

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band: 70 (2016)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Aesthetics of decolonization : the magazine Souffles (1966-1972)
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-696869>

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Aesthetics of Decolonization – The Magazine *Souffles* (1966–1972)

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0041

Abstract: The magazine *Souffles* was published by intellectuals and poets in Morocco from 1966 to 1972. It functioned as a node, medium, and interface in the intellectual, political and artistic production of a post-colonial subjectivity. Going beyond existing studies of *Souffles* that mainly looked on its relevance for literature production in Morocco, this article highlights the contributions by visual artists and transnational solidarity movements for the magazine's trans-local constitution. This includes encounters, relations and transfers between radical art and political discourses and practices, as well as the transnational context in which the magazine's post-colonial aesthetic proposals emerged. The article is based on insights conducted in a research project with the same title that studies the magazine's polyphone character in a trans-disciplinary manner. It combines artistic research, interviews and conversations looking closely at the visual and aesthetic proposals as well as written testimonies in dialogue with a socio-political reading of the publication, considering as well recent theories on aesthetics and concepts developed in the field of postcolonial studies.

Keywords: radical aesthetics, decolonization, transculturality, art and politics, postcolonial studies

1 An Atlantic breeze

Souffles is regarded as one of the most influential Moroccan literary magazines of the twentieth century. It was published in Rabat from 1966 to 1972. As the magazine was banned in Morocco in 1972, it was for a long time untraceable. Its editor, Abdelatiff Laâbi, had been imprisoned for eight years before he was released in 1980 following international pressure and went to exile in Paris. Thanks to his efforts, the magazine is today accessible online on an international scale. The City University of New York, USA digitized it in 1998.

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Figure 1: The 50th anniversary of the *Souffles* magazine. Exhibition curated by Mohamed Melehi at the National Library, Rabat, April 2016.
Photo: Marion von Osten.

Ever since 2010 it has been accessible at the National Library of the Kingdom of Morocco. The French-Moroccan literary scholar and journalist Kenza Sefrioui recently provided a review of its history in the frame of her doctoral dissertation. Further, a new anthology of *Souffles* poetry and articles has been translated into English and edited by the North American scholars Olivia Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio.¹ Articles by the Rome-based art historian Toni Maraini in the *Springerin* periodical and the online journal *Red Threat*² have contributed to familiarizing a younger generation of writers, academics and cultural producers with *Souffles*. Articles and projects that highlighted the publication include the *Bidoun* magazine, the South African publishing project *Chimurenga*, the publicly accessible library of *SAVVY Contemporary*. *The Laboratory of Form-Ideas* in Berlin-Neukölln and the *l'appartement 22* art space in Rabat; as well as the projects *Action! painting/publishing* that I have curated at *Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers* Paris (2012), and the research project *Ästhetik der Dekolonisierung* at the Institute for Theory at the Zurich University of the Arts (2014–2016).³

¹ Sefrioui 2013; Harrison/Villa-Ignacio 2016.

² See: http://www.springerin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=1869&lang=de (05/1/2016); <http://www.red-thread.org/en/article.asp?a=41> (05/5/2016).

³ See: <http://www.leslaboratoires.org/en/projet/architectures-de-la-decolonisation/architectures-de-la-decolonisation> (05/1/2016); and <https://www.zhdk.ch/index.php?id=73291> (05/5/2016).



Figure 2: The 50th anniversary of the *Souffles* magazine. Exhibition curated by Mohamed Melehi at the National Library, Rabat, April 2016.

Photo: Marion von Osten.

While the assessment that *Souffles* was one of the most important Moroccan literature magazines of the last century must be endorsed, the national frame and focus on poetry omits the magazine's transnational and interdisciplinary character. Whether *Souffles'* scope of activities is exhausted by its national setting (Morocco) and orientation toward one discipline of art will be discussed in this article. Rereading *Souffles* today, one can equally call the publication an internationalist, Pan-Arab, Pan-African, and tricontinental, critical culture magazine shaped by Maghrebi, European and Creole writers, artists, and activists.⁴ What unfolds in the 24 issues are discussions on the concepts of Negritude, the Pan-African festivals in Dakar and Algiers, debates on culture and revolution in the Tricontinental movement and in *Third Cinema*, as well as the protest movements of 1968 in Europe.⁵ A national focus obstructs the view to the entangled histories and plural prospects of the magazine and its transnational and

⁴ Constituted as an anti-colonial and non-aligned resistance, the Tricontinental Movement from the mid-1960s onwards had direct effects for the constitution of the New Left and various Third World solidarity initiatives in the Northern hemisphere. Created mainly by activists, theorists and artists from the global South it became a major reference point for non-aligned transnational solidarity projects until today. See: www.tricontinentale.net.

