

Platform 009

Enacting the Void

Fayçal Bagriche in conversation with Sheyma Buali

Sheyma Buali



*Fayçal Bagriche, Point, Line, Particles, 2008. Video still.
Courtesy the artist.*

A reoccurring theme in Fayçal Baghriche's practice is the question of what one sees versus what is actually there. From found objects to film, installation and performance he has worked across many media and forms. In the development of his performance work, this question is reinterpreted by the various ways that Baghriche enacts his condition in various roles: whether as an artist, a performer or an actor. These various roles and the works they produce, in ways explain his approach to his performance art practice. Here, *Ibraaz* Channel Editor, Sheyma Buali, speaks to him about enacting these various contexts and conditions, leading to ways in which his practice, and performance art in general, can be defined.

Sheyma Buali: You have now had a long career as a multi-media artist. You once told me that at the beginning of your career as an artist you were doing art about the 'condition of being an artist'. And you did this via performance. It seems like there is a crossing between 'being', 'thinking' and 'enacting'. How did that work?

Fayçal Baghriche: For me, being an artist is a necessity regardless of your social condition or financial income. You can explore your creation in many ways – it does not necessarily need heavy means of production. When I had no studio and no tools I just used my body. If I had had the means I would have used tools, but I didn't – my limbs were my utensils. But it was still a struggle; maybe that's why marginalization is a strong theme in my work. Sometimes your environment reminds you of who and what you are. That difficult time was an eye opener, I started focusing on the people around me who were striving – I could empathize with their pain.

It was in this state of mind that I created *Ma Déclaration de Septembre* in 2006. In this video you can see me making my last unemployment registration on a French phone-automated system. Every month you are supposed to call and give an update on your situation. It's called 'My September Declaration' because that was the month I found a job, it was the last time I was going to enact this 'declaration'. I had been calling this service for nearly 10 years and I knew all the questions by heart. It's a simple film – the story of a man leaving art school and having to face unemployment for several years. When I found a job I wasn't the suffering artist anymore, the struggle went elsewhere. Creation became the act, an act of reality. My work *Facing Forward* (2002) is a reflection, a manifesto, of this creative transition. These simple actions talk quite accurately about this situation .

Sh.B: You have works that involve inanimate objects that you are surrounded by. You use your environment almost like a tool to express what you are saying, as you did in your *Declaration*, or as you do much later in your career with the trains in *Point, Line, Particles* (2008). So there is this mode of using the environment, which can be constituted almost as found objects. But then there is also this mode of transferring these performances to video. How do you negotiate between these ephemeral acts that you perform versus the longevity of life given to the acts

through

video?

FB: I call them video performances because the video is an important part of the work in itself.

Sh.B: As a question of definition, when these acts go onto video how do you differentiate between performance art and video art or what you call video performance?

FB: Well let's take *Facing Forward*; I am walking forward while everyone else is walking backwards. This performance relies on the actual editing process. The video in itself is part of the action. On the other hand, for example, *Philippe* (2008), in which a mannequin is placed in front of the Louvre, is also a video but it is more of an archived documentation of the performance. The video in itself does not echo in the action. The action exists; the video just relays what happened. The relationship between the media and the content fluctuates, it depends what role it needs to take on .

With *Point, Line, Particles*, where I am spraying a train with paint, there are two versions. The short version of two minutes shows only the action and then there is a longer one that I use for some exhibitions. This version includes the empty train station for about eight minutes with no action and then every time the train comes I get up and perform the action once again. So in that case I involved the video with the process. In most cases, the film is just a way of communicating the action.

In my case I think that the video, the performance and its demonstration make a whole, a unity. While at school, when I used to watch art videos they were never captioned very well. These were videos by artists who didn't have great video skills. It was a moving camera, the scenes weren't well shot, the sound was poor – these were not professional people using a camera. These weaknesses made me realize that I wanted my videos to stand on their own.

Sh.B: Do you separate them as works, between the performance as and when it was enacted and the videos they ultimately produce?

FB: It depends. This question arises when I know that it will be shown in a gallery, for example. Most of the time I just say 'video' because that is accurate. The description depends on the work – for *Philippe* I could say it's a 'five-minute colour video' or it's 'plastic, golden fabric and a mask'. It's a description – there is no absolute and there are so many ways to talk about a work.

Sh.B: I am, again, looking at the different ways to define these various performance art works. They will come to us via various forms of media: live, photography, video. So based on the media and the description they are given I wonder if the definition slightly changes?

