

# Kader Attia & Ralph Rugoff in Conversation, 2019

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RR: What was the first sculpture that you made?

KA: Probably *The Dream Machine*, which was a vending machine that contained various products branded with a halal logo that I designed. I made it just after 9/11. In France at that time, young migrants from Muslim backgrounds were looking for a way to embrace consumerism, but through this sort of Islamic filter. For me, this was something new, because I grew up in a world where this did not exist: we didn't eat pork, but we didn't use halal, either. But at the end of the 1990s the teenagers from the part of the society that I come from – the French suburbs that were home to a large migrant population from North Africa and Southern Africa – were looking for a narrative that would speak to them and that they could feel a part of, rather than the official national narrative promoted in schools and the media. You'd go to school and read Victor Hugo and La Rochefoucauld to find big ideas. They were very important writers, but I discovered later that there were also tremendous French writers from the former colonies who were not taught in the schools in France, even though in some areas the majority of children are from African countries. Writers like Kateb Yacine from Algeria, Leopold Senghor and Boris Diop from Senegal, and the Moroccan poet Saida Menebhi. In terms of pop culture, there was a 'born in the ghetto' trend within urban fashion brands from the USA that had a strong impact on French Muslim consumerist society at that time. One of the most interesting was FUBU, which means 'For Us, By Us' – a black, hip-hop streetwear fashion brand. I wanted to take this a step further and explore this eagerness to create your own consumer universe, so I created the Halal clothing brand.

RR: How did you present your fashion brand – in a gallery exhibition?

KA: It was exhibited in a private gallery in Paris, and then in Nice at the Villa Arson. It was presented as a shop, a real shop, with 'Halal' sweatshirts, hoodies and jeans, also sexy things, including 'Halal' g-strings. It was crazy.

RR: Could people actually buy any of this merchandise?

KA: No, nothing was for sale – it was a political statement. I did register the name, however, and later I received many offers from companies to buy it – but I never sold it. Many young people commented on my Halal clothing on social media, some of them saying it was the biggest sin to put this holy word on clothes, and others saying, 'No, I'm proud of it, it's great. Halal is us and we are also now part of society – if I can buy one of these I will take it and wear it proudly.' The word of mouth was so strong that journalists contacted me and asked for interviews. That was the idea of the project – it was a sort of a cynical action to get a response from journalists. All of the French articles were Islamophobic, saying this is a brand created by a

Muslim, and it will encourage radicalisation, et cetera. This was in 2003 – so that tells you that the current rhetoric about radicalisation and Islam is nothing new.

RR: Before the Halal project you were mainly taking photographs. Did you start out taking pictures in and around the neighbourhood where you grew up?

KA: Yes, I was always taking pictures there. I grew up in a neighbourhood of concrete buildings – but behind these towers there was a huge area of forest and a farm. I remember how much time I spent there when I was a kid, looking at the landscape, drawing it. It was just a small piece of land, but in this very rough, poor, concrete place, it probably helped to create my desire for dreaming. I used to run alone in that forest, and I think my teenage years were made bearable because of the presence of nature. I don't know if I would have been the same if I had grown up totally surrounded by concrete architecture.

RR: When did you realise that making pictures was something you wanted to pursue more seriously?

KA: I think my first photographs were of architecture, taken in Mexico when I was travelling. I was 19 or 20 at the time and I was fascinated by the Spanish colonial architecture there. But I have to say that even though I was interested in the texture of walls and the shapes of buildings, I've always been taking pictures of people. I'm definitely a humanist photographer. When you photograph people – whether the person is posing for you or not – there are so many things going on: your curiosity for other cultures, other generations, other types of people; you are also trying to understand how they think. After Mexico I went to Algeria many times, and also to the Congo, where I took portraits of people in Brazzaville. When I was back in Paris after more than two years travelling, it happened that I was crossing the street one very sunny afternoon and I heard behind me, in the middle of this crowd in the street, two men talking like women in Arabic. I turned around and discovered the two men were dressed as women, wearing skirts and stilettos. People were staring at them but they didn't care. They were just so free and brave that I decided to follow them. After walking for half an hour we ended up in a small, very bizarre café, full of transgenders from Algeria, which was for me, like, 'Wow!' I didn't know that this world existed.

