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## Street Art out of Time

### The Cultural Moussem of Asilah and Other Entanglements of Public Space, Arts, and Politics

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#### Abstract

The small town of Asilah in the north of Morocco holds an annual international festival of visual and performance arts, including exhibitions, workshops, conferences, and other parallel activities. However, it is best known for the murals that are painted every year anew by invited artists on the facades of old town houses. Founded in 1978, the Arts Festival or Cultural Moussem of Asilah qualifies as the first street art festival in Morocco and has significantly shaped the cultural context for arts to interact with public spaces. It has, in particular, linked street art manifestations to ideas of cultural dialogue and south-south alliances as well as to urban regeneration and social development. At the same time, the Festival has been criticized for using the integrative concept of the *moussem*, a traditional communal festivity, for cultural marketing and for connecting arts and culture to the power of the monarchy. By focusing on political, aesthetic, and urban aspects of the institutionalization of the Asilah Festival, this article draws a genealogical perspective on entanglements of art, public culture, and urban politics in Morocco. It thereby analyzes the cultural context in which street art finds its place, meaning, and critical potential today.

**Keywords:** arts festival; cultural moussem; street art; Morocco; Asilah

#### Introduction

Art in public space is deeply inscribed in popular Moroccan culture when we consider the various traditions of music, public storytelling, and performing arts, which are part of the market, the square, and countless religious and cultural festivals. To these mainly performative and oral cultural traditions we might add the visual and sculptural dimensions of everyday life in the villages and ancient medinas: the architecture and light conditions into which one is drawn, carpets that hang along the walls like murals, laundry that dries on rooftops, and goods that build up on the streets like sculptures, the dense simultaneity of movement and interaction evoking a performance or multiscreen installation. These kinds of 'street art' might sometimes resemble touristic folklore, performed to attract tourists and to fulfill their supposed expectations of an oriental culture, yet they additionally reflect social relations, aesthetic meaning, and embodied knowledge. They have not only inspired modernist artists from north and south of the Mediterranean, but also entered contemporary art forms in various ways.

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While art and everyday life have always been closely connected in this sense, street art, originating from graffiti art and subculture, first appeared in Morocco in the early 2000s (Waddacor 151-153). In the course of the 2010s, street art festivals in Casablanca, Rabat, and other places have changed the face of these cities by introducing abstract and figurative compositions on walls and facades throughout different neighborhoods. Apart from bringing new colors, forms, and figures into the cityscape, these new kinds of street art also generate tensions within the urban space. By presenting different visual worlds and imaginaries, street artists challenge conventional perceptions of the city, including separations between private and public spaces as well as respective social, cultural, and gender norms.

The main question which guides me in this article is how to understand the frictions between the established aesthetics of street life, the extensive control of public space, and the transformative potential of street art manifestations in Moroccan cities. What are the conditions for street artists to enter into dialogue with the city by means of wall painting? What kind of street art is socially welcome or invasive, morally decent or offensive, aesthetically connecting or interruptive? How are Moroccan state and communal politics involved in shaping the peculiar character of street art in the country? To approach these questions, I follow a genealogical perspective on entanglements of art and urban politics. I argue that we can obtain a deeper understanding of the political and cultural context in which street art finds its meaning and critical potential today when we consider earlier manifestations of art in the streets and their implications in cultural politics.

Similar to other modern and contemporary artistic practices, street art became gradually accepted in the Moroccan public realm through its adaptation into festivals. Cultural festivals, in general, spread from the early years of independence in the second half of the 1950s onward. They build upon the *moussems*, traditionally tribal and popular festivities in honor of a saint, often including religious rituals, music, dance, and exchange of goods (Boum). In shaping a new national identity for the independent kingdom, the state linked the religious dimension of the *moussems* to the institutions of the monarchy. It thus became a celebration of an imagined Moroccan nation, multi-cultural and tolerant towards ethnic, religious, and subcultural groups as long as these could be framed in non-political terms (Boum; Marmié 4).

It might seem paradoxical to include street art in these attempts to nationalize cultural activities since, at least in its occidental genealogy, street art is commonly a subcultural expression or performance in opposition to state institutions and national framings. Nevertheless, street art festivals have emerged in recent years in Morocco, like the Sbagha Bagha Casablanca Street Art Festival (since 2013) or the Jidar, Toiles de rue Festival in Rabat (since 2015). These street art manifestations cannot be reduced to non-political, compliant art and cultural festivities, if only because they have emerged out of Moroccan and international subculture with the participation of international artists, who set different aesthetics, motifs, and themes not necessarily, or not directly, associated with the local culture. These recent festivals are part of a new cultural dynamic which grants more space and autonomy to transcultural projects as long as they do not openly challenge established framings of the arts in Morocco and can be associated with social or economic aspirations and cultural marketing. A political role for the arts might be explored within these frameworks, especially for street art as an openly visible transformation of public space. The first large event to establish such a Moroccan framing for street art was the Arts Festival, or Cultural Moussems, of Asilah. I shall focus below on this festival and the political conditions for street art it created, conditions which defined not only limits for public space to accommodate art, but also the potential for art to change perceptions and thus ideas of the public sphere.

The research for this article is based on archival material and literature as well as on personal conversations with artists and cultural stakeholders about the Asilah Arts Festival and other street

art manifestations.<sup>2</sup> The corpus of critical literature on the Asilah Festival is limited; the Festival's archive in the Prince Bandar Bin Sultan Médiathèque in Asilah offers a mainly official view stemming from occasional documentation of festival editions and artists' catalogues, published by Al Mouhit (the Ocean),<sup>3</sup> the association behind the Festival, as well as selected press reviews. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Festival was canceled in 2020 and held in a reduced version in 2021, making it difficult to form an up-to-date impression. On this basis, the text offers a fragmentary reading and juxtaposition of different materials and voices, aiming to shed light on the historical intertwining of art, politics, and public space in Morocco. The first part focuses on the foundation of the Cultural Moussem of Asilah and its first edition in 1978. I will also draw on earlier manifestations of art in the streets as well as on parallel art practices in Asilah before considering more recent forms and structures of street art in Moroccan cities. These various times and places connect through the question of how art can be thought to shape, expand, and transform public space and the cultural imaginary, not only through economic or touristic valorization and urban cultural marketing, but also by way of symbolic forms, poetic images, and aesthetic reflection.