⁵ Davies 2015; Harrison 2013; Stafford 2008. This discussion also refers to recent studies from the Anglophone context relating to the Tricontinental or Pan-African dimensions of *Souffles*.

transcultural approach. It also disregards the magazine's international and Marxist-Leninist perspective that ultimately led to its being banned in 1972.

Souffles is discussed today rather as an interdisciplinary project, a virtual meeting place for critical intellectuals from North Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Europe. It was as well a magazine produced by and with visual artists. It is precisely this diversity of voices and cross-border contexts and disciplines, which all came together in *Souffles*, that allows to gain insights into the short century of decolonization and its aesthetic discourses. The diverse articles, manifestos, and interviews help to understand artists and writers negotiations with the violence of European colonialism that had also created racist and paternalistic perspectives on the colonized cultures⁶ The hybrid and transnational character of the magazine is thus related to one of the main subjects of debate in the magazine: artists and intellectuals were deeply concerned with the awkward position for aesthetic production that was brought about by both the colonial past and the conservative cultural politics of the succeeding post-colonial regimes. This includes the attempts of the artists and poets publishing in *Souffles* to overcome colonial episteme by redefining and radicalizing their aesthetic project, and expanding the scope of action for cultural production and interdisciplinary projects. This expanded range of action unfolds in the magazine in different ways during the course of its development and the period it was published. The magazine *Souffles* was one of the major building grounds to define new concepts of radical aesthetics in the era of decolonization, constantly negotiating the limits between imposed and reinvented traditions. In this article I will focus on the aesthetic dimensions of the magazine project, highlighting the relation between different art forms and the engagement of visual artists and the magazine's handling of images and art projects.

2 Decolonizing culture

The editors of the magazine – a group of outstanding young writers, Abdellatif Laâbi, Mostafa Nissaboury, Mohamed Khair-Eddine – decided to publish, ten years after Morocco's independence, a magazine by their own efforts.⁷ As

⁶ Mudimbe 1988; Young 2003.

⁷ The poet and editor Abdellatif Laâbi, was born in 1942 in Fes, Morocco, and lives in Paris and Rabat; Mostafa Nissaboury was born in Casablanca in 1943 where he also lives, writes and teaches till today. Mohammed Khair-Eddine was born 1941 in Tafraout, south of Agadir. In 1964 he founded, with Mostafa Nissaboury, *Poésie toute*. He migrated to France in 1965, and lived as



Figure 3: The 50th anniversary of the *Souffles* magazine. Exhibition curated by Mohamed Melehi at the National Library, Rabat, April 2016.

Photo: Marion von Osten.

Abdelattif Laâbi stated in an interview he gave in July 2015 in Paris, they were coming out of a generation still shaped by the colonial education system and that it was precisely the French colonial condition they grew up in that had shaped the radical orientation of the magazine:

First there was an understanding that we could not move forward without having resolved our problems with the colonial experience. The generation that preceded us, Moroccan men and women, was preoccupied with the political fight against the colonial system. That generation succeeded, as Morocco was able to regain its independence in 1956. But that generation never asked itself the question of whether colonization was a loss of autonomy and national dignity, or if it was a loss of something else. What happens in a colonial situation? Is it simply a political oppression, economic, all of that? Or is it something else? It was my generation that concretely asked itself about these problems. What happened culturally? What was the colonial enterprise in the framework of culture? What was the impact of colonial politics on the being, on the psychology of Moroccans, on their identity, on the relationship they have with their past, present, and future?⁸

a worker in the Paris *banlieues*. In 1966, he published in the journal *Encres Vives* and collaborated with the magazine *Les Lettres nouvelles* and *Présence africaine*. He died in 1995 in Rabat.

⁸ The interview with Abdellatif and Jocelyne Laâbi was conducted in French on the 14 July 2015 in Paris-Creteil by Marion von Osten, in collaboration with the literature and film historian Olivier Hadouchi (Paris) and the artist Peter Spillmann (Zurich). Translated into English by Kate McHugh Stevenson, Geneva. An edited version will be published in September 2016.



Figure 4: The 50th anniversary of the *Souffles* magazine. Exhibition curated by Mohamed Melehi at the National Library, Rabat, April 2016.

Photo: Marion von Osten.

