



KARTHIK PANDIAN & ANDROS ZINS-BROWNE / THE GREAT INDOORS

ATLAS REVISITED

In *Atlas Revisited*, visual artist Karthik Pandian and choreographer Andros Zins-Browne stage the making, unmaking and remaking of a dance about freedom and the treachery often required to realize images of it.

In 2012, Pandian and Zins-Browne visited the Atlas Film Studios in the desert of Ouarzazate, Morocco. There, in front of film sets from previous Hollywood productions, they hired a group of studio camels and tried to persuade them to dance.

The result of this endeavor can be seen in their 2014 video *Atlas/Inserts* - a choreography that casts the camel both as a political animal and a technology of movement. Now with *Atlas Revisited*, their latest collaboration, the artists look back at the project and beyond. In a performance using text, movement, and moving image, they question their own motivations and the consequences of their pursuit of an image of freedom.

Drawing on new video material, shot at EMPAC in Troy, NY in front of a green screen with American camel-actors, they pose the question of whether *Atlas/Inserts* was actually a ruse. Was the coercion depicted actually the performance of high-priced American talent keyed into background footage from Morocco? Were the artists documenting a shoot or acting in one?

BACKGROUND (Atlas/Inserts, 2014)

In 2012, we- choreographer Andros Zins-Browne and visual artist Karthik Pandian traveled to the Atlas Film Studios in the deserts of Ouarzazate, Morocco to make a film. We cast an ensemble of five film camels and costumed them in custom-made outfits embroidered with coins. In front of standing film sets left behind by earlier- mostly Hollywood- film productions of Ancient Egypt, Mecca, Jerusalem and others, we set ourselves the task of trying to persuade the camels to dance. More specifically, we attempted to choreograph the camels to perform excerpts of the Merce Cunningham/ Charles Atlas dance-film Channels/ Inserts (1982). While the aims of this project were admittedly daunting if not wholly improbable from the beginning, we did -to some degree- achieve our goal and the results are evident in two moving image works, Atlas (Statements, Art Basel, 2012) and Atlas/Inserts (Artists' Film Biennial, ICA London 2014).

INTRODUCTION (An Image of Freedom, a Situation of Constraint)

Completing these works, however, seemed only to engender more questions than it had answered. Firstly, while the project had started with an interest in the Arab Spring revolutions- the images representing these events and the fervor surrounding them- we asked ourselves what the complicated legacy of the revolutions since 2012 meant to the future of the project. We had initially intended to cast the camels as the worker bodies of the desert, an (intentionally problematic) analogy for the Arab Spring protestors, now moving on their own as liberated bodies in an autonomous zone of movement expression. But after the shoot, we asked ourselves how the means by which we had produced these images- mainly, pulling the camels by fishing-line to get them to execute the choreography- say more about trying to represent freedom than our ideals for the film itself? In other words, didn't coercing camels into producing an image of freedom speak volumes about the situation in the Arab world, its relationship to the West's representations of the revolutions, and about the politics of making images in general?

While we found the result of the film to be a success, the means of producing it remained problematic in interesting ways for us- both artistically and politically. In trying to produce an image of freedom, we had wound up producing a situation of constraint. Feeling that the previous project had opened the doorway to the next, we decided to launch a third iteration of Atlas. With Atlas Revisited we have expand on some our earlier questions from wholly different perspectives, combining previous and new footage with our own bodies on stage.

THE NEXT HUMP ("I've been told it's a documentary. But I don't know the meaning of that word."- J.L. Godard)

The impact a documentary image can make is often premised not on the shock of the event, but on how the image of the event is composed. How can we distinguish documentary from artistic images from those which blatantly want to entertain? Is there a difference any longer? With these questions in mind, we had planned to return to Morocco to shoot the same film again. This time though, we would set up a second

camera shooting us at all times, capturing us directing and negotiating the images we wanted to 'document.'