RR: You had never noticed any transgender people when you visited Algeria?

KA: At that time – this was 1998 – Algeria was in the middle of a civil war between the Islamists and the army. And to be someone who looked different could mean death. Many of the transgender people that I met were in Paris to escape from the risk of being killed in Algeria. So that was how it came about that I started to photograph this group of transgender immigrants – completely by chance, but also through curiosity. In addition, I felt there was something important to do, and that I needed to do something because I was lucky enough to be there. I think this notion of curiosity is very important in my practice, because I really like to share not only my experiences but also a non-objectified view of people who are unknown to the mainstream. When I was working on these photographs over a two-year period, my aim was to show the viewer something they had no idea about.

RR: Why did you call this series of photographs *The Landing Strip*?

KA: 'The landing strip' is the slang way that they referred to where they were working as prostitutes in the outskirts of Paris, along these avenues that are so big

and so flat that they look like landing strips. They used to say, 'I arrived here directly.' It was a very tough area.

RR: Were they comfortable with you taking pictures of them? I can imagine that if you are an illegal immigrant and working as a transgender prostitute, you are probably worried about getting the wrong kind of attention.

KA: I think it was more difficult for me at first to gain their confidence because I was Algerian, and they were all worried I would send images to their families. It took about six months of building up trust before I could make the first pictures. I started out by trying to assist them with their legal efforts to stay in France, because they were all illegal immigrants. You can imagine the danger they faced: if they were arrested by the police and sent back to Algeria dressed as women, they might have been murdered on arrival. These Algerian transgender people are very strong. Few of them have pimps. They also have different ways to enjoy life – one of them is to have a nice big party for their birthday, but the birthday is like a ritual, either for presenting a new boyfriend or to entertain the audience with the love story that they are living with the boyfriend. As we became friends, they asked me to become the photographer of their parties and fake weddings. I know how to do wedding photographs, of course, with a flash and a nice camera. I did this because it helped me become part of the whole family. And for me it was a way to illustrate the good moments in their lives, because I was also shooting scenes of prostitution and their difficult day-to-day existence. I wanted to represent the whole picture of their lives, to show that even illegal migrants working as transgender prostitutes have moments of joy, of happiness. For me, this is about being respectful. When we represent minority communities like this one, we need to include images that do not show them as victims.

RR: Many of your pictures portray very intimate scenes, and almost feel like they were taken by a member of the family. How did you manage to create this sense of closeness with your subjects?

KA: Since I was a kid I've always had a sort of empathy with the pain of others. It's in my nature. And I really do think that this empathy is often expressed in my work. With *The Landing Strip* photographs, it's the only explanation for why I was so interested: I was never intrigued by the glamour – though they are glamorous of course – but to be honest, they really touched me. Some of them have very tough stories. Especially in Muslim societies, they are often the perfect scapegoat. So when I talk about making humanist photographs, it means creating pictures that convey a certain respect for someone and trying to do as much as I can to retain the dignity of that person.

RR: You took approximately 2,000 photographs over this period. How did you finally decide that the project was finished?

KA: With a project like that you do not decide. It was very much a life project, and I do not think it is finished even today because their struggle is ongoing. Last January, I helped to organise a symposium on the relationship between prostitution and colonialism, and some Algerian transgender prostitutes came.

RR: Did you identify with the way these illegal immigrants risked publically defying social norms to fashion their own identity?

