

## 9. | Brainteaser for moderate muslim



2004, acrylic on rubiks cubes, 54 x 11,5 x 13,5 cm.  
Exhibition view from Traces du sacré, Haus der Kunst, 2008, München.  
Courtesy of the artist and BARO galeria, Palma.  
Ed. of 5 + 1 A.P.

### Collection of Nadour, Krefeld

### Collection of a/political, London

*Casse-tête pour un musulman modéré* est une série de sculptures inspirées du célèbre jeu de logique Rubik's cube. L'œuvre s'inscrit dans un travail initié en 2004 avec la vidéo *Manipulations* et se poursuivant avec une série de photographies, une sculpture et finalement un jeu. Les jeux mis au point par Mounir Fatmi se composent de cubes à facettes noires, à l'exception d'une rangée de cubes portant un trait blanc sur une de leur face. La série de sculptures met en scène des Rubik's cubes identiques à différents stades de leur résolution, jusqu'à l'étape finale, qui fait apparaître une bande blanche continue sur la rangée supérieure.

L'œuvre examine les rapports du croyant à un objet cultuel. Elle questionne le rapport de ce dernier aux dogmes et aux rituels de sa religion. *Casse-tête pour un musulman modéré* étudie le geste rituel accompli par le croyant lors du pèlerinage à la Mecque, à savoir la circumambulation autour de la Kaaba (littéralement le "cube"). Chaque sculpture se propose comme la représentation du monument cultuel (la Kaaba), dont elle reprend la couleur noire et l'ornementation de la partie supérieure du cube par une frise calligraphique exprimant la profession de foi musulmane. Mounir Fatmi compare ainsi, d'une façon qui peut sembler humoristique, ironique, voire même paradoxale, la profession de foi irrationnelle du croyant effectuant des cercles autour du cube de la Mecque, aux stratégies rationnelles, logiques et

*Brainteaser for a moderate Muslim* is a series of sculptures inspired by the famous game of logic Rubik's Cube. The piece is part of a larger body of work initiated in 2004 with the video *Manipulations* and continued with a series of photographs, a sculpture and finally a game. The games created by Mounir Fatmi are composed of cubes with black faces, with the exception of one row of cubes with a white line on their faces. The series of sculptures shows identical Rubik's cubes in various stages of completion, until the final step, where a continuous white line appears on the upper row.

*Brainteaser for moderate Muslim* looks at the relation of a believer to an object of worship. The work questions his or her relation to religious dogma and rituals. It studies the ritual gesture accomplished by the believer during the pilgrimage to Mecca, namely the circumambulation around the Kaaba (literally the "cube"). The logical game is conceived as a representation of the monument of worship (the Kaaba), emulating its black color and ornamentation on its superior section by a calligraphic frieze expressing the Muslim profession of faith. In this way, Mounir Fatmi compares, with what can be perceived as humor or even irony, the irrational profession of faith of a believer walking in circles around the

mathématiques du joueur tentant de résoudre le Rubik's cube.

L'objet de culte se voit transformé en jeu de décodage où la raison intervient à nouveau et invite alors à une approche scientifique du divin. Plutôt que de faire tourner aveuglément et à l'infini le cube, et de tenter en vain d'épuiser les combinaisons possibles afin de rétablir un ordre, le casse-tête invite peut être à développer une stratégie fondée sur l'usage de la raison. Le titre de l'œuvre souligne la difficulté pour le croyant dit "modéré" - qui se réserve une distance critique par rapport aux dogmes de sa religion - à considérer de manière rationnelle l'objet de culte et le rituel qui lui est associé. La circumambulation autour de la Kaaba suppose un geste et une attitude irrationnelles du croyant. Elle suggère à celui-ci d'abandonner la réflexion et d'agir avec dévotion. L'œuvre exprime quant à elle la difficulté pour la raison d'appréhender l'objet de culte et le rituel, difficulté envisagée à son tour comme un problème à résoudre. Avec Casse-tête pour un musulman modéré, Mounir Fatmi tente d'aborder un phénomène d'une grande complexité avec les moyens limités de l'art. Le recours aux techniques inspirées du minimalisme permet finalement une approche de la complexité avec un minimum de moyens : à l'aide d'une forme géométrique simple et limitée, il réalise la description d'un univers de probabilités approchant l'infini.

S'affrontant à la création, les sculptures dressent ici un portrait de l'artiste en être libre de faire des choix et en concurrent de Dieu lui-même. Exposée derrière une vitrine, figée au sein d'un dispositif muséal et soustraite aux éventuelles manipulations des spectateurs, l'œuvre indique également le moment précis où l'objet quitte son statut ludique et interactif pour devenir une œuvre d'art soumise à l'attention d'observateurs passifs. Elle illustre enfin de quelle manière la démarche artistique s'apparente à un jeu consistant à opérer une sélection parmi un univers de possibilités quasiment infinies.

