

Sharjah Biennial

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April 25,
2017

Biennial themes are often underdeveloped, amounting to little more than mood-setting phrases that give a poetic gloss to eclectic displays of artwork. Christine Tohmé, director of the influential Beirut nonprofit Ashkal Alwan, has taken a different approach with the thirteenth Sharjah Biennial, developing an elaborate—and seemingly overwrought—conceptual framework for a project that may be remembered as an editorial initiative as much as a curatorial one.

The biennial's title, "Tamawuj," is an Arabic term that refers both to tidal

surges and to interstitial zones with porous boundaries. The exhibition, on view at the Sharjah Art Foundation's complex of small-scale galleries and renovated historic buildings in the city center as well as a few satellite venues, may be one such indeterminate zone. In its mix of tightly related projects and incongruous inclusions, the show feels unresolved.

This effect might be deliberate. Tohmé and her team conceived the exhibition, which features more than sixty artists and collectives, as one component of a yearlong initiative to study how the roots of contemporary social realities can be found in the basic elements of organic life. This ambitious—and unwieldy—effort will encompass off-site symposia and workshops organized by five “interlocutors” in four cities (Dakar, Istanbul, Ramallah, and Beirut), each responding to a “keyword”: “water,” “crops,” “soil,” “the culinary.” Meanwhile, a separate team of four editors have begun publishing an online magazine with articles related to these programs. The entire effort is evidently anchored by a cache of cross-disciplinary research compiled on a private intranet known as the “chip-ship.”

Water, crops, soil, food—these basic “elements of our relationships with one another and with our environments,” as Tohmé writes in a curatorial statement—come together literally in multiple biennial artworks related to gardens and botany. Brazilian artist Tónico Lemos Auad's *A Moment of the Sky/Four Humours* (2016/17) is a site-specific garden with plantings of medicinal herbs native to the Arabian peninsula in overlapping octagonal plots designed to echo the dense construction of the region's traditional architecture. Paired with a small library of botanical literature, the work, located in a shady courtyard, emphasizes the dual role of gardens as both soothing retreats and living repositories of traditional knowledge.

Uriel Orlow's *Theatricum Botanicum* (2016) is one of several projects to examine the contested status of such knowledge. The South African artist's two-channel video installation details historic legal attempts in his home

country to regulate traditional medicine derived from foraged herbs, bark, and roots. Plant matter takes on a symbolic dimension in +/- 1791 (2017), a courtyard installation by fellow South African Dineo Seshee Bopape. Here, herbs burned in abalone shells on informal brick ziggurats amid scrappy arrangements of plastic water bottles filled with gasoline and seawater appear as emblems of the folk traditions and ritual practices that fortified opposition to colonial power.

These works suggest powerful links between ecological resources, traditional knowledge, and social movements. Yet in the context of an air-conditioned city in an oil-rich Gulf state such appeals to local communities and spiritual beliefs also feel partly like cover, a way to avoid discussion of large-scale systemic efforts to confront climate change and the actual tidal swells (among other catastrophic events) that put traditional societies most at risk.

The only work to draw attention to the energy economy that drives growth in Sharjah and its neighboring emirates is Natascha Sadr Haghghian and Ashkan Sepahvand's *Carbon Theater* (2017), an installation in a diminutive planetarium outside the city center. The Berlin-based Iranian artists created an abstract sound work with recordings made at oil wells, coal mines, and other sites of resource extraction. But the planetarium location lends the piece a sense of (unintentional) irony. In an isolated structure on the side of a highway that looks as if it were from another era (it is, in fact, slated for demolition), the crude sounds of oil production seem locked away like a repressed memory.

The planetarium offers a stark contrast to the white-cube gallery space that the Sharjah Art Foundation opened this year in a northern enclave of the emirate, about forty minutes from the city center. The presentation at the latter venue feels like a microcosm of the exhibition in the sense that it is never entirely clear how or if the work on view relates to the curatorial premise. London-based Iraqi artist Walid Siti's white plaster floor

installation resembling a dried and fractured sea bed certainly alludes to fragile ecological systems. But searching for a *tamawuj* angle risks limiting the complexity of other projects, such as the Otolith Group's *The Third Part of the Third Measure* (2017). This two-channel video featuring a performance of music by the black American composer Julius Eastman offers a deeply felt meditation on race and avant-garde aesthetics, the nuances of which might be lost in even the broadest metaphorical reading in ecological terms.

This pattern repeats throughout the exhibition as a whole, which careens from literal presentations of organic matter to the metaphorical invocations of surges found in works like Daniele Genadry's beautiful paintings of light-saturated landscape photographs to pieces such as Harun Farocki's seemingly unrelated film essay on the neoliberal ideology underlying the benign human resource policies of a German corporation. Of course, it's not uncommon for biennials to feel broad and varied, but then why go through the effort of fortifying the show with a huge intellectual undertaking?

During an opening week roundtable discussion, Tohmé made a plea for large, well-funded international institutions (presumably referring to the Sharjah Art Foundation, which is underwritten by a Gulf monarchy) to support "small- and medium-size" organizations, like the one she directs and perceives to be under threat from both hostile governments and suspicious societies. The biennial's elaborate structure might be understood in this sense as an attempt not just to frame finished artwork but to shore up the organizations around the region that sustain cultural production between biennial openings and long after them.

As of the biennial's official opening, only one off-site project had been realized. Artist Kader Attia served as "interlocutor" for a symposium in Dakar featuring local artists and scholars discussing the subject of water. The online publication now includes two related articles that reflect the

purview of the event. One is a dense sociological analysis of the “financialization” of water resources in the global south while the other is a sprawling catalogue of West African folk tales extolling the elemental power of rivers and streams. Different systems of knowledge and modes of intellectual inquiry connect under the umbrella of the art magazine.

It may be this methodology, if not explicit organic imagery, that’s shared by some of the strongest works in the exhibition, from Metahaven’s lyrical video essay on digitally mediated relationships to Joe Namy’s sound installation that presents readings of historical documents related to opera in the Arab world in a gallery overlooking the giant colorful curtain he mounted on the exterior of a building. The most affecting work in the show is a sound installation by Jordanian artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan that also melds distinct forms of expertise through hybrid research methods.

Working with Amnesty International and other human rights groups, Hamdan interviewed former inmates at the notorious Saydnaya Prison in Syria, where prisoners are kept entirely in the dark and forbidden from speaking. Hamdan asked the interviewees about what they heard in the prison, and used their responses to construct a sonic map of the facility and to document its goings-on, creating “earwitness” testimony of the torture occurring there. Housed in a blacked-out gallery, Hamdan’s audio installation combines excerpts he reads from an essay he wrote on the project, portions of the prisoners’ accounts, and the type of sounds he played for the inmates in his research, giving biennial audiences, as he did human rights attorneys, insight into a malicious reality that exists in darkness.