Rituals of Chaos

Kader Attia invites me to line by the Senegalese poet Birago Diop: “Those who die have never left.” This is what interests Attia now—to show that the dead are not dead, and to explore the ways we cohabit with their presence/absence in the world around us. But what does it mean to make an appeal to the dead in a gesture of repair, as he does in this installation, and as Abel Gance did in his 1938 antiwar film J'accuse, both in the midst of wars and a struggle against fascism? The Algerian-French artist and I are talking at La Colonie, the cultural center he created in 2016 in Paris as an effort to “reappropriate and decompartmentalize” the city for those confined to the segregated suburbs where he himself grew up, to fight obliteration, and to reframe the terms of both culture and art. For more than two decades, Attia has focused on the materiality of wounds and scars in the aftermath of colonization, migration, violence, and loss, and on the immaterial rifts—expressed as madness, possession, and phantoms demanding to be heard—that haunt the lives of individuals and collectivities.

Historical lapses, phantom limbs: these rifts, or the “Missing,” as Attia sometimes calls them, are fissures that by their very existence make present a reality imprinted upon and scarred into the landscape. His artistic practice seeks to rebuild the broken links, inviting the viewer to engage in a relationship with the lost and the unknown.

In installations of sculpture, photography, and video, and in poetic remixes of historical archives, Attia explores the Colony in its many faces as a plastic theater of modernity. He traces its complex dialectics of appropriation, dispossession, and re-appropriation, which he addresses through the concept of Repair. A paradoxical principle, and one central to the operation of art as he intends it, Repair evokes the irreconcilable duality of a destructive and constructive plasticity, reminiscent of a Freudian dialectics of Eros and Thanatos. “I always think in complementary terms,” Attia explains, “never just one side or the other. I have a predilection for oxymorons. Repair is inherent to injury.”

The unequal encounter of incommensurable worlds is a violent process of creation and destruction, a Freudian dialectics of Eros and Thanatos. “I always think in complementary terms,” Attia explains, “never just one side or the other. I have a predilection for oxymorons. Repair is inherent to injury.”

One path Attia has taken in his explorations is to reflect, both artistically and politically, on the aesthetics of “broken faces” in World War I. An earthquake of gigantic proportions, the war both annihilated and revealed. It enabled for a brief moment the emergence of an aesthetics of chaos, expressed on the shattered faces of veterans, and in the delirium and visions of shell-shocked soldiers. Expressionism was born in the reverberation of that gaze—a gaze that emerged in the surgical operation of repair, and resembled that of sacred African statues. “African statues don’t represent objects in the visible world—instead they make the invisible present,” Attia says.

“For me,” he explains, “the First World War is crucial, because it is the moment of collapse, and there is a realization that the huge technological apparatus of European modernity is in fact made to destroy. This raises questions for both art and philosophy. There is always a thing and its opposite: war is related to art.”

“It is enough to look at the history of art,” he continues, “to note the emergence of artistic avant-gardes in connection to wars: pre-war premonitions, and post-war reparations, when societies seek to unary, or at least exercise, the suffering of war. We can think of Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq, and of periods of violent suppression in Morocco, and of their relation to artistic creation. When I started researching this connection in Europe, I found that after World War I, some seven million soldiers returned home from the front disfigured. They all came through Paris. And in Paris, at that time, all the modern painters were there—impossible that Picasso or Braque one day did not run into a ‘broken face’ in the street. They were everywhere.”

To explore the connection of art and war, and seeking to develop an artistic process capable of defying the ideological machine of fascist aesthetics with its valorization of the intact masculine body, Attia assembled an archive of photographs of these disfigured soldiers—known in France as gueules cassées, or “broken faces”—and of their still-misshapen reconstructions, through the early efforts of maxillofacial surgery. The photographs were shown in his installation Open your eyes (2015), which displayed the disfigured faces alongside African masks, themselves broken, repaired, or representing illness. “I spent a lot of time watching the amazing formal analogy between the reconstructed facial wounds of soldiers and African traditional masks,” he says.

Among hundreds of photographs, Attia found only two instances of African and Arab “broken faces”—pointing to immense disparities in medical treatment of veterans. As an act of artistic repair, he brought the photographic archive of gueules cassées to Senegal—while living in Congo in the 1990s, Attia had studied African statues and healing rituals. He asked three Senegalese craftsmen to assist him in sculpting the “broken faces”: They accepted, and one told him, “My uncle fought in the Battle of the Marne [1914] and never came back.” Carved in wood from trees that, like the war, were one hundred years old, the result is twenty-six uncanny busts. They reveal the “broken face” for what they are, and already were, if unknowingly: ritual “valtness masks,” operators of transformation, capable of showing that the dead are with us, connecting with the invisible in a ritual of chaos.

“As an artist, I am attracted to these ‘broken faces,’” Attia says, “because they remind me of the aesthetics of African masks, ‘other’ aesthetics, which summon you to the world of invisible realities. . . . We were talking about decolonizing imagination, undoing the mimetic canons of Western classical
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Surrounded from all sides, we are thrown into the space of our own dying, a space in which only sides by heads that seize your gaze.

J’accuse,

very destruction repairs. The spaces in between the elements, the silences: I pay a lot of attention to black hole is the void, the space that severs and sucks you in, which destroys—but which by this of the dead," he explains. "I created a dispositif [setting] in which I confront the viewer with forms mirror each other, opening a space in between—because we need an entrance to access the world toward the invisible with the sacramental force of the African sickness masks that so fascinate him.

The film is no longer a representation, but an event.

Walter Benjamin called such an awakening,⁸ the film presents a summoning in the time of the world enemies and friends, and the dead of all wars to rise. Born of “a moment of recognizability,” as a World War I veteran, sets off to awaken the dead of the 1916 Battle of Verdun, in which some 500,000 soldiers were killed. With great emotional intensity, he calls on battalions and nationalities, enemies and friends, and the dead of all wars to rise. Born of “a moment of recognizability,” as Bernard Fallou and Issa FAYE.

In Attia’s installation at BAMPFA, his Senegalese wooden sculptures of “broken faces,” these reverberations of ritual sickness masks, encounter the final sequences of Abel Gance’s 1938 film.

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