### The Cultural Moussem of Asilah

Asilah, a small northern town on the Atlantic coast, nearly thirty kilometers south of Tangier, annually hosts the Cultural Moussem of Asilah since 1978. It was initiated by a group of artists and cultural stakeholders around the politician Mohamed Benaïssa<sup>4</sup> and the painter, sculptor, and photographer Mohamed Melehi,<sup>5</sup> eventually becoming linked to the cultural association Al Mouhit. The Asilah Festival, as it exists today, grew out of the idea of linking art with the life of the city to enhance cultural and urban development. The small town of Asilah, hometown to both Benaïssa and Melehi, was to become a place of encounter and dialogue for artists, writers, and intellectuals from Morocco and from all over the world. In the catalogue for the first edition of the Festival, Benaïssa and Melehi speak for a "generation of the 'cross-cultured' Arabo-Muslim intellectuals, who, by and large, attended colonial schools and have unconsciously absorbed those moral and intellectual values which often have contributed to their alienation and identity crisis" (11). They present the Asilah Festival as a rebellion "against the concept of Western civilization" as well as against "an imported culture," instead referring to domestic roots and seeking a common culture in a "Third World" alliance (11). At the same time, Benaïssa and Melehi wanted the Festival to detach itself from the Moroccan cultural logic of the time, withstanding "the 'club syndrome,' the elitist groups, the art exhibitions organized for the privileged few, the illiberal meetings where avant-garde intellectuals, poets, writers and artists delight in dealing with the solitudes of common

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<sup>3</sup> Later to become the Fondation du Forum d'Asilah.

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed Benaïssa was born in 1937 in Asilah, which was, at that time, part of the Spanish Protectorate in Morocco. He studied in the United States of America and worked for the United Nations and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. Upon his return to Morocco, he became a member of the city parliament of Asilah from 1977 to 1983 and then mayor of the town from 1984 to 2010. Between 1985 and 1992, Benaïssa was Minister of Culture of Morocco, between 1993 and 1999 Moroccan Ambassador to the USA, and between 1999 and 2007 Minister of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed Melehi (1936-2020) was born in Asilah and a childhood friend of Benaïssa. He studied in Tetouan, Seville, Madrid, Paris and Rome and lived in New York through a Rockefeller Foundation scholarship between 1962 and 1964. At his return to Morocco, he joined the Casablanca School of Fine Arts as a teacher for painting, sculpture and photography. Melehi was part of Morocco's burgeoning artistic and cultural scene in the 1960s and 1970s, participating in cultural magazines, such as *Souffles* (1966-1972) and *Integral* (1972-1977), which he initiated and published. From 1985 to 1992, he was visual arts director in the Ministry of Culture (a position newly created by Mohamed Benaïssa) and worked, between 1999 and 2002, as a cultural consultant to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation.

man and a grass root society and yet deny its representation and fail to recognize its true aspirations and ambitions" (11). Critical of such foreign and exclusive spaces for art and intellectual life, the Cultural Moussem of Asilah aimed to create "common ground" where intellectuals, artists, writers, or poets of the "Third World" could meet their Western counterparts as well as people from various social backgrounds (11).

The 1978 flyer for the Moussem's first edition, written in English, French, Spanish and Arabic, conveys these ideas (fig. 1):

On the Atlantic Coast / In the province of Tangier / Home of ancient civilization: / Phoenician, Roman, Vandal, Arab-Islamic / Asilah: an encounter / People to people. . . thinkers, writers, artists: / To emphasize the role of culture in the evolution of civilization; / To promote man, his traditions, his environment / To lay the foundation for a permanent center of dialogue, encounter, exchange. . . / through collective action, research, contact; / . . . / Through its simplicity of form / Through its density of culture. / Asilah is a symbol of continuity and of authenticity / survivor of touristic rites indifferent to the primary dynamic of guest and host. (Flyer for the first edition of the Cultural Moussem of Asilah)



Figure 1: Flyer for the first edition of the Cultural Moussem of Asilah, 1978.



This short self-description is remarkable in its abundance of references to the grandeur of historical civilizations, which it seeks to revive through the meeting and dialogue of artists, writers, and intellectuals. In the flyer, local residents and their current lives are addressed, if at all, only by reference to the “simplicity of form” (“simplicité du milieu” in the French version) and the “density of culture” with which “man” founded great civilizations. Similarly impressive are the abundance and variety of projects announced for a couple of summer weeks in a small town otherwise devoid of major cultural activities: workshops and conferences, performances and concerts, art exhibitions, film programs as well as sporting events.

For the first edition of the Moussem, the city council of Asilah invited professional Moroccan artists, members of the Moroccan Plastic Arts Association, to participate in a campaign of urban improvement. In spring 1978, the artists Farid Belkahlia, Mohamed Melehi, Miloud Labied, Mohamed Hamidi, Mohamed Chabâa, Saad Hassani, Hossein Miloudi, Mohamed Kacimi and Abderrahmane Rahoule created murals on the walls of the medina and guided young people from Asilah in assisting them. For this purpose, parts of the idyllic but modest town were renovated and embellished, historical buildings were restored, and walls of houses were whitewashed to create surfaces for wall painting. Throughout the old section of town, the facades of private and public buildings became supports for murals by renowned artists, whose mainly abstract forms and bright colors radically transformed the city’s image for the summer season (fig. 2 and 3). It became a festival tradition that these murals remain in place for a year before being redesigned in the next edition.



Figure 2: Wall painting by Asilah youngsters. Image reproduced from the catalogue *Asilah. First Cultural Moussem July/August 1978*, Shoof Publications, 1979, p. 19.



الروائي المغربي محمد شكري أمام لوحة جدارية لمحمد المليحي (المغرب) 1978  
 Mohamed Choukri (Romancier Marocain) assis devant la fresque murale de Mohammed Melehi  
 Assilah 1978

Figure 3: Mohamed Choukri sitting in front of a mural by Mohamed Melehi, Assilah 1978. Image reproduced from the book *Peinture murale d'Assilah. Évasions dans l'imaginaire* by the Fondation du Forum d'Assilah, p. 28.

It was the first initiative of this kind to give wall and mural painting an official visibility and recognition among modern art forms in Morocco. The murals also played a major role in combining artistic manifestations with an ambitious political project of urban regeneration. They became symbolic not only of the Moussem of Assilah but also, more generally, of art's potential to transform a city and boost urban development.

