

KW

Hassan Sharif

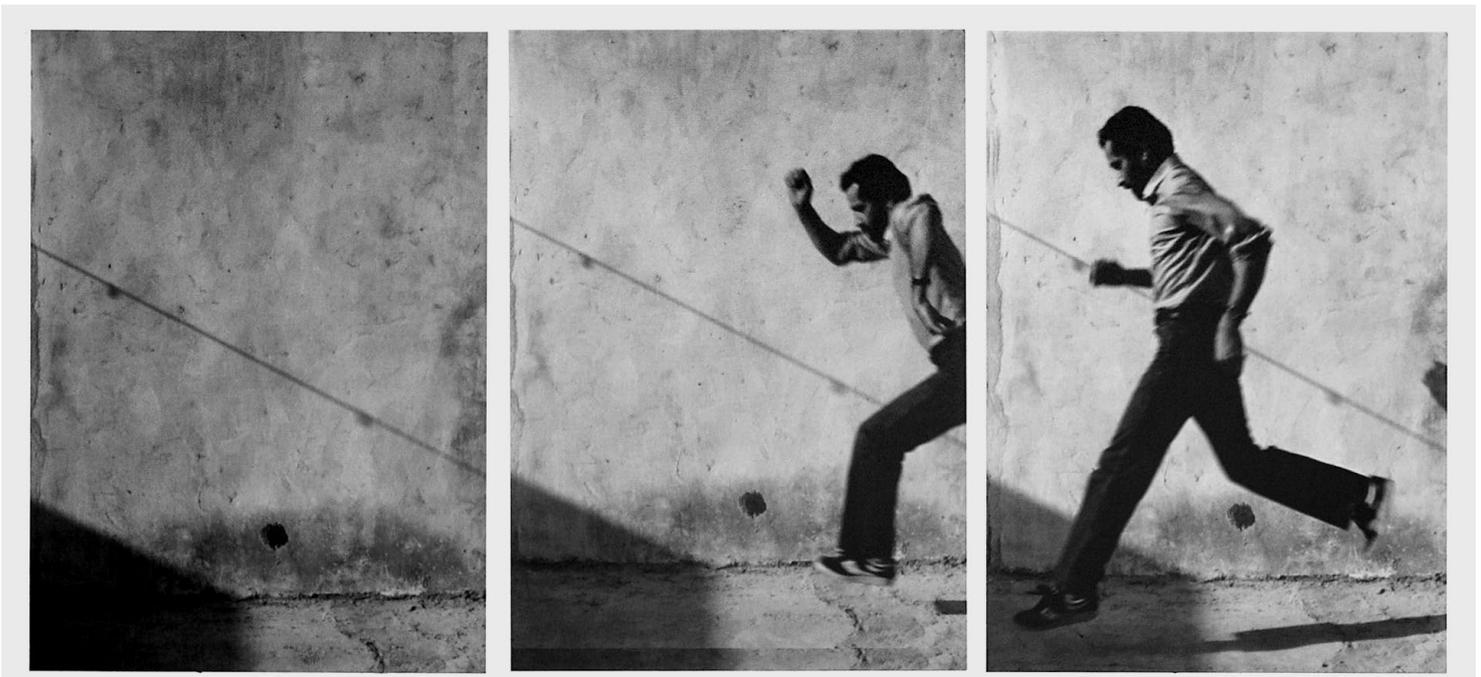
29 February – 3 May 20

Hassan Sharif
I Am The Single Work Artist
29 February – 3 May 20
Opening: 28 February 20, 7 pm

“The essence of localism is to bestow upon objects of heritage an amended and progressive position that negates the dullness of regurgitated concepts like identity, language, customs and traditions, and to give them complementary qualities and intellectual, visual, dynamic, enjoyable, and meaningful dimensions that encourage new sorts of questions.”
—Hassan Sharif (1951–2016)

In collaboration with Sharjah Art Foundation (UAE) and Malmö Konsthall (SE), KW Institute for Contemporary Art presents the first retrospective of Emirati artist Hassan Sharif in Europe. Hailed as one of the most important Middle Eastern artists of the twentieth century, Sharif became a groundbreaking pioneer in conceptual art by reconsidering the conventional understanding of time, space, form, and social interaction. Sharif, who lived and worked in Dubai, was one of the first artists to break with the classical conventions of art production in the Arab world and reinvented them with an innovative, experimental approach that continues to resonate among subsequent generations. Detached from local art production, he articulated an artistic language that was non-elitist, pared-down, process-based, and inspired by Fluxus. Within the tradition-conscious Arab world, however, his art was dismissed as unrepresentative, while in the West, there was talk of mere imitation.

