Arabic Calligraffiti: A Political Liminal Practice in Street Art's Visual Scene

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Abstract

Arabic calligraffiti, a form of urban art, has spread in both Arab and Western cities, including Montreal, Paris and cities in Tunisia and elsewhere in the Arabic world. Its visibility underlines different tensions and highlights various conflicts and power relations, such as Arab-Western tensions in the visual culture of Western cities, tensions around the religious role of Islamic calligraphy in Arab cities, tensions around urban art in all cities, and tensions around the various digital spaces where these works are disseminated (Zahar, 2018). Arabic calligraffiti has its origins in Islamic calligraphy, modern Arabic calligraphy and the globalized graffiti movement. It is situated at the problematic meeting of the Arab and Western worlds and raises the question of possible interpenetrations and/or tensions (physical and digital) between those two cultural ensembles. Arabic calligraffiti can be considered in many ways as a liminal practice. In this article, we will illustrate the different facets of this liminal practice.

Keywords

Visual scene; Arabic calligraffiti; political liminal practice; urban art; Arab and Western worlds; visibility

1. Introduction

Arabic calligraffiti is present in abandoned warehouses, trendy neighbourhoods, galleries, museums and open-air museums in many cities around the world: in the United States, Canada, Australia, Europe but also the Maghreb, the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula. Arabic calligraffiti has its origins in Islamic calligraphy, modern Arabic calligraphy and the globalized graffiti movement. It has spread in both Arab and Western cities and is thus situated at the current and problematic meeting of these two worlds. Arabic calligraffiti raises the question of possible interpenetrations of graffiti and Arabic scripts in Arab and Western cities as well as in various locations in the digital space. Its visibility underlines different tensions and highlights various conflicts and power relations: Arab-Western tensions in the visual culture of Western cities, tensions around the religious role of Islamic calligraphy in Arab cities, tensions around street art in all cities, and tensions

around the various digital spaces where these works are disseminated. Arabic calligraffiti is in many ways a liminal practice in the global visual scene of street art. In this article, based on a 15-year study of street art's visual scene, we will present Arabic calligraffiti and see how it fits into the political dimension of public visibility. More concretely, we will try to understand what liminal image practices are used by Arabic calligraffiti to become publicly visible and 'to make visual politics'.

2. Origins of Arabic calligraffiti

To understand Arabic calligraffiti, it is necessary to understand its threefold origins: Islamic calligraphy, modern Arabic calligraphy and graffiti. Islamic calligraphy is an essential element of Islamic art (Grabar, 1987). The 'art of the line' (khatt in Arabic) creates a relationship with God and is initially reserved to the scripting of the Quran. It developed strongly from the 8th century and became an important sa-

cred art partly because of the interdiction of representing humans in Islamic art (Beaugé and Clément, 1995). The history of Arabic calligraphy reflects the many innovations and styles that have marked the expansion of Islamic civilization within various cultures (Blair, 2007; George, 2010). Several Arabic calligraphy styles developed over time: the koufi (see Figure 1) and naskhi styles are the two major categories from which more than 20 other Arabic calligraphy styles emerged (Khan, 2006).

Figure 1. Written in Kufic script, the Topkapi manuscript is the oldest near-complete Quran in existence and dates from the 8th century. (Alamy) Source: https://www.arab-news.com/ArabicCalligraphy looked 2022/08/28.

More recently, some Arabic calligraphers have sought to raise in their work the issue of acknowledging the 'Arab-ness' of Arabic calligraphy traditionally associated with Islamic calligraphy, while trying to evolve it toward the modern Arab calligraphy present in the public space of Arab and Western cities. An interesting characteristic of this new type of calligraphy is that the letters are not always designed to be legible (Marsh, 1996) and depart from the calligraphic tradition based on a reading of the Quran. By

questioning this tradition, modern Arab calligraphers are opening new avenues and redefining calligraphy's artistic approach. These innovations were introduced in the 1960s and 1970s through new artistic movements, such as the Hurufiyya (lettrism) and the Saqqakhaneh in Iran, and by artists like Hossein Zenderoudi, Ghana Allani, sculptor Parviz Tanavoli, and Hassan Massoudy (Ali, 1997; Issa, Cestra and Porter, 2016).

