

## From Commonplace to Common Ground: Facial Injury in Kader Attia's *Continuum of Repair*

This essay assesses the ambivalent gesture of repair in the work of the Franco-Algerian artist Kader Attia, in particular as it is brought to bear upon the history of the facially injured soldiers of the First World War, or *gueules cassées* as they are known in French. Attia's recent work mobilises the formal possibilities of installation art in order to ask searching questions of the epistemological frameworks within which the experience of the *gueules cassées* has been understood in the last hundred years. His recent installations embed practices of cutting, stitching and sculpting in installation forms which scrutinise the cultural groundings of knowledge, as the process of reworking materials also signals a reconfiguration of the field of knowledge in which art-works are situated. I focus in particular on Attia's *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012) and *Continuum of Repair: the Light of Jacob's Ladder* (2013-14) and the assessment in those works of artistic craft as a means of addressing the complex cultural history of facial injury.

That history is scrutinised by means of the notion of the 'continuum', which problematically suggests a relationship of equivalence between surgical and non-surgical repair and, equally, between Western and non-Western facial modification in the present and the past. In this, Attia's meditation on facial injury is closely linked to the strand of his work concerned with the problematic of shared space in architectural forms, for example in *Rochers carrés* (2008). Both are contextualised here by reference to the notion of the *lieu commun* in the work of Edouard Glissant, in particular in its capacity to evoke both shared space and a convulsive poetic encounter which brings into contact spaces remote from each other. The architectural articulation of common space, meanwhile, returns in the construction of a large framework of metal shelving in the *Repair* installations. The ambivalent construction of a spatial framework which appears to contain the *gueules cassées* as a cultural object points to the ongoing difficulty of finding adequate cultural forms with which to do so. At the same time, it introduces a figure which appears to make sense of the *Continuum of Repair* installation: that of Jacob's ladder. The epistemological promise of that figure and, equally, the renewed enquiry into the relationship of craft and knowledge which it suggests, are considered in the conclusion of this essay.

### The First World War and the *gueules cassées*

The realities of First World War weaponry and trench warfare resulted in unprecedented numbers of facially injured servicemen, and current estimates put the numbers at 60,000 at least, in the UK

alone (Delaporte, 1996: 30). The history of the facially injured soldiers has been something of a marginal subject, a situation which has only gradually been addressed by publications such as Sophie Delaporte's *Les Gueules cassées* in 1996, books by Valade and Monestier in 2005 and 2009 and the recent research of Marjorie Gehrhardt (Delaporte, 1996); (Valade, 2005); (Monestier, 2009); (Gehrhardt, 2013); (Gehrhardt, 2015). While this is not an unknown subject, neither is it exactly 'common knowledge'. To respond to the *gueules cassées*, as we shall see, is to interrogate a particular cultural history and, equally, to scrutinise the unsuspected epistemological problems and possibilities which arise from it.

Britain and France both responded to the wave of facial injuries sustained during the First World War by setting up dedicated maxillofacial surgical units, in Sidcup in the UK and Val-de-Grâce in France. Their respective heads, Harold Gillies, a New Zealander, and the Martinican surgeon Hippolyte Morestin, were responsible for major innovations in surgical technique in the period and, as recent research has emphasised, the cross-Channel dialogue between the two played a role in the rapid evolution of maxillofacial surgery in the war years. Working for the Red Cross in 1915, Gillies was posted first to a Belgian ambulance unit and later to the Anglo-French hospital at Le Tréport. On leave in June 1915, Gillies met Morestin at Val de Grâce. He observed an operation for facial cancer, and described Morestin's raising of a flap of skin from the neck to repair part of the nose, lip and cheek as 'the most thrilling thing that I had ever seen' (Pound, 1964: 24). On his return to Britain, Gillies persuaded the authorities that specialist units for facial surgery were needed, and was ordered to report for duty at the Cambridge military hospital in Aldershot in January 1916. Gillies moved to the newly opened Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup, in 1917, and was active there until 1925.

