



Sharjah Biennial has consciously placed art produced in the region at the centre of its projects, giving special attention to regional artists

JACK PERSEKIAN

A figurehead for the art movement in the Middle East, Jack Persekian's direction of the Sharjah Biennial has helped to expose the art and culture of the Middle East to an international audience. By his own standards there is still much to improve, but also much that has been achieved, and in this essay he talks about setting up the Sharjah Biennale, its evolving format and his new role as Artistic Director

A History of Cultural Production

The Sharjah Biennial developed and expanded the National Exhibition, which was originally organized in the late 80s and early 90s by Sharjah's Department of Culture and Information. In its initial form, the Sharjah Biennial followed the model of the Cairo Biennale, which had adopted the classic practice of inviting official country representation, still seen today at the Venice Biennale. While the intention was to position Sharjah on the international map, the concept was set in the context of the Middle East and Arab world, rather than simply in reference to the West. At the time, Sharjah's attempts to engage with the international art world were quite humble. Its connections to western art circuits or contemporary Middle Eastern art movements were primarily undertaken through the diplomatic missions of the respective countries. Often, the results were artworks and projects that could be described as 'official'.

When the Department of Culture and Information began to set up the Biennial, some of the individuals involved were practicing artists and so had a good knowledge of the modernist art movements in the region. To put all in context, the Department of Culture and Information had been established to support the local art scene and encourage a broader understanding and interest in art throughout the emirate. The Department had already developed a strong theatre infrastructure, building theatres, supporting theatre groups and funding productions. In 1982 it established the Sharjah International Book Fair, the Poetry Festival, the Heritage Days Festival while at the same time embarking on an ambitious plan of museum building.

It is perhaps not surprising that this long-term commitment to the support and encouragement of art and culture has been driven by the personal interest and passion of the Ruler of Sharjah H.H. Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed al Qasimi. His conviction that the arts should be inseparable from the education process and integral to the creation of a cultured and forward-looking society has been instrumental in developing an important cultural legacy in the UAE.

In parallel to these government initiatives: artists, theatre people, writers, poets and photographers in the Emirates founded their own independent societies with the Department's support. These entities were established in Sharjah where they are still located today. The influence and involvement of the Emirates Fine Art Society can be clearly traced in just this way, right from the early stages of the Biennial's establishment.

Yet, the winds of change and transformation swept away the previous format of the Biennial when in 2003 Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi took over directorship of the Biennial, then in its 6th edition, appointing Peter Lewis to work with her as co-curator. A year later, I was invited by Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi to submit a concept proposal for the 7th Sharjah Biennial, and was appointed Head Curator. What I inherited was a Biennial model already radically reorganised and reconceptualized. I headed the curatorial team in both 2005 and 2007, gradually phasing out my involvement in 2009 so that by 2011 I was curatorially uninvolved. I have, however, maintained an overview of the Biennial's evolution and realization in my capacity as Artistic Director and, in so many ways, the general coordinator.

In retrospect I think that over the years the most important objective was to define the role of the Sharjah Biennial as an institution operating in

Sharjah, the UAE, the Arab world and the region as a whole. This is in contrast to, and in some ways in conflict with, the previously held vision of its purpose as a showcase for art in the UAE.

I saw the resources available to the Biennial as a means to support the budding art movement in the region rather than as a vehicle for PR, and personal or institutional promotion. I redirected these resources to the production of artwork and the support of artists and their efforts to find resources, material and professional expertise.

It has been my observation that one of the major problems in our region has been the willingness to commit resources to the edifices and real estate for art endeavors rather than to the actual production of art, and by extrapolation the production of knowledge, and its much-needed support infrastructure.

In spite of its relatively humble budget and means in comparison to the other regional initiatives, I believe that our focus on the art and the artists themselves has strengthened the Sharjah Biennial's reputation, relevance and credibility internationally.

It was this thought process and our concerns with both the sustainability for our activities and actually our *raison d'être* that compelled us to introduce a new range of initiatives: the March Meeting, the Production Programme and the Residencies, all of which emerged as responses to the needs of the arts community, as identified by the work of the Biennial. Structured now as independent projects, these initiatives run alongside the Biennial, which is again free to focus on its role as a laboratory and site of experimentation. In 2009, the Sharjah Art Foundation was established to act as the umbrella organisation for these distinct yet interconnected projects and programmes.

Recognizing that its home is in the Arab world and that it is now part of the fabric of Arab Culture, the Sharjah Art Foundation has consciously placed art produced in the region at the centre of its projects and programmes, giving special attention to regional artists in all of its initiatives, while never losing sight of its international scope and the need to position these artists within this broader context. This has since defined the work of the Sharjah Art Foundation, as it operates across regions, cultures and societies, avoiding unnecessary or limiting classifications, categorizations or designations.

I think the most important aspect of supporting contemporary art and culture (on the part of governments) is to provide a solid infrastructure for the arts, not only erecting buildings and depositories. It is critical that governments understand how the full cycle of art production—the dissemination, promotion, acquisition, marketing, valuation, education and logistics—is inextricably connected as a network and a constellation that supports the art sector's feasibility and sustainability. Governments should view art production from the same perspective as education.

Based on my observations, I don't see a concerted effort to develop contemporary art in the region. On the contrary, I discern an apparent reluctance to commit the level of energy and investment this sector needs to rise to its challenges and potential. At this point in time, I do not believe we can speak of an overall UAE model for development in the arts. I only see a range of disparate propositions, most of which stem from the generosity and convictions of largely personal initiatives. ■