Everything is Relevant

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Surprising Sharjah

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Monday, 21 February 2005

The seventh Sharjah International Biennial opens in a little less than two months. Every morning, more emails arrive in my Sharjah inbox. I have numerous must-dos each and every day, including hounding artists to send in their statements for the catalogue and/or passport information for air reservations to Sharjah. Besides all this, I have a presentation to give in Miami and a public art project to work on in Melbourne, Australia. There are also University of British Columbia duties, lots of them. Princess Hoor Al Qasimi, director of the biennial and one of the daughters of the ruling sheik of the Emirate of Sharjah, wants to discuss the film series being planned in conjunction with the biennial. I find it rather surreal—or is it unreal?—to be in this position of associate curator of an art biennial in the United Arab Emirates.

I remember my first visit to Sharjah, in the summer of 2003. I arrived on the first day of Ramadan. It was 46°C and surprisingly humid. The littoral on the Persian Gulf where Sharjah is located is humid, but half an hour south by car, it is arid as can be. It was surreal from the start: my flight to Dubai went straight across Iraq, right over Fallujah. I thought: I guess there is no more no-fly zone.

Sunday, 27 February 2005

I write from Miami International Airport, utterly exhausted. I was invited to a symposium on the future of the art school. The dozen artists and designers invited included Hani Rashid, Stephen Prina, Rita McBride, Dana Friedman, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Richard Wentworth, and Jorge Pardo. I felt a bit out of place in this grouping as I was the only one not from a major art capital.

The discussions were lively, intelligent, and yet loose, a combination of qualities I seldom find in comparable Canadian events (especially loose). I came down Friday from Vancouver and am awaiting a home-bound flight—via Los Angeles—on Sunday. This is not good for the body, I tell myself.

Things happen when you meet people in the United States. I was asked by one of the several celebrated museum directors in attendance to join a future project. Last night, after a long day of discussions, we were taken to what I can only describe as a wise guys’ restaurant, a steak house full of people with huge gold baubles and women with big or extremely long hair. Back at my hotel, I opened my laptop to find numerous messages from Sharjah, several of them marked “urgent!”
Saturday, 5 March 2005

Every morning, a whole new set of problems to deal with. Indonesian artist Heri Dono has not received the official invitation to the biennial that he requires for a visa. It is a very urgent matter and I am not so good at yelling at people, but yell I had to. Other problems are even amusing. Mexican artist Miguel Calderón wants to recreate one of Monet’s *Water Lilies* paintings in toilet paper. I need to find out just what is available in the United Arab Emirates in the way of coloured toilet paper. Some of the colours Miguel wants I just don’t think could possibly exist for toilet paper.

As usual, I feel tired. I am always behind a computer, writing away. Yesterday, I received news that I won a large public art commission. Today, officials in Melbourne, Australia, asked me to come for a visit to inspect the site of another public artwork. The commissions are good news, but I find myself with little time to savour either “victory.”

Wednesday, 9 March 2005

Tracey Moffatt wants to deal only with me. No one must know her email address. No one else can communicate with her. Much more work for me, as I have to relay everything to the staff in Sharjah, rather than her doing so directly. I don’t think I am cut out to be a curator, at least not for much longer. I can’t wait to just get back to making art, doing some drawings, refining ideas. At some point, being a curator becomes counterintuitive to being an artist.

Sunday, 13 March 2005

Sharjah is a long way from Kelowna, BC, and I don’t just mean in distance. I am here on University of British Columbia business, staying in the Eldorado, a famous old hotel that fronts directly onto Okanagan Lake. It is a magnificently beautiful place, so beautiful it stirs in me thoughts of dropping the art-world route and just hanging about here a while. I feel at ease. There are few of the stresses I feel whenever I think about the art world. Of course, it is in part a privilege to say this, given how artists here feel just the opposite—the lack of stress because of the lack of an art world is precisely what is stress-inducing. The artists I have met here are curious about art in Shanghai, Dakar, and Sharjah. They hang out weekly at a beautiful bar called Sturgeon Hall. They may have an artist’s discontent but their lives are happy: an impossible
contradiction, I would have thought at one time. But then, at one time, I thought an artist’s life was art and nothing else. In less than a week’s time, I leave for Sharjah.

Thursday, 17 March 2005

From the Air Canada lounge at Vancouver International I write, finally about to depart for Sharjah. Endless items to juggle. Taro Amano, a curator of this year’s Yokohama Triennale, will be attending and wants me to book him a hotel room plus get someone to meet him at the airport in Dubai. Not a big demand, but they do add up. Charles Merewether of the Biennale of Sydney will be attending as well. Received email from Hans-Ulrich Obrist, who may also come. He writes that he hears that Sharjah could be very interesting. While comforting to read such words, I wonder where they come from because Taro Amano mentioned the same thing. The art world is a world in which consensus and conformity arise very quickly. While I think Sharjah will indeed be a very good show, the point is that when something feeds the grapevine, facts become secondary. I know it is cynical to think this way, but consensus in the art world is like a moving truck; it really can’t change course very easily.