I want to suggest that these formative years in the evolution of maxillofacial surgery see two key developments which continue to shape its cultural history. Firstly, collaboration between surgeons and artists; and secondly, a particular set of epistemological problems concerning archival and museal forms. According to Gillies's biographer Reginald Pound, Gillies found it hard to describe his surgical methods orally (Pound, 1964: 24), and this may have been one of the factors leading to the employment in Gillies's unit of the artist Henry Tonks, a known painter and teacher of anatomy and drawing at the Slade School. Tonks undertook before and after drawings of Gillies's surgery and, in Pound's words, became 'the graphic historian of World War One injuries to the face' (30). In fact, Tonks did rather more, and his pastels go so far beyond the call of duty as to have been recognised as significant works of art in their own right (see Biernoff, 2010). The re-evaluation of their wider importance since 1999 is seen in exhibitions such as *Henry Tonks: Art and Surgery* (2002-3); *Future Face* (2004-5); *Faces of Battle* (2007-8); *War and Medicine* (2008-9) and *Faces of Conflict* (2015).

The reassessment of Tonks's work roughly coincides with the rediscovery or reconstitution of the Gillies archives which took place in the 1990s. The Gillies records had disappeared, but were rediscovered at Queen Mary's Hospital, Roehampton, in 1993. Following this, New Zealand records of the facial surgery unit at Queen's Hospital, Sidcup were donated by Sandy Macalister in 1989. In the archive's present form, it is housed by the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

#### Repair, Reparation and the *Lieu-commun*

Attia's installations *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012) and *Continuum of Repair: the Light of Jacob's Ladder* (2013-14) speak to the artist's long-standing concerns with alterity, time and materials, but also interrogate artistic craft as a way of thinking about the intersections and stresses between artistic and scientific knowledge in the medical history of the *gueules cassées*. At the heart of these works is a concern with reappropriation, as everyday objects are reused in the fabrication of fetish objects and trench art, both of which are explicitly depicted and juxtaposed in Attia's 'Repair' works. Attia expands upon the significance of cross-cultural reuse and the proximity between such strategies and his own conception of repair:

When a Congolese fetish is made of or includes a Western item and when a Western item made of a bullet or a bombshell from the First World War is transformed into a holy Christian artifact or an everyday object, these things create a new, ambivalent reality that emerges from the one belonging to its original context and that links it to another, the context of its new reading. (Attia & Scott, Kitty, n.d., p. 164).

Attia is especially interested in the incursion of non-indigenous materials into culturally marked works, for example the use, in repaired objects found by Attia in the Congo, of 'a Western material in the repair, through delicate and skilful plaiting, all of which gives a new, decorative supplement to the repaired object' (165). Reappropriation, which Attia associates with Proudhon, the Brazilian modernist poet Oswald de Andrade and the Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, exists in a 'relation of mutual interdependence' (165) with the repair and, most importantly of all, 'governs all relations between modernity and tradition' (163). All of these foundational points of reference, like de Andrade's vision of 'an artistic practice at once nationalist and cosmopolitan, nativist and modern,' seek to reappropriate artistic models and discourses from representatives of a bourgeois and / or colonial authority in order to restore agency to socially marginalised groups

(Shohat & Stam, 2002, p. 38). Attia pursues these concerns through two related figures, the 'repair' and the 'continuum', both of which serve to shape the latter installation. The continuum bears within it a critique of Western accounts of the birth of facial surgery, and by implication questions the uniqueness of the experience of the *gueules cassées*, recontextualising their singular history as part of a *continuum*, implicitly acknowledging the prior existence of reconstructive techniques in other cultures and invoking non-Western practices of facial modification (Cheney & Hadlock, 2014; see also "The birth of modern British plastic surgery," 2014).

The emphasis on craft in Attia's work, meanwhile, recalls the work of Richard Sennett, and its vision of social regeneration based on common participation in work. In *The Craftsman* (2009), in particular, Sennett proposes craft as the expression of shared cultural values: 'we want the shared ability to work to teach us how to govern ourselves and to connect to other citizens on common ground' (2009: 269). I draw upon Sennett's notions of craft and of reconfiguration, as well as his brief consideration of processes of repair, in order to assess the implications of Attia's art for the idea of common knowledge. Where Sennett emphasises the capacity of craft to celebrate common values and to renew community, though, Attia ambivalently positions craft at the centre of an enquiry into the problematic status of facial injury and facial modification (whether surgical or otherwise) as subjects of common knowledge. That enquiry involves both artisanal activity (although this is often not carried out by Attia himself) and the construction of archival and museal forms within the installation space, a technique which ambivalently juxtaposes the craft of repair with the business of collecting. The continuum equally frames the perpetual concern with space in Attia's work in terms of the seemingly endless migrations which characterise both Attia's own early experience and the relationship of Africa and Europe, and in the real or figurative possibility of common ground.