FB: To use an example, Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void* (1960), the image of the young artist leaping into emptiness, is a performance with a fictional act. Everything in this image is fake. First of all it's a photographed action but nobody has actually seen it except the performer, the photographer and whoever surrounded the scene at the time. Second of all, the action never really happened. It's a fake image. You see him jump but he has friends on the ground with a big sheet to catch him. He's not flying, as he had put it, but merely falling down. But that is besides the point because what we are left with is an iconic image of a jump, nothing else.



Fayçal Bagriche, *Le sens de la marche*, 2002. Video still.

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Most of the time, the materialization of the performance is all we have left to see. In museums we have photos, texts or a video and that is what remains from an action, or perhaps the tools if there were any used. So this is really interesting – in the 60s when Klein did this work he proposed something that looked like the act without action. That's why I like this photo. It is a photo of an unreal situation .

Sh.B: You have slightly deviated from performance art but you do still create performance works from time to time. How do you approach this medium today?

FB: I will still resort to performance if the subject needs that kind of response. The reality is that I have a lot of exhibits, hence a lot of work. It takes a lot of energy to make performance. You need to involve your body and your brain. It's difficult for me, at the moment, to use my time in that way. I would love to though. I have some ideas about future projects and performance is definitely a part of them, it's a very deep way of expressing a matter.

Sh.B: Having studied in France you must have had different ways of referring to the practice, linguistically and conceptually. The word that refers to performance art in French it is *spectacle vivant*, which is literally translated as 'live art'. While a theatrical performer or actor is called a *comédien*. While in Arabic, performance art is *fann isti'raathi*; *fann* is art, *isti'rath* is performance or display. It is verbatim towards the English. But acting is *mumathil*, which is literally to 'act'. I am referring back now to definitions. I wonder if at all you, as a multi-lingual artist who works on various layers of media in an interdisciplinary way, have ever looked at these linguistic differences. Have these linguistic differences ever had a role in expanding ideas regarding the differences in performance? Your work embodies all these differences. Your early work is a bit more conceptual but your latest performative piece *Last Man Out* (2011–2012) has an element of acting that the older works do not.

FB: Yes, *Last Man Out* has theatrical elements. You need to use your acting skills, your body, your movements. In French you say *performance d'acteur*, which designates intrinsically 'acting'. The word performance can also be used in other domains like sports; it refers, in French, to the fact of excelling, going deeper into the process. For me, *Last Man Out* was a very different experience from the rest of my work. There was nothing to lean on – it was just me and my acting performance.

In 2003 I did a work called *La Sale Histoire de Fayçal Baghriche* (*The Dirty Story of Fayçal Baghriche*), which borrows its title from a 1977 movie called *Une Sale Histoire* by the director Jean Eustache. His film is about a naughty story recounted by a man who watches women through a hole while they use the toilets. He tells a story in a very unconventional way; you never actually see him in action, you just watch him talking about it. When I saw this movie I thought that it borrowed codes from the performative arts. It made me want to learn the entire text and perform it myself. This is very much the type of preoccupation an actor has, finding a text interesting and wanting to find many ways of delivering it to people – this aspect really speaks to me.

Sh.B: With performance artists, people that work with this discipline in an intervention format as well as in sound or other media, the question of what is there versus what you see comes up

often. In your work, in performance as well as your installations and video work, you also have this question. You redefine the question of what you see in different ways. *Last Man Out* has this interception between what you see in the news or in the media versus the first hand accounts you read on the Internet. Can you talk about this theme and how you deal with it in your work and in your performance work in particular?

FB: Yes. For example, I am working on a photography project in Morocco; I shot photos of stones painted by locals to look like semi precious minerals. From these images arises the question of the relationship in between the photo and the object itself. This interrogation is very similar to the one in the *Leap into the Void*, in fact many of my works are based on the question: What is reality?

When you go to the theatre you know your reality: you buy a ticket, you watch the actor on stage and people who decided to be there for the same reasons surround you. The power of the story lies in the ability of the actor to make you forget this reality. The artificial element puts you in another situation of reality. I bring up theatre because that's where you can feel this. Cinema, TV and new media also do this but you have the filter of the camera; the screen tells you that this is virtual. But with the theatre there is no screen so there is that piece missing. But questioning this state of reality is what happens today for most people in the world especially in new media.

