

***Adel Abdessemed***

***The Power to Act***

**2008**

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***Habibi***

Circulating in your bones an intoxicating sap

The undertakers can't see the flesh or the life that lifts your frame

The opportunists come as well  
To spit on your skeleton

They make it their job to maintain the grave

Habibi

They point you toward other skeletons for phantoms  
But you know that your bones are your only vessel

And you trace  
Elsewhere  
Always very far  
Always more intense  
Without ever stopping . . .

Habibi

Your bones knock together in a redemptive din  
Energy is your thought  
Generosity is your sap  
The concept is your laughter  
Love is your art  
Art is your life

Habibi

Chaos  
Providential expanse  
Radically welcoming differences  
Possibilities  
Ad infinitum  
So long as one holds on

Habibi

They want to flatten you  
But you're not one to lie on the ground  
Your propellers are your wings  
They crush the tyrant's power

They stir up the wind, that starry void of voluntarists

They retain creative energy

Habibi

You cleave the air  
Belly to the ground

And everywhere else

You belong to no place

You do not contain or retain space

The air burns everywhere around your bones

You don't look back  
Though your ancestors mastered the danse macabre

Habibi

You rejoin your love  
And the flesh of your flesh

Habibi

Your bones may be consumed.

If you fall to the ground  
It will be to dissolve the abjections of human horror

If you happen to tumble  
You pass through the earth  
At the farthest point  
For you love that raw and living matter

And your sap spreads deep to make your bones flower again  
To be dispersed far and wide by the desert wind  
And an invisible sap  
will manage to gather them together for a new chaos

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Image Impacted by the Act**

## Affect and the Power to Act

Born in 1971 in Constantine, Algeria, Adel Abdessemed began his artistic career at a very young age, producing works in Batna (1986–1990) and Algiers (1990–1994), then in Lyons (1994–1998), Paris (1999–2000), New York (2000–2001), Berlin (2002–2004), and once again Paris (2005–2008).

On this journey, he passed with uncommon speed through extremely tumultuous periods of contemporary history, building up a power of creativity that is as great as the ignominy linked to postcolonial history, terrorism, and political villainy.<sup>1</sup> A number of events have profoundly disrupted Abdessemed's personal life: Muhammad Boudiaf, leader of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) and called at the head of state after being forced into exile during 27 years, was assassinated in 1992, for his wishes to put Algeria on the way for democracy and to undermine corruption inside the State; in 1994, when Abdessemed was studying at the School of Fine Arts in Algiers, the director Ahmed Asselah and his son were murdered on the school grounds; during Abdessemed's residency at the PS1 Contemporary Art Center in New York, the attacks of September 11, 2001, occurred, giving rise to phobias and rejection of the other; upon Abdessemed's return to France in 2003, the xenophobic political declarations regarding the immigrant populations set off a reactionary conflagration. The diktat "zero tolerance," pronounced by Donald Rumsfeld and Nicolas Sarkozy, was adopted by the artist as the title for his 2006 exhibitions *Practice Zero Tolerance* followed by the publication *A l'attaque*.<sup>2</sup>

Abdessemed, however, is extremely vigilant about not mythifying his person through the compassionate figure of the artist, about not assimilating his art to a

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of these contexts, see Thomas McDonough, "The Mole," in *Adel Abdessemed: Situation and Practice*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Visual List Art Center, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> *Practice Zero Tolerance*, exhibitions held in 2006 at the La Criée centre d'art contemporain in Rennes and Plateau frac Ile-de-France in Paris; *Adel Abdessemed, à l'attaque* (Zurich: JRP-Ringer, 2007).

narrative of victimization by history. His oeuvre categorically evades all attempts to reduce it to any identity whatsoever, whether communitarian or nationalist.

Abdessemed's works never designate an identified place or a figure of power. Every human being, every civilization is capable of political monstrosity: hence the statement *La naissance de Mohammedkarlpolpot* (1999), "The birth of Mohammedkarlpolpot" handwritten on a piece of paper. Abdessemed's art fixes on a power to act that far exceeds the issues of territoriality and internecine struggle. It embraces the question of power in the capacity of images to generate a power of life as strong as the powers of sadness, oppression, or death that we impose on ourselves or that are imposed on us.

In other words, the works conceived by Abdessemed always provoke a disruption of the political, but they are not political works. They lead straight to the question: Is power possible of a representation? What is the power to act in the construction of discourses and in the production of images?

Abdessemed invites the viewer to adopt an exigent and often uncomfortable viewing posture. To put it differently, Abdessemed's art is an art of affect and not of affection. That is a significant nuance.

"Affection" (*affectio*) refers to the state of a body that submits to the action of another body or of an image. In art, one could say that there is an art of affection that excels at and confines itself to making the viewer feel states of perception. That art of affection—sometimes very intricate—can be elaborated in the mode of the spectacular, the poetically elegant, the conceptually subtle, thus producing forms of reception in which seduction, contemplation, intellectual satisfaction, and admiration occupy a large place.

"Affect" (*affectus*), conversely, has to do with the shift from one state of perception to another and with the variation between the two. That is, the affect is not simply a bodily state but manifests itself as the movement, change, separation, or amplitude existing between one state of perception and another. We may be

affected passively by these variations in perception or we may attempt to modulate them, depending on whether they provide us with a greater strength to exist, a better power to act. Gilles Deleuze is very precise on this point when he clarifies the notion of affect in Spinoza's thought: "For Spinoza, *affectus* is the continuous variation in the strength to exist, inasmuch as that variation is determined by the ideas one has. . . . There is continuous variation—that is what it means to exist—in the strength to exist or in the power to act."<sup>3</sup> An art of affect is therefore an art that invites the viewer to be impacted<sup>4</sup> by these modulations and transitions, that is, to feel and vary the degrees of perfection, happiness, or sadness between bodily states and ideas. Nevertheless, the art of the affect also runs the risk of devolving into an art of pathos, thereby slipping into a form of representation where an intensification of feelings would prevail, confining the viewer wholly to the passive experience of the affect and preventing any critical discernment, that is, any possibility of distance with respect to the image. We are already familiar with the forms of political and ideological co-optation of that art of the affect, either in the form of propaganda under large-scale dictatorships or in the current and more insidious form of the dominance of the affect of sadness among the masses.

As Deleuze also said: "How is that that the people who have the power in any realm whatsoever need to affect us in a sad way? Passions as sad as they are necessary. Inspiring sad passions is necessary for the exercise of power. And Spinoza says in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* that therein lies the profound link between the despot and the priest: they need the sadness of their subjects. Understand, though, that he does not take sadness in a vague sense, he takes sadness in the rigorous

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<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Cours Vincennes, 1978–1981: Spinoza," retranscribed and edited by Richard Pinhas at [www.webdeleuze.com](http://www.webdeleuze.com), unpaginated. [Unless a bibliographical reference in English is provided in the notes, translations of quoted passages are my own—trans.]

<sup>4</sup> [Throughout his book, the French terms *épreuve* and *à l'épreuve* are translated as, respectively, "impact" and "impacted." *Épreuve* is conventionally translated as "test" or "ordeal," [*mettre*] *à l'épreuve* as "put to the test." The verbal form *éprouver*, however, means not only "to test" but also "to experience" or "to feel," and Frogier combines these three meanings in his use of the noun *épreuve*. An *épreuve* in this sense is a sudden, unexpected experience or encounter, one that may produce strong feelings.—trans.]



sense that he was able to give it: sadness is affect insofar as it encompasses the diminution of the power to act.”<sup>5</sup>

When we say that Abdessemed's oeuvre is an art of affect, we do so to consider two essential aspects of the artist's project. First, Abdessemed pursues with infallible persistence the work of art's capacity to hold representation to a power to act, that is, the image's power to generate within itself and within the viewer the impact of the shift, the reversal, the paradox, difference. The artist never limits himself to a work that courts the viewer by means of a minor formalist or conceptual poetry. If a radical form of poetry were to be found, it would be among authors as diverse as Pier Paolo Pasolini, Tahar Djaout, and Édouard Glissant. Abdessemed's creations work at generating affects and rubbing them together, at turning them against one another in such a way that they bring about a shift in the gaze and a seismic tremor of thought. Second, Abdessemed works the affect by presenting a true challenge to contemporary art: how to return to art the power to revisit the passions without giving an inch when it comes to the rigors of critical thinking? How to exercise the capacity to revolt and to cry out in art without slipping into the expressionist myth that the heroization of the individual and the mythification of history are lying in wait inside the image? How to produce an art of action-passion in keeping with the revolutionary aesthetic experiments of artists as different as Marcel Duchamp, Bruce Nauman, Robert Morris, Carolee Schneeman, and Andy Warhol?

Abdessemed's works offer a formidable opportunity to open up the possibilities of an art where affect would absolutely not stand in contradiction to critical vigilance.

Hence the artist's declaration, which could not be more explicit: “I am romantic but criminal.” That lapidary observation expresses the refusal to compromise viewers by placing them in a state of contemplative or emotional absorption. Abdessemed's oeuvre always stands on the line between chaos and the sublime: powerful force, expenditure of energy, act of love, exacting revolt, permanent resistance. An oeuvre

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze, “Cours Vincennes, 1978–1981.”

of radical simplicity and an extreme richness of meanings, with multiple theoretical and poetic ramifications. An art of becoming and of paradoxes, of engendering and open generosity.

## Touching the Real

*My art makes no claim to represent reality but simply to touch the real.*  
—Adel Abdessemed, in an interview with the author

In 2002 Abdessemed filmed three seconds of a foot crushing a lemon. The artist decided to project that video image in a loop against an exhibition wall, accompanying it by the title *Pressoir fais-le* (Press do it). A work disconcerting for the simplicity of its figuration (a foot, a lemon, an act), for the form given it (a looped repetition of three seconds of images), and for its mode of display (mural projection and a title inside a case).

But then, what constitutes an image here? Is it the mere representation of the foot, the lemon, and the act of crushing? Ought one to see the figure of the lemon as a symbol related to order or the law? Might not the repetition of the act of crushing turn the symbol on its head and produce a different image? How does the title of the work participate in the fabrication of the image?

*Pressoir fais-le* is one of the dizzying visual elaborations specific to Abdessemed's video works, lapidary, repetitive sequences involving the impact of a crude materiality and the visualization of motion: whirling, crushing, striking, pouring, falling, covering, amorous coupling, unveiling.

Standing before the artist's works, we are no longer in the presence of images possessing a sufficient degree of figurability to represent reality. They deviate radically from a classic practice of representation, which has produced rich variations by making the image approximate reality as faithfully as possible (realism), by giving the image the power to improve on reality (idealism), or by removing from the image the superfluous elements of reality (abstractionism).

Abdessemed seems absolutely set on forcing representation toward the near side of reality, that is, toward what the artist calls "touching the real." Some art critics

have been quick to denounce the artist's videographic images as "oversimplification," an "unconvincing repetitive staging that is discomfiting."<sup>6</sup> Such reactions, beyond their polemical tone, are of interest because they reveal the great difficulty critics have had in grasping works that attempt an image production impacted by the real. They remain intent on detecting in contemporary images a sufficiently elaborated representation of reality, focusing on an exclusively referential function of images, granting a legitimacy only to works that would demonstrate a dexterity in manipulating signifiers, form, and narrative construction/deconstruction. In the history of art, the same reproaches were addressed in their time to artists as different as Carravagio, Gustave Courbet, and Andy Warhol. In other words, an artist who takes the risk of fabricating images impacted by the real also risks ruining one's eyes.

Understand, then, that "touching the real" as image leads to a famous paradox: every representation as such already stems from language, that is, from infinite procedures of identification, symbolization, and uses of rhetorical figures (metaphor, allegory, metonymy). Beginning from that fact, some artists take to blocking these procedures or turning them against themselves to make the image accede to the *tuché*<sup>7</sup> of the real. The true work of criticism, then, consists of analyzing the aesthetic and political issues specific to these works of art, where contact with the real takes precedence over the representation of reality.

Jacques Lacan clearly demonstrated in what respect the real is to be radically distinguished from reality. Reality is what is open to discourse and symbolization, making possible the creation of a vision of the world. Within reality, we perceive and construct the world with our senses, our capacity for language, and our imaginative intelligence. With the real, something entirely different manifests itself. The real is

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Storr, "Un faux pas," *artpress* 342 (January 2008): 18.

<sup>7</sup> [*Tuché*, or "accident," an Aristotelian term adopted by Jacques Lacan to designate the irruption of the real in the symbolic—trans.]

fundamentally what is lacking in symbolization: “The real, or what is perceived as such, is what resists absolutely [symbolic] symbolization.—In the end, does not the feeling of the real present itself at its maximum in the burning manifestation of an unreal, hallucinatory reality?”<sup>8</sup> The real is what is seized on through the manifestation, the presentation of an object that cannot be named, described, or imagined. In that strictly primary perception of the world, the subject does not exist as such, that is, as an autonomous being capable of identification, of language. In other words, the subject knocks up against the real without being able to distance itself through representation.

The real always remains lurking behind the network of signifiers, or manifests itself as a rift in the system of signs, language, and representation. The real “is nowhere else . . . but in the intervals, the rifts, and where, strictly speaking, it is the least signifying of signifiers, that is, the rift.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the symptomatic manifestations of that rift lies in the procedure of repetition, in the return of the same.

The art historian Hal Foster adopted the Lacanian approach to the real in order to deploy an innovative reading of Andy Warhol’s works, which were in fact contemporaneous with the psychoanalytic theory of the real. Foster begins with the observation that it is reductive to interpret Warhol’s oeuvre solely through the paradigm of an absolute simulacrum or a disabused manipulation of the signs emerging from consumer society. He demonstrates in particular that Warhol’s art belongs to a “traumatic realism”; that is, it entails visual procedures that bring about caesuras and gaps in the representation of a reality. Such is the case for the *Death and Disaster* series, which shows catastrophic news events that emerge from a given reality and are then retranscribed by the media as photographs. Far from

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire—Livre I—Les écrits techniques de Freud (1953–1954)* (Paris: Seuil, Coll. Champ Freudien, 1991), 80.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Le désir et son interprétation,” in *Le séminaire—Livre VI—1959–1960* at <http://www.ecole-lacanienne.net/stenos/seminaireVI/1959.06.03.pdf>.

being satisfied with a realist representation, Warhol proceeds to cover over the image in strata—one could almost speak of an iconic embalming of the photograph—through silk-screening and paint, and to engage in an impressive repetition of figures (wrecked cars, corpses lying on the ground, electric chairs) that come to riddle the canvas as a whole. In that repetitive saturation by a single motif, other accidents rise to the surface of the canvas: ink smears, unintentional erasures, a square of empty space deliberately contrived by Warhol, as if to authorize a plunge toward that *tuché* of the real, toward the near side of the figure, or, to borrow Lacan's expression, toward a *trou-matic* figure, a figure full of holes, hence traumatic: "Repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also *points* to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition. It is a rupture less in the world than in the subject—between the perception and the consciousness of a subject *touched* by an image."<sup>10</sup> After several decades of theory and art during which the signifier seemed to reign as lord and master over the conditions of the work's production and reception, that reading of Warhol's paintings in light of a Lacanian definition of the real introduces a better understanding of the works of artists concerned with a return to the figure in art. That approach consists, notably, of rejecting the conventional dichotomies between sign and trauma, simulacrum and *tuché*, dichotomies that led to two well-known and opposing dogmas, modernism and postmodernism. That approach also takes the risk of reintroducing a particular dramatization of feeling in the face of globalization and the consumption of images, a particularly powerful impact of sensation that in no way corresponds to the ideological and pseudoheroic incarnations of a (neo)expressionist art. Again on the subject of Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series, the historian Thomas Crow observes that the Pop artist managed to produce "his most powerful work by dramatizing the

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<sup>10</sup> Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 132.

breakdown of commodity exchange. There were instances in which the mass-produced image as the bearer of desires was exposed in its inadequacy by the reality of suffering and death. . . . In his particular dramatization of the newsprint medium, Warhol found room for a dramatization of feeling and even of history painting.”<sup>11</sup> With that declaration, we understand that the *tuché* of the real is not merely a gaping hole in the image; it is one of the critical responses to the political issues of contemporary history, where the commodification of the image, its use as communicational propaganda, consumption, ingested and transformed into flesh, were judiciously questioned in the 1970s and 1980s by Bruce Nauman and Cindy Sherman. They are being questioned again in the era of globalization by artists such as Douglas Gordon and Abdessemed.

