

precarious pavilions

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Atlas Unlimited (Act IV) 'Europa'

16 December 2018—13 January 2019,
Old Harbour Antwerp [starting point: Red Star Line Museum]

The 21st century is, and increasingly will be, characterized by far-reaching crises: Besides climate change there will be continuing financial and cultural crises. How do we think about architecture—the creation of space—within an unstable world? How can the notion of precarity offer a lens through which to rethink our way of living, not only in a negative sense but also in a positive one?

Karthik Pandian and Andros Zins-Browne invite the public to take a walk in the Old Harbour of Antwerp. Guided by an audio narration produced in collaboration with Syrian sculptor Zakaria Almoutlak, visitors will encounter a series of sculptures that range from the monumental to the invisible. Issues of migration, history and scale motivate this work that leads visitors on a journey from an iconic port into the global imaginary.

Precarious Pavilions – Atlas Unlimited (Act IV) is the third pavilion in a line of four. Each pavilion is being presented in a different city, season and created by a different artist (collective).

The Migratory Work of Atlas Unlimited

—Aruna D'Souza

Atlas Unlimited is a work that, by the time of its opening festivities on September 29, 2018 will already have traveled thousands of miles and spanned many years. It was born out of Karthik Pandian and Andros Zins-Browne's encounters, often chance or contingent, with sites, texts, people, and even animals over an extended period: living abroad in Cairo near Tahrir Square in 2001, ten years prior to the Arab Spring demonstrations that would recast its geography as the locus of a (failed) revolution; a site visit for the Marrakech Biennale in 2012 that led to their discovery of Atlas Film Studios, which has been used in countless productions over its 60-plus year history, from *Lawrence of Arabia* to *Game of Thrones*; a group of camels and their handlers; an Arabic translator, sculptor, and refugee who turned out to have an astonishing story; a carnival float in Aalst; and so on. All of these have shown up, in one form or another, in the various iterations of the *Atlas* project, an ongoing collaboration between Pandian and Zins-Browne starting in 2012 that has so far taken the form of a video installation (*Atlas*, 2012), a single-channel film (*Atlas/Inserts*, 2014), a stage performance (*Atlas Revisited*, 2016)—and now, *Atlas Unlimited*, which will unfold in Aalst, Antwerp, Chicago, New York and Rotterdam between 2018 and 2020 as exhibition, performance, public sculpture, and parafictional¹ theatre.

¹ Carrie LambertBeatty writes: "the parafiction is like a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor. It is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction. It remains a bit outside. It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature, but has one foot in the field of the real. Unlike historical fiction's fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. With varying degrees of success, these fictions are experienced as fact. They achieve truth status – for some of the people some of the time." ("MakeBelieve: Parafiction and Plausability", October 129, Summer 2009, pp. 51–84.)

Each of these engagements propelled the artists and the project forward, often without a sense of what would come next. But that movement, for all its contingency, is not without a tragic logic. The previous iterations of *Atlas* were driven by questions surrounding the Arab Spring—by the hope and disappointment that it inspired globally, by the visual economy of political uprising in the age of social media, by the idea of a revolution that would not just be televised but also YouTubed and Facebooked, the truth value of imagery that was taken to be immediate and real. Pandian and Zins-Browne sought to explore the sticky question of how to create an image of revolution, one that was not merely documentary but reproduced by the at turns real, glancing, and ephemeral freedoms and misprisions it could generate. Now, with *Atlas Unlimited*, we have a project driven by the aftermath of the Arab Spring: the forced migrations resulting from the political repressions, privations, and civil wars that occurred in revolution's wake.

And as they are deeply aware, Pandian and Zins-Browne are creating work about migration in an artworld that itself is marked by an assumption of an almost unfettered mobility as artists and audiences and artwork travel from one international exhibition to another—a very different kind of movement than that of political and economic refugees, but one that must be acknowledged as the artists incorporate such individuals and stories into their work. In the face of their mobility as artists, Pandian and Zins-Browne have created a scenario in which their own movement (conceptual and literal) is choreographed by the people and narratives enfolded into their project. The resulting, multipronged *Atlas Unlimited* doesn't offer an image of migration—it instead proposes an approach to art making that is impelled by the same kinds of encounters, forces, and contingencies that characterize our new global condition of mobility and displacement.



When Pandian and Zins-Browne took up the challenge of making art that addressed the Arab Spring, they were forced to grapple with the question of the artist's responsibility to history, and to history's actors.

Atlas began, we are told, with an idea of recreating viral video clips of the Arab Spring uprising in Tahrir Square, using actual participants in those protests as actors. When that proved impossible, they turned to camels—beasts of burdens that, due to their famously recalcitrant nature seemed to them to embody the resistance at the heart of Arab Spring. But this very recalcitrance made the camels unwilling participants in the scenarios that Pandian and Zins-Browne envisioned. What does it mean if you have to force camels to stand for freedom? How do you deal with bodies that refuse to move? What are the ethics of coercion (by animal trainers, choreographers, or artists)? Such questions became the heart of *Atlas Revisited*.

