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## Éric Van Hove’s ‘Living Art’

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Éric Van Hove has developed a cosmopolitan consciousness that is markedly evidenced in his artistic practice. He works in multiple genres and with a range of media including installation, performance, writing, photography, video and sculpture. He has visited more than 150 countries and has created challenging works *in situ* in over a hundred of them. His creative practice, intellectual pursuits, and deep engagement with some of the compelling issues of today - such as climate change, social inequality, capitalism, political dogma, and intolerance - reflects a socially conscious artist who has his fingers on the pulse of our contemporary times. Handcrafted sculpture is his current medium of choice. In 2014, Van Hove completed the breakout *V12 Laraki*, an ornate and exact replica of the S-600 Mercedes-Benz V-12 engine, now in the collection of Dartmouth College’s Hood Museum of Art, New Hampshire, United States. Comprising a variety of local artisanal materials sourced from around Morocco, the sculpture marked a new direction in Van Hove’s practice on two major planks. First, it laid to rest the peripatetic proclivity that defined his art early on in his career. Second, *V12 Laraki* inaugurated Van Hove’s current collaborative approach to art making.

Prior to *V12 Laraki*, Van Hove was concerned with impermanence and cosmopolitanism as artistic tropes; the role and impact of mobility on the production and reception of the art form or object. Although his practice at large is context-specific as opposed to site-specific—in the sense that location is not primary to the existence of his art—his condition of itinerancy, early on, resulted in his creation of ephemeral works or prototypes for more permanent works that considered the countries in which they were developed. His work has since taken on a more permanent status centered in *Fendug*, based on the *fundug*, the Moroccan mixed-bag of commercial and workshop space, where he operates from with his team of local craftsmen. Tarek El-Ariss’s essay in this publication considers the Derridean concept of bricolage in describing Van Hove’s *Fendug* as a transactional and collaborative space inhabited by Van Hove and his collaborators. As he suggests, the product of his atelier is not decidedly local or authentic, though it is all of that and more. Instead, it is a *mélange* that is old and new, local, national, transnational, and global. A multi-cultural art object that combines old and contemporary techniques and that is reflective of Moroccan, Maghreb, African, and European sensibilities. Whereas Van Hove is not the first artist to run a studio-style workshop, he is arguably the first to hire traditional craftsmen who are treated as artists and co-producers of the realized artwork. I argue that what emerges with the current dispensation of Van Hove’s practice is a complex bricolage that imbibes art, artisanship, tradition, contemporaneity, social entrepreneurship, utopia, and idealism.

### *Art that Lives: Vision, Material, Form*

Van Hove’s collaborative practice is located at the interstice of what he describes as ‘living craft’ and contemporary art. Living craft refers to artisanal practices that are crucial to the

advancement of modern life as opposed to the framework of cultural heritage and tradition within which the crafts industry, tied to tourism, is promoted. Van Hove describes his sculptures as socio-economic object precisely because of its relationship with craftsmanship, a living tradition practiced by nearly three million Moroccans, representing twenty percent of the active workforce, and with a dedicated ministry by the Moroccan government. Every Moroccan family has a practitioner, which means that it is quite possible to write Moroccan familial history through its craftsmanship tradition. In the souks of old medinas such as Fez, Casablanca, Rabat and Marrakech, the *savoir-faire* of Moroccan craftsmanship is evident in elaborate leatherwork, embroidery, ornate rugs, tiles, furnitures and jewelry. Van Hove embraces the traditional system of network at the base of artisanal practice in Morocco whilst expanding what the network can be as a self-sustaining co-operative. He plugs Moroccan craftsmen into the formal industrial economy, offering them a path to financial stability, and ultimately makes a meaningful impact on the local economy by aligning craftsmanship and high art. He proposes a new social economy that ultimately reinvents artisanal practice and extends its critical potential for entrepreneurship. But how did he get to this point?

