

Fig. 1





Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Figs. 1-3. Installation views. Kader Attia: The Museum of Emotion, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London
2019.
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Kader Attia in conversation with Sylvia Keck

IN FAVOUR OF AN EMOTIONAL MUSEOLOGICAL SYSTEM

Kader Attia is a French contemporary artist of Algerian descent born in 1970. He has acquired an international reputation after receiving the Marcel Duchamp art prize in 2016. Attia works with a range of media, from sculpture and photography, to installation and video. He is interested in the themes of community, belonging and visibility, although he is most renowned for his work that questions how to repair the wounds of colonialism in the museum context. The artist aims at unveiling the power dynamics between different cultures detectable in the way museums display artefacts.

He first envisions repair as a practical process. In a show entitled 'The museum of Emotion' hosted by the Hayward Gallery in 2019, he built an installation that displayed African objects relegated to the storage spaces of ethnographic museums that had been sewn back together with Western elements, such as Vichy patch or fallen bits of tin. He reproduced similar operations in a range of other works. Attia's repair is also a metaphor for cohabitation, as it uses trauma through wounded objects that combine intercultural materials to draw connections across cultures. He believes that viewing these objects enhances a communal and emotional experience in the exhibition space, advocating for a bodily relation to spectatorship. Finally, repair proposes a new model of temporality within the museum space where wounds of the past have to be acknowledged in order to visualise a better future, interrelating both times and spaces.

We met on Zoom, and had a conversation about museums as both repressive and liberating systems, politics and the art world and language and poetry. The interview was originally conducted in French.

Sylvia Keck: Why did you choose the museum as a critical system for repair?

Kader Attia: The museum is a critical space of repair, but it is also a critical space of injury. While modern thought wants to sell them to us as separate, reparation and injury in my view are inseparable. So, when I look at museums, I see them in their ambivalence. On the one hand, they show works of art, which are a repair in themselves since they move from one state to another, from nothingness to an idea, an emotion. On the other hand, works, especially those of classical art, contain an invisible part, which allows a society to enrich itself with art, whether it is intellectually, economically, socially. An interesting example of this paradox would be Baroque art, an art of lust and abundance. Yet, this era was also a period of

serfdom, slavery and colonisation. Women were neglected, which we see in classical museums where they are often represented as prostitutes, witches or virgins. What interests me is to understand things by what they hide from us.

SK: Is this why you went to dig into the archives of ethnographic museums?

KA: My goal in going to museum storage and archives was to show what they don't show. Museum reserves are considerable, whether they are museums of classical art, of Antiquity, or of art of non-Western cultures. There is this ambivalence in the museum where we only see the tip of the iceberg, since a selection has been made; what's best is on display. When we see this phenomenal quantity of storage, we learn a lot from what culture consumption is. Why do we need to have so many hidden art objects in museums?

The changing times make us see works in different ways, which shows how the contemporary gaze works. Perhaps in the 19th century, some of the works now in the archives were exhibited at the Louvre and considered famous. Perhaps in three centuries, the works lying dormant in storage will be exhibited and the works currently in museums and galleries will be in the archives.

Regarding the African objects that I worked on, I wondered why these masks, statues, calabashes that were broken and repaired in their original village were forgotten in the reserves of Western museums, particularly those that were repaired with an element from Western consumer society. It has been said that these objects were considered impure in the anthropologist's view. I'm more interested in this oversight than in the system of archives itself.

SK: So how should we display these forgotten objects?

KA: I think that we should create an exhibition space within the museum that would be shared between spectators and objects, outside of the work of restorers, anthropologists or curators. Spectators could touch the artefacts, share their feelings in relation to these objects to give them an unexpected life, and not have them spoken by speakers to whom our society has transferred a form of false authority. Anthropologists and museum curators may have carried out in-depth studies, but there is always an element of the unknown in the object, especially when it is repaired in an unexpected way. I think that these objects are witnesses to a form of human creativity which must be communicated in a non-disciplinary way.

SK: At the same time, the museum is fundamentally an elitist and sacralised institution. Can we really have this emotional connection to the objects you are talking about within this system?

