

Our World Is Burning

by Abdellah Karroum

In July 2019, I went to the Rif Mountains for a stay that was to provide me with a slower pace of life, which was both necessary and beneficial, and has become a family tradition. On nearing the final summits before the north coast of Africa, a smell of burning wood filled the bus. Hundreds of hectares of forest were going up in smoke. The fauna and the flora were quite simply vanishing before our eyes. This ecological catastrophe which destroyed all the woodland around Tafersit was ignored by both the Moroccan and international media. How many other forest fires went unnoticed that same year? This personal experience in the Rif made the news about the fires that were ravaging Amazonia feel even closer and the danger of a world that was burning more tangible. Life in and around the forest of Tafersit would never be the same again, neither for the villagers, nor for the Moroccan émigrés who return to their ancestors' trees and souls each summer. This forest, like those of Gourougou or M'diq, are ecosystems for their fauna, flora and surrounding inhabitants. They are also zones where migrants from other African countries arrive from across the desert and take refuge while waiting to find a pathway to the sea, so as to cross the Mediterranean at the risk of their lives. They are forced to flee towards the north coast of Africa and exile, in the hope of a better life, like the antelopes described by Marguerite Duras: "One day, on the Moroccan shores, a hundred and fifty years ago, thousands of antelopes together threw themselves into the sea."¹

That same summer, a movement of popular protest erupted in the streets of Hong Kong against an authoritarian, repressive Chinese regime. The people of Algeria, Chile and Lebanon have also been on the streets for months. All these popular revolts were born in the wake of the Arab Springs, and uprisings at once for social justice and against the corruption of political and military elites. Between the moment when I'm writing and the moment when you will read this text, how many other social movements in the world will have been put down by authoritarian regimes?

Given this realisation, we have no other choice than to "make do," in other words to act and to navigate the waves instead of resisting them, to think collectively instead

¹ Marguerite Duras, "The Antelopes," in *Green Eyes*, Carol Barko (trans.) (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990), 109-110.

of isolating ourselves at the top of a tower whose base is already on fire. It is both necessary and urgent to bind together our rafts of professional intellectuals² and turn them into theatrical stages on which the imaginary has the power to facilitate a dialogue between things, beings and a “je-ne-sais-quoi.”³

The exhibition “Our World Is Burning” expresses this awareness. Its title not only alludes to the thousands of fires which are consuming forests across every continent, but also the infernos of the wars that are consuming the world and the injustices that are destroying lives. While drafting this project, the point was to look at the world around us, to think through the spatial and temporal proximity of geopolitical conflicts—the blockade against Qatar, the war in Yemen—as well as the popular uprisings and democratic élans in many countries in this part of the world, from the Iranian Green Movement in 2009 to the Sudanese Revolution of 2018. The exhibition has been conceived as a space for encounters and the pooling of energies that interact with the artistic production of our era. This means being fully aware of the place from which we speak and look at the world, through the prism of artworks, be it from Mathaf⁴ in Doha or the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. If our institutions are to be solidly anchored in the real world, they must be civic sites, spaces for debate and “reflection,” where it is possible to connect the messages of artworks with the contexts in which they were created. *Passages*.

The situation of the world is now pushing artists into zones of uncertainty, which makes them question the forms that should be given to works, so as actively to take part in changes, against both enclosures and obscurantisms. Artists conceive works which are active agents in the debate about the situation of today’s world. Even in some of the works were created decades ago, their discourse remains so topical that encountering them awakens in us sensations or ideas that speak to us here and now. How do artists breathe an active dimension into their works? How can a work then continue to exist in broader spaces than its initial place of creation? And how does a work take on an active dimension, beyond its presentation in a museum and/or when presented to a given public, so as to develop a “civic agency”⁵ as an invitation to think about the state of the world? What happens when these questions are asked about works dealing with such vital issues as ecology, the human condition or history? A work becomes “civic” when it is encountered, in other words when it becomes meaningful for a public, who recognises in it their relationship with others and with the environment.

The exhibition has also had to articulate the works, so as to underline their power of resistance against this crisis in meaning. Isn’t the responsibility of an exhibition

² The Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi has spoken of a “professional alien.”

³ Jean-Paul Thibaud, *Comme un jeté de textes* (Saint-Ouen: Éditions hors’champs, 2000).

⁴ Some of the works in the exhibition “Our World Is Burning” come from the collections of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (Doha).

⁵ “A conversation between Olafur Eliasson and Daniel Birnbaum,” in *Olafur Eliasson: Verklighetsmaskiner/Reality machines* (Stockholm: ArkDes & Moderna Museet, 2016).

