

## *Repairing, resisting*

The legal notion of reparations for historical wrongs is a product of US jurisprudence that is now recognized and applied internationally. Its claim is that History is now subject to trial, that reparations can now be sought on the basis of historical prejudice materially, politically and symbolically. Harboring no illusions on the will of states and governments to effectively carry out the process, its existence and implementation nevertheless offers real opportunities, in some cases (in the US and Columbia, for example), to individuals, communities and societies to claim justice for historical wrongs committed, be they massacres, population displacements, colonization, plundering or missing persons. The idea that History is subject to trial thus provides a legal framework for conflicts of memory while contributing a fundamental step toward moral and sociopolitical demands on a History both global and national that must maintain the universal scope of the law while addressing situations particular to each country or ethnic group. Whether History can be repaired or not is already a complex question based on fragile processes. Therefore one can only wonder whether contemporary art that claims to engage with sociopolitical issues is indeed apt to do so. Can Art repair History?

To ask such a question seems to imply that one has already resolved that it should do so, that this is indeed art's role and function. Demanding that art be critical of socio-historical events, making of this critique its very substance, would leave no alternative course to art than criticizing History and the deviating, detrimental, negating and divergent uses it is put to. The notion of reparations itself would then have to be critiqued. What right does the artist have, other than an aesthetic one, to assume that his/her work can repair certain deeds, events or facts of History? Does it make sense to stay strictly within the domain of the art world and consequently aim for artistic reparations rather than other forms of symbolic, material or political ones, knowing that the effects of art on civil society are mostly nonexistent? At the very least, art and other forms of reparations have in common their simultaneously symbolic and material dimensions, all reparations necessarily requiring a tangible, concrete aspect – an object through which to perceive the symbolic – whose primary function is precisely to make visible the reparation. An invisible or imperceptible reparation would have no impact on that which it intends to resolve, notably when what must be saved is on the verge of disappearing, or exists only in the minds of its last and only keepers.

The most well known type of reparation is the monument, which seeks to establish a kind of permanence or durability of articulation to the past while heralding the future. Reparation takes place because there was violence, damage, concealment, partial or full disappearance, voluntary

or involuntary threat to what one wanted to keep alive and well. Monuments are visible reparations in the public space attesting, by their presence, to the desire to conjure a void and the possible absence of entities or beings. So goes Freud's notion that "monuments are responses to loss". Works of art are also, according to Freud, substitutes for painful realities, as "we are naturally led to seek in the world of fiction, in literature, in theater, what we are forced to refuse ourselves in real life. Only there are the conditions met by which we might reconcile with death. Indeed, this reconciliation is only possible if we successfully embody the conviction that, no matter the vicissitudes of life, we will forever live on sheltered from any harm."

(*Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, 1915) Reparations for History in Art and art works have as their de facto aim this double aspect of reconciliation with death in all its intolerableness, and the safeguard of life against any further destruction. At the same time, we know that nothing and no one escapes death and that the erring usages of History are legion. We also know that if no action is taken to repair the lies, misusages, and misappropriations of the facts and events of History, it itself would tend to disappear. History would end, as certain authors have prophesized, sometimes unwittingly taking sides with those ideologues for which the end of History is taken as a sign that all is now permitted. Human beings would no longer be historical beings. Hence forth, the significance and value of the human would be relative values within a chaotic chain of asignifying events.

Artistic reparation is both a material and symbolic process that must be simultaneously perceived as material and ideal. A strictly symbolic reparation in art would miss accessing the field of the senses and sensibility, of esthesia and esthesis, which are the foundations of the creation and reception of art. Totally invisible, the reparation would not function as one or meet its claim to modify the symbolic relation that binds me to the object, since the space of the reparation – also both material and symbolic – would be indiscernible. As a practical intervention on different kinds of foundations with the help of divers materials, reparation is not restoration (an attempt to reproduce the object identically) but rather the creation of a new object in which different histories, personal and social experiences are melded. The objects chosen by Kader Attia are hybrids that proclaim a new art and a novel esthetic accompanied by new usages, functions and values. By uncanny montages and re-montages, the hybrid (*métis*) object reinterprets History on its own scale while proposing a different history that interweaves the material and the immaterial. The value then attributed to this object constituted through a process of more or less successful or conflicting hybridizations, is simultaneously esthetic judgment, social practice, historical stake and interpersonal relation, all of which make it's unquantifiable immaterial value, literally priceless, as the symbolic vehicled by the object remains without equivalent in economic, market or transactional terms. A material base is however present, circulating and symbolizing this immaterial value that human beings instate

