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Meranze, Theo. "You Are Never Alone": Kader Attia on the Reparative Nature of Art in a Shattering World." [Elephant Magazine](#) (September 2, 2025) [online]

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"You Are Never Alone": Kader Attia on the Reparative Nature of Art in a Shattering World

The artist speaks with Theo Meranze about the redemptive power of art amid modernity's failures and the effects of sensitivity, architecture, and the unconscious on his practice.



Kader Attia, *Pluvialité*, 2025. © Kader Attia, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Evan Bedford, Courtesy Regen Projects

Kader Attia's storied practice spans decades: countless biennials, museum and gallery shows, curatorial endeavours, and starting in 2023, a two-year residency at the Louvre. He is an artist defined by a multiplicity of titles—Writer, Curator, Artist, Intellectual—which fold into each other. Through his multi-modality Attia maintains an impressively singular perspective, one which explores at once the violence of our inherited mythologies and the possibilities of their repair. This dialogue between multiplicity and singularity is key to his thinking — it provides the forum for his refutation of colonial perspectives and fragmentation.

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Below is a conversation I had with Attia, which took place in July following the closing of his most recent show in Los Angeles' Regen Projects, *The Hubris of Modernity*. The interview is a product of our political climate's desperate urgency, detailing Attia's views on the communal nature of existence as it relates to the function of art in dark times.

Theo Meranze: We're living through an incredibly distressing moment. I would be remiss not to mention that here in Los Angeles, where your last show, *The Hubris of Modernity*, took place, the reality of ever encroaching state violence is particularly intense. In the midst of this destruction, one of the things I found really pertinent about your practice is the way it involves itself with ideas of repair. It reminds me of one of my favourite sections of Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, where he talks about redemption as this necessary theoretical, artistic process of making whole again through the act of revealing. I read a quote from an interview you did around two months ago where you mentioned believing that art can, in a certain way, save the world. Could you elaborate on this in relation to your most recent show?

Kader Attia: Don't get me wrong, I don't think art can really save the world in the sense of a mysticism or a prophetic figure. I think the artist incarnates a kind of prophetic figure, that's for sure, but I don't think it works in the romantic way that "saving the world" implies. I don't think this world is about to be saved, but what I think *is* about to be saved is the exceptional agency that moved mankind to be a species that has produced catastrophe but also incredibly good things, and I think philosophy is one of them.

I think that art has this capacity to continually orient mankind's agency to the quest of constantly individuating the subject as a collective one — a kind of collective individuation — by dealing through art with aspects of reality that are both here and totally abstract, like Cassandra in Greek mythology. I'm talking about those who are very sensitive, and I include myself in that category. I cry easily, I am deeply sensitive to injustice, and there are even those who are far more sensitive. I think that this sensitivity works, as we say in physics, as a prism: the light goes through the prism, and you see all the frequencies of colours that compose the light. I think that artists, and sometimes artworks, have this capacity to amplify the fragility and pain of the world. That's why we need art — it maintains us in our awareness of our mistakes, of the pain that we are producing and its consequences. I like the word you used, the notion of redemption. I think art can bring the possibility of the redemption of the modern subject that has evolved into its own catastrophe because of the brightness and certainty of modernity, because of the obsession with progress as its motor. I think art enables us to see and engage with this possibility of redemption. It is a process of repair when you create an artwork; when the artwork has left the non-knowledge dimension, the anonymous side of existence.

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Kader Attia, *Mirror Mask*, 2025. © Kader Attia, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Evan Bedford, Courtesy Regen Projects

I also believe that artworks have always existed. The only thing that we do is drag them out of the *non-knowledged-ness*. But not without any pain. For example, when mistakes used to happen while I was producing a work, I would get depressed and angry at myself for missing something I wanted to do. Progressively, I discovered that some mistakes, surprisingly, after days or sometimes weeks, become quite interesting, especially when working with wood. I think that there is a force within this strange dialogue between the artist and the I-don't-know-what, the *non-knowledge-ness*, that resists the creation of the artworks.

