
mounir fatmi
The Observer Effect

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It was in 2003 when mounir fatmi (Tangier, Morocco, 1970) began the production of a sculpture entitled *Propagande*¹, the piece would be seen the following year in his solo show at the CAC Le Parvis in Ibos². This cubic construction made with VHS videotapes stacked on top of a metal stand, bursts in like a flagrant monument to obsolescence, a vestige that places on its pedestal one of the symbols of the frenetic decline suffered by all technological products. This enigmatic Kaaba-like structure, not only critiques the maddening maelstrom that is the digital, the frenetic pace of progress, the industrial collapse, the alienating fierce capitalism and unbridled consumerism, but it also contains less obvious perspectives that appeal against certain institutions, conventions and norms, to religion and politics, to information, to their ill-affected manipulation and to that sibylline post-truth that tries to condition our movements³. These vectors of complex coordinates position *Propagande* as a device that questions the actions of different factual powers, of those who become prescribers of biased, limited, and instrumentalized knowledge to the point of nausea, promoting proselytism and thus invisibilizing free spirits that are engulfed by globalization's gray cloak, and that are annihilated under a layer of stupidity that destroys science, consciences, differences, and coexistence.

All of this takes place amidst the communication era, in this chronological context in which imperative conditioning factors and restrictive borders are in contradiction with the very essence of our time, that of a liquid and flexible world in permanent mutation and constant change. With this piece, mounir fatmi questions himself, interrogates us, about the heterogeneous motives that are in the genesis of the construction of ideas, in the archeology of images, showing, for better and for worse, its infinite polysemy, its representation, and its representativeness. A work that takes the form of a disturbing and uninhabitable architecture, authoritarian in structure, in its appearance, but precarious if subjected to a critical, rigorous, and attentive analysis. A container of outdated and irreproducible information that is the perfect field of action for manipulation, lies, and bias. fatmi puts this question on the discussion table, on the pedestal of the old monument, dematerializing the artistic object to materialize it again, offering the iconoclastic possibility of destroying its architecture so that, on those remains, on its ruins, on the rubble, it can be built again.

This *Propagande* from 2003 is the seed from which a series of recently produced pieces emerge. They share the same name and are made out of the same VHS videos, but this time, they are assembled into wooden frames that support them as two-dimensional installations on the walls of the room⁴. Their morphology can allude to a type of organic growth, to a metastatic cell multiplication spreading throughout the exhibition space. A reference to the pixel is also evident, to that minimum bit of visual information that connects with the way images are represented in “technological pioneerism”. Black masses expand on the wall of the gallery as if typical paintings from digital archeology. By 2005, mounir fatmi, had already presented a first specific installation under the title *Ecrans Noirs* at Centre d'Art Contemporain Intercommunal in Istres⁵. Since then, these proposals made with VHS were taking different forms, some with the magnetic tape itself abruptly coming out of the case. In that way, a city skyline⁶, a tomb⁷, an electric chair⁸ or a Tower of Babel⁹, made up a disturbing panorama completed by the forcefulness of the other installations that conquered the space through the excess of beauty and the sinister¹⁰: *Ghosting*¹¹, *Le Mur*¹² o *Dark Memory*¹³.

For this current exhibition at ADN Galeria in Barcelona, fatmi has conceived one of these installations, a piece that extends along the walls and the floors of the room, competes with the viewer for the space itself, and generates a hallucinatory dimension which the observer must face. *Already Dead 01*¹⁴ continues to speak of progress and obsolescence, of massive reproduction, uniqueness, ideas, their manipulation, and transmission, but also about the power of images. All that historiographic genealogy, manifests through subtle links to the geometry of art and to the means of economic minimalism. However, fatmi's research moves away from neutrality and seeks a permanent position that distances them from any innocuity. The VHS tapes that conform these pieces, filled with images and sounds, full of information that now stays encrypted given the impossibility of reproducing their content, due to the practically non-existence of devices to view them, becomes an archaic prefiguration of that contemporary black mirror that, with the force of a black hole, traps everything inside, dispossessing us of our true essence, leaving us without a clear path of return, absorbing our attention, our lives, our concerns, our desires and all our fears.

