

# All the Difference in the World. By Manthia Diawara, 2014

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## 1. Lieux-Communs

I was introduced to the work of Kader Attia at the 2009 Bamako Photo Biennale. At first, I was intrigued by his color photographs of a beach, covered with large sheets of white-grey concrete blocks, like somebody's bad idea of a conceptual art installation. Then, on looking closely, one discovers that the photos are actually of a real beach, that of Bab El Oued, a poor neighborhood in Algiers, where the government had erected these huge concrete blocks to prevent young men from taking boats across the Mediterranean sea to Europe. So the photo installation by Attia, entitled *Rochers Carrés*, is not just a quixotic *mise-en-scene* for the camera, which would have been esthetically limiting, anyway; but an actual architectural structure that sets a boundary, a no-trespassing zone, between the South and the North, which distinguishes it as a found object for the artist's camera.

The photo installation includes long shots of the multitude of concrete slabs looking like shoreline high-rises, from a bird's eye view; low and wide-angle close-up shots of them standing on the beach, against the blue Mediterranean Sea; and medium shots with young men sitting or standing on them and looking at the ocean. Thus re-appropriated by Attia's camera, the blocks on the sand, which were before perceived as masses of lifeless and hostile objects of obstruction, as a kind of wall, or frontier to stop people from crossing-over, are now recharged and invested with new meanings and emotions, that put them in a relationship with other objects of architecture around the world, other poetics of migration, and other imaginary of border-crossings.

In *Philosophie de la relation*, Edouard Glissant defines "lieux-communs" as those sites where ideas emerge, illuminate and influence other ideas from other places of the world. In this sense, a common site is different from a commonplace, which is made out of naked truths and obvious statements. By contrast, a common ground, (note that the French use 'lieu-commun' for both common place and common ground), is a source of creativity and opacity, a fertile ground of inexhaustible energies, where relationships are continually generated between the ideas and poetics of one place and those of another. Sharing a common ground with someone is to be related to him/her through the rhizomes of places and imaginaries, to have the same pulses about the world as him/her. A common ground creates the conditions of possibility for the emergence of unpredictable feelings of resistance against the systematic truths induced by commonplace thinking and reasoning; and against the meanings imposed by the logics of coloniality and governmentality.

The artistic genius of *Rochers Carrés* derives from Attia's discovery and revelation of the site as a common ground, a *lieu-commun*, from where the youth show their resistance to the state's attempt to control their movement from Algeria to Europe, where they might find a better life for themselves. By re-appropriating the "bétons bruts" as a point in the world for recreation, contemplation and other outlaw activities, they reinvest the place with new imaginaries, poetics and epic heroes. They also reconnect the place to Europe and other places where immigration is impeded by walls. To put it in Glissantian terms, the youth of the *Rochers Carrés* have created subterranean connections and rhizomic relations with other youth, in other places, confronted with frontiers of nationalism, prisons, immigration and discrimination. *Lieux-communs* are sites where calls are made about one condition of the world to the other sites of the world, so that they too may relate it to their own conditions and relay it to all the corners of the world.

Attia's photos, by re-appropriating architectural concretes as *lieux-communs* or habitat, raise questions of resistance and defiance against walls erected everywhere against immigration and boundary crossing. As common grounds, the *bétons bruts* on the beach have become sites of contemplation and new imaginaries for the youth of Bab El Oued, a place that link their intuitions of resistance against global imperialism and the barbwires against peoples' freedom of movement. As a common ground, the *Rochers Carrés* have become a place, like Lampedusa, Palestine, the frontier between the United States and Mexico, to speak about the walls of immigration and the inhuman laws; a place where a relation is created between the emotions of the people in these different sites; and finally, a place for conceiving new poetics and politics with other *lieux-communs*; or to put it in Glissant's words, "un lieu où chaque fois une pensée du monde appelée et éclaire une pensée du monde" (a site whence thoughts and ideas always emerge to call upon and illuminate thoughts and ideas from other sites of the world).[1]

Still following Glissant, we can say that Attia's work is about finding art in found objects, the *Rochers Carrés*, and revealing what they have in common with other contemporary propositions about the world; namely the conceptual statements they make about politics and resistance. Attia shows how the *Rochers Carrés*, a forbidden space, is appropriated by the very same youth it was designed to exclude. The history of the *bétons bruts*, an architectural structure, is thus turned upside down to signal a critic of anti-immigration laws, to celebrate boundary crossing, and to elect a common ground for relations between differences.