Born in the United Arab Emirates at the beginning of the 1950s, Sharif grew up in a time of great upheaval. After oil was discovered in the Gulf region in the early 1960s, the area changed overnight, and the economically weak desert region of the Emirates became a sovereign nation marked by its desire for progress. Sharif discovered his curiosity and affinity for art at a very early age and independently studied masters of Modernism such as Vincent van Gogh, Paul Cézanne, and Pablo Picasso, whose works he discovered through English books. Since he did not speak English, however, this first encounter with European art was informed purely by his observations on aesthetics, form, and style. During the social and economic upheaval in the Emirates, Sharif was working for the weekly magazine *Akhbar Dubai*, drawing caricatures and ironic cartoons relating to everyday life and politics. His provocative and satirical works quickly gained popularity and remain significant today as historical evidence of that period and culture. Through this practice, Sharif developed his critical voice in society at an early stage and was never too self-conscious to express his opinion on things, which he saw as his duty as an artist. While many of his contemporary colleagues were interested in a revision of traditional Arab art under the auspices of Modernism, Sharif continued with his autodidactic practice, learned English, and explored movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, reproducing their painterly styles in his own manner in order to understand and internalize them. Sharif began his studies in London in 1979. While being abroad he moved within an intellectual circle that was to become inspirational for his views and practice. During this period, he also intensively studied Marcel

