



Kader Attia, *Untitled*, 2017, ancient Dogon wooden mask, Muslim prayer beads from Senegal, and metal base.
 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG

In 2007, the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia created an arresting installation with sculptures of hundreds of disembodied chadors—large pieces of cloth of the kind wrapped around the heads of many Muslim women—rendered in aluminum foil and splayed across a gallery floor. The piece, titled *Ghost*, tapped several of Attia’s recurring themes, from the clash of civilizations to belief systems reliant on what he himself calls “non-knowledge.” The poignant quality of the work owed to the paradoxical plea within its spectacle: a call for self-reflection invoked through a dissolution of the self.

Attia has described experiences of the sort as an act of “repair,” with the term extending far beyond the connotations associated with a simple fix or restoration. For Attia, repair is a constant, evolving, holistic operation—in his own words: “an endless process of intellectual, cultural, and political adjustments that humanity carries on in parallel with its natural process of evolution.” In his work, Attia has spent over a decade attempting to elucidate his conception of repair through a variety of media, from photography and

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sculpture to installation and video. In its range of realizations, his art can appear disparate, but beneath it all lies a rigorous, research-based practice that forms the foundation from which his encoded, existential ideas emerge.

His inquisitive inclinations are on display in *Reason's Oxymorons* (2015), a multi-channel video installation on view for the first time in U.S. at the Lehmann Maupin gallery on New York's Lower East Side through March 4. The installation features a "video library" made up of 18 screens placed within an array of empty office cubicles, like a cube farm in which isolated workers sit and toil for productivity's sake. In the midst of such an environment—and from the perspective of an upraised balcony adjoining the room—Attia asks that the installation be seen from the point of view of the personal (through one-on-one videos conducted with subjects involved in the field of psychiatric pathology) as well as the political (through subject matter that fits within a broader social construct of productive systemization).



Kader Attia.
MICHAEL DANNER

Filmed over two years, the videos involve conversations Attia had with psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, philosophers, ethnographers, and religious practitioners from Africa, Europe, and North America, all discussing different approaches that Western and non-Western cultures have taken in their attempts to understand and treat mental-health disorders. Arranged into categories such as "Language," "Trance," "Magical Thinking," and "Reason and Politics," each video comprises a fragmented collection of conversations that connect various ways different cultures attempt to define complex matters of the mind.

At a push, Attia labels himself as a sculptor, but his main material might be juxtaposition. Before delving into the topic of psychoanalysis while in New York a few weeks ago installing his current show, he began with thoughts about modern conceptions of beauty. "It's fascinating to see how much this culture of hedonism, beauty, and eternal youth has been capitalized," Attia said, citing an example of how repair has been interpreted by a modern capitalist society. "Nowadays it's normal that people use very expensive products, creams, and Botox to kill cells and paralyze their skin."

Attia attributes this to an "unspoken ideology of flawlessness." But, in trying to remove wrinkles and return skin to an unblemished state, modern Western culture has developed a fundamental misunderstanding of repair. "It has something to do with this illusion that, in controlling the injury by removing it, you have superiority over time and history," he said.

Attia is no stranger to injury. Born in France in 1970 to Algerian parents, he grew up with dual nationalities, bouncing between countries where his mother and father separately resided. Later, he would spend four years living in the Congo as part of his Algerian non-military service. Through these experiences, Attia witnessed firsthand the physical and psychological toll of colonization. What he observed was that, unlike physical scars, marks of psychological injuries are immaterial and thus in need of different kinds of repair—a path that would later lead to *Reason's Oxymorons*.



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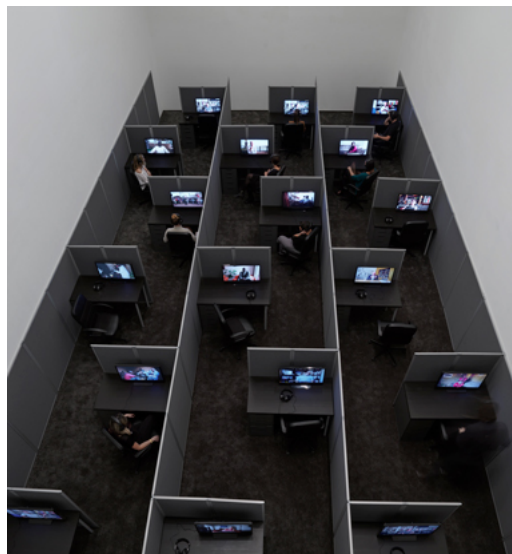
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“Subconscious,” the title of one of the installation’s 18 videos, is understood as a concept in very different ways by Western and non-Western societies. “In traditional non-Western societies they often attribute [the subconscious] to ancestors,” Attia said, noting how this belief continues to be used as a descriptive mechanism for explaining psychological illnesses like depression. The presence of such maladies are lent a supernatural quality, which may not directly solve the problem but does help patients living with the condition. “When I discovered that the legacy and power of ancestors is still present in Sub-Saharan Africa, it was really something. It’s this very deep and dense link—which still exists through a kind of animism—to traditional societies and the very darkest and primitive age we all come from.”



Kader Attia, *Reason's Oxymorons*, 2015, 18 films and installation of cubicles.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK AND HONG KONG

Comparing the efficacy of this line of thinking to psychoanalysis as each relates to possible forms of treatment, Attia became fascinated by one question: How do practitioners of traditional non-Western medicine effectively convince patients that their psychological suffering is rooted in something supernatural? The best answer he found came from a French ethnologist named Brigitte Derlon. In the video focused on the subconscious, Derlon explained to Attia that a person can be convinced of anything from ghosts to the spectral presence of ancestors when influenced by the cultural group that surrounds them. This suggestive notion led Attia to the conclusion that psychoanalysis, rather than an exact science, is best considered something more fluid and dynamic, influenced by contextual factors.

This realization is central to the purpose that guides *Reason's Oxymorons*. The piece, for Attia, is about avoiding easy categorization: the kind of proverbial cubicles that keep ideas and beliefs separated from each other. Offering his ideal for an alternative by way of example, Attia suggests that in a different society our understanding of psychiatric pathology would be treated as less “a science to heal disease or illness[and] more as a philosophy to understand.” By embracing this approach, Attia believes modern society would be better equipped to deal with social problems that continue to arise from our increasingly interconnected world.

Like much of Attia’s practice, then, *Reason's Oxymorons* can be read as a stand against rigidity—a point emphasized by Attia through his parting words: “Without repair, there would be no movement. I think repair is the movement. Descartes explained that life is movement, a change from one space and time to another. This is a fundamental understanding that applies from the arts to sciences.”



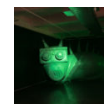
Kader Attia, *Hainamoration*, 2017, steel cable, mirror polished stainless steel, and ancient Sakalawa wooden sculpture from Madagascar.
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