This merging of street art with urban cultural politics was not uncontested. Local associations and a number of artists and intellectuals did not agree with this kind of cultural marketing. In the first year, there were actually two festivals which most people could not easily distinguish, aside from a few initiates (El Maleh, *Assilah* 25): the International Festival and the Moussem, a concurrence marked by friction, intrigue, and rivalry (Louakira 68). Debate and disagreement between the two groups of organizers, according to the writer Edmond Amran El Maleh, revolved around the meaning and aim of the festival and culture in general, for Assilah and its inhabitants (25). For him, the key significance of the Moussem was that it allowed for activities to take place, like, for example, the engraving studio. El Maleh and others emphasized Assilah's vocation for arts and crafts, still vital in the region, and wanted the Moussem to develop its own profile in this direction (25). In a similar vein, the futurologist, sociologist and economist Mahdi Elmandjra took issue with the modern habit of inserting the adjective 'popular' before 'culture,' arguing:

This was inconceivable in the past as culture was by definition an integral part of the life of everyone as well as of society as a whole. The disintegration resulting from the consequences of industrialization has encouraged a cultural development

where the emphasis is on the product of culture instead of the process itself.  
 (Elmandjra 29)

In Elmandjra's view, culture in Morocco—theatre, music, dance and sculpture—was closely associated with social happenings, harvest periods, or religious ceremonies: "The music was played according to the seasons. . . Everyone participated in the performances. Today people don't live the music but listen to it. . . with no specific relationship between the sound heard and the events, feelings or mood which the music purports to transmit" (29).

El Maleh, in his text for the first edition catalogue, makes it clear that he sees this form of culture endangered by the tendency of the Moussem of Asilah to use art as a tool for political strategies and urban development (24). He criticized the Al Mouhit Association for trying to take over local initiatives and subordinate the needs and desires of residents to political strategies: "The Zailachis [people of Asilah], the ones who started it all, were right to react in defense of their city" (24). How, he wondered, could they stand passively by while the city's body and soul were annihilated for profit? How unfortunate it would be if the will to resist collapsed because of a failure to consolidate last year's gains and "if the city simply turned over the keys to the invader. . . and the leprous degradation of the culture business actually found the door wide open. . . free to ravage and ruin, even the old ramparts" (24). The writer Mohamed Louakira similarly saw the Moussem as establishing an "alibi culture," "a parade, a pretext, a justification to consolidate a certain power or to ensure financial profitability" (68).

Ideas for this Moussem thus ranged from a festival that should remain a local affair, especially for young people, to one that should bring national and international artists together on a "common ground," linked to an embellishment of the town and economic improvements (Benaïssa and Melehi 11). These divergent ideas can also be found in different interpretations of the word *moussem* which, in Moroccan dialect, like *mawsim* in classical Arabic, refers to traditional culture and communal festivity. It literally means 'season' and signifies a big celebration during a harvest period or religious pilgrimage. It is an inclusive notion, involving everyone from the community and beyond, and it originally implied solidarity, as in the past in rural communities everyone helped with the harvest and joined in the festivities afterwards. In the context of the Asilah Festival, the notion of *moussem* adds a sense of importance and communal significance to the event, which lasts throughout the entire summer season. It also refers to the variety of activities, people, and not least art forms and genres.<sup>6</sup> Skeptical about a tendency to empty the word of its inclusive meaning and to open it instead towards cultural marketing and branding, El Maleh, in his contribution to the festival's first edition catalogue, defends its original relevance:

After all, the word "Moussem" was chosen for a reason: to avoid the usual touristic vocation of the normal cultural festival. There is still a lively tradition among the people in this country: the Moussem as celebration, in the fullest sense of the word. This meaning has been lost in the West and may risk the same fate here. We are talking about a celebration which does not impeach religious fervor, or prevent the simple joy of being part of the crowd. The pretense and imitation of what the culture business imposes elsewhere is killing culture. . . A spark of imagination could make the Moussem become a real fête, a celebration that we could wish for. (El Maleh, *Asilah* 26)

To give an impression of the atmosphere during the first edition of the Moussem, in which different ideas and even different festivals still coexisted, I cite from an account published in the political and cultural magazine *Lamalif* by Zakya Daoud, a French-born journalist naturalized as a Moroccan in 1959, who was the cofounder and chief editor of *Lamalif* (1966-1988):

<sup>6</sup> I thank Ahmed Boughaba for his nuanced explanations of the notion of *moussem*.



The program for the first day of the first Cultural Moussem of Asilah. . . included, in addition to the opening reading of Quran verses and various speeches by government officials, the inauguration of the Palace of Culture in the historical Raissouni building and of a brand-new vacation complex. . . The atmosphere is relaxed, friendly. In the alleys, vacationers move around: nationals and foreigners mixed, as many silhouettes in gandouras of all colors. . . The village is filled to the brim, with 600 people, including 110 artists, competing for the straw huts, and is dozing in the heat. But in the café, Elikia M'Bokolo discusses the theme of his lecture on the following day: "Black Africa and the Arab World" while the musicologist J. C. Chabrier. . . talks about the oud (lute) and the ancient Arab music that he loves in all its purity and in all its simplicity. (Daoud 40)<sup>7</sup>

Zakya Daoud's text paints a vivid picture of this hustle and bustle, not without a critical irony vis-à-vis this simultaneity and overabundance of cultural, intellectual, and tourist business:

. . . at 7 pm [the inhabitants of Asilah and their visitors] are entitled to a big parade in the streets of the city with the *dakka*<sup>8</sup> of Marrakech. . ., the famous puppets of the Fadili brothers, Taktouka Jabalia,<sup>9</sup> the *chikhate*<sup>10</sup> of Tounfit and the Feast of Fools, these wonderful satirical fools, musicians, mimes, and clowns all at once who, for a week, have been making up the good evenings of the International Festival. Next to the village, where the beachgoers slowly come back from the sea, Jillali Ferhati speaks, in front of vacationers sitting on the grass, of his film *The breach in the wall*. At the same time Buñuel's film *The Milky Way* plays in the cinema that was installed in Asilah. But tonight, it is the show which attracted not only the villagers, but many enthusiasts from Tangier, Tetouan, from all cities, Casablanca even: Keith Jarrett. . . As the people of the festival say humorously in their mimeographed sheet *The unleashed seagull*: "we are criticized for programming two, three interesting things at the same time, but honestly, we prefer this reproach to a testimonial of emptiness". (Daoud 40-41)<sup>11</sup>

An impressive number of performers and intellectuals were invited to the first edition. Daoud mentions, among others, the band Nass El Ghiwane, the jazz pianist Bill Evens, Haj Abdelkrim Raïs and his Arabo-Andalusian music; national and international films; poetry readings; and lectures by, for example, the Moroccan philosopher, politician, and writer Allal Sinaceur or the Franco-Algerian philosopher and Islamic scholar Mohamed Arkoun. The same can be said for visual artists: for the first edition, eleven artists from Italy, Iraq, Japan, Latin America, Morocco, Palestine, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sudan, and the United States came to Asilah, led workshops, discussed, and exchanged. In the first years, the notion of a "dialogue of cultures" seemed central, coupled with the wish to redirect general interest toward the South. Instead of artists and intellectuals leaving the country for the North, the festival should attract people from all over the world to Morocco (Benaïssa cited in Binder and Haupt).

