

Sharjah Biennial 11

Various venues

Despite the amount of maps at the Sharjah Biennial 11, I kept getting lost. Trying to find the work of 100 or so artists, architects, calligraphers, filmmakers, musicians and performers – including 35 new commissions – across 33 sites in a city with which one is unfamiliar is no mean feat. There was art in alleys and courtyards, on rooftops and a boat, in a playground, a museum, a couple of outdoor cinemas, a new gallery complex (designed by local architect Mona El-Mousfy) and an old bank. During the opening week, in a literal acting out of the show's cumbersome title, 'Re:emerge, Towards a New Cultural Cartography', visitors raced around clutching their wilting maps, looking for the next venue and often stumbling into one they hadn't expected.

Efficiently curated by Yuko Hasegawa, the intended aim of this most diplomatic of biennials was, however, almost absurdly ambitious, wanting to: 'reassess the Western-centrism of knowledge in modern times and reconsider the relationship between the Arab world, Asia, the Far East, through North Africa and Latin America'. Phew! Biennials often make grand claims in order to justify big budgets to funding bodies, while remaining open-ended enough to accommodate the myriad responses of invited artists, but this clearly becomes counter-productive when the claims are so sweeping as to become meaningless. Speaking of which, what *does* 're:emerge' mean? I never did work it out. What did emerge was an exhibition that brought together a lot of good – and occasionally great – work, that, seen together, functioned less like an argument about Western-centrism than a discursive daydream about the kind of place the world might be if national boundaries were replaced by the borderless regions of the imagination of artists and architects.

About this review

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SANAA, *Bubble*, 2013, installation view

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Hasegawa was inspired by the courtyard in Islamic architecture – a place that, for her, is a metaphor of the intersections between public and private life. This is a neat idea, but it doesn't take into account that what is permitted in courtyards in Sharjah (a constitutional monarchy and one of the seven emirates that comprise the UAE) is sorely restricted. This is ironic given that the exhibition's stated interest in the courtyard 'as a plane of experience and experimentation – an arena for learning and critical thinking of a discursive and embodied kind [...] a generative space for the production of new awareness and knowledge'. If one were to only go to biennials in countries with spotless human rights records, one might be limited to travelling once every two years to, say, Iceland, yet Sharjah's local laws run counter to many of the basic tenets of freedom of speech and expression: it's illegal to 'deride or damage' the reputation of the UAE or 'display contempt' for religion; alcohol and homosexuality are banned; and the Sharjah Decency and Public Conduct Rules state that, 'A man and a woman who are not in a legally acceptable relationship should not be alone in public places, or in suspicious times or circumstances.' (Obviously the authorities turned a blind eye during the biennial opening, as I can categorically state that I talked to men I'm not married to, some of whom were *definitely* gay, and we all got off scot-free.) Sharjah has no democratically elected institutions and residents don't have the right to challenge the government or to form political parties. Freedom of the press – especially since the Arab Spring – is restricted, and the UAE has not signed most international human-rights and labour-rights treaties. Foreigners account for around 85 percent of residents and exploitation of migrant workers is widespread. Thus, during my week in the emirate, I was constantly visited by the nagging feeling that there was one rule for most of the people who live there, and another for the few hundred or so members of the international art set who swoop down for a fascinating week in a place they – i.e. me – understand little about.

All of which begs the question: who is this biennial actually *for*? Is it a smokescreen, an exercise in soft politics or a genuine challenge to the status quo? For the curator, it's a minefield, as the Artistic Director of the last Sharjah Biennial, Jack Persekian, discovered when he was sacked by Sharjah's ruler, Sheikh Sultan bin Mohamed Al-Qasimi (whose daughter, Sheikha Hoor al Qasimi is the director of the Sharjah Foundation) for the installation of Mustapha Benfodil's *Maportaliche / Ecritures sauvages* (It Has No Importance / Wild Writings, 2011) – which comprised mannequins wearing T-shirts emblazoned with phrases of a sexual and anti-Islamic nature in support of rape victims – in a square close to a mosque.

Hasegawa made very clear – at times, almost relentlessly so – that cartography is a form of translation. For example, Indian artist Ravi Agarwal's photographs of pollution, 'Below the Surface' (2012), were accompanied by the declaration that: 'The earth is no longer mere land: it is the sociopolitical terrain of our species.' Elsewhere, wall texts earnestly declared that Tiffany Chung's map drawings are attempts to 'examine conflict, migration, urban progress and transformation in relation to history and cultural memory' in places such as Afghanistan, Beirut and Bosnia. These works add little to the histories the Vietnamese artist scrutinizes, and transform conflict into something all-too-easily digested. Much more compelling was work that examined the idea of borders less literally, such as Mexican artist Eduardo Terrazas's extraordinary 'Tablas' series of geometric abstract 'paintings' from the 1970s, which were created by using yarn on board covered with wax. Similarly, Egyptian artist Mouneer Alshaarani's 17 exquisite calligraphy works employ a traditional technique to quote ancient and modern poetry, aphorisms and Sufi teachings such as 'speech is pitfall' and 'the hidden is revealed in the apparent'. Of course, there are many ways of making serious observations about the world, and many of them are funny. One of my favourite works in the show was also one of the most absurd: Egyptian artist

Basim Magdy's film *13 Essential Rules for Understanding the World* (2011) features red tulips with worried faces drawn on them. A deadpan voice-over intones helpful suggestions such as: 'Never forget that there are almost seven billion people in the world. You don't matter. Really.'

