

Sharjah Biennial 10

Plot for a Biennial

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34: CAIRO: The idea that one could collect everything, without any kind of agenda — this takes all the fun out of it! Because what's an agenda? It's the fun! I'm against the idea of stepping away to auto-document and all that. Why not do something different... I don't know, something revolutionary! I mean, how are you guys going to do it? Because how ever arty you try to be, different or whatever, thinking outside the box or whatever, you certainly do have a format...



Sharjah

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In 1977, Naeem Mohaiemen was eight years old and obsessed with *The Zoo Gang*, a television series about four World War II resistance fighters — codenamed The Tiger, The Fox, The Elephant, and The Leopard — who regroup thirty years later to battle crooks, Nazis, and war criminals. Mohaiemen was waiting for *The Zoo Gang* to start when a hijacking and hostage crisis bumped his show off Bangladeshi state TV. To Mohaiemen's incredulous frustration, the emergency broadcast proved not only monumental but marathon, stretching out day after day, night after night, for eighty hours of negotiations between the United Red Army and Bangladesh's military regime.

On September 28th, five members of the United Red Army hijacked a Paris-Tokyo flight after a stopover in Mumbai. They forced the plane down in Dhaka, where the hijackers believed they would find a popular, independent Islamic government sympathetic to their cause. Like the Japanese Red Army, established in Lebanon and aligned with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the United Red Army was an offshoot of Japan's Red Army Faction. All three wanted to overthrow Japan's government, abolish its monarchy and trigger a worldwide revolution to rid the globe of imperialism through armed insurrection. They weren't the only ones in a decade full of ultra-left movements resorting to violence, but they may have been the most brutal and certainly the most bizarre.

The hijackers assembled in Dhaka, however, were apparently unaware that Bangladesh's young, independent government had been toppled in a succession of military coups. They were negotiating, in effect, with a junta rather than a popular party. Through their Bangladeshi interlocutors, they demanded six million dollars from the Japanese

government and the release of nine imprisoned comrades in exchange for freeing some but not all of their 156 hostages. Two days later, Japan's prime minister agreed to their demands, one of the last government capitulations of the time. The exchange took ages to arrange (in part because three of the prisoners in Japan refused to go, saying they feared for their lives). When it finally happened, the hijackers flew to Kuwait, then to Damascus, and then to Algiers, where the saga ostensibly ended. Mohaiemen revisits this pivotal moment in personal and political history in his seventy-minute video *The Young Man Was... [Part 1: United Red Army]*, one of the most riveting new works in *Plot for a Biennial*, the sprawling, thoughtful and ultimately ill-fated exhibition that constituted Sharjah Biennial 10. The piece not only epitomized one of the exhibition's crucial and entirely unscripted themes — how to make engagements with a revolutionary past meaningful in the sudden eruption of a revolutionary present — it also doubled back on some of the biennial's grand and problematic claims, proposing art as a subversive act, for example, by questioning art's potential compared to that of political action or sustained activism.

Mohaiemen describes *The Young Man Was...* as a work in progress, and one among several chapters in a larger project involving videos, texts, and photographs he has been producing since 2006. Though broadly concerned with failed utopias, the project pursues a specific thesis: that the revolutionary movements of the 1970s gave the left an accidental Trojan horse by giving rise to a reactionary, counterrevolutionary right.

In the video, Mohaiemen deftly weaves together flickering black-and-white images of the standoff as it was broadcast on TV — delaying *The Zoo Gang* for what felt like forever — and archival audio footage of the radio discussions that took place between the disembodied voice of a hijacker on the plane, who identifies himself as Number Twenty, and Air Vice Marshal AG Mahmud, the second most powerful official in Bangladesh, who confronted, coaxed and cajoled the hostage situation

from Dhaka's airport control tower.

Mohaiemen knows he has incredible material, and he unpacks it with great delicacy. He splices in pop culture references — *The Zoo Gang's* opening credits, news bulletins, scenes from the fluff Hollywood films in which one of the hostages starred — and paces the piece with a soft-spoken voiceover narration, filling in backstories, raising questions and tracing the deep grooves of consequence that such incidents have scored in people's minds.

The jewel of the work, however, is the conversation between Dhaka Tower and Dankesu, the radio handles for Air Vice Marshal Mahmud and Number Twenty, who are represented on a black screen with green and red subtitles, respectively. Though tough in the beginning, their negotiations soon become tender, affable, and confessional. At one point Mahmud pleads: "Danke, you are not at war with the poor, half-fed, half-clothed, diseased people of Bangladesh! You are not helping the people of Bangladesh! You can do many things, but this is not the thing to do for these poor people, who have looked after you for eighty continuous hours!" By the end, he sounds like a spurned lover.

But as time drags on, things go very wrong. The negotiations lurch into chaos and hysteria, with Number Twenty sounding more and more like an automaton gone berserk ("The United Red Army is described as insane, even by other terrorists," Mohaiemen explains, detailing the group's habit of killing its own in self-criticism sessions). The plane starts taxiing on the runway. Mahmud doesn't know whether Japan has sent the United Red Army's booty or a commando unit preparing an attack, Bangladeshis be damned.