In the *Continuum of Repair: the Light of Jacob's Ladder* installation at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2013-14, and *Repair, Culture's Agency*, shown as part of *Here and Elsewhere: Contemporary art from and about the Arab world*, at the New Museum, New York in 2014, Attia incorporates the *gueules cassées* in the form of marble busts displayed towards the rear of the space. I want to suggest that this provocative gesture amounts to a manipulation of the installation space by means of which the face is strategically and provisionally marginalised. In this, it connects with other, earlier works by Attia in which marginal subjects and populations are very much to the fore, and are mediated by spatial and architectural forms. In *The Repair*, the busts are presented on a framework of metal shelving alongside masks, scientific illustrations and all manner of scientific and historical textbooks (**figure 1**). One of Attia's dominant techniques here is to juxtapose representations of the

face which straddle media, chronological periods and cultural contexts and, in doing so, to destabilise the assumptions underpinning those categories.

Such a mode of presentation implies that the facially injured soldiers of the First World War in fact constitute just one of a dizzying range of problematics, many of which entertain some relation with the face and all of which are bound up with the cultural determination of knowledge. Artefacts representing the face (including busts and masks) are positioned as single items in a vast repertoire of knowledge, which the viewer may choose to select or not, and which, by implication, may be consulted and examined like the books and printed documents which make up a large part of the work. Attia's invocation of the archive and the cabinet of curiosities serves, as we shall see, both to organise the material presented in the installation and to offer a critique of the forms of knowledge which it suggests.

Many of the masks and busts which feature prominently in Attia's displays have a markedly African appearance, and suggest an encounter with objects of a certain antiquity in an ethnological museum. In fact, though, they are contemporary artefacts, commissioned by Attia from craftsmen from Senegal and Italy (**figure 2**). Their creation displays an unexpected incongruity, as the cultural origins of the craftsmen and the type of commission were transposed. The wood sculptors were from Dakar, in Senegal; their task was to represent *gueules cassées*. The marble sculptors were from Carrara in Italy; they were tasked with producing representations of African heads and bodies (Lageira 2013: 52). Each was forced to make a transition from one cultural context to another and, equally, from one material to another. The installation thus articulates important messages about cultural belonging, reparation and mastery and, for Manthia Diawara, designates a form of Glissantian *lieu-commun*:

The common ground for all these bodies is that they are all looking for reparation, they all need something else to make up for something missing; they're all striving to achieving [*sic*] a perfect state in the world, a compensation for some kind of lack, an amputation, or something perceived as a due.

As a reparation artist, Attia makes us revisit, through his installations, Europe's debt to Africa for the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and the current mutilation of indigenous populations and their environment through mining and wars (Diawara, 2013: 12).

For Diawara, Edouard Glissant's work provides both a model of alterity and a particular mode of address of the other which is rooted in the imperative of reparation. Central to Diawara's claim is the suggestion that the experience of the *gueules cassées* can be placed within a 'continuum' of

repair, as is indicated in the title of Attia's Whitechapel Gallery installation. The continuum proposes that surgery can be accommodated within a narrative of continuity and, as Diawara argues, that 'the broken faces, of black and white, masks and people, utensils and human faces are interchangeable' (13). The claim in fact foregrounds the clear incommensurability of people, masks and utensils, unsettling established medical histories of the *gueules cassées* through an impossible ethics. That ethics paradoxically highlights the implication of the repair in reparation, so that modern practices of surgical repair are bound up with postcolonial politics of reparation and exchange.

If this is to be read as a Glissantian *lieu-commun*, then, it is not simply a shared time or place, but a generative topos or figure which gives rise to poetic speech, as Glissant suggests in the *Traité du tout-monde* (1997): 'the thrust of the poem results from the restless, often anxious quest for a conjunction of forms and structures from which an idea of the world, transmitted from its location, encounters or does not encounter other ideas of the world' (Glissant, 1997: 32).<sup>1</sup> Such an encounter, as Diawara argues, represents a clash of 'inexhaustible energies, where relationships are continually generated between the ideas and poetics of one place and those of another' (Diawara, 2013: 5). Attia, I suggest, draws upon the capacity of the *lieu-commun* in French to refer at once to commonplaces, common ground and, following Glissant, dynamic exchange arising from the encounter of *topoi* which may be spatially remote from one another, and whose violent encounter gives rise to a form of poetic expression. The stations of that exchange, in Attia's work, include the metropolitan French medical archive and the gallery space, but also the places of origin of the African artefacts Attia reappropriates and the problematisation of hegemonic Western geographies in his earlier installation and photographic projects. The troubled exchange between those locations produces fractured display spaces in which the viewer's search for knowledge is productively frustrated.

