

Art Forum, Sharjah Biennial 11, Text/Claire Bishop, P316-317, May 2013

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From left: Carsten Höller, *Random Rolling Cylinder*, 2013, aluminum, steel, rubber, electric motor, paint, fluorescent lights. Installation view, Bank Street. SUPERFLEX with Schul Landscape Architects, *The Bank*, 2013, mixed media. Installation view, Bank Street.



Sharjah Biennial 11

SHARJAH ART MUSEUM AND OTHER VENUES,
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

Claire Bishop

IT'S MY FIRST RESEARCH TRIP to the Middle East, and I am woefully underprepared. What do I know about Sharjah? Only that it's a "dry" emirate (in both climate and alcohol consumption) that has invested seriously in culture and heritage rather than buying brand names (Abu Dhabi's yet-to-be-built Louvre and Guggenheim museums) or pursuing art as business (Dubai's commercial galleries and art fair). I also know that Jack Persekian, the artistic director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, was fired due to controversy over a "blasphemous" work in the 2011 Sharjah Biennial by Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, this edition's curator, Yuko Hasegawa from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, chose to present an unpolemical framework by way of conciliatory riposte, albeit one wearily reminiscent of many 1990s biennials in its theme and syntax. "Re:emerge—Towards a New Cultural Cartography" offered some familiar ideas about the importance of reassessing Western-centrism, a proposal that the East and Global South are now reappearing after centuries of lying fallow, and a focus on the local architecture of the Islamic courtyard as a place where cultures mix and new hybrids are formed. (Ironically, Benfodil's installation had been located in one such court-

yard.) In the context of the Arab Spring and the UAE's notoriously abusive labor conditions, this architectural celebration seemed to be a fairly evasive pretext.

If the themes of cartography and urban space offered a flashback to the '90s, then so, too, did the lineup of artists, which included Thomas Demand, Olafur Eliasson, Carsten Höller, Ernesto Neto, and Gabriel Orozco. These were brought up to date by juxtapositions with a younger generation of biennial favorites from the Middle East and South Asia—think of Wael Shawky, Saädane Afif, and CAMP—and a handful of local Emirati artists, some of whom seemed too young to carry the mantle of international representation. In terms of layout, the biennial was manageably installed in clusters over four main sites: the Arts Area Al Shuweihien (including the Sharjah Art Museum and Collections Building), Bank Street (one of the main drags leading to the Corniche, flanked by ATMs), Calligraphy Square, and the Sharjah Art Foundation Al Mureijah, the last two forming an extended labyrinth of low-rise, dust-colored buildings in the Heritage Area, interspersed with courtyards and narrow passageways.

Inevitably, there was a surfeit of works about cartography and mapping, most of them rather twee and decorative (Tiffany Chung, Tintin Wulia, Fumito Urabe) but a few rising to make a critical point (Burak Arıkan's *Neoliberalism[s]*, 2013). Fortunately, a walk around the Heritage Area in the blinding sunshine swiftly dispelled any skepticism about the courtyard theme, as the biennial venues provided a seductive choreography of continual movement between inside and outside, old and new architecture. Works either looked out over courtyards (Gabriel Lester's rooftop aeolian harps, *Vayu-Vata*, 2013), provided shady rest areas between courtyards (Neto's *Enquanto a cultura nos separa, a natureza nos une* [While Culture Moves Us Apart, Nature Brings Us Together], 2013), or occupied courtyards, most effectively in Carlos Amoraes's *We'll See How All Reverberates*, 2012, three huge Calderesque mobiles made of cymbals that viewers could play with chunky padded drumsticks. Two parallel programs also made good use of this ubiquitous architectural

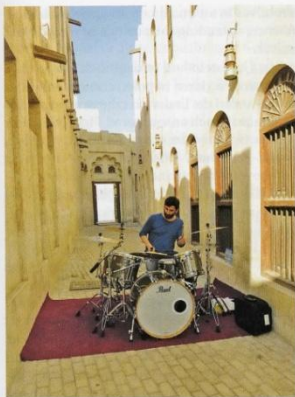
feature: a performance and music program by Lebanese sound artist Tarek Atoui and a film program by Apichatpong Weerasethakul in a specially constructed, long outdoor cinema designed by German-born, Beijing-based architect Ole Scheeren.

Atoui's own contribution, *Metricize*, 2013, deployed ten prominent international percussionists to play on drum kits in courtyards around the biennial over the three opening days. In the late-afternoon sun of Calligraphy Square, I encountered a spellbinding, moody improvisation by Lukas Ligeti, Susie Ibarra, and Uriel Barboza. A day later, I stumbled across Turkish artist Cevdet Eray thrashing away solo on a glittery drum kit in a narrow, dusty passageway in the Heritage Area, a prog-rock intervention into an otherwise perfect Orientalist fantasy.

The show foregrounded an Islamic tradition of abstraction, both visual and sonic, as a diplomatic approach that avoided the perils of censorship and aimed to create some unity after the divisions of 2011.

These works, together with many others—especially Nevin Aladag's three-channel video installation of tambourines and other percussion instruments rolling around city streets and the desert—foregrounded the abstract language of rhythm and sound as an unspoken theme of the exhibition.

