

SPIKE

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL: SHARJAH

Column

by Dean Kissick



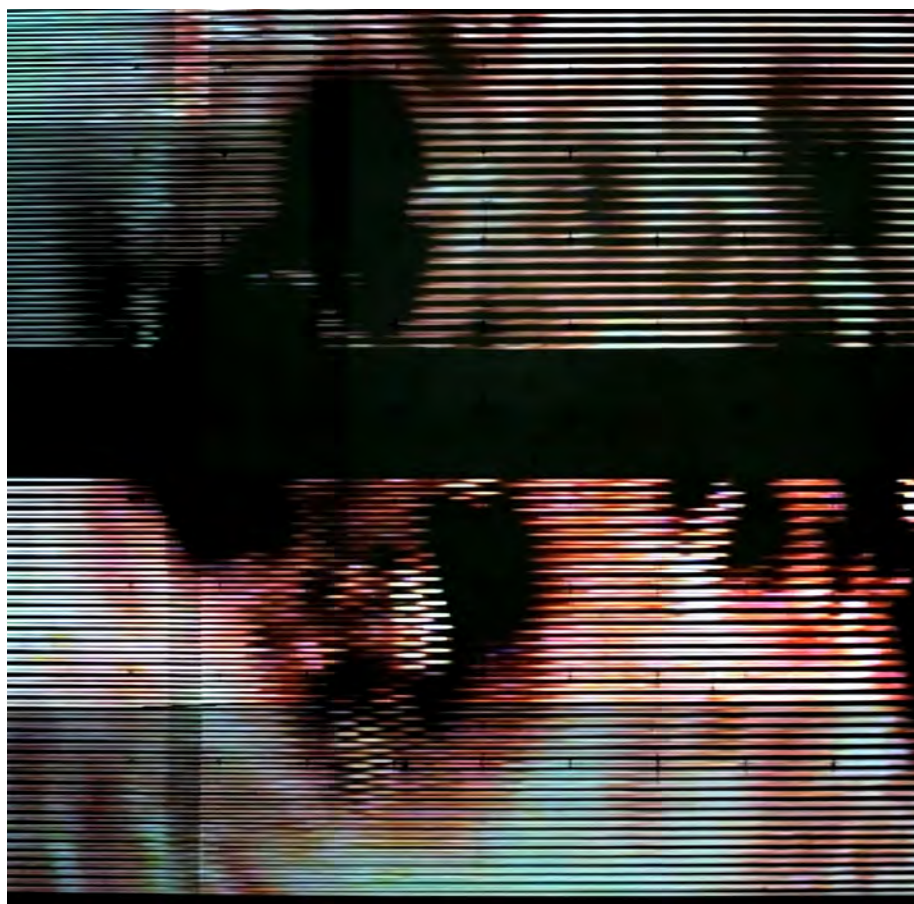
Alia Farid
At The Time of the Ebb, 2019

This month, Dean Kissick went to the United Arab Emirates to visit Sharjah Biennial 14.

As we began our descent into the Arabian Peninsula my entertainment portal turned itself on and told me, “I’m the flutter in your chest, the chill down your spine ... I’m the spirit of

impossible, the spirit of Dubai.” In the gangway outside was an HSBC poster saying, “The UAE – where impossible doesn’t exist.” The Sharjah Art Foundation, certainly, is an organization without limits. With royal ties, scenic premises all over the emirate, and a nearly bottomless purse, its directors can make it whatever they wish. They could, like their neighbours in Abu Dhabi, buy the entire history of world civilization, in the form of the Louvre, back from the West, but rather they’ve chosen to be an interchange, a trading post for ideas. In a country that’s mastered spectacle like few others, they’ve sided instead with the discourse: a year-round programme of exhibitions, residencies and talks, and the pearl in their oyster, a biennial. For the 14th edition, “Leaving the Echo Chamber”, Zoe Butt, Omar Kholeif, and Claire Tancons have curated three distinct shows. Tancons favours performance, Kholeif likes artists working with technology, and Butt likes lesser-known artists and, I think, provocation through cruelty; all are interested in post-colonial studies and voices from around the world.

My favourite work’s located in Al Mureijah Square, a disorientating maze of restored heritage houses, secret gardens with walls made of coral, and modern galleries built by the foundation. Birds sing in every tree and calls to prayer boom from the minarets of the skyline. Alia Farid’s film, *At the Time of the Ebb* (2019), documents traditional celebrations and parties celebrating *Nowruz Sayadeen*, or Fisherman’s New Year, on the Iranian island of Queshm to the north. She records figures dressed as camels and tigers and other animals dancing happily on the beach, and great outpourings of joy in locals’ houses. In this piece, like everywhere else, the old folklore is coming back, if it ever left us.



Allora & Calzadilla
Spectres of Noon, 2019

In the next gallery along, beginning at high noon every day and lasting for only a few minutes, Allora & Calzadilla's *Spectres of Noon* (2019) reminds us of the French avant-garde's obsession with solar gods. A light show of red and yellow lasers bouncing up and down the wall is accompanied by a recording of a text by Roger Callois, dating from 1936, about what ecstatic visions the blazing sun can bring about in a weary person. Writes the sociologist and frequent Georges Bataille collaborator:

"I am the Meridian Daemon, hidden under a cloak of light. I drown you with sensation."

