

# **Participation as Patrimony: The Ben M'sik Community Museum and the Importance of the Small Museum in Morocco**

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What does it mean to be a small museum in Morocco? In my book on state art museums and private spaces in Morocco, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Post-Colonial Morocco*, I explored how tactical museologies emerged from a national museum crisis, and how Moroccan curators and art collectives embraced the small in response to a perceived and experienced absence of state architectures and infrastructures for the arts. According to Gustavo Buntinx, tactical museologies are often the product of a radical institutionality, one that deliberately forsakes “the established demands for the long-term, the firmly-located, and the well-endowed, opting instead for the small-scale, the mobile, the nimble, even the whimsical and the opportunistic.”<sup>(1)</sup> Though the Ben M'sik community museum is certainly invested in both the long-term and the firmly-located, I would argue that it also productively builds on the radical institutionality of small-scale museums. In forsaking state and elite desires for the

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1. Gustavo Buntinx, “Communities of Sense / Communities of Sentiment: Globalization and the Museum Void in an Extreme Periphery” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures / Global Transformations*, edited by Ivan Karp, Corinne Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 221-222.

monumental and the symbolic, the Ben M'sik museum works to create what theorist Tony Bennett has dubbed "conversable civic space," and in the process, it recognizes that civic engagement and reciprocal practices of participation are also an important part of Moroccan patrimony<sup>(2)</sup>.

In a 2011 interview with the online arts project *La chaise rouge*, Moroccan theater director Driss Ksikes stated that "the only place that has been ritualized in our society is the mosque, and the bar," and he demanded that sites of culture (theaters, museums, cultural centers) become integral parts of Moroccan life<sup>(3)</sup>. Ksikes is one of many who believes that museums in Morocco have the potential to become ritualized sites of culture and as such, ritualized sites of collective memory. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka tells us that collective memory "as a set of ideas, images, feelings about the past – is best located not in the minds of individuals, but in the resources they share"<sup>(4)</sup>. In the Moroccan context, state-run museums appear stuck in an intellectual mission that excludes the public and public life. And this exclusion has led to the anemic presence of museums as resources for collective memory, and to their absence as central architectures working to promote access to and participation in Moroccan cultures and history.

In light of this national museum history, artist collectives such as La Source du Lion, and curators like Abdellah Karroum have worked to create alternate art spaces and museological projects that start with the idea of shared resources and engage small collective units such as neighborhoods, marketplaces, parks and squares in their work. In the late 1990s, Ali Amahan founded a rural community museum at Aït Iktel. The museum, a public, but non-official space won the 2001 Aga Khan Prize in Architecture for the model of cooperation it projected<sup>(5)</sup>. As Amahan noted: "The museum enables people to see the potential of the com-

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2. Tony Bennett, "Pedagogic Objects, Clean Eyes, and Popular Instruction: On Sensory Regimes and Museum Didactics." *Configurations* 6.3 (1998), 370-371.

3. Driss Ksikes, Interview on *La chaise rouge* (August 14, 2011): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBJY5bGp2mE>.

4. Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, *Frames of Reference: The Dynamics of Collective Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 4.

5. The Jury citation from the Aga Khan award stated: "This project has received an Award because it exemplifies a new approach to development, environmental conservation and the improvement of living conditions for rural populations. The success of the project was based on mobilizing the experience of emigrant villagers who brought back expertise after living in modern urban contexts, joining hands with those who remained in order to take charge of their own destiny. As a result, old ==

munity as an essential asset for development, through its institutional heritage (systems for social organization, mobilization, solidarity, etc.) and ancestral knowledge, in such domains as governance of «public» community affairs, and technology. [...] the Association has brought the solidarity between the community and its diaspora (emigrants) into play, which can provide both the intellectual and material requirements for implementing and running projects<sup>(6)</sup>. For Amahan and the Aït Iktel project, by passing the nation in favor of local and diasporic communities has brought forth the change and sustainable development that state modernization discourse promised. The Ben M'sik museum builds on this new museology that moves Moroccan institutions of culture and memory from monolithic ex-colonial structures to participatory architectures of civic self-fashioning. And through meaningful engagement with the community it serves, the museum reveals to what extent national museums have failed as carriers of meaning in the lives of Moroccans.

Like the communities that La Source du Lion, Karroum and Amahan engage, the neighborhood of Ben M'sik is marginalized, and often simply unrecognized, by dominant narratives. In fact, one could argue that the lives and stories of its inhabitants would rather be forgotten by the state. The neighborhood is widely seen as a zone for migration, crime and dissidence. As Reda Benkirane describes it, “official urban planning has long considered this area a “ville en négatif” [A negative space] and the average Casablančan has long seen his co-citizen as “someone who lives behind the sun.”<sup>(7)</sup> The *ville en négatif*, is precisely the inverted space whose history the museum seeks to record and whose memory and existence it seeks to recognize.

