**American University of Beirut**

Critical Review

Stammer by Shady El-Noshokaty

Name: Freddy Vartabedian

Instructor: Dr. Angela Harutyunyan

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“Stammer is the moment where the conscious mind loses control, for it is always bound within three parallel planes: the mind, the physical existence and the power of imagination,” El-Noshokaty explains.1

Shady El-Noshokaty’s *Stammer* is a multifaceted and ongoing contemporary art project that started in 2007 and comprises installations, photographic images, drawings, recordings, videos, texts and performances. It is a seven part project where each part addresses a certain dimension, while all parts converge into the concept of stammering, conveying the impossibility of coherence between El-Noshokaty’s three planes, the mental, the physical and the emotional and the impossibility of these dimensions to express themselves freely and without interference.1

Through carrying his viewers into an altered state of the mind, *Stammer* tackles the complex and ambiguous relation between the mind and the body, as well as the mind with itself, meaning the conscious and unconscious and their effects on the consequence of expression and its impossibility, or more precisely, the communication of form that is met with the collapse of structure; a human condition of the clash of reason and emotion in which a most desired coherence between the mind and the body is fragmented, resulting in a failure to arrive at a rational conceptual expression.

For El-Noshokaty, research is the universal language on which he builds his art, to arrive at the materialization of concepts such as stammering. For example, in *Stammer, a Lecture in Theory* 2007, the artist tries reading aloud the concept of the mind being a digital computer, and then turns to his blackboard, which is a recurrent element for physical performance in his *Stammer* series, to convey his scientific concept through energetic, emotionally packed and large gestures that aim at a perfectly symmetric drawing, starting at a center and stretching to extremes, reaching out in an attempt to break an invisible boundary within and yet, end in a final collapse of the perfect symmetry produced, signifying the failure of the body at fulfilling a desire for expression. The performance is also intercepted by the artist’s memory, a memory concerning his son. In his performance, El-Noshokaty reads, stammers, draws, remembers, tries hard to convey meaning, feels and even sheds a tear, but in the end stands in a frozen gaze at the audience, a gaze that is not lacking in anticipation or in violence. It is a dramatic and abstract performance of an abstract theory, the mind and body dualism.1

Similarly, in *Stammer-Research* 2009-2010, the artist explores the notion of stammering and failure of expression. Through playing the harmonica wearing yellow plastic gloves, through ending his performance with a silent gaze, or through the installation itself that features the recurrent blackboard, a TV, texts, notes, drawings and big loudspeakers, all hinting to extensive research, the artist explores the notion of energy and its relation to the mind, the body and to emotions and memories in order to define the relation between the theoretical and the material, or between the subjective and the objective.1

In *Class* 2010, the performance being similar in elements to *A Lecture in Theory* 2007, the artist engages in an explanation about rats and their behavior, while a drawing of intertwined rats in different positions behind him on the blackboard glares violently at the audience. The performance culminates again in El-Noshokaty’s failure at expression and his anticipating silent gaze, but this time even more violent, with a bloody nose1. The recurrence of rats in the artist’s various works betrays a subtle violence that stems from his memory as well as from the intensity of conscious or real life situations2. These rats sneak on thoughts and concepts and contribute to the failure of communicating a definition, i.e. the collapse of a scientific structure against the interfering pressures of the human condition.

In *Stammer Words* 2008, El-Noshokaty addresses the failure to achieve harmonious verbal patterns of communication through language due to interference. This failure fills the space with the harshness of an abstract noise of explosion and takes the viewer back to the mind and body problem where language, stuck between the theoretical, physical and metaphysical, fails to convey concepts, resulting in violent frustration. The idea of the fallibility of language is taken further in *Stammer-Pablo=Shady* 2008, which features vocal experiments performed by El-Noshokaty and the Spanish artist Pablo, and which delves into the idea of vocal sounds and the different meanings they produce in different languages, making sound or language a barrier in communication between cultures, or more precisely, an act of stammering1.

El-Noshokaty’s view of sound as being an inefficient medium of communication is further addressed in his *Class* 2010, where the inability of sound to convey intended messages is made obvious through his exaggerated or even monstrous sculpture of loudspeakers hanging from the ceiling of a classroom of girls who chant together in a haunting monotony sentences like, “my mind is a ball of dough…”2. The large, yellow braided and beaded loudspeakers with connecting rods made to resemble crutches used by the disabled, imply the failure of sound at conveying rigid scientific structures, making the whole scene another act of stammering.

Besides the concept of stammering, the class scene in *Class* 2010 conveys an educational or cultural theme, mainly the traditional rote learning and imitating adopted by the governmental art scene in Egypt versus the contemporary free thought and creative expression adopted by El-Noshokaty, which comes as a natural outcome of the artist’s contemporary views in conceptual art and its teaching and which is further emphasized through his use of mind mapping to create art and through his use of various media such as sound, video, photographs, recordings and performance and not just drawings or paintings in his art works.

This idea of dichotomy is taken further to an issue of a definition of the role of art and the identity of an artist in *Stammer-Rehearsals for Important Statement* 2009, where the artist tries to express a statement through his chalk drawings and through statements that also appear as textual notes like, “If art has become a little more than a commodity in a global market place, if the primary concern of artists is the furtherance of their own careers and if the success of any exhibition is measured by the amount of exotic publicity it generates. What does this tell us about the role of the contemporary art in our culture”1. While dealing with the concept of stammering and communication and the clash of the inside and the outside, the artist clarifies his refusal of art as a commodity, as well as the prevalent marketing of artists.

However, El-Noshokaty’s disagreement with the ongoing traditional art practices and his quest for producing art that conforms to universal norms doesn’t imply his refusal to refer to occasional traditional art, mainly drawing which he also teaches and considers a basis for art together with painting2. His *Stammer* series involves drawings of large and small sizes, mainly in pencil or pen. These drawings involve biomorphic shapes such as piles of rats or varied octopuses, drawings of the head, in addition to the artist’s notorious loudspeakers that appear alone or as part of installation sketches. In his drawings, the artist focuses on the visual and the dream, the conceptual and the emotional, both central to the concept of *Stammer*.2

*Stammer*, a project that started with how four different artists viewed stammering as an obstacle of communication (*Stammer-Occidentalism)* under El-Noshokaty’s direction has evolved into a project realized completely by El-Noshokaty himself in an attempt to read conceptual definitions, only to show that every act of expression, every act of communication is a stammering act. It is a project that raises awareness of the complexity of the human as a person whose existence is related to and governed not solely by the brain, but by conscious and unconscious experiences, emotions and situations; the basic human condition that fails to fit into a clear scientific explanation.

References:

1. [www.**noshokaty**.com/](http://www.noshokaty.com/)
2. A. Harutyunyan, *Stammering as a (Non)Representational Paradigm, Shady El Noshokaty’s Stammer* 2007-2010, Cairo Practix, p. 193-201