

MURMUR IN THE WHITE CUBE

On Iman Issa's work

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Laura Valles reflects on Iman Issa's artistic practice in which subjects such as familiarity, mimesis and fiction are represented in the form of a display. Issa's work seems to demand a responsibility to the forms capable of generating a speech act.

“Come back and make up a good-bye at least. Let's pretend we had one”, Clementine says to Joel in a scene from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, the 2004 film with a story by Charlie Kaufman and Michel Gondry that reminds us that it's not so easy to silence the memory. And like a scene from the movie, in the series *Triptychs* (2009) the artist Iman Issa seems to be telling herself “come back and make a new start.” But, what is left in the space between what one experiences, what one remembers and what one forgets?

Each one of the six displays in *Triptychs* is comprised of three parts. On the left there is a small snapshot of an urban space, different in each one. Then we have a larger photograph with a neutral backdrop portraying all sorts of disparate elements: a still life of fruit, tools, a tray or a chess board. Finally, there is a three-dimensional element on a shelf or stand; a television, a book or a Discman. The first photo on the left came about when the artist found herself in an unknown place that for some reason or other struck her as *familiar*. A specific memory from this encounter with the urban space then led to a new mental image, an idea, a construction that Issa painstakingly reproduced in order to set off a chain of associations between the first and second photograph, a framed still life that came from an evocation, from a memory. Finally, the third element is produced from a self-imposed exercise in forgetfulness. “Look, think, and look again,” is what Donald Judd told us. Or so the artist reminded us in her lecture at the Dia Art Foundation last year.¹ In this case, Issa is bent on looking at her own photographs as if she were a stranger, as if she had nothing to do with these depictions. And from the endeavour to try

to understand what the previous two images *speak of* and what it is that strikes her as familiar, comes the answer, the third piece that completes the question “what is left in the space between what one experiences, what one remembers and what one forgets?” In consequence, it is not a series of specific elements shown in the images that triggers a kind of *déjà vu*, a knowingness of the places depicted in the first image in the series, but seemingly it is the complete opposite, the lack of recognisable elements, the generic quality of the place, that produces the sense of familiarity.

Born in Cairo in 1979, Issa studied political science and philosophy, that is, until her university decided to create a Visual Arts Department. This was the backdrop against which she, along with other colleagues, signed up for a new programme where she specialised in photography. Then, in 2005, she moved to New York, taking with her a series of projects that revealed her interest in the creation of forms that, while containing a notable decorative quality, had more to do with questions she would later explore more deeply: public space, architecture, language, or memory. For instance, *Proposal for a Crystal Building* (2003) and *Meeting Point* (2004) are two projects presenting architectural structures conceived for the urban space in which there is a defence of inconclusiveness —of the proposition, not the resolution— based on the use of materials already familiar to Issa, like, for instance, glass or artificial light. These projects examine the container as a form in its own right, but they do so with the precaution proper to any proposition presented as a hypothesis. On the other hand, in *Skyline* (2006) and *Making Places* (2007) — created while studying at Columbia University in New York— one can intuit a more conscious rapprochement with issues like the memory of place and its communicative capacity through representation and experience. The two works consist of a series of photographs and videos which, for the first time, include the figure of a person doing an action in a city. Nonetheless, it would not be until the series *Triptychs* that Issa would undertake more thorough research which laid the foundations for what she defines, and defends, as a *display*: display understood as a dialoguing space containing a series of elements that goes beyond the production of forms, a place, a light, a ceiling, a floor, a distance between elements, an absence, a possible presence, a continuous murmur that activates the communicative potential of the exhibition space.

The idea of *familiarity* that runs through the whole of Iman Issa’s work —spanning from the material quality of her phase in Cairo and including the experiential quality of her early period in New York— takes me to the notion of *mimesis*, understood not as imitation or the copy of an original (Plato), but as a representation of the praxis of human actions which are presented as future possibilities (Aristotle). Mimesis, in this sense, ought to be viewed as a process, as a

continuous making and knowing, as an opening. For Aristotle, mimetic representation resists all comparison with the referent, resists any kind of simplification. In his essay “On the Mimetic Faculty” from 1933, Walter Benjamin wrote “nature produces similarities”, although he went on to add that, “the highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man’s.”²

According to Benjamin, even though the human being develops a primitive language able to mimic things, situations and persons in a kind of magical correspondence with the world, this mimetic faculty strengthened in childhood through playing and other activities gradually diminishes and is transformed into a series of correspondences increasingly further removed from the senses. Aby Warburg sustains the same idea in a similar fashion. The shared history of peoples and cultures starts out as ritual, develops into art and ends up in technology; there is a progressive path towards the rational and a greater separation from the experiential. One could already see pointers towards these ideas in *A Lecture on the Serpent Ritual* from 1939 in which Warburg recalls his experience with the Pueblo Indians who use magic and snake symbols to summons rain, among other actions associated with superstition.

The idea of mimesis is strongly linked to language and usually goes hand in hand with the concept of diegesis.³ Diegesis does not show or represent; it narrates, it tells a story from fiction to depict an inner world. Conscious of this potentiality of language, Iman Issa began a new series of works from 2010 that, while they formally mutate, diverge or encounter in the exhibition space in the form of installation, conceptually they seem to find points of contact that give rise to a discourse that is seen to be increasingly more mature. In it, the artist leaves plenty of clues to the spectator of the work to “look, think, and look again.”

Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places (2011) is a book of fiction that Issa wrote with the purpose of continuing to think about this idea of how to represent the specificities of an experience, of a latent image that seems familiar. This time she uses language to address the concept of likeness or recognition through thirty-three short stories that eschew all detail, and where *he*, *she* and *they* are the main characters in a series of probable situations that are characterised by a generic banal quality. Meetings and mix-ups take place in a car, a garden or an office, but we never know why. In this exercise, there are no adjectives and barely two proper names. These stories pretend to describe but they are only a pretext. However, they seem to stimulate our imagination to try to decipher what all this wordiness is intending to say.

In *Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places* the modus operandi of *Triptychs* is repeated. First, Issa writes a book of fiction, she has an experience. In *Triptychs* she visits a place, she experiments it. Starting with the exercise of writing the book, she produced a response in the form of an installation which she calls an “epilogue”. This arises in turn from the mimetic extrapolation of a series of evocations or mental images generated from the first phase of the project: the book. In *Triptychs* she reproduces a mental image that takes the form of a still life and which is the consequence of the first encounter with the urban space. Finally she “comes back and makes up a new start” generating an index — a list of words that comes from a process of forgetting in an attempt to understand what the set of objects in the three-part installation actually has to say. A similar thing occurs in *Triptychs*, where we find a rational response to the experience. The elements in each installation transport us from the experiential to the rational, passing through representation.

I am then taken to another scenario, which is austere, elegant and minimalist in its formal resolution, where I come across *Lexicon* (2012-2014). The thirteen pieces arranged around the Rodeo gallery in London claim to be a contemporary alternative or remake of an original work of art. The only thing I can find on their referent is a detailed description on a vinyl accompanying a sculpture which has little to do with what I am reading if you are to think of Plato’s idea of mimesis. The texts are replete with details, describing paintings, drawings, lithographs... They invite me to make connections between what I see depicted and written. Associations between the materials and the forms on exhibit and the words that produce another mental image, very different from what I, by default, try to connect. “There is an original object but everything is described with my own language. The idea behind the title is that it is supposed to operate as an element that makes the work *speak*,”⁴ says Issa. And while she says this when talking about *Lexicon*, she could just as well be talking about *Material* (2010-2012), *Common Elements* (2013) or *Heritage Studies* (2015), as they are other projects that make use of hermeneutics to produce a reaction, in other words, to give rise to a communicative act and to appeal to the senses from which, as Benjamin and Warburg tell us, we are increasingly further removed. In *Material* Iman Issa works with alternatives to monuments in proximity with their surrounding environs yet removed for some reason from their original meaning. The titles offer clues to those who wish to explore the possible failures of formal representation of the collective memory. *Material for a sculpture proposed as an alternative to a monument that has become an embarrassment to its people* is a good example. *Common Elements* makes use of autobiography to explore (self) representation by the individual aware of its function and collective responsibility. On this occasion we do know that it was Edward Said, Nawal El Saadawi, Taha Hussein and Mourid

Barghouti (key figures in the production of knowledge within the Arab context and postcolonial theory) who paved the way to create a project that, once again, returns us to memory and shared experience. Finally, *Heritage Studies* transports us to a past charged with symbols through an installation that speaks of tradition, inheritance and belonging.

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, published posthumously in 1970, Adorno said that “art is imitation exclusively as the imitation of an objective expression.” As such, it is self-sufficient because art “becomes eloquent in itself”, and he adds, “this is art’s mimetic consummation.”⁵ Though each in his own way, both Adorno and Aristotle identified a tension in the very definition of mimesis that has to do with the paradox that is created in that space between the real and the expression of the experience in itself, that rational, original and autonomous composition which is the work of art.

Iman Issa seems to call for a responsibility towards forms able to *speak* to whoever is willing to listen, able to activate a field charged with future potential and sensitive experiences closer to the senses yet without overlooking reason. It is in this space between container and content, between artist and audience, between the work and any of its social, geographical and cultural contexts, where we will find this murmur, this place for encounter and debate that is generated in the midst of all contradiction.

Notes

1 *Artists on Artists Lecture Series: Iman Issa on Donald Judd*, at Dia Art Foundation, New York, 3 March, 2014.

2 Benjamin, Walter,: “On the Mimetic Faculty” in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), 1999, pp.720-722.

3 Back in the time of Plato and Aristotle the concepts were used to speak about poetry and the poet in relation to their communicative faculty. And while Plato described the mimetic narration of diegesis in Book III of *The Republic*, in his *Poetica* Aristotle defended that all arts are mimetic, without exception, though he did admit certain nuances that distinguished them in degrees of imitation. Diegesis therefore is not presented as an opposite, but as yet another value in the equation of representation.

4 Conversation with the artist on 30 June 2015.

5 Adorno, Theodor W.: *Aesthetic Theory*, Bloomsbury, London, 1997, 153-4.

<http://www.editorialconcreta.org/Murmur-in-the-White-Cube>