

# POINTS OF ENTRY

Bochra Triki : “My queerness is about questioning norms and opening new possibilities.”

Hello. I’m Katie Kheriji-Watts and you’re listening to Points of Entry – a conversation around re-imagining cultural organisations in a rapidly changing world.

My guest today is Bochra Triki, who describes herself as an activist, curator, and artist – in that order. She’s based in her hometown of Tunis, but her work using art and culture to advance her feminist and queer organising has taken her all over the world. We talked about what it was like for her to live through the Tunisian Revolution, how she feels about going into international spaces as a North African non-binary woman, and how a new generation of activists and artists in Tunisia is mobilising for queer visibility and freedom.

This episode is part of a series of conversations commissioned by On the Move, the information network that supports the international mobility of artists and culture professionals. On the Move just held, in May 2023, its annual [Cultural Mobility Forum in Tunis](#), focused on understanding environmental sustainability in the arts from the perspective of people working in Africa and South-West Asia. An archive of that event, as well as a written transcript of my conversation with Bochra, and a translation of that transcription into French are all available for free at [on-the-move.org](https://on-the-move.org).

Let’s get started !

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## **Bochra Triki**

Okay, so this house was kind of a dream house for us. It was an artistic residency, and there were a lot of concerts and events happening here. So when they put it up for rent, we were like, *okay, it’s an aligning star, we have to come to live here.*

## **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

And everyone that lives here is an artist ?

**Bochra Triki**

Yes! I'm living with an actor, an editor (she's actually the editor of my movie and she's also a photographer), a musician, a festival organizer, and me.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Bocha, we're doing good with sound, so I'm going to have us jump into our interview together. It is a real delight for me to be here, to be in Tunis, to be with you, to meet you in person. Thank you for doing this !

**Bochra Triki**

Thank you so much.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

I wanted to start by asking if you could describe what kind of relationship you had with the city of Tunis while you were growing up.

**Bochra Triki**

The relationship I had with Tunis... I mean, obviously it's my city, I've always lived here, and I think I will continue to be here until I can't. I think I really started connecting with the city and connecting with parts that were unfamiliar to me when I was a teenager. And I also connected a lot with friends coming from other parts of the city and went very fast to going downtown, for example, and going to events and going where it's more boiling – because my neighbourhood was very calm and very residential, so I was craving to see more happening. So, yeah, my relationship with the city is also a relationship with parties, with fun, with meeting people randomly, and trying to find myself while finding others and connecting with others. So I think it's also in that way that I started to know artists and to know people that were, little by little, starting to think of practising arts. Yeah, I think my relationship with the city is very linked to my relationship with the arts here.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Did you want to be an artist?

**Bochra Triki**

It's something that really came after. I just started to consider myself an artist like two years ago. Before that, I was mostly working as someone that would facilitate for others – like

putting everything in place for artists to be able to do, or to organise events, organise festivals. And, yeah, it was very hard for me to really go in that step, but I'm really happy I did it.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

What was the thing that made you decide that you were an artist?

### **Bochra Triki**

It really started with an invitation. There was this invitation from [L'Art Rue \(a Tunisian organisation of art\)](#) and for the first time there was a structure that invited me to do an artistic work. And I was like, *okay, so there is a structure that is thinking that I maybe can do it!* And, yeah, it was my first installation. It's a sound installation that I called The Walls Have Your Ears. It's an empty room where you enter and you will have halls and in these halls there will be very intimate stories of desire. It's interviews that I made with persons, very different profiles. There was the desire to be part of a community, for example. And it was an interview with a friend that is gay and that spent his teenagehood being part of the Salafist movement. And this was very related to his need to be part of something and to be part of a community that can understand him. And, very surprisingly, he felt very understood in the Salafist movement. And now he's not anymore part of this and he's living his queerness very openly, et cetera, but he has this relationship with this period of his life that I found very interesting. So the desires that we were talking about were like very different ones. There was also a person having OCD that was talking about her desire to not be afraid anymore, to not live with this constant fear and this constant thing happening in her head that blocks her. So it was the first installation that I did and was considered as an artwork.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Just for people that might know: Salafist is...?

### **Bochra Triki**

Salafist is an Islamist movement and they will be (let's say it like this) the most strict with the rules of Islam.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

It's very conservative.

**Bochra Triki**

Super conservative, yes.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

How did you get interested in the topic of desire?

