

FUTURE DIAGNOSTICS AT THE SHARJAH BIENNIAL 2009

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Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly. *Smile, You're in Sharjah* (video still), 2009. Courtesy: the artists.

In recent years, the proliferation of the American rhetoric on the “war on terror” has translated into wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and been reinforced by the ongoing violence and conflict between Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. Mainstream media coverage has analyzed, sensationalized and fetishized these wars for the Western public, while governments have supplied their military forces.

Together the government and the media have generated policies based on fear and suspicion, while words such as “terrorists,” “Islamic fundamentalists,” “security,” “illegal immigrant” and “anti-war protester” have entered daily conversations and further restricted the movement of a large majority of people. After a period of silence within the art world, issues concerning violence, anxiety, memory and displacement have become common themes in the major international Biennials. But do they foster a better understanding of the scale and complexity of recurring violence, loss and punitive laws against asylum seekers?

The 2009 Sharjah Biennial opened in the midst of a profound economic crisis, just months after the war on Gaza ended, offering the timely theme of *Provisions for the Future*. Located in the heart of the Middle East, the trauma of displacement, marginalization and fragmented histories has a palpable presence in the local environment of the Emirates, which has a population mainly comprised of migrant laborers and expatriate workers. In this context, the Biennial has the potential to play a crucial role in subverting the polemic discourses of terrorism and the Islamophobia perpetuated by the Western mainstream. My concern was whether the Biennial could serve as an international platform for mobilizing discussions on migration, movement and the status of workers to develop a deeper

understanding of contemporary experience in the Middle East and to examine the interconnectedness of contemporary societies in the 21st century. The works that succeeded in the Biennial transformed the passive viewing experience into a compelling and enlightening exercise of looking for new models and trying to find solutions.

One of the most successful works in the Biennial placed the process of reconciling trauma at the centre of moving forward. *3 Triptychs*, by Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige, engaged viewers in a sensory experience as they walk through a labyrinth of interconnected chambers that triggered a deep sense of loss and grief. Imagine a small dark room. You enter it alone and see a faint reflection of yourself on the opposite wall. As you walk towards the wall, it leads you to another room. You enter this room and it's even smaller; washed out projections of children, landscapes and war merge into one another on the wall. A hypnotic flow of images and familiar sounds draw you to the next room, where it is pitch dark. Strings of music accompany you as you feel your way into the following room where the projections of fragmented images continue. Walking through the labyrinth of spectral sounds and images feels like déjà vu. For Joreige, *3 Triptychs* is an exploration of memory, erasure, collective and fragmented histories and the aftermath of war. It is a powerful work that evoked complex feelings that blurred the boundaries

between the viewer and the artwork, personal history and collective memory, self and other. The darkened rooms, echoing with sound, poignantly embodied a trauma that can never be retold in words.

Joreige's message was particularly resonant in Sharjah, an oasis in the turbulent Middle East where the reiteration of violence and war has become routine. The Biennial took place in the Arts and Heritage district, comprised of the Sharjah Art Museum and its peripheral galleries: Shamsi House, Serkal House and the Collections building. The museum and arts district is located minutes from the vibrant Sharjah Creek, docked with colourful dhows (wooden sailing boats) and crowded with goods, laborers and migrant workers loading and unloading boats by hand and with small cranes. The creek is surrounded by rows of dry fruit sellers carrying different varieties of nuts and raisins, dates and chocolate, worked and run by migrants who are an essential part of the local economy.

