

PERROTIN

PRESSBOOK

JR

The Eye of Photography

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THE EYE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

LAURENCE CORNET - MAY 10, 2018

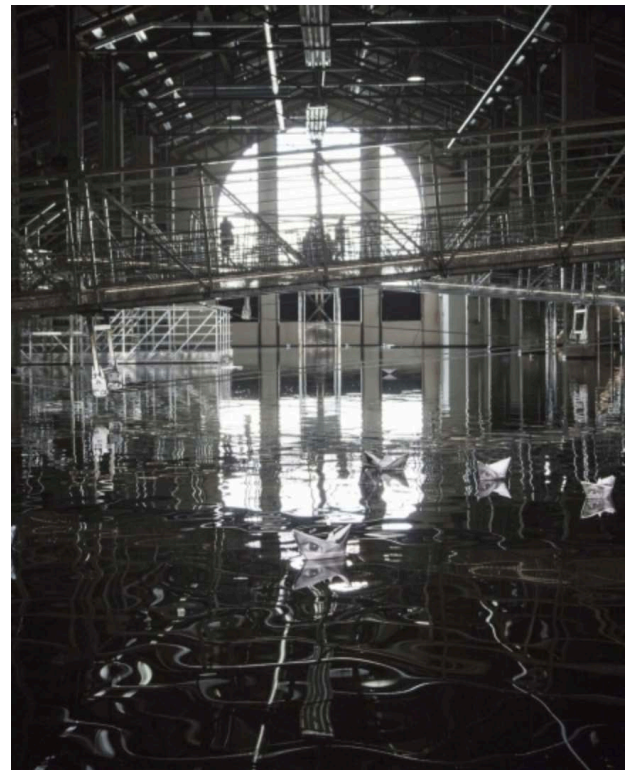
Walking around Marseille, one passes street markets, plastic tables covered with fresh fish, and outdoor stands providing traditional Maghrebi foods. Voices are loud, lively. Stories are long, exaggerated, punctuated with humor. Accents come from everywhere – Arabic, Southern, popular, and, more exotically yet, the occasional Parisian freshly settled in Marseille to seek warmth. All along the shore, salty scents merge with that of food and industrial fumes.

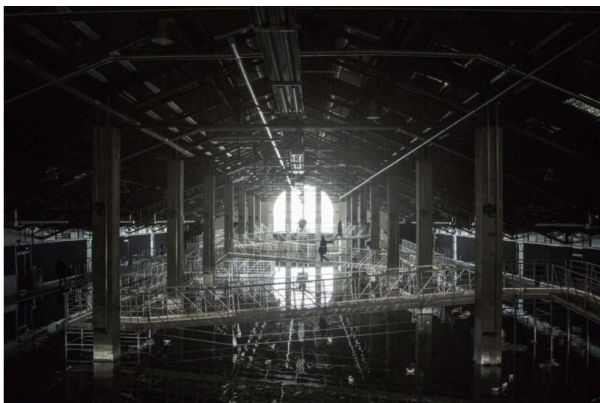
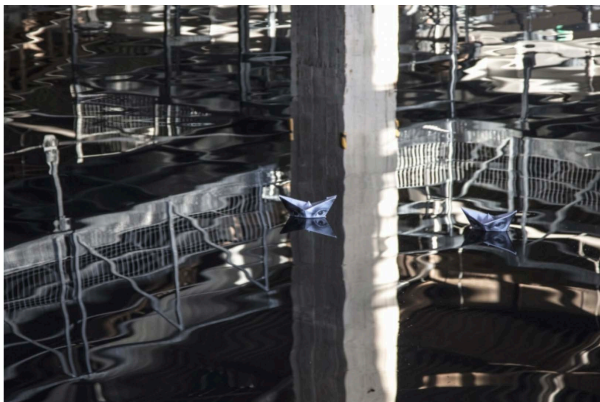
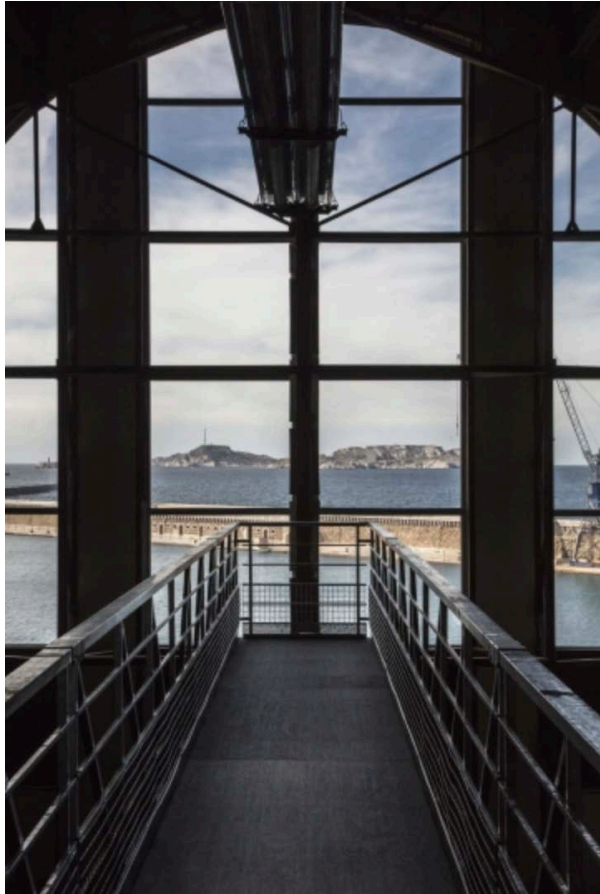
The biggest port city in France, Marseille is also the most mythological. For years, waves of migrants elected Marseille their port of call, like generations of Mediterranean merchants in the centuries before them, contributing to the city's hospitality. Famously rebel, a model of cultural diversity, sometimes reduced to its slums, the city jokingly plays on its reputation while being a real terrain of investigation and experimentation for NGOs and politics trying to implement successful urban assimilation and cultural mixing.

