



All the Difference in the World

MANTHIA DIAWARA ON THE ART OF KADER ATTIA

COMMON GROUNDS

The hyphen in lieux-communs (common-place) is a crazy root that pushes you beyond the edges. A forward moving root that keeps you in place.

A JAGGED EXPANSE of grayish-white concrete blocks stretches toward a placid sea. In the pale, caustic sunlight, the blocks cast stark shadows, as do the young men who appear here and there, precariously perched, staring across the water. This clearly man-made yet hostile landscape, the setting of Kader Attia's photographic series "Rochers Carrés" (Square Rocks), 2008–, appears too bizarre to be real. But in fact the photos—shot from a variety of angles, ranging from bird's-eye views to monolithic close-ups—depict a beach in Algiers, where the government placed these huge objects to prevent people from taking boats across the Mediterranean to Europe. These images—

which I encountered at the 2009 African Photography Biennale in Bamako, Mali, and which served as my introduction to the French-Algerian artist's work—are not concerned with digital or darkroom effects, nor are they views of a quixotically ambitious installation. Attia has documented an actual architectural structure, a boundary that establishes a no-trespassing zone between the South and the North. Pictured by Attia's camera, the blocks on the sand, lifeless objects of obstruction, suddenly take on a different function: They are romantic promontories from which to gaze into an unknown future, loci of melancholy and desire.

In his 2009 book *Philosophie de la relation*, the late philosopher Édouard Glissant defines *lieux-communs* as those sites where such new meanings emerge to be relayed around the world. As such, a *lieu-commun* is more a common ground than a commonplace, though the latter word is the French term's

Opposite page: Kader Attia, *Rochers Carrés* (Square Rocks), 2008, gelatin silver print, 31½ x 39¾". From the series "Rochers Carrés," 2008–.

Below: Kader Attia, *Black Holes* (detail), 2012, black pigment, rice, dimensions variable.





Kader Attia, *Rochers Carrés* (Square Rocks), 2008, gelatin silver print, 31½ x 39¾". From the series "Rochers Carrés," 2008–.

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most literal translation. Glissant uses the locution in both senses, giving it a kind of double edge: A commonplace (*lieu commun*, unhyphenated) is a topos, a cliché, a construction made of naked truths and obvious statements, while a common ground (*lieu-commun*) is a source of creativity, a fertile zone of inexhaustible energies, where relationships are continually generated and woven between one place and another. To share a common ground with someone is to be related to him or her, knowingly or not, through the branching, intertwining connections of places and imaginaries, to feel, with him or her, the vibrations and pulses of the world. Via such connections, a common ground creates the conditions of possibility for resistance to the constraints imposed by commonplace thinking and by the logics of coloniality and governmentality.

The brilliance of "Rochers Carrés" derives from Attia's discovery and revelation of the block-strewn beach as a common ground where the youths captured in his images show their resistance, their refusal to accept the state's attempt to control their movement from Algeria to Europe. By reclaiming the beach as a point in the world for outlaw recreation and subversive contemplation, they, too, reinvest the place with

new resonances, new sensibilities and politics, and recast themselves as epic heroes. In so doing, to put it in Glissant's terms, they have created subterranean connections and relations with other people in other places confronted by nationalism, incarceration, anti-immigration laws, discrimination, and barriers to boundary crossings of all kinds—places including but not limited to Lampedusa, Palestine, and the border between the US and Mexico. Glissant conceives such connections as phenomena that may or may not be immediately perceived or apprehended, but that will nevertheless make themselves felt. He suggests that a place like the Algiers beach is "a site whence thoughts and ideas always emerge to call upon and illuminate thoughts and ideas from other sites." In conjuring this exhortation, this act of calling-upon, he is describing the dissemination of a possibility. Attia's photographs are not merely a depiction of that exhortation but an enactment, an amplification of it.

