

Iman Issa *by Andrew Weiner*

Iman Issa interviewed by Andrew Weiner
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I first encountered Iman Issa's work in 2011 in the context of a curatorial project called Fifteen Ways to Leave Badiou, for which Bassam El Baroni had invited a group of artists to create work as a critical response to Alain Badiou's thinking about contemporary art. Issa's contribution, Colors, Lines, Symbols, and a Text, consisted of a fragmentary diagram composed of elements of a flag and an activist logo, together with a short text outlining potential connections between recognition, the rhetoric of the image, and the politics of aesthetics. I remember being compelled by the way that her piece combined formal rigor and conceptual precision with a more poetic, oblique poise. Several years later, I had the chance to meet Iman and discuss Material (2010–12), an installation that indirectly engages memory in a series of evocative, thoughtful, and impeccably crafted displays which suggest alternative forms to existing monuments and memorials. I was very happy for the chance to resume our conversation over tea on a breezy March afternoon in New York, and to speak about some of the ways in which art enables its own singular modes of communication.

—Andrew Weiner

Andrew Weiner: *Let's start by talking about objects and the role that they play in your practice. One impression I've had from your work is that the objects you display aren't easily reducible to sculptures; you seem to be thinking more in terms of installation or display. I've also been struck by the autonomy they appear to have, and I don't mean autonomy in the conventional modernist sense but rather that there's something that's self-contained and independent about them. They seem self-possessed; they seem to follow their own rules.*

Iman Issa: I don't think of myself as an object-maker or a sculptor. I like both *object* and

sculpture as terms, and see how they might be useful in thinking about the work. But I use the word *display* to describe the work, in the sense that the work is composed of a set of elements relying on and relating to each other. For example, in most exhibitions I do, text, be it in the form of captions, descriptive panels, or vinyl lettering on the wall, is an integral part of the work, as are the object, support structure, spatial configuration, light—to me all of these things constitute the work.

AW: *What you're describing sounds more like a system of relationships, one that allows for some sense of a multiplicity.*

II: I like to think of the objects and the text as collaborators. I understand that they're structurally different and have different capacities, but for me they're equal because I treat them both as tools to hint at or evoke something which itself might not be physically present in the space. Maybe autonomy would be an interesting concept for me to think about. I'm not sure if the works themselves are autonomous. Their affective quality is certainly important, and how one might interact with or receive what's physically present in a space is something I think a lot about. I try to avoid creating a situation where a viewer feels the need to search Wikipedia, the news, or history books in order to feel they're "getting" a work, so in that sense the works are self-contained; but that said, they might also have referents in other contexts. So they're also not autonomous in the way a Donald Judd or Sol LeWitt might be.

AW: *What I'm trying to get at in talking about autonomy is this sense I've had that the work is asking to be experienced and read in different terms than one would use to evaluate something like a news story or a documentary. It follows its own codes. I wonder if you agree, and, if so, what you think these codes or tendencies might be.*

II: Sure, I believe artworks allow for subject matter to be tackled differently than, say, in a news story or a documentary. In the end, it all comes down to the space one is working in and what sort of sentiments, encounters, and questions the parameters of that space allow for. I understand, however, that such parameters can only become clear to a maker by actually undertaking work within a specific context. In my case, I've worked across different mediums and contexts, and sometimes the work ends up being a book, a lecture, a film—or a display in an exhibition venue. Usually, the decision of what form to give a work is based on what I believe will do the most justice to the concerns I have while making it.

AW: *What would you say are the criteria for the viewer's experience in the kind of space that the work sets up?*

II: Maybe one of the dynamics artworks allow for, that might not exist so readily elsewhere, is a different sensation of time and space than the one we are used to.