The political independence of Morocco, the anti-colonial struggle, the national liberation front was successful in bringing about the political independence of Morocco in 1956. However, ten years later the young intellectuals were facing a condition in which the stratification of society, as well as the attitudes and behaviours of colonial governance were still in place. It is thus telling that the *Souffles* editors conducted an interview with the Tunisian-Jewish author Albert Memmi in one of the first editions. In *The colonizer and the colonized*, Memmi analysed the mental and cultural impacts of European colonization and the interdependent relationship between the colonized and the colonizer.⁹ The central proposition of the *Souffles* magazines founders was that decolonization had not yet been fully realized and made this their aim.

One of the striking features of the project of this “Autodecolonization”, as Abdellatif Laâbi states it, was the experimental, deconstructive treatment of the French language:

How to decolonize minds? How to decolonize culture? How do we rediscover our autonomy, our freedom of creation in relation to a culture that was imposed upon us? But with this paradox: all of that must happen in the language of the colonizer. It was necessary to

⁹ Memmi 1957. The first issues of *Souffles* stress crucial intergenerational connections to writers such as Driss Chraïbi, Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon, who laid the foundations for new local and postcolonial forms of writing.

deal with this paradox and this contradiction. How to produce a literature that would carry this movement for the emancipation of the human being? We worked with the only language that we had at our disposal. We didn't choose it. I didn't choose to write in French; French was imposed upon me during a history that went over me personally. The important thing was to see what I did with this language. What did I succeed in creating within this language? How did I make this language my own?¹⁰

Language, speech, the speech act, the contextualization and decontextualization of the former French colonial school language appear as a major task. Mohamed Khair-Eddine speaks even of the formation of a “linguistic guerrilla.” French – learned as a written language – is moulded, appropriated, and deconstructed; disruptions are introduced and new narrative forms are developed.¹¹ The experimental and imaginative handling of language is expressed in so-called kilometre poems and new forms of prose. The radicalization of narratives by means of montage and collage, techniques of fragmentation, non-linear narrative forms, and the emphasis on language's event character can be grasped as conceptual responses to the rule of violence and the cultural paternalism of French colonial power. In a separate series published in parallel to *Souffles* called *Editions Atlantes*, important novels of the editors, as well of Algerian, Moroccan and Tunisian authors associated with the *Souffles* magazine appear.

Moreover, the condition of speaking two or three languages is not the result of European colonialism, but is also due to Morocco's multilingualism and the entangled histories of the Mediterranean region and the African Atlantic coast. The official spoken language since independence from France in 1956 had been Arabic, or more precisely, the Maghreb-Arabic dialect or *darija*. The Berber dynasties and the Moorish-Andalusian culture shaped the history and language of the country, as did the settlement by Arabic nomadic tribes.¹² This multilingual condition is an expression of diverse historical power relations and is also due to Morocco's specific geographical location as the southwestern gateway to the Mediterranean region and the northwestern, Atlantic border of Africa. As Laâbi states:

¹⁰ Excerpt from the interview with Abdellatif and Jocelyne Laâbi. For further information, refer to footnote 8.

¹¹ In his book about Moroccan French-language literature (1981), the literary scholar Marc Gontard characterizes the writers associated with *Souffles* as “violently eloquent.” This “aesthetic of violence” directed against the colonial heritage is both a curse and a space of potentiality for the young *Souffles* poets. See Gontard 1981: 36.

¹² Since the new constitution passed in 2011 – a result of the reform movement in the context of the Arab Spring – the Berber languages are today officially acknowledged by the Moroccan Government.

We claimed a cultural plurality. To be Moroccan is to be Arab-Muslim, Tamazigh (Berber), Jewish, African, Mediterranean, Saharan. We claimed our identity as one of pluralism, because Moroccan identity can only be understood if we see all the components that constitute it.¹³

The multilingual condition and plural, cosmopolitan position of the magazine's founders, including their interest in diverse narrative formats, gave rise to a number of language experiments, creolizations and new literary forms. The artistic and linguistic experiments of the *Souffles* authors can be interpreted as a critique of a monolingual and puristic understanding of the French language. Citing Eduard Glissant's concept of *créolité* in this context does not mean to simply compare Caribbean literature with the North African post-colonial condition, but refers to Glissant's concept of creolization that by including different language trajectories and migratory dialects wants to intervene and create a new Francophony beyond French literature.¹⁴ The *Souffles* authors and their post-colonial polyphonic use of the French language embraces multitude mixture and transcultural translations and accepts the diversity of tones, pronunciations, meaning, dialects that are also expressed in the spoken language. The magazine's title *Souffles*, which has a variety of meanings like "breathings", "breaths" but also "breezes", mirrors this conception. The Romance language allowed other global relations than to the French colonial power, it opened up connections to the anti-colonial struggles and intellectuals of Latin America and other French ex-colonies, and to the intellectual network organized around the publisher François Maspero in Paris.

