

ART, SOCIETY AND PLAYERS: A PANORAMA OF THE TUNISIAN ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL SCENE



ARTCENA is the French National Centre for Circus Arts, Street Arts and Theatre. It works towards its missions in three main areas: the sharing of knowledge through a digital platform and activities of documentation, the support to professionals via mentoring and training, the development of these three artistic fields by providing funding to authors and carrying out international development. It coordinates the Circostrada network and has a permanent seat on its steering committee.

This report was
written by Claudine
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by Circostrada



• European Network
Circus and Street Arts

Since 2003, Circostrada Network has been working to develop and structure the fields of circus and street arts in Europe and beyond. With more than 100 members from over 30 countries, it helps building a sustainable future for these sectors by empowering cultural players through activities in observation and research, professional exchanges, advocacy, capacity-building and information.

FOREWORD

Artistic creation in the public space at the centre of a series of Euro-Mediterranean meetings

Lack of funding, limited or even inexistent recognition of the arts by public entities, the absence of status for artists, legal constraints, political instability, and a closed-off public space – the task at hand is as arduous as the road before us is fraught with pitfalls! And yet, the artists and cultural actors involved are far from discouraged; these many obstacles and shortcomings have instead led to the emergence of creative, innovative initiatives across the Arab world.

Six months after heading to Alexandria, then to Cairo, with the goal in mind to meet two new members of their network, Circostrada initiated last October, in Tunis, a series of meetings entitled KAHWA ('coffee' in Arabic). It is from this first stage in Egypt, and more precisely the exchanges that took place during the Co-writing Lab, an initiative of Mahatat for Contemporary Art (Circostrada member), that the KAHWA project was born.

Integrated into Circostrada's quadrennial program (2017-2021), these meetings reflect the desire of the network to reinforce, nourish, and develop professional and artistic collaborations between Europe and the MENA¹ region. Once a year, the network brings together a small group of professionals from countries across the southern Mediterranean in order to discuss the realities of the artistic and culture scene in this region, involving members of the network who wish to take part in this process of exchange and reflection.

As part of these annual meetings, members explore the many facets of artistic creation in the countries of the Mediterranean basin; highlight local and regional cultural initiatives, as well the actors involved; analyse the relevant public policy, difficulties, challenges and obstacles to be addressed; and, encourage dialogue and cooperation among professionals of the public space on both sides of the Mediterranean.

The KAHWA in Tunis took place under the guise of the 6th Dream City Biennale - a multidisciplinary modern arts festival - in collaboration with L'Art Rue and the Foundation Kamel Lazaar, and in turn marked the first step in the creation of a long-term project. For two days, participants exchanged ideas around various topics relating to local artistic creation, with the link between the arts and society as central theme. In a society in transition, deeply shaped socially, economically and politically by the popular uprisings of 2011, what is the status of artistic creation in Tunisia today?

Included among the priorities identified by the 30 some professionals present at the meeting were: the elimination of hierarchy between artists and funding bodies, the identification of new sources of financing, and the diversification of economic models. Other issues that came up in these discussions included how to bring the local populations in closer proximity to the process of creation and in doing so ensure that the art in question responds to the needs of that area. What strategies should we adopt to consolidate the sector, encourage collective organisation models, and exert influence? What tools can we develop to validate the work done by the actors in question? These various lines of questioning presented a wider view of the cultural situation in Tunisia in all its diversity, as well as the socio-political context in which it exists.


The next KAHWA meeting will take place in Tiznit, Morocco, from the 8th to the 10th of November 2018, under the auspices of the General Assembly of Culture, organised by Racines. Member of Circostrada, Racines is a Moroccan non-profit organisation that works for the integration of culture into the public policy of human, social and economic development, and more generally, for the cultural development in Morocco and the rest of Africa.

¹ MENA is the acronym for Middle East and North Africa.

