

ESSAYS

Other People's Stories

Or, Severing History from the Person

Fawz Kabra



Iman Issa, *Common Elements*, 2013, 54 framed text panels, 14 framed c-prints, five wooden sculptures, five painted white plinths, sources' panel/caption, installation. Courtesy the artist.

'In the future we will have a collective memory identical to the individual's memory. It will be as if what happened to one, happened to all.'^[1]

Personal stories can reveal much about what is to come. History repeats itself in the familiarities we find in other people's tales and the way experiences can move from the particular to the universal. In retelling a story, history and experience are severed from one another, and forms are reduced to their essential basics. Moments are singled out, highlighted, exaggerated, as memory in itself never really provides the entire picture. The same could be said of history, which in turn shapes our perceptions and projections of our future selves, both as individuals with our own personal mythologies, and as members of a community produced from wider, collective narratives.

In her installation *Common Elements* (2013), a systematic methodology enables Iman Issa to contemplate the instability of memory when it comes to the personal and the collective, the singular and the universal, and the specific and the particular, which references both individual and collective histories. It adopts a method of looking into the past and extracting narratives and meanings to assemble new combinations through abstracted texts, images, and sculptures that speak to a particular present and potential future. As opposed to recollections, memory is instead reimagined, allowing for new forms to emerge. The starting point for the installation was a selection of phrases from four autobiographies by Arab thinkers, activists and authors: Mourid Barghouti, Taha Hussein, Nawal El Saadawi and Edward Said – central figures in Arab cultural knowledge, they redefined political and cultural Arab thought and post-colonial theory, a voice for the oppressed and advocates of human rights. What followed was the production of images and objects using those selected phrases, chosen for their personal resonance with the artist – a sort of déjà vu in which the text demands a double take as it becomes absorbed into the familiarity of not the author, but of another.

In this, autobiography becomes a point of departure that proposes a way to access collective memory through the personal lens of the individual. The autobiography is a specific literary format, where one speaks from their own perspective, yet with the presumption that their biographical narrative bears a broader relevance to the world. In other words, the autobiographer is also the writer of a social history and their autobiography is a way to map out possible futures. Saadawi's, Hussein's, Said's, and Barghouti's autobiographies project a wider narrative, while also speaking to an awareness of the past and how the present condition is suggestive of how we can collectively perceive our future selves. It is out of the singular event of the autobiography that worlds are assembled, out of individual elements, to encapsulate this general and collective memory.



Iman Issa, from the series *Common Elements*, 2013.
 Courtesy the artist.

Faithful to the characteristics of memory, the objects that appear in *Common Elements* are compressed in their basic shape: the flatness of the images, the clean lines of the sculptures, and the ordinariness of the quotes. They are nonreferential, distilled formulas that have clarity in their own identity, fixed in a moment of capturing their sense rather than describing it, rendering the historical narrative as abstracted from the lived experience. Objects in the photographed images are set against artificial lighting and a plain backdrop. They are stripped of any overtly specific signage, readily waiting for the moment when the reader will activate them. Featuring staged still-life constructions – tight close-up shots of statues and architectural fixtures, or quotidian objects such as an ashtray, plate, pen, or leaf – they are placed together in pared-down, undramatic patterns that are composed in such a way that demands associations to be made and timelines and common narratives to be designated: The guardian lion, that familiar statue seen in almost every metropolitan city adorning the entrance steps to a museum, foregrounding a flat, white sky; the ashtray with its extinguished cigarette and lighter placed next to a small brown vial; a minimal composition of a blank book with a leaf; a collection of woven baskets you have seen or used to store cotton buds and cotton balls; and a peculiar image of a porcelain miniature owl surrounded by complete darkness are but a few examples. Together, the compositions of these materials suggest broader connections reminiscent of the characteristics of a period room[2]: a visual autobiography made up of objects situated in relation to one another. In other

words, these particular elements are put together to reimagine a narrative, but are also suggestive of a wider cultural and social relevance. However, in *Common Elements* it is also the separation of history and its lived experience that stem from the objects that Issa presents. They are placed, categorized, and arranged to reveal their dual existence: being an object that points to itself as well as an object connected to others in the world – also corresponding to the autobiographers who motivated the installation as a whole, individuals who have engaged with the shaping of history.

