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The craftsman, the artist and the stateless person

Eelco van der Lingen

How does an artist come up with the idea of loading a V12 engine block from Riga into his mother’s car, transporting it to Marrakesh and once there visiting the many workshops of craftsmen and asking each and every one of them to copy a part of the engine in their own unique technique and style? Éric Van Hove (Guelma, Algeria, 1975) did this in 2013. In Morocco he handed out 465 engine parts among fifty craftsmen. In two years’ time they produced their own versions of the components. Van Hove then used the parts to create a new craft based engine. The fact that this happened in Marrakesh was no coincidence. Not only does 50% of the Marrakech workforce earn a living as craftsmen, there was a poetic and conceptual basis as well.

The first supercar of Moroccan make was presented in 2004 at the car show in Geneva. The Laraki Fulgura, designed by Abdeslam Laraki, was not just a simple family car or a practical off-road vehicle, but a luxurious racing car. Laraki wanted to show that Morocco could match any other country by producing a supercar, something that up to that point had only been done in the West. The car was advertised as 100% Moroccan, but as almost all parts were produced and put together in Casablanca, one part of the car couldn’t be produced in Morocco: the engine. The heart of the car, a V12 Mercedes-Benz engine, was imported from Germany.

Through Van Hove’s tenacity and the skills of the Moroccan craftsmen the engine block became a Moroccan production as well, thus completing Laraki's advertising slogan. The low-tech approach of Moroccan craftsmen was in sharp contrast with the original German high-tech production. Nevertheless, the end result was every bit as good as the German one.

In 2014 the Moroccan-Dutch curator Hicham Khalidi selected *V12 Laraki* for the Marrakesh Biennale. The work was prominently displayed at the central location, the Bank Al Maghrib on the Djemaa el Fna square. During the day the work was admired by international art lovers with a ticket. When after six o’clock the location was open for free, it attracted hundreds of interested locals who wanted to see with their own eyes what their own people had put together. *V12 Laraki* was the beginning of a new phase in Van Hove’s work. It led in the end to *Fenduq*, a new-style artisan workshop where art, innovation, societal reflection, exchange of knowledge and craft meet. The name *Fenduq* is a combination of 'fenn', the word for ‘art’ in Arabic, and 'funduq', the temporary trading posts from the past. These Funduqs, buildings in the style of a riad with an open square in the center, enabled traveling caravans to trade and to maintain the network. The Funduq was a temporary inn, workshop and market place all in one.

Van Hove invited a number of craftsmen with whom he had worked on the V12 to join *Fenduq*. In contrast to the classic workshops of Marrakesh, the craftsmen here work as

employees and not as self-employed workers or underpaid servants. As a result, they get a steady income, are eligible for social security and get the opportunity to travel abroad. Together with this team Van Hove developed a number of new works. The most striking one is perhaps *D9T (Rachels' tribute)*, a work based on the engine of a Caterpillar D9 bulldozer. This yellow monster was originally developed in 1954 to enable the construction in difficult circumstances of a new infrastructure in developing countries. During the Vietnam War, the D9 proved to be quite useful in acts of war as well. The Israeli army even turned it into a military vehicle. In Africa, the D9 is primarily known as a tool for clearing barricades and suppressing riots. This is how the D9 has become the symbol of oppression - instead of construction - in the post-colonial era. Van Hove's D9T consists of 295 handmade parts and is an amalgamation of various craft techniques and materials and 46 materials from different corners of the world, from Brazilian purpleheartwood and Surinamese Tatajuba hardwood to red marble from Agadir and pink granite from Tafraoute. The individual parts were produced by 41 different craftsmen. During the production process, attention was not only paid to the representation of various nationalities, but also to the possible fusions. Indonesian bone carvers worked together with bone cutters from Morocco; through which they learned each other's techniques.

In 2015, Van Hove and the *Fendug* team were invited to exhibit in Germany. This laid the foundation for a new work that connected both of these contexts. *Dorigin* is a Moroccan Mercedes-taxi made up of separate parts of the Mercedes 240, found on scrapyards especially dedicated to the this model car from all over Morocco. The Mercedes 240 has earned great prestige in Morocco for being indestructible and was originally produced for the global export. For environmental, financial and pr reasons the Moroccan government wants these cars off the roads. *Dorigin* was driven 'back' to Frankfurt, Germany, the country of origin: *d'origine de Dorigin*. The journey to Germany was documented and the resulting road movie could be viewed from the Mercedes itself during the exhibition. Although the name *Dorigin* refers to the foreign origin, on return to Germany the car was mainly seen as a typical Moroccan car'. The origin was flipped.

After *VI2 Laraki* and *D9T (Rachel' tribute)* Van Hove and his team deconstructed and reconstructed other engines connected to 20th century industrial icons. In addition, they decided to produce a piece of craft artwork that could also manifest itself outside the museum walls. A production line of electric mopeds with 'craft modules' was set up in *Fendug: the Mahjouba Initiative*. After hosting the climate change summit COP22 in 2016 Morocco looked to develop means for sustainable solar energy as alternatives for fossil fuel. By now, the Noor Solar Power plant has been build in the Moroccan desert to ensure the country's electricity supply (It currently produces 50% of the national usage). The export of solar energy has great potential for the economy and it is a boost for the country's national pride. In consequence of this, within *the Mahjouba initiative* the attraction of future alternative energy is linked to the appreciation of the craft sector and its social economic context.

