

# Kader Attia. The Phantom Limbs in Art. By Clémentine Deliss, 2016

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*“Ceux qui sont morts ne sont jamais partis:*

*Ils sont dans l'ombre qui s'éclaire...”*

*(Birago Diop, “Les Souffles”, mars 1943)*

Since his seminal work on the *gueules cassées*, a two-channel projection that juxtaposed archival photographs of the mutilated faces of soldiers from WW1 with images of broken and mended ethnographic objects, Kader Attia has developed a unique continuum of inquiry between political, aesthetic, and architectural expressions of *repair*.<sup>[i]</sup> For Attia this word, with its mechanical, even domestic, connotations of stitching and fixing, extends beyond visible strategies of reparation and the discourse of restitution. He inverts the term to articulate the chaos that lies behind the internalised rendering of that which has been pathologically harmed or forcibly removed. Whether this wound is located on a person's face or embedded within the socio-political tissue of a continent or a faith, the process of repair generates ambivalence. For while it may succeed in eradicating signs of a damaged past, it also reconstitutes trauma through artificial means creating multiple somatic remainders and prosthetic monuments to that which is no longer there.<sup>[ii]</sup> Repair, in Attia's artistic vocabulary, denotes the endless agency of a chthonic, subterranean process of regeneration in contrast to a rationalist affirmation of progress.

Like an activist of the mind, he forges subtle and unexpected paths that penetrate the exclusive portals of occidental bibliophilia. His installations are recognised for their vast structures laden with volumes of twentieth century books and publications. Against these shelved remnants of modernist capital, he produces new unforeseeable dialogues. He manages to cross-fertilize advanced academia with meanings from the periphery by tapping into the experience and folk wisdom located in marginalised territories. Moreover, he articulates these exceptional dialogues through sculptural and poetic form evoking, in the words of Aby Warburg, the symbolic connection between a “culture of touch and a culture of thought”.<sup>[iii]</sup>

With their tactile geometry, Attia's sculptures, however immobile, are unusually kinetic. Steel shrapnel, mirror fragments, glass mosaic, wire mesh, copper filaments, iron staples, rubber, string, cardboard and wood together build the fallen matter that Attia engages with. Grand yet humble, like the offerings of a market-stall holder at the end of the day, these small goods, however desolate, represent the

world. In “Chaos + Repair = Universe” he stitches together the shards of coloured mirrors to build an improbable globe. Glimpsing through the gaps, a shiny multitude of autonomous elements appears, each with its distinctive colour, shape and geography. His allegorical construction becomes the *porte parole* of René Girard’s snowballing mechanism of mimetic desire, the mirror-jewels reflecting the spiralling void of consumerist craving, contagious, sharp-edged and inherently divisive.

Built from the “slips and scraps of history (that) know no hierarchy”<sup>[iv]</sup>, Kader Attia’s artworks address what he calls the “metaphysics of everyday objects”. Each thing, fabricated and manipulated by someone, bears the tangible biography of this person and their relations to others. He reinstates the signature of the modest man who fixes the broken calabash, adapting it with care so as to restore its original function. This workshop of life is condensed within a concrete gesture of the hand, expressed through the “minor science”<sup>[v]</sup> of everyday survival. This is far from the current cycle of “production-destruction”<sup>[vi]</sup>, with which we replace and update commodities at an inordinate speed of consumption. It is about the conservation of common histories, which like “congealed actions”<sup>[vii]</sup> are gently and poetically etched into the domestic object. Repair makes something operational once again, transforming its ontology in ways that the original maker had not predicated. Whether looped together by hand using the age-old method of embroidery, or soldered through robot-assisted nanotechnology, ultimately this corrective and recursive process produces the same outcome. The archetypal chain stitch of remedial surgery is repeated *ad infinitum*, its technicity updated in the eternal hope of improving the human condition. Attia’s practice speaks about the mythic relations between harm and healing, often identifying that which we prefer to ignore. He draws us back to the forensic qualities of daily existence located between the macro-politics of socio-religious collapse and the intimate injuries, ruptures and dislocations borne by individuals.