Studio Fatmi, Juillet 2017.

cube in Mecca with the rational, logical and mathematic strategies of a player trying to solve a Rubik's Cube.

The object of worship is transformed into a deciphering game where reason is present again, encouraging a scientific approach to the divine. Rather than to blindly and endlessly rotate the cube in a vain attempt to try every possible combination to restore an order, perhaps the brainteaser invites the viewer to develop a strategy based on the use of reason. The title of the work highlights the difficulty for a so-called "moderate" believer – who authorizes himself a certain critical distance with the dogma of his religion – to consider in a rational way the object of worship and the ritual associated with it. The circumambulation around the Kaaba requires an irrational gesture and attitude on the part of the believer. It pushes him to dismiss thought and to act with devotion. As for the work of art, it expresses the difficulty for reason to apprehend the object of worship and the ritual, a difficulty that is also seen as a problem that needs solving. With Brainteaser for moderate Muslim, Mounir Fatmi tries to tackle an extremely complex phenomenon with the limited means of art. Resorting to techniques inspired by minimalism enables him approach complexity with limited means: with a simple and limited geometric shape, he realizes the description of a universe of probabilities that touches on infinity.

Tackling the subject of creation, these sculptures show the artist as an individual who is free to make choices and in competition with God himself. Exposed behind a window, frozen within a museum configuration and shielded from any manipulations by the viewers, the work of art also indicates the precise moment when the object sheds its playful and interactive properties to become artwork subjected to the attention of passive observers. Finally, it illustrates how artistic propositions are akin to a game that would consist in making a selection among a practically infinite universe of possibilities.

Studio Fatmi, July 2017.

" The title suggests a playful reference to The Kaaba, a pre-Islamic monument rededicated by the prophet Muhammad, while the work as a whole invites

## critical thinking, with tones of political reflection. "

Elena Stanciu, PETRIe Magazine, 2016

### **exhibitions:**

2023

Breaking the Cycle - BARO galeria, Palma - Personal show

2021

1-54 Paris at Christie's - Wilde Gallery - Art Fair

2018

Systems of Demarcation - Von der Heydt-Kunsthalle - Expo collective

2015

All the World's a mosque - Théâtre de Carthage - Kamel Lazaar Foundation - Expo collective

2014

Le Maroc Contemporain - Institut du Monde Arabe - Expo collective

2009

Art Amsterdam - Solo show - Galerie Ferdinand van Dielen - Art fair

2008

Traces du sacré - Haus der Kunst - Expo collective

2006

Tête dure / Hard head - Bank Galerie - Solo show

2005

Ecrans noirs - Centre d'art contemporain intercommunal - Solo show

Africa remix, contemporary art of a continent - Hayward Gallery - Expo collective

2004

Comprendra bien qui comprendra le dernier - CAC Le Parvis - Solo show

## press articles:

Elena Stanciu, A struggle with meaning - The art of mounir fatmi, PETRIe, April 4th, 2016

PETRIe

### A STRUGGLE WITH MEANING - THE ART OF MOUNIR FATMI

It was shock, angst, and inescapable panic that introduced me to the work of Mounir Fatmi, a 'French artist in USA, an African artist in Europe'. His kinetic installation *Modern Times - A History of the Machine*, on show in Denmark's Brandts 131 gallery, sends the viewer into somatic overdrive, yet remains acutely conceptual, as it employs referential elements pertaining to both Western and Eastern (Islamic) aesthetics. Visual repetition, perpetual circular motion, illegible Arabic calligraphy, and aggressive sound create a sense of danger, announcing an imminent clash of worlds embracing the mechanics of modernity, but struggling to grasp the essence of it.

At times, Fatmi's works tap into strands of speculative philosophy, often breaking down bonds of meaning: objects are dislocated, taken beyond their instrumentality, reconceptualized, separated from the burden of a necessary relation to their qualities, in a potential attempt to explore what Graham Harman would call the 'object oriented ontology'.

In *Between the Lines*, a steel circular saw blade becomes the inscription surface for Quoran verses, which undergo a process of being emptied of semiotic content and rendered decorative elements. The defining qualities of both the object and of language are suspended, and the image becomes the new bearer of knowledge.

*Between the lines*, 2010, saw blade in steel, 150 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Photo credit: Mia Dudek

A portrait of Mounir Fatmi

In his creative process, Mounir Fatmi uses a variety of media and materials, and appropriates objects at hand, in attempts to question their materiality and attributed function. His artworks challenge the thingness of things, as they take the form of known objects, but occupy meanings beyond their shape and instrumentality; in *Brainteaser for Moderate Muslims*, the commonplace colourful cube is transformed, redirected towards new possibilities of its materialism. The title suggests a playful reference to The Kaaba, a pre-Islamic monument rededicated by the prophet Muhammad, while the work as a whole invites critical thinking, with tones of political reflection.

