

The Art of Younes Baba-Ali is unconventional, intelligent and critical. He likes to work in the public domain or in non-obvious places. He is a keen observer and poses pertinent questions with regard to society, institutionalism, as well as his own audience.

You have done many residences, including in Senegal, Poland, Morocco, Britain, and Spain and as of this year, you are an artist in residence at Moussem.

I think working in residences is very interesting. I like to work in a precise context. My work feeds on this particular method. I almost never work in a studio; I usually work on projects on location. The preparation of files, the search for funding and partners for my projects forms an integral part of my practice. Moussem, for instance, is a specific situation. This is not a physical residence, but a series of projects in different locations and in different contexts. Moussem co-produces the project I am preparing for the MAAC, the *Maison d'Art Actuel des Chartreux* in Brussels. Yet Mohamed Ikoubaân also invited me to participate in *Moussem Sounds* at Bozar. For this occasion, I am realizing a sound system together with two other artists. And I am presenting an installation during *Moussem in Het Bos*, an evening that is primarily devoted to stage arts. After that, there are other projects in the offing.

Your oeuvre engages with the everyday and you are an avid supporter of the democratization of art.

I address a wide audience, not the traditional art audience. I want my art to speak to everyone and I call the relationship between art and the art institution into question. I want to rid art of its elitism, its sacrality. In my work, I use everyday objects and phenomena that I introduce into an art environment. Then the question arises at what time an ordinary utensil becomes art. Is it enough to place it in the art space or does it require more? I constantly play with this. I want to bring art and the public together again. I prefer to confront people with art in their own space. That is why I love working in the public space; it gives me much more possibilities and makes possible other forms of interaction.

Your work is also characterized by a high degree of activism. You do not shy away from controversy.

I want something to happen. As an artist, I do not want people to remain indifferent. Sometimes I do this through provocation, such as, for example, in my installation *Horn Orchestra*. In the exhibition space I install ten car horns – an object that people use without even thinking about it – and when you approach the installation a loud noise goes off. In the city this is a daily occurrence, but by presenting it in this way, I disturb the physical aural space of people in a place where they least expect it, almost at the edge of the intolerable.

Sound often plays a significant role in your work, as does technology.

New technology fascinates me. I am not referring to high-tech devices, but the technology used by the common man. My work is characterized by a high level of 'ready-madness'. In Marseille, for instance, I am currently working on a project I already presented in Morocco in 2012: *Caroussa Sonore*. The starting point is a kind of trolley that is normally used to sell CDs with Koran recitals. It is a common object in the Maghrebian street scene, a very accessible and ingenious piece of technology. I then adapt this object to my needs and exploit it for my own purposes. With *Caroussa Sonore*, I bring sound artworks to the people in a democratic manner. It is a creation and at the same time, I act as curator, because I have invited other artists to disseminate their work by means of this device. It circulates in the city, and we organize various interventions around it. And in this way, it becomes part of the street life.

You divide your time between Brussels and Casablanca. Two very different contexts, especially when you look at the local art scenes.

I have lived in Brussels for three years now and it is true that there is a very vibrant art scene. But Casablanca is becoming a highly cultural city, there is huge potential. There are more and more galleries, although most play it safe and approach art mainly from a commercial point of view. Few galleries in Casablanca dare to exhibit installations or video work, or invest in young work. And yet, the landscape is in transition. Something new is emerging. One of the great pioneers in the contemporary art field there is obviously Hassan Darsi. I have much respect for his approach through which he steps outside of the formal contemporary artistic framework. There is a certain stubbornness in his work. He works with many different audiences in a variety of spaces, often areas that are not suited to showing art. He really creates new artistic environments. It is in this that we find each other. But there is a big difference. Hassan was born and raised in Morocco. He studied in Belgium and then returned to Morocco. I grew up in France. I had access to the art world, museums, galleries, and art centres from childhood. But I did not find my place in the French museum

world, not as a spectator and later not even as an artist. I have always maintained a conflictive relationship with the establishment. This has prompted me to think about new forms of presentation, about artistic proposals that may exist outside the established framework. In 2007, I returned to Morocco out of true professional curiosity. And I have gradually learned how contemporary art can function and survive in Morocco. The situation was completely different to the one in France. The scene is still in full development and the relationship the public has with art in Morocco is even more elitist than here. And so I consciously went looking for confrontation, especially with that audience. I was invited to a group exhibition that was organized in a luxurious villa in the diplomatic district of Rabat. In this neighbourhood – and in similar affluent neighbourhoods in Morocco – high speed bumps are being installed. I consider this manipulation of the urban space as very bourgeois, and moreover directly related to power. The people in those neighbourhoods take the liberty to raise speed bumps that are totally out of proportion. And so I brought one of those speed bumps into their living space, in the bourgeois villa. Well aware of the fact that the audience that visits the exhibition is basically the same audience that is responsible for this very phenomenon in the cityscape. By literally shoving it under their noses as a work of art I engaged in social confrontation. I consider my interventions as social, even political interventions.

