

GALLERY  
ISABELLE  
VAN DEN  
EYNDE



Throwing Stones, 1983, Photographs, ink and pen on paper and pencil on mounting board, 84 x 59.5 cm

## HASSAN SHARIF

### *Redundant Repetition*

Hassan Sharif made a vital contribution to conceptual art and experimental practice in the Middle East throughout 40 years of performance, installation, drawing, painting and assemblage. In his early artistic maturation, he rejected calligraphic abstraction, which had become the dominant discourse in the region in the 1970s. Instead, he pursued a pointedly different vocabulary, drawing on the non-elitism and intermedia of Fluxus and the potential in British Systemic Art.

In the early 1980s, during summers spent back home while he was attending art school in London, Hassan Sharif executed a series of simple actions in the harsh desert landscape outside Dubai. Documented in a few black and white photographs (image above), these early performances involved simple activities – walking, jumping, throwing stones, digging, and then standing in a hole in the

sand – that resemble elementary forms of child's play, the kind of basic movements though which we, especially as children, map out and acquaint ourselves with the spatial and material conditions of our surroundings. Sharif continued to carry out such provocative 'Experiments' and 'Performances', as he called them, as he studied at the Byam Shaw School of Art, and brought his commitment to radical and experimental art practice back with him to the UAE upon completing his degree in 1984.

Influenced by Marcel Duchamp and Fluxus International, Sharif turned his attention to the ordinary and the commonplace, to investigate the artistic potential of banal objects and everyday actions. These strands of inquiry came together most powerfully in the *Objects* he started making in the 1980s and continued to construct until his death in 2016. Sharif's process is humble and straightforward. It involves the seemingly obsessive repetition of mundane manual tasks – cutting, folding, rolling, weaving, twisting, knotting, tying, plaiting, binding, gluing, and wrapping. In a 2015 interview he declares, 'If you look at my works, they are handcrafted, but with a complete lack of skill utilised. They are raw actions'.

The earliest known *Object* is the now lost *Nylon Rope* (1982), a piece of rope dangling off a hook on the wall, with knots of varying sizes and shapes tied at irregular intervals down its length. Eventually such knots would hold other objects, or parts of objects, creating a string or matrix of smaller units. Sharif's *Objects* are made of modest materials. The earliest ones exclusively featured organic materials like coir, jute, cloth, rope, paper, papier-mâché.

Increasingly wary of wasteful consumption, Sharif also began to use cast-away materials, tying discarded cardboard packaging material together into simple bundles', as in *Cardboard and Cloth*, 2001 in which these very materials are rolled in small tubes, held tightly together with cloth and displayed in an unassuming pile.



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Art Basel 2019 | Feature and Parcours

Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde  
17, Alserkal Avenue  
T +971 4 323 5052  
E info@ivde.net  
www.ivde.net

Images courtesy of the Estate of Hassan Sharif and Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde  
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Rug, 2016, Rug, emulsion paint, glue and cotton rope, 260 x 145 x 10 cm

Sharif's more recent *Objects* specifically draw from the underbelly of global trade – the cheap, mass-produced commodities that fill the old souks and small neighborhood groceries. *Rug*, 2016, for example, consists of hanging bundles of strips of typical sub-continental household linen, dipped into tempera paint, woven and braided. The raw materials are rarely transformed through the sculptural process – their original form and function remain identifiable. Though the *Objects* are recognisable as works by Sharif, they are simultaneously unexceptional and anonymous – capable of simply and seamlessly blending into the existing urban landscape.

In an important essay from the mid-2000s, Sharif characterises his practice as a type of 'weaving'. An ancient technique for creating surfaces, forms and structures, weaving is central to various indigenous craft practice. By weaving, he claims solidarity with the bodies, primarily female, that traditionally perform these and countless other unacknowledged domestic tasks – acts distinguished by their endless nonproductive repetition. Sharif's tapestry-like wall pieces such as *Rug*, 2016 make this link to weaving explicit. Revitalising an ancient handicraft technique as a viable medium of contemporary art though enacted through his male body, reveals and revels in a strong feminist aesthetic and ethic of labour and care.

In that same essay, Sharif also positions his practice as a conscious critical response to the alienating effect of consumer capitalism spreading across the globe and transforming society and culture in the the UAE. His response is to turn himself into a type of pointless nonproductive machine engaged in 'redundant repetition', perversely re-enacting through a human body the conditions of mass production.

