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Press Kit
Berlin, 26.4.24

Kader Attia, 'J'Accuse', 2016, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024,
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Kader Attia

J'Accuse

27.4. – 19.8.24

**BERLINISCHE
GALERIE
MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART**



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Kader Attia, *J'Accuse*, 2016. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024.
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Toronto / Toni Hatkenscheld



Kader Attia

J'Accuse

27.4. – 19.8.24

Kader Attia (*1970 in Dugny, France) has spent many years exploring the principle of 'repair', which he views as a constant in both nature and the history of humanity. He understands every system, social practice, and cultural tradition as an infinite process of repair. For him, injuries and the act of repair should be considered as the starting point for a new form of existence—and their potential utilised for resistance.

At the Berlinische Galerie, Attia presents a conversation between two large installations: *J'Accuse* (2016) and *The Object's Interlacing* (2020), complemented by selected collages by Hannah Höch from her iconic series *From an Ethnographic Museum* (1924–1934); some of these works are from the Berlinische Galerie's own collection.

J'Accuse (2016) consists of seventeen wooden busts, eight sculptures and an eleven-minute excerpt from an anti-war film of the same name by French director Abel Gance (1889–1981). The title of the work is not only a reference to this film but also to the famous open letter written by Émile Zola (1840–1902) to express his solidarity with the Jewish military captain Alfred Dreyfus, who had been falsely convicted of treason.

The busts portray 'gueules cassées' (broken faces), First World War soldiers who had suffered severe facial disfigurement. This term became symbolic of the war when new fragmentation grenades became the leading cause of injuries. These people and their faces have been a recurring theme in Attia's work: they represent a large-scale attempt at 'human repair', while their scars remain as visible signs and reminders.

For *J'Accuse*, Attia translated historical photographs of the wounded soldiers' faces into sculptures, using African wood as old as the servicemen depicted. In doing so, a new act of repair takes place: Attia reminds us of the rarely discussed fact that thousands of soldiers from colonised territories (called 'tirailleurs algériens' and 'tirailleurs sénégalais') fought in the First and Second World Wars. They were an integral part of the French army in what was named 'régiments mixtes'. During the First World War, more than 440,000 of these people—many of whom were forcibly recruited—fought for France alone.

Abel Gance's film *J'Accuse* was made twice: once immediately following the First World War, in the wake of its influence, and a second version in 1938—full of rousing hopes of being able to prevent another war. The second version of the film, which is

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part of Attia's installation, also featured real soldiers with 'gueules cassées', whom had initially refused to appear in the first version of the film.

Attia's larger-than-life wooden busts stand as silent observers in front of the screen showing the final scenes of Gance's film: the memorials erected in memory of the fallen come to life, the dead of the battlefields rise from their graves. A warning against the monstrosity of war.

The installation is complemented by *The Object's Interlacing* (2020), which consists of a video work and twenty-two sculptures. In the video, Kader Attia builds a dialogue with various experts about the debate on the topic of restitution of cultural assets violently looted during the colonial era. Together they construct an understanding of restitution as a practice of repair with far broader implications than simply repatriating objects looted from their place of origin.

In their reports, the experts in the video denounce the colonial machinery of plunder and its contempt for the 'local cosmology of life' (Kader Attia), which is exemplified by the stolen objects. Within such a cosmology, these objects are a living, active force as well as a crucial symbolic, philosophical, and discursive resource that sustains a particular society. The interviewees explain that the colonial powers did not appropriate the objects for their cultural, social, or religious significance, but for their material and market value. The speakers fear that the artefacts themselves have 'internalized' their new role over time and, in particular, that they have adopted their characterization as aesthetic or ethnographic objects. In this way, the specialists believe, the objects have changed just as fundamentally as the societies to which they belong. 'When you talk about the restitution of objects,' asks one protagonist, 'where will they return to?' Will they return merely as commodities, or will they continue to possess their original immaterial qualities? If they are 'irreparable', can this 'irreparable repair' become a source of creative reinvention despite the enduring colonial asymmetries?

The video is projected through a group of reproductions of African artefacts, that include some made out of wood and others that have been 3D printed. The 3D prints are replicas of works from the collection of the Musée du quai Branly, the French national museum for the art and cultures of Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas. There is very little information about these works in the museum's database; for example, the identities of the original artists

are unknown. This lack of information is one example of how the former colonial powers treated the cultural artefacts they looted. The objects cast their silhouettes onto the screen, symbolically asserting their own voices in the debate. Together with the visitors sitting between them, they become witnesses to all that is said.