Working between these two worlds – Morocco and Europe – strongly affects my work and my approach. The projects I realized in Morocco truly originated there and the same goes for my European projects. The context plays a key role. I did a project in the building of the Société Générale in Casablanca. The title of the exhibition was *Nature et paysage* (Nature and Landscape) and I made an installation with the kind of black plastic bags that litter the Moroccan landscape everywhere. It is something I do quite often; I confront those involved with everyday objects and provoke reflection with my installations. The elite for example, who have access to high art but who are not concerned with environmental issues, or the consequences of their behaviour for the local population.

You also call the art institution itself into question.

I grew up, and studied, in France. I often find it very frustrating to see what is being presented to us in the galleries, in museums, in cultural institutions. This is often very frigid, very detached art. Art that does not engage with the public, or even worse: that does not even take the audience into consideration. My work is fuelled by frustration. It is a response to that observation. I dare say that the contemporary art in Belgium is of another level. Actually, it is not so much about the quality, but about audacity. In Belgium there are many more interesting things happening, the scene is less local. There is a greater openness towards art, greater openness also towards young artists. As a young artist in France, it is incredibly difficult to conquer a place in the prevailing art establishment. Here you have many more options. After my studies in Strasbourg and Aix-en-Provence I saw no future for myself there and I came to Brussels.

Is there such a thing as an ideal museum for you?

I really love the concept of the art hall (*Kunsthalle*), the way it exists in Germany or in Switzerland – and even in Belgium by the way. The museum as a forum, a platform that can be used for many different activities.

The museum in France does not have this function. The first museum where I felt at ease was the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Geneva. At least here, I was allowed to touch the art; I was even encouraged to interact with the works. That is unthinkable in France. In Geneva I was allowed to step into the work of Gordon Matta-Clark, which was a totally new experience. In the French museums where I saw works by the artist, they were given an almost sacral aura.

And that is sad, because it happens beyond the control of the artist. It is not the artist who canonizes his work, but the institute, the museum.

When I studied in Strasbourg, I hardly ever went to Paris or other French cities to experience art. I went to Germany and Switzerland. ZKM (The Centre for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany) is a museum that has really opened my eyes. I went there many times and it was always a great experience. The presence of the school in that building is fantastic. That, and the residential areas. A museum should live and be experienced by its audience and its artists. I have experienced this more in Belgium and Germany than in France.

During your residency period at Moussem you will work on an exhibition project for the Brussels MAAC. Can you tell us something about this?

I am still in the reflection phase as far as this project is concerned, but what is certain is that I want to create something in which my relationship with Brussels takes central place. How I experience that city, the different nationalities all living together, being an immigrant. It is a very complex city and I have a love-hate relationship with it.

I am toying with some ideas, although there is still nothing concrete. One of the questions that has kept me occupied for quite some time now, is the boundary that exists in Brussels between multicultural and multi-community. It is a pronounced multicultural city – with people from the European community as well as other immigrant nationalities – and yet it is also a city of communities. I would like to work on that, perhaps in a work that takes language as its central focus.

I live in Molenbeek, in the Moroccan Quarter, so I am not displaced. I live in what I call the 'border zone'. And that is something I find particularly shocking in Brussels, the invisible but very present boundaries that are created and the way in which they divide communities.

Another project I think of doing is more in the line of *Televendita* (an installation the artist will present in the frame of *Moussem in Het Bos*). I want to make a portrait of someone who talks about all kinds of social scamming in Belgium. At one time, I submitted an application to the PCSW (Public Centre for Social Welfare) in Molenbeek. There I realized that a lot of people, even entire communities, live under the wings of the social system. Although I have never benefited from it myself, it did inspire me. I am quite familiar with the attitude of the 'social opportunists'. In some families people are virtually trained to use all the possible options the social system has to offer. So I would like to get to work with someone who knows the ways of the social network, an authority in the field, so to speak. I see it as a criticism of the system, but also as an ironic manual that people can effectively use.

That is your socially critical side.

As an artist I can afford a critical stance. It is my nature. I started painting, but it is only through the discovery of installation art that I truly came to express myself as an artist. Criticism is a language, irony is a language. It is the same attitude that I adopt towards my French-Moroccan cultural background. Not in a destructive, but rather in an open manner. I ask questions, I want to make you think. I want to involve the public. It is a recurring dilemma, but I hope that what I do reaches people. Positive or negative – as long as it affects them.

It is a delicate balancing act. I make sure that what I present does not become vulgar or 'cheap'. As an artist, you are somewhat of an alchemist: it is all about the correct dosage. You work with matter and you have to find the right balance, the right form, the aesthetics, the idea ... and the way in which you express that idea, or not. And I need the audience. Without audience, my work has no reason to exist and I cannot evolve.