

OCULA REPORT

Making waves towards post-art: Act I of Sharjah Biennial 13

Mohammad Salemy | Sharjah | 15 April 2017



Official opening of SB13. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

Imagine a living body in metamorphosis: part dying and part thriving. Imagine evolution as a form of complexity from the perspectives of nature, political economy and technology. Then imagine how this process would look if put into a material body visible to a public. Walking around the different venues of Act I of *Tamawuj*, Sharjah Biennial 13's (SB13) exhibition in Sharjah (10 March–12 June 2017), is nothing short of witnessing this unfolding evolutionary drama. Part of the larger project of SB13, which is taking place in Beirut, Dakar, Istanbul, Ramallah, and Sharjah between October 2016 to October 2017 (Act II opens in Beirut this October), *Tamawuj*'s first act isn't simply cataloguing a historical era and its corresponding art forms. The mission of the Biennial's curator, Christine Tohmé (founder of the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, Ashkal Alwan), has been to find and display the changing politics and aesthetics of contemporary art and encourage their systemic transformation. By adopting the loose title *Tamawuj* (making waves, undulation), Tohmé allows some 70 participating artists to indulge in their own evolutionary trajectories.



Abbas Akhavan, *Envelope* (2017). Hot air balloon envelope. Dimensions variable. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Exhibition view: Sharjah Biennial 13, *Tamawju* (10 March–12 June 2017). Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

The Biennial's commissioning of around 30 new works by artists including Baris Dođrusöz, James Webb, Mariana Castillo Deball, and Fehras Publishing, can also be seen as taking part in pushing contemporary art over the historically defined edges of the discipline and ushering in new ways of putting the space of art into productive use. And like all metamorphoses, watching contemporary art shed its skin and get over its former self can be difficult, if not at times painful. The exhibition does not seem to shy away from this gore. Tohmé does not bother covering up the uncomfortable parts, taking liberty in providing the artists enough rope to hang themselves or escape the burning house of contemporary art. It is only through this game of trial and error, fully on display, that SB13 ends up featuring the good, the bad and the ugly in all their glory.



Abbas Akhavan, *Variations on a Garden* (2017). Framed photograph. Outdoor misting system, water and plants, 122 x 213 cm. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Exhibition view: Sharjah Biennial 13, *Tamawju* (10 March–12 June 2017). Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

An artist whose presence best captures this evolutionary essence is Abbas Akhavan, whose deflated hot air balloon, *Envelope* (2017), lies on the ground in the Al Hamdan Bin Mousa Courtyard. The patchwork blue textiles of this flattened object look particularly poignant against the sky and the blue tiles of Sharjah's Shia mosque in the background. Informed by Hurricane Katrina's impact on urban life and humanity's destructive marks on earth, Akhavan's other work, *Kids, Cats and 1 Dog* (2017), is a large text piece painted on the rooftop of the Sharjah Art Foundation's Gallery 1. The third and the most complex work is *Variations on a Garden* (2017), an installation in Bait Al Serkal. What is common in all three works is Akhavan's abandonment of magic that marked his earlier practice. A sense of truth to materials prevails here, as the artist avoids using his signature trompe-l'œil tricks, marking a conscious break from his past.

The exhibition features many works that showcase different ways in which artists have taken up critiques of contemporary art in recent years, while trying to move their work beyond the status quo and reconfigure art's disciplinary links to politics. In particular, recent years have witnessed the absorption of the neorationalist and accelerationist critiques of contemporary art, articulated most succinctly by Suhail Malik in his now-famous four-part lecture series at New York's Artists Space in 2013 titled, 'On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art'. Malik's main contention is that by remaining limited to its phenomenological experience and thus indeterminate in its content and direction, contemporary art as a universal genre of art and exhibition-making waits in passivity to be completed by a diversity of audience interpretations. For Malik, art can only exit this impasse if artists refuse to engage their subject only at the aesthetic level and instead place their works within particular trajectories of meaning and function. Malik demands that art leaves behind what he calls 'zombie criticality', marked by hypersensitivity towards aesthetic and political problems, and instead becomes active in producing new and better worlds both inside and outside the realm of art.

