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The Fendug and ethnocommodity

Natasha Hoare

To experience Marrakesh is to stand at the bleeding edge of a complex dialectical labyrinth. The entanglement of tourist with souq vendor, craftsman with the digital native, clashes forms, traditions, languages and temporalities. How can the artwork and the artist enter meaningfully into this fray, especially as the position is so complicated by the contradictory and often uncomfortable legacies of colonialism, hegemony of western art history, dearth of institutional support systems, and the challenge of legitimacy amongst a context a population battling poverty and illiteracy?

The fendug is a unique sculptural response to this landscape. Fixed between city and mountains, it was always already a liminal space in which to reimagine the possibilities for artwork and commodity, artist and craftsman, history and future. Travelling alongside the project for some years, and gratefully receiving the unending generosity and hospitality of its creators, I have been frustrated by readings of the project through the lens of Marxist critique – a skittishness at the harnessing of the commodity form – and the perception of the colonial structures are play in the employment of Moroccan artisans. These critiques have come from the fields of art history and anthropology. Searching for a tool with which to meet these, I came to the concept of the ‘ethnocommodity’, coined by Comaroff and Comaroff, two anthropologists working at Harvard University. They describe the ‘ethnocommodity’ as an object, performance, song, sculpture, that is able to constitute itself as a positive point of identity formation for the group that wilfully authors it. As such it brings together branding and marketing with culture and identity to produce a ‘culture’ brand that is both object and idea. It ‘appears to (re)fashion identity, to (re)animate cultural subjectivity, to (re)charge collective self-awareness, to forge new patterns of sociality, all within the marketplace.’

The term liberates us from the quagmire of ‘criticality with no alternative proposition’ in the field of art, design and commerce. It also brings us to a proposition of how a contemporary artwork might operate; active in the production of subjectivity, and activated by the communities that collectively

engender it through their own vernacular. Here the gaze of the tourist is turned in on itself, the performing community is able to author its collectivity via objectification, consuming themselves in order to 'become' in the contemporary moment. Comaroff & Comaroff describe how, 'Cultural identity in the here-and-now, represents itself ever more as two things at once; the object of choice and self-construction'. As such the 'ethnocommodity' activates is a sense of the agency of those cultural operators within and under the gaze of the tourist (let's not forget the figure of 2 million a year to Marrakech) – a gaze extended via the tentacular byways of the Internet to reach globally located spectators.

Their book *Ethnicity Inc* (2009) documents an extraordinary example of tribal groups in South Africa banding together to form corporations. One could read this as the final seep of capitalism into the indigenous cultures that it has done so much to destroy. However in a system entirely built - in its laws, its systems of exchange, and its every reality - upon the bedrock of capital, to develop such corporate structures is to use the logic imposed upon one and turn it against the forces that threaten to strip your people of their rights, their land, and their resources. If collective rights can be engendered through such schemes, it spells promise for the futures of such indigenous groups and their ancient forms of knowledge – desperately needed at a time of environmental disaster.

In such a spirit of hacking a rigged system, the fenduq invites in the spectre of the commodity, and the structures of industrial design and the globalised art market. Opening out these forms to test them for their potential to support a whole community of makers who otherwise bear the brunt of poverty and marginalisation as the skills handed down to them over centuries are rapidly eroded by mechanisation and bastardisation under the pressure of mass market tourism. What's more, with the leap into the realm of technology - the meeting of bone and wood with battery and circuit board – the fenduq proposes to break craft out of the mausoleum, recognising that the best preservation of its techniques and forms are to be made through its application to contemporary life, to problems of living in the here-and-now, in an unequal global playing field of makers and consumers, white bodies and brown, West and Global South. The project traces the fault lines of labour ethics, it collides diverse value systems, regimented visual traditions, and well policed borders of aesthetics and use functions. A sculptural NGO with all the artistry and language of the white cube, and all the dirt, dust and inspiration of the medina workshop. It stays with the

messy trouble of human relations, of forming bonds across cultural divides, languages and habitus. The fenduq has been described as a socio-economic sculpture, but this label does not adequately convey the relational energy of it as a hub for artists, curators and craftsmen to share ideas and to make problems. Dialogues and conversations repeat and circle, new systems and dreams are made and discarded and acted upon, building new identities forged through exchange, making, and knowledge production. The product of this labour are thus ethnocommodities, loaded and primed to perform as a trojan horse in the galleries and museums that display them, changing the immediate community of the fenduq artists who work there daily, and agitate for the production of Moroccan goods for Moroccans that instil cultural pride, visual recognition, and economic rejuvenation.

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