KA: I completely identify myself as a rebel, and I think transgender people are

rebels. For me, this rebel attitude is definitely what makes a man or a woman into a bigger person. If we do not resist society, we become its slaves. This is why I have always been interested in political activism and why people's revolts, rights movements, protest and demonstration are an important aspect of my work – lately, for example, fighting for migrants' rights or exposing political injustice. And what I have discovered so far is that both transgender people and people like me are alone when we first decide to struggle. Of course then you discover the communities that are also resisting. During this period the transgender prostitutes became like my sisters. And if I was touched by them, it was partly because they were the incarnation of being alone and trying to establish a social group just to protect themselves.

RR: Was it difficult at the time to find a gallery willing to show these photographs?

KA: When I showed the first pictures to a fancy magazine in France, a Leftist one, the art director said, 'Oh, they're very nice, they're beautiful – but an Arab girl on the cover of a magazine in Paris? This will never happen. A transvestite? No way, darling.' Later I tried to show this work in many places, including galleries in Paris, and they all said no. Finally, one day I decided that I would show them myself.

RR: So would you consider that to be your first art exhibition?

KA: Yes, definitely. I transformed my small apartment in Belleville and painted it all black except for one section of white wall where I projected a slide show of these pictures. Then I covered the whole neighbourhood with advertisements for the show. And all the outsiders of Paris came! I should have photographed all of them. I did this every evening for three months and as word-of-mouth spread, activists and art-historians also came, and I met many incredible people.

RR: Most of your later video projects also feature groups that find themselves apart from the mainstream of society in one way or another, including amputees and people with mental health issues. You seem deeply interested in the experience of people who are different and so are made to feel like outsiders in their own society.

KA: I'm very much affected by the notion of humiliation. It's extremely important for me to show that people from former colonies – for example, Algeria, where my family comes from – belong to generations struggling against humiliation. In Arabic, there is a word 'hogra', which means humiliation. When Arabic speakers talk about a former colonial leader they say, 'They've humiliated us'. The Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama, who I interviewed for my video dealing with phantom limb syndrome, says that colonisation is exploitation, is rape, is expropriation – but colonisation is also humiliation.

RR: Did you personally experience humiliation growing up in Paris?

KA: Yes, of course. Among other things, I encountered racists insulting me and saying things like 'Go back to your country'. It's not by chance that I work with so much anger and passion on the subjects that are addressed in my work. We are surrounded by a continuum of humiliation in society and this produces monsters sometimes, like terrorists who feel they have nothing left to lose. From my perspective, our world today cannot be understood without taking into account the psychological and emotional aspects of society. That's why I talk with a lot of psychiatrists for my projects. I'm also interested in schizophrenia and mental disease, because to some degree a mentally diseased person is alone. But within

the context of their own illness, they make sense.

RR: You have spoken about the ongoing critique in your work of the West's obsession with classifying and ordering knowledge in tightly logical systems. This critique animates some of your works that address the modernist housing estates in the Paris suburbs where you grew up.

KA: The way that post-war social housing for migrants and workers, called 'Grands ensembles' in France, was pushed by the rationalisation of space and time incarnates a crucial aspect of modernity: the so-called promise of equality and comfort. This has failed and it did so because of the obsession with creating a controllable tool for the nation state. I often think about the Panopticon when I am doing research on social housing. State surveillance of the 'proletariat' has always been a continuation of the colonial project that experimented on populations in other countries. Indeed, in many respects colonialism was the laboratory in which the design of the French suburbs was developed. Right after the independence of its former colonies, the French state knew that to grow their economy they would need a very cheap source of labour, which they would have to control with a national hegemonic narrative. French social housing landscapes form both a panopticon and also a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, and this is a symptom of a complex control machinery which started with the accumulation of objects in cabinets of curiosity and continues today with the accumulation of people in these open-sky jails.

RR: You mentioned *mise-en-abyme*, which in art history refers to placing an image within a similar image, but the term also conjures the common experience of standing between two mirrors and perceiving a seemingly infinite series of reflections. This uncanny device is referenced in a number of your works, from wall paintings and sculptures to some of your photographs that depict housing estates as landscapes of repetition.