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A LITTLE KAHWA IN TUNIS

Artistic development and professional organisation

In Tunisia, as elsewhere, cultural actors face the necessity of deepening those elements that integrate art and society, as much in their local aspects as through exchanges with and differences from other countries in Europe and the Mediterranean. Conscious of what's at stake, L'Art Rue, the Kamel Lazaar Foundation, Dar Ben Gacem

sian artists, activists and cultural operators brought together at the behest of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation and Circostrada, meet one another alongside other participants from Jordan, Morocco, Egypt (via Skype), France and Great Britain. They are meeting to address the professional realities they face in Tunisia, obviously, but

As a part of the European network Circostrada, KAHWA meetings are meant to open a workspace for reflection on the channels and means needed to develop new fruitful international connections together. A long-term workspace, included in Circostrada's four-year project, this initial phase in Tunis will be followed up by annual



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meetings, organised each year in a different country along the southern rim of the Mediterranean. In this regard, KAHWA #1 is an extension of the Co-writing Lab by Mahatat for Contemporary Art, held in April 2017 in Cairo¹ and was created in line with L'Art Rue and the theme of the Biennale Dream City, which began the following day: "Art and Society Project". In fact, the relationship between artistic work and Tunisian society is one of the primary focuses of L'Art Rue, the organisation hosting the biennale.

Ever since L'Art Rue acquired, in 2015, a permanent space in the Medina, Dar Bach Hamba, the aims of the association have centred on four particular positions: support of young artists through residences; art and education advocacy focusing on primary school children; training, debate and reflection meant to harmonise artistic thought and action; and immersion, creation and distribution through the Dream City project.

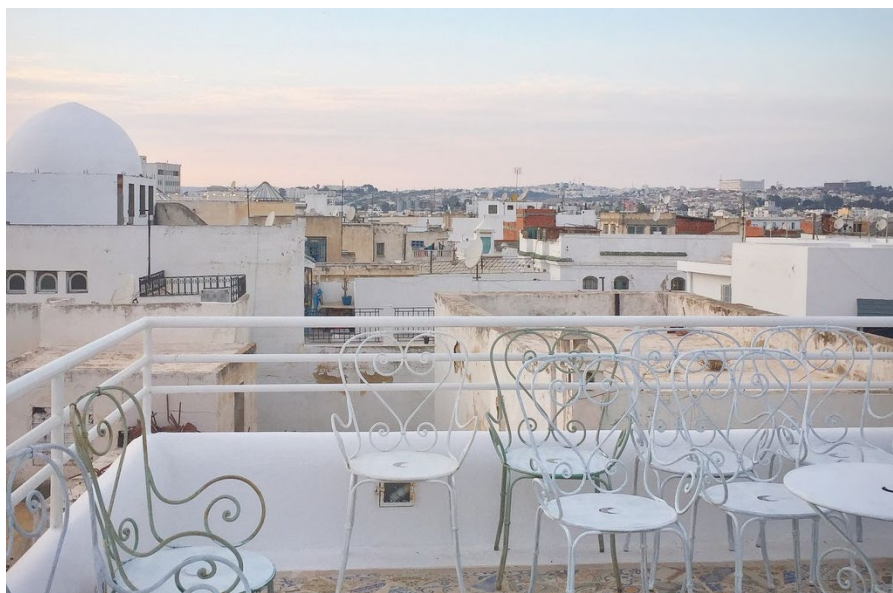
and the Circostrada Network have joined together to organise a moment of reflection and exchange around these questions with other local and regional cultural actors, as prelude to the 2017 Biennale Dream City. Early October 2017. First KAHWA meeting in Tunis on the roof of Dar Ben Gacem, in the heart of the Medina. Under a sky awash with the first rains of autumn, the light is soft, and a small group of Tun-

also across Europe and the Middle East and North Africa. A few questions remain their priority, namely those relating to the public policy in each country and the legal context that governs the work of an artist, whether it be a question of artistic production, creation or education. KAHWA #1 also allows for them to discuss international cooperation, their expectations and the possible contributions of one another.

¹ For more information on the Co-writing Lab, see the dedicated [website](#)

In this context, though L'Art Rue and its flagship project Dream City are as of now acting as a collective driving force, the other forces at play should not be forgotten, enacted a long while ago by various cultural figures in the region, who have all been aided in their objectives by the effects and outcomes of the 2011 revolution in their societies. The *Danseurs Citoyens* from Art Solution, passing from the association *Interferences* to the *Kamel Lazaar Foundation* and the *Observatoire culturel tunisien*, have rallied around the issue of art and Tunisian cultural politics in important ways, in the same way they developed appropriate strategies despite various constraints and obstacles.

