

ThinkArt, are pleased to initiate a collaborative venture in 2020–2022 revolving around the approach of the *School of Casablanca*—a school that developed innovative education and exhibition strategies in 1960s Morocco.

Drawing on and interpreting the Bauhaus Manifesto, the *School of Casablanca* engaged models of rethinking the relationship between arts, crafts, design, and architecture within a local context. Recommencing this engagement after the centennial of the Bauhaus, the collaborative venture seeks to further the legacy of the *School of Casablanca* in contemporary thought. This aim proves to be important not only within a Moroccan context, but also in relation to critical reflection on the traditions of Western methodology and self-perception.

An integral part of the venture is a residency in Casablanca that will take place from 2020 to 2022, during which time residents will conduct research, produce new work, and create a public program focused on the subject(s) addressed in their research. The six invited residents are Céline Condorelli, Fatima-Zahra Lakrissa, Marion von Osten, Manuel Raeder, Bik Van der Pol, and Abdeslam Ziou Ziou.

### **About the *School of Casablanca***

Created in the 1920s and officially inaugurated in 1951 by the French protectorate, the Casablanca School of Fine Arts was an innovative institution in 1960s Morocco. After Moroccan

independence in 1956, civic awareness rose, impacting both artists and intellectuals seeking to reconsider their social function and visibility in the public sphere. Through this process, the artist became the producer of a social and cultural project, in which art was expected to become a space of shared knowledge and experience. In the midst of this post-colonial artistic and cultural renewal, artists Farid Belkahia (1934–2014), Mohamed Chabâa (1935–2013), and Mohamed Melehi (1936–2020) formed the *Group of Casablanca* at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts. They were later joined by Mohamed Hamidi (born in 1941, MA), Mustapha Hafid (born in 1942, MA), and Mohamed Ataallah (1934–2014).

Supported by art historian and anthropologist, Toni Maraini (born in 1941, JP), and researcher of popular arts and rural traditions, Bert Flint (born in 1931, NL), the *School of Casablanca* pioneered innovative and multidisciplinary education and exhibition strategies that rejected the Western academic tradition and epistemology. The School engaged in a number of field-research projects to study and re-appropriate traditional crafts as well as urban and rural architecture. They created the publication *Maghreb Art* and produced exhibitions in urban spaces titled *Présence plastique*—the most memorable act of which remains the 1969 manifesto exhibition in Marrakesh's Jamaâ el Fna Square. In the late 1960s, and over the following decade, Belkahia, Chabâa, and Melehi realized important

architectural projects for public infrastructure—termed *Les Intégrations*—in collaboration with architects Patrice de Mazières (1930–2020) and Abdeslam Faraoui (born in 1928, MA).

**Farid Belkahia** (1934, Marrakech – 2014, Marrakech)

From 1955–59, Farid Belkahia studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he experienced the first radical and decisive turning point of his career: the rejection of the uniformity of academic education, and the need to return to his origins. In 1960, for the first time, he titled a work after a Moroccan vernacular term, Wac-wac (The scream), in homage to Edward Munch. He left Paris, embarking on a long journey to the Maghreb and the Middle East, and settled in Prague to take scenography courses at the Academy of Performing Arts. He returned to Morocco in 1962 and directed the Casablanca School of Fine Arts until 1974. 1963 marked a new turning point for Belkahia: his radical and definitive break with Western pictorial dogma. He formulated his own approach to painting's support, frame, form, color, and two-dimensionality based on his career path and culture, both of which were marked by folk art and archaic expressions. For him, the return to tradition was fundamental to realizing an ideological critique of Western cultural imperialism: "Tradition is the future of man," he wrote. Farid Belkahia substituted copper foil for canvas and produced large sculptural reliefs. Starting in 1975, he explored skin as a material. By choosing copper or leather, he turned to a vocabulary of

signs, ideograms, and hieroglyphs, which constitute a form of writing as characteristic of his work, as is its materiality. He summons the finesse of Arabic calligraphy, the richness of Berber signs, and the geometry of archetypal forms—the triangle, the circle, the arrow, the point, the infinity symbol, the cross, and its cardinal points—all of which make up his image repertoire. The strength of his work lies in a distinctly innovative combination of the symbolic, geometric, and spiritual registers of signs, which nevertheless preserve their universal significance.