Zakya Daoud, from her leftist political position, was certainly critical about the orientation which the festival took at the hands of its two principal initiators, Mohamed Benaïssa and Mohamed Melehi, who were both at that time part of or very close to the state apparatus and deeply

<sup>7</sup> Translated from the French by the author.

<sup>8</sup> The *dakka* means a rhythmic frapping of hands. It is a musical tradition of the oral heritage (see: <https://cmtra.hypotheses.org/1900>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2022).

<sup>9</sup> Songs in Moroccan dialect and music from the mountains of the region.

<sup>10</sup> The *chikhates* are Moroccan singers and dancers who practice the art of "aïta," a kind of lament or blues, in dialectal Arabic, or who sing "chaabi," a more festive music. (see: <https://mouqawamet.wordpress.com/2015/09/13/les-chikhate-marocaines-des-chanteuses-populaires-libres-video-en-darja/>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Translated from the French by the author.



implicated in cultural diplomacy. Looking at the general political and cultural context of the late 1970s, one should not forget that these were the 'years of lead' at their most pronounced, marked by political repression and cultural stagnation. Especially after two attempted coups d'État in 1971 and 1972, the government responded with massive repression against the political opposition as well as against leftist intellectuals, writers, filmmakers, and artists. The magazine *Souffles* (1966-1972), to which Melehi and other artists had significantly contributed, was forbidden in 1972, films were censored, theater groups dissolved, people arrested or forced into exile. Researcher Amina Touzani writes in her study on cultural politics in Morocco that around 1970 a growing gap of incomprehension spread between the state power and the cultural milieu. For the first time, cultural planning was inscribed in five-year plans, culture was subordinated to the Ministry of Cultural Affairs established in 1974, and charts full of imported ideas took hold without much connection to the way the country lived (60).

In this period, the Moussem of Asilah might have been an attempt to create a hub for cultural activity in a remote place at some distance from the centers of power and of cultural production, with a certain autonomy and utopian vision, yet in accordance with and supported by the state apparatus.

### Art in the Streets

The Cultural Moussem of Asilah can be seen as the first street art festival in Morocco. Yet nearly ten years earlier almost the same group of artists had already been organizing events which brought art to the street. For ten days in May 1969, Mohamed Melehi, Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chabâa, Mohamed Ataallah, Mustapha Hafid, and Mohamed Hamidi presented their paintings in Jamâa Al Fna Square in Marrakech and, later the same year, again on 16<sup>th</sup> November Square in Casablanca. This group of artists, associated with an aesthetic and pedagogical reorientation at the Casablanca Art School in the 1960s, took the initiative for a "manifesto-exhibition" titled *Présence plastique* not only in opposition to the state-sponsored *Salon du Printemps* held at the same time, but also to demonstrate a new self-understanding among artists, a modernist avant-garde with close links to their local audience and a new visual language.<sup>12</sup> In the literary and cultural journal *Souffles*, the collective wrote about the exhibition in 1969:

We wished to reach the popular audience where it is, open and comfortable, by proposing this living [art] demonstration: outside the closed circle of galleries, of salons which this audience has never entered. . . We also wanted to awaken the interest of these people, their curiosity and critical spirit, to stimulate them and make new artistic expression part of their rhythm of life and daily space. And we can say, for sure, that these discussions and the whole experience were very important for us: we did indeed tackle the concrete problem of integrating art into the urban frame, into the street, into a distant view, into the natural light, etc. . . and, most importantly, we realized the problems posed by communicating through art and by barriers that remain to be crossed, in ourselves, between us, and towards this audience" ("Action plastique").<sup>13</sup>

This statement reveals interrogations about the role of the artist and the gulf between art and the people. It also questions the potential of the street to nourish modern art and of art to become part of the rhythms and meanings of everyday life. We find a similar motivation to connect art with social

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<sup>12</sup> For more information about the *Présence plastique* exhibitions and the Casablanca School see, for example, Maud Houssais. "Débris modestes. Trois présences plastiques dans l'espace public marocain." *Zamân*. no. 7, 2017, pp. 11-37; Brahim Alaoui, and Rajae Benchemsi, editors. *Farid Belkahia et l'École des beaux-arts de Casablanca, 1962-1974*. Skira, Fondation Farid Belkahia, 2019; Françoise Cohen, editor. *Maroc. Une Identité Moderne*. Catalogue of the exhibition "Maroc. Une identité moderne" at the IMA-Tourcoing, 15 Feb. – 14 June 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Translated from the French by the author.

urban practices in the initiative to create the Cultural Mousseum of Asilah. While the manifesto-exhibition in Marrakech ultimately reproduced a gallery format of paintings displayed on the wall, the Asilah festival devised a new format by inviting artists for a week to create murals *in situ*. Painting thus became a street performance in full view of the local population. This way, the murals were more deeply embedded in their spatial context, eventually becoming part of it and remaining in place between one edition and the next. In 1973, in a text for the cultural magazine *Intégral*, Melehi published a critical reflection on the *Présence plastique* exhibition in Marrakech in 1969:

Following this experience, I realized that the paintings were nevertheless out of place – powerless and anachronistic—because they had not been conceived for the street. Like it or not, they remained the products of research limited to particular situations, not adapted to the outside, nor to its light, nor finally to the aspirations of the moment and to the environmental requirements". (Melehi, as quoted in Houssais 18)<sup>14</sup>

What, then, does it take for an image to be in place, in tune with the street and with the life of a city? In his reflections, and certainly later on during the Asilah festival, Melehi seeks to answer this question from the point of view of art: Does it succeed in adapting itself or in speaking to the environment, its light, colors, rhythms? His central motifs of horizontal waves and vertical flames, combining geometrical forms with dynamic movement, certainly speak to the winding streets and historically layered buildings of the port city in which he grew up, although he had developed them since his time in New York City and during many visits to studios, exhibitions, and festivals worldwide.

This article is not the place to inquire how local residents responded to the murals which, pursuing an annual rhythm, changed the perception of their town (fig. 4 and 5). Katarzyna Pieprzak poses the question how the residents of Asilah reacted to the mural paintings in her book "Imagined Museums" and laments the lack of research, not least of inhabitants' voices. She speculatively concludes: "One can have no doubt that the Moroccan public at large, as untrained and unaccustomed to modern art as it was, did react to the art, and that on some level, subtle, unconscious, or momentary as it might have been, the artwork changed their way of seeing" (146).