Great artists, before Attia, have played with the subterranean and fertile common ground between different objects. David Hammons, for example, has had to paint Reverend Jesse Jackson with blond hair to show the *lieu-commun* between him and the white American politicians. Edouard Glissant, too, has eloquently pleaded for the poetics of errantry and nomadology, which he deploys against the discourses of sameness, singularity of identities, and systematic systems. For him, "le Divers, la totalité quantifiable de toutes les différences possibles, est le moteur de l'énergie universelle, qu'il faut préserver des assimilations, des modes passivement généralisées, des habitudes standardisées". (The diverse, that which constitutes a quantifiable sum of all the differences possible, is the engine of the universal energy that we must preserve from systems of assimilation, from passively generalizable models and standardizable habits). [2]

#### 1. Poetics of Relation: *Bon appetite Monsieur Le Corbusier*

We have just seen how important the local is to Attia's work; and how he puts it into play to revive relations between Arab-African and French-European cultures. Attia incessantly uses art found in his background to think with the world—not for the world, like a conqueror or a colonizer—but with the world, like a person who's searching for himself in the Other, and vice versa. It is in this sense that I call Attia an Afro-Arab and French artist who is incessantly looking for himself in sites such as the *Rochers Carrés* in Bab El Oued, the Cashbah, another neighborhood of Algiers, the ancient city of Ghardaia, the masks and sculptors of the Congo, but also in the Cubist paintings Picasso, and the modernist architecture of Le Corbusier. The creative genius in Attia is always after these spaces for the purposes of rediscovering or re-appropriating them as art, or to shed light on them as rhizomes and crucial links that have been ignored in the history of modernism.

This incessant search for *lieux-communs*, an unending search for the Other, can be considered as the very definition of Attia's art. It is what Glissant calls the poetics for relation, which keeps the poet on his/her toes, hungering for perfections and totalities that are not totalitarian; and knowing fully well that he/she will never reach them. For the artists such Glissant and Attia, working from one's own location in the world is what enable them to connect their intuition and sensibility with those of others in the quest for totalities, one world in relation, or "le tout-monde." It is by participating in the revitalization and redefinition of *lieux-communs*, that such artists feel that they are restoring to the world the vital force that it needs for its equilibrium.

To paraphrase Glissant, artists work from their own locations and think with the world; "ton lieu est incontournable; il n'est pas de lieu qui ne signifie pas" (you cannot ignore your location, because every location signifies something different.) [3] For Attia, too, every one of the sites he chooses to work reveals one aspect of the state of the world that needs our full consideration. Because every location reveals to us something about our humanities, it is also center of the world, no less important than Paris or New York. Every location can be used to think through the connections between art, politics and resistance. Thus, to create from your locality is one way of telling about the world, its weaknesses and strengths, its sensibilities, beauty and ugliness.

Perhaps there is no better place to illustrate this idea of the relationship between location and artistic creativity, what Attia calls the re-appropriation of a space in order to make a specific intervention in contemporary definitions of modernist art, than in the installation, variously entitled: *Bon appetit Monsieur Le Corbusier*, or simply *Ghardaia*. Here, using couscous to reproduce the architecture of Ghardaia—a UNESCO classified monument—Attia puts into play the notions of cannibalistic consumption, appropriation, resistance and re-appropriation as objects of creation and self-validation in modernist architecture.