All of Abdessemed’s art is concerned with freeing the image from formal demonstrations to go straight to that *tuché* of the real, that is, to the utter irreducibility of trauma and fantasy. The videos of falling, crushing, devouring, slaughtering, and coupling constitute that entry into matter without fissure from the real. In fact, anyone seeking to detect a signifier in the image risks being disappointed. What takes precedence is the impact of vertigo, empathy with the thing crushed, the feeling of anger, an explicit libido. There is, however, nothing of an expressionist theatricalization of feeling, but simply a power to act, condensed, one might say, into a raw, sharp, and clinical cry. That dimension of the cry unfolds in the videos through the importance the artist grants to sound, which is recorded in real time as the act is being filmed and then “balanced” as such in the exhibition space. Except that the looped sound produces a very particular aesthetic effect that almost belongs to a throbbing sound ritual, sometimes bewitching or irritating, sometimes diffuse or sharp as a blow: “The video as sound/image is the ability to activate the banal, the everyday: to crush a Coke bottle, to squeeze a lemon with one’s foot, to offer milk for

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Crow, “Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol,” in his *Modern Art in the Common Culture: Essays* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 51, 57.

cats to lap up. . . I could draw all that, but there's a sensuous alchemy in the specificity of sound in the instant, one that becomes almost metaphysical for me. That instant, that breath, matters more to me than anything else, and I must find it from the outset. As a matter of fact, I don't redo it a second time. If it's a flop, I go on to other things."<sup>12</sup> *Pressoir fais-le* is a video work where the repeated crushing of the lemon by a foot is, in the first place, that act of primary expression, which may be directed as much toward the act of artistic creation as toward a power to act in the everyday existence of the living being. To express, according to the Latin etymology of the word, is first of all to press something out, then to show, represent, exhibit. To express is to press matter, to extract its sap, its substance. To express is also to make one material encounter or resist another or, on the contrary, to unite two elements in such a way that their friction generates the construction of the living being. To express, finally, is to take the risk of contradicting the order of things.

We can therefore see that Abdessemed's capture of the real as image cannot be confined solely to the Lacanian definition of the real as trauma. In fact, in the majority of the artist's videos, a rift occurs in the chain of signifiers that makes one touch the real; but simultaneously, the referential dimension of the image is blocked, to be better propelled backward. So it is with the lemon, which, in its strict symbolic dimension, is a reference to order and the law. That symbol is brought down to earth in both the literal and figurative sense, not as a gratuitous act of destruction but as the responsibility to act, to resist, to think, to regenerate.

For Abdessemed, the *tuché* of the real is thus very remote from a mere rift or, to borrow Lacan's terms, from the regressive movement of a deconstruction of the subject in the grip of that "revelation of the real at its least penetrable, of the real with no mediation possible, of the last real, of the essential object that is no longer an

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<sup>12</sup> Adel Abdessemed in *Adel Abdessemed, à l'attaque*, 130.



object but rather a something before which all words come to an end and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence.”<sup>13</sup>

The title of the video, “Press do it,” is explicit in that respect: the work summons a power to act. With *Abdessemed*, touching the real cannot be reduced to annihilation or to the simple absorption of the subject in the plenitude of the real. Touching the real is fundamentally a matter of powers, as much in its modalities of resistance as in its possibilities for construction. In fact, *Abdessemed*’s capture of the real is very particular: even as it fully embraces the traumatic and fascinating impact of the real, the work simultaneously produces a critical distance by attempting aesthetic and political about-turns.

There is another way of thinking about contact with the real that can be radically differentiated from the *tuché* proposed by *Abdessemed*. That is the *punctum* as Roland Barthes posits it in his reading of the photographic image. To be sure, the philosopher provides a lovely definition of the photographic noema: “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body that was there, emissions originated and came to touch me, I who am here. Little matter the duration of the transmission; the photo of the departed being comes to touch me like the deferred beams of a star.”<sup>14</sup> According to Barthes, what pierces me in the photographic image is an element outside the field of the image or a detail I do not see but that illuminates the photograph as a whole. All the same, such a definition of contact with the real through the photographic *punctum* runs the risk of enclosing the image entirely in the fantasy of fusion with the real, reducing the subject to that absorption in the *punctum*, forgetting the fact that the image in itself contains social and political codes that make it readable and that make possible all the propagandistic and ideological exploitations of it. The Barthesian approach to the photographic *punctum*

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire—Livre III—Le Moi dans la théorie de Freud and dans la technique de la psychanalyse, 1954–1965* (Paris: Seuil: Coll. Champ Freudien, 1991), 196.

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire, note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, Seuil, Cahiers du cinéma, 1980), 126.

takes the Lacanian real literally, considering it solely as trauma, and almost makes it a matter of contemplation. That is never the case in Abdessemed's works.

From the instant Abdessemed produces a video image, he pushes to its extreme limit the point of contact with the real, but that contact is more an eruption of tension than a point of forgetting or disappearance. The video image produces an unspeakable traumatism whereby which the subject is pricked but never lost in oblivion. The real can never totally annihilate the subject in its self-construction (subjectivation) and in its political consciousness. For Abdessemed, then, the real is always experienced as a power to act that is fundamentally the power of propulsion, of momentum, of fear, of expansion, of arrangement, of construction.

## Generating a Critical Real

At this stage in our analysis, it is important to clarify what in Abdessemed's videos deserves to be characterized as "the impact of a critical real." Let us take two works, radically different in their way of touching the real: *Happiness in Mitte* (2003), an innocuous and peaceful series of seven videos showing seven different cats lapping milk from a bowl; and *Don't Trust Me* (2008), a brutal and violent series of six videos consisting of a sheep, a horse, a steer, a pig, a goat, and a doe put to death by a hammer blow to the skull. The two series coincide in their use of the figure of the animal but also in the political issues they generate within that aesthetic of the real.

*Happiness in Mitte* is a series whose title is a continuation of the video image, that is, of the commonplace scenes that fix on a moment of happiness in a public space, the Mitte neighborhood in the German city of Berlin. These cats, more precisely, were filmed in the middle of a vast dry artificial pond with a blue bottom. When that pond is filled with water, Berliners come to swim in it and to bask in the sun on pleasant days. The Mitte neighborhood is also an urban zone of the former East Berlin, one that, when the wall came down, found itself vested with an intense artistic life in the center of the new city.

The *Happiness in Mitte* video is, in the first place, the crude capturing of a simple pleasure on the part of the living being through an innocuous act, an animal engaged in drinking milk. For Abdessemed, the simplest and roughest scenes serve as a catapult for turning the situation on its head. The first reversal comes about in that capturing of the real, a full and complete entry into the milky matter and into the very act of alimentary survival. As simple as it might appear, the original source of the visual energy is found there: in milk and in drinking. Even before being a symbol of anything, the milky matter and the act of lapping are what make possible the creative

process and the living thing. But no one is duped. The living being in Abdessemed's art is propelled outside itself to occupy, as a free spirit, zones of creations as powerful as life itself. In that sense, *Happiness in Mitte* is a series of videos that, as in Pier Pasolini's films, makes both the aesthetic and the political dimension of art operate in reverse. Where some see only oversimplification, Abdessemed's rough images in fact give flesh and libido to the image. The video image does not merely record reality, it is not even an "image of the real": it is a REAL image. The banality of the images coincides with the roughness of the treatment: a stationary shot, an act, and a repetition of the image. These close-ups of animals are magnetic and they imprint life deep in the retina. Where some would like to detect—too quickly—a symbolics of milk, the artist seeks only a violent vitality in the surging forth of the living being.

But if we were to enter into the play of symbolic references, we might simply note that, in Abdessemed's works, milk is an inverted symbol. In *Zen*, a video produced in 2000, a bottle of milk was poured over the body of a black man standing in a public park. The looped image of the gesture of pouring the milk and covering the black body introduced a brutal paradox between the generous act of the offer of milk and the oppressive gesture of pointless integration and the occultation of differences. In *Happiness in Mitte*, milk, far from being limited to the symbols of happiness and maternity, is placed in direct contradiction to the other two visual elements of the video: the seven cats and the blue background of the urban space. These feral cats—and it is not incidental to note that each possesses a coat of a different color—have overrun the city, they are as common as grains of sand. Despite their apparent gentleness, in the images they assert themselves as strong, determined, indisputable presences. These are mongrel cats that introduce a form of beneficent chaos into the city and differential gaps in the video aesthetic. As for the blue background of the artificial pond, it constitutes, by virtue of its social and urban usage, an ideological element, since it symbolically connotes the public space of the

German city, a happiness (re)captured and shared. But it can also be seen here as the symbol for a screen concealing the fraught contemporary history of the German people and the city of Berlin.

Finally, a third visual procedure in *Happiness in Mitte* turns the space of representation and the symbolic order on their head: the work requires a particular mode of display, a certain kind of visibility for the videos. The seven films of cats are always shown as a unified series, but these videos are diffused on monitors placed on the floor, disseminated in often forgotten and apparently “innocuous” corners of an exhibition space. The visitor, then, encounters these images of cats while strolling about. They can be seen as punctuations of the architectonic space, rhythmic pauses in the course of the exhibition, but also as elements of infiltration, disruption, and irritation. That particular effect of disruption and exasperation has been formulated in a review written by an art critic on the occasion of her visit to the exhibition *Passages du temps* (Passings of time), conceived by Caroline Bourgeois, who selected nearly ninety-seven works by thirty-nine international artists belonging to the Fondation Pinault.<sup>15</sup> The art critic reproaches Bourgeois for having made, from among “treasures” of works, a poor choice in Abdessemed’s *Happiness in Mitte*.<sup>16</sup> She condemns two particulars of the work: first, the “dismaying” quality of the subject and its impoverished treatment when compared to the masterful treatment of the image by the other artists in the exhibition; and second, the dispersal of the seven videos over the entire space, a dispersal that, from her perspective, had the effect of saturating the exhibition in its totality: “In every new room another cat, innocent . . . Dismaying in its facileness and above all unworthy of such company.”<sup>17</sup> On reading that judgment, we feel obliged to make a remark from the outset: the exhibition space *Passages du temps* has a surface area of four thousand square meters, laid out on three levels, and it bears acknowledging that the seven videos of “innocent

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<sup>15</sup> Emmanuelle Lequeux, “François Pinault dévoile ses trésors,” *Beaux-Arts Magazine* 282 (December 2007): 154.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

cats” must have a real power to be able to clutter the space and one’s sight to that extent. Their occurrence throughout the exhibition visit seems intolerable to the art critic’s eye in that they come to disrupt a homogeneous and predictable reading of the other works on view. Such a reaction demonstrates the true efficacy of Abdessemed’s video works. The apparent naïveté of *Happiness in Mitte* proves to be frightfully subversive because it infiltrates the very heart of a display, instilling archaism, the accidental, contesting the notions of standardization and exclusion in favor of a total acceptance of differences. These cats castigated by the art critic are so many alien elements in the conventional space of an exhibition, and it is truly that innocuous difference of the alien that seems to disrupt one’s habits of looking. It is obvious that Bourgeois made the choice of *Happiness in Mitte* for its potential to question and disrupt a scenographic layout. She thereby avoided an overly linear vision of the collection, which she was responsible for giving a plural semantic readability, a perambulatory energy, and a kind of friction through the juxtaposition of works.

The art lover will remember the anti-architectural and antimonumental nomadic caravan of Michael Asher, one of the most important conceptual artists. Within the context of the *Skulptur Projekte* (1977), he offered a response—pertinent at the very least—to Kasper König’s invitation to fill the German city of Münster with sculptural statements. Playing on a form of invisibility and the subtle marking of urban space, that caravan was parked every day of the week in a different place of the city, inviting the visitor to an art event or the user of a public space to take stock of that innocuous object and to reconsider the space of the sculpture broadened to include its urban, social, and political environment. The work was reactivated in 1987 and then in 2007, but the context had quickly changed, especially since the sort of art that currently takes an interest in the specificity of the site very often makes a dogma of institutional critique or exhausts it in entertaining, ornamental, or pseudo-interactive statements.

Although he acknowledges the determining role of institutional critique, Abdessemed in no way requires the “in situ” as a focal point for his work. He has even formulated a radical opinion on the current obsession that makes the form and meaning of a work constantly depend on its space and exhibition context: “I grant no importance to the specificity of the site. It’s the work and the thought that count. I don’t work from spaces or from the proportions or context of a given space. Other artists worked pertinently and critically in the 1970s on the specificity of the site—I’m thinking especially of Dan Graham and Michael Asher. Too many exhibitions today are interested in the specificity of the site and turn it into a style. It’s becoming decoration.”<sup>18</sup> The work *Happiness in Mitte* thus constitutes one of the best tributes to institutional critique *as well as* an effective response to its possible consequences. The artist proposes an art of critique, but an art vested with the *tuché* of the real and with the power of passion and contestation. *Happiness in Mitte* infiltrates the ideological strata of a space of image consumption in order to contrast it to a different space, one that contains a fundamental value for the living being. Based on the few critical comments cited above regarding Abdessemed’s video works, it appears that it is difficult at present to truly assess the critical radicality of such a gesture. The cats in *Happiness in Mitte* are absolutely not innocuous. Rather, they constitute archaic figures that jam the well-oiled machine of what is currently expected of an art exhibit. The exhibition space has now become one of the sites par excellence where the issues surrounding communication, consumption, and commodification are played out. What are called works of institutional critique are themselves either absorbed within their own dogma and self-critical closure or co-opted as commodities. The cats in *Happiness in Mitte* intervene in that aridity of discourse and space. They reintroduce an energy, a mystery of the living thing into a space where the certainties of knowledge, the cult of spatial mastery, and the spectacularization of art have tended to control and anaesthetize the gaze.

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<sup>18</sup> Adel Abdessemed in *In Geneva No One Can Hear You Scream*, exh. cat. (Geneva: Blondeau Fine Arts Service, 2008).

We cited earlier the explicit reference Abdessemed makes to the cinematic works of Pasolini and especially to the film *Medea*, which includes a shot a few seconds long of two cats lapping milk from a bowl. These figures of cats lapping milk inside Medea's house obviously functioned as symbols of fertility, maternity, and kinship relations. But this shot also precedes another shot visualizing a dual figure, the centaur—oscillating between man and horse—which conveys both the sacredness of existence and, in the ordinary man, a profane vision of existence. Pasolini therefore sought to make perceptible that symbolic conflict between the blasé life entailed by a consumer relation to the object and an individual or social existence in which the secret and mysterious dimension of the living being is taken to its height.

For Abdessemed, the seven cats in *Happiness in Mitte* undermine contemporary spaces preoccupied with their own communicational ideologies, their worldly success, and the conquest of the world. These cats instill a dimension of the archaic, of pleasure, and of differences into our standardized world of globalization and consumption, within which art runs the risk of losing face. As figures, the cats in *Happiness in Mitte* could not be more antispectacular and antiaesthetic, setting up a space of friction, of pleasure, of beneficent chaos, and of difference to oppose the dominance of technoscience, all-knowingness, and art under the control of discourse.

*Don't Trust Me* is a series of six very short video sequences, each showing a violent assault with a hammer to the skull of an animal, a single blow by the hand of man, but an unexpected, abrupt, sharp, heavy, and lethal blow. This video takes the paradox of a deeply iconoclastic image to the point of paroxysm; at the same time, it is powerfully constructive. It is iconoclastic because it encapsulates the *effet de réel* in a power to act that is at work in the darkest corners of humanity, that is, the power to administer death. And it is constructive because it pursues to the limit the question



magnificently formulated by the philosopher Marie-José Mondzain: “Can the image kill?”<sup>19</sup>

*Don't Trust Me* is a distressing work because it is patently violent and unbearable in its content but also and above all because the image produces a further violence through the repetitive, dry, and extremely clinical form given to the visual production of the traumatic real. Let us clarify that the violence of the work also lies in the realm of sound, namely, the sound that resonates in the exhibition space. There are actually always two sounds that repeat in the visitor's ear, even if that visitor attempts to escape the sight of the videos: the first, extremely sharp, is that of the hammer banging against the animal's skull; the second, more muted, that of the collapse of the animal's body onto the ground. Mondzain, revisiting the television images of the attacks of September 11, 2001, that were produced and broadcast in a continuous loop, delivers a fundamental insight: the violence of images does not reside exclusively in their content but in the way that certain apparatus of production, diffusion, and control enclose the image in a particular form. The philosopher then observes that the true violence, the violence of violence, lies in the image's capacity to obliterate any critical discourse and any responsible choice: “The violence of images in the visible has to do not with images of violence or with the violence specific to images but with the violence done to thought and speech in the spectacle of visibilities.”<sup>20</sup> That violence of violence plays a determining role in the work that concerns us, since *Don't Trust Me* is a series of images that, as much in its content as in the form given it, has the power to stun viewers, leaving them speechless before the repetitive, serial, and direct deployment of the violent act. Must we therefore conclude that *Don't Trust Me* can be reduced to a pure spectacle of violence and its traumatic fascination? I am not certain of that. In the first place, Abdessemed visualizes the violence in a mode radically opposed to a mechanism of spectacularization and theatricalization. He penetrates the violence without formal

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<sup>19</sup> Marie-José Mondzain, *L'image peut-elle tuer?* (Paris: Bayard, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

contrivances and without recourse to narrative. In that way, he delivers an utterly particular quality to the image, a quality the artist likes to call clinical. Through that particular treatment of the image, *Don't Trust Me* really posits what is at stake in the power to act and in the power to exist.