Artists are often 'last in line' in the cultural project development process; they are too rarely involved in planning and yet too often brought in for implementation. Working with financiers becomes difficult as a result, with their own agendas and priorities that are often not in line with the needs on the ground. More precisely, one of the essential elements in the work of a cultural operator is to balance the expectations of the people in a particular region with the originality of creative proposals. They play a definitive



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role at the crossroads where artists, populations and political and financial institutions meet. "This work is only productive thanks to a constant dialogue between artists and the general public," underlines Veronica Stephens, production director for *SeaChange Arts* in the UK. Professional training for artists and cultural organisers is an important aspect covering artistic and technical

training needs, as well as the ability to work collaboratively, while drawing from the various necessary skills of cultural work (like artistic, technical, administrative skills and those related to production, coordination and communication).

Public cultural policies

While in every country of the Arab world, culture is the poor or absent parent of their governments, the participants address the wide array of policies carried out by each country. Despite this deficiency, initiatives have been made by cultural actors, such as the activist work of the group *Racines* in Casablanca, with the support of UNESCO, as well as the work of the *Observatoire culturel tunisien*. This work is made arduous by the rigorous methodology, necessary to carry out studies in various artistic domains and analyses of cultural practices. Its political and operational interest must be understood by cultural actors and accepted by public authorities. *Racines*¹, who has taken on this mission since 2013, endeavours

to share in this process. The organisation supports initiatives in neighbouring countries, such as through the project *MARSAD*, created in 2017 with the *Observatoire culturel tunisien*, *El Madina Theatre* in Alexandria, and *Me'ZAF* in Lebanon. The *Kamel Lazaar Foundation* created the project *ArtsMENA*² in 2015. It consists of an independent on-line platform of information, created as a dynamic database, with a mobile app and interactive map using Google Maps. *ArtsMENA* allows users to locate artists and cultural spots as well as different actors in the arts scene of the Maghreb and Middle East, using a filter or keyword search function. *ArtsMENA* seeks to increase visibility and connectedness of figures within

the Middle Eastern and North African arts scene on a local, regional and international scale, and to give access to information about visual arts throughout the region.

The exchanges also cover differences in judicial and legislative issues that concern civil society and community rights. The latter is clearly restricted or threatened in several countries, and better protected in others. The freedom to assembly is one of several key levers of initiative development. Difficulties that civil society encounters are also evoked from the point of view of economic means, opening a debate on the independence of cultural organisations and on the existence of alternative economic models to subsidies.

¹ Based in Casablanca, Morocco, *Racines* (member of *Circostrada*) is an association for culture, development, cooperation, and the promotion of cultural and creative industries. For more: www.racines.ma

² For more: <http://www.kamellazaarfoundation.org/project/artsmena>

Independence and economic models

In the MENA region, the independence of NGOs in general, and cultural organisations in particular, relies on their capacity to seek out alternative sources of financing, other than those made available by national governmental powers, to carry out their projects. Most frequently, their budgets are derived from European cultural institutions,

from EU delegations in the framework of their public policy, or through private foundations, either locally or abroad. The latter emphasise their affect on the art and/or culture in several countries, notably Morocco, Tunisia and Lebanon, among others. Parallel to this, a divide between culture and economics grows ever more distinct, parti-

cularly in regard to questions of tourism as an industry driver. The path remains steep between the benefits and dangers of this approach – beneficial in that it values the arts and culture as a draw for that society, but dangerous in that it exploits artistic creation and the value given to cultural heritage for economic ends.

Professional organisation of cultural actors and artists

The two meetings of KAHWA#1 in Tunis confirmed the need to improve and reinforce the collective nature of organising cultural actors. Several attempts, initiated in Tunisia since 2011, have done little to achieve lasting affects, such as, for example, creating influence (through lobbying or activism) with local authorities, elected officials, ministries or international organisations. This contributes to the creation of a state of competition, while synergy is more strategic. In fact, the ability of actors

within a certain industry or sector to organise themselves is a sign of maturity and a factor in development, from the moment that artists' and structures' common needs are enumerated and demands promoted collectively and democratically.

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This would create a first means for communication and exchange that would privilege, in one way, the viability of such a landscape and, in another, the circulation of professionals could help to uncover a rich and diverse landscape, as much on a scale within Tunisia, but also more widely throughout the MENA/Europe region.



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Several concrete options were brought up at the end of the meeting, among which included an interest for joining networks for Tunisian operators and, more globally, those throughout the MENA, as well as pursuing a partnership with Mahatat in order to create a network of shared resources and lobbying for art in public spaces in the MENA region in collaboration with Circostrada.

