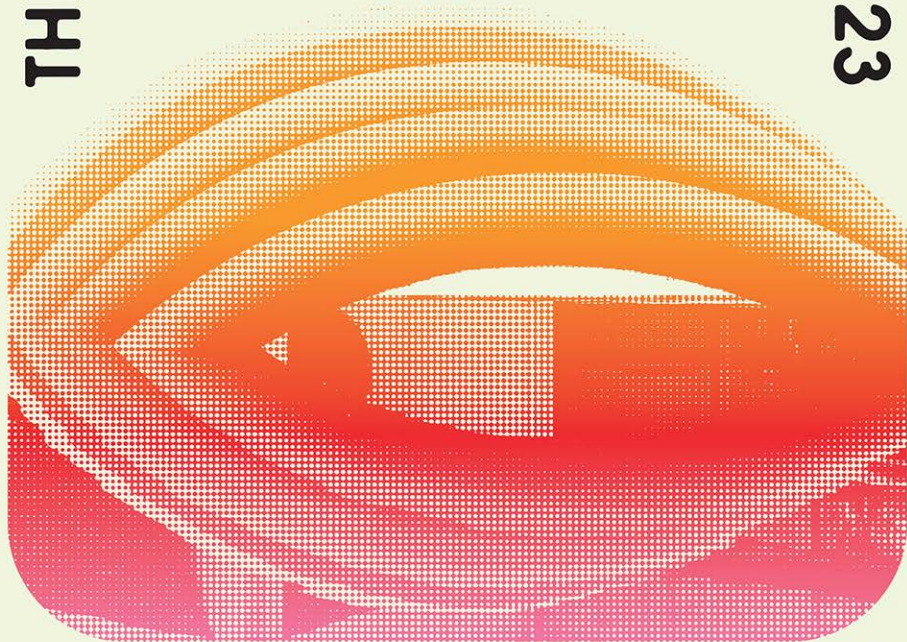


THE UNCONTAINABLE COLLECTIONS RESEARCH PROJECT 2023

PERMANENCE/  
IMPERMANENCE

Mohammed Laouli  
Interview Transcript



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Hugh LeRoy, *Rainbow Piece*, 1972, York University

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Art Gallery of York University

Uncontainable Collections Research Project 2023  
*Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art*

**Interview with Mohammed Laoui**  
by AGYU (Allyson Adley & Jenifer Pappararo)  
with live French translations  
by Meryem Alaoui

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Interview conducted: Monday, April 03, 2023

Editors: Allyson Adley, Jenifer Pappararo & Michael Maranda

Copy Edit: Danielle St. Amour

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Art Gallery of York University, Keele Campus, Accolade East Building, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3  
Canada • <http://agy.uart> • [agy@yorku.ca](mailto:agy@yorku.ca)

The following interview with with artist Mohammed Laouli is part of the Art Gallery of York University's Uncontainable Collections Research Project, an annual workshop series initiated in 2022 as part of our drive to make York University's art collection more accessible for research purposes and to the public. It is a program in which we are learning in public, wanting to make our process of research and knowledge-gathering transparent and in the present with our audiences and colleagues.

This second edition is developed under the theme *Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art*, which aims to learn from involved arts practitioners the challenges and importance of public art, addressing the very concept of 'public' and 'publicness' and re-evaluating how to engage with communities and record histories. Time is a key motif we draw through this interview — time as it relates to histories, particularly who and what gets represented and the power structures that control these decisions. The following conversation re-orienting our understanding of how public art can function and exist as an alternative to traditional practices. Most notably, it turns away from historic and commemorative monuments and grand formalist gestures that demand space and define time as permanent.

This interview is one of four engagements with curators and artists who conceive of and present counter-models to the conventions of public art. We engaged a series of practitioners who understand public art as a form that emerges with an acknowledgement of the time in which it was produced, and with an understanding of the possibility of accepting impermanence: **Allison Glenn** (US), **Vanessa Kwan** (Canada), **Mohammed Laouli** (France, Germany, and Morocco), and **Raqs Media Collective** (India).

These interviews were conducted in preparation for an online panel discussion, addressing the principles and ideals of democracy in how public space is inhabited; how decolonial acts of resistance de-centre monuments that glorify settler-colonial histories; what role communities can play in the commissioning of public art; and the limitations and risks of working in public spaces.

