

REVIEW OF ADEL ABDESSEMED'S
SITUATION AND PRACTICE
AT THE LIST VISUAL ART CENTER AT MIT

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Adel Abdessemed has created a world in the street outside of his studio. Whether it's a microcosm of the actual world or an analytical cross-section of society, he asks viewers to enter confrontational situations that question every individual's role amid harsh realities. The installation at MIT's List Visual Art Center is a sensory and spatial onslaught that parallels the artist's world, and immersion is the only way to understand it. Abdessemed does not use "illusion," according to his two-sentence artist statement. Rather, he depicts a violent collision between the common and the uncommon that indicts any assumptions about the catholicity and trustworthiness of human society.

In his exhibition, *Situation and Practice*, Abdessemed transforms the LVAC into the hectic street scene that is his interpretation of contemporary life. Most of the pieces in the three-room show are looped videos on monitors or projected. The combined sound of all the videos creates a buzzing din reminiscent of both a noisy cityscape and the early phase pattern work of Steve Reich. Through lens-based description and real time motion, video has a special capability of rendering reality, for creating the space that Abdessemed wills. The nonlinear organization of the pieces creates an analogue for a real street setting. Pieces with relating content are not always in close proximity; for instance, a seven-channel video of alley cats drinking milk is dispersed throughout all three rooms. The concepts overlap spatially.

As a viewer you don't just look at the pieces, they surround you. The hostile physicality of the videos makes you feel attacked. In three pieces — *Foot On*, *In Pressoir-fais-le*, and *Talk Is Cheap* — Abdessemed violently stomps on a lemon, a Coke can, and a microphone, respectively. You can almost feel each stomp under your own heel. *Talk is*

Cheap also produces an arresting *thwack* and engages another sense. These common items assault you personally.

Some pieces target your stomach as well as your senses. An everyday occurrence like a cat devouring a rat turns grotesque and violent when projected at a monumental scale. Reviling maybe, but that's everyday life. And how would you react if it was *your* foot holding back an unfurling snake, or if a lion and pack of wild boar were unleashed in *your* street, as Abdessemed shows in a series of photos? Abdessemed implies that they only seem savage by their exclusion from human society; hence the photograph of the artist with the lion is titled *Séparation*. And that brings us to the overarching brilliance of the exhibition as a single piece. Abdessemed places his viewers in this setting that viscerally engages their senses and emotions in order to make personal the question *What is anyone's role in society?* Once you're thrown into this mix, you can't help but rethink everything.

A man in the street with a red clown nose laughs hysterically. Amid his cackling you can hear him either *say that* he is a terrorist, or *ask if* he is. Or ask if you are. Our cultural classifications are many, but their definitions stretch thinner with every news broadcast. Is a woman in a hijab that covers all but her eyes a terrorist, or is the unexpectedly fair-skinned, light-haired woman beneath it?

In the video *Zen*, white milk is poured over a dark-skinned Algerian man. After he is totally drenched, he looks directly at the viewer as if for a response. In this glance, Abdessemed calls the viewer to rethink where they are in this dichotomy. Are you part of the whiteness that spreads throughout the world like a liquid? How much globalization

can you handle? The world as it exists is not just your neighborhood, but also where this man lives and where lions, boars, and snakes live.

I can't discuss the amazing spectacle of social politics via wild animals without referencing the spectacle that is Abdessemed himself — especially given a cryptic title for a video showing the same menacing clown, this time with vampire teeth, screaming a hybrid of various national anthems. The piece is titled *Trust Me*, recalling Abdessemed's would-be exhibition, *Don't Trust Me* at the San Francisco Art Institute. Last March, The SFAI shut the exhibition down in response to death threats from animal rights extremists. *Don't Trust Me* showed the bludgeoning deaths of six animals in short video loops. The institute defended the works claiming that Abdessemed had no part in the killing, but that these animals were raised for food in the rural Mexican food collaborative where the videos were shot, and that this is the unfortunate slaughtering practice of the region. I find this connection difficult to understand but impossible to ignore. Even if the subject matter of the pieces were overtly similar, why trust him now and not then? I honestly don't know.

But we can trust Abdessemed when he says that his “rage comes ... from a mad deep love for our humanity.” *Situation and Practice* shows his fear that if he does not go into the street to perform these “acts,” no one will. The questions he asks come from his concern for the well being of us all, not a desire to place blame. His regret for the violent history of the Abrahamic religions is a theme in the exhibition, and he calls for a rethinking of their role in society as well. But he also demonstrates the remarkable energy they provide for people in the performance *Also Sprach Allah*. In it, ten men blanket-toss

him into their air to inscribe those words onto a rug attached to the ceiling. Abdessamed questions everything but remains hopeful. He includes himself at the center of the questioning; after all, he is the one dangling from the Helicopter