KA: We have to. If we consider works of art as repairs, due to their movement from nothingness to thing, museography conditions the

spectator's attentional environment in an overly pressurised way. Yet, we can feel a very strong emotion when faced with a work of art, whatever it may be. Bénédicte Savoy [a French historian specialised in European Artistic Heritage who contributed to the redaction of a national report on colonial restitution commissioned by president Macron in 2017] told me the story of this woman who went to admire the Apollo Belvedere every Friday morning in a museum in Rouen at the beginning of the 20th century. This woman found the figure of the Apollo so beautiful that she went into a trance. They ended up having her institutionalised.

What this scene shows is that the museum is not a place where one can feel ontologically oneself, it remains a system of social authority. I very much respect the work of museums, but I think that it undermines the social bond of that meeting space. The museum imposes a framework of attitude towards works of art so that the visitor system can be maintained. I think that we must rethink our relationship with museography by breaking away from this straitjacket, and favour other systems for understanding the museum. The interest that the museum seeks to have in our society today is not fulfilled.

SK: Do you consider emotion, taking the example of this woman and knowing that it is an important theme of your work, to be a form of resistance?

KA: It can be a form of resistance, but it is also a great weakness. This woman is under the emotional influence of the work. She gives herself to this work. The stage of giving oneself to the work comes after that of resistance, which is not gratifying but dissonant, since it is what this museological system imposes. This museographic system requires us to resist the power of the works, which explains the tension present in museums – we cannot touch, the light directs our gaze in a specific way... Yet, the emotion cannot be resisted, it is an explosion of the subject.

This is why this example is interesting, because in our society, since the age when museums became places of both entertainment and modern learning, they have become systems in which individual emotion cannot enter. We can be moved by a work, but we cannot start screaming or crying, for fear that people will judge us as unreasonable. I believe that the notion of resistance is not appropriate here: we resist against something that is unjust, but the emotion that a work of art arouses, on the contrary, leaves us room to exist. Great works of art, in my opinion, don't take everything from us, they give back. A process of exchange of attention is implemented, between the viewer who looks at the work of art, and the attention the artist put into it, in a looping movement.

SK: To continue with this intimate relationship to art and exhibition spaces, I am interested in the immersive nature of your work, with which we can have a real intimate experience, distinct from

traditional museographies. Why is audience immersion important to you?

KA: I believe that when we visit an exhibition, we don't just see with our eyes. The body is also the object of this exchange of attention between the work and the spectator. Immersion plays a significant role in the experience of the work of art. I can't conceive of installation art by putting aside the bodily dynamics with which we must work to take the viewer into a language. This is why I work a lot on the phenomenology of perception: perspectives, smells, music, light. For me, light is also very important in an installation. This is often an overlooked step in exhibitions, something I learned from talking to those working with light. They tell me that they are always contacted at the end of the installation, but I like to contact them beforehand to truly create a work together. Immersion and the body are intrinsically linked, and thus the body that moves in an installation is also the object of this installation.

SK: It's also something that we tend to forget in our highly cerebral Western society, this relationship with the body. To continue with paradoxes and knowing that your work is often categorised as political, do you think that we can articulate a statement that is both corporeal and political within the art world?

KA: There are lots of art worlds. Among them are the world of the art market and the world of art. Political art is not an art that sells, that's for sure. It's not an art of seduction, it's one that criticises and attacks. It's true that it's paradoxical, there are periods where I'm exhibited a lot, and others not at all. Politically engaged work is disturbing work. When a work takes you somewhere emotionally, you leave the exhibition with something that the work gave you. Yet, a political work also takes something from you. In my opinion, political art puts people in danger with regard to themselves, no matter the question – whether it is decolonial, queer or anti-capitalist issues. The engaged work of art sheds light on blind spots and the spectator can suddenly consider themselves in error.

I'm not interested in these questions because I calculate them, I make works as they arrive. I really try to delve into the subject when I commit to a work, which can sometimes derange. The art world accepts pseudo-political works that remain on the surface, because they will quickly be forgotten, often because the subjects they evoke have already been mentioned. But works that are disturbing make you realise, to take the example of colonial questions, that there are privileges that exist and which were not visible to you because you were on the right side of the society. In these cases, we prefer to consider that it is not art, but activism. But that's not true: art is a language, and it can be both a poetic and a political language.