Of Iraqi origin, Hassan Massoudy is one of the modern calligraphers who inspired the work of several contemporary Arab calligraffiti artists. Modern Arabic calligraphy, as developed by artists like Massoudy, led to a first rupture with Islamic calligraphy. It moved calligraphy away from simply reproducing the Quran and took it into an aesthetic exploration of the artistic developments in the Western world (see Figure 2). Interested in building a bridge between East and West, this calligrapher borrows citations from various cultures, not just excerpts from the Quran, in a marked departure from Islamic calligraphy.

Islamic calligraphy and modern Arabic calligraphy repre-

Figure 2. Calligraphy by Hassan Massoudy (no date mentioned) Source: https://massoudy.pagesperso-orange.fr/galerie.htm looked 2022/08/28.

sent two important sources of Arabic calligraphy. In addition to these influences is the modern and globalized movement of contemporary graffiti, and here resides—in this new ensemble—the originality of the Arabic calligraffiti remix. Hip-hop culture and graffiti represent the "street art" component of Arabic calligraffiti (see Figure 3). In Arab countries, graffiti first developed by imitating Western styles. A sign of rebellion and liberation from dictatorial powers, it transposed graffiti's spirit and form into the streets of Arab cities (Rabbat, 2012). It would take the advent of Arabic calligraffiti to bring the heritage of calligraphy into the mix of graffiti street art.

Figure 3. Artwork by urban artist Zepha (France, 2011) Source: Urban artist website https://www.abadiafez.com looked 2022/08/28.

In the Western world, Arabic calligraffiti developed from hip-hop culture during the 1990s. Certain artists learned calligraphy from renowned masters while others were self-taught and transmitted their knowledge to other artists. This was the case of urban artist Vincent Abadie Hafez (Zepha), well known in Parisian graffiti artist circles since

the '80s, and an artist that has played a key role in the development of Arabic calligraffiti. These early Arabic calligraffiti artists, including Zepha, A1One, Abdellatif Moustad, Marko93 and L'Atlas, certainly produced works of "Arabic calligraffiti" before the emergence of the urban artist eL Seed came onto the scene in 2008, but their creations did not enjoy much visibility and are perhaps identified as a "movement" or style, as was the case after the emergence of the urban artist eL Seed.

eL Seed is clearly the Arabic calligraffiti artist who has made the greatest contribution to the growth of this urban art form in Montreal and then around the world. Born in France, of Tunisian parents, eL Seed lived in Montreal from 2008 to 2011 and then moved to Tunisia, and Paris, to every continent, and then to the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, where he opened a studio in 2015. He has produced works in over 30 cities around the world and enjoys substantial media visibility (see Figure 4).

Any starting date for Arabic calligraffiti is therefore somewhat arbitrary. What is clear is that the leading urban artist of Arabic calligraffiti, eL Seed, moved to Montreal in

Figure 4. Artwork by urban artist eL Seed (Djerba, Tunisia, 2014) Source: Urban artist website http://www.djerbahood.com/portfolio/el-seed/ looked 2017/12/12.

2008 and produced a series of Arabic calligraffiti works there over a period of three years. This intense production phase and the dominant role this artist played in the subsequent development of Arabic calligraffiti has prompted us to consider 2008 as the starting point of an important phase in this urban art style.

3. Analytical framework

To understand the evolution of Arabic calligraffiti, its liminal practices and the politics of its visibility, we are proposing an analytical framework based on two interrelated concepts: the visibility regime and the visual scene.

3.1. Visibility regimes

The visibility of Arabic calligraffiti in the urban public space reflects the characteristics of the visibility regime under which it is expressed. This concept has been studied by several authors (Jay, 2017; Virilio, 1994; Mirzoeff, 2006; Brighenti, 2007, 2010a, 2010b). For Jay (2017), a visibility regime suggests the idea of a framework or a determination of "visual behaviours," meaning that visual expression results from the power relations between different urban actors. But Jay relativizes the hegemonic flavour ("from above") of the 'regime' concept and stresses that this concept reflects instead a dynamic equilibrium of the visual rules and practices at play in a specific culture. In this sense, 'resistance' to a visibility regime does not involve stepping outside that regime, but rather negotiating and/or gradually transforming the framework offered by the regime through the introduction of new visual practices or modifications of existing practices. Meanwhile, Brighenti (2010a) stresses the structural aspect of visibility regimes, focussing on the 'asymmetries' that define them. In this sense, there is an ongoing negotiation between the structural characteristics of a regime and the practices of the images that constitute it: the emergence of new practices can "create" tension and 'force' the transformation of the visibility regime. Similarly, new practices can emerge following this transformation of the regime.

