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RACHEL KENT IN CONVERSATION WITH KADER ATTIA

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RACHEL KENT (RK): To start our conversation, let's talk about your childhood, Kader. You were born in 1970 in Paris to Algerian parents, and grew up in the *banlieues* or outer suburbs of Paris, as well as Algeria. I think that you returned, in fact, around about the age of three and thereafter you traveled back and forth between France and Algeria.

You've talked a lot about this idea of an "in-between space": the space between two very different cultures that has been a central feature of your life, but also your art as an adult. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about your childhood, and this idea of in-between–ness?

KADER ATTIA (KA): Yes, I grew up between France and Algeria. It sounds very simple today, but in the mind of a child—and I was probably very sensitive—I understood the difference between France and Algeria in many details. When we arrived in Algeria after a trip in France, we were supposed to bring a lot of cheese in our luggage. When we were going back from Algeria, the luggage was filled with dates.

Like any child, I was sad leaving the place where we were staying for a while, and repetitively, back and forth.

My father told me one day that the most important thing for your life as an immigrant—which is very important nowadays, when you think about immigrants—is not the country you leave, nor the one you're going to find, or want to find, but the journey.

This notion of the journey has kept my mind protected from depression. I know now that I was depressed, but when I was teenager, I didn't know that. I was supposed to stay home twenty-four days or twenty-five days, waiting for the moment in which I was able to leave for holidays—to move, again.

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RK: Where was home?

KA: It became a single home when I was a teenager, in the French suburbs of Garges-lès-Gonesse. My father said I had to stay in the same place because of my studies. He was very skeptical about the level of studies in Algeria—it was very tough after the post-colonial era in Algeria, and still is, to educate your children. You need to have a lot of money, and my father came from a very poor family in the East of Algeria, in the country. We had a lot of land . . . just dry land with stones, which I enjoyed a lot, because for a teenager this is fantastic. You just spent your life on donkeys, and hunting . . . but most of the time I was in Algiers.

In Algiers, we were very poor. We could not afford a high-quality level of school. In France, because of the republican educational project, everyone could go to school. That's why my father decided to keep us in France, even if I loved to go back to Algeria. My home became the Garges-lès-Gonesse suburbs and I started to develop my intellectual personality in the context of French culture of the 1980s and '90s. It means a lot today. For instance, I've lost a lot of Arabic . . .

RK: Language?

KA: I still speak the Algerian dialect without any problem, but I lost the formal Arabic that I could communicate with easily in any other Middle East country, which is slightly different. Many words change, and the grammar and the structure of the sentence changes. On the other hand, I became very sophisticated in French because I started to read French philosophy.

I was fascinated by philosophy, even Christian philosophy like Saint Augustine—even more so when I discovered that Saint Augustine was a Berber from Annaba. He was from Algeria. In any case, I have embraced French philosophy, French thought. It helped me to open my mind in terms of growing up in a society where you have to know you are "taking part." You're part of it, but how?

Very early in my teens I not only started to read philosophy, but to be fascinated by books. At home, there were not many books. Most of the books were religious, the Qur'an obviously, and magazines; and

books on construction because my father used to build houses. Then I went to the local public library, Elsa Triolet, in Garges-lès-Gonesse.

There, I discovered my first literature. I started to read. When I was sixteen, I was reading Schopenhauer's philosophy. I was fascinated by that, but already looking at art books a lot.

I was fascinated by Vermeer de Delft, by the light in his paintings, and especially the portraits. I used to draw my hands from Michelangelo's studies of hands. The Tuscan school, Raphael, Giotto, I was very much interested by. The second, let's say, "earthquake," in my brain, in terms of art, was a book about Pablo Picasso.

On the cover, there was an absolutely incredible painting called *Three Musicians*, of three musicians painted completely flat.

RK: What an interesting picture, the idea of you as a young French-Algerian boy in the suburbs of Paris, studying the Italian Renaissance and then discovering Picasso. . .

Let's talk now about your studies. It's extraordinary to think that by sixteen, you were reading Schopenhauer. You're a devotee of the local library. You're working your way through the canon of art, but also literature.

As a young man, you studied philosophy as well as applied arts and design at university, first in Paris and then in Barcelona. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about your studies and this grounding in a wider understanding of the world. How does that apply to your work as an artist now?

