

## WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS: THE MAN AND THE MACHINE IN THE WORKS OF TAREK ATOUI, MAHMOUD BAKHSHI, MOUNIR FATMI AND PASCAL HACHEM

By: Jareh Das



Tarek Atoui, La Suite, 2012, photo by Lewis Ronald - Courtesy of plastiques.co

Man's relationship with the machine has been longstanding due to advancements in the machine age, a period often attributed from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. The subsequent periods that ensued saw the replacement of 'physical' with 'mechanical' labour and it was a period blighted with class struggles, oppression, conflicts and the isolation of individuals. The consequences of 'the machine age' have been portrayed through moving image in seminal silent movies, *Metropolis* (1929) and Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). Both movies highlight the changes this age brought to daily life and man's subsequent relationship with labour.

*Metropolis* tells the tale of the city of Metropolis, an urban dystopia, ruled by a powerful industrialist with his vision of a highly technical world. Based on the relations between the working and ruling classes, the story unfolds around the main characters of the industrialist, his reformist son and a female worker, Maria. Each plays a key part in the sequence of events that unfold, involving members of the different class systems. The film concludes with the son devoting himself to his father's empire, but mediating between him and the workers. *Modern Times* focuses on the psychological affects that are a direct result of working with machines. The film puts Chaplin's iconic



Mahmoud Bakhshi, Sunsets, 2010, sound organ installation, 40 speakers, tinplate pipes - Courtesy of the artist.



Mounir Fatmi, Intervention 1, 2010, Saw blade and calligraphy, Saw blade 21cm, edition of 15 - Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London.

Little Tramp character to work as an inept factory employee. Chaplin's work on an assembly line cumulates in him going insane due to the monotony of his daily routine. There are scenes of him being consumed by the machine, as he is unable to keep up with it. His only solace after this experience is prison, which offers him a more peaceful existence. The film, although humorous, portrays the loneliness of the individual due to the mechanical advancements of the era. The machine metaphor - rationalism, dynamism, progress, power - is thrown in to disarray in this cinematic masterpiece and is an issue that resonates with contemporary artists responding to a 'machine-culture' within their artistic practice. This 'machine-culture' relationship is between human beings, technology and creative expression from the personal, social, political and self-reflective perspectives related to the machine age.

The industrial revolution signals a point when the world observed the

transition from man to machine power. Walter Benjamin elaborates on this in his seminal text, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*: he observes that, "During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well" (Benjamin, 222)<sup>10</sup>. Benjamin's suggestion that changes in perception are determined by both nature and historical events is pertinent to this group of Arab artists, who question the socio-political impact of industrialisation on life and culture in the Middle East. These areas will be explored through the immersive soundscapes of Tarek Atoui; Mahmoud Bakhshi concern with the effects of the Industrial Revolution of Iran; Mounir Fatmi's interest in urbanisation vs. consumption; and Pascal Hachem's on-going investigation of power struggles.

#### MAN AND THE MACHINE

The intersection between technology, art and human communication is what situates the visual artist's relationship within the mechanistic process. Encountering the immersive sound and performance installations by Lebanese artist Tarek Atoui is like stepping into the inside of a 'ripped apart' sound system. Mixers, cables, wires, modern and historical musical equipment look like they have all been turned inside out and are now on view for all to see. His *Revisiting Tarab* (2012) performance premiered at the Sharjah March Meetings 2012 creating an electrifying evening of music for all who were present. This event consisted of an evening of music which the artist contributed to alongside the largest collection<sup>11</sup> of classical Arab music interpreted by a group of sound artists, whose styles ranged from hip-hop to electronic and contemporary musical styles. *Revisiting Tarab* took place in the atmospheric and historic Calligraphy Square, Sharjah, and was an impressive experience that lasted for six hours. The sequence of events was in effect quite simple. Each artist, musician or members of a collective

group, took to the stage at different points during the course of the evening with a presentation of varying approaches and styles, which were all unified in creating an immersive and mesmerising sound environment. Atoui's relationship with traditional Arab music started later on in his life. Initially he was drawn to the American and European music which was infiltrating the younger Lebanese generation. After his University degree, he spent a period travelling the world. This led to a return and full immersion into his own musical heritage. *Tarab* expresses the emotional effect in music but is also a traditional form of art-music<sup>12</sup>. It is a form of enchantment triggering an ecstatic and trance-like state. Atoui's individual performance is captivating. His rhythmic but manic bodily movements control the sounds produced by the machines he has built himself. Many of the improvisations involved rely heavily on his responses to the music. What is particularly striking about Atoui's performance is that he completely becomes an extension of the machines he made, which sets up a kind of man-machine union and entrances the viewer. As the performance progresses, one is less



Mounir Fatmi, The Machinery, 2009, 30 saw blades, dimensions variable, edition of 5 - Courtesy of the artist and Paradise Row, London.

aware of the collective experience as the focus is on the performer and the sounds created by movements. Atoui battles with these machines, racing to reach the end of this musical journey. He experiments, turns, twists and clicks various buttons, until his movements give the illusion that machine and man are unified.

