

ZINEB SEDIRA



SAM ART PROJECTS



Jour de l'indépendance, Alger, 5 juillet 1962 - Photographie de Mohamed Kouaci

« La photo

Caroline Hancock : Avant de Tokyo, retraçons brièvement en Kabylie vers Gennevilliers l'Algérie pendant les vacances pour étudier l'anglais. Tes enfants sont anglais. La naissance de l'Algérie date de la guerre civile, comme tu ne t'impliques pas dans cette communauté.

Zineb Sedira : Cette expérience et en tant qu'artiste. Je vis avec des algériennes. Je n'étais pas habituée de me réaccoutumer à la vie de trente ans, ceux-ci sont très fréquemment à Gennevilliers, dangereux d'effectuer des séjours en vacances chez moi en rapport à mes souvenirs de la capitale, Alger, que je ne suis pas le directeur du Centre culturel pour passer du temps dans ces lieux montrés en 2005 aux États-Unis [Alger]. Cela m'a donné une expérience mais comme artiste. Je suis tombée amoureux de la ville et de l'architecture et des médias. J'ai décidé de travailler un moment. Je savais que c'était mon travail. J'ai noué des contacts et une découverte constante de la ville, notamment les artistes.

Image Keepers

By Caroline Hancock

« *Photography was his weapon* » Safia Kouaci, 2010

Caroline Hancock: *Before discussing the piece you are presenting at the moment at the Palais de Tokyo, it might be worth summarising your journey to date... Your parents migrated in 1961 and 1962 from their village in Kabylia to Gennevilliers. This is where you were brought up only ever visiting Algeria during the holidays, until, in turn, you migrated to London to study English. The UK has been your home since 1986 and your children are British, Algerian and French. Your own direct personal discovery of the country of Algeria has taken place primarily since summer 2002 when you returned there after the civil war (known as the 'black decade') ended. You decided then to establish part of your life in Algiers and have since commuted regularly, engaged professionally with the cultural scene and become a core part of the community there.*

Zineb Sedira: This experience was important for me as a mother and an artist. I wanted my children to know about their Algerian roots. I hadn't been to Algeria since 1988 so I needed to re-acustom myself with to my parents' land. Having lived in France for more than 30 years, they now live in Bordj Bou Arreridj, returning to Gennevilliers frequently. Once it was declared safe to travel long distances there once again, we organised several holiday trips to visit my parents and family. Algeria was very different to from what I remembered from my childhood or teenage years and, for the first time, I visited the capital, Algiers, which I had only ever passed through before. Then, in 2003, I was invited by Aldo Herlaut, then director of the Centre Culturel Français (C.C.F.) in Algiers, to spend time in the city and make produce some new work [exhibited in 2005 at the C.C.F. in Constantine, Oran and at the Galerie Esma in Algiers]. This gave me the opportunity to go back again and again, not as a visitor but as an artist.

I fell in love with Algiers – the lively city, the ambiance, the people, and the architecture. It was nothing like what was portrayed in the media. I decided to get a place of my own in the city centre. I knew that Algeria was going to be a great source of inspiration for my work.

In the art scene there, I now have a close network of people who have informed my constant discovery of this culture. To cite just a few, I would mention artists Amina Menia, Ammar Bouras and Arezki Larbi and art historians/curators Nadira Laggoune and Nouredine Ferroukhi, actor Samir El-Hakim, journalist and writer Mustapha

Benfodil, documentary filmmaker Malika Laichour Romane, and cultural agent and historian Mustapha Laribi (1). I have been fortunate to work with Mohammed Djehiche [director of the Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain d'Alger, known as MAMA], and Mustapha Orif [director of the Agence Algérienne pour le Rayonnement Culturel] on a variety of projects.

The passionate discussions we have when we meet inspired me to propose this new film idea to SAM Arts Projects last year. It is such a wonderful chance! I feel so amazingly lucky that this prize has actually enabled me to produce it!

This past year your work has become the centre of polemics it has sparked controversy on two occasions (2). The first, in November 2009, was the Alexandria Biennale where you had been invited to represent Algeria but this pavilion was closed (due to football incidents between Algeria and Egypt). This had nothing to do with your work but then, this spring your solo show at the Musée Picasso in Vallauris was closed down for several weeks due to complaints. The bone of contention was the subtitling in French in your video Retelling Stories: My Mother Told Me (2003) which translated the word 'harki', referring to the Algerians who chose allegiance with the French during the war, as 'collaborator' (3).