In the double issue no. 10/11 (1968) a paradigmatic shift can be witnessed. Focusing specifically on Maghrebi literature, the magazine is published in French and Arabic. From 1969 to 1971, separate Arabic issues titled *Anfas* (*Souffles* in Arabic) were published alongside the French *Souffles* editions. This decision was made not only with a view to the local readers, but – as revealed in several essays and prefaces in the issues – has to do with a rising Pan-Arabism that gained momentum in the entire region after the Arab–Israeli War in 1967. From the onset, debates on Negritude, Pan-Africanism, and Pan-Arabism intersected in the magazine. Discourses that reflect the necessity of being able to

¹³ See footnote 8.

¹⁴ The *créolité* movement critiqued the dominance of school French as the language of culture and literature in Caribbean literature. It favoured the use of West Indian Creole in cultural and academic contexts. Eduard Glissant had stressed that a Caribbean identity came not only from the heritage of ex-slaves, but was equally influenced by indigenous Caribbeans, European colonialists and their East Indian and Chinese servants. See Gilroy 1993:67; Bernabé 1993.

imagine commitments and alliances other than the local ones again, as well as new affinities. The transnational and cosmopolitan dimension of the magazine also gives rise to an Arab identity in the making, thus enabling future communities and practices that were constituting themselves at the time of the magazine's publishing process. It is crucial that this is not at all an exclusively national imagination of community, or a reconstructed imaginary of existing concepts.

As Laâbi articulates:

When we revolted against the models, the Western, Oriental model, we wanted to create our own model, something of the future. Of course, at the time, we found intellectuals, creators, who helped us in this process. Frantz Fanon, who went very far, in a clinical way, to analyse the colonial phenomenon and its repercussions on the identity of peoples and their cultures. Aimé Césaire, of course, an important poet, who was at the time one of our older brothers. Other poets who were kicking at the stalls, as they say. Mayakovsky was one of these, Russian poetry from the 1920s and 1930s and the futurists such as Khlebnikov. Or Nazim Hikmet, a Turkish poet who paved the way by demonstrating that poetry could be very dangerous, but that it was necessary to accept this danger.¹⁵

In this recent conversation, Laâbi expresses several times that the search for a new model was a journey into the unknown. But their concerns were confirmed and expanded by the experiences and the exchange among international intellectuals and cultural producers also based partly in Morocco, who had gathered for the first Tricontinental Congress in Havana or the Pan-African Festival in Algiers in 1969. This was an experience which resulted in another reorientation of the magazine. Part of this post-colonial journey and translocal approach was the critical reflection of existing concepts like the Negritude movement. Thus, concepts of the late 1950s and early 1960s needed to be countered with a radical multiperspectivism and plurality. Addressing in its issues after 1968 the notion of a “Maghrebi literature” and the common Arabic language, as well as the shared postcolonial experience in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, made it possible for Maghrebi writers and similarly for the visual artists to assert and put into practice a counter-project on site to the Western hegemony of art and culture that reflects French orientalism and its projected archaism on Non-European cultures. This counter-project corresponds with the main concerns of the editors and involved visual artists to liberate their own cultural production from its colonial legacy.

¹⁵ See footnote 8.

3 The art of contemporaneity

In an interview given to Christoph Schäfer published in the magazine *The Quarterly Conversation* in June 2013, Abdellatif Laâbi states:

It was in 1965. I had started writing and publishing in several literary magazines, here in France, and also in Moroccan reviews. And then I discovered that there was a group of young poets in Casablanca publishing some small reviews called *Poésie toute* and *Eaux vives*. And they also published in the automobile magazine of Casablanca. That gives you an idea of the limited options at the time when it came to literary reviews. So we met – or rather – I was curious enough to seek them out, and at the same time we met a group of painters in Casablanca: Mohamed Melehi, Mohamed Chebaa, and Farid Belkahia. Farid was the Director of the École de Beaux Arts in Casablanca, and the two others taught there. So that was the group we started with. The poets Mostafa Nissaboury and Mohamed Khair-Eddine, and the painters from Casablanca. I think it's very important to note that *Souffles* began with a group of poets and artists/painters, which is something that gave it a completely original character, perhaps unique in the history of Moroccan literary reviews up to that time.¹⁶