One work that anticipated *Don't Trust Me* was a video entitled *La capacité qu'a la main* (The capacity the hand has), produced in Israel in 2006: at the invitation of the Dvir Gallery, Abdessemed filmed a fish killed by a blow with a wooden mallet at a market stall in Tel Aviv. The work is the direct capturing of a cultural and everyday act, a ritual killing, done in the interest of alimentary survival and collective sharing. Although the act of violence is thereby culturally validated, the title of the work diverts the ritual toward doubt: in the title *La capacité qu'a la main*, what is at issue is the potential for deadly violence. Mondzain articulates that first posture in the following terms: "It is from the capacity to be violent that one must draw the strength not to be so. Violence would thus be power before being or not being an act."<sup>21</sup> In addition, let us note that, if the video image of *Don't Trust Me* possesses the power to stagger or traumatize the viewer, it does so solely by producing a violent image that is profoundly carnal. The artist takes the risk of visualizing horror without artifice, without resorting to an aestheticization that would have made the image of violence more bearable and beautiful. That is where the true stupefaction manifests itself, in that capacity to produce not an image of violence but a violence incarnated in an image. The gap between the two is telling. The clinical aspect of the video also gives flesh to the image. Violence is not simply represented but is incarnated as image. That is what gives the viewer the responsibility to bear the sight of the work, to keep looking at it. The violence is certainly enacted on animals, but it is carried out by the hand of man and is addressed to man within the context of his most unimaginable and most unpredictable powers to act. Hence the title *Don't Trust Me*. In other words, the author restores flesh to a violence that is most often made spectacle by

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 20.

the media, highly codified and consumed without any affect or critical distance. Mondzain formulates incarnated violence as follows: “The only image that possesses the force to transform violence into critical freedom is the image that incarnates. To incarnate is not to imitate or to reproduce or to simulate. . . . The image is fundamentally unreal, and it is therein that its force resides, in its rebellion against any substantialization of its content. To incarnate is to give flesh, not body. It is to operate in the absence of things. The image gives flesh, that is, carnation and visibility to an absence, at an insuperable distance from what is designated.”<sup>22</sup> Finally, if *Don't Trust Me* seizes the gaze in an almost unbearable manner, but without ever engulfing it, if it sustains the viewer's gaze by giving flesh to the violent image, it also requires in return a critical gaze, that is, a sufficient distance that will allow the viewer to appropriate the image, in order to name and represent violence somewhere other than in the violent sequence of animals being slaughtered. To produce a space, a distance, is to be capable of seeing *Don't Trust Me* in its latent but unavoidable connections to a collective history, that of Nazism or contemporary forms of terror. In other words, it is a matter of formulating violence in terms of the relations of power from which no one can escape but against which each person can attempt what Michel Foucault calls the care of the self, that is, a creative force within a network of powers.

*Don't Trust Me* tears away the veil of propriety that conceals the foundations of the sites of power. It allows one to glimpse a power to act and to exist that recognizes both the human being's force of oppression and the human potential for revolt and creativity. Let us return to Lacan, who had a clear insight into the relations of power established by the impact of the real: “The word ‘real’ means what it means; everyone knows that the real person is something we encounter rarely, and we encounter it rarely because we hardly seek it. We can spend a whole lifetime next to someone without ever wishing to know anything about him except the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 32.

function he fulfills in relation to us . . . without suspecting for a single instant his reality as a real person, in the common, and not philosophical, sense of the word—Pretend to see nothing, that is the fundamental position toward one's fellow; to do the reverse would be the height of impropriety.”<sup>23</sup> Abdessemed's works, and in particular the series *Don't Trust Me*, never pretend to see nothing. The artist always strives to keep his eyes open to the real, even if that means burning his eyes, and he does so as well to better open the eyes of anyone wishing to take that risk. Nothing about that undertaking has a “dismaying facileness”; rather, it is profoundly risky, since it undermines the little relations of power that socialize and reassure us, in favor of an infinitely more creative power to act.

*Don't Trust Me* is, finally, a radical denunciation of the barbarism of our world: barbarism of the everyday, especially in the world of work and consumption, barbarism of war, barbarism of terrorist extremism. The murder of animals is, of course, a violent act, but it can also be seen as a dual act of the living being: that of denouncing a really terrifying contemporary world that believes solely in the commodity; and that of activating alternatives where belief in the living thing—sacred, carnal, rebellious, and constructive—still remains possible.

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<sup>23</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Intervention sur l'exposé de G. Favez: 'Le rendez-vous avec le psychanalyste,’” comments delivered at the Société Française de Psychanalyse, February 5, 1957, published in *La psychanalyse* 4 (1958): 305–14. Lacan's comments are available at <http://www.ecole-lacanienne.net/pastoutlacan50.php>.

## The Work Does What It Says but Does Not Suffice: Hence the Act

Abdessemed's videos, actions, sculptures, and installations all participate in a plunge into—a precipitation-participation in—a mode of acting, moving, and becoming.

The work of art would therefore enact even before representing, prior to the imposition of form on a reality or an imaginary.

If the act is primordial in Abdessemed's art, must we say, all the same, that his works belong to an art of performance? Nothing is less certain. To reduce Abdessemed's creations to performance would be to miss a revolution of the image. The artist is explicit on this point: "I hate the word 'performance.' For me, it's associated with Cac 40 or NASDAQ, with stock market performances and the way they're worshipped. I believe I prefer 'act' in reference to my pieces, whatever their nature. The act is in motion, it is direct. Maybe performance better evokes the idea of improvisation and the manipulation of the public, or the notion of an unpredictability, coming from the African American tradition of jazz, but for an artist, it's difficult to inherit its historical complexity while at the same time working on the terrain of the present."<sup>24</sup> The philosopher of language J. L. Austin demonstrated that an utterance does not merely describe or affirm a fact: it is also in itself the act through which it states the fact. In other words, an utterance is always a "speech act": to speak is to act, to say is to do, as suggested by the title of Austin's key work.<sup>25</sup>

On the basis of these linguistic insights, the art historian Peggy Phelan, in her *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, proposes an ontology of performance.<sup>26</sup> She observes in particular that the performing arts can be distinguished from all the others in that they do not simply represent a reality or a mental image but rather give

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<sup>24</sup> Abdessemed, *Abdessemed, à l'attaque*, 126.

<sup>25</sup> J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962).

<sup>26</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

a performance, perform a representation, at the very moment of the act. The essence of performance thus lies in its quality of nonreproducibility: it exists exclusively in the value of the act at the present moment and in its inevitable disappearance. The experience of the performance cannot be preserved, recorded, or documented without slipping into the register of the archive and representation. The performance articulates the presence of a body acting in real time and coexisting with the spectator. As art, then, performance would stand in opposition to any representation of a reality and any form of image reproduction.

Because of that quality of nonreproducibility, Phelan detects in performance an art of political subversion that undermines the hegemonic structures of power, “clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital.”<sup>27</sup>

That declaration is not very far from Abdessemed’s thinking, since we find in him the same demand for a nonreproducibility of the act: once it’s done, it’s done, one cannot go back; if it’s a flop, it’s a flop, one moves on to something else. Similarly, the act, since it cannot be reproduced or co-opted, possesses a political potential for critiquing the power apparatus.

But having begun there, Abdessemed’s works do not limit themselves to a strict performative ontology. The act propels (itself) outward, it is already becoming, and in that respect it already bears within itself images and “senses,” in both the somatic and semantic sense of that word.

That is what I will call the condensed stratification of an “act-image-act” that pervades all Abdessemed’s works.

Take *Bourek* (2006), the fuselage of an Aero Jet Commander that has been crushed and folded over on itself.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

First stratification: the “act-image” consists in that imperious need to crush these tons of steel and to crumple them to the point of making them malleable as pastry dough. Obviously, we are no longer dealing with a performative act of the artist in the co-presence of the spectator. The work is also very different from the postminimalist process art of the late 1960s, such as Richard Serra’s notorious *Hand Catching Lead* (1968) or his lead installations *Splashing* (1968) and *Casting* (1969), or even the performative videos of Vito Acconci (*Rubbing Piece*, 1970; *Conversions*, 1970–1971). The act in Abdessemed’s sense does not lie solely in the exploration of gesture and materiality. It is the entry into a block of sensations that produces a movement, a chaos, a physical and phantasmal transformation. It is all a history of energies, of condensation, and of the propelling of sensation into and out of matter. And it is that materiality propelled outside itself through the act that must be maintained from the moment the work is completed until its exhibition. To put it differently, the act is what is seen and felt first and last. Paradoxically, it is in that precipitate of sensations on the part of the act that distance is produced, and likewise meaning and representation: an image.

Second stratification: the “image-act” is an image rolled up and folded together with other images and contradictory meanings. It is never self-evident, just as it is not organized, formalized, harmonized: first, because the artist has the “responsibility” to hold the act in abeyance in the materiality and form of the work offered for view; and second, because the image-act is an image-passion where multiple references jostle one another in a chaotic block. *Bourek* is thus a roll of crumpled sheet metal that alludes by its title to a North African pastry. Making pastry with dough and with steel. *Bourek* may therefore bring to mind a filmed action, *Brik* (2005), which shows hands rolling out pastry dough to model an airplane. Digging into the dough and getting one’s hands dirty, acting, entering into the action, however simple it may be: an act of life and an eminently political act. *Bourek* is also an aggregate of steel whose chaotic energy contradicts that of the linear and

incessant trajectories of airplanes in the era of globalization. *Bourek* produces a vertiginous precipitate, a spiraling movement toward a space other than that connecting us to one another. It thus makes reference to a postcard the artist slipped into *The Green Book*,<sup>28</sup> an art book that assembled national anthems gathered from the artist's loved ones. The postcard consisted of a black-and-white photograph of a plane in the sky, and Abdessemed simply inscribed in red letters, on the bow of the plane's fuselage, the word FATHER. The plane that was thereby connoted became a bearer of meaning, of a certain kinship relationship, which can be understood in the familial, artistic, and cultural senses. These relationships no longer have anything to do with restrictive geographies and defined territories: they are open spaces constantly being recomposed.

The third stratification is the "act-image-act," whereby Abdessemed's works produce potentialities of acts as images. Through their reception, the artist's works carry within them a potential act. *Bourek*, for example, is a work of stratified images that constantly confront their own differences and contradictions. These are images going against the grain, turning symbols on their head, inverting political postulates, contradicting aesthetic certainties. Works by Abdessemed such as *Bourek* do not simply make of us beings of sensation and perception; they propose that we take the risk of becoming with them. They give us responsibility for the act in that compound of percepts and affects that is offered for our view.

It sometimes happens that this last stratum, the potential for action, is not unveiled explicitly, but is on the contrary completely buried in the form given the work, to the point of being held in extreme tension in it.

That is the case for the masterful work entitled *Salam Europe* (2006), produced for the Fundación NMAC-Montenmedio Art Contemporáneo, located in the city of Montenmedio at the southern tip of Spain, just across from the continent of Africa.

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<sup>28</sup> *Adel Abdessemed: The Green Book*, Vassivière: Centre national d'art et du paysage; Rennes: La Criée centre d'art contemporain; Rheims: Frac Champagne-Ardenne; Sotteville-les-Rouen / Frac Haute-Normandie, 2002.



Sixteen kilometers of steel barbed wire form a massive coil of perfect circles five meters in diameter, pressing against the ground with their full weight. A work that seemingly fell from the sky, got stuck in the ground, and which, however, if it were unrolled, would trace a line. That line, in its original conception, corresponds to the shortest distance separating the northern tip of the African continent to the southern tip of Spain and the European continent. We are seemingly caught between two continents and two geopolitical spaces, Europe and Africa. But in documenting borders and migratory movements, *Salam Europe* does not limit itself to that reference. *Salam Europe* is an essential work that visualizes the impossibility of the act—of delimiting, withdrawing, hindering—even while making the act absolutely vital, in potentiality as in life. The mass of barbed wire of *Salam Europe* makes profoundly contradictory forms and percepts rub up against each other: the paradox between enclosure in a circle and deployment in a line, between the massive steel block and the lightness of the barbed wire, between the coiling up of withdrawal and the spiraling burst of openness. In fact, between two affirmations there is always a passage, a hollow space, a respiration. To return to the geographical references, between the two landmasses of Africa and Europe there is an expanse of sea, just as between the two words “Salam” and “Europe” there is a little empty space. But these are two expanses, vacant a priori, that enact, as sense and as image. These two spaces are powerfully acting expanses-extensions where everything becomes possible, unfathomable chasms capable of the worst violence and exclusions—delimitations, borders, transgressions—and of the most beautiful constructions and most generous encounters: connections, passageways, total acceptance of differences.

Finally, *Salam Europe* traces an escape route but not a mere crossing of boundaries or an infiltration into alien territory. *Salam Europe* visualizes an essential act, the one articulated by Deleuze, the clandestine act of becoming, in the capacity to hazard the unknown, the other, radical difference, transformation, crossing. *Salam*

*Europe* is minimalist in its form and maximalist in its potential to signify and to question power or the capture of territory.

The coiling of steel wires into a mass in *Salam Europe* resonates with the minimalist blocks of Robert Morris, who claimed to be reducing the expression of form to its most simple manifestation in space in order to offer visitors the means for a maximal perception of real space. The minimalist module would thus be a “blank form . . . empty in its essence.” But that block does not assimilate the empty form to a nothing. The block designates the empty form as the very place where the act irrupts, the place of performative intentionality. Hence in 1962 Morris undertook to judiciously condense the phenomenological approach to the act in the famous little *I-Box*: a small gray metal frame and a little wooden door enclosing the photograph of the artist’s nude body, his face sporting a teasing look and smile. The internal edges of the frame and those on the door were shaped to form the personal pronoun “I.” Like the first columns produced by Morris at the scale of his own body, the *I-Box* “performs” intentionality in sculpture as word and body. On one hand, the work constitutes an effective visual concretization of the performative utterance (the famous speech act) as well as a real recognition of the ontological postulates of performance. On the other, anyone who opens the little door of the *I-Box* engages in the intentional act of a viewer coming to share that self. The *I-Box* postulates the unitary representation of the body but at the same time opens a field of experiences in which the viewer is henceforth fully implicated.

The aesthetic revolution proposed by minimal art is of great value. All the same, it is now insufficient. It was already so in the context of 1960s America, as we discover on reading the works of minimalist art and their utopia of real space against the space of life, overwhelmed at the time by racial conflicts, feminist protests, and the Vietnam War. In 1981 Morris himself pointed out that “one of the central aspects of . . . Minimalism is the projection of an aura of power and domination over the

viewer.”<sup>29</sup> That self-criticism was confirmed in the 1980s by Benjamin Buchloh, Douglas Crimp, and Hal Foster, who demonstrated that the real space of the minimalists took root as an absolutist postulate, excluding all institutional, historical, social, or sexual specificities and porosities of the body and of space. In this view, minimalist sculpture replaced pure modernist opticality with a preobjective perception and a pure intentionality of the act stripped of all history, sexuality, language, and power.

In our time, the minimalist block is incapable of letting us perceive or represent both the complexity of the space we use and the potential of the acts through which we intervene in the world. At a time of unrestrained migration, illegal or not, and of political or consumerist massification and its effects, the minimalist block is at a loss to justify its critical contribution other than through that beautiful neutral presence in a beautiful neutral space.

*Salam Europe* thus rubs up against the minimalist module, even while infiltrating into it, in place of a perfectly smooth machine-tooled steel, a steel that is just as perfectly tooled, but as barbed wire. Abdessemed replaces the solid blocks with tangled strata of steel wire. Hence *Salam Europe* does not ask the question of the body in its unity and in its individual and overt intentionality. It proceeds in the exact opposite direction: the body is open to infinitely multiple, collective, swirling, protruding, contradictory lines and trajectories. Each viewer is also reminded of news events, social and political histories. Finally, there are possibilities for moving beyond sociopolitical references to an infinity lying outside the codes imposed and informed by history and society. Acting in order to become. Like a shooting star. And there is nothing more effective for visualizing openness and transformation than the use of its opposing symbol, barbed wire.

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Morris, “American Quartet,” *Art in America* (December 1981): 98.

Abdessemed introduces a revolution of the gaze, an aesthetic revolution heretofore lacking in art: an art of shattered limits, an art of critical poetry. Few artists have taken that risk.

**Chapter 2**  
**The Image *en abyme***

## Figuring the Unnameable, Letting Go of Narrative

In October 1999, Abdessemed scribbled in pencil on a loose piece of paper: “La naissance / Paris 20 oct. 99 de / Mohammedkarlpolpot (The birth / Paris 20 Oct. 99 of / Mohammedkarlpolpot). That lapidary annotation created a work of art following a visual procedure that was radical and masterful within the history of art: contained within a word was the power to generate images and, at the same time, to place them *en abyme*.<sup>30</sup> What is at stake in representation is played out in that scrawl of overlapping names, a staggering precipitate that spills forth the unfigurable, making the stupefying and obscene power of terror quite simply perceptible.

