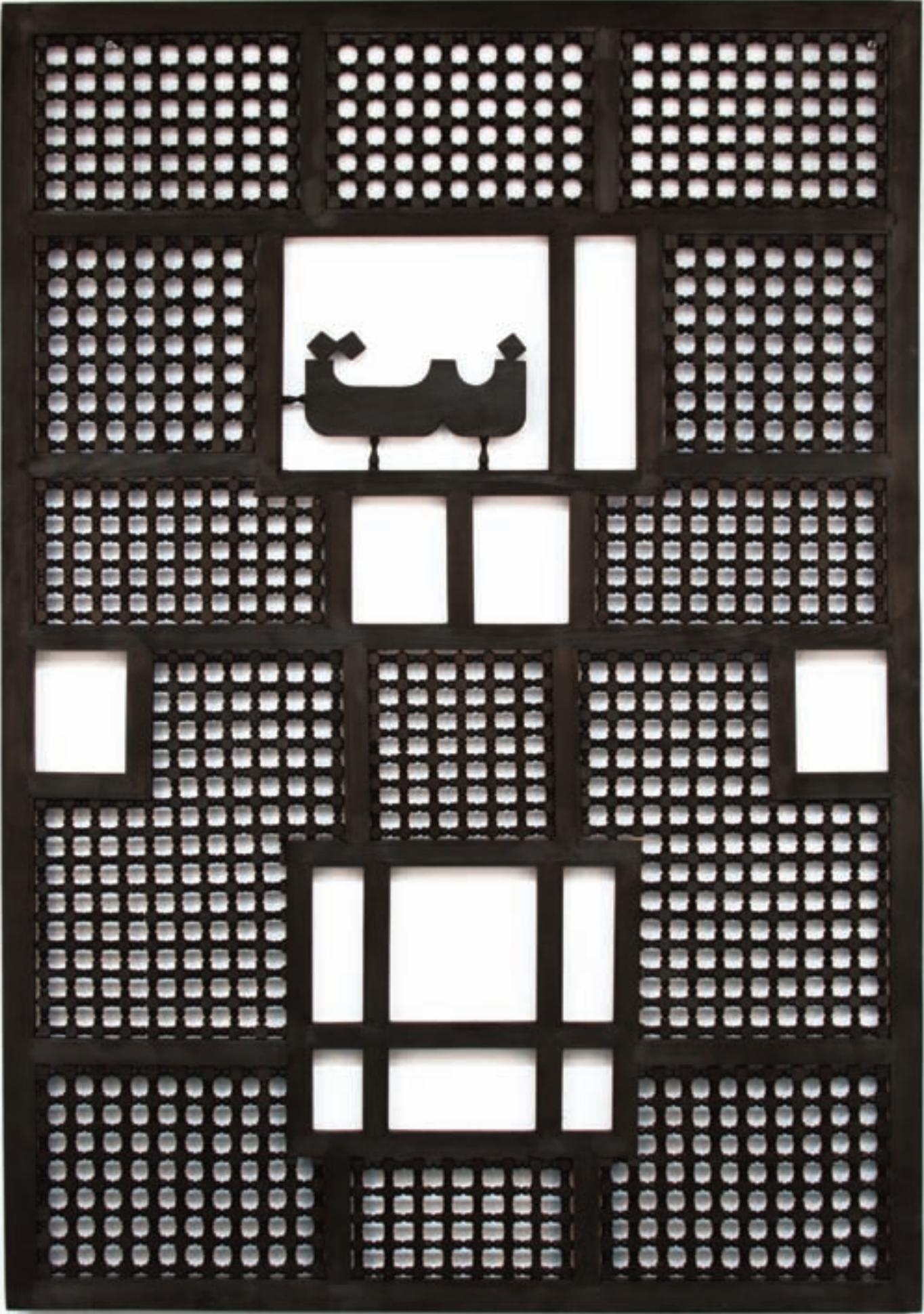
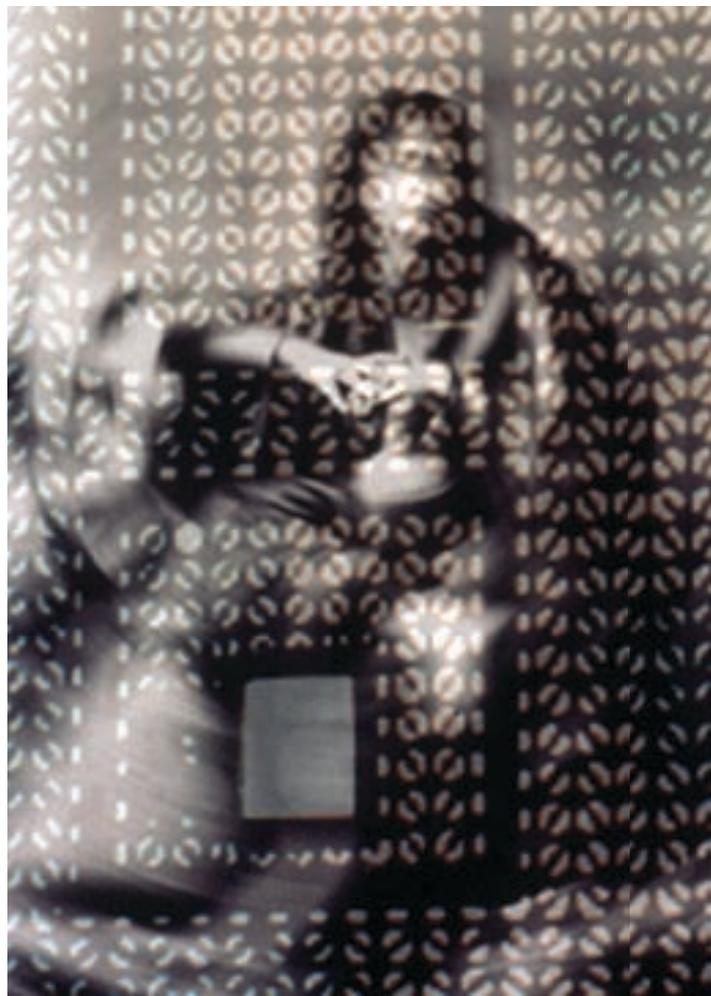