Six interview questions form the basis of these conversations. Each participant received them in advance of a virtual meeting, which is transcribed below. Preliminary questions were workshopped with York University graduate class ARTH 6000, led by professor Anna Hudson including Abbey Humphreys-Morris, Kimberley Rush-Duyguluer, Jamie Cameron, Zachary Scola-Allison, Bahareh Rostakiani, Isabelle Segui, Julia De Kwant, and Rana Khattab.

**AGYU:** Your performance work in the public realm led us to you and this request to participate in this series which examines the complexity of situating art within public spaces. We were particularly enticed by your performance *Les Sculptures n'étaient pas blanches*. Beyond whiteness. Intersecting aesthetic and political contestations to the colonial order, 2020, which in many ways set the tone for this iteration of the Uncontainable Collections Research Project and led to its theme of “permanence/impermanence,” as you so gently yet critically address a deep tension in placing and commissioning work in the public realm. To begin a series of questions that more generally relate to public art, we thought to start with this artwork. Can you please describe for our audiences this performance; your ideation process and your experience of producing the work?

**Mohammed Laouli:** *Les sculptures n'étaient pas blanches* is an intervention in public space on a statue called *Colonies d'Afrique*, 1923–24, which is located in the city centre of Marseille. *Colonies d'Afrique* is a statue made by Louis Bottinelly, a sculptor of the colonial era. It was commissioned by the city of Marseille for the National Colonial Exhibition of 1922. This statue celebrates an allegory of the African continent in the form of a lascivious naked woman who constructs the colonial message through a primitivist representation of Africa. During the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, this statue was covered in red paint by an anti-colonial activist group.

My intervention touches several aspects of this colonial monument. When I discovered the statue, a representation of an African woman, covered with red paint, the paint added a layer of violence to the violence of the original representation. When the anti-colonial movement attacks the colonial heritage represented by statues of men such as slave traders, the white men responsible for this violence, it makes sense to me. But here, in the case of *Colonies D'Afrique*, the representation is different. *Colonies D'Afrique* is a sexualized, exoticized woman, a black African woman, and fighting back or committing this pictorial projection with red paint is different; it was problematic for me. Against this background I wanted to take a position as an artist who works on colonial heritage and its traces and how we come to terms with this heritage in public space today. Therefore, I wanted to introduce a notion of care by thoughtfully and gently washing the body of the sculpture during a performance.

But there are more reasons for me to develop this work. At one point, I discovered the German art historian Johann Winckelmann, who developed a well-known art historical theory that the whiteness of classical Greek statues was related to the superiority of the white race. In the

last few decades, it has become more widely known that Greek statues were in fact coloured, and that Winckelmann's theory was not true. Winckelmann is an influential figure in art history, with his theories being referenced by art historians for more than 250 years. Winckelmann's theory accounts for both the advent and the prevalence of whiteness of the statues and sculptures in the Western world, including the sculptures exhibited in museums and produced in fine arts schools.

And so, in this performance, I tried to establish a ritual of cleaning or taking care—especially the cleaning and taking care of the body of this African woman represented in the Colonies d'Afrique statue, who finds herself defaced by red paint. I used this cleaning gesture to remind us how much the modern aesthetic project and the paradigm of whiteness aimed to root the fine arts in a canon through colour. Aesthetic categories, in this case, were determined by racial categories. Basically, what interested me with the performance was the act, the ritual, of cleaning the statue (which is white Carrara marble) of the red splattered paint as a reminder that the aesthetic project of Western art is determined by racial categories.

While doing the intervention I noticed a large group of people from the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa, so-called illegal migrants that spend their days at the train station, around the sculpture. They became the public audience for my work, which was beautiful and violent at the same time. It was almost as though the colonial exhibition was still happening in the here-and-now. When I performed, these communities were present; one of my objectives was to perform for them.

There is another dimension to the work, signified by the blue uniform I wore during the performance. Blue overalls are a symbol of the African immigrants who are very often working as gargonnes and who also take care of and clean up the metropolises of France since the 1930s. My gesture is intertwined with the Black Lives Matter movement, and, for me, the purpose of the work was to highlight the role of the past in comprehending the present.

**AGYU:** We should unpack some of the vocabulary surrounding public art. With this in mind, we highlight the word public, and ask you, what is your understanding of publicness as it relates to public art, the public sphere, public space, or the public? How does your understanding of public inform your approach to curating and producing art within this realm?

**ML:** The definition of public art remains ambiguous, even for me, because public is really complex. It is linked to public space and the public

sphere—so for me personally, public art is any form of art shared in public space, either in monumental form as a permanent artistic installation or as a very subtle, short-lived work or as an artwork perfectly integrated into the space.