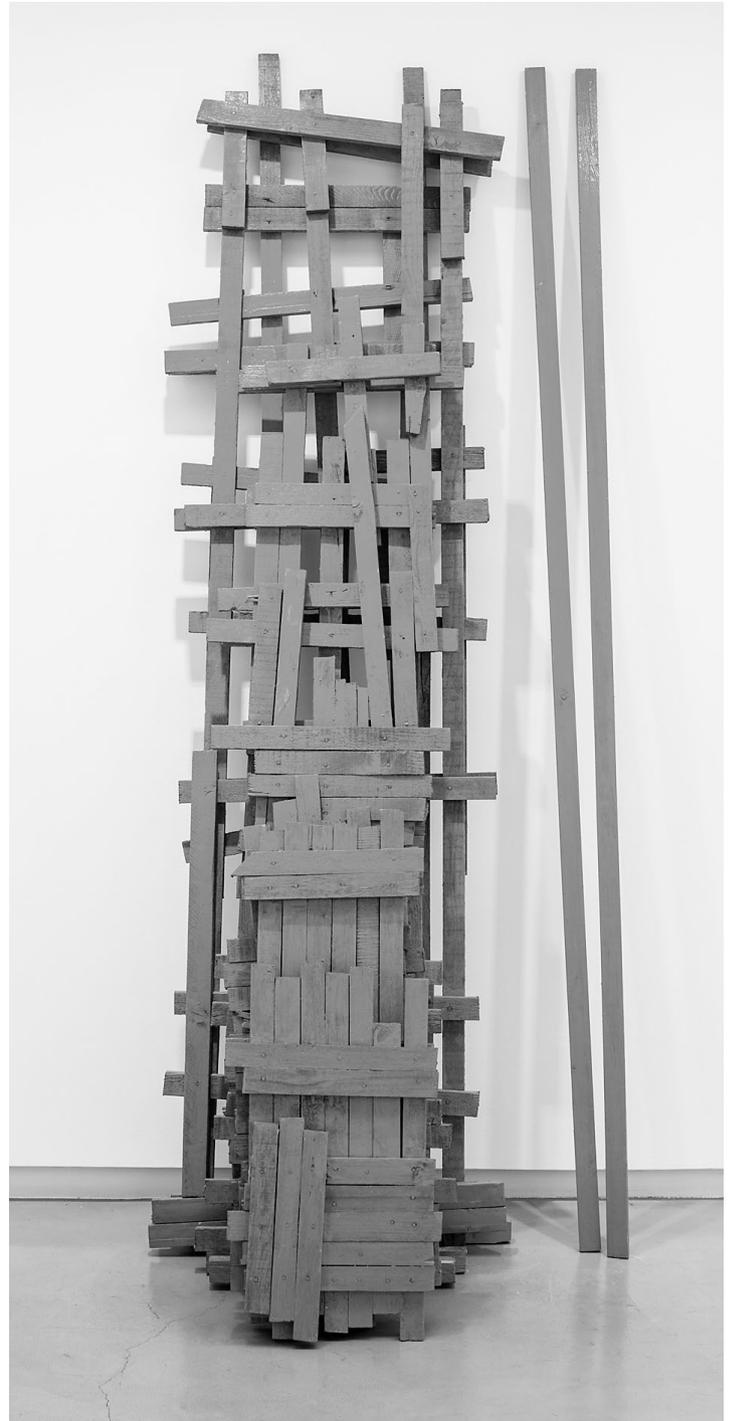


Hassan Sharif, *Jumping No. 1*, 1983, 3 of 7 photographs, Collage: photographs, ink and pencil on mounting board, Photo-documentation of a performance in Dubai, Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate, Alexander Gray Associates, New York, gb agency, Paris, Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde, Dubai

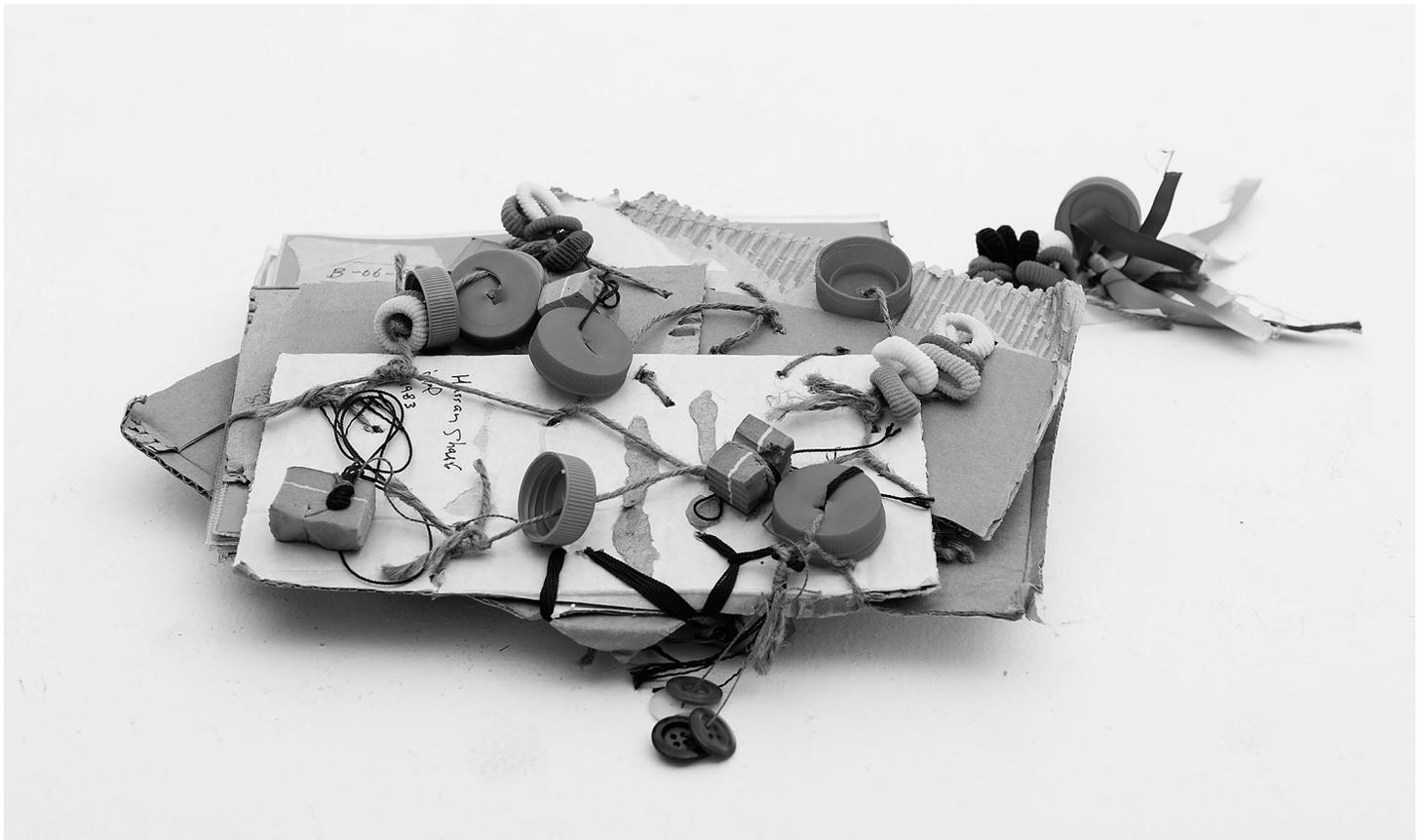
Duchamp's works, which had a lasting influence on his understanding of art. At the same time, Sharif adopted various postmodern artistic trends in London such as Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Performance Art, Pop Art, and Fluxus. Of main importance was a group of London artists who started a local movement with their examination of the modern manifestations of Constructivism and were known as the "Constructionists." Sharif was primarily influenced by their way of systemic thinking, which he reflected, for example, in his grid drawings or his photographic works created between 1981 and 1985. Further, his work was also influenced by the Fluxus movement, which had a great impact on his performative practice at the time. One of his first early performances took place in the Hatta Desert near Dubai. The photographic documentation shows the artist carrying out ordinary sequences of movement such as walking, jumping, or digging, which, without context or any sense of purpose, lose their actual meaning. In their non-linearity, they subvert repetition, immateriality, and site-specificity as hitherto classic forms of work. After completing his studies in 1984, Sharif consciously decided to return to the United Arab Emirates in order to support the local scene with his newly acquired knowledge. With the help of the government of Sharjah, he launched the Al Marijah studio, which became the center of intellectual life in the United Arab Emirates, and which he used to introduce a younger generation of artists to contemporary theory and praxis. At the same time, Sharif organized exhibitions at various venues such as the Al Markazi Market in Sharjah, where he presented works alongside other contemporary artists. His contribution resembled a readymade, consisting of two abstract geometric square paintings resembling a chessboard. One was placed on four water bottles, the other on the floor with the bottles placed in each of the four corners. Both works were reminiscent of elements of local architecture, as well as the low tables in the market where one drink tea or coffee while sitting on the floor or on cushions. One year later, Sharif used the Al Marijah studio itself as an exhibition venue—he painted the exterior walls of the building and the outbuildings between which he stretched a rope with stones. Both projects are examples of how Sharif would always regard his artistic production as situated in a social context as well as try to ground it in the public debate. In this respect, it was also important for the artist not to use valuable materials, but rather to show that objects found on the street were entirely sufficient to create works of art. This way of working attracted a great deal of attention and was subject of heated public discussions as the interventionist method of combining art with everyday objects was met with a great deal of incomprehension. Sharif viewed these reactions in a relaxed manner. His primary goal was to give the audience new food for thought. In line with this objective, the artist also experimented with