**Bochra Triki**

I worked a lot in the queer and feminist movement in Tunisia. And, yeah, I think it's all about being able to live your desire in a free way and to not fear to be in jail or persecuted or fired from your work or house because you are queer.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

And just so that we're clear (for people that might not know): homosexuality in Tunisia is considered a crime.

**Bochra Triki**

Yes, homosexuality in Tunisia is condemned. It's condemned with three years of jail. It's mostly gay men and trans women that are arrested for being gay or trans. And, yeah, also to prove homosexuality when it comes to men, they will do an anal test which is an act of torture, basically.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Since we're on this... topic, I had a question for you because I read an interview that you did and you said that before the revolution, being queer was not a politicised act in Tunisia. Can you help me understand why?

**Bochra Triki**

Because it was very difficult to be politicised before 2011. We were living in a state of dictatorship and it was very hard to even think of getting politicised. Or even we didn't have the right to have organisations, for example. Right after the revolution, thousands and thousands of organisations opened because it wasn't possible before. And, yeah, being queer wasn't a political act. And also it was kind of hard to get together and to find ourselves, I think. Most of us knew each other from the party life or from university, et cetera. And so we kind of stick together because we could create this free bubble between us that we would never find anywhere else.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Since we're on the topic of the revolution, you said that January 2011 (which marks more or less the beginning of the Tunisian revolution and the Arab Spring) was a huge turning point for you personally. Can you tell me more?

### **Bochra Triki**

Yeah, it was a huge turning point in the sense that, as I was saying, it was very hard before 2011 because even your hopes and dreams, there will be something blocking them. So, yeah, seeing that this regime can fall very fast – like from December to January, so it was very fast – we didn't really think that it would be possible. So it was a happy moment, but it was a shocking moment. And also it was a moment of, okay, so now we can do things, but what do we want to do and how? And you have kind of a responsibility because there is no more this excuse of, *yeah, it's a dictatorship, so nothing is possible*. From one day to another, a lot was possible (the best and the worst), and everyone felt a responsibility to try at least to bring something on that huge table. And, yeah, it's an energy that I'd never lived before.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Because the dictatorship that was in place before this lasted for decades.

### **Bochra Triki**

So the dictatorship was in place from 1987 to 2011, and I was born in 1988, so it's basically the only regime that I knew until that moment. And it was like this for 10 million people !

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

And since you were talking about these organisations, you were highly involved in one of them called Chouf. Can you tell me a little bit about your history with Chouf?

### **Bochra Triki**

Yes ! So Chouf started in 2013 and it was created by friends of mine. When they created the collective, the idea was to talk about feminist and queer topics through art. The first big project of Chouf was [Chouftouhonna, an international feminist art festival](#). It started in 2015 and a month before the festival, one of the founders of Chouf called me and asked if I wanted to come to help to do this edition. And, yeah, I stayed. So we did four editions and I think it was the four most powerful years of my life. I really, really loved this project.

## **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

What made it so powerful?

## **Bochra Triki**

It was powerful because we were a bunch of feminist and queer women and we were really experimenting a lot. We were able to bring hundreds of international artists and to connect them with Tunisian ones and to make this huge festival in a very popular neighbourhood of Tunis. For me, it was a powerful act to be very visible through art. And I think it constructed us a lot. It's like when you have a glitch in the matrix or something. I feel like what we were doing at that moment was a kind of glitch that was needed.

We were doing the festival in El Halfaouine, which is a neighbourhood that is very popular and that is kind of closed – you can't enter by car. So we needed to walk a lot by foot to go there. Hundreds of women from different nationalities and a lot of very, very visible queer women passing by these very small streets of the Medina in a neighbourhood that is not really used to have come and go. So every day was like a silent protest and you saw the neighbourhood changing with our presence because people would just go take sandwiches and take coffees, et cetera, and sit in this place. And, little by little, there would be some connection or at least just getting used to the presence of the other. And, for me, this moment was really, really beautiful. And it was also very improvised. We didn't think of doing it like this.

## **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

I know that during the time that you were working for Chouf and organising the International Feminist Festival Chouftouhonna (at least as far as I understand) you were also involved in a couple of other projects that were outside of Tunis in the Gafsa region of central Tunisia. You were working with a platform called Siwa, another program (another project, I guess) called [Under the Sand](#). What did you find most surprising or interesting about working outside of the capital?

