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TALK TO ME, I AM LISTENING

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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TALK TO ME, I AM LISTENING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, Sculpture at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Sami Ben Larbi, Bachelor Fine Arts Ceramics, University of Washington, 2004

Director:
Gregory Volk
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SCULPTURE AND EXTENDED MEDIA
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Abstract

TALK TO ME, I AM LISTENING By Sami Ben Larbi MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.
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Major Director: Gregory Volk Associate Professor, Sculpture Department

An introductory conversation with a new person I just met usually goes like this:
So, where is your accent from? Are you American?
Well, yes, .....but no. Not really. I do have American citizenship and I lived in the US for fifteen years but I grew up in France.
Ok, so you’re French?
Well, yes, but ......not totally. My mother is French but my father is Tunisian.
Ok, so you’re Tunisian?
Well, yes, but... not wholly. I don’t speak Arabic, so I don’t totally feel Tunisian.
So what are you? American? French? Tunisian?

With my work, I ask the same questions. What is this? What does it do? How do I, the maker, relate to it? How does the viewer, the other side of the conversation, relate to it and understand it? Can we understand each other if we do not speak the same language? Who am I and who are you anyway?
Dreaming

I was awakened last night by a recurring dream, or nightmare, I don’t know how much of it is recollection, how much of it is unconscious imagination.

I am in Tunis. I am living there and it is summer. I am 20 or so. I am visiting grandma at Aunt Fatouma’s house. My cousin Cherifa is there too. My grandma and I are sitting under a tree in the garden. She’s making tea on the Kanoun. Even though it is summer we are both sitting around the fire. She’s talking to me and I’m talking to her, but I have no idea what she is saying because I do not speak Arabic and she does not speak French. She’s gesturing, using her cane, pointing in different directions, at me sometimes. Her voice gets angry. It seems like she’s cursing someone. I have NO idea what it’s about. Is she fussing at me? I don’t think so since a few minutes later her voice gets lower and she does her “yaah sidi, yaah sidi”, slaps me on the back and laughs. I don’t know what I myself am talking about. I know I am opening my mouth. I think I am talking about my aspirations, what I want to be, but again I feel like I am a spectator to it all. Maybe I’m trying to tell her about me, about my life back home --home-- She’s looking at me with big eyes, she’s quiet when I talk, it seems like she’s making the effort to listen to me, but then she nods at the wrong times. I know she has NO IDEA what I am talking about.

Then I wake up.

I realize I really don’t have a sense of who she was other than remembering how she acted, knowing without language, knowing without a common culture.

In a sense I knew Mamie, I saw her soul. I saw she was a good person, but I never got
past that.
I missed the stories that came with her. What she saw, what she lived...

But then what is knowing someone? Is it really about having that conversation, exchanging words, thoughts... or is it looking at whoever we are trying to talk to, in the eye, seeing that person talk, seeing how they express themselves, but with the remote in the mute position. What part of what we ‘know’ about the other is what we project onto them? What part of what we know of ourselves and others is based on memory that may or may not be accurate? What part of ourselves is a response to another; wanting to be like a person we admire or wanting to be different from a person we despise. Early in my work I began to explore and ponder these questions.
Memories

Thinking about memory, I fabricated white nondescript, vacuum formed frames, devoid of images. Onto each frame I projected light, where the images would have been. The installation is about real, imagined and mythical events that happened to me. The representation of me as an individual, an identity, is both revealed and absent, projected and stripped.

The installation, “Pictures I wish I had” (2007), was presented in the end of a big room in an empty early 1900’s dilapidated furniture store in Richmond, Virginia. To prepare the space for the installation, I slowly scraped away a broad band of paint from the gypsum walls. As I scraped, the wall revealed some of the history of the building; the penciled calculations, measurements and messages of the original builders. To complete the installation I arranged a few pieces of period-appropriate furniture. The only light was that of the projections, creating a shadowy space. The antique furniture emphasized the domestic setting implied by the placement of the frames on the walls. Facing a couch and coffee table several frames mimic a mantelpiece arrangement.
“Pictures I wish I had” was a departure for me from previous work. For the first time I inserted my own identity, or search for one. I imagined having pictures of me playing with Prince in concert (a fantasy) or me scoring the winning basket in the French championship final (I played as far as the quarter-finals with one team, and was a part of an actual champion team but never played). As the piece progressed the actual images became less important than the thought of them. The absence of images left more to the imagination than their presence. The introduction light into the project acted as a substitute, a projection, for the missing images.
Knowing