The viewer of *Mohammedkarlpolpot* has the right to wonder whether the work could have materialized as a monumental sculpture or as a history painting, with figures narrating the horrors of humanity. But *Mohammedkarlpolpot* does not lend itself to narrative figuration or to the genre of history painting: it is the antinarrative work par excellence.

*Mohammedkarlpolpot* is, in the first place, an inscription in pencil, and it is important to insist on that form, a note dashed off on paper, potentially ephemeral but indisputable once it is expelled. In addition, the dazzlement of the annotation lies in the amalgam of two given names and a nickname that not only designate historical figures but also constitute sketchy signifiers for the powers of humanity: religion, philosophy, revolution, tyranny, barbarism. In *Mohammedkarlpolpot*, therefore, it is not a matter of rendering as image the truth discourses of a utopian belief or of celebrating the portraits of revolution or dictatorship.

*Mohammedkarlpolpot* is literally an a-nomaly: the work falls short of figurability and narration. More precisely, *Mohammedkarlpolpot* visualizes an act of

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<sup>30</sup> [To place *en abyme* (literally, “into the abyss”) is to introduce a small replica of an image into the center of the image itself, thus creating the illusion of infinite regression. The term *mise en abyme* originated in heraldry, where it describes a coat of arms in which a shield contains an identical, smaller shield at its center. By extension, *mise en abyme* refers to effects of specularity or self-reflexivity in a work of art.—trans.]

pre nomination, that is, something that precedes identification, to better condense all the paradoxical potentialities for representing the world. The anomaly is completely as odds with a normative and moral judgment of an individual, a society, an ideology. It simply displays a hallucination, a monster—except that this monster is not alien to language or to representation. On the contrary, it is the foundation, the matter, and the original power or potential for constructing, for becoming, for representing. For better and for worse.

The second essential fact about the antinarrative *Mohammedkarlpolpot* is its capacity to project words and images in a movement akin to spiraling, whirling, or spinning. The simple act of reading the precipitate *Mohammedkarlpolpot* impels that swirling motion, which we also find in other works, such as the black marble drills of *Pluie noire* (Black rain), the whirling descent of *Schnell*, the coiling of barbed wire in *Salam Europe*, the open-ended copulatory animation of visual signs and religious symbols generated in the video *God Is Design*, and the three intertwining airplane bodies of *Telle mère tel fils*. For Abdessemed, the *mise en abyme* of representation does not proceed merely from the nesting of one image in another but from the power of that amalgam to engender a multitude of other images that collide with and bounce off one another so as to better open themselves to other unthinkable or unimaginable possibilities.

As to the maelstrom of *Mohammedkarlpolpot*, we can only attempt to fix on a few fragments: “Mohammed” is the name of the prophet of Islam and also a common first name of a multitude of singular individuals in the Muslim world. “Mohammed,” in its friction with the West, has become the stereotypical denomination of the alien, a given name in some sense overcoded with negative values—immigration, instability, xenophobia. “Mohammed” can also be instrumentalized, can slip from the name of the prophet to a terrorist weapon. “Mohammed” collides with “Karl,” the given name of Karl Marx, inventor of a materialist mode of thought radically opposed to any

religious or idealist belief. “Karl” also announces the birth of Marxism, a critical philosophy of industrial society that augured the current impasse of state capitalism versus private capitalism. But the given name “Karl” all but rejects the surname “Marx,” already too closely identified with Marxism, as if to signify how critical materialist thought slipped away from the philosopher and engendered political systems contrary to democracy and at times totalitarian. That given name “Karl” runs up against “Pol Pot,” the nickname that Communist China bestowed on the Cambodian Saloth Sar. The nickname “Pol Pot” is an abbreviation for “Political Potential,” used to signify the possible Communist invasion of Cambodia by the Chinese. But in 1975 that nickname was fully and brutally embraced by “Pol Pot” himself as his true nom de guerre, which he would use to write in blood his regime of terror.

Finally, it is not incidental to note that *Mohammedkarlpolpot* is an annotation on paper but also an e-mail address that was used for a few years to “denominate” the artist Adel Abdessemed. Every e-mail exchange at the time had to go through *Mohammedkarlpolpot*, an address for the artist that inevitably elicited uneasiness and perplexity in the correspondent. That e-mail address can, moreover, be reactivated by the artist at any time.

*Mohammedkarlpolpot* thus constitutes a whirling updraft of signs, referents, and uses whose connections and disparities meld together in the conflagration of narratives. *Mohammedkarlpolpot* inverts the power of truth discourses to generate, in fantasy and as image, that monster of the unnameable.

That being said, we still need to clarify the particularity of the antinarrative in Abdessemed’s art. In fact, the antinarrative set in motion by Abdessemed runs counter to a theoretical and artistic practice of narrative deconstruction and the



disappearance of the author that has often pervaded literature, architecture, and the visual arts in recent years.

In 1953 Roland Barthes published *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (*Degree Zero Writing*),<sup>31</sup> then, in 1968, "La mort de l'auteur" ("The Death of the Author").<sup>32</sup> These two founding texts argue that our modernity has established the myth of the Author as the creator of narrative, in which passions, feelings, and the glory of meaning manifest themselves. To counter this myth of the Author, Barthes posits that of the contemporary "scriptor," wherein the act of writing takes precedence over the narrative and over the affirmation of meaning. The text no longer resides exclusively in a narrative buoyed up by the author but rather in the act of writing, which generates an infinite number of texts. In addition, the reader participates as much as the author in the signifying unity of the text. For Barthes, acknowledging the death of the Author constitutes a revolutionary act that undermines any authoritarian and ideological claim to the status of writer or Of narrative: "Writing constantly posits meaning, but always only to evaporate it: it proceeds to a systematic exemption from meaning. By that very fact, literature (it would be better to say *writing*), in refusing to assign to the text (and to the world as text) a "secret," that is, an ultimate sense, frees up an activity that could be called countertheological, literally revolutionary, for to refuse to arrest meaning is ultimately to reject God and his hypostases, reason, science, and the law."<sup>33</sup>

Barthes's writings on the death of the author brought about a conceptual synthesis of literary and artistic practices that had already found powerful expression at the dawn of the twentieth century, with works as diverse as those of Stéphane Mallarmé, Raymond Roussel, Marcel Duchamp, James Joyce, Lewis Carroll, and Francis Picabia. But the philosopher's reflections also inaugurated new practices in

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<sup>31</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), reprinted in *Roland Barthes, oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 137–90.

<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," *Manteia*, 5, no. 4 (1968), reprinted in *Roland Barthes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 491–95.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 494.

the field of the contemporary arts, where antinarrative was no longer solely a means or act of writing but was becoming an end in itself, that is, a style, an aesthetic movement, a system of thought, and sometimes a dogma. Antinarrative then ran the risk of becoming another form of transcendental glory, that of the absolute and narcissistic signifier. Hence the multiple theories of postmodernism and the artistic practices that would find their *raison d'être* and their aesthetic legitimation in the simulacrum, the copy of a copy.

In 1970 Michel Foucault delivered his lecture “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” (“What Is an Author?”) in the United States, again taking note of the death of the author but introducing a key inquiry that turned Barthes’s observation on its head: “I wonder whether that notion, sometimes reduced to a popular usage, does not transpose the empirical characteristics of the author into a transcendental anonymity. . . . To think of writing as absence, is that not quite simply to repeat in transcendental terms the religious principle of the tradition, at once incorruptible and never fulfilled, and the aesthetic principle of the survival of the work, of its continuation beyond death, and of its enigmatic excess in relation to the author? I think, therefore, that such a use of the notion of writing runs the risk of maintaining the privileges of the author under the protection of the *a priori*: it allows the play of representations that formed a certain image of the author to subsist in the hazy light of neutralization.”<sup>34</sup> Foucault’s warning has the value of a criticism of any artistic and theoretical attempt to elevate the death of the author to its own preeminence and universality. At the very least, what is at stake is the opening of possibilities for what the philosopher calls an “author function,” lying no longer in a single personal identity as the “name of the author” or strictly in narrative fiction but in “the break that sets in place a certain group of discourses and its singular mode of being.”<sup>35</sup> That remark is fundamental: it invites us never to lose sight of the four givens related to the study of a work and an

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<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?” (1969–1970), in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 1, 1954–1969 (Paris: nrf/Gallimard, 1994), 795–96.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 798.

author. First, a text and an author participate in “the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society.”<sup>36</sup> Second, there is not one and only one author function but a necessary variability in that function over time and depending on the context. Third, the author function moves in two directions at once: on one hand it attempts, whatever one might say, to find a point of unity that overcomes the contradictions of a text or that organizes them “around a fundamental and original contradiction”;<sup>37</sup> on the other, the author function is composed of a plurality of egos. Fourth, some authors have been not merely participants in discursive systems but “founders of discursivity.” Whether in the field of philosophy, literature, or art, “they opened the space for something other than themselves, which, however, belongs to what they founded.”<sup>38</sup>

Abdessemed intervenes at the point where the author function seems to have been dropped in favor of a closed loop consisting of the loss of the author and of narrative. It is as if the artist managed to take into account the insights of a critical art of antinarrative even while placing them wholly in the service of an artistic creation where affect, meaning, and passion collide with one another and are shaken loose from a heavy and at times culpable history within an artistic (post)modernity. The profoundly subversive quality of Abdessemed’s art is thus played out in the wide gap between the loss of narrative and a critical creativity fully assumed by the author function. For Abdessemed, antinarrative is thus not a zero degree writing where the death or impersonality of the author would prevail. He makes art in order to move beyond any claim to the truth of discourses in favor of a poetics, a critical thinking, or a production of meaning that fully embraces an author function aspiring to be multiple, unpredictable, and paradoxical. For him, then, the collapse of narrative

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 802.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 805.

does not do away with the author function; on the contrary, it gives that function a new responsibility for the production of sensation, significance, and reflection.

As it turns out, the author function explored by Foucault provides for a denser and richer understanding of Abdessemed's work. Foucault's thinking, like Abdessemed's art, goes beyond the many theoretical, aesthetic, and artistic forms of dogmatism that have pervaded the atmosphere of the time in recent decades. This dogmatism continues to spur endless debates on the notion of the loss of master narratives, the exclusive reign of the signifier, and the simulacrum as the sole "refuge" of an art of neutrality, disillusionment, and disenchantment. In reaction to that artistic current, other artistic theories and practices have also flourished since the 1990s, sometimes equally doctrinaire, directed either toward an art of catastrophe and crisis—neoexpressionism in its various incarnations—or toward an art activating a network of intersubjectivities in the age of globalization, an art turned toward the production of interconnections that are somewhat artificial and forced, occasionally naïve, as if to better conceal the necessity of a critical posture.

As strange as it may seem, Foucault fully vests the author function, provided it is used to highlight the historical specificity of the utterance, the necessary contradictions of identities, and, in certain cases, the founding of new modes of thought and creation. In recent decades, a few contemporary artists have set about to deconstruct narrative and the status of the author even while preserving a real originality in the founding of discursivities. To put it differently, Robert Smithson was not only the artist of postmodernity and of the loss of the art object's originality, he was also an extreme poet who carved up the real to fabricate material, textual, visual, and semantic chaos. Robert Filiou was not simply the artist of language who abolished the boundaries between art and life, but the one who, simply by spinning the sign around, managed to produce an art of permanent creation and heuristic flux. Ana Mendieta was not solely an artist of corporeal performance, she also produced

an art of social criticism and contemporary feminism that perfectly supports her poetic quest for vital forces stemming from the history of civilizations and the cultural construction of sexuality. Tony Smith was not simply a representative of minimalist art, he was also the one through whom trauma and death have today been returned to sculpture, at the risk of minimalist neutrality.<sup>39</sup> Felix Gonzalez-Torres was not simply an artist of institutional critique, he also introduced within that institutional critique what Foucault called the “care of the self” or a revolution in the construction of the subject—hence of the author—within the potential dissemination of the work.<sup>40</sup>

In the case of Abdessemed, he has founded in a massive way an art of qualitative, expressive, and critical arrangement [*agencement*]<sup>41</sup> that we need to assess. An arrangement as Abdessemed produces it no longer corresponds definitively to a linear narrative structure or to a harmonious formal composition. Arrangement proceeds by friction, confrontation, amalgamation, and the introduction of gaps, differences, and contradictions between the expressive materials. In that sense, what is primarily at stake in arrangement is an incessant procreation of images within a particular work or with respect to the oeuvre as a whole. The swirling motion perceived by the viewer in Abdessemed’s works demonstrates the impossibility of stabilizing representation in a diegetic construct. Furthermore, the eddying motion calls forth the power of the image to become and to be transformed.

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<sup>39</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Minuit, 1999).

<sup>40</sup> See Larys Frogier, “Marcel Duchamp, Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Le sujet en regard,” in the proceedings of the colloquium *L’artiste en personne* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1998); and “Le photographique à l’épreuve de la répétition: Andy Warhol, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Cindy Sherman,” in the proceedings of the colloquium *Reproductibilité et ir-reproductibilité de l’oeuvre d’art* (Brussels: La Lettre Volée, collection “Essais,” 2001), 181–206.

<sup>41</sup> [*Agencement* is a term used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and conventionally translated as “assemblage.” That translation has been questioned by John Phillips (“*Agencement: On the Translation of Agencement by Assemblage*” <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/deleuzeandguattari.htm>), who points out that *agencement* is a “common French word with the senses of either ‘arrangement,’ ‘fitting,’ or ‘fixing’ . . . In contrast, the word *assemblage* in English means more or less the same as its actual French counterpart, *assemblage* . . . [which] has a more restrictive range of uses in English.” In the present context, “arrangement” means the physical placement of materials or objects in relation to one another.—trans.]

Abdessemed's art continually thwarts narrative in favor of a poetics favorable to change. The art critic Pier Luigi Tazzi perfectly grasped this aspect in *Mohammedkarlpolpot*: "The phrase, inasmuch as its utterance is suspended, possesses its own magical substance, if we understand by magic a close adherence to immediately contingent material conditions in view of a transformative effect that projects itself into a future that is just as immediate. It is then a question neither of a historical reflection nor of a propaganda action, positive or negative, that would announce a reversal—utopian project or active revolution—of existing conditions. The artist positions himself neither on the side of utopia nor on the front lines of revolution but on the vacant ground of change."<sup>42</sup> According to this view, Abdessemed's sculptures spin out what *Mohammedkarlpolpot* masterfully condensed: the founding power of a poetics of arrangement placed in the service of permanent indignation, transformation, and construction.

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<sup>42</sup> Pier Luigi Tazzi, "Mohammedkarlpolpot," in *Global Multitude*, exh. cat. (Luxembourg: La Rotonde 1, 2007).

## Arrangements and Sculptures

*Ocean View* (2005): five U.S. one-dollar bills are diverted from their mercantile function to be worked into origami sculptures representing two little boats, which are soberly deposited in a Plexiglas case. The case rests on a modest base composed of a stack of blue styrene sheets. The placement of the object under glass is paradoxical: the ambiguity remains as to whether it is the international monetary standard that is being preserved, or its fragile form as paper boats, or the metaphor of capitalism in the era of globalization. The blue styrene strata function as a symbol of the ocean but also as an inverted symbol because, in contact with the case and the dollar bills, the symbol of the ocean is transformed into an allegory for the starless void of a globalized contemporary world immersed in permanent commodification and senseless consumption.

*Spirit* (2005) is a full-scale replica of the NASA robot probe sent out to explore the geology of the planet Mars. But the device was exactly reproduced by ratcheting down the ultra high performance technology to a primitive raw material, clay. In the exhibition space, *Spirit* oscillates between an oversized toy for adults, a primitive form of civilization, a fossil of human intelligence, and an allegory for the vital forces springing from the ground. Above all, it is very enticing to see *Spirit* as a simple but terribly effective visual somersault: the sculpture follows the reverse path of the power of conquest mastered by science and technology by simply putting hand to clay, to soil, to the earth of the Earth, in order to turn on its head the magnificent words of Neil Armstrong: "One small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind."

*Practice Zero Tolerance* (2006): the mass of steel of a wrecked automobile is molded in clay, and that clay is fired in a kiln until it is thoroughly charred. Some will read it (too) quickly as a dramatic illustration of contemporary social events

associated with urban rioting. But *Practice Zero Tolerance* can be viewed in the first place for what the sculpture presents: the image of a car materialized as a heavy massive block of terra cotta, a deformed parallelepiped, a (non)color, a weighty form occupying space, an image of weightiness exerting gravity with and on the earth. It is on the basis of that simple exploration of earthy matter amalgamated to the visual sign of the car that multiple readings of the work then arise, in the light of contemporary social disturbances, the cultural history of the black cube, or the uses of the geometrical module in contemporary sculpture—or as a metaphor for the social body. The sculpture is also fitted out (*agencé*) with a title *en abyme*, since *Practice Zero Tolerance* is the title of the work and also that of two of Abdessemed's exhibitions mounted in 2006,<sup>43</sup> as well as a political formula adapted by Nicolas Sarkozy in France to control immigration and by Donald Rumsfeld in the United States to justify the war in Iraq. The expression “practice zero tolerance” emerged from a political theory originating in the United States in 1982, which was variously applied at a global scale and in China, the United States, and the United Kingdom to eradicate delinquency, deviance, and revolt. Concerning the image of a terra cotta automobile and its title, *Practice Zero Tolerance*, let us thus simply recall that kiln firing has the characteristic of producing a texture and a color peculiar to the sculpture. At the same time, the method of burning in an oven resonates gravely in our collective memory. In its formal, somatic, and semantic dimensions, *Practice Zero Tolerance* visualizes a burden of humanity of which we cannot rid ourselves and which deserves to be confronted without evasiveness.