In the urban space, structural characteristics are reflected in the laws, rules and norms that 'frame' the different visual practices at work. This more formalized framework modulates citizen participation in the city's visual culture, varies according to the different visibility regimes and evolves with the changing visual practices at work. In turn, this citizen participation transforms the visibility regimes. To understand visibility in its political sense, it is necessary to integrate political theory, urban sociology and social movements, among other dimensions. Indeed, beyond its strictly visual dimension, the concept of visibility becomes eminently political: what is visible (or invisible) in the public space influences the citizen and the evolution of society (Brighenti, 2010b; Cook and Whowell, 2011).

Street artists and calligraffiti artists must "negotiate" with visibility regimes even in authorized forms of street art. When eL Seed produced a giant calligraffiti on the mosque of Gabes, in Tunisia, he decided to use a citation from the Quran but, interestingly, this citation was about tolerance and "knowing each other" (see Figure 5). In doing so, this practice can be seen as liminal because it succeeds in inscribing graffiti on the exterior walls of a mosque, a sacred space for Muslims in an Arabic visibility regime.

One year later, the same artist created another calligraffiti on the exterior wall of Tour 13, a soon-to-be demolished building along the Seine in Paris, but this time using a citation from Baudelaire, demonstrating once again a liminal practice (see Figure 6). By using the words of a famous

Figure 5. Artwork by urban artist eL Seed on the Jara Mosque (Gabès, 2012) Source: Urban artist website https://elseed-art.com/projects/ looked 2022/08/30.

Figure 6. The work of urban artist eL Seed on the facade of Tower 13 (Paris, 2013) Quote: « La forme d'une ville change plus vite, hélas, que le cœur d'un mortel » (poet Baudelaire, in Lallier, 2018) Source: Lionel Belluteau's website http://www.unoeilquitraine.fr/?p=2300 looked 2022/08/30.

French poet, the presence of Arabic script was more 'acceptable' in this Western visibility regime.

The same liminal practice was used by Karim Jabbari when he inscribed the words of a Tunisian poet on the walls of a mosque in Montreal in 2017, but this time in a Western visibility regime (see Figure 7).

3.2. Visual scenes

Visual scenes are another theoretical element that help us understand the liminal practices of calligraffiti artists. As it develops, urban art produces visual scenes, a concept derived from work on cultural and musical scenes (Irwin, 1977; Shank, 1994; Straw, 1991; Zahar and Roberge, 2016). These scenes further accentuate the visibility and creative productivity of urban art; they act as integrating elements organized around a visual "thing that matters" (Kozorog and Stanojevic, 2013) and contribute to attracting new actors within the scene: artists, cultural intermediaries, audiences, forming an extended community which, in turn, adds to the cultural overproduction of urban art.

For Zahar and Roberge (2015, 2016), cultural scenes exist in the form of visual scenes: "scenes oriented towards this thing that matters through the production of images in local, trans-local and digital settings" (Zahar and Roberge, 2016, p. 42). If the musical scene is about an important musical 'object', the visual scene is about a visual object. In this sense, visual scenes abound in urban art. For these authors, the participants in a visual scene of urban art form a semi-structured community, what Zahar and Roberge (2015) refer to as an interpretive community. Bengsten (2014) sees in this community characteristics that belong to both the "art worlds" of Becker (1982) as well as the theories of Bourdieu (1986). The relationships that exist in this community are sometimes similar to the social "horizontality" described by Becker, but the observation of practices is also the expression of different powers (see Figure 8).

The other element that seems to be quite fundamental in the concept of visual scene, which was already emerging in the exploration and documentation of urban art, is that of systems of articulation (Straw, 1991, 2004) that link everything in the visual scene. These systems of articulation have been revealed by the ethnographic methods that we used in this study.