AW: *I've noticed that people tend to pick up on a reductive economy in your work, a certain amount of reserve or restraint. You're not going out of your way to divulge information. The term austerity seems to crop up. I'm curious to hear whether terms like economy or reserve speak to certain aspects of your process.*

II: I have a complicated relationship to some terms such as *reduction*, *reserve*, or *restraint*. I can see how they might appear to describe the work, but they're usually removed from the way I think of it. Another term that comes up quite a bit is *abstraction*, which is hard to reconcile with my understanding of what I'm doing. It is my belief that I'm moving from material that is already abstract toward something specific and not the other way around. In general I would say abstraction is rarely a methodology I find generative. At the same time it's clear to me that abstraction has a very strong hold on contemporary life and our understanding of the world. In a way, I've developed an acute sensitivity to it, bordering on an allergy, especially to the kind of abstraction that masquerades as specificity.

On the other hand, terms like economy and austerity make more sense to me, for I tend to think of my application of forms as an instrumental one. So whatever is in there is usually there for a reason. To give an example, some of the captions in *Heritage Studies* include the location of where the object comes from, while others don't. These decisions are based on what I believe to be key to how the objects speak or fail to speak.

AW: *There's a particularity to what you're saying about these relationships that is quite important. But if we were to step back and view them in more familiar, generic terms, we could say that the features we're speaking of read as Apollonian characteristics. I wonder whether this vocabulary is relevant here. Are there places where there is a less obvious Dionysian aspect to the work, or perhaps a conflict between these tendencies that might not be apparent in the finished work?*

II: When I say "instrumental application of forms" it's not like I can tell you what each element

in the work means. It's not about the ability to translate into language what is essentially an encounter. It's a reliance on the different capacities of these elements, most of which lie in a domain more attuned to what we may refer to as intuition or affect. To me, a caption is also a form.

AW: *I understand your use of the term to mean something like a cultural form or a media format. Is that right? But there's also the question of form as philosophers of aesthetics use it, meaning a sensible, perceptible, unified entity on the order of a gestalt. I'm not implying that your work is formalist, at least not in the conventional, typically pejorative sense. That said, there is a strong and consistent concern with how specific forms are constituted, with how your mediation as an artist alters these forms, and also with the ways in which the different formats or media you're working in—language, sculpture, photography, sound—relate to each other.*

II: I understand that formalism is a term that relates to a specific historical discourse, but it's important to unpack what we mean by that when we're speaking about work made today. A work that applies the form of the political in its reliance on a language that implies content or in its use of banners, dissident terminology, performative demonstrations, historical archives, or legal records doesn't strike me as any less formalist than, say, an abstract geometrical painting, nor necessarily more successful in allowing for a conception of the structures that govern our lives. We can refer to a work as engaged or political insofar as it is affecting our sensibilities, understandings, and desires to act in the world, but that, too, needs to happen through a form. So I think I may have forgotten your question... *(laughter)*

AW: *Me too! I think my question was: Could you please discuss form?*

II: Yes, so if we agree that everything is a form, then the question becomes, Which forms are adequate for tackling urgent concerns? As I mentioned, I don't think of my works as reductive, abstract, or minimal, and I think if you look carefully at the work, you'll find many elements that exclude these descriptions.

AW: *You just used the term adequate, which makes me wonder how you determine when a piece is done. Adequacy has to do with sufficiency or effectiveness, but also values like truth and propriety; are these somehow in play when you make this decision?*

II: Up to this point, my works have almost always been presented as proposals, propositions, or

studies, as opposed to conclusive forms. I find a study to be a very useful format, a way to posit the work—regardless of how finished it may look—as a start to a conversation. You can say, for example, that in some of the formal reinterpretations the work takes, I’m noting a discrepancy between certain forms and the concepts attached to them. Now, someone else can come and say, “You’re totally wrong, your objects should be bigger, smaller, made out of wood instead of metal or metal instead of wood.” Or perhaps with the passage of time another reinterpretation will need to be attempted. So to me, the idea of a study allows for this conversation to take place, as well as for me to think of the forms as potentially mutable.