Iranian artist Mahmoud Bakhshi, on the other hand, observes the changes in his homeland which are a result of the industrial revolution of Iran. Bakhshi's main inspiration comes from the socio-political issues born out of volatile situations and subsequent regime changes. He sets up propositions that offer investigative approaches to the situations he has observed as part of a younger generation of individuals who have grown up in post-revolutionary Iran. His works are highly informed and experiential with a very raw, DIY aesthetic. He often comments on his internal struggle between creating works that are connected as opposed to disconnected from his personal surroundings. This conflict is itself a manifestation of perspectival shifts through historical events. Mahmoud's installation and sculptural works deal with the aesthetics of post-revolutionary Iran, composed of a distinctive combination of ideological Islam, industrial capitalism and the liberation iconography of the 1979 revolution. The works represents a struggle between an art that is self-conscious of its independence and symbolic of the propaganda of the state. Bakhshi appropriates everyday objects into his practice to capture propaganda that has now become part of everyday vernacular. Cigarettes, neon signs, flags etc. have become objects that possess a political character beyond their everyday use. This juxtaposition of objects presents an unusual visual aesthetic and iconographic confrontation when experienced by the viewer. *Mother of Nation* (2008-2009) is a tinplate and metal pyramid sculpture with a meat grinder mounted on the

top. When the viewer turns the handle, the meat grinder pumps up oil from the reservoir below. This is then spurted out from a valve and trickles down the steep sides of the structure. Bakhshi's sculpture becomes an allegorical representation for the relationship between individual and natural reserves (in this case oil). By turning the mechanically operated meat grinder, the viewer transforms a clean monument into one that is contaminated. He also questions the dependency we all have on natural resources in a global context by putting the viewer in control of this situation. Bakhshi's works go beyond his immediate context<sup>(4)</sup> as they raise questions about trade and exchange amongst nation states. The politics surrounding the trade of oil has implications for the producer and user of this sought after resource. His works are conceptual representations of political systems embodied through a mechanical process.

Mounir Fatmi explores the alienation of humankind as a direct result of rapid urbanisation. He illustrates contemporary industrial society through the symbolic use of metal saw blades in *The Machinery* (2009) and *Intervention 1* (2010). These circular blades are inscribed with Arabic calligraphy, a recurring motif in Fatmi's works. *The Machinery* with its repetitive circular motifs, presents a machine-like motion in a suspended frame. One imagines this system as continuous and non-stop, eventually tiring out the operator. He subverts the function of the blade by presenting it as a singular entity. Is it part of a system that has broken down? On the other hand, is it one that represents dystopia? This work also raises questions about the absence and presence of man, acting as a metaphor for creating and being consumed by machines. These works can also be understood through a close reading of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, a film cited as Chaplin's critique of the machine age and an era rooted in the history of industrial sabotage. The

film's main iconographic image is captured in the scene where Chaplin slides into the machine's gears suggesting that man can only keep up with the machine by being consumed by it<sup>(5)</sup>. Fatmi's symbolic works are representative of the unprecedented modernisation in the Middle East. He engages with this modernisation that has seen a vast growth of cities and is still observable in the current urbanisation of places like The United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Both places seemingly rose out of the desert sands like a mirage. The vast development of this region happened (as is still happening) at such an unprecedented rate and there has been little time to reflect and analyse these changes. This absence of 'workers' conveys so much about the working process and demonstrates Fatmi's sensitivity to the plight of the working man. It highlights the human implications of these rapid developments and raises subtle questions about the alienation of the individual in this brutal and continuous process. We know that these places are still being built by the efforts of an impoverished migrant workforce. Pascal Hachem's most recent works are politically charged and centred on his on-going investigations into shifting roles of power in the Arab world. He raises questions about the transience of power and the belief systems that sustain it. If these systems are broken, power reveals itself as something unstable. As a Lebanese national, Hachem has experienced power struggles that have affected his homeland, with a civil war that ripped Lebanon apart. The country's geographical location also accounts for indirect tensions with neighbouring conflicting zones. This 'dressing/making up' of power struggles is embodied in his large-scale sculpture *My Martyr... No My Martyr* (2013). The work has at its core a large metal cylindrical tube encased in a glass vitrine. This tube rotates ever so slightly, meaning that at first glance it is hard to observe the subtle movements. The outer cylinder rotates to reveal a bronze rocket-like inner tube which was initially concealed by the outer casing. This action repeats itself simultaneously revealing and concealing. This work frames the ideologies surrounding martyrdom with two assumedly opposite sides claiming the cause for their own interests. *Loophole* (2013), on the other hand, takes on a paradoxical role as something of beauty and danger. This rotating cylindrical sculpture gradually reveals and conceals red lipsticks arranged across the entire surface of the work. The red lipstick resembles a bullet i.e. a dangerous weapon that is now disguised as a thing of beauty. The motion of the lipstick rising simultaneously, gives the work a haunting effect similar to automatic rifles launching round after round of bullets. Hachem's sculptures can be read as political machines that bring to

the foreground and raise important questions about the dynamics of power. Hachem plays out the realities and dangers of believing in power systems and their subsequent control mechanisms.

