

CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Of Fortresses and Flows

Artists' mobility in the Mediterranean

Lara Bourdin



Illustration by [Carole Hénaff](#)

On January 10, 2018, Hamza, Bourich Omar and Ahmed, three hip-hop dancers, embarked on a plane in Casablanca for what was supposed to be a decisive trip for their careers: an international hip-hop battle was being held in the city of Eindhoven, in the Netherlands, and they were scheduled to perform. Their trip had been prepared for months; their visas secured for almost two weeks. Hamza and Omar had already been to Europe, to participate in other battles. For Ahmed, this trip was to be a first. Within the short few hours of flight that separate the two cities, all three young men were living the same nightmare.

Over the next 24 hours, they would be in turn interrogated, searched, and interrogated again, before being loaded into a van and driven 200 km away. Ultimately, they would be dropped off in a detention centre for undocumented migrants outside the city of Rotterdam. Hamza and Omar would stay for five days; Ahmed, for seven, before being driven back to the Eindhoven airport and loaded onto a plane back to Morocco—more specifically, to Marrakech, roughly 250 km from the young men's place of departure. Upon their arrival, they would live the mirror image of the process they had just undergone: with police awaiting them at the gate, they would be escorted out of the airport, to the Marrakech police station, and interrogated, yet again, before being released. Throughout the ordeal, Hamza would reiterate: "I am not a criminal, I am an artist".

Readers may know the dancers' story from the campaign that was led in the following weeks by Maria Daïf, an independent cultural actor and former journalist based in

Casablanca. Hamza's plea became the title of an article published by Daïf on openDemocracy.net that was circulated extensively on both shores of the Mediterranean and beyond, within cultural networks and outside them as well [1]. No doubt it was shared so widely for its inherent shock value, for the accumulation of abuses that constitute its narrative arc. But it is equally probable that the story's spread owes at least as much to the very opposite factor: to its ordinariness, to its similarities with so many other stories that fill our newsfeeds, our conversations, our professional lives every day.

To be sure, Hamza, Omar and Ahmed's story finds resonance in those of countless artists and cultural operators who every year engage in the (generally) long, complex and tiresome process of applying for a Schengen visa—only to see that request denied, ignored, or, as in the case of the Moroccan dancers, engender a veritable cascade of humiliations and mistreatments. The year before, Maria Daïf had signed an open letter denouncing the process that she had had to undergo in her attempt to travel to Brussels, on invitation from Moussem Nomadic Arts Centre. At the time, she was Director of the Touria and Abdelaziz Tazi Foundation and cultural centre L'Uzine, an important hub for the contemporary arts in Casablanca. Moussem was hosting a week-long event centered on the metropolis, and had invited her to moderate a panel. She was granted the visa—but only after undergoing a process that included, among other absurd steps, the production of the totality of her paycheques, going back twenty years. The accumulation of bureaucratic excesses prompted Daïf to withdraw from the event and to pen the open letter explaining her decision. As she wrote in its concluding line: "How can Casablanca be in Brussels if we, artists and cultural workers, are not welcome there ?" [2].

Maria Daïf's question opens onto the host of contradictions that lie at the heart of the Euromed partnership and in particular its policy on culture. The notion of mobility has become a catchword of policy and cultural sector vernacular, and it is unequivocally vaunted as an objective that must be strived towards. On July 5, 2017, the European Parliament voted a resolution recognizing that "mobility is an essential part of the EU's international cultural relations, requiring the setting up of mechanisms to facilitate visa access to and from third countries for cultural professionals" [3]. Meanwhile, Articles 14 and 16 of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Promotion and Protection of the Diversity of Human Expressions enshrine the obligation for signatories in developed countries to "facilitate access to their territories for cultural activities," and to "grant preferential treatment to artists and other cultural professionals from developing countries" [4].

In spite of the contradictions that lie at the heart of the Euromed partnership and its policy on culture, the notion of mobility has become a catchword of policy and cultural sector vernacular, and it is unequivocally vaunted as an objective that must be strived towards

These policies exist because travelling continues to lie at the heart of artists' aspirations — all the more so at a time when the Internet and social media are generating connections that only await to be materialized. Moreover, while important events, spaces and networks are blossoming along the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean, the North continues to exercise an important pull factor for artists and operators due to its higher and more established concentration of facilities, funds and events.

And yet: while EU and Euromed policy documents exalt the virtues of exchange and cooperation, the rulebook for the stated cooperation appears to remain firmly in Europe's hands. To be sure, even as "bilaterality" and "multilaterality" are consecrated as desirable frameworks for exchange, they cannot be substantiated when one side denies the other's rights to move. These contradictions cast a shadow around the official policies and statements that have been made in favour of greater mobility in the Mediterranean.