Then everything explodes. While the world's attention is trained exclusively on the hijackers and hostages, disgruntled army officers stage a coup, right there on the airstrip in Bangladesh. Suddenly, the roles are reversed. Dhaka Tower tells Dankesu, "Without hesitation, shoot

those people, shoot to kill!" to which Dankesu's eerie, tinny voice responds, "I have understood that you have internal problems." Eleven die on the tarmac — photographed by tourists turned hostages turned witnesses. Hundreds more suspected coup-plotters are later rounded up, tried in secret courts, and killed. This is the lost, tragic legacy for which Mohaiemen is digging. Not only did the ultra-left of the 1970s fail to get its revolution off the ground, but by glomming on to more precarious third world liberation movements, it exposed them to the grim realities of a power politics that the United Red Army, in this case, literally could not see, did not fully understand, and in the end, probably didn't care all that much about.

The Young Man Was... shares the same driving energy and fullness of thought as Johan Grimonprez's dazzling hijacking documentary *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* and Walid Sadek's mind-bending installations on Kozo Okamoto, the Japanese Red Army member who became the only foreigner even granted political asylum in Lebanon, where he lives to this day. But perhaps because Mohaiemen lingers for so long on one concrete occurrence, his work delves further into the unintended damage that violent revolutionary movements wrought, articulating the need to address them critically, skeptically, even generously, but without nostalgia or romance, fascinated but not seduced.

That need echoed all over *Plot for a Biennial*, in works as varied as Ahmad Ghossein's *My Father Is Still A Communist: Intimate Secrets to be Published*, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *Lebanese Rocket Society: Elements for a Monument*, Khalil Rabah's *Readymade Representations*, Julia Meltzer and David Thorne's *Not a matter of if but when*, Rania Stephan's *The Three Disappearances of Souad Hosni* and the pitch-perfect revival of Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica's *Videograms of a Revolution*.

In Sharjah, the notion of dredging up old history became, if only

temporarily, a searching and imaginative task. In Yto Barrada's photographs of her illiterate grandmother's method for memorizing family members' phone numbers, it was heartbreaking and brave. In Shumon Basar and Eyal Weizman's video installation with Jane and Louise Wilson, on the murder of a Hamas operative in Dubai, it was stylish and astute. In Bouchra Khalili's mapping of illegal migration routes, it was rigorous and oddly beautiful.

Curated by Suzanne Cotter, Rasha Salti, and Haig Aivazian, *Plot for a Biennial* explored a fistful of themes — including treason, betrayal, devotion, corruption, and insurrection — that rose and fell as one wandered through the space and time of the event. With 119 participating artists, writers, filmmakers, and performers, the biennial was too large by a third, and took on too much. But it presented (and in many cases produced) a disproportionately high number of excellent projects, most notably the videos, films, and books that have already traveled elsewhere, leaving Sharjah behind.

When the biennial opened, the curators dedicated the event to the Arab Spring and the spirit of change in the region. Speaking from Sharjah, which for all of its charm is still the most conservative corner of the United Arab Emirates, that was probably a mistake. The UAE has seen none of the mass popular protests that have rocked other authoritarian regimes in the region over the last six months. In the initial tumult of the Arab Spring, the government kept its balance by literally playing both sides of the fence.

Just as the biennial opened in Sharjah, the UAE sent police forces into Bahrain to assist Saudi Arabia's crackdown on protestors there (stoking a small but highly symbolic protest that led to two of the biennial's curators and a few of its visiting artists being called in for police questioning). A few weeks later, the UAE pledged troops to NATO's military intervention against Gaddafi's regime in Libya. In between, five local activists were

arrested for signing a petition calling for democratic reforms.

That petition grew out of an online discussion forum and a Facebook page, both since blocked in the country, but the UAE has otherwise offered a chilling counterpoint to the notion that young people using online social media are inherently reformist rather than reactionary. Youth groups on Facebook posted photographs of the people pushing for change, and tagged their faces with the word "traitor." And no, it wasn't an art project.

In the mainstream Western media, places like Sharjah, Dubai, and Abu Dhabi tend to be treated like blank slates devoid of history. But it's worth noting how volatile the area's modern political experience has been. In the 1920s, fratricide was the mechanism of choice for determining succession within the ruling family of Abu Dhabi. In the 1940s, Dubai was crippled by tribal wars. In the 1980s, Sharjah was on a building binge and becoming the hard-partying playground of the UAE. The snap decision to ban alcohol — made by Sharjah's ruler, Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed al-Qasimi — plunged the oil-rich emirate into debt as residents, restaurants, and nightlife enterprises fled. By the time Sheikh Sultan's older brother staged a bloodless coup in 1987, Sharjah was in the hole for \$1.3 billion. The palace rebellion lasted six days, until Sheikh Sultan was reinstated. All this shadowy intrigue made an exhibition about plots, rumors, and conspiracies risky but wonderfully apt.

The biennial was bulky, but it was also the first truly curatorial iteration of the event, inviting participants to play with a tangle of rich and resonant ideas. If things had gone smoothly, this would have seemed like progress, an evolution of Sharjah's standing as one of the world's weirder and more unlikely cultural hubs. But as in Mohaiemen's film, actions taken out of sight suddenly cluttered into the frame. Sheikh Sultan abruptly sacked the biennial's director, Jack Persekian. An installation by Mustapha Benfodil disappeared. Another installation by Rosalind Nashashibi was

altered and then restored. Some 1,500 artists, writers, and curators signed a petition pledging to boycott the biennial, the foundation, and all future cultural initiatives in Sharjah if demands for dialogue were not met. The foundation dismissed the petition as the work of outside agitators. What has been lost in all of this will take time to unravel, but the biennial is unlikely to escape unscathed. Maybe it doesn't matter, maybe the discussions have moved on, and maybe a film as good as *The Young Man Was...* and many more besides simply deserve better.