

# Visual dialogue: A drawn conversation about the city of Fez

*Samira Jamouchi*, Assistant Professor  
Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Science  
Oslo, Norway

## Abstract

The visual essay with moving images, see the link below to the video "Visual Dialogue Fez", is an invitation to the viewer to approach the urban experience given by the female participant of this project. She narrates and at the same time draw the city of Fez, which she moved to, from Norway, some years ago. This video exposes and connects multiple strata of meaning, emerging from the intra-action between different actors: as between the participant and her imagined city of Fez, the participant and her drawing act, and the participant and me as researcher.

This written essay relates the background and the context of the project, grounded on my interest in urban experience articulated by persons with more than one urban reference. This written essay is also a short reflection on research design involving arts-based research and how the data/material collected and produced affect me, and in return how this affect has an impact (effect) on the video produced during this project.

## Bio

**Samira Jamouchi** is a visual artist and pedagogue in the subject of arts and craft. She lives in Norway and works as an assistant professor at the Oslo and Akershus university college of applied science. Her work combines various artistic forms of expressions and the use of diverse materials. Her arts-based research is rooted in her artistic work, and it is now often connected to teachers training. In her later works she explores different performative approaches to the subject of arts and crafts in teacher education. This includes performative drawings, as well as performances that put materials and objects in the center of an aesthetical experience.

## Introduction with video

My parents are originally from Morocco. I was born in Belgium and I moved to Norway eighteen years ago. The aim and the motivation for this project is rooted in my double connection to Morocco and Norway: I am both an insider and an outsider in these countries. The material for the visual essay was generated during fieldwork in Morocco in 2007-2009. This material archive is comprised of photographs I took, videos I recorded, and drawings the participants made during the project. These drawings are the results of interviews I had with the participants of this project who were all Norwegian-born persons who live in Morocco. Those interviews are a combination of verbal narratives and drawings the participants made while we explored and tried to unveil the participants' double urban experiences.

The aim for this project is to understand the Moroccan city (medina) of Fez from a Norwegian point of view. I was curious about how people with a double urban reference experiences and express the city in various ways (orally and visually). I developed this project guided by my curiosity about experiences of the city and by my interest in articulating a research design appropriate for such inquiry and explorative processes.



Figure 1, Samira Jamouchi, 2009. Photograph I took during a fieldwork in Fez.

Overview of the medina, photo taken from a roof terrace.

Video # 1. Jamouchi Samira, 2016 "Visual Dialogue Fez". <https://vimeo.com/182381950>

For the participant in this visual essay, the first urban experience is the city of Oslo, and her second urban experience is the old city (medina) of Fez. After moving to Morocco, she had to understand and incorporate a new, for her, Moroccan city. This is the topic discussed in the video, whilst she is drawing Fez.

## Research and artistic approach: An evolving research design

My interests in exploring experiences of Fez and in finding a way to investigate such experiences stimulated me to adapt a research design inspired by my earlier work as a visual artist as well as other bodies of work from different disciplines. The research design resulted in a two-folded dialogue-meeting with the participant. Each part of the dialogue uses a different, and yet complementary, data collection form. During the first part of our meeting I used an open-ended qualitative interview method to invite the participant to talk about the city. This part was mainly producing a verbal narrative, describing the city of Fez, predominantly with words. The second part of the meeting was structured around the participant's hand-made drawing of Fez. This part of the meeting allows a broader dialogue. The dialogue was no longer based on our orally exchanged. An inner dialogue took place between the participant, her hands movements, and the lines and shapes on the paper she made during the drawing process. Throughout this inner, visual dialogue I occasionally asked her questions to highlight the different aspects of the city she draw on the paper. I filmed this part of the of the dialogue-meeting.

The first part of data collection was conducted as a qualitative interview (Repstad, 1993; Halvorsen, 1996; Kvale, 2004). I sought to value the personal experience of the participant's everyday life. The interview took place as a verbal dialogue between the participant and myself and mainly focused on her thematic experiences of the city. The interview had a fluid and flexible structure that enabled us to follow the changing dynamics of our conversation. During the interview, the participant expressed her knowledge about and her understanding of the city in her own way.