AW: And yet these objects are presented very carefully. I’m not saying they’re precious, but they don’t look messy or sloppy or provisional the way that some art objects do. They look very mindfully executed, and also quite poised, maybe even polished. I can’t imagine any of that is accidental.

II: It’s not necessary that the objects be polished, but it’s necessary for me that whatever form they take— be it waxed wood, rusted steel, or hand-rubbed brass—comes across as a well-thought-out decision to potentially engage with. It’s a way to insist on the format of a conversation.

AW: Although the nature of this decision might be an open question, at least insofar as part of your practice seems to be grounded in intuition.

II: Sure. Most of the formal decisions in the work are done intuitively, but in the end they’re still decisions that determine the life of an object. I believe objects have a life of their own, independent of a user or maker’s intentions, which is what makes them so interesting. At the same time, this doesn’t cancel out a maker’s ability to sense the consequences of his or her formal decisions and to make decisions accordingly.

AW: To go back to this idea of the work as an element in a conversation, as an invitation, or perhaps an opening gambit: This kind of indirect or metaphoric conversation makes a lot of sense to me as a way to describe the encounters that people have with or through art. It’s a strange conversation, right? It’s certainly very real in that the experiences we have around art can feel more real than everyday life; they’re distilled and more intense, maybe even qualitatively different. At the same time, this exchange is generally nonreciprocal, since so much of a viewer’s experience of the work doesn’t come back to the maker.

II: When I say “conversation,” I don’t necessarily expect or need to sit with people and get their feedback. But I believe that forms are capable of continuing or starting a conversation. The person who made the work is not necessarily the one who will receive feedback about it.

AW: This makes sense, and yet it’s hard to think of other circumstances in which we might spend so much time devising a statement that has such indirect responses or consequences. On a related note, I read somewhere that you think of your works functioning like speech acts. Could you elaborate on that?

II: I mentioned the term *speech act* in reference to a specific project, *Heritage Studies*, which is presented as remakes of historical artifacts in an effort to capture their relevance to the present. And maybe remake is not the right word, for every single thing I made in that project looks nothing like the original from which I started. So you have two objects with different materials, color, dimensions, or shapes, but you refer to them as the same object; the proposition here is that you can do so because they’re doing or saying something similar. That is what I meant by a speech act. I should also say that I was attracted to the term *heritage studies* not because these objects have anything to do with my heritage—they don’t—but because unlike history, heritage studies is usually presented as a field that takes an interest in the past with the idea of a practical end in the present. I was interested in this idea of a functional return.

AW: Clearly this pushes the limits of what we usually think of as resemblance. There’s a lot that interests me about this idea of positing an equivalence between what might seem to be completely different objects. Is this primarily important to you for aesthetic reasons?

II: It has to do with the idea of an instrumental application of forms. The object is a tool just as the text is a tool. In that way they are equivalent, while of course being structurally and materially different.

AW: Do these function as tools in the same way as screwdrivers or computers do?

II: They’re trying to get at something. That’s what I mean by tools. It’s not about them having a function that you can clearly articulate; I’m interested in what happens to forms when you approach them in such a functional manner. And, of course, this changes from project to project. For example, it’s impossible to speak about the films and photographs I’ve made in the past

in similar terms for there is an excess inherent in the process, medium, and resultant imagery that would be difficult to control in the same way that might be possible with some of these sculptural and linguistic forms. Of course these contain excess as well, but perhaps of a different kind that is more amenable to this treatment.

AW: *You spoke earlier about the importance of display. Your work deploys different formats of display; a piece might include sculptural objects, photographs, wall texts, different kinds of recordings, and so on. The least interesting way to describe this would be as a mixed-media installation, which wouldn't really say anything about the specific relationships between the forms. When you assemble these deliberate arrangements, with the individual parts reinforcing or modifying each other, they become something other than a mere collection of objects.*

II: That's probably why I use the term display. It seems to encompass the parameters of the larger structure in which the elements are functioning, as well as the elements themselves.