To read the series in these terms is to point up only one instance in which Glissant's thought relates to Attia's work with an almost uncanny salience, such that the philosopher and the artist may be, and seem almost to demand to be, considered together, one elucidating the other. To be sure, Glissant's ideas may



Kader Attia, *Following the Modern Genealogy*, 2012, collage on cardboard, 29½ x 39¾". From the series "Following the Modern Genealogy," 2012–.

be brought to bear on other artistic practices; great artists before Attia have played with the subterranean and fertile common ground between different objects and subjects. David Hammons, for example, painted the Reverend Jesse Jackson with a shock of blond hair to show the *lieu commun* of racism that builds a wall between Jackson and white American politicians. Felix Gonzalez-Torres's empty-bed billboards evoke the site of those democratizing commonplaces illness, sex, and sleep. And so on. As such works illustrate, common ground does not mean homogenization. Indeed, throughout his writings Glissant eloquently pleads for tactics of errantry and nomadology, which he deploys against the discourses of sameness. Hence his attachment to the notion of the diverse, which he defines as "that which constitutes a quantifiable sum of all the differences possible . . . the engine of the universal energy that we must preserve from systems of assimilation, passive generalizations, and standardized habits."

In opposition to such fixities, Glissant proposes a theory of "relation": He posits difference and diversity as the elements without which it would be impossible to conceive of the "*tout-monde*," or "all-inclusive world." *Relation* itself, as deployed by

Glissant, might be described as a way of thinking and moving within the *tout-monde* without suppressing multiplicity and without resorting to the totalizing universals that still underpin Western philosophy and theories of domination. Here, Glissant's and Attia's concerns are remarkably congruent. In a 2009 statement, the artist declares: "I think about people who have been dispossessed by Universalism (a powerful system of appropriation developed to apply theoretically and physically the Occidental mind's hegemony, and to synthesize the non Occidental world as another global entity, to bind it easily to the global system, whereas it has always been multiple)." Attia's art is itself diverse, peripatetic not only geographically but also with respect to medium and aesthetic. His best-known project is probably *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, 2012; a high point of Documenta 13, the work (of which more below) is a sprawling installation, densely allusive and materially profuse. Another installation he showed the same year—*Black Holes*, 2012, in which grains of rice trace delicate circles on a blackened floor—might almost be *The Repair*'s obverse, so stark is its reticent minimalism. What binds such disparate projects together is an unflagging concern

for the force that Attia identifies as universalism and for potential strategies to combat it. One way of thinking about this multifarious body of work is as a practice of relation, of setting things in proximity, even conflict.

POETICS OF RELATION

To enter into the world is as much to make a home in it as it is to turn your back on it. . . .

AS HIS ALGIERS PHOTOGRAPHS SUGGEST, the notion of the local is crucial to Attia's work. The local here might be understood as specificity that demarcates zones of history and culture as well as territory, and that thwarts universalizing impulses even as it remains open to links with other specificities, other locales. In this sense, the local is not insular, and is not antithetical to the notion of the *lieu-commun*; to the contrary, it offers a vision of a kind of expanded worldliness. Glissant observes: "You can't get around it; there is no location without a meaning." And because every location has its meaning, every location is a center of the world, no less than Paris or New York. Every location offers opportunities to think through the connections among artworks,

The common places Attia unveils are intricately specific, overwriting such generalizations as modernism and primitivism, metropole and colony.

Kader Attia, *Untitled (Ghardaïa)* (detail), 2009, cooked couscous, ink-jet print on paper, photocopies on paper, dimensions variable.



places, politics, and resistance. So, to create from one's locality is to tell others about the world, its weaknesses and strengths, its sensibilities, its beauty and ugliness.

"*Rochers Carrés*" is not the only project in which Attia puts this kind of meaningful locality into play to reconfigure links between distinct cultures. He spent his childhood traveling between France and Algeria and lived in the Congo for three years as an adult, and he incessantly uses objects with a biogeographical significance to think with the world—not *for* the world, like a conqueror or colonizer, but *with* the world, like a person who is seeking himself in the Other and the Other in himself. Attia conducts this search in the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa (on the beach of Algiers or in its casbah, or in the masks and sculptures of the Congo) but also in Europe (the Cubism of Picasso, the architecture of Le Corbusier). The common places he unveils are intricately specific, overwriting such generalizations as modernism and primitivism, metropole and colony. This obsessive quest for *lieux-communs* may be considered the very definition of Attia's art. It is what Glissant calls the *poetics* of relation.