The non-equivalence between the various objects of repair ambivalently situates artisanal repair at the centre of the exchange, as specific techniques of repair are transposed from one context to another. In this, Attia's concerns connect with those of Sennett in *The Craftsman*, in which the repair is deemed to be a 'neglected, poorly understood, but all-important aspect of technical craftsmanship' (2009: 199). Considerable space is devoted to the problem in the later *Together: the Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation* (2012), too, in which repair work is taken as one of the sources of 'dialogical social behaviour' (Sennett, 2013: 199). For Sennett, the repair of physical objects is bound up with the mastery of embodied skills which can, equally, strengthen cooperation and improve social relations.

Sennett distinguishes between three types of repair: restoration, remediation and reconfiguration. Reconfiguration, the most radical type of repair, 're-imagines the form and use of

the object in the course of fixing it' (2013: 212). As Sennett further argues, 'all repair strategies depend on an initial judgement that what's broken can indeed be fixed' (212). Such a judgement is implicit in Attia's work on the face, in which the ambivalence of the notion of facial repair is foregrounded through both craft techniques and spatial, architectural interventions. In Sennett's account, the initial assessment of the object serves to differentiate between hermetic (irreparable) objects and those susceptible to repair and, equally, indicates a judgement as to the purpose of the object. Such a scheme resonates significantly with Attia's work, in which the juxtaposition of repaired objects with faces initiates an impossible enquiry into purpose and context. Face and object can only be mismatched, and yet their juxtaposition produces persuasive visual rhymes which unsettle our common understanding of the face. Craft, too, highlights the incommensurability of face and object: when images of the *gueules cassées* are juxtaposed with repaired fetish objects, our resistance to the ontological demotion of the face is engaged. Elsewhere, as in *Irreparable Repair*, the technique of stitching, common to the repair of fabric, leather and skin, awkwardly binds broken shards of mirror together. The piece, striking in its incongruity, puts Sennett's celebration of community under immense strain, as the transposition of craft into alien contexts suggests both a breakdown in common knowledge and a relation of impossible equivalence. The repair appears here not as a sign of continuity but of disjunction: techniques like the stitch are applied to materials upon which their purchase is highly uncertain, while in the busts artisans' work is expropriated from context, its techniques applied to unfamiliar, non-native materials.

The disingenuous suggestion of equivalence between sharply differentiated processes of repair and apparently unrelated subjects is pursued in the slideshow which is part of Attia's installation *The Repair*, a montage whose ultimate destination proves to be the medical archive. In a remarkable juxtaposition, a page of medical diagrams is accompanied by a photograph of a wooden African figure seen from below; the medical illustrations on the left-hand slide depict a reconstructive procedure centring on the upper arm and median nerve. The doll-like wooden figure in the right-hand slide bears no obvious resemblance to its counterpart except in the large stitch-like bindings which secure the feet to the legs. The detail emphasises the role of the repair as a form of suture between the images of Attia's installation while offering a critical understanding of the common ground between them. The medical illustration comes from the collection of Val de Grâce, Paris, indicating the archival source of Attia's image, and unexpectedly recontextualising the history of maxillo-facial surgery. The illustration appears in the records of Jean André Sicard, head of the neurological unit at the hôpital Michel Lévy in Marseille during the First World War. Sicard's monthly reports also include references to the Maxillofacial Prosthetics unit (*service de prothèse maxillo-faciale de l'hôtel-Dieu*) at the Hôtel-Dieu hospital, Marseille, confirming its foundation in July 1915

(Ferrandis, 2011: 32). Facial injury, then, even when it is not an explicit presence, proves to guide the montage of *The Repair*, and the space of the gallery is haunted by the spectre of the archive, in this case the remarkable collection 'Archives et documents de guerre', comprising around one-hundred thousand archival documents, established at Val de Grâce at the height of the war, in July 1916, and the basis for the later Musée du Service de Santé des Armées, established in 1918 (Saint-Julien & Ferrandis, 1998).

