



**"NORTH BY NORTHWEST
ERASED AND RESHOT"**



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A conversation with Sami Ben Larbi



La distinction entre un Carthaginois et un Hexdecagone, au subjonctif
installation, 2007-8

A:

A previous installation of yours, "La distinction entre un Carthaginois et un Hexdecagone, au subjonctif", was a recreation of a scene from "Les quatre cents coups" from F. Truffaut. This new work, "North by Northwest - Erased and Reshot", is also a recreation; the famous airplane crop dusting scene by A. Hitchcock. Two questions quickly come to mind. Why this film and why this scene?

SBL:

Several of my projects have centered around films that fascinate me. "The Hole" by Tsai Ming-Liang is, to me, a masterpiece in its construction and language. So much happens with so little being said. "Les quatre cents coups" is a very French, a very Parisian story, a story very similar to mine. Unloved at home, unsupported at school, the streets of Paris are the playground for Antoine Doinel, the main character in the film. The film is also one of the first of the Nouvelle Vague. More mobile cameras and synch sound were used, which made the film seem less staged, more real. This reality is what draws me in. The last scene of the film shows Doinel looking directly at the camera, directly engaging the viewers. He is looking at me, even now 50 years later, he is still engaging me. So the film was, to me, a very important step in the understanding, the decoding of film as a means of communication. Truffaut, here, created his own cinematic language.

A:

Ok, but what about this new project?

SBL:

The same with Hitchcock. His use of camera angles and cuts created a new syntax. One that is with us, as consumers of film, video and television. It is like English, so ubiquitous that it's an afterthought to consider how the understanding of media, the decoding, was shaped by a few key figures, Hitchcock among them. "North by Northwest" and the airplane scene are burned in our collective memory. According to quite a few sources, the airplane scene is THE most famous cinematic scene. The one we all know. A common reference.

A:
Why is this important for you?

SBL:
Well this commonality is to me the key ingredient. I only need to mention the airplane scene and everyone knows what I am talking about, or think they know. They have their own baggage to bring to the understanding of my recreation. It's as if the story is a given and what is at stake now are the mechanics. One of the questions I had coming into the project was, what would happen if I reduced everything to its essence by taking the scene apart and isolating each element, the camera work from the acting work.

A:
What did you do to the scene then?

SBL:
I erased, from the original footage the bus, the plane and all of the characters and cars. This created the first video channel for the installation. In the second channel, a slide projection, I reshoot the scene, taking the place of Cary Grant in the scene, in his role as Roger Thornhill. In the reshoot I always look at the camera. For example when Thornhill looks behind him, at the airplane in the distance, I am looking behind, at the camera, at the viewer really. It's also important to note that in front of the slide projector lens, there is a nose of a model airplane. It serves two purposes. It makes the projection flicker as if it's a film projection. Appearing to be something it's not. And it ties the recreated scene with the airplane and the viewer. In effect the character, who is always looking at the camera, is always looking at the airplane. It's a looming presence.

A:
You mentioned the importance of Doinel, in Truffaut's film, looking at the camera. You have done several projects around the same theme. For example the installation "Un Der Pres S Ure", in 2001. You had actor/participants perform for the camera, but they were their own audience, so they really performed for themselves. What is to you the significance of this act? What is so important about the camera?

SBL:
The installation you refer to was an experiment in understanding what happens to the identity of the participants once social boundaries are opened up. Each participant was anonymous and had a mediated experience. They only saw themselves through cameras in the space and LCD screens in their helmets. So they could theoretically have done whatever they wanted. In this case the camera was the separator between physical reality and mental reality. The participant saw themselves from the third person, from the camera perspective.

To me the camera is a window. It connects the past and the future, forever. The young Doinel, 50 years later, is still the same, his act remains the same, his essence, his longing is still there to haunt. So it's an ability to jump through time, freeze time and communicate. It is a way to relate. That's one reason documentary film and television are so powerful. The camera is our eyes, as distant viewers, onto the past or distant places. And the camera is also a thief of sort. Once recorded the subject is frozen, there can be no do-over. It deprives the subject from ever progressing, changing, aging. This could be the reason that Native Americans thought that photographs robbed them of their souls.