I think the artwork, within the creative process, even the implementation of the work, resists you. Not by itself, but with the forces that are maintaining its entirety in the nothingness — the ghosts, which I prefer to refer to as traces. These traces are not just of our ancestors, but of the billions of selves that have existed on Earth. Human civilisation is a structured system that has accumulated millions of traces that, I think, have progressively produced collective individuation.

I believe that this redemption that you were talking about is also a momentum of giving up this obsession with “the perfect” that the modern mind and the modern project have sold us. This is what more or less I would like to tell you about dealing formally with art today. For me, it calls for an update of our relation with the collective, and with this process of individuation, which is not a dividend. It comes from forces that are not what we have always taken for granted, like “teaching,” “learning,” “information,” etcetera. These are forces that are much more abstract and unconscious. Maybe if we want to understand how art can save the world, it is by acknowledging that art has always been the most important specificity of the human mind. Because it started with the unconscious and how it activates through dreams.

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This leads me to something I wanted to speak to you about. The role of fragmentation and duality in your work, especially your work with mirrors, is really interesting. It seems that fragmentation is a product of, as you've called it, the zero point of modernity: the violent dogmatism of modernity that manifests itself in the fragmentation of the self and the other, the othering of oppressed peoples, the fragmentation of the environment. And yet it is also something that is potentially redemptive in that it represents these unknown multiplicities that are being ignored by this hubris.

Yeah, the question of fragmentation is very interesting. It's been thought about a lot. When Sigmund Freud was creating the earliest concept of psychoanalysis, he focused on dreams, and he said that the process of memorisation, the memetic process of collecting data, is stored in our brain as fragmented. When we record something, suddenly the unconscious gathers all these fragments again, and sometimes it gathers them in an incorrect way. That's why some dreams are surreal. But most of the time it actually reassociates the events quite well. All forms of fragmentation are bound to the origins of what this existence is about. If you focus on anything — from the biggest size to the smallest size, from the theory of relativity to quantum mechanics — everything is about constant gathering and separating. When I'm working with sculpture, as in the case of the mirror masks, where I use shattered mirrors to propose multiple perspectives for the viewer, this is a tribute to that in a sense. I want to reflect what Freud said, that the unconscious experience of the souvenir is actually the gathering of fragments, of memories.



Kader Attia, *Mirror Mask*, 2025. © Kader Attia, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Evan Bedford, Courtesy Regen Projects

Memories are mnemonic traces. I create a lot of collage, and this technique is quite interesting in terms of the notion of the mistake. I can remember coming back from dinner with friends, maybe a little drunk at one or two in the morning, and looking at my

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desk in my studio with pieces of paper sitting on top of each other and discovering interesting relations that I hadn't thought about before. Again, it's like this strange force is trying to talk to you, as if these artworks could've existed somewhere, and it's up to you to engage in this conversation. The first time I experienced this, I came back three days after, sober, and found that some of the collages were not interesting, but one of them was, by chance, great. It included one element from one context, and one element from another context, and there was a very strong political and poetic dialogue between those two images.

When you do collage, after weeks, the whole studio is covered with pieces of paper of different sizes that you have sometimes outlined, sometimes not. This is a way to understand that art is not a singular, individualistic practice. Even when you are alone, you are never alone. When you look at an artwork even as a viewer, not an artist, you are never alone. There are millions of traces inside of you that are looking at the artwork with you at the same time, that orient your mind. I agree with you that there is a fragmentation within our world today, but maybe we need to wonder whether this fragmentation belongs to an agency that precedes a gathering. Maybe we need to be aware that this societal fragmentation will not stay in place forever, because we are a part of an agency that is before and beyond us — this gathering and separating.