"THE UAE – WHERE IMPOSSIBLE DOESN'T EXIST."

At its best, going to a biennial should also be a Meridian Daemonic dreamlike experience, and that's how I feel wandering sleepily around the ruins of the old Ice Factory in Kalba, by a mangrove forest, on the Gulf of Oman, under the hot, dry sun, a long drive through the desert mountains from my hotel room (and also how I felt strolling around the Palm Jumeirah at sunset). The Ice Factory, and everything mentioned so far, is curated by Claire Tancons. Nikolaus Gansterer's swaying, twirling, waving sculptures catch the light and throw it around one of its huge, derelict rooms. In the next, Isabel Lewis, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy and Hacklander / Hatam hang painted muslin banners from the rafters, stick coloured gels to the windows, and commission a series of overlapping performances from roving musicians playing instruments ranging from the traditional to the synthetic. At points the musicians rove quickly; for the finale, a white Ford, a white Lexus and a gold Lexus drift around outside warbling burbling techno while a dancer with ribbons in their dreads moshes through their donut hearts, kicking up sand in the air. The show ends, but cars keep speeding by in the desert.



Isabel Lewis, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy and Hacklander / Hatam
Untitled (juice, inwardness, natures), 2019

As a relief from all this joy, however, Zoe Butt's slice of the biennial is a didactic, sadistic tour de force. A decade ago I went on a class trip to Long March Space, Beijing and listened to a curator describing a recent exhibition where they'd placed a baby in a room with a robotic eagle that watched over it menacingly. That can't be right, I thought. For many years I assumed I'd just misheard or hallucinated this whole gallery tour, but here, off a hidden courtyard by Calligraphy Square, are photographs and a video from Xu Zhen's *The Starving of Sudan* (2008), for which the artist restaged an infamous, Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the South Sudan Famine of 1994 using the child of a Guinean migrant and a dead eagle that he'd brought reanimatronically back to life. The original photographer, Kevin Carter, was roundly criticised for not helping the child and later killed himself. Xu Zhen was also criticised, but not as badly. South Sudan, which is currently at civil war, has since suffered many more famines and will likely suffer one again this year.

**SOME DAY, A FRIEND TOLD ME
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HAVE BEEN HAPPENING

Another captivatingly appalling work from Calligraphy Square, Meiro Koizumi's three-channel film *Angels of Testimony* (2019), features the artist interviewing a World War II veteran that has written about the horrors perpetrated by the Japanese during World War II, and Japanese youths reciting lines from this testimony. He has them encircle a girl lying on the floor and chant, "We teach you what it feels like to stab someone" over and over at her. A different girl is made to laugh her way through a story about soldiers throwing a mother's baby off a cliff, followed by the mother jumping off herself; after she's done, the girl keeps laughing like a mad person, seemingly disturbed by what's going on. Koizumi presses the old man, who's suffering from Alzheimer's, who can no longer remember his own stories, about whether he's seen all these awful things, and the old man says he's not sure, mumbles incomprehensibly, asks, "Is this a nightmare, or has it really happened?" The artist keeps going until his subject bursts into tears, keeps filming as snot and drool pour from his mouth. I feel some sympathy for the dying war criminal, disgust for the theatre student. The whole experience is twisted, uncomfortable, gruesome, hard, different to what I've come to expect from art. But we do need to hear these stories, don't we?



Meiro Koizumi
The Angels of Testimony, 2019

My Japanese grandfather served in the Asian theatre during the war but never once spoke about what he saw, even as he lay dying. Here, an artist brings an old, demented man to tears and turns his horror stories into a video installation. A few nights before, I was at a gala dinner in the square outside with Sheikh Sultan III. A guy from the oil company won a prize. Afterwards, migrant workers wolfed down the leftover food from the tables like they hadn't eaten for days. I'm on an all expenses paid press trip from New York. This feels like the world in a square. Some day, a friend told me recently, we'll look back on the way we live now, the places we're able to go, and sights we're able to see, and know that these things should not have been happening. They're signs, he suggests, of a world gone awry.

Anyway, I loved my time in the Emirates. In a sense, this show just represents the new normal for biennials: lots of discordant curators, non-Western artists, post-colonial handwringing and historical revisionism. But this approach makes more sense in Sharjah, a real city of the South, than it did in Berlin, New York, Venice, Kassel or even Athens. These days I often think about how I loathe our cultural moment here in the West. But for some moments in Al Mureijah Square, below the high noon, surrounded by bright bird song, with no LTE on my phone, having seen a good film and a light show, I did feel as though I'd slipped outside of the echo chamber, into spaces of both, the pure joy that's completely lacking from Western culture, and the terrible darkness that's still there, but you're not really allowed to show anymore.

DEAN KISSICK is a writer based in New York and a contributing editor for Spike. A new installment of The Downward Spiral will be published online every second Wednesday a month. Last time he investigated what's going on in Goshen, New York.