When we were asked by EMPAC -a performing arts center in Troy, NY which specializes in hi-tech productions- to propose a project to them, however, we began to imagine a new direction for the camels. We decided that rather than return to Morocco, we would do a second shoot to mirror our earlier one, but this time in front of a green screen where we could question whether we went to Morocco in the first place, or if the project which we show footage of and offer an artist talk about, was in fact all created virtually. With the second shoot, we staged the making of a political film, replete with the cast, not only of camels, but of camera-people, crew, trainers, interns, and ourselves trying to capture the perfect image.

The B-roll footage from Morocco is full of quite shocking abuses by the camel handlers, many of which we found ourselves unable to stop or change without shutting down the shoot entirely. At EMPAC in front of the green screen we asked the camel trainer to instruct the camels to reproduce the same movements as the Moroccan camels being mistreated. By shooting our attempt to recreate some of the more violent scenes from Morocco, we wanted to question whether the abuses by the camel handlers in Morocco were real, digitally fabricated, or perhaps more specifically, what it would mean to even ask whether images of injustice might be fabricated? The idea of a Western camel performing the difficult plight of a Moroccan Camel from within the comfort of a studio seemed relevant to the history of the Hollywood imaginary and the making of images of 'the other'. It also speaks to our position as western artists armed with technology, hoping to make a work of art about the protestor 'over there'.

The performance therefore installs a rhythm of using moving image to establish what other footage, actions, or descriptions destabilize, contradict and undo. This genuinely raises questions of veracity, authorship, and who's story or perspective to believe. Confusing the roles between director, actor, extra, double, documentary and fictional footage- and their respective image repertoire- grainy, handheld cell phone camera on the one hand and HD, motion capture, computer animated and green screen keyed-in-image technologies on the other, all contribute to the sense of the exponential growth of information and the inverse relationship this has had with our sense of certitude.

THE NEXT STAGE (And a Few More Humps)

Our first step in making the stage material for this performance has been starting to write an 'unreliable' artist talk about the project, one where we look back at what we did, but explain it in a non-linear, contradictory, and quasi-fictional fashion. For this, we speak about our initial intentions from the voice of slightly loftier, more naive versions of ourselves. Here, the goal isn't parody, but to try and express the project through the voice of 'The Western Contemporary Artist'- who has an ideal to use the dancing camel as a fresh and radical image for the Arab Spring. Footage from our B-roll, often contradicts what we say in the Artist Talk: by juxtaposing impassioned but idealistic artists with the seeming evidence of footage, we hope to implicate ourselves within these acts of violence.

We have also written both real and imagined descriptions of cellphone footage from the Arab Spring. From a point-of-view perspective, we want to bring out the relationship between the body of the camera person in these videos and

the events that they recorded. Here we're interested in the connections between these images, (where the camera person seemingly has no control over the event they're recording) and highly constructed, staged images. Twisting these cellphone video descriptions- some of which are quite exhilarating and/ or violent into passionate imaginary descriptions of scenes we as artists would like to shoot, and ultimately to the imaginations of destruction by a jihadi-like character- complicates the public's ability to fully empathize with or reject any of these viewpoints.

THE LEGACY OF THE ARAB SPRING IN THE AGE OF ALTERNATIVE FACTS (The Trump That Broke The Camel's Back)

What do we say in 2017, when the spirit of freedom from the Arab Spring protests six years ago has led to a resurgence of dictatorial governance in many countries and the rise of extremist groups such as ISIS in the midst of ensuing Middle Eastern and North African political instabilities? What do we say when the West, the supposed alternative to such oppressions experiences an almost opposite problem- too much freedom of information, post-truth, and 'alternative facts'? In the miasma that is today's image economy- truth, politics, entertainment, and fiction rears its many-headed body, and all we know in the end is that we can never really know. 'Oh Dearism' as Adam Curtis called it- the feeling that its so overwhelming that we don't know what we can do- often results. In the midst of this rubble, subtle lines of objectivity might be found, but might also just be drowned out by what sounds or looks better to us, because after all, we've been trained by the very technology with which we consume these images, to be users- so why shouldn't we be users of truth too?