The phrases incarnated from her selected autobiographical texts interlace with one another into a weave of idioms that slow us down to the pace of reading. Taken out of their original narrative context, the short poetic phrases become obscure thoughts, statements, and questions that spark memories of things from the past: 'They are killing horses, isn't that right?'; 'Houses on the mountains, houses on my mind, houses I entered in my childhood, houses whose locations I do not recall'; 'The fortune teller was a blind woman, but she could read the future.' Their isolation from contextual meaning relies on subjective responses to fill the gaps: What comes to mind are the men on horses storming into Tahrir Square during the protests in Cairo. The houses recall the forced migrations of families, resulting in no particular attachment to a place. And the memory of a blind woman harks back to the side street in Istanbul, laden with coffee cup readers, where fortunes are revealed, but not by blind women. Issa's system of language is rooted in a familiarity that she seeks to unleash in all its multiplicity, by propping associations up against one another – image to text to sculpture – in an attempt to fill in the blanks that expose a disentanglement of history with its lived experience.

As display, *Common Elements* invokes this very disentanglement, not only between person and utterance, experience and memory, but between object and meaning. It is made up of separate components: textual pieces hanging on a wall punctured by framed photographs, and sculptures resting on white plinths that dot the space. This maps a walking territory that combines sculpture, image, and text that trace a network of meanings, drawing on personal relationships to things such as places, figures, and time. It is worth pointing here to the descriptive text as it is a clue to revealing Issa's methodological strategy: '*Common Elements*, 54 framed text panels, 14 framed c-prints, five wooden sculptures, five painted white plinths, sources' panel/caption, Installation, 2013.' From this chain of events emerges an understanding that makes references to things cultural, ritualistic, or historical. Their existence as objects – as things – speak literally, physically, and metaphorically. Their identity belongs to

themselves and is feature-less, revealing Issa's concern with stripping away layers that can personify or give attributes to the objects and images. And so the elements are detached from their original frame of reference – Said, Hussein, Saadawi, Barghouti – in pursuit of articulating a collective experience of familiarity. Yet, although they are derived from heavyweights of Arab literary thought, activism, and literature, the objects here are presented to refer only to themselves. This renders the figures themselves – the references behind the works – as at once insignificant and significant, specific and general, with meaning and without.

It is this space of circulation, between images, texts and sculptures, which turns this into a display of dislocated symbols or semiotic elements. One thing frames another, or one thing speaks of another. One of the text panels reads: 'In the future we will have a collective memory identical to the individual's memory. It will be as if what happened to one, happened to all.' And in fact, it is in this familiarity that is experienced when reading a text, looking at a picture or encountering a sculpture, that a sense of *déjà vu* is produced. Because of their forced displacement, one is compelled to place the objects into a web of context, meaning, and association that is highly subjective. The viewer becomes a key participant in the making of meaning, filling in the gaps to reengage with these lived experiences in history.



Iman Issa, from the series *Common Elements*, 2013.
 Courtesy the artist.