KA: For me, it is one of the most sophisticated ways of communicating emotion. In French, the term relates to the idea of a putting into darkness, of endless depth as well as repetition. So we can see different kinds of *mise-en-abyme*: the kind in the neighbourhood where I grew up, a landscape filled with similar modern and postmodern buildings, and the kind that plays with endless depth. The importance of this depth for me is its incarnation of nothingness, which produces a sort of anguish that relates to many things that I'm working on.

RR: I wonder if this *mise-en-abyme* device – which was used in the early twentieth century on commercial packaging for a number of popular food products – also illuminates anxieties around mass production, the endless multiplication of identical objects that reshaped the character of life in industrial societies.

KA: I think that my upbringing was shaped not only by the architecture of the French suburbs but also by the society of consumption. The next step, which we are living through today, is digital, which is even scarier. It is an example of the disappearance of physicality. The industrial revolution produced real goods, but today the physicality of human relations is dissolving. For me, this is important because emotion is physical, not quantifiable, measurable, or digital. It's part of our deepest elementary instinct – the gregarious instinct to gather together in groups.

RR: Your use of mirrors in a number of works also relates to the power of *mise-en-abyme* effects to simultaneously fascinate and unsettle a viewer.

KA: I have always been a bit scared by the depth of two mirrors facing each other. But it also fascinates me because it is a technology that has existed for thousands of years and has been used as a magical, symbolic, ambivalent form. The early exchanges between Portuguese sailors and the Congolese involved the exchange of mirrors. There was an interesting text on this by Frantz Fanon in which he describes how the Portuguese people thought the locals were really stupid to be exchanging ivory for fragments of mirrors but for the Congolese people these were rare items. For them it was a translation of values, they already had a lot of gold and ivory.

RR: That history seems to surface in those works where you tile over African masks with mirror fragments.

KA: These works have a different source. In 2009, I visited the exhibition *Picasso and the Masters* at the Grand Palais in Paris, which included works by artists like Caravaggio, El Greco, Paul Cézanne... all of whom influenced Picasso. But there was not a single African mask. We know that African masks clearly influenced Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and the work of some of his contemporaries such as Georges Braque. Omitting them from this exhibition was an insult to the traditional art of Africa. In response to this exhibition the first thing I did was to make a work that simply showed to the audience how Cubism was invented. I took an old mask that I found in a market in Dakar – not a Senegalese one but a copy of a traditional Dogon mask. I plastered on mirror pieces following the angles of the mask. After I had put on five pieces, I looked at the mask and saw myself completely fragmented, so I continued to cover the whole surface. This mirror mask is showing everybody who looks at it a Cubist portrait of themselves. Its reference to the influence of African art on Picasso's art is very simple and direct.

RR: In a number of your vitrine installations (pp. 118–26), African masks are placed alongside taxidermied animals such as cheetahs and monkeys. In these juxtapositions, are you recalling the way that museums of 'natural' history in the West traditionally presented 'primitive' cultures alongside exhibits of flora and fauna?

KA: In many of my works, especially when it comes to the complexity of dealing with the aesthetics and ethics of colonialism, I ironically re-enact what has been done historically. The vitrines are depicting what has been erected, worshipped and celebrated by museums as a way to explain the world, juxtaposing native populations with exotic animals. But for me it's more than that. It's very important to be clear with this use of material that carries the legacy of colonialism, racism and the exploitation of other societies. In these vitrines I juxtapose animals that are imaginatively depicted by masks or wooden sculptures from traditional societies with stuffed animals produced for people of power in Western cultures, for whom this literal form of representation – of making dead animals into life-like specimens – confirms a sense of mastery over objective existence. This says a lot about human nature, and what we need to keep an eye on: our physical relationship with the other and with creation.