What do we know of the other? How do we know the other? When meeting someone we are quick to assess that person according to our own past, we judge according to what we know. (We project ourselves onto others and alter that projection when new events, new actions by that person force us to reassess. What happens when the quick assessment is not possible? When the environment is such that to get to know a person we have to relearn how to see, if seeing is even possible.

For the installation “Un Der Pres S Ure”(2001) I fabricated latex jumpsuits and headgear fitted with LCD screens. The installation took place in an abandoned military base in Seattle, WA. I designed four living rooms, each set in a different era. Participants were asked to enter one of the four living rooms and take a number. One person at a time from each living room was called and led to a dressing room to don a latex suit and headgear. They were then led to another room where the suit was inflated. Next they were led to a room and allowed to interact with three other participants for a period of time.

The experience was claustrophobic for them, but also liberating and sometimes oddly comforting, as they were forced to renegotiate how to communicate and interact with each other anonymously.
“Hello Sami-

I’ve been meaning to write you since Mother’s day - that was the day that I came to participate in your installation.

I waited for three hours to go in. I put on the suit and the headpiece immediately smothered my head (I have a very small head). The usher led me out. I suddenly was having a terrible time breathing as the headpiece lowered over the bridge of my nose and I couldn’t breathe well out of my mouth. Consequently, I started to have second thoughts about going in. I met you and you told me I had to get blown up. I suddenly became so intensely claustrophobic in the suit, I freaked out and opted out of the whole thing.

So this is what I want to tell you. It was an excellent exercise in control, manipulation and trust. It left me with a psychological reaction to the work so strong, I could not participate. There are many levels of thoughts and ideas at play here. I find just as interesting those who freaked out as those who entered (and all of the many hipsters who left with their black clothes covered in talc). On one level, technology is always removing us one step farther from the “real” experience. Your work too, robs the viewer of sight and touch, forcing the viewer to experience the world as all the other participants, anonymous and the same. At the same time, this robbing of senses, like a flotation tank serves as a way to see to another level of experience (we all hope) - it allows the viewers to be stripped of the usual conditions to begin to think in another way.....(excerpt)“.

Jennifer West, 2001

With “Un Der Pres S Ure” I was interested in creating an environment that forced the viewers to be physically reactive to their surroundings, to be on a survival basis, to delay the criticism of the work until after the experience was over. Jennifer West is a good example of what it meant to go through the work.

I was also interested in creating something that could not be replicated. Every day, every experience by the participants was to be different. I wanted to present an ever-changing environment to produce ever-changing responses. Stan Douglas’s work resonated with me as it dealt with similar themes. “Win, place, show” (Stan Douglas, 1998) a six minute scene between two men in a dormitory is edited in real time by a computer. The sequence is ever changing, the point of view of the cameras offers new information and therefore the understanding of the interaction between the two men
is ever different. Witnessing Stan Douglas's piece feels like being there, being in the room with the characters, not knowing what comes next and constantly being aware of every thing happening. I wanted a similar effect with my installation, I wanted to create singular experiences.

“Un Der pres S Ure" had obvious limitations, the physical demands on the participants meant that not everyone could go through with it, limiting the actual range responses. The installation also required that the participant be open to experimenting, be willing to interact within the restrictions. In this installation and subsequent work I have discovered that the interactive demands limit the number of participants up for the challenge. It is indeed very personal and reveals a lot about an individual to participate. Ever since “Un Der pres S Ure" I have worked to reduce the level of engagement, sometimes to surprising results, while still creating a physical experience for the viewers. In “Pictures I wish I had", an installation talked about earlier in this paper, the physical interaction between the work and the participants was not a requirement. Nevertheless the viewers started to play with the projected light, making me reconsider how to engage viewers into interaction.
Projections

