



The Crisis of Reason: A Conversation with Kader Attia

In this age of crisis of reason, is repair possible? Matt Hanson speaks to renowned French-Algerian artist Kader Attia about his recent works, about "~~La Colonie~~" - a decolonization space that the artist runs in Paris, and Attia's reading recommendation for self-isolation.

Conversation / Matt Hanson March 23, 2020

Kader Attia is a renowned French-Algerian artist based in Berlin. His multimedia installations untangle global narratives of migration in relation to the ongoing impact of colonization. Often working in Africa, significantly in the Congo and Senegal, his film essays foreground intellectual contributions to art, medicine, philosophy, and science by the world's Indigenous Peoples. His ideas are inspired by the concept of "Repair", towards communal rehabilitation throughout the planet.

Hayward Gallery - Kader Attia - Thierry Bal-21.jpg



[1]

Kader Attia, *The Repair from Occident to extra-Occidental Cultures*, 2012, installation. Mixed media

Installation view "The Museum of Emotion", Hayward Gallery, London, 2019

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Photo: Thierry Bal

We spoke in a Berlin coffeeshop on an early November afternoon. He explained the zeitgeist as a "crisis of reason," and discussed his work for the group show "[Tell me about yesterday tomorrow](#) [2]," at the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism, curated by artistic director Nicolaus Schafhausen, and as a panelist at BAK in Utrecht, for their ongoing "[Propositions for Non-Fascist Living](#) [3]" series.

In 2016, Attia received the Marcel Duchamp Prize, followed by the Prize of the Miró Foundation, Barcelona. On February 13 and 14 of this year, Kunsthalle Wien hosted a conference that he co-initiated, titled "The White West III: Automating Apartheid," breaking down what academic Nikhil Pal Singh called 'the afterlife of fascism.'

His next solo show will be exhibited at Kunsthaus Zurich, Switzerland beginning May 29, 2020. Before that his first show in Brazil opens on April 3 at SESC Pompeia. His video essays are shown around the world; lately, [The Body's Legacies](#) [4] in Istanbul at SALT Galata's walk-in cinema, a film we spoke about. He normally organizes a popular decolonization forum in Paris called [La Colonie](#) [5]. But now, for those in self-isolation, he recommends reading, "Self-Devouring Growth" by Julie Livingston



Matt Hanson: I'm interested in your participation in the show "Tell me about ~~yesterday~~ tomorrow," in Munich, and your preparation for the event "Deserting from the Culture Wars" at BAK, in Utrecht.

Kader Attia: The Munich one includes a work I did with the question of reason in terms of, on the one hand, non-modern cultures that have been dealing with beliefs, from religion to animism, and on the other hand with the way that colonialism has brought, to Africa especially, these conceptions of reason in fields like psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

And [in] the film [*Réfléchir la Mémoire / Reflecting Memory* (2016)] that I'm showing there, there is a part of this work now at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, where I'm showing ten short films that are also exhibited in Munich. What interested me a lot in this project is to investigate the fact that premodern societies, pre-colonized societies were already taking care of mental illnesses; schizophrenia, paranoia, psychosis, but using traditional belief and traditional medicine. I visited 22 countries with my camera and with ethnologists also. In Africa, you have both types of medicine, those who have been educated in Germany or the US, and use the Western language. But then you have those who have been educated in both parts, but give significant care to the world of the invisible.

To make a long story short, I do think that we are tending now, in the world, in the Western world, and all of the other worlds, towards a crisis of reason. I think this is what we are living now, a crisis of reason. Artificial Intelligence and the digital are accelerating. The digital is another occult world where everything is possible. My film has a lot of interviews, because I'm trying to make those people speak to those questions of what I call the crisis of reason on the one hand, and on the other hand, what I call the "Repair." What can we do? Is it repairable or not? Are we lost forever?

[unnamed.jpg](#) [6]



[7]

Kader Attia, *Réfléchir la Mémoire / Reflecting Memory*, 2016

Single-channel HD digital video projection, colour, sound, 48:01 min.

Courtesy of the artist, Galleria Continua, Galerie Krinzinger, Lehmann Maupin and Galerie Nagel Draxler

Photo: Kader Attia

[unnamed \(1\).jpg](#) [8]



[9]

Kader Attia, *Réfléchir la Mémoire / Reflecting Memory*, 2016

Single-channel HD digital video projection, colour, sound, 48:01 min.