A scene can emerge locally and remain local, but it can also translocalize and become digital through new practices. The analysis of practices within the constraining framework of continuity of the scene's focal object makes
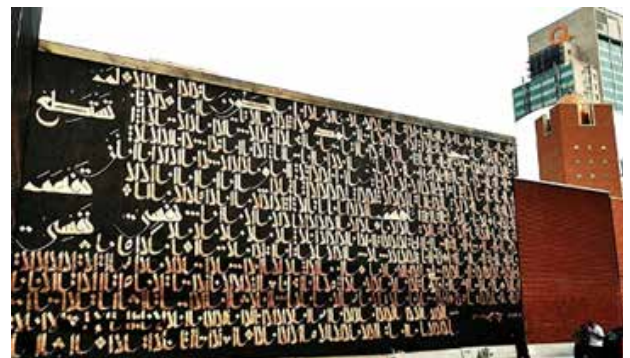
Figure 7. A mural by urban artist Karim Jabbari on the Al-Omah Al-Islamiah Mosque (Montréal, 2017) Quote: "I Would like to understand the universe, but I fail to understand myself" (poet Abou el Kacem Chebbi – Interview with Karim Jabbari, 2017). Source: @ Hela Zahar, 2017.

Figure 8. Local, translocal and virtual scenes Source: @ Hela Zahar 2022.

it possible to delineate and analyze how it functions. Moreover, a chronological approach to the development of the scene makes it possible to understand the succession of these practices, their transformations, the emergence of new practices, and their impact on the productivity of the scene while ensuring that the scene's object remains the common thread and unifier of its 'cohesion' through time. Through its practices, the existence of a cultural scene is in some ways always in equilibrium between the threat of loss of unity (through dilution or transformation of the thing that matters) and the threat of loss of diversity (through homogenization of its practices). As long as the scene is nourished by new cultural productions while maintaining its focal point, it develops, grows and remains effervescent; when it becomes repetitive, it stagnates or gradually perishes. When it changes the "thing that matters," a new scene emerges and starts to develop.

The systems of articulation of a visual scene, like the global street art scene, are a kind of network that must be penetrated and "traveled" by street artists and calligraffiti artists. Our ethnographic study shows how calligraffiti artists penetrate the visual scene of street art from the periphery of abandoned warehouses to the centrality of public walls. Visibility regimes and visual scenes are the two conceptual elements of our theoretical framework that enable us to analyze the development of Arabic calligraffiti. Paired with ethnographic methods, they articulate a view where we can understand how liminal practices of Arabic calligraffiti enable it to increase its visibility in street art's visual scene.

4. Ethnography

To study the visibility of Arabic calligraffiti, a hybrid ethnography was developed concurrently with the establishment of a theoretical framework. The first result of this ethnographic work has been the establishment of a chronology of the development of Arabic calligraffiti over a period of 15 years, from 2008 to 2022.

4.1. The chronology of arabic calligraffiti (2008-2022)

By following the digital traces of Arabic calligraffiti works, a network of actors comprised of artists and intermediaries gradually emerged. With research, a large number of Arabic calligraffiti works have been identified, and analysis of the websites, blogs, Facebook and Instagram pages of artists and intermediaries has made it possible to gather comprehensive information and build a spacio-temporal chronology of Arabic calligraffiti. The chronology revealed the division of this period into five major and successive segments linked to sociocultural tensions (see Figure 9).

Each segment illustrates a major stage in the development of Arabic calligraffiti and is comprised of several events representing the creation of one or more works of Arabic calligraffiti. Montreal is the first segment in the chronology, from 2008 to 2011. It reveals the emergence of Arabic calligraffiti in the graffiti milieu of Quebec's metropolis. The second segment, from 2011 to 2013, illustrates the work of the same artists after going to Tunisia following the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011. The third, Parisian segment, from 2013 to 2015, starts with the Tour 13 event and continues through to summer 2015. It is characterized by the

Figure 9. Artwork Chronology of arabic calligraffiti (2008-2022) Source: @ Hela Zahar 2022.

