

Making her Voice Heard at *Speaker's Corner*: A Review of Latifa Echakhch's Installation at the Tate Modern, Fall 2008

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Born in El Khnansa, Morocco in 1974, Latifa Echakhch has lived most of her life in France and now resides and works in both Paris and Martigny, Switzerland. Primarily, Echakhch's work focuses on themes such as cultural identity, agency, globalization, and immigration. Along these lines, her 2006 work entitled *Hospitality* explores the bureaucratic obstacles faced by immigrants to France and the ways in which these "outsiders" are perceived by their Western counterparts. This fall, I had the opportunity to view Echakhch's installation entitled *Speaker's Corner*, currently on display in London's Tate Modern. The installation is made up of two parts residing in separate rooms. Though physically separate, they communicate with each other thematically on many levels. *For Each Stencil A Revolution 2007* is a room of dark blue carbon paper layered over the entirety of each of the four walls. The title of this section harkens back to international human rights and war protests of the 1960s, during which carbon paper was used to create multiple copies of flyers, statements, and images. To create variation in the shades and textures of the carbon paper, Echakhch dripped methylated spirit down the paper-covered walls. As a result, the blue pigment was leached from the carbon pages and formed small drips down the walls and onto the floor. To this room, Echakhch added a small installation piece, *Smoke Ring 2008*, comprised of burned tires, symbols of the urban riots that have occurred in the Parisian suburbs (and elsewhere in France) over the past two decades.

Upon entering the first room of the installation and pausing to read the curator's statement, I was overcome by the odor of the methylated spirits. My mind immediately went to my previous research on immigration in France and I recalled Jacques Chirac's (former President of France) flagrantly racist comments regarding the "bruit et l'odeur" ("noise and odor") of France's immigrant population in the Parisian suburbs. According to Chirac, these intangible elements provided yet another division between the French and their "undesirable" immigrant population. Just as the strong odor of the methylated spirits created an intangible, invisible boundary between the room containing *For Each Stencil A Revolution 2007* and the rest of the Tate Modern, there exists a similar, hazily-defined boundary for immigrants in France. These "invisible," boundaries exist for France's immigrant population in general, but especially for women who often find themselves doubly or triply marginalized by the patriarchal structures of their cultures of origin and racist (or sexist) factions of the Western society in which they now live.

The second section of *Speaker's Corner* is a piece entitled *Fantasia 2007*, comprised of a plethora of bare, white flagpoles protruding from each of the four walls. According to the Tate's press release, the "chaotic" placement of the flagpoles is representative of global politics in

general. Moreover, the piece also had much to say regarding gender and national power, given the phallic nature of the flag poles and their erect placement “at odds” with one another. Quite simply, this could be considered a commentary on the fact that women are grossly outnumbered by men among the elected elite in most countries around the world, and that political “pissing contests” have become the norm in elections, wars, and in foreign policy negotiations. Indeed, viewing this piece from a feminist perspective is especially relevant considering the climate of today’s international politics. As we know too well, in democracies around the world, women are systematically denied a voice or used as political pawns to win elections or bolster conservative agendas that have historically denied both women and immigrants basic rights. In addition, the creamy white color of the flagpoles is symbolic of race relations and white privilege as they pertain to Western politics. In the middle of the flagpoles, a lone wooden crate stands in for the actual Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park, a place where any individual can openly express his or her opinions, political and otherwise, as long as they are considered lawful (by the British government). Though it is sobering to remember the millions of immigrants who are denied opportunities and voices in the West as a result of their appearance, religion or gender, it is also heartening to know that, as an immigrant woman, Latifa Echakhch’s artistic voice has reverberated across the Channel and can now be heard clearly heard and experienced by art aficionados at her own *Speaker’s Corner* in one of Europe’s premier modern art centres.

Latifa Echakhch’s *Speaker’s Corner* will be on view at the Tate Modern from September 19th until November 23rd 2008. For more information, please visit www.tate.org.uk