In a new section of the performance which we're working now, a virtually manipulated voice directs scenes from a media control room of 'images of freedom' that were the precursors of the Arab Spring- an Iraqi journalist throwing his shoes at President Bush, Bush landing on an aircraft carrier to declare 'Mission Accomplished', the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein at Firdos Square... While these images might be indelibly recollected in our minds, the frenzy of the control room directing the lighting, editing, research information, computer graphics etc. in order to capture these seemingly simple images gets at the complications involved with today's mediated truths. Simultaneously, projected will be footage which overlaps our two shoots in Morocco and Troy, in which the camels on the greenscreen follow the pathways of the camels from Morocco in the background, led by a trainer in a greenscreensuit, who disappears into the background image as she's 'keyed out'. All layers between real and virtual blur and it becomes difficult to distinguish what's what or who's leading who. The scene evokes the media circus in which we operate, the environment from which we try to reliably draw our information and our outrage. But it also points to something we're encountering more frequently now- the aesthetics of confusion- where the storyteller gives up on trying to tell the truth, and like a politician- tries to realize how powerful confusion can be.

BIOGRAPHIES

American artist **Karthik Pandian** has held solo exhibitions at The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bétonsalon, Paris; and Midway Contemporary Art, Minneapolis among others. Pandian's work was featured in the inaugural L.A. Biennial at the Hammer Museum as well as in numerous international exhibitions including *La Triennale: Intense Proximity* at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris; *Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015* at Whitechapel Gallery, London; *Film as Sculpture* at Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels; and the 4th Marrakech Biennale, *Higher Atlas*. In 2011, Pandian received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award.

Andros Zins-Browne is an American choreographer who lives and works in Brussels. His work consists of performances at the intersection between installation, performance and conceptual dance.

Andros' works have been presented internationally both in theatres and exhibition spaces including Centre Pompidou, Paris; Dance Umbrella and the ICA, London; Het Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Yvonne Lambert gallery and the HAU theater, Berlin; De Singel, Antwerp; Vooruit, Gent; MDT, Stockholm; Kaaitheater and The Villa Empain, Brussels; EMPAC, Troy, New York and the Theater Festival Impulse, Düsseldorf where he received the Goethe Institute Award in 2011 for *The Host*. In 2013 he founded his own association, **The Great Indoors**.

PRESS

'Atlas Revisited' at EMPAC makes a political statement - with camels

**Tresca Weinstein
Times Union
March 30, 2016**

Trying something new has its struggles

In our media-saturated world, creating something new is becoming an increasingly difficult feat – and it's even tougher if you're trying to make a meaningful political statement, too.

That explains a lot about the dancing camels in "Atlas Revisited," a new multimedia performance by visual artist Karthik Pandian and dancer/choreographer Andros Zins-Browne, which will be shown at EMPAC Friday at 8 p.m.

"The challenge for a lot of artists of our generation is how to speak about current events with an image language that feels fresh, not like you're just watching the news," said Zins-Browne, who lives and works in Brussels and has performed his own dance pieces throughout Europe.

In 2012, inspired by the Arab Spring movement, the artists – who met 15 years ago at Brown University – decided to merge their respective mediums in pursuit of an unexpected artistic and politically minded creation.

"Andros was in Brussels and I was in Los Angeles, but we were both seeing images of a revolution spreading throughout the Middle East, images that were a vital element of sparking that revolution," recalled Pandian, whose sculpture and video installations have been shown around the country and in Europe. "We felt an urgency to speak to something very important happening in the world."

To do so, they went far afield. At Atlas Film Studios in the Moroccan desert – where scenes from numerous Hollywood movies, including "Jewel of the Nile" and "Gladiator," have been filmed – they hired a group of studio camels and tried to persuade them to dance. Their concept was to restage sections of the 1982 dance film "Channels/Inserts," by Merce Cunningham and Charles Atlas – using camels.