AW: *To focus on another aspect of your practice: different kinds of appropriation seem important to what you're doing, although these often work in ways that function differently than appropriation is typically thought to. You also seem to have an interest in withholding or concealing particular aspects from certain images. I'm wondering what kind of relationship you have with your source material.*

II: That's a good question. I don't think I ever set out to conceal my sources. Even though it happens, that's not how I think of what I'm doing. In most cases, if the sources are absent, that's because the work is not about them. In a project like *Heritage Studies*, the intention was to understand the relevance of the original objects in the present, so in a way the original objects have no place in the work. Including them would have been detrimental to it.

Another example would be *Common Elements*, a work I completed in 2013, where I drew excerpts from the autobiographies of four public figures. I ended up mentioning who the figures were, although their names weren't essential to the work. But neither was it essential that they be absent, so I included the names in a space that wasn't central to the work.

AW: *Because withholding that information could end up drawing more attention, right?*

II: Sure. It has to do with whether the included information allows the work to do what it's meant to be doing. Sometimes the source material takes center stage in the presentation of a

work, sometimes it appears in a footnote, sometimes it doesn't appear at all.

AW: *It's interesting how this establishes a particular relationship between the artist and what we could call "the real," for lack of a better term. And it seems as if you're working with that relationship—or reworking it. This reminds me of the different ways in which you've used fiction as part of your practice. Could you say more about how fiction informs your work, particularly those ways that might not be readily apparent to viewers?*

II: You mean fiction in the sense of literature such as the short stories or narratives used in the work, or more like the general use of imagination?

AW: *I guess I'm thinking about both.*

II: My source material involves all kinds of things, including what I read in history books and hear on the news. Perhaps when working with this idea of an instrumental application of forms, the question no longer centers on whether a narrative took place but on what it's trying to get across. That is one way to answer your question.

I didn't start out studying art; I came from a background in philosophy and political science, and when I encountered the space of art, I felt that it allowed for certain concerns to be tackled in ways that didn't seem possible in those other fields. That's why I switched to art. I believe there is something it opens up—you can call it a space of imagination, a space of fiction, or, more precisely, a space of equivalence between fiction and nonfiction. I think it allows for many different conversations. I find this to be extremely generative.

AW: *You use the term encounter. It's a word that I use sometimes as a writer to describe a particularly heightened or charged experience with an artwork, or a strange or uncanny one. I'm wondering what you think makes an encounter different from something more common, like a meeting. Apart from this sense of an increased intensity or unpredictability, an encounter often seems to imply some sort of risk, even if the nature of that risk isn't necessarily clear.*

II: In an encounter you come across something that you thought was missing, or you are confronted with something you recognize immediately but might not have seen before. It proves things that you already know but offers a new way to see them. There is something familiar in an encounter. In a way, this is how I feel about art as a field. Part of the reason I became

interested in it was because of a job I had as a guard at an art museum—

AW: *This was in Cairo?*

II: No, this was in Seattle in the late '90s. It was at the Henry Art Gallery. One of the art works that I would describe as allowing for an encounter is *Fish Story*, by Allan Sekula, which was shown there.

AW: *That's such an amazing work. Is Sekula an important reference point for you?*

II: He is an important reference as someone who made work that had a powerful effect on me, partly because of his topics but also because of what one might call his formalism in dealing with those topics. I remember he came to the gallery once and his slide projector was off time by a second and a half, and he noticed immediately and became extremely upset. Some of the personnel were not very sympathetic, but I completely identified with him. Of course, now that I'm an artist, it's clear how such a time lapse makes a huge difference to a work, but back then this experience was an *encounter*; something I unconsciously knew but hadn't thought about in those terms before.