We are who we are because of others. The first decisive layer is parental. We either adopt or reject characteristics of our parents. I myself tried to be as much of the opposite of my father as possible, with varying degrees of success. The second layer is our extended family, the older cousin, the distant uncle or aunt whom we idolize and want to be like. The next layer is the friends. We are like sponges, we take what we want, what we like and we expel the superfluous. But then most of all we respond to our environment, to that famous singer who’s the perfect being, the image of the prefect being. I grew up identifying with Prince. We had several dissimilar traits (he is rather short and very religious) but for the most part I could see myself as him. Just like me, he had a domineering father and had some issues with finding his own path, separate from his father’s demands. Fairly common stuff, especially for second-generation immigrants (like myself). So I could project myself as him and aspire to bigger and better things. We shared a common persona.

We can and do associate and mold ourselves according to film characters, or in relation to actors whom we think we know because we’ve seen them in their most vulnerable states. We’ve witnessed their first love or their worst acts. We are their witness, their conscience. They really are a beacon of sorts. They remain true to themselves no matter what. They are who they were when the film was made and they remain unchanged. --WE KNOW THEM--

While being an actual physical projection, cinema is also a door into the characters of the movies. As viewers we are all powerful, able to witness actions of others (to get to know them when they are alone, when they are their true selves) without repercussion. We are safe. But then we are also emasculated; we see only what we are allowed to
see. The power of cinema is it’s an easy escape from daily life, from problems, for a couple of hours. We leave ourselves at the door and project ourselves onto whoever comes on screen. And this is the case wherever we are. It is, as humans, our common thread, throughout space and throughout time.

But then what happens when the escape lasts longer than the film itself?

In 2007 I made “La distinction entre un Carthaginois et un hexadécagone, au subjonctif” a recreated sequence from the film “les quatre cents coups”, by Truffaut. I reshot a scene in which Antoine, the main character, played by me, goes on a ride in a Gravitron (a circular fair ride that spins really fast and glues the participants onto the walls). The sequence is projected inside a smaller scale, fully working, Gravitron. The sequence is perfectly timed with the starts and stops of the machine. I am, like the characters in the movies I associate with, stuck in time and place. Doinel, in the sequence in question, is trying to have some fun in the ride, he is trying to escape his own reality. I decided it was the best moment to insert myself in his shoes, as he is leaving I come in.
La distinction entre un Carthaginois et un hexadécagone, au subjonctif, 2007
In Steve Mc Queen’s “Deadpan” (1997), a remake of a scene by Buster Keaton in “Steamboat Bill Jr” (1928), a house falls down onto the artist, who, like Buster Keaton himself, comes out unscathed thanks to an open window. The work plays on stunt trickery but stays in the cinematic realm, it remains projected light. For “La distinction entre un Carthaginois et un Hexadecagone, au subjonctif”, I wanted something actually physical, that could be grasped. I recreated the scene so that the viewers become a part of the recreation, they are the spectators in the film. To date this installation is the closest I have been in my search for total cinema, a term coined by Andre Bazin in the 60’s.

“a total and complete representation of reality... the reconstruction of a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief... a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time.”


The piece (“La distinction...”) has the same effect on me as the film (“Les quatre cents coups”) does, it makes me very nostalgic. Every time I am in the subway, the sound produced by arriving trains reminds me of the Gravitron in action. Suddenly I am spinning again, I am watching myself spin, I am watching others watching me spin, and we are all laughing, we are caught in the moment, trying to make it last as long as possible.

Excerpt from the catalogue “La distinction entre un Carthaginois et un hexadecagone, au subjonctif”, a discussion between Fionn Meade and Sami Ben Larbi.

FM: ........And perhaps this offers a connection to talking of the new piece and your recreation of a crucial scene from Truffaut's film “The 400 Blows”. In the film, Paris is a stand-in for the city as both a playground for the main character Antoine Doinel to wreak havoc upon, a place to wander through and get in trouble (“les 400 coups” referring as it does to an idiomatic expression of “raising hell”) but also a refuge where Antoine turns because
of unrest at home. This tension creates a version of the city as “rupture” and “refuge.” What was Paris to you growing up? Does the portrayal of Paris that Truffaut offers align with your own experience?