The juxtaposition of the wooden figure and the medical illustration suggests that the medical archive represents the principal means of knowing the wounded face, a suggestion to which I return below. Nevertheless, it takes place in a section of Attia's slideshow entitled 'Modern Repairs', which arguably exemplifies Attia's suspicion of the attempt to 'rationalise the evolution of humankind through measurement and categorisation' (Attia & Scott, Kitty, n.d., p. 166). I want now to turn to the ways in which modernity is figured as a clash between two irreconcilable domains in Attia's work, whether of the gallery as opposed to the archive, or of art as opposed to architecture. The clash looms large in Amanda Crawley Jackson's account of Attia's earlier work, in which 'Attia sets up an antinomy between architecture (which he uses as a metaphor for the ideological edifice of modernity) and art' (Jackson, 2011: 165). Such an antinomy, which returns in the creation of an edifice representing knowledge in *Continuum of Repair*, is clearly felt in Attia's *Rochers carrés* (2008), a series of photographs which depict an expanse of very large greyish concrete blocks (**figure 3**). The enormous shapes crowd the gaze and are at first difficult to make sense of; Manthia Diawara identifies this initial disorientation, describing the jumble of forms as 'like somebody's bad idea of a conceptual art installation' (Diawara, 2013: 5). It subsequently becomes clear that these are photographs of a real beach, Bab el Oued, and that the concrete blocks were placed there not in the name of art, but in order to discourage people from setting out for Europe by boat (**figure 4**). Attia reflects on the summers he spent here as a child and upon the resemblance between the 'massive and strange construction' which 'imprisons' local young people in Bab el Oued and the architecture of the French banlieue, where he subsequently lived (Attia, n.d.-a). As Amanda Crawley Jackson argues, the architecture of the French post-war banlieues, responding to 'post-colonial immigration and the disorderly proliferation of shantytowns at the edges of major cities', was underwritten by political expediency and, echoing the logic of sites like Bab el Oued, '(re)produced an apotropaic socio-spatial grammar of exclusion and segregation' (Jackson, 2011: 166).

In sharp distinction from Glissant's vision of a *lieu-commun* created through the dynamic encounter of differing world views, here a monolithic colonial ideology casts multiple sites in its own image, as the architecture of the Parisian banlieue and the coastal strip of Algiers displays the same dominant forms (crude concrete blocks which function to impede movement). Such an architecture

is subtly modified in the juxtaposition of *Rochers carrés* with the concrete blocks of *Untitled (Concrete Blocks)* (2008), in which concrete slabs like those in Attia's photographs are densely packed like nested, partly raised bricks into the central area of the viewing space, while the wall above the slabs displays the photographs of *Rochers carrés*. The works are infused with the logic of remaking and reappropriation, as the hybrid installation provisionally *becomes* the specular image of an installation glimpsed by Diawara in *Rochers carrés*. The reappropriation of the concrete block, first as a photographic image, and subsequently as a form in the installation space, extends the logic of the repair to Attia's own work, revisiting and adapting the original object instead of replacing it. For Diawara, Attia's engagement with Bab el Oued serves to 'reinvest the place with new imaginaries, poetics' (7). In Hannah Feldman's account, too, Attia's work serves as a form of resistance to the exclusionary logic of the post-colonial West: 'exclusions such as those that order the experience of the *grands ensembles* in the French banlieue, Attia insists, inevitably fail to modify the sameness of the culture we see here and, significantly, there, in the conditions of the former colony and the former colonial power' (Feldman, 2010: 68). Unlike the 'empty spacelessness' (69) which is the ultimate product of contemporary global networks in Feldman's analysis, I want to suggest that Attia's work is deeply invested in the work of repair as 'the expression of an individual (the repairer) intended for a group' (Attia & Scott, Kitty, n.d., p. 165). Attia's version of the repair, in referring to the 'cultures of people who are still close to nature', sets out a critique of the Western conception of repair, whose aim is simply 'the disappearance of the wound', and investigates instead the potential of craft to both engage and unsettle the situatedness of knowledge (Attia & Scott, Kitty, n.d., p. 166).