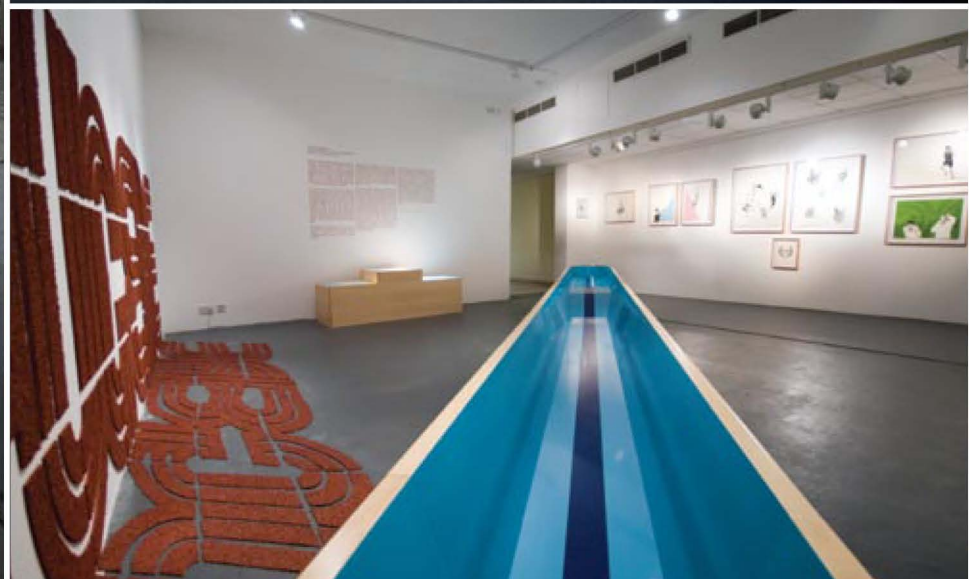
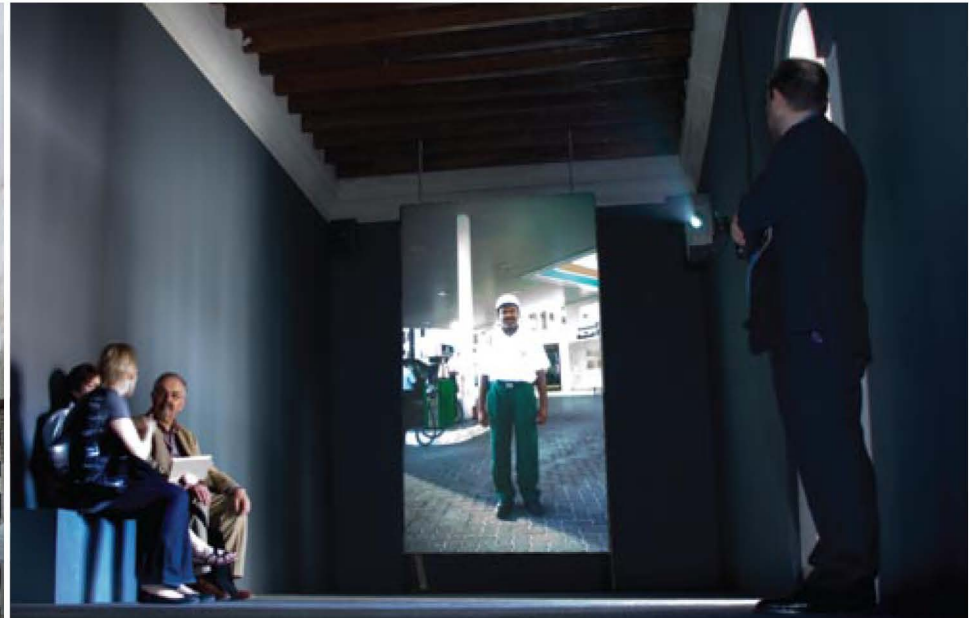


Every evening for the first three days of the Biennial, from 7pm to 10pm artists Shaina Anand and Ashok Sukumaran hosted a radio show on Radio Meena 100.3 FM, taking music requests and airing the comments and experiences of the sailors and dry fruit vendors who work in the area surrounding the museum. The artists played songs in all the regional languages of the South Asian countries from which the majority of the sailors and migrant workers in the neighbourhood originated. The radio show was part of a larger piece called *Wharfage*, a two-part project including a publication that was based on the booming dhow trade between Sharjah and Somalia in the wake of the financial crises and a series of radio-broadcasts from 18 – 21 March, 2009 initiated by CAMP, an artist collective based in Mumbai. This project was commissioned by curator Tarek Abou El Fetouh for the Biennial's performance and film screening program. The strength of *Wharfage* lay in the extensive research conducted by Anand, Sukumaran and Sanjay Bhargav on the lives of the sailors and their trade routes. They did not romanticize the trade

or dhow sailors — instead their meticulous documentation of the goods flowing between Sharjah and Somalia revealed the multidirectional influence and far-reaching impacts that do not end at the ports of these cities. It was a symbolic project to begin the Sharjah Biennial with, as it immediately contextualized the Biennial within the very local environment and created a forum for the labor force of Sharjah to present their views in the mainstream. Even though *Wharfage* wasn't part of the main exhibition it was awarded the main Jury Award at the 2009 Biennial.