Ever the astute master of metaphors, in the preface to *Eric van Hove: V12 Laraki*, Van Hove describes a meeting with a former heroin addict in the lobby of an opulent hotel in Dubai in 2005. The man narrates his chance encounter with Cofán Indians of the Amazon forest and his experience of witnessing their burial practice. The old do not die. Instead, when he or she is ready to join the ancestors, they begin the process of becoming one with the environment by binging on leaves and then falling into coma. The relatives discover the body, strip it, and cover it in honey. The body is then carried into the deep jungle and left on an anthill to be feasted upon by fire ants. It is a process of dispersal in which the body is fed to the natural environment, atom by atom. For Van Hove, what remains is a living idea, a cultural practice or form that does not die.

The conversation in Dubai resolved several things for Van Hove. First, to achieve something profound with art, it was important to travel, lose oneself in other cultures, learn from the human stories of the world's cultures, find a common connection upon which to bring the cultures together. Like the Cofán practice of returning the body to a natural redistributive state, Van Hove has sought out craft because it embodies the everyday experience. Second, craftsmanship offers him a pathway to the humble origins of humanity's industrial past, affirming as well, his critique of post-Fordist capitalism that dictates contemporary lifestyle. Artisanal practice centered around the engine became a centralizing myth of this search. The engine weaves together a network of relations consisting of various individuals, cultures and social experiences, and is thus, for Van Hove, a monument to humanity.

The inspiration for Van Hove was a dream he once had to create an engine that would involve the idiosyncratic skill sets of craftsmen from all over Africa. This vision had come to him while working with blacksmiths in Senegal. These craftsmen would melt down blocks and fabricate them into household utensils such as forks, spoons and knives. This sort of artisanal re-use or repurposing is widespread across Africa. In Kenya it is called the *Jua Kali*, a Kiswahili word for the hot sun used metaphorically to refer to the Kenyan informal economy, populated by craftsmen of different persuasions. Initially, Van Hove wanted to pursue this vision of exploring

the engine using the Kenyan government's unrealized early postcolonial aspiration of manufacturing cars locally as a point of departure.

With the crafted object as a creative obsession, Van Hove has since been working with Moroccan craftsmen to bring to life his utopian vision of a commingling of cultures centered on what I may refer to as the cult of the sublime engine. *V12 Laraki*, the first of these engines, was inspired by the story of Abdelslam Laraki, a local Moroccan entrepreneur and sports car enthusiast, who has since relocated to California. Laraki created Morocco's first indigenous luxurious car but had to import the engine from Germany. Van Hove completed Laraki's vision by producing a utopian non-functional replica of the exact same Mercedes Benz V-12 engine in collaboration with about 52 local craftsmen. The realized art object recognizes Laraki's attempt, but more importantly, it is a celebration of Moroccan craftsmanship and industry, as such, and an ode to the worker-class whose modernity in the context of Morocco is often ignored. Created with 59 local materials, *V12 Laraki* is also a testament to Van Hove's managerial ability to galvanize the different individual skill sets, creativity, and technical sophistry, and knowledge base of different local crafts-materials despite his outsider status, especially in the early stages of his sojourn in Morocco from 2013 to 2014.

In a body of work produced over the last five years, ranging from handcrafted meticulous replicas of an engine and engine parts, car and motorbike prototypes, and rebuilt Mercedes Benz 240D, Van Hove proposes a vision where the hand-crafted meets the industrially manufactured. It is this exchange between technical virtuosity typified in the human hands, the superfluity of myriad materials commingling and giving life to form. Revealing the artist's activist desire to revalorize artisanship, Van Hove's works delight in the glory of details, the beauty of craftsmanship, and the conceptualism of contemporary art.

