

# Counter Interpellation: Mounir Fatmi and the Disorientation of Authoritarian Identities

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24 April 2008

To whom does an artist identify? The question has just as much to do with history as it does with the time of a project. Yet, to what does the need for identity owe? Does the need originate from an ever present desire to belong to a community, or, instead, a desire to escape from an entire discourse of such a community? Of course, the removal from a particular discourse only precludes another one. Yet, in this removal from symbolic identity Mounir Fatmi (born 1970, Tangier, Morocco) locates his work in a disorientation of authoritarian symbols of identity. While spectacular symbols appear throughout Fatmi's work, they do not tell of any definitive origin. As such, Fatmi's work proposes a radical disjunction from the symbolic interpellation<sup>1</sup> of identity for one that autonomously represents itself.

Figure 1



*Save Manhattan 01, Series C, 2003-2004*  
books, lighting, drop shadow  
dimensions variable

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<sup>1</sup> Theorized by Louis Althusser, the term interpellation designates the attachment of ideology to the pre-ideological subject.

Figure 2



*Save Manhattan 02, Series C, 2005*  
VHS tapes  
dimensions variable

Figure 3





*Save Manhattan 03*  
at 2007 *Venice Biennale*  
Dimensions variable

Fatmi scrambles the authority of spectacles meant to orient a class to a symbolic object, (Muslim, French, Moroccan, proletarian, etc.) by locating such identity in an origin of infinite possibility. Fatmi inverts interpellation by locating a work in the shadow of narratives that have become symbolic of capital in a global empire while locating its origins in a non-narrative play of objects by a radical subject. Fatmi turns the spectacle of symbolic narratives on its head by humorously locating these supposedly transcendent themes in the present. These symbols become ironic once material and the irony of the symbols induces humor. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin offers an analysis of humor regarding the grotesque *Rabelaisian* laughter:<sup>2</sup>

The rogue, the clown and the fool create around themselves their own special little world... none of these figures occupied an essential place... Essential to these three figures is a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege—the right to be “other” in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; none of these categories quite suits them, they see the underside and the falseness of every situation” (Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M.Bakhtin*, pg. 159).

The occurrence of this non-narrative play disrupts the authoritative narratives that symbolize a particular classification of subjects. In many instances, the non-narrative play has to do with objects rendered mundane by their commonplace

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<sup>2</sup> A term for laughter referring to the medieval comedy and its use in what was then the grotesque instances of concrete human corporeality that locate a subject within material instead of the symbolic chronology of events (Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M.Bakhtin*, pg. 170).

consumption. For instance, in *Save Manhattan 01, Series C, 2003-2004*, (fig. 1) various books form a pre-11 September, 2001 Manhattan skyline on top of a table. A spotlight shown on these objects projects the shadow of the skyline on the wall of a gallery. In *Save Manhattan 02, Series C, 2005*, (fig. 2) Fatmi uses VHS tapes to form the profile of a Manhattan with the twin towers. In *Save Manhattan 03*, (fig. 3) speakers play a compilation of sounds collected from various locations in New York City while mimicking, again, the shape of Manhattan's pre-11 September, 2001, skyline. A spotlight shown on the speakers projects a shadow of the skyline on the wall of the gallery. Each reference to the New York skyline prior to the bombings locate a recurring symbol within the lexicon of contemporary discourse about identity, yet are presented in the mundane shadow of these works by Fatmi. But why save such a supposedly sublime symbol? Like the shadows in Plato's cave that symbolize things beyond reach by those within the cave's confines, the symbol loses its illusory effect only after leaving the cave. As such, the objects behind the shadow lose their desirability. In this way, Fatmi proposes an alternative to the locution of identity in the shadow of symbolic objects by mimicking the symbols that interpellate subjects in order to show them as constructs. It is by relinquishing the calcifying narratives surrounding identity, ones that objectify and alienate the subject in a spectacle, that Fatmi introduces the subject to the irony of interpellation.

