

"I don't believe in God, I believe in the poetic dimension of life."

Kader Attia, June 2006

The Road to Happiness

On Conflict, Desire and Disillusionment in the Work of Kader Attia¹

Tami Katz-Freiman

On October 27, 2005, two young men of African origin were electrocuted to death while fleeing police forces in the Clichy-sous-Bois suburb of Paris. Their deaths, for which the Afro-Muslim immigrant community blamed the French government, triggered riots of a kind France had not experienced since the student demonstrations of May 1968. A wave of violent demonstrations, arson cases and serious manifestations of vandalism consequently spread like wildfire throughout France and in other European cities. Over a period of about 20 nights, some 9000 cars were burned, 126 policemen were injured, two citizens were murdered by rioters and the police made some 2900 arrests.

As a member of the North African community, Kader Attia has spent the past several years examining the tangle of identity conflicts that contributed to the unfolding of these difficult events. Rooted in the complex relations between East and West, his art probes the charged encounter between these markedly different worlds – an uprooted North African culture and a seductive Western consumer culture. Deeply embedded within this

¹ This essay is a revised version of Tami Katz-Freiman's "The Road to Happiness: On Cultural Conflict, Desire and Illusion in the Work of Kader Attia" – the central essay in the monograph *Kader Attia*. The monograph was jointly published by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon; Le Magasin, Grenoble; and JRP, Ringier Kunstverlag, Zurich. Attia's quotes are based on my conversations with the artist during the years 2004–2007, which took place in preparation for his exhibitions at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art (2004); The Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon (2006); and the Haifa Museum of Art (2007).

duality, his work reflects upon the sociopolitical powder cake that is threatening French society, and upon the millions of Muslims who have lost all hope of integrating into it.

For the past ten years, Attia has engaged in social criticism by means of sculpture, photography, drawing, installation and video art; he has done so in a reflective manner suffused with personal pain, which constantly vacillates between humor and despair. The exhibition at the Haifa Museum of Art includes five works by Attia. Their installation at the museum emerged out of a process of reflection on the complexity of an Israeli society struggling to maintain a semblance of coexistence (particularly in Haifa), – and on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has no foreseeable resolution.

Kader Attia was born in 1970 in Dugny, France, to a family of Muslim immigrants from Algeria. He grew up and was educated in the multicultural atmosphere of the Sarcelles neighborhood on the outskirts of Paris – an area with a large concentration of mostly Muslim and Jewish immigrants who lived side by side in relative harmony. Although he was not born in Algeria, his family's country of origin has occupied a central place in the formation of Attia's cultural identity. His father was the only member of the Attia family who immigrated to France, while most of his family members have remained in Algeria. As a child, Attia regularly visited his paternal family in their village in the Atlas Mountains, and spent every summer and holiday vacation there for over 11 years. In recent years, his mother has continued to live in Paris, while his father has returned to his village in Algeria.

"The culture I come from has nothing in common with the culture I live in. This fact is crucial in terms of the lifestyle of Arabs in France, yet it is not really understood here." In this statement, Attia refers to the transition from the culture of the North African village to that of the housing projects on the margins of large French cities. These crowded immigrant neighborhoods – which he refers to as "ghettos" – have become traps of crime and poverty; lately, they have begun to appear in Attia's works like ghosts from his past.

Alongside early works – mainly photographs and videos – characterized by an anthropological quality, Attia has created a distinct body of works that focus on the implications of demographic changes in France following the influx of immigrants from Muslim countries; more specifically, these works probe the encounter between their religious practices and Western consumer society.

The conflict between an uprooted culture and between the desire for consumer brands is the overarching theme in these works. Like many others, Attia too believes that consumer society and its brand names have come to replace religion. His ironic and nihilistic stance is directed against religion just as much as it is directed against Western consumerism. In both cases, he maintains, what is at stake is a cynical exploitation of human distress – since both religion and consumerism contain a promise of happiness and offer a fantasy of freedom.

This double form of criticism appears in several of his works – including the installation *Big Bang* (2005), which was originally created for the interior courtyard of the Jewish Museum in Paris. A smaller version of this same work is currently installed in the exhibition space at the entrance to the Haifa Museum of Art. In this work, Attia distilled the symbols of Judaism and Islam – the Star of David and the crescent – into a charged image; these two intertwined elements form a large, tantalizing ball that alternately resembles an enormous disco ball or a meteorite threatening the Earth. One may read this work as an expression of a longing for reconciliation between two hostile religions; nevertheless, its title – which alludes to the scientific theory of the Big Bang rather than to mythological and religious narratives of creation – points towards a more layered reading. The religious symbols bursting out of the black hole characterize the identity conflict embodied in Attia's works. Moreover, the compulsive recurrence of religious symbols in this and other works presents them as signs that have long been orphaned of meaning; all that remains is the scintillating glow of the signifier, which is branded like any other consumer product.

