In Conversation. Kitty Scott and Kader Attia, 2014

Kitty Scott: The notion of repair is central to your current thinking. Can you tell me where and how this originated?

Kader Attia: I have been working on the concept of repair for many years. There are several origins of my interest, but the central one is linked to the term “re-appropriation.” Over a long period I have observed, in my home village in Algeria as well as in other African cities I have lived in like Brazzaville, how much sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts were grounds for the “re-situation” of things as well as words – that is, of both material and immaterial signs. Sometimes the Western cultural vocabulary called it recycling, but it was much more complex than this.

It started to become more obvious after considering the different points of view on re-appropriation of three thinkers: Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Oswald de Andrade and Frantz Fanon. Proudhon invented the term re-appropriation based on the principle that property is theft and gave it a political connotation. This insight will influence a whole range of thought about re-appropriation. A few decades later, the poet Andrade, with his poem / manifesto about cultural anthropophagy, moved the concept toward the cultural field. “Tupi or not Tupi: that is the question” – referring to the native Tupi people of Brazil and, of course, to Shakespeare – is its first sentence. Finally, Fanon situated the word in the colonial context, raising the issue of re-appropriation in relation to the notion of repair and what people had been dispossessed of. Re-appropriation – a concept that arose within European anarchism during the Industrial Revolution and developed within different colonial contexts – governs all relations between modernity and tradition. It sheds light on the parallel relationship between power and modernity and, more precisely, colonization and modernity.

Thus re-appropriation began to take on its larger meaning, which is actually that of repair. As I understand it, the motivation for these struggles – from the social struggles of the Industrial Revolution to the racial and cultural struggles of colonization – came from an instinctive desire of the human mind for repair. From culture to nature, repair, as a concept, became more and more clear in my observations.

KS: Can you trace this concept in animate and inanimate things? I am thinking in particular about objects and images I have seen in dOCUMENTA (13) and more recently in Berlin.

KA: After years of research and observation mainly focused on concrete things such as those belonging to the sacred or the profane – from the holiest to the most everyday of objects – it slowly dawned on me that a similarity exists at the core of reality in the differences they share, but not only these. Indeed, René Descartes states in his book *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* [Rules for the Direction of the Mind] that the order of things does not only lean on a system based on comparisons or similarities but that, through inference, we can also assimilate differences between things as analogies that bind them together.

When a Congolese fetish is made of, or includes, a Western item and when a Western item made of a bullet or a bombshell from the First World War is transformed into a holy Christian artefact or an everyday object, these things create a new, ambivalent reality that emerges from the one belonging to its original context and that links it to another – the context of its new reading. Each transformed object embodies a bridge that can be seen as both animate and inanimate. Objects created by the mind and the hand within contexts of poor material conditions always embody such a bridge between two spaces – including the one between nature and culture, which is key – as well as between multiple times.

During the First World War, soldiers from different countries, stuck in the middle of hell – often the place where they met an early death – made artefacts. This trench art, the things they made with their hands, was constructed out of deadly objects such as bullets, shells and other remnants of war. From the tools of destruction, they produced art and in doing so they have created another reality. This very reorientation is a repair.

Modernity has embodied a rupture of the bridge that used to link us to nature's logic. What remains of that is now, to some degree, present within the social sciences. For example, in Germany the terminology used in ethnological museums to name their subjects is *Naturvolk*, which means "people of nature." The hegemony of culture as a form of knowledge emerged from such disciplines as the unique power to control otherness, as Michel Foucault demonstrates in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*. So what if, parallel to everything visible and vibrating, an inanimate order of things is the real canvas or net on which the human being is based?

In any minor human flesh injury, any biological injury, or when any natural element is broken, the body instinctively "auto-repairs" itself as if the injury was insignificant. What the human mind does when it is repairing is just following nature's logic. It is more obvious when the rupture is really big, but in the end the only thing the mind does is continue a natural specificity, which is an endless repair. So the difficulty of

repair is its fatal automatism. Actually here we should not say that the human mind "does," because it is not just an act consciously thought by the mind. It is a natural process. I call this "the continuum of the repair." Continuum is what it is all about here. I have developed this notion in work I made for the Whitechapel Gallery entitled *Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder*.

