

Risking the
Perception
of Poetics:
An Introduction

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"Thinking thought usually amounts to withdrawing into a dimensionless place in which the idea of thought alone persists. But thought in reality spaces itself out in the world. It informs the imaginary of peoples, their varied poetics, which it then transforms, meaning, in them its risk becomes realized."

— Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*¹

I was at a party, a small gathering, in the Sacré Coeur neighborhood of Algiers late one evening in March 2016. Djalila Kadi-Hanifi, an author and professor of mathematics, handed me a book bound in thick white paper stock that had been very simply printed in 1979. *En Attendant Omar Gatlatto* (Waiting for Omar Gatlatto), price 25 dinars, written and edited by Wassyla Tamzali. It is an early sourcebook on Algerian experimental cinema, focusing roughly on the period from the end of the 1960s through the late 1970s. Stills from a handful of films, shooting notes, production documentation, and interviews with individual filmmakers make up the bulk of the volume. It aims to constitute the existence of Algerian cinema despite the challenges of everyday life and the struggle to establish infrastructures for culture after the war.

En Attendant Omar Gatlatto posits that in the mid-1970s, the filmic representation of the Algerian everyman replaced heroic and mythologizing war movies. "Today we must leave the common ground of 'film born in the flames' (films that rise out of and are devoted to the War of Liberation) in order to support filmmakers, to take part in their efforts," Tamzali writes in the book's preface. She identifies the transition, and then articulates the responsibility it imposes on its public: "We must let go of the astonishment, of the indulgent joy in the existence of film in Algeria. We must analyze Algerian films in order to measure the road already traveled and that which remains to be traveled."²

En Attendant Omar Gatlatto expresses the exceptionalism of the 1970s in the country, which historian James McDougall describes as the era of a "new, young and profoundly transformed Algeria."³ The book, an excerpt of which has been translated and is included in this volume, takes its framing metaphor from Merzak Allouache's film *Omar Gatlatto*, an extraordinary cinematic portrait of Algerian youth released in 1976, fourteen years after the end of the War of Liberation. For Tamzali, *Omar Gatlatto* was not only paradigmatic of a period saturated with the claim for subjective emancipation, it inaugurated an awareness of that freedom: "Now we know. We were waiting for *Omar Gatlatto*. Merzak Allouache clasps the old mummy that film had become, and plunges Algerian cinema into a pool of tenderness and rebellion."⁴

"Waiting for Omar Gatlatto" is an exhibition conceived in response to Tamzali's insight and to the film of which that insight is born. This layering of thought has provided a curatorial framework ambivalent enough to encompass a survey of artworks by artists from Algeria and its diaspora in Europe. It also allows for a full acknowledgment of the impossibility, both political and aesthetic, of representing an artistic context that is at odds with its own national

1 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 1.

2 Wassyla Tamzali, "Eloge au cineastes," in *En attendant Omar Gatlatto: regards sur le cinéma algérien* (Algiers: En. A.P., 1979) n.p. Translation mine.

3 James McDougall, "Culture as War by Other Means: Community, Conflict and Cultural Revolution, 1967–81," in *Algeria Revisited: History, Culture and Identity*, eds. Rabah Aissaoui and Claire Eldridge (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 243.

4 Wassyla Tamzali, "The Birth of a Cinematographer: Merzak Allouache's *Omar Gatlatto*," page 27 in this volume.

5 Émilie Goudal, "Frantz Fanon, an Icon? Thoughts to See: Fanon's Algeria in the Visual Arts," page 104 in this volume.

6 Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli. La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), and Benjamin Stora, *La Guerre Invisible: Algérie, Années 90* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2001). The War of Liberation was waged primarily between the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and the French military between 1954 and 1962, ending with the signing of the Evian Accords. For a canonical account of this conflict see Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962* (New York: New York Review Books, 2006). The Black Decade, which is the preferred term in Algeria, rather than the Algerian civil war, was an armed conflict between an FLN-backed single party government and various Islamic militias which began in 1991 and continued at various intensities through the early 2000s. See Martin Evans and John Phillips, *Algeria: Anger of the Dispossessed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). For an in-depth study of this conflict, see Luis Martínez, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990–1998* (New York: Columbia University Press / Centre d'études et de recherches internationales, 2000).

