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complementary conversations

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A few weeks ago, in Austria, a teenager was arrested and judged as a jihadist, and participant of the Islamic State. The Austrian Police reported that they discovered he was planning a bombing in Vienna's Central Train Station. They found evidence of this plan, as well as visual documentation on the massacres perpetrated by ISIS not in his pockets, nor on his computer, but in his Playstation.

The preparation for his attack was stored in the memory card of his game console...

Until recently, this story would have seemed impossible, since terrorism was considered as part of the adult world. Twenty or thirty years ago, when terrorism was part of a world in the grip of the Cold War, it was a weapon to create fear, and above all to convey messages, the political ideology of which had been formed after a secular political educative journey (or even anti-religious when it was Communist). These ideals were nurtured through several years of being taught it was possible to invent a better world; a world of social and racial equality. Today, 15-year-old teenagers go and fight as jihadist to access a better world that does not exist on this Earth. Instead they all aspire to become martyrs (Chahid) and access the eternal paradise. We are now in the 21st century, and we would never have imagined such a world. What happened? What is going on? What still needs to be understood to maybe reinvent our reality?

First, we have to admit failure, as evidenced by the generations we have created that are so full of hate, where the culture of contemporary violence mixes with the traditional violence of beheading and throat cutting. The pervasive culture of physical violence in our society contrasts distinctly with the intellectual, psychological and immaterial violence that takes place in our contemporary society: a political, social and cultural frustration.

We have all confronted the struggles of childhood and adolescence; when existing in society, or in a group, was something excessively important. We have all been "exiled" in our own country, in the community we have lived, sometimes even in our home or our own bedroom. When we become adults, and our adolescence is far behind us, we forget the fragility in which we used to lose ourselves at that time of our life. We sometimes even smile remembering the naivety of our behaviour, and of our understanding of the world during our adolescence. And yet, today the social, cultural, and economic frustrations that govern most of teenagers' world, the one in which they have to fight to exist, are very real and have never been so intense.

A few years ago, I filmed a group of teenagers in Paris, who were playing an online game of virtual combat. I was touched by their innocence, despite the violence of their goal, and the way that they were fighting. Long after that, I filmed young Algerians, near my village, playing soccer using the remains of a Roman architecture – the arch of a temple - as their goal. I have always been fascinated by this strong political gesture of reappropriation, and the

contrast between the simplicity of these acts and the intellectual force their symbolism will resonate forever. I believe it is best expressed through the question that sociologist Serge Gruzinski has chosen as the title of his latest book “*History to do what?*”. Gruzinski even used the very same photograph that has been used for the invitation to this exhibition, “Complementary Conversations”, as the basis of the first chapter of his essay. For him, this question is at the core of the scenes previously described, and the main issue within Western societies, including France, Austria, Germany, etc. Gruzinski is asserting against the seemingly impossible ability for these countries to initiate a common social project with their populations of different cultures.

This issue of a social project shared by inhabitants of all cultures and religions within a singular nation has always concerned me. A few years ago, in the city of Graz, Austria, I questioned the social and cultural separation between the Austrian, Western bourgeois neighbourhood and the neighbourhood with the majority of Turkish and immigrant populations through an ephemeral and symbolic line. This line was drawn on the floor with couscous, and was slowly eaten away by pigeons until it disappeared. The complete lack of real exchanges between populations and cultures that live side by side, even if they only meet briefly, can be seen in the conclusion of the film “History of Reappropriation, Architecture as a stake”, in which young French people play war online, and young Algerians play soccer without caring for History.

This outcome is also the impossible juxtaposition of Palestinians of Jerusalem and massive settlements. This film, realized in 2012, has a far older conceptual origin. That is one of many reasons why it is particularly interesting to show it today, since the situation hasn't improved but even worsened. During my trip in Israel in 2003, I was lucky enough to cover the invisible lines of the urban plan of the wall that was then still under construction with Israeli friends, academics in architecture.

The parallel between this real story and the works of fiction that teenagers from Algeria, France, or Austria invent (the dramatic events of the Austrian jihadists, or the French terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo being two examples) has been the reason for my desire to show this film made in 2012.

The young Algerian soccer players unconsciously show their desire for a reappropriation that repairs; the famous “bricolage” (makeshift) dear to Claude Lévi-Strauss, which can be found in several other works in this exhibition “Complementary Conversations”: the scooter shells repaired by young Senegalese with cardboard and fiberglass, or – even more surprising- the clay plate of my great-aunt and the historical continuity that her ancestral gesture embodies, both strikingly simple and meaningful.

One day, while dreaming on the terrace of my aunt's house, she started to break big fragments of an old circular clay plate into small parts. This plate, traditionally used in the Aures mountains to bake bread, is a central element and very common in the traditional history of the Algerian mountains. To my surprise, she spent a considerable amount of time crushing the pieces of the plate with a stone, until they turned into powder. Suddenly, she poured water onto the powder to produce clay dough. My aunt kneaded the dough, and flattened it until it took the shape of a new plate. Beyond Claude Lévi-Strauss' “bricolage”, the continuity of this ancestral gesture of creating something new from something old is pure Repair, and it questions the concept of modern creation, which – to quote Lenine as well as Le Corbusier – makes “tabula rasa” from the past.

