

Kader Attia. Sacrifice and Harmony. By Klaus Görner, 2016

Kader Attia, who was born in Paris in 1970 and grew up in Algeria and the suburbs of the French metropolis, takes the experience of his life in two cultures as the point of departure for his artistic praxis. For his investigation of the far-reaching impact of colonialism and Western cultural hegemony on non-Western cultures he adopts a poetic symbolic approach and enquires into the identity politics of historical and colonial eras against the background of a globalised world.

For several years, Attia has been focusing his research on the concept of repair as a constant in nature and human culture. In a variety of areas that appear heterogeneous at first sight – for example, architecture, science, philosophy, economy and gender – he examines the contrary systems of the modern West and traditional non-Western cultures. And what he observes is that every system of life is an endless process of repair. Attia had already shown his work in many exhibitions before his sensational installation *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* on the occasion of dOCUMENTA 13 earned him worldwide recognition in 2012. Since that time he has been invited to continue his approach in numerous solo and group shows.

Repair

Kader Attia uses the example of things he finds in the storerooms of ethnological museums – objects repaired by their original owners and therefore usually not placed on display – to illustrate two different models of repair. The patched vessels, statuettes, writing tablets and so on openly display their seams and pegs and thus their respective histories. The Western concept of repair, on the other hand, is guided by the ideal of the flawless recreation of the original state. In the consumer society cycle, defective objects are disposed of and replaced by new ones. The repair itself remains invisible, and is thus tantamount to an obliteration of history. In many of his works, Attia is now applying these two models to a wide range of different areas of knowledge and techniques while at the same time depriving them of unambiguous classification by pointing out comparable phenomena in the respective other cultural realm. He thus pursues a kind of reappropriation that makes reference both to the foreignness of the other culture and to elements of our own culture that are isolated and repressed. Here his concern is not with a reconciliation of cultural differences but with the keener perception of each culture's inherent pluralities.

For the exhibition designed for the first floor of the MMK, Kader Attia developed a new work group. *Sacrifice and Harmony* describes a path of experience and a path of cognition. The artist considered the individual works and positions in the circular tour with the greatest care and repeatedly changed them. He attaches the utmost importance to their sequence. In this respect the architecture of the MMK presents a challenge as it does not dictate a strict succession of rooms. The central hall alone offers the visitor seven options for continuing through the museum. It is a space that does not support the idea of chronology, nor does any space in the building. The open structure adheres to a different principle.

Why this insistence on a fixed sequence? The reason lies in the idea that forms the core of Kader Attia's work: the idea of repair. Every repair – and the term is to be understood here in its broadest sense – implies a non-arbitrary sequence, is a 'story', a sign of a history. It indicates an (initial) state which has undergone breakage, disturbance or injury, a trauma. Through the act of repair, a new state is attained. Attia's interest in methods of repair that do not try to erase the signs of repair derives from his interest in the 'history'. The majority of his works have a more or less obvious relationship to historical facts and artefacts.

As a process, repair thus denotes a development. The changes brought about by a repair link two states with one another; they represent an evolutionary process. For Attia, it is not the concept of adaptation that is crucial but that of repair. Because of the fact that he conceives of the evolution of species, of societies – indeed, of civilisation and cultures – as an unending process of creation, destruction and repair, we can justifiably speak here of a continuum of repair.

The Continuum of Repair

The term 'continuum', which derives from 'continuo' – to connect, unite, string together – virtually comprises the act of repair. At the same time, seen from the opposite point of view, it denotes a 'whole which maintains itself as such regardless of the possible breaks and boundaries it can be subjected to'.^[1] The continuum thus has two uses: it designates, on the one hand, the inconcludable process of repair itself and, on the other, the whole that results from that process. In this second sense, we can recognise an artistic method of Attia's when he brings phenomena from different cultures, techniques or fields of knowledge together in a single context that makes precisely those distinctions appear as non-final, as bridgeable, perhaps as non-existent. The whole that comes into view in the process, however, is not an undivided whole merely awaiting discovery but a whole with 'seams' which forms itself anew – or emerges anew, as the case may be. In a spectrum ranging from the ability of the human body to close a cut in the skin to the ability of societies to reform again and again, to respond to other societies and merge with them, we can observe an analogous principle. The methods of repair, however, are multifarious and in the case of sacrificial rituals paradoxical. The idea of coping with crisis through renewed loss initially seems absurd.

Sacrifice and Harmony

'Sacrificial feasts are traditional means of overcoming social crises of all kinds. Again and again exceptional emergency situations, hunger, epidemics and so forth

can lead to human sacrifices. The customs that have to do with the recurring crises of society, with the young generation's succession of the old, are more firmly established: there is no initiation without sacrifice. The constant renewal of the year is likewise dramatically accentuated by sacrifices celebrating the annihilation of the old in favour of the new.' [2] The paradoxical structure of sacrifice – recreation through annihilation – is the subject of Kader Attia's deliberations in this show. He writes, 'Contrary to the original perception of sacrifice as the repair of collective pain (to intensify and soothe the latter), the act of sacrifice in present-day societies serves the politics of fear as a key instrument in the negation of peaceful coexistence and social harmony. The depiction of this history of thought gives us an opportunity to better understand the responsibility we bear in the present situation and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.'

In times of escalating horror and fear, of the terror spreading throughout the world and producing new and more shocking images every day, the artist undertakes to rethink the ideational history of sacrifice in connection with his concept of repair.