It was an idea based on two metaphors: the camel as a symbol of a burdened people, and dancing as a symbol of freedom and the ability to choose one's own life path. The question they were investigating, Zins-Browne said, was, "What would it look like if the camel would revolt, stop carrying everybody's stuff and start doing something else with its body – like dancing?"

They chose "Channels/Inserts" partly because of the "Atlas" pun and the fact that Cunningham was a choreographer and Atlas an artist working with the moving image, but also because "their work, with its hand-held, close-up style of capturing moving bodies, is formally similar in many ways to the Arab Spring and other protest videos," Zins-Browne said.

But there was one problem: The camels didn't really want to dance. The artists and the camels' handlers (many of whom were children, working full-time) tried all kinds of ways to get them to move in tandem: tempting them with food or hay, roping them together, attempting to designate a leader for the others to follow. They even considered using fishing line to guide them, then editing it out of the footage, but they didn't have the technology.

"We couldn't ignore a certain sense of exploitation that we ourselves were producing by making this work," Zins-Browne said. "The irony was really stark: We went there to produce an image of freedom, and we were employing kids who were coercing animals to produce an image for two Western artists."

Shaken by the experience, they put the project away for a couple of years, then returned to the footage in 2014 to cut the video "Atlas/Inserts." In the process, ideas for a second chapter began to percolate.

"Atlas Revisited" was created during a residency at EMPAC in January. The artists again hired camels (two American professionals who have appeared in commercials and with the Rockettes in "Radio City Christmas Spectacular"), but this time their approach juxtaposed fantasy with transparency: They used a gigantic green screen and special effects, but also included footage of the creation process, including the production crew at work. Along with video from both Morocco and EMPAC, the piece includes text and live dancing by the two artists.

"The performance presents possibilities, some contradictory and some that may seem fantastical," Zins-Browne said. "It raises several questions that we don't necessarily answer: Why did we go to Morocco? Did we go to Morocco? What does it mean if we went to Morocco?"

Underlying these are more universal questions about art-making, the difference between freedom and images of freedom, and how to speak about politics in a way that's not superficial (particularly relevant in an election year, the artists note). "There's an idea that politics is always 'over there' – in Egypt, or in Tunisia, or wherever," Pandian said. "The performance is enabling us to say, 'No, it's here, too.' A lot of these themes are alive in America in 2016."

And yet she moves

Elke Buhr,
Monopol

(...) “Today, for the first time, it’s the other way around: dance is taking over museums and infiltrating art. And many see the fusion of dance and art as self-evident, much like the younger generation of artists who are combining means of expression freely instead of wasting too much thought on what exactly it is that they’re practising – whether it is performance, video or painting. “The artists are far ahead of the institutions”, Andros Zins-Browne explains. “In theatres, for example, everyone still wants a piece to have a beginning and an ending at a set time. Museums make a hassle of setting up the infrastructure needed for dance. The Stedelijk, for example, has built in an extra performance room in its new building – only the door is far too small to bring in stage sets.”

The switch from art to stage performance and vice versa is often an effective way to push not only the media, but also the institutions to their limits. At Isabel Lewis’ rare theatre performances, she often surprises staff by wanting to arrange not only her own performance, but the whole hog, from ticketing to the foyer. Zins-Browne, in turn, irritates visitors with an open ending in his latest work “The Middle Ages”, on show at the Berlin Hebbel am Ufer in November. After the piece takes on a chronology of dance routines since the Renaissance, it arrives in a future dominated by social media and the dancers repeat their movement meme in potentially endless variation: it becomes installation.

