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## At the Sharjah Biennial, Getting to Know the Intimate Side of Rebellion

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Photo by Elizabeth Rappaport

The opening procession of the 2011 Sharjah biennial

Although focused, the exhibition has been endowed by its organizers — **Suzanne Cotter**, curator of the **Guggenheim Abu Dhabi Project**; **Rasha Salti**, creative director of **ArteEast**; and **Haig Aivazian**, a Chicago-based independent curator — with a conceptual apparatus so loose it hangs off the show's structure like a pair of too-large pants, threatening to fall away entirely. It's organized around the concepts of "Treason, Necessity, Insurrection, Affiliation, Corruption, Devotion, Disclosure, and Translation." And it's plotted like a film script, a fact evident almost exclusively in the fine catalogue, which is divided into six "scenes" instead of sections or chapters. The bagginess of the conceptual framework in no way hinders the success of the Biennial as a whole. Indeed one suspects that the curators left things vague because a tighter framework might have resulted in a less various, and less exciting, selection of work. It might also have retarded the proliferation of stories and conspiracies that snake through this garden of delights.

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That most of the narratives fall under the overarching rubric of politics might surprise those who imagine that Sharjah, the most conservative and traditional of the emirates, would seriously curb freedom of expression. In fact, the limits set — tacitly, as far as I know; the artists were not asked to adhere to specific strictures — allow for robust political dialogue. What are the limits? Certainly offense to religion is out of bounds, and one artist, the American **Caveh Zahedi**, had his film barred for blaspheming Islam. Nude pictures would also be considered offensive here.

Persekian speaks to this issue in the catalogue: "Artists come forth with ideas and proposals for projects that lie beyond the conventions of religion or dominant culture. In such cases, the artists' challenge lies in confronting censorship, which may be imposed on them by the topical or local framework of the Biennial. But this challenge beckons them to create a framework for participation and dialogue that is in accordance with local culture. Dialogue then becomes the point of entry into the work, instead of artists' imposing their views, habits, conventions, and liberties or restrictions on the Biennial."

A few of the participants chose to conduct a dialogue with the notion of censorship directly. For instance, black squares reading "Please Be Aware This Image Contains Nudity" cover strategic pictures in the four large collages that make up **Ramin Haerizadeh's** "Beware of This Artist," an otherwise unremarkable 2010 installation. Choreographer **Omar Rajeh's** performance "Mushrooms and Fig Leaves," with the **Maqamat Dance Theatre**, goes beyond Haerizadeh's simple acknowledgement of censorship, pushing at the issue like a bulge in a Speedo. X-rays of offending

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areas of the body are affixed to the Plexiglas wall that divides the audience from the stage, from which male and female performers aggressively thrust bare elbows, knees, bellies, and clavicles — all supposedly verboten — at the viewers. The Emiratis seem to accept these visual arguments with equanimity.

Sex and Islam are understandably dicey subjects here. Far more latitude seems given to political works. **Amar Kanwar's** "The Torn First Pages," 2004–08, explores repression by Burma's military regime in a 19-channel video projected, to gorgeous effect, on sheets of paper hung by binder clips. The 2011 film "United Red Army," part of the Bangladeshi artist **Naeem Mohaiemen's** ongoing research-based work targeting the ultraleft's utopian dreams, creates a gripping historical allegory by splicing together 1977 recordings of negotiations between a member of the eponymous Japanese terror organization, which had hijacked a plane to Dhaka, and the control tower there.

No place, however, in the political geography traversed in this Biennial — from Kashmir to Lebanon to the Arab suburbs of Paris — is examined more closely than the bit of turf fought over by Israelis and Palestinians. The two groups come together in the **Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency**, which conspires, through a variety of media, to reinhabit settlements and military bases that would be emptied with the end of Israel's occupation of the West Bank. **Jane** and **Louise Wilson**, along with **Shumon Basar** and **Eyal Weizman**, chase the conflict back to the UAE in "Face Scripting: What Did the Building See?," an enthralling 2011 film installation that "ghosts" the forensic footage used by the Dubai police to investigate the assassination there of the Hamas official **Mahmoud al-Mabhouh**. Among the most affecting works are those in which individual voices bear witness to the stories of a community, such as "Al Jaar Quabla al Daar" ("The Neighbor Before the House"), 2009, by the Mumbai-based collective **Camp**. In it Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem tell stories about, and comment on, their neighborhood as they and we observe the area through a security camera.

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