

MOHAMMED KAZEM THE PERSPECTIVE APPROACH

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Anecdotes are just like nicknames and cliché, they help in fixing details and in remembering what we would otherwise forget. Like all elements for assisting memory, anecdotes bear a considerable margin of approximation. There are lives, or specific moments in life, when people tend to repeat and coagulate relevant portions of their own or others' biographies. This generally occurs around the recurrence of an episode that seems to carry the special quality of synthesizing significant content which can be associated with an easily recallable verbalization.

Mohammed Kazem started his artistic path when he first met Hassan Sharif at the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah in 1984. At that time he was only 15 and characterized by the infallible instinct that guides, drives or pushes one's personal research of new horizons towards their next level. Encounters are undeniably the most significant moments in life. In the early 1980s, Hassan Sharif was one of the very few Emirati artists to have followed a university course abroad and certainly the only one to have been exposed to the western school of conceptual art. Deeply assimilating all on offer, Sharif brought back this knowledge as a message to spread to the UAE.

At the time of their encounter, Kazem was not a sophisticated young man: he was a reluctant and rebellious student, quite polemical towards the educational system and set on pursuing a parallel way of personal growth. In those days his main interest was oriented towards painting: colours were a true passion and Mohammed still recalls his "desperation" whenever at night he found himself without white colour and had to wait for the next day to go to buy a new one. After accurate training in the formal traditions of western painting, Kazem began to develop a more personal and characteristic discourse by experimenting with medias and styles.

Painting admittedly remains one of his passions. Nevertheless, over the years starting from the beginning of the 1990s, he turned to other directions in order to find a different and more personal way of expression on a bi-dimensional surface. In 1990 he first started his *Scratches*, which are realized by using sharp tools to incise the surface of the paper thus creating a variation in the incidence of the light. By this means, Kazem formally reflects and elaborates the idea of infinity: the sunlight moving over the surface of the paper creates continuous and unrestrained variations in perspective through continuous changes in its intensity and orientation. Kazem started out with a remarkable level of artistic maturity and the 1990 *Scratches on Paper* - an emblematic series of 18 sheets where the geometrical patterns dictate the distribution of the incisions on the paper - do indeed represent one of the most successful examples of his research. This orientation has been recurrent in his practice until the very recent group of work titled

Sound of Angles (2013). In both series, as well as in the 2008 *Scratches on Paper* created during his residency at the Chemnitz Museum (Germany), the balance between emptiness and fullness, between the geometrical lines that define the fields of action and the free-handed traits that either occupy or seemingly neglect to interact with the strictly geometrical shapes, results in a poetry of presence and absence, in a tangible sign of a highly personalized way of reading reality and interpreting its materiality. Another aspect that this body of works aims at materializing is the sound of the very act of scratching, of its gesture impressed on the paper. Kazem, a trained musician who often improvises when performing Arabic music playing the Oud, has never considered, and has even excluded the possibility when asked, of recording the sound accompanying the scratching. Nevertheless, this aspect is essential and it remains an intangible movement, just like music written on a phonograph or the incisions on the surface of a disc, which evoke rather than reproduce the corresponding harmonies. Silent sounds are made tangible but are still a distant dimension to reach, an intuition instead of a direct experience, almost a symbol, certainly the abstraction of an idea and the suggestion of a parallel dimension.

In the mid-1990s he began a period of deep and profound experimentation in the fields his mentor Hassan Sharif had followed ten to fifteen years earlier. Just like Sharif, he exhausted this phase after a few years without returning to those experiences, at least not in a literal way, but rather retracing those experiences again and transforming them in a new direction. Experimentation first turned to the exploration of alternative ways of treating paper, of painting and of using colours. The bi-dimensional approach followed until the moment that the work left its space to find new depth: paper is inked and then bent, plied, cut, crumpled and transformed into an object. It was also at this time of experimentation that the first inked scratches were produced in a larger size creating the only evident continuity in Kazem's practice between the mid-1990s and the following decade. During the same period he began to return to the photographic medium, a tool often utilized in successive years at increased intensity. Autobiography is certainly a significant aspect of his practice and artistic interest at this stage: the observation of the self clearly precedes the observation of the context, which will identify his practice in the mid 2000s, the period that has coincided with his notoriety on the regional and international scene.