The KAHWA meetings on the 2nd and 3rd October have served as a chance to uncover the principle problems faced today and to debate possible solutions, namely around the relationships of artists and financiers, of the professional training of cultural actors and the demand for a more ambitious cultural public policy.

DREAM CITY, THE MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF AN ARTISTIC EVENT

Reflection and action at the same time!

Dream City is a march constructed around the citizen body.

There is nothing better than art as a means for occupation and reappropriation of public space. We created l'Art Rue so that artists would flood the streets and the city, the Medina, would turn into a huge play space, so that people of all ages can take on art as means of expression of their problems and their preoccupations.

Sofiane Ouissi, artist/director of L'Art Rue

Dreaming the city...

Dream City was born from an “artistic putsch”, following the censorship of a radio programme, in which participated Sofiane Ouissi, dancer/choreographer, in 2006, and a subsequent peaceful march of artists carried out to make the State take measure of all who worked in this field. After that, Sofiane and Selma, along with a group of artists from all sorts of artistic fields, wrote the Dream City project as a collective work, first appearing in November 2007.

Their approach involved insisting on lengthy periods for the creation of artistic works in close harmony with the urban space of the Medina, a consideration of the local residents, expansion of the viewing public, and deeper integration of reflection into the artistic process. For the Dream City team, from the beginning, the idea was clear: “Art plays a vital role in educational, social and economic development, and the right to culture is a fundamental right, in the same respect as the right to health, education and justice.” Progressively with each subsequent presentation of Dream City, L'Art Rue team refined its methodology and its message, without deviating from the original intent. Dream City embraces its “laboratory”



ATDK, © Pol Guillard

style regarding society and the arts. After the inaugural event in 2007 with Tunisian artists, in 2010 the project was opened to the world involving artists from Europe and the rest of the MENA. Following the revolution and in a society in the midst of political awakening, full of hope, yet also rocked with violence and danger, Dream City 2012 worked on the theme “the artist in the face of liberty”, in Tunis and Sfax. In this unusual

climate, carte blanche given to Marseille by Karwan¹ in 2013, as European capital of culture, the artists were able to send their aesthetic across the sea and try out new toolboxes in the Estaque neighbourhood². This access to a larger community, beyond the walls, helped L'Art Rue's approach to mature and develop.

Without giving up on the collective aspect of the project, the artistic direction is officially

¹ Karwan is one of the associations of the Cité des Arts de la Rue in Marseille. They are in charge of the development of Street Arts and Circus Arts, mostly within the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region. For more: www.lacitedesartsdelarue.net/karwan

² Northwest of Marseille

under the guidance of Sofiane and Selma Ouissi, in partnership with Jan Goossens. In addition to this, a venue for the project was created, Dar Bach Hamba, and a new

Dream City embraces its “laboratory” style regarding society and the arts.

approach to production was organised by Béatrice Dunoyer, production director for L'Art Rue. So, the 2015 theme “Artist and social connection” tests this new direction with artists from sub-Saharan Africa. “We

are convinced that when placed in the heart of the city, an artist can only go on to generate a delicate relationship, a sensitive, receptive openness to the needs of the area,” Selma Ouissi explains. “We are also stepping away from art that is consumed in global privatisation. We are seeking to make a society of communities, with the public, to anchor us in shared spaces, and this process enriches us individually and collectively.”

For Jan Goossens, former director of KVS¹ in Brussels, and currently director of the Festival de Marseille², “we need in our cities shared spaces, liberty and exchange, in which artists can assert the role they play. I believe in an artist’s prolonged,

deep exchange with their society and I am deeply inspired by the activities outside of Europe. Despite budgetary problems that always come up at some point, either in public spaces or not, it is important to build frameworks within which these exchanges can take place. For the artists invited this year, Dream City is truly an artist laboratory, a time for creation that feeds their projects on the long term. It is precious for the career of the artist and for the biennale. Since none of the works created in this framework can be shared as it is, as they were created in an organic connection with the spaces and with the people of Tunis, they will spread in another way.”

