

Involved In Nonsense
Artissima 2015
Hassan Sharif
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Involved In Nonsense focuses on works by Hassan Sharif made between the years 1982 and 1985. The works refer to a moment in the late 1970s, early 1980s when a generation of Asian, Latin American and African artists began to practice in the West. The exhibition focuses on the very early practice of Sharif, the first recipient of a fine art scholarship from the United Arab Emirates, and the years he studied at the Byam Shaw School of Art, London (today part of Central Saint Martins).

Unlike several fellow artists from the Middle East/South Asia working in London at the start of the 1980s, Sharif did not respond to the Western avant-garde with an East-West polemic or a return to regionalism. Instead, like the heaps of material that he would later become known for, Sharif bundled together as much art history and contemporary practice as he could carry back to the Emirates. He recalls watching Laurie Anderson at the Tate, and absorbed a brief resurgence of British constructionism's ideas, *A New Spirit In Painting* at the Royal Academy, and the last echoes of Fluxus and Arte Povera.

Between 1982 and 1985, Sharif frequently travelled between the Emirates and the UK, mailing or carrying works between the two countries, and staged his first solo exhibition -/+, rejected at the time but is now regarded as the first exhibition of contemporary art in the country, at a sports club in Dubai. This nomadic back and forth movement of artist, knowledge and works underscores a dynamism that charged this initial encounter between the Emirates and the Western avant-garde.

At the core of this collection of works is Sharif's practice of handing purposely useless yet laborious gestures back to society as art: a pointed refusal of official art and heritage as well as the rapid commercialisation (consumer society tsunami) that Sharif observed taking place across the Gulf at that time. As Catherine David writes in the artist's monograph, "The ironic display of the materials, of slowness and patiently crafted but useless artefacts is also a rendition of the body's resistance to economic dynamics and mainstream capitalistic speed."

Wooden Boxes and Files (1982) is the first Semi-system work Sharif brought to the UAE from London for his -/+ exhibition. Taking Kenneth Martin's *Chance and Order* dictum to its core, the original work consisted of over a thousand sheets of 14 x 12 cm pieces of paper marked with sequences of X's in a nine-square grid; tied into nine bundles and then exhibited in rows of official-looking folders on shelves or as shoeboxes. The work was mailed from London to the UAE and back again (bringing the postman into the performance, according to Sharif), and due to the vagaries of travel only photo-documentation of the work and five of the original bundled papers now remain.

The Mail (1983) is a series of 14 works on paper in which Sharif traces all instances of a single letter on a page from the British newspaper Daily Mail. He then pairs up these letters with a pencil line.

Cloth and Rope (1984) and *Funnelled Paper* (1985) are two of Sharif's earliest assemblages. Both works have steadily shrunk in size over the years in transit between London and Dubai, as well as subsequent exhibitions.

Kitchen (1985) shows a diagram of varying lines between two points, each indicating Sharif's movements from his desk to his kitchen and the purpose of this movement, plus a meticulous written log of his mundane activities in the kitchen itself (boiling water, drinking tea, etc.). This work resonates with the frenetic back and forth movement between the UK and UAE of the rest of the works in this show.

BIOGRAPHY

Hassan Sharif (b. 1951, Dubai) lives and works in Dubai. He has made a vital contribution to conceptual art and experimental practice in the Middle East through 40 years of performances, installations, drawing, painting, and assemblage. Prior to leaving the UAE to study in England in 1979, Sharif gained attention for his cartoons published in the UAE press – ironic, outspoken critiques of the rapid industrialisation of the Emirates and political deadlock of 1970s Arab Nationalism. As an artist, he rejected calligraphic abstraction, which was becoming the dominant discourse in the Middle East at that time, and pursued instead a pointedly contemporary vocabulary, drawing on the non-elitism and intermedia of Fluxus and the potential in British Constructionism's systemic processes of making. Sharif graduated from The Byam Shaw School of Art, London, in 1984 and returned to the UAE shortly after. He set about staging interventions and the first exhibitions of contemporary art in Sharjah, as well as translating art historical texts and manifestos into Arabic so as to provoke a local

audience to engage with – or at least reject – contemporary art discourse.

Sharif's conceptual works are formally categorised into four core, interrelated groups: a set of works in which familiar, material contexts and systems are deconstructed, which he refers to as Experiments. Quotidian actions performed in a particular setting to an audience, which he has called Performances. Semi-Systems includes drawings and sketches inspired by mathematics and the interruption or breaking of material and immaterial system of codes to include chance and error. And finally assemblages constructed from ready-made materials, which he refers to as Objects.

In addition to his own practice, Sharif has encouraged and supported several generations of artists in the Emirates. He is a founding member of the Emirates Fine Arts Society (founded in 1980) and of the Art Atelier in the Youth Theatre and Arts, Dubai. In 2007, he was one of four artists to establish The Flying House, a Dubai institution for promoting contemporary Emirati artists. The first Emirati to have his work shown in the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, Sharif was also selected to be the debut artist to represent the UAE during its first national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2009. In 2011, Sharif was the subject of a retrospective exhibition, *Hassan Sharif: Experiments & Objects 1979–2011*, curated by Catherine David and Mohammed Kazem, presented by the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture & Heritage/Platform for Visual Arts. His works are held in several important museums such as Guggenheim, New York and Abu Dhabi, Centre Pompidou, Paris, M+ Museum for Visual Culture, Hong Kong, and Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, among others.