

PRESS RELEASE

*Les Mains parallèles*¹

claim

On 9 October 2018, a law penalizing all forms of racial discrimination was adopted in Tunisia. That event marked a stage in the struggle being waged by militants and activists for the black cause in our country. Among these latter are Maha Abdelhamid and Saadia Mosbah, two women and leading figures in this fight against making people invisible. These two names were also among the first mentioned by M'barek Bouhchichi, during our phone call: we were starting out from a universal observation, to do with the question of existence and the attempt to cover up individual and collective struggles. A violent setting of segregation and social tensions. Our conversation was interrupted. We resumed and a third name came, that of Slim Merzouk, a black Tunisian militant and researcher. We gradually talked about the exhibition *Les Mains parallèles*, which, within the Tunisian context, transposes questions which engaged the artist for many years in Morocco. In the gallery context, new works are being shown, thought up and conceived between Tunisia and Morocco. This *modus operandi* is an attempt to gauge the differences by sketching liaisons between communities, histories and people.

How can one claim something, over and above a mere reaction? We have mentioned the career and involvement of Slim Merzouk. As a young black student at the time of the French protectorate, his career took him to France and the United States. Back in Tunisia after the country's independence in 1956, he was keen to work on the project of creating a political party defending the voice of the black communities in the south of the country; in his village near Gabès, Merzouk was cut short in his political ambitions and interned for almost four decades in a psychiatric hospital—a period during which he crossed paths with Frantz Fanon (1935-1961). Having taken refuge in Tunis in 1956, and in addition to his work at *El Moudjahid*, and his political engagement, Fanon invested a great deal of energy in setting up and running a day-care centre; an advanced model of psychiatric care, especially in the de-colonized countries. So how was it possible, as an artist and by way of writing, to question that modern Tunisia, the first country to have abolished slavery in that part of the world? The lack of sources and documents about Slim Merzouk leads us to think about our understanding of those neglected figures in Tunisia's history, and the role of the psychiatric hospital as a political tool of exclusion. The exhibition raises the issue of politics as a vector for getting rid of individuals, contexts and deep-rooted histories. Bouhchichi was aware of that history, which became the trigger for his work and the writing he duly developed.

That writing passed by way of the repetition of forms and inscriptions which continually recur in his oeuvre. But if Bouhchichi repeats himself, he also, and almost as frequently, repeats all or part of "external" compositions. In the history of art, this systematization of repetition has often been regarded as a problem. It actually opposes the values of originality, novelty and invention—principles on which western art has been built since at least the Renaissance. So it is impossible to explain it in the narrative plot of a modern art history governed by the idea of progress. In Bouhchichi's praxis, this feature is eventually justified from a political, philosophical and cultural viewpoint, and some will see therein a philosophical line of thinking at work. Art historians have usually contrasted repetition with artists' originality. The distinctive thing about Bouhchichi resides in his capacity to make a kind of synthesis between these two contrary ways of conceiving the production of images and forms.

We find a “manual” dimension in his oeuvre, combining material and practical aspects with regard to the “historical” and the “political” which imbue his approach. The artist cannot confine himself to this “manual” part of art and remain captive to technical issues. The intellectual horizon of his work is underpinned by extremely lofty intentions, historical, philosophical, and political intentions which he transposes to the Tunisian context, through his work, and its present state. Bouhchichi respects this craftsmanlike part of his art, as is illustrated by the works in this show, produced in collaboration with different groups and trade associations. He stresses the vector whereby the work comes into being, namely, the hand. Unlike certain Renaissance painters, striving to delete the manual share of their activity, Bouhchichi readily likens his art to a factory involving body, hands and even fingers, because in some works a duplication of the signature by way of finger-prints is at work, thus making these latter the vestige of multiple physical contacts. *Les Mains parallèles* conjures up the power of artistic action, the act of “making”, through which forms come into being. For anyone wanting to gauge the importance of repetition in his work, it thus seems impossible to gloss over a precise analysis of his procedures.

repetition

The exhibition displays this *modus operandi* at close quarters. Based on research, meetings and note-taking involving a given context from which he takes narratives and forms and reproduces his own, the artist transports us from one cut-out to the next. These procedures might be likened to cutting out a form in order to put it back together in a different way, and make other forms from it. Bouhchichi creates a diversity through the juxtaposition of a host of signs. Before being an economic discovery, a cultural habit or a philosophical intention, repetition is akin, above all, to a method. The methodical nature of repetition appears when one endeavours to distinguish the different forms of repetition through which one’s work proceeds. First and foremost, repetition can affect the composition as a whole. So the remake is never total. The artist also has the habit of repeating certain forms and motifs. The work *Lieux de mémoire* (2019) is part of this same common thread. Composed of four abstract forms made of black ceramic realized in Morocco, the artist extracts here one of the three versions of this series. Beyond the use of sequencing, resumption and seriality, the work constitutes itself from topographical coordinates, the latter coming from cemeteries in black communities in Djerba, Gahbaya neighborhood in Gabès, L’mdou and finally Arram. This double plot prompts us to question, in particular, the place of history, which is here almost completely shifted. These procedures invite us to reflect about the liaison, separation and creation of free connections. So the present is governed by traces of monuments and places of memory which are not wound up, in the Tunisian and Moroccan contexts. Bouhchichi’s intent is to invite an awareness—individual and collective—of these historical and topographical data which are then given a positive gloss by the artist’s gesture of inscription. It is the permutation of the different series which creates variation by the use of procedures involving shifts and insertion.

