

## LETTER TO: SALAM ATTA SABRI

Our first encounter must have been back in December 2014. I had travelled to Baghdad to prepare what was to be the exhibition *Invisible Beauty* in the Iraqi pavilion at the Venice Biennale the following year. I remember vividly your disbelief when I told you I wanted to show your *Letters from Baghdad* in Venice. Since then the drawings have travelled around the world: Venice, Ghent, Erbil, Kathmandu, Abu Dhabi... Why are these drawings so important? What makes them so special? I find it hard to approach the drawings from an objective angle. For I know the maker so well, and time and again I'm carried away and moved by his story, a tale of a tragic life — in this instance the life of an artist, but it could have been anyone's life. Let me try to describe the drawings. Sabri nearly always uses more or less A4-sized sheets of ordinary drawing paper, though he uses paper of varying quality. Most drawings have been made with a black felt-tip pen. Sometimes there are traces of pencil or fluorescent highlighters on the sheet. Most drawings look nervous, like quickly drawn, braided fabrics of black lines. These are testimonies, drawn records of fictitious conversations. Time and again, the endless number of drawing sheets is covered all over with marks, signs, writings. Repetition as a remedy against forgetting, as a means to highlight the importance of something, of personal or historic events. The drawings reveal a necessity, an obsession, a mania. As if only in drawing does the artist find a way to get his own history and that of his country out of his system. One drawing leads to another one, which in turn carries in itself the framework of the next, which in turn... Sabri's drawings proliferate like his thoughts incessantly proliferate and spin around. Things seem to acquire meaning and life only when the artist endlessly explores a motive: the history of Iraq, his personal biography through cities and places, dates as chronological anchors, names of illustrious predecessors in the modern art of Iraq, formal references to the great civilisations between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates... These and many other elements describe Salam Atta Sabri's thinking-through-drawing. Some people would call the written drawings nostalgic. There's this continual looking back at times long gone, times that will perhaps never return. But isn't nostalgia our only hope in a political and social context that is torn apart by violence, conflict, corruption and war? Isn't it the only thing that's left to Sabri? For Sabri, this longing for the past is a way to survive, a way to lend shape to different truths. The quick movement of the hand over a sheet of paper makes it possible to control a semblance of reality that doesn't relate to any reasonable form. Just as, in the early twentieth century, two diplomats divided the Middle East with a few lines, Salam Atta Sabri divides his drawing sheet with an endless play of lines that don't divide, but attempt to link the memory of a past with today's broken reality.

Philippe Van Cauteren  
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