SBL: It was very similar. It was my playground and my teacher. I was away from Paris one year when I was a teenager, back in Tunisia, and I had real trouble adjusting to an environment I could not move around freely in and observe and learn from. It was also equally as hard, unjust and unlucky as Paris in the film. That is why this film has such resonance for me. It is the quintessential French film yet it is really universal. And it also raises the French question, about identity, about integration, which I feel is the real problem for that country. For France and the French, integration is a one-way affair, hence the problem with youth which, as we know, is a long way from being resolved.
Obsessions

Truffaut and Tsai Ming-liang

Growing up in Paris, France, Truffaut’s films where part of my unconscious memory. I had watched several times “Jules et Jim” and “Les quatre cents coups”, among others. I knew them, was familiar with them. It’s not until I had lived several years away from home that the films started to resonate with my sense of identity, my Frenchness. I identified with a period in time I had not lived in but nevertheless felt familiar with.

I understood myself through the movies. They were the emblem of my past identity. Truffaut made a series of films, mostly autobiographical, on Antoine Doinel, showing the evolution of the character, from a thirteen to a thirty-something year old. Tsai Ming-liang’s films, which I discovered a few years ago, also have this familiarity and quality. They follow Hsia-Kang, a young male in a mostly harsh urban environment. Both filmmakers used actors that do not act; they are just themselves on film. There are no differences between Antoine, the character in the film, and Jean Pierre, the actor. Jean
Pierre effortlessly mutates himself. “Three parts make a Hole”, a film I made in 2008, presents such a blurring of identity. In the film three characters, in three sequences, are all played by me. In the first sequence I am playing myself, as an eighteen year old, a wannabe actor. In the second sequence I am playing Antoine and Hsia-Kang, shooting the movies they are known for, with increasing confusion as to which films is being shot, in what language the film is in and where it is located. In the third sequence, I am the director of the film, writing the screenplay for it. But I am also Truffaut and Tsai Ming-liang.

As in my previous works, there are again multiple perspectives. In this case, as the main characters, I am both in the film and a spectator of it. I am reenacting actual events that happened to me and mixing them with fictional ones and some taken from films. I wanted to reweave my past with what I dream had happened. For this film I
even recreated scenes I had earlier recreated, further confusing what happened, when it happened, if it ever happened. The film, as medium, itself has some identity issues, it’s a film but it’s made solely from still frames, borrowing the use of still frames from “La Jetée” (1963), by Chris Marker.

Screenplay for “Three parts make a Hole”, 2008

INT. SHOOTING “THE HOLE” - DAY


On the set of the scene for “The Hole”. Scene in the living room. The set has a living room raised by 20 inches so that someone can crawl underneath. The set shows the corner of a room, with a couch, a coffee table, a chair to the side (barely visible on the frame) and a television. A hole on the concrete floor as been dug in the center of the living room. The scene has Jean-Pierre sitting on the floor, in briefs and a white sleeveless top, with a lit cigarette in his hand. Someone from the crew keeps handing him freshly lit cigarettes. He is contemplating the hole in his living room.

DIRECTOR
Action

Suddenly a hand comes out of the hole, with a spray can, and starts releasing the contents of the can. Jean-Pierre goes off screen and comes back with a casserole cover. He uses it to fan the fumes.

FADE OUT.

“...the reason why I don’t use language to transmit messages is because often, what people say is often the reverse of what they do....I came around to the view that the language was a dangerous thing, especially in cinema...”
Tsai Ming-liang
In my work I always want to consider the viewer, the person intended for the experience I create. It’s a manufactured experience, meant to be repeated. It’s like being with me, being me, talking to my grandma. I gesture, we gesture, but she still does not get it. What is left afterward is how it felt, what was intuitively felt, what was physically felt.

