

## Notes on Ali Cabbar's Artistic Methodology

Başak Şenova

My encounter with Ali Cabbar began in 2006 with the research and development period of *Rejection Episodes*, which was a two-fold exhibition in the framework of the Istanbul Ekspres Festival with the collaboration of Vooruit Art Centre and De Centrale—an old electricity factory in Ghent, Belgium. The project title *Rejection Episodes* was derived from the science of medicine: Immune cells may cause serious damage in order to protect the body from any medical intervention by triggering rejection episodes. The immune system functions by distinguishing between cells it recognizes as “self” and foreign material. The occurrence of these episodes is totally instinctive. Similarly, a social rejection may also be instinctive and beyond reasoning. This analogy shaped the entire project with the participation of sixteen Turkish artists. *Rejection Episodes* was developed through the detection of corresponding social cases in the context of urban culture, particularly experienced by Turks living in Belgium.

A few months prior to this exhibition, I paid a visit to Ali Cabbar's studio; our fruitful conversation on his works extended from his studio into the streets of Brussels. Discovering how the “rejection episodes” analogy completely matched and summarized Cabbar's reflections on sociopolitical issues was stimulating. Consequently, he presented a painting series *Disorientated, Rootless, Dislocated II* (2005) at the entrance of the Vooruit building, a historic complex that was originally used as the festival and art centre of the Ghent-based labour movement in the context of the exhibition. It was not a coincidence that Cabbar's venture had similar facets with the history of this building. The titles of the works were extracted from Edward Said's book *Reflections on Exile: and other literary and cultural essays*.<sup>1</sup> This triptych depicted the issues of alienation and strangeness that bridged his past to his existence both in Turkey and Belgium.

During this studio visit, not only his distinctive graphical visual language, but also his exceptional artistic methodology immediately captured my attention. Cabbar has a very specific approach and technique of using his own image in his works. Nevertheless, considering this act of rendering his own image as “self-portraits” would be a misleading reading of his methodology.

Cabbar first creates settings and choreographs a series of self-portraits in them. He then processes the outcome through painting, sculpting, and different printing techniques. The elements of the setting and the choreography are kept at the background of his works. And these backgrounds, indeed, document the research phase of the thinking that shapes the work. Nonetheless, the very performance aspect of this process is almost concealed by the artist.

The performative and experiential “movement” first appears as a thought; then it is tested numerous times in front of the camera as the essential phase of his artistic research—with challenging poses and accidents altering the initial thought at times. The repetition of this act over the decades of producing artworks has registered a signature technique in combination with different associations and reflections by internalizing a subjective point of view. Through

these associations, his works have the potential to unfold themselves in multiple layers that would be activated by the effort of the viewer. Hence, they all carry a sense of disquiet and loneliness with fragmentary and incomplete narrations. Following our correspondence through visits, calls, and emails over the next couple of years, finally in 2009, by anchoring the term “disquiet” because of its close associations with the state of “solitude”—not in terms of a destiny, but as a choice of life— we started to work on an extensive solo show, *Disquiet Shadow* at Yapı Kredi Kazım Taşkent Art Gallery in Istanbul. This time, Fernando Pessoa’s *The Book of Disquiet*<sup>2</sup> inspired the title of the exhibition due to the similarities in form and content between Cabbar’s works and this exceptional book. For instance, modes of “pain” shaped the narratives of the works, while the use of parody in response to traumatic events was seen nearly in all the narrative based works of the exhibition. These works question the concept of personal freedom by indicating an oppositional, even tidal situation that is closely linked to Cabbar’s past. This questioning also clearly signified the difference between the tidal state of being inside and outside. Pessoa’s book not only functioned as a compass for my curatorial decisions, but also influenced the content of the *Disquiet Shadow*<sup>3</sup> (2010) exhibition’s publication.