KA: I've always been very sensitive to the necessity of understanding the world . . . I just wanted to understand humankind. I became totally agnostic, if not atheist, as an adult but the first time I got into philosophy was at the mosque. In the suburbs, we had an imam who explained God to us, which until this moment—for me, like all children—was an old man with a long beard. He told us, "No, God is not this. He's everywhere. He's in the stones, in the air. He's in you; He's outside you. He's everywhere. Everything is God." This explanation resonated for me, because I asked him, "Is the universe limited things?" He said, "Absolutely not. The universe is endless because it's God."

RK: It's infinity. . .

Let's talk about your travels, because you have always been a very peripatetic person. You've talked about your childhood, living between Paris and Algeria, but travel has been a hallmark of your adult life and artistic practice. When you completed your university studies, you went to the Congo. You spent three, four years back and forth, first of all in Brazzaville in the Republic of the Congo, then across the river in Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

I know that you did this as part of your compulsory military service, but you were fortunate because you were able to work with NGOs in both places. I wonder if you can expand on that experience of living in Congo, and the work that you were doing there.

KA: Yes, Congo represented a very important moment in my life because I'd been looking to escape from this gray, everyday life of the suburbs. That's probably why I went to the library, but after my graduation in Paris, my first escape was to go to Barcelona. . . . Travelling is not easy when you're alone; sometimes it's very tough. One day, after crying, I found a good opportunity, which was my first job. It was at the French Institute in Barcelona, the department where they were providing French lessons. They asked me to draw advertisements for them, and I did so. They were on the buses of Barcelona. The director was so happy. One day I explained to him my problem with my outstanding military service, and he said I should apply for a public service role. I applied, and received an offer to work with the Ministry of Culture of Congo. It was a cooperation project.

RK: While you were in Congo, you were doing quite extraordinary work within the community. It was really a form of social activism. You were working with the Ministry of Culture, but at a grassroots level. I remember you telling me that, at the same time, you were pursuing an art practice and you were constantly taking photographs.

KA: In Congo, you work in the morning; you have to start at seven o'clock or eight, because it's very hot, and you stop at noon. After I had lunch, I was walking, constantly shooting photographs and making drawings. I was drawing a lot.

Tropical countries are amazing for drawing because you're surrounded by nature. In Congo, which is in the equatorial zone,

nature is absolutely abundant. It's so powerful. It was very humid, raining every night, like living in an artificial garden. I've always been fascinated by photography, but in Congo I had time to set up my material, then develop my own prints as well. I had a darkroom in my home. This was fantastic, although I never found such a difficult place to photograph. Most of the population didn't like photographs; [people were] completely suspicious, and they were superstitious.

RK: Around 1997—so you would have been aged twenty-six, twenty-seven—you finished your work at Congo and returned to Paris. This was a time for rethinking—a bit of a crisis, I remember you telling me, because you had to make a choice in terms of What do I want to do? You had a background in philosophy, applied arts and design, your private artistic practice in photography, and drawing, and you had this quite global experience of the world. What turned you formally to the direction of art?

KA: I think what turned me toward the direction of art was definitely the political ethic, the ethos. The notion of living together cannot be a passive thing. This is what many people misunderstand. Living together in a society involves duties, rights, but work as well.

RK: It's reciprocal, about giving back.

KA: Yes, because we always hear that we have the duty of memory. We must celebrate; we must take care of memory. We have the right to memory, but there's always a dimension we forget. To be sustained, memory needs work. That's why I'm fascinated by Israeli and Jewish culture, for instance, because it's [hard] work to sustain something; it's a big job. People have devoted their life to that.

I have always been fascinated by the concept of repair, the idea that human beings are on an extraordinary adventure, but full of injuries. Those injuries need to be repaired. How? You can be political. You can be a doctor. You can be a captain of . . . you can do whatever you want. As far as I'm concerned, the arts have an incredible ability to change the world and its systems from the inside, through a very slow-motion process.

There's a frustration to that too; like a historian, you can dedicate your whole life without witnessing the results. What I know

is the passion, the sensibility, the notion of beauty, of ethos and aesthetics. . .

