Visual Artists from the Bled. From Sadek Rahim to the Hirak, Contemporary Algerian Art's Quest for Autonomy

Florian Gaité

Translator: Phoebe Clarke

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/53876>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.53876

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

This article is a translation of:

Plasticien du bled. De Sadek Rahim au hirak, l'art contemporain algérien en quête d'autonomie - URL :
<https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/53874> [fr]

Publisher

Grouperement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 26 November 2019

Number of pages: 136-154

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Florian Gaité, "Visual Artists from the Bled. From Sadek Rahim to the Hirak, Contemporary Algerian Art's Quest for Autonomy", *Critique d'art* [Online], 53 | Automne/hiver, Online since 26 November 2020, connection on 04 February 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/53876> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.53876>

This text was automatically generated on 4 February 2022.

EN

Visual Artists from the Bled. From Sadek Rahim to the Hirak, Contemporary Algerian Art's Quest for Autonomy

Florian Gaité

Translation : Phoebe Clarke

EDITOR'S NOTE

Florian Gaité is the fourth recipient of the grant for the writing and publication of a critical essay that was created in 2016 by the collaboration between the Institut français, the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA) and *Critique d'art*¹. The grant, determined by a yearly call for applications, enables the recipients to visit one or more art events of their choice and to critically analyse them in an article. It is part of a wider programme that supports writing on contemporary art and its international dissemination initiated by the Institut français in the field of visual arts and in partnership with the Ministry of Culture and the Direction Générale de la création artistique. This programme has made it possible, in collaboration with the INHA, to create different measures promoting the mobility of scholars and art critics, the dissemination of their ideas and the translation of their writings.

Florian Gaité's grant took him to Algeria during the Spring of 2019. Thus, his examination of the means for conceptualising the autonomy of contemporary art in Algeria coincided with the beginning of mass protests – the *Hirak* – against political immobilism and in favour of the reorganisation of social space. The resulting essay takes into account the intrusion of these events into his investigation, carefully avoiding any hurried judgement, developing on the contrary a qualified reflexion that takes on different guises: from a close-up analysis of Sadek Rahim's work – whose monographic exhibition in Oran² is at the heart of Florian Gaité's reflection – to the

attentive observation of official and alternative structures that outline the field of contemporary art in Algeria, to the potential hybridisations between the latter and the effects of the *Hirak*. Attempting to circumvent the pitfalls of a power-tainted gaze from the outside as well as of an analysis subjected to a sole theoretic framework, however important it may be (decolonial, for instance), the text you are about to read constantly reflects on the critic's position as well as on the very definition of what is "contemporary" in art, trapped between the patrimonial function promoted by institutions and the testimonial function that is so vital in times of conflict.

We hope you enjoy it!

Elitza Dulguerova, Research adviser in the field of 18th to 21st-Century Art History, INHA

Invitation card for the opening of *Sadek Rahim : Gravity³*, Oran, 2019 © Faouzi Louadah

- 1 Producing a critical essay on Algerian art means laying aside most of one's interpretative filters in order to seek out a mobile and contrasted, occasionally underground scene that is constantly under construction. Algeria itself is a mosaic-like society, divided into many different communities, languages and regional cultures³, and although its art scene is not organised according to these social distributions, it nevertheless does reflect its fundamental plurality. Fragmented artist networks and unevenly distributed organisations, the abundance of initiatives and varying degrees of closeness to the institution, all form a multi-levelled, sometimes unplanned geography, including side roads, dead ends and places of exile. To step into this space requires rejecting all uniformising discourses. The other pitfall would be to consider it from a postcolonial perspective only, at the risk of indulging in exoticism and mistakenly connecting current productions to former "indigenous art"⁴ – an art of colonised identities. However, one only needs to spend a few days in Algeria to realise that colonial history is merely one variable in a much more complex equation, as it has been affected by other traumas which are just as integral to its current identity, particularly

the Civil War in the 1990s. A decolonial interpretation seemed to me to potentially betray a latent form of Eurocentrism, placing colonial domination at the centre of the history of colonised countries. By approaching the Algerian scene through this frame of reference, would one not be at risk of artificially constructing a local scene from the outside?