Science defines the “observer effect” as the disturbance that occurs in any organized system by the mere act of observing, by the bare presence of the observer. The most obvious examples being those associated with the interference that the instruments and actions to carry out such controls exert on the observed. Although the effects of observation are hardly perceptible in the observed, it is also true that, however insignificant they may be, some changes do occur. This physical statement has also

inflected into a definition of a social component, a belief based on emotional issues that indicates that the presence of a conscious observer can modify the observed reality. This effect, *The Observer Effect*, is what gives its name to this exhibition, an exhibition that brings together some of fatmi's most recent productions based on paradigmatic elements and concepts present in his work: archeology, architecture, the archive, technology, the analogical, the machine, the written word, scientific knowledge, artistic creation and the questioning of the role of the artist in a society in crisis. It is precisely the latter concept that directly alludes to the title of this project for ADN Galeria. mounir fatmi proposes a system of expansive influence in which the creator places himself as the first observer of a world he assimilates, interprets, and exposes through his work, pieces that, in turn, will be contemplated, processed, and communicated by every new viewer. An elementary yet sophisticated mechanism seeking to influence critically on the construction of realities and their stories.

*Vision Périphérique*¹⁵ is one of the works on view that is more closely related to this curious effect caused by observation. It consists of four black and white photographic self-portraits, where we see the artist from the front, back, and side. The face is hidden partially by a large geometric measuring instrument, a protractor that shows the possible field of vision extending before it. A wide perimeter range that, nevertheless, has a blind spot coinciding with the neck of the creator where nothing is observed, where fears, uncertainties, and restlessness lie, where things are beyond our control. A piece that reveals our limitations when understanding the world that surrounds us, the deficiencies of visual language, and the frontiers that the artist encounters when translating his ideas into images¹⁶. While the central human vision is detailed and analytical, the peripheral gaze offers general impressions, the one that captures environments, the one that intuits environments, that said fatmi, is interested in the act of seeing as a set of cognitive processes and that, in his case, connects with a sensitivity predisposed to science. Delving into his work we find two direct precedents of this *Vision Périphérique*: *Soddy*¹⁷, where art, knowledge, and poetry once again have a meeting point, and *L'Aveugle*¹⁸, in which the self-portrait emerges as a means to address identity issues. All of them are pieces that appeal to a futuristic aesthetic that connects them with the avant-garde. mounir fatmi states that this peripheral vision is one of the powers endowed upon artists: a decentralized, global, and synthesized view, based on links and connections, that broadens his perception of the world that allows him to look at his surroundings critically.

Without any excuses or unnecessary rhetoric, this statement serves as a decided position that the creator takes, maintains, and completes with the writing of his own Manifesto (2018)¹⁹, a visceral text that he makes vehemently as a therapeutic, healing, sincere, and

poetic device. This writing is not only a showcase of principles that govern his pieces intellectually, but it also takes material form in some of them. As seen in the series *Coma, Manifesto*²⁰, we find two examples of sculptures made of oxidized metal plates from which the letters of this manifesto have been laser cut and put to rest on the ground. The leaning panels play a game of shadows on the walls while these texts are seen as projected dematerialized thoughts and its cut-out letters are placed physically at their base. Mounir Fatmi puts language on the scene as one of the fundamental elements of his investigations through *Coma, Manifesto*, a kind of essential redoubt of his ideas that safeguards his intellect, artistic integrity, and what relates to his personal life. In a previous piece entitled *Coma*²¹, Fatmi already touches on the healing gesture of creation, the relationship between artist and public, and the archival nature of his work, an installation that, in a way, is a direct prologue of this written manifesto and of the sculpture *Coma, Manifesto*. Derivative works that use testimony and autobiography as sources, that is, the relationship of the artist in the first person with his personal, family, and social history, exploring the correspondences between language, culture and identity.

It is precisely in the loins of his culture and his identity where Mounir Fatmi's most recognizable and iconic pieces delve into²². It responds to a technique that he has been using since 1998 and that receives the generic title *Racines*. Made with white antenna cable and presented in the form of spatial installations, sculptures, or wall reliefs, the creator appeals to the entire tradition of Islamic art's geometry and plant motif, to shape disturbing technological *atauriques* where the viewer gets lost within an endless entanglement; a perfect metaphor of what contemporaneity is. The reference to the term "root" that gives name to this entire line of research, establishes a direct connection with the cultural origin of the artist and with those contradictions that cause the stereotypes that arise around said substrate. *Racines 08*²³, the piece shown in this exhibition, is a wall sculpture that uses retro-technology, those cables that used to connect television sets to their antennas and transmit images, as a material in danger of extinction that, from a double perspective, appeals to the concepts of archive, history and tradition, but also to all those relationships that the artist establishes with the other cultures he knows and that have influenced him.

