

Other stars

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(catalogue FUEGOGRATIS)

By his training, and since he began his career, Jordi Colomer has been interested in urban architecture: in the modernity of traditional buildings, as in *Arabian Stars*, or, sometimes very critically, in the post-modernity of contemporary constructions, as in *Anarchitekton* (2002-04), but also in temporal contrasts, notably between the medieval period and the current epoch. But it was when he saw Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Le Mura di Sana'a* (1971), a documentary and plea to UNESCO for the preservation of Yemen's architectural heritage, that Colomer felt a desire to make a work in the Yemeni desert and in cities such as Sana'a, Shibam and Aden.

In addition to its extraordinary beauty, which seems to have been forgotten by history, the country also offers a series of contrasts which, if wholly contemporary, are just as fascinating. "Yemen is like a medieval society with postmodern gadgets," Colomer observed in an interview.¹ It is indeed an extremely poor society that has retained the heritage of its tribal identities and finds itself in a fragile economic situation, with a growing population and relatively underdeveloped industrial activity. And yet, while the country seems to lack factories, its people still have objects such as mobile phones and plastic items made in China or India.

The setting of this false documentary is as important as the actors in the false fiction. In *Arabian Stars* the desert, but also the urban constructions, seem unreal, whereas in fact their inhabitants are the people we see walking in front of the camera and thus acting as performers in the video. Each of these buildings is home to an entire family, generation upon generation, and in fact the structures grow vertically in keeping with the growth of the family group. In one of the sequences shot in Sana'a, the long slow movement of the truck on which the camera is placed is all the more important in that it enables us to see and observe this very specific form of architecture, these "skyscrapers" in the middle of the desert.

The "actors" are the inhabitants of cities, mainly men—women no doubt being less prominent in public space—met during the journey. They carry brightly painted cardboard panels with inscriptions in Arabic. These give the names of well-known Yemenites and Western celebrities, both real and fictitious, phonetically transcribed. While this mixture joyfully records a European artist's encounters with members of an Arabian population, it also marks a reciprocal incomprehension: we do not know the contemporary poets Muhamed Al Zubeiri and Abdullah Al Baradoni, nor the singer Abo Bakr Saalem, nor the minister of human rights Amat al-Alim al-Susua, nor can we be sure that these panel-carriers really know James Bond, Barbie, Astérix, Santa Claus, Che Guevara, Mies van der Rohe or Picasso, although they are familiar with the Japanese cartoon character Pikachu.

Within each set of names, the Yemenite and the Western, the same levelling occurs: footballers are put on the same level as poets, just as political figures are

equal to movie heroes or singers. Just as mass culture can infiltrate a society with no hierarchy of values, so here different times, spaces and registers all merge. That, one might say, is the postmodern vision set out by *Arabian Stars*, with its possibly critical connotations: the omnipresence of a dominant Western culture in which everything is spectacle and commerce, confronting an ancestral local culture.

Nevertheless, Jordi Colomer places the emphasis more on the ambiguities engendered by the way *Arabian Stars* was made and the way it is shown, for the very genuine collaboration does not rule out a deep difference. As the ambiguous title suggests, this is a crossing of registers more than an unequivocal discourse. As often in Colomer's work, it is the shared consciousness of these ambiguities that accounts for the burlesque aspect of the work, with the effect of unresolved paradox producing a kind of absurd humour.

Jordi Colomer belongs to the generation of artists for whom the whole world is becoming an open-air studio. This is where his projects take place, be it in Romania, Brazil, Japan and Spain for *Anarchitekton*, in Yemen for this installation, or in Chile for the recent *En la pampa*. By measuring himself against these local situations, he aims to achieve a certain idea of universality.

The three parameters combined here—location, script, actors—are representative of the different modes of operation that stand at the limits between art, the real and fiction. They express a contemporary post-structuralist aesthetic. Shot as they are in a real-life setting, Colomer's works could be placed in the documentary category. Presenting as it does characters, in fact children who are asked to play a role, this work could be considered a fiction, a short movie. Structuring *Arabian Stars* in keeping with a personal rhythm and creating a specific set-up for its presentation (walls echoing the light green colour of Yemenite interiors, and as many unmatching chairs as there are panel carriers), Colomer bestows a poetic role on this installation, a role that emerges from the intertwining of the three registers. A certain vision of the world (he did not choose his countries and cities blindly), a personal relation to the false actors who are putting on a performance more than acting, and the artist's close attention to the parameters of the installation's reception in the museum, interweave at the heart of *Arabian Stars*.

As Jacques Rancière writes in *The Future of the Image*: "What might properly be called the fate of the image is the fate of this logical, paradoxical intertwining between the operations of art, the modes of circulation of imagery and the critical discourse that refers the operations of the one and the forms of the other to their hidden truth."²

1 "From Picasso to Pikachu. Jordi Colomer in conversation with William Jeffett," in *Jordi Colomer. Arabians Stars*, St. Petersburg (USA), Salvador Dalí Museum / Madrid, Museo nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2005, p. 144-151.

2 Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London, Verso, 2007.