

Hassan Sharif to “Al Shuruq” My Artistic Pleasure in Provoking Viewer

Interviewed by Ahmad Farhat

I remember very much the works of artist Hassan Sharif and his interest as well as other artists of this age in the works of Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Max Ernst, Richard Huelsenbeck and other...from the great figures of Dadaist movement in Europe.

So much I remember these works, especially artist's urge for it, his love for destroying traditional art forms (a sculpted work) and inventing new substituting positions based on displaying and moving ready-made objects, as well as manipulating substances of various sources: metal, plastic, paper, cloth, canvas and so on... and to present all this to the viewer without preconceived ideas or results...the objective being creating a shock and surprise to the viewer and prompting him to denounce and disapprove, in such denunciation and disapproval lies the “Hassan Sharif's art” fulfilling its awaited function.

Actually, the first artist to have done this different game or art protesting dissidence, was Marcel Duchamp who decided in the early 1900's to abandon brush and painting and go to expose ready made objects seen as an ironic protest or satiric one against prevalent art...art as inherited manners and imposed or incarnated practices especially from a bourgeois side of that French and European time.... In the year 1914 he intentionally displayed a Bottlerack “Bottel Dryer” as part of what he called “Readymade”... and accumulated over it other works that have shocked or provoked the common viewer and the traditional exhibition halls, and this constituted a strong attack on the art and artists of his age; and he used not care at all to cut all links with past and prevailing art and art traditions. Hassan Sharif the distinguished U.A.E artist follows the spirit of Marcel Duchamp and perhaps his protesting questions but with different and unique artistic achievements. Hassan recognizes that his “sickness” is greater and more complex than the one of Marcel Duchamp as well other pioneers of shock, renewal in the western fine art front.

Here is a dialogue with Hassan Sharif on his artistic experience and his role in changing the art map in the U.A.E:

□ “Al Shuruq”: when and why did your art style started to get different? That is how did you move from your traditional relationship with the work of art, painting, to another trend in art incarnated in taking the work to another trend, incarnated in the game of collecting objects in a heap and dispersing them, “rearranging” or “re-modeling” them...no matter whether paper, cloth, canvas or plastic ropes...and so on?

• Hassan Sharif: it is quite natural for an artist to pass through stages of dreaming, mixing colours and the traditional connection with paper or canvas as an area to wrestle with lines and colours. Me personally, I experienced this stage and got convinced that drawing does not satisfy to my interrogations as an artist and the search for other art compositions has become a great concern to me, so, I used these substances and material: ropes, canvas, paper, wires and so on.

There were also other reasons that have prompted me to abandon painting, in its head is: the search for a new viewer whose task to be denouncing art, the sooner he does so, he reaches a stage of doubt and serious questioning...denunciation to me is therefore more important than enjoying line and colour and their overlapping on a painting.

On the other side and at the abstract painting level, we discover that it addresses romance and the eye: as for my works it does not address that part of the eye, but it raises questions and doubts for the viewer...It pushes him straight to denounce...and by such a concept I find myself in the position of one who really prompts the viewer to transform and change...I prompt him to become modern and conscious.

□ “Al Shuruq”: Modern in which sense and conscious to what issues or questions?

- Hassan Sharif: Modern in the sense of understanding the art game an advanced condition being a crowning result to what preceded it...and consciousness here is connected to artistic quest and questioning...and protest against all copying or reproduction?

□ “Al Shuruq” : But what you are doing is not new. It is quite known that the artist in the West has resorted to these spontaneous artistic choices since the beginning of the 1900’s...he resorted to it as a reaction towards pressing social political and cultural reality...the Western artist ridicules prevailing bourgeois values of the time; he took them for reasons of Wars that plighted his societies (World War 1 and World War 2)...Dadaists and surrealists called for total liberation and refused all ready-made rules in art and the other areas...so, there is a certain breaching of traditional concepts, motivations being justified at that time...but the question to be raised now what were your own motivations and justifications, especially having in mind that our societies have not passed stages of Bedouin life and agricultural monopolies?

- Hassan Sharif: Let’s be a bit realistic and admit that any Cultural or Creative achievements in the West reach us very late, as for Western countries themselves, generally, each achievement in one country spreads fast to the other countries...What has begun in Switzerland, for example, spreads fast to France and then Germany, Italy, Britain...and so on. Concerning us, as we do not accept quickly the other’s achievement, we need longtime to wait, and frankly regarding me, I do not care in anyway if what I produce now has already been produced by other European and American artists. I have ridden myself out of many matters and obstacles, and all that I care for is my own work or art.

I must also not forget to say that if I know the history of the development of this type of art that I produce, so I have every right to use it as model wherever I have been and at any period of time to have lived.

A Creative Contribution:

□ “Al Shuruq”: But where were the new artistic and creative contributions that you add to experiences of your predecessors...this is what matters here

- Hassan Sharif: There is specificity within art itself. Perhaps this specificity or advantage is inherent in the fact that none of us had ever seen such a work of art before.

