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Aesthetics and colonial heritage

An interview with artists based in Marseille¹

Badr El Hammami, Mohammed Laouli and Marine Schütz

Beginning in 2000, art in France has revealed a striking proliferation of works exploring the complex cross-cultural relations that have resulted from a long history of exchanges between France and the Maghreb. The attitudes towards identity and difference that have unfolded in media debates, especially when related to immigration or violence, provide the impetus for many works of art exploring Franco-Maghrebi identities.

While a significant proportion of these artworks reveal a common aim to counter Western stereotypes about the Arab difference, many involve a wider critique of the relations between France and its former colonies by investigating the traces of empire pertaining to its representation in monuments. The city of Marseille was historically marked by colonial history. As the gateway to the East and to Africa, which makes it an important crossroads for European, Mediterranean, and African cultures, many street names and monuments bear witness to this past. A number of artists located in Marseille take as a starting point the weight of colonization on historical narration and representations in order to unfurl a critique of colonial narratives that, although written in the past, remain the source of intense suffering.

This interview, which took place in the summer of 2020 with contemporary artists Badr El Hammami and Mohammed Laouli, centres on questions about the relations between decolonizing the arts and monuments, their own backgrounds, and the effects of the recent Black Lives Matter struggles on their artistic production.² Their comments explain how they approach traces of colonialism (such as memory erasure, epistemic colonization, and the monument as a persistent expression of the political matrices that governed the past) in order to denounce unequal relationships of the present. While their responses point to the quest for two types of justice—social and memorial—they convey a conception of the decolonization of knowledge aimed at imagining societies that are more concerned with the place of the individual. These artists' responses also illuminate aspects pertaining to the new relations that can be put into place between Morocco and France. Indeed, Badr El Hammami and Mohammed Laouli develop representations of colonial histories that go beyond a unidirectional process of contestation and overcome restrictive nationalist visions of identity in the Maghreb, thereby showing an

aspiration for transnational approaches that are determined by the complexity of Franco-Maghrebi identities in art in Marseille.

Marine Schütz: In France, the consideration of colonization seems to oscillate between the difficulty of its recognition and the political valorization of its supposed ‘positive aspects’. Yet colonial issues made an early appearance in your respective works. Badr El Hammami, in your work *Sans titre* (2012) (Figure 12.1), you have put forth representations of the world where you propose other modalities of relationships by transforming borders into connective zones. Borders rank high among the salient legacies of French colonialism in Africa. Such an overcoming of the legacies of colonialism seems to be central to your work; can you explain its genesis?

Badr El Hammami: The installation *Sans titre* (2012) is made with wool and represents a world map. I chose to let the rest of the wool threads fall and

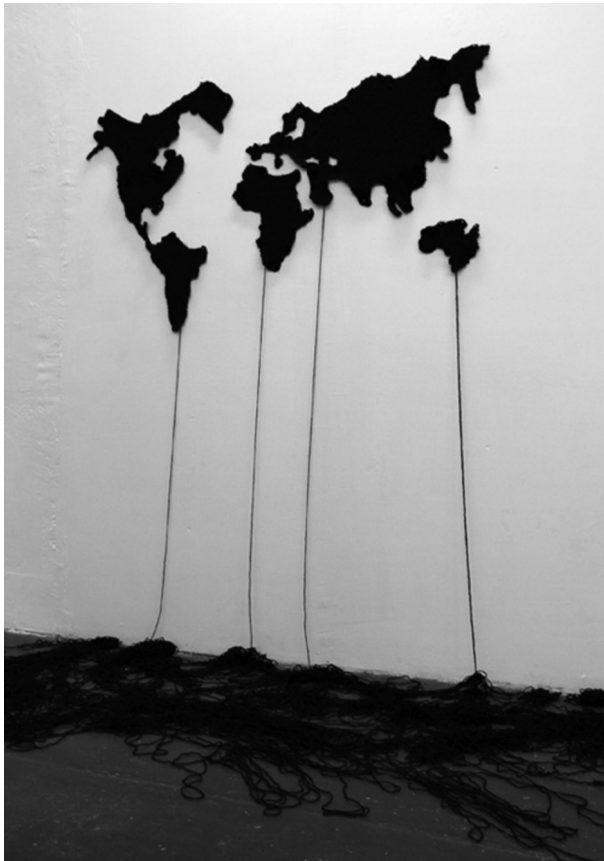


Figure 12.1 Badr El Hammami, *Sans titre*, 2012, wool, 180 x 140 cm, view of the exhibition *Vie privée et familiale*, Espace 29, Bordeaux, France, 2012.