RK: Let's pick up on the question of injury and repair. These themes have been a constant in your art practice for some time now, and in talking about injury and repair, there is the concept of physical injury and restoration, surgery, whatever it might be . . . but there's also the deeper concept of psychological injury. How does one address that, because it's not something on the surface, something that can be seen?

One could extrapolate more widely and talk about the scars of an individual, but also a culture. For example, of the scars that may carry through generations in relation to the colonial process, the relationship of Algeria and France. How do concepts of injury and repair manifest within your artistic practice?

KA: I came to the notion of repair after many years of working on re-appropriation. I discovered that the real stake of re-appropriation is repair. There is a process whereby cultures dominated by foreign powers that we call colonial ... mimic the symbols, or even change their own cultures, by including, absorbing, elements coming from the West. There are thousands of ways of different absorptions. This process works in both directions too.

Nowadays, we usually believe that repair is the fixing of a broken item or situation; but actually, repair is also the changing or evolution of a system. If you take this paper coffee cup today, for instance, it would have been a glass cup before it became a paper cup. I don't think that the paper cup was invented before the glass cup, but I'm sure that before the glass cup, there was a ceramic cup, a pottery cup, and before the pottery cup, it was probably a wooden cup, the horn of an animal. . .

This is what Michel Foucault explained in *The Order of Things*. He said that "nothing has spontaneously fallen from the sky." The knowledge that we have is also the consequence of a very long, slow evolution of "improving processes." These improvements are also a form of repair—we repair a system that can be improved.

You see, Rachel, I think the notion of repair became a crucial stake in my understanding of humankind, because it is also part of these old untold stories that we are living on top of, with, and surrounded by. In this era of amnesia, we have to take care of these

successions of state between anything that we are using or not. Even in nature it happens.

RK: It's adaptations, which can be biological or cultural.

KA: It's what Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin developed in their theory of evolution. I have been talking with scientists, biologists; when I mention that I have been working on the concept of repair, and trying to understand whether this could be a synonym for natural selection, they all said of course it's a repair.

I started to learn about so many layers, in so many disciplines, from the evolution of cultures, to natural selection, to political systems. . . . The highest point of the repair is art—creation—motivated by this instinct of urgency that is pushing us constantly towards the future. . .

In 2012 I exhibited my installation *The Repair, from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* at the dOCUMENTA (13) exhibition in Kassel, Germany. It illustrated the concept of repair by taking two examples of broken objects. In one instance, the objects were repaired in their original context, because in traditional societies, repairing an injury means showing the injury, sometimes with a very sophisticated process of knots or staples. In Japan, ceramics used for the tea ceremony have been repaired along the fault line with gold paint. When you are invited to participate in this incredible ceremony, you receive the cup with the fault painted in gold on your side, turned towards you, so you could admire the incredible work of the craftsman.

I'm fascinated by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's observation that cultures that have never actually met have developed parallel similarities. He called this structuralism.

In Congo, calabashes are repaired using incredibly sophisticated processes. In Japan, at the opposite side of the world, you have the ceramic cup repaired—highlighting the injury and celebrating it, giving these broken objects a second life. What I just described is the opposite of the dogma of modernity in the Western world.

In the twentieth-century, Western, modern world, when an object was broken, you had to repair it by removing as much of the injury as possible, then giving back to the object its original status.

RK: It's almost like concealing, isn't it?

KA: Yes, exactly, but it's what I call a myth, because we never get back to the original.

RK: It's erasure. . .

KA: It's erasure and denial of the injury; it's a denial of time, of history. It's also the fantasy of controlling as much of the universe as we can. The traditional object, repaired roughly, can be illustrated by the person who repaired it: "Hey, I repaired this. This is repaired. This object had a life, and it's still alive, and it has a history, and is living with this wrinkle, if I may."

In the West, this obsession with removing the wrinkle is Promethean. In the First World War it was an obsession of not only building extremely powerful weapons, but also repairing the broken faces of soldiers by giving them the illusion that they have been repaired exactly like they were at the outset. If a soldier lost his jaw, they built a perfect resin replica, with perfect coloration.

I think there is an interesting metaphor in the notion of repair, which polarizes tradition and modernity.