Now, with *Atlas Unlimited*, we have not bodies that *refuse* to move, but bodies that are *prevented* from moving by borders, states, security forces, and so on. And, as with *Atlas Revisited*, questions cropped up for Pandian and Zins-Browne: what is the artist's responsibility to those bodies, and the narratives they generate? How to make a work that is not *about* migration, but reveals something about its effects, its intelligence? How to avoid instrumentalizing the stories of migration which are so often deployed in the form of "migrant confessionals" by well-meaning artists (and writers and journalists and activists) trying to shine light on a global crisis, but in ways that inevitably veer into spectacle—and turn the stage over to the storyteller?



Atlas Unlimited picks up where *Atlas Revisited* left off: that is, with a camel. This camel is not, as in the earlier work, a living and breathing creature, but rather comes in the form of a massive styrofoam float made for Carnival in Aalst, which the artists chanced upon during a site visit in 2018. The coincidence of seeing this effigy at the very moment they were contemplating what form their intervention in Aalst would take was too good to pass up—and so they purchased the float, intending to parade it through the city to Network Aalst to mark the opening of their exhibition. The float will be accompanied (as it was during carnival) by the crew of artisans who made it, costumed and dancing, and will be dismembered at the

end of this procession—the first of many acts of destruction that will punctuate *Atlas Unlimited* as it makes its way from Europe to North America and back.

At Netwerk Aalst, another camel emerges. In 2017, Pandian and Zins-Browne were searching for an Arabic translator, and happened to interview a Syrian refugee who had recently moved to Brussels. His name was Zakaria Almoutlak. During the course of their conversation, Almoutlak's amazing story emerged: of his life working in his father's sculpture atelier in Palmyra; of his uncle, the head of the Palmyran museum, executed by ISIS; of the lively trade in counterfeit sculptures in Syria, some of which have made their way into the world's great museums, according to Almoutlak, including the Louvre; of his fraught escape from Syria only to arrive in a German town on the day of a neo-Nazi parade; and of his eventual arrival in Belgium.

Over the course of the exhibition, Almoutlak will tell a story about the time he and his father decided, against their better judgment and beliefs, to accept a commission from a wealthy emir to create a counterfeit ancient sculpture of a rearing camel. It would be the largest they'd ever worked on, and they were offered a spot in the Palmyran museum of archeology to complete their work. The sculpture was, as it happened, destroyed by ISIS forces when they took over the city, including the museum, in 2017, forcing Almoutlak to flee the city. As he tells his story over the weeks of the exhibition, Almoutlak will create a replica of the replica—a counterfeit to the second degree—of the rearing camel in the galleries in Aalst.

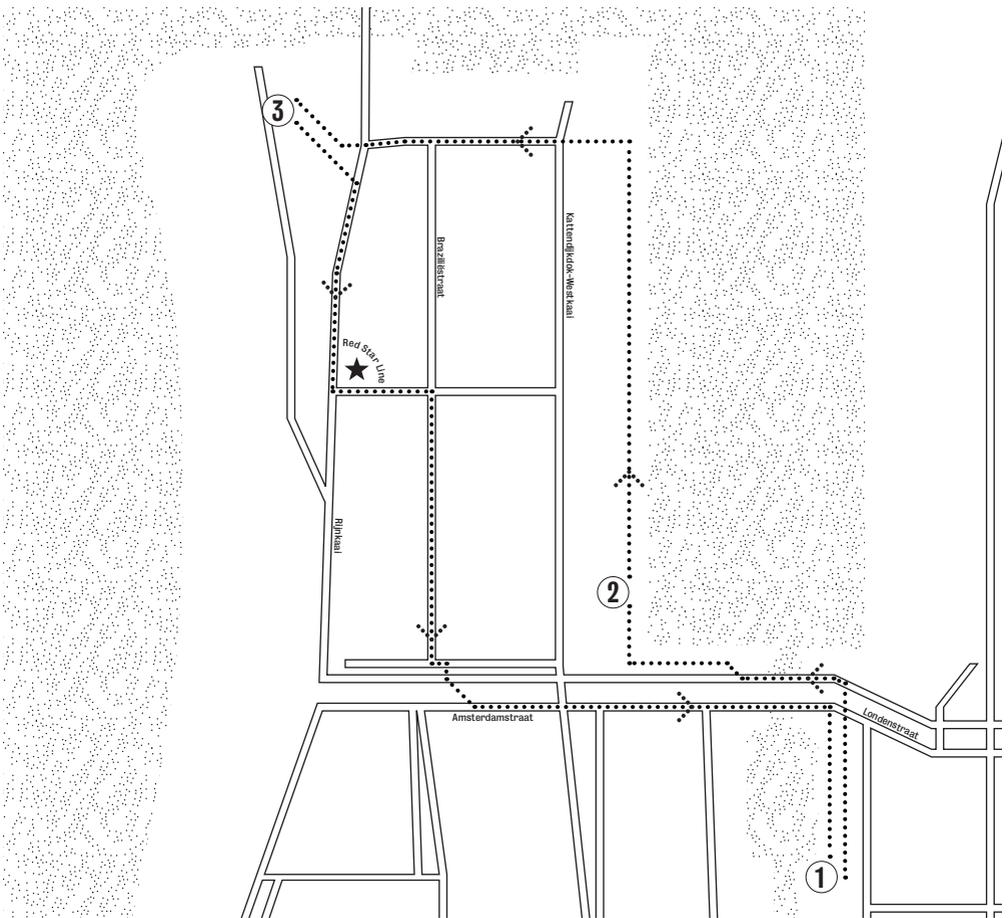
As with each of the earlier iterations of the *Atlas* project, how much of this narrative is strictly true, and how much of it is parafictional—rooted in the real without being entirely factual, believable but not to be believed—is left to the viewer to decide. The artists, rather than asking Almoutlak to confess his migrant's tale or offering him a fantastical, predetermined script, have created the space—the stage set, as it were—for Almoutlak to make a new claim on his biography, using the power of fiction. And in doing so, they have obligated themselves to create a work that responds to Almoutlak's words, and that re-contextualizes their past work on *Atlas* in light of this artisan-translator-refugee's revelations. The result is a project that grapples with a moment of unprecedented migration in a formal, rather than literal or

