy: Well, we wanted to engage other young people and to show a different image of young people in Tunisia. On TV young people are portrayed as either being lazy or being thieves, we want to show the artistic side, and what can be done in the streets. So, also this video was dedicated to Chokri Belaid (pauses) he was killed because he spoke out. So we will continue to express ourselves until we get what we want, but with artistic means – so we called the choreography ‘Stop The Violence’.

Kader: Before making the video, we didn’t think or plan. It was something we felt…we were talking about Chokri, and why he was killed. To many, he was our hope…so we wanted to make this real. He (Chokri) was not scared, so we shouldn’t be scared either, gas bombs or not.

Tilia: Did you receive any positive or negative reactions?

Teezy: Some Tunisians did not understand the video. Also, I had some threats on my private Facebook page (pauses) some people sent me messages saying that I should not do this as a girl; I am a bad Muslim etc.

Kader: Public reactions have not changed, before or after the revolution, people are the same – we are a country without art. We need an Art Revolution to change things. For example when you watch Tunisian television, you don’t see artists you only see famous people, who are working to be more famous and more paid just to say “Ahh this is a good country, I love it”. They say stupid things. This is not the real Tunisia. I think that artists are really from the street, but they are neglected in this country.

In terms of censorship, it is mainly for singers and rappers like Weld El 15 and VIPA – they are wanted now, just because they say what is happening in the streets.

Tilia: Yes, speaking of the streets, did you ever face any problems with the police?
Kader: Yes, because when I started dancing, we really danced in the streets like in front of a café or so, because if you dance in the streets in Tunisia you go to jail. I don’t know why but all public dancing is banned. For example if you want to make a Flash Mob, you need a permission and they choose who can work on it, how do you make it and when. There are too many rules, so you cannot express anything – and if you do not respect the rules they come and stop the show.

Teezy: The police tried to also shut down the performance we made (on YouTube), but we had some ordinary people who protected us.

Kader: Right now, there is a new generation who now has access to Internet and there are more artists everywhere and they maybe have a better understanding of why people do art. Our artistic expression is about the message, to pass it to people. We try to make free shows, and dance in the streets just so people can see us – even if one out of a thousand understands us, then we have changed something.

Teezy: There is no artistic freedom of expression…because rappers go to jail every week, Chokri Beladi was killed and TV is still censored and state-monitored. The only difference now is that we have free Internet.

Kader: We have to cross the line between art and activism, you see? Many of our friends are not respected because they dance, some of them were in jail just for dancing, so when we dance we take an action…we know the risks we take. Before, we had dance performances everywhere but the police is more hard now, and they act on their own. I think that artists are people who do not just smile and befriend the government; this is why they are a threat.

9.6 Interview 3: Conducted in Tunis with Ali and Oussama, 20/3-2013.

Oussama: In reality, we started graffiti before 14 January (January 14, day of revolution)…each one of us was doing it alone. After the elections, we noticed as many other citizens (erhm) that what every politicians say about helping the youth (pauses)…recognition to them was only words, they divided politically into left and right and they forgot about the real problems we are facing.
Today in Tunisia, you find no one speaking about the youth and the poor. Every demonstration today is a social demonstration composed of young people – who are not members in any political party, and these demonstrations are faced with repression…so we united our efforts and started the artistic collective Zwewla.

“Zwewla” means ‘the poor’ in English, and we want to express ourselves because we found no one that talked about our problems. Our collective is composed of students, jobless people and workers. We are young people that think and innovate between 17-30 years old. It’s for our social messages that we are accused, and we prefer to remain anonymous in order to not say that we are political, and we denounce the social problems with graffiti.

In Tunisia after the revolution today you can express yourself and problems of human rights, freedom of expression but you cannot expose social or economic problems. When you talk about the system or unemployment, you face jail.

Ali: (Ali cuts in here) As is the case of Oussama – we try to (pauses) not guide poor people, but we try to make them think by themselves…we try to push them and to be able to speak for themselves and their situation. We try to do our work in poor areas mainly. We also go to popular places like Avenue Habib Bourgiba…we are trying to reach people where they are. People started to notice us, and then the police came and arrested Oussama and Chahine.

Tilia: What happened in the case?

Oussama: It has been reported that the trial will be for the 27th of March and we will know…let’s hope for the best…but we’re not giving up.

Ali: In fact, this system after Ben Ali, has a real problem with artists in general…in a way it’s worse now because they want to limit freedom, they do not want conscious people who think for themselves. They just want people to live their lives…’eating, sleeping working, eating, sleeping, working’ –

Oussama cuts in: They want just ONE culture. This culture is not representative for our society!
Tilia: Where is this pressure coming from? Is it coming from the state, the police or individuals? I mean are we talking about political or religious pressure or what...?