Scale (1993) is a series of 28 photographs representing a selection of the objects of his daily life weighed on a household scale: his Army boots, beloved Oud, a book and his childhood tricycle are just some of the objects immortalized in a domestic environment, which is also the setting of a



Directions 2002, 2002 (detail). Color video installation, with sound, 2 min, 15 sec., four chromogenic prints, stickers, and two acrylic on wood panels; 100x70cm each, overall dimensions variable - Courtesy of the artist.



Tonque, 1994 (detail). Three from a series of 45 gelatin silver prints mounted on five corrugated boards, 43x43cm each board - Courtesy of the artist.

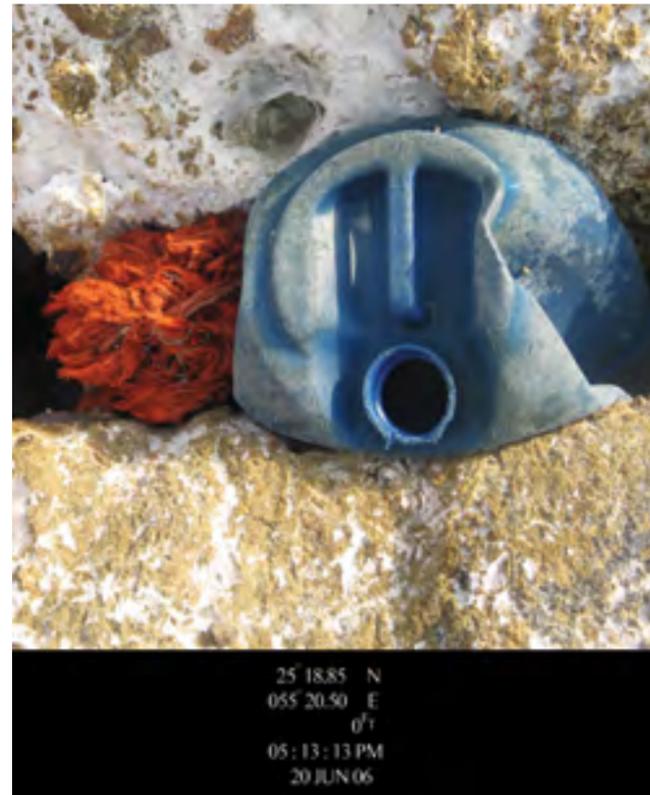


Scratches on paper, 1990, from a series of 18 sheets of paper, 45x38cm each - Courtesy of the artist.

