

Raafat Hattab: The Lumberjack's Compassion

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In a conversation with me in July 2019, Raafat Hattab spoke of processes. In his rhythmic tone of voice, I detect walking—lively and responsive walking on the one hand, accommodative walking, quiet and even tentative walking on the other. There's something very spiritual about Hattab's walking but also an element of practical, concrete searching. Now and then he sends me images of objects that have congregated around him by dint of his gaze and notes the importance of being aware of his surroundings. These objects, the gifts of existence, show Hattab that he is attuned, in his role as an artist, to what happens and what exists—exactly as Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes: "An artist's vision learns only by seeing [...]."[1]

Hattab's non-random randomness is captured in the intensive practice of his craft, in which he scavenges and snares events wherever they occur: in an object, a word, a song or a thought. Once he gathers up the objects encountered in his journey, he allows them to do as they please and circulates among them: "I decode these things as indictors, I surrender to them, respond to them." I join the walk and stroll along, following Hattab but not always managing to see the figure who strides ahead of me, steadily becoming blurred.

After years of toil in the field of art, Hattab still questions his role as an artist and asks why he makes art. In a book that he's reading about Sufi mysticism, he encounters a dialogue among birds that's managed by a hoopoe, the leader of the birds, who proposes that those assembled set out on a spiritual journey in search of the mythical bird Simorgh. This hoopoe, who wishes to lead the birds on a journey that will refine their vision and their gaze, appears to be one of the answers to Hattab's questions about the role of an artist.

Just as I feel that I have managed to see Hattab's journey and am gaining a few steps on him, he tells me that we've come to a fork in the road. The Lumberjack's Compassion, he adds, "is another point in an endless journey of a process that's meant by its nature to continue."

[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," *The Primacy of Perception*, James E. Edie (ed.), trans. Carleton Dallery. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 165.