

Jonathan Watkins, Curator, Sharjah Biennial 8

The Sharjah Biennial 8 (SB8) will present a wide range of works by contemporary artists from all over the world, in various ways addressing the current dilemma of our natural environment. Excessive urban development, pollution, war and other hideous results of political ambition, and an abuse of essential resources continually tend to undermine social and environmental equilibrium. This biennial proposes a role for art in a compelling conversation about the achievement of proper and sustainable human existence. Not only will it constitute a platform for presentations and commentaries, but also it will actively encourage artists to make new work corresponding to the topics at hand. Through collaboration, especially with other cultural and educational institutions - locally, regionally, nationally and internationally - it aims to be an effective catalyst for a wider debate on questions of ecology.

The curatorial team acknowledges the very loaded nature of the theme of this Sharjah Biennial. Such an art event is engaged with a globalised consumer economy, is one of an increasing crop of biennials, year-by-year coaxing a growing number of artists, curators and audiences to jet around the world, with environmental consequences that are increasingly proven. There is an assumed understanding that many of the activities associated with biennials and other international art exhibitions exacerbate the problems being considered here. A high-minded didacticism, easily construed as hypocrisy, is to be avoided at all costs.

Likewise, a complexity of meaning around this biennial arises from the fact that Sharjah is part of the UAE economy, based mainly on fossil fuel reserves. Many cities in this part of the world exploit natural resources to an extraordinary degree, aspiring to the condition of a high-rise, car-filled urban life-style. The efforts being made to transform the desert into a weird synthetic landscape signifies a local desire for a more comfortable place on earth, a place more luxurious than it once was, which cannot be simply dismissed, especially by those from a more privileged "first world". On the other hand, this biennial encourages artistic gestures that do not exist in some insulated realm, for their own sake, but rather asserting a crucial vitality of critical debate. A traditional role of art, whereby attention is drawn to phenomena taken for granted, things seen in a radically different way, or problematised, is especially appropriate and valuable here. It assists in the process of weighing up the short-term advantages that characterise modern life - gained for example through "labour-saving" devices, or a pervasive digitalisation of human experience - against their long-term costs.

This Sharjah Biennial is meant as a positive contribution to an activism in the face of looming threat. It favours openness as opposed to insulation, falling in with other attempts to merge together art, society, and environmental issues. It is not intended as a judgmental exercise, telling people how to live their lives, but aims instead to point up urgent concerns in the light of contemporary culture, in its broadest sense. This Biennial is at once a celebration of the natural world and a response to the countless alarms being set off as a result of human thoughtlessness, a concerted effort to convey poignant observations on the seriousness of the impact we have and the extent of our responsibility.