- 2 Examining the subject of this study through the angle of autonomy is significant, as this terminology can translate the distancing act ex-colonised peoples perform. This stance reflects the way in which Algerian art builds and asserts itself as a specific scene, staunchly refusing to be defined by others. Autonomy, the ability to define one's own laws, strongly resonates with the history of a country that was colonised several times, as well as with pressing current events, as mass popular uprisings (*hirak* – “movement” in Arabic) are demanding a change of political system. In this essay, I will detach the term “autonomy” from its strictly moral or political meaning, in order to place it at the centre of a semantic network that brings together concepts of self-determination, self-management and emancipation – in other words the lexical field of identity construction and self-definition. By making it central to this essay, I am attempting to link current shifts in the artworld with the institution, in an ambivalent relationship with the global context and in direct contact with the ongoing revolution.
- 3 The subject of autonomy implies characterising a local scene, in which artists from the diaspora – long-gone emigrants or descendants of emigrants⁵ – cannot be fully included. While it would be unwise to create a separation between emigrants and local visual artists, as they entertain close and consistent ties, it is however necessary to take into account the differences in their access to training, production, distribution and research subjects. This essay focuses on Algerian visual artists who live and work in their country, and among whom Sadek Rahim is one of the most eminent figures and the possible precursor of a new profile of contemporary artists. Within the limits of this essay and the research journeys that nourished it⁶, the connecting thread is the analysis of Rahim's milestone exhibition *Gravity*³ which took place in Oran this summer⁷, the most outstanding proof that Algerian art is moving ever more firmly towards autonomy. *Gravity*³ derives from the fruitful collaboration between the artist and the French curator Marie Deparis Yafil, which began on the occasion of Art Dubai in 2017. The project has developed over the past two years into a formally heterogeneous corpus (drawings, installations, video, photography, sculpture and performance) structured around common subjects (migrating youths, industrial politics, societal inertia and so on). The study of this exhibition, from its organisation to its contents, will lead me to question in more depth the relationship between Algerian contemporary artists, the institution and the global artworld. Faced with the government's defection, how can artists fuel their ambitions? Is the dialogue with Western countries necessary? How is it possible to negotiate between the will to assert one's local identity and finding one's place in a globalised culture? Questioning the way in which art can convey autonomy in Algeria takes on a new meaning in 2019. Drawing a parallel between *Gravity*³ and the popular upheavals that have been unfolding since February 22nd can reveal how art reflects a society headed towards emancipation. Does the ongoing revolution have the means to accompany or stimulate the evolution of Algerian art? Up to what point is the revolution a factor in the renewal of art?

Image 100000000000FC00000BD026959BA990C430D9.jpg

Sadek Rahim in his studio, Oran, 2019 © Faouzi Louadah

Contemporary art in the public institutional network: fighting conservatism

- 4 Contemporary artists do not find their primary support from public institutions, which only offer a precarious and mostly dysfunctional network. This low level of commitment is visible in a general lack of infrastructures, legal framework, acquisition policies, research programmes and, more broadly, funding, generating difficulties for artists in finding workshops, grants and residencies. The opening of two national modern art museums, the MAMA in Algiers in 2007 and the MAMO in Oran in 2017, reflected a shift in mentalities. But their importance on the cultural scene must necessarily be put into perspective: their visitor numbers and funding run low and their collections are unworthy of a national institution. Another structural factor should be added alongside insufficient investments: opportunism and social exclusivity, which corrupt the political system and play out in obscure nomination procedures, as exemplified by the controversy surrounding the very first Algerian pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennial. Created on the initiative of Hellal Mahmoud Zoubir, the pavilion's selection of artists was not based on a public call⁸ and included the curator's own daughter.⁹ Conscious of the major implications of this potential first participation, the artworld rallied together and wrote an open letter contesting its legitimacy, denouncing the secretiveness of attribution procedures, stressing the fact that popular protests were being staged in response to precisely this lack of political integrity. In the crisis that ensued, the government decided to withdraw from the project¹⁰, forcing the organisers to seek private funding in order to maintain it. This withdrawal was one more example of how badly the institutions were out of touch with international circuits, since public policy bodies – such as the ARPC¹¹ or the AARC¹² – were not sufficient to stimulate global exchanges. The few international events devoted to contemporary art are constantly jeopardised by the lack of funding, as was the case for the Festival international d'art contemporain (FIAC) which was discontinued after seven successful years. Institutional power thus curbs the development, vitality and cohesion of the contemporary scene, either from passivity, resignation, carelessness, disinterest or coerciveness; or because it is motivated by political calculation and a will to control everything.¹³
- 5 There is also an ideological reason to this state of affairs, the marginalisation of the very use of the term “contemporary art”, understood as a way for the West of imposing its culture globally. Is “contemporary art” a way of approaching art that transcends cultural differences or is it a Western style that imposes itself hegemonically? Although the question is valid for every subaltern or minoritized scene, I will discuss it through the prism of Algeria where the terminology is informally contested, even though the lack of academic and professional gatherings hinders the discussion's public expression. In spite of Algeria boasting a number of national modern and contemporary art museums, it is remarkable that the latter qualification is not emphasised and is sometimes even deleted from communication documents. Some art school professors ignore post-war creation in their classes, and certain artists do not claim they are “contemporary”, self-describing, rather, as “modern”, “avant-garde” or “present-day”. What could be perceived as a semantic debate is in fact the sign of a strong distrust of the normative power of Western societies. Recognisable in visual arts festivals and museums of fine arts, the aesthetic ideology promoted by the Ministry is

