

# Flash Art

SHARJAH, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

## Sharjah Biennial 8

Chris Sharp

Sharjah Biennial 8, "Still Life: Art, Ecology and the Politics of Change," could be considered a well-intentioned prelude to this summer's European *gesamtkunstwelt* extravaganza. To duly note, my first impression of Sharjah itself, with its spectral desertscape teeming with skeletal, half-built skyscrapers, was that of an architectural necropolis in the making, and my last impression—both from recklessly speeding cabs

—was that of fleeing Hades. Mike Davis' *Fear and Money in Dubai*, which should be required reading for all U.A.E. vacationers and investors (right), abundantly confirms the last impression, at least for the majority of the U.A.E.'s (transient) population, while making a pretty good argument for the first.

This biennial comes in the midst of a massive cultural armament in neighboring Emirate Abu Dhabi.

Guggenheims and Louvres, replete with a roster of star architects that include Jean Nouvel (Louvre), and Frank Gehry (Guggenheim) with multi-million dollar price tags are being bandied about with bewildering financial insouciance. Consequently, a 'cultural life' is being conjured up out of thin air in the U.A.E.. Whether this is good or bad is almost beside the point (the point being rather what this feverish wizardry might betoken). What is truly strange and unprecedented is the wholesale importation of 'culture,' as if culture was some kind of transplantable flora that could take root and flourish anywhere when watered by a sufficient amount of money (and maybe it is that simple, who knows?).

Beyond the hackles raised by such flagrant incongruities as corporate oil sponsors and the fact that the biennial's audience will be more or



less limited to the some odd 200 art professionals it flew in, SB8 was riven by a fundamental disparity of intention among its three curators. Invited by director Hoor Al Qasimi and artistic director Jack Persekian to engage issues of ecology and the environment, the three curators Mohammed Kazem, Eva Scharrer and Jonathan Watkins each approached the project in highly individual ways.

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**e-Xplo, I love to you. Workers voices from the U.A.E., 2007. Installation view. Left: Henrik Håkansson, July.14, 2006, 2006-2007. 35 mm film. Courtesy the artist.**





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Kazem, judging by his catalogue essay, seemed darkly sympathetic to the stakes outlined by the director, but the majority of the work he selected by artists from the Middle-Eastern region sadly was not — save for a few notable exceptions such as Group Tuesday (Fadi Abdallah, Bilal Khbeiz, Walid Sadek), whose project addressed the last summer's war between Lebanon and Israel via a text and a video, and Raeda Saadeh's two-channel video installation of a woman improbably vacuuming a mountain top. Watkins on the other hand, in his brief contribution to the catalogue, comes off as almost hostile to the thematic. Eva Scharrer, plaintively acknowledging the manifold contradictions and challenges in the overall project, nevertheless seemed willing to make an effort to confront those challenges. "It's not about presenting ad-hoc solutions, for saving the planet," she wrote. "It's about creating an image and an experience to sharpen sensibilities with regard to our relationship with and our impact on the earth — bearing in mind the social, political, economic and mental dimensions of 'ecology'."

That stated, probably the most cogently ecologically-engaged artists of the whole bunch were Tue Greenfort, Peter Fend and

Marjetica Potrc. All three not only addressed regionally specific ecological and energy issues, but they even went so far as to present symbolic solutions to the issues addressed. Peter Fend's sprawling landscape model entitled *Flight Transect Basin of The Gulf* (2007) represented two Middle-Eastern basins threatened by rising sea levels, and, through structural interventions, proposed strategies to increase animal habitat and strengthen water cycles. Marjetica Potrc's pithy contribution, *Desalination Device with Solar-Panel Canopy* (2007), consisted of a solar powered desalination device originally installed in a local school, which offered an alternative to the region's fossil fuel desalination systems. Tue Greenfort's elegant *Exceeding 2°* (2007) sealed off a room in the Sharjah Art Museum, in which he reduced the air conditioning by two degrees; the money saved by the reduction will be invested in buying and preserving a plot of rain forest in Ecuador.

Other notable locally-engaged projects, both of the order of historically or lyrically enfranchising the disenfranchised, were Laura Almarcegui's *Guide to Al Khan: An empty village in the city of Sharjah* (2007) and the collective e-Xplo's (René Gabri, Heimo Lattner, Erin McGonigle in collaboration with Ayreen Anastas) *I love*

*to you. Workers voices from the U.A.E.* (2007). Part memorial, part oral history, Almarcegui's project was an account of the remains of a small fishing village located in Sharjah, whose inhabitants had been evicted so that the area could be developed. Drawn from interviews with the former inhabitants, her account was presented as a small guide along with projected slides of what was left of the area. E-Xplo contributed a sound installation and anthological CD of various (voiceless — again see Mike Davis) immigrants singing songs in their native languages. Comic relief came in the form of Leopold Kessler's droll video *Red Sea Star* (2007) that portrayed the artist's scuba-diving discovery, so to speak, of the world's only underwater restaurant. Inflected with a dry, understated 'what-the-fuck?'-ness, this video spoke to the absolute colonization of planet earth, however implausible, by Homo sapiens. For sheer poetry, as elegiac as it was inevitable (earth swansong), works by Ilana Halperin and Henrik Hakansson merited deep bows. Halperin's multipart installation *Towards Heilperin Land* (2007) juxtaposed a series of photos with videos of icebergs and volcanos and a superbly wrought text about the peregrinations of a possible relation,

prin. Hakansson's 35 mm film *JULY 14, 2006* (2006-2007), filmed using a special high-speed camera and then projected in slow motion on a broad, Ab-Ex painting-sized white screen, lucidly depicted the passage of a small wasp across a portion of its outsized expanse. Given the current crisis of 'CCD' (Colony Collapse Disorder — the environmental bee holocaust), this gorgeous film took on a particular poignancy, but would have impelled a stunned silence in any context.

When all is said and done, despite all this biennial's failings, which could be located in its unevenness, unctuousness and half-hearted engagement, I must confess to leaving it with a heightened sense of ecological dread of my ability to produce waste, and a compulsion to limit that ability as much as possible, which definitely counts for something. —CS

**Top left to right: Lara Almarcegui, Guide to Al Khan. An empty city in the village of Sharjah, 2007. Guide, slide projection; Peter Fend, Flight Transect Basin of the Gulf, 2007. Mixed media, dimensions variable; Marjetica Potrc, Al Shifa' Bint Al Hareth School: Desalination Device with Solar-Panel Canopy, 2007. Reverse-Osmosis desalination device, solar panel, photo. All images courtesy Sharjah Biennial 8.**