Internet was a revelation – you no longer have one issuer but many. Everyone has the power to express his or her opinion and position around a subject. 2001 was really the beginning of this new century in the sense that it was the host of the first international news event. The twenty-first century started on 9/11 not on 1 January 2001. This date completely defines the environment in which we live today .

When I came across the footage William Rodriguez's speech (who is said to have been the last man to escape the World Trade Centre alive), also entitled *The Last Man Out*, I was impressed. He was acting like a real actor, a professional – he was a man who made a show. But at the same time the story he was telling was his own story. You may or may not believe in this conspiracy story. If you do believe it it is not a problem – you take what he says as a reality. If you don't believe it you will find it strange that this real janitor lived what he did and wonder why he is doing this. Does he really believe what he is saying or is he just pretending? It is an aesthetic situation that reveals the state of our world today. He saw people die, he helped people, he survived. But this real situation became a fiction, or it is better to say he borrowed the tools of the fiction. He was a simple man, with a low social status who became a hero by saving people. He didn't believe in God at the beginning of the story and had a revelation during the events. He became famous in the news, met the president of the United States and then found himself without money almost homeless.

Sh.B: You are questioning these various elements: media, reality, transformation. Can you explain why performance was the best way to flesh out these ideas rather than say, collage or a video edit or some other medium?

FB: I really like this text for its content – I thought it had a lot of acting potential. I always used to learn texts and involve my body in them. It's really exciting to take charge of the text with your body. It's just one man, alone on stage with a text and trying to transmit a message. For *Last Man Out* I am an Arab talking English with a French accent trying to be a Puerto Rican janitor speaking English with a Spanish accent. When you are confronted with my performance you know that it's fictional, that I am acting. But people know what my character saw. Everyone saw it on TV: the planes going into the skyscrapers, the people falling from the towers and the towers collapsing. It's like knowing the lyrics to a famous song – regardless of who is singing you will recognize the tune.

Sh.B: In a way your backdrop is people's pre-existing knowledge of the setting. Do you have any performance art examples or artists that you look to that have inspired you?

FB: When I was a student in France, I used to watch Eric Duyckaerts' work. I thought it was very interesting because he used to perform as a scientist. He is in a knowledgeable position so it's not just acting but being a conceptual informant. It was quite different from the performances that would take place in 1960s or 70s. Before the performance art revival in 2000 there was a period where it was quite dated to use this method. For most people performance was people doing weird and mystical activities that could not be understood by the general population. I wanted to perform without all the weirdness – I wasn't into using my body as a literal canvas. Eric Duyckaerts brought a vision that I could relate to.

Another performer caught my eye, Bas Jan Ader. My work *Falling* (2001) is, to me, very close to his work. He used his body with very simple gestures. Bas Jan Ader just falls everywhere: from a tree, from a bike, from a roof, and so on. When Klein is jumping and flying into the sky, Bas Jan Ader is falling. This gives an idea of the way you can imagine the artist of the 1970s through his actions. It is like a metaphor or a question of the situation of the artist. He is not the 'avant garde' anymore, but he is an artist closer to the ground. I like his work, the conceptual simplicity of it. Even his death didn't happen – he was on a boat and disappeared in the sea. I like the idea that he was never found. He is a *romantique conceptuel* – a conceptual romantic.

Fayçal Baghriche (b.1972) grew up between two cultures, navigating an Arab culture in the private sphere and western culture in the public realm. Baghriche has a diploma in Fine Arts

from La Villa Arson, Nice and a BA in Dramatic Arts from Sophia Antipolis, Nice and an MA in Multimedia Creation from the National School of Fine Arts in Paris. He has exhibited widely both in France and internationally. He has participated in *Brooklyn Euphoria*, New York, and Dashanzi International Art Festival, Beijing. He has shown his work in Outpost for Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Bielefelder Kunstverein, Germany; Al Riwaq Art Space, Bahrain and The Museum of Modern Art of Algiers, Algeria. He was included in *La force de l'Art* in 2009, and took part in Nuit Blanche, Paris, and Le Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse. In 2010 he showed at The Museum of Modern Art Paris, Museum of Contemporary Art Bordeaux, and Fondation Vasarely in Aix-en-Provence. In 2011, he was part of *The Future of a Promise*, at the 54th Venice Biennale. In 2012, his work was be exhibited at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the Gwangju Biennale, BrotKunsthalle, Vienna and Galerie Campagne Première, Berlin.

About the author

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