susan hefuna
mind the gap



profile

The dichotomy of identity has permeated almost every piece the Egyptian-German artist Susan Hefuna has created. In the preface to the monograph book 'XCultural Codes', Hans Gercke describes Hefuna's works as 'always having a substantial dimension, a timely and yet timeless validity. Hefuna's art, at the seam between two cultures, both foreign and familiar, is political and private, precise and open at the same time'.



TEXT BY LISA BALL-LECHGAR,
HANS ULRICH OBRIST AND REM KOOLHAAS
PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Previous pages
 Left (Clockwise): 'Knowledge is sweeter than honey'. 2007. Wood and ink. 220 x 200 cm; 'Ana'. 2007. Wood and ink. 180 x 210 cm; 'Ana'. 2007. Wood and ink. 220 x 210 cm; 'Knowledge is sweeter than honey'. 2007. Wood and ink. 250 x 210 cm.
 Right: 'Enta'. 2007. Wood and ink. 200 x 140 cm.

Facing page: 'Woman behind *Mashrabiya*'. 1997. Photography, C-Print. 160 x 120 cm.

The streets of Frankfurt are a far cry from the banks of the Nile Delta, but for Susan Hefuna they have been her life. Born in Cairo to an Egyptian/Muslim father and a German/Christian mother, she moved to Germany with her parents at the age of six but never - even as a teenager - did she feel the desire to dislocate herself from her Arab roots. "I used to go back every year, no matter what. I would spend every summer with my father's family in the Delta," she recalls. To exist on the edges of two such distinct and seemingly unconnected cultures, it comes as no surprise to learn that Hefuna has sought to identify the disruptive and unifying elements of intercultural communication.

A passionate advocate of design, Hefuna has adopted the *mashrabiya* as a source for her creative improvisations:

a structure that symbolises the essence of her duality (those on the outside looking in cannot fully see those on the inside looking out). Even the simple window - perceived as a barrier, a reflective and a juncture in the same breath - is a source of inspiration for Hefuna. Over the years, she has dissected each utilitarian function and representational significance of this universal architectural element, seated (and adorned) as it has become within specific cultural environments. Site-specific projects such as 'Installation via Fenestra' (2003) in Frankfurt, exemplify her approach; consisting of Orientalist-style photographic self-portraits shot behind a *mashrabiya* pattern, these pieces were purposely positioned to be framed by the Gothic architecture of Frankfurt's cathedral.