Courtesy of the artist, Galleria Continua, Galerie Krinzinger, Lehmann Maupin and Galerie Nagel Draxler

Photo: Kader Attia

MH: Have you worked before with the Munich Documentation Centre for the History of National Socialism?

KA: I've never been there. I've never worked very much on national socialism except when it was related to themes that I think are important, [such as] colonialism. The Nazi colonial project is very interesting. It was in East Europe, definitely, but also in Africa, they wanted to get back the colonies that they lost during WWI. I had a lot of books on that, and books from the 1930s, from the Nazis. I did a lot of research on that.

The second question that I found interesting with national socialism was the question of fascism. I read a lot of Wilhelm Reich and Walter Benjamin, because what interested me also was the national socialist, or fascist, agenda. I read a sick book, it was very difficult, which transcribed all of the speeches by Joseph Goebbels, from 1928 to 1936. It's an incredible book. What I can tell you is I'm interested in this question of applying this Aryanist project, the Aryan exceptionality, into a worldwide fascist project. I think we're getting back into it again, definitely, in different ways with Artificial Intelligence, refugees, and Islamophobia becoming a recycled Christian German antisemitism.

MH: What specifically interested you about Goebbels's speeches?

KA: The tone of his speeches interested me because he was ambitious, and he was in competition



with the others, Hermann Göring for instance. But then what interested me was how a destructive ideology can organize itself to become a death machine. It's not only one person. Primo Levi used to say, I'm not afraid of the monsters. I don't care about the monsters. They are few, they are rare. What scares me are the millions ready to execute the orders of the monsters. This is Primo Levi who survived Auschwitz.

From this sectarian ideology, which is the ideology of Aryanism, [Heinrich] Himmler was saying the Aryan race existed a long time ago, but now it's covered by layers of other races, that we need to re-excavate, like archaeologists, to bring back this superior race. From this sort of sectarian ideology, I think it's important to understand how it became a worldwide phenomenon, because this is what is happening today. That's why I'm interested in this, in the question of fascism and its relation to colonialism.

Last but not least, because I'm an artist, and because Hitler was a painter, I'm interested in the impact of art in this ideology. The fascist movement intervened into the art field. They created the Degenerate Art exhibition. They have celebrated creations; sculptures, architecture. We still have the Tempelhof Airport here [in Berlin], which was built by the Nazis. In Italy, Mussolini was influential on artists. The Futurism movement was a fascist movement, even if we like some of the artists, I really like [Filippo Tommaso] Marinetti for instance. But they were fascists.

MH: In the Munich exhibition, your work will be shown with the Nazi artist Emil Nolde.

KA: Emil Nolde was in the Degenerate Art show, and after the war, he was considered a sort of hero because of that. But actually, he was antisemitic, and was supporting the Nazis.

MH: I met with the Design Museum Den Bosch. They've mounted their exhibition, "[Design of the Third Reich](#) [10]." A lot of criticism has come up about whether or not they're glorifying National Socialism. When you're tackling issues of colonialism, do you ever come up against criticism or are a part of shows that have been criticized? Do you question the effectiveness of political art?

KA: There was a moment, like ten years ago, because I'm very interested in modern architecture, when I discovered most of the artists who were criticizing modernism were actually admiring it. In Mexico, for example, because I lived in Mexico for many years, I'm very familiar, I speak Spanish, I spoke with artists who criticized tackling modernism.

Maybe it's naivety, or hypocrisy, or Stockholm syndrome, there's a form of admiration on works that are supposedly critical. In terms of modern architecture, in its essence, is very radical, dry, austere, but at the same time it extracts from this *rigueur* a form of poetry. Le Corbusier wrote a poem which is called "The poem of [the right angle](#) [11]." It's a poem for the right angle. These people were really fascinated by what they were doing.

You can come with all of your epistemology and try to dismantle the fortress, but sooner or later the fortress will eat you. It's like Bauhaus. Many people criticize Bauhaus these days because it's the celebration of the centenary, but there aren't many arguments against such a movement. My critique of Le Corbusier is colonialist. It's very simple. Cities like London, or Paris, since Napoleon is a city where it's almost impossible to build new buildings. Young architects such as Le Corbusier were not allowed to build. They did not find money to build a project. Most of them had the beginning of their careers in the colonies, in Algeria, Morocco, in Tunisia for the Italian. What is interesting in the case of Le Corbusier is that he not only went there and built there. He went there and infused his research in an insane way. Most south Algerian and Moroccan, called mud architecture or clay architecture, influenced Le Corbusier's aesthetics. One is a city called [Ghardaia](#) [12], in which I worked a lot.