#### Conclusion: Jacob's Ladder and Quantum Systems

Attia's *Continuum of Repair* scrutinises the face by means of an edifice which literally tries to make sense of the business of organising cultural knowledge. The masks and busts are displayed on an open framework of metal shelves, while the centre of the installation is taken up with a large cabinet to which a wooden ladder is attached on one side. Symptomatic of the investment in 'space, sculpture, volume and installation' (Attia & Scott, Kitty, n.d., p. 165) in Attia's more recent work, the construction of the framework had site-specific significance in the Whitechapel gallery as part of the 'in-depth engagement with the space as the reading room of the former Whitechapel library' in Attia's work in gallery two ("*Untitled Interpretation Panel*," 2013). Rather than a library, though, the

large, dense expanse of shelving suggests an archival repertoire, recalling the 'archival aesthetic' seen in Attia's work by Emily Butler (Butler, 2014: 116).

In a further complication, the work recalls the cabinet of curiosities, literally containing a heterogeneous collection of objects in the brightly lit cabinet at its centre. The logic of the piece suggests that the viewer's progress around the shelves and through the work to this central point will result in a climactic discovery; the cabinet contains objects including telescopes and microscopes and books on theology, astronomy and architecture as well as botany and zoology. If the installation's epistemological promise is partly fulfilled by the concretisation of the work's concerns in this central cabinet, the viewer's curiosity is simultaneously redirected towards the ladder. The ladder is very short, and takes us only just above the cabinet, but it also leads us to look up, whereupon we encounter the extraordinary visual effect of the 'ladder'. The vertical view appears to reveal a vast ladder lined with fluorescent tubes which look like horizontal rungs and, at intervals, a series of large, book-lined horizontal landings. The effect is created by two large horizontal mirrors, one placed on top of the cabinet and the other in the ceiling above it.

Disconcerting as it is, the ladder provides a powerful expression of Attia's concerns. The cabinet of curiosities and the archive both provide containing forms which promise to explain and categorise the history of facial injury, and yet they singularly fail to do so. Attia pursues a long-standing enquiry into the expressive capabilities of installation art in his *Repair* installations, and embeds the problematics of facial representation in the shifting ground which characterises almost all of his work. In doing so, Attia's work leaves the place of the *gueules cassées* resolutely unresolved, ambiguously situated within a continuum of disputed cultural histories and geographies. Jacob's ladder, moreover, the form which appears to provide a key to the work, in fact creates both a visual disturbance and an equally significant epistemological disorientation. The most obvious reading of the ladder is in terms of its biblical subtext, that is, the dream which promises to guide Jacob both to the promised land and to heaven:

Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder *was* set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and your descendants. Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; and you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Kohlenberger, 2005: 33).

Jacob's revelation promises an end to the migrations which characterise Attia's work: instead of the relentless 'going back and forth between Algeria and France, between an Oriental and an Occidental world' which characterises Attia's own early life, Jacob is promised ownership of 'the land on which you lie'. That ownership, paradoxically, will lead to further migration: 'you shall spread to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south'. Algeria, too, and its migrations, is the source of Attia's meditations on facial surgery: he posits the practice of scarification as a sub-Saharan 'aesthetic practice[s]' which 'evoke[s] the beginning of [...] aesthetic surgery' (Attia, n.d.-b). For Kim West, meanwhile, aesthetic surgery in its Western incarnations, invokes 'an original defect, a fault or imperfection that historical development then attempts to repair' (West, 2014, 58). The inclusion of African figures whose 'undamaged' facial features have been modified in order to comply with non-Western ideals of beauty demonstrates the relativism of Western understandings of facial repair. The Whitechapel installation, then, taking place in the building which formerly housed the Whitechapel Public Library, contains 'a critique of the library as a factor or main actor in the West's urge to control', and of the cultural viewpoint from which the dominant histories of maxillofacial surgery are written (Attia, 2014b: 27). The edifice of knowledge, which apparently stands for the fulfillment of Jacob's dream of return, and an end to wandering, is in fact aligned with the restless Glissantian 'thought of the wandering' whereby knowledge is perpetually unsettled.