by common accord in order to safeguard life and denounce violence, destruction and hate. The hybrid object is the exact opposite of negative identitarian discourses, as reductive as they are. Rather, it actualizes the concept of “creolization” dear to writer Edouard Glissant. More than works of art particular to certain cultures that represent, according to Marcel Mauss, a “total social fact” (*The Gift*), the hybrid object is, specifically, a “total historical fact” as it unites all social activities, and to the extent that it integrates as it modifies them, histories and globalized History. The work of Kader Attia presented here is, de facto, a complex hybrid that comes from diverse and unexpected places and that, most especially, raises fundamental and urgent questions: what Human history do we want? What is the esthetics of this History that we wish to produce?

It may seem incongruous to ask African artisans to produce sculptures based on the faces of “geules cassées” (literally, “broken mugs”), those soldiers who came home terribly disfigured from wounds sustained during World War I, as if it were a given that “negro art” (*Neger Plastik*), as Carl Einstein put it, fostered close relations to the deformations, gashes and slashes of these combatants. If we recall that the Great War was a worldwide one, that a number of belligerent countries were colonizers of Black and Maghrebian Africa, and that a large number of soldiers were recruited from there; that these colonies were also at stake in the conflict, and that the Great War was to have disastrous short and long term consequences on these colonized territories, then Kader Attia’s proposition seems perfectly legitimate. Even necessary, as he integrates ongoing reparation practices in certain African countries into the objects created, whereby material as well as historical traces of this colonial and postcolonial, sometimes even neo-imperialist interaction, are made visible. And also because through his work, he reposes the question: what has been done or what continues to be done today in order to repair History? One must face the facts. The disaster persists and we have learned nothing, or almost nothing from past conflicts. In the 1938 audio version of his film *J’accuse* (1919), Abel Gance added a powerful scene in which an old soldier calls upon all the dead soldiers of WWI to return and testify to the errors and atrocities of the past before the living that are urging for a new war, soon to breakout. In a remarkable passage that could well qualify as phantasmagorical realism, the “gueules cassées” parade in front of the camera, playing as it were, their own roles. They literally figure as disfigured extras come to claim justice before the tribunal of History.

Reparations for historical wrongs in Art are of little consequence on the course of History in the end, both in terms of their relations to the past and their preventative effect on the future. But to do nothing would be to concede that human societies continue without them, validating the notion that we have no means to act on and interact with History. Against this esthetic of concession, which is a new kind of voluntary servitude, artists and audiences must opt for an

esthetic of resistance and not leave it up to some higher entity to make History in our stead. The work of Kader Attia presented here is modest if we take it on its own politico-historical scale, and yet ambitious on this same scale as it concretely proposes a possible configuration of what we might call the contours of History. Art works being also historical documents, their forms, shapes and esthetics are visible and perceptible reconfigurations of the significance of history. Reparation thus appears in its function as historian, because by acting on a figure, form, or image of History, it proposes a dynamic representation of the latter as also a form of judgment, positioning, or declaration on what we are willing and able to do in History. Contrary to what one may think, and this is one of the strong esthetic moments in Kader Attia's work, reparation is in no way a false reconciliation. That would be leaving the problematic as it stands and resolving nothing. To the contrary, it works as a continual and keenly perceptible presentation of a critical gesture insisting on material and symbolic intervention. The reparation hides nothing of what it means to repair.

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