mythology. *Waiting for Omar Gatlatto* is also the title of this volume, which anthologizes new translations of texts that flesh out the complexity of the Algerian and Franco-Algerian artistic contexts. Both the exhibition and this volume respond to the impossibility of representing Algeria with the conviction that is necessary to face the task as an impossibility and to act in spite of that fact. Why? Because the attempt at perception across difference is the ground for politics, here defined as a contestation of how power is organized. Without resolving any of the contradictions involved in such an attempt, "Waiting for Omar Gatlatto" proposes that the decolonization of art requires an effort to perceive Algeria and places with similar histories of liberation. Émilie Goudal has referred to a similar idea in her essay in this volume as the effort to think "visuality in Algeria through the prism of an *aesthesis* of emancipation."⁵ The curatorial responsibility entailed by such a notion means directing resources, organizing exhibitions and printed matter, and drawing public attention to artwork related to postcolonial contexts, of which Algeria is an example, and especially to artists and their work that respond with subtlety and sociocultural sensitivity to the contradictions that structure it.

Waiting for Omar Gatlatto is a cacophonous project, intuitively pursued, and based on relationships. Guided by an imperative to privilege long discussions with artists and writers over the presentation of any single authored idea about Algeria or its diaspora, it is presented without absolute justification. Rather than tie the selected artworks together into a unified picture with the authority of the curatorial text, an open-ended analysis of every artist's work is included in this volume. These texts are conceived as an extension of the curatorial framework in the sense that they constitute a record of what I have been able to perceive through discussion and negotiation with each artist. They follow the epigraph's imperative to *space thinking out in the world*, in Glissant's sense. They honor the artists' varied poetics and the risk of thought that is realized in each artwork.

To make decolonial exhibitions is, necessarily, an exercise in trying to unknow the order of the world. This means avowing the impossibility of providing a coherent vision of the effect Algeria has on the imaginations of artists who belong to it. I urge readers and viewers to relinquish their desire to know, in order to find some other mode of encounter with the art and writing presented.

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Waiting for Omar Gatlatto responds specifically to the visual and imaginative obscurity that blankets Algeria, a phenomenon that historian Benjamin Stora has linked to collective amnesia born of trauma in his work on the both the War of Liberation and the Black Decade.⁶ The reasons for Algeria's lack of artistic representation at the international level, even in comparison to its Maghrebi neighbor Morocco, are complex: 130 years of settler colonialism by the French engendered both a robust literary and artistic legacy in its

own image and, simultaneously, a strong rejection of that legacy by postcolonial authors such as Kateb Yacine and by artists such as Mohammed Khadda. As a result of an unrelenting yet ambivalent struggle for self-determination at every level of the sociocultural sphere, no digestible, unified narrative has emerged for the West to read Algeria.

Further contributing to this obscurity is the fact that cultural production across all sectors—in fact much of public life in Algeria—came to grinding halt in the 1990s during the Black Decade. In December 1991, the ruling government canceled national elections when it became clear that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) would carry the popular vote. In the aftermath of this decision, the military took over the government, banning the FIS and arresting its members, but a violent Islamist coalition movement emerged in its place. The various groups that comprised this movement targeted journalists, theater producers, writers, artists, and professors specifically, but they also massacred entire villages. Unveiled and professional women were shot in public, and tens of thousands of people thought to be collaborating with either the military or the militias were disappeared. Because it was often a case of violence perpetrated between neighbors, people who knew one another, the effects of the conflict chilled all forms of shared experience. People stayed home, locked themselves into the space of the family behind reinforced metal doors. The infrastructures for cinema, music, and art atrophied.

Artists, journalists, and intellectuals responded to the threat against them in various ways, but many left Algeria. This exodus and its repercussions on artists' lives and professional trajectories is part of the reason the diaspora remains important to a nuanced understanding of artistic production in Algeria, but it is not the only reason. Fifteen years after the end of the conflict in 2004, there is still a systematic disinvestment on the part of the Algerian cultural ministry, especially with regard to the visual arts and film, which is due in part to a lingering fear of artistic expression as a vector for sociopolitical destabilization in a country that has experienced enough of violent conflict on ideological grounds. The government's neglect of the arts not only affects the opportunity to exhibit within Algeria, it also impacts the intellectual infrastructure for critical debate about the function and value of art. There are very few dedicated art critics, no pedagogical structures to train curators or art writers, apart from independent initiatives such as *Aria*, a residency and professional development organization in Algiers founded by Yasmina Reggad and Zineb Sedira, and the more free-form *Rhizome Culture*, cofounded by Myriam Amroun and Khaled Bouzidi in 2017, which is described in more depth by Bouzidi in the final pages of this volume.