If you return back to my works of the last ten years you will find existing and hoped connections. These connections were the creative addition to the others. The ingredients of my work might resemble to the ones of another artist from Italy, France or Netherlands, but something of a special must be there in my productions and it is necessarily different from others creations. For sure and as we live in a very large world, my works will continue to differ from works to other artists and not reproduce them...and if I had to repeat I do repeat or remake only my proper experience.

□ “Al Shuruq”: Many a great figure in the world of art have departed from a rejection to the art theory and its despisal...I remember here Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Max Ernest, Holinspek and others...were you tainted with their “madness”.

- Hassan Sharif: My sickness is greater than the one of Marcel Duchamp, even greater more complicated than sicknesses of others who were pioneers in shocking and renewal in fine art as the ones you have mentioned, and among them is the German Kurt Schwitters, so why is my sickness or tragedy greater?

Here we have to consider the time period and place where these great figures produced their works. In their time there were certain magnificent and suitable exhibition halls in Paris, Zurich and New York.etc. There had been an artistic atmosphere living with concerned people, critics, movements and trends, cultural press ready to accept, adopt and urge new experiences...we are right now and after all these civil developments taking place in our country, and after all this history separating us from the debut of the 20th century we even lack a single art center for fine arts.

I see now how my situation is more difficult and complicated than from the ones of Duchamps...and his colleagues? Do you see how I face lonely what another art current failed and fails to confront in a different situation?

In the workshop or Atelier which I supervise, I work on teaching foundations for fine art to young artists, But I do not view with disrespect traditional drawing compared to the kind of work I produce, each is different and having its own identity. For us to go dissident vis-à-vis another art, we must study it and absorb very well, to be able later on to criticize and revolt against in a reduced time not like the one of Marcel Duchamp, so, my suffering is greater from his.

□ “Al Shuruq”: But Hassan, the artist who went for non-objective art at the beginning of the 1900’s had a philosophy of their own, but however it has departed or distanced itself from art norms, it is no doubt still within its norms but with a new vision and new prospects or horizons... Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia and other Dadaists got interested in the question of art renewal and they adhered with great belief in this renewal message even the experimentalist prospects as a last resort...

- Hassan Sharif: Yes, they had been both adherents of renewal, and satiric towards previous or preceding experiences. This constitutes a renewal in the message of art itself. As for me personally, I do not ridicule my predecessors...I do not ridicule or answer any of them.

- “Al Shuruq”: It is not necessary to have personal sarcasm here...but through the work of art itself...and here I am not at all against your artistic irony.

- Hassan Sharif: Let this be your own impression, it does not concern me as I am not to inherit anything other than my own artistic experience and I do not develop or transform outside it.

- “Al Shuruq”: The importance of the Dada movement lies here in its non-inheritance of any proceeding art movement or trend...It is not to inherit futurism or Cubism for example...so, it declares itself being non-historical...is linked or connected only to its present questions...it doesn't care except for its present questions...It cares for neither past nor future...and from here stems its inclination to deform pioneering artistic models incarnated in the artistic morals of our predecessors...(Duchamp for example put a moustache on Mona Lisa).

- Hassan Sharif: This is true although I am not interested in this. I can say if it is revealed that you imitate a preceding movement of art, this does not mean in any way that you do not have new contributions within the same art context or outside it. It is no doubt I respect Marcel Duchamp and this respect is not holy, of course.

Doubt & Questioning:

- “Al Shuruq”: As you have already told me you like to see viewer denounce your art, so, what kind of pleasure comes upon you during this act of denunciation?

- Hassan Sharif: Denunciation means here doubt and serious questioning. The doubts and questions of the viewer stimulate him intellectually. My pleasure comes in observing this provocation or “stimulation” that happens to viewer. A viewer might denounce a new work displayed in one exhibition and after two or three years comes back the same viewer to regret his past denunciation, why for? This is because he started to accept gradually what I produce or create. This might be a slow act but it remains interesting; in the year 1985 when I exhibited some of my works, a man attempted to attack and hit me...nowadays and in the 1990's...the same person comes to see my works showing much responsiveness, acceptance and respect for what I do...my pleasure that this man has changed and has turned into a new viewer. Despite all this I do not search or hurry behind viewers of my works...I don't want common viewers...I want a new intelligent viewer.

- “Al Shuruq”: If Marcel Duchamp has expressed through his famous work known as the “Large Glass”, expressed a denunciation attitude vis-a-vis the industrial world which he used to make part of in his time, now where is your denunciation or protest where you rely on a

collection of fiber ropes, canvas and paper...what kind of world you protest against here in artist terms?

- Hassan Sharif: My protest is not addressed to the industrial or technological world, my protest is addressed to the mentality of people in the first degree, my immediate question to them: why don't you accept my works seen not as art? Why does the art process seem to be a result of an inherited education or gained in a special way...I also ask them: why do you apply specific measures for art? The "Large Glass" carries within itself a beautiful irony towards "machine" and I do not care for machine; I care for the human mentality that should accept the new thing or object.

□ "Al Shuruq": But your protest is a play within a play you suppose a condition and that you live or experience it...as for Duchamp and his fellows used to face a whole front...they also faced old solid fine art currents...what previous art current you were facing here for example?