Ali: It’s all connected, police does not work to protect people, they work to protect the government – and the government works to protect police, and the police works to protect politicians...so the system helps the system.

Tilia: Has anything improved for artists – have people become more active?

Ali: In some way, we are talking about quantity however rather than quality. Before, I did not know all these artists in Tunis. We are all working now and trying and we have goals. But, we are always forced by the government to not do what we want. Our messages are not reaching people, because they prevent us from doing our work.

Oussama: To kill arts, that’s what they want...I mean the government. Before, even artists everyone has been scared of the government, even now we don’t talk about the government. But something changed inside the artists...and inside the society.

Tilia: So do you think they have (artists) become more conscious?

Ali: Conscious...yes. But it is not enough. In my opinion, the conditions for artists is the same before and after the revolution, it’s the same situation. You have the freedom to say what you want...but no one will listen to you – you see? Dictator Democracy is what I call it.

Tilia: How was it before Ben Ali, did any one write on walls or did no body dare to do it?

Ali: Talking about artists...graffers (graffiti artists) were completely unknown before. You found nothing on the walls, just the Tunisian flag or propaganda. There were some musicians sometimes or individuals writing, but it was not a “high level”, more just slogans. But now, we find that people begin to mix political messages with arts.

Oussama: But before, it was like hell. If you speak you be jailed, if you think (just if you think) or if you try to make someone think...you go to jail. You could be in a coffee place taking to someone like “Hey man, we need to do something about this
system”. The next thing you know, a police officer is behind you asking what you are trying to change. Jail. 10 years. You see?

Tilia: Yes, it seems to me, from talking to many artists that of course some things have progressed, but in general – not a lot has changed, even in post-revolution Tunisia. I guess building a movement for you must be difficult, because how will you change decades of a certain mentality amongst ordinary Tunisians?

Ali: The main problem now is the mentality. We want people to wake up in the morning and have a desire for a better life, and that they want to work for a better society. But ordinary Tunisians just want to go to work, and wishing to come home with something to eat. We’re talking about 45% of the Tunisian population. You see that everyone is complaining, some people even miss the old regime…you see? We’re trying to make them feel good, and feel that they want things to change. That’s the main goal, and to make them work harder, but also to speak. Just to speak for themselves. I won’t force you to come and paint the walls with me, but just speak. Let me deliver the message to you, and speak for yourself. Freedom is…something I did not know until now. I’m not an extremist but I just want people to feel it with me, to make it to freedom. To make it to live a better life.

We want to see Art everywhere; we want to see people expressing themselves everywhere, in every corner, in every place. You see Tunisians now…they are so closed. There is no expression, no life, no joy. We want to bring them to life!

Ali: Regarding artivism…I think we are artivists because of the way that we use art. We don’t belong to any NGO or governmental organization or political party. But we deliver our message though art. Not l’art pour l’art, but for the message. We don’t care about getting our name out on the streets, and we don’t want to limit ourselves to just one type of art. We go in the streets and express ourselves, we scream, we talk and make noise (taps on make-belief drum) in the street, on social networks everywhere. The point is to make people think. We don’t want to limit ourselves, we want to expand – but in our own way, because we remain anonymous. ‘I’m there but you can’t see me, I can touch you but you can’t see me, you can hear me but you can’t see me’.
Street Art is not the art medium of the commercial. You find it in the streets, you see it in a dirty place, where people pass everyday, where they stand and talk and smoke. You don’t find it in hotels, politicians don’t address it, and you don’t see it in a formal way. It’s just there.

We do it at night when everyone is sleeping, when the police are chasing us…you see? That’s what it is…that’s art. You fight for it, because it is bigger than you. We do it just to provoke some thoughts, subconsciously you know?

Tilia: Yes, It’s like a reminder, in a way just as how advertisements work. If you are constantly reminded that something exists, it slips into your sub consciousness.

Ali: Yes, but they don’t know who we are. But every time when you walk in the streets and you see the street art and what is written, you think about it – waiting for a bus for example and in front of you is the word “Freedom”, you begin to think. What is freedom for me? Am I free? It’s just that, making people think.

Oussama (in French - translated): In Tunisia through our group we are activist for a new Tunisia, to change our lifestyle for the poor. We target the system and not just the government, so we have a core principal: our problem is not the government, it’s not the people in charge – it’s the policies, it’s the global system as a whole – and that’s why we discussed with our friends in Egypt to make a movement like Zwewla, which is specialized in art and activism, in order to change things.

In our experience, we have many positive reactions because we are apolitical and we just fight for our country, to put the people in charge. Because we fight for Tunisia and we target the essential problems, which are not dealing with secularism and the Islamic state. We focus more on the social issues, because from what I can see, they are the most important.

Tilia: Any bad reactions?

Ali: Yes, online but only from the supporters of Ennahda (political party).

Tilia: And what did they say?

