

In search of a lost environment

by Antonello Tolve

Models of possible reality. Models of interpersonal relationships. Models of approach to the other – and to the other's culture – through communication strategies from different backgrounds and languages.

L'Mar9A, the first exhibition by **Younes Baba-Ali** (1986) for the **VOICE Gallery**, raises questions that span the current human condition to understand, from different angles, the complexity of our world's polycentricity.

Multiculturalism, space sharing (cohabiting), the current thresholds of identity, the concept of post-ethnicity and that, equally essential, of plurality. Of *Être singulier pluriel*, to say it with Jean-Luc Nancy. These are some of the themes used by Younes Baba-Ali to develop an action of re-appropriation of the real through a partaking observation and a discipline intersecting focusing on the infinite meanings of life. These are *commitments*, socio-anthropological attitudes, inevitable logical analyses of society which influence the artist's elaboration of his works to build new worlds, new reading possibilities.

Reality, in all its various forms, is for Baba-Ali a center of gravity, a platform from which to move to conceive public and private actions aimed to short-circuit the commonplace. To check, from an analytical point of view, the space of life. To go beyond appearances. To pierce the viewer's gaze and enter it within a language scenario (object- and behavior-focused) which praises differences and reforms the essence of the world.

Driven by the idea of creating a relationship between two similar greetings (*Salam Aleikoum* and *Shalom Alekhem*) Younes Baba-Ali highlights the noticeable differences of a bifurcated culture, linked to the past and the present, the archaic and the current: *Shalom Aleikoum* (2013) follows this line of reflection, this spirit which yearns to bring together a collective sentiment on the plane of life.

Barrier (2013) is, on the other hand, directly drawn from reality, a reflection on capitalism. On a circuit biased towards the handcraftsmanship of a context – that of Morocco – which alters the nature of prefabricated material to include it into an essentially artisan-oriented economy which is still alive and thriving.

Marked by decontextualization, by the *sacralization* of the common object, *Kamikaze* (2013) is a further step in the exhibition which highlights the absence of a safety-oriented attitude, the human carelessness for terribly dangerous everyday objects. A portrait of the lack of safety standards, the work – a local cart carrying time-worn gas cylinders – is a metaphor for neglect, but also a provocation against the planetary paranoia which warns against global terrorism and attack.

Hymne Marocain, together with *Pulizia* – the latter consisting of an altered logo of the Italian police – represent further stations of an aesthetic journey that fits between the tight texture of life in order to find answers, to open reflections, to suggest ways to reform the world.

In the Moroccan Arabic dialect Darija, l'mar9a is the sauce, the basis of almost all the main dishes of the Moroccan cuisine. By extension, metaphorically l'mar9a is also understood as the essence of things, the energy, the gist, the atmosphere.

AT / I would like to open our conversation (a pleasantly polyphonic reflection) starting from the very concept of *conversation* – i.e. to go ahead *together*, to address the same direction, to help each other, to jointly promote an action –, which paves the way for a series of glowing figures. For a number of issues related to *difference*, *identity* and *otherness*, *plurality*, *acceptance* and *coexistence*, *sharing* and *merging*, the dialogue between different cultures, the community (*communitas*) and for differing societies. And finally for the various forms of civilization. I think that the artist explores these themes, these vast areas of the contemporary debate, to sensitize the peoples, to report abuses, to return to an essential critical thinking of the world.

YBA / Through the artistic gesture, I set my critical eye on everyday problems and experiences, not always to denounce them directly.
I transform the *défaillances* that strike me into open-ended questions.
Questions that I send back to the viewer through a common and irony-laden language, a language that I use to attract and invite the public into getting involved and being part of my work.

AT / One of the features that characterizes much current art is the resumption by the artist of re-appropriating reality. The artist makes reality his own in order to interpret it, blame the excessive power of the ones in charge, open happy islands and just as happy reflections. What is your attitude towards this return to reality?

