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Soft Machine

Laurent Courtens - (translated from French by Matthew Cunningham)

Words are not everything, my lord, going to visit the elephant solomon today is a poetic act and will perhaps be seen as such in the future, What is a poetic act, asked the king, No one knows, my lord, we only recognise it when it happens.

José Saramago, in *The Elephant's Journey*, 2008

The V12 engine is a miracle of Western technology. Powerful, precise, calibrated to perfection, it combines the industry's most exact products, using the creative resources of its design and production chains: engineering, experimentation, laboratory tests, material resistance studies, extraction, transformation, assembly... to propel high-powered racing cars to over 300 km/h! It would definitely have blown Marinetti's mind¹.

The V12 is the engine of the Aston Martin, the Audi A8, of Ferraris, Lamborghinis and Jaguars, legendary sports coupes that stars, executives, managers, technocrats and developers associate with their power, their creative energy, the speed of their soilless, otherworldly, exclusive way of life. Distinction...

This engine is also the missing link of the Laraki Fulgura², a Western-inspired limited edition luxury car produced solely with the support of the national industry's own resources. It can manufacture everything except... the engine.

And here is a specimen of this mythical V12 (a Daimler-Benz in this case) dismembered piece by piece, carefully broken up into primary cells, each of which is offered as a model to a Moroccan artisan (nearly forty in all, mostly from Marrakech, but also from Tangiers, Fes, Rabat...). These artisans accurately copy the original, whether it be an engine block or the

¹ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) was the author of *The Futurist Manifesto* (1909), whose fourth sentence marked an epoch: “*We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace*”.

² Named after its pioneer, Abdeslam Laraki, a rich, influential industrial designer educated in Switzerland and France. He began by designing luxury yachts, particularly for the king of Bahrain, and later turned to automobile production.

smallest bolt. In bone, resin, copper, ceramics, wood, aluminium, leather, stone... And every piece must precisely fit one or several others, reflecting the very high precision of the prototype.

Although the Moroccan national industry is unable to produce a V12 engine out of metal alloys, Morocco's artisans can produce its reflection, its transplantation into composite materials, its recomposition through people, through the actions of the hand, through the exercise of a trade, of know-how, of patient intimacy with textures. Through the test of repeated attempts, adjustments, corrections. Through the activation of a revived, renewed, restored tradition, carried beyond the repetition of impoverished clichés, the production of goods for the tourist industry, and the dead ends of an imported technicist model. *V12 Laraki* is not an author's whim, nor the product of a condescending use of a region's potential, but the concrete, tested manifestation of a possible future for the economies of the South, combining industrial archetype, informal production, local creativity, history, tradition, evolution.

Third-party mechanics

The discovery of the Laraki Fulgura about two years ago was a stroke of luck for Éric van Hove. It was the confirmation of a long-term project: get an engine built by local artisans in several African countries. An engine for movement, motive power, the transmission of powers, the transformation of energy. An engine like motors found all over Africa—patched up, with every crank, every tube, every pipe recycled, fed on palm oil or impure diesel. Motors preserved well beyond their intended lifespan. Invented, reinvented, reconstructed past the end of the Western production-consumption chain. Outside of it. Motors for drawing water, working the land, lifting loads, erecting walls, cutting wood, assembling and bending pieces of sheet metal...

A motor made by hand: the potential symbol of an Africa that already invents, already knows, already offers, far from its black legend...

Invention, knowledge and production that operate according to modalities different from the serial linearity of Taylorism, which is fundamentally still in circulation and is increasingly automated (engineering - design - extraction - transformation - assembly - distribution - consumption - scrapping)³. No, in this case an object, a product, a material eludes serial determinations in order to be reactivated, transformed by tools, manipulation, exchange,

³ One could—one should—qualify. But we believe that the new production methods (Toyotism, post-Fordism...) change nothing with regard to the question of the relationship to the (most remote) object, the (increased) intercession of machines, the nature of the materials and their implementation, the denial of skills (versatility sharpens this contempt as soon as, on certain sections of the chain, one role is as good as any other, one job is as good as any other).

circulation. These informal (post-)production dynamics rely on the use of hands, embrace circularity, cyclic conversion.

These are the resources that *VI2 Laraki* activates, in a country where the craft industry, enriched by a prestigious heritage, is still a thriving sector (8% of GDP, 2 million workers, 15% annual growth⁴). But these prospects are struggling to move beyond the tourist and folklore industries. With the consequence that some forms are being strangled by constrictive stereotypes that limit creative and technical potential. It is more the strangling of a tradition than its renewal.

So what a surprise it was for Abdelrafour, Mohammed, Abdelkhader, Abdujalil and others, isolated artisans, small entrepreneurs, masters and apprentices, what a surprise to get that bizarre request from Éric van Hove: a water pump, a crank shaft, a manifold, six bolts, a belt, a fan, an alternator, an air filter... “Can you do it?”, “um, yes, maybe, probably, I’ll have to see, how much?”, first price, “it’ll be difficult, very difficult”, second price, “I’ll see, I’ll try, but it’s still going to be hard”, another price, “yes, yes, I’ll do it, but it’ll still be hard”. Then what a joy to seize the challenge, attempting, failing, reattempting and finally succeeding, resolving everything. And from attempt to attempt, from piece to piece, confidence grows, dignity is instilled, joy, play, complicity with the project. One crank shaft will be carved in bone, set with copper, readjusted. Another component will be sent to Fes, then return to Marrakech, and be set, reset, retouched, mended, shaped, will move from one hand to the other, from one action to another.

Transport

The prototype’s transplantation, its “composite evolution”, takes place gradually, by spreading out through the territories, dispersing in workshop smoke, in the firing of makeshift ovens in a courtyard, in an aluminium pulp cooked in a saucepan, in the remoteness of a family farm, in the feverish hammering of the souk, in the rotation of lathes, under blades, awls, drills... Sanding, carving, hammering, inlaying, melting, casting, incising... A multiplicity of territories, places, materials, tools and actions. Then setting, assembling, rubbing, transmitting: the connecting of these territories, these materials, these tools and these actions.

It was in an artist residence on the Marrakech coast that this patient assembly took place: on a table, the Daimler-Benz prototype in detached pieces, studied at length, continually twiddled. On the work bench, the embryo of its double, its core assembled, disassembled, reassembled,

⁴ The Moroccan Industrial and Commercial Property Office (OMPIC), “*Indications géographiques pour produits non agricoles – cas de l’artisanat marocain*”, 2013.
http://www.wipo.int/edocs/mdocs/geoind/fr/wipo_geo_bkk_13/wipo_geo_bkk_13_16.pdf

readjusted. In the next room, Dragon and his associates sand, re-sand, drill, file, assemble, disassemble, test, all day long. There is a smell of cedar. In another room, Keetja Allard sets up the studio: spotlights, lighting tests, laptops. And simple curtains as well. High tech, low tech. With silver-plated reflective panels, Abdelarim delimits a space where one can isolate oneself. Like a mosque.

This landscape of accomplishment and convergences is that of the engine. These are the images of the forces he is engaging, the temporalities he is embedding. *VI2 Laraki* is not a nostalgic imprecation to return to a hypothetical Golden Age of tradition. He is involving the trades in a renewal of production methods. It is also a sculpture, a collectivity of sculptures, a ritual aggregation, a web of friendships and experiences. Like every poetic act, it sparkles with multiple sonorities, with an equal number of indeterminacies and possibilities...

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