Ali & Oussama: That we are impolite young people…and atheists! (laughs).
We did not have any problems with salafists, but other artists are facing that every
day...for example our friend who designed the Chokri Belaid “moustache”, he was
stabbed in his hometown of Bizerte just after the design came out.
We made a stencil of this design the day of his funeral, and started a riot...

*(Shows me clip on YouTube):*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Rt6IFgC6cKM#
*The writing says: we want social justice – for the poor*

_Tilia:_ To return to the questions...do you think of what you do as a kind of creative
strategy before your actions, I mean, how do you organize yourself basically?

_Ali:_ Yes, we talk about it before every action. But there are no limits – if we think of
something that can be useful for the poor people we just go for it. Strategy…it’s a big
word. It’s not exactly that, but we talk about it creatively.

_Oussama:_ But every part of the group is autonomous, and makes their own decisions.
So, we have some principles that unite us but everything that has to do with the work
on the ground, is decided individually.
But still we respect everyone’s differences and ideologies, the important thing is the
*action.*

_Oussama:_ In our collective, we do not need any support from the government,
because everything is self-financed. When the artist chooses to finance him/herself,
you are not dependent.

_Tilia:_ How are you experiencing artistic freedom of expression?

_Oussama:_ Well, as I have already indicated...I am facing jail. Today in Tunisia, you
are allowed to speak about general rights, which are not in relation with the actual
system. When you target the system and the problems connected to the system, like
unemployment, you will be charged with serious accusations. We are accused with
disturbing the peace, and with the dissemination of false information. You know,
those are dangerous things…

_Tilia:_ So, how does the censorship work?
Oussama: Everything that is artistic, the system has a problem with. Like, everything that is new and innovative, which reflects the situation of society.

Tia: But do you not think you have been censored…?

Oussama: Yes, censorship existed before and after the 14th, it’s the same situation. We will not stop expressing ourselves, we won’t give up – as I have said before we are activists and we stay so for our Tunisia, so whether or not they apply censorship it is their problem.

Tilia: Yes but you take a lot risks?

Oussama: Yes, but what can we do? On one side, we don’t have a choice but on the other side, the martyrs who have given their life for this country – we see our work as a continuation of this devotion, we share a similar mentality.

Tilia: Are there new spaces (imaginary/real) to create? Have the conditions improved?

Oussama: There are no new physical spaces, we do not believe that art can only be done in a standardized (conformed) space – we target the poor and the poor do not move in these spaces. Regarding those ‘real spaces’ where everyday people move (outside the white cube). Even before and after the revolution, these everyday people find this kind of street art creative and appealing – they find something positive in this everyday kind of art.

Ali: Improved…? Maybe changed, but not in a good way. Now we can express ourselves but it is still very limited. Governmental places, like before if an artist was supporting the government through his work, he can easily express everywhere. Now, it’s still somewhat the same. There are still limits and people watch you everywhere…but we try to expand these limits all the time, and try to make your own space. If your message does not get across, you find a new place. We should be able to work everywhere, not to be scared, not to be afraid of being jailed. Because limits are always there, even 10 years later from now there will be limits, and there will always be people who have a problem with what you do. But it’s about not making art
for yourself. If you don’t think about making the situation better and you don’t make a move, we don’t want to just stay here and say: “we are limited, we cannot work like this”. No, we just do it. If things go better, we will continue – if things become worse, we will also continue.

We are still here, even if we have a case…being attacked and being accused is something positive for us, because it means we are touching something, we are doing something.

_Tilia_: Well, because a lot of artists in my experience (erhm), I know of artists who have for example written a song and have been jailed for it. So, some begin to practice some self censorship (auto-censure), because they have a lot to risk, they have a family and so on – so how do you feel about this?

_Ali_: Artists in Tunisia are still directly arrested for what they say. But, cases are different from each other. For example, a rapper who critiques the government – he will be jailed for smoking weed. They will come in the middle of the night, to his house and arrest him for smoking, but this is not why he is arrested, really it is about what he said through his music. For us, we are a target for what we do, graffiti, protests, making noise in the streets. And we will continue, we won’t give up even after the case we will be there to deliver our messages.

_Tilia_: Do you think that the media attention surrounding your case will change anything?

_Oussama_: Within the frame of advocacy, yes. Amnesty International has already communicated about it on the 21 January (2013), and we have the possibility to make a new press statement also through other organizations, even Tunisian ones like the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the Artist’s Union, and all those actions may be efficient. But, it is possible that we may be sentenced to 5 years, but we hope for the best. Inshallah…In 7 days we will know.
10. Photos

Oussama from Zwewla. Copyright: Zwewla.

Video shoot for ‘Up on the Roof’. Copyright: Turning Tables
‘Willis from Tunis’ at Radio Chaabi. Copyright: Tilia Korpe