RR: Some of these vitrines allude to acts of looking: a taxidermied animal seems to gaze intently at a mask, or stuffed birds are placed alongside optical instruments like telescopes. These scenarios bring to mind the notion that the vitrine itself is a kind of virtual optical technology, a display mechanism that dematerialises objects and stages them as images consumed behind a glass screen.

KA: I like the fact you evoke this, because my fascination with mirrors also comes out of this desire to look. I come from a culture where 'looking at' is very important, including looking with malicious intent. In North African culture this is called the Evil Eye. And interestingly, here we are back once more to this question of physicality. The devotion that we give to objects and artworks, to the process of making an exhibition – what is it all about in the end? It's that we want to be together. That's why I want to call this exhibition *The Museum of Emotion*. I hope that we can open up physicality again as a medium of collective experience.

RR: You began to explore the aftermath of physical injury, and different cultural ideas about repair, with your major installation *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012; pp. 80–85, 87). A key and disturbing element in this work is the group of historical images that depict severe facial injuries suffered by soldiers in the First World War, images you also explored in *Open Your Eyes* (2010; below and pp. 76–79). How did you get interested in working with these portraits of men whose faces – the visual marker of our identity – had been brutally altered by violence?

KA: It was while I was doing research into the ritual scarification practiced in some traditional African cultures that I started to remember what I call the 'broken faces', these soldiers from the First World War. I'd seen images of them in the past, but I hadn't looked carefully. Across seven years of research, reviewing thousands of images of these broken faces, I discovered that in the early years of the war the body retained a significant presence of the injury. The French and German armies were so overwhelmed by the number of injuries that they sent nurses onto the battlefield to sew up the faces of soldiers before they took them away. I then discovered that towards the end of the war, doctors evolved new techniques of repair – they began to work with sculptors and painters to imagine the missing jaw, for example, and to build resin prosthetics and paint them in skin tones. The repair had moved much closer to a fantasy of modernity, based on the Latin etymology of repair, *reparare*, which means going back to the original state. The First World War is the most interesting, significant event in modernity – probably the first collapse of modernity. And the ambition of giving back the injured body its original shape was tied up with this modernist vision. That is how society works now – we are fascinated with staying younger, removing wrinkles, all traces of aging. For me, this myth of the perfect is like the prehistory of the world we're living in today. The notion of beauty is very important in this work too.

RR: The other main components in this installation are displays of damaged and repaired traditional carved masks from Africa. You placed these masks in proximity to the images of damaged human faces as if setting up an equivalency between them. The juxtaposing of these two types of elements, which no normal Western museum would have put together, is very unsettling.

KA: What interested me with this project was how to connect the facial injuries of soldiers with these broken artefacts that have been treated and repaired in a non-modern or even anti-modern way. In Western society, the pinnacle of repair has become to erase all signs of the injury (though these pictures show this wasn't always the case). In traditional societies, it's the opposite: they have ways to fix an injury that also keeps it visible. I've always been fascinated by traces, by the way that objects are used by time – broken, rusted, and so on – and as I continued my research I also became fascinated by this difference between traditional and modern modes of repair: one that acknowledges the passing of time, and the other one that aims to deny the effects of time.

RR: So you're contrasting two aesthetics – one that embraces the traces of activity, and another that is trying to conceal or erase them.

KA: In the course of my research I discovered that when you look at these kinds of objects that I've included in *The Repair*... you're not only looking at a repair but an injury. The word 'repair' is an oxymoron. Every repair is entangled with the injury – you cannot separate the two.

RR: Museums, of course, typically look askance at historical objects that have been repaired, as if they had lost their original meaning and were no longer 'authentic'. By showcasing repaired artefacts in your installation, you raise a question about how institutions view the damaged works in their own collections...

KA: When I had a residency at the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C., the first question I asked of their anthropologists was, 'Do you have a category for repaired objects in the database?' Databases in such museums are huge: they have categories you have never even thought about. But I was surprised to find out they didn't have one for repair. Later, a woman who had worked there for years showed me some of the repaired objects they had in storage, which were not easy to find. They had amazing objects, like a mask from Congo covered by a piece of tin metal torn from a milk box. For me these repairs are not only smart, they also have a lot to say. I think the fact that anthropologists from the West have completely neglected these objects is a sign; it explains something. It shows how much Western museography has been colonising these objects.

