

187 SPOTLIGHT

IN CONVERSATION
WITH
MONIKA SZEWCZYK



IMAN
ISSA





Heritage Studies #20, 2016 (opposite) Heritage Studies #35, 2019 (p. 186) Heritage Studies #30, 2017 (pp. 188-189)

MS To begin, I wanted to ask you about photography, where your work began. Do you see the world as if through a lens even when making a sculpture?

II Sure, my background is in photography, and even now, when a large output of it is sculptural, I think of image making as the primary mechanism for generating work. It is perhaps interesting to think about photography, not as a mechanism related to a camera or lens per se, but one that defines a relationship to the world. One can think of photographing the world as creating, through mirroring, another world parallel to the original. A world, which is distinct from our world with its own rules and parameters, while also being closely related to it, regardless of how much it resembles or fails to resemble it in its appearance. In this sense of the term, many of the sculptural displays, films and texts I produce can fall under the rubric of photography.

MS How did you come to the third dimension? Perhaps you can consider this through *The Fifth Dimension*, an exhibition I organized at the Logan Center, University of Chicago, which you contributed to with three of your *Trip-tychs*. With those mind-bending works I started thinking that the fifth dimension might lie somewhere between the second and the third.

II It is possible to imagine an endless array of dimensions after incorporating time, but I think there is something sharp about locating the fifth dimension between the second and third. This proposition, for me, can relate to the manner by which I incorporate different elements in the work. I rarely think of the work as that of sculptures, photographs, films, or texts but always as displays composed of multiple elements, co-existing in a non-hierarchical manner, working together to evoke or bring about something else; something which itself might not be physically present in the exhibition or viewing space. That is how I think of the relationship between objects and text for example, and it is perhaps one way to think of the fifth dimension.

MS In your series *Heritage Studies*, which we plan to install at de Appel (in our late modern Aula space, whose heritage designation remains a question

mark), the labels rehearse a museum language of shared national or communal memory—evoking empire building and historic regime change. How then do we reconcile these words and the elemental sculptural forms you devise, which seem both ancient and sci-fi? What are the measures (numerical and other) that you apply to this series?

II The *Heritage Studies* series emerged from a simple question, which is “what is this obsession with and need to turn to the past?” I wasn’t an artist who had, prior to this project, thought of history as my subject matter nor had I a particular interest in history per se but it gradually became clear to me that there was a serious need to tackle it. In general, I’m very suspicious of turns to the past, especially when they are framed as returns to a tradition or a golden untouched culture located by a move backwards in time. At the same time I was asking this, it became clear to me, that displays in museums, which I had previously entertained in the most removed manner (a normal reaction considering some date 4000 years to the past) had begun to assume an eerie life-like presence in my view and to forcibly capture my attention. I then started to take photographs of such displays I encountered, and to remake them with this idea of figuring out what gave them this sense of presence, or what I started to speak of as ‘their relevance to the present.’ Almost everything I remade looked nothing like the original I had encountered, which gave me the idea that one can speak of two objects that share neither the material, shape, color, or dimensions, as being the same. The idea being that they are the same because they are perceived to be doing the same thing. It is an instrumental understanding of forms. It is also where the term ‘heritage studies’ comes from, which is defined as a return to a past with a clearly articulated practical aim in the present. As for the displays themselves, they are all presented as studies regardless of how finished they appear to be. This is to stress the fact they are non-conclusive forms that could easily be modified in time or under different conditions. The series started in 2015 and I hope to finish it this year. Theoretically it could keep on going, but I suspect that at this point I’m close to the end of the line of what engaging in this work is helping me understand.



MS Increasingly, your sculptural work is becoming cinematic. Do you think we are living in a movie?

II It is an interesting question considering I had just started working, last year, on a new series titled *Surrogates*, which is giving three-dimensional form to elements extracted from film sequences. The idea is to reach into a film and grab an element such as an architectural prop or a character and give it once more a three-dimensional form, but this time the form is influenced by its appearances in the given film sequence.

I am not really sure what exactly prompted this work as it is quite new but one conjecture might have to do with the idea of objecthood. I am personally not so interested in objects per se. For me they are tools, not different from texts or images, but I'm becoming a bit wary about their effect. Perhaps in objects unlike images, we imagine a coherent whole, an immutable identity, which I find problematic. I guess I tried to deal with this problem before through presenting objects as studies, stressing their contingency but I feel I needed another approach to further emphasize the relationship these three-dimensional elements have to their sources, and moving images are a good mechanism to do that. In film, one might imagine a presence of a coherent whole to an element, character, or scenario but that coherent whole is never given. In moving images, what we are seeing, sensing, hearing are always fragments of personhood, events, or places, constantly shifting in or outside time, even when completely frozen as in a still, or a moving still. This seems to me to be pertinent to incorporate in these three-dimensional displays; a dynamic which we readily accept in film but less so in so-called objects.

MS I share your fascination with our changing relation to things as a society (or rather as several societies in relation). This condition of non-conclusive form, especially when your work has a kind of "Platonic solid" aspect to it, carries potentially huge political implications. I'm reminded of Marx and Engels' "All that is solid melts into air..." But that feels too conclusive. If you were rather to phrase a question the work is asking, what would it be?

II I almost never allow myself to think in terms of implications when making work. That said, a question, which I ask myself often (although not in the work itself, as the work usually demands the formulation of more pointed questions), is: "If we concede that the identity we assume and presume on other entities is neither essential nor fixed, can we still engage politically and socially in the world around us and try to affect it?" It seems to me to be a lazy short-cut to declare what is fragmented to be coherent, in order to simply move forward with an action or an argument. It is surely hard to argue that the identity of entities is contingent, when, all around us, attacks are launched on the basis of identity, and where a clear need to defend oneself or others who are grouped under such rubrics presents itself. But the failure to do this means that both the attacks and the resistance to them are launched from the same starting point. They concede to the same preliminary premise, which fixes what is a shifter, while pluralizing what is singular. This is unlikely to yield emancipatory results, and more likely to result in terrifying ones. Maybe at the core of all this, I feel an urgent need to find a different entry point.

MS Characters, portraits, extras—the way people appear in your work is rather precisely plotted. May I ask you about Iman Issa?

II I think many artists' work comes from sincere desires for knowledge, that relate, in one way or another, to their lives and experiences and I'm sure my work is not different but I rarely find it interesting or generative to psychoanalyze myself. But, I think, perhaps your question has to do with the subject position assumed in the work. For example in *Heritage Studies*, the person of the artist doesn't take center stage even though the works are presented as artist's studies, but this is by no means a consistent strategy. For example, right now, I'm undertaking a new series titled *Proxies, with a Life of Their Own*, where I'm making self-portraits, granted they are also portraits of other people, nonetheless still self-portraits. But these choices of locating a work in the person of the artist or in a more abstract entity such as a historian or scientist are only just that, choices meant to do justice to the concerns of the work. We have to always take them with a grain of salt.

All images Courtesy: the artist and Rodeo, London / Piraeus

Heritage Studies #36, 2019 (opposite) Untitled Illustrations from Pages 15; 27; 9; 23 of 'Art of the Past Twenty-two Centuries' Exhibition Catalogue, 2018 (pp. 192-193)

