

## RESOUNDING IMAGES AND DISTANCES: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ISMAÏL BAHRI AND SILKE SCHMICKL

**Silke Schmickl**

**1 November 2011**

Artist Ismaïl Bahri is known for his videos, drawings and photographs that highlight delicate and ephemeral phenomena. These could include the movement of ink in water, for example, or the tensile properties of a taut piece of string: simple things capable of evoking intangibility, friableness and volatility. The artist, who was born in Tunisia to a Tunisian father and Swiss mother, now lives and works in Paris. He has exhibited work at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and at the British Film Institute in London, among other international institutions.



Ismaïl Bahri, *Orientations (Variation 1)*, 2010, video still. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Les Filles du calvaire, Paris.



---

In September, in Paris, Bahri sat down with Silke Schmickl, an independent curator and director of Paris-based film label Lowave, to discuss his work. Bahri's 2008 video work *Resonances* is featured on Lowave's *Resistance[s]* III DVD collection, which was dedicated to film and video art from the MENA region and whose trailer can be viewed here on Ibraaz, along with an extract from 2010 video *Orientations*.

**Silke Schmickl:** Ismaïl, you are a visual artist from Tunisia living and working in Paris. We met in 2008 while preparing the third edition of our DVD collection *Résistance[s]*, dedicated to avant-garde film and video art from North Africa and the Middle East. Since then we have worked on several other projects together, such as *Human Frames*, an important video art exhibition that took place at KIT -- Kunst-im-Tunnel museum in Düsseldorf this summer and which will be released on DVD by the end of the year. We have also shown some of your drawings and photographs at art fairs, in Martinique in 2009 for the Marché d'Art Contemporain du Marin and last year in Istanbul at ARTIST contemporary art fair. Your body of work includes different media and techniques. Which are your favorite artistic media?

**Ismaïl Bahri:** I work mainly with video and drawing but it happens that I have recourse to other media like photography. For each of my projects I try to develop a framework that allows me to observe and capture subtle phenomena and that's where video essentially steps in, as a tool for recording.

**SS:** Your video *Résonances* (2008), featured on *Résistance[s]* III, combines video, visual writing and sound. Can you tell me more about the genesis of this work and its production context?

**IB:** *Résonances* is my first video. In retrospect, it looks like a beginner's piece to me. I shot this video over two weeks in the bathroom of my parent's house in Tunis. Its structure developed day by day, while I was filming. In the beginning, I just wanted to experience how to look at this place through filming, but then, little by little, I became interested in interfering, in writing on the inner surface of this space, to use it as a receptacle for writing and thoughts. An evolution was taking place: the video starts with shots that are very aseptic and aestheticised, and moves on to show a kind of blurred cosmogony in the end.

**SS:** The bathtub is an intimate space, situated in the house of your childhood and is sealed, isolated from the outside world. However the video seems to evoke other places ...

**IB:** The use of writing, cartography and sounds that stem from insects and landscapes aims to open up this capsule built in human proportions in order to resound with other landscaped, cosmic and acoustic elements. In the course of my research I realised that this tub could become the inverse counterpart of a welkin; the imaginary sphere on which celestial bodies appear to be projected. The appearance of words written in ink on the inner surface of the tub takes the shape of a constellation of stars. During the editing, nightfall was accompanied by the chirping of crickets, recorded around the house. In short, I wanted to explore the excess of the senses, images, landscapes and sounds.

**SS:** Ink is a recurrent media in your work. I am thinking of the photo series *Sang d'encre*, accomplished in 2009, and one of your most recent video works, *Orientations*, shot in 2010.



---

**IB:** I use ink as an element of appearance and infusion. In *Sang d'encre* for instance, I drop small doses of ink on the skin; it starts infiltrating the pores, the wrinkles and cracks. This graphic approach cannot be dissociated from organic secretions. I explore the body through its cracks as if I would draw from the inside of the skin itself in order to reveal a hidden interiority. In *Orientations*, ink is used to produce images. I walk through Tunis, holding a glass filled with black ink in my hand, and shoot, the camera directed at the reflecting surface. As soon as you focus on it, the surface of ink becomes a screen that is capable of receiving images. To focus on this glass is already a way of framing, of filming; and filming this black lentil leads to a reflection on the act of seeing itself. I am also interested in the way the inky surface allows the video images to vibrate and the way the gaze, as well as the camera, tries to find the right distance between the material and the surrounding landscapes. Any orientation seems useless in this attempt at permanent accommodation.

**SS:** Besides ink, the motif of thread is frequently used in your videos, such as in *Coulée douce* (2007), *Dénouement* (2011) and your latest video *Attraction* (2011). What interests you about this element?

**IB:** What touches me about thread is its disposition of contact. It ties and connects and with such tenuousness! Handling a thread is a simple gesture that can somehow become extreme. It can carry a real suspense because it touches the void. And I like the way a thread can be folded, how it approximates the hollow of things, the way it embraces and cuts the air when it knots. When you handle a thread, it allows you to understand what surrounds us, with fineness. In *Dénouement* one sees a stretched thread that surveys and embraces the void of a snowy landscape. In *Attraction*, the thread takes on the fold of a ray of sunlight in a totally dark room. It outlines the light. By crossing the luminous ray, the thread becomes the source, the spark that allows us to see. In these two videos, the thread indicates the limits of the zone of appearance. As soon as it disappears, the spatial marks lose their way in the immensity of the landscape or in the opacity of darkness.

**SS:** Your work is characterised by a rigorous approach and formal structure that contrasts with a certain 'letting go' and poetic escapes.

