



**Art Radar Asia**

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## **“180° Behind Me”: Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi's linguistic games – in conversation**

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Göteborgs Konsthall recently hosted “180° Behind Me”. Moroccan-born artist Mounir Fatmi's first solo exhibition in Sweden.

Through installation, video, sculpture, text and philosophy, Mounir Fatmi surveys the myriad tensions between analogue tradition and accelerated contemporaneity.



Mounir Fatmi, 'Peripheral Vision', 2017, pigment print on paper, 70 x 105 cm. Image courtesy Göteborgs Konsthall.

Mounir Fatmi compares his recent exhibition at Sweden's Göteborgs Konsthall to a book. Like the meandering storylines of a novel, like the contemplative notes of a poem, his projects evoke a beauty, violence and fragility that takes time and willingness to digest. Titled “180° Behind Me”, the solo show – which so happens to be the artist's first in Sweden – integrated literary allusions wherever possible: several of the works incorporate Arabic calligraphy, selected both for its historical and contextual references and for its intricate patterning. The beauty of words, and their power to weave together and shatter, is consistently present in Fatmi's practice, his work exposing the layers of interpretation and reinterpretation that construct certain histories.

Curated by the Konsthall's Artistic Director Stina Edblom and Liv Stoltz, “180° Behind Me” presented a series of “linguistic games” in order to reveal oppressive social and political structures. As such, the exhibition explored the urgency of free speech and seeks to deconstruct dogmatic religion and ideology in critique of an “increasingly volatile and precarious world”. The materials that he selects – old VHS tapes, wires and outdated copy machines – are not only dictionaries of information, but also function as archives in and of themselves. His works appear as monuments to the utopias of contemporaneity and to the nebulous narratives which are gradually erased from memory.

In celebration of the momentous exhibition, Art Radar got in touch with Fatmi to discuss his exhaustive breadth of work, which was on view at the Göteborg institution until 16 September 2018.



Portrait of Mounir Fatmi. Photo: Le Birgersson. Image courtesy Göteborgs Konsthall.

**Your solo show “180° Behind Me” at Göteborgs Konsthall was prefaced with the following quote by Hannah Arendt: “There are no dangerous thoughts, thinking itself is dangerous.” How has this statement influenced the exhibition and how has it been important to utilise Arendt's words in Sweden, in 2018?**

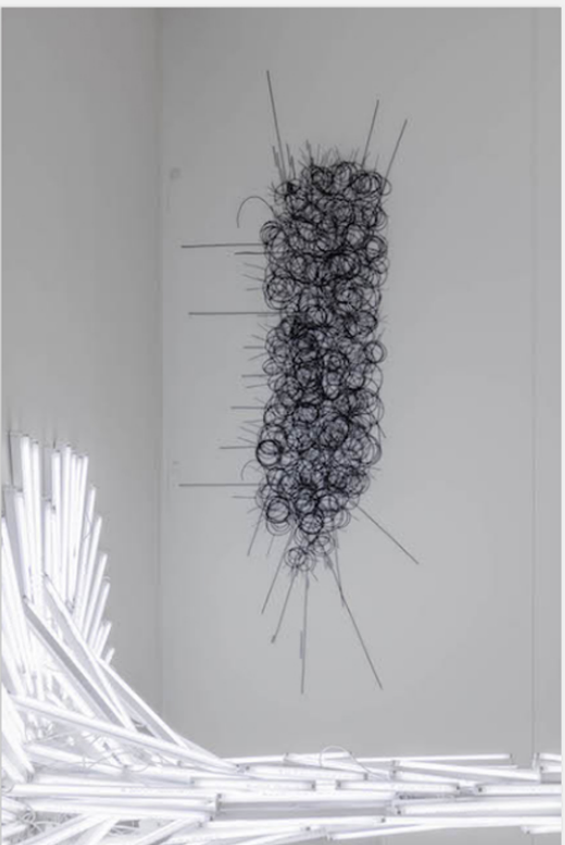
There are often phrases and words in my exhibitions. Sometimes they are sentences of thinkers, philosophers or poets and sometimes they are sentences that come from my manifesto “Coma” that I started writing in the 1990s. The first sentence of this manifesto states: “My father has lost all these teeth, now I can bite him.” I remember using it during my first group show at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Hannah Arendt's sentence is about thought and its dangerousness quickly became one of the keys to understanding this exhibition. The idea that there is no such thing as a dangerous thought, but that the act itself is dangerous, sends us back to ourselves. How do we think about this world today? Or, how to think about the world in times of crisis? This system of thinking or creating in times of crisis, and the radical change of societies, is a fundamental issue in all of my work: how can one be an artist in a society that's in full collapse?

