



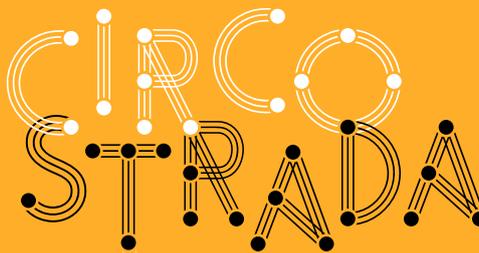
# ART IN THE PUBLIC SPACE IN THE ARAB WORLD: DYNAMICS, ACTORS AND RESOURCES



How can we begin to speak in general terms of public space in the countries of the Arab world when they are so diverse and geographically spread out? When it has become in recent years an open theatre of various events, peaceful and violent demonstrations, resistance and barbarism, a melting pot of citizenship and brotherhood, a site of sacrifice and an echo chamber of all possible expectations? It must be said that in the past few years, the street has played a leveraging role in the ongoing changes in today's Arab societies, even while subjected to secular injunctions and protest bans.



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.



• European Network  
Circus and Street ArtS

This report was written by Claudine Dussollier and edited by Circostrada

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

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How can we begin to speak in general terms of public space in the countries of the Arab world when they are so diverse and geographically spread out? When it has become in recent years an open theatre of various events, peaceful and violent demonstrations, resistance and barbarism, a melting pot of citizenship and brotherhood, a site of sacrifice and an echo chamber of all possible expectations?

How does one begin to consider public space when it is perpetually interfaced with a media that magnifies it and social networks that determine its movement? It must be said that in the past few years, the street has played a leveraging role in the ongoing changes in today's Arab societies, even while subjected to secular injunctions and protest bans.

Circostrada travelled to Egypt for the first time in order to meet two new members of the network: Mahatat for Contemporary Art, based in Cairo, and I-Act, in Alexandria. After discovering the Backstreet Festival organised by I-Act in Alexandria, Circostrada was invited to take part in the Co-writing lab designed by Mahatat for Contemporary Art early April around the theme "Tales of Community Art and Art in Public Space", together with the FAI-AR and ISAN, two other Circostrada members. Following this laboratory, the network suggested, in the framework of the new project (2017-2021), to lay the foundations of a new cycle of meetings named *KAHWA*, which will focus on artistic creation in the Mediterranean region and will be dedicated to professionals working in the public space. The next meeting will take place in Tunis on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, in partnership with L'Art Rue, the Foundation Kamel Lazaar and Dar Ben Gacem. A report will be subsequently issued online both in English and French.

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## NEW ARTISTIC TERRITORIES

The past twenty years have seen the gradual emergence of cultural structures, artist and activist collectives, of public demonstrations in previously unheard-of forms in several countries of the Arab world. These initiatives distinguish themselves from the institutions already in place – either academic or national – establishing themselves, more so than not, along separatist terms. This independence was made possible typically through Western financing – largely from Europe and the United States – and from institutional grants from the Gulf nations, and with the support of cultural exchange programs in place, namely following the Barcelona Conventions of 1995.

Through these measures, the cultural landscape was dotted with new artistic territories <sup>1</sup>. Whether

it be the **SHAMS** or the **Beirut Art Center** in Beirut, **The Garage**, **Gudran** or the **El Madina Theatre** in Alexandria, the **Emad Eddin Studio** in Cairo, **L'Art Rue/Dream City** in Tunis, the **Young Arab Theatre Fund** in Brussels or **Racines** in Casablanca, different events like the Meeting Points <sup>2</sup> organized across cities of the South and East Mediterranean, constituted of professional and educational meetings, have allowed the actors of a new 'culture generation' to build networks and gain attention from international organizers. Former industrial wastelands such as **Santrallstambul** in 2007, or **La Fabrique Culturelle des Anciens Abattoirs de Casablanca** (the old slaughterhouses of Casablanca) have created new possibilities for urban cultures.

<sup>1</sup> The Garage in Alexandria, SHAMS in Beirut, etc., are all part of the New Territories of Art identified in the world in the early 2000s. See this report on New Territories in Art and the international summit of the same name, Fabrice Lextrait 2001-2002.

<sup>2</sup> Meeting Points is a transnational, biannual event, created as a festival of multidisciplinary arts with the goal of creating exchanges and forming connections between artists and artistic organizations in the Arab world. Conceived in 2004 by the architect and set designer Tarek Abdoul el Foutouh, founder of the Young Arab Theatre Fund (YATF), the Meeting Points being one of his major achievements.

