

Régis Durand: „Kader Attia“, 2008

From *La Piste d'atterrissage* (The Landing Strip, 2000–02) to *Rochers Carrés* (Square Rocks) and *Casbah* (2008), Kader Attia has come a long way. This idea of a journey, of movement, so essential to his work, is present on the level of geography, of course, but also on the technical and intellectual levels. *The Landing Strip*, a montage of slides with a soundtrack, poses questions about the deracination and instability of an identity both national and sexual. Algerian transvestites who have left their country, where they were victims of persecution, find themselves in Paris, where they become prostitutes. Marginality does not preclude the feeling of belonging to a community, and emigration and being transsexual are markers of an even deeper wavering, an in-between state that Attia tries to express in various ways. How can such a

space of friction and contradiction be made visible while at the same time remaining faithful to the logic of each? In *Ghosts*, the shapes obtained from moulds of layers of aluminium foil on the bodies of men and women undoubtedly suggest those of praying Muslims. But they also play on the tension between fullness and emptiness, the suggestion of the body and its absence. The holy land ironically evoked by the work of that title, *Holy Land*, is no more than the illusion of the 'promised land' of emigration. But the shards of a mirror driven into the ground are like steles to the memory of those who believed in the promise of a better life elsewhere. At the same time, as pure reflections, they reflect back to us the hollow image of our own illusions.

This question of here and elsewhere, which is constantly being displaced and reformulated, is at the heart of Attia's work. But nothing would be falsier than to reduce it to a matter of identity in the strict sense of the term. We should see in it, rather, true poetic and philosophical reflections elaborated by means of sculpture and installation.

A work such as *Casbah* appears to depict the roofs of the kind of shantytown that exists in many countries, both developed and underdeveloped. The recreation and choice of materials are exact, but we are not in the realm here of sociology or ethnography. The work is a composition, a vision from above, as if we were discovering these roofs and these patios from an airplane about to land. In addition, the viewer is able to walk on the work and thus to experience it physically and directly. This idea of experience has the greatest importance for Attia. 'I like the idea that sculpture not be a relation between a formal entity and the viewer', he says, 'but rather a relation between viewers and the emptiness that exists between them and this entity. "Man creates things, but emptiness gives them meaning", Lao Tse tells us. Moreover, when viewers [walk on] the roofs, they [become] sculptures too, supported by these roofs, which [become] their pedestals'¹.

The success of Kader Attia's work lies in large part in its ability to invent forms (drawings, sculptures, ephemeral installations and photos and videos, for the most part) in which he employs both strong ethical and political concerns and poetic experimentation. A poetry of the ephemeral and of emptiness, but which nevertheless does not lose the meaning of its existence in the world of experience². His work using mere plastic shopping bags shows this quite well. Because they retain the mark of essential items distributed to people in need, they remind us that emptiness is not only

a metaphysical concept, it is also the fragile sign of absence. This emptiness, however, is also the 'impalpable boundary between representation and reality' and the outer edge of a specifically political art. 'No matter how political it is, art, in the face of social reality, finds in this absence the outer limit of what it can express', he remarks. The ephemeral nature of much of his work, like the depiction of fragility, in the video *Oil & Sugar* (2007) for example, are thus the result of a fundamental decision and a desire to exist in a 'temporal fault line', breaking with the desire to preserve things inherent to us all: 'I liken this fault line, this break, to an emptiness in time. I believe that the ephemeral aspect of my work illustrates a desire to elude space and time, in exactly the same way that my thinking today would like to transcend the lack of bearings in the present-day world and its somnambulant march'.

1. All quotations given here are taken from an interview between Kader Attia and the present author published in the catalogue marking the solo exhibition of his work at the Centro de Arte Contemporáneo de Huarte in Spain from 4 July to 18 October 2008. 2. On the concept of 'exchange of experience' and more generally on the dialectic of identity, see for example Alain Badiou's analysis in *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?* (Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2007), 86–94.