**You are known to use outdated material in your work – old VHS tapes, type-writers, copy machines, printing presses, etc. – and build them into large installations. What is your reasoning behind integrating this kind of analogue technology and how does it play into your interests in machinery and consumer culture?**

Since the beginning of my career and my artistic research, I have been interested in objects that have reached the end of their lifespan. It surely comes from my place of birth in Tangier. I grew up in the district of Casabarata, which was known for being the flea market of the city. There, my mother was selling children's clothing and I was often her model. I spent hours and hours observing all the things that happened in this market. In the 1970s, given the scarcity of household products and their exorbitant prices, many Moroccans bought them in flea markets. Most of these products arrived from Europe via Tangier, brought by Moroccans living abroad who collected them in garbage cans in France, Spain or the Netherlands.

I understood then that objects, like us, like all things, have a lifespan. Everything is part of a duration, a cycle. There is also this notion of the archive. Most of my installations include the medium and the message [within them]. It's a kind of an archaeology of the media. In the near future, a young audience who did not experience the image revolution with the creation of the VHS cassettes around 1970, or the antenna cable or the large photocopying machines, will surely ask questions about the materials that I am using now. My work revolves around these questions, this precise moment when there is a crisis, where the end of a period coincides with the birth of another.



Mounir Fatmi, 'My Cloudy Day', 2018, antenna cables, dimensions variable. Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger. Image courtesy Göteborgs Konsthall.



Mounir Fatmi, 'The Index and The Machine', 2018, printing press from 1872, jumper cables, paper, dimensions variable. Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger. Image courtesy Göteborgs Konsthall.



Mounir Fatmi, 'Everything Behind Me', 2018, antenna cables, wood, 488 x 100 x 80 cm. Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger. Image courtesy Göteborgs Konsthall.

**The title of the exhibition "180° Behind Me" comes from your photographic series Peripheral Vision. It expresses that we all, regardless of where we come from, suffer from limited and/or one-sided visibility. You also discuss "otherness" and how disparities in education "make us see but also make us blind". Could you elaborate on this?**

