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## The Oeuvre Nonpareil

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“*[Pierre Menard] resolved to anticipate the vanity that awaits all the labors of mankind; he undertook a task of infinite complexity, a task futile from the outset. He dedicated his scruples and his nights ‘lit by midnight oil’ to repeating in a foreign tongue a book that already existed.*”<sup>1</sup>

Eric van Hove’s ambitious undertaking to recreate the V12 Mercedes-Benz engine used in Abdeslam Laraki’s 2004 luxury sports car conjures Jorge Luis Borges’ tale of fictional French philosopher Pierre Menard’s endeavor to reproduce Miguel de Cervantes’ 1605 epic novel *Don Quixote*. In this short story, Menard dismisses the notion that his rewriting is mere mechanical transcription or facile imitation. Rather he aims to recreate the novel, word for word, not as Cervantes wrote it “but continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard.”<sup>2</sup> Van Hove, too, is no copycat. Over the span of nine months and with the help of 42 local Moroccan craftsmen, van Hove replicated the V12 engine, not as Mercedes-Benz manufactured it, but through the experience and history of Moroccan craftsmanship.

“*[Pierre Menard] did not want to compose another Quixote—which is easy—he wanted to compose the Quixote.... His admirable ambition was to produce a few of pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes.*”<sup>3</sup>

Like Menard’s *the Quixote*, each painstakingly reconstructed component of *V12 Laraki* corresponds to one of the 465 parts of the original German engine. Assembled, *V12 Laraki* retains the precise shape and volume of the V12 Mercedes-Benz engine. Yet their similitude only heightens the radical differences between them.

Laraki’s desire to build a luxury sports car derived from a wish to project Moroccan affluence and engineering prowess. As designer, he took great pains to see that the car was manufactured entirely in Casablanca using local man power. That the Laraki Fulgara only achieved its high performance thanks to the inclusion of a German engine was less an oversight than a tragic flaw.

The first V12 engine, built by Daimler is 1889, was a realization of the then nascent modern industrialist ideal: an object whose form was defined solely by its function. In the early twentieth century, Henry Ford’s assembly line practices streamlined automobile manufacturing and forever altered human labor. Industry’s increasingly mechanized, alienating modes of production

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Group Incorporated, 1998) 95.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

degraded man to *homo faber*, a mere toolmaker and producer of things. As Hannah Arendt writes, modernity was the process of “man’s adjustment to the machines he himself has designed.”<sup>4</sup> Modern machine-making was not only an ambition to control nature and other men; it was a struggle for self-possession both personal and political. By making the German engine central to the Laraki Fulgura and Moroccan advancement, Laraki set his project and his country up to fail. The inclusion of the V12 Mercedes-Benz exposed a gap in Morocco’s engineering capability that not only threatened the country’s claim to having created a homemade luxury car, it undermined its bid to become a global leader in state-of-the-art industrial design.

The *V12 Laraki* can slide neatly into place in a Laraki Fulgura, but it would not be able to make the car run. Rather than replace the Mercedes-Benz engine, van Hove seeks to recuperate alternative models of artisanal production that have long been dismissed as irrelevant to empower alternative models of national identity. Van Hove’s *V12 Laraki* is not a suggestion to replace engineering with artisanship, but a proposal that the two are not mutually exclusive. Its inability to function as an engine is not a failure but a refusal to accept the modernist, teleological notions of scientific achievement and economic attainment ingrained in Laraki’s aspirations for the Laraki Fulgura.

*V12 Laraki* cannot be characterized comfortably as either state of the art or work of art. Choosing to model itself after the German engine in Morocco’s first luxury sports car places it, and the artisans, in dialogue with the country’s complex history of artistry, artisanship, and industrial design. *V12 Laraki* makes its strongest claim against both the functional and the decorative as an expression of the ambivalence of the object’s status as an artwork and the agency of its makers.

Van Hove conceived *V12 Laraki*, but it was constructed by the 42 artisans whose names are inscribed on its base. The craftsmen favored a collaborative process that rewarded finely honed skill and fused methods of craft-making. They drew from and redefined traditional artisanal methods, including gears carved from horn or bone, ceramic casings, and elements made of braided leather, hammered copper, and carved wood. The mastery and materials of each handcrafted component reveals the breadth and depth of Morocco’s legacy of craftsmanship and contemporary artisanship.

In Menard’s *Quixote* neither the words nor the story have been altered. More than four hundred years after its publication, Cervantes’ text remains visually the same, but the author and reader have both changed. In appropriating only the form of the Mercedes engine, Van Hove’s *V12 Laraki* usurps authorship and purpose to offer a very different narrative from that told by Abdeslam Laraki.

Borges’ narrator states, “[t]he Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer.”<sup>5</sup> The V12 Mercedes-Benz and *V12 Laraki* are coinciding engines of equal size, shape, and volume, but only the latter will help Morocco to move forward on its own.

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 146.

<sup>5</sup> Borges, *Collected Fictions*, 94.

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