Figure 4



*Evolution or Death, 2004*

color photographs, tirages numériques  
dimensions variable

Fatmi inverts spectacular representations of identity by rendering them mundane and within reach of a subject that may scramble any conclusive narrative. Fatmi's work counters strategies of interpellation that identifies a

subject with an ideology prior to that subject's ability to place their identity in or beyond a particular ideology. Fatmi parodies the various interpellations of colonialism and capitalism that seek to define others according to symbolic narratives. In *Evolution or Death*, 2004, (fig. 4) two Anglo-European looking subjects imitate suicide bombers with books and papers taped around their abdomens. One holds open a trenchcoat and another holds up a book that looks like a detonator attached to wires. Fatmi reverses the situation. These are not the suicide-bombers from Arab and Muslim countries. Instead, they appear to be of European descent in a European street or modern room in casual clothing.

Figure 5



*Brainteaser for moderate Moslem*, 2004  
acrylic on rubix cube  
54 x 11.5 x 13.5 cm

Much of Fatmi's work is about escaping narratives that amass identity within a singular, yet, spectacular, event. Fatmi alludes to such narratives by the simple arrangement of mundane materials such as national flags, rubix cubes, speakers, books of a modern canon, a Manhattan skyline, VHS tapes, etc. Fatmi constructs these narratives at the same time that he renders them in a liminal framework, one in which the next move opens to chance. Fatmi locates the subject in the presence of a game in which there are seemingly infinite possibilities. Thus, in *Brainteaser for moderate Moslem*, 2004, (fig. 5) Fatmi paints rubix cubes black with white stripes to imitate Mecca. At the same time Fatmi projects the symbol of Mecca, he subverts the spectacle surrounding it by introducing an element of play that scrambles any one possibility in defining the object.

Fatmi's discontinuation of strategies of interpellation creates a contradiction. While Fatmi does not want to belong to the various lineages surrounding symbols of capitalism and imperialism, neither does he want to belong to the heritage of Islamic fundamentalism as it has been defined in reaction to such ideologies. *Evolution or Death*, (fig. 4) pits the two traditions as part of same coin, a burdensome history requiring a juncture from the system of exploitation by empire and the reactionary tendency to identify exactly with the subject that capitalism interpellates only to exploit.