The tension between charged traditional symbols and a secular image symbolizing hedonism and consumerism recurs in other works by Attia. The work *Mosque/Night Club* (2005), for instance, included – in the same spirit – a flickering red neon sign that alternately read "Mosque" and "Nightclub." Here too, Attia fused the two poles of the conflict – tradition and secular culture – in a familiar urban sign advertising a state of utopian coexistence. It seems that this longing for utopia has been shattered in more recent works, perhaps following the 2005 riots in France.

One of the terms that Attia has frequently employed in recent years is "hallal" – the Muslim term for meat slaughtered according to Islamic rites, which is roughly equivalent to the Jewish concept of "kosher" food. In a work called *Hallal* (2004), which garnered much media attention in France, Attia transformed an art gallery interior into a clothing boutique in which every fashion accessory had supposedly been created by a trendy young designer. Attia registered the brand name "Hallal" at the National Institute for Industrial Property, and marketed it in a widespread campaign. Overnight, the brand's religious name and the fake campaign created around it transformed the boutique into a sought-after fashion label. In a similar vein, Attia created *The Sweatshop* (2004) as part of the Art Positions container project at Art Basel Miami Beach. In this work, he transformed one container into a boutique offering haute couture versions of Hallal designs. Looking through a curtain at the back of the container, visitors could observe the dark side of the capitalist system: illegal workers from Haiti and Cuba hard at work sewing the longed-for brand items.

Over the past two years, Attia's work has taken an even darker, yet more poetic turn. Memories from the suburbs he grew up in; echoes of their crowded gray architecture and of the poverty and sense of oppression that pervaded them; and of course the echoes of riots and of police brutality – all of these seem to have filtered into the works, giving birth to a more abstract urban poetics. Although at times this new poetic strain is interactive and demands the involvement of the viewer, it is no less somber and poignant in terms of the social criticism it contains.

The work *Arabesque* (2006), a direct response to the recent waves of violence in France and to the way in which they were stemmed by police forces, was created as a wall installation for an exhibition marking the tenth anniversary of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. At first glance, this installation resembled an abstract modernist composition reminiscent of a Mondrian painting. A closer examination, however, revealed that it was composed of hundreds of police truncheons sunk into the concrete wall. This dialogue with the modernist project was further developed in the impressive installation *Fridges* (2006), which was included in Attia's 2006 solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon. Using 150 old-fashioned refrigerators, Attia reconstructed the landscape of his childhood in the crowded housing projects on the outskirts of Paris. Upon each refrigerator he drew lines and squares in various shades of gray, which formed a rough grid resembling a depressing housing project; the viewers walking among them could almost physically sense the oppression and humiliation they engendered. In the central gallery of that same exhibition – a large space whose walls were painted black – one hundred spiders composed of umbrella skeletons were scattered close together on the elegant parquet floor (*Untitled*, 2006). The spiders, some of which "climbed" the black walls and dangled from webs seemingly woven on the ceiling, endowed this space with a charged surreal, poetic and magical atmosphere.

Spider webs also appear in the current project, which was specially created for the Haifa Museum of Art. In the work *Untitled (Spider Web)*, 2007, the artist stretched out a web of shiny metal handcuffs across one of the museum's exhibition spaces. The spider is an archetypal symbol whose meaning changes from one culture to another: as a tiny and conniving creature busy weaving death traps, it is a symbol of evil and of threatening sophistication in Western culture. In Arab culture, however, it is a lucky omen, and people avoid killing it. Attia amplified this duality by means of the streamlined, elegant quality of the installation. As in his other works, here too seduction and fantasy, attraction and repulsion operate simultaneously on the viewer.

A similar kind of transformation took place in the window installation *Moucharabieh* (2006), which was also exhibited in Lyon. Attia transformed three museum windows

overlooking a nearby park into arched windows inspired by Moorish architecture; each window contained an arabesque design composed of hundreds of shiny, interlocking metal handcuffs. The arched form of Moorish windows recurs in two different manners in Attia's Haifa project: in the video installation *Untitled* (2007), a back projection of a seascape appears within a Moorish window, which has been carved into the museum wall. In the installation *Holly Land* (2006–2007), which was first exhibited at the Canary Biennial for Art, approximately 100 arch-shaped mirrors are placed at different angles on the promenade of the Bat Galim neighborhood in Haifa, where they reflect the seascape at various hours of the day.

The installation of *Holly Land* in what is considered to be one of Haifa's most neglected neighborhoods – one populated by immigrant, lower-income and minority residents – acquires a new meaning related to the experience of immigration: "For people who see these mirrors from the sea, especially from far away," Attia explains, "the landscape will appear to be shining, as if the coast was imbued with the radiance of the 'Promised Land.' Yet this landscape will become less attractive as they approach the mirrors. These mirrors reflect to the immigrants what they have left behind, as well as the reality of what they have found. This work is about the shattered dreams of people seeking a better life and a new identity, detached from the homeland they have left behind."