Copyright Badr El Hammami.

form a set of threads that cross each other. The choice of wool is not a coincidence: it was a heavily imported material in colonial times. There are two things that interest me in this installation. The first one is the representation of borders in history textbooks, of those lines that separate countries and that shape an image of their roots, without a beginning or an end. But each line is loaded with a tragic history. The simplicity of these drawings of world maps has always been a way for the colonial powers to assert control over territories. The second is that I always think of a particular sentence when I see a world map, that of Georg Simmel, who says: ‘The border is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact that takes on a spatial form.’³

Marine Schütz: Mohammed Laouli, the presence of colonial issues in your work also seems closely linked to space, namely to urban space in Morocco and France.

Mohammed Laouli: I decided to get out of my studio because when I was in Morocco, at one point, the enclosed space was not enough for me; it didn’t nourish me and there wasn’t much to draw on from my imagination. I don’t work with my imagination. I am an artist who works with reality. The evolution of my artistic practice has had as its goal public space and the streets in order to be in direct contact with the people and what is happening in the reality of today. I started to create my interventions in Morocco. There, there are not so many statues. They all have been removed. There was one of [Hubert] Lyautey, but it is at the French Institute.⁴ So in Morocco I started doing my interventions with people. That’s where my interest in public space started. When I came to Marseille, I was already doing the work *Frontières Fluides* with Katrin Ströbel, a project that takes public space as its starting point. But for my own work, because I was in Marseille, which is a city with a huge colonial heritage, I began to confront these statues, because it is something that is there, that is present, that marks and summarizes a whole history. The whole colonial history is there, in these sculptures.

It was with the *Ex-voto* series that these questions about colonial history began. It’s been three years since I started working on these questions and from this point of view, from France. Now, I work from both sides; before, I only worked from Morocco. And now I’m on this side. This is a sensitive subject. In *Power Dance*, you see that in the pieces I’ve made, there is a kind of conflictual relationship, an aesthetic of conflict—for example, when I juxtapose a *kepi* with the pompoms of a djellaba (Figure 12.2).⁵ Sometimes I am afraid of propagating an aesthetic of war and that the work may be misunderstood. You can see that my work *Chasing Ghosts, Homage to the Harkis* is a video that is difficult to understand. It passes for an homage to the *harkis*.⁶ But I don’t pay homage. I use the story of the *harkis*, the situation, like other stories, the colonization, and the postcolonial situation, because up until this very day we continue to face the scars of this story. These stories are so strong and violent that they interest me. Yet it is not the personal histories of the *harkis* that interest me but rather the mechanism that produced this and the effects as well as the impact of this today.



Figure 12.2 Mohammed Laouli, *Ex-votos*, 2018, *Colonial kepi vs pompon* (Installation), *Untitled* (photography) and *Necklace* (found object), view of the installation in the Friche de la Belle de Mai, Marseille, France.

Copyright Mohammed Laouli.

Marine Schütz: Badr, your work *Thabrate* deals with the means of communication used by Moroccans who migrated to France after decolonization in the 1960s. The ways you allow entangled French and Moroccan histories to reemerge seems to challenge French national narratives on the history of colonialism, which are often conceived—as in Benjamin Stora’s analysis—as a form of collective amnesia.⁷ How has your personal history led you to such critical approaches to colonial history?

Badr El Hammami: Concerning my origins and the way I treat colonial history, you have to know that Morocco was a French and a Spanish colony, the Rif [mountainous area in Morocco] was colonized by the Spanish. So I have always been interested in my native region before the history of the Moroccan nation. But from a young age, I was interested in the French language. Yet in the Rif, everybody speaks Spanish; I always had this impression that the Spanish were still there. The proof that European borders go all the way to Morocco (they don’t stop at Spain) is the existence of the Spanish enclaves Ceuta and Melilla, two large European cities in Africa!⁸

This is an example of a contemporary colonial history that remains taboo in current debates. In one of my artistic productions, *Sans titre* (2012) (Figure 12.3), with a coin and a table, the coin comes from the Franco era. It spins non-stop on the table. It is a way for me to say that the colonial question is still topical; there will be no flip of the coin.