Towards the fortress

If impediments to mobility have become so frequent in recent years that they have begun to be naturalized in the collective imaginary, it is important to remember that the situation was not always so fraught. Artists and operators who began their careers prior to the 1990s remember a time when it was relatively easy to cross into the European space [5]. This time of "euphoria," as some have called it [6], began to fade in the late 1990s and entered a precipitous decline in the new millennium, with the onset of the post-2001 era of securitization and the acceleration of armed conflict in several countries in the MENA region. The degradation of conditions for mobility has been particularly pronounced in the Levant, where land routes and train networks used to safely link major cities, from Cairo all the way to Baghdad and Istanbul. The accelerating occupation of Palestine, the occupation of Iraq and the war in Syria have decimated infrastructure and effectively put an end to many existing circuits.

The problems engendered by Schengen visa policies are numerous and their impacts can be devastating: financially, professionally, psychologically. What is more, they appear to affect nationals from the MENA region disproportionately. In its 2012 study on visa restrictions' impact on non-European artists and cultural professionals, cultural mobility information network *On the Move* found that half of respondents whose visa had been rejected without explanation were from the Middle East or North Africa; the same was true for 40% of those who had experienced difficulties in communication with the authorities handling their applications and those whose visa process took longer than projected [7].

These statistics lend credence to Cameroonian historian and political philosopher Achille Mbembe's claim that visa policies are directed more towards "classes of populations" than towards "individuals in particular" [8]. Today, men with MENA passports between the ages of roughly 18 and 35 are eyed with particular suspicion: to the generic accusation of "likelihood of non-return," is added the perceived threat of potential terrorist acts.

Mobility restrictions are particularly hard to stomach for artists when they occur within the

framework of bilateral or multilateral cooperation efforts, or in the context of initiatives designed to shed a “spotlight” on the artistic production of different MENA countries and/or cities, as was the case for the 2018 Moussem festival honouring Casablanca. Bilateral ties are especially strong in the cases of former colonies or protectorates, as is the case for Morocco and France, for example. Cultural institutes such as the Institut Français, the British Council, the Goethe Institut, Pro Helvetia, the Cervantes Institute and others have played a significant role in supporting the training and exposure of artists and cultural professionals in the locales where they work, and indeed in creating and funding mobility opportunities [9].

Artists participating in projects supported by these institutes generally benefit from facilitated visa procedures due to the institutes’ access to the relevant immigration authorities. However, this reality only accentuates the sense that the playing field is drastically uneven, especially in countries like Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan and Lebanon, where European nationals enjoy visa-free entry or visa on arrival. In other words, while self-declared exchange programmes can funnel European artists into MENA countries to “share their culture” with no checks in place, they hold a monopoly on simplified travel for artists from those same countries.

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Zineb Haddaji, a cultural project manager based in Casablanca, sums up the sentiment shared by many of her colleagues and the artists she works with: “There is a real drive to pursue exchanges in Europe, but the political climate cuts that drive. There is a form of double speech from European politicians: cultural institutions adopt a stance of openness towards the world, but then States refuse the visa” [10]. This reality arguably impoverishes the notions of “exchange” and “partnership,” lending further weight to the sense that bilateral cooperation has more to do with European institutions’ self-interest than with genuine openness or willingness to work towards an equitable context for dialogue and exchange [11]. To make matters worse, artists and cultural professionals complain that working relationships with cultural institutes are often marked by paternalism, which can express itself in the verbal treatment given to artists, the paltry fees paid, or the reluctance to fund programmes rather than projects [12].

Between and beyond the shores, new walls

In this landscape of exacerbating restrictions on mobility towards the North, many artists and cultural professionals are turning their sights to neighbouring countries in the region and towards the South. In tandem with this shift, a wealth of independent initiatives and

infrastructures have supported mobility between North African and Middle Eastern countries in the last thirty years especially, gaining new momentum and purpose in 2011 and the ensuing years. Cross-border access to these opportunities has been bolstered by mobility funds such as the Arab Fund for Art and Culture (AFAC); Culture Resource (Al Mawred Al-Thaqafy); the Young Arab Theatre Fund, now Mophradat; the Anna Lindh Foundation; the Roberto Cimetta Fund; and others, such as Art Moves Africa.