And so it can be argued that the exceptional capacity of Attia’s artworks is that they are intentionally fractured, made to reveal absent organs and missing parts, asymmetries needing to be equalised, or cognitive responses on the verge of being performed. His sculptures and collages incite the viewer to compensate for the epistemic black-outs, handicaps and penalties within visual art’s hierarchical replication of social and ethical injustices. Unrelenting, like the dogged pain of a phantom limb, his sculptures obliterate our critical distance. They inject us with a split-second placebo that both releases and manipulates our expectations. Before we can stop to think, we read Cubism’s tectonic reference to African masks in the modular cardboard packaging of electronic equipment.<sup>[viii]</sup> And yet Attia’s work is a far cry from any formal trickery or knee-jerk reaction. It’s about introducing a larger poetic and political frame around the dysfunctional relations of longing and violence that have qualified the building of empires across space and time.

Take the city of Ghardaia built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Mozabite architects in the Algerian M’zab valley and viewed as a miracle of engineering. Inspired by the writings of French anthropologist Marcel Mercier, Le Corbusier visited Ghardaia in 1931. There he discovered numerous design solutions, which he later reformulated for his *Cité Radieuse*. 70 modernist years (and several centuries) later, Attia outlandishly reconstructs a model of Ghardaia out of couscous grain. Like a castle made of sand, once exhibited in a museum, it threatens to crumble and dissolve, demanding impossible forms of reconstruction and conservation. This is where his methodology of analogical thinking becomes so acute. By employing a specific materiality gleaned from daily experience, he turns an aesthetic moment in colonial ideology on its head. The “couscous Ghardaia” reveals African-Berber, working-

class sources within French urban planning. This fragile, sculptural chimera represents the unseen neglect that weighs heavily upon Algeria's post-colonial modernity and is felt right through to the suburbs of Paris today.

So what happens when an artwork consciously invokes the viewer to compensate for the disequilibrium and absence that something or someone else has produced? By extension, what form of intellectual and aesthetic *supplement* is Kader Attia introducing through his work? Which sculptural syntax does he deploy in order to articulate the extended continuum that characterises the concept of "repair"? For Attia is fascinated by forms that transport their own history and, more specifically, that echo the human body with its somatic charge. Modernity's dogma of reparation, he suggests, is to revert to the perfect, to hunt for the authentic utopian organism. Cosmetic surgery, for example, seeks to erase the lines of human aging such that the intervention of the scalpel dissolves entirely. But no organ can be sutured without affecting another point in the body. If you stitch skin, you pierce it: you harm in order to heal. Through this incision, the injury is remediated: the subject transgresses its original wounded state and a new topology emerges. As Attia's investigations demonstrate, repair does not reduce the process of fracturing; it increases it, allowing meanings to proliferate beyond control.

It would be misleading to divide Kader Attia's practice into an anthropological and an artistic dimension. He doesn't seek to explain or contextualise but rather to generate new perspectives for the public. To do so, he splinters his artistic identity, cohabiting several disciplinary sectors in order to develop a *revelatory* technique, a choreography of relations between seemingly incongruous practices. Through his sculptures, collages, installations, performances and photography, Attia experiments with the limits and failures of analogical thinking. By creating constellations that are elliptical, he asks us to recognise the blind spots and chasms in our knowledge of the world's aesthetic practices. The correlations he sets up between ideas and things extend beyond the formalist affinities inscribed by Primitivism into twentieth century art and through which we have learned to accept correspondences between African masks and fauvist or expressionist painting. His work is an open system of "porous subjectivity".<sup>[ix]</sup> Rather than freeze-dry the status quo, he crafts tactile filters that remediate the damages of the past. A Sakalava funeral stake injured by time is embellished and repaired with small droplets of metal alloy; a Dogon mask acquires a shimmering and protective armour of mirrors. Here Attia performs a critique of the policing framework that seeks to control the discourse on African art today, bringing it back at every turn to a reasoning based on ethnicity and provenance. Instead he asks: Can we accept that we don't know enough? Can we find ways of working with lacunae and absences, the non-knowledge that surrounds these artists and their productions?