narrative, way: just as the artists' role is now dispersed over multiple actors (the Aalst carnival crew, Almoutlak, Pandian, Zins-Browne and others), Almoutlak's narrative itself migrates from one body to another. It emerges variously from the mouths of Zakaria himself, of other characters who will appear in the gallery over the course of the exhibition, or of stand-ins for the sculptor himself.

At the same time, other narratives intervene, including episodes of Pandian and Zins-Browne's specious tale of the genesis and evolution of the *Atlas* project, now transposed onto the character of a curator discussing the difficulties of producing an artwork for a biennial. History is presented as a necessarily fragmented story, told by different people (different individuals, some of whom are represented in the performance via a changing cast of actors), scattered around the gallery space. This need to reconstruct the past—not simply ancient history, the history that was lost, for example, when ISIS destroyed the monuments of Palmyra, but a very contemporary history that is only available via conflicting news reports, social media posts, camera phone recordings, and government propagandists—puts every one of us trying to grasp the complexity of our political situation in the position of archeologists, confronting relics that do not make clear their truth status so easily. What the *Atlas* project, and now *Atlas Unlimited*, achieves, by trading on untruths and half truths and almost convincing untruths scattered among the “real,” is to demonstrate the ways in which all historical reconstruction is fictional to a degree—driven by our difficulty seeing the present or imagining the future outside of the lessons of what has come before, or indeed outside of the seductions of the spectacular lenses through which its claims are delivered.

In Antwerp, pieces of the carnival camel from Aalst will be installed around the Old Harbour, resonating with Antwerp's own history as a site of dispersal: from the early 19th century to 1934, nearly 60 million European refugees sailed from Antwerp's port to the U.S., in the hopes of escaping political repression, war, persecution, and dire poverty. The pieces will be linked by an audio-narration that combines walking directions with a darkly comic narrative from Almoutlak's journey from Syria to Belgium. To see each fragment will require an imaginative, perhaps impossible, reconstruction of the whole they once constituted.

Pieces from the shows in Aalst and Antwerp will then continue onwards to Chicago where some will regain their monumental stature while others will be reconstituted by a conservator-performer in the gallery. That such relics can travel more easily than the refugee that produced them is a bitter irony, of course, now that the current U.S. administration has made clear its utter opposition to immigration even by those seeking asylum for humanitarian reasons. And so, when the relics from Belgium show up in Chicago, in need of reconstruction, they will do so without the storyteller who created the original. Almoutlak's stories will move and be retold by other actors, and, like a child's game of telephone (or indeed like the circulation of digital images) there will be a degradation of their (already tenuous) truth value along the way, as details become blurred or embellished or forgotten. And in this sense, *Atlas Unlimited's* parafictional approach makes clear something very true: that a world in which bodies cannot move is a world of impossible fragmentation, of incomplete narratives, of parafictional archaeology, of interrupted memory, of endless repetition of cycles of reconstruction, destruction, and reconstruction again.



CREDITS

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Disagree. vzw

Coproduction

DeSingel, Extra City
Kunsthall, Netwerk Aalst,
The Great Indoors vzw

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Performance on December

16th, 2018 by Zakaria
Almountlak, Rand Abou Fakher,
Omar Maad, Atta Nasser

PRACTICAL INFO

Free

The walk starts at the
Red Star Line Museum
(Montevideostraat 3, 2000
Antwerpen). Audio guides
are available at the Museum
in Arabic, Dutch and English
from 18 December 2018 – 13
January 2018, along with a
map for pick up from Tuesday
till Sunday, 10:00-17:00

Without audioguide the
installation is accessible
24h/24h, 7d/7d

www.precariouspavilions.be