SB13's artists display their awareness of these problems in many shades. However, most of these responses fall into the two categories of diagonal or direct rectification of the problem of contemporary art's indeterminacy, as articulated by Malik. On the diagonal side, we can count the contributions of what can be called artists as 'natural philosophers': those whose practices find refuge in the great outdoors as both the setting and the metaphoric import for how art can more effectively produce meaning. For instance, in their collaboration with science fiction writer Ted Chiang, Allora and Calzadilla produced a spacious double screen installation, *The Great Silence* (2014), which offers the *Amazona vittata* parrot's last words. In this work, the world's end or survival hangs on the intuitive and unmediated truthfulness of nature as an inhuman sage that can save us from ourselves.



Dineo Seshee Bopape, *+/-1791 (monument to the haitian revolution 1791)* (2017). Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable. Produced by Sharjah Art Foundation. Exhibition view: Sharjah Biennial 13, T_amawju_ (10 March–12 June 2017). Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

This natural turn is also felt in works by [Kader Attia](#), Em'kal Eyongakpa, Tónico Lemos Auad, [Mario García Torres](#), and Natascha Sadr Haghigian with Ashkan Sepahvand. Although artists in this grouping discard the aesthetics of obscuritism associated with contemporary art, they nevertheless repurpose nature as the infinite source of historical and political contingencies, a higher form of indeterminacy above that of the human. The exception to this trend is Ursula Biemann and Paulo Tavares' well-researched multimedia installation *Forest Law* (2014), which focuses on the politics of land rights in the context of the indigenous people of the Ecuadorian rainforest. The work features a two-channel installation that offers an illustration—through interviews with various members of the indigenous community—of how aboriginal concepts of nature as a political subject can be used to create a new set of laws to protect the environment from excessive human use. The artists' sustained focus rescues their large and beautiful installation from museographic naturalism, granting it authority over both its meaning and function as art.

Other artists deviating from contemporary art's accepted norms do so by directly addressing the question of content and introducing elements of the supernatural to make up for contemporary art's lack of grounded disciplinary methods and/or its reluctance to commit to a specific opinion. These include Dineo Seshee Bopape and the collective A.S.T., who respectively utilise rituals, shamanism and occult imagery towards these ends. On the one hand, Bopape's +/- 1791 (*Monument to the Haitian Revolution 1791*) (2017) rigorously incorporates the spiritual aesthetics of the African diaspora to build a political monument dedicated to the struggle against apartheid. On the other hand, the A.S.T. collective's multimedia installation *Noise (back-broadcast through the persistent illusion)* (2017), presents the infrastructural complexities of our planetary silicon-carbon technosphere both ideally and pragmatically. At a formal level, the installation is a series of control room monitors featuring moving imagery on multiple screens. They situate the viewer in what feels like a moving spaceship as it goes through an integrated physical and virtual universe. The work is an innovative way of presenting various visual data sets in a single large-scale multiscreen display.

As with the visible transformation of contemporary art, another new reality that SB13 highlights is the pending expiration of the notions of art and the artist. So many of the successful projects in the exhibition are by makers and collaborators who were not educated in art schools, with practices imported and perhaps adjusted to the space of art from other disciplines. It is as if the Biennial has called on the spectres of design, filmmaking, architecture, anthropology and philosophy to come to the rescue of a discipline in which formalism has reached its limit by being overburdened with its own metaphoric surplus. Among SB13's participants, the works of [Raqs Media Collective](#), [Otolith Group](#) and [Lawrence Abu Hamdan](#) are perfect examples of this larger transformation, which not only points to the future of exhibition-making and the changing status and function of art, but also constitutes the forward-thinking approach taken by the curator of SB13 as a whole. These contributions complete the exhibition's conceptual mandate of fostering a laboratory of thinking and action rather than staging a conventional exhibition.