*Telle mère tel fils* (2008): three heads and three tails of airplanes are attached by long natural-colored felt tubes inflated with air. The forms, hard and soft, intertwine and stretch out into space to form an enormous braid. The sculpture imposes itself in

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<sup>43</sup> *Practice Zero Tolerance*, Rennes: La Criée centre d'art contemporain, June 30–August 27, 2006; *Practice Zero Tolerance*, Paris: Le Plateau/Frac Ile-de-France, September 14–November 20, 2006.



space and yet occupies the ground with an impression of lightness and elasticity, inviting the visitor to slip along the entire length of that drawn-out embrace of felt and steel. The materiality of the sculpture plays with rich ambiguities of form and sense. The stretching and swelling of the felt mass extends through a tangle of steel with angular, protruding, and sometimes threatening forms. The airplanes have had their wings materially and symbolically severed, a castration producing a new power of movement, however, one that stems no longer from a rectilinear trajectory but from undulation and copulation. The airplanes might have symbolized male, phallic omnipotence, but their radical horizontality as well as their intertwining into a plait suggest rather a long lock of women's hair. That motif of tresses might have remained attached to the obsolete stereotype of gentle, fragile, and sensual femininity, but the steel and felt plait emphasize rather a representation of woman in which power, energy, movement, and direction predominate. Finally, the title of the work—*Telle mère tel fils* (Like mother like son)—combines all these contradictions and restores density, consistency, and complexity to the possible psychoanalytic readings of the work, especially those based on notions of the phallus and of Oedipus.

Abdessemed's sculptures are remarkable for the way they optimally materialize an art of arrangement, not as a mere plastic and stylistic procedure but as the foundation of the creative act, and as a poetics of transformation and change.

Every one of Abdessemed's works is a dazzling manifestation of matter, form, and sense. But the image en bloc, having surged forth, takes hold because the elements of the work are the object of an extremely subtle, elaborate, and stunning arrangement. I would not want to diminish the force of the act of arranging so particular to Abdessemed's works, but we do need to point out its basic characteristics.

## Arrangement Is the Power to Act

Arranging requires a power to act on the artist's part, that is, an availability, a quest, and a permanent creativity in the service of nondiscursive manifestations of thought. The power to act is at odds with any conceptualization of the object to be created and imagined. In fact, the production of form and sense in Abdessemed's works is based less on theoretical models or an analytical process than, most often, on a spark emitted when an idea happens to touch a material or vice versa. For Abdessemed, the power to act manifests itself through that constant search for a point of contact between thought and a material that will be prospected, traversed, questioned, and confronted. With *Habibi* (2004), for example, it is the energy and propulsive force of the living thing—in other words, the power to exist—that find their full effectiveness in the arrangement of a monumental skeleton and a jet propeller suspended above the ground. The skeleton is laid out on its belly in the air, a force of propulsion ahead of the propeller. In *Pressoir fais-le*, the image and impact of the Law finds full expression in the simple act of crushing a lemon with a bare foot. The omnipotence of money in the governance of a globalized world finds its absurd but effective elaboration in *Queen Mary II* (2007), a luxury ocean liner cobbled together from thousands of cut-up and reassembled tin cans. It is therefore clear that the power to act must be maximal on the artist's part so that the arrangement will be real and optimal in its choices and in the friction between and significance of the materials, gestures, affects, and percepts that create the work of art.

But at the heart of the power to act is, above all, the risk-taking that consists of acting outside proprieties, outside the law: the arrangement is an inevitable plunge into a world of gaps, breaks, instabilities, transitions. Arranging undermines the reign of truth. What is necessarily at stake for Abdessemed is a confrontation with repression, censorship, sometimes cowardice and ignominy. Creation through arrangement is the power to act because it wagers on permanent instability in order

to retain the vitality of thought, procreation, change, and development. In the end, to speak of the artist's power to act is less to celebrate the authority of the artist in person than to highlight the commitment to the labor of art. Abdessemed provides this incisive formulation: "I do not work for my person, I work for Abdessemed,"<sup>44</sup> a declaration that echoes the magnificent insight of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze on the power to act held by the creator of art: "The artist . . . goes beyond the perceptual states and affective transitions of the lived. The artist is a seer, a becomer. How would he recount what happened to him, or what he imagines, since he is a shadow? He has seen something in life that is too great, too unbearable also, and the mutual embrace of life with what threatens it, so that the corner of nature or districts of the town that he sees, along with their characters, accede to a vision that, through them, composes the percepts of that life, of that moment, shattering lived perceptions into a sort of cubism, a sort of simultaneism, of harsh or crepuscular light, of purple or blue, which have no other object or subject than themselves. . . . It is always a question of freeing life wherever it is imprisoned, or of tempting it into an uncertain combat."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Interview by the author with Adel Abdessemed.

<sup>45</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 171.

## Arrangement Defers ad Infinitum

To arrange is to engage with the unstable impact of sensation, where the qualities of various materials and signs may be significantly different, even paradoxical, so that the power relation, or simply the friction between them, forms a block of percepts and affects grounded in heterogeneous mediations. Arranging, therefore, cannot be reduced to the act of juxtaposing or combining materials and signs, of forcing them to coexist, in order to compose a stable and coherent whole. To arrange is to attempt to make a form hold together and produce meaning through tension, friction, distance, rift, reversal, displacement, traversal, breach, alteration, transition.

Abdessemed seizes on, moves through, appropriates, or conceives of a material and a sign in order to then short-circuit their primary functions and meanings. This material and this sign are made to collide with the paradoxical, sometimes contradictory materiality of the original material. Hence, the steel of the explorer robot *Spirit* is obliterated in favor of clay; the felt tubes in *Telle mère tel fils* replace the metal cabins of airplanes in order to optimally materialize force, extension, eros. For Abdessemed, arrangement proceeds by perilous leaps to different substances and materials that turn the image and the meaning against themselves or open them up to unsuspected potentialities. For him, arrangement very often comes about through withdrawal, spacing, transgression. It is therefore no longer a matter of producing a logical chain of elements in succession to achieve a coherent or significant unity but rather of holding together a paradoxical block of materials, affects, and percepts that undo the chain of signifiers, in order to make the work and its vision attain different modalities of thought and vision.

In addition, arranging becomes possible only on the following condition: the raw material must be sufficiently expressive in itself. It will become more so through its promiscuity, its amalgamation with or break from the other material. A material

possesses an expressive power when it allows sensation to enter it, and when it allows itself to rise to the level of sensation. Hence steel possesses a quality of hardness and coldness that one feels on looking at an airplane, but it is altogether possible to contradict that sensation and to make the airplane malleable, by folding it over on itself like pastry dough (*Bourek*) or by elongating it into a felt braid (*Telle mère tel fils*). As Deleuze writes: "Sensation is not realized in the material without the material passing completely into the sensation, into the percept or affect. All the material becomes expressive."<sup>46</sup> Because Abdessemed arranges by diffraction, qualitative leaps, breaches, and collisions, his works undermine the notions of resemblance and imitation to which the discourses on art have accustomed us. The artist frees his works from the obsession with reading grids that plot historicist genealogies, linguistic references, and semiological signifiers. Abdessemed's art is a radical labor of differences and of generative and transformative chaos. It is therefore absurd to wish at all cost to make the work correspond to a representation of reality, a lived experience of the artist, a historical reference to art, or even a fantasy. That radical labor of differences is somewhat reminiscent of Édouard Glissant's poetics, that is, the poetics of a Whole-World [*Tout-Monde*], where "the harmony of similarities is neutral and infertile but the encounter of differences, which is not the harmony of contraries, is carried out with and through each side surpassing the other, an act that lies at the foundation of the unpredictability of the Whole-World. That hard labor of differences is neither harmonious nor reasonable. The accumulated varieties, whose diversity is shaped by the whole, entail diversions that change their nature, as well as proliferations that bring them closer together even while placing them in opposition, unpredictable operations."<sup>47</sup>

*Pluie noire* (2006) is certainly one of the sculptures by Abdessemed that most aptly manifests that production of differences: fifty-one huge steel drills, sized to correspond to different stages in the growth of the human body, are sculpted in black

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 166–67.

<sup>47</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Une nouvelle région du monde* (Paris: nrf/Gallimard, 2006), 63.

marble. The marble, perfectly machine-tooled, causes the shafts of the drills to oscillate between an extreme delicacy and a pronounced density and thickness. Erected in the exhibition space, they are organized into a large square of paradoxical units, both compact and dispersed, fragile and solid, heterogeneous and unified. The black marble, smooth and matte, confers contradictory qualities on the work, that of a tactile sensuality and that of a threatening coldness, as if an erotic form were evolving into a martial form. *Pluie noire* visualizes issues related to the construction of the subject: the autonomy of the individual and the unavoidable openness to the other, participation of the individual in the collectivity, absorption of the individual and of the collectivity into the massification characteristic of a concentration camp. *Pluie noire* also allows for unusual qualitative leaps into art history: from the incarnations of drapery in Bernini's sculptures to the minimalist geometrical modules of the 1960s, from antique columns to the Muslim Kaaba, from Tony Smith's black cube to Giacometti's unpleasant objects.

## Arrangement Manufactures Thought and Vice Versa

The expressive quality of the matter and the friction between materials absolutely do not signify the relinquishment of thought. What is at issue in arrangement as Abdessemed practices it is to take thought beyond a logico-deductive discursivity. In other words, thought must not be confused with discourse or completely reduced to the concept. Thought also comes about with and in matter. One of the representative works entailing thought impacted by matter and sensation is the sculpture *Oui* (2000), a twenty-seven centimeter cannabis star that can be smelled through a honeycombed glass plate. The cannabis pulp was amalgamated in sufficient quantity for a star to be modeled. *Oui* constitutes, in the first place, an elementary act of modeling matter in order to explore, in an innovative way, the power of cannabis to affect the brain and sensation. On display, the material in *Oui* is offered to sight and smell, thus proposing a form of sensorial experience different from that of inhaling the smoke and letting the cannabis penetrate one's brain. The work plays, of course, on the ambiguity between pleasure and frustration, but above all it visualizes an act of sight and thought that breaks away from a conceptual and retinal logic. The star shape of *Oui* is multifaceted: endlessly exploited in our global cultural history, that shape contains within it the power of human thought to generate paradoxical forms of dream, power, stigmatization, repression, or revolt. Entitled *Oui* (Yes), the star-shaped material propels the image into word, a word that indicates a form of power to exist and to act.

The cannabis star recurs in 2008 under the title *Elle est cela* (She is that), created not by modeling but by piling up slices of cannabis arranged to form a star-shaped block approximately one meter across.

## Arrangement Allows One to Become

A sculpture by Abdessemed may contain a crude alloy of materials, usually standing in opposition to one another, and it is precisely that alloy of contrasts that will bear within it fundamentally multiple and indeed infinite images. Therein lies the force of Abdessemed's creativity: his sculptures, very simple in their presentation, convey an extremely dense semantics, both material and formal. The arrangement of a work thus allows for the procreation and perpetual transformation of the image.

But let us also recall that many of Abdessemed's works are arranged in relation to one another, setting off an incessant activity of thought, permanently shifting sensations, and an uninterrupted flow of images associated through a connection or a rupture. With respect to the cannabis star *Oui*, for example, it is interesting to note that the importance granted to the impact of sensation and thought through the penetration into matter is found again in a black chalk drawing on paper done in 2006 and titled *Amygdale fornix du cerveau*. This drawing is composed of a structure of lines dashed off on the paper to form a grid pattern. That grid is itself traversed by other, spiraling lines that seem to initiate the material concretion of a formless mass comparable to a piece of the human body or a flying machine. The title of the work, "Amygdala Fornix of the Brain," designates neurons and a commissure of the brain usually analyzed in the neurosciences for their function in emotional memory, particularly the role they play in triggering fear and aggression. That title does not so much illustrate the drawing of the amygdala figure as demolish the pretensions of modern *disegno*, whereby drawing is considered a form of intelligibility: *disegno* is what the mind conceives of the world a priori, in order to then make by human hands a perfected and idealized representation of it. *Amygdale fornix du cerveau*, by contrast, pulls drawing toward the material, sensorial, and unpredictable experience of drawing. Abdessemed produced *Amygdale fornix du cerveau* as matter in the process of becoming, both in the collusion between black chalk, paper, and formless



figure and in what the surging forth of that formless mass allows us to glimpse as a potentiality of power.

The inversion of modern *disegno* is radically pursued in a 2008 work, *Helikoptère*, composed of ten wide wooden planks assembled to receive black lines forming chaotic curves, twists, and spirals. A video informs us that the drawing was done with the artist's body upside down, suspended by the feet from a helicopter in operation, his head skimming the planks of wood on the ground. Responding to the vibrations from the helicopter, the effects of the wind, and the artist's instinctive reactions, the lines made on the planks display percepts and affects in the process of becoming. We are definitively no longer in the presence of a controlled and ideal representation of the world; an entire world seizes the body and the practice of drawing through these spirals of excess and transformation.

Drawing may itself be transformed into writing to materialize a thought as act: *Also Sprach Allah* (Thus spake Allah) is a work composed of a cloth on which the title sentence is inscribed and of a video showing Abdessemed's body being projected into the air to carry out that act of writing. Where *Helikoptère* turned the body upside down to draw, *Also Sprach Allah* projects the body upward to write, as if one had to attempt to take literally, but also against the grain, the vertical and ascending motion of body toward spirit. But obviously, that verticality and that hierarchization of body and spirit are undermined by the resulting work. As a matter of fact, the act of writing comes about through the body of the artist, acting between two cloths: one cloth is held by a group of people, who bear the artist and throw him into the air several times; then he attempts to touch, with his hand and the black chalk, another cloth attached to the ceiling. The body is thrown repeatedly, until the entire sentence *Also Sprach Allah* marks the cloth. The repetitive physical efforts of the collectivity and of the artist, the spatial distance between the two supports (the cloths), the reactions of the individual body and of the collective bodies, the accuracy or inaccuracy of the height to which the body is projected, the irregular contact of the

chalk with the cloth, and the shared cries to produce an act and a work of art are all elements that participate in a physical writing that manifests itself line by line, hatch mark by hatch mark, jolt by jolt. But ultimately, everything holds together in that energetic and constructive instability. Writing no longer adheres to the linear development of a thought; rather, it translates a thought-producing force that proceeds by momentum, contradiction, and the conjunction of heterogeneous elements.

*Also Sprach Allah* is an infinite elaboration of drawing into writing, of writing into painting-sculpture, of sculpture into video, constituting a vertiginous spiral of image production that is itself placed *en abyme* by the sentence itself. The hybrid utterance “Also sprach Allah” is a jarring marriage of the German language to the Arabic, a blunt telescoping of the atheistic philosophy of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche with Islamic religious thought. *Also Sprach Allah* sets in motion the concept of “the will to power” dear to Nietzsche: the being is not an abstraction of the body reaching toward a conceptualization of the world; it is first and foremost a body in its lived experience, a flow of active energies, a creative faculty, a sense- and value-producing force. The will to power is thus the opposite of a system of thought: it is a practice of interpretation and a dynamic of the forces of a living being.

Finally, it is not incidental to note that the artist Abdessemed always signs his declarations “Ainsi parla Abdessemed” (Thus spake Abdessemed), a formula also written out in German or English. It goes without saying that that signature-manifesto embraces the power to act that I evoked at the beginning of the section on arrangement. The formula “Thus spake Abdessemed” is an affirmation of the author function, not so much in the sacralized celebration of the name of the author but in its Nietzschean power to act, that is, in the risking of energy and creativity, which is obviously of concern to anyone who really wants to become with the work: “In relation to the percepts or visions they give us, artists are presenters of affects, the

inventors and creators of affects. They not only create them in their work, they give them to us and make us become with them, they draw us into the compound.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 175.

