

Between the Things and the Words.  
An exchange with Octavio Zaya

Octavio Zaya- In a recent statement that you made public during your exhibition at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle (USA), you mentioned that you have been questioning political issues through art, and that from the resulting reflections you have taken “a more critical step”, questioning “the limits of these discourses” in the face of everyday life. Could you elaborate on these “critical steps” and on what is it that you understand as the “limits” of these political discourses?

Kader Attia- My work is always in dialogue with the world it belongs to. It must often be considered in the spatio-temporal context (geography and history) it was produced in. I have studied both "Beaux Arts" and philosophy. From this period I've kept a constant desire to never fall into the dogma of certainty, but on the contrary, to feed my thoughts with doubts. These last few years, my reflections have led me to create different works, which illustrate this desire to question shapes and discourses that arise with society's evolution. These works question life on all the subjects I care about: identity, dreams, immigration, sexuality, paradoxes, myths, and above all poetry. I am at a critical step in my work, I mean that I want to make people think about engaged art, like the myth of Sisyphus.

Whereas the discursive dimension of political works of art is based on its capacity to question the system, it remains stuck to the context in which the works are shown. This is the case of many of the projects I have realized, or seen around me. Art is a machine producing "myths", but as someone whose engagement is not only through the artistic process, I need truth. The "myth" is, so it is barely avoidable. Nevertheless, the "critical step" I want to commit myself to, is the one that questions the truth through the realization of political works. What I mean by the "limits of the political discourse in the face of social reality" is this capacity of artistic creation to shape "mythological architectures," which are valuable only in the spatio-temporal sphere that art is. Away from this context they are weak. This limit is both abstract and concrete. It is relative, as it depends on each individual and on his will to see the truth in these political works. This will depend on several criteria like the social and cultural origins of the person viewing the work. But above all, it depends on the experience of both the work and the viewer. Unfortunately, as Saint Augustine says: "Man hates the truth." He separates the truth into two kinds: on the one hand, the truth is the light we throw on things, we want to know about, and which provides us with control over them. On the other, it's what brings us back to ourselves, and to what we would rather keep into the shadow. While desiring the first one, we run away from the second one. If we would love the truth, we would like it to throw light on us.

O.Z. I'm not so sure what art, on the one side, and politics, on the other, have to do with truth, particularly in the face of the “architectural mythologies” you are referring to. Since the late 80s much of contemporary art seems to be engaged in this sort of contradictory predicament. It seems to me that you are trying to raise a primordial question for contemporary art: its mediating function in the ethical and the aesthetic relationship between reality and language, meaning and form, self

and other. How are you trying to transcend that melancholic reality of finding yourself “remaining stuck in the context,” as a Sisyphus-like character? Is there any way out?

K.A. Politics and art have in common that those who are involved in them believe that they are less ignorant, don't they? Intellectual, sensitive and ideological (or social) processes, need myths (I prefer this word to « architectural mythologies») to convince and unite “people”. These myths are, for me, as weak as any fantasy for summarizing a reflection of an entity, such as, for instance, a form or an idea. This happens in such a way, that the history of the art work (its referent) can be hidden by the viewer's subjectivity of the myth, like a tree, which hides the forest.

I know that it happens everywhere, not only in art... A couple of months ago, I was in Mexico. I know this country quite well, as I lived there for 3 years. What I liked a lot was to watch the live all-in wrestling bouts. I find there what Roland Barthes explains us in his "Mythologies": the viewers' excitement shows how little they care whether or not the fight is a real sport or not... they are only sensitive to what is supposed to come out of the event...because "what the viewer wants, is the image of passion, not passion itself." The truth of the fight, that is, the actual motive for the fight, or its conclusion, is not interesting, because it is immense. On the contrary, the spectacle is limited in time, and by human criteria, like morality, which is reassuring because in human moral standards the hero always wins in the end, contrary to reality. From any kind of mythologies, -Greek, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, to this popular spectacle, the hero is there for the viewer to project his ego upon him.

Regarding your reference to the 80's, whereas, since the late 80's society has changed a lot, political art is in a “d  j   vu, endless process,” reproducing, in a kind of amnesia, forms and concepts which have already been demonstrated. Though some people have underlined the “relational aesthetic” between artistic concepts and the society they belong to, as a new way of thinking about social codes in the art context. From a social context to an art context, any kind of urinoir becomes art, as Marcel Duchamp would say.

