

Tensta Konsthall

Iman Issa's (Cairo/New York) installations speak to our memories and our ability to make associations. In **Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places** we get glimpses from a trip to the zoo, an observation from a campus, a fragment of a family's vacation traditions – relationships and everyday events described with barely any adjective, names or other details. In **Common Elements** it is familiar text from several intellectuals' autobiographies, like Nawal El Saadawi and Edward Said among others, that connects the personal with shared, lived experience.

Iman Issa's first solo exhibition in Sweden will be shown at Tensta konsthall this summer. It includes a collection of works that in different ways take a story out of its context and, in doing so, create a new story. She uses photography, text, sculpture, video and audio to formulate questions about individual experience and how it is linked to the collective. In this way she can make the personal into something more, something familiar, or even universal, that generates fantasies. In her practice she detaches and deconstructs events, characters and places to create something new, with new eyes.

description of a moment to a point until only the most common remains and then rethink, create anew and inspect the space that emerges.

Self-presentation

Iman Issa lives and works in Cairo and New York. Her recent group and solo shows include: **The Ungovernables**, New Museum, New York (2012); **Abstract Possible: The Stockholm Synergies**, Tensta Konsthall. Stockholm; **Seeing is Believing**, KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin (2011); **Material**, Rodeo, Istanbul (2011); **Short Stories**, Sculpture Center, New York (2011); and **Propaganda by Monuments**, Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo (2011). Her video work has been screened at several venues including Transmediale, Berlin; Tate Modern, London; Spacex, Exeter; Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool; and Bidoun Artists Cinema, Dubai. Issa is a recipient of the first Han Nefkens Foundation-MACABA Award (2012) and the Abraaj Capital Art Prize (2013). www.imanissa.com

Iman Issa will introduce the exhibition at 14:00 Thursday 13.6.

Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places is an installation in three parts where the first part contains a book of stories. The second part is an epilogue to the book. An index on a text panel, with a descriptive function, is the last part of the work.

Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places becomes a book written in three dimensions.

The literary goes through Issa's work like a red thread. **Common Elements** was created in a similar way. Out of four intellectuals' autobiographies, she took out and identified sentences that felt familiar. Autobiographies are in themselves performative and a retelling of a personal story, a form where the individual and the collective already are intertwined. Fifty-four of these fragments are presented individually as framed prints.

The audio piece **The Revolutionary** weaves a story around the multiple meanings of the word "revolutionary".

Issa communicates through her memories and associations but the objects do not only become a type of expression but a way to communicate, and new issues are constantly on the verge of being articulated. The process is to take a

Fahyma Alnablsi, host at Tensta konsthall, will have a number of presentations in Arabic during the exhibition period. To be announced on www.tenstakonsthall.se

Translations into Swedish and Arabic of the texts in the exhibition are available at the reception.

A conversation between Iman Issa and Maria Lind in May 2013

Maria Lind: *Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places* is an intricate installation consisting of thirty-three short texts, six videos, a number of photographs, one sculpture and an index. The index is a vinyl text on the wall, indicating that there are a number of things missing in the story. How would you suggest that a visitor to the exhibition navigate your installation and its various parts, missing or not?

Iman Issa: The installation is divided into three sections: a section where the book could be read, another section designated as an “Epilogue” to the book and which consists of artworks that take different forms and which are inspired by the texts in the book and, finally, a third section titled “Index” which supplies the artworks in the “Epilogue” with descriptive titles. The different sections are linked. A viewer can choose to follow these links through or to approach each element independently.

ML: The texts in *Thirty-three Stories* are presented in a slender book and the installation also holds an index as well as an epilogue, like a book. What happens if we think about this work as a publication, as literature articulated three-dimensionally?