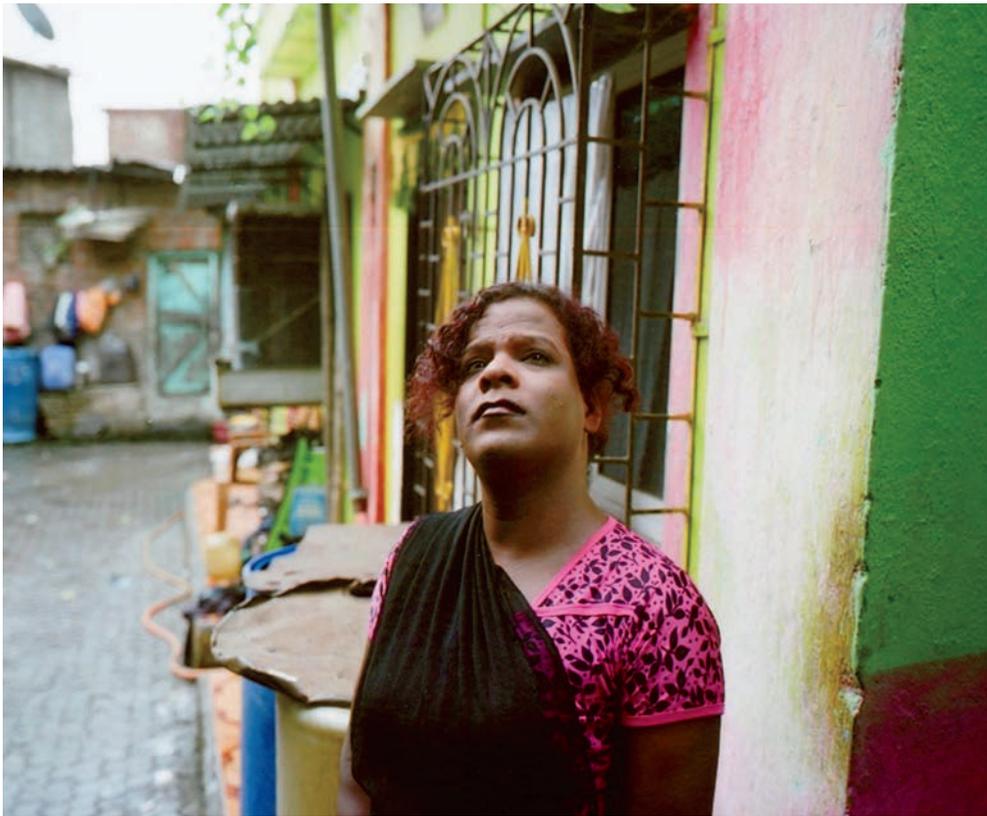
But again, Attia's poetics is also praxis—it is performative. Attia does not merely represent or document commonalities, he activates them in the service of what he calls reappropriation. To reappropriate is to reverse the "powerful system of appropriation" that is Western universalism, not through simple negation but through creative reengagement. This is

what the young men on the beach are doing, and what Attia does throughout his work—nowhere more pithily than in the 2009 installation his statement accompanied. The work, *Untitled (Ghardaïa)*, takes as its starting point a colonial encounter that, while possibly as seminal to the development of modernist aesthetics as Picasso's encounter with African art, is less familiar: Le Corbusier's 1931 visit to the Algerian city Ghardaïa. During his stay, the architect sketched the austere beautiful eleventh-century buildings there, which bear a marked resemblance to some of his own later structures. Attia argues for a direct influence, observing that certain design elements advocated by Corbu, such as the roof terrace and free facade, "are indeed already present in these 11th-century architectures of the North African desert." The irony, of course, is that many of Le Corbusier's urban French housing blocks (to which Attia alludes in his series of collages "Following the Modern Genealogy," 2012–) would be inhabited by North African immigrants. To address these historical confluences, Attia constructed a model of Ghardaïa made out of couscous, a once-exotic oriental dish and the very stuff of colonial exchange and Orientalist tastemaking: food. At Tate Liverpool in 2012, the edible maquette was displayed with photographs of Le Corbusier and a reproduction of UNESCO's decree that Ghardaïa is a World Heritage Site. The juxtaposition of elements not only connoted the cannibalization and regurgitation of Afro-Arab elements in Western art and archi-

itecture, but also pointed toward questions of artistic influence, imitation, and adaptation in the context of imperialism—questions that today have still not been reckoned with fully.

By putting Ghardaïa and Le Corbusier into Glissantian relation, Attia's work invites us to reconceptualize oppositions such as original/copy, anterior/posterior, superior/inferior, modern/traditional, or exotic/domestic. He prompts us to embrace the moments of confrontation in which one term dissolves into the other, so to speak, and hierarchical dualities become fluid, polymorphic exchanges. It is this dissolution of oppositions that, in Glissant's philosophy, may finally undo what is arguably the most fundamental opposition of all, that of self and unfathomable Other, and the classical conception of identity predicated upon it. In place of this dualistic identity, which ultimately licenses nationalism, empire, and conquest, Glissant (drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) imagines a rhizomatic identity that is not tied to family or place of origin. Such identity is sustained through relation to the Other, but not through opposition to a monolithic antithesis. Instead, it is multiple, constituted and reconstituted through innumerable encounters between differences; it is a state of becoming, a floating rootedness.