[kader attia gugenheim.jpg](#) [13]



[14]

Kader Attia , *Untitled (Ghardaïa)*, 2009

Couscous, two inkjet prints, and five photocopy prints, couscous diameter: 16 feet 4 7/8 inches (500 cm); inkjet prints: 70 7/8 x 39 3/8 inches (180 x 100 cm) and 59 1/16 x 39 3/8 inches (150 x 100 cm); photocopy prints: 59 1/16 x 39 3/8 inches (150 x 100 cm)

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Guggenheim UBS MAP Purchase Fund, 2015 © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

Le Corbusier, in 1943, or even before, started to turn fascist. He wrote a letter to Marshall Pétain, who signed a pact with Hitler and built the government of Vichy in France. Le Corbusier wrote that he wanted to embrace the new France, the fascist France. There is a thread that draws a continuum between colonialism and fascism, but that you can not reach if you stay mesmerized by the aesthetic and strength of the project. I do not think that Le Corbusier is a stupid person. He's an asshole but he's a genius.

The question about Emil Nolde, I have to say that when I saw the exhibition here [in Berlin at Hamburger Bahnhof] a couple of months ago I was very surprised, because I used to like Emil Nolde a lot, very much. I was very skeptical, by both liking it, and his figures of the Other, it was extremely exotic. He painted a lot of black women, African sculpture, fetishes, including them in his painting. The model had no name, "the black woman, a negro, a frau." It is problematic to make the identity of the person you paint invisible, especially when this person is a black person. You can not paint a portrait of a white woman and title it, "white woman."

What I'm telling you is we have to be careful. We have to work like surgeons with a blade. We really



have to be critical and acknowledge the relevance of an artwork, a writer. This is my philosophy.

MH: Prior to the Hamburger Bahnhof show, you had a genuine appreciation for the artwork of Emil Nolde? But then after you saw it?

KA: I still appreciate the paintings but I'm very critical of them. In the show there were a lot of archives, letters by him. I read them all. I have a problem with this. He was supporting a monster, the devil.

Some of his paintings are extremely beautiful. He was excluded from one salon in Berlin, when the Nazis were rising, and the president of the artistic committee apparently was Jewish, and Nolde, because he was excluded, started to campaign in the milieu in Berlin for antisemitism.

After the war started, he really started to do anything he could for Hitler, sending him letters of admiration. This is a problem. Right after the war, he was celebrated as a hero. The admiration I have for Otto Dix or George Grosz, who were really heroes that had been living like shit, is also for me what makes me very skeptical with Nolde. After the war, he took advantage of this and had a bourgeois life.

MH: Looking at an artwork, can you separate the life of the artist from your direct appreciation?

KA: It's a big question. I think there's a moment where you cannot, and there are moments when art takes over you. You could speak about musicians or theoretical texts. Jean Jacques Rousseau, who I really like, has been the philosopher of the society, but Rousseau was an asshole. He had eight children that he abandoned. He abandoned them to the city. Rousseau was a jet-setter. You can read this in *Les Confessions*. All of his family were abandoned and they all died in misery. When you read *The Social Contract*, you think how can I accept the morality of this guy who has no morality.

There's a moment where you need to separate the person because it helps us as a tool to enhance reflections. You can not exclude Nolde from this period of history that was German Expressionism. You have [Ernst Ludwig] Kirchner, you have Otto Dix, you have Grosz. Nolde has some beautiful works.

MH: As an artist too, there must be a point where your works take over. In a similar way, you may have ambitions and intents, for example, you might fail to express your political perspective because the work itself takes over. Maybe you come from a rightist stance personally, but your work becomes very leftist, which is what happened with Nolde.

KA: There's something that moves away from you. You can not control it. It's the artwork.

MH: Have you experienced that in your works, where you wonder after you've created something, "Should I show this? Because the artwork is genuine but it says something entirely different than what I intended?" Or do you stop yourself?

KA: No, never because I've always admitted that when the work is done it has its own life. It's like a kid. Your parents make you, but there's a moment when you are you. I don't like openings, I go to mine or some of my friends, because I'm polite. But then you have some anonymous person who talks to you about your work. They are most of the time uneducated people, working in the post office, and you hear things that sound like an appropriation of what you do.