KS: A subtheme in your research is the notion of reconstructive surgery and its relation to the notion of the repair. A more extreme version of this strand of thinking leads us to plastic or cosmetic surgery, which is so prevalent today. Is this area of repair something you have considered in relation to this body of work?

KA: Yes it is, especially through my research on transgendered bodies. They are always between different forms of representation – representation dictated by the social sphere, which channels all relations between people through a visual contact, more than the private one. The illusion of not being "discovered" as a man for a transgendered woman, especially from the modern Western world, is an important stake of living a transgender life.

KS: Where do you find these repaired objects? Can you describe the search process?

KA: For more than a decade, I have observed and researched contemporary objects during my frequent travels to North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Little by little, I collected some contemporary repaired objects. This activity led me to dig deeper into their history and to question the origins of the repairs. Eventually I began to look in museums, where antiquities are stored, whether in Africa or the West. I wanted to make sure that the starting point of my interest in the repair within traditional cultures – say, an *nchakokot*, or raffia "skirt" made by the Kuba people of the Congo that a friend had given me – wasn't a rare or isolated phenomenon. It was a fascinating time. Many things I learned at this moment were fundamental to my subsequent research. For example, it is difficult to find repaired objects because the Western institutions where I worked never had a category for repaired objects in their databases. The repair of antiquities from non-Western, traditional cultures used different methods and forms. The most common method would be to use a staple to hold something fragile together, but there are many other methods, including the most unexpected: using a Western material in the repair, through delicate and skilful plaiting, all of which gives a new, decorative supplement to the repaired object.

And last but not least I realized re-appropriation and repair are two concepts that exert a relation of mutual interdependence.

KS: Your discussion here focuses on objects. Can you tell me how you have worked

with images? What are you looking for in imagery? Where do you find the images that come into the project and how do you work with them in the context of exhibitions?

KA: I have always been fascinated by images. My first artworks were photographs. I even taught photography for two years when I was younger. And the first time I exhibited here in Berlin, where I live now, I showed a very humanist slide show, entitled *La Piste d'atterrissage* [The Landing Strip, 1997-99], at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in the early 2000s, in "The State of Things," organized by Catherine David. Years have gone by and I now also find pleasure in space, sculpture, volume and installation. However, sometimes using images is unavoidable and imperative in the face of the real object's presence. The difficulty is then to produce an artwork that won't fade in front of the superiority of the object's presence, because nothing will ever compete with the strength of an object's presence in front of the viewer's eyes. This is even truer when the research theme deals with the object as such.

KS: So why images? What do they bring to the corpus of knowledge displayed in an installation like *Repair*?

KA: Images articulate reality without substituting for it. They talk about a reality through the proxy of their physical and intellectual characteristics. Yet in the frame of repair as a physical element, the fundamental reason for their interest is their political aspect. Indeed, whether in traditional cultures – in which repair is displayed as a new element and, above all, as the expression of an individual (the repairer) intended for a group (the community, or maybe some other group) that underwrites an individuality – or in modern Western cultures – in which the stake of this act of repair is the disappearance of the wound as well as of the repair itself – in both case the ethical result asserts a desire for the superiority of culture over nature, over, that is, a specificity peculiar to a natural order of things. The wound of a body as well as of an object is the result of a natural weakness, and the act of repairing it is cultural, hence ethical and political. It's because they are highly political that images are, in that case, of interest to me. First of all, contrary to objects from traditional non-Western cultures, images are a pure technical and semantic product of Western modernity – and so a unidirectional political tool, from the West toward itself. Images, cultural products par excellence, perhaps embody a form of repair of culture over nature peculiar to the West, just as these non-Western repaired objects embody the sign of a re-appropriation and a repair of culture – that is, of knowledge – over nature, in the sense of the natural order of things.

Last but not least, the slide show included in the installation *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* illustrates a critique of the amnesia indirectly – and sometimes directly – enshrined by modernity in regards to the cultures of people who are still close to nature, and particularly of those whose rituals of intentional body transformations embody the cultural continuity of human genealogy itself.

From ethnography to ethnology and then to anthropology, modern sciences have always tried to rationalize the evolution of humankind through measurement and categorization. Yet in my opinion this mathematical, Cartesian logic misses one thing: magic. Images in this artwork, as well as in art in general, embody the link that separates and links us to the magic of things.