

Review of The 5th Marrakech Biennale

A biennial is at its best, according to veteran biennial curator and critic Hou Hanru, when it is “culturally related to the local traditions of the exhibition site but open to international exchanges.” This Janus-faced idealisation of the international art event speaks to contemporary discourse on the global versus the local, a binary that regularly exercises biennial makers, participants and viewers. Located literally in time and space yet populated conceptually by global concerns, the biennial runs the risk of becoming fundamentally dislocated.

[Marrakech Biennale](#), which opened for its fifth edition on 26 February 2014, tackled this issue of locality head on. Themed “Where are we now?”, the event addressed the local/global dichotomy, the current cultural and political status of Morocco, and, self-reflexively, the position of the biennial itself in its tenth year. Back in 2004, in the wake of the September 11th terrorism attacks, founder and president Vanessa Branson established the Biennalel to “build bridges between cultures through art.”

Morocco has always been a rich ground for cross-cultural fertilisation, sitting within Africa, historically connected to the Middle East and within sight of Southern Europe; this complex (and sometimes contested) history of the nation makes the country a rich site for a biennial that reflects on the status of contemporary art in the Maghreb and beyond.

Biennale organisers were provided with an opportunity to reflect on the event’s mission to build cultural bridges only a few days before the opening of the fifth edition. Morocco’s ‘anti-normalisation’ faction, a group campaigning against open relations with Israel, protested against the inclusion of Tel Aviv-born video artist Keren Cytter. While the opening

was free from anti-normalisation demonstrations, Vanessa Branson confirmed that the Biennale staff were sensitive to the political situation of Morocco but nonetheless had "very strong views" about the necessity of including a broad spectrum of artists. The controversy served to illustrate the continued importance of promoting understanding and dialogue through the arts, ten years after the event set out with that aim.

The anti-normalisation debacle proved an interesting backdrop for the Biennale, throwing into relief the syncretic structure and staging of the event. For the first time the biennial was split into four strands – visual arts, literature, cinema and video, and performing arts – creating dialogue between the different disciplines and figuratively mirroring the public space of the jamaa, an open square for public discussion and Marrakech's most famous site.

This open structure, which necessitated four curators working under artistic director Alya Sebti, could have diluted the interrogative theme; but instead it proved a clever curatorial strategy that prompted exploration. The close interaction between the four elements was obvious in the fluidity allowed to the 72 participating artists, many of whom hopped between visual and performing arts, asking the spectator to question his or her accepted norms of categorisation.

Visual arts curator Hicham Khalidi, former artistic director of the Institute for Audiovisual Art in The Hague, the Netherlands, worked with 43 artists to present diverse media works across several venues throughout the city: 16th century ruin the Palais el Badii; the city's museum of fine art Dar Si Said; the Bank Al Maghrib, located squarely in the central square Jemaa el Fna; and L'Blassa, a disused art deco space. As 30 of the works were site-specific, they created a palimpsest of related concerns and explorations on the theme of where we are now.

This interdependence was particularly evident in the Dar Si Said museum, where new works sat alongside the original artefacts, sometimes side by

side in the same vitrine or wallspace. Walid Raad's politicised interventions on the museum space, part of his ongoing project "Scratching on things I could disavow" made visual reference to the soon-to-open Louvre and Guggenheim museum branches in the Middle East, raising questions on the status of national heritage and its preservation.

Mexican Adriana Lara's *Interesting Theories #12* and *#17*, also part of an ongoing project, spliced with Marrakech's cultural heritage on a more personal level: Lara worked with local artisans for a protracted period prior to the biennial, creating with them quasi-traditional rugs and carpets. In addition to the works on show in Dar si Said, the artist also placed carpets for sale in the surrounding souks for people to uncover independently.

The same curatorial cogency was evident at Palais de Badii, an enormous ruined 16th century palace into which Khalidi curated only 10 works. This understated approach, perhaps surprisingly, worked to emphasise the interplay between the objects and their spatial status. Asim Waqif's *The Pavilion of Debris* used fragments of discarded wood from the palace itself to construct an interactive sound installation that challenged the conventional art-viewing experience. "I always think that people who are in a museum have a very passive experience, primarily because the commercial value of art work has eclipsed the experiential element, and [art] demands to be touched but you're not allowed to touch it. Here the more adventurous you are the more you're rewarded." Shezad Dawood's short film *Towards the Possible Film* played with chronology and mythic archetypes to generate an dystopia, asking viewers to imagine parallel universes of now-ness, and Cevdet Ereğ's *Courtyard Ornamentation with Sounding Dots* found its Morse code bleeps mirrored in the calls of the storks nesting on the Palais walls.

Although the works of the Moroccan artists on show were less

immediately plangent, they provided a quiet overview of Moroccan contemporary art today. Yassine Balbzoui's self-portraits, in all of which the artist's face is obscured by a variety of incongruous objects, were complemented by a performance in which Balbzoui again obscured his head, this time with a variety of liquids. Mounira Al Solh's sound installation *In Brown, Longtime Thresholds and Substrates Without Catalogues* also posed questions of modern Moroccan identity: two speakers, placed on a double sided wooden stairway to nowhere (again constructed by local artisans), played a recording of the artist singing in seven languages. Hicham Benohoud's *Bienvenue a Marrakech* set out the quest for a modern Moroccan selfhood through a series of monochrome photographs.

By addressing ideas of locality, globality and place, the Biennale successfully placed itself within Marrakech's urban context while opening up international exchange. Which is not to say that the question of Moroccan cultural identity was glibly answered by the event. As Hicham Khalidi emphasised when asked his opinion on where we are now in terms of Moroccan contemporary art, "we don't want to give you answers. It's an open question." With funding for the next iteration of the event as yet unsecured, one can only hope that the Marrakech Biennale is around to ask more open questions and provide more possible answers in 2016.

The Marrakech Biennale, 5th edition runs until 31 March 2014. For more information visit www.marrakechbiennale.org.

Credits

1. Can & Asli Altay, *An Archipelago from the Mediterranean*, 2014. Commissioned by Marrakech Biennale 5 Photo: Pierre Antoine.
2. Marrakech Biennale 5, (2014). Hicham Benohoud La Salle de Classe (reference work) Analog photography. Courtesy of L'Atelier 21 and the artist.