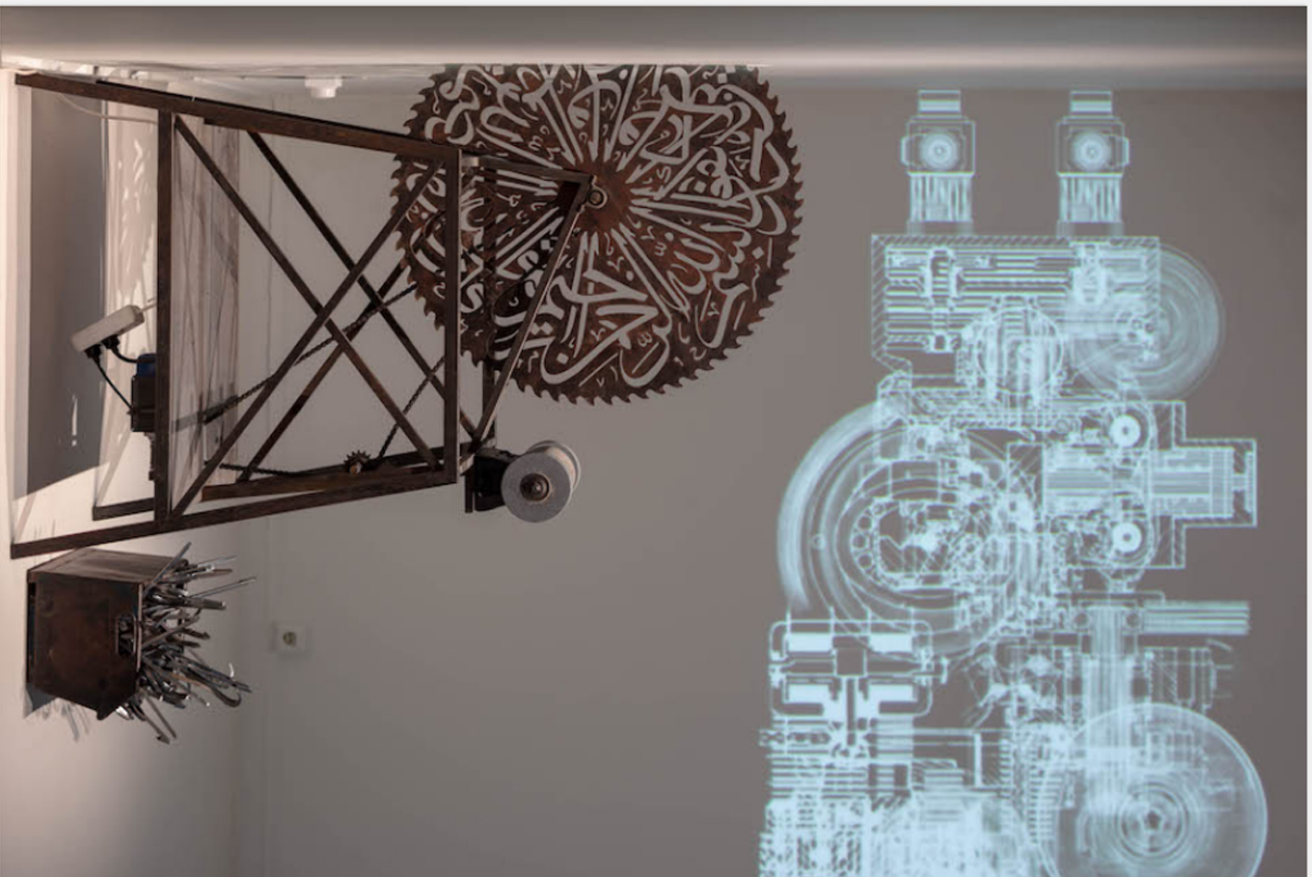
Becoming aware of living in a physically limited body in a space with narrow thought is the first observation that must be accepted in this period of our contemporary history. Of course, in comparing oneself to animals, man thinks of himself as being intelligent and free, but that is not the case. The German philosopher Schopenhauer expresses this thought very well in these terms: "Every man believes that the limits of his own field of vision are the limits of the world."

My 'Peripheral Vision' series comes from an awareness of what connects us to the world and an apprehension of its limits. In his book 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus', the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein also addresses the question of the limits of an essentially linguistic point of view: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." The exhibition "180° Behind Me" also stages these shortcomings, namely the aesthetic language and its incapacity to translate the thoughts of the person employing it. In this way, it elaborates an artistic project that is doomed to fail before it can even be formulated.

**Could you speak more about the importance of text and textual objects – or should I say linguistic games – in your work? As many of your projects integrate words, phrases and Arabic scripts into your installations, and keeping in mind William Burroughs' suggestion that "language is a virus", how do you suggest audiences interact with the exhibition?**

To understand the importance of the text in my work, it is necessary to return first to the absence of the image in a part of the history of the Arab-Muslim civilisation. Even during "The Golden Age", and despite the presence of painting, the Arab world did not create an image. I could never know the face of Averroes, Ibn Khaldun, Al Farabi, Al Khawarizmi, nor the face of the prophet Mahomed, nor that of women. I live with ancestors without a face. I do not make a negative critical finding, but it's interesting to see a civilisation that was not interested in portraiture. A civilisation that did not want to see itself in mirrors, but rather in words. In my opinion, this is what created this shock or misunderstanding with the Christian West. To draw a portrait of the Arab world, it was necessary to analyse its architecture, its fascination for mathematics and machines and finally to understand its poetry, which remained very abstract.





Mounir Fatmi, 'The Paradox', 2013, machine in steel, engine, 75 x 100 x 116. Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger. Image courtesy Göteborgs Konsthall.

