

## Mounir Fatmi: *Survival Signs*

by Alan Gilbert

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In his current exhibition filled with formally precise artworks using a clear set of visual tropes—typewriters, sharp objects, and books—one work by Mounir Fatmi feels incongruous: a small, slightly blurry black-and-white photograph of a man sporting an Adidas satchel standing next to a glowing circle on the ground. *Walking on the Light* (2012–ongoing) is an image of Fatmi’s controversial projection of light and rotating text from the Koran that was included at the Le Printemps de septembre contemporary art festival in Toulouse, France, in 2012. After it was installed with the image on the ground, people began walking on the projection, which created a controversy within the local Muslim community unhappy with the idea of sacred verses being trod upon. Fatmi eventually agreed to remove the work, although it has since been shown elsewhere.



*Inside the Fire Circle*, 2017. Typewriters, starter cables and paper, 55.12 × 118.11 × 23.62 inches. Edition 1 of 5. Courtesy of Jane Lombard Gallery.

Fatmi’s art frequently concerns itself with networks and cross-cultural interactions, while highlighting the potential for violence embedded within them, as well as their fragility. Sometimes these interactions occur within cultures as well, as when Fatmi talks about his complicated relationship with Morocco, where he was born. Fatmi’s *Survival Signs* exhibition at Jane Lombard Gallery continues this examination. Six black-and-white photographs feature a slender piece of metal that curves to a point. In most of the photos, a man’s hand grasps the object in a way that might make it a weapon, a tool, or a stylus. In fact, each photograph bears the title *Alif* (2015–ongoing), the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, which is always written unattached to any subsequent letters. In Fatmi’s series of photographs, the letter serves a variety of purposes, as religion and language itself always do. By isolating the letter, Fatmi shows how it can be used to disrupt communication as much as facilitate it.

A more substantial breakdown in transmission is signaled in the five-minute video *History is Not Mine* (2013), in which a man taps at typewriter keys with two small hammers before returning the machine's carriage to type again over the same line. The result is an illegibility of expression to itself and to others. Otherwise shot in black and white, the red strip in the typewriter ribbon signals an emergency, while the black half has small holes in it from the force of the striking. The indecipherability of the anonymous typist's message leaves his anger, or maybe it's his desperate hope, undeciphered. Fatmi's more recent work embeds this desire for connection and exchange, while also manifesting the challenges to it. *Roots 03* (2015–16) is three framed pieces consisting of elaborate, twisting rows of narrow, white cables—the interactions are supple, flexible, complex. Next to it is a contrastingly radiant yet spiky iron sculpture—*Défense 01* (2016)—that makes the concrete bench on which it is situated a less inviting place to linger.

Despite being mostly filled with severings and ruptures, whether linguistic or physical, at the heart of *Survival Signs* is an installation of more than a dozen black typewriters and white sheets of paper joined with jumper cables. Visitors to the installation are encouraged to write messages indicating what they are doing to help make the world a better place. Some of the notes are platitudes, some are silly, some more somber, while others place their faith in art. The metaphoric charge of *Inside the Fire Circle* (2107) is obvious, and its messages are meant to travel far, despite the analogue materials. Or maybe at the exhibition's conclusion, the notes will simply be destroyed. Or maybe they'll be sent to Fatmi, who in an open letter accompanying the exhibition's press release (and also excerpted as a wall text at the gallery's entrance) says he is not traveling to the United States for his own show *after a previous traumatic experience with a U.S. customs agent in which he was interrogated for hours and forced to swear on a Bible. Whatever their fate, these messages are "survival signs" in a world cracked apart.*

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