The Waiting Game

The artist Susan Hefuna is a slight woman with long black curly

hair in the classical fashion and a Roman nose that gives her the

appearance of someone who has stepped out of a pre-modern

frieze. In a contemporary urban context, she sometimes looks like

she has been dropped in by Photoshop. When she is sitting on the

street — where I often see her — she looks like a statue, sifting

through the wreckage of modern life. In conversation, she is

more than happy to spend long stretches of time in absolute silence.

(It took some years for me to understand that she did not

find this awkward in any way.)

It is perhaps not strange, then, that much of her artwork rests

upon her being a mostly passive interlocutor — observant, patient,

always behind the scenes. It is in the sublimation of her

presence that Susan bestows her trademark touch on the situations

that she stumbles upon and that, very often, form the stuff

of her artwork.

Take, for example, an early video that involved nothing more

than setting up her tripod atop a dusty roof in her father’s village

in the Egyptian delta. Over the course of a few hours, one sees villagers

ambling by en route to the cotton and rice fields, animals

lingering, and one very long and very tedious Chekhovian deliberation

over a broken sewer pipe. Though Hefuna, the artist, is

not present (save one fleeting moment in which she walks

through the shot), her fingerprints are to be found throughout

this unedited video. A similar process was deployed in subsequent

videos made on a Cairo street in 2007 (Cairo Crossroads),

and on the Edgware Road in London (Edgware Road@Cairo

2010/1431), in 2010.

Hefuna’s tendency to step back and allow for things to evolve

and take on a life of their own goes as far back as 2000 at least, in

an installation at the South African National Gallery in Cape

Town. Using the traditional palm that is found in rural Egyptian

settings, Hefuna constructed a two-metre-square structure

shaped like a box, declaring it a gift to the people of Cape Town.

The grid not only evoked the mashrabia of vernacular Islamic architecture

— a favored leitmotif in her work — but also the standard

crate used to transport vegetables, eggs, or even wheat in

almost every village context. In the meantime, she asked visitors

to the exhibition to leave their own mementoes. Over some

weeks, the site assumed a hodgepodge, sacred, shrine-like nature,

inspiring the donation of sachets of henna, a wooden crucifix,

a book entitled Plants of the Qur’an, a love letter in the Zulu

language, and, in one case, a wedding cake.

In many ways, the South African exhibit was a warm-up for a

project that was born in and around the Townhouse Gallery in

children to the elderly — to work with her in personalising tents

- the very tents that are used to house Ramadan celebrations

and, more memorably, were erected in Tahrir Square during that

year’s uprising and citizen occupation. People were invited to offer

up their own personal slogans, messages, and hopes, and in

turn these sayings and writings were embroidered onto the cotton

fabric. The resulting tents, palimpsests of generations, genders

and ambitions, were set up in London’s Speakers’ Corner in

Hyde Park, itself a historic meeting place and venue for debate.

Within the tents, videos of interviews drawn from the participants

were installed, and all manner of collateral events — including

a dance performance — took place in and around them.

Though the interviews do not explicitly take on the subject of the

Egyptian uprisings of 2011, they are hinted at obliquely in many,

from descriptions of urban living situations to an explanation

about a certain camel embroidery and, in a sideways manner, the

revolution’s famous “Battle of the Camel”.

One last story does not exactly climax in an artwork, but does

capture Hefuna’s gravitation toward people and stories from the

peripheries. Back in 1993, Hefuna participated in one of the

American artist James Lee Byar’s performances in Germany. Entitled

“Sun, Moon, Stars”, the performance involved, as Hefuna recalls,

“people dressed in white walking in circles for many hours”.

When the famously reclusive artist met Hefuna, and learned of

her Egyptian heritage, he asked her if she could help him get to

Cairo; it was a personal dream of his. Years later, Hefuna heard

that he had not only made it to Egypt, but had died there. Ten

years after that, in 2007, Hefuna endeavoured to investigate the

circumstances of his death and to find his grave, which was in

Cairo’s vast and pockmarked City of the Dead. In pictures documenting

that journey, Hefuna stands, always statue-like, in black,

negotiating the cemetery caretakers in a lush palm-fringed setting.

In one photo, she leafs through a hospital logbook, which

holds his name, misspelled. In another, she looks down at a simple

gravestone that declares that Lee Byars was born in 1932, and

died in 1997.

Here, and elsewhere, Hefuna is a witness and accomplice, albeit

a quiet one, to a life that has come and gone. Moving as she does,

with her ear to the ground and her eyes wide open, you could

imagine her absorbing the comedies and tragedies — both banal

and spectacular — of the world around her. Had she not become

an artist, I think, Hefuna may very well have become a storyteller.

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