mostly oriented towards heritage arts and the promotion of academic practices and subjects, from the war of liberation to the beauty of Algeria, including portraits of Tuaregs, representations of picturesque Casbahs or the Amazigh symbol. Academic painting is the most respected medium, and it is hegemonic – when it is abstract it often refers to letters or signs; when it is figurative, it is in line with expressionist and narrative styles. These mutations, which contributed to liberating genres in the 1960s, were later rigidified by the conservatism of State policies, anxious to promote local culture against the values of the ex-colonisers, at the risk of entertaining a backward-looking attitude or a retreat into nationalist ideas of identity.¹⁴ It is in light of the process of cultural reappropriation launched in 1962 that one must assess the discrete presence of “contemporary art” in Algeria and the resistance it is faced with on an institutional level.¹⁵ The terminology, however, is not at all problematic in institutions that maintain direct ties abroad, where it acts as a functional category, giving access to international recognition and providing an introduction to the market. Contemporary artists who identify as such enter a dynamic of international exchanges, as often as not initiated outside of public institutions.¹⁶

The means of autonomy: alternative projects and para-institutional structures

- 6 The precariousness of this network hinders the growth of contemporary art, all the more so because it is not compensated by the existence of a centralising and unifying market, even though Algerian artists simultaneously enjoy worldwide recognition and are the subject of many events abroad. However, this seemingly unfavourable situation also contributes to stimulating the autonomy of artists and to reinforcing non-institutional projects that act as interfaces with Western, North-African and Middle-Eastern countries. Artists’ initiatives are sources of emulation and create potential professional springboards – as such they have become essential for the local scene’s vibrancy. They foster models of self-managed art and of versatile artists who are all at once creators, curators and critics.¹⁷ Events such as the Biennale méditerranéenne d’art contemporain d’Oran [Oran Mediterranean Biennial of Contemporary Art] or the Civ’œil gallery, both founded by Sadek Rahim and Tewfik Ali-Chaouche; or more alternative forms, as for instance the Box 24 collective, are resolutely open to the world and openly para-institutional. Among Box 24’s founding members, it is worth mentioning Mourad Krinah, the curator of *Picturie Générale* (2014, 2015, 2016)¹⁸, and Walid Aidoud, who coordinated ARTIFARITI, an International Conference for art and human rights in the Western Sahara [Rencontres internationales de l’art et des droits de l’homme au Sahara occidental]. The strong presence of graphic art and street art on this alternative scene forces one to reconsider the hierarchies between disciplines, as well as the local influence of these practices, regarded as secondary in the West, on contemporary art.
- 7 Private and foreign structures are strong tools in the autonomy process. Residency spaces, corporate foundations, NGOs and cultural institutes are the leading intermediaries with the rest of the world. These collaborations prolong the way in which international relationships are created empirically, through individual itineraries, including those of artists living abroad while maintaining close ties with their home country. Among them, Zineb Sedira, who lives in London, regularly comes back to Algeria to work. She opened the A.R.I.A. residency with Yasmina Reggad,