Jacob's ladder nevertheless contains a final dilemma. Although the biblical subtext engages the thematics of migration and (facial) repair, Attia's ladder simultaneously refers to the experiments carried out by Serge Haroche at CERN on quantum systems. In particular, Attia is interested in Haroche's creation of a photon 'trap' between two mirrors made of superconducting material, in which the decay of individual photons was dramatically slowed down and their behaviour could thus be studied (Georgescu, 2012). Attia's interest in the work stems from the vast, unseen journey which it undertakes within the trap, covering ten thousand kilometres within a tenth of a second. This inscrutable migration provides an unexpected and hugely provocative counterpoint to the journeys of Attia's work, and the common ground which subsists between them. After being retained in the trap for a tenth of a second, the photon disappears, and this ultimate breakdown of the experiment further contextualises Attia's interest in it:

This idea, that in the end nature automatically re-appropriates its 'independence' from culture (or culture's tool of control, science) thrilled me; it is all about order, the order of things; an order that is before and beyond human knowledge. The particle of light escaped, it disappeared after a tenth of a second supposedly for different reasons [...]. When I heard about this experiment of the photon it immediately stuck in my mind as a breach in mathematics. To be a

good physicist today Serge Haroche said: 'You need observation, obviously... but also imagination, and last but not least: intuition. In some ways just like an artist' (Attia, 2014: 23).

Attia ultimately aligns Haroche's quantum experiments with the artisanal work of the artist: in the end, art and science indicate not rupture, but continuity. The suggestion that the parallel mirrors of the 'ladder' signify the enigmatic path of the photon sounds an ambiguous final note. Although we may perceive the ladder as a continuously illuminated space, and be unaware of the frenetic passage of light waves through it, the invocation of Haroche's work emphasises the inevitability that light will escape and, by implication, that the subject of our enquiry, like the top of the ladder, is forever unreachable. The decay of the photon, finally, is one that can never be repaired: the frantic progress of the photon definitively cancels the possibility of continuum, indicating instead a frenetic journey which ends not in revelation or the promised land, but in invisibility. The closed system of Haroche's experiment is one which renders knowledge, whether that of science or art, indeterminate, designating a process which always takes place on unseen ground, far from the human observer. The work of Kader Attia, meanwhile, by implicating the viewer in this problematic space, ensures that the realm of common knowledge constitutes an ever-expanding field.

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### **Image captions**

#### **Figure 1**

Kader Attia, *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, installation, mixed media, installation view at dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012. Photograph: Roman März.

#### **Figure 2**

Kader Attia, *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, installation, mixed media, installation view at dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012. Photograph: Roman März.

#### **Figure 3**

From the series *Rochers Carrés*, 2008, photographic series, silver print, 80 x 120 cm, courtesy Collection Barjeel Art Foundation - UAE, Collection Sharjah Art Foundation - UAE, Collection Société

Générale - France, Collection Mac/Val - France, private collection, and Galerie Nagel Draxler. Photograph: Kader Attia.

**Figure 4**

From the series *Rochers Carrés*, 2008, photographic series, silver print, 80 x 120 cm, courtesy Collection Barjeel Art Foundation - UAE, Collection Sharjah Art Foundation - UAE, Collection Société Générale - France, Collection Mac/Val - France, private collection, and Galerie Nagel Draxler. Photograph: Kader Attia.

**Figure 5**

Kader Attia, *Continuum of Repair: the Light of Jacob's Ladder*, 2013. Metal shelves, wooden vitrine, books, metallic stands, archival documents, lithographs, telescope, microscope, strip light, mirrors, installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2013, Irene Panagopoulos Collection, courtesy Roupén Kalfayan, Athens and Galerie Krinzinger. Photograph: Stephen White.

**Figure 6**

Kader Attia, *Continuum of Repair: the Light of Jacob's Ladder*, 2013. Metal shelves, wooden vitrine, books, metallic stands, archival documents, lithographs, telescope, microscope, strip light, mirrors, installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2013, Irene Panagopoulos Collection, courtesy Roupén Kalfayan, Athens and Galerie Krinzinger. Photograph: Stephen White.

**Figure 7**

Kader Attia, *Continuum of Repair: the Light of Jacob's Ladder*, 2013. Metal shelves, wooden vitrine, books, metallic stands, archival documents, lithographs, telescope, microscope, strip light, mirrors, installation view, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 2013, Irene Panagopoulos Collection, courtesy Roupén Kalfayan, Athens and Galerie Krinzinger. Photograph: Patrick Lears.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations mine unless otherwise stated.