However, the visa regime has woven its way into the region as well, effectively installing the same types of barriers that exist between the North and South/East of the Mediterranean. While some barriers existed long before the rise of the post-2011 security climate, as is the case for Morocco and Algeria, many are relatively new. Basem Abuarab, an artist booker based in Cairo, has had to cancel numerous concerts due to visa restrictions imposed by the Egyptian embassy. “Even within the Arab region, it’s complicated to get visas,” he states. “Because of this, I can’t even think artistically; I have to think of logistics, which is so annoying” [13].

Entry into Egypt has become particularly difficult in recent years, due namely to the influx of Libyans fleeing the war. Meanwhile, for Libyan artists and cultural professionals, mobility has become something close to a mirage. Abdul Mohamen Zarty, a cultural manager and architectural photographer based in Tripoli, summarizes the state of mobility for artists from his country: “In the last 9 years, every country has shut its door to require an entry visa that takes too long to get. [...] For example,] we never used to go to Egypt with an entry visa. Same thing with Morocco. We used to be able to go and get our visa at the airport. It’s now easier for us to get a Schengen visa than to get one from the Moroccan kingdom” [14].

A new visa to replace them all?

In the face of mounting escalation of impediments related to visas and immigration policies, calls have been made across the independent art sector for the institution of special provisions for artists and cultural professionals [15]. These have tended to consolidate around the ideal of a “cultural visa” or “passport,” which would afford special privileges to artists and cultural professionals travelling for the purpose of participation in cultural events, trainings, and other opportunities.

European institutions have not turned a deaf ear to these advocacy efforts. In its 2012 *Report on the cultural dimensions on the EU’s external actions*, the Committee on Culture and Education calls for “the creation of a cultural visa for third-country nationals, artists and other professionals in the cultural field, along the lines of the existing Scientific Visa Programme in force since 2005.” This call can also be found in the European Parliament’s resolution of July 5, 2017, *Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations*.

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“visas are a central instrument in the EU’s culture of border control,” to quote political scientist Nora El Qadim

However, as Elena di Federico and Marie Le Sourd note in *On the Move’s* 2012 report on visas for non-European nationals, these requests remain controversial on several fronts [16]. On a pragmatic front, they would require a consensus as to whom qualifies as an artist—an objective which seems hard to reach, as Di Federico and Le Sourd note, “given the lack of agreement on the status of the artist even within the EU” [17]. This lack of policy consensus is even more pervasive in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, and it is aggravated by the lack of quantitative data needed to bolster advocacy [18]. On a more philosophical level, the plea for a cultural visa has been met with resistance to the very principle of preferential treatment for artists. To the extent that the factors that most often cause visa problems for artists (insufficient proof of funds, bureaucratic requirements, short deadlines) apply as well to travelers of all kinds, it can be argued that the battle for a cultural visa is unduly limited and may create hierarchies within civil society when there should be equality and solidarity [19].

To push the point further, one may indeed ask if a visa is truly the answer in a world where “visas are a central instrument in the EU’s culture of border control,” to quote political scientist Nora El Qadim [20]. To be sure, will any cause truly be served if artists can avoid lineups at the embassy and skip to the front at the airport, while women and men of different lines of work, or those in search of new professional and personal horizons, remain at the back—or worse, on boats, in camps and in prisons?

Beyond visas

The dilemmas surrounding the cultural visa may indeed bring into relief the depth of the problems framing cultural mobility in the Mediterranean and their inextricable links with the broader context of “planetary segregation” that is unfurling today, to quote Mbembe once more.

A multitude of recommendations have been put forward by the cultural and civil society sectors to bring solutions to the impasses and paradoxes that exist today, both for the short and the long term. In her chapter on mobility for the UNESCO 2018 Global Report, Khadija El Bennaoui (Director of Art Moves Africa and Head of Performing Arts Unit at the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation) argues that the independent sector is uniquely positioned to steer new efforts, on the strength of its experience “addressing gaps between institutional frameworks, policies and realities on the ground” [21]. Artists and operators can namely remind us that mobility must also be a tool for strengthening and dynamizing independent cultural circuits in the South and East. This goal is essential to reversing the trends that have made Europe into the principal centre of attraction for cultural projects, both in fact and, crucially, in the collective imagination. A stronger cultural sector in the South and

East, connected through professional networks, associations and lobbies, can not only work together to create new opportunities but also to push back against existing and emerging restrictions [22].

In this landscape, independent artistic platforms and dedicated South-East/South-South mobility funds will surely have a crucial role to play. The emergence of funds such as Africa Art Lines, which connects Morocco to the rest of Africa with funds sourced entirely within the continent, and the recently announced launch of a similar initiative in Algeria, are promising signs in this direction.