Here, too, Glissant's thought usefully informs a consideration of Attia's work, which finds rhythm and vitality in the performance of identities that, in their unfixed multiplicities, embody notions of the network. We see this clearly in Attia's 2011 photographs and



Two stills from Kader Attia's
Collages, 2011, three-channel
video, color, sound, 67 minutes.



three-channel video of transsexuals from Algiers and Bombay. The works' subjects cross the borders of identities—Algerian and French, male and female—without losing themselves. They change clothes and mannerisms as they move from one territory to the other, traversing nationalities and genders with no sense of existential threat. Perhaps they would agree with Glissant, who writes, “*Rien n’est vrai, tout est vivant*,” which I’ll adapt here as “There’s no truth; it’s all in the living,” but which might be most aptly translated as “The only truth is that which comes alive through the relation between differences.” In his installation *Ghosts*, 2007, Attia paradoxically gives life to truth through what would seem to be a *tableau mort*. The work consists of row upon row of figures, crafted in aluminum foil and resembling robed women on their knees, bending forward, all facing the same direction. But there is nothing inside the freestanding foil robes—where one would expect to see a face, there is only hollow emptiness, dark shadows that almost evoke black veils. The effect of this silvery phalanx of ciphers is indeed ghostly, even frightening. While many viewers will take the robed effigies as representations of Muslim women at prayer, it is just as clear that there is no fixed identity behind the veil, and that any assumption as to who or what these figures represent is in fact the product of the spectator’s own preconceptions.

In *Ghosts*, an essential point about Attia’s art is brought to the fore—namely, that he is always reflecting upon, and prompting the viewer to undertake, a search for the Other, be it the Other place, the Other identity, or the Other within the self. Per Glissant, “Sometimes, we find ourselves by taking on the problems of the Other. This is . . . the rhizome working to show that identities are not only found in roots, but also in relations.” Le Corbusier eating couscous in Ghardaïa; transsexuals changing clothes between Algiers and Paris; spectators confronting their own desires by filling in the hollowed faces of the foil women: All desire and seek the Other, which is our way of searching for ourselves, without any guarantee of satisfaction.

THE ARTIST OF REPARATION

If the quakeful thinking does not lead to an immediate reparation, as required by political and civic actions, it announces and prepares us, at least, for the long and permanent reparation that our imaginaries—changing and exchanging among themselves (by trembling)—entertain.

GLISSANT’S UNDERSTANDING of the Other is very different from that of such postcolonial thinkers as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, who are all more or less faithful to the Fanonian



Kader Attia, *Ghosts*, 2007,
aluminum foil. Installation views,
Stiftung Federkiel, Halle 14, Leipzig.

The casualties of the brutal force that Attia calls appropriation may be found in all times and places of modernity, and in *The Repair* he reappropriates these subjects experiences, their likenesses, and the art that they produced.

definition of this difficult concept. As is well known, the Other for Frantz Fanon was an Other whose quest for decolonization fixed him in a binary opposition to the colonizer. And, in their various ways, Bhabha, Said, and Spivak all theorize an Other who is antagonistic to and unassimilable within Western contexts and discourses, except as a frozen representation. But for Glissant as for Attia, the Other is someone or something with which we inhabit the *tout-monde*, and which forms part of a totality—but one that is continually fissured, rendered multiple, by difference. Within this fluctuating totality, Glissant avers, “I can change myself through transacting with the Other, without destroying or denaturing myself.” Such transactions may be the true mechanism of decolonization, not only for the formerly colonized but also for the West.

