

# Middle East

## SHARJAH, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

### SHARJAH BIENNIAL 8

Thirty years on from the emergence of process art and the turn toward dematerialization—artistic approaches whose antiaesthetic practicality, one might argue, worked in sync with the demands of early environmentalists—comes an exhibition rife with potential contradictions. In the year of Al Gore, the United Arab Emirates, part of the oil-producing Arabian Gulf, hosts Sharjah Biennial 8. Proposing to reinsert art into a position of dialectical significance, the curatorial team—artistic director Jack Persekian and curators Mohammed Kazem, Eva Scharrer, and Jonathan Watkins—offer an extraordinarily ambitious theme, “Still Life: Art, Ecology, and the Politics of Change.” Here, instead of resisting the hegemony of theme-driven international expos, they face it head-on, presenting a broad survey of 80-plus works addressing a visceral subtext of anxiety, urgency, and melting ice.

In a taxi on the way to the first of three main venues, passing Rirkrit Tiravanija’s offering—light boxes featuring only the words LESS OIL MORE COURAGE—I asked my Pakistani driver what he thought of it. Somewhat embarrassed, he couldn’t understand what courage had to do with oil. Personally, I hoped the rest of the work would prove a bit more robust than liberalist sloganeering. At the Expo Center (a cavernous space with an impressive design by Mona El-Mousfy, which accommodates 36 installations), situated off-center in the entryway is Mona Hatoum’s *Hot Spot* (2006), a large wire-frame globe with the continents outlined in red neon. Displaying all the vitality of a corporate logo, the work represents the low end of the dialogue, with charged ambiguity functioning solely to indicate a passive familiarity.

Elsewhere, by contrast, there is programmatic empathy. Dan Peterman’s *Civilian Defense Sandbag* (2007)—a circle of stacked sandbags made from patterned materials that have a faded, third-world feel—communicates with honest humility the trauma of a bombing raid. The ice-white surface of Maha Mustafa’s *Landscape Minus 37°C* (2004), a large refrigerated panel covered with condensed air, is incised with names and slogans by visitors: I did the same. Mierle Laderman Ukeles’s *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1977–80), documentation of a performance work utilizing New York City sanitation workers, serves as an emblematic benchmark, while nearby, works by Marya Kazoun and Claudia Losi engage in faulty logic or misplaced conceptual strategies by indulging in closed-circuit intimacy and emotiveness. Nevertheless, even in the most poetic meanderings, a mere touch of utility rescues

the work, redefines the criteria, and propels the theme forward, as in Sergio Vega’s video *Paradise on Fire* (2007), which explores the consequences of the natural world’s colliding with an artificial lifestyle.

For *Water: A Natural History* (2007), Peter Fend presents a sprawling installation of models, maps, and sand, a way of working that he hasn’t changed since the early ’90s. Fend is still fully engaged in the idea of improving vast chunks of landscape: one intention this time is to implement giant multichannel canals for redirecting water flow, creating vast quantities of zero-emission methane. His effort continues to define the possibility of an artist’s presence in the forward-thinking required to address the monumental crisis at hand. Nearby, fellow futurist thinker Tomas Saraceno has set up a workshop with large models of his ongoing project, *Air-Port-City*, featuring bubble-shaped architecture, the premise being the possibility of building structures in the sky that exploit natural energies. Again, however fantastic, his process, an idea in progress for several years, aims for practical solutions through material means.

The Heritage Area—a recently renovated complex of historical buildings, with many plazalike spaces resembling miniature de Chirico stages—is a near-perfect place to install work. In these spaces, the discursive premise of site specificity elevates the entire exhibition. Luca Vitone has installed several subtly brilliant panels in an arched arcade. The panels, part of a series titled “Landscape” (2007), were originally placed throughout Sharjah to capture the atmosphere and dross of the city; the work is a mute testament and a profound presence. Marjolijn Dijkman’s large bright green backdrop, *Lost in the Future* (2007), encourages participants to imagine themselves chroma-keyed into an idealized future, much the way a “green screen” functions in the television industry. But when I saw the screen, it was inactive and mute: Nobody was using it, but it still generated a flood of associations: all things yet to happen, everything we’re waiting to see.

Sharjah, like other emirates within the UAE, such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai, is undertaking massive development, including substantial land reclamation. Fantastic, futuristic communities constructed on top of acres of dredged ocean: certainly a red flag for any environmentalist and a unique opportunity, given the theme, for this biennial to spin a public-relations bonus. Indeed, the extraordinary context of this biennial is in itself a political action. The curators provide a commensurate film program and an exhaustive platform of panels, architects, and visionaries, including a keynote by Bruce Sterling. All these voices deliver the same message—concern for the environment. The problem of curatorial overcontextualization that undermines work in other international venues is not relevant here. In Sharjah, the event’s collective, unified spirit overshadows individual efforts, and perhaps, given the urgency of such a theme, that’s as it should be.

—DENNIS BALK