The second part of the data collection was conducted just after the qualitative interview, after she had expressed her experience of the city with words. I call this second part of the research design visual dialogue. This dialogue is inspired by my earlier artistic works presented as video installations, such as "Her city" (2008) and "En lukket dør mot Europa" (2008). This research design

is also inspired by the use of mental map, such as those found in Kevin Lynch's (1960) book "The image of the city." The visual dialogue as a research design is informed by the theoretical work of Stephen Spencer (2011) for whom a map is both iconic and symbolic as well as art-based research method (Leavy, 2009). I have also been inspired by Sarah Pink (2011) who emphasizes the distinction between examination of images and the production, or the making, of images. I perceive this research design as a form of communication combining verbal- and visual communication with a drawing process. The video attached to this article (#1) shows this process of drawing by a female participant. Through the narration and drawing she depicts her experiences within the city of Fez. I have intertwined the interview and drawing process with photographs and moving images.

By doing so, a further dialogue emerged materializing my intent to engage with another person and her experience utilizing verbal and artistic dialogues.

The visual dialogue refers to different types or levels of dialogue: 1) communication that occurs between the participant and myself, 2) the inner dialogue that emerges between the line made on the paper while the participant recalls her experience of the city, and 3) the dialogue that emerges and materializes between the different materials, or data, presented together as palimpsest in motion (as shown the video attached to this article (#1)).

The material contains a magma of information with multimodal elements. It is complex and seems to be in a constant metamorphosis of reflections, dialogues, connections, re-invention, and so on. As such, my material appears as a palimpsest composed by layers of urban sounds, participants performing drawings and narrations, photographs and films.

My material keeps taking me on a repeated or cyclical journey, rather than arriving at a fixed understanding of how a Moroccan city is experienced, described and then re-presented. I regard my archive as an active material. It is intense, continuously in motion, not stable and it is not yet fixed. I approach my material through a continuous back and forth movement and I de-compose and re-compose my material as I analyse it. It has become clear to me that the most adequate and meaningful way to work with the material is to edit it in order to present it respecting its natural tendencies. My artistic approach, using video, is what allows me to accomplish a resonance, which a written text would perhaps fail to achieve (Leavy, 2009).

The viewer of the video is invited to partake to the evocative approach of Fez as divulgate by the participant. The video try to go beyond fixed or normative explanations of who Fez is, but allows individual and reflexive approaches to how its urban spaces can be experienced. The video shows inner and outer spaces, different levels of street views, entangled buildings and details of the walls of the facades, small and large spaces, the participants position in the city, and how the city is positioned in a broader landscape. All this is addressed from a personal point of view. The multi-layered video may affect the viewers in vastly different ways, as it allows different interpretations.



Figure 2, Samira Jamouchi, 2016. Snapshot from the video "Visual Dialogue Fez" showing a crossfade between the participant's handmade drawing and a photograph I took in the medina of Fez.



Figure 3, Samira Jamouchi, 2009. Four photographs I took during a fieldwork in Fez. Different views from the street level, called derb or darb in Arabic (narrow path).

## References

- Halvorsen, K. (1996). *Å forske på samfunnet. En innføring I samfunnsvitenskapelig metode.* Oslo, Norway: Bedriftsøkonomens Forlag.
- Kvale, S. (2004). *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju.* Oslo, Norway: Gyldendal Akademisk.
- Leavy, P. (2009). *Method meets art. Arts-based research practice.* New York, USA: Guilford Press.
- Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city.* Cambridge, Mass., USA: M.I.T. Press
- Repsal, P. (1993). *Mellom nærhet og distanse.* Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget.
- Pink, S. (2014). *Doing visual ethnography.* London, UK: Sage.
- Spencer, S. (2011). Mapping society: a 'sense of place.' In S. Spencer (Ed.) *Visual research methods in the social Sciences: Awakening visions.* (pp. 69-109). London, UK: Routledge.
- Spencer, S. (2011). Visualising identity. In S. Spencer (Ed.) *Visual research methods in the social sciences: Awakening visions.* (pp. 110-131). London, UK: Routledge.