There is, however, nothing utopian about this vision. Our relation to the Other as subject and object may still be deeply fraught and horrifically violent, as Attia suggests in the aforementioned *Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*. *The Repair* establishes ricocheting commonalities among African and European histories and subjects via a theme of trauma. On industrial metal shelves, masks and traditional figurative sculptures evincing the respective local idioms of Dakar, Senegal, and Carrara, Italy, are arrayed among ephemera and miscellaneous artifacts, including “trench art” produced by soldiers in World War I. All of the sculptures show signs of damage and repair, disfigurements unnervingly echoed in projected images of mutilated veterans of the Great War. We see all the possible representations of the embodied Other: traumatized bodies, bodies for exhibition, repaired bodies, fetishized bodies, aestheticized bodies, objectified bodies, white bodies, black bodies, bodies of Africans, bodies of Europeans, bodies carved in wood, bodies stitched in fabric, masked bodies, tattooed bodies, hollowed bodies, protruding bodies, bodies locked up in boxes like incarnated stereotypes, bodies becoming or coming apart. The common ground of all these beings is that they are looking for reparation. They all need to make up for something they’re missing, something, perhaps, that they perceive as their due; they’re all striving to achieve a state of renewed equilibrium, a compensation for some kind of lack or amputation.

Inevitably, we must understand this reparative panorama in terms of Europe’s debt to Africa, the unpaid balances of the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, and the current decimation of indigenous populations and their environments through mining and wars. Thus the idea of repair takes on at least two levels of signification. First, we see that a broken body is a body that has had a weakness introduced

into it, a hole that becomes the sign of trauma and that we need to treat by covering it up, stitching it, or decorating it with other scars in order to reappropriate it. But there is also the notion of reparation as payment, settlement, or psychological recompense for an injury that has not only weakened us but has also taken from us something of value, a vital force. It is in this sense that groups such as African Americans (who were literally decreed half-object and half-subject, or, more precisely, two-fifths object and three-fifths subject) have demanded reparations for crimes committed against them. Some of the African masks in Attia’s installation were created as agents of this kind of reparation: They were used in rituals to represent ancestral deities who were called upon to compensate for damage caused by epidemics and natural disasters.

Walking through the installation, one of the first things one realizes is that the broken faces, whether black or white, masks or people, are interchangeable to the extent that all are scarred, all need repair. They each work to construct a *lieu-commun*, one that may be shared not only among themselves but also with the viewer. Confronted with so many terrible injuries, we may recoil. But if we persist in looking, facing the images on offer in their dreadful specificity, we may begin to see the relations among these damaged subjects and our own visibly or invisibly damaged identities—since all identities bear scars. The consciousness of difference comes to coexist with visceral identification.

It is difficult to think of a contemporary artwork that so palpably articulates the carnage at the very heart of modernism. For in the juxtaposition of the faces of these piteously mangled men and the masks whose stylized geometries they sometimes gruesomely mimic, we are reminded that the disarticulations of World War I were as generative for the historical avant-gardes as African art was. Perhaps we should see these scars as the traces left by modern technologies of the self, by the modern subject making and remaking itself as well as others, violently. The casualties of the brutal force that Attia calls appropriation may be found in all times and places of modernity, and in *The Repair* Attia reappropriates their experiences, their likenesses, and the art that they produced—returning to them some measure of historical agency and to us some sense of the present’s still unpaid debt to the past.

As its title hints, his current installation at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, *Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob’s Ladder*, 2013, extends precisely these investigations. “The biggest illusion of the Human Mind is probably the one on which Man has built himself: the idea that he invents something, when all he does is repair,” the artist observes



Left and above: Kader Attia, *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, 2012, mixed media. Installation view, Fridericianum, Kassel. From Documenta 13. Photo: Roman März.

Kader Attia, *Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder*, 2013, mixed media. Installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London. Photo: Stephen White.

in the accompanying statement. The installation (on view until fall 2014) suggests that perhaps it is the world's different systems of knowledge—sundered from one another by the advent of modern science and history, by the invention of invention, as it were—that invention repairs, not in the sense of merging disparate fields back into an originary unified state, but in the sense of revealing both their difference and their proximity. Via a cabinet of curiosities full of books and artifacts, Attia relates the history of astronomy in Europe and the Muslim world to the biblical tale of Jacob's nocturnal vision of a ladder to the heavens. A vertiginous column of infinite space, penetrated by a beam of light, stretches above visitors' heads. It is an illusion created with mirrors—which, after all, are primary technologies of the self, fundamental to optics and thus to the first telescopic assays into space, but also to confrontation with one's own reflection, with a seemingly externalized self, a self as Other. Yet no such split can be discerned in Attia's optical illusion. Instead, he presents a vision of a *lieu-commun* where scientific invention meets the dream logic of parable and where subjects of knowledge, objects of knowledge, and ways of knowing are neither opposed nor complementary but densely intertwined. □

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