## **Bochra Triki**

So at that moment, I was teaching in Gafsa, it's a city in the south of Tunisia. It's a city that's known because of the phosphate and because of the strikes of the people that work in phosphate, because their conditions of work are horrible. They work as miners, and they will have, like, all the issues of health that are coming also from working.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

What were you teaching there?

**Bochra Triki**

French literature. It's another life ! I taught French literature in university for five years. And, yeah, I decided to go more into the activist and art scene. But I still teach somehow but in other ways, less academic.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

So you were in Gafsa because you were teaching French literature at the university there.

**Bochra Triki**

Yes. And I was contacted by Siwa and Under the Sand, because I was already there and because of contacts within art. And, for me, [the residency with Siwa in Redeyef](#), is another project that really shifted something in me, because it was a project bringing Tunisian, French, and Irakien artists to Redeyef. And the project was centred around l'Économat – during colonisation, it was a space like a supermarket. And when Siwa came, it was empty, it wasn't used. So, they created residencies around this space. And for me and really for all of us, we were all going out of our multiple comfort zones in multiple ways. It was very intense.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

What made it outside of your comfort zone?

**Bochra Triki**

I mean, you're outside of your comfort zone also because you feel the frustration of the people that are living there. Phosphate is one of the most precious materials in Tunisia, and that brings money to the state. And you will see that the place from where it's coming is one of the most precarious. And of course you are angry. And how to transform this anger, how to use it ? Not only in art, but also in art. There are very talented rappers there. They write their own rap and create their own sounds with their phone, et cetera. But you will also find a culture of theatre, of classical theatre, and I was surprised to see that, in all this frustration and anger, art was already there. So, yeah, they are continuing now and it's beautiful to follow what they are doing.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

You said that working on that project shifted some things for you. What did it shift for you?

**Bochra Triki**

I think it's more how to navigate very difficult areas, but while staying yourself somehow. I had very strong connections with some persons there. And what I really, really liked is at no moment I felt the need to change myself.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Your queerness wasn't as much of a problem as you thought it was going to be in that context.

**Bochra Triki**

Yeah, it wasn't at all a problem. I mean, I didn't need to change or to lie or to give another personality or anything there. I think it's the first time that I realised that art can be like a very powerful tool to connect between people that can seem like they are coming from very opposite dimensions or very opposite universes. And, yeah, when you put an artistic project in the middle between them while letting everyone be totally free in their practice or in their needs or desires, it's a very strong tool.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

I'm curious to know how this is going to tie into my next question, which is that you co-curated [a festival called Tashweesh](#) with a Lebanese artist that I really admire, whose name is Tania El Khoury. And that festival took place between Tunis, Brussels, and Vienna. What did you learn from the process of collaborating with her on that project?

**Bochra Triki**

So when I was proposed to be co-curator with Tania, I was like, *oh my god*, because she's an artist that I admire a lot and I feel like her work is really powerful. I think we worked together for a year-and-a-half but spent one year without seeing each other.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Because of the pandemic?



**Bochra Triki**

Because of the pandemic, but also because I'm in Tunis and she's based in New York. So it was very difficult. All the process was interesting, in that way of, *how to work with people that you haven't seen before?* But also because it was Tania and I and a lot of institutions: the Beursschouwburg, Tanzquartier, and L'Art Rue. And I think, for all of us, it was sometimes like, *how are we doing this?* But, little by little, we finally managed to do it.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Was it the first time that you had curated for a place outside of Tunisia?

**Bochra Triki**

Yes.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

What was that like for you?

**Bochra Triki**

For me, it was huge to find myself in this festival happening in three different places and with two places that are not familiar to me, like Brussels and Vienna. I mean, the context and the art scene, is like, yeah, very different perspectives and very different ways of approaching art. And at first, I was thinking, *how to be relevant in these places that are so far from my context?*

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Because the point of the festival was international, intersectional, feminist voices in art.

**Bochra Triki**

Yes. And with a very strong perspective on artists coming from the SWANA region (so South-West Asia and North Africa). It's better to say this than "MENA region," because MENA region is more like a political way of dividing, but SWANA is more geographical.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Okay, good to know ! Since we're talking about you working internationally, you told me that you just came back from India and you were working on an exchange program with other

artists from... I was going to say "Global South," but I think it's one of those things we're not supposed to say anymore... like "MENA."

### **Bochra Triki**

Ah, that's true !

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

If you can tell me how I should say it, I'm more than happy to hear it ! Anyway, that's not the point. The point is that you were involved in this super interesting project, bringing together people from places like Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Africa (I'm sure I'm forgetting some) to exchange with each other. Can you just tell me a little bit about that experience?