I was born in Morocco, and grew up in the capital in a marginalized, underprivileged district. In these neighbourhoods, the public and the inhabitants are disconnected from contemporary art. This experience had an important impact on my work, and my thinking about the dialogue between my art and the public.

My artistic work takes the form of video, photography, installation, drawing, and painting. When I started showing my work in galleries and museums, I noticed that it was intended for a bourgeois upper class, and the working class that I come from did not actually have access. From that moment, I understood that I had to intervene in the public space with artistic accents that included both the inhabitants and the public space of the neighbourhood. What really interested me was to create a link between my artistic work and its environment through an audience that is not familiar with art.

**AGYU:** I noticed that your public work in your community could be characterized by an immediacy and a generosity of spirit. I'm thinking of the work with the white winged horse, Pegasus, where you created these gestural moments of magic, warmth, and generosity, whereas your work in the gallery has a more didactic approach, since it references multiple concepts and questions that have to be solved over time.

**ML:** Actually, it's a bit more complicated than that. When I started doing interventions in public spaces, it was really for this audience. The intervention you referenced with the horse is called Everything is Sacred. It's not Pegasus; it's actually a horse, a Buraq. According to Muslims, the prophet Mohammed rode a Buraq to the heavens. Pegasus is a Western reference and does not relate to this work. So, I played with the image of a horse in an abandoned public space in Salé. It was a horse that was abandoned every day, tied up in the same place—it worked at night to pick up the trash. I used the image of a horse with wings to talk about humans. The horse becomes a representation of a marginalized, abandoned community. I used a sacred figure that is anchored in the collective imagination of the neighbourhood's inhabitants. Over the course of a month, I produced a two-minute video. Every day I created a ritual where I put the wings on the horse, and then all the children in the neighbourhood would gather around, singing and talking with this animal. The children shared lots of interesting comments during their time interacting with the horse, and that was beautiful.

**AGYU:** Thank you, this segues perfectly into the next question: Public art has often been associated with principles and ideals of democracy in how public space is inhabited. When art is placed in civic spaces, can it reveal, interrogate, and disrupt the takeover and monopoly of public space by private capitalist interests? What role can public art play in expanding and amplifying our claim to public spaces?

**ML:** First I'm going to say something in relation to the previous question—which I forgot to explain. In my journey, I came from Morocco, where I was already a practicing artist, and then migrated to France where the understanding of public space is contextually different. After having worked in Morocco for 20 years as an artist, I arrived in Marseille in 2016. Suddenly, my notion of public space changed. The historical context was also different. Both of these influenced my artistic practice in public space. Marseille is a cosmopolitan port city, with large North African and Sub-Saharan communities. So, a large number of the inhabitants are immigrants from former French colonies, and the traces of its colonial past are still very present in its urban spaces. This presence of colonial history in public space also had an impact on my work. This is where my interest in monuments and colonial heritage in public space really came from.

I do agree that art in public space is often commercialized and plays an important role in the capitalist system. But we must not forget that art in public space is also often initiated or taken over by the state and governments, either to make propaganda, or, more often, to give the state the impression of freedom of expression or open mindedness. So, public art is often about presenting artworks that don't change or impact structures and institutions. In this regard, I have personally decided to develop artistic gestures outside of these logics, clandestine gestures and interventions that can go unnoticed and that can sometimes be perceived as risky.

**AGYU:** Our next question is: In recent years, we have witnessed a global public reckoning centring around monuments that represent and glorify settler-colonial histories. Decolonial acts of resistance have in part focused on the defacement and dismantling of these signifiers of imperial domination. How have these recent developments impacted understandings and attitudes towards public art, and how have they impacted the field? Does the backlash speak to the obsolescence and futility of monuments, or can new monuments be reimaged through a decolonial lens? Who and how do we decide who or what gets commemorated?

**ML:** Public art can potentially play an important role in the claiming of

public space: by the inhabitants of a city or a village, for example. As I mentioned before, it can also be a tool of indoctrination in the case of totalitarian or conservative regimes. After the last anti-colonial resistance movement resulted in the defacing and dismantling of statues that glorify colonial violence, the world experienced a major shift that led to a new understanding and perception of these artifacts and their relationship to the public. The refusal to live with these representations in the public sphere reflects an awareness on the part of citizens of their common history. In order to create counter-narratives and to represent the colonial past differently, new approaches and visual forms have emerged in public space. Ideally public art can be a decolonial tool. This may happen if artists rise to the challenge and commit to reinventing images that represent the world in a more complex way. This would entail producing a public art that avoids dominant narratives by privileging our common histories and cultures.

