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Festivals that Change Lives

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Introduction

There are countries in the world where ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ don’t have the same meaning as in our western European countries, especially in the street or in what is called ‘public space’. Even so, in some of these countries, street art festivals exist and they can change the life of the artists and of the population. Jürgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), has defined this term. According to him, the bourgeois public sphere (which appeared in the 18th century) is the place between private individuals and government authorities in which people can meet and have critical debates about public matters. Whether debates are about culture, habits or law, in the countries discussed in this chapter (Iran, Belarus, Morocco and Kuwait), this barely happens. Critical debate is forbidden or simply inconceivable.

Street art festivals

If one considers that Thespis on his chariot was the first actor and that his performances in the streets of ancient Greece led to the creation of tragedy, street art performances are several thousand years old. One can also mention the Middle Ages performances on the parvis, pavements or in public squares, and the acrobats and ropewalkers travelling from one city to another, following the merchants in the fairs. But what is considered as street art performances nowadays dates from the late 60s, early 70s, and appeared in the United States, then in United Kingdom and France (Gaber, 2009). At that time societies were shaken by social conflict and large demonstrations in favour of racial and sexual minorities, or peace in Vietnam flooded out into the avenues. Artists would play music, carry huge puppets, revive *commedia dell’arte*, etc. alongside the protestors.

In France, the phenomenon has increased too, so that today there are 1100 street companies and 300 festivals dedicated to street performances. But in the pioneers’ time, it was not always easy to perform on the sidewalks. It was (and still is) forbidden to perform outdoor if ‘causing a breach on the peace’ in France and, except in festival time, the artists would be arrested by the police. It is one of the reasons why today artistic performances can hardly be found in the street outside festival times. Festival organisers themselves have to ask permission to cause a breach on the peace ‘under control’. If an artist decides to perform the