### **Bochra Triki**

Yeah ! I feel very privileged that I was part of it. It's a program of residences that we had in three steps. The program is called [Portals Next](#) and the first step happened in Switzerland, in Basel, in Kaserne and then we met again in South Africa. And this year was the last step and it happened in India in a region called Attappadi. This is where Sankar [Venkateswaran], one of the participants of this residency, built his theatre. It's really a magical place because it's a theatre that he and Satoko [Tsurudome], his wife, built together. They spent ten years building it and it's kind of in a no man's land in the jungle, but there are villages around. And we were there for the opening of the theatre and there were performances and music every night and we saw all the villagers coming as an audience to the place. And the relationship they built with the area, you already feel that it's a very strong relationship that was built with the people that are living there. It's really an open door theatre, like people can come and go at any time. It's, yeah, it's beautiful.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

And you were there to kind of witness and learn from what they're doing in rural India. But it was also to have discussions around what an art space can be in places where we don't necessarily think art goes most of the time, I suppose. Is that correct?

### **Bochra Triki**

Yes. The majority of the artists and practitioners that were part of the residency already have residency spaces that they run themselves. Most of them, they've built themselves these residency spaces in Mozambique, in South Africa, in the Philippines. And, yeah, the idea of this program is also to know that each one of us exists and is doing something and to try to mind the gap that is happening between the South countries. Because it's more difficult for

me coming from Tunisia to connect with Matchume [Nzango], an artist coming from Mozambique, than to connect with an artist from France. Connections between artists from the same continent or from the same context sometimes will happen thanks to the North. But the idea is, okay, *how to create our own realities and how to create portals that can open in an easier way between us?* And, in this residency, I felt like the world is so much bigger and the artistic world is so big and there is so much to learn from and with countries that we do not think about at first sight.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

One of the things that really stands out to me about how you've been working in the arts, especially in the last few years, is how much international collaboration seems to be a part of it. And I was wondering how those experiences have informed your perspective on the local initiatives that you're involved in.

### **Bochra Triki**

I think it's one of my biggest questions because I had this very overwhelming and exciting phase because I was a lot in this international collaboration and I was invited a lot to talk in panels, in conferences, et cetera. And at the same time I have my decolonial part thinking, *am I invited because I look white, because I can speak very good French and okay English? Am I invited because I'm what they would like to see for an Arab?* And these questions were very hard for me (but not that hard because it's also a privilege and I will not cry about it !) but, still, it's, okay, *how to deal with this?* Like, this is a fact. And, what to do with it ? So I try more and more to choose where I go and in which context I find myself. And when I find myself in contexts that are more institutional and political, for example, when I was invited in Institut du Monde Arabe, I found a way to remind everyone that homosexuality is illegal in Tunisia because of French colonisation, because of a law that was put in 1913 in Tunisia and we are still dealing with that, for now.

And what does it bring to me, here? I think now I'm in that moment where I want to bring more of the experiences that I had the chance to live outside, to bring them here in Tunisia. This is why I'm starting this [Mixed Signals project](#). It's also a way for me to be able to bring artists to do residences between local and international artists. And also to have a platform that, for now, is a series of events that I put in place and that's happened twice in bars in Tunis. And, for me, this bar was very important in my teenagehood because I started to go there very early. And this is where I met a lot of artists and a lot of queer persons. So, yeah, I wanted to do something there so I just knocked on their door and said that I want to do an exhibition and concerts and also a punk concert happening. It's a French band of three women, they are between forty and fifty years old and singing German punk in the bar, but also having an exhibition of several Tunisian artists happening in the space.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

So you're wanting to kind of curate spaces that bring in international art and mix it with what's happening here in Tunisia ?

**Bochra Triki**

Yeah, basically the idea is just like, okay, *I lived all this, I had all these connections and I had the chance to go there. What can I do with it now?*

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Since you're talking about these places in Tunis that mean a lot to you, I was wondering if you could maybe tell me if there's another physical space in Tunis that you think illustrates how the city and your relationship to it has really changed over the last ten years.