enabling Mohamed Bourouissa to carry out his project *Le Murmure des fantômes* which was nominated for the Marcel Duchamp Prize in 2018, and made it possible to host an artist of such international stature as Alfredo Jaar in Algiers. These structures confront artists to new forms, stimulate imaginations and dialogues, and exist through their connections and oppositions with other countries. Another key example is the Ateliers Sauvages, founded in 2015 on the initiative of Wassyla Tamzali, an essayist, activist and art lover. Boasting an international profile, total independence and freedom in programming, the space hosts artists that are from local or diaspora backgrounds and from abroad, and has established itself as one of the most active centres for creation on the emerging Algerian scene¹⁹ and for those who wish to work in Algeria. Devised as a form of utopia, where “art has taken the place of political and activist languages”²⁰, the Ateliers are a space for freedom and indiscipline and therefore for the autonomy of artists regarded as “wild – like wild flowers”²¹. Its programme hosts experimental and activist projects along with otherwise underrepresented media. Foreign cultural institutes – from France, Italy, Spain and Germany – also play an important part in the rise of contemporary art, by providing the artworld with significant logistic, theoretic, economic and communicational support.²² All of these structures constitute real alternatives to institutions in Algeria, where they take on the dimension of cultural counter powers, by completing the institutional offer, while enabling international networks to develop.

- 8 Sadek Rahim’s *Gravity*³ reveals the need for artists to be proactive and to look for ways of carrying out their projects outside the institution. The exhibition was proposed to the directors of the MAMO and was developed independently, with no funding or support from the institution, which is a token of autonomy as much as it is of the museum’s lack of implication. Although the exhibition was certified by the Ministry of Culture and the Zabana Museum, it was only made possible by the logistical help of the Institut français of Oran and the Instituto Cervantes, as well as sponsorship, particularly from private companies and personal funding. Being strongly connected to local communities and supported by internationally significant structures constitutes the most viable production model for Algerian contemporary visual artists, which comes with its share of contradictions.

Sadek Rahim, *Territoire*, carpet, concrete, 122 x 185 cm, 2019. View of the exhibition *Sadek Rahim: Gravity*³ (5 july-30 september 2019), Oran : MAMO © Faouzi Louadah

Choosing to exhibit in Algeria, a possible and political decision

- 9 Despite a context of relative isolation (Algeria's limited openness to tourism, discrete presence in international events, and its officials' distrust of the West), the complex yet constant foreign relations, particularly with ex-colonisers, constitute one of the most insistent paradoxes of this study. One foot on their native soil, one eye turned towards the world, Algerian contemporary artists must learn to run with the hares and hunt with the hounds. While this situation forces artists to navigate between several continents, Sadek Rahim's profile is unusual, as he is one of the only Algerian artists, if not the only one of his stature, to have gone to study abroad – at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (Beirut) and Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (London) – and to have chosen to come back to settle in his native country. While this explains why he is not as well known internationally as some of his emigrated counterparts²³, in his country he is a leading character and he exercises a noticeable influence on emerging generations. By establishing his position through this first institutional monographic exhibition, he has contributed to the creation of an artistic “elite”, a “Made in Algeria” scene that can rival with other representatives of the international artworld.
- 10 His work manifests his determination to invest the country, asserting the possibility of building a career there, of not giving in to the temptation of exile. This is evident in his work on the theme of migration, which goes against the grain of the local artistic *doxa*. A widely treated subject in the most recent works of Algerian art²⁴, the fate of the *harraga* (the Arabic name of those emigrants trying to reach Europe clandestinely) is usually addressed from the perspective of the tragic crossings of the Mediterranean or through criticism of European asylum policies. Sadek Rahim takes on a markedly distinct position, where he denounces how his country feeds into a culture valuing migration. Through a corpus of works that uses oriental rugs as their main motif, the artist turns the symbol of the flying carpet against itself, in order to reveal the illusory nature of the Eldorado it is floating towards. Weighed down by oozing concrete, displayed facing a dysfunctional piston from a fishing boat (*Piston*), or alongside a cemented petrol valve (*The Missing*), a fuel injection pump (*Made in URSS*) or motor pieces (*The Fleet*), Sadek Rahim's carpets do not so much embody possibilities for escape as they do the failure of the myth prompting it. Pinned to the wall – as aeroplanes can be pinned to the ground – they are burdened by the weight of reality. The artist brings the carpets back to a pragmatic vision, as if he were trying to convince them to stay grounded. This vision is exemplified by a quote from Pierre Bourdieu flashed up in a display case (“Because we know the laws of gravity, we are able to fly”²⁵), illustrating how the knowledge of constraint is the condition for surpassing it, a declaration that is made even more audible by the current context: the *hirak* has led to a decrease by 80% of young Algerians leaving the country. Sadek Rahim's life and work demonstrate that exile is not inevitable, and *Gravity*³ is a thinly veiled call to constitute a local, autonomous and emancipated scene.