The ground of political contestation is moving, nevertheless. On March 11, 2019, Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika dropped his bid for a fifth term, and citizens filled the Place Audin in the center of Algiers, the colonial orientalist portico of the Grande Poste, and other major urban intersections, such as Martyr's Square and May 1st

7 Sky News Arabia is an Arabic news channel broadcasting 24/7 to audiences in the Middle East and North Africa. It is a joint venture between UK-based Sky and Abu Dhabi Media.

Square. A reporter for Sky News Arabia stood on the sidewalk near Place Audin with a microphone, narrating the events behind her in Modern Standard Arabic, speaking of demonstrators' happiness at Bouteflika's decision not to run.⁷ A man stepped into the frame, was held back, pushed into the frame again—not aggressive, but firm. The reporter passed the microphone to him and he explained, Algerians are not happy, the people want the government to change, not simply its figurehead. As he was speaking, she repeated the same word over and over, "Arabia, Arabia, Arabia..." She wanted the man to speak in Fusha or Modern Standard, so that people throughout the Arab world would understand his objection. He responded with a frustrated wave of his hand, "I don't know Arabia, we speak Derija here!" Derija is a local dialect of Arabic shot through with French, Spanish, words from Imazighn dialects, and is spoken with shortened vowels. In fact, Derija is a different amalgam of languages in Oran, in Annaba, and in Algiers, further complicating any claim to linguistic hegemony.

Within minutes, the clip was shared thousands of times on social media, appreciated for the tenuous relationship its point about language illustrates between Algeria and the rest of the so-called "Arab world"—nearly sixty years after the War of Liberation, Algeria maintains its sense of singularity. The specificity of its long, intimate colonial relationship to France and the significance of its non-Arab, Muslim Berber minority in political discourse and cultural life are just two factors contributing to this exceptionalism. *Waiting for Omar Gatlat* takes this claim for Algeria's national exceptionalism seriously, in part because it is one of the factors in the country's exceptional imaginative obscurity. Without essentializing artists who live in Algeria or in its diaspora, the project takes its singularity as an important structuring condition of Algeria's effect on cultural production.

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The exhibition began to take shape in the spring of 2016, long before the mass protests that started on February 22, 2019, filling every intersection of downtown Algiers. It is conceived in response to something I felt at that time: that there is a new, young, and profoundly transformed Algeria today that includes artists and filmmakers, graphic designers and photographers, living between Marseille and Mascara, Paris and Algiers. Fanny Gillet describes these people in her essay in this volume; in brief, they are a composite generation. Some lived through the Black Decade as children, and have emerged from it with an incredible will to see their country reanimated, its spaces of public discourse reactivated. Some were born into its aftermath and have reached adulthood without fear of the extremism that obstructed the energy and creativity of their elders. The previous generations studied in the USSR and the United States, choosing to live and study on one side or the other of a stark division of the world, but the emerging generation studies in London, Istanbul, Beirut, Aix-en-Provence, Brussels, Paris—or

they study in Algiers, while traveling to Hong Kong, Abu Dhabi, or Alicante for artist residencies. In other words, they breach any dyadic relationship to empire.

Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche, curator and director of the National Public Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MAMA) describes this generational notion as one that “provokes people’s awareness, allowing society to take stock of its own potential, to situate itself in its own era and everyday context, connected to its origins, its reality, its present and future.”⁸ This is the Algeria of *Picturie générale*, three large-scale exhibitions of contemporary art, largely organized by Mourad Krinah and jointly initiated with Djamel Agagnia and Sofiane Zouggar in 2013 at Artissimo, in 2014 at La Baignoire, and in 2016 at Volta, all in Algiers. *Picturie générale* is widely recognized as a phenomenon that made an artistic counter-current visible both in Algiers and internationally, one built by artists without asking for permission or official support.

