

Hannah Feldmann, „Life on the surface of everywhere“, 2008.

Space seems to be constricting in Kader Attia's recent work. What little room there was to navigate the already crowded cityscape that the artist forged out of more than one hundred scavenged refrigerators at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon (*Fridges*, 2006) has buckled beneath the glittering refraction of the same slab-and-fridge skyline tiled with tiny mirrors at the BALTIC Center for Contemporary Art (*Untitled (Skyline)*, 2007). Even the scant volume that remains between these shimmering towers is little more than illusion, a *mise-en-abîme* of surfaces reflected off of other surfaces to present a spectacle of depth and light, to conjure a pretense of breathable air. No longer does there exist any margin for bodies in this urban grid, even as it is only the spectators' reflection from without that animates the fractured, mirrored surfaces, giving contour, color, and a sense of life to the 'buildings' and the cities they mean to evoke. Architecture and the cities it constructs, Attia's work intones in an increasingly dramatic register, live off more than they provide for.

Such is certainly true of the French banlieues that provide the most immediate architectural inspiration for these installations. Originally meant to provide housing for a burgeoning immigrant and working class population following World War II and the second swell that ensued at the end of the Algerian War of Independence, the housing projects of such townships as those within the département of Seine-Saint-Denis—'le 93' for short—where Attia spent his childhood, had, by the early 1980s, become the site of massive discontent and unemployment, fragmentation and isolation. Today, the technophilic world of promise these architectural agglomerations were originally meant to embody has certainly given way to grimmer realities, just as the allure of Attia's undulating skylines are quickly thwarted by claustrophobia and anxiety. In so doing, these room-scaled cities encapsulate for the art world spectator—while simultaneously implicating her within—the trap of consumerist aspirations that Attia has long ironized with work like *La Machine à Rêves* (2003) and *Loose Weight* (2004). Even more significantly, these works quickly conjure the tension between inclusion and exclusion that has animated Attia's decade-long investigations into cultural identity under the hegemonic index of globalization and the increasingly fraught condition of those rendered in exile as a result of the geopolitical conflicts that are often called postcolonial, but remain decidedly rooted in a long history of colonization and the battles fought to refuse it.

Attia's interest in this subject matter takes root in his own experience, wherein the interrelated crises of community in both France and Algeria after the 1962 resolution of the Algerian War of Independence anchor the oppositional poles of postcolonial possibility and probability. Indeed, despite the French Republic's ongoing reticence to compile statistics regarding the ethnic origins of its citizenry or to substantiate the kinds of identities earmarked by the hyphen that might otherwise or elsewhere appear between a range of geographic or religious markers and the national identity they mean to complicate or complement, Attia is consistently referred to as a French-Algerian artist. Moreover, he understands himself precisely as such.

Attia's mother is Arab, his father a Berber of Chaoui lineage. Both are from highland regions surrounding Constantine and so both were once subjects, if not citizens, of France before Independence rendered them Algerian. Born just eight years after

Algeria achieved its sovereignty and eleven years before the national conflicts generated during the battles for this right devolved into a bloody Civil War, Attia grew up in those northeasterly suburbs of Paris that have since come to epitomize immigrant and youth-generated violence for a rapid Western audience. It was in the unyielding grid of these urban developments that Attia came to know and hate the claustrophobic isolation that his 'fridge installations ascribe so effectively to the spatial terrain of the French suburb. And yet, honed in equal part by the cultural heritage of the banlieue, itself a cosmopolitan collage of religious and geographic tradition, that of his hybrid family lineage in rural Algeria where he would visit as frequently as war and the school calendar would allow, and the high cultural realm of art as it was presented to him in the Parisian museums he would visit on his own every Sunday, Attia's upbringing was as transculturally porous as they come.

From this culturally composite constellation of experience, Attia has honed a sense of art as a simultaneous means of communication and method of catharsis. Art enables him to speak with, but also to act against. In this sense, he refuses the notion of a pure or autonomous sphere of artistic production, even as his work has become increasingly attached to the institutional parameters of the art world and the large-format spectacles it allows, if not demands. From his earliest photographic foray in the mid-1990s, when he documented the two halves of his family in France and in Algeria, Attia has used the tools of his trade to bridge gaps and to attempt to bring people and places closer together, whether in reality or in the symbolic space of representation. At first, this might have seemed a hopeful endeavor, full of faith and a desire to cross boundaries and to bend genres. Fittingly enough, the project for which he would first achieve international celebration, *La Piste d'Atterrissage* (1997-1999), combined both these desires as it represented a population of Algerian transvestites and transsexuals, or what the French language names as transgenres—a nomination that, even if inadvertently, likens sexual difference to a category of things constructed across a series of discursive practices. In this series, Attia presented 156 photographs documenting the daily life of a community of Algerian-born transvestites as they made their living working as prostitutes on the Boulevard Ney, itself also something of a border between city and suburb, center and periphery, here and there.