The end of ideologies, like socialism, and also the weakness of capitalism, has shown us the huge gap between a belief in a better world, and the reality that we now know: environmental disasters, lack of justice, and disinformation, two-tier medicine etc...The world has changed, but as you said, since the late 80's, most of contemporary art seems to be engaged in that sort of contradictory predicament.

There is indeed an infinity of possibilities to feel stuck in this context, as soon as you feel frustrated by its weakness, or boundaries, that you would like to escape from. I think the reason why I don't give up art to become 100 % involved in social issues is because, as you know, neither art nor politics are able to change people's lives. On the contrary, when political art becomes excessive, it can become questionable. Do you know this phrase by Dominique Baque: "the most efficient political art is totalitarian art"? Maybe she's thinking about socialist realism... Does this mean that the tendency in contemporary art to show activist groups as art concepts is the only alternative to being in this narrow feeling of

ethic? Even if, falling in this context, these political concepts could become kitsch forms?

I think that you can feel a kind of Sisyphus myth syndrome, as a political artist as well as a politician or someone socially involved, as long as you are waiting for results from what you do, without ever achieving your goal. The trap is to have a final goal. If you don't have any, you are free from the result, and you then care about the experience of your reflection. It is like growing a bonsai. "It does not grow, but it makes you grow inside," as a famous haiku says.

I think that a possible way to answer is found in both these two extreme and paradoxical notions, especially when considering reflection as being like a bridge between these two opposite notions; a bond that links opposite parts obviously richer than each one of them, and extremes are always connected. Lao Tzu says that happiness walks hand in hand with misfortune. "If you happily love someone, and then you lose this person, you then know sadness..." Both go together. Desire creates frustration and vice versa... As the son of North African immigrants who came to Europe, I have always lived between two opposite cultures, two different worlds, two opposite languages, and two opposite religions. So I have had to develop an ergonomics of mind, to always be between two things, as if being totally into something would be a trap. This ability to "go back and forth" has led me to never feel comfortable in the same place, in the same position, and by extension in the same state of mind. I frequently question myself. I apply this duality in thought to my thinking. That's why, in my first work, I was very interested in Algerian men who decided to change their gender, and after several months switch back, and so on...

O.Z.: To what extent do you consider the language support of this exchange as necessary for helping experience "Ghost," the series we're addressing here? How important are the commentaries to your work, and any other language resources you bring to it?

K.A.: Your question is very interesting. It is, in my opinion, more interesting than the answer it questions, as it begins something. In that way I think that questions are always more interesting than answers, because they create a space for thought, which works like a "draught" for something that does not yet. This "draught" or "call for meaning" is important. It is situated between the question and the answer, and is thus free.

That's why, in my opinion, the language support of this exchange is necessary to experience the work we are talking about, because it materializes this hesitation that exists in the conception of such a work, which the reader, the viewer has to feel. It leads the reader/viewer to be open to this notion of "in betweenness" that exists in my work, but which also exists in life: between language and meaning, between ethics and hypocrisy, between identity and uniformity, emptiness and fullness, myth and history, between before and after. I think that this exchange can help to experience the work because it is already an experience itself. The importance of comments and other languages supports I bring to my work is relative. Sometimes it is strong, and sometimes it is not. The comments and other language supports operate in my work like a book's punctuation. They are entirely part of the work but they are not the work.

They allow its breathing, its rhythm, i... but do not interfere in the work's existence, which, in my opinion, also belongs to the experience, or, at least, to the reading that will be made of it.

Here Foucault is crucial. In *The Order of Things* he demonstrates how all representations of things neither depend completely on our culture, nor totally on the scientific rules that define them, but also on the space between these two extreme notions, which is experience. This experience affects our perception of the world more than we would like to believe, and the way things appear to our eyes is subordinated to it.

O.: And beyond the specificity of each experience, couldn't we refer to the same concepts and issues to address the conditions of absence and erasure, remains and traces that are the main concern of all those works of yours dealing with disappearances? I'm not just talking about the "ghosts" we are trying to approach in this exchange, but also about those other "ghosts" you first presented at the Haifa Museum, about the "Untitled" mattresses you exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and even about "Holy Land," the outdoor installation you created on a beach in Fuerteventura (Canary Islands). Isn't it necessary to transcend experience so that the language of art can reach me, and reach anyone removed from that specificity, to experience the work?