The exhibition

As Attia himself expresses it, he investigates the consequences of 'the centuries-old modern repressive colonial and hegemonic politics to which the West subjects technologically inferior societies'. To do so, he takes architectural examples, various concepts of the healing of traumatic experiences, and the world wars still relevant today as his models, which will be considered more closely in the following.

The path described by the exhibition begins with *Los de arriba y los de abajo*, a huge installation from 2015 which the visitor must walk through. Wire mesh has been stretched over the space between two rows of metal roller blinds to the left and right and is strewn from above with rubbish and refuse. This oppressive, claustrophobic situation of confinement and abasement was inspired by the actual conditions in the city of Hebron. The horizontal division of entire streets into Palestinian shops on the ground floor and the flats of Jewish settlers on the upper floors led to such construction measures. To counter the settlers' habit of throwing their rubbish out of the window, the streets are covered over with wire mesh.

Walking through the 'tunnel', the visitor experiences the physical and psychological effects of a divided society. Attia sees not only daily humiliation in this situation but also an attempt to draw a psychological boundary between 'clean' and 'dirty' and a dissociation from the 'bad other'.

The traumatic consequences of such experiences are also the subject of the video installation *Reason's Oxymorons*, which can be described as a video library. Attia conducted numerous interviews with philosophers, ethnologists, historians, psychoanalysts, musicologists, patients and healers on topics such as "genocide", "reason and politics" or "totem and fetish". In its entirety the work represents an essay on psychiatric pathology as it is perceived in traditional non-Western cultures on the one hand and modern Western societies on the other. All of the interviews address various forms of injury with regard to their 'repair'. The approaches and possible interpretations differ, however, in both the description of the causes and the methods of treatment. Every one of the films is assembled from fragments of the respective interview. This results in collages of the approaches and viewpoints that bring home the fact that neither the conflicts nor the proposals for their solutions

can be deduced from a single cause. What is alluded to here can perhaps be described as the 'pensée du tremblement' (thought of trembling), to quote Édouard Glissant. It is a kind of thought that resists the force of its own respective system. This mode of thought conceives of the thinker's own identity in relation to the other. It does not resist change through exchange without losing itself in the process.

The concept of visible repair is directed against amnesia. Seams and scars are testimonies to a history. For the MMK's large triangular hall, Kader Attia created the monumental installation *J'accuse*. Eighteen larger than life-size wooden busts stand as silent observers before a wall projection showing a brief excerpt from a film by the French director Abel Gance (1889–1981). Even shortly after the First World War, Gance made an anti-war film entitled *J'accuse*; in 1938, in view of the imminent threat of war, he produced a second version. The second film closes with a powerfully eerie scene in which the protagonist – as a last resort in his efforts to warn the world – summons the dead of the battlefields of Verdun to set out in a gruesome parade. Not only do the graves open up; monuments erected to commemorate the soldiers killed in action also come to life. To the horror of the people living there, the ghastly procession makes its way through cities and villages.

Whereas for his first version Gance had used footage of real combat operations, for the second version he persuaded wounded war veterans – *gueules cassées* – to join the admonitory procession of war dead at the end of the film. *Gueules cassées* is the term used for the many thousands of soldiers who suffered severe facial injuries during the First World War. After that war, the shocking photos of these victims had frequently been published in anti-war literature, for example *War against War!* by the pacifist Ernst Friedrich, first published in 1924. The scarred faces of the wounded, which plastic surgeons had attempted to salvage in countless operations, bear horrible witness to a suppressed past while at the same time presaging the coming atrocities.

Kader Attia has used the *gueules cassées* images in many of his works and installations. They are testimonies to injury and attempted repair. By translating the photos into wooden busts, a different act of repair has now been performed. Under Attia's guidance, sculptors from Senegal carved the sculptures, taking the historical photographs as their models. The artist thus reminds us that several African countries were involved in the First World War as colonial territories of the belligerent parties and had suffered thousands of losses. The wood from which the busts were carved was chosen according to its age: it is approximately as old as the people it depicts.

The exhibition closes with a work to which the meaning of a sum can be attributed. Attia sums up his conception of evolution in the equation *Chaos + Repair = Universe*. Every change is preceded by a disruption, decline or demise; the parts constituting the former state merge in an unforeseeable manner to form a new whole. The sphere consisting of many fragments of mirrors alludes to the concept of repair as a universal principle. The sphere has been used since antiquity as an image of the cosmos, unity and continuity. Yet unlike the gapless sphere of being described by Parmenides, the wholeness of this work by Attia is full of seams and cracks. The gaps between the shards afford a view of the interior and the infinite reflections that render both the individual fragments and the repairs an inconcludable process of refraction. It is a creative process of renewal in which – as we are repeatedly reminded by the mirrors in Attia's oeuvre – the beholder is always a constitutive element. The plurality of perspective, it would appear, counters the

ossification of thought and feeling. It shows every 'whole' as something composed from parts, and every separation as preliminary.

[1] Norbert Herold, 'Kontinuum, Kontinuität', in: Joachim Ritter (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Schwabe: Basel, 1971–2007, vol. 4, col. 1044.

[2] Walter Burkert, 'Griechische Tragödie und Opferritual', in: id., *Wilder Ursprung: Opferritual und Mythos bei den Griechen*, Wagenbach: Berlin, 1991, p. 25.

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