By now three Mahjouba prototypes have been developed. The entanglement of artistic product and commercial plan is explicitly part of the artistic process. Surrounding the development of the prototypes Van Hove organizes brainstorm sessions in which captains of

industry, innovation experts, artists, technicians, critics and designers discuss the viability of the idea and the social-economic consequences of *the Mahjouba initiative*. Van Hove sees these think tanks, the consumer research and all other development projects surrounding the Mahjouba, together with the prototypes, as a living work of art.

Within the productions a number of elements come together that can be traced back to Van Hove's personal history and cultural identity. The artist has a Belgian passport and a Flemish family tree, but he speaks French and grew up in Africa. Both his parents used to be engineers for the Belgian Foreign Affairs Ministry and worked on the many development cooperation processes that had to assist Africa in the post-colonial era. In 1989 the family moved from Yaoundé in Cameroon to Grez-Doiceau in Wallonia. For Van Hove, who was born in Algeria and brought up in Cameroon, it was not easy to adapt to life in Belgium. The education between the palm trees was swapped for a school with thick walls and iron window bars. The young Van Hove experienced the strict curricula of the Catholic secondary school in Basse-Wavre as smothering compared to the open dynamics of Yaoundé.

In 1996 Van Hove went to *the École de Recherche Graphique*, a somewhat unconventional section of the Saint-Luc Art Academy in Brussels. On the top floor of the institute, he was offered the possibility to develop into an autonomous artist, a concept that was not directly obvious to him. Without having a theoretical background, he freely stacked the ideas of Nietzsche, Bataille, Blanchot, Benjamin, Barthes, Saïd, Pessoa and Fanon on top of each other in a number of books themed *'l'artisan, l'artiste et l'apatride'* (the craftsman, the artist and stateless person). Not entirely by coincidence, this lovely alliteration reflects Van Hove's own position at that time. He had problems with the concept of the autonomous artist in Belgium, which he considered to be based upon a limited Western canon. He was looking for a broader vision, one that would also accept non-Western concepts and in which the relationship between artist and craftsman would be more in balance. Within this context he also examined his own cultural identity as an African Belgian or Belgian African. The doubt about his cultural identity made him decide to move away as far as possible once he had finished his studies and to explore the relationship between language and image elsewhere. He signed up for a Masters Course in traditional calligraphy at the Tokyo Gakugei University in Musashi-Koganei. After having obtained his Master's, he also obtained his PhD Arts at Tokyo Geidai University and then returned to Belgium.

During his many trips, especially to places where industrialization had gained less foothold, Van Hove noticed how individual craftsmen worked with comparable techniques and materials, without being aware of each other's existence and context. He also saw the vulnerability of the small-scale practice of traditional craft in addition to the increasing influence of the tourist industry and the factories where Western brands outsource their production. It was in those days that the idea for the artisanal engine slowly started to develop. To Van Hove the engine block is a metaphor for the global society: a machine in which large parts draw the attention, but where smaller parts are equally important to keep the engine running. In many countries, the combustion engine also symbolizes the end of the age-old crafts. Although the first cars were designed by craftman and can be seen as typical samples of artisanal competence, the need for cars produced in series arose rapidly. Bent iron

makes way for components of cast steel and on production lines identical cars leave the factory. The combustion engine in which explosions take place and in which an enormous heat develops, does not lend itself for craft techniques. Besides, these techniques are not efficient enough to deliver a big production. Where industrialization continues, crafts lose ground.

With the idea of the craft engine in his suitcase, Van Hove traveled back to Belgium. Hoping to get the work realized, he contacted curators and critics in the Belgian art world. He visited many institutes or museums, but he did not succeed in making the right connection. If people were enthusiastic about the plan, they doubted whether Van Hove would be able to make it work. As the Belgian art world appeared to offer no possibilities, Van Hove turned his gaze again on Africa. His attention was drawn by an appeal from the Dar al-Ma'mûn residency program. There they offered a place to work plus 5,000 Euros in production costs. The story of the Laraki Fulgura super car and the high percentage of craftsmen within the working population of Morocco sharpened the concept further. Van Hove signed up, but was rejected. He decided not to give up and contacted the jury. It turned out the jury had great doubts whether he would ever succeed to produce the V12. He was told that there was one committee member who thought the concept sufficiently attractive. This juror, Sandra Mulliez, however, had not been able to convince the others. After Van Hove had paid her a visit, she decided to help him herself. She organized a sponsor acquisition dinner that brought in enough money to enable Van Hove to start. He hired one of the residences in Dar al-Ma'mûn himself and loaded the used V12 engine block from Riga into his mother's Citroën Picasso. In a car named after one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century, he set out to produce an artwork that in those days did not look realizable but has by now developed into what we know now as *Fenduq*.

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