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Tunisia's "Dream City" Festival Needs Awakening

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TUNIS — Organized by Tunis-based artistic association [L'Art Rue](#) since 2007, the 10-day multidisciplinary art festival [Dream City](#) is back in Tunisia's capital city for the first time since the outbreak of COVID-19, following its postponement in 2021 amid severe economic and political upheavals.

This eighth edition, which takes place in several locations in the Medina of Tunis — a UNESCO World Heritage site — and nearby downtown Tunis, gathers 90 artists representing 25 different cities in Tunisia and abroad. With these 60 shows, the organizers want us to inhale a breath of fresh air and experience the euphoria of renewal as we return to post-lockdown "normalcy" — however defined.

This ambition takes on playful forms as art exhibitions and performances nest in places such as the National Theatre, Tunis's train station, and heritage sites in and around the Medina. By and large, the audience comprised a refreshing crowd of young Tunisians.





Directions pointing to Dream City 2022 venues in the Medina of Tunis

The overall program tilted heavily toward video, film, and performing arts; painting, drawing, and sculpture were regrettably absent ([Jaou festival](#), opening October 6, should focus more on these areas). Despite such limited curatorial offerings, Dream City succeeded in placing various artworks and events in conversation (recalling Tunis as a historical site of geographical and cultural crossroads) as it presented different artistic perspectives — from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Berlin — on similar themes. For instance, Tunisian musician Nidhal Yahyaoui mixed popular Arab-Andalusian and Greek traditional music, channeling a sense of displacement in “Rebetiko-Malouf,” while French-Portuguese choreographer Filipe Lourenço engaged with fluidity and non-binary typologies in his performance “Pulse(s) in Situ” through the beat of an Alawite war dance.

But no matter how strong Dream City's dream may be, it's hard to mask the reality of today's hardships in Tunisia. More than a decade after the Arab Spring, local people are grappling with a symbolic hangover of disappointment and frustration. Going from one festival site to the next, visitors pass the Avenue Habib Bourguiba, downtown's main artery, where in 2011 thousands of Tunisians protested injustice and dictatorship, toppling the 23-year-long coercive regime of former President Ben Ali. Now [protest on this street is forbidden](#). There aren't many tourists either, and local women queue to buy water, milk, and butter before they disappear from supermarket shelves.



Live performance of Lawrence Abu Hamdan, "Daght Jawi" (2022), Cité des Sciences, Dream City 2022

These reactionary times surface, for instance, in one of Dream City's opening performances. Singer Emel Methlouthi returned to

the Tunisian stage for the first time in four years, blending traditional Tunisian and Mediterranean drums with electronic and modern arrangements, along with a string quartet. She dedicated a song to Iranian 22-year-old Mahsa (Jina) Amini, who died on September 16 under suspicious circumstances, after being arrested by the morality police; her death sparked protests throughout Iran. Emel's fiery performance included classics such as "Kelmti Horra (My Word Is Free)," which the Tunisian singer defiantly performed during the incandescence of Tunisia's brewing revolution; 12 years later the song is tinged with an elegiac quality. In an earlier summer festival in Tunisia's second-largest city, Sfax, police in civilian clothes disrupted a performance by a popular provocateur humorist, Lotfi Abdelli, now in a self-imposed exile in France. Are words still free? Not quite.

While the festival does not directly confront growing restrictions on freedom, human rights, and artistic expression, curatorial choices subtly — if rather insufficiently — acknowledge the emergence of crises, such as in scheduling the film *Lebanese Rocket Society* and Lawrence Abu Hamdan's performance "Daght Jawi" (2022) on the same afternoon.

In *Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012), award-winning documentary filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige remember the short-lived adventure of a group of Armenian-Lebanese students who decided to build Lebanon's, and the Arab world's, first space rocket in the 1960s.





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Their audacity, ingenuity, and sense of possibility contrast sharply with Abu Hamdan's "Daght Jawi," a multi-sensory essay of sound and images addressing daily violence and the gripping meaning of silence. The Turner Prize winner lent his "private ear" to the sounds of monthly violations of Lebanese airspace by Israeli drones and F35 fighter jets between 2020 and 2021. Projected against the curved ceiling of Tunis's planetarium, Abu Hamdan tries to make sense of Beirut's busy sky, in which he identifies both the absurdity of a reliably noisy sky and a deep, two-pronged failure: Lebanon's inability to evolve from its broken political

system, causing immense economic hardship for its population, and the international community's failure to uphold international law when it comes to Israel. (This juxtaposition may or may not have been deliberate.)

Suffering, whether the forced disappearances under Ben Ali's regime in Lotfi Achour's short film "Angle Mort" (2021) or Abdallah Al-Khatib's film diary of Yarmouk's siege in Syria (*Little Palestine*, 2021), seemingly unite in a common call for justice and dignity but it's as if Dream City forgot that it's 2022, not 2010/2011. For the last decade, the MENA region is the only place where [extreme poverty has been on the rise](#). In Tunisia, democratic gains are being erased. And the so-called Arab Spring has not realized its promise of equity, participation, and prosperity. What have we learned? And more crucially still, what have we missed?



Installation view of CATPC & Renzo Martens, "Plantation and

Museums" (2021), Caserne El Attarine, Dream City 2022

When does reality end and dreaming begin, we may wonder in the face of such epistemic confusion. At the border of delusion about the state of our world maybe? "Nothing is stable nowadays and all things change," says the curatorial statement penned by festival co-founders and directors Selma and Sofiane Ouissi and Jan Goosens. Considering that ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus cast the same judgment around 2,500 years ago, the observation feels somewhat of a cliché.

In this assemblage of multinational artworks, a cohesive postcolonial canvas fails to fully emerge, owing to Dream City's lack of bold vision. Despite gesturing toward themes of social, ecological, and political crisis, individual artworks don't quite come together as a collective voice, and we continue searching for something truly urgent, radical, subversive — a dream to inspire new realities.

[Dream City Festival](#) *continues (various venues, Tunis, Tunisia) through October 9. The festival was organized by L'Art Rue.*

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