Every Meeting Points takes place simultaneously in multiple cities across Europe and the Arab world in collaboration with local institutions. During its 7 most recent iterations, Meeting Points has taken place in cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, Tunis, Beirut, Amman, Damascus, Brussels, Berlin, Athens, Moscow, Vienna and Hong Kong. Since 2007, each year the programming is organized by a different organizer: Eerie Leysen in 2007, Okwui Enwezor in 2011, and the curatorial group What, How & for Whom /WHW in 2013. The last Meeting Points was held in April 2017 and had the theme of Both Sides of the Curtain, directed and organized by Giovanni Caromine, Malak Helmy, Baimundas Malašauskas and Christophe Wavelet.

For more information, visit the following address: <http://meetingpoints.org>

## FIRST STEPS TOWARD PUBLIC SPACE AND CONSOLIDATION OF THE MOVEMENT

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**It is then in this context, around the end of the 2000s, when this necessity to address the relationship with the audience in a new way, in particular a more working-class audience, would appear. From this came the question of the artist's relationship to public space, understood here as a shared space.**

It is then in this context, around the end of the 2000s, when this necessity to address the relationship with the audience in a new way, in particular a more working-class audience, would appear. From this came the question of the artist's relationship to public space, understood here as a shared space. However, this space was often difficult to access, even forbidden, and the street already taken up by the activities of the everyday, making the idea of artistic endeavors in these spaces that demand attention and engagement difficult to imagine under such conditions. The first attempts were carried out in Cairo and Alexandria with the support of the Goethe Institut and the Institut français. In Tunis, Dream City – Biennale of contemporary art in the public space – was initiated in 2007 in the Medina, while in Lebanon it is the **Young Arab Theatre Fund** that emerges in 2002, under the guidance of **Zico House**. Since then, this pioneer of the field has resolutely maintained a meeting every year in the streets and public squares of Beirut, except during times of war.

However, it is during and after the Arab Spring that the movement toward public space really solidified, precisely because these questions of citizenship, of what is shared, of values and identity were being played out in the streets, with everyone involved, artists included. The former played a pivotal role in the expression of culture and identity, of the dreams and grievances of the youth from these countries. What followed was an intense period of artistic creation within the urban public space, and this was not restricted to the capital cities either (a period, which for Egypt and Tunisia, includes 2011 and the first half of 2012). While this dynamism would see itself curtailed by the reactions and repressions of the newly installed powers, it left a deep mark. On the one hand, it became an indelible reference in the individual and collective conscience, and on the other, it brought about the emergence of several groups that would go on to form various troupes, resource centers, long-standing recurring events and festivals that manage to negotiate their new existence.

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Many actors within Arab civil society, among them artists and cultural associations, from that point forward think of their actions in the long-term. Public space is not seen as uniquely a stage, but as new spaces for citizenship, where art has a role to play. "Art as development," as defined by Hassan El Guerety, stage and artistic director for the Egyptian group **El Warsha**.



**Mahatat** fits in well in this dynamic. *Mahatat*, which means 'station' in Arabic, was created in 2011 in Cairo, having taken advantage of one of these moments that was a bit crazy as well as a bit hopeful for a society finally awoken and put into motion.

Quickly, Mahatat set about documenting their artistic endeavors that sought to engage with an audience in Cairo – in public transit, squares, cafes, and working-class neighborhoods. Then, like everyone in Egypt, Mahatat had to adapt to successive new political situations throughout the period from 2012 to 2017. The strategic decision of their team was to focus on building up resources and diversifying projects by expanding the notion of public space to

areas far from Downtown, and/or far from Cairo, by facilitating tours and holding beginners' workshops for populations far away from the centers of contemporary artistic production.

As a result, in the Arab world, this question of action carried out over a territory, either rural or impoverished, has become an integral part of the approach that mixes art and public space by the actors involved, as was the experience of the thirty or so participants, hailing from fifteen different Arab countries, who attended the Co-writing lab, organized by Mahatat at the beginning of April 2017 in Cairo.

This three-day lab organized in Cairo in spring 2017 by Mahatat was built around the following theme: "Tales of Community Art and Art in Public Space". The Co-writing lab is a space to document shared experiences, ideas and methods. It brought together forty artists, practitioners and culture makers from Egypt, France, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sudan, Syria, and Tunisia. The lab gathered artistic knowledge and expertise from all over the Arab region and Europe, and harvested that collaborative creative experience in order to develop multimedia works. After the lab, the editorial team finalized the content in three languages – Arabic, English, and French – for publication on the following online platform: <http://cowritinglab.com/en/home/>.