"The codes and meaning in the different images I create can generate such diverse responses, depending on the

country I show." Works such as 'Not for Sale / *Enta Omri*' will of course cause Egyptian audiences to make an immediate reference to Oum Kalthoum, while others outside the region will read the work in another way. Hefuna is adamant that she shares her work with her audiences, wherever they may be in the world. The conflict she examines within her own identity is far from unique. "I spent three months in Cape Town teaching and working with Muslim women from the townships. I invited them to place objects inside the shrine-like cages I created from sticks of palm wood. These items related to their identity

but not to a group to which they belong. I understood their approach. People tend to ask me 'Are you German or Egyptian?' but I'm beyond this now. I am not in a group but I have my own identity."

Hefuna is currently working on a new exhibition which will see her work return to the public realm of Cairo, just as she did with her installation of banners around the façade of the Groppi coffee house in Talat Harb Square in 2001. "My new project will explore the *vitrines* [shop window displays] in the streets of the capital. I'm taking the work out of the gallery and creating works that will be for the people and from the people. After all, to have a gallery is so European. The streets of Egypt are so rich that to remove art from this locale and put it in a gallery, diminishes its value."

As part of the mini-marathon of artist interviews that took place at the International Design Forum in Dubai earlier this year, curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and architect Rem Koolhaas quizzed Hefuna about her visual arts practice and the context of the work she creates.

Hefuna has sought to identify the disruptive and unifying elements of intercultural communication.

profile



Hans Ulrich Obrist: Can you please introduce yourself and your background?

Susan Hefuna: I have Egyptian and German heritage. I was educated at academies of art in Germany and have been showing my work in Egypt since 1992. Three years ago, I went there to do some research as part of a project by the German government to create a concept for a new faculty of design. At the same time I started to curate the show 'Kairotic' for The Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cairo. I invited Karim Rashid, Gary Hill and Mona Hatoum to exhibit and create new work in Egypt. The show opened in January 2006.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: In terms of the discussion we had in London when we last spoke, the whole idea of a Middle Eastern art context to which you belong is interesting. However, you are obviously part of the German art world - the European art world - at the same time. Your work is a kind of 'in-between' in terms of geography. You mentioned several artists in Cairo and also Alexandria with whom you are working quite closely; could you maybe talk about the context of your work and the dialogue you have with other artists?

Susan Hefuna: My context is the Townhouse Gallery with

whom I've been showing since it was opened by William Wells in 1998. It was the first gallery in Egypt that was not linked to the government and it changed the whole arts scene in the country. After all these years,

and particularly over the last five, a lot of young artists have developed their artistic practice through this gallery and its facilities. Last year, a new space opened in Alexandria [ACAF, the Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum] run by the curator Bassam El-Baroni and the artist Mona Marzouk. Another independent venue was launched in Cairo [CIC, the Cairo Image Collective]. Just in the last 12 months, I have also been working with The Third Line in Dubai.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Now, one of the things which is interesting to explore is this issue of 'tradition globalised' or 'globalisation traditionalised' to quote a very interesting book that came out recently. How does the combination of the traditional and progressive elements happen? Your work has been very much involved in this. For example, you use very traditional elements that you find in Cairo and combine them with a Contemporary vocabulary. Could you maybe talk a little bit about how this happens in your work?

Susan Hefuna: I'm motivated by architecture. I don't necessarily work with objects I find. When I first began, I drew a lot of sketches and took many rolls of photographs. For the last three years I have been working on *mashrabiya* screens in wood and bronze. I started to work with craftsmen in Cairo in order to create new designs that had words woven into the structure of the screens. I have been trying to work on this and see how far I can take the concept by talking to the craftsmen, showing them my sketches, and collaborating with them to realise my designs.

Above: From the 'Nile Delta, Egypt' series. 1999. Photography. 60 x 80 cm.

Facing page: 'Structure'. 2006. Bronze. 40 x 35 x 35 cm. Courtesy Susan Hefuna and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.



“The codes and meaning in the different images I create can generate such diverse responses depending on the country in which I show.”