**Bochra Triki**

It's a good question ! Maybe I will think of a space that is unfortunately almost disappearing now. Unfortunately, we have a lot of spaces that are punctual, almost ephemeral, and it's very hard to sustain spaces here. It's a small cinema that was in my neighbourhood, El Manar, where I was living with my family but after where I lived also by myself. And, a lot of years after, my cousin took the cinema, so it became like our familial cinema. And it was something that was very important for all of us, like this magic of being able to navigate in a cinema, to help in the cafe. And also we were organising events there. They would host our queer events and would lock the doors when we asked, it would be like super locked doors. And, unfortunately, they had to close this year. It was very sad for us because they really struggled for eight years to make it work because, with the owner that always wanted to raise the rent, et cetera, it became too difficult.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

It wasn't financially sustainable anymore.

**Bochra Triki**

It wasn't financially sustainable at all ! And so it closed. We had a last drink there and we said "bye" to the place.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

So what I'm hearing you say is that a lot of the places where you have created a community are disappearing and you're having to create those spaces anew for yourself.

**Bochra Triki**

Yeah, I think we are kind of used to not getting attached to spaces because it's very hard to own your own space here. We're used to having places that will open, like kind of pop-up stores. But also it creates somehow a detachment with the space. It's always something that is punctual. It's difficult to have a very long term vision because you never know how much time you will have here, or how much time this space will continue to function that way, or how much time the owner will be okay with what you are doing.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Speaking of this relationship with time, you wrote on your Instagram last year that you have "never had a vision of the future. This absence is an inherent part of queer people's relationship with time."<sup>1</sup> If that's true for you, what gives you hope?

**Bochra Triki**

I always have hope ! It's something that is totally inherent to me. Hope is not necessarily something related to time or to future. I know that there are still a lot of surprises coming and that there are still a lot of things that can happen. So, no, I think hope is here and will always stay here, otherwise I can't function! And I think it's also how now I'm seeing beautiful movements happening from younger artists, younger activists. And, yeah, I'm already in the surprises that I was waiting for because they are totally pushing the limits and pushing the borders that we weren't able to push that much. Like, they are very visible as queers, they are disturbing public space just by being present. And I feel it's a movement that can really create something new and a new breath, here, in Tunisia.

**Katie Kheriji-Watts**

We opened on this topic of desire. And so I want to know what you, Bochra, are desiring for Tunis and its relationship to the art world internationally.

**Bochra Triki**

I think one of my desires would be that Tunisian artists have more trust in the fact that the work they are doing is unique and very important, very powerful. It's unique because of the

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<sup>1</sup> This text on queer time was writing for an exhibition of the Tunisian artist Ghad Al Majid

history that we have, our history is very rich. What happened in these ten years and what is still happening is very rich. And at the same time, the strongest desire for me would be that Tunisian artists would have the same opportunities to travel internationally. It's very frustrating to see so much potential that is stuck in a geographic area without any possibility to connect outside of your space. And going outside from where you are coming is very important.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

What are the biggest barriers for Tunisian artists being able to go abroad ?

### **Bochra Triki**

The biggest barrier is visa, because it's getting harder and harder to get a visa. And it's almost impossible when you don't have a status, an artistic status or something. And if you are an artist outside of the institutional path, it's very hard for you to get the artistic card that will give you the opportunity to apply for a visa. So, yeah, for me, it's mostly this, the borders.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Since you're talking about borders: what's a border that you have seen shift, for the better, in your lifetime?

### **Bochra Triki**

Maybe I would think of how queer persons here are totally pushing the borders of social roles or social duties. Yeah, I think of these social paths that we were able to blur a little bit and to not make them, like, so straight, to make them a little bit more queer. So, yeah, I think it's something that will, of course, need to be pushed so much more because it's still illegal, still a very bad scene socially. Like, people are still struggling with their families or having to live in forced marriages and all this. So this system is closed on itself but, outside of it, there are like so many bubbles of freedom that are so unexpected.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

So queer is the practice, for you, of taking a straight path and making it a little bit broader and blurrier?

### **Bochra Triki**

Yes ! Queer, for me, is not only related to your sexuality or your gender. It's also a way of being and it's also a way of questioning norms in a wider way. For me, being queer is just

opening so many more possibilities and so many more alternative narratives instead of just being stuck, everyone, in one way of living.

### **Katie Kheriji-Watts**

Thank you so much for doing that work of opening doors, blurring borders, putting on punk rock shows. It's such a pleasure to be here with you in Tunisia. Thank you for your work, for your voice, and for your actions. It's been an honour to talk to you.

### **Bochra Triki**

Thank you. Thanks a lot.

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This episode was commissioned by [On the Move](#), produced with the support of the French Ministry of Culture, and edited by [Émilie Wadelle](#).

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