Nikolaus Gansterer
Sympoiesis Observatory, 2011



Meshac Gaba
Perruques Architectures Émirats Arabes Unis, 2019



New Orleans Airlift
The Trans-National, 2019

Performance with Astral LXXXII, FREEK and Monster Crew



Ulrik López
Patakí 1921, 2019

Performance with Karime León Barreiro, La Trinchera, Sara Cruz and Rafael Maya



Shiraz Bayjoo
En Famille 3, 2015



Mohamed Bourouissa
Blida-Joinville, 2018-2019



Phan Thảo Nguyên
Mute Grain, 2019



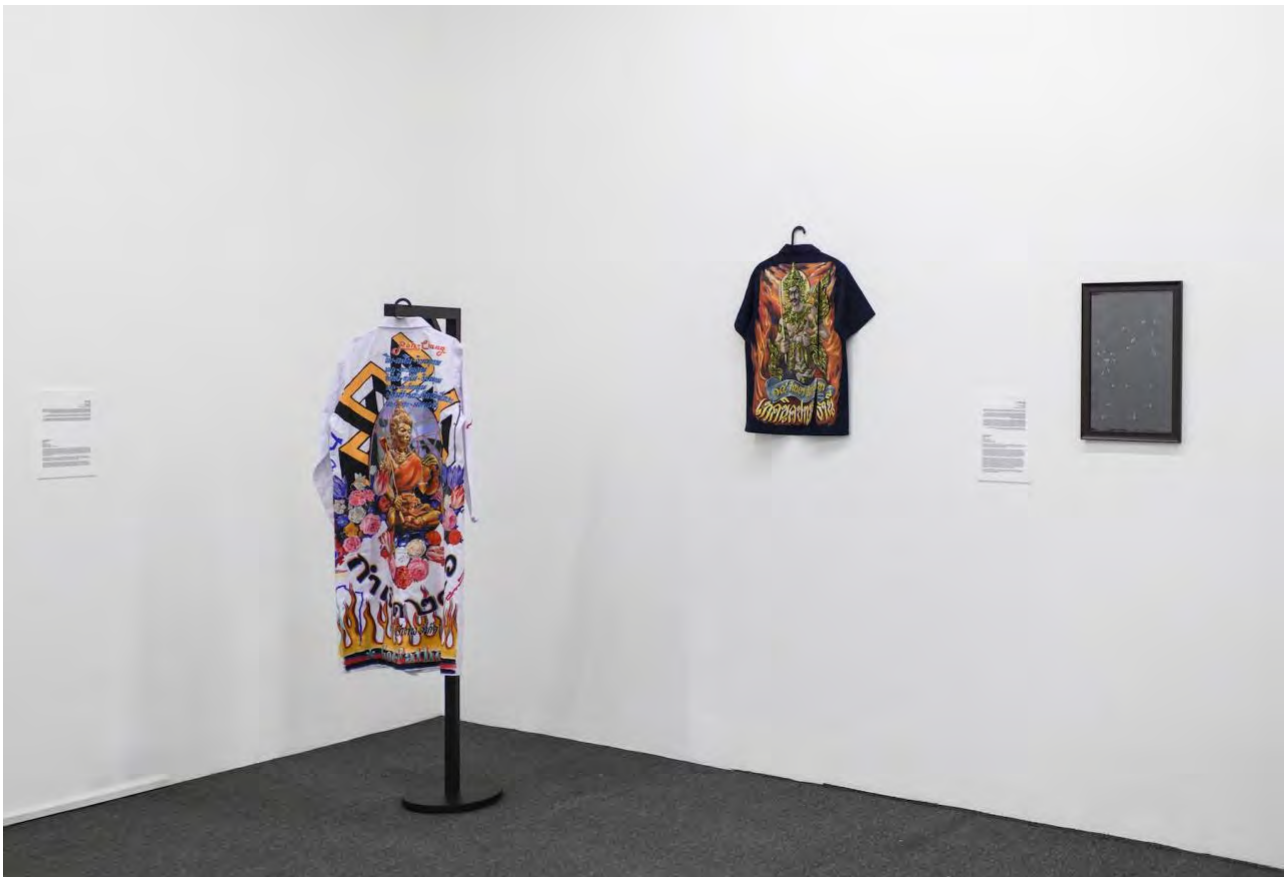
Cory Arcangel
various works, 2019



Otobong Nkanga and Emeka Ogboh
Aging Ruins Dreaming Only to Recall the Hard Chisel from the Past, 2019



Suchitra Mattai
Imperfect Isometry, 2019



31st Century Museum of Contemporary Spirit
various works, 2018-2019



Akram Zaatari
The Landing, 2019



Michael Rakowitz
The Ballad of Special Ops Cody, 2017 (video still)



Kidlat Tahimik,

Ang Ma-bagyong Sabungan ng 2 Bathala ng Hangin, A Stormy Clash Between 2 Goddesses of the Winds (WW III—the Protracted Kultur War), 2019

SHARJAH BIENNIAL

DEAN KISSICK