**Chapter 3**  
**Affecting Power**

## ***Possest-image***

Abdessemed focuses on the maximal range an image can have. The artist is concerned not with formalizing an idea as image or with defining or questioning some status of the image, but with fabricating the image as a power to act. Abdessemed creates to make use of the image's capacity for producing an infinite variety of affects; he works on the power of these affects to generate transformation and thought. Deleuze, analyzing the works of Spinoza and Nietzsche, uses the Latin term *possest*—an amalgam of the verb “can” and the present indicative “it is”—to designate the power or potentiality in every thing: “The *possest* is precisely the identity between the potentiality and the act by which I define something. Hence I would not define something in terms of its essence, what it is, I would define it by this barbaric definition, its *possest*: what it can do. Literally: what it can do as act. . . . This means that things are potentialities. It is not only that they have potential but that they amount to the potential they have as both action and passion.”<sup>49</sup> In the two previous chapters, we examined the visual procedures for creating a *possest-image*, in particular, the way that Abdessemed intervenes in the real and produces an image-act, both by abandoning narrative in favor of permanent movement and by practicing an infinite art of arrangement.

It remains to be seen, however, how that power to act inherent in the image also entails a power of critique in relation to the order of discourse, the administration of institutions, and the control of bodies. We shall consider how Abdessemed's *possest-art* questions authority. In other words: What distinguishes the power to act from the possession of authority? It is one thing to dominate by exercising authority, quite another to enact the power of life and creativity.

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<sup>49</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Cours Vincennes, 1978–1981: Spinoza,” retranscribed and edited by Richard Pinhas at [www.webdeleuze.com](http://www.webdeleuze.com), unpaginated.

For Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze, the exercise of authority cannot be confused with the power to act, the *possest*. In fact, the two are exact opposites. Domination by means of authority is the most flagrant manifestation of powerlessness. That exercise of authority generates neither permanent creativity nor the living being nor transformation. It is a power that, in order to exist, has an absolute need for sadness:

Tyrants, priests, and slaves need to establish the rule of sadness because the authority they have cannot be founded on anything but sadness. And Spinoza draws a very strange portrait of the tyrant, explaining that the tyrant is someone who needs, above all else, the sadness of his subjects, because there is no terror that does not have a kind of collective sadness at its base. The priest, perhaps for entirely different reasons, needs man's sadness about his own condition. And when he laughs, it is no more reassuring. The tyrant can laugh, as can the favorites; the tyrant's advisers can laugh as well. It's bad laughter. And why is it bad laughter? Not because of its quality, Spinoza would not say that, it's laughter whose object, precisely, is only sadness and the communication of sadness.<sup>50</sup>

There is darkness and pain in the images Abdessemed produces. Let us clarify, however, that the affect of pain has nothing to do with sadness. Pain is an affect coming in response to the powerlessness of tyrants, leading the artist to face the abjection, cowardice, injustice, and abomination of which the possessors of authority are capable. Pain lies at the foundation of Abdessemed's work, but the artist manages to transform that affect into a power to act and create. In that sense, Abdessemed's artistic act confirms the brilliant declaration of the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk: "We must be torn asunder by something beyond us in order to think."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, "Il faut être déchiré par quelque chose qui nous dépasse pour penser," interview in *Philosophie Magazine* 6 (December 2006).

The formulation is categorical: far removed from the religious connotations of sacrifice and stigmatization, the pain evoked by Sloterdijk, the experience of being torn asunder, places the subject before a radical aberration of authority, which generates the human capacity to tell, to suffer, to act, to exclude, to administer, to discourse, to build, to oppose, to overcome, to become. No one knows of what man is capable.

In the same way, Abdessemed's art summons forth a pain diametrically opposed to pathos and the finer feelings. The artist is impacted by pain, even in its capacity to create and to bring forth the living being. The power to act thereby becomes possible, turning the anomalies of authority against authority itself.

The power to act is the aim of Abdessemed's art, and his creations are *possest*-images: their involvement in the power structure, their engagement with and against authority, always produces an increase in the power of the affect, of the act, and of thought. It is an unstable posture, but it has the merit of forever refusing to yield, choosing instead movement and critical rigor. Then there is the artist's laugh, a resounding laugh that manages to silence the mocking, cynical, and sad laughter of the tyrant.

## Against Authority: The Cry of Irrationality

Abdessemed's art critically embraces power and at the same time sets it ablaze: it sets in motion both the Nietzschean "will to power" as power of creation and the Foucauldian "will to knowledge," which extends the analysis to truth discourses. Such a posture stems from a "creative dissidence"; it tolerates neither compromise nor neutrality nor submission. Abdessemed's "creative dissidence" is a critique of authority that stands at a remove from objective analysis and at the same time avoids being confined by theorems or prejudices. His art will never be "images about authority" or "images of authority": the artist produces works deeply embedded in power issues, affecting them as a whole even while moving beyond them to make visible the effects of oppression and to generate on that basis a much greater creative power. Hence Abdessemed declares: "I do not create illusions. I left ideologies behind and will never return to them. As an artist, all I can do is change things little by little. I dabble. I love that word, 'dabble': one dabbles."<sup>52</sup>

That ambiguous claim has given rise to a number of polemics regarding the artist's work: some interpret the comment as confessing a subjectivity too passionate to be able to study authority, while others reduce the "dabbling artist" to a mere copier of key works from the history of art, both ancient and more recent.

It is clear that, for Abdessemed, "being an artist who dabbles" is in the first place an engagement with the large-scale effects of power, namely, oppression and abomination. In addition, the expression "being an artist who dabbles" indicates a form of autonomy and irascible independence that consists of engaging with power issues and never allowing oneself to be confined by them. That is also the reason why Abdessemed's art will never be political and why it elicits so much controversy: his works cannot be co-opted from any side.

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<sup>52</sup> Interview of the artist by Élisabeth Lebovici in *Adel Abdessemed, à l'attaque* (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2007), 110.



At issue in Abdessemed's art is a confrontation with the intolerable, beyond any possibility of evasion. To grapple with the effects of power and to produce an image of it is in some sense to make a work of art that is a cry, a cry-work. The close involvement with the power structure may seem excessive, but it is not an easy posture at a time of intentional disillusionment and indifference. To affect power is to recognize the power of the irrational cry. Deleuze declares that there are also philosophical cries of irrationality, philosophers who not only analyze the power in thought but push philosophy to the limits of thought, enacting an irrationality in the face of authority.

To affect power is to infiltrate it in order to better turn it on its head. It is also to ingest it and expel it. It is to move beyond power in order to generate a power much higher than that of man's domination over man. Abdessemed's art produces a fissure in the surface of the image, opening the chasm of the unrepresentable.

*Un cri court* (A short-running cry, 1998), one of the first of Abdessemed's video works, is already an extremely incisive and clinical piece. The filmed action shows a man dressed in blue jeans and a long white T-shirt who keeps running in place. Isolated in a dark room illuminated by a single spotlight from above, the man cries out and keeps crying out, at the same rhythm as his steps but with a slight time lag. He cries out from deep within him until he reaches the point of exhaustion. The man runs after the cry to be expelled. He does not need to cover a distance or to delimit a geographical territory. He is a cry. Running in place allows for the repetitive act of the cry, and repetition generates differences in the sensation and in the action. To the very end. There is a moment when, among all the other cries, one cry emerges, the one that opens and liberates. Then the man keeps crying out. No one can identify the force that has overwhelmed or imprisoned him. He seems to inhabit a mental prison or to be obsessed by a prayer ritual; or he may be trying to outrun a thought.

With *Un cri court*, the cry is an act, an increase in power. There is nothing pathetic in the cry. At most, it is a cry of irritation. Nothing more. Just a cry. The cry is stifled and released, taking hold of the man, compromising his power of freedom as if he were in the grip of a greater power that enveloped and confined him.

In 1864 Fyodor Dostoyevsky published *Notes from Underground*, a haunting cry-monologue in which the narrator vents his spleen about his own spitefulness and the world's abominations. Dostoyevsky's book rejects rational logic and excavates words so as to face the monstrosity of humanity in the figure of man himself: "Anything can be said of world history, anything conceivable even by the most disordered imagination. There is only one thing that you can't say—that it had anything to do with reason."<sup>53</sup> A power similar to the irrational cry can also be found in Abdessemed's *Trust Me* (2008), a fifty-six-second video showing a man who is no longer truly a man but rather a vampire, emitting the sounds of a singer who is no longer truly a singer but rather a swallower of sounds and words. The camera frames in close-up the vampire-vocalist standing before a devastated urban landscape, between ruin and reconstruction. That urban chaos reverberates with the sounds, cries, and words expelled from the vampire's mouth. The shot is stationary, but the madman is constantly in motion, his nerves frayed, busy belching sounds and words while simultaneously gulping them down, producing a quasi-intelligible cacophony or sentence fragments such as "God save the . . ." "Allons enfants . . ." Similarly, musical tones begin to take shape but are immediately overpowered by others, which are themselves engulfed by those that follow, generating a range of sounds that are simultaneously absurd, senseless, frightening, and comical. There is an extreme tension in his body and voice, as if the vampire could not contain anything more monstrous than his own insanity. The vampire struggles with sounds and words, attempts to get away from them, but the more he tries to expel them, the

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<sup>53</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Jessie Coulson (New York: Penguin, 1972), 37.

more he merely swallows them, becoming overwhelmed by an all-encompassing sound— cacophony and general disorder.

Abdessemed chose to have David Moss, one of the greatest contemporary vocalists and performers, carry out the action, which consists of interpreting the first lines of seven national anthems. In other words, the vampire does not suck human blood but does something far worse: he swallows anthems, the foundation of human beings' nationalities. These swallowed-up national identities constitute a global monstrosity: not the face of the vampire but the monstrous sound that the vampire himself cannot contain. A sort of absurd, totally absurd human insanity, like a cannibal feast of human words and sounds.

*Trust Me* shouts itself hoarse singing national anthems in a single breath, that is, making them into a huge block, unveiling the hegemony of any oppressive authority. The individual is, therefore, a being literally agitating to get out of his physical body and out of the body of the controlling authority.

The video *Trust Me* is an extension of another of Abdessemed's works, the *Green Book*, an art book incorporating the anthems of nations of the world, handwritten on pieces of paper by different individuals. But whereas the writers and readers of the *Green Book* express themselves distinctly, as autonomous entities within the book as a whole, in *Trust Me* the vocalist and the viewer are swept away in a totalization of sounds, words, and national anthems.

To find a similar breach in representation in response to the power of human horror, we must turn to unusual and powerful works such as Francisco Goya's series of *pinturas negras*, especially his notorious *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1922) or *The Dog*, a spare but breathtaking painting depicting the head of a wild-eyed dog, with the rest of his body submerged in a mass of sand/pigment.

Abdessemed and Goya pierce the world of linguistic conventions and push the image to the breaking point of figurability, that is, to absolute absurdity. The artist is

no longer concerned with representing the world. Rather, he brings to the surface of the word, the sound, and the image a material that is the senselessness of representation, what lies beyond it.

In our time, media images of violence exploit the cry in keeping with a dual strategy on the part of the power structure. On one hand, the cry is rendered as image in order to symbolize the alien, the other (savage, impulsive, depraved) or to designate an inferior nation. It is especially striking to observe how the cry is repeatedly visualized in televised reports on gatherings of fanatical Muslims or in documentations of protests by European workers. There is seemingly a desire to designate, through the image of the cry, a lack of culture, a lack of civilization, a lack of sociability. The cry gathers up an uncontrollable mob or the irrational masses. Analyzing the representations of Arabs that the West has constructed, Edward Said observes, "In newsreels or newsphotos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the images represent mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric) gestures."<sup>54</sup>

On the other hand, among the educated and the powerful, the image of the cry is stifled, concealed, as if to convince us that there never was any violence and that a great nation is incapable of perpetrating atrocities. Think of the sanitized images of the so-called surgical strikes on Afghanistan, Serbia, and Iraq: there are very few cries, mishaps, or messes on the screen. The tidiness of the images conceals a less honorable reality, where errors, accidents, and slaughter are patent. The absence of images of the cry serves to absolve the so-called civilized democratic countries of barbarism, annihilation, and mass slaughter.

Abdessemed's works give flesh and materiality to the cry; they confront the face of horror, however inaccessible or monstrous it might be. Abdessemed adopts the

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<sup>54</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 287.

declaration made by Marlon Brando's character in Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now* (1979): "Horror has a face . . . And you must make a friend of horror." Of course, Abdessemed's works do not illustrate the figure of the cry in order to humanize the violence or to turn it into a media event. They function rather to make the effects of power perceptible—power's capacity to confine, oppress, massify. Hence, Abdessemed maintains the extreme tension underlying the paradox of figuring the unrepresentable. In *Un cri court* and *Trust Me*, it is aberrant cries that disrupt a hegemony over the human field of action and the field of representation. The cry constitutes another kind of language in Abdessemed's works, the language of pain, the power to show the unspeakable and the unfigurable. In her essay on the images of violence after the attacks of September 11, the theorist Judith Butler asks the fundamental question: "One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake. But what media will let us know and feel that frailty, know and feel at the limits of representation as it is currently cultivated and maintained? . . . We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), 151.

## **Distancing Authority: The Artifice of the Word**

Other works by Abdessemed affect power in opposite ways from the cry. These are, notably, text installations, especially those that employ the gaseous medium of neon. Unlike many uses of neon in contemporary art, which verge on the decorative illumination of space, Abdessemed's neon word installations are very simple: a word sculpture without elaborate typography marks the space in the same way that the artist might have dashed off these words on a piece of paper. Abdessemed exploits the cold and dry quality of neon. In other words, neon is a material that crystallizes the affect, placing it at a remove to better accentuate the artifice of the word and to skewer the authority of language and thought.

Hence *EXIL* (EXILE, 1996) is a neon sculpture whose dimensions (11 x 26 cm, or 4 3/8 x 10 1/4 in.), written format, and placement in space assimilate it to the sort of luminous sign that delimits space and indicates an emergency exit in public buildings.

The word play consists of a change in a single letter, which casts the language of identity and the marking of territory into the bottomless pit of the displaced being. The work is as startling as an electric arc: *EXIL* entails a rejection of a policy of oppression, assimilation, and alienation. But at the same time, the coldness of neon, its artificial quality, makes *EXIL* a forcefully discreet work, like an unimpeachable harangue about an imperceptible process of change that begins at openings. In that sense, exile would be not only flight and renunciation but the voluntary construction of a permanent act of becoming.

*EXIL* certainly constitutes a brilliant response to Morris's *I-Box* and to the conceptual works of the 1960s and 1970s. In earlier decades, it was still possible to deal playfully with linguistics and to draw a self-portrait of the artist as narcissistic shifter. By contrast, Abdessemed's *EXIL* minimizes the artist's linguistic I-play,

opening the word to an infinite power of disorientation, displacement, and delocalization.

We have at present a few strong works produced by artists who are in some sense new Ulysses of contemporary odysseys. Felix Gonzalez-Torres initiated the contemporary artistic gesture that consists of turning away from an extremely harsh, exclusive, and discriminatory geopolitical reality in favor of a poetics of displacement, passage, and wandering. One of his most beautiful creations is *Untitled (Passport)*, in which stacks of identity documents are replaced by photographs of the sky and of birds in flight.

It is indisputable that Gonzalez-Torres's and Abdessemed's art points toward profound fractures in the two men's personal and artistic lives. In the case of Gonzalez-Torres, we need only mention the very ambiguous relationship that America maintains with the Cuban diaspora to which he belonged, or to governmental and cultural inaction in the face of the AIDS crisis, which prompted him to become involved in activist collectives. As for Abdessemed, we may simply recall his departure from Algeria at the cruelest moment of inaction by the Algerian government and of the bloody terrorist attacks, his leave-taking from France during certain episodes when his art was being poorly received, his many changes of location, from Berlin to New York to Paris. All these events generated works enriched by dispersal and by encounters with the most violent paradoxes of the power structure.

All the same, the works of Gonzalez-Torres and Abdessemed do not merely illustrate their individual life histories. The creative force of the two artists lies in the particular aesthetics they propose, wherein the process of subjectivation is very different from the production of images of identity. This process is closer to what Foucault calls "a form of power that transforms individuals into subjects": "No doubt the principal objective today is not to discover but to reject what we are. We must imagine and construct what we could be in order to rid ourselves of a political

'double bind' of sorts, the simultaneous individualization and totalization of the structures of modern power."<sup>56</sup> Once these power stakes have been made clear, however, it is obvious that Abdessemed's and Gonzalez-Torres's works differ radically from each other. Hence, unlike Gonzalez-Torres's *Untitled (Passport)*, Abdessemed's *EXIL* is not hampered by an aesthetics of disappearance. Although discreet, it forcefully asserts itself. It is as chilling as an ice floe, as arid as a stone in the desert. The art critic Teresa Macri writes aptly of Abdessemed's work: "*EXIL* is not the silence imposed by unsuitability; on the contrary, it is a cry resonating with lawfulness, an affirmation of existence, an agent of legitimacy. And it is no accident that Adel Abdessemed chooses the artifice of neon to represent the artificiality of his status, chooses the minimalism of the sign to underscore the reductive identity forced upon him."<sup>57</sup> The silent cry of *EXIL* does not manifest itself as a cathartic expression of confinement and expulsion. It is simply incorporated into a performative utterance that rejects alienation and welcomes an elsewhere. Within the context of the 2007 Venice Biennial, Abdessemed chose to disperse eleven *EXIL* signs in different spots around the exhibition, between the Arsenal and the Giardini, in doorways or near exits. Incidentally, the work introduced confusion into the exhibition space, since visitors mistook them for directional indications. But at a deeper level, the force of *EXIL* lies quite simply in its marking of an imminent departure. It challenges the visitor through the act of marking space; but paradoxically, that delimitation points to its exact opposite, namely, openness, distancing, expatriation. Abdessemed's *EXIL* thus echoes the sublime words of the poet Tahar Djaout:

There is always in the group in motion (in flight?) a young man with a pernicious spirit who bears, in addition to the weight of the sky pressing down on the desert, an

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<sup>56</sup> Michel Foucault, "Le sujet et le pouvoir," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4, 1980–1988 (Paris: nrf/Gallimard, 1994), 227, 232.