creation of several important Arabic calligraffiti works in the heart of the French capital and a "Parisian" event on the Tunisian island of Djerba. The fourth segment, from 2015 to 2019, illustrates the fragmentation of the phenomena of circulation of Arabic calligraffiti with the exacerbation of Arab-Western tensions. During this segment, Arabic calligraffiti 'revisits' Arab and Western cities, returning to Paris, Montreal and cities in Tunisia, but also travels to new places like Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, the United States and Australia. The last segment, from 2019 to 2022, is characterized by a significant drop in the number of Arabic calligraffiti (and urban art) works in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Establishing this chronology allowed us to identify more than 20 Arabic calligraffiti artists, a diverse audience and several intermediaries (gallerists, columnists, event organizers, photographers, journalists) active in the creation and dissemination of hundreds of works, both in the physical space of cities and in the digital space of the Web (see Figure 10). As we explore below, this network forms systems of articulation within the global visual scene of street art, systems of articulation that connect the different actors and enhance the visibility of Arabic calligraffiti (Za-

har, 2018).

This spatio-temporal chronology makes it possible to grasp the extent of the challenges of attaining visibility for these urban artists who decide to incorporate Arabic script into their artistic production. Their works are created in very different locations. In all of these places, they are confronted with the challenge of finding 'walls' and must negotiate with authorities, deal with intermediaries with varying degrees of resources, and "adjust themselves" to the surrounding visibility regime. Both the intermediaries and the audience can be surprised by, curious about, sympathetic or outrightly hostile to the creation of their works. Once they are created, the artists must seek to raise their visibility in the digital space. There again, they must deal with creating relevant digital images and seeking visibility with diverse intermediaries and audiences.

What explains the increased visibility of Arabic calligraffiti over the first 15 years of the chronology? As a physical and digital artifact in the public space, Arabic calligraffiti transports visual characteristics that associate it with the Arab world and the Western world and reveals the tensions associated with its 'Arabness' in the Western world
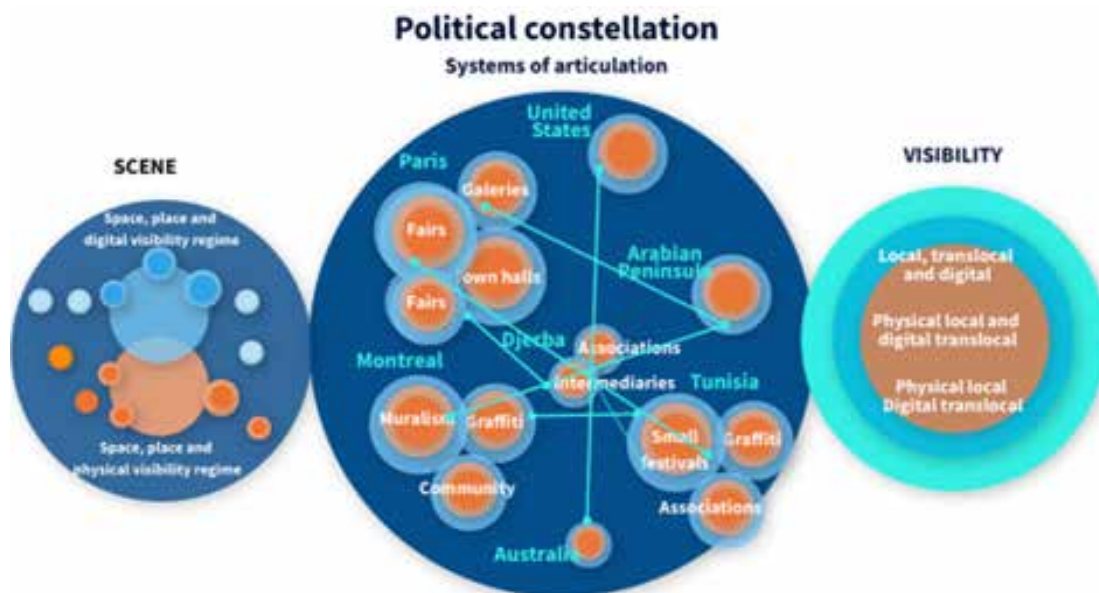

Figure 10. Arabic calligraffiti scene political constellation Source: @ Hela Zahar, 2022.

and its 'Westerness' in the Arab world. Moreover, it is also situated within the tensions between popular, transgressive and participatory urban art, an expression of 'power from below' associated with graffiti, and the authorized practices of an urban art associated with the "power from above" of commercial and governance practices. In the Arab world, it also generates tensions with respect to the presence of art in the public space and reveals the contrasts between tradition and modernity, between traditional Islamic calligraphy and its more contemporary form. The ethnography reveals the winding trajectories and liminal practices used by Arabic calligraffiti artists to penetrate the global visual scene of urban art.