**AGYU:** With that as context, what role can community members play in the commissioning of public art? Should they be part of the consultation process with artists? What should meaningful community input and engagement consist of, or look like? Do the processes of community involvement and the integration of community voices matter as much or more than the resulting artwork?

**ML:** This question is really very difficult. It seems to me personally that the notion of community is not the same in France, in America, and in Canada. I can't say much about that, but it seems risky to me to think of community as something homogeneous. For me, communities are diverse and complex, like all of society. And so, it seems to me important to always ask the question, who speaks for whom, from what position, and with what perspective or goal?

**AGYU:** Working in the public realm often carries material restrictions, platitudes of accessibility, and inferences to permanence. Do you see limitations or risks involved in public art? As the public realm can be an unsafe space, how can you mitigate risk of harm while also challenging conventions, norms, presumptions?

**ML:** Public space is far from easy to access, even in Europe. It is always a challenge to make interventions in public space, especially in a country where the political regime is wary of freedom of expression. I speak about this because I am in-between places; I work between multiple countries and the African context is completely different than the European context. I have personally experienced several incidents where I was stopped by the authorities while I was performing. To make interventions in the public, I have developed clandestine strategies that

take into consideration the time and the space of the intervention, but also the inherent risk. For example, when I made this intervention on Colonies D’Afrique, it was during the second Covid lockdown. It was really risky to do this intervention without authorization, because you have to go up the steps of the Saint Charles train station to get to the work. Also, I was touching State property, which could cause the police to stop me. This is made more complicated still by the fact that I do not have French papers; I only have a German residence permit. I could have gotten into trouble. Timing strategies are critical to being able to pull off unsanctioned performances in public space. And, to return to the second question, if I were to have applied for authorization to do this performance, this intervention would not have been able to take place. The red stain remained for two days, and after two days it was cleaned, whereas an official authorization would probably have taken at least 15 days to be granted. This is why I talk about the effectiveness of clandestine strategies: sometimes it’s more effective and efficient to act as an artist than to negotiate with the group and the community to make a work of art.

**AGYU:** This touches quite closely with our next question: How does the body or organization that commissions and/or owns a public work of art affect the public’s perception of the work, and/or their investment in maintaining it and seeing its value?

**ML:** In my opinion, for public art to be accepted and maintained by the public, it must be transparent and representative of its public.

**AGYU:** This echoes our earlier discussion about the challenges of placing artwork in the public sphere in a democratic space. When the state plays a role in how we interpret the work, it raises questions about the possibility of it being a decolonial gesture. What we’re trying to examine in this series are ideas of permanence and impermanence— your work renders the differences in these concepts quite clearly. Time as a theme figures very prominently in your work, along with a resistance to static colonial histories that have been monumentalized and rendered in marble. Your project *Ex-Voto*, 2017–, is very interesting because you are able to blend both permanence and impermanence by using the loaded material of marble within formal conventions while also employing lighter, more ethereal, gestures like graffiti. I wonder if you could speak a bit more about this conflation?

**ML:** So, *Ex-voto* is a project that started when I arrived in Marseille. I discovered the votive form for the first time at Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde, a very large church well-known in Europe. At the church, a huge 20-metre wall is covered by marble *ex-voto* slabs. There are several

forms of ex-voto, it is a very plastic form. It's an offering made to a divinity, a request for grace or in thanks for a benefit obtained. I discovered marble plaques with engravings from various ethnic communities, including Arabic, European, and Sub-Saharan African names. Later, when I was doing an artist residency in Algiers, I discovered a very famous church there called Notre-Dame d'Afrique. At this church, I discovered a wall with ex-votos and the names here were in Arabic and Berber. Against this background I started making marble ex-votos, but I changed the text. Instead of using a religious text, I used historical texts that relate to various major violent events and names of persons marking the history of colonization. For example, I started with the Berlin Conference, making an ex-voto to thank King Leopold II and Otto von Bismarck for the Conference and for dividing Africa in 1884–85. I chose major events such as so-called human zoos and colonial exhibitions that mark the history of colonization. In another example, I made an ex-voto thanking Maréchal Lyautey for the International Colonial Exhibition which took place in Paris in 1931 (Lyautey was the curator of this colonial exhibition). So, there is a direct link with the past and the present in public space.

