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Università degli Studi di Cagliari  
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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITLE:** *Artivism for a transnational history from below in the SWANA region*

**PROPONENT:** Sara Borrillo (University of Naples L'Orientale), [sara.borrillo@unior.it](mailto:sara.borrillo@unior.it)

**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

This panel aims to historically investigate, map and analyse experiences of Artivism (i.e. activism through art) in the SWANA region, by conceiving artivism as a transnational phenomenon, which not only confronts different national contexts but also crosses cultural and political boundaries by influencing the construction of new “geographies of liberation”. At the same time, this panel will frame artivism as a useful field composed by living primary sources which can be explored in order to contribute in writing a transnational history from below of the SWANA region. In this perspective, the panel aims to empirically observe the political revolutionary potential of apparently non-political forms of artistic activism and to understand if and to what extent artivism could be understood as a “counter public”, a space of resistance and proactive citizenry which can construct a new hegemonic culture. Here artivism will be conceived as artistic and cultural practices with a political aim which include independent artistic festivals, comics, web series and audio-visuals, performing arts, music, street art, digital activism, which are produced both by artists who explicitly politicize their work and by activists who use art as a political tool.

The panel will welcome historically informed case-oriented researches in order to identify variables and patterns through a comparative qualitative analysis which takes into account local specificities but uses a transnational approach in order to produce an explanation of the complexity of phenomena investigated. The panel will welcome researches which are grounded in an inductive methodology, which is based on participant observation and hence, after the collection and elaboration of the data, allows to produce knowledge on wider historical, socio-political and artistic phenomena.

The panel will particularly welcome contributions that:

- use interdisciplinary approaches where history and social sciences of the middle east encounter gender studies, visual and performing arts, digital humanities and where qualitative research combines the textual and oral sources analysis with the visual and performing arts' ones;
- use an intersectional and decolonial perspective;
- focus on specific revolutionary momentums of the post-colonial phase or on the post 2010-2011 uprisings phase;
- look at new forms of activism through art and cultural production, by focusing on the experiences of political activists who deliberately chose art as a strategic tool for their struggle;
- observe art as a language of protest and focus on how art becomes, often informally and out of official circuits, a political contested space;
- investigate to what extent creative practices contribute in reconfiguring methods of contention within social movements, produce mobilizing projects, and impact social change by re-appropriating public spaces, also in a transnational perspective;
- explore the historically informed political economy of artivism;
- analyse the interaction between cultural politics and cultural spaces in the light of the dynamics of conflict/resistance or cooperation/cooptation between the state, cultural institutions and the artivists, by looking at the artivists' political aim of appropriating the cultural domain;
- look at individual biographies and collective trajectories;
- focus on gender and LGBTQ+ artivism;
- focus on digital and media artivism.

\*Acknowledgments: This panel is part of the activities which are realised in the framework of the ERC Starting Grant MEGAMAPS – Mapping Emerging Gender Artivism in the Mediterranean Arab Public Space (2024-2029).

## **Papers' abstracts:**

### **1. Olga Solombrino (University of Rome Tre)**

#### ***Memory Matters. Cultural trajectories and Palestinian memory activism: digital flows and visual archives***

The question of memory is a pivotal issue in Palestinian cultural and political production. In response to the practices of *memoricide* that have resulted in the systematic erosion and constant overwriting of the Palestinian narratives (Masalha 2012; Sa'di and Abu-Lughod 2007), various forms of re-appropriation of the right to memory have emerged on the Palestinian side. The last decades have witnessed, also thanks to the use of digital tools, the emergence of various practices of constituting digital archives - both autonomously or coordinated by cultural institutions - to facilitate a rewriting of the Palestinian past and present, in the wake of what Doumani (2009) has called 'archive fever'. The aim of this paper is to extend the scope of analysis to encompass vernacular, popular, and widespread forms of relating to history and memory, and which contribute to the proliferation of counter-memories (Foucault 1977; Demos 2012). The paper will examine the evolution of such culture and memory work, starting with a particular focus on digital activism. This will include an analysis of experiments in digital activism, such as those developed around specific hashtags, such as #mynakbastory and #mypalestiniansitty. These initiatives bring to the surface individual and family stories that contribute to the delineation of a collective and shared memory. Additionally, the paper will explore various visual art practices, including those evident on Instagram, such as @picturing.palestine, to projects such as Lena Kassiech's *Arsheef Sido* or Hazem Harb's collages, which focus on photographic collections and family archives, in order to examine the narrative and visual intertwining of individual and collective memory. Through these forms of memory activism, it is possible to observe the multiple ways in which the aim of countering erasure is linked to the production of autonomous knowledge and interaction with history from below, shaping narratives that challenge historical erasure, correcting the omissions of history and offering pathways to decolonised futures.