More than 50 years after the Algerian war, France is still in denial about certain violent events that occurred during that period. This was a painful and disappointing revelation for me. What hypocrisy to think that the French did not inflict torture! Whether we like it or not, in every war there are collaborators. Collaborators are part of history. During World War II, the Germans created French collaborators. Why isn't it possible to state that the French created collaborators in Algeria? I believe this was an excuse to censor my mother talking about torture and rapes by the French military in the video. I agreed to remove the word 'collaborator' from the subtitles in the French version since in France everyone knows what the word 'harki' means. But the show continued to be censored by the mayor. A group of Anciens Combattants [war veterans] and of Pieds-Noirs [former colonists of French Algeria] were opposed to the video and he claimed concern for the safety of the show. Once the show finally reopened two months later, my work attracted no complaints, aggressive attacks, and no vandalism towards it whatsoever!

Self-censorship has developed in many parts of society in France. French colonial denial or aphasia is not truly contested publicly and politically. The reaction of the press to the Vallauris censorship was an obvious example of this. With few exceptions, articles stated facts but did not take a critical position.

Living in England gives me a distance and the strength to talk about France's 'unspeakable' colonial past and my family's experience in an open way.

You belong to a new generation of artists and filmmakers who are beginning to portray or film Algeria differently. You are attentive to new developments in Algerian

cinema like recent films by Malek Bensmaïl, Tariq Teguiâ, Rabah Ameur-Zâmeche, Fatma-Zohra Zamoun for example. The opening of the MAMA in 2006 has been significant in the Algiers art scene with ambitious exhibitions such as L'Art au féminin and Les Artistes internationaux et la révolution algérienne (both 2008) and the F.I.A.C. (Festival International d'Art Contemporain) occurring every two years. This was also one of the venues for the second Panafrican Festival of its kind last summer. You are now very involved in this scene and one its major promoters on the international stage. Can you tell us about this and what are your hopes for the future?

Algerian cinema is interesting but there are still too few directors making their mark strongly and 'placing' putting it on the map again since the successes of the 1960s and 70s. With regards to the visual arts, many international artists are invited to show there. But there isn't yet enough official desire to extend the visibility of the Algerian exhibitions and artists internationally. I believe the art education system needs to be adapted to be in line with other art colleges in Africa, the Middle East or Europe. Opening up to the world and more exchanges would allow contemporary Algerian art visibility beyond the borders and give opportunities to local artists to also exhibit outside Algeria. There is a real need for a market outside the public institutions, a need to interest collectors, a need to show in-situ work or performance.

Gradually, through these encounters, books and films, you are deepening your knowledge of the history of this country, the colonisation by the French in 1830, the liberation war between 1954 and 1962 when Algeria became independent. Can you tell us about the subjects of your new film Image Keepers: Mohamed Kouaci (1922-1996) (4) and his widow Safia Kouaci (born in 1928) (5)?

Mohamed Kouaci was the main (if not the only) official photographer for the Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne (GPRA – Temporary Government for the Republic of Algeria) working for the Ministry of Information. From the late 1950s until the independence, the GPRA was based in Tunis.

Amina Menia introduced me to Kouaci's photographs. She knows the family well and has developed a great admiration for this historical archive. We discussed its future at length. Stored in Safia's flat in Algiers without professional conservation conditions, the archive is deteriorating and urgently needs to be preserved and documented according to methods of best practice. When Amina was in London [2009, Delfina Foundation residency], we prepared a dossier and started approaching different institutions in Algeria and worldwide to ask help or total commitment to save this visual heritage. I met Safia and looked closely at the numerous photographs taken during the Algerian war and post Independence. They have had so little exposure. To date, no one in Algeria has seemed interested in producing a significant exhibition or substantial publication. In fact, apart from the 1950s and 60s officials, not many people know Kouaci's work...

Reproductions of some of his iconic photos are sold everyday rather like souvenir post-cards by vendors on the main streets of Algiers like the rue Larbi Ben M'Hidi.

But this occurs with impunity, without the photographer being credited and without the family receiving any dividends. We are campaigning to raise consciousness on all levels.

You are showing this work for the first time in a Module at the Palais de Tokyo. Why have you chosen a tripartite composition for this multi-layered portrait?

I decided to make this as a homage into a tribute to this man and this woman. It will contribute to giving them the long overdue recognition they deserve. The first thing that struck me when I saw Mohamed Kouaci's work was the incredible power of his photographs. Yet Safia has really struggled to give them visibility. My immediate reaction was to record the stories she tells so well. I sincerely hope that this film might prompt the rescue of the archive (the negatives, the original prints, the press cuttings etc) accompanied along with rigorous thorough classification and research by historians. It seemed right to propose a multi-screen installation in order to focus on one hand on her and the archive and on the other on her, her husband and history. I wanted to film her telling her life story, as a wife, a collaborator, and a privileged witness to the historical events photographed by her husband. She helps us grasp or decrypt decipher the stories hidden behind these shots.