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==buildings are now cared for and new installations have been added to provide basic services such as a water-supply network, electricity and education facilities. The cooperation between the villagers has enhanced daily life while preserving the traditions of this isolated and poor population. The success of the project makes it an example for the entire region, bringing hope to rural communities throughout the Islamic world and reinforcing their determination to improve their own lives.” Aga Khan Award for Architecture, The Eighth Award Cycle, 1999-2001 [http://www.akdn.org/agency/akaa/eighthcycle/page\\_02txt.htm](http://www.akdn.org/agency/akaa/eighthcycle/page_02txt.htm)

6. Ali Amahan, “A Model Community Museum in a Village in the High Atlas” International Museum Day 2001 [http://icom.museum/imd\\_rep2001\\_c.html](http://icom.museum/imd_rep2001_c.html).

7. Réda Benkirane, Bidonville et recasement, modes de vie à Karyan Ben M'sik (Institut Universitaire d'Études du Développement (IUED), Université de Genève, 1993): <http://www.archipress.org/reda>

In terms of building a collection, oral interviews are the heart of the museum. It is the stories and memories of the people who live in Ben M'sik that are most valued by the institution. In addition to memories, however, community residents have been stepping forward, unsolicited, and offering objects from their homes that testify to neighborhood history. While rarely of high quality, the bowls, inkwells, and teapots, are valuable samples of the material culture and history of a community of rural migrants. They are displayed simply in the museum with identification labels of the object's use and origin. This collection process, based entirely on community participation is the opposite of the collection building process in the national museums. For example, in the case of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rabat, artists and curators, not to mention the general public, feel completely shut out of the process. In 2011, curator Dounia Benqassem stated that: "Regarding the Contemporary Art Museum that has been slated to open for quite some time now, my sense is that it will be a cemetery of pictorial works, acquired by the Ministry of Culture without any recourse to the expertise of museum professionals, and above all, created without any consultation with artists."<sup>(8)</sup>

The Ben M'sik Community Museum promotes long-term reciprocal communication and exchange between the museum and the neighborhood. In so doing, it gives up its monopoly on voice, and much like the dialogical aesthetics described by Grant Kester in his work on community and art, the museum recognizes the importance of shared discourse and "a common system of meaning within which the various participants can speak, listen and respond."<sup>(9)</sup> The museum invites a self-aware participation that acknowledges the unequal power and social relations that structure it. And thus, quite radically, in addition to stories and objects, participation itself becomes a core part of the patrimony the museum seeks to identify, recognize and preserve.

The movement from monolithic monumental structures to smaller participatory architectures of civic self-fashioning is certainly not unique to Morocco and has been amply described and theorized. In 2006, Gustavo Buntinx wrote of the necessity to break from a neocolonial logic that asserts that there is one mu-

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8. Dounia Benqassem, comment on Driss Ksikes on La chaise rouge. August 14, 2011. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10150274282274385&set=vb.207619802621918&type=1&theater>.

9. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 85.

seum location and one model of museology<sup>(10)</sup>. Likewise, in his work on South African national parks, David Bunn writes that the museum should never be singular but rather “it should be understood as one element of a series of real or imaginary articulated zones” that lead to a civic self-fashioning<sup>(11)</sup>. Following the lead of Bunn, it is important that the small museum not be read solely in opposition to the large, the well-endowed to the small-scale. These dichotomies betray the complex relationships and histories that form between institutions and their audiences. While artists, curators and community members have felt alienated by large and empty arts structures in Morocco, they have not disavowed them – in fact, their engaged critiques attest to their investment in the potential of such institutions. The small and the large are both elements in the building of a diverse group of institutions that can curate art, history and memory. And thus, while large museums in Morocco struggle to redefine their founding missions and become relevant structures in public life, the Ben M'sik Community Museum plays the crucial role of re-defining museology in Morocco and making sure that neighborhoods are not forgotten.

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10. Gustavo Buntinx, “Communities of Sense / Communities of Sentiment: Globalization and the Museum Void in an Extreme Periphery,” 238.

11 . David Bunn, “The Museum Outdoors: Heritage, Cattle, and Permeable Borders in the Southwestern Kruger National Park” in *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures / Global Transformations*, edited by Ivan Karp, Corinne Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 358.