

METRO PICTURES

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Latifa Echakhch, *À chaque stencil une révolution*, 2007, *Speaker's Corner* installation view at Tate Modern, London, 2008

Latifa Echakhch's research is a reaction to the identities normatized by society, religion, and the State. In 2001's *Frames*, Echakhch undid, one strand at a time, a number of Islamic prayer mats, leaving their frame untouched, thusly confusing the imaginary border between holy and unholy ground. Political and poetic, delicate and critical, the work of the Moroccan artist, through the de-structuring of apparently ordinary objects, is an occasion to reveal the hidden codes that often we didn't get.

MILOVAN FARRONATO: *Certificate de Vie* (2002) and *Alien of Extraordinary Ability* (2005), two works of yours, feature two sentences that refer to very different conditions—ultimately two sides of the same coin, ironic and dramatic at the same time. How much does citizenship affect human rights? What is this "extraordinary ability" you mention in your golden plate?

LATIFA ECHAKHCH: This "certificate de vie" is an official Moroccan document whose only function is to give proof that somebody is still alive. It is mainly used for administrative purposes—that's why I did it initially. It's given by the Consulate of the Kingdom of Morocco. I just presented my Moroccan ID and a paper proving my residence in Paris to a civil officer and they gave it to me. This document attests my official existence for the Moroccan administration and allows me to take advantage of this right! The United States Alien of Extraordinary Ability Visa or O-1 Classification is given to aliens who can demonstrate that they "have risen to the very top of their field of endeavor." Aliens with extraordinary ability are those foreigners with "extraordinary ability in the sciences, arts, education, business, or athletics and who have received prestigious national or international acclaim and whose achievements in their given fields can be proved through extensive documentation." I was interested in the strangeness of these two sentences, as in many of the official formulas I use in my works. This is an odd thing to need a certificate to prove: that we are alive for our native country. And to be defined as "super-alien," a superman, to get such a visa!



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MF: And then also: “Decides to remain seized of the matter” (*Resolution*, 2003) and “Espace a Remplir Par L'Etranger” (*Hospitalité*, 2006). Other sentences, other stories—impressed, embossed on the surface, and deeply into our humanity. What about the sources of these other two works of yours?

LE: *Resolution* is an extract of text from a United Nations Security Council resolution: passages often ended with this formula. It's a strange sounding sentence, like a false translation. I did it first in Thailand in March 2003, during the last moments before the start of the Iraq war. The UN Council condemned a military intervention by the USA, but it wasn't respected, and I wanted to question the efficacy of this international coalition. This is the source, but out of context you can use it for a lot of subjects. The formula is painted by hand on the wall in black. When you see it close-up you see all the imperfections of the application. You can easily imagine the artist in front of the wall painting this sentence as a punished kid at school! For *Hospitalité*, I took this sentence from a document that I have to fill out to receive a new resident card in France. There is one side to be filled out by the foreigner and the other side by the administration. I use it as an artistic statement. I engraved the sentence in the wall and after the exhibition another stranger filled the empty space with plaster to install a new exhibition, but the sentence is still hidden on the wall.

MF: Something seems to be always missing—wherever it is, it is no longer here. I'm thinking of *Frames* (2001), for example, or *Micro vide* (2006). In the first case you cut away the interior motifs of a series of prayer carpets and leave just their borders. In the second one, you present three tripods with hollow microphones. And then also in the more recent *For Each Stencil a Revolution* (2007) and *Fantasia (empty flag)* (2008). What are you deliberately omitting or avoiding?

LE: The only thing I removed is the main practical significance of each object: they are stripped of their well-known functions and made obsolete. This gesture is a kind of minimization and debilitating transformation. In the carpets I remove the delimiting space on the objects. In *Fantasia* I remove the flags that are supposed to be displayed on each pole, and I install them in such a way that we no longer see a coherent ensemble. Regarding *For Each Stencil a Revolution*, it's primarily concerned with abstraction, like if I do every step of the process of duplication but in a different order of assembly. Certainly I omit the utility, but I'm not avoiding the foundation. It's the well-known paradox of Melville's *Bartleby*: in his “I would prefer not to,” he still strongly affirms his gesture, and that's precisely why it leave all fields of possibility open.