Creations in the field, the city as partition

Dream City is an arts festival in the city. The 6th year took place once again in the heart of the historical city, the Medina and its surroundings. The artistic biases and streams of production defined by Sofiane and Selma Ouissi, Jan Goossens and Béatrice Dunoyer, allow invited artists to create works in the field. Coming from Tunisia, the MENA, Africa and Europe, they are first brought to an immersion in the city, to explore without a predetermined project in mind, to uncover paths to creation in sensitive and concrete relationship to the population of Tunis - re-

“We don’t ask that the artist be engaged somehow. What’s political, rather, is that they be here, present in the city.”

sidents, institutions, artisans, etc. Once the project is determined, they come back for 4 to 6 weeks to produce it in the field, carefully assisted by L'Art Rue team, whether

for the choice of location, collaboration with the local population, children, youths or adults, and of course, the means to carry out the project. In this way, once they have imagined and worked for nearly two months in total immersion in the city, their creations - choreography, installations, performances, exhibitions - are impregnated with the social realities of the people and the spirit of the places, sometimes in unusual ways. “Each artistic project is considered for its specific and unique needs,” Sofiane Ouissi says. For him, it is the complexity of the project that is interesting, “each artist is a Dream City of their own right”. As Dream City is a “political act,” adds Selma Ouissi, “the artists are invited to work freely. Not every work addresses a political topic directly, there are many ways to work in a city. We don’t ask that the artist be engaged somehow. What’s political, rather, is that they be here, present in the city.”

Dream City offers their audience five days of walking through interlaced pathways lea-

ding to the discovery of individual works. Houses, courtyards, streets, alleys, roofs, walls, squares, historic dwellings, ruins, abandoned buildings, mausoleums, the possibilities are endless. The Medina becomes a metaphor for the city, for Tunisian society and for the relationship this country has to the rest of the world.

Despite the beauty of the places, the festival’s schedule does not lend itself to simple tourism, since what it offers us to see and feel are emotions that are provocative, in the literal sense of the term, poetic, yes, but also disturbing. Essential questions spring up among all the works, whether they are made by Tunisian artists or not, giving further evidence of the real intimacy achieved between them and the city – freedom of expression and thought, freedom of bodies in private and public spheres, the future of the Medina and society writ large, the difficulty of citizenship in a country that doesn’t give enough space or work to the youth,

¹ KVS Koninklijke Vlaamse Schouwburg - national Flemish theatre

² Festival de Marseille: dance and mixed arts festival festivaldemarseille.com/en

violence against women and children, relationships to the world and to borders, exile, memory, change, the influence of the virtuality of technology on thought and action.

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So many themes, that out of Dream City, make the Medina into a mirror presented to ourselves. In this globalised society, in this world of uncertain futures, dislocated by tensions, war, and climate change, many

challenges persist, the integration of the youth remaining in first among them. Art, the response made by L'Art Rue, is also the growing demand of artists and cultural actors reaffirmed since 2011.

Despite the blotches on the social and political landscape to which many of the works at the 2017 biennale bear witness, the vitality, the creativity and the talents of the young people and young artists involved, as long as they are given the tools and shown a path, give something to be optimistic about. As Béatrice Dunoyer highlights, "it is of the utmost importance that the elected officials and politicians take note of the potential of the youth of today and of what they are capable of when we give them the proper tools."



Nacera Belaza, © Pol Guillard

Workshops of the Dreamed City

For L'Art Rue, artistic practices feed thought, and reflection is a mechanism to engage the youngest among us. "From the beginning of our adventure, many specialists and art critics met with the Dream City collective to question the process and establish the scope of thought in relation to the artistic act," says Sofiane Ouissi. For the year "Workshops of the Dreamed City"¹, their ambition was to reconsider the city, to reflect on ways to create the city together. During the biennale, these workshops were held every morning on the following topics: How to maintain the heritage of the Medina in the 21st century; Youth, driver of modernity; Tunis - world city? Between the Medina and the new city; Art and the city; How to change urban mobility in Tunis. They were facilitated and organised by the professor Eric Corijn, who came from Brussels for the event, alongside the Tunisian philosopher Adnen Jdey, enriched by exchanges with the public, among whom many young people participated.

It was during the second workshop, focused on youth, which Imed Melliti contributed

(sociologist at ISSHT and researcher at IRMC). His research, carried out in the working class neighbourhoods of Tunis, concerns the relationship to family, religion and justice. The discussion during the session on "Youth, driver of modernity" was one of the most animated moments of exchange with many young participants present at the debate. While focusing on the youth of the working-class suburbs, the little detour offered by the work of Imed Melliti illuminated the background of the social fabric in which L'Art Rue has anchored their artistic mission. Observing that in urban spaces, the space of the neighbourhood superimposes itself on the traditional familial space resulting in a distancing from the traditional 'big family' of the villages, reminding us that even when reduced to the scope of the parental unit, family remains essential as a space of stability and familiarity. The situation varies in function of means and socio-cultural contexts: girls, for example, can take on a much greater power than in the traditional family pattern of before once they go to school, get a

job and contribute to the economy. But if they've had the chance to get an education, parents expect more from them than their brothers. The points of friction between young people and adults is mostly centred on issues of money, joblessness, education and dating. These conflicts are explained by the fact that frequently the expectations of the youth far exceed the aspirations of their parents, because each generation comes of age in a different era.