Kader Attia is probably the only contemporary artist to have repeatedly visited the extensive holdings of nineteenth century ethnographic museums with their vast collections of non-European art. He has entered the quasi-clandestine cabinets of Josephite missionaries and gained access to the secreted collections of the Vatican. Indeed, this is how we first met, when Attia came to the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt in 2012 to locate further examples of *damaged goods*. No other artist I can name has managed to infiltrate these guarded catacombs of material culture in such a systematic way. Attia has achieved this by identifying an apparently innocuous area of classification, one that has no status in the data bank. By requesting items that belong to the inexistent category of the "repaired object", he makes visible the chain of interdependency that links together different cultures and their practices. Neglected within the evolving canons of European art history,

the artefacts he selects represent epistemic amputees, specimens of histories that have been dismembered. Scattered around Europe, together they build a reservoir of aesthetic energy held in paralysis. The “spectro-poetic” [x] is engraved on their blighted bodies, rendered inaccessible in the vast stores of ethnographic museums. And so all those glass vitrines, shattered in the performance “Arab Spring”, indicate not only an individual's desperate attempt to break through the *techne* of colonial classification with its discourse of display and control. His action, as if opening Pandora's box, demonstrates the impotence and compromise of today's social and aesthetic revolutions.

Through his artworks, Kader Attia draws us into the double bind of pride and defiance that accompanies a history of loss and dispossession. And therein lies the contradiction that he seeks to reveal: the dilemma of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its residue of a modernist fascination for the soiled, festering underbelly of civilisation's discontents pitted against the contemporary heroism of a hygiene-centric, post-touch condition. His politically charged production draws our attention to the cyclical agonism between injury and repair. The subtraction of limbs borne by today's refugees from Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, and Syria who, mutilated and handicapped, have migrated to France and other European cities, symbolises not only a breach within the social order, but illustrates the psycho-pathological scars of centuries of religious strife and industrial exploitation.[xi] Apparitions loom behind the secrets of the past and, when suppressed, only discharge further ghosts and phantom references.

Adamantly physical in its execution yet highly conceptual, Kader Attia's art offers the public a dynamic conduit between political, social and cognitive fields. The normative frameworks of anthropology, neuroscience and medicine are twisted into a new cord of poetic traction. Not unlike the ideogrammatic poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire or Pierre Albert-Birot when he writes, “Nous sommes des circonférences”[xii], or even the lyrics of Lou Reed in “I'll be your mirror”, Attia's artworks perform a never-ending surgery on language, image and volume. His concept of the phantom limb in art is situated between Paul Valéry's “objet ambiguë” and Marcel Duchamp's “Ready-Made”. From Valéry we retain the poetic uncertainty of meanings, the blurring of nature and culture, the object at the edge of the unknown.[xiii] With Duchamp, the artefact is interchangeable, manufactured industrially and quintessentially anonymous. In contrast, for Kader Attia, a repaired object remains an *organ*. It displays the active DNA of its own morphology, the wilful marks of appropriation, and the poetic indentures of time's passing.

And so it is that Kader Attia's practice as an artist speaks about an intense preoccupation with aesthetic and psychological imbalance, with the disequilibrium created by an ideology of perfection and consumption. Whether we are gazing at stapled shards of mirror that emit only a partial image, or contemplating the bricolage of a cardboard chassis on a scooter, Attia points us to the ideological flaws and material frays that define our conjoined, post-colonial present. His installations appear smooth and coherent, his objects seductive and resolved, yet it is the sensitivity with which he articulates the troubling disfiguration of history and the fracturing of individual memory that makes his body of work so contemporaneous, rigorous, and poetic at once.

Clémentine Deliss

[i] A particularly succinct rendition of the notion of continuum can be found in Kader Attia's installation „Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder“, Whitechapel Gallery, London, November 2013-2014.