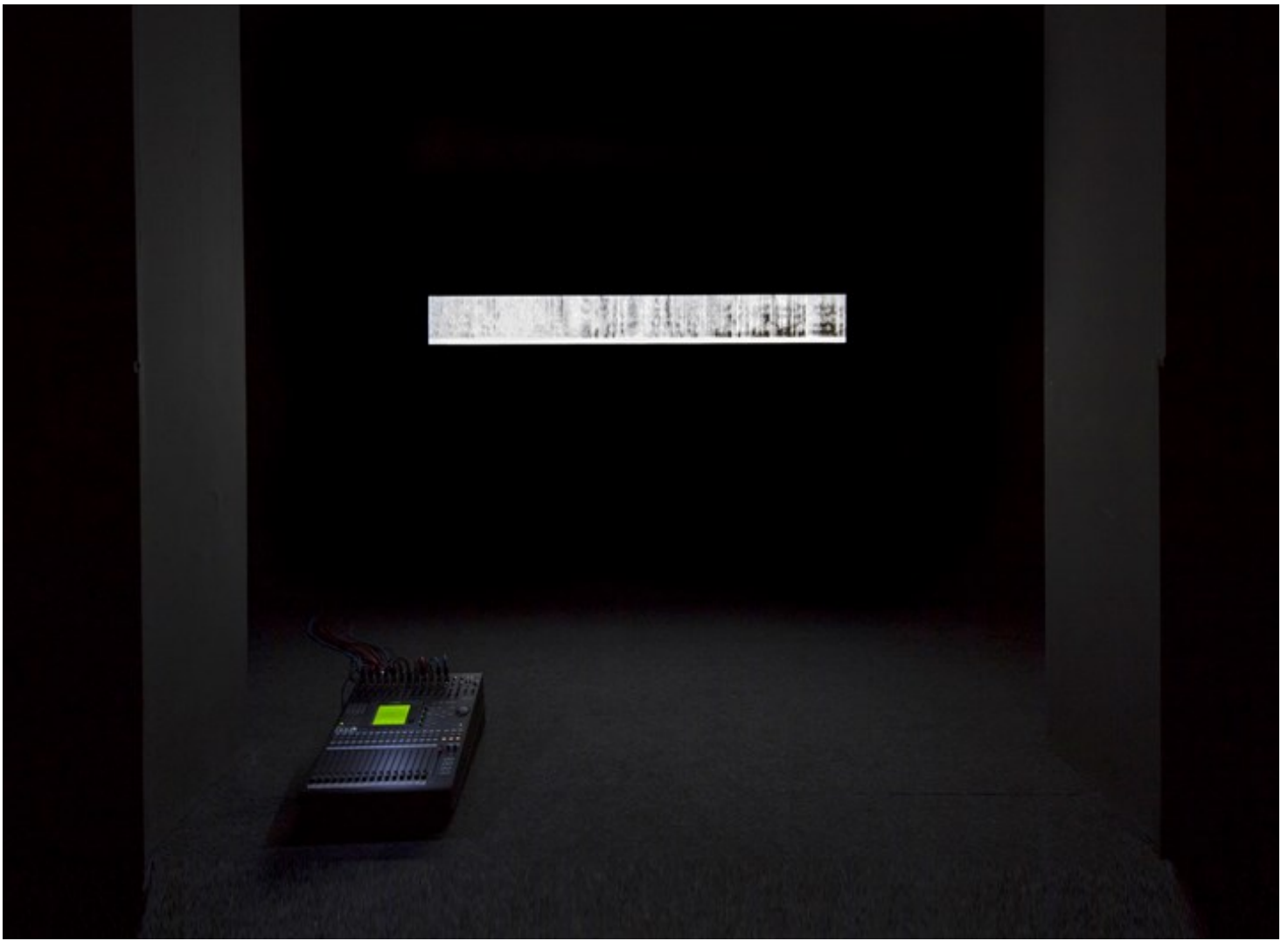
Raqs Media Collective, *The Necessity of Infinity* (2017). Performance. Part of Sharjah Biennial 13: *_Tamawuj_* and March Meeting, 2017. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

