

Art Review:

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'In the Western world people see the work as just pattern; if I show it in the Arab world the work changes totally' Susan Bafuna

December 2010

Rasheed Araeen:
The artist who came in from the cold

Adrian Sironi:
His work may be lauded by history, but he ain't so history painter

Ignacio Ojeda:
One hat, four pens, eight sheets of paper

EVERYTHING
SUSAN HEFUNA
IS DRAWING

As every motivational speaker knows, there is no 'I' in 'team'.

There are, however, plenty of 'I's in Susan Hefuna's artworks. But that doesn't

mean it's all about her.

WORDS: MARK RAPPOLT
PORTRAIT: ROBERT NETHERY

FOR SOMEONE WHO has spent the past two decades producing a large number of works that feature the word 'I' – normally in its Arabic incarnation, *ana* – at their centre, Susan Hefuna is an artist whose identity is surprisingly tricky to locate. For if that love of the personal pronoun might at first suggest a form of narcissism, it's absolutely not the kind of reflexive narcissism Narcissus knew. Take her monograph *Pars Pro Toto* (2008); at almost exactly the midpoint, it features an interview between Hans Ulrich Obrist and the late Senegalese writer Tayeb Salhi, who had built a reputation as one of the masters of contemporary Arabic literature. While there's no doubt that Hefuna has a strong interest in literature, at no point in Obrist and Salhi's conversation – which appears to start in the middle rather than the beginning (Q: *So who are they, the architects?*) – does either party make any direct reference to Hefuna's work. Similarly generous, the artist's *Manifesto* (2008), produced for the Serpentine Gallery's Manifesto Marathon of that year, consists of a series of 200 postcards, branded on one side with a Manifesto logo, onto which she invited random passersby selected at various London locations to write a word or sentence that they thought might make the world a better place. These range from matters of local interest – 'We need more Tubes' and 'No student fees!' – to matters of more universal interest – 'Everyone should help people in need' – to utopian sentimentalism – 'Always sunshine and green trees' – and statements of a more personal nature – 'Need to change myself'. Although given that there are no clues as to who this 'self' might be, the last is only personal in a limited sense, particularly since the accumulated statements were finally read out as a call and echo by a pair of actors. Given that Hefuna's initial contribution to this project was to propose that it should enshrine the 'I' (by embedding *ana* in the title), it's somewhat surprising to find that it tells us little or nothing about Hefuna herself.

So here are some facts: Hefuna was born to a German mother and Egyptian father. She leads something of an itinerant life that encompasses Germany, America, Egypt and, more recently, Japan. Her work spans drawing, sculpture, photography, video, costume-making and performance, and has been exhibited at the Louvre (2004), the Sharjah Biennial (2007), New York's



Hefuna has managed to transform the basic logic of grammar – to make the first person singular stand for a first person plural



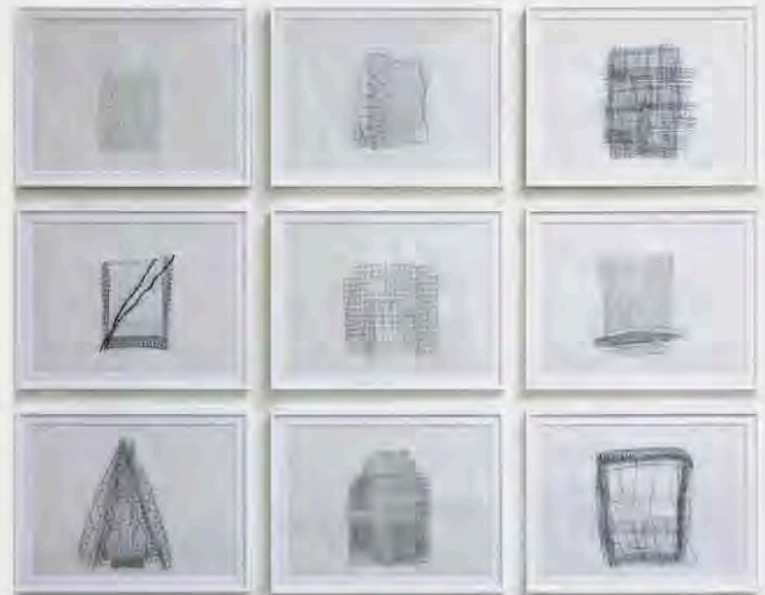
New Museum (2008) and the Venice Biennale (2009), as well as in a number of commercial gallery spaces. But even now, all you really know about her is that her parents were born on different continents, that this might account for her interest in identity, that she likes to travel (perhaps because of her mixed ethnicity) and that she is not in the habit of expressing herself via a single medium (perhaps she's indecisive). Although she has said that all her work comes down to drawing of one sort or another.

Take *Manifesto*, for example. While it may appear random and chaotic, to Hefuna's eyes it reveals a structure through which one might understand a community. Partly because, according to the artist, the kinds of wishes people expressed seemed to correspond to the area in which they were interviewed, and partly because the work allows a city, via its inhabitants, to express itself. But above all because the postcards gave a certain structure to the city, even if that structure was developed by the artist as an individual, through the decisions she made about where to stand and who to stop. Like much of Hefuna's work (take the video *ANA/ICH*, 2006, in which 81 people from the streets of Cairo say "ana", for instance), *Manifesto* executes a delicate operation of simultaneous molecularisation and atomisation – in social terms, of the group and the individual.