Marine Schütz: After the death of George Floyd, the Black Lives Matter movement has targeted certain aspects of the legacy of colonialism, such as its monuments and the systemic effects of racism on the psyche or the



Figure 12.3 Badr El Hammami, *Sans titre*, 2012, coin and table, view of the exhibition in La Kunsthalle, Mulhouse, France.

Copyright Badr El Hammami.

employment prospects of Black populations in the United States and Great Britain. Your video *Les Sculptures N'étaient Pas Blanches* (Figure 12.4) takes as its starting point the reactions of anti-racist activists, who poured red paint on Louis Botinelly's sculpture, *Les Colonies d'Afrique*, that was erected in Marseille during the colonial exhibition of 1922. In this work we see you at work, cleaning these stains from *Les Colonies d'Afrique*. What is your relationship to these current events?

Mohammed Laouli: I use current events, the debates born of Black Lives Matter, as a catalyst to underline the colonial relationships and the colonial and postcolonial situation between here and there, this space that is France and the other side of the Mediterranean. This act allows me to underscore points that are really very sensitive and that you can't define with words. It's the question of taking care of an image that represents the colonized. How can you do that without the image? That's the strength of the image.

Marine Schütz: For this reason, your work functions as a sounding board for these Anglo-American debates, even if the population of Marseille seems to have been relatively unreceptive to controversies about the decolonization of monuments. However, while the issue of removal was often at stake in these debates, you have prompted a physical approach to colonial monuments that is based on gentleness. Where does this act of cleaning that you perform in your video come from? And what is at stake with such an approach?



Figure 12.4 Mohammed Laouli, *Les Sculptures N'Étaient Pas Blanches*, 2020, video. Copyright Mohammed Laouli/ECHOES.

Mohammed Laouli: In *Ex-Voto*, I had made marble plaques on which I said, 'Thank you for colonization'. There, I am taking care of the colony. I am giving thanks. In *Ex-Voto*, I was starting from colonial facts and events such as the Berlin Conference. I found it interesting to make a Catholic ex-voto from a marble plaque.⁹ It was conscious and intentional. There is an irony. A bitterness. There is the balance of power: you (the colonizer) consider me weak. I am the dominated one. So, I let you believe that you dominate me.

I consider *Les Sculptures N'Étaient Pas Blanches* as another step in my work because I was able to treat these violent facts with gentleness and subtlety. It's too difficult to approach these subjects without violence. You can't approach colonial history in the world by denying violence. It is thanks to violence that I was able to arrive at this notion of taking care. I hope that from there this will lead me back to ways of working in the realm of gentleness when dealing with violence.

In relation to aesthetic resistance or aesthetic decolonization, I realized that I have made this gesture of cleaning hundreds of times in Morocco because when we go to the men's hammam, two or more of us go together, and one of us often takes care of the other's body by removing dirt from the skin with a glove. So the ritual that I set up in the video is a ritual inspired by the protocol of the Maghreb hammam, a common space of sharing and of purification.

Marine Schütz: What was the intellectual genesis of this video?

Mohammed Laouli: During the lockdown [caused by COVID-19] I made a new series. I even found a new content for my practice. I lived with this

sculpture [*Les Colonies d'Afrique*] when I landed in Marseille and also with the *Statue of Peace*.¹⁰ When I come into contact with something, an object that becomes part of everyday life, it is reflected in my work. It's important that my experience as an immigrant is here, in my work.

So during the lockdown I found myself a subject: modern sculpture. In the street, I found beautiful engravings of sculptures created by the Louvre Museum in the 1960s. There's Rodin, there's everyone: the French and European modern, Dutch sculptors, etc. The prints were in my studio for three or four years. And during the lockdown, as I was into sculpture, I began to exchange the features of the sculptures on the prints, the head with other faces, which are faces of the South, North African, Mexican, Black, etc. I played with that and I found something, without knowing the story of *Les Sculptures N'Étaient Pas Blanches*. When I learned the story of *Les Sculptures N'Étaient Pas Blanches*, I thought it was huge. There was a documentary produced by Arte called *Non! Les Statues antiques n'étaient pas blanches*.¹¹ It said that a German politician who had a connection to Winckelmann decided that all sculptures would be white, which related to the so-called superiority of the white race.¹² Because the Ottomans had coloured sculptures, the Greeks had coloured sculptures. This, so that the European would not be confused with the others.

