

# Previews

Three times a year, *Artforum* looks ahead to the coming season. The following survey previews forty-five shows opening around the world between January and April.

## SHARJAH BIENNIAL 12

VARIOUS VENUES

March 5–June 5

Curated by Eungie Joo with Ryan Inouye

**FEW BIENNALES** anywhere in the world are quite as *site-specific* as Sharjah's. That term! It's sprinkled like gold dust on just about any well-meaning press release, as if to imbue an exhibition with both purpose and originality. And yet site-specificity is meaningful in Sharjah, Dubai's dusty, low-lying, syncretic sister emirate that is distinguished by—among other things—an endearing mix of Pakistani kebab stands, corner stores stuffed with all manner of knickknackery, and elaborate gardens in which the cheery words WELCOME TO SHARJAH are spelled out in red flowers. A cosmopolitan pastiche of South Asian, African, Iranian, and Arab cultures, Sharjah often makes other cities look petty and provincial in comparison.

Under the stewardship of Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, the Sharjah Art Foundation has, over the past five years, built up an enviable contemporary-arts infrastructure that includes a museum, an annual "March Meeting" of artists and cultural practitioners at large, and artist-residency and production programs. During this time, a number of curators—from Tirdad Zolghadr and artist Ken Lum in 2005 to Suzanne Cotter and Rasha Salti in 2011 to, most recently, Yuko Hasegawa in 2013—have taken advantage of Sharjah's quirky peculiarities by embedding artworks within the fabric of the emirate. For the most part, they have been successful: Rayyane Tabet's occupation of a cricket stadium once host to itinerant Afghan and Pakistani teams, the collective CAMP's orchestration of a pirate radio station along the port city's waterfront, and Trisha Donnelly's evocative staged environment complete with grass, trees, marble, and audio are but three recent examples that come to mind.

This year's curator, Eungie Joo—formerly of the New Museum in New York and Brazil's Instituto Inhotim—will likely extend that tradition. Sharjah Biennial 12 press releases have stated that Joo's iteration will strive to ponder the "potential of artistic positions to imagine

something beyond current states of social and political confinement" and will "address new forms of social organization." Lofty and vague as these claims may seem, they make for a fine definition of what good art stands to do. If successful, Joo's show could be truly exciting, especially given the rapidly shifting—and occasionally vexed—sociopolitical backdrop of the United Arab Emirates.

SB12's list of participants includes a wide range of artists whose work has engaged the Middle East, such as Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, Asunción Molinos Gordo, and Julie Mehretu, and others, such as Damián Ortega and Adrián Villar Rojas, whose work might stand to gain a compelling new life in the context of Sharjah's occasionally hallucinatory, otherworldly atmosphere. The biennial builds from issues first broached at this past winter's March Meeting, at which contributing artists and outside scholars presented pieces of ongoing projects. The occasion offered a sneak peek into some of Joo's preoccupations, as well as a discursive prelude to some of the stakes that would presumably animate any conversation about a biennial in this part of the world at this point in time: how to tell histories of Arab art (care of researcher Kristine Khouri and curator Rasha Salti), how to engage multiple constituencies (care of artist Tarek Atoui, in conversation with curator Tarek Abou El Fetouh), and how to begin to acknowledge the grinding inequities associated with labor in the Gulf today (care of the artists Rene Gabri and Ayreen Anastas)—the perennial elephant in the room. At one point during the March Meeting, Joo acknowledged the complexities, paradoxes, and compromises before her, stressing the need for participants to acknowledge their own complicity as agents within this fraught context. In this—avoiding having their cake and eating it, too—the show's organizers have set themselves a tall task.

—Negar Azimi