Highlighting the visual artists' contribution and visual policy of the *Souffles* enterprise in my contribution stresses the transdisciplinary character of the journal as well as its transnational, tricontinental relations. The collaboration mentioned with the three painters referred to by Laâbi was of central importance not only for the aesthetic dimensions of the *Souffles* magazine but also for its conceptual frame. From the first edition onwards Mohamed Melehi designed the elegant cover, which remained unchanged up to the fourteenth issue in 1968 with the exception of the colour composition and parts of the subtitle.¹⁷ He also produced the small quarterly magazine by hand during the first years. Melehi's magazine covers from 1966 to 1969 are impressively plain: a lettering modelled on 1920s Constructivism and Modernism, as well as a black circle that the art historian Toni Maraini described as the "Black Sun of Renewal".¹⁸ Mohamed Melehi's paintings, which were created in parallel to his work as a graphic artist and book designer, dealt with the North African relationship between sign and space, urban-Arab culture production and modern forms of visual communication and their possible ambiguities. These investigations into non-figurative sign systems can also be found in other artists' works presented in the *Souffles* journal, like those of Ahmed Cherkaoui, who interpreted in his paintings the

¹⁶ Excerpt from an interview with Christopher Schäfer (2013) see: <http://www.laabi.net/site%20anglais/pageaccueilanglais.html> (05/5/2016).

¹⁷ On the back, the word "souffles" was written in Arabic: "anfâs" ("breeze" or "breath").

¹⁸ Maraini 2006.



Figure 5: The 50th anniversary of the *Souffles* magazine. Exhibition curated by Mohamed Melehi at the National Library, Rabat, April 2016.

Photo: Marion von Osten.

non-figurative language of rural-Berber crafts. From 1969 onward, Mohamed Chebaa was responsible for the *Souffles* magazine's design. Applied graphics and the aesthetic of political posters and photography of the early 1970s characterize his graphic design of issues from 1969 to 1971. This is a development that additionally reflects central post-colonial aesthetic decisions of that period. According to an exhibition review, Mohamed Chebaa's early paintings were characterized by techniques of fragmentation and decontextualization, a method employed as well in the post-colonial poetry published in *Souffles*. At the same time, Chebaa operated his own graphic design firm in Casablanca, as indicated by small advertisements in the *Souffles* edition. The artists, then, quite deliberately chose their role between designers, graphic artists and painters. But beyond their role as designers and producers, the artists were also involved in decisive conceptual considerations.

The three painters had started to deal with regional arts-and-craft traditions and non-figurative sign systems having returned to Morocco after studying in Spain, Italy, Czechoslovakia and the United States. Farid Belkahia for example, was pivotal in reflecting and dealing with local cultural production.¹⁹ Due to his studies and exhibition involvements, he had been in contact with the Central and East European functionalist art scene as well as with the modernist ideas of the

¹⁹ Irbouh 2005.

synthesis of the arts and their societal role. As the director of the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca from 1962 to 1973, he implemented a new curriculum, with which he created an impressive counter-program to the existing colonial folklorization of local cultural production. He promoted a synthesis of craft and art education and interdisciplinary, research-oriented teaching methods, thus adapting in part the Gropius Bauhaus Manifesto.²⁰ For this post-colonial education reform he had hired Mohamed Melehi, who established a photographic class, Toni Maraini, who had started to establish an art history that included an African perspective, Bert Flint, who taught ‘popular arts’ by referring to Berber arts traditions and Mohamed Chebaa, who was teaching graphics, to name just a few. These teachers and collaborators developed a condition that was more advanced in its curriculum than what art colleges in Europe offered at that time. Already in 1965, the “Casablanca School” published the journal *Maghreb Art*, which reflected the concerns of these emergent ideas. Later, in 1971, in the frame of the conceptual shift of the *Souffles* magazine, Toni Maraini, Mohamed Melehi and Moustofa Nissaboury created the magazine *Integral*, which continued with reflections and debates of contemporary art and culture of the Maghreb.

In *Artists Magazines. An Alternative Space for Art*, Gwen Allen sees self-organized artists’ magazines as a specific, alternative space of action that gained international relevance in the 1960s and the 1970s.²¹ They enabled the dissemination of counter-narratives to hegemonic culture with simple printing means and at low cost. In the medium of self-published magazines, new aesthetic formats were conceived, and notions of art and literature were renegotiated. Especially in North American and European Conceptual art, the self-published art magazine played a crucial role in expanding the domain of art. The self-determination of artists and writers, as well as their independence from the art market and the press, undermined the official power of defining art and culture. The self-published magazine was the site of production, distribution, and discourse for a non-established art movement. Alternative and small-scale publishers became an important medium for writers and authors in the 1960s and the 1970s. It was thus possible to bypass the selection criteria, contractual terms, and commercial interests of official publishers. Literary self-publishers and author-run publishing houses created a platform for less well-known authors and critical readers, establishing a new aesthetic community of writers and readers. The production means and distribution channels were taken into one’s own hands in the Brechtian sense. It is not by chance that *Souffles* is mentioned in Gwen Allen’s publication. What might get lost in general

²⁰ Belkahia 1967.