Picturie générale is symptomatic of the broader claim for visibility and an appropriation of public space by artists that has been growing for years. It emerged from an artist’s collective called Box24, founded in December 2008 and named after a room in the *École supérieure des beaux-arts d’Alger* that a group of students had taken over as a project space. Soon to open a new venue in downtown Algiers, Box24 is run today by Walid Aïdoud as a residency and project space. A strong pedagogical engagement and a commitment to working collectively runs through these kinds of initiatives in Algeria, which is partly the result of a society governed by socialist principles for decades. Rather than stay in the center of Algiers among a small group of artists, for example, since 2009, Box24 has partnered with cultural organizations in the Western Sahara to create the ARTifariti festival, which launches an open call to make work and teach art in the Western Sahara resettlement camps in solidarity with the Sahrawi people’s struggle for sovereignty.⁹

Writing in 1961, in the essay “On National Culture,” included in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon argues that “the native intellectual who wishes to create an authentic work of art must realize that the truths of a nation are in the first place its realities. He must go on until he has found the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge.”¹⁰ This generation of artists who belong to Algeria, like the characters depicted in *Omar Gatlato*, are ready to follow Fanon’s injunction. They have let go of the astonishment and the indulgent joy that Algeria and its artists *exist*, in a basic sense.

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When I asked curator Zahia Rahmani to consider contributing to this book on the basis of her own remarkable curatorial achievements in the field of Algerian histories of representation, she responded that perhaps the best thing would be to make an exhibition about the impossibility of Algerian art. Rahmani believed that this project’s

8 Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche, “L’art, ici et maintenant,” in the exhibition catalogue for *Picturie générale II*, held at La Baignoire, Algiers, March 2014 (Algiers: Barzakh, 2014), n.p. Translation mine.

9 I am grateful to Walid Aïdoud for laying out the relationships between these structures, and though the collectivity of these endeavors is paramount to their impact, it must also be said that they exist because of his commitment to them.

10 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), 224.

11 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 151.

12 It has been pointed out to me, however, that in Algeria there is a concentration of artists in Algiers and that very little curatorial work has been done to date that reaches beyond the capital's networks. While I have made some effort to decentralize "Waiting for Omar Gatlato" in this respect, this effort should not be considered sufficient.

mandate, as I articulated it to her at the time, would inevitably lead to the symbolic recognition of a state system that should not be considered synonymous with the cultural production of the inhabitants of its territory, and even less that of its diaspora. Though I could not convince her to elaborate on this point, it has profoundly marked the shape both the exhibition and this accompanying book have taken since. I shared her unease at the thought of tethering artistic production to any single nation, and to Algerian nationalism in particular. Having spent a good deal of time in Algeria, and having debated this point at length both with the artists included in the show and those from an older generation, such as Denis Martinez, I acknowledge the difference between artwork made in Algeria by people who were trained and live there, and that produced in relation to Algeria by artists living and working in France. The formatting of artists, as Martinez would say, is different in each national context, as are the stakes of making art and even of identifying as an artist.

Yet those living in the diaspora are intimately connected to Algeria formally and culturally, so to exclude them would be to present a reductive and politically naive understanding of cultural legitimacy in relation to artistic practice. It is possible to be inhabited by a place to which one's belonging is unstable. Further still, "territory is the basis for conquest," as Glissant reminds. "Territory requires that filiation be planted and legitimated. Territory is defined by its limits, and they must be expanded. A land henceforth has no limits. That is the reason it is worth defending against every form of alienation."¹¹ The debate about what it means to be Algerian and to reflect on the impact of the histories of Algeria on aesthetic practices occurs in many places that are not, strictly speaking, in Algeria: Kader Attia and Zico Selloum's bar and event space in Paris, La Colonie, for example, or La Compagnie, an exhibition space and experimental arts programming center run by Paul-Emmanuel Odin in the Belsunce neighborhood of Marseille for over twenty years. For this reason, a guiding principle of the exhibition's curation has been to find an (almost) even balance in the list of artists between those based in France and those based in Algeria, with a slight bias toward those in Algeria.¹²