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<sup>14</sup> Translated from the French by the author.



سيدة زيلاشية أمام جدارية فريد بلكاهية وجدارية محمد الحميدي (يمين) - أصيلة 1987  
Une femme Zailachi devant les peintures de Farid Belkahia et Mohamed Hamidi à droite - Assilah 1987

Figure 4: A woman of Assilah in front of murals by Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Hamidi (right), Assilah 1987. Image reproduced from the book *Peinture murale d'Assilah. Evasions dans l'imaginaire* by the Fondation du Forum d'Assilah. p. 70.





Figure 5: Mural by Mohamed Abou El Ouakkar, Asilah 1991. Image reproduced from the book *Peinture murale d'Asilah. Evasions dans l'imaginaire* by the Fondation du Forum d'Asilah, p. 29.



We can also interrogate the relation between art and the street from the perspective of the urban landscape and ask what it takes for a city to be open and accommodate artworks that carry different histories, aesthetics, and discourses. Why was the Cultural Moussem initiated in a small town so far from the centers not only of cultural life but also of urban plurality? The *Présence plastique* exhibitions in Marrakech and Casablanca developed out of the context of the Casablanca Art School and were certainly more related to discussions around a modern Moroccan identity and a transcultural contemporaneity, rather than earnestly addressing different social realms and urban issues. The Moussem of Asilah went in a different direction by inviting Moroccan and international artists and thinkers to come to a place without much urban, cultural, or economic activity, hoping to bring their visions and artistic practice to this site, with a set frame of cultural dialogue, reactivation of historical heritage, urban development, and social participation.

This is not to say that Asilah and the broader region—primarily Tangier but also Tetouan, Larache, and other places—were devoid of cultural and intellectual activity. The region has acquired its character from former Portuguese and Spanish occupations, significant Jewish communities (which, to a very large extent, left Morocco in the 1950-60s), and the attraction it had for international and Moroccan writers and intellectuals such as Jean Genet, Juan Goytisolo (both buried in the Spanish cemetery in Larrache), Edmond Amran El Maleh, or writers like Paul Bowles, William S. Burroughs, Mohamed Choukri, and others who lived in or passed through Tangier when it was an International Zone (1923-1956). Tetouan has the only National Institute for Fine Arts, which, along with the Casablanca Art School, has been the most important base for art education in Morocco. In Asilah, there was at least one other cultural association before the festival arrived. It is the hometown of Khalil El Ghrib who, despite not calling himself an artist, is among the best-known Moroccan artists today. The Café Zrirek, or Blue Café, a modest place in front of the harbor, was a meeting point for intellectual, artistic, and poetic debate and reverie. Edmond Amran El Maleh, a close friend of Khalil El Ghrib, describes the atmosphere of the Blue Café and the role of El Ghrib in it in one of the essays in his book *Le Café Bleu. Zrirek* (1998):

As famous as the "Blauer Reiter Almanac", the blue rider, the Zrirek café, the blue of the sky, the shallows cupped by the ocean, the starry constellation in the *kif* firmament, the seventh heaven, the city archives, the astrology inscribed in the mint and tea, the grains of truth, the ocean playing diamonds across the reed beds, vegetal dividing line, thinking bulrushes, between here and elsewhere, outside, summer, "leiali", winter nights, repose within, folds and folding of a meditative reverie. . . Immense spaces opened up, unknown lands, peoples we had never heard of appeared, eyes running like horses of flame, ploughing the seas, the mountain deserts set against the sky, the great cities of ancient ages, of the modern era came rushing with the buzz of their human presence,. . . frontier-free geography of all desires, voyage of initiation, all carrying their own tales, their own empurpled dreams, Khalil, the Storyteller, evokes those nights of destiny, tells of those times when he had carved himself a *sebsi* pipe, wrought from drawings, from illuminations like a precious manuscript,. . . Khalil, poet of matter. (El Maleh, *Le Café Bleu* 13-15)<sup>15</sup>

The Blue Café appears as a parallel universe to the Cultural Moussem within the same small town of Asilah. Out of its simplicity it opens towards time and space from nothing but imagination, *kif* and storytelling. Here, the question is not how art and urban space relate to each other, but rather how to sense and translate the art of everyday life into words and images, and how to aesthetically transgress the limits of time and space. In terms of artistic and cultural visions as well as of political

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<sup>15</sup> Translated from the French by the author.

convictions, the daily debates in the Blue Café certainly also represent a counterpoint to the foundational ideas of the Cultural Moussem. Khalil El Ghrib, the storyteller of the Blue Café and the “poet of matter” described in El Maleh’s text, lives modestly, seemingly in perfect accordance with his surroundings and with what he has or finds in the open space around him, with no need either to seek inspiration from other places or to bring his art to some unknown public. At the center of his creation is a philosophical as well as material consideration of the transience of life, the transformative decomposition of materials, and the temporality of being. He finds inspiration in inconspicuous things turned up on the beach and in the streets: stones, paper and cardboard scraps, old bread, and other found objects. He collects these things on his daily walks, stores them in his overcrowded studio, and composes them into artworks which in turn live on in their own rhythm of decomposition.

Belonging to a younger generation of artists and having different ideas and questions about art and history, Mohssin Harraki gave one of his first public performances in the Café Zrirek. Born in 1981 in Asilah, Harraki encountered both the Cultural Moussem and the Blue Café from childhood on. In 2007, after graduating from the Institute of Fine Arts in Tetouan, Harraki, together with friends, presented recorded performances in the Café. The medium for these performances was a CD with a home-made cover like those used by pop groups in Morocco and entitled *Création de l’extérieur (Creation from the Outside)*. After failed attempts at this early stage of his career to enter into established art spaces in Morocco, the idea behind this project was to create an immaterial space for art with no artistic history, like a CD, a café, or a village house: “We wanted the space to go to the people and not the other way around” (Harraki, as quoted in Boudou). Born out of a certain frustration that the few existing venues at the time were hardly accessible to young artists, this art performance can be interpreted as a way of creating an ephemeral space and an audience able to circulate across private and public spheres. At the heart of the performance lies an ironic reflection on the role of art venues and their historical exclusiveness as well as a vision for overcoming this dilemma by radically rethinking material or immaterial spaces as spaces for art.

The organizers of the Cultural Moussem of Asilah were doubtless also rethinking the existing urban space as a space for arts (fig. 6 and 7), but their visions for change and progress essentially came from elsewhere, either from a historical elsewhere by reactivating a cultural heritage, from a geographical elsewhere by bringing cultural and aesthetic creations from all over the world to Asilah, or from a political elsewhere by using art to drive urban and social development.



