

Biennial report

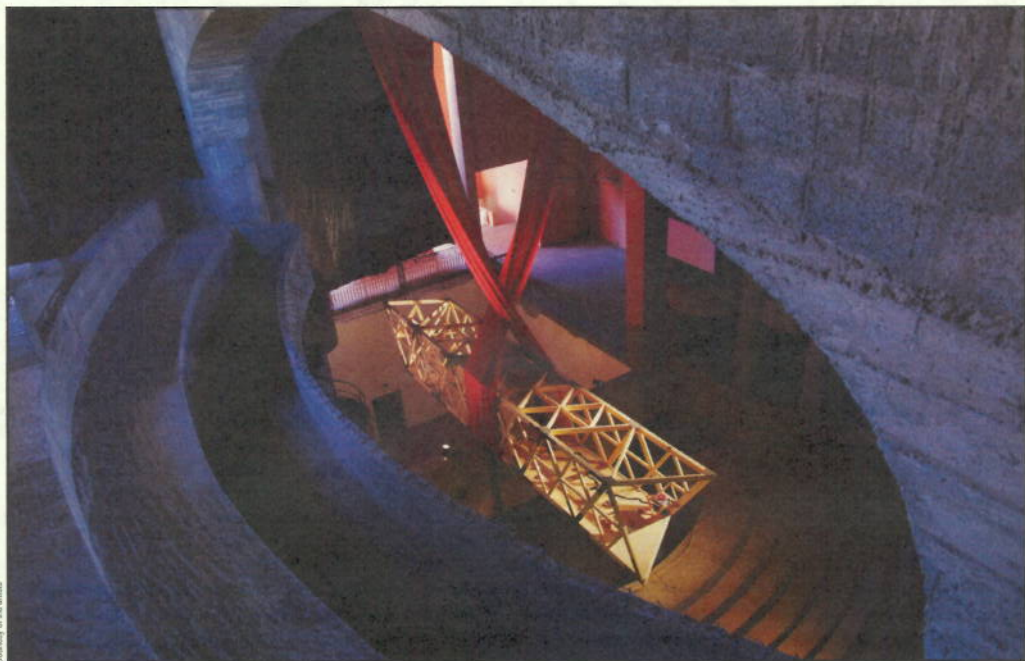
Marrakech plays down Arab Spring

Event is strong on site-specific works but weak on political engagement

MARRAKECH. The fourth edition of the Marrakech Biennale marks a new and more ambitious phase. What began in 2004 as a small, private initiative by the art patron and businesswoman Vanessa Anson to hold a salon-like cultural gathering at her Marrakech home has evolved into a wider contemporary art festival. Talks, events, exhibitions and performances now take place in venues throughout the city.

Site specificity is a prominent theme this year and Carson Chan and Nadim Samman, the co-curators of "Higher Atlas" (until 3 June), say that they want the exhibition to have "an expansive dialogue with the city" and also to be "conscious of the socio-political context". Virtually all of the participating artists (of which only three are Moroccan) have produced works that were conceived and created in situ and often produced in collaboration with local manufacturers. All the artists made research visits to the city and each worked with an institution from the Cadi Ayyad university in an attempt to create an international biennial that responds to its location, rather than being a survey of local artists.

Contemporary art permeates the city in unprecedented ways. There are light and sound works in the underground chambers next to the Koutoubia mosque, including German artist Felix Messling's hovering mirage-like *anet*. Los Angeles-based artist Arthik Pandian's giant, illuminated inflatable floats over the historic Bank Al-Maghrib building, which also houses a film programme, while the Berlin-based



Schweder La and Carroll La's *The Rise and Fall*, 2012: an oblique reference to the Arab Spring?

artist Aleksandra Domanovic has coated a monument from the former Yugoslavia in a local *tadelakt* plasterwork, installed in the city's new Cyber Park.

The bulk of the show is in the half-finished Théâtre Royal, whose rough, concrete shell of an auditorium is hidden behind an ornately tiled foyer. Here Moroccan themes abound. French artists Florian and Michael Quistrebart present patterned films, Moroccan artist Faouzi Laatiris has installed a stack of mint tea glasses, while British artist Andrew Ranville's *Seven Summits* consists of rocks

from the tops of the seven tallest High Atlas mountains. These are mounted on wooden structures on the theatre's roof, framing views of the mountains.