Unlike the authors of so many of the photographic archives presented in art spaces over the last decade, Attia had come to know his subjects quite well over the two years he spent documenting them. The photographs he took were first and foremost, one senses from the intimate detail and affectionate rendering, produced for these subjects, and were meant to help achieve the visibility and hence the representation as political subjects that they had been denied, first by increasingly fundamentalist factions in Algeria during the Algerian Civil War and again as undocumented immigrants in an inhospitable France. Twice excluded, they lived the precarious vulnerability of what some have come to call "bare life," stateless and unprotected by either Algerian or French law. In particular, the latter refused to recognize the transvestites as political refugees and refused to ratify their quest for the residency papers that would allow them to find legal employment. It did equally little to protect them from the violence and abuse they received in their current line of work, especially from young beur males from the cité beyond the Boulevard. In this project, Attia's interest in creating bridges, in incorporating the unincorporated into a universalism that did not

have room for them, took on an even more literal form than that which might have otherwise been afforded by the simple act of interrupting the gallery's privileged space with the image of those it might normally exclude. Indeed, these images, still best remembered in the art world as the ephemeral, color-slide projection that Attia first installed in the architectural grandeur of the Centre National de la Photographie in 2000 and then again in 2003 at the Venice Biennale, had made their public debut in the pages of *Têtu*, a popular, full-color French monthly marketed exclusively to a gay and lesbian readership. In *Têtu*'s pages, the photographs provided both illustration and impetus to a compelling article—equal parts autobiographic lament and impassioned defense—written by journalist, music critic, and activist Héléne Hazera about the plight of these individuals in relationship to both a history of gay-bashing in France and its sinister double in the Algeria of the 1990s. Hazera's article made unflinchingly clear that Attia's investments were neither purely aesthetic nor remotely opportunist—a distinction that, for her, rendered the work categorically unlike similarly perceived folios produced by figures such as Nan Goldin. Instead, Hazera carefully foregrounded Attia's aesthetic practice within the sphere of his social conscience and in his own, autobiographical investments in refusing the invisible conditions of being only ever either this or that, here or there. To this end, Hazera explains how Attia had championed the rights of his photographic subjects, laboring with them to achieve residency papers for no fewer than eight amongst them.

That photographic imaging could facilitate such crossings of journalistic reportage, activism, and art world spectacle provides an important insight into the rigorously straightforward lexicon of forms, shapes, and allusions that have constituted Attia's more sculptural and site-specific installations in the decade since *La Piste d'Atterrissage*. Whether two- or three-dimensional, all of these works are still meant to function, in Attia's lexicon, as "pictures," and to speak to experience across the unique aspects of a cultural specificity that he is certain has become increasingly suspect.

It is well known, if not already something of a truism, that France is a country less interested in promoting diversity than in maintaining an implicit sense of frenchness through assimilation and integration. In recent decades, the mounting presence of the legacy of the Wars fought in Algeria has presented itself as an expanding set of stumbling blocks to the construction of a seamlessly postcolonial, European France and its concomitant cultural image. As French governmental policy has strictly enforced a policy of universalist assimilation and labored to keep private most visible evidence of religious and other sectarian difference, an increasingly alienated banlieue-bound generation of African and Maghrebin descent has become more and more susceptible to the separationist identities marketed to them like so many other commodities by Islamist (and other) groups seeking to augment their numbers with bodies reaped from the fertile discontent of the banlieues. When Attia satirized the fashion of this kind of religious affect by creating a line of hip-hop clothing called *Halal* (2004) and placed it as the saleable product of an extremely visible boutique (in reality the artist's then gallery) in the heart of the French capital, his humor cut more than skin-deep—just as the knife of his critique sliced both ways. The very desire to belong that enables the appropriation of religious symbols as tools of access rather

than avenues of devotion (and the fear that these augur for the majority population) is not a psychological phenomenon so much as it is a historical one, born of years of disenfranchisement and isolation at the margins. In Attia's repertoire and in accordance with his investment in thinking about identity across lines of sexual or cultural or religious boundaries, this appropriation is as applicable in the construction of, for instance, Jewish identities as it is in Islamic or Christian ones. To make his point, Attia's 2005 wall-based *Star*, for example, features an array of golden, Star-of-David-shaped sequins arranged against a black velvet background to spell the work's title, demonstrating this collision of material desire and religious symbols while also highlighting the ambition to be seen, to be, in effect, like a star. Similarly, the hastily rendered sketches Attia makes of faceless youth in hooded sweatshirts alternately emblazoned "Halal," marked with the secular icon of McDonalds' golden arches, or festooned with six-sided stars and Islamic crescents decry a rapidly multiplying mass identity, distinguishable only by brand, but united only in their aspiration to achieve this minimal mark of difference. The aftermath of a failed universalism is manifestly clear.