# PUBLIC SPACE: AN INTERFACE BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY



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3 *Halqa*, circle of storytellers.  
4 The *mouleds* are an expression of popular religious practice in Egypt. Commemorating a saint, either Christian or Muslim, these parties involve music, huge parish fairs bringing together musicians and singers, street vendors of all sorts, game stalls for children, pastries and sweets. Under the guise of a religious celebration, the *mouleds* are a special moment where different social classes interact, whereas in any other circumstance they might not encounter one another.

We know that multiple factors are at play in the place art has in a society and that these vary from one country to another. We may consider, for example:

- The specific relationship between public and private space.
- The dynamic of relationships between the real and the virtual, between social/internet networks and the street.
- The place of artists and art in political and social life.

One element common to the social space of Southern Mediterranean societies is the long-lasting cultural influence from the Ottoman Empire. Traditionally, and for centuries, the saltimbanco entertainers, musicians, storytellers, puppeteers, dancers and singers enriched life inside the courts and harems, as well as that in the streets and cafes. Let us note, however, the distinction between erudite and popular society, the noble vocations that make up one and those others reserved for the poor wretches of society. As the old storytellers in the *Jemaa El Fna* square of Marrakesh will say, when the vocation took hold of them, drawing them unstoppably to the *halqa*<sup>3</sup>, their fathers would disown them, as this kind of occupation

was socially unacceptable. Here we find a manifestation of one of the figures of the artist, damned and marginal, and yet so necessary to social life.

Incidentally, these old, religious and popular festive events, organized in the public space in the tradition of the Egyptian *mouleds*<sup>4</sup> hide the inevitable disappearance of most traditional artists over the past few decades. Drastic to such an extent that today, issues of memory and its transmission are called into question from Istanbul to Casablanca and from Cairo to Tunis. One may come to fear this issue will be treated solely in terms of preservation of world heritage and museology, rather than as performing arts or artistic creation. Luckily, various projects have highlighted the insistence of some contemporary artists to rebuild bonds with tradition in order to give new life to those practices, reinventing the art form, all this while drawing from a collective ancestral imagination.

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This is the case of the **Awaln'Art Festival**<sup>5</sup> in Marrakesh, which under the guidance of Khalid Tamer has reclaimed the emblematic space that is the Jemaa El Fna square. For several decades now, Awaln'Art has built in the public space the foundations of an artistic renewal by bringing together Moroccan, African and European circus performers with contemporary dance troupe like **Ex Nihilo** and the **Collectif Random**. At the same time, Awaln'Art has been involved in **Arts'R'Public**, a Euro-Mediterranean lab for artistic creation and transmission of arts in public space; with a particular focus on bringing a new audience into the process of artistic creation<sup>6</sup>.

It is also the case for the troupe El Warsha<sup>7</sup> of Cairo, who has for 30 years now, brought together actors, musicians, baton dancers, singers and storytellers. Directed by Hassan El Gueretty, the group has returned to the roots of tradition, notably with the Banu Hilal style, all while maintaining a nomadic theatre, playing across the country for the entire population thanks to a mobile scenography. Taking themes from

everyday life, like with *Le Caire sur la main* (Cairo in hand) or *les Nuits d'El Warsha* (The Nights of El Warsha), which breathe new life into public space, the troupe mediates between tradition and modernity, stage and street, real and fictional, public and private.

This long-term project draws inspiration from the idea of creating a junction between past traditions and the present of artists today, between vectors of social communication of the Arab-Berber peoples and connection to the world. This undertaking is in response to a search for what can go beyond divides and norms, beyond the patterns and dogmas that regulate the world of international contemporary art. It is not a matter of returning to the past, or of promoting some kind of folklore, but rather of placing oneself at the nexus of the many compositional elements of today's world.

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<sup>5</sup> AWALN'ART Festival: [www.awalnart.com](http://www.awalnart.com)

<sup>6</sup> Arts'R'Public is an international cultural project coordinated by the association Eurocircle; the project is partnered with several artistic organizations (Lezarap'art, Stamp Festival, Collectif Eclats de Lune and Sarabanda) from four partner cities (Marseille, Hamburg, Marrakesh, and Genoa) and is supported by the Creative Europe program of the European Union.