He has employed a diverse range of locally sourced materials used by Moroccan craftsmen to create his work. They include, middle Atlas white cedar wood, high Atlas red cedar wood, walnut wood, lemon wood, orange wood, ebony wood of Macassar, mahogany wood, Thuya wood, Moroccan beech wood, pink apricot wood, mother-of-pearl, yellow copper, nickel-plated copper, red copper, forged iron, recycled aluminum, nickel silver, silver, tin, cow bone, goat bone, malachite from Midelt, agate, green onyx, tigers eye, Taroudant stone, sand stone, red marble of Agadir, black marble of Ouarzazate, white marble of Béni Mellal, pink granite of Tafraoute, goatskin, cowskin, lambskin, resin, cow horn, rams horn, ammonite fossils of the Paleozoic from Erfoud, Ourika clay, geometric terra cotta with vitreous enamel (zellige), green enamel of Tamgrout, paint, cotton, argan oil, cork, henna, rumex and camel bone. These materials and more are evident in Van Hove's magisterial sculptures, meticulously handcrafted and well put together in arabesque perfection.

In more recent works, Van Hove and his collaborators strip the sculptures of the ornamental craft which hitherto tied them to tourism and tradition. They now focus on concise and precise creative strategies in communicating the realized translated engine forms as pure art. In other words, emphasis is less on the charms of the superfluous and the heavily elaborated. Instead, it is now on the purity and the materiality of form and ideas. Aesthetic affect has since become the watchword and perhaps it is this borderline that distinguishes craft from art, heavily present in earlier works such as *V12 Laraki* and the *D9T*. At that point, both Van Hove and his

collaborators were more insistent in making a case for the revival of craft tradition as that which gave rise to art and formed the bedrock of mechanized industry. Yet, one could argue that in focusing on purity of form, the artist and his collaborators are now aiming for precision, the holy grail of technological innovation.

The clarity and purity of form lending itself to technological innovation cannot be any more apparent than in *The Mahjouba Initiative*, a project that shifts emphasis from ornamental replications to actual motorized objects, centered on the motorcycle, the major mode of transportation for a broad swath of the Moroccan public. The project is intended to revolutionize the transport sector of Morocco by creating an indigenous motorcycle industry through critical partnership with the local network system at the base of artisanal practice in the country. In 2015, Van Hove created the first prototype, *Mahjouba 1*, borrowing its basic design from a ubiquitous and cheap Chinese electric motorbike called the *Beswag* in Morocco, and deriving the name from the old Arabic female name *Mahjouba*, which is in turn derived from the Arabic word 'mahjoub' which colloquially means 'covering sacredness with a veil'. As Van Hove implies, it is its literal meaning 'unveiled' that describes *The Mahjouba Initiative* – with the crafted motorbike aiming at unveiling to the Moroccan people the potential power of their own craftsmanship legacy in modern times. The visually arresting *Mahjouba 1* is ninety percent handcrafted from locally sourced materials such as red copper, yellow copper, camel bones, cedar wood, resin, tin, recycled brass, recycled aluminum, and goat skin, and powered by an electric engine. Van Hove has since created other examples of the sturdy motorbike, emphasizing mechanical precision, and shorn of the overly decorative. At the level of craftsmanship and art, *The Mahjouba Initiative* is groundbreaking and offers a tantalizing model of socially engaged practice that reinvents the wheel. Its major strength, however, lies in the humanist concerns it proposes, namely, how to provide sustainable means of income for some of the world's economically disadvantaged; one which relies on their talent, instituting an economic model that is locally engineered.

In all, Van Hove monumentalizes the social-self by reconsidering the relationship between art, craft, and entrepreneurship. He articulates a new kind of partnership between the handmade and the industrial, in which the handmade is no longer in service to the industrial but both are brought together to forge a new sustainable economic model. It is also this ability to find a socio-economic role that art can play, one that destabilizes the idea of the solitary autonomous genius and instead builds on the social imperative of cooperative society. Finally, by inventing a new artistic vocabulary that offers new modes of interpreting and translating the mechanical form, Van Hove has begun a new chapter for Moroccan craftsmanship in the 21st century. It is one that could have an unimaginable and enduring impact for decades or even centuries to come.

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