The mimicry of Ghardaia through its buildings made out of Couscous, an exotic Orientalist dish, does not only connote cannibalism, excessive consumption and regurgitation of Afro-Arab elements in modernist art and architecture, but also aspects of artistic influence, imitation and adaptation which are often swept under the carpet, when discussing the sources and quotations in the masterpieces of Le Corbusier and Picasso. Attia's couscous installation forces the viewer to place Ghardaia in an affective and political relation with Le Corbusier's buildings for social housing in France. The place has thus become re-appropriated as a site of resistance to theft and annihilation of the original by the copier.

By putting the so-called original, and the copier, Le Corbusier in a Glissantian

relation, Attia's art invites us to move away from such binary oppositions as original/copy, same/other, anterior/posterior, superior/inferior/ modern/traditional, exotic/domestic, etc., and to embrace the moment of their encounter—Le Corbusier at Ghardaia, or Picasso upon seeing African masks for the first time—as both moments of relation and equalization. The new architecture and modernistic art born out of the meeting point is relayed later to the word and relativized as modernism, at the center of which Attia puts Ghardaia and the African mask. To quote Glissant, “Dans la relation, ce qui relie est d’abord cette suite des rapports entre les différences, à la rencontre les unes des autres. Les racines parcourantes (les rhizomes) des idées, des identités, des intuitions, relaient: s’y révèlent les lieux-communs dont nous devinons entre nous le partage (In the theory of relation, what brings things together is first of all this successive rapport between differences, as they meet, one after the other. The roots, (rhizomes), that cause ideas, identities, intuitions to meet, relay them for the purposes of revealing to us the common grounds that we share.)[4]

For Glissant, the “poetics of relation” is that which relates, links, and relays in the relationship between all the differences that are possible and invisible in the “Tout-monde.” Glissant argues eloquently in the book that the only way to go beyond the boundary set by binary oppositions is through the recognition of the differences that constitute and hold together the tissue of the world into one; a totality that is inextricable, but not totalizing or totalitarian: “La pensée de l’Autre ne cessera d’être duelle qu’à ce moment où les différences auront été reconnues.”[5]

Just as he ties the dualist conception of identity to a hermetic and unfathomable Other, and to the notions of single roots, Glissant posits his theory of identity as something acquired through Relation, through the theory of rhizomes, which, as we know, have multiple roots. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Glissant states that rhizomes are roots that run like currents under the ground or on the surface, and multiply themselves, x-times, into a network of extended relations, without destroying or denaturing each other, unlike predatory roots that can only live among themselves. Rhizomic identities come through rootedness, without a totalitarian impulse.

In this sense, every identity is sustained through its Relation to the difference of an Other identity; every identity “s’étend dans un rapport à l’Autre,” (grows out of its relation to the Other), in a rhizomic manner. With Glissant, we are in the world of multiple identity positions, multiple relationships to the Other, where new possibilities arise and we find the fulfillment of our own identity in our search for the Other, our identification with his problems, etc.

With Attia, too, art must find its rhythm and vitality in difference and the performance of multiple identities. For him, identities find their authenticity through performances and productive repetitions, instead of being true to a singular truth and fixed origin. What is rewarding in Attia’s photo and video installations of “Trans-Sexuals (from Algeria and India),” is the manner in which they cross borders between identities—Algerian and French, for an example—without losing themselves in one single identity, and having it threatened every time they move across the border to the French side, change clothes and mannerisms to play like French transsexuals.

Attia shows us that the meaning of art lies in performances, in which identities become alive through “play” acts. It is in this same sense that Glissant, too, says “Rien n’est vrai, tout est vivant,” (which I’ll adapt here, first as: “There’s no truth; it’s all in the living;” and second as, “The only truth is that which comes alive through

the relation between differences.”) In *Ghosts* (2007, 2012), for example, Attia produces an aluminum installation of women bent over on their knees, as if in prayer. The frontal part of each sculpture is hollowed at the level of the head, as if to indicate that the women have no faces, or that the faces were hidden behind a black veil.