The entire exhibition was a strong manifestation of this performative aspect, which was imbedded in the artist’s working methodology through different formats. The exhibition consisted of sections by underlining the diversity of these formats (such as drawings, murals, animation, light box, and spatial installations). Therefore, the gallery was divided into sections with architectural interventions. To support the distinctive graphical visual language and style of the artist, the spatial design of the exhibition was based on the simplification of the space by using basic geometrical forms for these sections and the elimination of unnecessary details of the space. In this altered space, Cabbar’s own image was repeated numerous times in numerous formats. The performative aspect of his working methodology and the traces of this performativity overlap with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which is related to the formation of the subject. In this respect, “Ali Cabbar” is the main subject of his works and this subject comes into being through performance. As Judith Butler puts it, “there is no performer prior to the performed”<sup>4</sup> and “performance constitutes the appearance of a ‘subject’ as its effect.”<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, aside from this manifestation, Ali Cabbar’s own image has another function: it works as the “enunciator” of the narration. Francesco Casetti defines enunciator as “a kind of hybrid of the extra-diegetic narrator and the implied author.”<sup>6</sup> Enunciator has an important role within the process of identification. Similar to how Alfred Hitchcock shifts the positions of both the enunciator—characters as messengers—and the viewer to facilitate different viewpoints and developments in the narration, Cabbar’s own image generates the narration and the viewpoints. While analysing the narration of the Hitchcock films, French film theorist Raymond Bellour underlines this shifting identification process. The identification of the enunciator, the character, and the spectator fluctuates between being the image and possessing the image as a fetishist aspect. As Bellour puts it, the fetishist aspect is constituted, controlled, and possessed by the director as the enunciator to the image.<sup>7</sup> The same mechanism

is also secured by Cabbar's methodology of using his own image; he controls the image along with its signifiers as well as the positioning of the audience. The audience shifts from being a witness to an accomplice; to a suppressing figure; or to the one being questioned. Cabbar maintains this tidal identification by disguising the enunciator as his own image.

In 2012, the Red Passage project, which assimilated a critical approach to the power politics, values, hopes, sanctions, restrictions, and beliefs in relation to the sociopolitical situations in Turkey, took place on another floor of the same building of Yapı Kredi Art Centre while the entire building was under construction due to renovation. Aligned with its title, a passage was constructed in the gallery, lined up with works that saluted the viewer as if in a procession. In Red Passage, Cabbar graphically rendered the relationship between life and death. He linked the acceptance and legitimation of death to the exploitation of these values. The artist's symbolically embellished icons—once again created with his own image—were put into words through blood, through a flag, and at times with a border by shifting the role of the viewer through the same tidal identification processes.

Over the years, I have collaborated with Cabbar on a number of projects, group and solo exhibitions, and publications, including commissioning a work questioning the urban development of Istanbul for the Zorlu Center Collection (2012); the exhibition and the book *ELDORADO: A Wor{l}d Game* at Museum of Fine Arts in Split (2019), where Cabbar again delved into the effects of gentrification; and *Climbing through the Tide* (2019), the inaugural exhibition of Kamel Lazaar Foundation's B7L9 project space in Tunis.

Cabbar continues to work on urgent matters instigated by political and social systems in the same way my curatorial and theoretical interests intercept his artistic research and his unique artistic methodologies. With his humorous and critical approach, Cabbar currently seeks to call into question the overriding influence of social media on individuals concerning sociopolitical urgencies including climate change and environmental degradation.

- 
1. Said, E. W. (2013). *Reflections on Exile: and other literary and cultural essays*. Londra: Granta Books.
  2. Pessoa, Fernando (2002). *The Book of Disquiet*. Ed. and Trans. Richard Zenith. Londra: Penguin.
  3. Ali Cabbar. *Disquiet Shadow/Huzursuz Gölge*. (2010) Ed. Mine Haydaroglu. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
  4. Butler, Judith. (1991). "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York ve Londra: Routledge. p.24
  5. Ibid. 6. Casetti, Francesco. (1986). "Antonioni and Hitchcock: Two Strategies of Narrative Investment," *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism*, 51, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p.76
  7. Bellour, Raymond. (1977) "Hitchcock, The Enunciator". *Camera Obscura*, Fall, No:2, p. 66-91. Reprinted as Chapter 6 of *The Analysis of Film*. (2000). Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.