Any references to the uprisings in the region, and the bombing of a café in the Djemaa el-Fna square in which 17 people were killed last April, remain oblique, however. Berlin's Sinta Werner plays on the Théâtre Royal as a redundant space with *Lost in Translation*, filling the auditorium with draped structures, while the lack of a stage is also the central feature of *The Rise and Fall*, an evocation of shifting

territories by German artists, Alex Schweder La and Khadija Carroll La.

It was left to the talks programme, organised by the artist residency body and biennial partner Dar Al-Ma'mun, to grapple with the political context. The talk, "Is There a Spring of Images?" referred to the plethora of visual material including graffiti and posters that are playing a key part in the Syrian uprising. Speakers emphasised, however, that the term Arab Spring is discredited as glib and inaccurate by many Arabs. ■

Louisa Buck

Qatar/Dubai forum

Activism vs "clickerism"

Politics of Arab social media debated

DOHA. As a sandstorm brought cold winds and dust clouds to the capital of Qatar, the first sessions of the Global Art Forum got underway at Mathaf: the Arab Museum of Modern Art (18-19 March). This is the panel component of the Art Dubai fair, and provides a platform for cultural debate in the region. The Qatar Museums Authority hosted the first two days of the forum, which continued in Dubai.

The sessions attracted a crowd, including Sheena Wagstaff, who has moved from Tate Modern in London to lead the new modern and contemporary art department of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, and her husband Mark Francis of the Gagosian gallery, as well as Venetia Porter, the assistant keeper of the Middle East department at the British Museum, London.

The theme this year of the sixth edition is "The Medium of Media", looking at the double meaning of the term, as an artists' medium and the world of news reporting. The issue has been thrown into relief by what many call the Arab Spring—although not everyone accepts that term. One panel included the *Gulf News* columnist Mishaal Gergawi, Al Jazeera's anchor Ghida Fakhry Khane and the Egyptian journalist Yasmine El Rashidi. They discussed the impact of social media on news reporting during the upheavals, while the blogger Sultan Sooud Qassemi—the chairman of Dubai's Meem gallery and the founder of the private Barjeel collection of contemporary Arab art—spoke about artist-activists on the internet.

For Khane, the "citizen journalist" has filled a space left by the failing influence of the established media, but their information presents editors with the problem of unverifiable information. Al Jazeera receives around 1,000 videos a day, and, as Khane said, by broadcasting a video "you legitimise and endorse it". But, she added: "In [all] reporting, objectivity is a myth. There is a heavy dose of subjectivity in everything we do, in the pictures that we choose, the headlines we write, the people we quote."

Even using social media, said El Rashidi, the coverage of the Egyptian revolution was skewed in favour of young, university educated, English-speaking contacts. "Journalists need a narrative acceptable to the western world and most of them don't speak Arabic, so a handful of people became the voice of Egypt," she said, emphasising that fewer than 1% of Egyptians are on Twitter. All the speakers felt that

“People assume that online activism started with the Arab Spring”

there was a dearth of nuance in coverage of the Arab uprisings. In another session, Qassemi looked at the growth of internet use in the Arab world. According to a Dubai School of Government report, the number of users leapt from 21 million in January 2011 to 36 million by the end of the year. However, "people assume that online activism started with the Arab Spring," he said, whereas artist-activists started long before, citing the case of the Lebanon-based artist Zena el-Khalil who blogged about the Israeli siege during the July 2006 conflict.

Qassemi also pointed to the dangers of the internet: "Activists thought they could use social media to communicate freely, but governments have started to infiltrate them." He cited Lacoste's decision to withdraw the Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour's work from the Lacoste Elysée Prize because of its content. This sparked an online protest ending with Lacoste withdrawing its support and the Musée de l'Elysée, Lausanne, suspending the competition.

Challenged as to whether support for the Arab Spring has been passive and less engaged because of the internet, Qassemi defended "clickerism" saying: "The internet educates people, and that is positive." ■

Georgina Adam

For a full report on Art Dubai, see www.theartnewspaper.com

Maxwell Anderson, who moved from Indianapolis to lead the Dallas Museum of Art in January, is about to announce a capital project. "[They] are typically harbingers of returning confidence," he says. "Patrons have not been that hard hit or felt the pinch in their inheritances [here]."