To come back to your question, it is from reading William Burroughs and his idea of language as a virus that I started a real critique of the medium "language", these flaws, weakness and its limitations. In my exhibition, language is used as a medium in crisis, almost at the end of life. It's a changing medium, facing a new visual language of emojis, portraiture and self-portraits. We can speak here of a new visual Babel announcing the collapse of language. Everything is a visual trap, even a phrase that we can read and understand. The audience then has the choice to accept this trap and to fall deliberately into it or to leave the exhibition by being satisfied with its aesthetic aspect.

**In connection to this, could you speak about your general interest in communication? From where does this stem and how has this interest grown or transformed whilst writing your book, The Pretext?**

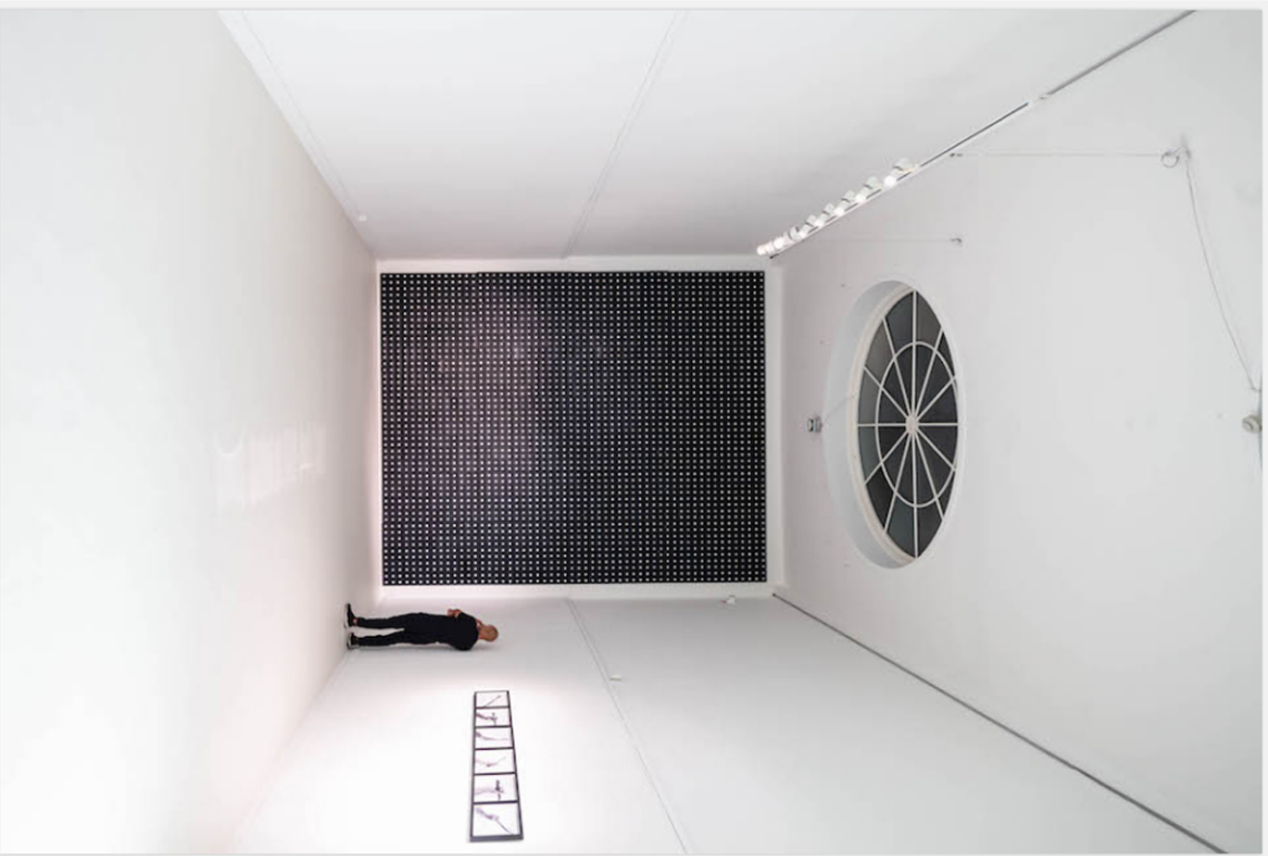
I have always been interested in the medium of language and communication, because I come mainly from a private face culture. For me, words have played the role of concept as well as image. In my book The Pretext, I often talk about the difficulty of using words to say what we feel and the obligation we feel to do so, to think through deconstruction. On this subject, the reading of Jacques Derrida and his general idea of "deconstruction" visited throughout his philosophy helped me to understand how Western culture is locked in a conceptual framework of duality – sign / meaning, spirit / body, inside / outside – and that it is absolutely necessary to deconstruct them. I also think that the work on this deconstruction can start with the language, which is itself a "pretext" of communication since more than eighty percent of our communication is nonverbal. It is bodily and therefore does not come from language.