Available online: http://arkdes.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/conversation_eng.pdf

curator, a museum director or a cultural programmer to turn a museum into the site of a poetic experience and a political reflection, while presenting works which criticise the constant crises of our times? The awareness of the destructive effects of human activities on the environment, the struggle for freedoms, and the examination of historical and geopolitical narratives, are ideas that have guided and structured how the works in the exhibition “Our World Is Burning” have been arranged. In a vibrant museum or art centre the connection of each work with the world is woven; but also the relationships between each idea or fragment of a work with the fragments of other works. The point is to adopt a position in the museum space which has become a platform from which the rest of the city can be addressed and a dialogue can be initiated. Grasping reality by the means of how art questions the present makes it possible to imagine future worlds.

This reflection is set in the continuity of a research project and the exhibition “Revolution Generations,” which concerned generations of revolutionary artists in the modern era.⁶ These include intellectuals, artists and activists who, throughout the 20th century, and still today, have created reviews, theatre troops, or circles of poets and writers, as spaces for discussing ideas and envisaging a new, truly transnational society, from Morocco to India, and from Turkey to Sudan. These women and men have thus denounced both colonial injustices and the abuses coming from the new powers that be, or their authoritarian ideologies. The portraits of activists⁷ and ordinary citizens made by Inji Efflatoun → P.36 are an excellent illustration of this commitment among artists during the post-independence period of the 1950s and 1960s. Amal Kenawy’s installations perfectly illustrate the position adopted by an artist working in the 2000s, at a time prior to the Arab Springs. Art thus reflects the aspirations of other revolutionary citizens who denounce the multiple crises and obscurantist ideas that consume essential cultural heritages: legends of flying carpets and dragons, temples, sacred and secular books, or manuals covering customs and the knowhow of “creative craftsmanship.”⁸ *Civilisation*.

Some works are determined by specific contexts, concerning very local questions. This is, for example, the case for those which are based on an autobiographical approach in which the artist is, above all, a citizen. However, in the case of a politically committed “manifesto-work,” even if its context can be distant from us, its subject can still be perceived and shared—when dealing with the environment, for example—and stand as a model which can be transposed into other contexts which recall similar civic actions and responses. *Proximity*.

⁶ The exhibition “Revolution Generations” at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (Doha) in 2018 presented artists from the Arab World, Turkey, Iran, India and the diaspora. It investigated important moments of change in the history of modern and contemporary art; specifically the 1950s-1960s post-independence era, followed by the period between the 1970s and the 1990s, and the pre-revolutions of the 2000s when underground artistic movements developed in the region in response to the absence of freedom of expression. Offering a historical narrative, “Revolution Generations” introduced artists as vital actors of social and cultural change in each of these periods of modern and contemporary history.

⁷ Inji Efflatoun, *Ceza Nabarawi* (1965), Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art Collection (Doha).

⁸ Etel Adnan & Michel Nachez, *Maroc: l'artisanat créateur* (Paris: Dessain et Tolra; Casablanca: Almadariss, 1983).

The exhibition “Our World Is Burning” has been conceived so as to offer an experience of works and a reflection about the state of the world. Its construction in three interwoven themes responds to the need for an awareness of the urgent questions which can be seen in a series of crises in existence. The first of these crises is ecological. The second is social and political. The third is ethical and human: which is approached in the works not only through a critique of hegemonic narratives, but also of the fake news that imperils the credibility of the media.

This fragmentation of the world and the difficulty in giving an overall meaning to an idea of freedom are expressed in the work of Danh Võ, *We the People* → P.44, a reproduction of the copper shell of the Statue of Liberty, left in pieces and scattered across the world.

Alive, with Cerussite and Peppered Moth (2017) by Raqs Media Collective → P.102 continues this possibility of extension and infinite transformation. Digital images of insects are projected onto mineral and vegetable elements. These insects mutate so as to adapt to changes in their natural environments, in a perpetual movement of coexistence between matter and organisms. This capacity for adaptation allows beings to continue to seek out a certain form of balance, despite the threats that human colonies occupying vast territories bring to bear on the environment and the planet Earth.

The works produced by Mustapha Akrim → P.40 using articles from the Moroccan constitution underline the contradictions in the political and social organisation of a country. This shift of a legal text into the field of art is an invitation to rethink our relationship with institutions. Here, art offers more than an interpretation of a given situation or a critical reading of the realities of a political system. It is also an active vector for change. In this way, a work takes on the form of a slogan-manifesto, which can be declaimed both in a museum and on the street.

Amal Kenawy’s work, *The Silent Multitudes*, → P.52 was conceived in 2010, before the Arab Springs. It is set in the continuity of a politically committed and provocative series of works (which can be filmic, performative or theatrical). The art of “Generation 00,” a movement Amal Kenawy was part of in the 2000s, is thus a form of commitment, resistance and contestation contributing to revolutionary movements. For Amal Kenawy, the sum of personal stories triggers the meaning of universal history: the everyday lives of women in Egypt; the living conditions for young people in this country where the state uses intrusive surveillance to control public spaces; or else the corruption that lets school desks and hospital beds rust, thus adding the pressure of daily existence to repressive security. *Resistance*.