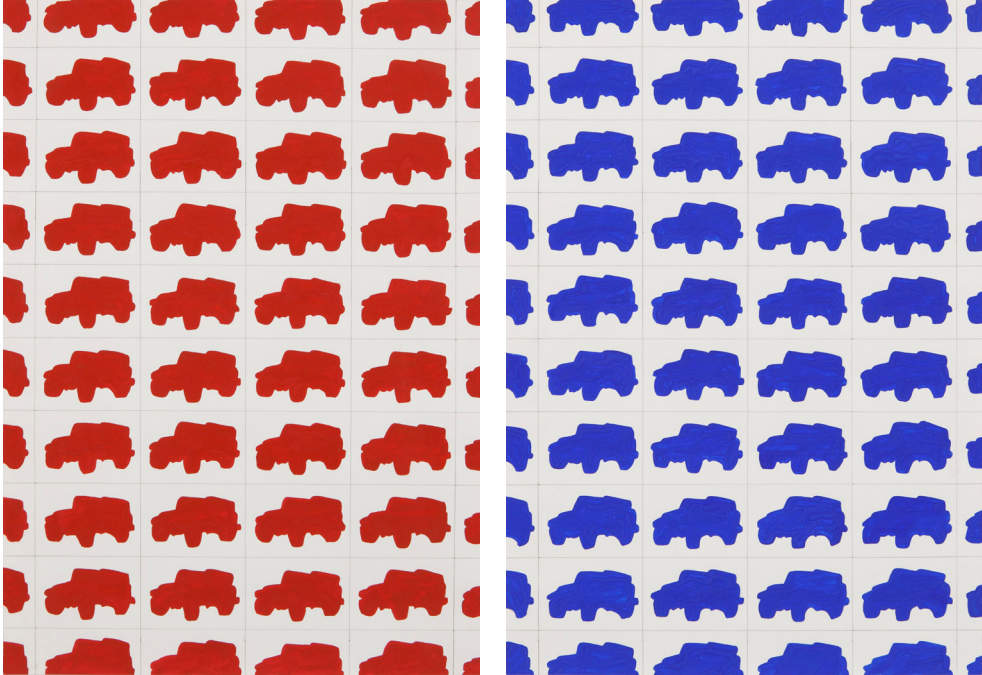
For Sharif works, the act is more important than the final result. Channeling Duchamp, he rejects the authority of authorship by repeatedly performing a type of

unspecialised task, a process that could extend endlessly, without producing use or surplus value. Made through obsessive repetitive labour, the completion of these objects is somewhat arbitrary and dependent on exhaustion, raw materials, time, space, energy, desire, and interest. Sharif repeatedly downplayed the significance of his process and dismissed the value and status of the final product, dubbing it "useless, an exercise in construction" – a phrase that emphasises the insignificant, routine, and repetitive quality of the process, and links it to the notion of art as a set of instructions to be followed.

*Cadmium Yellow No. 2*, 2014 establishes a formal link between his *Objects* and his paintings. Using a discarded teak garden chair, Sharif amassed a thick layer of papier-mâché which he then adorned with acrylic pigment, asserting the work's claim as an abstract painting. In his paintings on canvas, he typically gave way to gestural



The Flying House 32, 2008, Oil on canvas, 150 x 100 cm



Images No. 8 and No.9, 2013, Gouache and pencil on paper, 42 x 29.5 cm each

abstraction as well as repeated and minimalistic imagery, 'weaving colours together', he explained. Subject-matter is firmly embedded and responsive to his present such as *The Flying House 32*, 2008, depicting a somewhat surrealist composition of floating objects outside his studio in Satwa, UAE.

Sharif's *Semi-Systems* works, begun in the early 1980s, were heavily influenced by the British Systems Group. These works introduced a degree of chance and human agency in their strict use of mathematics, systems, and structures. He invented a set of rules to create varying qualities of mark, line and form to emerge out of a pre-determined structure. A grid appears often, such as in *One to Nine*, 2010: the main drawing is accompanied by draft papers explaining the experimental parameters he established for himself. Sharif revelled in the mistakes and errors that naturally occur in the monotonous creation of the work, believing that "'Art' is a result of errors." The two drawings of small Jeeps entitled '*Images*' relate to the proliferation of images in our contemporary world. Shairif resolutely proclaims, "Images,

particularly photographic, are everywhere – constant and yet ephemeral like ghosts. They are fast, often coming from distant places, from a number of sources: the computer, TV, even the radio....Each image holds the potential of a new self. This is everywhere, not just the UAE, but perhaps here billboards are more present and numerous than in other cities. So there is this cycle: you work in order to buy, you spend and then you need to work again. I don't criticise this per se, but I am keen to show or remind the viewers that this is now our reality. Through this work, I am saying 'These are images I am subjected to. What are yours? Do you recognize yourself in these?'"