<sup>57</sup> Teresa Macri, "Adel Abdessemed: *EXIL*," unpublished article, unpaginated.



additional burden—in the passageways inside his head thousands of beating wings, boundless grazing lands, girls with fruity lips. He already knows the sea, the vastness of the dancing water and the span between the banks. A solitude envelops him, weaves an aura of strangeness around him, excludes him from the caravan. Yet it is up to him to find the water, the word that reinvigorates, up to him to uncover the territory—to invent it if need be. It is up to him to tell of the wanderings, to trip the snares of aphasia, to lend an ear to the whisperings, to name the lands passed through.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Tahar Djaout, *L'invention du désert* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 122.

## Localizing Power: Enacting Resignation

In the process of making art, there is another particular form of exile: resignation. In 2001 Abdessemed completed a work entitled *Adel a démissionné* (Adel has resigned) consisting of the title declaration handwritten on a piece of paper, enlarged into a silk-screen and plastered onto a wooden billboard in various places, in a field or at the entrance to an art exhibition: for example, *La force de l'art* (The force of art), a major event held at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2006. The notice is also accompanied by a video diffused on an ordinary monitor, which shows Abdessemed's wife repeating ad infinitum: "Adel has resigned."

Abdessemed seems, therefore, to have decided to take his leave. But from what precisely?

The abeyance in the work would consist of an absence enacted as art, that is, the introduction of empty space where there is already an overplentitude of images, the insinuation of doubt where truth imposes itself as authority, the production of confusion where clarity causes harm, the imposition of silence where logorrhea sometimes covers over works of art. The performative act of Adel's artistic resignation is clearly expressed from a place deeply engaged with the power stakes of contemporary art. It goes without saying that, at a number of contemporary arts events, thoughtful works have taken a back seat to spectacularization, ornamentation, pseudo-poetic seduction, and the redundancy of rhetoric, which ultimately prevent one from looking at the art. Hence Adel's resignation is enacted in response to the risk of art's renunciation of aesthetic and critical issues. It is a declaration of his intention to position himself along the fault lines of artistic discursivity and practice. Far from being an act of neutrality and neutralization, the performative utterance localizes the political in artistic practices that signify,

establish, and regulate identities, aesthetics, and consensus in order to “reflect on” and “show” art.

*Adel a démissionné* is no dupe. The work visualizes with great acuity the Foucauldian approach to power, which breaks away from the usual dichotomies between oppressor and oppressed, king and people, governor and governed, master and slave. Power is above all a set of relations—whether of connection, friction, resistance, or force—between two elements. Power manifests itself in that necessary and inevitable tension. No one can claim to position himself outside power; everyone participates in her own way. To be silent or to say that one is stepping away from power is also an act of power. *Adel a démissionné* does not claim to exempt itself from these relations. The utterance is always performed and exhibited where the power stakes are being played out, but the power in question takes intentionally imprecise, latent, and sometimes underhanded forms. The work thus acts to reveal the forces of power within the art institution.

In addition, *Adel a démissionné* indicates a retreat from the place that the art institution would aspire to assign the artist. Resignation is thus to be understood as a continual movement of evading categorization. Astute and mischievous, *Adel a démissionné* perfectly grasps how authority is exercised in different forms of discourse, forms that are often shifting and not always identifiable at first glance. Power is not a fixed and unique entity. It is exercised within the order of discourses that determine and orient individual and collective behaviors. Power is also administered via the institutions responsible for overseeing, showing, or diffusing discourses, objects, and persons. It is not so much a matter of identifying who has the power or what power is but of grasping how power is exercised, its degree of visibility, of variability, its potential for increasing or diminishing.

Finally, though there are power relations at issue in any human relationship, *Adel a démissionné* also pursues what Foucault calls the “care of the self.” The self,

caught up in relations of power, is no longer enclosed within a proper name, an identity, an essence, or a substance; on the contrary, the construction of self comes about through relations of transformation, differentiation, change, permanent creation. *Adel a démissionné* thus entails incessant construction. Moreover, it indicates how the process of making art as Abdessemed conceives it extends beyond the mere name of the artist. To declare that “Adel has resigned” is also to say that the artist does not work for himself but for something beyond him, the only thing that counts.

## Power and Utopia: Humanism in Question

Foucault's thinking profoundly disrupts any approach to power founded on ontology and the moral ideology accompanying it, namely, humanism. Consonant with or opposed to religions, sciences, or political regimes, humanism at its core considers man an animal endowed with intelligence and language. The organization of the individual, the collectivity, the city, and the world has become centralized on the basis of that superiority of the human intellect. For centuries, humanism has constructed a utopian ideal of man's power to generate goodness and harmony around him. Everyone is now perfectly aware how relative that utopian ideal is. Humanism has taken very far both the most benevolent forms of power and the worst oppression:

What we call humanism, the Marxists, the liberals, the Nazis, and the Catholics all put to use. That does not mean that we must reject what we call "human rights" and "freedom," but it entails the impossibility of saying that freedom or human rights ought to be circumscribed within certain boundaries. For example, if you had asked eighty years ago if feminine virtue was part of universal humanism, everyone would have answered yes.

What frightens me about humanism is that it presents a certain form of our ethical system as a universal model valid for any kind of freedom. I think our future encompasses more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions than humanism lets us imagine.<sup>59</sup>

*Drawing for Human Park* is the title Abdessemed chose for his 2008 exhibition at the Magasin in Grenoble. The title, like the works produced for the exhibition, sets in motion the sort of dizzying visual and semantic spiral for which the artist is famous.

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<sup>59</sup> Michel Foucault, "Vérité, pouvoir et soi," in *Dits et écrits* 4:782.

*Drawing for Human Park* is a nod to Peter Sloterdijk's *Regeln für den Menschenpark* (Rules for the human park),<sup>60</sup> in which the thinker undertakes to revisit humanism. That book is itself a response to Martin Heidegger's notorious "Letter on Humanism," composed in autumn 1946.<sup>61</sup> Sloterdijk argues that one of the extensions of humanism currently being set in place is the utopian ideal of liberal democracy in a time of globalization. In that so-called utopia of liberal democratic capitalism, power proceeds by manipulating consciousness with communicational strategies, producing propaganda that commodifies objects, bodies, and thought. Wearing down consciousness, ruling out choice, eliminating alternative information, indoctrinating through discourse, and preventing access to culture are a few of the current tactics of authority. The philosopher proposes to revisit the warnings of Nietzsche's Zarathustra regarding the domestication of man by man. He also reconsiders Plato's *Politics*, which attempts to establish the rational and idealistic rules for a zoopolitics: "Plato's intuition, dangerous for dangerous subjects, runs up against the blind spot of all civilized political and pedagogical systems: the inequality of men with respect to the knowledge that bestows power. Taking the form of a logical exercise in grotesque definitions, the statesman's dialogue develops the preliminaries for a political anthropotechnology. It is no longer merely a question of leading by taming already docile herds but of systematically raising human specimens that are closer to their ideal state."<sup>62</sup> The exhibition *Drawing for Human Park* constitutes an arrangement of works that are unusually forceful in that they tackle questions of power using figures placed at the confluence of humanity, animality, machinery, and monstrosity. But be careful: in the exhibition, these figures are in no way fixed or distinct from one another, and they do not unite to form a

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark: Antwortschreiben zur Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), translated into French as *Règles pour le parc humain, Réponse à la lettre sur l'humanisme* (Paris: Mille et Une nuits, 2000), 64p. [my translation from the French edition—trans.].

<sup>61</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings from Being and Time to The Task of Thinking*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

<sup>62</sup> Sloterdijk, *Règles pour le parc humain*.

thematic narrative. On the contrary, they are always entangled with one another or face off in contradictory power relations: the three airplane bodies of *Telle mère tel fils* are interlaced like an enormous serpent; the vampire in *Trust Me* becomes monstrous by emitting the sounds and anthems of humanity; Nietzsche's Zarathustra and the figure of Allah are united in letters forming an image on cloth in *Also Sprach Allah*; the skeletal but oversized coffin of *Messieurs les volontaristes* (Gentlemen voluntarists) is a metaphor for the monstrosity of human vacuity, the fabrication of little compromises and quarrels that poison art and life; *Helikoptère* inverts the use of prostheses, since what extends the reach of the human body so that it can draw is a flying machine. Then there is the central video series *Don't Trust Me*, in which animals are slaughtered by the hand of man.

But from the moment visitors enter the art center, they perceive that the exhibition is an authoritative corpus composed of dense and complex threads. In fact, visitors are welcomed by a vast neon sentence stretching across the wall:

ANYTHING CAN HAPPEN WHEN AN ANIMAL IS YOUR CAMERAMAN

The assertion is incisive because already profoundly heterogeneous. It imposes the co-presence and joint activity of the human beings looking at and reading the sentence, the mechanical camera whose function it is to record and generate the image, and the animal that is supposedly looking and moving, thereby creating the image. In this installation, consisting of a sort of hybrid with tremendous and unimaginable powers to act, everything comes together in the yellow neon words. The sentence is addressed to the visitor, who from the outset is challenged to move toward open, contradictory, and hallucinatory forms of perception.

"Anything can happen when an animal is your cameraman" is a reference to the theorist of science Donna Haraway, who herself borrowed the sentence from an

advertisement for visual exploration devices placed on the bodies of animals.<sup>63</sup> Haraway revolutionized the materialist, feminist, and socialist approach to thought, particularly by repositioning power in relation to the hybrid figure of the cyborg, which radically problematizes the mechanisms of control exerted by new technologies. She opens possibilities for polymorphic mutation, in contrast to universalist identities or ideological dualisms, and proposes revolutionary feminist alternatives by reclaiming the givens of biology that feminists had abandoned.<sup>64</sup>

Abdessemed's references to Sloterdijk and Haraway are explicit. It is important to point out that the work of art and exhibition *Drawing for Human Park* in no way entails a naïve belief in the fusion between human beings and animals or machines. Nor does it slip into a "posthumanist" aesthetic, which has generated its own trends and dogmas. Moreover, the artist is extremely vigilant in opposing discourses that make one believe in revolutions of ideas and which ultimately turn out to be minor disturbances in the atmosphere of the time. That suspicion is masterfully visualized in *Messieurs les volontaristes*, the work that concludes the exhibition. In this case, the human park is reduced to a monumental coffin that visitors can easily penetrate and pass through: the coffin is figured solely by its steel framework, but its overall volume takes material form through the physical void, the semantic void, and the ideological void in which the human masses situate and regulate themselves.

The importance granted to the representation of animals does not merely target the brutality of man's reduction to a savage state; nor is the animal figure used as a visual paradigm for the sacrificial victim.

Abdessemed summons forth affects and drives when he represents animals, and not only in this particular set of images. Affects and drives pervade all the other

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<sup>63</sup> Donna J. Haraway, "Compoundings," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, exh. cat., ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press/MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).



works in the exhibition, such as the cannabis star of *Elle est cela*, the braid of airplanes *Telle mère tel fils*, and the voice of David Moss in *Trust Me*. Then there is the staggering piece *Don't Trust Me*. The work is difficult to bear. All the same, it is an act duly rendered as image, and it is the responsibility for the act of slaughter that the artist means to pursue to the limit. It is neither industrial slaughter nor a sacrificial ritual nor a cultural tradition such as the bullfight; nor is it a snuff movie, in which a voyeuristic sexual pleasure would accompany the killing.

*Don't Trust Me* is the image of a hand holding a mallet, which kills a pig, a steer, a sheep, a goat, a horse, and a doe, without any spectacularization or dramatization. The brutality of power is concentrated in that capacity of the human hand, and no one is fooled: the hand's capacity is also man's power over every living being. The artist has refused to justify the work by appealing to the metaphor of the human victim projected onto the animal. It is a human act of killing a living being, period. That is what constitutes the impasse of the unthought with respect to power.

It may not be incidental to note that the source of *Don't Trust Me* can be traced back to a first video entitled *La capacité qu'a la main*, which shows a fishmonger killing a fish with a wooden mallet. The video was filmed by Abdessemed in a Tel Aviv marketplace at the invitation of the Dvir Gallery. The title of the video gestures toward the act as human power, but also links it to a cultural alimentary tradition, one shared, moreover, by various countries on every continent. The essential difference between it and *Don't Trust Me* is that, in the latter, the act of administering death is raw power. It is no longer situated within an alimentary culture. The drama of *Don't Trust Me* is to bring the image of death in contact with its enacted representation.

## The Silence of Men

Abdessemed exhibited *Don't Trust Me* at the Magasin in Grenoble in January 2008, then at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI). This second exhibition had to shut down a few days after opening, in response to a mobilization in force of animal defense organizations, which demonstrated their opposition through activist interventions and regular threats directed against the SFAI staff (death threats, racist and sexist accusations). During that dispute, the directors of the SFAI were obliged to justify themselves on several occasions for having made the decision to invite the artist Abdessemed and to show *Don't Trust Me*. Hou Hanru and Okwui Enwezor attempted to calm the dispute by claiming that the work had been produced in a traditional slaughterhouse in Mexico and that the artist had witnessed and filmed these scenes of slaughter. In reply to the well-meaning but inaccurate explanations of the administrators, Abdessemed sent a letter to the SFAI in which he declared:

*Don't Trust Me* is a video work for which I am fully and completely responsible, in its conception, production, and distribution.

*Don't Trust Me* is a work that I intentionally wanted to be a representation of an act of animal slaughter.

I sought out and purchased animals in order to make these videos.

The filming took place in Mexico with the voluntary participation of the cameramen and the local population.

The Zwirmer Gallery undertook to produce *Don't Trust Me* with me and to support its distribution, with full knowledge of what its reception would entail.

In the event that the work *Don't Trust Me* might cause insurmountable problems to an institution that has chosen to exhibit it, I prefer to put an end to the exhibition rather than riposte the polemics with untruthful justifications.

*Don't Trust Me* represents a violent act without spectacularization and without dramatization.

I do not seek to feign, justify, or excuse that act of slaughter. It exists. As you know, suffering is part of our existence.

"Horror has a name and a face. You must make a friend of horror," said Marlon Brando.

Thank you.

*Thus spake Adel Abdessemed.*

Abdessemed's declaration is implacable because it straightforwardly expresses the violence in the power of slaughter, the violence in the power of censorship, the violence in the power of lies. What the artist seems to be saying—to himself, to viewers, to the defenders of animals, and to art professionals—is that *Don't Trust Me* deserves to be discussed, denounced, or accepted on the basis of the following questions: Does the power of the act justify a power of death by the hand of man? Does that power of death by a human act demonstrate a powerlessness to express and combat horror?

Artists have previously attempted to visualize the face of horror through the figure of the animal. Chaim Soutine is known for his paintings of flayed poultry and beef, reminiscences of scenes from his youth in butcher stalls. Francis Bacon elaborated pictorial polyptychs from phantasmal photomontages, in which the process of transmuting bodies and faces blurred the boundaries between the animal and the human. Damien Hirst set about cutting up animal cadavers, putting them on view in glass curio display cases as metaphors for contemporary vanities.

But Abdessemed's work is already far removed from these, where the aspiration to aestheticize flesh remains the object of art. The only works with whom Abdessemed's art might be correlated are those of Pier Paolo Pasolini. The Italian

filmmaker represents the animal crudely, depicting both its power of life and the process by which it is killed by the hand of man. These rough images of the living being and of death generate visual rites that oscillate between the sacred and the mystical. But this dimension of the sacred and mystical aspires to be radically subversive, since Pasolini's cinematographic images have the power to reduce religion and politics to their most wicked deeds, sublimating only the power of creativity inherent in man and in the living forms of nature. What distinguishes Abdessemed's work from that of Pasolini is that the filmmaker still believed in a true and archaic past of the living being of which the human proletariat and animals may have been the last depositaries. In Abdessemed, that belief has disappeared, and in the archaism of his art there is an irascible imperative to push the visualization of the insanity of human power to its limit.