<sup>7</sup> El Warsha: <https://www.facebook.com/El-Warsha-Theater-Troupe-14623913510/>

# ACTION IN THE EGYPTIAN PUBLIC SPACE



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In Egypt, for reasons of security and the necessity to procure prior permission, the shows held in the public space are organized most of the time and until further notice in semi-open or semi-closed spaces – pedestrian streets, school courtyards, university campuses, cafes, etc. Despite these rather stressful

constraints, happiness abounds in the street, in the looks of wonder, the playful attitudes, and the joy of an audience surprised by a show either come upon voluntarily or discovered by chance on a street corner.

Several such large-scale public events have sprouted up since 2011. Together they form a map, open to international artistic exchanges, while favoring the urban,

pushing the authorized boundaries each time they take place: **D-CAF - Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival** in Cairo, **Nassim El Raqs** and **Backstreet Festival** in Alexandria.

D-CAF<sup>8</sup> is multidisciplinary and international. It takes place over three weeks in March-April each year, with several days of organized events in the

streets of Downtown Cairo. On the program is visual and digital art as well as performing arts. Organized and produced by Ahmed El Attar, director and founder of the Emad Eddin Studio, it is both an international event and a window onto artistic creation of the Middle East, recognized as ideal for professional networking. Ahmed El Attar has managed to build solid and sustainable partnerships with European groups, such as **Dancing on the Edge**, from the Netherlands, which offers training to young artists and artist residencies.

Nassim El Raqs<sup>9</sup> was created by the initiative of Emilie Petit, of the French NGO **Momkin**, with Lucien Arino, founder of **Rezodanse**, an Egyptian organization from Alexandria, with the support of the Goethe Institut, the European Union and the Institut français. It was developed on the basis of experimentation in dance and in new forms of poetry in the public space. Despite major hurdles, the Nassim El Raqs project has resisted and established itself, benefiting from an outstanding partnership with the international troupe Ex Nihilo. Since 2016, this nascent Alexandrian production group founded by Yasmine Aly, supports Nassim El Raqs alongside Momkin. Many artists and dancers, both Egyptian and European, collaborate there on projects ins-

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<sup>8</sup> D-CAF Festival, produced by the Emad Eddin Studio and Orient Productions: <http://d-caf.org>  
<sup>9</sup> Nassim El Raqs: <https://www.facebook.com/Nassimraqs/>

pired by the city of Alexandria. Recently, the company **Ici Même Grenoble** has laid the foundation for further sound and art projects.

Backstreet Festival <sup>10</sup> is an annual project from **I-ACT**, an organization created just after the revolution by the director Mahmoud Abodoma in order to give independence to the emerging Egyptian arts scene, and support it through a regularized training system. Having built a café, an exposition gallery, a small stage, a restaurant, Teatro Eskendria, as a friendly and permanent meeting point all while underpinning an economy of independence, Mahmoud Abodoma and his daughter Amina Abodoma launched the Backstreet project, of which she is artistic director. Backstreet takes place just as well outdoors as indoors, with options for all types of audiences, favoring circus arts and international troupes (**Colokolo, Grotest, Maru, Circus Lumineszenz**, etc.). Since 2015, Amina Abodoma has been creating

connections with France in the realm of street arts. Building sustainable links to the **CNAREP** (Centre national des arts de la rue et de l'espace public / French National Centre for Streets Arts and the Public Space), **Le Moulin Fondu/Oposito, La Cité des Arts de la Rue** in Marseille and, specifically, with the troupe **Générik Vapeur**, with whom a project for artistic training and production is currently underway, the first step of which took place in Alexandria in March 2017 following the creation of the Franco-Egyptian show *Eskendria Bivouac*. In Alexandria, at their 2015 festival, I-ACT encouraged participants to reflect on the theme of "Arts, public space and freedom", an open-ended reflection that went unachieved, understandably due to the difficulties faced by the artists and organizers in maintaining the balance of artistic aspirations and the burden of administrative authorizations and questions of security.

<sup>10</sup> I-ACT and the Back Street Festival: <http://www.iact-eg.org/>

## MAHATAT: A PLACE, A TEAM, A PROJECT AND RESOURCES FOR THE ARAB WORLD



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In this landscape, the existence and work of Mahatat mark a turning point for the cultural landscape of the Arab world, drawing on the model of the Dream City Biennale in Tunis, which opened a new path in 2007, or that of Racines in Casablanca, which founded the General conference (États généraux) on Culture in 2010.