The first impression the installation has on the spectator is that of a ghostly and fearful effect, on seeing this multitude of women dressed in a silvery outfit and all turned in one direction. The show connotes not only women wearing veils, but also Moslems praying in a Western space. Then the hollowed faces reveal that there's no such thing as a fixed identity behind the veil; that such a fixed identity is in fact the projection of the spectator's own anxieties onto the veiled women. Finally, we begin to appreciate the power and esthetics of the installation, when we realize that what we have in front of us are only empty identities—what Glissant calls “Literatures of traces”—and by multiplying them in the room we perceive a performance of identities that we, the spectators have brought with us to the installations.

The genius in Attia's art here comes from the way he pushes the museum visitor to search for this Other: be it the Other place, the Other identity, or the Other in us, without which we always feel incomplete and inadequate. Le Corbusier eating couscous in Ghardaia is like the Transsexuals changing clothes between Algiers and Marseille, and the spectators confronting their own desires by filling the hollowed faces of the sculptures in *Ghost*; they are all forms of anthropophagi, desiring and searching for the Other, which is our own way of searching for ourselves, without any guarantees of satisfaction.

### III. Attia, the Artist of Reparation

The reader would have noticed by now that the Other is perceived differently here, than with such postcolonial thinkers as Said, Bhabha and their followers who have remained faithful to the Fanonian definition of this difficult concept. As we know, the Other for Fanon was an Other of decolonization, an Other who was “against,” or “opposed to.” It is an Other that could not be defined outside of the context of national liberation, national culture and national sovereignty. The proponents of postcolonial studies took this Fanonian concept to another level with Said's writings on the relations between and Orientalism, and Spivak's definition of the Other as a Subaltern who cannot speak inside a Western discourse, be it Marxist.[6]

As we have seen in Glissant and Attia, however, the Other is someone, or something that we speak with in the One World, that we are all a part of; of which we all form the totality. Just as he ties the dualist conception of identity, that which is opposed to a hermetic and unfathomable Other, to the notions of single roots, Glissant posits his theory of identity, acquired through Relation, in the theory of rhizomes, which have multiple roots. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, Glissant states that rhizomes roots that multiply themselves, x-times, into a network of extended extremities in land or in the air, without destroying or denaturing one another in a predatory manner. It is rootedness, without a totalizing and totalitarian impulse.

In this sense, every identity is sustained through its Relation to the difference of an Other identity; every identity “s'étend dans un rapport à l'Autre,” (grows out of its

relation to the Other), in a rhizomatic manner. With Glissant, we are in the world of multiple identity positions, multiple relationships to the Other, where new possibilities arise and we find the fulfillment of our own identity in our search for the Other, our identification with his problems, etc.

Glissant, in an ironic twist, states that Fanon's search for freedom for Algerians, for example, lead him to discover his own; it shows that identity is not always buried in roots, only found in the recognition of one's roots, but also through one's Relationship with Others. Thus, for Glissant, a true decolonization, not only for the formerly colonized, but also for the West, will consist in going beyond the boundaries set by racism, sexism and nationalism. We have to dream of the impossible totality of the one world, in which all frontiers are abolished, except for those of difference and relations. Glissant finds the essentiality of difference through these terms: "I can change myself through exchanging with the Other, without destroying, or denaturing myself."

It is with his new installation *The Repair* that Attia fully addresses what Glissant has often called "la complexité monde," our relation to the Other as subject and object, and the subsequent difficulties that emerge from this encounter. We see all the possible representations of the Other in *The Repair* project: "les guelles casées" (the Broken jaws) of World War One, the traumatized bodies, the bodies for exhibitions, the repaired bodies, the fetishized bodies, the estheticized bodies, bodies of object, bodies of people, white bodies, black bodies, bodies of Africans, bodies of Europeans, bodies carved in wood, bodies stitched in clothes, masked bodies, tattooed bodies, hollowed bodies, protruding bodies, and bodies locked up in boxes like stereotypes. In this multiplicity of bodies, we find the body as opposition to; the body against; the hyphenated body, the relayed body and the relative body.