**IB:** That's true and I would like to jump back to the thread: what also touches me about this object is the fact that it is precise and flexible at the same time. It incarnates an ambiguity that I like to examine in my artistic research, that of a sharp delicacy or a floating precision. It is really this duality that I am interested in: I try to frame the floating, to confer a structure to volatile, intangible or at least fragile matters, but always searching for the right balance.

**SS:** Do you have a specific working method? Can you describe the way you work?

**IB:** My work develops slowly and on a long-term basis. I often start by gravitating towards intuitions and observations of diverse small phenomena that I write down in my notebooks. I try then, over several months, to refine these first drafts in order to find the right framework to develop them. This deployment implicates



---

several activities: I experiment with the material, of course, but also read a lot. All kinds of reading can function as a stimulator. *Attraction*, for example, was nourished by texts on the philosophy of atomism by Lucretius, or writings on the art of mime. Stimulation does not necessarily come through studying or the accumulation of knowledge. A network of words or even a misunderstood notion can serve as an initiation.

**SS:** How do you situate yourself within the contemporary art market and in regards to the Arab world?

**IB:** My research is light and not very expensive. I need very few things to work, which allows me to be quite independent and even if I am part of the art market, I have preserved a considerable margin of liberty. Regarding my position in relation to the Arab world, I am of course very concerned about what happens in Tunisia. I live in Paris but many of my thoughts go there. And this is quite difficult to explain, but every time I go there, I feel an urgent necessity to work. At the moment, I am trying to participate in some artistic projects there and I am happy with the fact that Lowave will screen some of their programs during the opening of the *B'chira Art Center*, which is taking place in November in Sidi Thabet, near Tunis. The direct contact with art works is still missing there; especially in the field of video art, it's very rare. We have to stimulate possible exchanges beyond the borders that are increasingly closed in Europe and especially France. This might be considered as a modest, yet existing, form of resistance. By the way, I would like to ask you a question too: how did you come up with the idea of the *Resistance[s]* collection and why did you choose this title?

**SS:** *Resistance[s]* is an editorial research project I initiated together with Lebanese musician Christine Abdelnour in 2005. It was sparked by the discovery of a growing number of outstanding video works and experimental films made by artists and filmmakers from or with roots in the Middle East and North Africa. At that time, only a few French distributors and festivals carried these works and we became interested in learning more about this emerging video art scene and its blossoming creativity. As for all our Lowave releases, we were interested in spreading the ideas that can be found in those works by making them accessible to an international audience beyond the film festival and art gallery circuit. All of the three programmes have since toured the world and participated in many exhibitions, biennials and film festivals. It is an ongoing process that now appears, following recent events in the Arab world, in a different light and we are curious to see what these new political situations will generate in terms of film and art production.

The collection's title was inspired by a text written by Gilles Deleuze in 1972, entitled *Pourparlers*. In it, he says: 'Creating is not communicating, but resisting [...] Art is what resists: it resists against death, servitude, infamy, shame'.<sup>[1]</sup> We felt that this vision of art and resistance was perceptible in all of the *Resistance[s]* videos and summed up the artists' commitments, whether political, social or purely visual. The pluralistic notion of resistance with an 's' thus became the leitmotif of the collection.

Your video *Résonances* was a real discovery for us and we were extremely happy to include it in *Resistance [s] III*. Your reaction to this un-limited DVD release was spontaneously positive even if this cinema-oriented distribution also implied a certain loss of control in comparison to the contemporary art exhibition system. Was this something you were aware of? Something new you wanted to experience?



---

**IB:** I submitted *Résonances* for several reasons. First of all, some of the videos from *Résistance[s] I* and *II* encouraged me to work with video and nourished the realisation of *Résonances*. These DVDs were a precious working material for me. They allowed me to study videos by Zineb Sedira, Taysir Batniji, Pauline M'Barek and others that I had not known before because their works were unavailable. So, when you called me a year later to offer me the chance to participate in *Résistance[s] III*, I told myself, wow! What an amazing coincidence! And I like this form of distribution because it creates encounters that are different from those produced by the traditional exhibition circuit. This type of distribution is very flexible and very contagious; every DVD has the potential to become a personal working material, as it was in my case, but also a vector for encounters on a bigger scale. The videos travel, can be exchanged, rented and I really appreciate the potential associations that reside in this kind of letting go.

**SS:** You told me that you are preparing new works, some exhibitions ... What are your projects for the future?

**IB:** At the moment I am concentrating on new work for an exhibition planned with my gallery Les Filles du Calvaire in Paris for May next year and a group exhibition at the *Institut du Monde Arabe* in May 2012, also in Paris. In the near future I will be showing *Résonances* in the exhibition project *How Water* at La Plate-forme 38 Wilson, which Lowave organises with Nathalie Parienté. Other screenings and exhibitions will be announced soon via my website.

[1] Gilles Deleuze, *Pourparlers 1972-1990*, Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit (1990/2003), (p. 235).

## About the author

**Silke Schmickl** studied Art History, French Literature and Intercultural Communications in Munich and in Paris, where she completed her diploma at the University of Paris (Sorbonne) in 2001. She has been a researcher at the German Center for Art History in Paris since 2000, where she published a book on Thomas Struth's *Museum Photographs* (MSH, 2005). In 2002, she co-founded the Paris-based film label Lowave, which she has directed since 2007. She is responsible for the conception and production of art projects as well as their distribution in partnership with international cultural organisations. Schmickl also works as an independent curator for international museums and institutions.