**This is the first time a professional, cultural body of the Arab world has charged itself with the question of resources in a self-structured and sustainable way.**

In fact, this is the first time a professional, cultural body of the Arab world has charged itself with the question of resources in a self-structured and sustainable way. The strategic priorities of Mahatat, apart from those focused on documentation and instruction of actors in the Egyptian public sphere, have since 2013 drawn them to further develop knowledge of and partnerships in the domains of street arts and circus arts. This happened while studying European festivals in France, the UK and Spain in 2015 and 2016, by exchanging with the resource center HorsLesMurs, now **ARTCENA**, joining Circostrada, and through the conception and creation of a network within the Arab world that allows for experience and resources to be shared.

It is in this context that the Co-writing lab was organized around three days sharing experience, through a methodical and collective system of sharing. The 40 participants from Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Palestine and Egypt as well as representatives of the **FAI-AR** (*Formation supérieure d'art en espace public* - Advanced training in art in the public space), **ISAN** (Independent Street Arts Network) and Circostrada Network, worked with a methodology of group activities borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon tradition that led to the implementation of a template with which to structure different kinds of information and representations of public space. The experience of the participants was not limited to artistic creation in and of itself, but rather on cultural mediation in rural and urban contexts, and on event organization in public spaces.

Several notions were addressed tangentially to the goals of the Co-writing lab, without hierarchizing nor ignoring them, because they were all relevant in one way or another to the group such as art in the public space, art that creates common ground for a shareable public space, the role of culture, the definition of a social art, etc.

At the end of the lab, participants underscored a methodology for engaging in the public space in a way every bit as well developed as in equivalent European contexts, revealing a great many on-the-ground skills and a prudent sense of the obstacles



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– as well as strategies to overcome them, be they economic, political, security, or organizational. A debriefing and the collected resources from these three days are available online at the following address: <http://cowritinglab.com/en/home/>

Demonstrating an impressive professional maturity, these different actors from the region that met, many of whom

for the first time, also tackled more strategic and prospective questions during specific round tables, such as the utility and aims of these networks. Why establish networks in each country, between Arab countries or even create new European or international ones?

The fact of 'being in a network' is a way of working that can facilitate lobbying and advocacy activities, but also the professional, artistic and organizational training that these young groups so desperately need - none of these focuses being mutually exclusive, of course. The work is just beginning, since the topics needing to be addressed are strategic and many are the problems faced by the organizers and artists, particular in relation to the territorial administrations and local public authorities.

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# TOWARDS A NEW ERA OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

**11** MARSAD: <http://www.facebook.com/Marsad2017/>  
**12** RACINES: <http://www.racines.ma>  
**13** El Madina Theatre: <http://www.elmadinaarts.com>  
**14** MESAF in Lebanon: <http://www.facebook.com/mezaf.initiative/?fref=mentions>

The question of public space is a real and ongoing dilemma, as much for the audience as it is for artists. Cultural actors want now more than ever for the general public to come in contact with art, and to make them consider the situation of their society. Whether the public space is accepted as a real space of expression is not the least of the challenges facing artists and cultural agents, the former emerging like figureheads leading to this utopia.

In the different countries of the region, it is still difficult for the general population to speak with real knowledge and recognition of artistic endeavors carried out in the public space. Time and more effective cultural politics are also needed to bring these initiatives out from the shadows. But the movement forges ahead. Meanwhile, a new project meant to improve the situation of cultural politics in the Arab world has been born - **MARSAD**<sup>11</sup>. MARSAD is organized in Egypt, Tunisia and Lebanon, based on the experiences of Racines<sup>12</sup> along with the El Madina Theatre<sup>13</sup> in Alexandria, **Mesaf**<sup>14</sup> in Beirut and l'**Observatoire Culturel** in Tunis.

Cultural cooperation and reciprocal exchanges constitute a lever with which the cultural actors of the Arab world can maneuver through their situation, namely by means of partnerships with various European countries, to the benefit of artistic and educational projects. There is certainly no lack of initiatives and creative energy!



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**Festival AWALN'ART/Marrakech:** [www.awalnart.com](http://www.awalnart.com)

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## Lebanon

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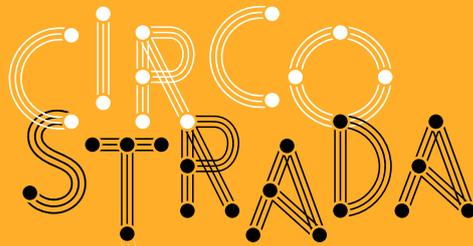
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