Introduction

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This special issue on “Artivism, Culture and Knowledge Production for Egalitarian Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa post 2011” offers an overview reading of the period following the uprisings of 2010-2011 by examining emerging forms of activism in different MENA countries, which employ artistic and cultural practices to create new spaces for knowledge production and, consequently, new social and political possibilities that challenge the established norms.

The issue draws on the two-fold meaning of the concept of ‘artivism’. By artivism, we mean artists who use their art as a means of political expression or engagement, which in turn instigates reflection on the part of the audience; and activists who employ art to stimulate awareness and active participation of the audience in a political cause at a given historical moment. These forms of artivism, we argue, succeed in re-envisioning the limits of legal and social normativity, and, encourage active citizenship, thereby establishing new platforms that allow for social transformation to take place.

The issue was conceptualised first as a panel on “Social Reconfigurations and Political Transformations through Artivism and Knowledge Production in Middle East and North Africa post 2011. Bodies, Desires, Movements between Resistance and New Forms of Citizenship” at the World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES) in Seville in 2018. It included scholars from both the Middle East and Europe who employ a decolonial approach in representing the region through a multidisciplinary perspective. Through their interventions, the panelists explored different forms of artistic performances which focused on issues varying from the relations between the representation of

the body, sexual identity, and gender rights, and political commitment, social empowerment and transformative agency following the counter-revolutionary wave post 2011. The close proximity of the scholars to the case studies which they presented reflected the unique relationship that can be developed between the researcher and the subject/object of his/her research, giving them access to alternative forms of knowledge production, based on mutual and critical exchange. This stance instigated further exploration and constituted the point of our departure as coeditors of this special issue.

We perceive our contribution as distinctive in the sense that it reflects our own, as well as the other contributors', positionality as researchers of and from the Middle East and North Africa who, consequently, present first-hand knowledge that facilitates the deconstruction of stereotypical representations of the region. The relationship that most contributors of this issue, ourselves included, have developed with the subjects and objects of their case studies is reflected in critical interventions that point to a personal level of involvement with forms of activism that have ultimately redefined our role as scholars and academic researchers. Through extensive fieldwork, interviews and conversations with activists, exposure to performances, exhibitions, and alternative models of activist art that allow for political expression and debate to take place, contributors became active participants in a form of collective agency. Being immediate witnesses of social transformation implies the sharing of languages and categories of analysis to understand the present and imagine the future.

The essays in this special issue, therefore, reflect this dual role, whereby authors, as researchers of the MENA region, are able to investigate up close and personal different forms of activism that ultimately encourage social engagement, reflections on the ongoing political situation and the construction of a new collective imagination that could contribute to social and political transformation on the long run. The authors investigate the transformative political and social effect of activism upon egalitarian citizenry, particularly in the historical phase that followed the 2010-2011 revolutions. The issue reflects a comparative perspective, drawing upon experiences from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey. In her essay "Envisioning 'Freedom': Liberated Gender Identities in Young Egyptian Women Artists' Oral and Visual Narratives", Rania Abdelrahman explores how the idea of freedom, which was one of the demands of the 25th of January revolution, is reflected in the life stories and artworks of three Egyptian women artists, and their struggle with the power relations that control the art scene in Egypt. Abdelrahman explores how art contributes in constructing new forms of subjectivities, through the oral histories of the three activists.

Similarly, in her essay on “Feminist Activism: Curating Women’s Memory”, Shereen Abouelnaga explores different forms of archiving spaces curated by women activists. She argues that through memory, such spaces become sites for resistance that facilitate the emergence of alternative and marginalized voices. Like both Abdelrahman and Abouelnaga, Marta Bellingreri explores the relation between space and feminism in her essay “Body Performance and the Engagement within the city: Women Artists Reframing Gender Roles in Amman”. Bellingreri employs the concept of ‘femivism’ to demonstrate how Jordanian feminist activists use forms of creative agency to challenge the constraints that are placed upon women in public space, particularly in the field of cultural management.

In her intervention, Sara Borrillo shares another example of activism. In “Chouftouhonna festival: feminist and queer activism as transformative agency for a new politics of recognition in post-revolutionary Tunisia”, she explains how the festival has become a political strategy for the recognition of feminist and LGBTQ rights. The space it has created, she argues, has evolved from being apparently apolitical, into becoming a political site for the subversion of social injustice, the coexistence of a new inclusive community and for claiming the rights of recognition for all. Likewise, public art, according to Carlos Garrido Castellano in “Temporary Art Platform and the Reconfiguration of the Public Space in Beirut”, has been instrumental in the creation of alternative knowledge based on civic agency through the re-appropriation of the public space. Activism here becomes a process of negotiation to challenge official responses to artistic practices.

Valentina Marcella addresses the concept of ‘laughtivism’ in her essay, “Satire as activism in contemporary Turkey: trajectories, achievements, current challenges”. She explores the role that satire plays in non-violent protests, and its potential for cultural change and social transformation in contemporary Turkey. Similarly, in “Mutations of Heroism: The Case of the Egyptian Superheroine”, Mounira Soliman offers a rereading of the superhero genre through the work of three female comic artists and their depiction of three examples of Superheroines. She revisits the notion of female heroism as a form of collective agency that is able to initiate social change.

We believe the essays in this issue speak to each other on more than one level. The authors address similar research concerns regarding the reconfiguration of public space, the construction of new forms of subjectivity, and the impact of creative and artistic practices upon relations of power and gendered identities. The contributors also engage in knowledge production that is based on personal involvement with their research subject, which in turn paves the

way for envisioning the role of the researcher and of academic scholarship in a more collaborative context with activism against injustice. We present this special issue, therefore, as an act of collective agency, hoping that it would encourage readers to rethink the relation between academia and activism.

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Note on the Transliteration of Arabic Terms and on the Images

We have chosen to use a simplified transliteration system. The names of authors already known internationally are not transliterated, while other words, including expressions from national Arabic dialects are transliterated in accordance with the *Studi Magrebini* journal's transliteration system.

The articles by Rania Abdelrahman and Valentina Marcella are accompanied by images in order to help the reader to visualize the object of the study.