II: The way the installation is set up had to do with the process involved in the construction of this particular project. It initially started with the idea of writing a book of fiction. This felt like an adequate way to go about questions I’ve had for a while, regarding how one can evoke and speak about familiar figures, events, places, and situations. I, of course, am not a writer and even though I felt pretty comfortable undertaking the task, I was certainly self-conscious about how I was constructing and editing these narratives. I became particularly sensitive to the mental images that were accompanying these constructions. Images of people I knew, of places I have lived in or visited, of situations I took part in or witnessed, were constantly popping up in my mind as I was writing these texts.

It was clear to me that these images were directly informing what was I writing, or at least were evoked by it. I imagine this to be a common experience for other writers and I have certainly experienced it myself as a reader, when certain fictional characters and events encountered in a book start to evoke or successfully correspond to memories one possesses of places and people they know. However what became interesting to me was how little the specificity of the characters, places, and events these images seemed to correspond to was materially reflected in the text. The text itself is written mostly in general terms. It is quite sparse and lacking in most details. The physical descriptions of characters and places in it are extremely minimal and, aside from a couple of instances, names or proper nouns are completely absent.

It was this awareness of the discrepancy between the text and the material inspiring it that made me want to go back to the text, and attempt to fill in what I was now thinking of as its missing details. I wanted to produce a language that would capture the specificity and particularity of the characters, places and events that I believed the text referred to. I realized

that this was not a simple matter of adding names or more elaborate descriptions to the book. After some thought, I decided that I was going to produce artworks that would attempt to do this. I believed that the framework, presentation, and mode of address that artworks potentially possess might offer the best method for evoking the specificity of the book’s subject matter. So I did this. I constructed different artworks that took different forms and I presented them alongside the book, and it is these works that came to form the “Epilogue” section of the installation.

As for the “Index” it emerged from the question of how a viewer might access and decipher the elements presented in the “Epilogue” section. There was no clear link between these elements and the text. They did not correspond to specific stories in the book. They were rather based on the overall memory of the places, characters and events that I believed informed the writing of the book. This struck me as a problem since my aim with the creation of these forms was always communication with a potential viewer, and it is this desire for communication that made me want to take the work a step further. The solution I came up with was to go back

to these artworks of the “Epilogue” and approach them as a stranger, to pretend as if they were found or produced by someone else and attempt to give them a descriptive title that might have little to do with the memories that informed their making. Titles which can perhaps open up a conversation of how these elements relate to other already existing forms and languages.

ML: Like **Thirty-three Stories, Common Elements** is based on an associative structure. You have identified a number of sections in five autobiographies, written by four people who can all be described as Arab intellectuals, and combined those with photographs taken by yourself and sculptures made by you whose motives are based on your own recollections from museums of various kinds. Why is the autobiographical and the personal recollection interesting to you?

II: I became interested in the form of autobiographies out of questions works, such as **Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places**, opened up. When one employs

and I went through these books line by line, and sentence by sentence trying to find instances of where I believed the constellation of words used by the writer spoke of something familiar. I started collecting these excerpts. The process took about a year and a half, at the end of which I had collected about 150 pages of text and it was from them that I formed the text panels of **Common Elements**.

ML: A recurring feature of your work is the combination of employing memory and its different codifications and the desire to look ahead; the past and the projective appear to be going hand-in-hand. Can you elaborate on this?

II: I didn’t start out being interested in memory, rather I was always more concerned with the production of forms that can evoke and correspond to what I believed was shared lived experience. It was the inability to come up with forms that I deemed successful in doing this that drove me to look at memory. One example would be a work I did in 2007 for the **Memorial to the Iraq War** exhibition at the ICA in London. This was an exhibition that asked artists

memory and personal associations in the production of forms with the aim of communicating with a potential viewer, how can one guarantee communication when the method relied on is as subjective and potentially inaccessible as one’s memory? It was this question coupled with an inability to come up with ways apart from my own memories and associations to speak about familiar figures, places and events that led me to take a closer look at autobiographies. For having spent a few years reading autobiographies of various public figures, I came to believe that the form allowed for a personal narrative to turn into something more.

