

Green Party

SHARJAH 04.15.07



Left: Architect Rem Koolhaas. Right: Artist Michael Rakowitz with H. H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi, ruler of Sharjah. (Except where noted, all photos: Rafal Niemojewski)

A giant sign made of flowers reading SMILE, YOU'RE IN SHARJAH greets visitors at one of the city's busiest intersections. But on the drive over to the smaller emirate from Dubai International Airport, I saw little to smile about. The area is bloated on oil steroids, evidenced by a stark increase in pollution, congestion, and chaotically dispersed buildings since my last visit two years ago. Against this backdrop, the eighth edition of the Sharjah Biennial—presided over by Princess Hoor al-Qasimi and titled "Still Life: Art, Ecology, and the Politics of Change"—opened with a provocative question regarding art's efficacy vis-à-vis environmental damage. With over two hundred guests flown in at the biennial's expense and catalogues and folders printed on nonrecycled paper, the exhibition's organizers hardly seemed to have taken the show's thematic concerns fully to heart. One exception to the inconsistency was artist Tea Mäkipää, who shamed us all with her hard-won artistic contribution: a twenty-four day ground journey to Sharjah from Weimar, which she religiously documented on her blog.

The two-day opening festivities began on Wednesday, April 4, when H. H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi, ruler of Sharjah, opened the exhibition alongside Rolf Schnellecke, the mayor of Wolfsburg (Sharjah's twin city and a potentially important economic partner). In the evening, over three hundred invited notables had the opportunity to experience Middle Eastern hospitality at the gala dinner and awards ceremony. Following a long and sumptuous halal dinner, thirsty revelers rushed to Dubai Creek Golf and Yacht Club, lured by the prospects of a not-so-halal open bar sponsored by Dubai gallery the Third Line and *Bidou* magazine. (Though strictly illegal in Sharjah, alcohol is tolerated in Dubai's numerous licensed venues.) The following evening's program offered even more contrast. After a formal alfresco dinner at the Radisson hosted by the city's commerce department, artists, curators, and journalists enjoyed the assorted shabby nightclubs and bars in neighboring midnight oasis Ajman. After a pint with higher-ups at two other biennials, Marieke Van Hal (Athens) and Paul Domela (Liverpool), I repaired to low-key joint the Baywatch, where a tame erotic dance performed by a group of teenage Filipinas was received in good humor by a crew of artists, including Marjolijn Dijkman, Kasper Akhøj, Tue Greenfort, and Tomas Saraceno.



Left: Artist Kasper Akhøj and performer Namik Minter/Donelle Woolford. Right: Manifesta International Foundation director Hedwig Fijen, Athens Biennial director Marieke Van Hal, and art adviser Victoria Anstead.

Despite my initial misgivings, the exhibition featured a number of site-specific works made in response to the local context and the concept of art and ecology. These included newly commissioned pieces by Lara Almarcegui, Greenfort, Dan Perjovschi, and Peter Fend, as well as the first-ever staging of Gustav Metzger's *Stockholm, June (phase 1)*, featuring 120 cars simultaneously blowing combustion fumes into a large plastic cube. Equally compelling was a community-specific project by e-Xplo (comprising Rene Gabri, Heimo Lattner, and Erin McGonigle) and Ayreen Anastas. Using recordings of migrant workers singing, the artist created a *parcours* of sound installations, literally offering a voice to the deprived laborers.

The multifaceted relationship between art and ecology was further articulated during a three-day symposium organized by Michaela Crimmin of London's RSA, Latitudes (Max Andrews and Mariana Cánepa Luna), and the American University of Sharjah, as well as during an accompanying film program curated by Mark Nash. A surprise appearance by Rem Koolhaas riled some spirits. His cameo prompted a fervent set-to between the Dutch architect and members of e-Xplo, who were irritated by Koolhaas's refusal of architecture's moral

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responsibility, as well as by his skeptical reactions to Mike Davis's texts denouncing the unglamorous reality behind the UAE's recent economic success. Koolhaas responded that, unlike contemporary art, his profession makes less room for institutional critique.

Before heading back to London, under the pretense of environmental correctness I shared a 110-mile cab ride with Manifesta International Foundation director Hedwig Fijen to Abu Dhabi to see the master plan of Saadiyat (Arabic for "paradise") Island. The mockup of the twenty-seven-billion-dollar cultural district—which includes Frank Gehry's new Guggenheim and Jean Nouvel's design for a franchise of the Louvre—turned out to be a devastating showcase of neoliberal attitudes run amok, in which culture becomes synonymous with the leisure industry. I was even more appalled by the Biennale Park project, comprising nineteen pavilions situated along a canal (sounds familiar . . .), bolstered by a detailed economic-impact analysis conducted by international management consultants Booz Allen Hamilton. While it's no secret that today's biennials frequently serve as many economic considerations as they do artistic ones, never before have I seen one so cynically instrumentalized to serve nonartistic interests. Suddenly, the Sharjah Biennial appeared as innocent as a grassroots initiative, its clumsy eco-activism and genuine commitment to contemporary art making it appear a quaint, frail species.

— Rafal Niemojewski



Left: Rolf Schnellecke, mayor of Wolfsburg, with H. H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi. Right: Artists Carey Young and Christine Sullivan.



Left: Claudia Cellini and Sunny Rahbar of Dubai's the Third Line Gallery. Right: Lea and Dan Perjovschi with Lombard-Freid Projects director Cristian Alexa.



Left: Tate Britain chief curator Judith Nesbitt with Sharjah Biennial curator Jonathan Watkins and artist Peter Fend. Right: Artists Tea Mäkipää and Johan Holten.



Left: Artist Tue Greenfort and friend. (Photo: Tea Mäkipää). Right: Dancers at the Baywatch.