45. | The Journey of Claude Levi-Strauss





2013, 3 channels video, HD, 30 minutes.
Exhibition view of The Sea is my land, MAXXI, 2012, Rome.
Courtesy of the artist and Ceysson & Bénétière, Paris.
Ed. of 5 + 1 A.P.

La fin des voyages

« Je hais les voyages et les explorateurs » c'est avec cette phrase que Claude Lévi-Strauss commença son livre Tristes Tropiques, obligé maintes fois de s'expliquer devant l'utilisation de cette phrase dure et sincère à la fois.
Les ethnologues de l'époque, les amateurs de voyages et les adeptes des expéditions dont il refusa de faire partie ne peuvent pas relier cette phrase à un autre voyage, celui de la dernière chance, celui de l'exil. Grâce au plan de sauvetage des savants européens menacés par l'occupation allemande et les lois raciales d'octobre 1940, Lévi-Strauss reçoit une invitation de la New Scool for Social Research de New York élaborée par la Fondation Rockefeller. … Il fallait y partir, mais comment ?

En Bateau

Dans un extrait du deuxième chapitre de Tristes Tropiques, il raconte : « (..)je n'aurai pas mon visa, le passeport me fut rendu avec un geste navré. »
A Marseille, il apprend qu'un bateau devait bientôt partir pour la Martinique. "Finalement j'obtins mon billet de passage sur le Capitaine – Paul Lemerle, mais je ne commençai à comprendre que le jour de l'embarquement, en franchissant les haies de gardes mobiles, casqués et mitraillettes aux poings, qui encadraient le quai et coupaient les passagers de tout contact avec les parents ou amis venus les accompagner, abrégeant les adieux par des bourrades et des injures : il s'agissait bien d'aventure solitaire, c'était plutôt un départ de forçats(…).
En plus de sa cargaison humaine, le bateau transportait je ne

The end of travels

"I hate traveling and explorers." It is with this sentence that Claude Levi-Strauss began his book, Tristes Tropiques, a critical yet honest sentence that required repeated explanation from him over the years.
Anthropologists and amateur explorers of the time with whom he refused to join, could not link this opening line with another type of travel, the last chance voyage, that of exile. With the threat of German occupation and the racial laws established in October 1940, European intellectuals were rapidly fleeing the continent for safety, and it was at this time that Levi-Strauss received an invitation from the New School for Social Research in New York, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. He had to go ... but how would he get there?

By Boat

In an excerpt from the second chapter of Tristes Tropiques, he says: "(..) I will not have my visa, my passport was handed back to me with a sorry gesture. "
While in Marseille, he learned that a boat was soon leaving for Martinique. "Finally I got my ticket for passage on the Captain - Paul Lemerle, but I realized on the day of embarkation, with the helmeted guards blocking the platform with their machine guns, cutting off last goodbyes from friends and relatives who were to remain, as well as those who were there to hurl insults and taunts to departing passengers, that I was beginning a solitary adventure that, one felt more like a voyage of convicts.
He continues, "In addition to its human cargo, the ship was

sais quel matériau clandestin ; on passa un temps prodigieux, en Méditerranée et sur la côte occidentale de l'Afrique, à se réfugier de port en port pour échapper, semble-t-il au contrôle de la flotte anglaise". Du 24 mars jusqu'au 20 avril 1941, à bord du Capitaine – Paul Lemerle, navire qui parti de Marseille avec plus de 350 voyageurs passant par Casablanca, Fort-de- France, Puerto Rico et finalement l'arrivée à New York où Lévi-Strauss trouvera refuge, plusieurs rencontres ont eu lieu.
On peut dire que pendant cette traversée de l'Atlantique, le hasard a fait qu'une partie de l'histoire des sciences humaines s'est écrite. Des liens entre un courant artistique, le surréalisme, et une pensée sauvage et structuraliste se sont liés. L'histoire raconte qu'en escale à Casablanca, Lévi Strauss entend un homme décliner son nom lors d'une remise de passeport, cette homme n'était autre qu'André Breton. Dans son livre Regarder, Ecouter, Lire Lévi-Strauss raconte : "Vous imaginez quel choc j'ai pu ressentir. Je me suis présenté à lui et nous avons sympathisé".
Il écrit aussi dans Tristes Tropiques: "La racaille, comme disaient les gendarmes, comprenait entre autres André Breton…Dans ce navire ou plutôt ce "camp de concentration flottant" figuraient entre autres, l'historien d'art John Rewald, Jacqueline Lamba, Victor Serge, la romancière allemande Anna Seghers, le couple d'Helena Benitez et Wifredo Lam.

C'est ce voyage qui le conduira à s'exiler à New York que mounir fatmi propose de développer dans le projet « le Voyage de Claude Lévi-Strauss » sous la forme d'un carnet de voyage vidéo sur trois ou plusieurs écrans.

