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Statement of Practice

The Mahjouba Initiative – Fendug/Atelier Eric van Hove, Marrakesh

Eric van Hove

Eric van Hove is an African-born Belgian conceptual artist. He established his atelier, the Fendug, in Marrakesh, after years of travel. Together with a team of Moroccan master craftsmen, he has initiated a consistent sculptural interrogation of the role of craft within modern society and the field of contemporary art. Van Hove has referred to his studio in the Maghrib as a “socioeconomic living sculpture producing affect and artworks alike”.

Abstract

This essay discusses the inspiration and gestation of van Hove’s latest project, the Mahjouba Initiative. Through this initiative, he aims to create a decentralized manufacturing model, enabling Morocco’s nearly three million active craftsmen to find a new role for themselves in contemporary society, through the production of electric mopeds for the local market on a grand scale.

Keywords: Morocco, Mahjouba, moped, industrialization, future of craft

While the first cars were made by craftsmen, industrialization throughout the twentieth century triggered two primary needs which craft could not meet: mass production/consumption, and the race for ever cheaper consumer items. The Arts and Craft Movements inculcated a wish for craft to retain a role in the production of consumer goods, but these two factors made this impossible. Another reason for the marginalization of craft was technology, largely symbolized by the combustion engine whose technical properties (heat, friction, pressure), and the exclusive use of steel alloys, made craft irrelevant.

But today consumer behavior and the manufacturing context are both changing. The public is increasingly conscious of

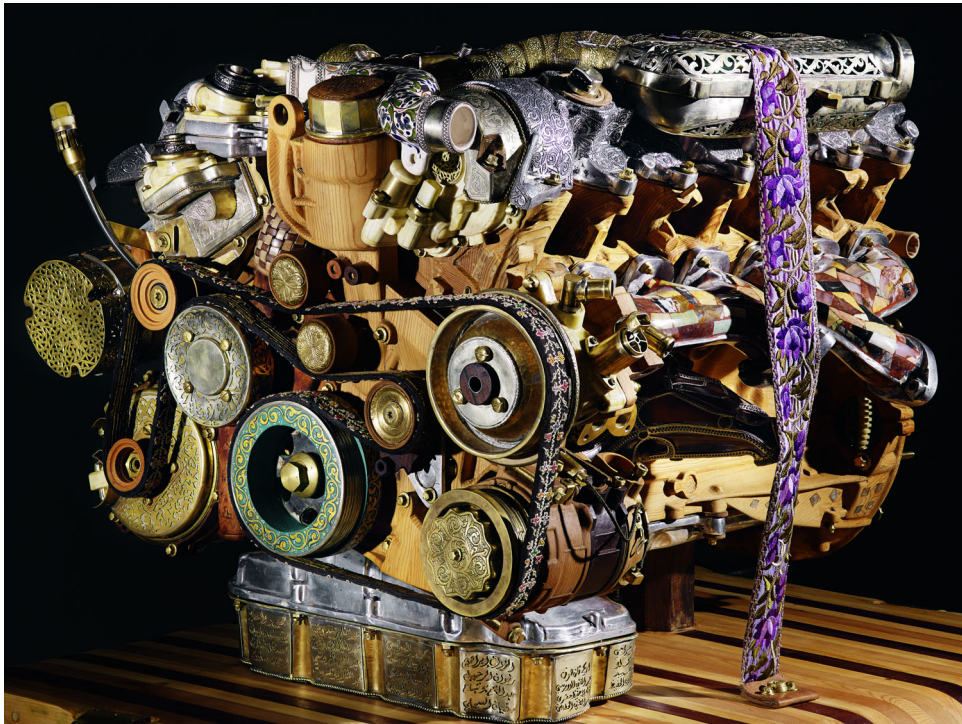


Fig 1 Eric van Hove, *V12 Laraki*, 2013. Mixed media (53 materials) Size: 110 cm x 90 cm x 86 cm. Weight: 380Kg. Courtesy the Collection of the Hood Museum of Art, New Hampshire, USA. Photo: François Hernandez.

what is at stake, both socially and otherwise; among the middle class at least the “Made in China” phenomenon of the 1990s brought about a new awareness. People don’t need the cheapest possible items any longer. On the contrary, they seem ready to pay more for a product that tells a story, that contains memory, that can be fixed, and whose process of manufacture they can understand. Postmodern cynicism is slowly giving way to Metamodernism: affect and storytelling are gaining ground.

Morocco

I have been based in Marrakesh for a many years now. I moved here in 2012 from

Tokyo, originally in order to produce a large sculpture entitled *V12 Laraki* (Figure 1), and I stayed. While working together with about fifty craftsmen for nine months to entirely rebuild that V12 Mercedes-Benz engine using craft techniques, I realized the full potential that sector could have in the post-Fordist twenty-first century.