Marine Schütz: Your remarks about this series of collages and this documentary suggest that, at a certain point, with the invention of modern aesthetics during the eighteenth century, the link between art and race was confirmed in a canon that represses any form of plurality. Your work thus seems to be directly linked to a critique of the effects of modernity on the construction of a white, European aesthetic, which, in its very enterprise, intended to crush all forms of pluralism.

Mohammed Laouli: Yes, it is a decolonization of the body, of the body of sculpture, because it is the canon of the body, it is the basis of modern and European sculpture.

Marine Schütz: Thus, you approach another relationship between art and decolonization that concerns representation itself. Questions of representation are at the heart of the colonial enterprise. You started from this matrix, as if you were deconstructing modern/colonial aesthetics by taking an interest in the question of representation. For aesthetics has excluded all other forms of expressions other than fine arts in order to classify them as ethnology or folklore. The eighteenth century appears as the key moment when the understanding of the diversity of the aesthetic phenomenon contracted.

Mohammed Laouli: Absolutely. And there, you arrive at something very important: my interest in the votive form. When I wanted to approach this power relationship between two poles, the colonized and the colonizer, I chose the votive form because Georges Didi-Huberman in *Ex-Voto: Image, Organe, Temps* says that the votive form was denied by art historians, that it was not considered an art form.¹³

Marine Schütz: In short, you have constructed your approach to the dialectics of the colonial/colonized by choosing a form that itself had been marginalized?

Mohammed Laouli: That's what interests me. What is important is that the form of thanking was like an introduction. With *Ex-Voto*, I found a way to work in a kind of third space, as Homi Bhabha used to say,¹⁴ which is open to all kinds of negotiations, to all kinds of things that are part of this process of decolonization. Whatever I do, I'm in a sea, I can't swim without a 'decolonization vest'! Historically with the votive form, we return to the situation, to this thought that dominates the balance of power between the colonized and the colonizer.

Marine Schütz: We have dealt with the issue of the decolonizing of the arts. In France, the notion is driven by a group of thinkers, *Décolonisons les arts* (Let's decolonize the arts), formed by Françoise Vergès, Eva Doumbia, Kader Attia, etc. They stand out for having developed narratives of colonialism that, while being critical of established power relations, sometimes seem to reassert old cleavages, especially those between different facets of racial and cultural identity. What is your view of their actions and attempts? Badr, what do you think of such approaches and more broadly of the role of artists in the decolonization of art, evoked by Mohammed?

Badr El Hammami: As far as the *Décolonisons les arts* movement is concerned, I am not very convinced by what they say. I listened to Françoise Vergès at the Friche de la Belle de Mai.¹⁵ What I understood from them is that Arab artists must speak only of Arabs and Black artists only of the Blacks, and the workers must speak of the workers. What shocked me is that she comes from neither of these backgrounds herself. I have the impression that she did not understand that artists have always decolonized the arts; it's even an engine of creativity and it is not simply a question of decolonizing by contributing to colonial history, but also by way of collective imagination. Transgression is a form of decolonization. What touches me in works of art is when they evade a direct interpretation, when they are open to several interpretations—they are not mass-produced IKEA tables.

Marine Schütz: Which artists do you have in mind?

Badr El Hammami: We can cite these artists, who, in some cases, often went unnoticed but have always addressed this question of decolonization: Trinh T. Minh-ha, Miklos Onucsan, Isaac Julien, Meschac Gaba, Ariella Azoulay, Guy Tillim, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Bouchra Khalili, etc.

Marine Schütz: Badr, in the movements pressing for the decolonization of knowledge, the issue of monuments dominated the headlines this summer [2020] in Bristol. In June, we witnessed the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston by activists during a Black Lives Matter demonstration. What is your perception of how the colonial heritage was dealt with in Marseille?

Badr El Hammami: Concerning the toppling of the sculptures, to tell the truth, I completely disagree with the idea of erasing the history of these

monuments, which is like saying that the concentration camps, the traces of Nazism, must be removed. That's what extremists usually do, we've already seen it with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan with the destruction of the Buddhist statues (the Buddhas of Bâmiyân) and in museums in Iraq and in many other countries. Erasing the history of historical monuments is erasing a history for future generations. Without the evidence, doubt is planted about the very existence of these stories.