SK: Does that mean that you consider your art political?

KA: Above all, I consider my art to respond to requests that come from within myself and which are concerned with creating a

graphic, visual and formal language. The message can be socio-political, but the form can be poetic. Poetry is a very important issue for me. This is why when I work with violent or injured images, I like to consider that the injury is not just the signifier of an accident or pain. It can be the signifier of beauty. Sometimes I come and go on specific political questions, or, on the contrary, I tackle broader questions of society. But these two are not necessarily antagonistic. When I work with broken/repaired objects, I engage in philosophical reflections on the human being. We can't say that this is political. Now, we can also create metaphors with political issues. There are many people who perceive me as a political artist because I have made some political works, and thus will equate all my creations with something political.

SK: I asked this question thinking of La Colonie, a forum you founded in Paris that seeks to engage with debates surrounding colonisation through conferences, clearly demonstrating a practical desire for social change. Why did it close?

KA: It closed due to COVID. A place like that requires a lot of visitors to be sustainable and we realised that we would not be able to hold it with all the restrictions. We therefore decided to continue this project on a nomadic basis while waiting to reopen a space for three to four years. We were in Barcelona twice, and we're going back in April. It is a place for debate, in which the conversation we're having now could take place. We focus more on social debates, and less on art.

SK: As you mention your privileged relationship to space, I'm thinking of architecture, and how important it is in your oeuvre. Architecture, for you, seems like a way to rethink the impact of colonisation. I'm thinking in particular of *Rochers Carrés* or *Untitled (Ghardaia).*

KA: Architecture is a way of rethinking colonisation as it is in close relation to heritage. The architecture of countries yesterday colonised by the British or the French, particularly the architecture in Africa, has greatly influenced architects like Le Corbusier or Fernand Pouillon. This is why it was important for me to do work on this, but here we are also in something quite poetic since the discourse is not literal. The work does not tell the viewer how the extraction process has been done, but rather makes you want to look at this architecture differently, through collages or a couscous installation. The work tries to reinvent a moment for this architecture.

SK: Your works often outline the cultural differences between the West and the East. How can we live together if our systems of representation are so different?

KA: We lived together at one point. There were so many exchanges during the Crusades. There are more intense exchanges than we think. Living together, for me, means protecting the last refuge of reason in humanity, namely, since we started this interview with museums, the exhibition space. I think that a place where citizens can go, of all ages, all cultures, all religions, to see artworks, is

a place where collective individuation is maintained. Everyone remains who they are as individuals, but they are still aware of being part of a group.

I highly believe in the future of humanity through cultural spaces. Cultural physical spaces. We can see ourselves virtually through communication media to work, like now, but I think that the artistic experience is a physical one, whether it's a concert or a museum. We are living in a crucial time in human history where we must protect this space of physical experience. By criticising, of course, because museums must be updated, they are too obsolete. But I am not the advocate of closing museums. I think that the exhibition space, whether it's a biennial, a museum, whatever, is what will save humanity. I think that social, cultural, religious and gender racism is unfortunately reinforced today due to social networks which transform the public opinion in a very toxic way. Museums and exhibition spaces cultivate reason. These are the spaces that allow society to accept difference.



Fig. 4


From the series *Mirrors and Masks* 2013–15
Wooden mask and mirror
Private collection, Paris
Attia made the first mask in this series in 2009, after visiting the exhibition Picasso and the Masters at the Grand Palais, in Paris. Although the exhibition included works by Western artists known to have influenced Picasso, Attia was shocked to find that it did not include any African masks, another well-known influence on the artist. The work he made as a response – a wooden mask covered with shards of broken mirror – reflects the viewer back in fragments, or in Attia's words, 'shows everybody who looks at it a Cubist portrait of themselves.'
Please do not touch

Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Figs. 4-6. Installation views. Kader Attia: The Museum of Emotion, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London
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