Le projet de l'installation consiste aussi à connecter les différents voyages et déplacements de l'anthropologue explorateur. Redessinant son parcours qui commença dans l'atelier de son père, qui était peintre, Paris la ville où il adorait flâner, le choix de la philosophie, de l'anthropologie, le parcours du Mato Grosso, le Brésil, l'exil à New York, l'adoption de la méthode structurale, la notoriété mondiale, le Collège de France, l'Académie française. Lévi-Strauss a passé sa vie à voyager.
De sa naissance à Bruxelles le 28 novembre 1908, jusqu'à son dernier voyage le matin du 30 octobre 2009 à Paris où il laisse derrière lui une oeuvre magistrale, il reste le seul chef d'orchestre.

L'installation ne se veut pas un récit biographique de la vie de Lévi-Strauss. C'est l'exil et le déplacement de milliers d'immigrés dans le monde, souvent dans les même conditions de ce voyage de 1941, qui intéressent mounir fatmi.
Plus que le voyage, c'est plutôt l'impossibilité du voyage, les frontières, les visas et le poids des identités que le voyageur exilé est obligé d'affronter qui forment le sujet de cette installation.

mounir fatmi, mars 2013.

carrying some sort of illegal material…. We spent a wonderful time on the Mediterranean and on the west coast of Africa, taking refuge from port to port to escape, it seems, being controlled by an English fleet." There would be many interesting and unlikely encounters on board the Captain - Paul Lemerle ship that left Marseille with over 350 passengers on March 24, 1941, passing through Casablanca, Fort-de-France, Puerto Rico, and finally arriving New York City on April 20, where Levi-Strauss would find his refuge.
We can say that during this Atlantic crossing, chance allowed a great chapter in the humanities to be written. Links between the artistic movements of surrealism, structuralism, and his pensée savage or the untamed human thought, were brought together. The story goes that during the stopover in Casablanca, Levi Strauss overheard a man give his name at a checkpoint, this man was none other than André Breton. In his book Watching, Listening, Reading, Levi-Strauss says: "you can imagine what a shock I have felt. I introduced myself to him and we got on well immediately."
Lévi-Strauss also writes in Tristes Tropiques: "on bard the ship, or rather 'floating concentration camp,' the rabble, as the police called it, included among others André Breton, the art historian John Rewald, Jacqueline Lamba, Victor Serge, the German novelist Anna Seghers, the couple Helena Benitez and Cuban artist, Wifredo Lam.

It is this journey of exile that took Lévi Strauss to New York that Mounir Fatmi proposes to develop in the project titled, "The Journey of Claude Lévi-Strauss." It will take the form of a travelogue film to be presented on three screens or more.

The project also proposes to connect the various travels and displacements of the anthropologist/explorer. It will re-trace his journey that began in the studio of his father, a painter, in Paris the city in which he loved to wander, his choice of philosophy, anthropology, the route to Mato Grosso, Brazil, exile in New York, the adoption of the structuralist method, global awareness, the College de France, the French Academy. Levi-Strauss spent his life traveling.
From his birth in Brussels on November 28, 1908, until his last outing on the morning of October 30, 2009 in Paris, Lévi-Strauss left behind a vast body of work, and he remained his own conductor in his life's journeys.

The installation does not want to present a biography of the life of Lévi-Strauss. It is the exile and displacement of the thousands of immigrants around the world who undergo similar, stressful conditions that he experienced on this trip of 1941, that interests Mounir Fatmi.
More than the travel, it is rather the impossibility of travel, through the borders, visas, and weight of identities that the traveler is forced to face in exile which is the subject of this installation.

mounir fatmi, march 2013.

" Who knows what to do? Who

knows what to believe? One of the principal lessons learned from the French anthropologist is that the savage is not quite who you think.
Thus came about the study of the supposedly primitive Indians. He found that they had a much greater knowledge of their environment than he could have possessed: names of plants, birds, flowers, trees…
A plethora of things that he did not know. "

Anti-utopias, January 2017

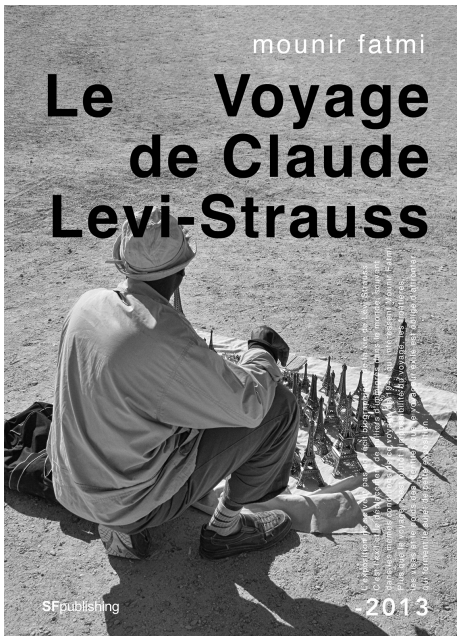
exhibitions:

2013

Le Voyage de Claude Lévi-Strauss - Institut Français, Casablanca - Solo show

The Sea is my land - MAXXI Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Rome - Expo collective

Ici, Ailleurs - La Friche Belle de Mai, Marseille - Expo collective



Le voyage de Claude Lévi-Strauss, SFpublishing 2025

The installation project consists of connecting the different journeys and movements of the anthropologist-explorer.

Institut Français, Casablanca, October 2013



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