4.2. Hybrid ethnographic methods

While constructing the chronology, the author has been conducting an overt ethnography in the physical and digital fields by presenting herself as a participating and observing university researcher of calligraffiti practices (O'Reilly, 2012). We conducted 105 semi-structured interviews in the three physical terrains of urban artists, intermediaries and the audience. These interviews were conducted based on an interview questionnaire and using O'Reilly's suggested methodology (2012). We interviewed 37 urban artists, 38 intermediaries and 30 members of the audience who were taking photos, on their use of images and their role in the urban art scene. The author took several hundred digital images and video recordings to document the works and visibility spaces of Arabic calligraffiti, at different sites of the physical terrain (Montreal, Paris, Tunis). In taking these photographs, the author interacted with the urban artists, intermediaries and audience by conducting semi-structured interviews. These documents were used to carry out an iconographic analysis (D'Alleva, 2012) of the works and images. This analysis entailed describing the sites where the works are located. The iconographic analysis also addressed the presence of the site in the photographic framing of the works as well as the possible presence of actors in these images (artists, intermediaries and audience).

In the digital field, we traced the images of Arabic calligraffiti on artists' websites as well as Facebook and Instagram accounts. For each Arabic calligraffiti work studied, the artist's website was consulted to determine if the images of this event were posted. Moreover, the entire chronology of the newsfeed on the artist's Facebook page was converted into a PDF document and carefully studied to identify the images related to this work and the posting date. The same method was followed, but this time online, to study the newsfeed on their Instagram page. Each of these images was subjected to an iconographic analysis to determine the framing of the work and whether or not the intermediary, artist or audience were present in the photographic image.

For each digital image studied on social media, several statistics were recorded (number of likes, number of comments, number of shares, framing of the image). In addition, Google reverse image searches made it possible to measure the "digital resonance" of each image by determining the number of websites featuring this image. Lastly, social media analytics tools like Popster and Sociograph
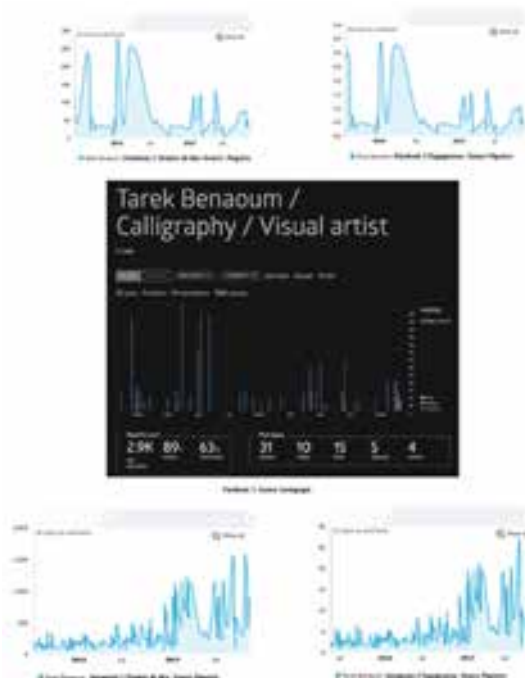
Figure 11. An example of a Pospters and Sociograph graphs for urban artist Tarek Benaoum illustrating the progression of the number of likes for Instagram posts by this artist. Source: @ Hela Zahar, 2017, 2022.

were used to assess the time progression of the number of likes for certain images (see Figure 11).