Mohamed Drissi (Maroc) 1994

محمد الدريسي (المغرب) 1994

Figure 6: Mural by Mohamed Drissi, Asilah 1994. Image reproduced from the book *Peinture murale d'Asilah. Evasions dans l'imaginaire* by the Fondation du Forum d'Asilah. p. 67.





Abdelkrim Ouazzani (Maroc) 1994

عبد الكريم الوزاني (المغرب) 1994

Figure 7: Mural by Abdelkrim Ouazzani, Asilah 1994. Image reproduced from the book *Peinture murale d'Asilah. Evasions dans l'imaginaire* by the Fondation du Forum d'Asilah, p. 50.

### “Culture and Art for Development”

Along with its emphasis on promoting art, cultural heritage, and dialogue across countries, the Cultural Moussem of Asilah also sought to upgrade the city's infrastructure, architecture, and economy, and in this aim it was successful. From the outset of the festival, much was done to keep the city clean, improve the electricity, sewage, and water supply, restore historical buildings and construct new ones. The Portuguese fortifications and the Al Kamra Tower were restored, and so too was the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Raissouni Palace, former home of Ahmed Al Raissouni, a well-known opponent of both the Spanish occupiers and the *Makhzen* (the ruling elites of the Moroccan state). The Raissouni Palace was transformed into the “Palace of Culture,” the main venue for the festival, and a studio residence for invited artists (before the Prince Bandar Cultural Complex was built). Houses, public buildings, and mosques were maintained, and pavements were decoratively renewed according to a design by Mohamed Melehi, taking up his central wave motif. New sites were created: a big open-air theater for 1600 people, the Hassan II Center, the Prince Bandar Library. In 1989, the city won an Aga Khan Award for its rehabilitation efforts.<sup>16</sup>

“Culture and Arts for Development” became the slogan to convince the local population to participate in and benefit from the festival. According to Benaïssa, the younger generation has been influenced by art and has learned to see it as a medium “to mobilize the resources of imagination and creativity” without which there can be no “sustainable, viable development” (Benaïssa, as quoted

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://www.akdn.org/architecture>. Accessed 21 Sept. 2022.



in Binder and Haupt). The renovation and rehabilitation of the town was intended to create a sense of pride, responsibility, and motivation for preserving the city and its future. Through the festival, the city was able to fund the work and consequently create jobs for the town's residents. By involving children in beautifying and cleaning the town, participation and bright prospects were to be promoted across the generations (Lin).

The rehabilitation of the town reactivated local tourism and made it an essential resource for Asilah's economy. During the summer months of July and August, when the festival is held, Asilah attracts people from all over the world. In 1989, when Asilah received the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 150 000 visitors were recorded (Lin). It is worth mentioning that Benaïssa rejected the prospect of international interest by deciding not to build big hotels and tourist facilities in hope of keeping urban growth under control, preserving the character of the place, and ensuring that local residents were the main beneficiaries of the festival's profits (Gómez López 14). Adopting a more critical perspective, researcher Eunice M. Lin points out that the role of the locals has mainly consisted in providing labor and supplies and less in participating in decision-making processes. Some sections of the population might have felt alienated by the temporary influx of an international cultural elite during a few summer weeks, along with the impression that the works and activities did not respect their own wishes or their traditions, instead, only reflected the ideas of particular artists and decision-makers. Moreover, growing speculation around the rising land values and subsequent urbanization and modernization have forced some people off their lands (Lin). According to Lin's summary of the *Technical Review* of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, the Asilah Arts Festival has effectively improved the town's infrastructure and architectural heritage, and it has boosted a local sense of pride and provided access to income. However, it has succeeded less in creating enough opportunities for most of the residents to participate in decision-making processes about the festival and urban planning. The festival has also not essentially enriched the cultural and social situation for local people beyond the temporary provision of services, since no factories or other more regular employment opportunities have been created (Lin).

Given both the accomplishments and deficiencies of the Cultural Moussem of Asilah, the central role of its two major patrons, Mohamed Benaïssa and Mohamed Melehi, remains ambiguous. On the one hand, thanks to their good diplomatic and political relations, they have set up a stunning festival along with an essential rehabilitation of the town, and they have managed to keep it running continuously until today. On the other hand, their influential power also seems to have prevented broader participation in decision-making and self-renewal, and so the festival has been falling into a repetitive mode and may have lost some of its mobilizing and motivating force over the years. Benaïssa, as a prominent politician, has always been keen to innovate Moroccan cultural politics. As Minister of Culture he planned and initiated a number of major projects, established new cultural institutions, and worked on reorganizing administrative structures. The Asilah Arts Festival was certainly among his most successful ventures. In Amina Touzani's summary about Benaïssa's work as Minister of Culture, she notes:

(w)hen Benaïssa left in 1992, and despite the stability and the support of the Palace from which he benefited, most of the announced projects were not implemented. . . The fact that the Moussem of Asilah continues to be successful has led some to say that the festival had become the major activity of the Ministry and to criticize the Minister for the way public money is spent on the festival, Benaïssa being both president and animator of the Festival and Minister of Cultural Affairs. (84)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Translated from the French by the author.

The festival, like any other, faced the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. Although it had to be canceled in 2020 and was slimmed down in 2021, the Foundation organized partial events to keep up the spirit of the festival and the motivation of the residents. Workshops and mural painting were organized in both years and programs for children and young people continued. In an interview with *Aujourd'hui le Maroc*, the artist Narjisse El Joubari from Asilah, who contributed to the murals in 2020, reflected how wall painting helped to create a festive, colorful atmosphere, which might have lifted local people out of their crisis mood of depression and despair by offering them joy and hope (Faïssal). Recently, the Fondation du Forum d'Assilah (The Asilah Forum Foundation) has been very active in initiating and implementing large infrastructure projects. It organized a working group in memory of Mohamed Melehi, who passed away in autumn 2020, and is planning a museum in his honor which will accommodate the foundation's collection and make room for educational events, a contemporary art gallery as well as a space dedicated to the United Arab Emirates (Ouiddar). An Academy of Arts is similarly planned to open soon, funded, like the museum, by the Fondation du Forum d'Assilah in partnership with the community and the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (Ouiddar). Furthermore, a complex for arts and crafts is being established, offering exhibition spaces and educational training (Ouiddar). In a financial partnership with the Kuwait Fund for Development, the Asilah Forum Foundation also constructed the house of solidarity, Dar Assabah, a space for various educational, social, and civic activities (Ouiddar). The Foundation therefore seems to be pressing ahead with its mission to make art a driver for urban development, implementing several new projects and expanding partnerships, especially with Gulf countries.