AW: *I find myself thinking now and again about the role that risk plays in art. Clearly there's the fact that for a great many people an art career entails an economic precarity that's very real. But I'm thinking more about the less tangible risks that come with making aesthetic decisions and making work public. Is this something that preoccupies you?*

II: Well, the art infrastructures that all of us are operating in seem to have evolved so significantly over the last few years. The discourse that I've been exposed to doesn't seem to have caught up to how these structures have changed. So, yes, there is a risk in operating in the dark within structures and infrastructures that feel obscure. You don't know exactly what conditions you're working under, nor the exact qualities of the space you're in, although you have a sense of what they might allow for. But that sense needs to be tested, needs to be pushed. You need to figure out where your edges are, where you're going to fall off the table. I don't think most of us know where that would be. So maybe that's one way to think of risk.

AW: *I also wanted to ask you about absence. Particularly in some of your early photographs, there are ways in which absence seems to relate to memory, to recognition and familiarity,*

things of this sort.

II: Many of those photographs were taken with the idea of capturing familiar spaces and events, but looking at them in retrospect, I recognize an emptiness in them as well. That was an unintentional and unsettling effect of trying to capture moments of familiarity. At one point, I remember I came up with this hypothesis that perhaps what I was capturing was not the presence of familiar elements but the absence of distinguishing details, that it was the very emptiness of these images that allowed me to capture them in the first place. This has been quite an important idea for much of the work that came afterward. That said, I have little interest in psychoanalyzing myself, or in examining the faults of memory. I had to rely on memory in certain moments to try to access things that seemed impossible to access otherwise. It was a way to try to counter what I would describe as a missing specificity.

AW: *To go back to your formula: Does it use memory as a form for instrumental application?*

II: Yes, I think so. But I also have a problematic relationship to it for sure. In one way, it seems to me that memory is one of the few spaces that can offer the means to counter the emptiness all around; in other ways, it closes off the possibility of a conversation. If I tell you this vase reminds me of my first childhood fall, there is nothing you can do but agree with me, unless of course you have a similar memory. I guess for someone like Henri Bergson memory was never located in the subject; but as a tool it has been a challenge to use it generatively. In a way, my work on monuments and memorials has been a response to this, for monuments result from a subjective vision on the part of the maker, but through their structure allow for a contestation on the part of receivers. They are forms that can be argued with. I think that's what I'm more interested in.

AW: *I know from various conversations that you're someone who pays close attention to political events in different parts of the world, and yet that's not present in your work in the same direct way as it is with certain other contemporary artists. Does your awareness or concern about these events come into your practice, either directly or indirectly? There are plenty of artists who are quite engaged as activists but prefer to keep that work separate from their art for various reasons.*

II: I don't see a separation necessarily. I don't see my artwork as a reaction to the news, but I don't see it as separate from it either. The key for me is how to best work within the context I'm

in and use what it allows for. I don't operate from the idea that there is no space for activism in art, if that's what you're asking.

AW: That would be its own kind of dogma, no?

II: I think there is a lot of uninteresting and uninspiring artwork that is labeled as activist. But as I mentioned earlier, this definition of activism itself needs to be unpacked. It is not self-evident what it means in a field like art. Yet I've also had encounters with works that were able to do things in surprising and really interesting ways.

AW: What's one example?

II: Cameron Rowland's exhibition at Artists Space last year.

AW: That was a terrific show.

II: Yes, his work in that space did something that was very successful on many different levels. And it didn't cancel out the space for reflection or doubt.

AW: There was a rigor that I really appreciated in the way he was trying to trace these parallels between the history of slavery and the history of capitalism, the changing relationship to the prison system during Reconstruction. It's a super smart work. Last question: What are you reading at the moment?

II: What am I reading?

AW: I always want to know what people are reading—to the extent that people have time to read.

II: Yes, well, I'm working on a project that requires a lot of reading. I'm reading all kinds of things—in law, religion, ancient mythology, physics, and on the history of various modern structures and institutions such as the army, the monetary system, and courts, among other things.

AW: That sounds fascinating. I thought you were going to say something like Rachel Kushner

or Elena Ferrante. (laughter)

II: I've been wanting to read a book of H. P. Lovecraft stories that's been sitting on my desk for the last seven months, but I haven't had a chance to.

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