Other parts of the US and smaller institutions may not be as fortunate. "My sense is that museums are coasting—to see how things go," says Ford Bell, the president of the American Association of Museums. "The economy seems to be improving but a lot of people are waiting to see if 'the other shoe drops'—it might suddenly get bad again." A sharp rise in oil prices "or a big tangle in Congress about how to stimulate the economy" could derail the recovery. ■

Javier Pes and Helen Stoilas

US museums rebuild but fears of relapse linger

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Economists predicted that the Midwest would be hit hardest by the recession, due to a "triple whammy" of the slumps in car manufacturing, banking and housing. But the director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, David Franklin, is in "growth mode—feeling pretty confident". In 2011, the museum raised about \$10m, and "in the eight months to March we have raised \$8.5m", he says.

Cleveland's museum is due to complete a \$350m expansion in 10 years. "That's encouraging people to be generous," he says. He also says that corporate support has returned "even though the economy is tense", and that companies want to show they are being active in the community.

Douglas Druick, the director of the Art Institute of Chicago, says

cost-cutting measures have ended, while support from companies, foundations and individuals has remained "steady". "But it will take a little more time to see any major shifts coming out of an economic recovery," he says.

San Francisco and the Dallas-Fort Worth areas escaped the worst of the recession and museums in both are expanding. "We're very optimistic," says Neal Benezra, the director of SFMoMA. "We certainly tightened our belts, but we didn't have to cancel any exhibitions or lay off staff."

The museum has raised "about 79%" of its \$555m goal, says Benezra, "but when you're on a capital campaign, the danger is that you neglect annual giving. We're really asking our friends to give twice, but the response has been positive."

How funds have fluctuated

| Institution | Value of endowments | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| | High point (2007-08) | Low point (2008-10) | Latest figure (end 2011) |
| Getty Trust | \$6.3bn | \$4.5bn | \$5.1bn |
| Metropolitan Museum of Art | \$2.9bn | \$2.3bn | \$2.7bn |
| MFA Houston | \$1bn | \$0.76bn | \$1bn |
| Smithsonian | \$1bn | \$0.76bn | \$0.97bn |
| Art Institute of Chicago | \$0.89bn | \$0.64bn | \$0.84bn |
| Cleveland Museum of Art | \$0.83bn | \$0.51bn | \$0.68bn |
| MoMA, New York | \$0.72bn | \$0.57bn | \$0.75bn |
| NGA, Washington | \$0.72bn | \$0.58bn | \$0.61bn |
| MFA, Boston | \$0.55bn | \$0.41bn | \$0.55bn |
| Philadelphia Museum of Art | \$0.38bn | \$0.27bn | \$0.36bn |
| Lacma | \$0.17bn | \$0.10bn | \$0.12bn |
| SFMoMA | \$0.16bn | \$0.12bn | \$0.15bn |
| Seattle Art Museum | \$0.11bn | \$0.08bn | \$0.11bn |

Endowment size reflects the performance of investments, plus fundraising



ERNST LUDWIG KIRCHNER
Selbstbildnis, Zeichnung
Black chalk, 1906 [Detail]

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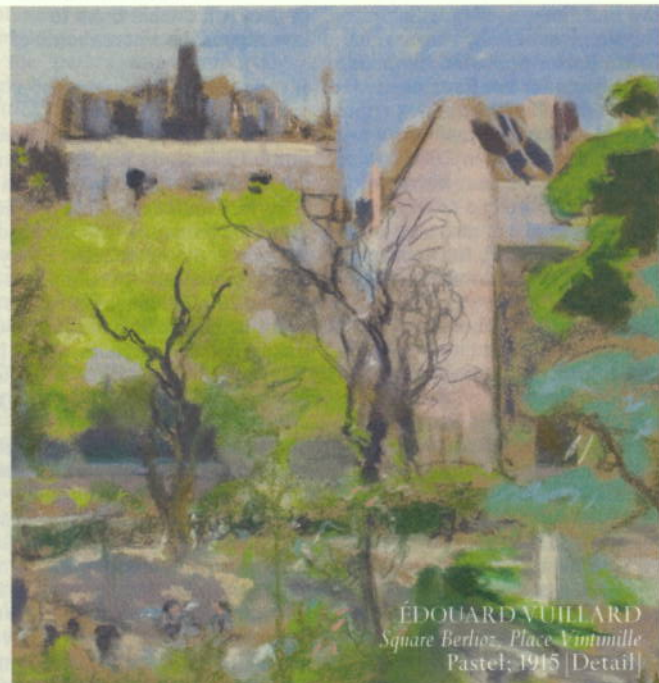
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ÉDOUARD VUILLARD
Square Berlin, Place Fontaine
Pastel, 1915 [Detail]