K.A.: Absolutely. But is it really conceivable to go beyond the specificity of the experience? The experience of an artwork that you perceive through its historical content, its archive, is, in my opinion, more than an objective iconological notion contained in its boundaries, but rather what subjectively binds us to the artwork. It arises from an intimate dialogue that works like a "sonar" between the artwork and the individual, and produces a personalized echo deep inside each one of us. The sound made by this "sonar" resonates deeply inside our own personal history, searching for an echo that will come back in the work, and vice versa, and this in as many different ways as there are individuals and their "self" on Earth. If we both look at the Van Eyck painting "The Arnolfini Couple," we may both appreciate it (or not), but not for the same reasons. I believe that the experience of an artwork has a very personal flavor, which belongs neither to the artist nor to the viewer, but which is a perpetual extension of a dialogue that differs among viewers, epochs, and geographical position.

Indeed, if we consider talking about works that deal with disappearance, we can refer to the same subjects and concepts. But we can do so only if we refer to an analysis that aims to mathematically demonstrate, by successive deductions, the "motive" for the artwork. In my work, I try to get away from a construction that implies a Cartesian reading of the artwork, which gives a wider field of freedom for the projection of the mind, through the experience of the work.

Anyway, I think your question is very important at this point of our discussion, because it re-positions our dialogue on the issue of the transgression (the transcendence) of the experience, which is, in my opinion, fundamental in the apprehension of the work. May I answer you with a question? Is it conceivable, or above all, is it necessary to transcend the experience of an artwork? I believe that to consider transcending this notion of the experience of an artwork, it is first necessary to perceive it. That's why I think it's necessary to take notice of it. That's the basis of

psychoanalysis... as soon as you are able to “name,” with precise words or concepts, emotional experiences that you had felt strongly, but whose boundaries seemed vague, then you begin to understand their meaning and can move on to the next step of the analysis. In art, it’s a similar process; above all in a work’s analysis, where, as soon as you perceive its experience, a veiled dialogue between it and the viewer arises.

With any work, such as “Ghost” or more recently in “Sleeping from Memory,” shown at Boston’s ICA, the perception of the work’s experience is subjective, as I said before. It is then inherent to, and different for, each individual. It is what individually binds us to the artwork.

The perception of the experience of an artwork leads us to transcend this experience. So, why transcend it, and what’s beyond? As you clearly state, “to transcend experience so the language of art can reach me, and reach anyone removed from that specificity, to experience the work?” But if the aim of this transcendence of the experience is to experience the work, why is it necessary to try so hard to transcend it?

Isn’t there the prosaic risk here, so precious to human beings, of the desire to transcend things to better control them? It reminds me of the anecdote about an old Caribbean fisherman half asleep on a beach, who awakes every ten minutes when a fish bites his hook. One day, a wealthy American businessman happens to pass by, and seeing this man half asleep catching a fish every ten minutes, he advises him to stop sleeping and to fish more intensively, to catch more fish, and sell them on the market. “With the money, you can hire two employees to fish for you. While they work for you, you could sleep...” And then the old fisherman, lying under a palm tree, answers “but why would I do all this when I already spend my days sleeping...?” We should hear our prosaic world in this businessman’s question, as an absurd act in the face of the natural character of an activity such as sleeping.

In “Ghost” or “Sleeping from Memory”, it can happen, as for any other pieces, that some people let themselves get passively stuck in a prosaic reading of what they see, as if a work should fit the criteria of marketing, as though the famous phrase WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) should drive its meaning. In a certain way, I think that this reaction is more cultural than natural, as it is nurtured with representations of concepts, which work through associations or comparisons. These representations are then limited to a mythological, almost romantic, reading of what these people see.

In “Sleeping from Memory,” the shapes of the bodies dug in the foam are not simple representations of what they are supposed to represent, but a way to make the viewer think of emptiness as an intermediate notion, a transition which is both a source of political and psychoanalytical referents. This installation describes a dormitory for children, in which the beds are very similar to those my brothers and I, like many immigrants from North Africa, used to sleep in. As I have said before, the experience of emptiness that these shapes reveal is a notion that has different and sometimes paradoxical sources. It underlines absence through presence, emptiness through fullness, space and time, but always in a subjective, almost intimate way.

What is important in my opinion is that this experience binds us to the work in time as well as in space, in a dark, untouchable, but true way, I mean beyond the myth, and in which only poetry can express itself. This space, which is similar sometimes to a boundary, sometimes to a limit, sometimes to what binds and separates “ethics and aesthetic,” is poetry. It is an emptiness that is similar to a physical form as well as to a political and metaphysical referent. It is made, through its fragile experience, of a poetry that is simply similar to life...