The *Obstacle* series also belongs to this line of research that has accompanied the artist for much of his career²⁴. Starting from the barriers used in equestrian show jumping, Fatmi addresses this extra-artistic element from multiple angles, firstly from the evidence of the aesthetic, physical and perceptual attractiveness that these objects possess, secondly, appealing to the conceptual, existential and sociopolitical interest of the same.

With formalizations associated with artistic movements as diverse as pop art, constructivism, minimalist austerity or the Duchampian ready-made, fatmi, elaborates some installation sculptures that without a doubt, appeal to the flagrant limitation of mobility, the imposition of borders, and to political oppression, but also, in an indirect way, to the exercises of resistance against all these questions, to basic binary structures that point back to construction and destruction, to the erection and overthrow, action and its consequences. *The Observer Effect 01*²⁵ is the work that, within this set of obstacles, gives title to this exhibition, a singular piece that is responsible for establishing a double game: on the one hand it raises the barrier of the show jumping contests as an archaic monument, on the other hand, it deactivates it with its relocation from the base to a pedestal that disables its original function, placed instead as a blocking icon, of difficulty, while offering it to a public, an attentive observer, who will seek to modify its contents and many of its effects.

Fernando Gómez de la Cuesta

1. *Propagande*, VHS and metal pedestal, 67 x 189 x 67 cm, 2003-2004.
2. Mounir Fatmi: *Comprendra bien qui comprendra le dernier*, Centre d'Art Contemporain Le Parvis, Ibos, France, 2004. [curated by Odile Biec]
3. Attributed to David Robert's concept of post-truth, used in his article: "Post-truth politics", *Grist*, 1 April of 2010. [<https://grist.org/article/2010-03-30-post-truth-politics/>], nevertheless, this premonitory piece by fatmi was conceived in 2003 seven years prior.
4. *Propagande 01*, *Propagande 03* and *Propagande 04*, VHS and wooden frame, variable dimensions, unique piece, 2021.
5. mounir fatmi: *Ecrans Noirs*, Centre d'Art Contemporain Intercommunal, Istres, France, 2005. [curated by Bernadette Clot-Goudard]
6. *Skyline*, VHS, 800 x 365 cm, 2007.
7. *Va et attends moi*, VHS, wall paint and acrylics, variable dimensions, 2007.
8. *Gardons Espoir*, VHS, mirror floor and leather belts, variable dimensions, 2007.
9. *Babel House / Empire*, VHS, brooms, black flags, wooden signs and lights, 150 x 150 x 300 cm, 2008.
10. "Lo bello, sin referencia a lo siniestro, carece de fuerza y vitalidad para poder ser bello", Eugenio Triás: *Lo bello y lo siniestro*, Editorial Ariel, Barcelona, 1992, p. 42.
11. *Ghosting*, VHS, Xerox machines, video projection and black acrylic painted phrase, variable dimensions, 2009.
12. *Le Mur*, VHS, 56'5 x 598 x 207 cm, 2011.
13. *Dark Memory*, VHS and brooms, 190 x 120 x 110 cm, 2014-15.
14. *Already Dead 01*, VHS, floor and wall installation, variable dimensions, 2021.
15. *Vision Périphérique*, pigment print on fine art paper, framed, series of 4 photographs, 70 x 105 cm, 2017.
16. "The limits of my language are the limits of my world", Ludwig Wittgenstein: *Tractatus logico philosophicus*, Alianza, Madrid, 2018, p. 123.
17. *Soddy*, pigment print on barium paper, 30 x 20 cm, 2014.
18. *L'Aveugle*, C-Print, 50 x 70 cm, 2015.
19. <http://www.mounirfatmi.com/manifesto.html>
20. *Coma Manifesto 01* and *Coma Manifesto 04*, steal panel, 170 x 90 cm, 2018.
21. *Coma*, paint on canvas, plastic wrap and photographs, variable dimensions, 1998.
22. See for example: *Mondes parallèles*, antenna cable and adhesive tape, 12 m long, 1999-2008.
23. *Racines 08*, antenna cable and staples, 111 x 80,5 cm, cable length 112 cm, 2016.
24. See for example: *Mur d'obstacles 01*, painted show jumping bars, variable dimensions, 2004.
25. *The Observer Effect 01*, sculpture made of equestrian show jumping bar and pedestal, variable dimensions, 2021.