

Karthik Pandiaan & Andros Zins-Browne: Atlas Unlimited (Acts I-III)

Pieter T'Jonck December 2018

Andros Zins-Browne (US/BE) and Karthik Pandian (US) have described their exhibition *Atlas Unlimited* in Netwerk Aalst as a 'migrating exhibition'. Unlike 'touring exhibitions', which present the same artworks and scenography throughout the different cities, *Atlas Unlimited's* form and composition changes with each new location. And even there, the exhibition keeps changing under the influence of a group of 'builders'. The exhibition that I saw in the Belgian city of Aalst at the end of September thus no longer exists in that form. Some pieces have now been damaged beyond recognition, such that any description has become obsolete. Yet, it is precisely this unruly character that reflects the essence of the exhibition, which marks a provisional endpoint of the six-year Atlas project that began in Marrakech, moved from Aalst to Chicago in 2019 and then returned to Belgium, Antwerp.

The 'builders' are an international and diverse group of people. Members include, among others, Zakaria Almoutlak, a Syrian refugee who moved to Brussels and is a sculptor and translator, the Egyptian cartoonist Makhlof, Egyptian musicians and the Aalst carnival band De Looizemannen. These 'builders' contributions can take different forms: sculptures, theatre-pieces, installations, but also cartoons and performances. In this way, the 'builders' can tell 'stories about migration, settlement and reconstruction – stories that interweave personal testimonies and fictional narratives'. They tell these stories while they are working.

The three-month exhibition revolves around three 'acts'. The first was the carnival procession that took place on the 22nd of September. The protagonist was the carnival association De Loizemaanen's camel in the form of a massive Styrofoam float, whose severed head became a central piece in the exhibition. The next act was a performance on the 26th of October during which French translator Nada Ghosn gave a guided tour around the exhibition. In it, she acted as if she were giving an exclusive preview of the 2012 Marrakech biennale. The last 'act' will be happening on the 14th of

December. This performance will take place in the future, in 2028. Zakaria Almoutlak will then return to Palmyra, his hometown, in an attempt to reconstruct the city and his own history. A preview of this will be offered by a mock-up of his workshop inside the exhibition. All the 'Acts' and stories from the 'builders' are therefore based on the objects exhibited.

The exhibition however also 'works' independently of these 'acts'. This was clear from my first visit on the Saturday that followed its opening: the exhibition still looked very 'unfinished' and there were no builders to explain this. At first sight it looks like a hodgepodge of dissimilar and unsigned objects. The first thing you see at the entrance is the carnival camel's massive foam ear. Two studies for stage canvases or film sets then block your sight. One of them displays the ruins of Palmyra while the other resembles a besieged North-African city. These cloths are held up by ostentatious, oversized and intricate wooden racks. Next you see the carnival camel's head, that was brutally severed from its body on the 22nd of September. These objects follow a type of image formula--the manufacturer remains anonymous, as if the objects are ready-mades.

After the camel's head, there is a change in tone. Arc-shaped figures on a wall evoke an old port. These were brought into being through the sanding-away of layers of paint from previous exhibitions. In addition, roughly hacked panels clumsily make this gate more spacious. A chalk panel once again suggests the texture of oriental city ramparts, however it is as ambiguous as an abstract painting. There is a stark contrast between the stage canvas and the camel's head. Here it looks like 'creators' with a recognizable 'hand' have been at work, despite the pieces being unsigned. Only at the 26th of October 'act' were some of the works' creators revealed. There laid an artistic intention, as confirmed by Nada Ghosn on that day.

In the last room, we enter a mock-up of Almoutlak's studio, which is reproduced by a weathered, battered steel door and walls with window openings. You learn in the brochure that when in Palmyra, with a predatory regime as a backdrop, Almoutak became involved in the counterfeit trade of antique sculptures, including of a camel. This is a story that he also recounted on the 26th of October. In the center you can see an unfinished sculpture, possibly one of these camels, with an interesting detail;

beneath the door, there is some chopped-up rubble. Just like you cannot make out the status of the objects that surround you, you cannot tell whether this is residue from Almoutak's sculpting, or whether it was brought in here on purpose as a vague reference to Robert Smithson's 'non-site', without the mirrors. It is also significant to note the authorless and unexplained satirical comic strip at the opening of the brochure. (Whoever continues reading can presume Makhlouf to be its author, but still...) It mocks the frenzy of the media around the Arab Spring, with camels as central figures. Graphically you would swear it was a Belgian comic strip, in the style of *Bollie en Billie*. While the strip resonates with the comic tone of the Aalst camel, Makhlouf is taking a risk in making it--indeed it could cost him his head.

In a very short time this exhibition thus forces you to confront extremely diverse image genres and (pseudo)artistic strategies that contradict and overlap with one another, to finally cancel each other out. This is however not a postmodern game aimed at 'disrupting the public'. In the booklet that is given to visitors, you can read Aruna D'Souza's short essay that explains that this exhibition is part of an approximately six-year long project, that was born out of the Arab Spring and had previously taken the form of a video installation, a single-channel film, a stage performance. The artists realized that images of these protests, the first to be reported 'in real time' through social media, nearly immediately became a freedom fetish in the West. But the very same media that had seen an eruption of joy quickly witnessed a rise in the expression of disappointment. The images lost their sparkle when it became clear that nothing was 'really' changing. So what did these images mean? Something to do with the migrant crisis that followed? In a conversation with Zins-Browne, he lets me know that the Atlas project, of which 'Atlas Unlimited Aalst' is just a step, was born out of the 'partly very serious, partly absurd' attempt to paint a lasting, 'real' image of this revolution.

The film *Atlas/Inserts*, in which camels learn to carry out modern choreography, was one of these attempts. The artists chose camels because these were the last desert animals that could epitomise the people who had fallen victims to the vicissitudes of history. The film ironically criticizes contemporary arts' pretence that such a revolution could be turned into a liberation or an instant of hope, and ridicules the 'good intentions'

of Western artists, who do not experience the pain. On the contrary, they are able to travel around the world freely, unhindered by borders which, for refugees, represent an oppressive reality.

Pandian and Zins-Browne offer an alternative approach, the key to which is to be found in the subtly raked gravel. This exhibition is *like* that grit. Everything you see here is debris, residue that in one way or another refers back to the Arab Spring as a historical event that shattered countless lives. The objects and artworks either evoke events or pose as 'testimonials', but you cannot tell to what extent they are strictly real or parafictional. They thus do not convey any 'truths' or offer a 'real' and complete image of this incomprehensible and violent historical event that Zins-Browne is alluding to. But these objects do have another effect. Each 'builder' uses them as a kind of stepping stone to overcome the gaps in their life, to come up with a meaningful story. It is less about historical accuracy than the possibility offered here to reflect upon the future. Indeed, Act 3 will be about the year 2028. Pandian and Zins-Browne demonstrate this process of assembling, disassembling to then reassemble, without specific intentions. The result is at once optimistic and heart-wrenching. The exhibition measures damages, but also speculates on the possible existence of imaginary treasures hidden in the rubble.