This dynamic is nowhere more present than in Hefuna's drawings. Earlier this year, in both a group show at the Kunstmuseum Thun (in which Hefuna exhibited alongside Bharti Kher and Fred Tomaselli), and a solo show at London's Rose Issa Projects, Hefuna presented a collection of works on tracing paper, each one of which is titled either *Cityscape* or *Building*, which seemed to represent a series of abstracted grids, or molecular structures, in forms distorted to varying degrees. It was clear, from the arrangements of points (objects without dimension) and lines (accumulations of points given a dimension), that the works were about connections, but they gave no clue (beyond their titles) as to what was being connected with what. But the sheer volume of such works, which Hefuna creates almost obsessively in regular retreats each year (often in New York), appears to represent an essential desire to connect, to map the world around her and thus to communicate a given state of affairs. Although the fact that Hefuna draws, redraws and then draws again suggests a state of affairs that is contingent at best.

This will to structure finds its most obvious articulation in an ongoing series of works that take the *mashrabiya* – a decorative wooden screen used in traditional Islamic architecture to regulate the light coming through windows while also hiding the interior life of a building (including its unveiled women) from the exterior life of the street. The ongoing *Woman Cairo* series features a *mashrabiya* in which the words of the title, together with the year of the work's manufacture, as registered in both the Islamic and Gregorian calendars (1429 and 2008, for example), are featured through a series of clever twists and rotations of the hand-turned dowels that form the screen. It's as if a wall had been genetically modified to produce its own graffiti. Furthermore, if you're unfamiliar with non-Western forms of measuring time, the assertion of presence (or the present date) seems to evoke the past (what happened in 1429, you might wonder), particularly since the *mashrabiya*, and the nonindustrial nature of its manufacture, so strongly evoke another age.

It's a cultural slippage of which Hefuna is acutely aware. Where she reads Arabic, I see little more than a pattern. Similarly, a *mashrabiya* might seem a charmingly decorative object to me, while to an Arab woman it might seem a boundary or limit of expression. When I first saw the word *ana* embedded in one of Hefuna's screens, I wondered who this woman that the artist





FEATURE: SUSAN HEFUNA

appeared so obsessed with might be. And even though it seems to refer to Hefuna, should I pronounce the word, it instantly refers to me. Through some strange alchemy, Hefuna has managed to transform the basic logic of grammar – to make the first person singular stand for a first person plural. In the face of these particular screens, everyone is I.

But that's not to say that Hefuna is some sort of straightforwardly radical socialist: indeed, it's difficult to prove that she has a particular politics at all. Recalling a workshop she conducted at the all-female Zayed University in Abu Dhabi in 2004, Hefuna states that the primary differentiation between the various abaya-clad students was which designer bags accompanied them. As a result, the workshop culminated in the production of a series of exaggeratedly idiosyncratic bags. If this was designed to highlight a certain limit on the ability of the Emirate's women to express themselves, the project wasn't a campaign for self-expression without any limits at all; it was instead merely extrapolating from the status quo. Crucially, rather than creating a bag for themselves, each student was instructed to design a bag for someone else. As much as the project was about self-assertion, it was also about denying the self in order to allow someone else to be revealed. Pushed to its limits, of course, and contrary to its initial appearance, such a scheme means that no one reveals herself. It becomes a kind of daisy chain in which everyone reveals someone else. There's a similar kind of blind generosity at work in the *Vitrines of Afaf* (2007), exhibited at Cairo's Townhouse Gallery. The sculpture features a series of personally significant objects – flags, car badges, trays, ornaments, etc – donated by the wives, sisters and mothers of local workers (*Afaf* is a name given to women whose identities are not made public) and exhibited in the kind of portable glass and aluminium vitrine used in shops all over the Egyptian capital. And like earlier projects, it both reveals and conceals its participants.

Perhaps this strikes to the core of Hefuna's work. Yes, it revolves around the ego of the artist, historical clichés about the male gaze and the lonely life of the misunderstood creative genius. Perhaps there's even an *übermenschlich* strain. But if, like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Hefuna seems to be saying that 'man is something which ought to be overcome', it's only in order to foster a more open and generous spirit, one in which the individual and the collective can be happy in a shared economy of me, me and me.

Susan Hefuna is in residence at the Serpentine Gallery's Centre for Possible Studies, London, and her work is included in Contemporary Eye: Crossovers, at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, until 6 March. The exhibition 7 x ANA is on view at the Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna, until 13 March, and Mapping Wien: A Project by Susan Hefuna is on show at Galerie Grita Insam, Vienna, until 8 January. The gallery will also host a solo presentation of Hefuna's work in the Art Kabinet section of Art Basel Miami Beach, 2–5 December.

VITRINES (HORDER OF APPEARANCES)

Foreword from *Manafra* (2006), produced by the secretary of the Museum of Modern Art, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2006

Crossings 2010 (Installation view of *7 x ANA*, Vienna Museum, 2010), installation on paper, each of 4 x 4 x 10 cm (Photo: Claudio Frensch, Courtesy Grita Insam, Vienna, Austria)

Vienna Case 2010 (Installation view of *Mapping Wien: A Project by Susan Hefuna*, Vienna, 2010), each of 4 x 4 x 10 cm (Photo: Grita Insam, Vienna, Austria)

Prisms 2000 (Installation view of *Art Kabinet*, 2000), mixed media, 2000 (Photo: Grita Insam, Vienna, Austria)