Its image lasted despite the economic reshaping of the city, initiated in the 90's – as local, Slate's journalist Jean-Laurent Cassely, puts it, "unlike urban hubs whose lifestyle became modern, formal and sterile, Marseille managed to stay true to itself, simple, popular. Family and neighborhood have kept strong ties. It's a model based on a traditional village society". A harbor of the Riviera, Marseille managed to avoid being transformed into an elitist port-city.

Yet, the recent urban plan for the city threatens the melting-pot, slowly underlining social inequalities and accentuating racial spatialization. The port undergoes a deep mutation as it expands West – the Euroméditerranée project is transforming the port area with architectural gestures such as the repurposing of the docks into a shopping mall, and of the port hall into an art space. The spectacular urban remodeling in the Joliette area is exemplary of that ongoing metamorphosis.

On the international ferry terminal, the hall J1 is awaiting its transformation. While the parking lot of this 1920's concrete building is surrounded with lines of cars and merchandises waiting to be loaded on ferries to Algeria, the second floor distills a very different atmosphere. A bar offering exclusively organic products welcomes the visitor in a few thousand-square meters' space filled with windows overlooking the sea, and a removable wall in the back announces the entrance to an exhibition – *Amor Fati*, by French artist JR.





“I am taking you back to childhood”, JR warns. “You’ll fold origami and launch your paper boat in the water.” But first comes the portrait, in an improvised photobooth whose architecture resembles that of a stylized ferry. All around, the sea and the city unravel their seemingly unlimited horizons. A minute after the flash, the photograph is delivered on a A3-size copy paper – the eyes of the subject expand over the whole width of the sheet while the rest of the face, swallowed by the machine, have left blank $\frac{3}{4}$ of the sheet. The effect is playful; an introduction to the next step. For those who have forgotten how to fold a paper boat, instructions are displayed on large tables spread around the photobooth and, fold after fold, the ephemeral embarkation takes shape, finally materializing with a hull featuring two wide-open eyes on each side.

Trophy in hand, the visitor enters another room – a vast empty hangar plunged in darkness, at the exception of a large window, a couple hundred meters opposite the entrance. Known for transforming cities around the world with giant scale photographs pasted on wall, roofs and ruins, JR here transformed 6,000 square meters of the hall into a giant pool. Above the monumental basin, a daedalus of scaffoldings open the way to many different paths. “When you launch your boat, you look at it making its way to somewhere. You follow it and discover other boats, other gazes – that of visitors animated by a similar curiosity, a similar impulse to explore. Reaching the end, you look towards the sea, towards the world, seemingly so close yet so far.” The thought of those crossing it at this very moment arises, giving life to other interpretations. Walking around the installation, with the eerie sounds of the building resounding in the space, one can’t help but envision scenes from the news when noticing a sinking paper boat, or a cluster of others stuck in a corner, fighting against the current to make their way further.

Since the early signs of the refugee crisis in Europe, JR has worked on the subject. “I worked in 2014 in Lampedusa [i.e. an island in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of which a boat carrying migrants from Libya sank in October 2013, setting off alarm bells regarding the migrant’s conditions]. I had also pasted a giant gaze on a 370-meter long container ship that ended up rescuing 250 migrants off the coast of Libya. And this, while I was working in Ellis Island, in New York, to understand what’s it’s become today.” In Ellis Island, JR had dived into personal and public archive of photographs and enlarged them to re-populate the island with the people who have shaped US’s popular history. He later directed a movie with Robert De Niro wandering around the abandoned, yet crowded buildings, as if reconnecting with his ancestors. In the last scene, shot during a snowstorm, De Niro walks towards the sea.

It is not JR's first intervention in Marseille – in 2013, he had been invited to invest the industrial neighborhood of La Belle de Mai. He had at the time organized participatory workshops and invited inhabitants to tell their story, getting to decipher through their voices the city's very complex social fabric. People and figures indeed argue against Marseille's actual diversity. Its social mix dates back to the 60's when immigrants from the ex-colonies came for work opportunities. The multicultural myth fades away when migrants are 1st, 2nd, or even 3rd generation migrants, just like JR himself. While Marseille can still provide inspiration as to what is possible when we embrace diversity, many sociologists argue that the reputation of the city as multiethnic and multicultural is the result of a "political fiction". The *Nouvelle Société savante de marseillologie* (New scholarly Society of Marseillology), which studies ready-made speeches about Marseille, published many articles on the subject – the reputation of the city, it appears, is sometimes complacently maintained by the locals themselves.

Yet, such discourse has undeniable social effects, and JR's installation echoes it. "The title, *Amor Fati*, comes from Nietzsche's description and praise of the love of one's fate", he explains. "It's a universal thing. There is a strong link between collective and individual fate. This is the reason why I wanted to focus on people's eyes. A gaze is very personal and hard to recognize at the same time. Looking at all the eyes floating on the water, they could be anyone. Everyone's life is a journey with light in the end; that's what keeps us going, the idea that something positive can happen on both an individual and universal scale." And just as Marseillais, visitors can fictionalize their own story to invent a collective destiny.

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