²¹ Allen 2011.

assumptions of artists self-organizations is the radical difference of the conditions that make self-publishing necessary.

According to Toni Maraini, the postcolonial artists responded to a local condition, in which a petty provincial and Eurocentric culture dominated the post-independence landscape:

The salons organized for Western artists admitted only Moroccan “naive” painters as a touch of “indigenous color”. Local European poets used to gather in “clubs littéraires” around the foreign cultural missions, ‘where they wrote verses on the ambassadors’ gardens.’ They ignored the best of Western production and the daring experiments of modernism, as well as the high tradition of classical Arabic poetry, not to mention Afro-Berber and popular arts and literature. They were not interested in the productions of a Moroccan cultural avant-garde.²²

The need for a space for self-articulation, resistance and international imagination was felt and shared. Publishing a hand-made magazine was for the *Souffles* editors triggered by urgency, as the cultural conditions were far from satisfactory. But the magazine was not only small in size but also in its possibility of funding and was based on each editorial member’s personal commitment. *Souffles* was disseminated via mail order and a network of small kiosks in Morocco, through word-of-mouth propaganda, and by the members of its alternating action committees. Hence, what the magazine constituted was an unofficial cultural space in Morocco. The collaboration of three poets and three painters created from the beginning a transdisciplinary perspective and with the implementation of an Action Committee with authors from Morocco, Algeria, Latin America and France, the magazine established a growing transnational, intellectual network. *Souffles* lent a generation a voice of its own, allowing it to develop a new language and establish and imagine transnational connections beyond the existing ones.

Along with the *Souffles* writers, the visual artists propagated the necessity of a new aesthetic going beyond the colonial episteme. Relations to these post-colonial discussions in the visual arts on local popular cultures and the role of the artist in society had been essential ever since the foundation of *Souffles*. The design, layout and handling of graphics, photography and art works during the course of the 22 issues from 1966 to 1971 reflect a complex conceptual framing and reorientation of the magazine: from dealing with the regional cultural, narrative and popular arts to an internationalist, tricontinental aesthetic. The debate on cultural decolonization and the role of the artists in society subsequently altered the image policy of *Souffles*. Already the first issue in 1966 featured graphics of the Casablanca Group alongside poems, text excerpts and

²² <http://www.red-thread.org/en/article.asp?a=41> (05/1/2016).

the first *Souffles* manifesto. In 1967, a special issue of the journal on visual art (*Art Plastique*) was initiated by the Casablanca Group members including Toni Maraini. Works of several, predominantly abstract Moroccan artists were introduced, who responded to a special “questionnaire” by the editors, shown in the magazine. This included works and statements by Mohammed Ataalah, Farid Belkahia, Saad Ben Cheffaj, Mohamed Bennani, Ahmed Cherkaoui, Jilal Gharbaoui and Mohamed Hamidi,²³ who were also part of the anniversary show curated and designed by Melehi in Rabat in April 2016. (Figures 1–5)²⁴ Between illustrations of the works of the invited artists, the *Art Plastique* issue also featured documentary photos of Moroccan everyday life and Berber culture, typography and ornamental works.

The most obvious change in the cover design and layout took place with issue no. 15 (1969), devoted to Palestine. Following this issue, works of art and photographs were specifically contextualized, with the pictures attaining a different status relative to the published content. However, the magazine’s internationalist orientation already started with the report about the first Tricontinental Congress in Havana by Mario Andrade in *Souffles* issue no. 9. These debates and discourses on Negritude and the Tricontinental Movement established also a new frame of reference for the local visual cultural production. The revaluation of local arts-and-crafts production or oral narrative forms might still have been of importance, but it was no longer the central force in further discussing the concept of decolonizing culture. In 1969, works by North African painters and graphic artists were no longer placed alongside poems and texts. Debates on cultural production, research and action, on films and socio-political themes were becoming dominant. After 1969, each issue ends with a photographic documentation of an artistic or filmic project: for example, the now famous exhibition organized in Marrakech at the Jemaa El-Fna as a counter-act in the public space, or more precisely the public bus station at that time,²⁵ an art-in-architecture project at a hotel in Agadir, a student exhibition project at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca, or Mohamed Melehi’s participation in the Sculpture Biennale in Mexico in 1968 are presented next to stills and reviews of movies, like the short film *Six et Douze* shot in 1968 by Ahmed Bouanani, creating an aesthetic experience of the modernist city of Casablanca.²⁶

²³ Sijelmassi 1973.