Susan Hefuna



Hans Ulrich Obrist: Another aspect of your work is video. Interestingly, this ties in with another topic that pops up in many conversations; the re-introduction of 'slowness'. Could you talk about the role this plays in your video work?

Susan Hefuna: It originates from my studies at the Frankfurt Institute for New Media. In the 1990s I did a lot of very technical things. After I went to Egypt, in 1992, my work took on a slower pace, which is influenced by the countryside where my family comes from. In 'Life in the Delta 2002/1423' (2002) I filmed a specific intersection in the road where people would come and go to reach the fields of cotton and rice. Without cutting or editing, the film is 100 minutes long. It's just about what's going on at this crossroads.

I made a video-based work, 'Via Fenestra', in Frankfurt in 2003 and another one called 'Ana//ch' last year after research into design in Egypt. I discovered that the first thing you do in design is to make a statement. The simplest one is to say 'myself', but I found that this was missing in Egypt. I asked 81 people, including me, to say the word 'ana' (myself).

Hans Ulrich Obrist: We've spoken about your current practice and the different studies you have made, what about the future and the photographic work that you have exhibited in Cairo?

Susan Hefuna: I did a series of works using a pinhole camera looking at the city and the countryside ['Landscape - Cityscape', 1999-2005]. I stand between two cultures, so my photographs are also vehicles for various distinctive codes. When I show this work in the West - for example in the USA, UK, Spain, France, Germany, Switzerland - the audience reads the image completely differently to the one in Egypt.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Where do you see these works going from here? Are you interested in the idea of the future and future scenarios? If so, how do you see the future for your projects?

Susan Hefuna: I think design is very interesting. There are a lot of very interesting discussions happening at the moment. It would be really great if a new school of Design would open in Dubai. As for my artwork, I'm preparing for a show in Cairo at the Townhouse which will take place in December where I will involve members of the community again and ask them to bring objects that are directly related to their own identity. I want to exhibit outside in the streets in portable *vitrines* (shop windows). The work will also travel to ACAF in Alexandria and then it will go to The Third Line in Dubai next year.

Above: 'Mirage 07'. Installation. Heritage Area, Sharjah. Sharjah Biennial 8, 2007. Billboard and reflective glass. 250 x 150 x 800 cm.

Facing page: 'Not For Sale - Enta Omri'. 2007. Fabrics. 100 x 148 cm. Courtesy Susan Hefuna and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai.

Rem Koolhaas: Do you think your work might also be influenced by contemporary, more modern conditions?

Susan Hefuna: I exhibited two works at the Sharjah Biennial this year, which I produced in the UAE last year ['Mirage', 2007]. As part of the preparatory process, I made two visits. It wasn't easy for me to do something as I work with the accidental. I don't control the moment so much. In Dubai I didn't find anything along the way or by chance. For example, when I drive somewhere - say, to Dubai Media City - I know exactly how I am going to get there and because of this I don't discover anything.

Rem Koolhaas: There's no accidental event?

Susan Hefuna: Right, there is no accidental event. And that is what I need. What I found interesting was when I went looking for craftspeople in Sharjah. I travelled around the whole of the Emirate. I didn't find the craftsmen but I discovered something else along the way and this contributed to my work.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: Your work at this year's Sharjah Biennial is very architectural.

Susan Hefuna: The piece was a three-dimensional glass

billboard because there are many billboards in the UAE. It was placed in the middle of the square in the Sharjah Heritage Area. The glass I used reflected images of the people viewing it as well as all the activity that was taking place around the work. The other work I showed in Sharjah - at the Art Museum - was a series of the photographs of the mountains where they took the rocks for the construction of The Palm. I took the photos to kind of document the journey around the Emirate.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: There is an incredible variety in your work. There is your drawing practice and the link to architectural elements and devices.

Susan Hefuna: My drawing is very important. I find inspiration in *mashrabiya*... in two layers of paper and ink. It's like calligraphy but very abstract. 

Susan Hefuna is represented by The Townhouse Gallery, Cairo, and The Third Line, Dubai. Her latest exhibition 'Knowledge is Sweeter Than Honey' will take place at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo from 2 to 31 December. For more information, please visit www.susanhefuna.com