Just as there can be no repair without an injury somewhere, and no sound without silence, the act of separating and gathering defines fragmentation. We do indeed live in a fragmented society, but, looking back to your question of whether art can save humanity, it is because of this capacity for repair and, consequently, gathering. I think it's vital to maintain artistic experience in our society as a space to constantly upload ourselves, in the sense of our awareness of our agency, and the agency of existence that is driven by this strange yet clear dynamic of explosion and gathering. I believe that we're entirely influenced by systems, and that the interdependence of these systems makes what appears fragmented actually connected.

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Installation view of *Kader Attia: The Hubris of Modernity* at Regen Projects, Los Angeles, May 22 — June 21, 2025. Photo: Evan Bedford, Courtesy Regen Projects

I also think we must protect the essential need to provide society with artistic experiences to remain alive; we need to protect the sacred space of artworks. This could be an installation, a film, a painting, a concept — any form. But there is a need to go to a place where others are present, not necessarily to share opinions, but to gather ourselves, to experiment and live physically and share statements through artworks.

Walter Benjamin argued that the problem with a society that mechanically produces art is that it gradually erodes the aura. What I take from Benjamin is that the connection between pre-modern society, with its use of masks — as I saw in Maui or in Congo, where I lived — and a contemporary artwork is this idea of physically sharing traces created by other selves as a form of repair, of dealing with trauma. For me, traces are, paradoxically, the creations of trauma. Negative trauma, of course, but also positive enjoyment, as Lacan would say. The object of desire is probably the first trace a baby experiences when they have the pleasure of touching their mother for the first time. The pleasure we chase throughout life produces good traces but also negative ones — traumatic experiences that generate their own traces. I believe that the experience of the aura of an artwork is, as you mentioned earlier, a form of redemption — an attempt to repair this trauma.

I love this idea. I'm thinking of Susan Buck-Morss's writing about Benjamin's work on the crowd-form as a kind of numbing apparatus that, like you said, doesn't truly fragment but creates a condition of numbness that leaves room for a susceptibility to something like fascism. In *The Hubris of Modernity*, I was particularly struck by your installation *Pluvialité*. Could you talk more about this work in the context of bringing people together, of gathering?

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This work is an embrace of what we could call natural elements and technique. Rainsticks made of bamboo with grains inside are articulated by arms that are powered by motors responding to code, to choreography I coded. The idea of this installation is a proposal of a space that is hard to experience physically, of a time that is coming up. We all take for granted that modernity has brought us into a technological world that was supposed to free us from labour, but as you know, this is a big fantasy. We have never been working so much. Digital technology, which is supposed to be fantastic because it brings you ease, right now only brings you the ease to buy and consume. If it made it easier for you to have more free time to relax, to read and sit on your lounge chair having a glass of whatever in front of a quiet landscape, this would be different. But at the moment, you are constantly erased by stimuli that are turning your brain into a machine of data that is being collected by algorithmic governance.



Kader Attia, *Pluvialité*, 2025. © Kader Attia, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Evan Bedford, Courtesy Regen Projects

I'm not a technophobic person, so I wanted to create an immersive experience about how we can imagine a conversation between technology and nature. Not vegetative, dead nature, but rather nature as an agency. Within AI, and in computing in general, there is a significant contingency which interests me. With algorithms, you never know what can happen, and I think this is from nature. Nature has this incredible metaphysic, this strange unpredictability that you can also find within algorithms. The idea in creating this work was for the viewer to be drawn into a narrative which never repeats itself but appears to repeat itself. There are some movements which have never been coded but do exist in this choreography, like the stick turning alone. This calls the viewer's attention to how worthwhile it is to maintain a link between nature and culture — and particularly between digital technology and nature as an agency — as something I cannot even explain except with the word *unpredictability*. For us, it is unpredictable, but maybe from

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another point of understanding in existence, it could be totally predictable. It's just that predictability is actually producing unpredictability somewhere.