Bouhchichi is often very free in his use of re-use and remakes sometimes produced in very different geographical and temporal contexts--through a whole host of gestural transformations. These variations of repetition show that the artist does not leave what he re-uses intact. The remakes are never total, because he tries to maintain the possibility of questioning the legitimacy of a work. Two seemingly identical works are in reality different in their production, either because of the materials used, or by the treatment--because repetition is not linked to the transfer of a canon associated with art history. For example, the artist may re-use almost all of a narrative or form by making an almost identical re-use of them—or, more simply, taking fragments based on geographical and contextual data—by way of a partial remake. If there is a difference between these two forms of repetition—endogenous and exogenous--, it is at an inter-discursive level. It is possible because of the liaison of a plentiful discourse which introduces relations between art systems. This difference has the twofold effect of including the *recipient* work in the *great text* of art, and enriching its meaning through a palimpsest effect.

The exhibition *Les Mains parallèles* thus develops a series of complex relations which connect the artist to people, places, histories, and images. It enables the artist to be part and parcel of a history to which he contributes by his gesture of introducing and testing present time. In this same perspective, *Étude pour un monument* (2019) creates liaisons between spaces and forms—more precisely the form of the ladder that we find in Berber and sub-Saharan architecture. The artist prefers the simplified and geometric form by asking questions: *What can the monument still do today? Does it always belong to governments?* So forms are catalysts for these questions, which they blend, connect, separate and overlay. The artist renders his relation to history more complex, from both a synchronic—his relation to the different people and contemporary voices invoked—and a diachronic viewpoint, through his participation in a history of forms, in the long term.

syntax

To get back to the factory itself, we should note that, whatever the nature of the remakes produced—composition, figure, his own or a borrowed invention—, what hallmarks Bouhchichi's *modus operandi* is the instrumental nature of the repeated units. These latter are no more nor less than free forms earmarked for re-assembly. This is what transpires in the context of the exhibition which makes it possible to keep traces of the artist's research. He organizes his studio and work-places in such a way that he can always return to his earlier works; especially in the production of replicas enabling him to come up with new works using a combination of earlier forms and compositions. His approach thus deals with what exists, it is at once retrospective, but also reliant on raw and simple materials (untreated oxidized metal, wood, wool, natural Tunisian pigments) and eclectic sources questioning the origin of things. The series of weavings titled *Tibratine* (2019) presents an abstract alphabet on colourful textile surfaces, made in southern Morocco. Each chapter seeks to make a connection between the people making use of the connection, like a gesture against exclusion. The artist's hands thus make different syntactic uses of formal units. They represent for him what, for the poet and musician, are elements enveloping and invading their mind and thinking in their place—in their work on language, music, syllabary, expressions and sounds.

The same goes for the artist, more or less. If it is easy for him to work with remains and waste of events, this is because all the forms he produces are based on units and forms, akin to what we find in the domain of language. Like an oral or written composition, formed by periods, sentences, and words, the composition can be divided, and fragmented.

cut-out

Let us note that this variable conception of forms is based on the principle of division. The pre-condition of the exhibition is based on many different forms of knowledge called on by the artist, wavering between distinction and classification, meetings and note-taking. He develops a whole body of artistic and historical knowledge, in its artisanal, practical and theoretical dimension; this same knowledge that is thus acquired by breaking down and fragmenting bodies and places. The artist uses segmentation as a pre-condition for almost every artistic operation. The series *Un cinquième* is made up of three ramifications, *Un cinquième terre – métayage*, *Un cinquième proposition 1* and *Un cinquième proposition, 2, version 1*. He is referring here to the society of sharecropping, an issue he has broached in Morocco, which he includes in the Tunisian context. Bouhchichi develops a line of questioning about living together, the evocation of the form of the rectangle (referring to a plot of land), the dovetailing and confrontation of forms which complicate the issue of the legitimacy of land-ownership.

By introducing distinction, the exhibition introduces a detailed, decompartmentalized knowledge, merging with a given context. The artist focuses on a knowledge of society, of the “whole” through its parts, meaning an historical

and contemporary knowledge of the relations established between these latter. So he takes a route proceeding by way of speculation, he composes using many different interpretations of the Word. He elaborates things with what exists, transfiguring nature and history through a knowledge of their specific manifestations and their rules. From this viewpoint, repetition is thus the sign of an ongoing struggle with contingency—*metis* and *techne* facing the accidental. The artist's research leads him to arrange forms and histories with a certain end purpose in mind; far from any production of new subjects or new heroes, but in favour of an arrangement made of systems. Composing a new narrative, an image or a form thus means re-arranging already existing elements: figures, places, acts, historical characters.

If art can be partly based on the re-assemblage of a given and historical material, we can understand that M'barek Bouhchichi has focused on repetition as a political category of the future. For him, repetition is creative. And it is creative because it has the strength to re-open the past onto the future. By repeating, we say something over and over again, we riposte, we lay claim. Repetition helps us to seek a solution among a host of possibilities which are apparently irreconcilable. The exhibition *Les Mains parallèles* offers a multitude of conjugations of the verb "to make" and refers to an unfinished action, a suspension whereby M'barek Bouhchichi takes cognizance of an always infinite and endless work, to be repeated forever.

Karima Boudou, 12 October 2019, Rotterdam

Translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods

1-*Les Mains parallèles* refers to the play of the same title written by Frantz Fanon in 1949. The context of the declaration earmarked by Fanon is a Greek place of fiction, the isle of Lesbos.