



Tackling Taboos in Algeria Community Punching Bags

MAMA, Algiers



TOP TO BOTTOM: Learners from the Lycée Omar Racim high school for girls in Algiers, working on collages for their punching bag designs; Yasmine Admane posing next to her punching bag at the exhibition opening. All photographs: Johann Van Der Schijff.

The Algiers chapter of the 'Community Punching Bags (CPBs)' project, involving local learners and teachers, was exhibited from 3 December 2014 until 31 January 2015 at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MAMA) in Algiers, capital city of Algeria. Consisting of fifteen collages and six punching bag sculptures, all of the artworks on exhibition were conceptualised and produced in Algeria in the month leading up to the event. The artist workshops and resulting group exhibition 'La Techné, l'Art du Designer,' the 6th Edition of the International Festival of Contemporary Art of Algiers (FIAC 2014), was made possible with the support of MAMA and funding from the Ministry of Culture in Algeria. Other participants included Cherif Medjebeur and Mourad Krinah (Algeria), Moahamed Ouattara (Burkina Faso), Hicham Lahlou (Morocco) and Bertrand Planes (France).

Early in 2014, curator Zoubir Hellaï invited me to propose an art project to be realised in Algeria. The invitation was as a result of my participation five years earlier in the second edition of the Pan-African Festival of Algiers (PANAF 2009). I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to share the original CPBs exhibition catalogue with the director of MAMA, Mohamed Djehiche, in May at the Dakar Biennale (Dak'Art 2014) in Senegal.

The original CPBs project was an artwork in collaboration with art teachers and high school learners from in and around Cape Town, South Africa. The collaborating art teachers and grade 10 learners were from Livingstone High School, Camps Bay High, Heideveld Senior Secondary School, Fish Hoek High, and Isilimela High School in Langa. Inspired by artwork in which the community plays a central part in its realisation, the CPBs project aims to show that issues often not spoken about openly — those that deal with violence, 'the other,' stereotyping, discrimination, racism, xenophobia and human rights — can be addressed in a collaborative and creative way through the making of art. This project was first exhibited in Cape Town at Iziko South

African National Gallery Annexe in May and June 2012 and again in Durban at KZNSA Gallery in July 2012.

I travelled to Algeria on the evening of the 10th of November, having finished my end of year examination commitments at the Michaelis School of Fine Art earlier that day. With my proposal only being accepted in late October, and all communication in French via Google Translate, I did not know what to expect on arrival. Fortunately Meriem Bouabdellah, the project manager of MAMA, had everything prepared. The learners and teachers of the four participating schools arrived promptly for their first introduction workshop on the Friday after my arrival. For the next three weeks I worked closely with this group, developing designs concerning issues specific to Algeria. When not working with the learners, I sourced materials and liaised with artisans to manufacture the sculptures, under the expert guidance of Tewfik Fadel and Meziami Lies, both mature artists and graduates of École Supérieure des Beaux Arts in Algiers. The final six punching bags, five designed by learners and teachers and one designed by myself, were tailored by Salim Gater, a master seamster from Algeria, with expert help from Zahida Chatour. Mohamed Chebata and his team from Lastar Advertising Company fabricated the brackets to hang the punching bags from. My hope is to realise this project once again, this time in Constantine, Capital of Arab Culture 2015. I am currently working on a CPBs pitch for either Rabat or Casablanca in Morocco.

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Johann's research interests are in the areas of computer-aided design and manufacturing techniques and the design of interactive systems. Questions of power relations in society underlie much of his work, forcing the viewer into a position of choice in their engagement with his artworks.