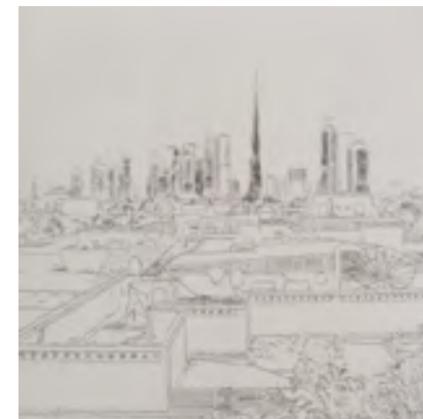
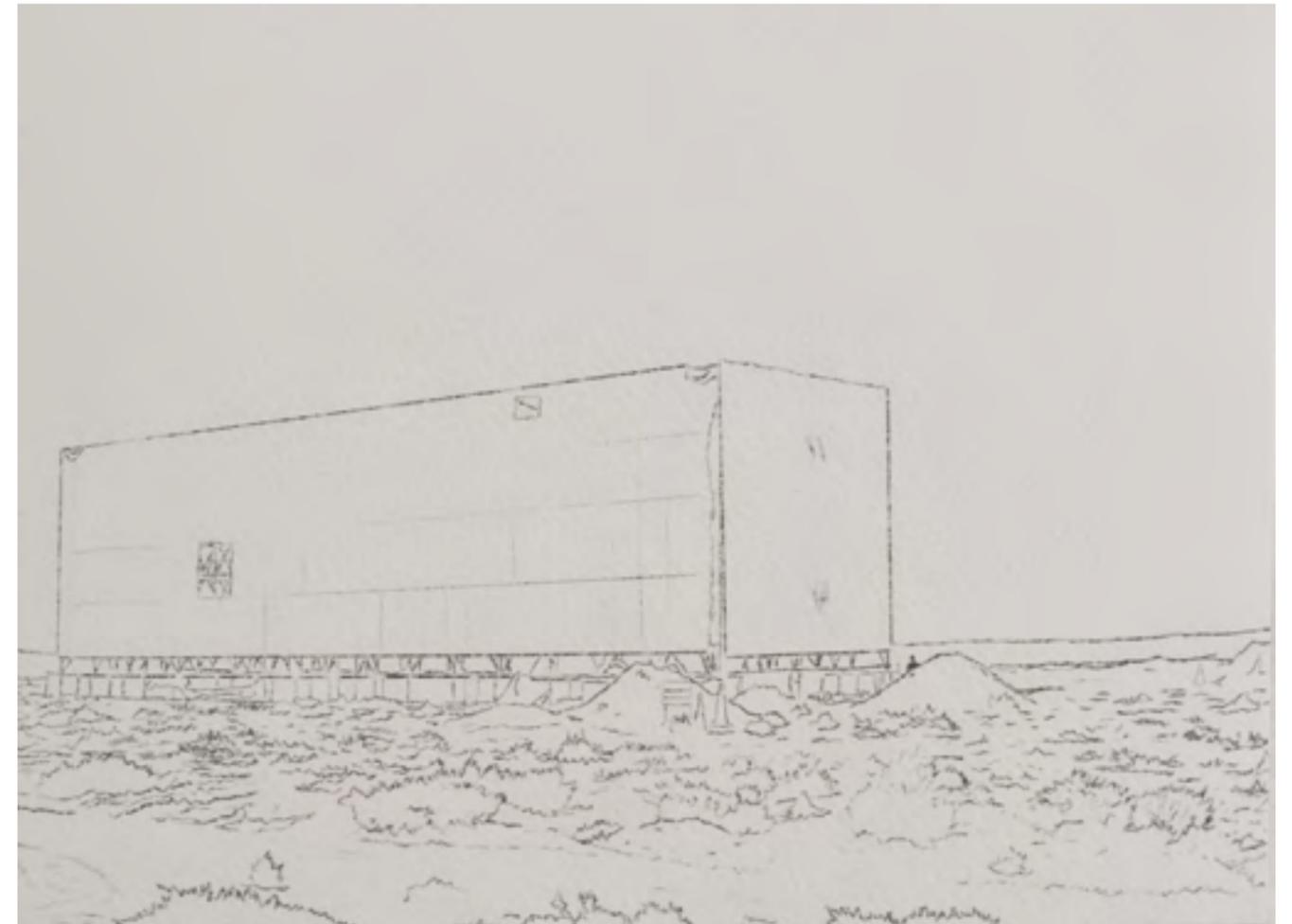
rebellion, of an attempt to evade the specific and to make his experience attain universal status. This emphasis on the self is even more accentuated in a series of works which centres on the very body of the artist: *Tongue* (1994), *Head Movement* (1995), *Legs and Arms* (1995), *Wooden Box* (1996), or even its absence: *Sound of My Room* (1994), *Apple* (1995), *Showering* (1998). The first group of works can be inscribed along the line of performance as they represent the documentation of an action displayed over a certain time and immortalized through photography. Following the tradition of performance in the Gulf region, these performances did not have an audience and exist only in the form of their documentation. Video was not the rule at the time, either because it was not available or could not be securely managed by Hassan Sharif, who must be credited for the documentation of these artworks. The concept of 'body' that we can derive from these works is that of fragmentation, of a partiality in the observation and reproduction of the body that is also singularly reflected in the works where absence prevails and presence can only be argued based on the traces left and displayed in front of the audience.

Tongue (1994) is a series of 45 photographs (out of which nine are regrettably lost) where he is portrayed in the act of inserting his tongue into a variety of ordinary cavities, thus transforming the everyday into a

field of enchantment and rediscovery. The same year, *Sound of my room* fixes and translates the physical act of moving through the familiar spaces of his home into an auditory experience: Kazem touches the surfaces of the walls and furniture of his room with a metallic object that produces a sound. This record becomes the evidence of a transition, of a presence. In fact, it becomes the immaterial trace of materiality, an attempt to abstract from the physicality of the bodily experience that this artist seems to explore at the same time through his early scratches and experimental works. The profound contradiction between the corporeity of his presence, of his involvement in the real world, his discovery and occupancy of space and time, and the denial of all these same dimensions through his artistic practice is indeed worth consideration. The contradiction seems to have a deep motivation, one that can be understood only when considering the many components of an individual life, of the singularity of an experience fully immersed in the circumstanced coordinates of the society and time where one happens to live. Charles Bukowski remembers the way he accidentally discovered the work of John Fante-the great American writer long neglected and only recognized as one of the major writers of his generation very late in life-in a library that he used to frequent when looking for other fellow writers engaged in the research of a narrative style characterized



1. Sea Escape, 1999-2006 (detail). Four from a series of 36 digital prints mounted on aluminum, 35x28.5cm each - Courtesy of the artist.
 2. Sea Escape, 1999-2006 (detail). Four from a series of 36 digital prints mounted on aluminum, 35x28.5cm each - Courtesy of the artist.