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/souffles.anfas>.

²⁵ El Amrani 2008; Salam 2004; El Kasri 1963.

²⁶ The short film *Six et Douze*, was directed in 1968 by Ahmed Bouanani (1938–2011). Bouanani was a writer, poet, filmmaker and artist who was part of the generation gathered around the journal *Souffles*, to which he contributed for a brief period.

The last issue of the year 1969, dedicated to Palestine as already mentioned, led to a fundamental change in the design concept, as well as in the relationship between image and text. Mohamed Chebaa was in charge of the graphic design of this and of all the following issues until 1971 and the Action Committee expressed a more Marxist-Leninist perspective. This “Palestine issue” presents posters and graphic design projects exclusively dedicated to Palestine’s struggle for liberation, voicing solidarity or seeking to agitate. The quality of these graphics (Melehi, Chebaa) is remarkable and simultaneously reveals a new self-understanding, as art and the struggle for liberation were now converging. Chebaa’s new layout intensified this appropriation of artistic productions for the struggle for liberation and agitation. In 1970, he fundamentally altered the format and the relationship between image and text. Each cover had its own graphic or photographic illustration. In the subsequent issues, the Tricontinental solidarity movement was referred to in order to address relations to other cultures of resistance and the social role of the intellectual and the artists in the three continents. Art projects and film stills no longer appeared, being replaced primarily by documentary photos corresponding to the issue’s content; for example, by photographs of the seminal Pan-African Festival in Algiers in 1969, by a reproduction of a poster on the anti-colonial liberation struggle in Angola published in the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (O.S.P.A.A.L) magazine *Tricontinental*, by portraits of Black Panthers at the Algiers festival, or of African filmmakers and writers. Now the photographs were illustrating the text, and thus images lost their autonomy as a language of their own.

The treatment of images in *Souffles* bears witness to a constant, process-oriented, and critical debate on post-colonial concepts of art and culture and the shifting role of artists and intellectuals in society. Decisions made by the magazine’s alternating action committees based on these image policies can be read as an increasing political radicalization and internationalization, reinforced by reprints of manifestos and visual productions from the context of the O.S.P.A.A.L magazine.²⁷ The radical graphic solution of placing emphasis on the transcultural entanglement of signs, images, and writing that characterized the first issues of *Souffles* was abandoned in its second phase between 1969 and 1972 in favour of documentary photography and a focus on political films and the *Third Cinema Manifesto* of the Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino.²⁸ Media and practices, photography and essay film, that are at

²⁷ Kunzle 1996; Chakrabarty 2005.

²⁸ The term *Third Cinema* was created by the Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their famous manifesto *Hacia un tercer cine* (Toward a Third Cinema), written

the centre of the discourse on globalized contemporary art today. But the postcolonial modes of synthesis between high and low, between applied and non-applied to be found in the radical approaches of Moroccan painting, and graphic artists present in the first issues of the magazine, still remain to be discussed as a special position taken in the moment of European empires' decline. Testimonies and visual contributions by the artists published in *Souffles* also give a vivid insight into the emergence of contemporary art after the Second World War, beyond the Eurocentric epistemology and the Cold War paradigm.²⁹

As Laâbi impressively formulated it in the editorial of the special issue *Art Plastique*, this Eurocentric knowledge production was the waste with which intellectuals and artists were faced ten years after Morocco's independence:

The history of Moroccan art has been, for more than a half century, a European specialty, a monopoly of Western science. [...] Now is the time for us to shake off the torpor of colonial trauma and face our history. But when we try to begin this confrontation, we are faced with a most problematical legacy: the colonial social sciences. The colonial phenomenon was, indeed, a serious disturbance in our history. [...] To return to this confrontation with our own history, we find that whenever we look at an area of our culture, we encounter the West and its scholars. [...] We cannot escape the history that the West has shaped for us. It is a vast raw material, a nursery of data. But it is also a construction of provocation, a mousetrap for objectivity. Colonial, even postcolonial, science throws up a constant challenge for us. [...] The self-examination we have begun, and which will continue for a long time, is a sacrificial phase, so much wasted energy. It is an exciting phase, it is necessary, authentic, anything you like, but it is still a waste. It is a long disturbance, a heavy ransom to be paid. But we must do it. Not to wash ourselves clean nor to slander the eternal imperialist West source-of-all-our-troubles, but for our own health, lucidity and for the truth of all humanity. Frantz Fanon wanted to 'release man' (the wretched of the earth, the oppressed). Our task now is to release the History of oppressed mankind.³⁰