The central work in the current exhibition is *Ghost* (2007), which includes approximately 200 figures of women kneeling in prayer. The body of every woman is oriented towards the windows, and is composed of a sheet of aluminum foil that lends it the appearance of an empty shell. These hollow, silvery figures fill the space with their crisp and threatening emptiness, and create the semblance of a herd of faceless women stripped of their individual identities. The viewer facing them becomes a voyeur in two different senses: he is allowed to penetrate into a world that is usually protected from the gaze of outsiders, and to peer inside the silver shells that stand in for the women's bodies. The veil, a sign of modesty, is ironically presented here as a glittering cover – a hollow, crisp mold that erases individual traits. This work expresses a provocative stance in relation to religious law; it underscores – especially in the context of public prayer – the silencing of

an internal, other form of female prayer. In this work, Attia is alluding to the representation of women not only in Islam, but also in various other religious contexts that simultaneously glorify and degrade a "present-absent" woman who has no importance as an individual.

Attia covered the wall facing these "praying women" with a large drawing (*Untitled*, 2006–2007), which contains the image of the suburb familiar from earlier works. Despite its monumental dimensions, this drawing is part of a more intimate body of works, which all contain figures of Muslims and Jews alongside symbols of consumer society. Imbued with identity conflicts and childhood memories, these autobiographical drawings constitute the conceptual glue that unites his markedly different works. They contain, in an extremely succinct form, all of Attia's preoccupations concerning identity in the age of globalization.

One may thus think of these sculpted figures of women at prayer as having emerged out of the drawings to acquire a tangible presence in space. Like the sculpted women, the drawn figures are also usually depicted frontally, and appear as individuals or as entire communities emerging from among the buildings; they are all identified by stereotypical attributes – the Jews appear in Hassidic garb and the Muslims in traditional dress, with the women wearing veils. Religious symbols (the Star of David, the cross and the crescent) and brand logos are scattered throughout these images. Attia treats these figures as ghosts from his past: "These are symbolic images of the Other, victims of the system who are trapped by consumer society. I see them as ghosts of their own fantasies about themselves." This statement is rendered even more powerful when one thinks of the spider web composed of handcuffs, which is located between the kneeling figures and the mural – as well as of the religious symbols in *Big Bang*, which is situated in another part of the museum.

An overall examination of the various components of "Who Cares?" – which at first glance appear markedly different from one another – reveals a web of representations and signs from which one may extricate an almost narrative meaning, centered upon a view

of religion as a system parallel to consumerism. As a producer of brand names that encourages a form of irrational allegiance, religion – like capitalism – exploits human weakness and desires, above all the desire to belong. In the exhibition "Who Cares?," Attia therefore protests against the helplessness of the victims of both these systems; he similarly protests against expressions of racism and against the exclusion of the Other, whose ability to survive in this world is cast into doubt. The elusive, complex and conflicted identities represented by Attia are constantly exchanged for one another as they come to form a rich poetic language; this language allows for a fresh and inspiring examination of the cultural tensions that characterize this moment in time – not only in Europe but also, to a large degree, in the context of Israeli reality.

Kader Attia was born in Dugny, France (1970). He is a graduate of the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris (1996–1998); and of the Beaux Arts School in Barcelona. Selected solo exhibitions include "Humanists in the Congo," French Cultural Center of Brazzaville (1996); "Urban Instants," Galerie l'Oeil du Huit, Paris (1997); "The Landing Strip," National Center of Photography, Paris (2000); "HALLAL," Kamel Mennour Gallery, Paris (2004); Le Magasin, Centre Nationale des Arts Contemporains, Grenoble; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Lyon (2006); "Sweet Sweat," Andrehn-Schiptjenko Gallery, Stockholm (2006); "The Store," The National Center of Contemporary Art, Grenoble (2006); Christian Nagel Gallery, Berlin (2007); Pury & Luxembourg Gallery, Zurich (2007). Attia has also participated in numerous group exhibitions, including "The State of Things Part 1," Kunst-Werke, Berlin (2001); "Fault Lines," Venice Biennale (2003); "Correspondence," Statements, Art Basel (2003); "Near East Project," Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt (2004); "Videozone," Video Art Biennale, Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, Israel (2004); *The Sweatshop*, Art Positions, Art Basel Miami Beach (2004); *The Loop*, Art Unlimited, Art Basel (2005); "The Experience of Continuance," Lyon Biennale (2005); Marcel Duchamp Prize, FIAC, Paris (2005); "Our History," Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2006); "Take a Walk on the Wild Side," Pury & Luxembourg Gallery, Zurich (2006); "Infinities," Art Unlimited, Art Basel (2006). Kader Attia lives and works in Paris.

