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V12 Laraki / V12 Fulgura

Hamid Irbouh

At the 2004 International Geneva Motor Show, Moroccan car designer Abdeslam Laraki unveiled his *Laraki Fulgura*, a Lamborghini Diablo car equipped with a Mercedes-Benz 6.0L V12 engine. *Laraki Fulgura* stood out pointedly as the first sports car ever made by a Moroccan. It represented a triumph in light of ambivalent experiences Moroccans from earlier generations had with automobiles. Motorized vehicles arrived in Morocco on the heels of the French Protectorate during the first decade of the twentieth century. When Moroccans first saw French and European cars maneuvering the narrow streets of Rabat and Casablanca they referred to them as *Dabatu as-Sa`a*, the Beast of the Apocalypse, a monster that announces the end of time and the Last Judgment.

Jump ahead to the 2014 Marrakesh Biennale where *V12 Laraki* debuted. *V12 Laraki* is a hand-built replica of Laraki’s Fulgura engine. It was produced by forty-two great grandsons of those early Moroccans under the guidance of Belgian artist Eric van Hove. The artist and his craftsmen “pit crew” have exhumed the automobile’s life force, dismantled, and reconstituted painstakingly its DNA, comprising 465 components and nearly 500 bolts. Over a period of seven months they domesticated the metallic fiend and transformed the *V12 Fulgura* engine into a sculpture inscribed in a language more compatible with their local environment. The entire *V12 Fulgura* has been reproduced using local craft materials and techniques. Van Hove and the Moroccan team left nothing in their simulacra unjustified. *V12 Laraki* conveys a sense of contingency and an irrefutable presence.

Production of *V12 Laraki* transgressed the practices of the craftsmen. Traditional craft artifacts are configured by and within definitions ascribed to them by society; and traditionally craftsmen neither fuss much about, nor flaunt, the singularity of their products. From the onset their artifacts are locked in a system so predictable that their goods seem to produce themselves. Craft traditions take into account systems of kinship and religion –indeed, entire cultural relations and social codes, involving the economic base of the society in which the crafts circulate. Because of their mediative role as cultural artifacts, and because they circulate among different social strata, crafts function like a nationalistic *lingua franca* that impacts the local culture. Within this non-Western model, there is no distinction between art and craft. Both are active and creative. Crafts share additional similarities with art: each tradition carries with it a gamut of symbols, and each engenders cultural values, which in turn morph into cultural, social, and religious mediation systems. In *V12 Laraki* van Hove and the craftsmen team manipulated the original mechanized engine into a new complex configuration. They performed a role akin to seismographers; they took the pulse of an originally non-native, non-local, and culturally estranged object and transformed it into something more in tune with their own traditions and culture. Their task, as it were, consisted in taming the mechanized engine, and measuring its pulsations in order to register qualitative difference between its initial form and the duplicate they had to produce.

As a duplicate *V12 Laraki* emulates its industrial counterpart but, in so doing, it transgresses from the realm of industrial design into the realm of “art.” The visual clarity of *V12 Laraki* owes much to, and is ensconced in, the thought processes of the craftsmen and their traditional craft inheritance. *V12 Laraki* generates multifaceted procedures and symbolic agency, all fashioned to contravene crafts as base structure into an artistic and cultural superstructure. However, the challenge van Hove and the craftsmen faced consisted in maintaining the replication and duplication of an everlasting simulacrum since, in producing *Laraki Fulgura*, Abdeslem Laraki inserted a preexisting engine into a preexisting car body. *V12 Laraki* appears to have been grafted from a complex software. And, not unlike other artists such as Americans Les Levine and Jeff Koons, Van Hove’s role was that of a supervisor, an entrepreneur, “investor and surveillance expert.”ⁱ The process of making *V12 Laraki* was complex and methodical; a mega-program that gave birth to a mega-product. Van Hove’s minimalist, hands-off gesture amounts to what American art critic Carter Ratcliff has called a “perspicuity of the evidence that has worked [the artist’s] will.” The production of the piece equals and is consistent with the intention of the artist. The artist’s decision is the primary provision that conditions the making process as well as the eventual exchange of the piece between maker and receiver.ⁱⁱ Yet, we need to “remember that...there is no correct way to construct the piece, as there is no incorrect way to construct it. If the piece is built, it constitutes not how the piece looks but only how it could look.”ⁱⁱⁱ Or, as American art critic and art theoretician, Michael Fried, stated, “It is its physical independence, above all, that contributes to the ... sculpture’s status as the representative of modernism.”^{iv} On one hand, *V12 Laraki* shares with Fried’s conceptualization of modernist sculpture a strong desire in foregrounding its physical aspect. Yet, *V12 Laraki*’s presence rests, partly, upon two conditions that separate it from Fried’s modernism. Its physicality is neither independent nor abstract, hence the unresolved dichotomy that impinges on *V12 Laraki*. The sculpture references an already existing thing—the *V12 Fulgura* engine—and it is assembled from parts crafted within a tradition loaded with cultural meanings.