Another highlight of Hasegawa's biennial was the work of Mumbai-based collective CAMP, who, four years ago, gave smart-phones to a group of sailors in Sharjah – most of whom are from Gujarat in India, Southern Iran and Pakistan – in order to film their journeys from port to port. The result – a hypnotic feature-length film, *To Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* (2009–13) – is made extraordinary by the fact of being so unremarkable: sailors go about their everyday chores on the boats, eating, laughing, sleeping, watching dolphins and playing cards. The film was screened every night on a street corner near the water; the night I saw it, crowds of locals, many of them sailors, watched it too – the kind of local engagement that was less evident elsewhere.

Also a study in migrant lives was the wonderful *Citizen's Band* (2012), a four-channel video installation by Australian artist Angelica Mesiti. Filmed in Paris and Sydney, it's a lesson in common humanity and the importance of music to both cultural identity and self-expression: a Sudanese taxi-driver whistles a traditional tune in his car; a Cameroonian water-drummer creates complex rhythms in a swimming pool; an Algerian busker in a train carriage sings a heartbreaking song while accompanying himself on a Casio keyboard; and a Mongolian throat-singer busks with a horse-head fiddle on a Sydney street corner. Indian artist Amar Kanwar also focuses on giving voice to people whose lives are marginalized: his at-times almost unbearably moving film about street poets and musicians in places of conflict in India, *A Night of Prophecy* (2002), asks if it 'is possible to understand the passage of time through poetry'. His huge, complex installation, *The Sovereign Forest* (2012) – included in last year's DOCUMENTA(13) – comprises film, video, photography,

seeds, music and handmade books in order to examine, through a mix of reportage and reverie, issues around ecology, politics and human rights in Orissa, on the east coast of India. I wondered if Hasegawa could have included such a work exploring similar issues in the UAE. While Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Siri's filmic portrait of a Bangladeshi worker in the UAE, *Dilbar* (2013), was included, his daily reality is imagined more as one fuelled by dreams and hallucinations than by the daily grind of economic hardship.

The most talked-about work at the biennial was John Akomfrah's filmic portrait of Jamaican-born, British cultural theorist and architect of the New Left, Stuart Hall, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), which was commissioned by last year's Liverpool Biennial. It was created for three screens, as if one wasn't enough for the urgency of what he needed to communicate – key cultural and political postwar debates, filtered through archival footage and the experiences of one man. This astonishing work – which is as sensitive to the nuances of music, collage, atmosphere and biography as it is to the brute facts of politics – opens with a famous quote by Hall: 'Identity is an endless unfinished conversation.'

Music was central to the biennial, and one of its joys. The exhibition opened with a performance by the artist Wael Shawky, titled *Dictums 10:120* (2012): 32 Qawwali singers from Pakistan, seated cross-legged in an alley between the new galleries in the heritage area, sang what sounded like a devotional song but was, in fact, fragments of curator-speak and overheard conversations translated into Urdu, including: 'a biennial is a tremendously self-conscious project' and 'as a curator, your audience is your alter-ego'. It was a smart, funny exercise in pricking assumptions about the relationship between art organizations and their local communities that could, in a neat reversal of the usual power play, only be understood by the Pakistani workers who live in Sharjah (some of whom are part of the biennial's production and

technical team). In a more abstract response to the location, high above the singers, Gabriel Lester's *Vayu-Vata* (2013) was installed on the roof – Aeolian harps the artist made in order to channel the winds that blow from the desert into a kind of organic song written by the elements. From the delicate to the bombastic: on a balmy evening

I enjoyed a performance of ten drummers in one of the squares in the heritage area (*The Call – from the City into the Biennial*, 2013); it was part of the programme of sound compositions, conceived by Tarek Atoui, created in direct response to the polyphonic musical traditions of the Gulf.

Substantial installations could be found in various squares in Sharjah. Japanese architects SANAA's *Bubble* (2013), a dreamy group of enormous translucent spheres that, although firmly fixed to the ground, seemed to float; Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's tent-like crocheted structure, *While Culture Moves Us Apart, Nature Brings Us Together* (2013), sat in the middle of a hot square like a cosmic oasis – inside it, a large block of ice, which was replenished every day, dripped into a small cool pond below. It proved popular with locals, who found respite in it from the hot sun. The Belgian design group OFFICE (Kersten Geers and David Van Severen) also designed three rather charming 'Oases' (2012–13) for the heritage area, filled with palm trees, benches and orange-juice sellers, and inspired by traditional Arish architecture.

While 'Re:emerge, Towards a New Cultural Cartography' was a wonderfully installed and often fascinating study in the art of different cultures, the question remains: what is the point of declaring that an exhibition explores 'new forms of contact, dialogue, and exchange [...] and new ways of knowing, thinking, and feeling' if artists aren't allowed to express what they really think and feel about the UAE, their belief systems – or even their own bodies. There's a simple, even obvious, answer: until Sharjah *really* opens up to new ideas, this biennial will never rise above being a brilliant PR exercise for the UAE. I would suggest that future iterations cast aside the maps, and look instead to their own backyard.

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