Dancers like Zins-Browne appreciate the freedom that the encounter with art offers: “As a child I learned classical ballet, then modern dance, but I quit because I felt that I couldn’t express myself that way. It wasn’t until I studied ’60s Body Art, with Vito Acconci or Chris Burden, that I returned to working with the body, and, therefore, to dance.” Merce Cunningham, who, inspired by his life partner and close collaborator John Cage, introduced the principle of coincidence to dance, best betokens the innovation that modern ballet needs so much, as far as Zins-Browne is concerned – even though he finds the American avant-gardist’s abstract, almost robotic movement language just about the strangest way a human being can possibly move. “I want to incorporate that in my next project”, he laughs. He has even tried to teach camels in the desert one of Cunningham’s choreographies, together with American artist Karthik Pandian. “I think their weird, stalking gait suits it perfectly.” The video is to be the first part of his new piece, “Atlas Revisited”, which premieres next spring.

The invasion of dancers in the system of arts comes at a time when contemporary art is testing its boundaries more than ever – and perhaps it even helps to better grasp the ongoing changes. “I notice that there are increasingly more visual art exhibitions which I would consider as choreographic”, Andros Zins-Browne says. “Take Philippe Parreno for example: to me, his large display at the Palais de Tokyo in 2013 was performative.” When Parreno lights lamps in specific rhythms,

plays music and sounds and lets them subside, he's performing a dance with objects: "It's about movement in time. If this dynamic's there, the material doesn't have to be a human body."

Sometimes even a traditional sculpture that's not moving can carry dance within itself. The Frenchman Jimmy Robert is currently proving that in a breathtaking manner: his photographs don't hang flat on the wall, they nestle in corners of rooms, they fold and bend - like in the amazingly beautiful work "Reprise" from 2010, where images of a Japanese Butoh dancer softly flow from a tabletop.

In May, a dancer animated a metal fold sculpture in Robert's Berlin gallery so that it looked as though it were his skirt. And at his most recent opening in the M-Museum in the Belgian city of Leuven, Robert and a female performer conducted a danced dialogue with his works: "It's like an extra language I use, to further extend the expression of art", he explains in an interview. This tall man, who has the physique of a dancer and was born in Guadeloupe in 1975, studied art at Goldsmiths College in London and never had a classic dance education. "But I was always interested in all kinds of movement: yoga, gestures, sign language, voguing, ballet. All these techniques have an influence on how we move." To Robert, the body is the point of reference for his art. That's why paper is his favourite material: it reminds him of the human skin, and when he looks at writing, he sees the movement of the hand that writes. Robert consciously wants to use the awkward position of the non-dancer in his performances. To him, all movements are equally valuable: he doesn't need to worry about the hierarchies and over-determinations that classical ballet schooling impresses on a body.

It's almost amusing to see how the people who cross borders always look for what they can't find in that other system. Performing in a theatre once, Jimmy Robert found it wonderful how intensely people can concentrate and to what extent they're able to notice details.

He enjoys it just as much as Isabel Lewis and Andros Zins-Browne enjoy people in their audience coming and going as they please. Zins-Browne, who sees the whole history of modern dance in every movement, perceives the forms of expression in art as less complex. But this idea would appear strange to a contemporary artist such as Robert, who not only alludes to modernism in his installations, but also transposes the fall of the folds in antique painting to paper and, what's more, poses questions about post-colonialism, race and gender.

The prevalence of dance in art is a sign of the new freedom of thought that the new generation claim for themselves. But it's also a sign of a kind of nostalgia taking over every art form that has entered the phase of self-historicizing. Contemporary art longs for the body and it takes it alive. And dance joyfully throws itself into the arms of art, because it's had enough of barre drills.

TOUR

01.04.2016 EMPAC, Troy, NY (USA)
09 > 10.02.2017 Kaaistudio's, Brussels (BE)
15.02.2017 BUDA, Kortrijk (BE)
29.06.2017 Inteatro, Polverigi (IT)

more dates tbc

CREDITS

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TRAILER

<https://vimeo.com/208815084>
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HIROS

Hiros is the joint venture of the management offices Margarita Production and Mokum. Together we continue to build a solid framework for individual artists and artistic projects.

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