In my mind the dogmatic myth of a break between Modernity and Tradition is nonsense, since I was raised with and nurtured by oscillation between the Christian Occident and the Muslim Orient. I have thoroughly immersed myself in the belief in an inherent continuity of things, and the conviction that, in the words of Bruno Latour: “*We Have Never Been Modern*”.

In the exhibition, “Complementary Conversations”, the notion of fracturing the intermediary space between things is fundamentally important, because this notion is integral to the ways in which I have based my own life. I have always sailed between two very different worlds, being the East and the West, and from these exchanges I have learned the value of the intermediary space; what Felix Guatari and Gilles Deleuze call “the fold”. The diptych of photographs at the entrance of the exhibition announces this ambivalence, embodied by the duality of two universes. First, is an image of a post-industrial landscape in the city of Halle in Germany, where vegetation has reclaimed its rights and has reappropriated its omnipresence on the concrete ruins that remain. In the distance one must squint to see the Volkswagen logo atop an abandoned factory’s chimney. This landscape emphasizes the end of the reign of what has been the motor of Modernity – Progress. The latter, opposite the first, depicts a completely different landscape. The crowd of palm trees evokes a non-western landscape, and a warm climate where the lush vegetation of an oasis can be seen, which strongly opposes a typical northern European landscape. In the middle of this palm grove, a earth architecture has been built above a water source. It is a well. Traditionally, a well such as this would be used with the help of a camel. However, in the past few years it has been modified to function with an electrical pump imported from China. Looking at this diptych, one should be less stricken by the depictions of the twilights of two eras occurring simultaneously, than by the space that separates them as much as it links them.

In the last room, arranged as a cabinet of collages, the legacies of Modernity as well as Tradition are juxtaposed through a dialogue which elucidates the core socio-political stake of Modernity: the control of the body. Since my early readings of Michel Foucault’s “*History of Sexuality*” and “*History of Madness*”, I have been forever haunted by the dialectic between the body and the mind, and the way in which a body navigates and occupies architectural spaces and space in general.

Until today, the ebb and flow of my life’s trajectory between North Africa and Europe, has helped me to discover, through deep reflection on the structure of private and public spaces, how traditional, vernacular architecture has influenced the ‘Masters’ of Modernism, such as Le Corbusier, Fernand Pouillon, and the entire Team 10 movement. Ironically enough, it was vernacular and secular aesthetics and building processes that have strongly influenced many European Architects, including masterpieces of social housing such as Le Corbusier’s Cité Radieuse. After this interesting and iconic social housing project, thousands upon thousands of problematic copies have been erected worldwide, especially in Europe after the Second World War. The aim of this particular brand of pseudo-social housing was to prevent its inhabitant from straying into the bourgeois neighbourhoods - in France these areas are referred to as banlieue (suburbs). These bedroom towns have restrained the human body by obstructing its physical and psychological progression to the cultural, political and economical elite. For example, in these neighbourhoods, public transportation is available only at working hours of the week, so that the only people who can effortlessly travel into the city-centre are those who are wealthy enough to own a car.

This series of collages describes the all-encompassing social and political dispossession of culture through colonization. One can see this in the Algerian vernacular city Ghardaia, which had a distinct influence on Le Corbusier, a fact which is often minimized - in the West - when

its not completely denied. Denial is a term that can be readily used when discussing most traditional, non-western culture's influence on Modern Art, such as traditional art from Africa.

In Paris, 2009, there was a critically acclaimed exhibition titled "Picasso and the Masters", and it was advertised as including all of the major artists who influenced Pablo Picasso's oeuvre. That is to say, all of the white, European, male artists were represented, and not a single African mask was to be found. There is no "better" illustration of the white, male domination, which forms the core of what I call the Trinity: Christianity, Colonialism, and Modernity.

My point is only further elucidated by the general misconception about traditional, African art is that it is not, in fact, Art at all. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Suleymane Bachir Diagne stated "*African Art as Philosophy*" and to quote his mentor Léopold Sédar Senghor, he added that it is an "ontology of rhythm" of "being as rhythm." The problem of such amnesia on the part of curators of the Picasso exhibition is further unraveled by its contrast with other exhibitions, such as MoMA New York's 1936 exhibition titled "Cubism and Abstract Art". Part of the exhibition's ingenuity was its integration of African, tribal artworks into the museological setting amongst Modern paintings and sculptures. What has happened since then? Why is it that well educated people do not grapple with the issues inherent to erasing history? What if the tables were turned? It would be nonsense...

Contemporary society has succumbed to laziness, where the trend of amnesia has overthrown the merits of thinking. Despite the lingering injuries of our past... we hide our scabs and scars behind the illusion that everything is working well.

Yet, as Cormac McCarthy stated, "Scars *have* the strange *power* to remind us that our past is real, it is highly necessary to live with them." The last series of fabrics I scavenged in Dakar Senegal, which were scratched and torn when I found them, have been carefully repaired to embody the injuries as a part of our subtle reality.

Kader Attia

Publications

La Pensée sauvage, Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1962

African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, 2011

We Have Never Been Modern, Bruno Latour, 1991

The History of Sexuality, Michel Foucault, 1976

Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, Michel Foucault, 1964

History to do what, Serge Gruzinski, 2015