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Mandy Merzaban interviews artist Kader Attia

MM: You have commented that as a child it was difficult at times to integrate fully into either French or Algerian society, a common sentiment of Arab emigrants. How has your experience on the fringe of these cultures informed your practice and aesthetic sensibilities?

KA: Nowadays, issues of immigration have nothing to do with the ones my parents knew. At that time, Europe was asking, almost inviting, immigrants from all its former colonies to come and work. Today, the contrary happens: European countries, as well as the United States, are now closing their frontiers. But in both instances, racial discrimination and intolerance against immigrants have been prevalent. As I grew up between France and Algeria, I had to face two types of racism. In Algeria, as a child, I sometimes had to fight against other children who would mock my accent. But in France it was tougher. As Algeria won the war of its independence against France, racism in France ran deep everywhere, from the children in the streets to the media, the economic system, the social network and obviously religion. So this helped me to develop a strong interest in ethics. The motive of an act became more important than its result. That's why, rather than being only aesthetic, my artworks try to point out the importance of ethics as the core foundation of any thought. Whatever the subject matter, I am always led by my ethics, often drawing on the theories of Nietzsche to Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

MM: What considerations do you make when conceptualising your work and how it will interact with a space?

KA: My work always starts with void, nothingness, then little by little, it becomes a drawing then a message and a statement emerges. This statement can sometimes be political, poetical, spiritual, emotional or sexual. It takes shape with a gesture that appears and disappears, but that remains as an experience in the viewer's mind. This shape can sometimes be ephemeral, sometimes sustainable. As in the case of "Demo(n)cracy", this work is both ephemeral and enduring, an experience that involves the viewer.

MM: Your installation 'Kasbah', which replicates an aerial view of shantytown rooftops, represents the typical living space for the world's poor. Viewers are invited to walk across the installation. What are the implications of their interaction with this work?

KA: Viewers that encounter the work "Kasbah" are indeed invited to walk across its open terraces, the layout replicates the architectural vernacular of many traditional cities in Morocco, Algeria, the Maghreb and Mashreq etc. It is also a tribute to Arab architecture. There is a distinctly Arab cultural tradition that revolves around the terrace. The terraces of Arab homes (especially those of the desert), for many reasons such as climate, security and proximity,

became primary places of home activity and social interaction. This has inspired many Modernist architects like Le Corbusier, who spent many weeks in Algeria particularly the Sahara desert, to formulate his manifesto "The Athens Charter", for which the "terrace roof" is one of the five dogmas.

Another notable feature of the artwork "Kasbah" is the paradoxical involvement of participants who walk on these makeshift roofs. Like pedestals, the roofs elevate the participants from the ground. As the viewers walk over the truncated homes of people, they are also in a way walking over the "heads" of the poor; this performance becomes part of the work. Like in minimal art pieces such as Carl Andre's, viewers are allowed to walk on the plinths, except that these "plinths", in "Kasbah", refer aesthetically and cynically to a reality of the world we are living in: poverty is the pedestal for any kind of bourgeois democratic society. Shantytowns are considered the lowest form of architecture, and are consequences of the modern, post-modern and contemporary world.

MM: Your piece Demo(n)cracy is featured in our exhibition Strike Oppose. The concept of democracy is nuanced and in the Arab world holding regular elections has served as a guise for autocratic regimes. What is your intention for this piece in the Arab world and/or the West? Do you believe that its relevance resonates more profoundly with waves of popular revolts sweeping over the region?

When I originally created the work "Demo(n)cracy", I started listing all the "-ism" terms (fundamentalism, socialism, capitalism, etc) that since the foundation of political knowledge like Paine's "Age of Reason", had invented the so-called democratic system. In Plato's essay "The Republic" he describes the dynamics of living in a just society and the nature of ethics. For Plato, in "The Republic" book IV, the idea of justice is paradoxically linked under the order of the power: "For some, it is natural to enjoy philosophy and to command in the city, for the others, to stay away from it and to submit to those who command". By representing this political ideology, I wanted to point out the paradox that it embodies. I did it because the hegemony, from which it both takes and implements its power, is its weakness. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the father of modern democracy, was also the one who warned us to be aware of its weakness. Rousseau indeed taught us that representation is in essence, usurpation: "As soon as a people chooses itself representatives, it is not free anymore; it disappears". As a governing system invented by the West, the origin of democracy, a so-called universal project, draws specifically from the interests of a small elitist group of economically and intellectually powerful people. It is a pretext to gather people around a dogma that makes them lose their identity and local history, to become a part of the global order and culture.

In Western colonisation the idea of universality is seen in the way the West dominated other cultures. Colonisers would categorise different groups in a country into manageable parts. This often meant numerous tribes would be grouped together, despite having different cultural practices, values and views. This was a strategy that summarised tribal groups and arbitrarily classified them into countries that do not consider their initially more complex ethnic boundaries; diluting cultural identities for a more global order and culture. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, Sudan, Israel, Palestine, Nigeria, Somalia, India, Pakistan, etc. have been constructed by the West. The work "Demo(n)cracy" shows the misinterpretation of this word by both the Western and the non-Western world. I think that what is happening today

in the Arab world is obviously a sign of the desire for a better world, but not specifically for democracy as a Western hegemonic concept. It's about "freedom".

MM: You are participating in pro-democracy demonstrations in Algeria this year. What are your thoughts on the relationship between government, people and social media in the context of the MENA region?

In Algeria, like in the rest of the Middle East, there is a huge gap between paternalist governments (gerontocracies), mainly led by old men, and discontented youth, frustrated with the status quo. These governments are no longer only criticised by an Islamic opposition, but now also by young people. It is quite similar to what happened during the social revolution of 10 million workers and students in France in 1968. In Algeria, youth are demanding greater freedom in their everyday lives. This means an everyday life free of the socio-Islamic pressure enforced by those who own and want to maintain power, as well as to make concessions toward their Islamic opponents. For instance, a young couple on holidays cannot share the same room in a hotel if they can't prove they are married. The hotel can be closed if they are caught, because that's the law. This law, and many others, is based on a family code of another age. It is still currently applied, on the one hand, because of the Algerian gerontocracy, and on the other hand, because by upholding these types of laws, the government wants to please its fundamentalist opponents, who want a state run by the Islamic law.

Those in power govern in a way that is out of touch with the population and does not see the deep changes society is undergoing. The boom of social networking sites, in Algeria and in the other Arab countries, has created a parallel world that the older leaders do not take seriously. It is a place where the population is able to assemble, communicate and even mobilise. This parallel world is totally connected to Occident and is both a window to that world and a way to rally against power structures. Today in Algeria, after Tunisia and Egypt, the government must take these changes into account. Otherwise, sooner or later, the government will be confronted with the same kind of youth uprisings.