5. Arabic calligraffiti: a political liminal practice in street art's visual scene

The results of our ethnographic study show a constant progression of Arabic calligraffiti in Western and Arabic cities from 2008 to 2019. But how is this possible if Arabic calligraffiti creates tensions in the visibility regimes where it exists? In some ways, Arabic calligraffiti politically 're-works' the visibility regimes in which it is expressed and prompts their transformation. In turn, the visibility regimes "rework" Arabic calligraffiti, which, in turn, is transformed to adapt to the political 'pressures' of the visibility regimes. Raising the visibility of Arabic calligraffiti is certainly problematic and it has been hypothesized that there has been a modulation in its practices to explain its spatio-temporal extension. It is this modulation in the practices of the Arabic calligraffiti image that makes it a liminal practice in many ways (see Figure 12).

5.1. Liminal practice as ambiguity

With the concept of visual scene as a framework, it becomes possible to describe how a politically charged form of street art can increase its visibility. As the different el-
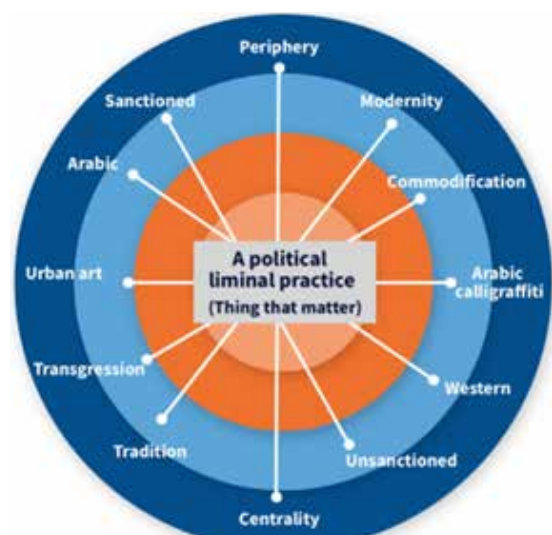
Figure 12. Liminal practices of Arabic calligraffiti Source: @ Hela Zahar. 2022.

ements of the ethnographic study illustrate, Arabic calligraffiti exists in an interstitial zone. It does not completely fall within authorized and commercial forms of muralist urban art; it exists on the graffiti margins and subsists in the ambiguous sphere of influence of its thing that matters. Is ambiguity in this sense indissociable from the very concept of visual scene? Is it not in this ambiguity that the sources of its renewal reside? If Arabic calligraffiti existed in the form of an autonomous and "pure" scene, would it not have ceased to exist as a scene? The drifting situation of Arabic calligraffiti, its comings and goings between a disconnected periphery and a market centre, its multiple concentric circles of visibility become apparent in the functioning of these systems of articulation. The chronological development of Arabic calligraffiti illustrates both the creation of tight circles of actors specific to it and integration into more diversified circles that are representative of the various sectors of the visual scene of urban art. When connections are made to these broader networks, they often serve as entry points for the specific actors of Arabic calligraffiti.

5.2. Liminal practice between the Western and Arabic visibility regimes

The meeting of all of these actors in the scene, of their powers and visual mediations can be understood using the concept of visibility regime. Whether in the physical space of cities or the digital space, a 'visibility regime' translates the dynamic and changing equilibrium of all of these powers. A visibility regime frames and regulates "from above" the expression of the visible, but also often lends itself 'from below' to more or less marked transformations.

Multiple and different tensions are raised by Arabic calligraffiti based on the specific visibility regimes in which it is framed. In addition to the tension of "spatial justice" (Bengsten and Arvidsson 2014), common to all forms of urban art, there are other tensions more specific to its particular remix. In Western cities, it highlights the presence of Arabness in a public space preoccupied by Arab-Western conflict; in Arab cities, it introduces the presence of the 'Western' modernity of an urban and contemporary calligraphy into public spaces that until very recently were not used to

this sharing of urban visibility. These different contexts of production problematize the visibility of Arabic calligraffiti based on the local political constellation specific to each event. Whether in Arab or Western cities, this sharing of visibility is never exactly translated into equal distribution.

The gradual adoption of these spaces and the struggle for visibility represent the challenge of all urban artists and more particularly Arabic calligraffiti artists, initially confined to the margins of this visual scene and having to navigate a particularly difficult path. Carriers of a tradition that dates back over a thousand years, they seek to remix tradition-al Arabic calligraphy in new places and with new stylistic expressions. Their art is revealing of diverse tensions in both Arab and Western cities. In Arab cities, they meet the iconoclast resistance of the more conservative factions in these societies; in the Western world, they meet that of certain citizens disturbed by any form of Arabization of the public space. This political issue forces them to modu-late their liminal practices of the image based on available places and visibility regimes, and to nimbly use the differ-ent systems of articulation of the scene.