### **2. Carla Pagano (University of Naples L'Orientale)**

#### ***Feminist activism across revolution and authoritarianism in Tunisia. New geographies of being in the public space***

The 2011 Tunisian revolution has paved the way for art as a form of both political claim and social change. In the uprising, artists took a public stand against the system and, in the face of the previous "*ben alian*" biopolitical capture of bodies, aesthetic, and desires, subjectivities as place of multiple and variable positions within the social field (De Lauretis, 1994) became increasingly visible. Since then, a social neo-dynamic has taken hold in Tunisia, with a rhythm that has gradually shifted towards artistic expressions of all kinds. Feminist aesthetics (Bovenschen, 1985) and queer activism was set in motion in an unprecedented way at this historical juncture with gendered subjectivities making the public space a space of accomplishment and realisation for their creations. It has been a movement whose affirmation over the last decade makes it resistant even with respect to the new authoritarian course into which Tunisia has plunged since 2021. A movement that, with the help of the digital revolution, is forging itself in the frontiers, contributing to the decolonial experience and the construction of new relations with subjectivation practices in the SWANA region. The paper analyses four cases of Tunisian feminist and queer activism from a diachronic perspective. The analysis was based on field research which traced some key messages such as feminist aesthetics of existence (Rago, 2013), intersectionality, transnationalism, decoloniality, and the construction of safe spaces in the digital world.

### **3. Alessandra Turchetti (University of Milan-Bicocca)**

#### ***Blackness as Political and Visual Performance: Race, Art and Activism in Postcolonial Morocco***

My paper, which is based on my Phd research, aims to explore the issue of "race" in postcolonial Morocco at the intersection of aesthetics and politics, art and activism. For decades, 'race' has been a taboo in Morocco, which presents itself as a colour-blind society without racism. However, in recent years, Blackness has become a crucial political and cultural issue, taking on different meanings and encompassing new (counter)narratives. The question of "race" is thus a complex and controversial issue in contemporary Morocco, touching on many aspects (from economics to religion, from geopolitics to national identity, from cultural and artistic expression to gender issues). Taking a critical, intersectional and transnational approach, I will explore the work of Black and antiracist Moroccan artists and activists, focusing on the connections between local meanings of race and global imaginaries of Blackness.

### **4. Flavia Elena Malusardi (Ca' Foscari University of Venice)**

#### ***Chapters from the Reality of the Third World: A Reflection on Aref el Rayess's Exhibition at Dar el Fan, 1974***

*Chapters from the Reality of the Third World (fusūl min al-wāqqa' al-'ālam al-thālith)* presents a series of black and white ink drawings by Lebanese artist Aref el Rayess, showcased in 1974 at Dar el Fan, an independent cultural hub in Beirut. Through stark, graphic-like drawings, the exhibition serves as a moment of introspection for the artist, as he grapples with the juxtaposition of idealism and harsh realities. Referencing Vietnam and Algeria as symbols of resistance to imperialism and reminders of the struggles to gain self-determination, the artist confronts the sobering realization that the utopian ideals of the Third Worldist movement often collide with conflicts or with oppressive political and economic systems. Through this work, el Rayess navigates this tension and lays bare the crisis of the Arab intellectual, whom the artist urges to awaken from slumber and renew the commitment to the struggle for freedom while shedding the mask of idealism that crumbles in the face of reality. *Chapters from the Reality of the Third World* is not a happenstance, but another segment of el Rayess's political commitment, which often found a platform at Dar el Fan. As one of its founding members, el Rayess played a pivotal role in shaping the centre's cultural landscape, renowned for its alignment with the New Arab Left. Through the display of el Rayess's *multazim* (committed) artworks, Dar el Fan became a living embodiment of principles of anti-imperialism and solidarity, serving as a contested arena for political discourse and action. This paper approaches the exhibition not as a mere illustration of el Rayess's political commitment, but rather as a dynamic product of both the artist's individual activism and the collective efforts of the cultural centre that hosted the event. Therefore, the analysis of the exhibition aims at connecting individual trajectories with institutions' agendas, within a wider web of transnational threads of solidarity and resistance that exceeded the limitations of regional delineations.

