

Q & A with Jack Persekian: Artistic Director, Sharjah Biennial 8

The Theme Still Life: Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change

The Biennial is not focusing on ecology from an environmental perspective only (i.e. global warming or eco-catastrophes); we are engaging with ecology in the wider sense, including: social ecology, political ecology, as well as mental and personal ecologies. The principle aim of the Biennial is to initiate a cross-disciplinary dialogue about ecology, on an arts platform. The Biennial's Symposium is one of the main platforms through which we will facilitate this discussion. With the information and awareness that we have today about the causes of the current environmental disintegration, we cannot look at ecology from a limited perspective and we must collaborate with all other sectors to find common solutions. Globalisation, economics, politics and the wars that are currently waged for the sake of controlling natural resources are all essential considerations that can no longer be ignored in an ecological discussion.

Globalisation has seen multinationals pushing industries out of city centres and the market, and then out from countries and into poorer parts of the world, seeking cheap labour and lower tax rates. The dark side of this process is that pollution through toxic waste created by factories, and the emission of greenhouse gases, as well as the changing of local topographies and their social fabric, are all affecting the natural, human, economic and political environments.

The dead fish that gets washed on shores after an oil spill are a good analogy for Felix Guattari's observation about homeless people worldwide, and the way they are similarly washed on the peripheral shores of society as a result of urban development or what is referred to as the process of gentrification in cities.

Were you acquainted with the topic of Ecology before it was decided upon as the Biennial's theme?

Not at all. Since discussing the programme with Hoor Al Qasimi – Director of the Biennial - I have been reading more about it and have become more aware of it particularly in the current climate, where matters of ecology make up news headlines on a daily basis and with the increase of current discussions taking place worldwide, between public officials, scientists and politicians.

What of the Sharjah Biennial's own impact on the environment?

Many art projects have dealt with ecology, but no single exhibition, so far, has brought together such a number of international artists from different generations and practices to address these issues. The Biennial is aware of the critical ambiguity of its subject matter, and of the fact that it is part of the product-producing and -consuming society, and of the constantly growing tribe of biennials, that year after year, encourage a number of artists, curators, audiences and artworks to travel around the globe.

Still, SB8 needs to be critical and will try to underline the fact that ecological crises are not isolated environmental phenomena but rather, a web of interrelated causes and effects. Keeping the Sharjah Biennial environmentally conscious and responsible is a concern. We will be honest about what we're consuming, and do our best to upset our part of pollution and resource depletion, by investing in projects such as Sharjah's recently launched recycling effort among others.

How will this be realised?

Besides the exhibitions, we are planning a symposium and a film programme that will interest individuals from all sectors: government officials, industry leaders, developers, architects and artists. We also run a two-month long, nationwide programme of educational activities for schools and universities, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, which will engage the public at large in the UAE. We aim to instigate a constructive and open discussion, and to contaminate the complacent thinking processes of people. We're trying to get as many people as possible involved and implicated, not only as audience members, participants, sponsors, but also as active players.

The exhibition will feature more than 80 artists, 18 of whom will be showing outside the two main venues in different areas of the city. Most of the works are new commissions by the Biennial from artists invited to visit Sharjah and develop new site specific projects.

The context

Sharjah has a truly multi-national population: few of its local residents are nationals of the UAE, 80% of the population is made up of migrant workers and expatriates. The cities that are being built in the Emirates represent, to many of the people living there, a place closer to an airport terminals and a transiting place; the urban areas make up no more than 5% of the total territory and the rest is desert.

How does the Biennial work with the Emirates' art scene?

The Biennial collaborates with many artists from the region, assisting them with the production of their work and promoting them on an international platform. There are few other institutions in the region that give such support to the local art scene. The Sharjah Biennial's mission is to engage with local and regional artists, particularly the younger generation. One of the three curators of this year's edition, Mohammed Kazem, is local artist. SB8 is also hosting the annual exhibition of the Emirates Fine Arts Society, which showcases the work of 30 artists living in the Emirates, as well as the graduation show of the College of Fine Arts and Design of the University of Sharjah.

Furthermore, the Biennial lasts for a duration of two months, which allows for more audience members from the region to make their way to Sharjah in order to attend the Biennial. Countless students in the country visit the show, and, in previous editions of the Biennial, we also supported a conference for festivals from the Arab world in conjunction with the Biennial, as well as other activities that involved film and publications. The Biennial also functions as a facilitator for dialogues, co-productions and collaborations that are not strictly related or forming part of the exhibition itself. In addition, the ongoing Artist in Residence Programme invites international artists to spend time in Sharjah and to develop site specific work for the city. As part of their residence, artists are also asked to give workshops at and to collaborate with local art colleges and art associations which yields great benefits to local artists and art students.

For additional press information contact:

Katie Taylor, Brunswick Arts London, +44 20 7936 1280, ktaylor@brunswickgroup.com