This is perhaps not so different as the tensions between one social class to another, or one society to another, the world changing as it is so rapidly, but it should be said that in Tunisia, as anywhere, the young generation have not grown up in the same environment or with the same means as their parents. For the Tunisian youth of today, the major problem comes from economic stress. How many masters degree holders are there without a job? How many young people, who weren't able to continue their studies, find themselves at 30 having never managed to really start an adult life, working or starting a family?

¹ This involved a series of workshops held during Dream City 2017. Open to all, they sought to incite participants to reconsider the city and to question themselves about urbanity in Tunis.

In these conditions, it's understandable that the dominant western model - everything exchanged, everything bought and everything sold - that defines success by wealth, by immigration and by the culture of consumption, creates a large discrepancy with the lived reality of the youth. Working

class youth, student youth and youth working within the projects of L'Art Rue and the youth among Tunisian artistic and educational operators, all disciplines and fields are merged together.

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Josef Wouters, © Pol Guillard



TO GO FURTHER...

CULTURAL PLAYERS AND RELATED RESOURCES

Africa-wide Networks

Arterial Network: <http://www.arterialnetwork.org>

Ma Rue: <https://www.facebook.com/reseaumarue/>

Arab Foundations Forum: <http://arabfoundationsforum.org/members/>

Key organisations and cultural operators of the MENA region

📍 EGYPT

Mahatat for Contemporary Art (Cairo): <http://mahatatcollective.com>

Co-writing Lab database (Arabic and English): <http://cowritinglab.com/en/home/>

El Madina Theatre (Alexandria): <http://www.elmadinaarts.com>

Guide of interventions in the public space: <http://www.elmadinaarts.com/uploads/pdf/STIG-English.pdf>

📍 MOROCCO

Festival Awal'n'art: <http://www.awalnart.com>

Théâtre Nomade (Casablanca) and the CNAREP project: <https://www.theatrenomade.com>

Racines: <http://www.racines.ma>

MARSAD project: <http://www.racines.ma/node/1593>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Marsad2017/?ref=ts&fref=ts>

📍 TUNISIA

Kamel Lazaar Foundation: <https://www.kamellazaarfoundation.org>

ArtsMENA project: <https://www.kamellazaarfoundation.org/project/artsmena>

Jaou project: <http://jaou.tn/>

L'Art Rue: <http://www.larttrue.com>

Dream City: <http://www.larttrue.com/dream-city/>

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/pg/DreamCityTunis/posts/?ref=page_internal

Tunisian Cultural Observatory:

<https://www.facebook.com/pg/ObservatoireCulturelTunisien/posts/>

Interferences - International Light Art Festival: <http://intunis.net/>

Culture Funding Watch: <http://culturefundingwatch.com/en/>

European Platforms and Networks

Circostrada, European Network Circus and Street Arts, led by ARTCENA:

www.circostrada.org/en

Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/circostrada>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/CircostradaNetwork/>

In SITU, European platform for artistic creation in the public space, led by Lieux Publics:

<http://www.in-situ.info/en/>

Venues in Europe: <http://www.in-situ.info/en/places-in-europe/map>

Artists, typology: <http://www.in-situ.info/en/artists>

CircusNext PLATfORM, European platform coordinated

by Jeunes Talents Cirque Europe (JTCE): <http://circusnext.eu/en>

On the Move (OTM) - Cultural Mobility Information Network: <https://on-the-move.org>

Resources related to "art in the public space" in France

ARTCENA – French National Centre for Circus Arts, Street Arts and Theatre: <http://www.artcena.fr/>

French Federation of Street Arts: <https://www.federationartsdelarue.org>

Manifesto (downloadable): <https://www.federationartsdelarue.org/A-paraitre-Le-Manifeste-pour-la.html>

EDITIONS/Art in the public space

Collection Carnets de rue/ L'Entretemps: www.entretemps.org

Editions Deuxième Époque: www.deuxiemeepoque.fr