V12 Laraki encompasses a clear desire by van Hove and the craftsmen team to produce an unmistakably articulated and unambiguous simulational structure using non-industrial processes. *V12 Laraki* conforms to the concept of the art work as a medium and a process, rather than as an aspiration for independent expressiveness. Indices of this lack of expressive power orient *V12 Laraki* towards an affiliation with crafts, not with modernist tendencies towards self-reflectivity. *V12 Laraki*, however, stands at ease. To call it a Moroccan contemporary art work, reflecting the undeniably high skills of today’s Moroccan craftsmen, or to read it as a manifesto on the current state of Moroccan crafts, is to overstate the case. Call it a demonstration in craftsmanship; call it an exercise in merging art, craft, and industrial design; call it an exercise in simulation--the fact remains that the entire enterprise of execution undertaken by van Hove and the craftsmen team represents something more than an assessment of the lessons to be learned from either one of these insinuations.

V12 Laraki does not unravel itself at once. It has more connotative information than it initially allows viewers to perceive. This process of reification constitutes a kind of fetishism of uncanny eeriness. Reification entails a structural mystification. *V12 Laraki*, a complicated fetishistic mystification, epitomizes an artistic arbitration between craft and art. It emerged as a mediation between traditional crafts and the achievements of industrial capitalist society. It constitutes an

art form of its own and has extra characteristics unattributed to the social and economic status of *Laraki Fulgura*. As an interdisciplinary product, *V12 Laraki* forces onlookers to “read” it simultaneously as a sculpture made by Moroccan craftsmen and as a Western-based Moroccan cultural derivative. *V12 Laraki*, thus, belongs to the realm of hybridity, which in Homi Bhabha’s words operates “as a camouflage, as a contesting, antagonistic agency functioning in the time-lag of sign/symbol, which is a space in-between the rules of [artistic] engagement.” *V12 Laraki* promotes both “doubling and splitting” and a transgressive act of cultural translation.^v

Sigmund Freud’s notion of the uncanny describes this transgressive process. *V12 Laraki*’s unusual status as an object that bridges the chasm between the hand-made and the machine-made brings up the question as to whether it is an object that “conforms with the [spectators’] real world, or one that...deviates from it.” *V12 Laraki* dispenses with reality from the very beginning --it is, after all, an engine unlike any other engines--and openly obliges itself to the approval of transcending the inorganic *V12 Fulgura* into a sentient double. The effect is uncanny, because in this transgressive process, the inanimate *V12 Fulgura* comes to life -- in *V12 Laraki* -- in an act reminiscent of “raising the dead.” The uncanny is an act of mimicry, a parody, and through *Laraki V12* the unhomely, the unfamiliar becomes homely, and familiar. Recognizable in *V12 Laraki* is a mechanized machine based on Western technology, yet by the same token this “beast” cannot escape the shackles of its Moroccan homeliness, of being domesticated and Moroccanized. *V12 Laraki* is a doubling of *V12 Fulgura* and, at the same, it is the “insurance against the extinction of the craft self, or ‘an energetic denial of the power of death’” of local crafts. This doubling -- *V12 Laraki* mirrored in, yet, not the same as *V12 Fulgura* -- gives roots to a symbolic defense of the persistence of Moroccan crafts.^{vi} Vice-versa, *V12 Fulgura* generates a feeling of the uncanny. Contemplating *V12 Fulgura* side by side with *V12 Laraki* stirs intellectual ambiguity to the possibility of whether the inanimate struggles to resembles the animate, and whether the lifeless mechanized engine bears an excessive likeness to the organic craftsmen’s product. In this sense, it is the model that becomes the subject of representation in a fetishistic swapping of signifier and signified, an operation that cannot escape or, rather, cannot bear all the imprints of constraints that cultural doubling imposes. Inorganic, inanimate *V12 Fulgura* gives the impression of tussling as best as it can to come close to aesthetic proximity with the animate, alert *V12 Laraki*.