The common-ground for all these bodies is that they are all looking for reparation, they all need something else to make up for something missing; they're all striving to achieving a perfect state in the world, a compensation for some kind of lack, an amputation, or something perceived as a due.

As a reparation artist, Attia makes us revisit, through his installation, Europe's debt to Africa for the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and the current mutilation of indigenous populations and their environment through mining and wars. Thus the show takes on, at least, two levels of signification. First we see that a broken body is a body that has had a weakness introduced into it, a hole that, if not repaired, becomes a sign of trauma. We need therefore to repair the hole, or the fissure, by covering it up, stitching it, or decorating it with other scars to re-appropriate it and make it familiar. It is in this sense that different ethnic groups in history have demanded reparation for crimes committed against them.

Some of the African masks that Attia uses in *The Repair*, were also used in traditional performances as symbols of ancestral deities who were called upon to repair damages caused by natural disasters and epidemics. Our understanding of reparation in this sense has the meaning of the restoration of a value that had been taken away. In so far as we think that damage was committed against us that has not only weakened us, but also taken a vital force from us, we feel that that we could only fix it through the payment of a debt, a legal settlement, or a psychological approach to the problem.

There is another level of understanding the show and Attia's concept of reparation.

Walking through the installation, one of the first things we realize is that the broken faces, of black and white, masks and people, utensils and human faces are interchangeable, because their scars are relatable. They each construct a *lieu-commun*, the myth of which can be shared with the state in which the others find themselves.

We need therefore to change our imaginaries in order to begin to see the relation between the different disfigurements in the installation. We change the way we see the victims of trauma by familiarizing ourselves with the victims, by embracing their scars and letting them embrace ours. By licking the Other's scars and allowing him/her/it to lick our disfiguration, as Attia has done with every object in the show, we engage in an exchange that change us in the process. This, for me, is Attia's fundamental discovery in *The Repair*.

What Glissant had to say about "Reparation" is equally profound. For him, a long and permanent reparation, beyond political and civic actions, is possible if seek out the Other and tremble with him/her. Building on what he has been calling "la pensée du tremblement" (a quakeful or tremulous thinking), Glissant argues in *Philosophie de la relation* that, faced with the misfortunes that strike people around the world, everyday, a quakeful thinking could open the door to a long term reparation, beginning by changing the imaginaries of the world. He states that myth and poetry find their condition of possibility in the quakeful, and the doubting thought. Even good philosophies must find their vocation in thoughts that are uncertain, timid, intuitive and opaque at first. To Glissant, thoughts that do not tremble are frozen, systematic and sterile. A people that only embrace themselves and their culture as the only culture, embrace nothing.

The quakeful thought is thus the very condition of reparation of our disfigured selves, searching for Other disfigurements to identify with, to tell their stories, and relay them with our own stories. *The Repair* by Attia tells the story of our *quelles cassées* and teaches us how to re-appropriate them as vital forces, sites of relation and creolization, as first obscure poetic and mythic scream of man on earth.

[1] Edouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue*. Paris (Galimard) 1990, p. 25.

[2] Edouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue*. Paris (Galimard) 1990, p. 42.

[3] Edouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue*. Paris (Galimard) 1990, p. 87.

[4] Edouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue*. Paris (Galimard) 1990, p. 72.

[5] Edouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendue*. Paris (Galimard) 1990, p. 29.

[6] See Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* (Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York (Pantheon) 1978; *Culture and Imperialism*. New York (Knopf) 1993.) and Spivak's "Can the Subaltern

Speak?" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana, IL (University of Illinois Press) 1988, pp. 271-313.)

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