If you look at nature, this is what has been done. What Darwin described in *On the Origin of Species* is that any species that could resist an unkind environment will produce a newness. The peach covering itself produces this warm, hairy skin. I think what also fascinates me about this agency of nature is how the spiritual still exists. What roots can we maintain for this spirituality here? I am not a religious person, but I sometimes believe that there is something — energy, pure force. This installation brings out the spiritual aspect of our relation with verticality, with elevation. Rain falls from the sky, but rain also makes the flowers grow and helps grow food. You have this endless verticality that you call energy. I did a film in Chiang Saen, in Thailand, focusing on the idea of the lotus slowly rising from the depths of the water to the surface, where it blossoms into a wide, incredible flower that became the flame that you can find on the top of the head of many Buddha sculptures, symbolising access to Nirvana. The room for spiritual introspection in this installation work, *Pluvialité*, is crucial. I didn't want to make a critique of the way that neoliberalism and digital technology enhance the destruction of the environment without this awareness.

The installation is a kind of choreographed ballet that reminds us of the rain, but it's also a sound installation. Sound is pure vibrations — it really goes through your body and involves your body in this conversation. This is a way to release an experience that speaks in the largest way possible to the audience, not just a small community of sound artists, especially given that L.A. has been suffering so much from fires and climate change.

That's really beautiful. A throughline of this conversation that I'm noticing is these unknown forces of animation. I know that you think about architecture a lot in your practice, and I remember there being a film at the beginning of your exhibition that touched on architecture quite a bit. Within architecture, specifically in ruins, something that is rotting also creates its own newness, and, in that sense, this unknown force you're alluding to is given room to manifest. It's somewhat like you were saying regarding mistakes when working with wood: cracks in buildings and abandoned structures can be incredibly useful or beautiful. I'm curious how architecture fits into the broader relationship to the unknown as it manifests in your practice.

My interest in architecture comes from my interest in nature. Improving our relationship to the environment is, of course, going to be a process of understanding what we can do concretely, but it is also going to be a significant, deep project of changing our conception of the environment. I think it is the same with architecture. I love urban plans, and I'm very interested in systems. When I'm in a city, I love highway views and subway maps, and understanding how these things work together, how they bring things together. How do you gather so many different people and lives and histories? This is what I call architecture, because it is not necessarily the question of how we can build a

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beautiful building, but rather the question of how we can improve the relationship between bodies, or between bodies and space. The whole question of architecture is actually the question of the body.



Kader Attia, *Mirror Mask*, 2025. © Kader Attia, Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Evan Bedford, Courtesy Regen Projects

The text that the historian Rolando Vázquez is reading during the film in my exhibition fascinates me, because he is focusing on one of the most iconic monuments of French modernity — the Eiffel Tower — but he is actually depicting its contemporary momentum when it was created. These skyscrapers and high buildings have brought humanity a deeper understanding of how much we are systems. I stumbled upon an interview with Michel Foucault, which really struck me. The journalist asked him what he thinks about how society will evolve in terms of individuals and the collective, and he responded by saying that at the end of the nineteenth century, we understood that God as a paradigm had died, but now, we have to understand that there has been a death of the paradigm of “mankind” and of the conception of “the human.” He said this in 1956. Because these notions are now irrelevant, what we are starting to see emerge from this trace are networks and systems, and everything that articulates these entities. I think that Foucault was extremely right, a few years in advance.

I’m also deeply sensitive to architecture. My whole childhood took place between Algeria to France. We used to live in this fantastic single house in the middle of hills and fields in Algeria. We had our house and our land, but when we ended up in France, we were living in project buildings, composed of twelve floors, where all the windows and balconies were the same. The mailboxes looked the same, and the human environment outside was extremely depressing, very grey. This open sky architecture functioned to control my mind. This aesthetic of control has made me sensitive to the fact that architecture is not only buildings, but it’s also the network, the city. If you look at the

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biggest architects in history, they were all crazy; they all wanted to build cities, not houses. There is this form of authority in architecture that makes it a ground for struggle. Again, art has this capacity to elaborate on deliberated space to help the audience and the viewer step aside from the main narrative angles of our time — what Santiago Castro-Gómez calls *the hubris of the zero point* — to have a more critical perception and maybe help society at large.