**You continuously come back to the theme of artists being censored or forced to live in exile, specifically with your references to the author Salman Rushdie in your work Who is Josef Anton (2012). Considering the political situation in the world today, where freedom of speech and expression are threatened, where journalists, authors and artists are wrapped up in accusations of fake news or emotion-driven "politics", what do you consider to be the artist's role in the present climate? How do you see these global tensions influencing your work?**

My work often asks this question: how does one create an artwork within a society in crisis? How should one continue to claim the status of 'artist' in a world destined to a programmed collapse? This unease that we are experiencing with this return of fundamentalists and this rise in radicalisation comes first and foremost from this feeling, [which is something] that we cannot express with words. It should be known that our industrial civilization (as we know it until now) based on fossil and mining energy is collapsing and we will surely fight for the last drop of oil. Will our democracy survive this energy shortage? I am not sure. All these political, religious, economic and societal issues, of course, influence my work and my way of thinking. As you know, I work on the media, but not in the immediate future. I am lucky to be an artist and it gives me the opportunity to take time to think about the world. It is a privilege to be able to express myself freely and for which I will fight to the end in order to continue to enjoy it.



Mounir Fatmi, 'In the Absence of Evidence' 2012, fluorescent tubes, vinyl texts, dimensions variable. Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger. Image courtesy Göteborgs Konsthall.



Mounir Fatmi, 'Black Screen', 2004-2018, 1500 st VHS-band, 5,6 x 4,6 m. Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger. Image courtesy Göteborgs Konsthall.

It is apparent that ideology, belief and spirituality represent an irreverent playground and jumping off point for much of your work. Topics ranging from the Black Panthers, the disappearance of Moroccan insurgent Mehdi Ben Barka and Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 Fatwa are examined through subtle imagery. Could you talk a bit about how you undergo some of your initial research? How do you maintain balance between your most important or urgent foci and a rich aesthetic presentation? Or put more simply, how do you keep the work from overshadowing your greater messages?

It is a very difficult equation to create an aesthetic by dealing with very serious subjects such as freedom of expression, the Blacks Panthers, the assassination of Mehdi ben Barka, religious radicalism, intellectual crisis or societal collapse...

I do not hide anything. I have always claimed my works are aesthetic traps. The aesthetic for me is a tool to reach the public and draw attention to a serious subject. It does not always work, of course, but when it works, it's a real miracle. When it does not work, unfortunately, my works maintain this aesthetic aspect until it explodes and I'm asked to remove them. I find myself censored. This has happened to me several times, until having the sad title of being the most censored artist in France.

So, how do you escape the temptation to decorate the world with meaningless images and objects? The only solution is to create camouflaged artwork, to create works in the works, to load the pieces with meaning as you load a gun with real bullets. You must never forget the meaning of the fight, never give in to the doxa.

**As the world grows rapidly more unpredictable and precarious by day, where will you go from here? Could you give us a glimpse into some of your upcoming projects?**

Yes, you are right, the world is growing fast and becoming more and more unpredictable and precarious each day. We are currently experiencing a slow and gradual decline in thought, art and culture in general. We have moved to what some scientists call "The Great Acceleration", the maximum acceleration that will certainly be fatal. As I explained earlier, I am not optimistic. I am not sure that fragile Western democracies will survive the planned collapse of our industrial and consumer society. We are entering a new era, a New World where it will be necessary to rethink politics, philosophy, religion and, of course, art. My ongoing project Casabarata, recently presented at the Echigo-Tsunan Triennial in Japan illustrates this very well. It is a project that deals with architecture and energy under a nostalgic vision of my childhood home.

Megan Miller

*"180° Behind Me" by Mounir Fatmi was on view from 8 June to 16 September 2018 at Göteborgs Konsthall, Gotaplatsen 7, 412 56 Göteborg, Sweden.*