V12 Laraki, moreover, emanates acts of cultural and artistic “heresy,” and “an offense of the ‘misnaming.’”^{vii} It allows for the emergence of a space for cultural differences to be continually and cogently experienced. This experience, however, occurs on polarized margins of Moroccan visual culture. In *V12 Laraki* references to both art and craft collapse and coil inside out, causing the sculpture to become an anxious sign of an art of denial of the “official” discourse surrounding Moroccan art. This denial is not fixed; rather it is pliable allowing for new forms of identifications that, when left unquestioned, uninvestigated, “traumatize tradition” (Bhabha’s expression) and confound the ordering of cultural hierarchy, i.e. a Western engine vs. an engine constructed with Moroccan local craft materials and procedures. When the forty-two Moroccan craftsmen employed local materials and methods to replicate the mechanized engine, they called on the power of hybridity, as if the scheme symbolizes resistance to the power of depersonalization and loss of the self, as well as a crack at infusing *V12 Fulgura* with cultural transference. As Bhabha would have it, “when [Moroccan craftsmen] make these intercultural,

hybrid demands, [they] are both challenging the boundaries of discourse and subtly changing its sterns by setting up another specific...space of the negotiations of [Western] cultural authority.”^{viii} In *V12 Laraki*, it was van Hove who “imposed” these intercultural emphases; the craftsmen executed his directives. This isn’t a criticism of the artist who, as mentioned above, was reiterating similar practices. This project “belongs” jointly to the forty-two Moroccan craftsmen and to van Hove. The task was initiated by van Hove, who has had strong personal experiences with post-colonial identity. Although the artist identifies as Belgian, he grew up in West Africa and witnessed, firsthand, Africans striving to establish and maintain their local cultural identity.

V12 Laraki conveys the impression that it was contrived at a threshold separating crafts and industrial design, the latter considered as a non-local and an “outer context.” To paraphrase Jacques Derrida, *V12 Laraki* epitomizes a kind of “withdrawal,” and “re-making” of *V12 Fulgura*. Van Hove and the craftsmen grappled with the line between this split notion of re-making *V12 Fulgura*. Throughout the process of translation they remained true to the form of the original model, yet they negated those characteristics they found alien to their cultural heritage and replaced them with attributes they considered home-grown. As a result, *V12 Fulgura* began effacing itself in the craftsmen practice and the materials they employ.^{ix} *V12 Laraki* has the capacity to intervene in contemporary Moroccan art production not because *V12 Laraki* represents a new practice or a new art strategy, but because it marks a particular date, i.e. the time of its appearance on the Moroccan art scene, and that is noteworthy. *V12 Laraki* dates from, or as Derrida would have, “dated from” a “place of origination.” The date is the place; and date and place send the beholder back to the “mark of a singularity...a temporal and spatial ‘this here’” when *V12 Laraki* emerged. It is this singularity of time and place that strengthens the work’s “irreplaceable uniqueness.”^x

Throughout Morocco’s colonial and postcolonial history craftsmen were apprehensive of Western machine-made objects. They feared that these objects might displace or render local artifacts obsolete. *V12 Laraki* quashes the situation; it materializes the wish of that which has been repressed (the crafts by modern machinery) to re-emerge, hence its hybrid value in the Moroccan art scene.

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Endotes:

- i. Carter Ratcliff, *Out of the Box: The Reinvention of Art 1965-1975* (New York, NY: Allworth Communications, 2000), 53.
- ii. Ratcliff, *Out of the Box*, 52.
- iii. Ratcliff, *Out of the Box*, 53.
- iv. Quoted in Ingrid Stadler, *Contemporary Art and Its Philosophical Problems* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1987), 62-63.
- v. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 277, 323, respectively.
- vi. Sigmund Freud. "The Uncanny" (1919) in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), 156, 153, 142, respectively.
- vii. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 322.
- viii. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 169.
- ix. Jacques Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2010), 18.
- x. Jacques Derrida, *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamus et al., (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), 378.