Visual translations in the work of Sadek Rahim: neither localism nor globalism

- 11 The exhibition *Gravity*³ is, to date, the largest monographic exhibition in Algeria to have been so strongly rooted in contemporary processes and as adapted to the aesthetic

norms of Western museums, without having sacrificed anything to its local identity. Although the markers of Western “contemporary” practices are visible – such as the importance of critical discourse, transdisciplinarity and the supremacy of concept – it also revealed more endemic stylistic specificities. As demonstrated by Nadira Aklouche-Laggoune²⁶, this dynamic is nothing new: Algerian contemporary art was built around an interplay of influences constituted of transfers, quotations and transplants, part assertions of identity, part assimilation of exogeneous codes. If one simply considered the various processes (installation, ready-made, performance, minimalist drawing, video...), materials (concrete, industrial tools, neons, etc.) and discourses it used, *Gravity*³ could be erroneously understood as a way for the artist to conform to Western formal markers. But meeting Sadek Rahim and Marie Deparis Yafil forced me to reverse the question: Sadek Rahim is certainly not so much influenced by outside codes that would “Westernise” his production than he is in a position where he chooses specific elements from Algerian culture which renew the interpretation of the forms and symbols of Western contemporary art. Located in the space between local references and global culture, his work does not yield to any dominant aesthetic but does not cut itself off from interpretative norms currently used by contemporary art.

- 12 It would therefore be mistaken to connect the reference to carpets and floral patterns to an Orientalist unconscious.²⁷ The irony in his approach should be read as a reinterpretation of the domestic object, suffused with family memories. Referring to his grandmother, for whom every young Algerian was a rose which every departure withered, the artist extrudes the flowers, evoking absence and separation. In two artworks displayed facing each other, he cut out the patterns woven into oriental carpets in order to bring the figures out from the background, in the same way young exiles uproot themselves. In the first piece (*Constellation*), he only kept the roses, fitting some of them with a rotating motor and assembling them into a networked constellation on the wall. Separated from the rest of the composition, the flowers become the promising young men that go around in circles or remain at a standstill. In the other piece (*The Missing*), the process was reversed: on the wall, a carpet from which the decorations have been removed, leaving a hole in their place, materialises the empty space left by those who have gone, a transcultural feeling that anyone can recognise. The auto-referential gesture evokes Oriental themes, but the process is distanced and understandable for a foreign audience.
- 13 The use of mechanical materials is also steeped in symbolism specific to the country’s history. Mostly taken from naval engineering, they are put to work representing the obsolescence and inevitable degradation of a society no one has taken sufficient care of. Dysfunctional motors and jammed gears are omnipresent, evoking the lack of movement and the inescapability of inertia. These ready-mades are also a reference to the equipment in Algerian ports and the machinery of the boats which concentrate so many dreams of foreign lands, such as the huge concrete matrix used for *Envole*. The mould evokes the blocks composing the dykes where young men hoping to leave go to sit. In association with concrete, it increases the criticism of society’s paralysis by voicing the hope that young Algerians should put down roots permanently, as in *Sabotage*, a portable geolocation system trapped in concrete, symbolically preventing their departure. In a sense, this is the gravity or graveness that lends its name to the exhibition’s title. The political emergency Algerians are confronted to is met with the strength of their attachment to their native land. Mechanical materials are

emancipated from post-industrial nostalgia, shifting in order to interpret pressing current affairs.

- 14 On a more general note, concrete is reminiscent of Algerian landscapes scattered with construction sites in direct contact with historic heritage. A symbol of the contradiction between the precarious preservation of architectural sites and mostly unregulated buildings policy, the installation called *Mémoires* is a schematic reproduction of the city of Oran, in which precarious constructions made from bricks and roof ornaments are piled together. The piece is completed by a photograph of Bey Hassen's palace, Oran's architectural gem, pictured near an abandoned 18-floor high-rise building, a discarded concrete monster defacing the landscape. This aesthetic dissonance is inherent to the experience of Oran and acts as a guiding principle throughout the exhibition, in which the artist's recent works are displayed alongside antiquities, exceptionally on loan from the Zabana Museum. Interlacing the local and the global, ideas of heritage and contemporaneity, Sadek Rahim's style delineates contemporary art as it is practiced à l'algérienne, bringing together representations of extreme contemporaneity and a quest for origins, openly assigning documentary and archival functions to art.

The contemporaneity of Algerian art: is the *hirak* revolutionising art?

