

Kunsthalle Wien

THIS IS

ORNA MENTAT

Karlsplatz #SaadaneAfif  
19/9 – 18/11 2018

SAADANE  
AFIF

AFIF

For *This is Ornamental*, French conceptual and installation artist Saâdane Afif created new works for the Kunsthalle Wien exhibition space on Karlsplatz. Afif's practice is characterized by extreme variability – even fluidity – between forms, categories, inspirations and methods used. Always pushing the limits of the artwork as an object fashioned by a demiurge artist, he creates ever-changing works that are only temporarily crystallized. To create them, he appeals to collaborators of diverse horizons, who bring their subjectivity and their expertise, which he then re-appropriates and makes resound in his works, comparable to interminable feedback loops. For the artist, the author is not dead but multiplied ad infinitum. In the same way, the reception and the interpretation of his works are multiplied and amplified, first by their very structure: each collaboration is the manifestation of the subjective interpretation of an existing work and each incipient work is a remake, a continuation, a derivation, more or less free, of previous parts. But it is also by the seizure of all paratexts and hypertexts (including technical specifications) that the artist makes interpretation and reception key features of his oeuvre.

For the exhibition at Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz, a new inflection comes into play. Not only does Afif continue this method of collaboration, derivation and variation – always engaging the authorship of the work, its reification as an object and its reception. He also addresses the entire process of musealization, institutionalization, and, finally, of historicization. For *This Is Ornamental*, he invited the writer and poet Thomas Clerc<sup>1</sup> to create a script of a play, which was later entitled *L'Heptaèdre*. The play was inspired by one of Afif's earlier performance pieces, *Souvenir: La Leçon de Géométrie*, in which seven figures meet an eighth, Yasmine d'Ouezzan, its main character. In the show, the text of the play is screened on a LED panel. The figure of Yasmine d'Ouezzan is also the subject of a biographical exhibition featuring documents of her life presented on a wooden structure.

The title of the exhibition, *This Is Ornamental*, sounds like a counterpoint to the lesson that Adolf Loos wanted to deliver in 1910 when, in *Ornament and Crime*, he banished the ornament, which he described as superfluous and outmoded feature belonging to the field of architecture and crafts. He feared that the exiled ornament would seek shelter in the sphere of the liberal arts. The movement of abstraction in the arts, then abstract art, though defensively, would vindicate Loos's prediction, but in an opposite ideological direction. In the Western tradition, ornamentation as a discursive and formal device has until recently been seen as privileging the superficial pleasure of the eyes, understood as a periphery of a central subject that alone makes sense. Ornamentation occupies a very

different place in the Orient, where, through the religious prohibition of figuration, it has unfolded into a complex system aiming at cognitive and emotional aesthetic experience – far beyond the formalistic or universal-essentialist reading that the West has long made of it. In the exhibition, there is no decoration or variation on what we would typically read as ornamental. By bold reversal, the entire exhibition is presented as ornamental – and with it the themes that cross it: language, geometry, the figure of Yasmine, art. Far from being a pre-established formal category, the “ornamental” (as precisely used by the artist) becomes a somewhat differential and transversal relationship between figuration and abstraction, fine and applied arts, form and concept, image and text, high and low, the known and unknown. The title is both an affirmation and an antiphrasis. In this way, the artist not only inscribes his intervention at odds with the usual hierarchies of the visible but also opens a transcultural dialogue between the East and the West, playing on the respective and reciprocal projections and receptions that have defined a conflictual, stereotypical and often violent relationship.

Afif's art ultimately grows out of a political gesture that seeks to offer resistance to the idea of a linear and eventually completed process and to straightforward art consumption. He opens his works up and encourages viewers to experience them from a wide variety of perspectives. Rather than celebrating the death of the author or the relativity of the work of art, these constant feedback loops sustain an – often melancholic – meditation on vanity and impermanence. As long as the works of art undergo translation and declension, as long as they prompt – accurate or mistaken, expert or amateurish – comments, they stay alive and do not succumb to the reification fetishized by the art world.