Saturday, 19 March 2005

Dubai International Airport is packed with people at midnight. The shopping concourse looks like a posher version of Toronto’s similarly scaled Eaton Centre. The queue through passport control is full of Russians and oohing-and-ahhing Europeans suffering Stendhal syndrome from the airport’s over-the-top Donald Trump-esque architecture, plus thousands of guest workers from Africa, Pakistan, Indonesia and, especially, India.

Dubai is the centre of gravity for millions of people from a large and complex part of the world we in the West know little about. For example, Iran is but two hours north by boat. There are many Iranians here, as there have been for millennia. Iran’s status as a pariah state is not as clear-cut as the American and Canadian media often make it out to be.

This morning in the local paper, another big bombing killing at least fifty near the Kashmir border. Every time I am here there is news of bloodshed in Kashmir, and yet this area gets very little attention in our media.

I am writing from my office at the Sharjah Art Museum. Young women dressed in long black robes and young men in equally long white robes are darting back and forth as the phones ring constantly. It is near mayhem here. Terry Atkinson was on the phone about his plane ticket.
Miguel Calderón is complaining that no one has replied to his last request. Carlos Garaicoa is worried about his work making it to Sharjah from Madrid in time.

On the symposium front, lots of good news. Geeta Kapur, Charles Merewether, Okwui Enwezor, Jean Fisher, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Achille Bonito Oliva, to name but a few.

Sunday, 20 March 2005

“Car bomb at Qatar theatre kills Briton, wounds 12,” reads the headline in this morning’s *Khaleej Times*. Doha is the capital of Qatar, an oil-rich Persian Gulf state that, along with Bahrain, rejected confederation with the United Arab Emirates. Also on page one, an announcement of a massive five-star residential development on artificial islands reclaimed from the sea. At breakfast, half the restaurant is filled with American contract workers destined for Iraq. Most talk and strut like poor bubbas from the South, their eyes attentive to the bearded Arab men who enter the room in long white robes.

I took a tour of the massive Expo Centre, where much of the biennial will take place. A team of mostly Indian workers is there twenty-four hours a day erecting pavilions and rooms in the hangar-like space.
Most work in silence, and I feel odd walking about with a big blueprint in hand of the work they are doing. Clearly they look at me as one of the bosses and I suppose I am, but I don’t feel comfortable as a boss. Wherever I go, guest workers attend to my every need. “How are you today, sir?” “Of course, sir.” “Right away, sir.” It makes me feel sad. I want to say, “Please don’t treat me as your boss,” but it would have no effect, and perhaps it would only further confuse the terms of our relationship.

As artists start to arrive onsite, the show looks more and more interesting. The sheik of Sharjah will tour the sites this afternoon, I am told. Radio Dubai wants an interview with the curators right afterward. Every day we receive letters from various ambassadors, including the Canadian ambassador, accepting our invitation to the biennial inauguration. For the Indian workers, it is all the same.

**Tuesday, 22 March 2005**


**Wednesday, 23 March 2005**

The heat just cranked up outside from the high twenties to the mid-thirties Celsius. Most of my day is spent darting between the biennial offices in the Sharjah Art Museum and the Expo Centre, about fifteen minutes away by car. There are also regular, quick trips to Dubai to pick up materials. I just returned from Carrefour, a giant French hypermarket in Dubai’s City Centre Deira mall. The mall is huge, but what is really interesting is the shoppers—expatriate Brits, Arab women veiled from head to toe while sporting Chanel handbags and new Adidas sneakers, guest workers from Africa, India, the Philippines, Nepal, and Egypt.

I was on Radio Dubai yesterday in a new radio show focused on art and culture in the UAE. While the questions posed by the host were quite generic, the show itself is surely a sign of a maturing society. After all, the UAE was only founded in 1971!

Every day more artists arrive. The show is also finally taking form, and I detect a growing confidence among everyone. More critics have contacted me about attending the opening and symposium, including Brits Sacha Craddock and Charles Asprey. But I don’t think the Sharjah crew can take total credit for the rising interest in this biennial among the art cognoscenti. I suspect it is partly due to the bandwagon effect in the art world: a couple of key curators or critics announce their intention
to attend an event, and this in turn spurs others to come. Again, consen-
sus and conformity.

