



Kader Attia, *Correspondance*, 2003 Installation 2 videos, 30 silver prints Courtesy the artist and Musée National de l'Histoire et des Cultures de l'Immigration, Paris Photo credit: Kader Attia

## **Asia Cotemporary Art Week (ACAW) 2017 FIELD REVIEW ISSUE 2: MIDDLE EAST**

### **KADER ATTIA AND LA COLONIE: The Art of Reappropriation By Chayma Drira**

A black and white photograph captured in secret. In the foreground, it is impossible to distinguish blurred facial features of a young man who does not dare to reveal his gaze. There is a modesty in the revelation and impression of the subject. This is the image of exile that makes one away from themselves... In the background is the solid concrete of towers and housing projects locating an excluded space. An environment,

tinged with a sweet melancholy, stands out immediately. Youth is often photographed in motion, always re-developed, never frozen. *Correspondance* (2003)<sup>[1]</sup> is an early photographic installation by Kader Attia, reflecting a major thread in his later work: the quest for one's self; the identity separated between Algeria and France. These thirty photographs are from Attia's own family album. Hanging on strings with clothespins, they restore the ruins of time and that of a family separated by two shores of the Mediterranean Sea. *Correspondance* is an intimate work located in-between, on the edge of here and elsewhere, where borders waver.

Kader Attia is a French artist of Algerian origin and descent, born in 1970 in Dugny, a suburban part of Paris. Born into an immigrant family, Attia grew up in Garges-les-Gonesses, a popular town known for its diversity of population. It is precisely this interracial mixture that inspires Attia for an aesthetic deeply marked by colonization and its consequent effects. For example, take the model for the fortress of Mzab, a city the artist built using seeds of couscous to represent Ghardaïa. Located in the southern part of Algeria, the architecture of this ancient city later inspired Le Corbusier for the construction of many large Parisian complexes.<sup>[2]</sup>

Through his multifaceted and metaphorical work, Kader Attia, who studied at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, continues to question the present and the past often with poetry and humor. Particularly, his photographic installations reflect the re-appropriation of spaces by a resistant aesthetic and repair. He summons the traumatic memory between France and Algeria to suggest transformation of the imaginary. The lack of national consensus on the Algerian war in the French society is reflected in the persistence of a spirit of revenge—carried out by the rightist ideology—and to anxiety towards Muslim identity. According to the French historian Benjamin Stora, these behaviors reflect the existence of a “white communitarianism” among certain French people who are worried about the emergence of a multicultural society.<sup>[3]</sup> Furthermore, the expert on the Algerian war also points out the institutionalization of the “mechanisms of forgetting” in France, a perspective that Kader Attia attempts to exhume through an aesthetic of reconstruction and rehabilitation as a form of symbolic compensation for the children of postcolonial immigrants.

Issues related to the diaspora nourish his reflections and often guide him towards a multimedia approach similar to that of the ethnologist, constructing a social tribute to North African immigration. Hence, in 2004, he transformed Kamel Mennour Gallery

into a ready-to-wear clothing store with a fashion line for casual wear named Hallal, investigating the identity conflict faced by immigrants of Maghrebi descent in France.<sup>[4]</sup> Hallal reflects the Muslim displacement and the new way of understanding Islam while facing challenges brought up against pursuing the traditions brought in from the motherland.

In his work, Kader Attia constructs a space where differences and imperfections could be expressed and interacted without marginalization. Thus, Attia, the winner of the Marcel Duchamp prize in 2016, opened La Colonie, a center for multidisciplinary programming under a title that particularly evokes the wake of current identity conflicts. Within months, this three-story former nightclub has turned into a key forum for ideas in the heart of Paris. The space has a soaring ceiling with an iron canopy visible from the middle of the ground floor; vintage leather chairs accentuate the atmosphere that recalls the decolonization era. Located in the cosmopolitan Gare du Nord neighborhood, La Colonie displays a minimalist style. Its hybridity reminds coffee shops in Berlin where Kader Attia currently lives. Exhibitions, performances, screenings, concerts, and philosophical discussions regularly occupy the venue.

Inaugurated on October 17th, 2016, La Colonie carries the memory of the massacre of Algerian demonstrators by the French police in 1961 when dozens of Algerians, perhaps between 150 and 200, were executed, and some bodies were found in the Seine River. Therefore, the date is symbolic. For decades, the memory of this major episode in the Algerian war has been obscured. How confidently can we speak of a history that does not transfer? The colonial history unfortunately remains a blind spot for a number of French politicians. Kader Attia intends to shed light on a dark page for a new generation of artists and intellectuals of postcolonial energy.

The open space offers incredible varieties of programming. Conference rooms are devoted to Western Sahara and the refugee crisis; French and foreign artists, such as the Egyptian instrumentalist Mohamed Abozekry, play concerts. Recently, Leïla Alaoui, the talented Franco-Moroccan photographer who was killed in Burkina Faso in 2016, was commemorated with a special evening. Activists gather for discussions on police violence.

La Colonie is a unique experimental site in Paris. The intensity of intellectual exchanges reminds us of Café de Flore, a mythical place in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Près where the Parisian intelligentsia gathered in the early 20th

century. Boris Vian, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre, Georges Bataille, and Pablo Picasso gathered together to remake the world. Today, the French intellectual life has become considerably impoverished with reactionary philosophers such as Alain Finkielkraut and Michel Houellebecq, who are obsessed with the decline of the former colonial power. Flirting with the ideas of the right wing, their publications signal the French decadence and the “big replacement” of whites by African and Arab immigrants.

Against the backdrop of these racist battles, *La Colonie* reflects the changes in an increasingly cosmopolitan country. In a table over the corner, Houria Bouteldja, the spokeswoman for Party of the Indigenous of the Republic, can be seen in discussion with the political scientist Françoise Vergès or sociologist Zahra Ali. *La Colonie* understands that postcolonial minorities embody the renewal of thought in a country within its racial tensions. In the aftermath of Charlie Hebdo attack, *La Colonie* offers the suppressed to tell their stories and to convey the forgotten or overlooked. Borrowing the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, “it is essential to follow the decentralization and rediscover the margins.”

<sup>[1]</sup> Kader Attia, *Correspondance*, 2003, Musée national de l’histoire et des cultures de l’immigration, Paris

<sup>[2]</sup> KADER ATTIA, *UNTITLED (GHARDAÏA)*, 2009, GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM, NEW YORK

<sup>[3]</sup> Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l’oubli*, La Découverte, 2005, Paris

<sup>[4]</sup> Kader Attia, *Hallal*, 2004, Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris

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