

**STILL
PRESENT**

Still Present!

A conversation with Kader Attia and Marie H el ene Pereira

'Mapping' as artistic strategy and method to reposition the 'historical now' is one of the continuous themes running through this year's (2022) Berlin Biennale. Curated by French artist Kader Attia in conjunction with his team of Ana Teixeira Pinto, Đ o Tường Linh, Marie H el ene Pereira, Noam Segal and Rasha Salti, Still Present! suggests an intermediate survey of repair, which in the artist-curator's practice is concerned with the moment of transition from one state to another.

The artist list reflects on the paradox of visibility and invisibility within the establishment such as a biennale, largely eschewing marquee names. Situated across six venues, the curatorial strategy of repetition emphasises the non-linear reading of history and its contemporary interpretation; at the same time one tends to spiral down complex concepts of colonial heritage, past and present iniquities, modernity and racism through visualised data points, the female gaze on accounts of social justice to environmental realities. "The place to which we have arrived today is not by chance: It is the result of historical formations constructed over centuries" reads its statement.

Although a direct correlation between works and spaces stays often unknown, it offers a different reading of the biennale concept, questioning its role and representation of the locale towards a de-contextualised strategy rather than a conversation between the work and its geographic presents.

On the opening weekend of the 12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, I spoke with Attia and Pereira about today's urgent questions, the inner workings of curatorial processes and where to go from here.

NM

The title of this year's BB - Still Present! reads like a multi-layered statement, connecting time and space as it speaks of the immediacy of the here and now, of being present. It also seems to describe a physical manifestation through objects and bodies at its centre. Still Present! speaks of resilience and a continuum. What are the urgent questions of the present?

Marie H el ene Pereira

Let's start from yesterday's press conference, where Kader spoke about something very important and a guiding aspect of the biennale, which is visibility and invisibility. This edition of the biennale proposes another way of doing exhibitions, of thinking about the biennale itself. A door, open to all practices, whether they are "validated" by the mainstream or not. During the whole process and the conversations with Kader, he was really open to listening and learning more about the propositions that we [as a team] had and to learn about the way in which the artists see their work and how they see the work exist in the spaces of the biennale. I was asked about the importance of Germany for the biennale and my answer was that the Berlin Biennale, although located in Berlin, with many echoes that exist between the different works, is important in the fact that it offers a space for conversations that are also happening elsewhere and that can be present and exist without necessarily having to be linked to Germany as a [geographical] context. There is a level of constructive criticality that we all practised throughout the process for this edition, reflecting on the urgency of opening the door for all practices to be valued properly. And I think we've succeeded in doing that as a team and through the vision of the curator Kader Attia in terms of disrupting the structures of biennales in general and the way in which they exist as the mainstream.

Kader Attia

Continuing with the regime of invisibility, incarnating the whole problem of blind spots that we have with the so-called decolonial narrative and the instructive modernity. I'm struggling with this decolonial word because I think it's a trap. Some people have a wrong idea of what would be in the biennale by hearing the word decolonial. I would even go that far to say it's time to speak about the de-modernisation of society.

And I think that, the DAAR [Decolonising Architecture Art Residency] project which is about decolonising architecture, a workshop that happens alongside the biennale, is about reviving and unveiling the seeds, the dark side of modernity, which are basically the seeds of fascism. Colonialism was used by the white West to create racism, and supremacy to exploit the Other. And this white supremacy, as we know, continues today. The question of the emergency to care about this visibility, is that the regime of governance we're living in and take for granted - the modernity - is actually biased within the categories of the Other. Rolando Vázquez Melken says: in the end, the white gaze on the Other is a white male gaze, creating these categories, but never qualifying itself. Artworks are the only tools we have today to be used as a lens to seek a bigger picture of those blind spots because these works and our exhibitions can create a space to meet and slowly to open the minds of the audience.

NM

This also alludes to actively shifting the default position, which is the white male gaze you mentioned and offering a more nuanced view through art. The constellation of the Berlin Biennale team echoes a current sentiment of the collective and the female/feminist gaze - the multitude over the singular. Has the collective gaze become a strategy and if so, how does it work within the constraints and formality of the institutional paradigm? (Artistic team members: Marie Hélène Pereira, Ana Teixeira Pinto, Đỗ Tường Linh, Noam Segal, and Rasha Salti)

KA

The gaze is a collective gaze, that we produce together and people see us as a collective, which is the image that we give as a group.

We also have to be realistic. The Berlin Biennale is a massive project and to make it happen, you cannot do it alone - you need a team. I have to say that I didn't believe I would be selected. I can work with a curator where we share many interests but when you work with an administration, it's another struggle. So I immediately thought I would like to work with a team of curators, artists, etc. Technically the Berlin Biennale had previously worked with four curators already and the bureaucracy told me they preferred one curator because of the otherwise long decision-making process. I suggested the idea of an artistic team, on the basis that each one has a significant and individual trajectory making her an expert in their field, like Rasha Salti on cinema, Marie Helene runs a space and is also a curator. Đỗ Tường Linh is a freelance curator and she's Vietnamese, which is very important because I have been to Vietnam, but I don't speak the language. Noam Segal is a curator and Ana Teixeira Pinto is a theorist. So I also created this team for the complementarity of their expertise and asked them to suggest artists and then to dialogue together about how the works could can in to these cardinal points of colonialism, feminism.... My focus was on the collaboration with the team and being more of an interlocutor, bringing different people I thought are enriching together and be part of the exhibition creation too. But at the same time this is only a small part that became visible in the exhibition while other processes are much bigger.