Back in the museum, exhibition curator Isabel Carlos outlined her curatorial concept as examining the future through “newly merging economic and cultural conceptions” in Sharjah, a city she described as the “meeting point” of many cultures and worlds. A key goal according to Carlos, was to generate and develop a critical discourse around the contemporary culture in Sharjah and the Middle East through the Biennial. As a result, more than half of the 68 international artists Carlos showcased were from Middle Eastern backgrounds. The video *Smile You Are in Sharjah*, by Mariam Ghani and Erin Ellen Kelly, documented the movement and rhythms of the city's public spaces in contrast to the ostentatious and banal tourist attractions that are foregrounded by government. In *We Began by Measuring the Distance*, Palestinian-American artist Basma Al-Sharif combined fragmented footage from news channels and found recordings with her own footage shot in Chicago, Cairo and Gaza to examine the media's portrayal of war. Egyptian artist Hala Elkoussy transformed her gallery into an archive brimming with framed portraits of children in school, men and women in military uniforms, books, musty fabrics and videos to document the scale of socio-economic change, upheaval and economic disparity in contemporary Egypt — all in the name of economic progress — in *Of Red Nails, Palm Trees and Other Icons*. New York-based Nida Sinnokrot developed an impressive installation that transposed the raised armed symbol of an ancient Egyptian belief system into a contemporary sculpture of mechanical bulldozer arms, creating a physical and metaphysical allegory of power. These examples portray the multiplicity of themes and references to Sharjah that the artists engaged in. Yet, spread out within the linear sequence of galleries of the Sharjah Art Museum they risked reiterating stereotypes and assumptions of the Middle East based on war, victimhood, wealth, censorship and endless construction.

More successful works engaged with cross-cultural dialogues and transcended the spatial limitations of the galleries, interrupting the lackadaisical movement of the audience and sometimes even contesting it. For instance, Danish artist Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen placed the viewer in the centre of two video portraits projected on opposite walls of a dark room. In *Rendezvous*, Larsen examined migration patterns from the southern Indian state of Kerala to Sharjah, where young men from small towns work as temporary, daily wage laborers. Through video portraits, Larsen connected the migrant workers with their families in Kerala, and the distance



<clockwise from left> Sheela Gowda. *Drip Field*, 2009; Nikolaj B.S. Larsen. Installation view of *Rendezvous*, 2009; Haig Aivazian. Installation view of *FUGURE*, 2009. All photos: Plamen Galabov. Courtesy: the Sharjah Biennial. <opposite page> The port at Sharjah creek during the *Wharfage* radio broadcast event. Courtesy: CAMP.

between the screens encapsulated the complexities of belonging and displacement that are perpetuated by the vicious cycles of globalization and migration. Indian artist Sheela Gowda's bizarre, resonant and rhythmic soundscape and industrial installation *Drip Field* was inspired by the well-established drip irrigation system in Sharjah. This installation amplified, mixed and projected the sounds of water droplets to offer a poignant critique of wasteful models of development on which our economies are based. Haig Aivazian developed a one-lane swimming pool for his mixed media installation *Fugure (A Series of Olympiad Moments)*. Built to the precise dimensions of an Olympic lane, it looked overgrown and out of place in the small gallery. Spanish-conceptual artist Maider López took this further by completely rejecting the gallery space within the museum. Instead her construction of *Walls* mimicked the construction of the galleries along the corridors. Polish artist Agnes Janich transformed her gallery into a claustrophobic maze that reminded viewers of the disorientation that accompanies fear and violence, echoing the surreal experience in Joreige's *3 Triptychs*. The quiet works highlighted the need to reconcile, mourn and remember the trauma of the past while envisioning the future, resonating loudly in the Biennial.

The Sharjah Biennial 2009 was most successful in showcasing the wide range of artistic practices that in one way or another attempted a connection with social and political reality in Sharjah and the Middle East. Altogether the Biennial did confront the many social, political and economic factors that determine fraught labour laws, traumatic recurrences of violence and destabilized routes of movement. With regard to finding *Provisions for the Future*, Carlos succeeded moderately, as the nature and caliber of the works varied along with their capacity to examine the issues at stake and the complexities that arise in "meeting points" of different cultures. All of this raises the question of whether national biennials offer an open space for generating a critical discourse on socially and politically engaged work or whether they perpetuate assumptions on cultural difference with the glossy (re)packaging of contemporary art.

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