[ii] Interestingly, both Carl Einstein and Frantz Fanon in their very distinctive ways discuss the phenomenon of fragmentation. Carl Einstein takes on a more psychoanalytic approach, writing that, “a far-reaching condition is concentrated in the fragment. (...) This is ecstatic isolation. By decapitation and dismemberment, one isolates that which is decisive: concentrated possession and sadism.” See « L'enfance néolithique (Hans Arp) », *Documents* II, 8, 1930, translated by Charles W. Haxthausen, in *October* 105, Summer 2003.

Frantz Fanon, in contrast, speaks of “tinctures of decay” and “mental disorders” that occur when one denies “the other person all attributes of humanity”, in other words, a wholeness to the conception of reality. See Frantz Fanon, “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” from “The Wretched of the Earth”, 1965, translated into English by Constance Farrington, reproduced in Kader Attia, “Repair”, Black Jack Editions, 2014, p. 436.

[iii] “Between a culture of touch and a culture of thought is the culture of symbolic connection.”

Aby Warburg, *Images from the Region of the Pueblo Indians*, 1923

[iv] Walter Benjamin, « ARCHIVE – Images, Texts, Signs”, translated by Ester Leslie, edited by Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, Erdmut Wizisla. Verso, 2007, p. 32

[v] In “Metaphysiques Cannibales. Lignes d'anthropologie structural”, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro describes his initial wish to write a book modelled on Deleuze & Guattari's „Anti-Oedipe“, In his case, he speculates that the academic narcissism of occidental anthropology might yield to the status of a « minor science », humble to its subject: the very people whom it studies. PUF, 2009, p. 3

[vi] See Philippe Dagen, « Destruction et Réparation » in *Kader Attia, Sacrifice and Harmony*, MMK, Kerber, 2016, p. 82

[vii] « Les artefacts possèdent une ontologie ambiguë : ce sont des objets, mais ils indiquent nécessairement un sujet, car ils sont comme des actions congelées, des incarnations matérielles d'une intentionnalité non matérielle. » Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, “Métaphysiques Cannibales”, PUF, 2009, p.28

[viii] « [I] nous semble que les formes tectoniques, n'étant pas mesurables, sont les formes les plus humaines, parce qu'elles sont les signes d'un homme visuellement actif agençant lui-même son univers et refusant d'être l'esclave des formes données. » Carl Einstein, *Notes sur le cubisme*, in Sebastian Zeidler, « Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso: Carl Einstein's Ontology of Art at the Time of *Documents* », published in *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 7, 2007.

[ix] Serge Grusinski interviewed in « Reason's Oxymorons », Kader Attia, Video installation with 22 films at Galerie Nagel Draxler, 2015.

[x] Jacques Derrida in « Spectres de Marx », Éditions Galilée, 1993

[xi] René Girard writes, “Le corps humain est un système de différences anatomiques. Si l’infirmité même accidentelle, inquiète, c’est parce qu’elle donne une impression de dynamisme déstabilisant. Elle paraît menacer le système en tant que tel. On cherche à la circonscrire mais on ne peut pas ; elle affole autour d’elle les différences qui deviennent monstrueuses, elles se précipitent, se télescopent, se mélangent, à la limite menacent de s’abolir. La différence hors système terrifie parce qu’elle suggère la vérité du système, sa relativité, sa fragilité, sa mortalité ! » in « Le Bouc Emissaire », Grasset 1982, p.34.

[xii] Pierre Albert-Birot, «Poème au mort», La Lune ou le livre des poèmes, 1924, tiré de Pierre Albert-Birot, Poésie 1916-1924, Mortemart: Rougerie, 1992, p. 199-202.

[xiii] Paul Valéry writes, “Le hasard, dans mes mains, vint placer l’objet du monde le plus ambigu. Et les réflexions infinies qu’il me fit faire, pouvaient aussi bien me conduire à ce philosophe que je fus, qu’à l’artiste que je n’ai pas été.” In “EUPALINOS ou l’Architecte”, 1921, p.49

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