5.3. Liminal practice between periphery and centrality
Through modulation if its practices, Arabic calligraffiti trav-els the urban art scene according to the tensions of this contemporary world. Its visibility emerges from the mar-gins, from these modest local scenes (Montreal, Tunis, Parisian suburbs), then begins to be moderately visible through social media platforms. When its actors circulate between these local scenes, the digital visibility of this cir-culation helps them access a more translocalized scene. The images in their works spread more and more within growing subscriber networks. Digital intermediaries post their work and physical intermediaries allow them to cre-ate works at flagship events like Tour 13 and Djerbahood. This adds to their visibility, which paves the way to new project proposals that they choose based on the triple de-mands—always potentially paradoxical—of transformative remixes, visibility and profitability. If they acquire a degree of financial autonomy, like eL Seed, this enables them to pursue other more transformational projects, free of mer-chandising demands. The progressive use of multiple sys-tems of physical and digital articulation of the visual scene

of urban art then enables them to go elsewhere and to give a trans-local status to their participation in this scene. Thus, it is the nature of this mise en scene that Arabic cal-ligraffiti exists both on the transformative margins, which generates occasional peaks of visibility associated with spectacular displays, and then integrates, at other mo-ments, into the most institutionalized and commercialized components of authorized urban art.

5.4. Liminal practice between physical and digital space
The visibility spaces that are the cities offer an ensem-ble of sites and diverse iconospheres. These sites visu-ally present through their architecture and everything that covers their multiple surfaces becomes the concrete and changing expression of social relationships among the in-dividuals who inhabit those spaces. With the development of new digital environments, this sociability is also increas-ingly practised in a new relational space also constituted of sites 'loaded' with meanings. But the terms of digital sociability differ from those established in physical sites; circulating and posting in these digital spaces becomes a more or less explicit encounter between prosumer actors of a "participatory" culture, digital intermediaries with more or less visibility, and the difficult-to-decipher algorithms of a galloping digital capitalism.

5.5. Liminal space between unauthorized and merchan-dized sites.
From its manifestation in authorized, merchandized, tour-ist areas to isolated, illegal and participatory graffiti in ob-scure alleyways, urban art remains a political expression and its presence in its various forms translates the strug-gle for public visibility and media acknowledgment of the social relationships that each of these forms carries. The political aspect of the liminal practice is translated in terms of spaces, sites and visibility regimes.
In the context of street art, where visibility is often associ-ated with merchandization and institutionalization, the Ar-abic calligraffiti artist is faced with a triple requirement: to bring the transformative aspect of his or her remixes to the public space (whether Arab or Western), to ensure visibili-ty, and to meet the commercial requirements (human and algorithmic actors) of this visibility.

6. Conclusions

Through the modulation of its practices, Arabic calligraffiti travels the urban art scene according to the tensions of this contemporary world. Its visibility emerges from the margins, from modest local scenes, then begins to be moderately visible thanks to social media platforms. When its actors circulate between these local scenes, the digital visibility of this circulation helps them access a more trans-localized scene.

Freewheeling and authorized, Western and Arab, Islamic and modern, Arabic calligraffiti is a political act in that it constructs itself. Its intricate messages convey a concrete, repeated and, undoubtedly, utopic expression of a contemporary cosmopolitanism. Arabic calligraffiti has its ambiguities and its geopolitical contrasts, as if its effervescence depended on it. The few dozen 'Likes' of a southern Tunisian artist are as necessary to him as the virality of Tour 13, Gabès or Perception; the acknowledgements of an obscure Tunisian association nourish him as much as the petrodollars; the open-mindedness and tolerance of an imam reconcile him with his roots.

In this great contemporary remix of cultures, the thing that matters in Arabic calligraffiti is the multiple tensions it generates, the questions it raises and the renewed creation of all the political interstices worked on day after day in the alleyways and hidden recesses of this hybrid, digital and participatory contemporary visual culture.

Conflict of Interests

 "The author declares no conflict of interests".

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