Laâbi addresses here the central problem that the study of the history of arts and culture by Western scholars had caused after independence: as the only texts existing on local culture were the ones by European archaeologist, anthropologist, sociologists, geographers, and art historians; these studies were transporting specific presumptions on underdevelopment as well as racial categorizations

in the late 1960s. Third Cinema was proposed as a militant cultural practice parallel to the anti-colonial and revolutionary struggles of the 1960s. Solanas and Getino were published in 1969 in the *Tricontinental* magazine of the O.S.P.A.A.L., therefore it had as well an enormous impact in other world regions.

²⁹ Feldman 2014.

³⁰ Laâbi 1967.

including normative ideas on local cultural forms and expressions.³¹ French and Spanish colonization in the twentieth century had not only ruled, exploited and separated Moroccan society in various ways, it also disregarded any kind of African-Arabic and European entangled history. Local histories were disambiguated by colonial knowledge production and branded as pre-modern and primitive.³² But the national liberation movements and postcolonial oligarchies also reproduced many of these colonial cultural and identity constructions. Products of local everyday culture had been categorized, folklorized and orientalized under European colonialism. The French protectorate in Morocco intervened in the economies of the local handicrafts with changes in the organization of the system of guilds and a sort of musealization of the medinas as traditional markets. The local economy was transformed into a picturesque, touristic site of indigenous tradition and radically isolated from industrial-capitalist modes of production, also in regard to urban planning.³³

Thus, one of the most harmful categorizations for post-independence intellectuals, as witnessed in articles and testimonies in *Souffles*, was the construction of a hierarchy between “high” and “low” culture. This is a domain in which colonial ideology had worked extensively. To focus on oral poetry, interior design or graphic art was a way to relocate local popular culture from tradition, folklorization and the past into a perspective of contemporaneity. To work against the divide of applied and non-applied art, against the folkloric reading of local culture production as either naïve or pre-modern was the central challenge for the new generation of post-colonial artists in the 1960s. With their multiple practices and roles taken, they created a new episteme that was countering the denial of coevalness in a radical sense.

The different positions gathered in *Souffles* magazine thus allow an understanding of postcolonial modernity as an antagonistic ground, on which the invention of the future is negotiated in transnational translations, violent rejection of the colonial legacy, creative adaptations of concepts and border-crossings of strategies and aims. Testimonies, visuals and graphics by artists and the plural, cosmopolitan perspective and international collaborations, question a widely accepted post-1989 paradigm of globalization of contemporary art today. These aspects not only allow a conceptual renewal of postcolonial aesthetics, but also provide important insights or a conception of the globalized

³¹ This form of knowledge production did not start with the French protectorate, but is constitutive for the colonial project as such. Benjamin 2003.

³² Mudimbe 1988.

³³ Katarzyna Pieprzak 2010; Von Osten 2010; Abu-Lughod 1980.

world as a web of multi-centred alliances and oppositions in which cultural and national borders are far from being the determining aspect.³⁴ Moreover, Jacques Rancière's understanding of aesthetics as the field in which the "partition of the sensible" is constantly renegotiated can be stated as the prospect for the post-independence poets and artists gathered in *Souffles*.³⁵ The transcultural awareness of the generation of post-independence artists in Morocco, who were engaged in creating a synthesis of popular arts and vernacular practices with the modernist techniques of collaging and montaging, aiming to decolonize culture and to create future vocabularies, allows critical reflection on contemporary assumptions – assumptions that still inscribe the political into the aesthetic without succumbing to the totalizing ambitions of Euro-American modernist discourses.³⁶ Rather than promoting a simple belief in a progressive betterment, the overcoming of domination, and art as a direct means for this aim, as the modernist programmes suggested, the approaches by the artists and poets engaged in *Souffles* magazine provide a renewed and fragmented understanding of the political dimension of aesthetics, which resides in the permanent renewal of negotiable frontiers of cultural production and political subjectivity. Rancière and many of the poststructuralist critics have not developed a sensibility for non-European currents in aesthetic renewal and remain largely Eurocentric in their approaches. Transnational perspectives on Modernism as expressed and acted out in *Souffles*, and the tremendous impact that Tricontinental and Third-World alliances produced in the 1960s and 1970s, are central elements allowing for the correction of these outdated assumptions.

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³⁴ Von Osten/Maharaj 2013; Maharaj / Hall 2001.

³⁵ Rancière 2004.

³⁶ Mercer 2005.

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