***Souvenir: La Leçon de Géométrie***  
(*Souvenir: The Geometry Lesson*), 2014

In early 2014, Saâdane Afif presented the performance *Souvenir: La Leçon de Géométrie* as part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Marrakech Biennale. Professor Dahmad Boutfounast was invited to give geometry lessons on the legendary Jemaa El Fna square. This immense square, a former caravanserai at the gates of the souk, is a prominent place of tourism and public life in the city. At nightfall, acrobats, hucksters, storytellers, musicians, snake charmers, fortune-tellers and crooks of all kinds move about or perform in large circles formed by onlookers. Every day at dusk, in the midst of this almost unreal atmosphere, Professor Boutfounast gave his lessons. Equipped with a flipchart, he tackled the basics of Euclidean geometry in seven chapters: point, line, and plane; the circle;

the triangle; the square; the rectangle; the polygon; and finally the volume. Repeating this cycle of lessons week after week for the duration of the biennial, the professor awakened not only the curiosity of passers-by but also attracted an ever more assiduous audience. Each lesson ended with a somewhat unsuspected tip: the teacher offered for sale – like many of his neighbours on the square – small folded or modelled paper objects as mementos of the lessons. Breaking the gesture of disinterested transmission of knowledge and subversively resuming the modes of interaction common on the square, the performance then became the subject of debate and controversy, creating a discourse around it.

The artist understands this work as a portrait of the city of Marrakech through geometry. Geometry is all over the place in the city: through its form, through the omnipresence of ornamentation and calligraphy according to Arabic iconoclastic tradition, but also through the mathematical rules and shapes artisans refer to in their daily work. Deeply rooted in the local culture, geometry is at the same time a universal language and the most ancient one. The work is also for Afif a way to return to the origin of all artistic forms and investigate the question of the creation of an artistic shape today. Through a complex process of sedimentation and concatenation, the performance became the point of departure of a linguistic and formal investigation, which led to the first development the artist now presents in his exhibition *This Is Ornamental* at the Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz.

### **L'Heptaèdre**

(The Heptahedron), 2018

In 2016, Saâdane Afif commissioned the writer Thomas Clerc to write a play based on *Souvenir: La Leçon de Géométrie* and elaborate on an argument imagined by the artist. "Sometime after this event, unusual things happened in Marrakech; some characters typical of the Jemaa El Fna began to speak "in geometry", an ornamental language. We could see but especially hear conversations of very high abstraction in the streets of the Casbah, or on the cafes' terraces bordering the square. It is one of these which will be faithfully reported to us a few years later in Vienna, in a play written by a direct witness." The commissioned work of literature is first seen as an extension of a past moment – the performance – and the promise of a future one, in the work of the artist: it emanates from it and at the same time inspires its future developments.

It was only in 2017 that the artist discovered in Marrakech, at the Maison de la Photographie, a portrait from the 1930s of a young Arab woman playing French billiards.<sup>2</sup> She was Yasmine d'Ouezzan (1913–1997), a French-Moroccan

woman, the first French female carom billiard champion, and a muse of some artists of her time. Implemented into the play in the course of its writing, she eventually became its main character.

The narration and outline of the characters oscillates between absurdity, abstraction, stereotype and caricature, opening the path for multiple interpretations. Despite the abstraction of the language and the absurdity of certain situations, the theatre piece revolves around a quest for meaning, Yasmine's personal quest, figured by the search for a heptahedron – a seven-sided geometric volume resembling a house. The resolution of her search seems to reside in the community and to be conditioned by the exchange (and sometimes confrontation) with the other seven characters, ultimately leading her to open herself to a radical otherness. The language becomes both a tool and ornament in the relationships between the characters as well as a viaticum for Yasmine to move towards another mode of existence. Language acquires a strong performative dimension in the piece.

Beyond the narrative, the quest for the "perfect shape" – which could very well apply to the perfect figure aimed at in carom billiards – also can be read as a metaphor for artistic research. The whole theatre piece resonates with questions that animate Afif's artistic practice. Why do human communities produce works of art? How does their reception and circulation, mainly through their shape, contribute to the construction of a common imaginary? How to represent the invention of a shape?

### **Vie de Yasmine d'Ouezzan**

(Yasmine d'Ouezzan's Life), 2018

*This Is Ornamental* at Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz is Saâdane Afif's first exhibition experiment arising from Thomas Clerc's text *L'Heptaèdre* and draws on its two core elements: the matter of the text itself, the language, and its main character, Yasmine d'Ouezzan.

The English version of the script is entirely screened on a large LED panel. Placed high at one end of the exhibition space, it is immediately reminiscent of supertitles used in theatres. On the other side of the gallery, around sixty documents about Yasmine d'Ouezzan's life – all gathered during the months preceding the exhibition – are presented on a several-metre-long structure made of wooden panels and painted yellow. The scenography, highly inspired by the spatial configuration and the architecture of Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz, evokes temporary exhibitions of town halls or tourist information centres. Yasmine d'Ouezzan, the champion of French billiards from 1932 to 1938, enjoyed a certain notoriety in European bourgeois circles of the first half of

the twentieth century and was even the muse of artists such as Vincent Scotto. However, in the public eye, her fame soon fell into oblivion. Under the title *Vie de Yasmine d'Ouezzan*, the installation unfolds in three parts: 1) A Dual Heritage, 2) Champion from the Thousand and One Nights, and 3) Scotto and Beyond.