site-specific works in the kitchen, bathroom, and corridors of the Al Marijah studio.

One of his most important work cycles also began during this time; the works grouped under the name *Objects—Urban Archaeology* are thus also prominently displayed in the exhibition. During his stays in Sharjah, Dubai, and the Hatta Desert which he made amid his university holidays, Sharif explored the particular aesthetics of his surroundings. His attention was drawn to the natural landscape on the one hand, and the aesthetics of the production of material goods on the other. His interest in the seemingly banal and mundane



Hassan Sharif, *Wood*, 2016, Wood, nails, and synthetic paint, Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate, Photo: Sharjah Art Foundation



Hassan Sharif, *The Human Factor—Graham Greene*, 1983–2006, Pencil on printed paper and plastic folder (1983) and cardboard and various readymade assemblage (2006), Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate, Photo: Sharjah Art Foundation

was sparked by his study of Duchamp, but also by his preoccupation with John Cage and his way of dealing with his immediate surroundings. “Art becomes important as a means to make one aware of one’s actual environment”—this credo was essential to Sharif’s works, as his period abroad had given him a different perspective on his country of origin. Here, too, the Al Markazi market was both a stimulus and a source of inspiration. Characteristic of *Objects—Urban Archaeology* is the amassing of objects and various materials such as torn clothing, old newspapers rolled up and arranged vertically in a corner of a room, jute strips stuck together, or homemade papier-mâché pellets looking like lozenges. These material accumulations possessed a certain ambiguity: it seemed as if their formations had developed due to natural mutation while however their materiality showed clear evidence of industrial production. Sharif used this ambiguity to work with a variety of references. Using cardboard, rope, cotton, and wire, he created forms that resembled Arab pastries and sweets. At the same time, the material was reminiscent of those used in traditional carpet weaving. Over time, Sharif tended to work more with mass-produced goods and discarded products such as plastic cups, discount toys, metal cans, or cutlery, which he tirelessly altered by cutting, bending, and gluing subsequently putting them on a string. The dimensions of these hybrid works would vary from small to taking up larger exhibition spaces, resulting

