

NEW COMMISSIONS (these are just a selection)

Lara Almarcegui: *Al Khan, 2007*

For the Sharjah Biennial 8, Almarcegui focused on the neighbourhood of Al Khan, which was the first settlement of Sharjah ca. 200 years ago. Almarcegui is interested in the yet undefined spaces that exist in urban environments. She documents and preserves wastelands that are untouched, apparently out of use, and forgotten by city planners. They seem to symbolise a zone of freedom, where anything can be possible. Often these wastelands are already sold and just waiting for private and commercial developments to start.

Lara Almarcegui explores those empty spaces in transition, tries to preserve them in their current state for as long as possible, and carefully documents them through publications. Al Khan is abandoned, forgotten and decaying, temporarily squatted by immigrants, and the area is now in a state of radical transformation and reconstruction. The old buildings are partly demolished, partly preserved, and the whole area will soon undergo massive urban planning, to be transformed into a tourist site with an open-air museum and big hotel resorts along the waterfront.

Al Khan as it is now will soon be an “undocumented past”. In the artist’s words: “The identity of Al Khan was gone when the fishermen who used to live there abandoned their houses. It currently doesn’t correspond with anybody’s plans, this is what I like about it and this is how I want to study, analyze and present it.”

Gustav Metzger: *Stockholm, June. Phase 1, 1972/2007*

Many of Gustav Metzger’s projects have remained unrealised and exist only as proposals and models. In one way, his practice is more to do with today’s art than with the period when it was created. In 1972 he was supposed to participate in Documenta 5 in Kassel with the work *Karba*, consisting of four cars which exhaust fumes would fill up a plastic cube, but this work was never realised. This also happened with *Stockholm, June*, a proposal for the UN Environmental Conference in Stockholm the same year, for which 120 cars were designed to fill a large square plastic structure with their exhaust fumes (phase 1) before the cars were to be encased inside the structure, overheat and self-combust (phase 2). The work was meant to be a protest as well as an ambiguous monument; Metzger explains that Auto-destructive art is made to be self-destructed. The act of destruction is crucial to the work.

35 years after its conception, the project *Stockholm, June (phase 1)* will be realised for the first time in full scale by the SB8. For this monumental work – of which to date only small-scale models existed that just made it into the Tate’s Collection – a 60x60x2.5m² structure will be erected outside the Sharjah Expo Centre between the Expo Hall and the Al Khan Lagoon. For security reasons, only phase 1 of the original proposal will be realised, and a number of the 120 cars will run simultaneously for an announced time during the opening days. Today, as man’s massive impact on global climate change through CO₂ emissions into the atmosphere has been proved, this work unfolds its full legacy and contemporary relevance. *Stockholm, June (phase 1)* will be on view as a temporary monument for a limited duration, and will be subsequently fully documented on film.

Marjetica Potrc: *Sharjah School: Desalination Device with Solar-Panel Canopy*, 2007

Salty drinking water is dangerous for human health, and consuming it on a regular basis can be lethal. How then does one live in an environment where salty tap water is an everyday reality? Today, the Emirate of Sharjah has become a test site for answering this question. Although the main desalination plant in Sharjah City – part of the Sharjah Water and Electricity Authority – is intended to deliver fresh drinking water to all residents, in some parts of the city, salty water still comes out of the drinking taps.

For the Sharjah Biennial 8, Marjetica Potrc will install a reverse-osmosis (R.O.) desalination device in a public school in Sharjah. This device will be connected to a solar panel and powered by solar energy. It will thus become self-sustainable, independent from the big desalination plants that run on fossil fuels. Particularly schools which are situated a bit outside the city centre, that have difficulties in getting good quality drinking water from the tap.

Marjetica Potrc focuses on issues of self-sustainability in her community-based projects. She also exhibits other people's designs that bare relevance to her concerns, as part of her artistic practice.

Michael Rakowitz: *The invisible enemy should not exist*

Michael Rakowitz's most recent project, originally conceived for a solo exhibition at Lombard-Freid gallery, NY, is an attempt to reconstruct the archaeological artefacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq in the aftermath of the American invasion in April 2003. This work-in-progress will be shown in an extended version, at the Sharjah Biennial 8. This work includes a narrative which is based on extensive research and which relates to the current status of the whereabouts of the stolen items, and the series of events surrounding the American invasion of Iraq, and its protagonists.

The title of the work takes its name from the direct translation of *Aj-ibur-shapu*, the ancient Babylonian street that was used as a processional way and that ran through the Ishtar Gate. Excavated and reconstructed at the turn of the 20th Century and later as a monument to Saddam Hussein under his reign, this site is the most frequently photographed and posted on the Internet by US servicemen stationed in Iraq.

