

Kader Attia, Centre de création contemporaine, Tours, France, in: Artforum 2009.

The implications of Kader Attia's installation *Kasbah, 2009*, extended well beyond the gallery's bare concrete walls and low, unfinished ceilings. Occupying almost every inch of available floor space and requiring nimble footwork to traverse, this oppressive universe of rusty scrap-metal rooftops, which was dotted with makeshift antennae and strewn with vagrant tires, shoes, and bricks, rendered obsolete any picturesque connotations still elicited by the work's title, the exotic-sounding name for a North African walled citadel. Instead, Attia, a son of Algerian immigrants who grew up in the banlieues, appropriated this potent symbol to convey the disenfranchised destitution in which a vast majority of today's « wretched of the earth », to use Frantz Fanon's designation, still struggle to subsist.

The five works that made up the exhibition suggested that aesthetics partially in composing and transmitting the reciprocal power dynamics linking empire to colony and that they still play a pivotal role in animating postcolonial geopolitics. Employing basic formal permutations, the two videos aptly polemicize this point: In *Misunderstanding, 2006*, a series of minarets, filmed closely and with-missiles, without context at an oblique angle, begin to appear like so many cruise missiles, while *Oil and Sugar, 2007*, depicts a white block made of sugar cubes becoming slowly saturated with petroleum, turning completely black before suddenly disintegrating.

While these pieces revealed the malleability and permeability of cultural forms within a shared public sphere, it was Attia's reflection on modernism's mediation of the Franco-Algerian relationship that was most compelling. Thought harmlessly projecting the spectator into numerous foreign bidonvilles, his post-Minimalist shantytown raised important questions about the ongoing disempowerment of France's former North African subjects, relegated to low-income residences in the suburbs of Paris beginning in the 1950s and 60's. Indeed, the work enacted a phenomenological model of that very mode of French citizenship, cast into dereliction and exile.

As if searching for the prehistory of this condition, Attia juxtaposed an untitled series of straightforward documentary photographs of typical Mozabite architecture in the Algerian town of Ghardaïa, taken in 2009, with photocopies of Le Corbusier's sketches of the locale, made in 1933, and of UNESCO's World Heritage Site declaration of 1981. The sketches predate by two years the publication of Corbu's treatise on modernist urbanism, *La Ville radiieuse* (The Radiant City), and Ghardaïa's resemblance to the Swiss architect's vision might easily make one wonder whether indigenous Algerian forms might have played a

seminal role in the development of an architectural modernism that would subsequently help keep the nation's immigrants marginalized within French society.

The exhibition's achievement was to firmly argue to the contrary by suggesting that power and identity are interwoven through a dense network of cultural and intellectual exchange. This idea was beautifully rendered in *Untitled (Ghardaïa)*, 2002, a floor piece resembling a vast desert landscape and made of tiny grains of semolina (couscous). Within this panorama of windblown dunes, Attia sketched a series of square and rectangular facets by sweeping away the yellow granules to reveal the black foundation below, with a geometric effect strangely reminiscent of Piet Mondrian's "Pier and Ocean" series. In this gesture, Attia transformed the rationalized system of modernism into a fragile, comestible (and ultimately dischargeable) language of social and cultural intertwinement. As a source for permanent reappropriation and resignification of forms within an entangled economy, modernism's afterlives open the way for new forms of individual and collective self-representation.

-Nuit Banai