## CONCLUSION

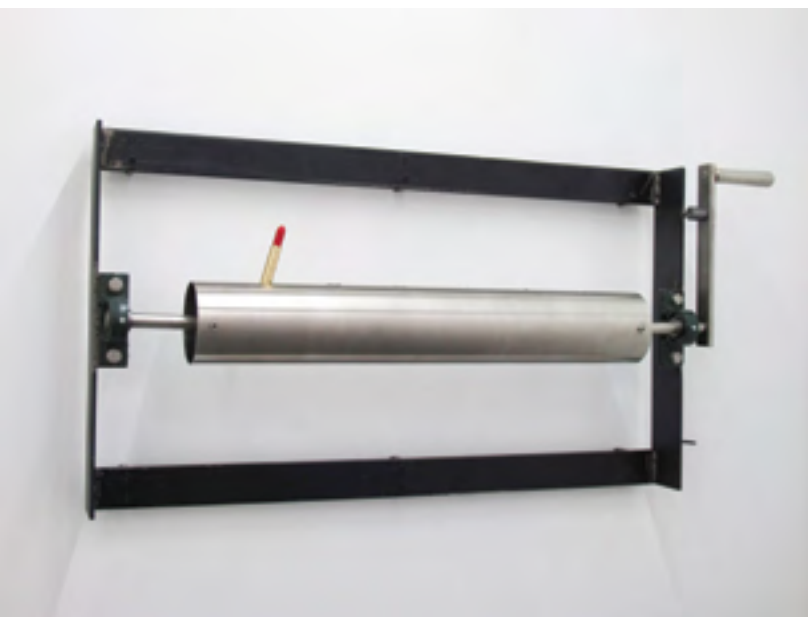
The claim is often made that computer-mediated activity represents, or will eventuate in, a complete break with all prior human experience<sup>(6)</sup>. We have lived through the decline of the industrial age, with the subsequent demise of manual labour and its replacement with machines. We are now in a time of rapid advancement in digital technologies which are doing away with many manual processes. These processes now occur through the 'click of a button'. In art, digital technology has revolutionised the methodologies involved in the creation, dissemination and distribution of art. In a world where everything is in motion, artists are less confined within rigid cultural identities based on traditional geographies. By revisiting and reinterpreting histories of space and place through mechanistic processes, this group of artists are in some way reversing the motion of current existence. They are slowing down processes in motion and asking the viewer to take a close look at situations that on the surface seem normative and indiscriminative. Tyler Cowen describes these changes in his book on Globalisation suggesting that individuals are liberated from the tyranny of place more than before, and that growing up in an out-of-the-way locale limits an individual's access to the world's treasures and opportunities less than ever before. But, the words are also a warning not to be fooled into believing we live in an age where there is more freedom; the power struggles come in many guises and are even more complex than ever before<sup>(7)</sup>. The incorporation of 'the machine' in the works by this group of artists was not conceived as a simple substitution of one mode of production for another, but is a process of opening up a critique of life today<sup>(8)</sup>. The evolution of machines has seen constant shifts in the organisation of labour with globalisation creating exchanges of people and products across the world. We observe a continual shift in superpowers which brings about varying tensions between nation-states who are ultimately concerned with protecting their own interests.

## ABOUT THE WRITER

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## End Notes

1. Koepnick, L. P., *Modern Visual Culture and Politics of Phantasmagoria: Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*, 1999, University of Nebraska Press, p. 141.
2. This private collection, owned by Lebanese collector Kamal Kassar, is comprised of old 78 rpm shellac discs and studio tapes ranging from 1903 to 1950, largely covering the Arab renaissance period that started early in the 19th century and continued through the 1930s.
3. Tarek Atoui goes on to explain the complexities of translating the meaning of Tarab to English in his statement on *Visiting Tarab at Performa* 2011, New York, web, viewed 19 January 2012, 10:15pm
4. Further discussions on this work raise questions of Iran's stake as one of the major oil producers and the socio-political issues that arise from this oil production.
5. Gregory Stevens's analysis the man-machine dichotomy in the films of Charlie Chaplin in his article: *Bitting Back at the Machine: Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times*, *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 60, October 07, 2011, web, viewed 10 December 2012.
6. Gregory, D. Sumner, *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Oct. 1997), pp. 960-962. Published by: Society for the History of Technology, Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3106960>, viewed 18 January 2012, 11 am.
7. Cowen, T., *Out conflicting Intuitions in Creative Destruction: How Globalization is changing the World's Cultures*, 2004, Princeton University Press, 5-10
8. Miles Orevel situates artist's relationship with the machine age in America in: *The Artist Looks at the Machine in After the machine: visual arts and the erasing of cultural boundaries*, 1995, University of Mississippi Press, 3-11



Pascal Hachem, Balance of Power, view 1 & 2, 2013