A:
I am sure you are familiar with "Deadpan" by Steve Mc Queen, a recreation of a scene from "Steamboat Jr." by Buster Keaton. How is your work different? or is it?

SBL:
It is similar in that I work with iconic scenes and re-contextualize them. In "Deadpan" 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 a Total Cinema experience, a term coined by Andre Bazin

in the 60's.

For "North by Northwest Erased and Reshot", the physicality, the characteristics of film - the flickering and pulsating quality, what makes the media come alive - is here a recreation. Slide projection and what is essentially a shutter combine to make the still image appear as though it is moving. The viewer is a witness to this trickery, a part of the team, behind the scene but also in the scene. The viewer is the missing, the erased elements from the scene. The barrier between projected image and physical space is broken.

A:

It seems to me, knowing you, that there are more reasons for you to have chosen this film and this scene that you have not yet shared with me. Is that true?

SBL:

Yes it is. The story, the McGuffin of the film is that Roger Thornhill is mistaken for someone else, Kaplan, who is a fabrication of the CIA. We never really know why the mistake ever happened, but that's irrelevant. It just is. For the rest of the film Thornhill is trying to meet this Kaplan, to clarify the misunderstanding. Of course he never finds himself...

A:

This idea of the self, the identity, is quite present in your projects. As in the remake of "Les quatre cents coups", you chose the scene in which Doinel goes into a fair ride to forget himself, to escape his life, his misery. This time you chose a film, a scene, where the character is threatened to be killed for wanting to find himself. A bit ironic don't you think?

SBL:

Exactly, the irony of the situation is what makes, for me, this film so enduring and so personal. Throughout the film every character is pretending to be someone they are not. Eva Marie Saint is pretending to be a nice girl wanting to save Cary Grant from being found by the cops, while also pretending to work for the foreign spies, but really working for the Americans. James Mason, the chief of the foreign spies, is pretending to be a UN diplomat. It goes on and on.

There's also another part of this project I find interesting. Erasing a Hitchcock, a masterpiece, stripping it of itself. It felt like being

Rauschenberg, erasing a de Kooning. The intent felt really similar. And the thought helped me survive the gruelling months of having to photoshop out the scene. It was a personal comic relief.

But I also feel this has a lot to do with my current work. It was a very profound experience to work so closely on the mechanics of the scene. I learned a lot from it. It was a sort of cinematic boot camp that will help me in my future projects.

A:

This is your third project based on film recreation. Do you intend to do more?

SBL:

Yes, the next piece in this series is a take-off from "A bout de souffle", by Goddard, where I will play Belmondo, as a flaneur, walking around the streets of Paris, in a circle. Midway there's a chase between Me/Belmondo and the camera/viewer. The film is significant to me. At some point Belmondo turns to the camera and says "si vous n'aimez pas la montagne, si vous n'aimez pas la mer, si vous n'aimez pas la ville, allez vous faire foutre!". He is directly confronting the viewers, breaking the physical/temporal barrier. To this day he is still talking directly to me.

A:

And then what? You mentioned in a previous talk, with Fionn Meade, the forthcoming of the Carthaginois - your screen name I guess?-What is happening with this project?

SBL:

I guess you are referring to the name in the title "La distinction entre un Carthaginois et un Hexdecagone, au subjunctif". Le Carthaginois refers to my Tunisian ancestry. The reference is to what was once great, the second most powerful port city in the Roman empire, but is now just a shell of itself, longing for its past. I am in the research phase of what I foresee to be a multi-year multi-parts project. I can only say right now that it takes the Crusades as theme, as the common subject. I am interested in exploring this fascination, this fantasy of rescuing the promised land, as seen by all sides.



Erased erased de Kooning, 2011, inkjet print

Sami Ben Larbi is a French American artist, of Tunisian descent, living in Berlin. He has exhibited at, among other places, Temporäre Kunsthalle, Berlin, Architecture Museum TU BERLIN, Reynolds Gallery, Richmond, Lawrimore Projects, Seattle, Aqua Art Miami. He has upcoming exhibitions in New York and Berlin, at Oberhafen Kantine in August and Tät in September.

Oberhafen Kantine
August 24 & September 8-10
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Tät
September 16-24
Opening September 16 19-22
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