Figure 8: Mural by Yassine Balbzioui, Asilah 2018, courtesy of the artist.

### The Universe of the Image

I began this tracing of impressions, information, and reviews of the Cultural Moussem of Asilah with a vivid description by the journalist Zakya Daoud and I would like to close it with a visual impression mediated via a mural created during the festival in 2018 by the artist Yassine Balbzioui (fig. 8). Both the text and the mural are similar in the colorful simultaneity of situations they evoke. While Daoud describes the various shows, performances, people, and debates, Balbzioui creates an imaginary universe in which characters morph into animals, plants, masks and comic figures. In this colorful spectacle we find numerous scenes that reveal the vanities, desires and follies, the leisure and labor of life in general and of the art world in particular. Two central figures with fish masks observe the goings-on with wonder, admiration, or incomprehension, while at the same time themselves forming part of the scenery. The image is not a visual record, either of everyday activity in the city or of the hustle of the art scene in general or the Asilah Festival in particular. It is a picture, an imaginary scene in which life and art merge into one another and dissolve into the image. As so often in Balbzioui's works, his characters are masked or hidden behind objects, yet it seems as if in this universe of the image the mask does not obscure anything but reveals essential aspects of social situations, relationships, and gestures, including the impossible, excessive, and ironic that art is able to create.

Talking about his experience with street art in Morocco, Balbzioui points out that painting a wall fills its own dimension, not only because of the size of the medium that needs to be handled, but also because of the interaction that occurs around and with the work. The street, for Balbzioui, offers a freedom that is never found in any gallery or museum with its closed space, curators, and conventions. On the street, surprising situations happen, pleasant and also unpleasant ones, but always with a lot of respect for the work, whether people like it or not. In the street, the aspect of labor becomes a visible part of the artwork and thus the artwork becomes part of urban life. Once the work is on the wall, people comment, ask questions, or perhaps remain indifferent, but in sight of the labor, the time, and the material it takes, interaction with the artist becomes a moment of everyday experience in a place that, if only for a passing moment, becomes a shared space.<sup>18</sup>

Murals potentially open onto other horizons, unknown visual conventions, and possible imaginaries, inviting residents to become not only spectators but also participants in their own field of vision, in a spectrum of changing forms, colors, motifs, and histories. In Asilah, a great number of spectators are tourists or visitors who also shape and intervene in this field of vision. In the photograph of Balbzioui's mural, the two people in front and even the ladder and paint cans seem to be part of the picture, as if the painted wall is extending its own vital force into the surrounding space. Wall paintings, whether abstract, decorative, figurative, or conceptual, change the urban space by changing the visual relationships in it: the universe of the image broadens out into new spaces and imaginaries, inviting new forms of perception of and participation in the cityscape.

### Interacting with the City

Yassine Balbzioui also participated in three editions of the Jidar, Toiles de rue Rabat Street Art Festival that has been organized annually since 2015. The festival opened a global path to contemporary street art which previously did not have significant local roots in Morocco. The festival invites well-known artists from the international street art scene as well as artists from Morocco to create large-scale murals in different districts across the city of Rabat on the facades of public and residential buildings. These murals are supposed to remain and become part of the urban habitat, to inscribe themselves into central places, specific sites and neighborhoods. The organizers seek to bring together artists, residents, and local structures "to open the field to the

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<sup>18</sup> This paragraph is based on a phone conversation with Yassine Balbzioui on 16 March 2021.



imagination, to naive and abstract art and the childhood of the mind to rethink the world, the city and the relationship to the public space" (Website of Jidar).<sup>19</sup> The festival is funded by the city and the Museum for Modern and Contemporary Art Mohammed VI (MMVI) and it is organized by EAC – L'Boulevard (Éducation Artistique et Culturelle), an association known for organizing music festivals, concerts and other cultural events, mainly in Casablanca.

In his book *Street Art in Africa* (2020), Cale Waddacor identifies precursors to Morocco's urban art movement in murals painted by football fans, or 'ultras.' According to him, graffiti art was limited, but there were pioneers, like Rabie and his Perfect Crew in Meknes, who experimented with different styles of paint, figures, and typography (151-152). Every larger city had a handful of active street artists since the 2000s who built up a national network and inspired a new generation (152-153).

As for street art festivals, the forerunner and at the same time the counterpart to the Jidar event is the Sbagha Bagha Casablanca Street Art Festival initiated by Salah Malouli in 2013 and run by a small team from EAC L'Boulevard. Malouli, who is also the artistic director of the Jidar Festival, came across street art in Barcelona and used his contacts and knowhow from both the street art community in Spain and the underground music scene in Casablanca. The Sbagha Bagha festival developed out of a small project to create murals in a neglected neighborhood in the city center of Casablanca, involving long negotiations with the municipality and community, and eventually managed to achieve remarkable recognition and appreciation for street art as part of the city culture. As Malouli underlines, it was important for the organizers to set and maintain a high level of artistic quality, with professional conceptualization and implementation of the murals, and to involve the neighborhood through research, engagement, and an integrative festival that featured art, music, performances, and shared activities. Although the neighborhood where the festival started is considered tough and harsh, the activities were generally accepted, and even supported, and the murals remain untouched to this day, creating a certain pride among residents and an attraction for visitors.<sup>20</sup>

The Sbagha Bagha festival continues to run and is spreading to other parts of the city, seeking to preserve its alternative, underground spirit combined with artistic quality and urban engagement. Salah Malouli and the small L'Boulevard team were asked to plan and organize a street art festival in Rabat and since 2015 they have been directing both festivals: a more underground and always precarious one in Casablanca and an official, well-sponsored one in Rabat, which enjoys support from the Mohammed VI Museum and the national cultural apparatus behind it. The Festival in Rabat includes collective and educational aspects: a collective wall, presentations by artists, masterclasses for students at the National School of Architecture, and workshops open to the broader public (Eliason).

In terms of their origins in alternative initiatives in the big cities of Marrakech and Casablanca, the role of external, international influences, and the vision of connecting art to the life of the city and its population, we can find parallels between the Cultural Moussem of Asilah and the Jidar, Toiles de rue festival in Rabat. Unlike the latter, the Asilah Festival did not lead to the development of a street art scene in Morocco but rather remained a sort of open-air gallery with changing exhibitions. By contrast, the Jidar Festival and the Sbagha Bagha Festival as its underground foundation, have aimed at opening Moroccan urban spaces to worldwide artistic developments and introducing a young generation to global street art trends while enhancing local styles, forms, and meanings within this international artistic language (fig. 9 and 10).

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<sup>19</sup> Translated from the French by the author.