- 15 Developed simultaneously with the *hirak*, which it implicitly evokes, *Gravity*³ is the first large-scale exhibition to critically examine its causes: political mismanagement and the tragedy of *harragas*. Everything seems to encourage seeing this temporal coincidence as a decisive moment, a time when the artworld and society both share the same desire for emancipation from institutions. However, the concrete implication of artists in the current protest movements is more often due to personal initiative than it is to collective mobilisation. Although artists do take part in protests, student strikes, comities and discussion groups, although they sign petitions, their degree of commitment varies, and artists find it difficult to make culture an important issue in the public debate. But Algerian artists and protesters use their creativity as a political lever, materialised by popular artforms (such as music, graphic novels, satirical cartoons and photography) and disseminated through channels accessible to all (online platforms, unauthorised poster campaigns, underground publications). More occasionally, artists initiate people's workshops – for example, Fatima Chaafa asked 200 children to draw their vision of the *hirak* – or public actions, such as Révolte-Arts in Tizi-Ouzou, or the large Algerian flag sewn during a protest, following an idea from Sarah El Hamed.
- 16 Art is at its most successful when it is a testimonial to the movement. As the press is restricted and even muzzled, and the government blocks any archival activity surrounding the events, artists have taken it upon themselves to constitute its memory. Political events foster new imageries (Mounia Lazali's compact crowds, Mounir Gouri's concrete blocks, Nedjoua Seraa's portraits of young people), and contribute to the increased value of photography, the medium best suited to documenting them. Algerian photographers, previously marginalised on the art scene, have used this situation as an opportunity to be taken into consideration, particularly through their work being extensively shared on social media. Notable examples are Liasmine Fodil in Tizi-Ouzou and Nacera Boulénouar in Oran, or the overnight success of the

220collective²⁸, whose work was published in major international newspapers and exhibited worldwide. Without ever presenting themselves as the people's mouthpiece, the position of these artists is that of activist observers, concerned by and confronted to the urgency of displaying facts. The *hirak* thus revitalises concepts of image, questions the political impact of art and provides it with new missions.

The rise of critical thought: challenges and developing evolutions

- 17 Taken from the perspective of its effects on the freedom of expression, the *hirak* represents a way for contemporary Algerian art of approaching its critical turn a bit more openly. It must be said that the spectre of censorship still requires the utmost caution from artists, meaning some of them refuse political interpretations of their work. It would seem, however, that the weakening of the current system and the opening up of public speech by the uprisings have created fertile ground for exercising art's ability for negation. At this point in the analysis, we should consider that every historical crisis (political, social, cultural or economic) is echoed by a conceptual crisis, opening up the possibility for the disinhibition of critical conscience. Up to what point can art be contaminated by this still restless spirit of freedom, allowing itself to take on the critical function that is so central to contemporary art? *Gravity*³ conveys an unprecedented degree of freedom of expression at this level of institutional visibility. Although the threat of censorship was not felt during the preparation of the exhibition, which was undertaken without any monitoring on the part of the institution, one could have expected it at the time of the opening, as the political context was still so sensitive. But despite a visit from officials, the exhibition was not banned, the consequence of higher permissiveness due to the political context.²⁹ This is also due to Rahim's strategy, symptomatic of an art scene accustomed to obscuring its true intentions. Sadek Rahim discretely conceals content in seemingly harmless and falsely ornamental forms (his work with carpets) or playful elements (a Moses basket weighed down by a flow of concrete). Political discourse is therefore compensated by poetic investment, meaning it is suggestive rather than an open statement. With the *hirak*, the possibility of revealing what is hidden can be conquered. It has become conceivable for artists and viewers alike to openly attack industrialisation policies, the paralysis of society and the status quo which are at the root of it all. As demonstrated by Sadek Rahim's work, the fact of voicing frank political criticism is commensurate to a more direct use of conceptual forms. For instance, the young painter Amine Boughachiche, who became known during the *hirak*, gave up his usual figurative style in order to produce a discursive pictorial artwork, in which the acronym of the party in power, FLN, is painted in red. The "L" is deteriorated and finally spells out "FIN" (the end). However, it is still necessary to intellectually assist artists and viewers in this direction, as art theory is virtually untaught and art criticism is an undeveloped discipline with no specialised press.
- 18 It would be impossible to conclude this essay without mentioning the place of women, who are still widely under-represented although they are increasingly present in the Algerian and international artworld³⁰. Since the 2000s, Algerian art – timidly – echoes the emancipation movement, which was materialised in specific exhibitions, such as *L'Art au féminin* (Algiers: MAMA, 2007), *Africaines* (Algiers: MAMA, 2009) and *Touchees féminines où se mêle le langage des couleurs* (Oran: MAMO, 2018). But they were unable to overthrow the dominant masculine order, which *de facto* grants men a greater access to

