



The National Pavilion United Arab Emirates. Courtesy The National Pavilion United Arab Emirates

Hammad Nasar on curating the UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

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One-page article

International curator and art writer Hammad Nasar has been appointed as the curator for the 2017 UAE Pavilion at the Venice Biennale – the world’s largest art event. His position as Head of Research and Programmes at Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, gives him in-depth insight into the region. He also advises several organisations including the Delfina Foundation (UK), Alserkal Avenue (UAE) and the Lahore Biennial Foundation (Pakistan). Nasar will curate an exhibition exploring aspects of play in contemporary art practice in the UAE. Here Anna Seaman catches up with him for a Q&A.

How did you decide on the theme of playfulness within Emirati art?

I have been an observer of the art scene in the emirates for the last decade, most directly through frequent visits to key events such as the Sharjah Biennale, Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art. On being invited to develop a proposal for the National Pavilion at UAE, I was keen for my proposition to come out of the collective artistic practices I had been observing. This attitude or approach of ‘playfulness’ was the most intriguing and persistent strand that I was drawn to.

Which artists particularly inspired you for this theme?

Among the artists that have shown so far in Venice at the UAE's national pavilions (2009-15) and the ADACH pavilion (2009), I would point to Hassan Sharif, Abdullah Al Saadi, Mohamed Kazem and Ebtisam Abdulaziz as exemplary of this playful tendency. Their practices have privileged an accumulation of gestures, actions and schemes that collectively give shape to a distinctive mode of art practice. One arrived at over time, through gentle variations, experimentation and deploying new strategies. Through their practice, teaching, writing, mentoring, curating and organising, they have injected this playful approach into the very DNA of artistic practice in the Emirates.

Why do you think Emirati art has become characterised this way?

I am not sure that there is a wide spread characterisation of art from the Emirates as playful; although it is something that people familiar with the scene recognise when prompted. I am intrigued by this experimental approach, and have conceived of the exhibition and its accompanying publication and events as a set of nested questions: Where does this attitude of play come from? Where and how has it been nurtured? What does play do?

Those of us even slightly familiar with the art scene of the Emirates would have come across the well-rehearsed genealogy of Hassan Sharif's training at the Byam Shaw School of Art in London and his development of a systems-based practice that emerged from practices and ideas he came across in his student days. But I am keen to explore and make visible other trajectories and practices that have not yet been fully acknowledged but have played a role in nurturing this playful tendency in the visual arts in the UAE, and highlighting connections to the wider cultural sphere.

Play is the means through which children first come across difference and learn to negotiate their own path as social beings. It is the vehicle through which they understand, internalise, but also push against rules. This capacity for play to mediate and test possibilities is, I suspect, what gives it such valency in the Emirates, where conservative social norms, a growing and shape-shifting art ecology, and a unique set of demographics, make the sideways approach a more productive artistic proposition.

Can you tell us the approximate number of artists you will include in the exhibition?

This is early days in the research phase, but at this stage I would suspect around four to five artists may be in the pavilion. I feel it is important that there be a conversation between different positions and practices, and that will require multiple voices.

Will you be attempting to chart that movement historically?

I am interested in wider questions – of genealogies, sites and the effects of play. I believe in the idea of the exhibition as a collective conversation – where the most important voices are those of the artists; the role of the curator is that of a moderator; and, where there are other interlocutors who are able to extend this conversation into the wider cultural sphere.

If we are going to make an exhibition about play – we need to also walk that walk; to be playful in how we conceive of the form of the exhibition itself.

I also subscribe to the idea of exhibitions having healthy afterlives. Given the time and scope we are working within, it would be foolhardy to even attempt something encyclopedic. So one of the aspirations for the project is for it to catalyse future efforts that engage with and respond to different elements, ideas and practices that the exhibition introduces or proposes.

Lastly, I do want to clarify that I am not proposing an identity label; an 'ism', that can reduce things to a recognisable style. I hope that what emerges will be more open, complex and productive. Perhaps more of an attitude than a marker of identity.

As someone who is not based in the UAE, what do you think the global perception is of Emirati contemporary art outside of the Middle East and will you be bearing that in mind as you move forward with the curation of the Venice show?

I suspect there is little global perception of an "Emirati contemporary art", and rather than artistic practice, it is ideas of art infrastructure (museums, art fairs, biennales...) and resources or lack thereof (budgets, prices...) that occupy greater share of mind when the Emirates comes up in the international art world.

I see the presentation at Venice as an opportunity to shift the international focus to the diverse artistic practices being nurtured in the Emirates. And while the audience for an exhibition in Venice will by definition be mostly 'international', I also see the exhibition as something equally, if not primarily, as part of an ongoing conversation among the art communities and societies of the Emirates. And while I am based outside the UAE, I will be working with a team that are very much part of this conversation. Together, I hope we can make some contribution towards the multivalent, poly-vocal and still very young histories of art practice in the UAE in the process of collective formation.

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