1. Window 2011-2012, 2011-2012. From a series of 100 graphite on paper, 25x25cm each - Courtesy of the artist.
 2. Window 2011-2012, 2011-2012. From a series of 100 graphite on paper, 25x25cm each - Courtesy of the artist.
 3. Window 2011-2012, 2011-2012. From a series of 100 graphite on paper, 25x25 cm each - Courtesy of the artist.
 4. Window 2011-2012, 2011-2012. From a series of 100 graphite on paper, 25x25 cm each - Courtesy of the artist.

by strong autobiographic components, or for whom the very basis of the act of writing was the examination of their own personal experience. That encounter happened to be a fundamental for both Bukowski and Fante, as the merit for the rediscovery of Fante is essentially due to Bukowski. Indeed, John Fante was dramatically influenced by his own biography and literally played around it, returning many times to the same episodes. There are similarities with what Mohammed Kazem has ostensibly done and still does, as do many other artists and writers. This is perhaps the *fil rouge* that links his works together and integrates the many aspects and orientations of his works into a comprehensive direction. With remarkable intuition, and after respectively reproducing the idea of movement and retracing a chapter of his childhood through his 1995 *Head Movement* and *Legs and Arms*, Kazem ultimately finds a way to communicate a physical experience, to transmit the sense of measurement and to involve the audience with *Wooden Box* (1996). A wooden structure of the same height as the artist is divided into six boxes on which sides are glued 24 photographs reproducing the movements of the artist at each and every level. The communication of the movement therefore implies the repetition of those very movements by the audience whenever they want to understand and appreciate the essence of the work. At a more abstract level, the absence of the body suggested by *Sound of My Room* (1994), *Apple* (1995) and *Showering* (1998), still evokes the idea of a presence and of an action that determines a variation in the physical evidence of the remnants the audience is exposed to. The subtlety of the annotation of the transformations inflicted on the environment has become a recurrent topic of his poetry since the mid-1990s in a constantly more abstracted and highly conceptual style. *Hangers and Keys*, both realized in 1995, testify a deeply ironic and distanced approach to the context Kazem is living in. Interacting with the social environment and pointing at its incongruences, this artist looks from an angle of resilient persuasion towards the senselessness of society and its contradictions. The very same approach, returns in a series of photographic works uniting the exploration of the environment with the inherent irony and a semi-scientific approach in the *Directions* series.

The year 1997 seems to mark a significant step in Mohammed Kazem's practice as it takes him to a new orientation and movement. Photography becomes a preferential tool for observing, documenting and provoking issues related to the evolution of society and to his native environment: *Photographs with a Flag* and *Photographs with Flags* (both 1997) propose a new perspective and way of relating to the context. In both of these series (knowing that the second series will be extended in 2003), he stands next to small coloured flags which mark Dubai's future developments. The substantial difference between these two series, which are formally very similar, consists in the orientation of the body and in the reference to the context. For example, in *Photographs with a Flag* the artist moves around the flag as if he could move around the expansion of his city in the anticipation of circumnavigating around the future growth of his native town. The second series sees the artist flanking the flag and looking at the horizon, either under construction or open and symbolized by the sea. The simplicity of the pose, the choice to include the audience in the observation and, at the same time, to partially exclude them as the portion of horizon covered by