MHP

I agree with the idea of the collective being very tricky. I really liked the idea of the team, because the collective might have applied collectively. Kader's proposal was speaking to me at each and every level. And I didn't really see my participation in just one cardinal point. But really with all points, because they interweave beautifully and the conversations with Kader, the back and forth that we've been having allowed for my perspective too. Not just about the

artists that are presented, but also the different themes that emerged from artists' work. I think it was good to have a team, not a collective because Kader took care of everything - the admin, the institution, that also protected the team. We are made of strong individuals who met in different places before gathering in Berlin for the final phase. Some of us had worked together before and outside the frame of the biennale. Everyone has their own interests and different perspectives, in that sense we are not a collective even though we are meeting at a very particular point. For example, Linh and I got to know each other through the conversations on the work of Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn [The Specter of Ancestors Becoming, 2019], who did a film on the Vietnamese Senegalese community, in Senegal, but is from Vietnam. This really enriched the conversation about the work and the way it is shown. Since Linh is from Vietnam and I am from Senegal we are knowledgeable based on our contexts, but combining them makes a stronger picture in terms of history, narratives, how stories are told, or not taught.

NM

Kader, in your art practice you often work with the notion of 'repair' as well as in your curatorial capacity within the 12th Berlin Biennale. Has your methodology changed in the sense of artistic and curatorial articulation? Repair for me speaks of recognising the nuance in order to know what and how something needs to be repaired. This method also speaks of the traces of the wound being accounted for - how can we make that visible without generalising the experience and its impact? How can we make this process visible and take care of the nuance? In that way of the 'care for the now', which also relates back to the colonial past that is ingrained in everything.

KA

This is a very important question because reflections carry the risk of stagnation. If I would speak from the perspective of an artist, I have a lot of tangible examples. In the practice, you try to not repeat yourself, otherwise, you become your own kitsch. I really care about that, when a work is déjà vu, it's

boring. For example the artist Florian Sông Nguyễn, who is based in Marrakech, MA, and Ho Chi Minh City, VN, deals with dogs in the European space that have been abandoned [The Stray Dogs, 2022]. This was something new to me and he explained that in the Muslim culture dogs are often disliked and mistreated, because of religion and that they prefer cats. From the perspective of the art practice, the notion of doing the same thing is problematic - you need to constantly reinvent yourself. But if you see it from the complexity of the repair, which is the evolution of a state to another one, everything is repair. I've been developing it through my work but if you take this glass bottle before it was shaped, it was sand and melted into glass - really everything is a process of repair. So we have to understand that repair is not necessarily linked to an accident that has to be fixed, which is the modern obsession of the perfect. The repair is an agency that exists in the universe. It's this movement of things from one state to another and we cannot avoid it. That's why, when I use it metaphorically in politics, saying that the decolonial conversation cannot happen, it's nonsense. It's an ongoing conversation that is much needed and the human society needs to accept that something was wrong and we need to fix it. I really like to split myself from the artist practice and it is quite rare that I use the artist perspective because when I am working on an exhibition or an event it's different. It's another reflection where you cannot have this meditative and actually selfish reflection that you need when doing work as an artist. The emergency you were talking about before needs us to invent a new language, new worlds, visual worlds, sound worlds, a new vocabulary. These questions we are talking about are also becoming banal because we do repeat them in these environments and we need to constantly reinvent the way, the method we are using to address this problem. Because society also evolves. And I think this is important for the decolonial conversation and to not turn it into its own kitsch.

MHP

On the now and the question of time. We've been taught to look at time in a very linear way. And this is really based on modernity and the way in which colonisation functions in different communities and different geographies.

But there was and for many still is a conception of time that's mostly circular, that functions as if someone is going from one point to the other, but really is going in a circle and thus coming back. I like when Kader talks about preparing the now and talking in the now, but not forgetting about the fact that the now is now because of what came before. Digging from what's already there, what has been there for centuries, and that has been really valuable and valued in different communities but got lost in the process of slavery, colonisation, globalisation, etc. And also about what will come because what we're doing is for the future, of different practices and stories to come. There is a need to be in the now but dig from what's in the past in order to repair what is coming for the next generations.

NM

The topics this Berlin Biennale are centred around - decolonising, collective memory, repair, etc. - are huge concepts, grounded in complex geographically and temporally specificities. Is the Berlin Biennale the product or the process? What happens afterwards?

MHP

It's definitely the process. It's a proposition that has to be taken further in different ways. I really believe that Kader will take it further into a certain direction and I will take it further into another one. And we will hopefully meet again at some point. Rasha, Ana, Linh and Noam will do that too which is part of the process. This [Still Present!] is a celebration point - we stop and we propose something out of our collective process, it can't be a product at all.

KA

The whole question of the decolonial conversation and what we have to understand is that it's an ongoing conversation, because the society evolves also. And the way we were speaking about decolonial thinking five years ago, is now different. The process is, speaking as the curator, what is most important,

to contribute and slightly open the mind of the audience on some blind spots and thought narratives. So it's definitely a process in which we are all reflecting on the reality of the world we are living in. And talking about what comes after, I think it's very important to say that the European Left has never been decolonial. [The Italian author] Enzo Traverso speaks about that in his book, *The New Faces of Fascism*....

Nisha Merit is an independent curator based between Johannesburg and Berlin.