

Aesthetics and Politics: Culture, Class, Youth, Performativity and the Transformation of the Public Sphere in the Arab World

➤ **Friederike Pannewick (CNMS): Introduction**

This panel presents the inter- and transdisciplinary research group “Aesthetics & Politics” at University of Marburg. The uprisings and oppositional trends since the last couple of years stand out because of a novel and more complex conflation of political, economic, religious, cultural and media factors. Unparalleled intense and comprehensive processes of transformation have been caused by this complex interconnectedness. The newly established research group is consequently a result of our recognition that these profound changes in the region are not any longer analyzable and understandable with the current paradigms, terminology and methodology. Therefore, we are trying to consciously cross traditional disciplinary borders and work from a trans-/interdisciplinary perspective.

Some of our leading questions are:

- In what ways do the counter-narratives and transformations of the public sphere reformulate the relationship between politics and culture in and outside the region?
- In what ways do cultural forms inflect the political imaginary?
- How does a given (every day) practice or form of articulation qualify as “politics”?
- How might analyzing the relationship between aesthetics and politics ultimately enrich the way we understand and position our own work as scholars of the region?
- Which (conceptual) role for intention? (Given the fact that seemingly nonpolitical actions or articulations by citizens may carry considerable political meanings.)

Common aspects of our research include corporality/embodiment, public space & empowerment, new identities, and performativity. These aspects and questions will be dealt with in three short exemplary presentations:

➤ **Ali Sonay (CNMS): Arab youth activism and its global relevance: The example of the April 6 youth movement**

The presentation aims at understanding the dynamics of Egyptian youth activism in highlighting its meaning to and **embeddedness into a global momentum of a novel political subjectivization**. This thesis will be exemplified by the April 6 Youth Movement, one of the main organizers of the first mass protests which sparked off the uprising in January and February 2011 and which is still a crucial pressure group. Most of the youth are not affiliated to a political party and do not identify themselves with a specific ideology, but a broad range of political views is present.

What is articulated instead is a new understanding of the **social space** which ought not to be designed by the state only, but the fulfillment of **the individuals’ objects and potentialities** is demanded deliberately and actively. **I argue that the political framing and display of these traits are observable universally and it is because of this that they have an implicit aesthetic and performative agency as they are taken up and circulate back in front of a global audience and stage.**

➤ **Ines Braune (CNMS): Parkour - Contentious practices in the public space**

Parkour can be seen as a youth movement in a very literal sense, this means that youths are moving in the public sphere in contesting the dominant ways of moving through the city. Beginning in the eighties and nineties in the suburbs of Paris, parkour has found its way via media representations to the world. This is especially so in Morocco, where it is very popular and performed mainly in urban areas. The idea behind parkour is to find the most efficient and effective way between two points and to overcome any obstacle within one's path using only one's own physical and mental capacities.

There is no need for anything else than one's own **body** as medium of parkour practices. In this sense, **parkour serves as an example of the *performative turn*** to indicate a **very material construction of culture** based on **bodily practices**.

Arguing with **Michel de Certeau**, who emphasizes the meaning of the city as a public space, it is **individual practices** that work to disrupt a very rational concept of the city. Parkour suggesting ways in which **space is negotiated** and appropriated in ways differently than those intended by the city planners and architects. Existing norms of behavior as well as the intended functions of particular public spaces are contested by parkour related practices. **It is because of this deviance of hegemonic order in the public space that parkour is political.**

➤ **Karolin Sengebusch (CNMS): "It is not politicized. But of course it is politics." – Unconventional forms of Lebanese anti-sectarian activism**

In Lebanon, protests against the principles of sectarianism have a long tradition. During the last protest wave in 2011, anti-sectarian activists showed a high degree of diversity in terms of organization and articulation. Concerning organization, formal institutions, such as political parties and NGOs, coexist alongside independent activists and loose networks. **Concerning articulation, protest repertoires have diversified.** To the traditional protest repertoires of demonstrations, press articles and conferences, young activists have added a **flavor of fun and lifestyle**. They also have introduced unconventional protest forms including **flash mobs, clown walks, and video clips**.

This is a point of disagreement between different types of activists, namely older, well-organized activists and younger, less experienced, independent activists. Their controversy revolves around the questions of **how political these new protest repertoires are**.

Hereby, they follow **contradictory concepts of "politics"**. I will identify these concepts, drawing on distinctions between **"la politique"** and **"le politique"**, and relate them to disparities in the activists' respective logics and targets of protest. At times, activists explicitly reject protest approaches that differ from their own. Thus, choice of a certain protest form is, for different types of anti-sectarian activists, also an instrument of social distinction within a broader movement.

Ines Braune: Arabic and Media Studies at Leipzig University and University of Damascus. PhD project: "The appropriation of globally available resources in a local context. The internet use of young Moroccans". Post-doc project: "Parkour as contentious cultural practice in the public space"

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