MF: I feel there's been a dramatic act, and we are seeing the climax. Sometimes, as in *Studio Oriental* (2002), the set for a photo shoot is left over. In other more recent cases, it is broken apart, as in *Erratum* (2004). How does "violence" enter into your work?

LE: Perhaps violence is inherent in a lot of art practice. To sculpt marble, for example, is not an easy action, to cut paper for collage, to break ceramics for mosaic. Violence in my work deals more with the result of a radical and irreversible action. It's the simplest way to free an object from its use, to deconstruct it. I am deeply attached to an idea of a "still life," this paradox of stillness and lively things—in French we call it "nature morte." Sometimes one has to "kill" the object to make possible a different reading. But the violence is never direct, the actions have been done before the exhibition opens—it's not a performance. It's the only way I can explain it. I am not particularly hysterical; I am known to be very calm and kind.

MF: Despite all the political and social issues that your work raises, I'm unable to ignore the romantic, poetic side. In which of your works most directly questions your idea of *heimat* (with all its political and poetical references)?

LE: I am not at all nostalgic about any idea of a *heimat*. It's a suspect idea to try to found or rediscover an origin, even a fake approach. But suspicion is an interesting process, it creates a necessary distance to consider things. I cannot communicate without political or poetic references, because they are my main tools, and even if I relate all the little stories of each work and how I encountered the original objects in my everyday life, it's always full of these references, that's exactly why I'm interested in acting on it.

MF: In just one work you are physically there, I guess: *French Touch* (self-portrait) (2004). A paradox, a question of identity? A simple gesture, but of course not simplistic.

LE: One day in a shop a woman told me that I had a beautiful "French touch" [French manicure]. I'd never heard this expression before. In my case it's completely natural, and that's why I was so surprised to have this innate French identity because of my nails. I found it funny to work with that, to do a self-portrait as a perfectly integrated immigrant. We see only half of my left arm, life-sized, with a white wall in the back. I accentuated the darkness at the bottom of my arm. I mixed two very simple iconographies to show my nails: one related to a well-known gesture of protest—clenched fist raised—and the thumb is curved as the one in the hand of Fatima.

MF: The next edition of *Manifesta* will be in the Spanish region of Murcia, the European area that is the closest to North Africa, and Morocco in particular. And the aim is to analyze the border between these two very different and very close cultural scenarios. I remember *Snow in Arabia* (2003), the first work of yours I saw: a black cube, a Mecca, realized in black tape on a input-free monitor. Since you are clearly involved in these topics, what are your expectations for this event?

LE: I don't have expectations about it, but I strongly hope that they won't use North African or African artists as a subject, as has been done all these years since "Les Magiciens de la Terre." There so many interesting artists, why do we always need to put them in boxes to define them or allow them to be shown? It's the same with the gender question, and I am particularly sensitive about that. I do not want to be used as an immigrant and/or a woman, because I am not only that. It's the reason I always refuse these kinds of invitations. These questions in a theoretical and historical way are really more complex than that—too complex to become simply a topic.

MF: We have mentioned several of your past works. What new projects are you developing for the near future?

LE: It would be a long answer and I prefer to talk about things after they're installed. To be brief, I invite you to see my next works in Kamel Mennour gallery in Paris. I'm doing two-part exhibition—*Pendant que les champs brûlent*—from the end of May until the end of July. This summer I will present two solo exhibitions, *Les sanglots longs*, at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel and at the Kunstverein of Bielefeld. And in September I will have my first exhibition at Francesca Kaufmann in Milan. It's mainly new works and site-specific installations. You have to see it and then we can talk about it!