YBA / The re-appropriation of reality is central to my research. Both from an aesthetic point of view – often in the form of *ready-made* –, and from a conceptual point of view. In fact, I could summarize my process through an almost alchemical formula. It all starts from a critical perception of reality: I extract what draws my attention and my sensitivity, I study it and experiment with it, I stretch it and give it back to the real world of art and the public sphere, to create a debate, to suggest new points of view.

AT / How much did – and does – your being in Morocco, a North African country that overlooks the Mediterranean, influence your work?

YBA / The fact of having an education which is both Moroccan and French – an access to two cultures –, has allowed me to develop a double insight, a double knowledge. A more distant, more analytical insight, through which I am able to detect certain forms of social flaws. Being between two cultures, sometimes perceived as one against the other, has given me a special sensitivity towards other people and difference.

AT / And colonialism?

YBA / In some works, I place emphasis on certain forms of contemporary colonialism, better defined as forms of economic and cultural colonialism. For example, in *Barrier*, I evoke the logo of Mc Donald, the icon of American capitalism. In the form of installation, these barriers, handcrafted in Morocco – almost as if they were counterfeit products – become a metaphor for the relationship between capitalism and its ways of adapting to the economic and social Moroccan context. This form of “wild capitalism” is expressed by the history and the precariousness of this object.

AT / In some of your works that I analyzed, there are projects that repossess history and geography. Even when this does not happen directly, one can perceive a feeling (of time and

travel) needed to establish contacts – ethical, aesthetic, or simply through language – with other places. With other regions. With different areas and cultures. How important is travel? And what represents *moving* within your poetics and your background?

YBA / Travel, movement, meeting – even ephemeral – with each other and with the others inspire my work. My double insight travels with me and comes up in different contexts. In *Pulizia*, for example, I act as a foreigner in today's Italy and offer an ironic outlook on the relationship between the State and the political issue of immigration. By inventing a sham cleaning company, I pick up and alter the visual identity of the Italian police: playing with language, the "Polizia" logo becomes a marker of this phenomenon. The project is a multi-phase work in progress: for the exhibition at the Voice Gallery, it will take the form of an illuminated sign and a series of work overalls bearing this logo. In the future, I will invite migrants to wear these overalls and clean public and private areas in Italy.

AT / I would like to shift our reflection into politics. Into an extra-esthetic plane that sees the artist committing (even gently or unintentionally) in the major issues that impact – especially in this period – our civilization. Your artistic path too develops, I think, along a line that looks closely at events, at issues of the current economic and political trends.

YBA / The connection with the current political situation is often suggested in either a subtle or an upfront way in my work, through the analysis of certain everyday situations. With *Hymne Marocain* [Moroccan Anthem], the viewer deals with a real-size video portrait of a man who leads his cart pulled by a donkey, a popular means of transport in Morocco, singing the Moroccan anthem in the voice he typically uses to lead his animal. This video affects the exhibition space like an alternative and critical anthem, addressed to both the public and the Moroccan population.

AT / For this new solo exhibition you have created a series of works that cross different cultures. What thinking underlies this new adventure?

YBA / At the Voice Gallery, I will present my first solo exhibition in Morocco, the result of a one-month residency. This time spent researching on location has greatly influenced my proposals. Thanks to the complicity of Rocco Orlacchio, I found a fertile ground where to combine my artistic research with a personal desire to question the established forms of artistic production and exhibition in Morocco. The exhibition presents multidisciplinary art forms, such as video and site-specific installations, which question the status of the art object to which the local public is often used to (and perhaps reassured by).

Here, through the artistic gesture, I highlight a series of objects and situations, transforming usual functions and meanings.

Using this *ready-made* approach, I also proposed *Kamikaze*, an installation consisting of a handcart overloaded with gas cylinders. A piece that on the one hand brings forth the issue of safety and human carelessness in handling everyday but dangerous objects, and on the other ironically echoes the constant paranoia of the dangers of Islamic terrorism in the West. Once again, an everyday object reveals and promotes 'other' reflections, related to both the local and global context.

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