I used the marble slab because it is a Catholic form, and it was important to emphasize the connection between colonialism and Catholicism. But my ex-votos in public space transform into something else. Like for example, the Ex-voto plaque where I symbolically thank the Renault car company. Renault was one of the first companies to start expatriating people from Maghreb to work in France. If you look at my website you will find a photo where I tagged "Merci" on a Renault. I had discovered a story about a Renault car that had been abandoned in a public space. It had belonged to a man who had worked at Renault in France and returned with his Renault car to Morocco and then died. Before he died, his only son, Salah, left to live without papers in Paris. Therefore, the car was abandoned in a public space and started to decay. At the same time, Salah, the owner's only son and heir, also deteriorates and suffers in Paris. These are images of Salah's inheritance: his father, who spent his whole life working for Renault; Salah, who ends up living illegally in Paris; and the car, which deteriorates in a public space in a working-class neighbourhood. That really sums up the whole immigration story for me. So that's when I decided to use the relic of the car as a kind of ex-voto suspended in space. It becomes a public work for the community, and also for the authorities because I also address them through this work. For this series, I have made twenty plaques and did three public interventions. It is an ongoing project, because it is so rich and layered that it's not finished yet.

To close, I want to speak about another important ongoing project

called *Fluid Boundaries*, 2013– . It is a project about migration, the status of artists in the contemporary global world, and the politics and policies of European migration. *Fluid Boundaries* is a textual and visual archive that I began working on with my partner Katrin Ströbel, an artist from Germany, since 2013.

The project takes movements of migration and transit between Europe and Northern Africa as a starting point to examine the cultural, social, and economic impacts of colonialism and European migration politics in Europe and Northern Africa. We are interested in how these issues influence the identity and everyday life of humans in general, but particularly of artists in an era of a globalized art world.

We are interested in geographical but also cultural, historical, psychological, and personal borders. Making passages and overcoming or accepting borders has become an important part of everyday life for artists, but it describes also the reality of thousands of migrants that crossed the seas over the last few centuries: From Europe to America; from Africa to Europe; from Old Europe to the New World; from one life to another, back and forth. Until now, the project took place in Rabat/Salé, Playa Blanca/Tangiers, around Lake Constance, Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Marseille.

At each location, we develop a site-specific installation, a kind of “nomadic boat.” This temporary shelter, built on local boats, is a symbol for the voluntary as well as involuntary forms of nomadic life today: unstable, temporary, precarious, always in motion, always in transit. Through building the installation, we get in contact with the local habitants and very often they share stories of transit and displacement with us. Those stories built the basis of our archive. It is the starting point for further installations, videos, photographic series, and much more.

Born in 1972 in Morocco, **Mohammed Laouli** lives and works between Rabat, Marseille, and Stuttgart. His artistic practice explores themes of postcolonialism, feminism, and cultural migration. Spanning the disciplines of painting, collage, video, sculpture, photography, and public interventions, his work examines and raises questions around structures of power and systems of domination that manifest across societies. Laouli's work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions as well as group exhibitions including the 13th edition of the Bamako Encounters – African Biennale of Photography; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; Manifesta 13 Marseille; Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne; the Tate Modern, London; Cube Independent Art Room, Rabat; Dak'Art Biennial, Dakar; Kunstmuseum Mülheim; Grassi Museum, Leipzig; Institut de Monde Arabe, Paris; ZKM | Centre for Art and Media, Karlsruhe; and the Marrakech Biennale.

The Uncontainable Collections Research Project presented by the Art Gallery of York University is a series which aims to serve as a pedagogical tool for faculty, students and arts practitioners while also informing the development of collection policies that promote ethical and current practices of collections care as our gallery expands and transitions into the Goldfarb Gallery of York University. This transformation will include the renovation of our current spaces into a Visible Vault for the University's art collection which includes over 1700 works. Each workshop in the Uncontainable Collections series is anchored by a small selection of works from connected streams through the collection, as well as topics pertaining to contemporary strategies for collections management such as: acquisitions, community engagement, conservation, education, interpretative planning, repatriation, and the ethics of museological care.

This iteration *Permanence/Impermanence: The Life of Public Art* of the Uncontainable Collections series was conceived and produced collaboratively by AGYU staff Allyson Adley, Liz Ikiriko, and Jenifer Pappararo.

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