Even as these recommendations and initiatives provide an essential and inspiring blueprint for concrete steps towards a new landscape for mobility, artists themselves are continuously breathing life and meaning into existing calls for action. For example, in 2018, Moroccan dancer Hind Benali premiered a new creation titled *M'Safir* (Traveller). In the press booklet, she writes:

*Citizens of the world
Of open borders
Of valued colours, of limitless passports, a sovereign people.
Futures filled with abundance
Free travelers.*

*Citizens of the South
Unattainable limits
Disregarded identities, undervalued riches, stigmatized religions
Futures by default. Potential migrants. A threat.*

No. You are not me [23]

By creating a portrait of these two coexisting realities, Hind Benali strove not only to confront spectators with the glaring injustice that comes with the contrast. She also wished to conjure a too-often disregarded figure: “the traveler, the simple traveler,” and her or his “simple desire to travel.” “What happens,” she asks, “when you’re a citizen of the South and you simply want to travel?” [24].

Beyond the walls, new frontiers

These questions seem all the more urgent at a time when mobility is a key stake in the quandaries sown by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, enormous segments of the world’s populations are, effectively, immobile, and the circulation of works has been slowed to a diminished pace and scope.

In the rare initiatives that have been made to invite creators from abroad, the usual mechanisms of restriction and exclusion continue to hold sway at borders. Belgian-Tunisian

dancer Mohamed Toukabri is among those who have experienced this situation intimately. His newest production, titled *The Power of the Fragile*, is a duet with his mother, Maimouna Lhatifa Khamessi. It was due to be presented at the Beursschouwburg arts centre in Brussels in the spring. It has now been postponed twice: first, due to the lockdown, and most recently, because his mother's visa was denied by the Belgian authorities. New preoccupations linked with the pandemic are intersecting with the usual anxieties of foreign invasion and potential attacks. As the managers of the Beursschouwburg wrote on the centre's website: "Colonial entanglements, structural racism and violent systems of exclusion are becoming more apparent than ever under Covid-19. Which systems aid movement and which hinder it? What permits one person to travel and another not to?" [25].

These questions are not new: the crisis simply forces us to contend with them again, with new coordinates and new information. But the pandemic may also deepen new fault lines. In a statement published on Beursschouwburg's website, Mohamed Toukabri signals to a possible new permutation of the fortress, especially for artists and cultural workers. He, like many of his colleagues whose shows have been cancelled in recent months, was invited to host his online, as a way of circumventing the restrictions on his mother's mobility and preserving the show. His response was negative. "Why," he asks, "should I share my mother's presence in countries where she is barred entry?" [26].

Mohamed Toukabri's decision not to hold his show online may be one of the first of its kind, in the new dispensation that is now upon us. Now we are left to wonder: how many other acts of resistance will be necessary to prevent virtual presence from becoming a convenient alternative to togetherness?

Testimonials

A.Y., artista, Istanbul

Haya Zaatry, música, Palestina

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- 9 — Fanny Bouquerel and Basma El Hussein, "Towards a strategy for culture in the Mediterranean Region. EC Preparatory document. Needs and opportunities assessment report in the field of cultural policy and dialogue in the Mediterranean Region," November 2009, p. 63. For example, the Goethe Institut's Moving MENA fund facilitated travels between MENA countries, as well to Germany.
- 10 — Interview with the author, December 16, 2018, published with permission and translated from French. Original quote : "Il y a une soif d'aller faire des échanges en Europe, mais la conjoncture politique coupe l'envie. Il y a un double discours de la part des politiques en Europe. Les institutions culturelles adoptent un discours d'ouverture sur le monde, mais après les États refusent le visa."
- 11 — Elena Di Federico, "Étude sur le Profil des Professionnels Artistiques et Culturels en Méditerranée non européenne," Roberto Cimetta Fund, December 2007, p. 24. See also Khadija El Bennaoui, *Surviving the paradox of mobility*, in: *UNESCO Global Report 2018: Reshaping Cultural Policies*, UNESCO, 2017, p. 118.
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- 13 — Interview with the author, February 25, 2019. Quote published with permission.
- 14 — Interview with the author, March 7, 2019. Quote published with permission.
- 15 — See for example Elena Di Federico, *Étude sur le Profil des Professionnels Artistiques et Culturels en Méditerranée non européenne*, p. 23.
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- 17 — Ibid.
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- 19 — Ibid., p. 27.
- 20 — Nora El Qadim, "The symbolic meaning of international mobility: EU-Morocco negotiations on visa facilitation," *Migration Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, p. 282.
- 21 — Ibid., p. 120.
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