- Hassan Sharif: Your speech enters into the foundation of art in our country and the whole Arab world...fine art here and as you know is a reflection to a reality we have borrowed from the West. So, and as a result of our art contact with the European and American West, this type of art has been established and developed in our area...This is a fait accompli and we should not feel shy of it...on the contrary we have to say it loudly indicating how we here differ from the other art and creativity-wise...

Then simply talking I do not act or play here in what I am doing, this because my work results from my conviction or belief in it, at least character, I don't care for reactions.

Repetition – Monotony:

□ "Al Shuruq": How do you work on your material? And what obliges you sometimes to use ropes, newspapers instead of plastic or canvas for example?

Hassan Sharif: I use my various material at all stages and whenever I like it i.e. whenever my work deems it necessary to do so; in the past I used newspapers then I ceased to use this type of material. And I might go back to reuse newspapers again...It is not stable or fixed. I used fibre and plastic ropes then shifted to other material or media and at another time I might go back again to ropes and so on...I do not neglect or forget or cancel my material because of having simply used them well before.

I walk in the market places and observe material that could be helpful in my works of art; I buy it and work on it. My work contains a good deal of repetition sometimes to an extent of monotony; and after finishing my work I expect to see viewer's surprise who might ask how much time has this artist spent in composing these repeated objects. Of course, I don't have answers for the viewer's questions or surprise as he sees patience, punctuality and monotony through my art.

□ "Al Shuruq": Let us talk about art map in the U.A.E...how do you view this map in general?

- Hassan Sharif: In my view and regarding Gulf countries, fine art in the Emirates, is the most distinguished and most developed. I may not liken the Emirates experience to existing ones in Morocco, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt; these countries have well preceded us in experiences and accumulated art...but even in these countries themselves and others of the Arab world there is a lot of traditional works, the new art experiences in them were very rare. In the U.A.E. attempts a group of artists to consolidate the new art phenomenon and their attempts might grow into an independent art current. They started to pave for themselves a bright and distinguishable presence from any other new other Arab artistic area. Among those artists I could mention Mohamad Ahmad Ibrahim who displayed an excellent work in the first session of the Sharjah International Arts Biennial, and currently he is the most inundated Emirates artist with concerns and questions. In the year 1984 presented Abdul Rahim Salim a work in tune with our (my) works, but he didn't continue then he quickly returned to the painting and I don't know why?

□ “Al Shuruq”: What are the major obstacles to confront the U.A.E artist?

- Hassan Sharif: But what type of artists who were confronted with problems? There is among us in this fine art field those who sell a painting for Dhs.40,000 or 50,000 and may be more than this, So, what problems to confront such an artist for example? As for an artist inhabited with concerns and new art questions and the necessity to change and move the concept of art and viewer...such an artist is likely to be faced with lots and lots of problems. On the other hand there are some who like to absorb or understand our new works of art at once in a brief meeting at tea table...this is in itself a nuisance, an obstacle and a problem. He wants to sit with you for ten minutes to reduce all your world and art history.

Above all this I would like to remark that some officials in our art institutions lack adequate knowledge. This stands as a barrier to our new experiments and they consider these experiments as dangerous to art, country, history, future, and to all generations.

□ “Al Shuruq”: And, what about exhibition halls and art galleries though modest?

- Hassan Sharif: We can add private galleries as another obstacle to confront the new U.A.E artist. We would like to ask: What type of art is presented by these galleries to the viewer?..What art celebrations prosper in exhibitions and private galleries at home? Traditional consumed European works were presented, targeting making articles and marketing in the first place, so, they refuse or obstinate from presenting works of art with new and dissident dimensions in art.

□ “Al Shuruq”: Since when do you produce different works of art?

- Hassan Sharif: It has been since 10 years and I produce this type of works of art, and I have the energy to continue producing longer; this is my way and the way of my substances, items and raw material that I take much care to collect and arrange in order to launch myself from there artistically.

□ “Al Shuruq”: In the end you, as an artist you are responsible in front of your art and towards history of art movement in the Emirates and perhaps the whole Arab Gulf area...isn't it?

• Hassan Sharif: What matters far more is not to have only one artist to produce this type of work; and in order to reach the concerned type amid a collection of what could be produced by a group of concerned persons with questions of new or modern art...between a painting and traditional sculpture, there must be a wide and variable art space, this necessitates the effort of more than one artist and the illustration of more than one experiment. If some of the flat artists we are having here, if they exit a bit from the limits or boundaries of a painting and they dared a bit vis-à-vis themselves, they might have profoundly contributed to enrich this space and to add to this variability. Why does Abdul Rahim Salim adheres during all this time to picture or painting?...sometimes I ask Hussein Sharif why has he stopped to work for two years or more...and in the same way one can address sensitive questions to some talented artists in this area.

□ “Al Shuruq”: you talk as if the function of a painting and its future were over...Don't you believe that a certain other creative “action” could rise from within a painting's structure and relationship to it?

• Hassan Sharif: A painting is there, it will remain to be there and it will never die: so, if it is simply a question of hanging a picture in a gallery such a thing will not easily die, but this is not art.

Al Shuruq
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Translated by Dr.Hassan El-Rayah