Rakowitz designed a long table, which shape derives from the measurements and layout of the Processional Way, and which serves to display the recreated artefacts. A series of episodic drawings punctuate the installation, and their narrative includes the story of Dr. Donny George, former President of the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage and Director General of the National Museum in Baghdad, who worked tirelessly to recover looted artefacts.

Thomas Saraceno

Following the ideas of Buckminster Fuller – think global, act local – Saraceno has developed a new work with special regard to Sharjah's environmental and social conditions, specifically the great potential of solar energy, which is available but remains almost unused in the UAE, and the tradition of Bedouins who erect their tents following certain environmental indicators and never return to the same spot.

In Saraceno's models, the material that he uses for the air pockets shifts from transparent to mirrored, limiting the visitors on the inside to look outside, while they can be seen trying to move in one direction, driven by an unconscious social behavior detached from the outside environment. Operating on a functional as well as on a metaphorical level, like most of Saraceno's projects to date – e.g. the large-scale inflatable three-story balloon for the 2006 Sao Paulo Biennial – the possibility of navigating in such a scenario is based on people's ability to pay attention to and be responsible for their fellow co-habitants.

Gerda Steiner/Jörg Lenzlinger: The Sharjah desalination plant waste garden, 2007

Asking similar questions as Potrc, Steiner and Lenzlinger look at the presence of water and salt in the UAE. Drinking water is gleaned from seawater via an energy-consuming process of evaporation. But salt – which exists in our bodies with as great a ratio as in the sea – is an essential component for life, and a precious commodity, in so far as it can be deadly. It is symbolically and materially rich in value.

In their poetic garden Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger transform the waste product of Sharjah's desalination plants – a concentrated brine, which usually goes back into the sea – into growing salt crystal plants. Through a hanging and branching hose system, the salt water drops slowly along ropes and fabrics on to “plants” that are made out of plastic and real dry plants from Sharjah. During the dripping process the water evaporates and salt crystals form, build up and extend. Visitors can walk through this garden and have a close look at the beautiful, mushrooming salt crystal plants. The dead artificiality of plastic plants and those dried out, will metaphorically wake up to new life. The garden will be grown in one of the courtyards of the old buildings in the Heritage Area of Sharjah.

Leopold Kessler: Film - *Red Sea Star*, 2007

Leopold Kessler's practice often involves a light form of vandalism, a humorous reclaiming of the public realm, somewhere in between public service and self-justice that asks simple questions about how space and property are organised.

His recent film for the Sharjah Biennial 8, was inspired by the possibility of filming a luxurious underwater restaurant from the outside: an environmental “bubble,” where humans gather for the social act of dining – per se an ordinary situation, but submerged into an extraordinary environment where human existence is usually not possible, for the sake of entertainment and exclusiveness. The *Hydropolis* underwater hotel is an extreme example of this, and it is to be built on Dubai's waterfront. The world's first luxury underwater hotel is situated 66 feet below-sea-level and will cover an area as big as London's Hyde Park. And will boast 220 bubble-shaped luxury suites, equipped with clear Plexiglas walls for spectacular (yet purely artificial) “underwater views”. The \$500 million project is being promoted as the first attempt to “colonise the sea”, but begs the question, at the expense and control of whom?

As the *Hydropolis* hotel currently only exists as a futuristic, computer animated utopia, Kessler travelled to Eilat, and sought permission to film around an already existing, however less fancy, underwater restaurant – a ship-wreck-like creation surrounded by open sea, which is usually prohibited for divers. The filmic result is a surreal underwater journey through marine landscapes that ends on a glass window façade. The bizarre view into an almost empty restaurant, where a lonesome couple eat their meal, cheerfully reverses the relationship of the spectator and his/her object, revealing the absurdity of such submarine “colonies”.

Joachim Koester: Film - *Mescaline/Post-Mescaline*, 2007

Koester's essayistic films and photographic series are a combination of documentary and fiction with haunting stories of man and landscape. His new work for the Sharjah Biennial 8 is a 16mm black and white film based on drawings by Henri Michaux – a journey into the unknown, which could also be described in the terms of French philosopher and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari's transverse approach as “ecology of the mind.”

“In the 19th century exploration was geographic. Journeys into impassable jungles or the ice deserts of the Arctic were an attempt to map the last “white” spots on the globe. But in the 20th century this notion of the ‘unknown’ changed. Exploration turned inward. The new realms to be explored were the molecule (Niels Bohr), the unconscious (Sigmund Freud), language (Gertrud Stein) or the outskirts of the mind (Henri Michaux).... Of all Michaux's work these drawings are most often described as a “venture into foreign territory”. They are seen as an exploration of a vast world on the borderline of words. My work is an attempt to literally animate this idea. It will examine the traces of this journey in a series of moving photographs and make what could be termed a psychedelic documentary.”

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