In more global terms, since those are the ones to which Attia is increasingly turning, we might also imagine the facelessness of this population—invisible beyond the iconic brands of their faith—as similarly related to the fate of the subject conjured by the reflective surface of the mihrab-shaped mirrors that the artist temporarily sunk into the arid terrain of the Canary Islands in an artistic gesture of symbolic welcome to the dispossessed migrants who arrive illegally and with growing frequency on the shores of this intermediary body between Africa and Europe in search of a "Holy Land" that, by default, the mirrors insist is always already somewhere else (*Holy Land*, 2007). Facing the sea and evoking in equal measure religious architecture and rudimentary tombstone, these sculptural fragments also enjoined the actual art world audience that would have been the only one to literally appear within the reflective frame of their surface during the duration of the 1st Architecture, Art, and Landscape Biennial of the Canary Islands to imagine itself as occupying this same subject position. To imagine itself, that is, in the impossible position of seeking to enter, but of being shut out by an impenetrable surface. The installation's title subtly joined this pilgrimage, occasioned for one population by displacement and hunger, but by the quest for greater cultural capital for another, to the idealization and corresponding contestation over certain religious sites in the Middle East as constituting a land more holy than any other.

But, perhaps the most eerie manifestation of Attia's fascination with the façade of faith as yet one more identity to be marketed and consumed is Attia's *Ghost* (2008). Here, row upon row of diminutive, but nonetheless life-sized, silvery body-shaped sculptures bend in a unified posture of prayer. From behind, the sea of fragile forms fills the room like a distorted regiment of Andy Warhol's Silver Balloons tethered to the ground in neat formation. Cross the room, however, and the elegant slope of what appears to be the figures' hooded heads open to reveal gaping holes where faces should be. Made from tightly wrapped tin-foil castings of women's bodies, these hollow shells are the logical companions to the triad of religious symbols with which Attia adorns his armies of suburban youth. Located at the margins of state-bound culture, his subjects become drones, emptied of substance and devoid of interiority, willing to bow down to

any or perhaps all dogma or religious creed.

Space, we might recognize, is compressed here too, precisely as it evacuates and territorializes the body we see represented only in its trace and only in its acquiescent sameness. By virtue of this sameness, by virtue of an existence defined only as pliable surface, these figures conjure the same subject we have seen elsewhere in the collapsing spaces of the world Attia remakes for us. Exclusions such as those that order the experience of the French banlieue, Attia's presentation begins to insist, cannot but fail to condition exactly the same culture we see here— and there. It is also only according to this same rhythm that the undulating flow of *Tsunami* (2006) can abstract the tin-roofed huts of all the world's shantytowns into one massive wave of ecological disaster, evoking in terse sculptural form the same global catastrophe that Mike Davis laments with such scholarly fervor in his *Planet of Slums*. The global networks celebrated by so much aesthetic practice, including, perhaps, Attia's own earlier works, as ways to hybridize and so universalize cultural belonging, here collapse into an endless repetition of the same empty spacelessness. What was once the utopian vision of a culture that might be located both here and there or somewhere in-between has given way to the dystopia of a culture that is everywhere and nowhere at once. It is only, for instance, the subjects conjured by the hollow shells of *Ghost* that might find a home in Attia's 'fridge cities or on the cement beaches of Algiers that Attia represents with the plywood and sheetrock obstacles of *Rochers Carrés* (2008).

Based on the artist's memories of childhood visits to the Algerian coast and the suburban shantytowns that sprang up around the abandoned French infrastructure, these looming masses once again threaten the individual subject with their scale, perilous volume, and rigid rectilinear formation, pointing to another instance of modern universalism gone awry and lining it up alongside so many others around the world. The irony may be that even as they describe this failure, these just-past modernist structures cannot exceed it and so too yield, albeit deliberately and purposefully, to the repetition of sameness that dominates a world stripped of cultural specificity.

At the heart of Attia's artistic investigation into these particular spaces and the experiences they foster lies an unresolvable paradox, a paradox from which his work takes its greatest force. In the world Attia builds to mirror our own, it doesn't matter, in the end, where you stand; there is still never enough room for you.