A more introspective tone was found at the Sharjah Art Museum, which presented calligraphic works from Islamic and Japanese traditions. Syrian artist Mounèer Abdou was a great discovery for me—taut geometry combined with slogans (NO TO KILLING, NO TO ARRESTING, NO TO SUPPRESSING . . .)—while the calligraphy of Yaichi Inoue (1916–1985) offered sweeping gestures of black ink smattering and bleeding into fluid pools. This unexpected immersion in traditional art forms also had a rhythmic pulse, which continued in nearby venues, from the small-



From left: Tarek Atoui, *Metricize*, 2013, Performance view, Heritage Area, March 13, 2013. Cevdet Ereğ, Burak Arıkan, *Neoliberalism(s)*, 2013, custom software, interactive screen, three digital ink-jet prints. Installation view, Arts Area. Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Sini, *Dilbar*, 2013, HD video, black-and-white, sound, 10 minutes.



scale (Pablo Lobato's mesmerizing video of Brazilian bell ringers, *Bronze Revirado* [Overturned Bronze], 2011) to the magisterial (John Akomfrah's three-channel documentary homage to Jamaican-born intellectual Stuart Hall, *The Unfinished Conversation*, 2012, with its deftly interwoven jazz sound track).

If anything "re-emerged" here, then, it was an Islamic tradition of abstraction, both visual and sonic, as a diplomatic approach that avoided the perils of censorship and aimed to create some unity after the divisions of 2011. The outdoor works, particularly the performance program, seemed to serve as a welcome point of overlapping encounter (if not direct communication) among Emiratis, immigrants, and biennial visitors. Without question, the best example of this was SUPERFLEX's *Bank*, 2013, a one-and-a-half-acre park created in the middle of Bank Street, on the site of a former traffic circle. The Danish collective asked local immigrants to nominate a signature piece of public furniture from their homeland (a particular design of playground equipment, bench, tiki hut, streetlight, etc.), which was then sourced or re-created and installed among rolling dunes of tarmac. While looking somewhat cut-and-paste by day, the park after sundown was densely packed with local children, teenagers, and families and was the single public space I visited in Sharjah where all ages, genders, and ethnicities socialized side by side.

A stone's throw from SUPERFLEX's park was the former Sharjah Islamic Bank, the only site with a critical mass of works arrayed according to the traditional biennial custom of more is more, commandeering seven floors of a ten-story building. Without the architectural flow of courtyards to provide respite from attention fatigue, weaker pieces were even more enervating when encountered thick and fast. Retro forms of site specificity (scatter installations by Latifa Echakhch and Sara Ramo) alternated with video installations plagued by technical difficulties (Wang Jianwei) and research-based art that failed to synthesize into compelling form (Simon Fujiwara, Lamia Joreige, Amina Menia). I gratefully heeded advice not to enter Valia Fetisov's installation, which trapped

visitors in an empty gallery for varying periods of time with nothing but a bench to sit on, a monitor imploring them to "PLEASE WAIT," and a locked glass door through which passersby looked on with pity.

Even with Fetisov's hostage installation taken into account, attendance was—compared with most biennial openings—conspicuously thin on the ground. While this led to luxurious viewing conditions in the galleries, it had a less desirable (indeed, almost devastating) impact on the annual March Meeting. Held in the auditorium of the Sharjah Institute for Theatrical Art, this conference was also organized by Hasegawa to reinforce the themes of the exhibition. Despite the free entry and lavish catering, the event failed to pull an audience; indeed, at times there seemed to be more AV technicians than punters. It was sad to see such munificent resources dutifully mobilized to such uninspiring ends: Woefully chaired by Claudia Pestana, a curator at Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF), most of the talks comprised lackluster presentations by artists paired with lectures monotonously intoned by curators. (A notable exception was Paulo Herkenhoff discussing his recently opened *Museu de Arte do Rio* and neighboring education institute.) Poor attendance was explained as a result of the decision to move the biennial opening a week ahead of Art Dubai and its own talks program, the Global Art Forum, whose starry lineup this year featured Douglas Coupland and Michael Stipe. Nevertheless, Sharjah is one of the few emirates with an art school—where were all the students? Was this a repercussion of the petition from the 2011 biennial, in which fifteen hundred artists, curators, and scholars pledged to boycott future art events in Sharjah if there were no public acknowledgment of censorship? Probably not, as many in attendance had signed on but later reconsidered their boycott, perhaps after Persekian himself disavowed the petition.

Inevitably, international visitors all had questions about the Arab Spring and its lack of representation within the show. Only one work directly addressed the fraught issue of labor conditions in the Gulf: Weerasethakul and Chai Sini's video *Dilbar*, 2013, a ten-minute

black-and-white dream vision following a day in the life of one of the Bangladeshi construction workers who had helped build the new SAF spaces. Images of Dilbar rising repeatedly from his bed in a construction camp and haunting the gallery spaces we had just visited were back-projected onto a transparent screen that flooded viewers with a ghostly anamorphosis.

The Sharjah Biennial is clearly caught in a bind: The exhibition is made both possible and impossible by the fact that its director, Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasbi (a graduate of the Slade School of Fine Art and the Royal College of Art in London), is the daughter of the ruling sheikh. It's easy to bemoan the lack of agitational conscience within the show, but the emirates are absolutist monarchies, and Sharjah in particular exercises strict religious control over its citizens. Censorship here isn't the same beast as it is in Havana, Moscow, and Shanghai, to name three biennials that operate under politically restrictive regimes. And it should also be noted that Sharjah's religious conservatism produces far less apparent social difference than is seen in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where the juxtaposition of obscene wealth, seven-star hotels, global multinationals, and armies of exploited workers (twenty thousand alone on the construction village of Saadiyat Island) is appallingly palpable even to a first-time visitor like myself. On returning to Sharjah after visiting these neighboring emirates, I appreciated the biennial's attempt to produce a serious (i.e., nonflashy) cultural framework for the presentation of contemporary art. Admittedly, this is not art in its most radical iteration, but what would "radical" really mean in this dual context of unbridled hypercapitalist expansionism and theocratic sovereignty? It seemed enough of an achievement to let art be shown in its thoughtful, sensuous immediacy, in spite—and because of—these constricted circumstances. □

Sharjah Biennial 11 is on view through May 13.

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