\*Acknowledgments: Doctoral research part of LAWHA – Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad: Trajectories of artists and artworks in/from Lebanon since 1943 – Orient Institut Beirut (Max Weber Foundation). ERC Grant agreement No. 850760

## **5. Fanny Faccenda (UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles)**

### ***Artistic practices off-shore. Generational encounters, languages, and contested arts on Syrian Revolution***

In this contribution, I suggest looking back at two art experiences and commitment that focus on two different ways of thinking about and dealing with the Syrian Revolution. Drawing on the experiences of some Syrian artists in Belgium who emigrated before the revolution allows us to use art as a dimension to understand the encounter between Syrian generations, languages, and ways of reading the past and imagining the future. During my PhD, I reconstructed the itinerancy of Syrians in Belgium before the revolution (1970-2010). Although the fieldwork focused on modes of government in Syria and on mobility mechanisms (University, free market and Christian communities linked to the Church), the field offered many further considerations. For example, some Syrian artists migrated before the revolution to study art or to perform it, both in the East (Moscow) and in the West (France and Belgium). The historical approach of my thesis and the semi-directive and biographical interviews enabled me to take a different look at art and engagement. During my fieldwork, the Syrian Revolution was a subject of debate, confrontation, and a central mode of thinking about oneself, on their own generation and on ways of becoming activists.

This contribution will focus on two examples.

The first example involves thinking about art to find the knots of subjugation and trace the theoretical frameworks for thinking about revolution differently. In a Syrian society represented from a political position or in its incessant suffering, art is a tool for expanding the imaginary of the "explicable". I suggest reflecting on these elements through the encounter of a generational language around the revolution. Two women: mother, and daughter. A Syrian artist and her calligraphic paintings, and her activist daughter. Her paintings are all in black and white and depict districts of the city of Aleppo seen from above, as if, from an aeroplane, we could see a distant city. She uses engraving with fragments of maps of the city of Aleppo, adding the words of a poet, the names of scattered Syrians, religious expressions. In her paintings, she speaks of the war, without saying it, without shouting it either. This 'calligraphic' language is very different from other collective projects, as well as to her daughter's language, in which she couldn't recognise herself. Starting with an intimate encounter and discussion of her paintings, I aim at reflecting on the delicacy of building margins of activism. Art represents the labyrinth of the domination of ways of thinking about revolution and commitment. Even art and activism have a generational dimension, helping us to understand the socio-political transformations of contemporary Syria.

A second example concerns art as a universe of the possible, the feasible and the thinkable. I suggest thinking in this direction based on a collective project entitled "Falak ['universe' in Arabic], echoes of Syrian voices", which took place in Brussels to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Syrian revolution in 2021. The aim of the project was to break away from political belonging and geography to forge links - those from the outside, 'a community of expatriates, the privileged, the elite' - including the others who have remained in Syria and who, from the inside, contribute to the production of works of art. Painters, dancers, musicians, archivists in Belgium and in Syria took part in this universal

space in which the message circulates freely and reaches a heterogeneous audience, while legitimising the voices that remain hidden. By looking back at the organisation of this event, in which I took part, I propose to return to the interplay of spaces, this permanent redefinition between geographical and political borders, its contours of artistic engagement. In conclusion, art is a key dimension to understanding the experience of the Revolution 'as a whole' beyond a single political positioning. It tells us about controversial languages, battles of meaning and the geography of ways of thinking about the Revolution and appropriating cultural dominance, narrative frameworks, surprising us with its creative results.

**Chair: Sara Borrillo (University of Naples L'Orientale)**

**Discussant: Paola Gandolfi (University of Bergamo)**