Attia's works are complemented by seven collages by Hannah Höch (1889–1978). Höch is considered one of the 'inventors' of photomontage and was the only woman in the Berlin Dada movement. Her work is of exceptional quality and diversity; she is also regarded internationally as one of the most influential artists of classical modernism. In 1916, Dadaism emerged explicitly in opposition to the bourgeois ideals and militarism that arose in response to the First World War. Höch's collages can also be understood as a reaction to the wounded soldiers of the First World War, who were a common sight on the streets at the time.

The works shown in the exhibition are part of the series *From an Ethnographic Museum*. In them, Höch combines magazine reproductions of non-European artworks with images of parts of the bodies or faces of predominantly white women from the 1920s. She thus creates an aesthetic of fragmentation and repair, which inspired Kader Attia to integrate her works into his solo exhibition. In these works, she adopts an anti-hierarchical approach—the different motifs from various cultural contexts in her collages are all of equal value to her—and counters the stereotypes spread by the mass media. Kader Attia is also fascinated by the ambivalence of Höch's work, whose expressionist form results from the use of photo fragments representing African objects in a time contemporary with colonization, illustrating the invisibilization of the system of exploitation of these same occupied cultures.

Kader Attia grew up in France and Algeria. He gained international recognition for his contributions to the Venice Biennale in 2003 and 2017 as well as *DOCUMENTA* (13) in 2012, among others. In 2022, the artist curated the 12th Berlin Biennale.



Podcast

In the WELTKUNST podcast, editor-in-chief Lisa Zeitz speaks with Kader Attia about his exhibition practice and the presentation at the Berlinische Galerie. The podcast will be available (in English) on all common streaming platforms from mid-May 2024.

Programme in English

berlinischegalerie.de/en/programme/calendar

Press images

berlinischegalerie.de/en/press-release/kader-attia

Online tickets

bg.berlin/en/tickets

Social Media

#KaderAttiaBG

#berlinischegalerie

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Tel +49 (0)30 78 902 600
berlinischegalerie.de

Admission 10€, concessions 6€
Wed–Mon 10 am–6 pm
Tue closed

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Biography

Kader Attia

Kader Attia is a multidisciplinary artist who draws upon the lived experiences of two disparate cultural identities: Algerian and French. From this place of cultural intermediacy, Attia's practice interrogates sociopolitical complexities rooted in histories of colonialism and cultural obfuscation. In his practice, Attia employs poetic installations and sculptural assemblages to investigate the far-reaching emotional implications of western cultural hegemony and colonial systems of power for non-western subjectivities, focusing particularly on collective trauma and notions of repair.

Attia was born 1970 in Dugny, France. He studied at the École Supérieure des Arts Appliqués, Paris (1993), Escola Massana de Artes Aplicades, Barcelona (1994) and École National Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, Paris (1998). Attia currently lives and works between Berlin and Paris.

Solo exhibitions

- Berlinische Galerie, Berlin (2024)
- On Silence, Mathaf, Doha (2021)
- Fragments of Repair, BAK – basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, The Netherlands (2021)
- Remembering the Future, Kunsthaus Zürich (2020)
- Irreparáveis Reparos, Sesc Pompeia São Paulo (2020)
- The Museum of Emotion, Hayward Gallery, London (2019)
- Kader Attia: MATRIX 274, Berkeley

Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (2019)

- Kader Attia. Roots Also Grow In Concrete, Culturgest Fundação Caixa Geral de Depósitos (2019)
- Sacrifice and Harmony, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main (2016)
- The Injuries Are Here, Musée Cantonal des Beaux Arts, Lausanne (2015)
- Culture, Another Nature Repaired, Middelheim Museum, Antwerp (2014)
- Contre Nature, Beirut Art Center (2014)
- Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder, Whitechapel Gallery, London (2013)
- Repair. 5 Acts, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2013)
- Construire, Déconstruire, Reconstruire: Le Corps Utopique, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2012)

Group exhibitions

- Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Germany (2021)
- Guggenheim Bilbao, Spain (2021)
- 13th Gwangju Biennial (2020)
- Shanghai Ming Contemporary Art Museum (2020)
- Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston (2019)
- Kunstmuseum Bonn (2019)
- The Met Breuer, New York (2018)
- Sharjah Biennial 13 (2017)
- Leopold Museum, Vienna (2016)
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2016)
- Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (2014)

- dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel, Germany (2012)
- Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012)
- Tate Modern, London (2011)
- Manarat Al Sadiyyat, Abu Dhabi (2009)

Collections

- Sharjah Art Foundation
- Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
- Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston
- Museo Jumex, Mexico City
- Tate Gallery, London
- Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Further Projects

- Interlocutor for the Sharjah Biennial 13 off-site project Vive l'Indépendance de l'Eau, Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar (2017)
- Curator of the 12th Berlin Biennale (2022)

Prizes

- Joan Miró Prize (2017)
- Yanghyun Prize (2017)
- Prix Marcel Duchamp (2016)
- Cairo Biennale Prize (2009)
- Abraaj Capital Art Prize (2009)

Exhibition texts

J'Accuse

“J'Accuse” [engl. “I accuse”] consists of seventeen busts, eight sculptures as well as an eleven-minute excerpt from an anti-war film of the same name by French director Abel Gance (1889–1981). The title of the work is not only a reference to this film but also to the famous open letter written by Émile Zola (1840–1902) to express his solidarity with the Jewish military captain Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935), who had been falsely convicted of treason.

The sculptures portray ‘gueules cassées’, First World War soldiers who had suffered severe facial injuries. These people and their faces have been a recurring theme in Attia’s work: they represent a large-scale attempt at ‘human repair’, while their scars remain as visible signs and reminders.

For “J'Accuse”, Attia translated historical photographs of these faces into sculptures, using African wood as old as the servicemen depicted. In doing so, a new act of repair takes place: Attia reminds us of the rarely discussed fact that thousands of soldiers from colonised territories fought in the First and Second World Wars. They were a part of the French army in what was named ‘régiments mixtes’. During the First World War, more than 440,000 of these people from the African continent fought for France alone.

The projection shows the final scenes of Gance’s film: the memorials erected in memory of the fallen come to life, the dead of the battlefields rise from their graves. A warning against the monstrosity of war.

The Object’s Interlacing

In the video of “The Object’s Interlacing”, Kader Attia builds a dialogue with various experts about the debate on the topic of restitution of cultural assets violently looted during the colonial era. Together they construct an understanding of restitution as a practice of repair with far broader implications than simply repatriating objects looted from their place of origin.

The video is projected through reproductions of African artefacts that include some made out of wood and others that have been 3D printed. The 3D

prints are replicas of works from the collection of the Musée du quai Branly, the French national museum of non-European art. There is very little information about these works in the museum’s database; for example, the identities of the original artists are unknown. This lack of information is one example of how the colonial powers treated the cultural artefacts they looted. The objects cast their silhouettes onto the screen, symbolically asserting their own voices in the debate. Together with the visitors sitting between them, they become witnesses to all that is said.

Hannah Höch

In these works, Höch combines magazine reproductions of non-European artworks with images of parts of the bodies or faces of predominantly white women from the 1920s. She thus creates an aesthetic of fragmentation and repair, which inspired Kader Attia to integrate her works into his solo exhibition.

Höch is considered one of the ‘inventors’ of photomontage and was the only woman in the Berlin Dada movement. Dadaism emerged explicitly in opposition to the bourgeois ideals and militarism that arose in response to the First World War. Höch’s collages can also be understood as a reaction to the wounded soldiers who were a common sight on the streets at the time.

In her works, Höch undermines stereotypes spread by the mass media, for example about non-European cultures or the so-called New Woman. Her collages are characterized by a great ambivalence: From a contemporary critical perspective, these works also reveal processes of appropriation that make authorship invisible and reproduce colonial power relations.



Kader Attia, 'J'Accuse', 2016. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024.
Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler Berlin/Köln/München.
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Artist Talk

Sat 29.6., 6:30 pm

Free admission

Registration: akkreditierung@berlinischegalerie.de

Limited capacities

Public guided tours in English

Mon 3.6., 5.8., 3 pm

Every Sat, 4:15 pm

Included in the museum admission

Registration on-site, limited capacities

Programme in English

More information

berlinischegalerie.de/en/education

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Press images



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Kader Attia, *The Object's Interlacing*, 2020, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2024, Courtesy the artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler Berlin/ Köln/ München, © Foto: Kuntshaus Zürich / Franca Candrian



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