Art is a kind of mirror. It is a mirror in which everyone can find anything one wants of himself or herself. When the work is done, and exhibited it's part of the cloud, the epistemology. Maybe it will disappear, forever, or for 100 years, maybe not. It does not belong to you. That's why I feel comfortable with some works of Nolde, I think they are part of the human adventure of creation.

I have a friend, a painter in France. He is 70 now. He says, "Since I'm 35 I go to the Musée d'Art Moderne, every week, at least every month, to watch my painting that I like of [Camille] Pissarro. It's the same one. It's my painting." The painting has never moved. There's a cathartic intimacy with the artworks, and which creation can give you.



[Big Bang.JPG](#) [15]



[16]

Kader Attia, *Big Bang*, Sculpture. Mixed media, diameter 170 cm, 2005

Courtesy the Artist and Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme, Paris

Photo: Laurent Lecat

[Big Bang 2.JPG](#) [17]



[18]

Kader Attia, *Big Bang*, Sculpture. Mixed media, diameter 170 cm, 2005

Installation view of "Big Bang", Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme, Paris, 2005 Courtesy the Artist and Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme, Paris

Photo: Laurent Lecat

MH: Have you ever directly represented Jewish themes in your works?

KA: I did because it's part of my education. My mother was raised by Jews in Algeria, and then in France. When I was a teenager [in France], before I was in Algeria, we grew up in a neighborhood when Jews and Muslims were living together. I grew up in this world, in the north of Paris. The Jews in France, most of them come from North Africa. The Ashkenazi are, let's say, the high class.

For a long time, they lived very closely. We used to go to bar mitzvahs. My mother used to go. It was not like today. In the film I did about surgery, called *Reflecting Memory*, a couple of surgeons, one is a very close friend, the other I met him for the film, are talking about that because the film is about memory. They were all saying the same thing. After [Algerian] independence, the movement from North Africa was so massive because the economy was devastated, that the Jews and Muslims lived together [in France].

One thing I did, which I started 15 years ago, was a series of metaphysical paintings and drawings. I used to draw with fire on wood. It's difficult to explain, but is a sort of Big Bang representation of moon symbols and Stars of David completely mixed altogether like a cloud. "The Big Bang" it's called.

MH: What are you planning for your panel talk "Deserting from the Culture Wars," for their



"Propositions for Non-Fascist Living" series in Utrecht, at BAK?

KA: I run a space in Paris which is called ~~La Colonie~~. It's a "decolonizing" space, and among many activities, we do mainly debates and public conversations. One symposium that I run called "The Wild West" is actually about the resurgence of fascism. What we try to dismantle is the normalization of fascism. I will speak about that, because the curator [Sven] Lütticken came to ~~La Colonie~~ and attended our symposiums.

I'm very interested to produce spaces of debate and action against fascism because we are in a very slippery time. If you pay attention to the US, most of the attacks in the US and everywhere four years ago were perpetrated by radical Muslims. And what is absolutely scary today is that they are perpetrated by white supremacist Christians and they are antisemitic.

I'm not saying that there isn't a Muslim radical antisemitism, there is. I'm clear on that. But now, what scares me much more is that in the size of a state like America, the potential for white supremacist antisemitic acts is huge. Everyone is aware [of that]. In the last two years, the [number of] attacks on synagogues has been tremendously high. But what is problematic today in our society is that we are all sleeping, actually. We are comfortably sleeping, attending a world collapsing.

For me this collapsing process could be stopped if we work on what makes us strong as humans, the common ground. That's why at ~~La Colonie~~ we welcome everyone, even people who disagree with us. Come, please let's talk. Take the mic, take a mint tea, take a glass of wine. But talk. I believe in this. I can send you some of the debates we've had. Many anonymous people come, not just confirmed academics. There is a desperation today to speak about your trauma. "*Reflecting Memory*" echoes with different things we've been talking about.

[la-colonie-fanon_84_md Sandra.jpg](#) [19]



[20]

La Colonie

Photo: Sandra Nicolle

[la_colonie_sandra.jpg](#) [21]



[22]

La Colonie

Photo: Sandra Nicolle

[La colonie Alix.JPG](#) [23]



[24]

La Colonie

Photo: Alix Hugonnier

MH: What are your thoughts on fascism in Germany, as compared to the Netherlands, France, or elsewhere? I think of Amsterdam, where the National Holocaust Museum is officially described as “in development” - it is currently closed for renovation, due to be reopened in 2022. That the city of Amsterdam and the Dutch nation are still in the process of establishing a permanent, national Holocaust museum is a concern - considering the history of Holland, where the Nazis murdered the highest proportion of Jewish people per population in Western Europe during the Holocaust.