his body is precluded from view, recalls the dignity of humanity facing the changes of the surrounding reality. Men are not giants, yet they embody a sense of legitimation and de-legitimation by their simple act of standing and not withdrawing from the confrontation with impossible adversaries. By acutely observing the contradictions implicit in our world, Kazem does not stigmatize it, rather he addresses the incoherence: *Window* 2003-2005 and the continuation of this project in the recent *Window* 2011-2012, where he silently witnesses the rapid urban transformation of Dubai, record the continuous change of geographical and landscape references of Dubai's environment. Kazem's evolution and movement from one work into the next is symbolised by the beginning of *Space* (2005-), an on-going photographic project directly derived from the last image of *Window* 2003-2005, where a portion of the top of the building, represented in the last image of *Window* 2003-2005, which became the symbol of the construction phenomenon in UAE, and is caught in its absoluteness surrounded by a very blue sky. This "cut" becomes the starting point of *Space* where he tracks and fixes in images the extremities of the most iconic or representative-of a certain culture and spirit-buildings in the world, thus embracing a more universal interpretation of reality paradoxically by referring to the coordinates of many specific contexts. An interest in the environment, where the interaction of natural and human is fallacious-Mohammed Kazem is deeply persuaded about the naturalness of all human manifestations-reappears in *Sea Escape* (1999-2006). This is a series of 36 photographs depicting and documenting relics taken by the sea to the shore. The work is similar to *Directions* 2001 (*Landscape*) (2001), where attention is focused on remnants and traces collected and recorded in the daily practice of urban exploration. All of these objects are precisely defined in their physical location by the coordinates recorded with a GPS (Global Positioning System) device. Once again, the contradiction between the inanity of these discarded objects and the adoption of a precise measurement of their geographical coordinates drives the attention to the absurdity of our world, and to the right of appropriation of any available tool to express a point of view regardless of how specific the perspective might be and the potential influence of its reuse. The use of a GPS device becomes iconic in the series known under the general title of *Directions*: all these works are characterized by a concrete reference to a specific environment and by its almost literal conversion into a work of art. This is achieved by using elements issued from the contextual reality and transformed into an installation, often a participatory one, either in its process or in its results.

Directions 2000-2001 presents a series of coordinates from four locations in the UAE: each one of them is materialized by plastic letters and numbers filled with sand from the very same locations and displayed on a wooden platform. The use of GPS, which was initially conceived for military purposes but has now been widely adopted in many different fields from science to nature, is significantly ironic in the sense that a substantial "inadequacy" of the tool would appear to be its suitability for the purpose of artistic work. Indeed, the fact of claiming the necessity of locating with unequivocal exactitude aspects of private events and experiences that, in their anonymity, could refer to a multiplicity of individuals, appears to be the



Window 2003-2005, 2003-05 (detail). Color video installation, with sound, 3 min, 6 sec, acrylic panel, LED light, 14 chromogenic prints: 70x70cm acrylic panel, 70x50cm each print - Courtesy of the artist.

essence of a humanistic position where normality is dignified and elevated to a status of exceptionality (*Directions (Autumn)*, 2003 or *Steps*, 2012-). Another component to keep in mind while trying to decipher Mohammed Kazem's practice is his tendency to materialize and to make tangible the impossibility of actions by merging the senses and working on a visual synaesthesia (*Directions 2002*, 2002, *Directions (Walking on the Chemnitz river)*, 2008, *Sculpting Sound*, 2008, *Walking in the space*, *Directions 2005*, 2005, *Directions 2013*, 2013).

In April 2002, Mohammed Kazem asked his friends and fellow artists Hassan Sharif and Mohammed Ahmed Ibrahim to accompany him on a boat trip in order to assist him in documenting his new project, *Directions 2002*. The "action" to be recorded consisted of throwing a series of wooden plates on which the coordinates of UAE locations had been engraved in to the Indian Ocean. By allowing these wooden pieces to float over the physical boundaries between countries and to move beyond those boundaries-or to come back, according to the capricious and indeterminable currents of the sea-Kazem explored the idea of political identity, of national belonging and, ultimately, of freedom. *Directions 2005* (2005) represents a further elaboration of this concept by means of a maquette miniaturizing the physical space to suggest to the audience the feeling of being lost at sea, just like those floating plates.

For many years the artist kept the model with him, knowing that only under exceptional circumstance he would be able to see it realized. These circumstances finally became reality last year when Kazem was selected to represent the UAE at the 55th Venice Biennale 2013. Employing the highest available technology, and thanks to an extremely accurate design, the model was finally translated into a physical space (*Directions 2013*, 2013), an igloo-like structure where a projection of the deep sea accompanied by the sound of the waves creates an almost spiritual experience, evoking feeling of solitude and deep connection with oneself. On the floor, where the visitors are supposed to stand, the coordinates keep changing, thus literally putting the visitors in the position of the plates thrown by him in to the deep sea. Although this could be a metaphor for the relationship between artists and audience-where the latter can be a tool in the artists' hands, demanded as they are to interact with artworks and to question themselves, I would rather consider this project as an emblematic example of a perspective approach. It offers a certain vision that clarifies retrospectively the elements of a discourse and allows audiences to understand the present in its contextual aspect by actually adding elements to reality and thickening our understanding of it.

About the Writer

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Walking on Water, UAE Pavilion at Venice Biennale 2013 Installation - Courtesy of the artist.