

*Monira  
Al Qadiri  
& Raed  
Yassin*

By *Laura  
CIGUSI*  
*Portrait* 122

**A Drowned  
World (This  
Is How  
It Ends)**  
123

Splintered selves, severed heads, and AI voices – Berlin-based couple Monira Al Qadiri and Raed Yassin ventriloquise multiple subjects, sense-making by surrendering to the funhouse mirror of an absurd present. What's left to fall back on in our experience of togetherness in an ever unearthlier world?



*Suspended Delirium*, 2021  
(detail)

It's 2020. Or maybe it's 2021. Winter has taken over once again. Days have merged into an amorphous blob. Nobody remembers anything new happening to them anymore. Possibly that's why it's called "memory palace" – once you get stuck in it and can't leave, memory starts to play tricks on you. Making space for monsters.

The artists (and couple) Monira Al Qadiri and Raed Yassin found themselves in such a place, reflecting on migration and exile, destruction, and nostalgia for a future that will probably never come, all the while navigating the novelty of being reunited under the same roof for the first time in their decade-long relationship, having previously lived through a whirlwind of international residencies, openings, production tours, and concerts (Raed is also a touring musician and composer). The stillness of the moment is stark in contrast with the hectic pace of their "before" life, and they have started noticing signs that their sanity is cracking. But they are not alone. A sort of unconscious, collective thought seemed to have taken shape, manifesting as wildly vivid dreams, bizarre coping mechanisms, and delusional, psychotic ideations. So they decided to embrace the madness by producing clones of their own heads and that of their cat, Loumi, and scripting,

choreographing, designing, and scoring an immersive installation which is simultaneously a performance, a play, a song, and a dancing sculpture.

*Suspended Delirium* was originally commissioned for "Wild Times, Planetary Motions" (2021), an exhibition at Gropius Bau in Berlin that was cancelled because of the pandemic. It was exhibited later that year at the International Congress Centre (ICC) in "The Sun Machine Is Coming Down". Built in the late 1970s by German architect Richard Ermisch, the 28,000 square metre conference centre feels more like a sci-fi landscape, or a retro spaceship spat out from a space-time portal, than an enclosed architectural complex. It also resembles a natural rock formation, its labyrinthine structure and perspective lines punctuated by intricate lighting systems.

Making the work involved writing and rewriting in multiple voices, complex robotic programming (in collaboration with artists So Kanno and Piet Schmidt), "auditioning" AI voices, and endless rehearsals to perfect the dramaturgy of synchronised movements and rhythmic pacing.



*Suspended Delirium*, 2021  
(detail)

© Eike Walkenhorst / Berliner Festspiele

After all, you don't need legs when *tanzen ist verboten*.  
Nor will you need them in the metaverse.  
"I don't want reality! I want to live in a box."



*Suspended Delirium*, 2021, robotic performance, 30 min., dimensions variable  
Installation view, "The Sun Machine Is Coming Down", International Congress Centre (ICC), Berlin

The three robotic heads, pierced by mechanical arms, hang from the ceiling and hover above a group of wooden polygonal plinths that remind of the mountains on the cover of Radiohead's *Kid A* (2000). The mise-en-scène is bare, rhyming with the building's aesthetic style that reveals the function of its parts; the feeling of uncanniness comes from facing an outdated version of the future, retrieved from the archive of contemporary culture.

Viewers gather around slowly, observing the piece from all angles while the characters

were still, appreciating the details of the texture and colour of the sculptures' skin, skillfully painted by Said Baalbaki. The music starts and they came to life. Sitting on the carpeted floor, captivated by their voices and the dramatic tension built by the soundtrack of synthesised *maw-wals*, the surroundings magically fade out. The chord progression doesn't "land" or find resolution – it's a song that builds its stage, like photographic paper slowly developing in front of your eyes. The influence of Eugène Ionesco and



*Suspended Delirium, 2021*  
(detail)

## Each of the layers of the work resonates with the experience of disembodiment, of losing oneself in identity.

Samuel Beckett is tangible as the script lingers between the mundane and the grotesque: dissecting conspiracies and resorting to attempts at mythological reasoning. And you can relate, to the never-ending wait and surrender to uncertainty, to the excruciating predictability of your immediate surroundings, and the repressed excess of emotional baggage punctuated by sudden psychotic episodes, bursts of overexaggerated laughter, obsession over irrelevant details, and self-imposed regimens for discipline.

Raed: "He said that I now have three people living inside my head!"

Monira: "I didn't understand what he meant."

Loumi: "Three people?"

Raed: "How is that possible?"

Monira: "He said it happens sometimes, as a result of psychological trauma."

Loumi: "But I couldn't think of anything that happened to me recently."

The heads are 1.5 times true size, their hair is solid, and their jaws detach like that of a traditional ventriloquist's dummy. It's not that they look real, it's that they look as if they have a soul. I almost forget that they have no bodies. "I opened my closet door, and instead of clothes, there were organs hanging in there," announces Loumi cheerfully, at some point. After all,

you don't need legs when *tanzen ist verboten*. Nor will you need them in the metaverse. "I don't want reality! I want to live in a box," insists Raed.

Each of the layers of the work resonates with the experience of disembodiment, of losing oneself in identity, and disintegrating, while simultaneously sharing a moment of intimate connection with the viewer. Contrary to the tendency of so many contemporary artworks trying to convey a post-human subjectivity expressed through fragmentation, dematerialisation, and physical dissolution in the bottomless pit of "the internet of things", the sight of a familiar face is a cathartic experience. In the face of looming environmental collapse, the threat of AI singularity scenarios and the doom of petrofutures, the artists ventriloquise multiple personalities, disorders, and subjectivities of the splintered self into characters – a mythological tale of destruction and resurrection that doesn't end. It goes back to the beginning of the Möbius loop.

Betrayed by the promise of technological progress, many of us wonder what machines can do for us. Since the beginning of time, human agony has been soothed by stories, less so by the compulsive consumption of information that we are left to make sense of ourselves. The absurdity of this present time can perhaps be read through the distorting prism of satirical surrealism. You look into a funky mirror and finally find solace in yourself.

*MONIRA AL QADIRI* (\*1983, Senegal) is an artist living in Berlin. Her recent solo exhibitions took place at Guggenheim Museo Bilbao (2022) and Haus der Kunst, Munich (2021). Group exhibitions include "The Milk of Dreams", 59th Venice Biennale; "Experiences of Oil", Stavanger Art Museum (both 2022); "Sunrise/Sunset", Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (2021); and "Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars (1991–2011)", MoMA PSI, New York (2019).

*RAED YASSIN* (\*1979, Lebanon) is an artist living in Berlin. His recent solo exhibitions took place at Onassis Stegi, Athens (2020); Sharjah Art Foundation (2018); Marfa Projects, Beirut (2018); and Castello Di Rivoli, Turin (2014). Group exhibitions include "An Exhibition with Works by...", Witte de With, Rotterdam (2020) and "Seismographic Sounds – Visions of a New World", CTM Festival, Berlin (2019).

*LAURA CUGUSI* is an artist, writer, researcher, and cultural worker living in Berlin.