The Munich Center’s “institutional remembrance” phrase, institutionalizing remembrance, that’s also in this formative state, and so I’m asking why, how, and who’s involved. From a place like this Documentation Center in Munich, I think that having artists involved in this archival history institution is different from a contemporary art museum. I’m interested in how you navigate these different national spaces, different types of institutions, when addressing these themes of migration, refugees, fascism. I live in Turkey, in Istanbul, where the government has been deporting Syrians back to war zones.

KA: Turkey has taken advantage of the refugee crisis, because it became the last border of Europe, and the European community has been paying Turkey to block the refugees. So they really took advantage of that. Now, they are deporting them to Syria, after having bombed, again, the whole region, in Kurdistan. I don’t want to be depressing but we are living in such a mess.

MH: Let’s say that, in certain contexts, visual art is more universal, or immediate than literature, or even music. If that is true, how do you consider the presentation of political subject matter? For



example, do you intend to prompt direct, political action through visual art?

KA: As far as I'm concerned, I've always felt frustrated by the limits of representation for two reasons. I really feel that contemporary art is a niche. It's absolutely not a society. I don't believe that artists and curators are representing societies. That's bullshit. Society is driven by macroeconomics. When Ronaldo the soccer player is more interesting than an artwork, it says something. Billions of people are watching him.

First, we have to be clear. We are not influential at all. We are entering a kind of bourgeois public sphere that is less than one percent of the society. I created ~~La Colonie~~ firstly because of these frustrations with the limits of contemporary art, by its own institutional frame. I decided to take action, create debate, speak, to occupy. We did occupations with ~~La Colonie~~.

We definitely tried to put the artwork as a second step, and the platform as an agora to exchange ideas, also visions and opinions, at the front. This is what I think is more important today. This is what the world needs today. This is how we've been to the move, by being active together, not by reconstructing a sort of decoration of the mind with artworks, but to actually confront this passivity that I was talking about.

We became a passive animal. We are not animals anymore. We are just passive entities. I hope the artists and most of the actors in contemporary art take seriously the need to create spaces, corners, whatever, in which re-appropriation of reality is possible. That's what I call action.

This interview was conducted in person with Kader Attia on November 8, 2019.

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Links

- [1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/_Hayward%20Gallery%20-%20Kader%20Attia%20-%20Thierry%20Bal-21_0.jpg
- [2] <https://yesterdaytomorrow.nsdoku.de/en/>
- [3] <https://www.bakonline.org/long-term-project/propositions-for-non-fascist-living/>
- [4] <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/His%2520next%2520solo%2520show%2520will%2520be%2520exhibited%2520at%2520Kunsthau%2520Zurich%2C%2520Switzerland%2520beginning%2520May%252029.%2520Before%2520then%2520his%2520first%2520show%2520in%2520Brazil%2520opens%2520on%2520April%25203%2520at%2520SESC%2520Pompeia.%2520His%2520video%2520essays%2520are%2520shown%2520around%2520the%2520world%2C%2520lately%2C%2520%E2%80%9CThe%2520Body%E2%80%99s%2520Legacies%E2%80%9D%2520in%2520Istanbul%2520at%2520SALT%2520Galata%E2%80%99s%2520walk-in%2520cinema%2C%2520a%2520film%2520we%2520spoke%2520about.%2520He%2520normally%2520organizes%2520a%2520popular%2520decolonization%2520forum%2520in%2520Paris%2520called%2520La%2520Colonie.%2520But%2520now%2C%2520for%2520those%2520in%2520self-isolation%2C%2520he%2520recommends%2520reading%2C%2520%E2%80%9CSelf-Devouring%2520Growth%E2%80%9D%2520by%2520Julie%2520Livingston.>
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- [7] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/unnamed_8.jpg
- [8] <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/unnamed-1.jpg-4>
- [9] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/unnamed%20%281%29_3.jpg
- [10] <https://designmuseum.nl/tentoonstelling/design-van-het-derde-rijk/>
- [11] <http://designspeculum.com/POD/Le%20Poeme%20de%20'Angle%20Droit,%20redu.pdf>
- [12] <http://kaderattia.de/ghardaia/>
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- [16] <https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Big%20Bang.JPG>
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- [18] <https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Big%20Bang%202.JPG>
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