Marine Schütz: In your own work, you seem to pay a lot of attention to the forms that allow history to persist. With the *Thabrate* project, you worked on the communication tools that Berber immigrants have used since the 1960s to transmit their culture. You seem interested in the effects that colonization in Morocco had on culture and on the narration of history.

Badr El Hammami: The reason I am interested in sound archives and transmission is simple: I lived in Morocco for 20 years and these stories are related to our Amazigh (Berber) culture, which was completely banned from history books in our country. But this is what remains, and by being a strongly oral culture it allows us to continue to perpetuate these memories and traditions. This is exactly what the Riffian generation did in the 1960s. Unable to communicate with their loved ones back home (I'm talking about the Riffian workers who arrived in France in the 1960s) given that landline telephones were not common in Morocco and the majority were illiterate, they had the intelligence to use audio tapes after 1963, when the Philips brand marketed this technology, to record actual oral letters that would go back and forth between France and Morocco. My father is part of this generation. What I find interesting in this recording process is that Berber culture is an oral one, and it is not because it is not written that there is no history. Written history has always been the story of the victors, but the way it is written doesn't tell how things exactly happened.

There are many stories related to the colonial era that have gone unremarked in history books. I am particularly interested in stories on the margins of history; for example, being a Moroccan from the Rif region (in the north of Morocco), I tried to understand what happened during the Rif War (1921) in relation to France in general and Marseille in particular. That's what interests me, to look where there is a gap in history, geography, politics, etc.

Notes

- 1 This work forms part of the ECHOES project which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 770248.
- 2 The ECHOES research project created the 'Key Interventions' section on its website with the aim of gathering different projects that emerged in the wake of 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. See *ECHOES*, <https://keywordsechoes.com/interventions> (accessed 11 December 2020).
- 3 Georg Simmel, *Sociologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2010), 606.
- 4 Hubert Lyautey was a French military officer during the colonial wars and became the first Resident General of the French protectorate of Morocco in 1912.

- 5 *Power Dance* was a solo exhibition by Mohammed Laouli that ran from April to June 2019 in Le Cube—independent art room, Rabat, Morocco.
- 6 *Harkis* is the term for the Algerian soldiers who fought on the side of France during Algeria's War of Independence. Many relocated to Marseille after Independence and in spite of the difficult living conditions they experienced upon their arrival in France they are commemorated with plaques in the city. One can be found on the back of the *Monument aux morts de l'armée d'Orient*. The artist questioned this commemoration in his project entitled *Chasing Ghost*.
- 7 The French historian introduced this notion in several texts, including Benjamin Stora, "Women's Writing between Two Algerian Wars," *Research in African Literatures* 30 (3) (1999): 78–94.
- 8 Ceuta and Melilla are two autonomous Spanish cities located on the north coast of Africa, opposite the Iberian Peninsula. They represent a special case within the Spanish state because they are landlocked on another continent and are the object of a Moroccan territorial claim. See Yves Zurlo, *Ceuta et Melilla: Histoire, représentations et devenir de deux enclaves espagnoles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).
- 9 The Larousse dictionary defines *ex-voto* as 'a painting or symbolic object hung in a church, a venerated place, following a vow or in thanksgiving for a grace obtained'. See "Ex-voto," *Larousse*, accessed 11 December 2020. <https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/rechercher/ex%20voto>.
- 10 This statue, erected by Joseph Chinard during the Napoleonic wars, was placed in front of the Marché des Capucins in 1802 and removed seven years later. It was finally returned to its original location in 1984. Today, this sculpture made in the beaux-arts style is surrounded by the stalls of the market of the Algerian district of Marseille.
- 11 This 2019 documentary, made by Benoît Puichaud and produced by the TV channel Arte, takes on the argument by the archeologist Philippe Jockey about the myth of a 'white' Greece. See Philippe Jockey, *Le Mythe de la Grèce blanche* (Paris: Belin, 2019).
- 12 Prussian archaeologist and art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) was the founder of archaeology and art history as modern disciplines. On his contribution to sculpture, see Daniela Gallo, *Modèle ou Miroir?: Winckelmann et la sculpture néoclassique* (Paris: Éditions Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2009).
- 13 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ex-voto: image, organe, temps* (Paris: Bayard, 2006).
- 14 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004).
- 15 The artist refers to a conference during the 2017 *Art-O-Rama* Art Fair.