<sup>20</sup> This paragraph is informed by a phone conversation with Salah Malouli on 30 March 2021.





Figure 9: Mural by Kalamour, Jidar, Toiles de rue Festival Rabat 2015.



Figure 10: Mural by Machima, Jidar, Toiles de Rue Festival Rabat 2019.

These recent festivals demonstrate that a young generation of artists is operating independently of the generation that constituted the artistic avant-garde in the 1960s, cooperating in a pragmatic rather than political way with state structures, and significantly integrating themselves into transnational artistic milieus. Unlike the older generation, these young artists seek to enforce transformations in the urban context in relation to specific issues of particular neighborhoods and social groups, requiring a self-reflexive engagement with particular historical, social, or environmental aspects of the city. Street art is able to interact directly with the urban space and its inhabitants, but for this very reason it is also especially subject to social control or political appropriation, commercialization, or cultural marketing.

Public space is never and nowhere a merely inclusive sphere of rational debate, but rather a space constituted by historical power relations through which normative ideas and values from all spheres of life are represented, performed, and reproduced whether it be state politics and laws, economic interests and social relations, or gender roles and sexuality. In Morocco, any public critique of religion, the king's authority and the territorial integrity of the country, gender binarity and heteronormativity comes close to a fundamental taboo. As long as the public space is strongly policed and socially regulated, the transgressive potential of street art in Morocco can therefore be found more in its aesthetic and social dimensions than in its political ones, more in opening to different visual worlds and imaginaries than in expressing political, religious, or sexual dissent and rebellion. Cléo Marmié situates the political power of street art in Morocco in a "beyond" of politics (politique "ailleurs" in French), in an aesthetic space marked by processes of importation,

hybridization and borrowing from different cultures—Western urban imaginaries, Latin-American muralism, or Arabic calligraphy—thus enabling street art to interact with and expand public space (11). Street art opens spaces of creativity, critical reflection and the imaginative expansion of existing norms and orders in a performative way, through visual interventions in urban culture and regimes of vision.

The framing of street art in the form of either a *moussem* or an international festival sets new horizons for the perception of urban space and the place of art within it. In Morocco, the framework of the Cultural Moussem of Asilah has been highly influential in its merging of arts, politics, and urban development, and this has inspired other festival formats like the Jidar Street Art Festival in Rabat. The latter, nevertheless, also demonstrates the contemporary concerns and questions as well as visual languages of a young generation who inhabit, embody, and reflect their urban surroundings in differentiated, generally more pluralistic, individualized, and transcultural ways.

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## Biography

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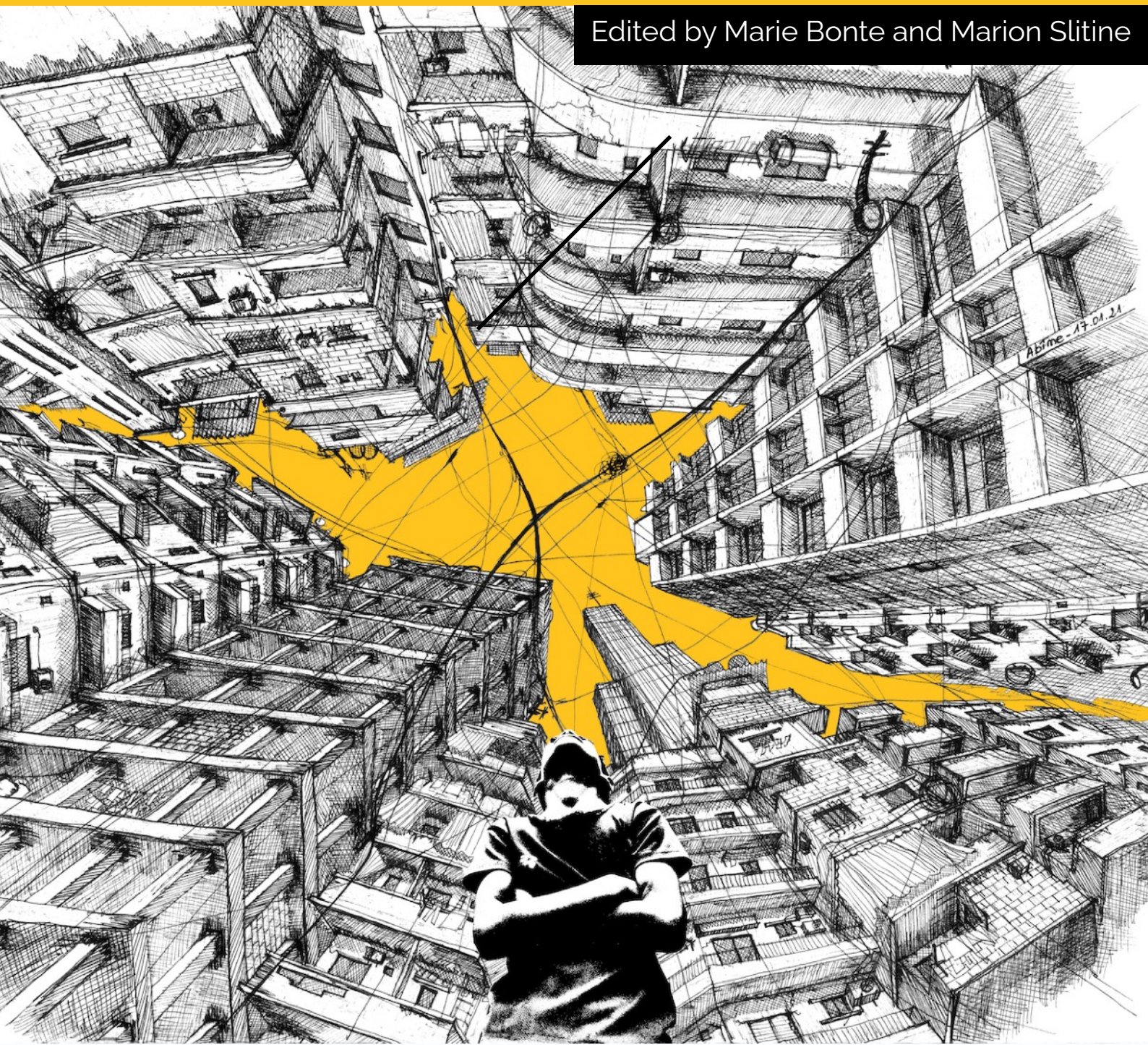
# Manazir مناظر Journal

4

## Ce que l'art fait à la ville en Afrique du Nord et au Moyen-Orient

Pratiques artistiques, expressions du politique et transformations de l'espace public

Edited by Marie Bonte and Marion Slitine





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