Raqs Media Collective's public reading performance took place during the exhibition's opening days. *The Necessity of Infinity* (2017) presents *Al As'llah Wa'l Ajwibah* [Questions and Answers], a forgotten exchange started in 999CE and lasting two years between two Persian scholars from Central Asia, Al Beruni and Avicenna, dealing with Aristotle's concepts of the heavens and stars. In these series of correspondences, the two sages question infinity and the possibility for other worlds to exist alongside that of the humans. During the Urdu version of the performance in a courtyard between the Sharjah Art Foundation's Art Spaces (it was also presented in Arabic and English), the minimalist aesthetics of the stage consisted of a simple rug and a single loudspeaker reverberating quiet sound effects. Together with the charismatic presence of the two performers, the audience was transported to a time and place where philosophical conversations deviating from the society's religious norms did not carry persecution for the speakers. (600 years after this correspondence, an Italian friar was burned at the stake for believing in the existence of many worlds.)



The Otolith Group, *The Third Part of the Third Measure* (video still) (2017). HD video. 50 minutes. Commissioned by ICA Philadelphia and Sharjah Art Foundation. Exhibition view: Sharjah Biennial 13, *Tamawju* (10 March–12 June 2017). Courtesy the artists and Sharjah Art Foundation.

In the case of Otolith Group, an ambitious film installation titled *Third Part of the Third Measure* (2017) largely consists of a piece of complex music written by the late African American composer Julius Eastman. The two-screen film is a stunning live recording of Eastman's score by four pianists whose bodies and hands are entangled in this difficult composition. In addition, by beautifully dramatising a specific introduction given by the musician during his residency at the Northwestern University, Illinois, in 1980, the work speaks louder than any work of art created after the election of Trump about our contemporary political condition and the future role of cultural producers in this moment.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)*, 2017. Sound, mixing desk, light-box. Dimensions variable. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation. Exhibition view: Sharjah Biennial 13, *Tamawju* (10 March–12 June 2017). Courtesy the artist and Sharjah Art Foundation.

Abu Hamdan's *Saydnaya (the missing 19db)* (2017) is a sound installation detailing his investigation into the brutal atrocities of the Syrian Government at Damascus' Saydnaya political prison, focusing specifically on light and sound deprivation as forms of torture and control. By refusing to rely on metaphors and instead confronting the core of the catastrophe with only enough philosophical insight, the work abandons 'artness' for impactful truth-making. Given that Abu Hamdan essentially presents a human rights investigation, one can argue that the evidentiary content of the work could have been transmitted via a long piece of investigative journalism in a relevant newspaper. However, Abu Hamdan intelligently bootstraps his investigative narrative to both the politics of 'sound as sense-data' and the spatial possibilities of art in order to make the convictions of his research more explosive many times over.

If artists like Abu Hamdan are discarding 'art-making' to discover the power of making truth claims, and if good art today functions like well-lubricated propaganda, then the task of an able curator can be compared to a successful planetary money launderer supporting these risky undertakings. Christine Tohmé's Sharjah Biennial succeeds by turning the resources and funds offered by a conservative monarchy on the southern beaches of the Arabian Gulf into an operating laboratory for social, cultural and political experiments. Speaking to some of the participating artists during the opening days made it clear that in addition to freedoms in materialising their plans, she also supplied them with plenty of logistical support to ensure the satisfactory completion of every project. And since laboratory experiments often turn into practical models, let's hope that this groundbreaking curatorial work will become a new model for how curators in the future will conceive of biennales and other large art exhibitions. —[O