In a single gesture, Afif not only pays tribute to d'Ouezzan, but also reintroduces her into a differentiated cultural history, bringing into circulation facts from "minor history", undermining the process of official historicization and its share of great men. Unearthing the life of a "free" woman of the 1930s, he also sketches an original social history, a reading of that time through the career of an "exotic" young woman, often stereotyped. Including the voices of journalists who wrote articles, the images taken by photographers, the documents gathered by archivists and all those who write history, the work creates an anonymous polyphony, without falling into the trap of ideological instrumentalization. The entire exhibition oscillates between fictional and documentary moments, between (fake) musealization and the creation of a myth.

Yasmine d'Ouezzan herself might initially be seen as the focus of the exhibition, but she is not. First discovered on a museum wall and transfigured by Thomas Clerc's play, she is the subject of a biographical exhibition that anchors her in her socio-historical context. In Saâdane Afif's work, she becomes a motif, inflected in several manners and metamorphosed by the artist in his own quest to invent and create a new artistic shape through history and space.

Saâdane Afif's first comprehensive monograph will be published in cooperation with Wiels, Brussels; La Panacée, Montpellier; and Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein.

Saâdane Afif (b. 1970, Vendôme, France) is a conceptual and installation artist based in Berlin.

His work focuses on interpretation, exchange, and circulation, and explores various media (performance, objects, text and printed matter) without categorizing his methods under any specific discipline. All of his projects are subject to a continuous process of alteration. Recent exhibitions include *Paroles*, Wiels, Brussels (2018), *Ici.*, Leopold-Hoesch-Museum & Papiermuseum, Düren, (2017) and *Là-Bas.*, La Panacée, Montpellier (2017), *The Fountain Archives*, Nouveau Musée National de Monaco, Monaco (2017) and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2017), *Quoi? – L'Éternité*, Atelier Hermès, Seoul (2016), *Vice de Forme: Das Kabarett*, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin (2016), *Das Ende der Welt*, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin (2015), and *Political Populism*, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2015). His work was included in Documenta 12 (2007) and in the International Exhibition of

the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale (2015). The artist won the Prix Marcel Duchamp in 2009, which led to an exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (2010), and the Prix Meurice pour l'art contemporain in 2015.

1 Thomas Clerc is a French writer born in 1965. Publications include *Intérieur* (2013), which was recently translated into English, *Poésy* (2017), and *L'Homme qui tua Roland Barthes et autres nouvelles* (2010), all released in Gallimard's "L'arbalète" series. He was awarded the Grand Prix de la nouvelle de l'Académie française in 2011.

2 French billiards, also known as carom billiards, is a type of billiards game. It is usually played by two players with three balls. In addition to the carom (red ball), each player has a cue ball either dotted or yellow. The general concept is to hit the ball at the two others on a single shot. Each player has a "distance to cover", which means a certain amount of points to score, in order to win the game. The exact date of origin of carom billiards is somewhat obscure but is thought to be traceable to 18<sup>th</sup>-century France.

## List of Works

### ***Vie de Yasmine d'Ouezzan, 2018***

Archive material (original photos, newspapers, magazines, score, cue, reproductions of: official documents, newspapers, magazines, posters and photos), partly mounted on Aludibond or Forex, display showcase, wooden exhibition wall, paint  
Various dimensions

Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin and Fonds Documentaire du Musée de Salon & de la Crau, Salon-de-Provence, France; Maison de la Photographie, Marrakech, Morocco; Fonds documentaire et iconographique de l'association Histoire & Patrimoine de Saint-Étienne, France; Archives municipales de Saint-Etienne, France.