means of production and dissemination. Although this assessment indistinctly fits all art scenes around the world, it must be acknowledged that the situation is more acute in such a patriarchal society as Algeria. The context of the *hirak* could bring about major change by reconnecting Algeria with its history of female revolutionary activism: women resisting in the shadows and *moudjahidate*, such as Djamila Bouhired, the icon of independence, whose every appearance galvanises crowds. Feminist struggles and their demands (reform of the Family Code and equal rights) are still met with hostility from conservatives and have difficulties transforming the current extra visibility they enjoy into a popular movement with sufficient momentum to have substantial political influence. I will conclude this analysis by expressing the hope that the struggles for political and sexual minorities will find enough strength in the current ferment to launch a significant evolution, a convergence of struggles for autonomy that would bring together the self-determination of people, the emancipation of minorities and the self-definition of contemporary art.

- 19 This fieldwork-based essay attempts to survey the shifting Algerian art scene, without ever claiming to be exhaustive as it is especially resistant to any kind of synthesis, even more so because it is subjected to deep changes, and it is impossible to know whether they will lead to the overturning of institutional order. The example of Sadek Rahim is to some extent freed from the institutions and hegemony of the West, and seems to delineate the profile of an autonomous contemporary artist on the verge of becoming a local model. The autonomy process at work in the artworld and in society are connected by joint goals and means, echoing the desire to take control of one's own fate and opening up the country. What remains to be considered is what a more direct introduction of Algerian artists into global culture would yield. After having been assigned to colonial history, to terrorism, to women's oppression, are Algerian artists not at risk of being reduced to the current political situation which they would merely illustrate? It is up to foreign platforms to host the emerging scene while rejecting this outlook, in order to acknowledge it in all its wealth and idiosyncrasies. For a long time, Algeria was a spearhead for assertive artistic events – such as the Festival panafricain d'Alger (Panaf) in 1969, which was hosted again in 2009 –, but can it regain its leading position in the struggle of ex-colonised countries for emancipation? The journey is long and fraught with pitfalls, but freed creative energies, the will to develop the artworld and to structure discourses all seem to outline its premises. It is now up to Algerian artists to take up the challenge and bring the revolution into museums.

NOTES

3. Depending on whether the populations define themselves as Arab or Berber, and whether they belong to ethnic groups such as the Kabyle, Shawiya, Tuareg or Mozabite people.
4. From the term used by the French administration to describe Algerians during colonisation, "indigenous art" was a tool for the colonisers as much as an object for reappropriation after 1962. See Orif, Mustapha. "De l'art indigène' à l'art algérien", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, vol. 75, November 1988, p. 35-49.

