

Octavio Zaya: „Upon Pillars of Sand, Pillars of Salt... Kader Attia's Holyland“, 2008

The body of work which has won Kader Attia recognition and acclaim is customarily considered through the popular cliché concerning the simplistic opposition between East and West. A superficial overview of the artist's biography itself, as well as the complexities inherent to the development of post-colonial African cities, on the one hand, and the transformation that the successive migratory waves have impelled in European cities, urban outskirts and suburbs, on the other hand, make it manifest that the referential realities and conflicts in Attia's work, and the cultural crisis in which we live on both sides of the Mediterranean, continue to be understood and identified in relation to a spectrum of binary oppositions and spatial and temporal distortions. I am not going to tarry here or go any further into the origins, effects and interests of those readings that ignore the fact that the meshes of histories, styles, cultural productions, aesthetic vocabularies and identifications that distinguished urban centres are clearly being untangled by globalization. I mention this to purge as soon as possible the deformations and hypocrisy deployed to simplify and reduce a body of work –which is characteristic precisely for its complexity and its history– to a generic denominator of dystopia and cynicism. Sometimes it is divested of its poetic subtleties and its sophistication, at other times of its exuberant contradictions and fragmentations, which as a whole have shaped a site for political challenging, in addition to a space for negotiation and agreement where the threshold of a different realm emerges and is developed.

Holy Land (2006) is not an exceptional case, though it represents an extreme of the poetics that replaces the mute witness and enigmatic visibility in search of meaning and sense. As on many other occasions, before and after the production of this piece, Attia addresses circumstances related to invisibility and absence, disappearance and erasure. *Ghost* (2007), which was first presented at the Haifa Museum of Israel, and *Sleeping from Memory* (2007), the hallowed mattresses he exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, also bear in that same direction, which can also be traced in *Flying Rats* (2005) and in *Untitled (plastic bags)* (2008), which he exhibited recently at the Henry Art Gallery of Seattle. But in *Holy Land* the artist addresses those themes and their multiple projections by directly involving the viewer and opening a complex space of reflections.

Holy Land was installed and presented at one of the beaches of Fuerteventura (Canary Islands) where some of the thousands of African “illegal” immigrants land in improvised motorboats that reach the island, which has become an entryway to Europe and its promises of better, more prosperous life. Those beaches are often also the places where they perish, their last destination, the end of the road that was the prospect of another life. *Holy Land* is, in this sense, a graveyard. Attia put nearly a hundred mirrors in the sand, facing the sea, scattered somewhat systematically, as if simulating the arrangement of the tombstones in a cemetery. Part gravestones, part surfboards and part gothic windows, these mirrors plot a web of meanings and reflections that do not help us but rather force us to think of the complexity of the subject Attia embraces without ever yielding to the ease of its illustration, or to the opportunism of simplifying and exploiting the tragedy.

Without a trace of the immigrants, without any boats, without any signs other than the sea and the sand, we alone, as spectators, can set in motion the wheel of meaning. Of course Attia is aware that up until only a few decades ago we Canary Islanders were also an emigrating people, also "illegal", and that our vessels at times found misfortune –and sometimes their end– on Venezuelan coasts. Attia could not but resort to the mirror. "People don't really look at a work _they look at the mirror it holds up to them"¹, states Attia, referring to art in general. In this sense, the spectators of *Holy Land* are aware of the representation, because they are kept trapped in the swaying of a spectacle that simultaneously includes them and excludes them, one that is captivating and at the same time remote, like a T.V. reality show. Through participation and inaction, knowledge and ignorance, Attia's mirrors force us to think about our own history and about our responsibility in it, but from absence. Paradoxically -and it could not be otherwise- the mirrors reproduce, yet in this case they reproduce disappearance; they reproduce the nothing that escapes us, "that remains without remaining, which is neither present nor absent ...which is a remainder without remainder"².

Attia confronts us with the complexity of the tragedy of immigration beyond objectification, in the manner in which globalization constructs -according to Ranciere³ - an alternative "other" as incarnation of a living thing that is expendable although unavoidable, because it is not even an object or a "what". This "discardable life" is not even the *representation* of the global illness; precisely because it is disposable - and divested of all value, of all ritualization and all sacred reference - it is easy to get rid of. This is what the politics of the market and global work represents: the "de-sanctification" of its victims. And this sanctification is what Attia aims to recover in his seaside cemetery, in his *Holy Land*. However, especially in the global context of September 11th, of the disaster of immigration, of Blanchot's disaster, *Holy Land* does not question us, but cancels out the questions and makes them disappear, as if "we" were to disappear as well in the disaster that never shows, that never appears. Attia understands that disappearance is not an event. And it is not that it does not happen because there is no "self", no "us" that can have its experience, but because, since "the disaster always takes place after having taken place, there cannot possibly be any experience of it"⁴. Kader Attia offers us instead a tribute for analysis and reflection. Upon pillars of sand, pillars of salt for filling this empty place.

1 - Jean-Louis Pradel, "Interview", *Kader Attia*, (Zurich: JRP/Ringier 2006), page 047.

2 - Interview broadcast on March 22nd 1986 on the programme organized by Didier Cahen about France-Culture "Le bon plaisir de Jacques Derrida" and published later by the title "Entretien avec Jacques Derrida" (*Digraphe*, 42, December 1987).

3 - Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, English translation by Julie Rose (Chicago; University of Chicago Press, 1999)

4 - Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, English translation by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), page 28