in spatial installations. *Objects—Urban Archaeology* testifies not only to the rapid transition from manual to industrial production in the United Arab Emirates, but also to the artist’s critical stance toward consumption. Another important aspect for Sharif was the inherent potential of materials to consolidate memories of actions. For Sharif, frequently used cardboard boxes were a form of historical evidence; the traces of human usage were clearly visible on the surface and—unlike their typical existence in the world—they were thus not merely anonymous objects.

The retrospective at KW is a culmination of Sharif’s long history with the United Arab Emirates and presents around 150 works from the artist’s diverse oeuvre, including sculptural installations, drawings, performances, paintings, and assemblages.

In conjunction with the exhibition on Hassan Sharif, Valsalan Kanara’s documentary *Objects. A documentary on Hassan Sharif* (2006) will be screened at Pogo Bar. On 28 February, 5 and 12 March, as well as on 9 and 24 April 2020 the film will not be on view.



Hassan Sharif, *Slippers and Wire*, 2009, Slippers and copper wire, Installation view of the exhibition *Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist*, Sharjah Art Foundation, 2017/2018, Courtesy Hassan Sharif Estate, Photo: Sharjah Art Foundation

Public Program

Film screening:

Werner Herzog *Lessons of Darkness* (1992)

4 March 20, 7 pm

Venue: KW Studio, front building, 1st floor

Admission: 5 € / reduced 3 €

Tickets are only available at the box office.

In German with English subtitles

Public tour with assistant curator Cathrin Mayer

5 March 20, 6 pm

Admission: included in exhibition ticket

In English

Film screening:

Alia Farid *At the Time of the Ebb* (2019) and *Maske Paske Wi* (2020)

Followed by a conversation with Alia Farid

8 April 20, 7 pm

Venue: KW Studio, front building, 1st floor

Admission: 5 € / reduced 3 €

Tickets are only available at the box office.

In German with English subtitles

Film screening:

Yto Barrada *Hand-Me-Downs* (2011)

Simone Fattal *Autoportrait* (1971/2012)

15 April 20, 7 pm

Venue: KW Studio, front building, 1st floor

Admission: 5 € / reduced 3 €

Tickets are only available at the box office.

In English

Film screening:

Basma Alsharif *Ouroboros* (2017)

21 April 20, 7 pm

Venue: KW Studio, front building, 1st floor

Admission: 5 € / reduced 3 €

Tickets are only available at the box office.

In English

Public tour with curator Krist Gruijthuijsen

23 April 20, 6 pm

Admission: included in exhibition ticket

In English

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Opening Hours

Wednesday–Monday 11 am–7 pm
Thursday 11 am–9 pm
Closed on Tuesday

Admission

8 € / reduced 6 €
Combined Day Ticket KW / me Collectors Room Berlin
10 € / reduced 8 €
berlinpass holder 4 €
Free admission to visitors up to and including 18,
KW Friends, KW Lover* cardholders, on Thursday
evenings from 6 to 9 pm, and during Gallery Weekend
from 1–3 May 20

Guided Tours

Free guided tours
During regular opening hours, visitors of KW can
participate in short introductions to the exhibitions by
the KW Guides. Please reach out to our staff at the
counter. Participation is free of charge.

Public guided tours through the exhibitions
Every Saturday at 4 pm in English
Every Sunday at 4 pm in German

Individual guided tours
60 minutes: 70 € / reduced 55 € plus reduced entrance
fee per person (free admission up to 18 years)
For further information on group tours, please contact
Katja Zeidler at kaz@kw-berlin.de.

Impressum

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MALMÖ KONSTHALL

SHARJAH ART FOUNDATION

The exhibition *Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist* is produced in collaboration with Sharjah Art Foundation and Malmö Konsthall. This exhibition was originally curated by Hoor Al Qasimi and organized by Sharjah Art Foundation, where it was on display in 2017/2018. The European venues are KW Institute for Contemporary Art and Malmö Konsthall.



The exhibition *Hassan Sharif: I Am The Single Work Artist* is made possible through support from the Capital Cultural Fund.

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for Culture and Europe | **berlin** Berlin

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