*Brainteaser for Moderate Muslim*, 2004, acrylic on rubiks cubes, 54 x 11 x 13,5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Photo credit : Rebecca Fanuele

Fatmi's oeuvre contains political statements, at various levels of articulation, which have the value to inform criticism and confront hierarchical or binary structures. Religious or ethnic identity is explored in the series titled *Face*. Here, markers of gender and lineage survive fragmentation and erasure, speaking to the dangers of prejudice and reductionism.

In a moment of reflection, Mounir notes: 'there are some things that cannot be named, nor described, and these are the things I am trying to show in my work.' This makes me doubt my own attempt to contain his work, to apply my limited language to his unlimited creative universe. Am I closer to the truth of a thing when I name it, when I describe it, or when its presence makes me feel shock, angst, and inescapable panic?



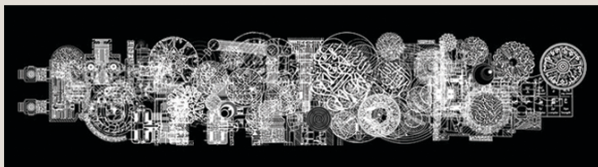
No Witness, (Portrait format) series started in 1906, 1995 paintings erased in 1906, 25,5 x 38 cm



Face, 1999, serie of 13 drawings, ink and acrylic on paper, 29,7 x 21 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Private collection. Photo credit : mounir fatmi

Elena Stanciu: found your work in Merchants of Dreams : An exhibition of Contemporary Moroccan Art – Modern Times – a History of the Machine 1– to be very powerful and a compelling commentary to contemporary social and political realities. Tell me a little about what inspired you.

Mounir Fatmi: Modern Times – A History of the machine is about the speed of modernization in the Arab World. With the speed of industrialisation, cities in the Middle East appear out of the desert, with buildings thrown up so fast that there is no time to reflect on the changes. "Modern Times" explores architecture in the Middle East, raising the question of the human impact of this unrelenting



Modern Times History of the machine, 2010, France, video installation, 15 min, HD, B&W, stereo. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town Photo credit : Mounir Fatmi

ES: How did you come to choose this piece to be shown in Denmark? How do you think the Danish public will react to your work, and to Moroccan and African art throughout this biennale?

MF: Christian Skovbjerg invited me to exhibit in the Images 2016 biennale in Denmark. We met in Paris about one year ago to discuss the exhibition, as he wanted to focus on Moroccan artists. It is great to have the opportunity to show my work there. Scandinavian cultures are very far from me and luckily art is the perfect opportunity to build cultural bridges.



Deconstruction Structure N°1, 2013-2014, Typewriter, hammers, A4 paper on office desk, video on flatscreen, Bilboquet game, typed sheets. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town. Exhibition view from Merchant of Dreams. Photo credit : Viborg Kunsthal

ES: You are very particular about consumption and the subject of consumption. Could you elaborate on these concepts, and on how they influence your work?

MF: I am concerned with the end of the object, the notion that one object becomes something else, like VHS becoming a town like in my installation Skyline, antenna cables become networks and depict a geometric pattern like in Kissing Circles.

I have started to explore the notion of politics, that it becomes the object of consumption like in the project Mutation, where the ideology of the Black Panthers Party became the brand of a hot sauce to raise money for children, or Picasso who is now a car produced by Renault, or even the PC, which was the Communist Party in French is now the Personal Computer. All those displacements are very interesting to me, as I observe how the world changes in terms of using images and creating meaning.



left:

The Lost Springs, October 2011, 3 brooms of 3 meters, 22 flags of arabian countries, 300 x 405 x 40 cm.

Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg-Cape Town.

Exhibition view from Le Monde Selon..., FRAC Franche Comté-Besançon, 2015. Photo credit : Blaise Adillon



ES: At the moment, Europe is struggling to make sense of various kinds of Otherness, which leads to particular crises – of identity, of meaning, of communication. Can art contribute to solving these issues?

MF: Otherness is a complex issue that I address in many of my works, for example in *Who is Joseph Anton?*, *The Blinding Light*, or *Darkening Process*.

I live in Paris and when I am in the USA, I am a French Artist, but when I am in France, I am a Middle Eastern or African artist. I am always from somewhere else, wherever I am! I see here an urgency to understand the other, to accept and to learn with the other, and art can be a way to facilitate this.



*The Impossible Union*, 2011, arabic calligraphies of steel, hebrew typewriter. Courtesy of the artist and Collection of the Kunstpalast Museum, Duesseldorf. Photo credit : Mounir Fatmi

ES: I see a recurrent motif in your works – Arabic calligraphy, visually manipulated and aesthetically repurposed, to the point that words and language abandon their function. Tell me a little about this.

MF: Indeed, the text in my work loses its function and becomes an image. Language loses its meaning and for me there is a kind of inability to mean something. Claude Levi-Strauss asks in his book, *The Jealous Potter*: "what does the verb to mean mean?"

We can discuss many things but there are some things that cannot be named, nor described and that is what I am trying to show in my work.

Words: Elena Stanciu

Artist: Mounir Fatmi