That said, there is a tension in the exhibition with regard to the diaspora that must be openly admitted. "Waiting for Omar Gatlato" excludes a number of established artists from the diaspora such as Mohamed Bourouissa, Adel Abdessamed, and Neïl Beloufa, among others, whose work has done much for the visibility of Algeria and its artists beyond its borders. Placing the curatorial focus elsewhere is intentional here, and is largely the result of heated debates I have participated in and witnessed with artists in Algiers and in Paris. In these conversations, people spoke to me very directly about the difference between work that is commercially successful in Europe—high-production-value artwork made to circulate within the international art world—and work made in a country with relatively poor arts infrastructure. What I understood from these exchanges was that if the intention of the proposed exhibition was to create a

non-hierarchical surface of appearance, a level playing field between artists from the diaspora and those based in Algeria, I should exclude work made by those who are routinely called upon to represent *Algérienité* to a global audience. The conditions of production, in the Marxist sense, are not considered equivalent by some, and this non-equivalence would make it impossible for work by those based in Algeria to fully appear.¹³ As a feminist with some ambivalence about the reduction of value to the material conditions of production, I nevertheless saw their point.

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The first question I was asked in almost every studio visit I conducted in relation to this project was, why are you interested in Algeria? It is a fair question, I am a white woman in soft cotton button-down shirts and bright blue sneakers. The answer is complex: I am inhabited by Algeria, a place to which I am entirely exterior, by virtue of a personal history over which I have no control. I was born in Marseille to an American mother and a *pièdes-noirs* father, a settler colonist who immigrated to France with his family after several generations in Algeria. I was very close to my paternal grandfather, and so my earliest relationship to Algeria was constructed through his experience of exile and conditioned by his nostalgia. This nostalgia was also complex: my grandfather's best friend and my father's godfather was Jean Sénac, a poet who was fiercely militant on behalf of Algerian Independence in word and action, and remains well-respected by the country's artistic and literary community. He was murdered in 1973 by his lover, though some claim he was assassinated by agents of the Algerian government for his unrepentant homosexuality. A painting by Mohammed Khadda, to whom Sénac was close, hung opposite my childhood place at the dining-room table in my grandfather's house. As he told the story, he had bought it directly from the artist in the early 1950s because Sénac chastised him for failing to support emerging artists in Algiers.

I began the research that would eventually result in this exhibition when my grandfather was dying, and living ever more firmly in the past, in an Algeria he left in the middle of his life. He grew Algerian jasmine from a pot so that it draped over the doorway to the kitchen, its scent the first thing he encountered in the morning as he stepped on to his small terrace deep in the heartland of France. He rolled couscous by hand in a giant wooden bowl made from a single olive tree, which he never washed for fear of losing the taste of olive oil left in the wood grain. I think there is no one who touched my grandfather more deeply than Sénac, and as the years between my grandfather's exile in 1967 and his present moment stretched out, his nostalgia for the country and his grief at Sénac's death became entangled.

Perhaps because of the research I had just embarked upon, perhaps because I had always been fascinated by the open, raw quality of his longing for the Algeria in which he and the poet were young, or perhaps because he sensed some similarity between

13 A number of people have pointed out that the reverse is also true: that it benefits artists with fewer resources to show with artists whose reputations are already international; it opens doors, creates more context for their work, and increases their visibility. I let the contradiction stand, hopefully to provoke a more engaged and rigorous debate on whether international visibility produces better artwork or better commodities, or something in between.

myself and Sénac, I became the one to whom he spoke about his loss. I am interested in Algeria first because I am astounded by that loss, by its force, and by its seeming non-relation to the historical record of brutal exploitation by colonial settlers of nearly everyone else in the country.

Waiting for Omar Gatlato is then founded on a question first formulated in relation to my grandfather's perspective on Algeria: Did he and others in his position ever perceive the country they developed such elaborate nostalgia for and with which they thought themselves so intimately involved? This question has evolved into one concerned with the structure of decolonial perception: Can a viewer in New York City in 2019 perceive the effect Algeria has on art and on artists, and through this perception, encounter difference? I don't mean ethno-cultural difference, but rather a difference in the role of art and in an understanding of its function in a society that is, at least in part, structured according to an African horizon of experience and thought.

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