That is, it struck me that in many autobiographies and even memoirs, what you had is a story of a particular man or woman but it was implied that what you were reading was also a story of this war, this country, this culture, this region, or a story of displacement, or the subjection to racism, sexism, prejudice or other shared human experiences. I became extremely interested in this and I wanted to understand how this dynamic was manifested formally; that is, in the very language used in the books. And so I chose five books to work on

to try and imagine what an Iraq War memorial at that time might look like. My contribution took the form of a video where a female subject reflects on her feelings and conceptions about the war.

Looking back at that video, however, I realize that in no way was I able to articulate how the Iraq War was different from any other war. This was slightly disturbing since this was a war that I followed closely and that I felt somewhat implicated in. Part of me wants to say ‘well perhaps all wars are the same, or all statues of great men are the same’ but the truth is, in my mind, this is certainly not the case. The Iraq war was a specific war to me. It was this realization that made me want to try and locate material evidence of this difference. And this ‘in my mind’ became the place to look for it since I did not feel I came across other existing forms that captured this difference. This is why memory became interesting to me. And it is also perhaps why your description is quite consistent with my intentions because memory is employed in the work but in an attempt to generate forms that can speak about existing situations, events, places, figures, and ultimately ideas.

ML: The Revolutionary is a six-minute audio work based on text-to-speech software which seems to be an evocative portrait of someone who could be participating in classical revolutionary actions as well as in being revolutionary in terms of choices in life. For example it is a “he” who is described as an urban person who nevertheless studied agriculture. Who is this person and why is he presented this way?

II: In **The Revolutionary** (2010), I was using narrative as a way to access what a term might refer to. I had been working a lot with text in projects like **Material** (2009-2012), **Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places** (2011), and others, and it became clear to me that I was developing a relationship to text that was similar to the way I dealt with images and other forms. I felt that there were certain words I could use, and others I could not use. I also kept running into terms which I felt I had no conception of what they might refer to. One of those terms is the “revolutionary.” And it wasn’t a matter of having contradictory or multiple understandings or visions of what the term might mean,

but rather of being confronted with a complete blank slate when I think of it. I could in no way put my hand on what it might signify nor create a mental image of what it could reference. Writing this narrative which is fictional became a way to try and furnish a more specific understanding of this term.

Maria Lind is the director at Tensta konsthall

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Common Elements, 2013

Fifty-four framed text panels, fourteen framed c-prints, five wooden sculptures on wooden plinths, vinyl text

Installation

Dimensions variable

Common Elements is a large installation that is based on text from memoirs and autobiographies of four public intellectuals—the writer and professor Edward Said, the poet and writer Mourid Barghouti, the legendary Egyptian writer Taha Hussein and feminist and writer Nawal El Saadawi. The autobiographies have been disassembled and parts of them taken out of their contexts. The personal story does not only focus on the person but relates to a bigger story about shared experiences. How can a personal and subjective story become universal?

Common Elements was initially produced for the 5th edition of the Abraaj Group Art Prize

The Revolutionary, 2010

5:58 min audio track on loop

Headphones, bench

Installation

Iman Issa runs into words that she cannot directly get a clear picture of or relationship to. This audio work examines the meaning of the word "revolutionary," and with the story as a form, she tries to get to the word's wider content. Through text-to-speech software a voice tells us about a specific man's life. A picture of a quiet man, with a smile which, according to the voice, later becomes his trademark, emerges.

Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places, 2011

Three-part installation (Book, Epilogue, Index)

Publication, six single-channel videos on loop, two framed c-prints, two framed inkjet prints, plywood sculpture, supports, vinyl text on wall

Dimensions variable

The objects and forms in this work are looking to the relationship between memory and material. The work contains three parts and is presented as a book in a three-dimensional form. The first part contains a book with thirty-three different stories—few details, adjectives or names are included in the text. The second part of the installation is a collection of works that forms an epilogue and was created out of the memories that informed the writing of the book. The last component is an index put on a vinyl text that adds a wider description and understanding to the work.

Copies of the book are available at the reception of Tensta konsthall.