The reduced shapes of the sculptures perform as iconic signs and function in a metaphoric way. As such, we are never quite sure of what it is we are looking at. Roland Barthes articulates that there is no essential meaning inherent to any image or text. Instead, he argues that meaning is created by its reading in a particular context. He continues that images and signs take on extensive connotations, readings, and cultural identifications with mythological proportions.[3] Issa's objects – as is the case with the figures she refers to through their autobiographies – have a staged neutrality about them. Without spectacle, or context, they are emptied out of aesthetic nuances that personify them, calling for meaning to be projected onto them. Their abstracted shapes are distilled into ideal geometric renderings of architectural structures bearing recognizable forms difficult to firmly place in our minds, but still allow for approximations: a house, a tomb, a podium, some kind of vessel. Their scale is corporeal, while their base, the painted white plinths – similar to the words floating in blank white paper held in a white frame – reminds us that these forms are not grounded. This clean and minimal mapping withholds directions to navigating the fragmented textual narratives of four individual pasts. Their staggered placement makes gaps in between looking at each piece. It is in those gaps when associations are engaged. The physical interaction of object, image, and text is reminiscent of Barthes's explanation of looking up from reading a book not as a gesture that denotes a lack of interest, but rather, suggests engagement and awareness. He writes: 'Has it never happened, as you were reading a book, that you kept stopping as you read, not because you weren't interested, but because you were: because of a flow of ideas, stimuli, associations?' He continues that the passing from one image to another, by way of associations 'traverses far from its original being, according to the tendency of a certain imagination which distorts yet does not discard it.'[4] *Common Elements* is immersed in associations with a circulation of meaning, one looks up or away and to the space between the image, text or object. That space is the present place that looks to its past with new meanings that extend further from the original experience. The elements, as sculptures, pictures in a frame, or objects in the pictures are the combinations Issa uses to represent what is lost when translating distinct histories into the representations that they may encapsulate. They have escaped their original significance, separated from the narratives they come from.

Looking back at Issa's previous works, it is impossible to consider the evolution to *Common Elements* without considering other pieces that also engage associative play and display groupings of signs. In *Material* (2009–2012), Issa refers to factual objects and histories by making proposals for monuments that

have lost all grounded meaning or specific reference. Titles include 'Material for a sculpture proposed as an alternative to a monument that has become an embarrassment to its people'; 'Material for a sculpture recalling the destruction of a prominent public monument in the name of national resistance'; and 'Material for a sculpture commemorating a singer whose singing became a source of unity of disparate and often opposing forces'. Once again, she does not pinpoint where and what these monuments refer to, but clues are provided by texts, which double as objects in themselves, hinting at a web of relations and associations between words and object arrangements. As with *Common Elements*, the significance is in association, memory, and the play in the production of meaning when the onus is on the viewer to extract whatever meaning there is that they might find.

Displaying these obscure combinations of elements – which are both object and sign – is an attempt to expose the gaps in the translation of memory and its past. The images and phrases carry the power to refer to other ideas through presence as well as absence. Showing the cigarette invokes a hand and a body that consumed it. This kind of open arrangement of forms provides the work with an unexpected aesthetic and psychological experience, as they are unitary forms that recall narratives loaded with political and social histories that stem from the accounts of four culturally significant figures. This, coupled with Issa's images and objects reach an intangible yet familiar place. In the end, just as the autobiography must yield to its final page despite a perpetually pending conclusion, the elements too remain open and unresolved, as they do not wholly sustain these narratives of the past. Making evident that no stable reference can faithfully represent a singular lived experience, their self-containment reveals a deconstruction, which begins with the autobiography, where the personal and the history are pulled apart. And so the singular lived experience becomes the future collective memory, as one's story – or history – circulates in another's sphere, locating common projections of both our present and our future (selves).

[1] One of 54 framed text panels from *Common Elements* (2013) by Iman Issa.

[2] A period room is a total environment where all of the pieces encapsulate an era of history. Former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Philippe De Montebello describes the museum's period rooms as, 'an opportunity to experience a sense of the way our forebears lived.' Amelia Peck, 'Introduction,' in *Period Rooms in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996), 9-13.

[3] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image – Music – Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-148.

[4] Roland Barthes, 'Writing Reading' in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 29-32.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Fawz Kabra is a writer and curator currently based in New York. She completed her MA at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (2013), and received her BFA in Studio Arts at Concordia University in Montreal (2004). She has worked with the Emirates Foundation, Abu Dhabi (2007), and continued on to curate public programs at the Cultural District, Abu Dhabi from 2008–2011. She co-curated the ongoing project, *Brief Histories* (Sharjah, UAE, 2011) exploring responsive practices to the rapidly shifting contexts and meanings in current global issues. Fawz worked with the Park Avenue Armory for *WS: Paul McCarthy* (2013).