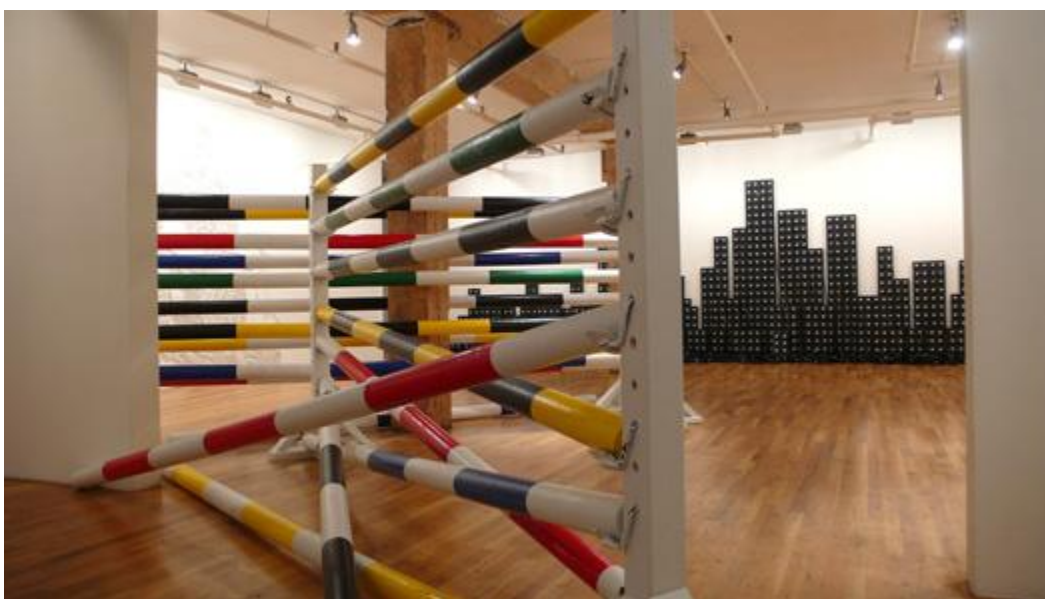
Figure 6-8





*Embargo*, 2004  
dimensions variable

Figure 9



*Obstacles (19 Poles)*, 2007  
19 poles, 6 schooling standards, 16 horse cups

62 x 173 x 43 inches (10 poles)  
 62 x 143 x 43 inches (9 poles)

Fatmi scrambles the spectacular narratives that marginalize mundane representations of events. In *Embargo*, 2004, (figs. 6-8) Fatmi bounds several rugs in plastic seals on a bare tile floor with brooms stationed at one end of the room. The brooms hoist flags of the G8 members whose embargo on Iraq caused mass starvation of mostly Iraqi children. The brooms become implicated in the sweeping of the floor that has scattered about fine rugs turned useless by their plastic seals. In a later work, *Obstacles (19 Poles)*, 2007, Fatmi paints stripes on the bars held by obstacles meant for horse jumping. The obstacles create a disturbance or impediment in the space, much like police barricades. The obstacles signify a desire to obstruct the flow of the space, which becomes quixotic considering that we do not know the reason for the obstruction. *Obstacles* reflects the seemingly unreasonable authority that obstructs movement from one end of the room to the other, critiquing the barriers or obstacles imposed on those who are unrepresented in conflicts.

Figure 10



*Ovalproject*, 2001-04  
 Résidence Centre culturel le Chaplin,  
 Mantes-la-Jolie

In *Ovalproject*, 2001-04, (fig. 10) Fatmi includes residents in Val Fourré, France in the process of producing a televised network for broadcasting images meant to represent the local community. Fatmi says, “The objective is to create and broadcast images, to be a part of this loop that connects the satellite dish to television in the native land” (Hadria, Cohen Michèle, “My audience is the person sitting next to me,” *interview with Mounir Fatmi*, pg. 3). Fatmi’s work opens up the possibility for the subject to autonomously generate their self-image, to imagine themselves separate from the calcifying spectacles that supposedly symbolize their identity. Fatmi’s work posits identity within an array of possibilities as an alternative to the “bad” or non-existent images that the media corporations place upon those not of the capitalist class. Fatmi poses an alternative identity to the representations of such communities whose country of

origins and residence marginalizes their presence in society at large. Many of the residents in Val Fourré emigrated from Morocco and have been met with increased segregation from the urban districts of Mantes la Jolie or Paris and a ghettoization of the suburbs.

Fatmi's projects disrupt the spectacles that mask identity. The shadows of spectacular symbols appear authoritative; however, their facture into the liminal appearance of mundane objects such as heaps of books, VHS tapes and rubix cubes render them absurd. This play does not inscribe any particular quality to the identity of the subject. Nor does the subject appear as the author of a particular narrative. Instead, the subject may sidestep, scramble or shuffle to enter into a work.

Fatmi's reverence for identity, a reverence to belong, irreverently resists simplistic and hegemonic narratives constructing identity. He feels at ease parodying capitalism as much as Islamic fundamentalism. By humor, Fatmi sharply critiques various interpellations that mystify the mundane experiences of the subject outside of the capitalist class of a global empire. In these works, identity does not belong solely to the symbols in the annals of history. Rather, the subject locates within a discontinuous sequence of events where the immediate orientation to an object may not be what it seems. In this way, Fatmi's work disorients the subject to the interpellations that prevent the autonomous viewing of identity.

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