**Mohamed Chabâa** (1935, Tangier, MA – 2013, Casablanca, MA)

Mohamed Chabâa graduated from the National Institute of Fine Arts in Tétouan in 1955. He went on to work in the architecture department of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. In 1962, he obtained a scholarship from the Italian government to continue his studies at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma in Rome. Teaching was an integral part of his career, first at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts, from 1964–69, where he was in charge of the decorative arts, graphic arts, and calligraphy workshops, and later at the National School of Architecture in Rabat. He also directed the National Institute of Fine Arts in Tétouan from 1994–98. Throughout his career, Chabâa embodied two attitudes—that of the artist-craftsman, and the intellectual-pedagogue—which he continuously sought to reconcile. He coined the concept of “position-work”: art objects that spur the emergence of responsible

actions within a given social context, in order to achieve a more just society. He emphasized the specificity of traditional artistic production: “At the time, we were far from perceiving a unique visual art form, or one which could lay claim to a universal set of plastic values, in the cladding of Moroccan architecture, the zellige and chiseled plaster murals, in carved wood, Zemmour and Glaouai carpets, or ceramics... in short, in all the national, traditional forms of autonomous artworks.” He valued the functionalism of artistic tradition in Morocco, as well as the complementarity between art, architecture, and artisanry, through his concept of the “3As.” Chabâa’s objective was to develop an art that could be integrated with collective life and consumer habits, and to include the viewer in the practice of aesthetic critique, defending the premise of equality for all over the “distribution of the sensible.”

**Mohamed Melehi** (1936, Asilah, MA – 2020, Paris)

After a brief stay at the National Institute of Fine Arts in Tétouan, Mohamed Melehi obtained a scholarship in 1955 which enabled him to study in Spain, at the fine arts academies of Seville and Madrid. In 1957, Melehi enrolled in Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma in Rome. These years were decisive for the orientation of his artistic practice; they confirmed the possibility of an encounter between abstraction and spirituality, intellectual thought and formal language. In 1962, he left for the United States to assume the post of assistant professor at the

Minneapolis Institute of Art, and later moved to New York. There, he recognized the originality of a society at the forefront of modernity, defining itself in opposition to the European model. The idea of going beyond European tradition provided a new analytical framework for his identitarian pursuit. Convinced he would be able to deploy his experience in the service of his country's social and cultural development, Melehi joined Farid Belkahia in the pedagogical experiment of the Casablanca School of Fine Arts in 1964, where he directed the painting, sculpture, and photography workshops. Drawing from the pedagogical principles of the Bauhaus, Melehi employed an interdisciplinary approach in his teaching, and emphasized the reciprocity between the work of the artist and the craftsman. He encouraged his students to decipher their visual environment in order to identify the correspondences between their formal research and its application within everyday life. The affinities linking him to Toni Maraini and Bert Flint generated a fruitful reflection on the formal and stylistic specificities of North African culture. Their discussions mainly concerned rural Moroccan art and urban folk art, and the need to reveal its modern, universal principles: "For me, it is not a question of copying tradition or imitating the patterns of traditional art, but first and foremost of getting closer to the Moroccan craftsman by observing his work. Of establishing a sympathetic relationship with him. Of valuing what he does. Of consuming his drawings, his arrangement of colors, in the same way one consumes a 'Picasso.' This is so as

to elevate our artist and his work to the same level of appreciation as any modern artistic achievement.”

**Mustapha Hafid (1942, Casablanca)**

Mustapha Hafid enrolled in the Casablanca School of Fine Arts before going to Warsaw, where he studied for five years at the Academy of Fine Arts in the painting and graphic arts department. In 1966, he obtained a Master of Arts diploma. Once back in Morocco, he taught at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts. In 1969, he participated in the manifesto-exhibition at the Jamaâ el Fna Square in Marrakech and the November 11th Square in Casablanca, alongside Mohamed Ataallah, Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chabâa, Mohamed Hamidi, and Mohamed Melehi. Between 1980–85, Mustapha Hafid was acting director of the Casablanca School of Fine Arts.

**Mohamed Hamidi (1941, Casablanca)**

Mohamed Hamidi studied at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts before going to Paris, where he first entered the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts and then enrolled in the École des Métiers d’Art. Having returned to Morocco, Hamidi taught at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts between 1967–75. In 1969, he participated in the manifesto-exhibition at the Jamaâ el Fna Square in Marrakech and the November 11th Square in Casablanca, alongside Mohamed Ataallah, Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chabâa, Mustapha Hafid, and Mohamed Melehi.

**Mohamed Ataallah** (1939, Ksar el-Kebir, MA – 2014, Caen, FR)

After studying at the National Institute of Fine Arts in Tétouan, Mohamed Ataallah joined the Accademia de Bellas Artes in Seville, the Accademia di Belle Arti di Roma in Rome, and finally Escuela Superior de Conservación y Restauración de Bienes Culturales in Madrid. He returned to Morocco in 1963 to conduct archaeological excavations in the province of Tangier. Between 1968–72, he taught at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts. In 1969, he took part in the manifesto-exhibition at the Jamaâ el Fna Square in Marrakech and the November 11th Square in Casablanca alongside Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chabâa, Mustapha Hafid, Mohamed Hamidi, and Mohamed Melehi. He returned to France in 1972 to teach at the Caen School of Fine Arts until 2004. Throughout his life, he sought to reconcile his visual art practice with his career as an educator.