Morocco is a rapidly industrializing North African nation with a growing middle class and nearly three million active craftsmen. Craft here doesn’t need safeguarding, as in many other countries where non-local foundations are helping to preserve intangible heritage. What is needed instead is a vision of a future where these skills find a viable



Fig 2 Eric van Hove, *Mahjouba I* prototype, 2016. Mixed media. Dimensions: 200 x 70 x 113 cm. Weight: 119 Kg. Edition of three. Courtesy the artist & the Fries Museum Collection, Leeuwarden/The Netherlands. Photo: Alessio Mei.

market and true purpose. To me, Moroccan craftsmen are mercenaries. They sell their skills to whoever pays best. Now consider this: in Marrakesh alone, there are five hundred thousand of them ...

It is important for the reader to understand that, while speaking of craft, I am not considering it as a decorative practice of the old world, but as I see it in the Moroccan context today: an industrial-scale potentiality in which human excellence meets unheard-of resilience, a sleeping juggernaut.

The Electric Revolution

In the last ten years Morocco has brought about a major transition to divert its need for resources towards renewable energy. An important step towards a zero-carbon economy is the on-going installation of the largest

solar panel fields in Africa (the Noor Power Plant). The country aims to provide nearly half its national consumption with clean energy by 2030.

In 2016, the “Ochre City” (as Marrakesh is sometimes called) hosted the Climate Change summit (COP22). At that time, I was thinking that while the city is home to half a million craftsmen, Google has a total workforce of about one hundred thousand. I was thinking that modern technology might allow for the creation of a huge open-air decentralized factory here: could the juggernaut be awakened? Maybe, I thought, the whole world could be changed if an enterprise succeeded in hybridizing western and medina approaches to making goods, mixing formal and informal economic realities, combining 3D printing with craft, offering fairness and



Fig 3 Eric van Hove, *Mahjouba II* prototype, 2016. Mixed media. Dimensions: 230 cm x 60 cm x 95 cm. Weight: 150 Kg. Courtesy Mu.Zee Collection, Oostend/Belgium. Photo: Steven Decroos.

hope while mass-making twenty-first century items. I was sure of one thing: the only sustainable market for these craftsmen was Moroccan middle-class consumers. And for that, a consumer good which is modern and actually useful had to be developed.

I was at the traffic light thinking about all this when I saw a Chinese electric motorbike drive by.

I knew every type of moped on Moroccan roads: the Peugeot 104, the Chinese Docker C-90, the Japanese Yamaha

T-50, the Italian Vespa, etc. That chance moment acted as a spark. That same evening, I bought a cheap “Be Swag” moped and brought it to my studio, where I proposed to my team to rebuild it, part by part, using copper, bone, steel, aluminum and wood. Installing the batteries and engine from the original Chinese model into our copy, we ran a successful test-drive three weeks later (Figure 2). I still remember the light in the eyes of these craftsmen ... they were in shock. They had just made a consumer good

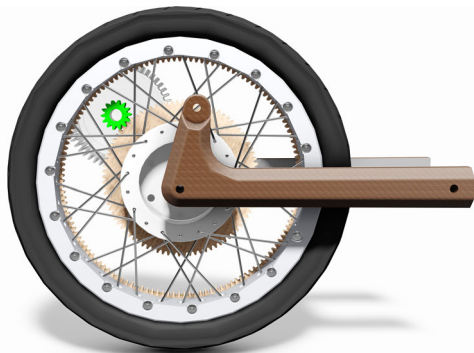


Fig 4 *Mahjouba IV* prototype currently in development. Courtesy General Transmissions/Wouter Barenbrecht. In-development two-speed transmission prototype with inner and outer gears on the rear wheel combining 3D printing and Moroccan craft for *Mahjouba IV* by French Multinational company General Transmissions.

worth more than any combination of souk-destined souvenirs for tourists. It was functional, and it made them proud in a way they had hardly ever felt before. The Mahjouba Initiative was born.

Mahjouba

Mahjouba is an ancient women's name from the Maghrib region, but it also refers to the veil - not just the headscarf which western media loves to polemicize. I chose the name Mahjouba to refer to the "unveiling" of Moroccan craft to itself, revealing its true potential in the age of information capitalism and artificial intelligence.

In short, the goal of the Mahjouba Initiative is twofold: firstly, to conceive an electric motorbike whose every component has been engineered specifically for the craft sector's tools and materials (Figure 3).

This means that we incorporate 3D printed elements where needed, so that we do not ask a person to do a machine's work, or use factory-made parts when locally available. Secondly, to develop an experimental socio-economic model via a series of think-tanks that bring together a variety of specialists. Here the aim is to find a way to hybridize the Western capitalist system and the local African made-to-order manufacturing and souk/distribution system (Figure 4). This new model should combine centralized and decentralized approaches in conjunction with the formal and informal economic realities of the contemporary Moroccan context. We also hope to develop an app that will allow for swift communication with all craftsmen involved, even if they cannot read or write.

In a way, Marrakesh with its countless workshops is already a huge open-air factory. The Mahjouba Initiative aims only to give it a common purpose, an enhanced market vision, a few unifying products developed with engineers, and an awareness of itself: it is about getting back ownership of the means of production. This, in turn, could become an inspiration for the African continent and beyond, where many other nations and family businesses are facing similar situations and challenges.

In that sense, Mahjouba is a Pandora's box: with so many calamities now released only hope is left to find, and now is the right time to begin the search.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).