### ***L'Heptaèdre, 2018***

Dialogue by Thomas Clerc, translated into English on LED panel, 300 x 100 cm, 31:55 min., handouts of the original French dialogue and the English and German translations

Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin

### ***L'Heptaèdre (Interfaces), 2018***

8 exhibition furniture, wood, colour  
Various dimensions

Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin

### ***Figure 37, 2018***

Facsimile *Der Meister im Billard-Spiel* by H.W. Theodor Dieter  
31 x 25.5 cm

Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin

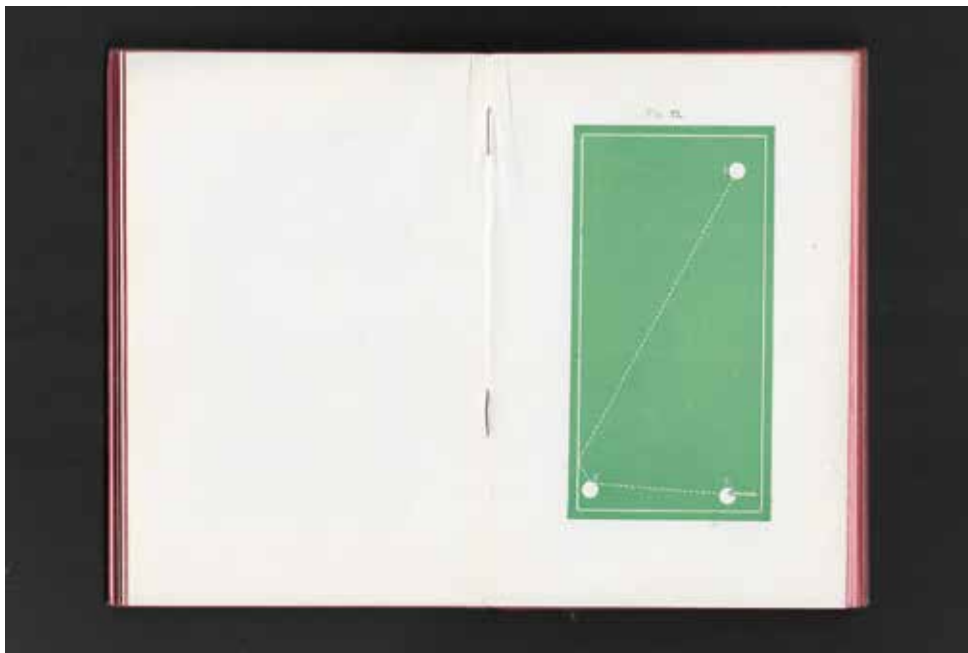
### ***Yasmine First Time, 2017***

Pigment print on aluminium plate, under acrylic glass  
12.5 x 7 cm

Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin



*Yasmine First Time, 2017, Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin*



Le Motif  
(Chanson pour Yasmine)  
Thomas Clerc / S.A.

Tu sais parfois je fais la gueule  
mais n'y prête pas attention  
je n'ai plus de champ de vision  
quand je dois rester toute seule

il me faudrait une face de plus  
un peu comme dans la femme qui pleure  
quand on comprend que la douleur  
c'est un malus pour un bonus

avec sept côtés je revis  
j'imagine un autre terrain  
le billard est entre mes mains  
et je fais des coups de folie

dans ce nouveau jeu tu le vois  
il n'y a plus de stratégie  
et même la géométrie  
n'a plus de règles ni de rois

tu sais parfois je m'imagine  
qu'en plus de jouer je suis une reine  
avec une incroyable veine  
du vert du rouge sur la feutrine

je vois au-delà du billard  
des figures et des théorèmes  
un envoyé qui me dit j'aime  
ta façon de chanter ton art

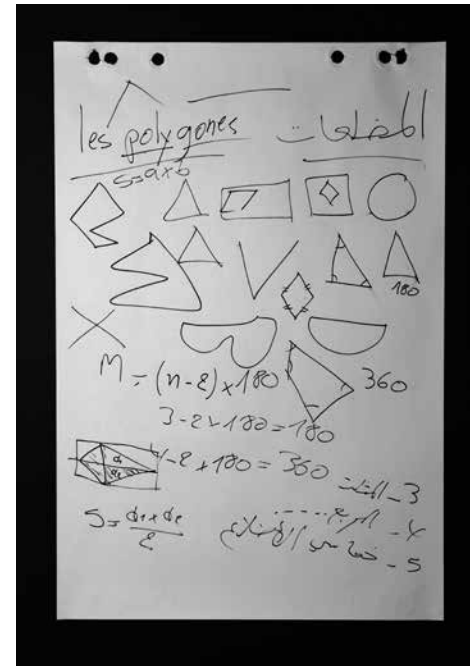
oui si j'étais un heptagone  
j'aurais une toute autre figure  
je traverserais tous les murs  
la ville entière serait ma zone



Le Billard Sportif, 1936, Magazine cover, Loan by Jean Marty, Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin



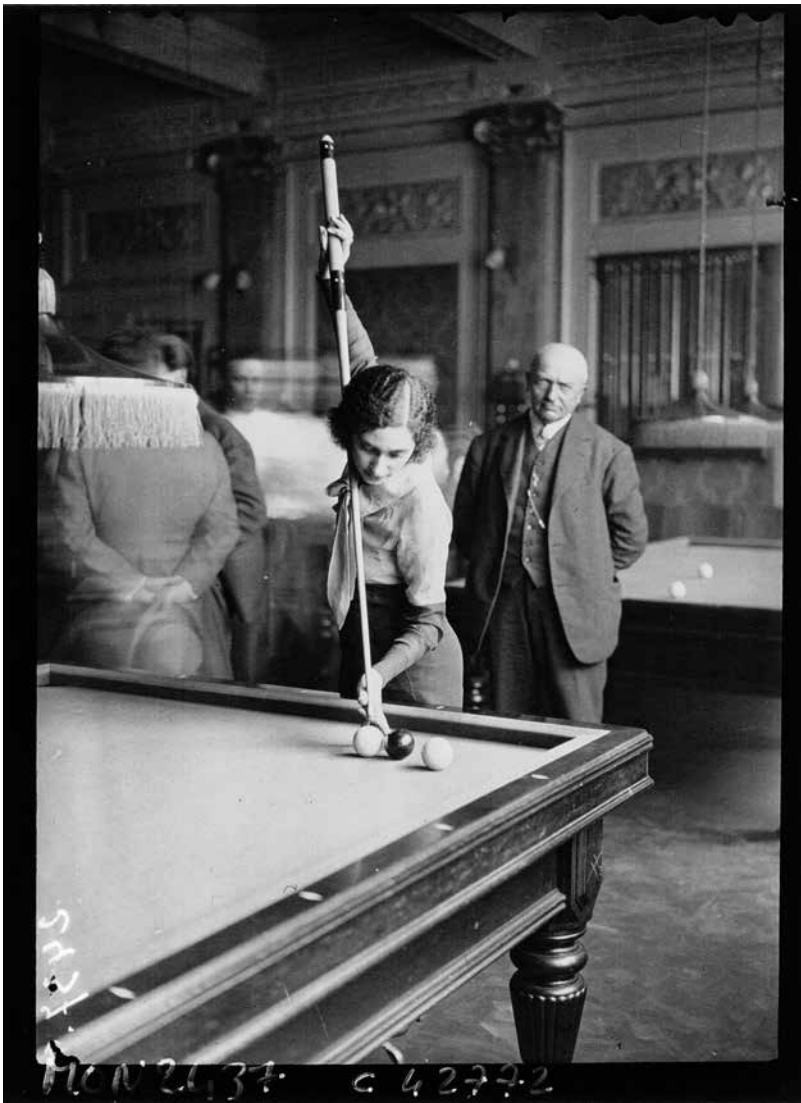
Saâdane Afif, *The Heptahedron*, 2018 (test model, aluminium), Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin



Souvenir: La Leçon de Géométrie in Jemaa El Fna, 2014, Photo of the Performance, Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin

Le Motif C1\_p017, 2014, Geometric drawings from the performance Souvenir: La Leçon de Géométrie, in Jemaa El Fna, 2014, Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin

Saadane Afif, Souvenir (Poster), 2014, Exhibition Souvenir: La Leçon de Géométrie, 5th Marrakech Biennale, Courtesy of Studio Afif, Berlin



Portrait of Yasmine d'Ouezzan at the billiards table, Agence Mondial, c. 1931, Courtesy gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque Nationale de France

## Program

### Opening and Talk

Tue 18/9, 6 pm  
Saâdane Afif in conversation  
with Nicolaus Schafhausen.

### Curator's Tour

Wed 25/9 2018, 6 pm  
Anne Faucheret, curator of  
the exhibition, talks about the  
artistic practice of Saâdane  
Afif and discusses topics and  
the background behind the  
presented works.

## Tours

### Symmetric levels of a biography

Tue 2/10 und 30/10 2018, 6 pm

### Lessons of Geometry

Tue 16/10 und 13/11 2018, 6 pm

On four Tuesday evenings,  
6 – 7 pm, our art educators  
Wolfgang Brunner and Michael  
Simku talk about the work  
of Saâdane Afif and are open  
for your questions.

On Tue 13/11 the Billard  
Museum Weingartner at  
Goldschlagstraße will be  
visited after the talk at  
Kunsthalle Wien Karlsplatz.

All tours are free with  
admission!

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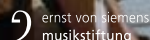


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