Un Der Pres S Ure,
leading a participant out of the attic
Seattle, WA, 2001
Vita

Born in 1972, Reims, France

Education:

2009 MFA in Sculpture/ Extended Media, Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, VA
2004 BFA in Ceramics, University of Washington, Seattle, WA
1992 Baccalaureate in Math and Biology, Lycée Helene Boucher, Paris, France

Solo Exhibitions:

2008 Three Parts make a Hole, Thesis exhibition, Terminal, Richmond, VA
          Multiplying the tenses, Kompact Living Space, Berlin, Germany
2007 Layered Tenses, Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, VA
          Parle moi, je t’écoute, Richmond Public Main Library, Richmond, VA
2006 Are We There Yet, Lawrimore Project, Seattle, WA
2001 Un De R Pres S Ure, Sand Point Naval Station, Seattle, WA
2000 Hart Gallery, CMA gallery, Seattle, WA
1999 Easy Baby, CMA Gallery, Seattle, WA

Group Exhibitions:

2009 Zeigen, Temporaere Kunsthalle, Berlin, Germany
          For Lovers, Kim Foster gallery, New York, NY
2008 Almost Famous, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, VA
          The Terrible Twos, Lawrimore Project, Seattle, WA
2007 Aqua Art Miami @ Wynwood, Lawrimore Project, Miami, FL
          Company Picnic, Metro Space Gallery, Richmond, VA
          Commonwealth Bricoleurs, Off Grounds Gallery, Charlottesville, VA
          Us and them, PlaySPACE Gallery, San Francisco, CA
2006 Aqua Art Miami, Lawrimore Project, Miami, FL
   This is Gallery, Lawrimore Project, Seattle, WA
   Debate Team, Fab Gallery, Richmond, VA

2005 Ergonomic, Consolidated works, Seattle, WA

2004 Presence, Bumbershoot festival, Seattle, WA

2003 YSA, Howard House Gallery, Seattle, WA
   Fashion is Art, Bumbershoot festival, Seattle, WA

2001 Annual Ceramic Group Show, CMA Gallery, Seattle, WA

2000 Art Drill 2/2, Consolidated Works, Seattle, WA
   Art Drill 1/1, Seattle, WA
   Juried Group Show, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle, WA
   Ceramic group show, Emily Carr School of Design, Vancouver, BC
   Annual Ceramic Group Show, CMA Gallery, Seattle, WA

1999 Juried Group Show, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle, WA
   Annual Ceramic Group Show, CMA Gallery, Seattle, WA

Awards:

2006 Jacob K. Javits Fellowship, New York, NY
   GAP grant, Artist Trust, Seattle, WA

2004 Artist Trust/WSAC Fellowship, Seattle, WA
   Seattle Arts and Cultural Affairs grant, Seattle, WA

2003 The Stranger Genius Award, “Artist to Watch”, Seattle, WA
   EDGE program, Artist Trust, Seattle, WA

2001 Dean’s list, University of Washington, Seattle, WA

2000 Noritake Scholarship
   Dean’s list, University of Washington (2), Seattle, WA

1999 Dean’s list, University of Washington (2), Seattle, WA
   1st Place, Juried Group Show, Jacob Lawrence Gallery, Seattle, WA
   Noritake Scholarship
1998  Dean’s list, University of Washington (2) Seattle, WA

**Bibliography:**

2008  Curious, Vol II, VCU press

2007  La distinction entre un carthaginois et un hexadecagone, au subjonctif, Exhibition Catalogue, with Fionn Meade

2006  This is Gallery, Artweek, p. 22 Dec 06-Jan 07
       Wurm, Turns the absurd on its head, Seattle PI, 12-01-2006
       Studio, VCU Arts, Fall 2006, p. 4
       Seattle Metropolitan magazine, Ed. #1, Seattle, WA

       Fashion Statements, Seattle P-I, Section E, p. E1-E2, 08-29-2003
       Fashion is Art, Exhibition catalogue, Thread


**Lectures:**

2007  Collecting Contemporary Art, Page Bond Gallery, Richmond, VA
       Artist talk, Off Grounds Gallery, Charlottesville, VA

2006  15 works by 10 artists, Henry Art Museum, Seattle, WA

**Commissions:**

2008  Three Parts make a Hole (web screenplay)  Blackbird Literary journal
       www.blackbird.vcu.edu/v7n1