Friday, 25 March 2005

I am not feeling well. Yesterday I put in another twelve-hour day.
Afterward, several staff members decided to go to Dubai for drinks and
karaoke. I declined and retired to my hotel room. Two calls in succes-
sion asking me to come along, and I relented. Traffic was very heavy as
it was a Thursday night and Friday is akin to Sunday here, which makes
Thursday akin to Saturday. It took more than an hour to make it to
Dubai. We went to the fifty-first-floor bar of the Emirates Towers hotel.
It was packed with Arab men in traditional dress and expat Brits living it
up. The hotel connects to a huge upscale mall full of chic bars and res-

taurants, and some among us decided to bar-hop. I followed along to a
karaoke bar. One song was “California Girls,” and the scenario included
the usual corny narrative of a young woman in love, strolling the streets
with her lover—except the background was Kitsilano Beach and Stanley
Park! As I went to the bar to order another drink, I bumped into the
“Dubai Eye girl,” Siobhan Leyden, who interviewed me on Radio Dubai.
Talk about a small scene. I also met Sunny, a spunky Iranian woman
intent on opening a high-quality contemporary art gallery in Dubai. She
pointed out that Dubai has put money into everything except museums
and libraries, but that there was finally talk of addressing those defi-
ciencies. Indeed, Dubai has amazing potential. In a way, a biennial of
contemporary art makes more sense here than in pious Sharjah. At about
1:30 a.m., utterly exhausted from both work and fun fatigue, I headed
back to Sharjah only to find a note from the director of the Sharjah Art
Museum under my door. “Ken, I request your presence at the Sharjah
Art Museum at 8 a.m. precisely. Hisham.”

Tuesday, 29 March 2005

Though it is sunny and hot outside, I have been suffering a very bad
cold. I feel weak and in need of rest. Trouble is, there is no time, as I
am constantly shuttling between the two main biennial sites, the Expo
Centre and the museum. Artists are arriving now en masse and asking
to start their installation work, even as construction continues apace to
finish their exhibition spaces. Yesterday, I went to Dubai again, for
another hour-long interview. Everything is now in super-high gear. What
was confidence only days ago is now borderline panic as everything is
now a race against the clock. A lot of the embassies have been pestering
the biennial officials for extra dinner tickets. I managed to finagle five for Canadian diplomats and their associates. The director of the Sharjah Art Museum kindly told me that he was allowing me five because I have been doing a lot of copy editing for the catalogue and rewriting of news releases, tasks not part of my curatorial responsibilities. As I mentioned on Radio Dubai, this edition of the Sharjah International Biennial will be the breakthrough, just as the 2000 Shanghai Biennale was the breakthrough for all subsequent editions.

Monday, 4 April 2005

It is the night before the opening. Yesterday all seemed hopeless. The mountains of debris made it difficult to assess how near we were to completing the installation. I put in more than fourteen hours yesterday and stayed up until 3 a.m. working. Some rooms were in deep trouble late yesterday, with serious technical problems. Today, the story is much clearer and the rooms much cleaner. It looks possibly like an all-nighter. Some artists have been fantastic, helping others to install. Others have decided simply to drop in for the opening and fly out the next day. I don’t think I would allow this to happen again if I were given a second chance to work on something such as this. People are running back and forth constantly. A hammer or a drill or a ladder become prized possessions. It has been an amazing amount of work. I am just taking a few minutes to write this, but I really have to return to the galleries. If I close my eyes, I think I will collapse instantly into sleep. I am that tired.

Tuesday, 5 April 2005

The day began with another early rise from bed and a walk straight to the museum. My muscles felt completely flaccid. My legs could barely support my frame. Two installations still unfinished at 9 a.m., and I was due at the Expo Centre at 10 for the official opening of the biennial with
the sheik of Sharjah. An artist whose room remained unfinished did not help matters—complaining, berating people, constantly threatening to pull out. I was a hair from basically telling him to screw himself. I realized how much crap a curator has to endure from artists.

I made it to the Expo Centre by 10 a.m. and lined up with the artists next to a long red carpet as the sheik entered. A media throng engulfed him as he shook hands with the artists. It was very exciting to meet the sheik, I must confess. The international art crowd descended into the exhibition space and, very quickly, word was that the show was a great success. (This was confirmed a few days later with a full-page laudatory review in Germany’s most prominent newspaper, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, and similar coverage in the Italian newspaper Il Manifesto.) Artforum, Art in America, Flash Art, Contemporanea, and Art Press are just a few of the magazines covering the show.

After the opening, which was great fun, everyone went to the neighbouring emirate of Ajman for a drink. Unlike Sharjah, Ajman is not a “dry” emirate. There was a large crowd at the seaside bar and everyone sat outside on Adirondack chairs beside an exquisitely beautiful beach. The surf was strong and powerful, and provided perfect background music. I was utterly exhausted but I felt good about the show. At one point, I walked along the beach and looked out into the darkness. Iran is only ninety minutes away by boat. To the north, on my left, a war rages in Iraq.