This text is mainly inspired by the following sources: Murtaza Vali, *Objects at / of Play (for Hassan)*, *Rock, Paper, Scissors*, National Pavilion UAE, Mousse Publishing, 2017; Ocula Conversations, interview with Anabelle Gersigny, 2015; Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, 'Hassan Sharif', *In Summer Autumn Winter Spring: Conversations with Artists from the Arab World*, Skira, 2014

Cover: Cardboard and Cloth, 2001, Cardboard, cloth and jute string,

HASSAN SHARIF | 1951 - 2016  
lived and worked in Dubai, UAE

#### EDUCATION

1984 Diploma in Fine Art and Design,  
The Byam Shaw School of Art, London

#### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2020 Kunst-Werke Institute for  
Contemporary Art, Berlin (upcoming)  
2019 Castello di Rivoli Museum of  
Contemporary Art, Turin (upcoming)  
*Blue*, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai  
2018 *Hassan Sharif: Semi-Systems*,  
Alexander Gray Associates, New York  
2017 *Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single  
Work Artist*, Sharjah Art Foundation  
*Reading is Making: Books and  
Boxes*, gb agency, Paris  
*Experimentations*, La Patinoire Royale,  
Brussels  
2016 *Hassan Sharif*, Alexander Gray  
Associates, New York  
*Hassan Sharif: Objects and Files*,



Cadmium Yellow No. 2, 2014, Wood, coir, papier-mâché, wire and acrylic, 101 x 48 x 17 cm

Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art,  
Doha  
2015 *The Physical is Universal*, gb  
agency, Paris  
*Images*, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde,  
Dubai  
2014 *Hassan Sharif*, Alexander Gray  
Associates, New York  
2013 *Approaching Entropy*, Gallery  
Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai  
*Hassan Sharif*, Alexander Gray  
Associates, New York  
*Hassan Sharif, Works 1980-2012*,  
Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut  
2011 *Hassan Sharif, Experiments &  
Objects 1979-2011*, Qasr Al Hosn,  
Cultural Quarter Hall, Abu Dhabi  
2007 *Hassan Sharif*, Sharjah Art Museum,  
Sharjah  
1976 *Caricature*, Central Public Library, Dubai

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2018 *The 9th Asia Pacific Triennial of  
Contemporary Art (APT9)*,  
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane  
*Crude*, Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai  
*We Began By Measuring Distance*,  
Musée d'art moderne et contemporain  
(mamco), Geneva  
2017 *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th International Art  
Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia  
*The Restless Earth*, Fondazione  
Nicola Trussardi, Milan  
*But We Cannot See Them: Tracing  
a UAE Art Community 1988 – 2008*,  
NYUAD Art Gallery, Abu Dhabi  
*The Creative Act: Performance,  
Process, Presence*, Guggenheim Abu  
Dhabi  
2016 *For an Image, Faster Than Light*, 1st  
Yinchuan Biennale  
*34th Annual Exhibition*, Emirates Fine  
Arts Society, Sharjah  
2015 *The Books of Asia, Part II*, Asia  
Culture Centre, Gwangju  
*A Prologue to the Past and Present  
State of Things*, Delfina Foundation,  
London  
*1980-Today: Exhibitions in the  
United Arab Emirates*, The National  
Pavilion of the UAE, 56th Venice Biennale,  
Venice  
*Sharjah Biennial 12: The past, the  
present, the possible*, Sharjah Art  
Foundation, Sharjah



Copper No. 32, 2015, Copper wire, 315 x 75 x 70 cm

*Adventures of the Black Square:  
Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015*,  
Whitechapel Gallery, London  
2014 *Artevida: Corpo*, Museu de Arte  
Moderna do Rio de Janeiro  
*Une Histoire. Art, Architecture and  
Design from the 1980s to  
the Present*, The Centre Pompidou, Paris  
*Here and Elsewhere*, New Museum,  
New York  
*International Biennial of  
Contemporary Art of Cartagena de  
Indias*, Cartagena de Indias  
2012 18th Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery  
of New South Wales, Sydney  
2010 *Interventions*, Mathaf, Doha  
53rd Venice Biennale  
*It's Not You, It's Me*, UAE National  
Pavilion, 53rd Venice Biennale  
*Performance Art of the 1980s, A  
Comparison*, The Prague  
Contemporary Art Festival, Prague  
2005 - 1993 1st – 7th Sharjah Biennial, UAE  
2002 *5 UAE*, Ludwig Forum for  
International Art, Aachen  
2000 The 7th Havana Biennial, Havana  
1996 *The Six*, Sharjah Art Museum

1990 *Exhibition of the Emirates Fine  
Arts Society. In the Soviet Union*,  
Moscow  
1986 *Emirates Fine Art Society*, Sharjah  
1985 Central Market, Sharjah  
*One Day Exhibition*, Almarijah Art  
Atelier, Sharjah  
1983 *-/+ (Minus/Plus)*, Al Ahli Club, Dubai

#### SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Fonds National d'Art Contemporain  
(FNAC), France  
Musée d'art moderne et contemporain  
(mamco), Geneva  
Tate Modern, London  
M+, Museum for Visual Culture, Hong Kong  
Solomon R Guggenheim, New York  
Guggenheim Abu Dhabi  
Centre Pompidou, Paris  
Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris  
Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha  
Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah  
Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah  
Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA),  
Yinchuan