On the eve of the 50 year commemoration of Algeria's independence, you take on a role as a keeper of images yourself, making visible multiple perspectives of the richness of this culture. You often highlight the importance, and urgency even, of recording personal heritage, untold histories and the crucial part women play in this transmission.

The role of women during war was already a key question in *Retelling Histories* and *Mother, Father and I* (both 2003). Safia's strong and engaged committed personality is an extraordinary example to all of us. She started her mujahidine activity as a wardrobe-dresser for the FLN (National Liberation Front) theatre troupe and became secretary to the Minister of Information of the GPRA. Coming from an old Algiers family devoted to nationalist values, Safia has always shown great commitment to her husband's political views and his work.

Kouaci photographed all the significant events during the war and the first three decades of the young independent country. There are images that have practically never been seen before of all the Algerian political personalities such as Ahmed Ben Bella, Houari Boumediène, Mohamed Boudiaf, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Redha Malek, of visits by Fidel Castro, Patrice Lumumba, King Hassan II, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and of mythical legendary figureheads of the struggle for freedom fight like Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon. Generally the photographs published in history books are those taken by Westerners – like those by Raymond Depardon, Elie Kagan, Marc Riboud, Kryn Taconis (6). When Kouaci's pictures are reproduced, they tend to be 'anonymous'.

Kouaci's photographs are such valuable documents on Algerian history – important

not only for the Algerians but also for the French and internationally. I have learnt so much working on this project! By focussing of the Kouaci's story, I have been able to continue an exploration of French colonial history and Algerian history. There is still so much unknown... This is a subject I am going to pursue for a while. I want to resist propagating amnesia.

This interview between Zineb Sedira and Caroline Hancock took place at intervals between August and October 2010.

Notes

- (1) Laribi directs a website www.algeriades.com with worldwide Algerian cultural news [only in French].
- (2) Simultaneously and for similar reasons, Rachid Bouchareb's film *Hors-la-loi* was the centre of polemics, a focus of controversy at the Cinema Festival in Cannes this year.
- (3) Understanding the relative insensitivity of this heavy-handed translation, Sedira changed the subtitles immediately. It is nevertheless useful to note that the use of World War II terminology to describe the horrors perpetrated by all factions during the Algerian War of Independence is not uncommon. The film *L'Avocat de la terreur* (*Terror's Advocate*, Barbet Schroeder, 2007) summarises such argumentation scandalously used by maître Vergès in his defence of the Nazi Klaus Barbie at the end of the 80s. These unfortunate occurrences highlight the traumas still extremely present amongst all the communities involved in these events. The wrenching dilemma persists. Dialogue is more important than ever.
- (4) Mohamed Kouaci published two books: *Algérie d'hier, Algérie de toujours*, Alger, E.N.A.L. (Entreprise Nationale Algérienne du Livre), 1983, and *Compagnons de lutte. 1954-1962. Photos réunies par Mohamed Kouaci*, Alger, Musée central de l'Armée, 1984.
- (5) See article: Souhila Habib, "Safia Kouaci. Le dé et l'aiguille rejoignent le fusil", *Horizons*, March 2010, pp. 18-19.
- (6) For the example, the book *Photographier la guerre d'Algérie*, directed by Benjamin Stora and Laurent Gervereau, Paris, Marval, 2004. Texts by Fabrice d'Almeida, Marie Chominot, Laurent Gervereau, Abdelmadjid Merdaci and Benjamin Stora. On the other hand, historian Marie Chominot has studied the Kouaci archive for her thesis at Université Paris VIII: « Guerre des images, guerre sans image? Pratiques et usages de la photographie pendant la guerre d'indépendance algérienne (1954-1962) », 2008. She has recently published: « Quand la photographie vint à la Révolution. Petite contribution à l'histoire des services d'information du FLN pendant la guerre d'indépendance algérienne », *Cahiers du Gremamo*, n° 20, « Images du Maghreb, images au Maghreb (XIX^e-XX^e siècles) : une révolution du visuel ? », Paris, L'Harmattan, 2010.

Caroline Hancock is an independent curator and writer based in Paris. Since 1998, she has worked at the Centre Pompidou and Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Tate Modern and the Hayward Gallery in London and IMMA in Dublin.

Traduction, Caroline Hancock

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Il était le photographe de la Résistance.



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Avait-il filmé ceux qui furent condamnés à mort ?