The title of the exhibition “Our World Is Burning” evokes the flames that are surrounding us on all sides. This image doubtlessly expresses what many men and women feel, especially those who live in armed conflict zones, countries devastated by civil wars or who are directly affected by natural catastrophes. These tragedies can be seen in the eyes of the Egyptian citizens photographed by Shirin Neshat, in the series *Our House Is on Fire* → P.68.

Aware of the absurdity of wars and frontiers, Francis Alj’s went to the battlefields of Iraq, sharing the everyday lives of the Peshmerga fighters who are attempting to repel the forces of the Islamic State → P.86. Through this experience of

the battlefield, in a zone where he could witness just one group, the artist ventured into the eye of the storm, so as to question whether war, and violent or invasive military actions are solutions for countering other wars and other forms of violence. The Second Iraq War, which was supposed to overcome the horror of blind terrorism, has produced even more destruction. *Tragedy*.

Human civilisations are constructed during conflicts, but also from encounters. Colonial expeditions and conquests, industrialisation and the intensification of trade exchanges, as well as the growing internationalisation of national economies, meant that an elite could build up collections of exotic works and objects. From the late 19th to the early 20th century, this led to museums being founded, such as the Musée Guimet and the Musée d'Ennery in Paris. This history inspired Oriol Vilanova's research behind *Outremer* → P.76. The attraction for another world and its exoticism, which characterises these collections, could be found in the homes of the rich merchants in the various centres on the Silk Road. They were already full of objects of curiosity, gathered because of a passion or the desire to own the stories, knowledge, and knowhows of the people the merchants traded with. For example, the Iraqi stained-glass technique⁹ was already used in Fez, Morocco, in the 9th century, during the era when Fatima al-Fihri ordered the construction of al-Qarawiyyin, which is now considered to be the oldest still-active university in the world. At the time, Fez was a world centre where philosophers, architects and musicians from Europe and Asia would meet.

This fervour for collecting exotic objects is a continuation of the craze for collecting countries and their natural resources. Sammy Baloji's → P.138 works examine the Congo's colonial memory, recycling its images and relics, not as simple narratives, but as historic traumas to be confronted. These sculptures and collages made from assembling fragments of weapons, images of post-industrial ruins and snippets of the lives of mineworkers, speak of the past so as to quiz the present. Postcolonial forms of trade thus come over as being as unjust as the exploitation and slavery during past centuries, which have left behind deep traumas which are impossible to fix.

The over-exploitation of natural resources and the use of their by-products in a context of exponential industrialisation have radically affected both ways of life and the environment. Plastic is the main product derived from the oil which is invading our everyday lives. With his "Plastic Museum" project → P.110, Fabrice Hyber goes about presenting the "riches of this invention as well as its dangers."

The works of Yto Barrada → P.132, John Akomfrah → P.128, Monira Al Qadiri → P.116 and Otobong Nkanga → P.136 also open up a debate, transforming the museum into a meeting place which incites both artists and visitors to the exhibition to work on their awareness of the state of the world. *Awareness*.

⁹ Mass-dyed Iraqi glass has been used by Sara Ouhaddou in her work *Sin ithran, ur mqadan, rousn / Deux astres, au déséquilibre, se brûlent* [Two Heavenly Bodies, Imbalanced, Burn One Other] (2020) → P.56 presented in the exhibition "Our World Is Burning."

The actual interdependency of life on earth is forcing us to rethink our lifestyles, our relationships with the living world, with other animal or vegetal species, the economy and the management of natural resources, as well as the protection of forests and oceans. This implies a need for states to consider the planet in its entirety, over and above the territories they manage socially and politically.

What form of governance might save the populations of Amazonia whose cultures and habitats are literally being destroyed by the expansion of mining, even after they have survived forest fires? Or the inhabitants on the banks of the Nile whose ancient lifestyles are being threatened by rising water, because of the widespread construction of dams?

What would happen if several million people decided really to take action and shift to a truly ecological, sustainable behaviour by no longer using plastic, for example? Would this have the same effect as when a large number of a country's inhabitants take to the streets to demand a change in the political regime, as was the case in Tunisia and other North African countries in 2011 and, more recently, in such South American countries as Venezuela and Bolivia? Is it possible that collective intelligences might work without friction, as is the case with trees whose roots weave a subterranean network, consolidating the soil and nourishing the vegetation? *Solidarities.*

The dream for a better life, the idea of creating a different world and projects to organise a fair society have preoccupied artists throughout history. They have cast into their artworks this dimension of responsibility, in an often poetic and sometimes political way. Encountering a work can alter our perceptions of the world and modify our relationship with it, while inviting us to take action, with an active participation in community life. In this collectiveness, the point is to connect ecological, political and ethical spaces. The questions raised by these works, as well as the positions adopted by the artists, allied with other groups of professionals and lovers of life, might trigger responses to the crises that threaten humanity as it drifts towards the unknown, like a boat crossing the high seas. *Future.*

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