RR: The dramatic lighting for your installation and the way you group and display the various images and objects seems to refer to the theatrical presentations of old-fashioned history and natural history museums.

KA: For me that style of presentation was ironic, it was partly a critique of the modern obsession with classification. When I use the word 'modern' here, I'm talking about the period following the rise of the age of reason, which saw the development of forms of certainties surrounding knowledge – what we today call epistemology. I'm critiquing those social sciences that claim to control and understand the world better than other ways of thinking, just by classifying it.

RR: You talked earlier about the cult of the original object, which you see as a crucial symptom of a dysfunctional modernism. You approach this subject from a very different angle in your video *Reflecting Memory* (2016; right and pp. 96–103), which explores – with great sensitivity – the difficult subject of amputation and the phenomenon of 'phantom limb' syndrome. Would you say that the video also explores our attachment to this idea of the original object – in this case, the intact human body?

KA: I think the video is definitely about the fact that the absence is painful. In Germany you don't say 'phantom limb' or, like in French, *membre fantôme*: in German it's *Phantomschmerzen* – 'phantom pain'. What is interesting is that this absence of the missing limb calls for repair through pain: what you feel when it hurts is actually your brain building the feeling of the pain so that you ask for repair to stop. For me, the video is very much about the repair. In the end you are left wondering if repair is even possible or if the injury is ultimately irreparable.

RR: On one level, phantom limb syndrome is a very uncanny phenomenon: you are

being haunted by a ghost that was once part of your own body.

KA: The neurologist Boris Cyrulnik says that it's like losing someone with whom you have lived for many years. At the end of the film there is this moment where they are talking about the difficulty of mourning someone. And Boris says there are two ways to repair the pain of mourning. On the one hand, culture: art, literature, films, creating things. And on the other hand, affections: you have to liberate affection. Boris, who lost his mother and father in the Holocaust, is actually more of an idealist than some other people. The American scholar Huey Copeland gives an interesting answer at another point in the video, saying that for him intense grief is a visceral thing you cannot repair. And the film hangs between these two directions – on one hand there is the possibility of repairing, on the other hand irreparable grief. So my film was really an ongoing research process carried out through discussions with different people, and including poetic images in which there reside no particular answers. I really took care to make sure that *Reflecting Memory* ends without a moralistic sense of certainty... it is definitely not like a film from the History Channel.

RR: Your video also explores phantom limb syndrome as a possible metaphor for memories of cultural trauma – in a society, for example, which has isolated or amputated some particular part of the larger social body.

KA: When I worked on this film, it started out as a form of research. I was asking historians, anthropologists and psychiatrists if they thought we can compare the trauma of the phantom limb not only with the huge missing part of a society where there has been genocide or extreme racism, but also with the amputation of its knowledge of colonisation. I was not expecting a single answer but all of them said, 'Of course, yes, we can.' Fethi Benslama said, 'We have to be careful because in psychoanalysis and psychiatry we should not use simple metaphors, but it works in this case.' One of the reasons he said it *is* comparable is because sometimes the phantom limb cannot be repaired – there is no effective treatment to stop the pain.

RR: Like much of your work, this project involved an extensive research process – you interviewed anthropologists, psychiatrists, ethnologists, sociologists, plastic surgeons as well as amputees. But unlike the output of many 'research-based' artists, your work transforms the research into something emotionally as well as intellectually compelling.

KA: Research projects should not sweat the researches. This is why I was very happy when Fethi Benslama told me: 'I really like this film, Kader, because it's not a boring film. This is what we psychoanalysts need... Take the average book about psychoanalysis – if you are not a psychoanalyst you won't read it.' He said that the film tells us much more about the psyche than many essays about psychoanalysis, and in a very simple and poetic way.