RK: We've touched on your extraordinary dOCUMENTA (13) work, which was a breakthrough for you in 2012. You've talked about the ways in which that particular body of work brought together all these ideas about injury and repair through the medium of art; but you're someone who's also worked beyond the immediate art world throughout your life and your career, and there is a quote that you told me which resonates. It's by a wonderful Argentinian artist, Antonio Manuel, who said in the 1970s, "I want to act, not represent."

In terms of taking these ideas out into the wider community, creating a space for discussion, just recently (in October 2016) you've opened a public space in Paris. It's called La Colonie and it's a combination of a space where people can come together to share ideas, to debate issues, to share a drink or a meal, to watch film screenings, and so on. Can you talk about why you've set up La Colonie and what you want to achieve with it?

KA: The reference to Antonio Manuel is very interesting to me because for many years, in my own reflection and production of art works, there was a frustration to struggle against the limits of representation. For instance, for one of my earliest works, I focused on the Algerian transgender community that was exiled in Paris during the '90s, when Algeria was caught in a civil war between Islam and radical Islamism.

Algeria was the first country to struggle against radical Islamism. . . I don't know how to imagine what it could have been [like] to be a man dressed as a woman in that society. Many of them were killed there and they were also not helped by the army.

It's a very horrible story, but what made me think at that time about the important difference between representation and art, was that I was doing photographic work with them, living every day and every night with this community. The result is probably three thousand photographs, but I was already feeling that there was a necessity to help them within the real world—to live—because many of them were caught by the French police, then put on a plane back to Algeria.

We joined a French association called Droits Devant, working with Sans Papiers cells and the LGBT community. Thanks to this association we developed a dialogue with French police and government so they could have temporary papers for protection, because they were in danger in their original country. Something the French always forget is to apply the law. There is a law called the Geneva Convention, which protects citizens of the world who are in danger in their original country, and the French have signed this agreement.

Transgender people caught up in the civil war between Islamist radicalism and the army are in danger. Many were killed and beheaded. This is what I think of in terms of acting. You cannot be a political artist and be satisfied by representing only.

I think it's extremely important that in a society there is always an arena of free speech, the freedom to act, to try to repair those huge injuries that illustrate all fragmented societies. That's why I think art alone is not enough.

RK: La Colonie is a really good instance of not just representing, but acting to create a public space for these very important dialogues. These questions are terribly important right now given the world that we live in, with the rise of extremism, on all fronts. Just give us a little

insight into La Colonie and the kinds of discussions one can have in this space. And who is La Colonie for?

KA: First, it's an interesting building. You have the first floor, where you can have a drink, but you can also attend presentations or film screenings. The second floor is dedicated to workshops and conferences. It's a place where we think, where we work, and it's fantastic. It's like a huge public square.

The third floor (when we have funds) will be a space only for art . . . with which you actually interact as a viewer.

Our first symposium was on re-appropriation, because La Colonie is itself a form of re-appropriation. It is a re-appropriation of the traditional public space, or agora, that we have become removed from nowadays—or that we have neglected.

The feminist artist Martha Rosler came to speak at La Colonie; Bruno Latour came. The Indian artist who founded Raqs Media Collective, Ravi Sundaram, came. So many people came to talk, and to share with the audience of the neighborhood that we are located in front of, the Gare du Nord, which is one of the most popular neighborhoods for immigrants in the tenth *arrondissement* of Paris.

People from the street—shyly at the beginning—are now starting to get involved and attend our forums. For instance, at the last forum a group of architects from Le PÉROU (Pôle d' Exploration des Ressources Urbaines) proposed to help refugees to build a place to live. They've been working for four years in Calais, in the north of France, where there was this incredible refugee city, ephemeral, temporal . . .

RK: The Jungle. . .

KA: The Jungle of Calais. They came to La Colonie to talk about this community, which was dismantled last week by the police. At one point, over six thousand people were living in this place. You have to imagine, what does it represent? The mass media where portraying it like the jungle, as if there would be animals—but there were schools, a theater, a makeshift library, there were cafes. There was a life inside this place.

At La Colonie, we want to build an agora to provide information to an audience outside of social media, or the mass media;

information that comes from the mouths of people who have experienced this road. There were two refugees that night explaining what life in the Jungle of Calais was like. I think La Colonie is also trying to repair this gap between the representation, and the act.

RK: Kader, we've covered so much today, but I think this is a very fitting note to end on. Thank you so much.