5. For example Kader Attia, Saâdane Afif, Adel Abdessemed, Zineb Sedira, Katia Kameli, Massinissa Selmani, Fayçal Baghriche, Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Kamel Yahiaoui, Halida Boughriet, Abdelkader Benchamma, Mohamed Bourouissa and Neïl Beloufa.
6. I travelled to Algiers, Oran, Mostaganem and Tlemcem in April, June and July 2019.
7. *Sadek Rahim: Gravity*³ (5 July-30 September 2019), Oran: MAMO. Curated by Marie Deparis Yafil.
8. For his part, Hella Zoubir explains that the government authorisations had not been delivered until February and the inauguration was in May – which would not have given him enough time to organise.
9. It was not so much her legitimacy as an artist as the conflict of interest which was put into question.
10. Saâdi-Leray Farid's detailed analysis, published in *Le Matin d'Algérie* on April 4th 2019, is noteworthy. Accessible online: www.lematindalgerie.com/la-biennale-de-venise-le-pavillon-algerien-prend-leau-et-la-poudre-descampette.
11. Agence nationale de gestion des réalisations des grands projets de la culture [National agency for large-scale cultural projects].
12. Agence algérienne pour le rayonnement culturel [Algerian Agency for international influence].
13. The State, for instance, controls the exportation of artworks and is slow to legislate on the legal status of artists.
14. Although paradoxically it is Western art history that is taught in schools, from the Antiquity to Modernism, and incursions into Muslim, and particularly Ottoman, art are rare.
15. Public institutions are often divided between conservatism and an openness towards current artforms, for instance at the Bastion 23 in Algiers or the residency Dar Abdellatif, although the latter is more versed in contemporary art.
16. For example Sadek Rahim, Zineb Sedira, Oussama Tabti, Atef Berredjem, Adel Bentounsi, Amina Menia, Mounir Gouri, Sofiane Zouggar, etc.
17. This is the case for Walid Aidoud, Mourad Krinah, Mohamed Benhadj, Mazia Djab, Tewfik Ali-Chaouche and Sadek Rahim for example.
18. A series of exhibitions which took place in the Casbah or a closed-down market, and which were so successful that the curator was invited to present a panel of young Algerian artists at the Dakar Biennial in 2016.
19. Sofiane Zouggar, Adel Bentounsi, Mounir Gouri, Djamel Agagnia, Fella Tamzali Tahari, Maya Ben Cheikh El-Fegoun and Mehdi Djelil [Bardi], among many others.
20. Tamzali, Wassyla. Merouche, Hichem. *Le Temps de préparer d'autres questions*, Algiers: Les Ateliers Sauvages, 2019, p. 129
21. *Ibid.* p. 149
22. Although this is also a way for ex-colonising countries to preserve an area of influence neglected by authorities and to maintain diplomatic relations in an occasionally sensitive context of bilateral exchanges.
23. Artists who decided to leave Algeria, such as Mohamed Bourouissa, Neïl Beloufa, Adel Abdessemed, Halida Boughriet, Saâdane Afif, Kamel Yahiaoui and Massinissa Selmani for example.
24. See for example the works of Fouad Bouatba (*The Missing*, 2015, and *Le Cimetière de la Méditerranée*, 2019), Mounir Gouri (*Les Routes cousues*, 2017), Atef Berredjem (*Stars*, 2011) and Zineddine Bessaï (*Harraga*, 2010).
25. Bourdieu, Pierre. "Ce que peut faire la sociologie", conference with Ronald Klapka at the theatre of Saint-Amand-les-Eaux in 1983. Initially published in *La Marmite*, the teachers' journal of Saint-Amand-les-Eaux (<http://remue.net/cont/bourdieu02.html>).
26. Aklouche-Laggoune, Nadira. "Résistance, appropriation et réappropriation dans l'art algérien", *Modern & Contemporary France*, vol. 19, n° 2, 2011, p. 179-193

27. Which Nadira Aklouche-Laggoune calls “Orientalism from within”. See “Marché de l’art : Le nouvel orientalisme du dedans”, *El Watan*, 5 October 2006.

28. Ramzy Bensaadi, Houari Bouchenak, Youcef Krache, Fethi Sahraoui and Abdo Shanan.

29. This analysis is valid in September 2019 and for visual artists only. Writers, directors and journalists are more vulnerable to repression.

30. We could mention Halida Boughriet, Zineb Sedira, Zoulikha Bouabdellah, Amina Menia, Lydia Ourahmane, Fatima Chafaa, Maya Ben Chikh El Fegoun, Katia Kameli, Carole Douillard, Sarah El Hamed, Amina Zoubir, Louisa Babari, and Hakima El Djoudi.

1. The grant has allowed:

- Julie Crenn to explore the female art scene in South Africa in 2016. “Who Run the World? South African Female Artists’ Relationship to History and Normativity”, *Critique d’art*, no. 47, Autumn/Winter 2016, p. 97-128
- Clélia Zernik to investigate, in 2017, on the form and status of art festivals in Japan. “Japanese Art after Fukushima through the Prism of Festivals”, *Critique d’art*, no. 49, Autumn/Winter 2017, p. 81-120
- Lilian Froger to analyse the relation between design, California and the collective imagination in 2018. “The Illusion of an Endless Summer: Californian Design, Sun and Mirages”, *Critique d’art*, no. 51, Autumn/Winter 2018, p. 105-144.

2. *Sadek Rahim: Gravity*³ (5 July-30 September 2019), Oran: MAMO. Curated by Marie Deparis Yafil

AUTHORS

FLORIAN GAITÉ

Florian Gaité is an art and dance critic, and a member of the AICA who works for the written press and the radio (France Culture). He holds a Philosophy Doctorate from the Paris Ouest Nanterre university, is a member of the ACTE Institute and is a teaching assistant at Paris I and Paris VIII universities. Following his stays in Algeria, he is currently devising a new form of critical writing, the first example of which will be the upcoming publication of a volume of collected critiques, *Tout à danser s’épuise* (Sombre torrents).