RR: Your ability to immerse yourself in long processes of research seems to reflect the curiosity you spoke of earlier.

KA: I am interested in ways of learning constantly. I'm not talking about knowledge as encyclopaedia – I'm convinced by forms of knowledge that escape academia. I'm talking about modes of thinking and making correlations that are elliptical processes, and that lead you somewhere new. I think my research into the repair, for example, is something significant that will stay – and not only in my work. I have the feeling that I have brought to light something very important.

RR: For me, your work that most explicitly references research is the 18-channel video work *Reason's Oxymorons* (2014; p. 61), which explores Western and non-Western approaches to treating mental illness. You created an office-like installation that resembled a research centre or mediatheque.

KA: With all the office cubicles in that installation, as well as the repetition of desks and the screens, I was wondering how to make sense of the times we're living in by ironically representing the modern mania for order that is driving all societies, by exaggerating its aesthetics. At the same time I included many videos of African people talking, sometimes very academically, and sometimes not. This is what I'm willing to do much more today – give a place to non-Western and non-modern forms of thinking. I want to contribute to a critique of modernity by really making a space for those voices.

RR: You recently made a video trilogy – *Shifting Borders* (2018) – that explores different ways people deal with post-traumatic stress disorders in Korea and Vietnam. These three videos – *The Paradoxes of Modernity*, *Recycling Colonialism* and *Catharsis: The Living and the Dead are Looking for Their Bodies* – add a new chapter to your exploration of notions of repair. You seem especially interested here in the therapeutic role played by traditional spiritual beliefs as well as the importance of collective acknowledgement in healing socially-related trauma.

KA: I've always been interested in the way that before colonialism and the modernisation that happened at the end of the nineteenth century, humanity had been using traditional forms of healing that had lasted for thousands of years. In the film *Catharsis*, a psychiatrist talks about a case connected to the Korean Sewol Ferry disaster of 2014. One family received the luggage belonging to their eighteen-year-old son who had died in the sinking boat. The mother wanted to throw the luggage away but the father kept it, and put it on the passenger seat of his car every day and talked to it. One day, they met with a psychiatrist and they decided to open it. It was not easy. The psychiatrist opened it with the wife, and there was the son's school uniform. They started to cry, and the psychiatrist had to admit that they needed the help of a spiritual healer. This openness to traditional belief systems is an interesting thing that I found in Asia. Even as they have completely transformed their economies, they have been able to adapt traditional legacies to deal with present situations. In Vietnam, I was very much struck by the worshipping of the Goddess of the Three Realms, which is still practiced today even though it was banned by the Communist party after the war. When you visit a medium in Vietnam who heals somebody who has been possessed by a dead US or French soldier, they take it seriously. I think it works because their religions are much more tolerant than Islam or the Judeo-Christian religions; they are animist, much more spongy. I have seen ancestor shrines in Vietnam that include representations of Christ alongside Ho Chi Minh and General Võ Nguyên Giáp.

RR: Besides offering a postcolonial critique, do you think your art can also play a kind of healing role by helping us to see groups of wounded people in a different light, and also helping them to see themselves in new ways?

KA: Until a couple of years ago, I never thought of that. But after making my video installations *Reflecting Memory* and *Reason's Oxymorons*, I began to receive letters from people who were affected by stories in these works. There is an American guy who wrote me an email about *Reflecting Memory*, which he said he'd seen four times. He is an amputee who lost his leg in Vietnam during the war. When I make my videos, I go out and meet with all kinds of people. I'm a storyteller, and I'm a

storyteller who tells the story of others. In the *Shifting Borders* films, I found some truly remarkable individuals who had experienced tremendous suffering; both myself and my interpreter were crying during one of the interviews. The shamans and the traumatised people who you see in these films, they are not academics, they are simple people and what they are saying touches all of us.

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