Élisabeth de Fontenay's *Le silence des bêtes: La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité* (The silence of the beasts: Philosophy put to the test of animality) constitutes an exhaustive repertoire of the discursive figures of the animal throughout the history of philosophy. The author declares that "it is philosophy, and more particularly, humanist metaphysics, not human reality, that I mean to put to the test of human animality."<sup>65</sup>

Fontenay traces a rich and impressive philosophy of the animal, from antiquity to our own time. Her research gives us the tools necessary to better understand the processes of interpretation, metaphorization, symbolization, instrumentalization, and co-optation of the animal undertaken in the interest of human power. In that sense, it may open avenues for a problematization of Abdessemed's art.

Nevertheless, my analysis takes its distance from Fontenay's study in that she sometimes undertakes a moral reading of certain philosophical or artistic works. Hence she criticizes Deleuze for invoking the animal-being while at the same time

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<sup>65</sup> Élisabeth de Fontenay, *Le silence des bêtes: La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1998), 25.

“disparaging the human being.” She suspects the philosopher of “not liking animals, in that his elevation of the tick to the dignity of the concept might lead one to fear that he is denying the animal hierarchy.”<sup>66</sup> Or again, Fontenay takes the liberty of giving Nietzsche and his Zarathustra a lecture on comportment:

For a reader who expects the author to keep his promise to dismantle subjectivity, there is something profoundly disappointing, profoundly impoverishing, in portraying being by means of animals, and in seeing and understanding oneself in beasts, even if one is Zarathustra, even if one is Nietzsche. Not that one could suspect Nietzsche of an egocentric anthropomorphism, since it is a different man that these beasts anticipate, the man of the future. But after all, the animal has something better to do and something better to be than to represent man, albeit a completely different man, whatever the meaning given to that alterity, since the animal is the absolute other in its living strangeness, and its mutism is much farther from us than the silence of God, as Heidegger will suggest.<sup>67</sup>

It is therefore clear that Fontenay will brook no philosophical representations of animals that distance themselves from, or propose alternatives to, the schemas of thought conceived by Hegel, Heidegger, or Derrida.

But what is most touching and disturbing about Fontenay’s study—what makes for all the power and all the fragility of her work—is the diffuse feeling the reader gets that her own interpretation of animal representations in philosophical texts is deeply pervaded and haunted by a history and a deep wound, that of the Shoah. It may therefore be pertinent to note that the author’s constant reduction of animals to their absolute silence could be just another entirely anthropomorphic interpretation of the animal. That silence of the beasts is obviously to be welcomed as a heart-rending

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–35.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 601.

cry in the face of the unjustifiable violence that man inflicted on himself in the traumatism of the Shoah.

The stumbling blocks in Fontenay's book are often the same points at which Abdessemed's works come to acquire meaning. The artist's works representing animals gesture in all cases toward a silence that is not solely that of beasts; it is in the first place the silence of men that he addresses.

Abdessemed does not produce works with animals to serve as mere provocations or to exacerbate a sense of victimization by violence. Nor does he seek to produce thematic projections of the animal onto the human or of the human onto the animal.

The artist observes that he is very often led to visualize animals in his art when works in the planning stage fall silent on their own, that is, when words fail to express the force of an image that comes to the author's mind. We are therefore faced with a first silence, that of the artist himself before an image that seems beyond him.

In addition, Abdessemed shows diverse aspects of animals:

—*Happiness in Mitte* is a video in which seven cats are filmed lapping up milk in the sun on a public square in front of the artist's apartment in Berlin;

—*Sept frères* (Seven brothers) is a photograph of seven wild boars let loose on a Paris street;

—*Séparation* (Separation) is another photograph, in which the artist attempts to approach a lion and seize him around the midsection;

—*Birth of Love* consists of a video of a cat filmed in close-up, eating the carcass of a rat;

—*Dead or Alive*, also a video, shows the artist holding a snake and guiding it toward his mouth in order to bite it;

—*Zero Tolerance* is a photograph of the artist's foot attempting to crush a snake crawling in a Paris street.

I do not think that we absolutely need to identify a single aesthetic characteristic of all these series of works with animals. Of course, it is obvious that the author captures relations of energy and force in these animal images: tension or calm, power and strength, ingurgitation and slaughter, life and death. But these relations of force are not limited exclusively to his images with animals. If we take *Séparation*, for example, the photograph depicting a lion and the artist, it would be very much to the point to connect the affect of tension and power emanating from it to a similar tension and power in *Nafissa*, a photograph that shows Abdessemed's mother carrying the artist in her own two arms, then lifting him horizontally above the ground. In the same way, *Séparation* and *Nafissa* could perfectly well enter into dialogue with *Telle mère tel fils*, the monumental sculpture of airplane bodies intertwined like snakes or a plait of hair. What establishes a connection between these three works is not their form or their subject or their medium, which are different in each case, but the shifting in the relations of force and from one affect to another in the act performed by the animal or the human being. Short of a fusion, we can at most speak of an empathy between the man and the animal or of their joint participation in a sensation. But there is never a narrative illustration or an excessive symbolization of affects in Abdessemed's works. The beings (men and animals) are placed in the presence of one another, and that suffices to produce the image.

The video series *Don't Trust Me* produces a particular aesthetic of the image: a visual and audio loop of the act of slaughter, a repetition that blocks any form of voyeurism in favor of a haunting image that seizes hold of the viewer's eye and ear, catches them in the snare of power's absurdity. The semantic reality of the work lies in the morally unacceptable human power to give death to the living thing but also in the compulsion to require man's accountability for the powers of horror that he

inflicts on himself and on the living thing. It is therefore clear that the cruelty of Abdessemed's images are morally reprehensible, but no one can reproach them for making the human community come face to face with its true power, that of imposing silence about the acts of war, destruction, genocide, exclusion, and racism that continue to be perpetrated.



## Power and Permanent Creativity: Dionysus ad Infinitum

“Attack!” is the cry often launched by Abdessemed at his loved ones, friends, and interlocutors. The formulation is as direct as a battle order and as generous as a precious gift. The title of one of his exhibition books, *Attack!* also serves as an onomatopoeia propelling all and sundry toward an energetic creativity.

The exclamatory invitation is particularly interesting in that it gets to the heart of the notions of pleasure, propulsion, and regeneration key to the question of power.

Quite obviously, the notion of pleasure as Abdessemed visualizes it cannot be reduced to a physical or affective state or to a contemplative stasis; it is the driving force of a permanent creativity that proceeds by gushing, coiling, propelling, transforming, projecting, rubbing, distending, traversing, and proliferating, by producing tensions, alloys, amalgamations, momentum.

*Fontaine* (Fountain, 1999) is an exemplary work dealing with intersecting issues: it is both a critique of authority and an exploration of the Dionysian power of creativity. Two white jars placed on the ground are connected to a device that makes an intoxicating nectar gush out continuously from the center of each of the jars. *Fontaine* has modest dimensions: 56 x 33 cm (22 1/8 x 13 in.). All the same, it possesses the visual power of two organic forms, extremely smooth and silky to the eye and touch, similar to two breasts. Yet the metaphor of the breast turns against itself at the visual level: the “breasts” point downward and their contents do not spurt from the tips but slowly flow into the hollow of the jars as a thick red liquid. In seeing and feeling the work, everyone perceives that it is charged with the force of drives possessing unexpected aesthetic ramifications. In his excellent analysis of *Fontaine*, the philosopher Georges Lapassade links the work to a history and cultural practice of wine that is profoundly Mediterranean, especially in the voluptuous relationship it maintains with notions of passage and transformation: “That wine, set in motion by

an invisible mechanism, represents the tumultuous agitation of ecstatic consciousness before it knows the release of love. It is therefore one of the states [*ahwal*] that precedes that final release, when everything that is not contemplation [*haqiqi*] is abolished. It is a stage one must necessarily pass through in the attempt to reach the final annihilation [*fana*] that dispenses with commentary. In that way, this fountain symbolizes a passage. Its outer surface, so soft to the touch, seems made to evoke a carnal love that will be transformed, in an ambiguity beloved of the mystics, into spiritual love. It is Sufi eros.”<sup>68</sup>

Lapassade also cites ‘Umar Ibn al-Fārid’s famous “Wine Ode”: “Wine signifies the drink of divine love [that] produces drunkenness and a complete obliviousness to what exists in the world. We have managed . . . to become oblivious even to our own obliviousness.” Abdessemed intended to set up *Fontaine* for one entire night in the large pond on Mitte Square in Berlin, the same place where he had filmed *Happiness in Mitte*, the video of feral cats lapping up milk in the dry fountain. Where the milky white matter of *Happiness in Mitte* had already produced a subversive infiltration of social space and of art venues, *Fontaine* would have brought about the transmutation of public space into a Dionysian site: a red square of joyful apocalypse. More than simply a provocative gesture, the installation of *Fontaine* in Berlin would have deployed extremely fertile, generous, and inexhaustible practices. The work would have insinuated into the German city a profoundly Mediterranean experience of the commonwealth and of wine. It would have been equally magnificent to see *Fontaine* spurting a red of pleasure in a square and a neighborhood that were the site of a cold war—of an ideological red, a blood red—that violently divided populations. Because of insurmountable difficulties in obtaining permits from the authorities, *Fontaine* in Berlin has never or not yet been realized.

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<sup>68</sup> Georges Lapassade, “Fontaine,” unpublished text, unpaginated.

Another exemplary work, *Black House* (2006), explores the same issues. It is a wood structure painted completely black and surmounted by a pennon, also black. *Black House* represents a composite mass (172 x 172 x 180 cm, or approximately 68 x 68 x 71 in.), whose forms amalgamate into a single block the architectural codes associated with Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam. *Black House* is a work that, from its original conception, was to have “taken place” in Jerusalem, on a plot of land whose political and religious borders are currently in dispute, a situation that has closed off the circulation of human beings and of cultures. Its title, *Black House*, alluding to the American “White House,” inverts, in a compact block, the power of geopolitical supremacy. But at the same time, it is an extremely porous block, permeable by many pathways. The functional destiny of the black walls of *Black House* may be to welcome works by artists of all nationalities interested in treating the question of power. What is at stake in *Black House*, therefore, is not the exercise of authority over the territory of Jerusalem; rather, the work points toward an (im)possible place of mixing and constructing. In other words, *Black House* constitutes a powerful erotico-architectural alloy of power.

*Fontaine* and *Black House* are not hampered by discourse. The two works introduce friction into spaces of discursivity using the raw materials of red wine and black pigment.

*Fontaine* and *Black House* coil up and deploy a spiral of forms, meanings, pleasures, and powers, which can be extended ad infinitum. The spiral stretches outward, in fact, until it is depleted, across video works that intervene like raw and generous offerings, images of nudity, couplings, and straightforward sexual pleasure.

*Le joueur de flûte* (The flute player, 1996) is a video that shows an imam, completely nude, filmed in a bare room. The imam poses a real challenge to the creative act: first, by breaking the taboos usually linked to his social status and his

body; and second, by managing to occupy an authoritarian space with his body and the music he produces in front of the camera.

There is also *Chrysalide* (Chrysalis, 1999), a video that depicts the artist walking in a circle, unwinding a cocoon of black wool, gradually uncovering the nude body of a young Algerian woman, from her feet to her head. Conversely, *Zen* (2000) shows an attempt to cover the body: a bottle of milk is poured over the head and chest of a young African man. Here is the paradox of milky matter, perceived simultaneously as a material offering and as a violent negation of differences. *Real Time* (2003) takes thirty seconds to film acts of carnal love and orgasm by several couples brought together in a single room. The image is simple, remote from any artificial eroticism; it focuses on the coupling and on the pleasure that each pair of lovers offer each other in unison, a paradox of intimacy in a public space.

All these works take the erotic and Dionysian dimension to the limits of visibility and sensibility. Abdessemed seems thereby to be challenging the viewer to consider the political stakes of eros and authority. Will we ever manage to conceive of the transformation of authority into the power of creativity through the figure of eros? Might we be capable of recognizing, with Abdessemed, that eros is indissociable from the power of creation?

It is not that the eros visualized by Abdessemed would immerse us in an insignificant art of sexual pleasure or a self-satisfied hedonism; but fundamentally, Abdessemed's eros is a monstrous energy able to produce rifts in the overly smooth operation of the chain of signifiers and of conventions. Abdessemed's eros is the anomalous figure of the artistic image as countertruth. As the artist himself puts it so well: "How am I to reply to a friend who says that art must tell the truth? That is of course what I hope. Unfortunately, I started off lying to my father, my mother, my

religion. Frankly, art can work—even if it's false, everything becomes true.”<sup>69</sup> *God Is Design* (2005) masterfully pursues that undertaking, the eroticization of power, through a simple but radical animated video. At first, it is a simple black line on a white ground; stretched to the limit, manipulated and reconfigured into every possible shape, it endlessly mutates into 3,050 abstract motifs that engender one another, blur together, combine, and come apart over a period of two minutes and two seconds. The work also has an audio component: the musician Silvia Ocougne produced a composition for the occasion in which the strata of sounds participate fully in the dynamic profusion of drawings. The process of fabricating images offers viewers a fertile succession of references to cells in the human body, religious symbols, the signs of Western geometrical painting or Eastern arabesques. It is easy to see that there is no nostalgia for the authority of religion in *God Is Design*. Abdessemed's work is an amalgam in which opposites pair up and multiply to better topple certainties and create paradoxes. The animation in *God Is Design* summons forth a fertile imaginary that opens on unexpected permutations, contradictions, and relationships. Simple and lighthearted, *God Is Design* rethinks the representation of the invisible in terms of a clash of codes and styles. Abdessemed visualizes with disconcerting sincerity a quest for the infinite where one least expects it, placing political issues at the center of spirituality, deconstructing authoritarian symbols, neutralizing any claims to dogmatism, ideological truth, or instruments of authority.

In fact, the religious is not what most interests Abdessemed. Religions have their importance for the artist, especially as regards history and the effects of their authority. But Abdessemed tackles them more as pretexts for phantasmal, uncontrollable, and literally in-credible fables. It is not beside the point to recall the extent to which *Also Sprach Allah* constitutes another fabulous animal emerging out of an act of writing, an act of corporeal and scriptural juncture between two cloths,

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<sup>69</sup> Interview of the artist by Anne Bonnin, in *Adel Abdessemed: Global* (Geneva: mamco; Rheims: Frac Champagne-Ardenne; Paris: Galerie Kamel Mennour, 2005), 123.

two names, two thoughts, two worlds. And the artist is situated between the two, tossed around and projected into the air, tracing the dazzling trajectory of the monstrosity of thought and creativity.

## ***Shadow and Light***

The first video work realized by Abdessemed, *Ombre et lumière* (Shadow and Light, 1994), is a direct declaration, a manifesto for life.

A stripping bare of the act: turn completely around while removing a black veil covering the shoulders and face. A revolution in one turn: reinventing a world of one's own open to the other.

A stripping bare of the video image: for a few seconds, film in a stationary shot this young woman on the balcony of an apartment. Simple beauty of a face that blossoms with the unveiling. *Video*: "I see." Just the time to see, the essential. Here, the nakedness of the face opens one's eyes. Dazzling self-evidence of the unveiling, turning every form of voyeurism on its head, extended beyond anything that can block one's view. And that dazzlement of sight is shared, taken on, as much by the young woman as by the artist.

It is not only our bodies that are veiled. So too are our eyes, our souls as well. Behind the black veil that covers the body, a lifting of the veils of the eyelids. A stripping bare of the gaze: light comes to bathe the eyes of this young woman. In return, her eyes reflect and offer us light. Behind the veils of the gaze, a raising and a sharing: openness, liberties, forces of existence.

The most simple of gestures, that of unveiling for example, can have weighty consequences, but it can also contain the most noble promises.

Unveiling is, of course, a resistance to certain cultural, religious, or social codes erected by phallogocentric powers. But let us simply say: becoming a woman and being one unconditionally.

*Ombre et lumière* cannot be reduced to a political denunciation. Something else about unveiling is being played out: there is no tougher battle than the one waged against oneself. How to act in order never to be the same? How to exceed the limits of a personal or cultural identity that too often reassures and blinds us?

Unveiling participates, then, in a vital commitment to what Michel Foucault calls the “care of the self as a practice of freedom”: “The relations we must maintain with ourselves are never relations of identity; they must always be relations of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. It is very tiresome to be always the same.”<sup>70</sup> Desire—impulse toward—is at work in *Ombre et lumière*. But not exclusively. The notion of pleasure is very important here. This young woman cannot be reduced to an object of desire and representation. She herself is the conveyor of a boundless sensation of pleasure to the “living being.”

In Abdessemed’s works, pleasure is not on the order of the fulfillment of desire. Far from satisfaction, pleasure is that through which our relation to the world is constructed; it permeates and gives consistency to our process of becoming, our creative force. Divesting pleasure of any symbolic, aestheticizing ballast and of any pornographic spectacle.

Eros and power, simply.

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#### Notes

<sup>70</sup> Michel Foucault, “Une interview: Sexe, pouvoir et la politique de l’identité” (1982), in *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4 (Paris: nrf/Gallimard, 1994), 739.