

Rediscovering the Alexandria Biennale: A Promising Twist

By Daniella Géo

With specialists losing count of the number of visual art Biennials happening around the world, more than hundreds of these types of events, happening for over the past century are usually rated as too many. Commonly recognized as one of the signs of a crisis – or the need to reconsider the role of major exhibitions in an international arena that regenerates the model of the institution in an evergrowing establishment of contemporary works, Biennials redefine the vision of what empowers the metropolitan criterium of cultural movements in the exhibiting cities.

Amongst other concerns, it is said that Biennials are losing out to art fairs which have now taken on the role of an active platform to gather, introduce and discuss the latest international research on an annual basis. While large scale projects of most biannual shows cause an overwhelming experience and somewhat impossible to absorb. Critics have also questioned the wide variety of artists names, which change from one project to another, as well as the very number of Biennials.

While the diversity of names are seen as a sort of inconsistency or a reflection of a continuous shift in the art

market, the growing quantity of Biennials is frequently referred to as an “overflow,” somewhat of a conventionalization of an event that used to be imbued with an aura when compared to other art initiatives. In fact, in the past, the definition offered by art Biennials had a unique manifestation, because it was one of the few opportunities to experience recently developed — even pioneering, international art. Now, with new Biennials emerging every year in a wider variety of locations, the impression of reproducibility is prevailing. But if, on the one hand, these new manifestations may dilute the importance of the already traditional Biennials and make it harder for specialists to follow, on the other, they respond to the needs of the regions where they take place.

In the local perspective, a Biennial can be an important initiative that offers visibility and a wider distribution system for local artists. Besides promoting a favorable environment for debate and on a broader network for cultural exchange, not everyone — and more precisely most of the affluent public enthusiast and even a large number of artists and art professionals — are able to travel around the world to see the developments of the practice in person. If art is for an elite, international art

is for an even more select group. In some cases, major international exhibitions, if it were not the only opportunity when the otherwise unreachable is so close, it thus plays an enriching role.

Perhaps considering that hosting such events should remain a privilege of the European-American axis, some may criticize the latest Biennials for assuming the primary motive of their realization is economical, political, touristic or anything other than for the interest of art as a visual tool in itself. It should also not be forgotten that the first art Biennial ever founded was in 1895 in Venice. Still acting as the main Biennial of them all, it was originally planned to stimulate the economy of its region. Venice, while already known for its tourism attributes but also far behind the economic development when compared to other cities in the north of Italy, became the hostess of a major art event in an attempt to attract more visitors to the town. Documenta in Kassel, another major regularly scheduled show, was also first projected for an ulterior reason: To nurture the reintegration of Germany into the Western world after the disruption caused by Second World War. Documenta represented the return to democracy to a liberal social organization, because the event tried to repair historical debts through an overview of the last 50 years of Modern Art. Something that had been banned from the country by the Third Reich.

Independent from the motivation recently seen even within the European Community, many countries have been launching their own Biennales. It was found necessary to take into consideration that there is no longer a sole center for the Arts, and various regions are emerging as prolific art centers, developing sustainability and establishing themselves on the international art circuit. Within that context or in the quest to create it, a major art event such as a biannual international exhibition can still function as a unique manifestation in every city it climbs through.

The Alexandria Biennale

The 25th Edition of the Alexandria Biennial, held

from December 17, 2009 to January 31, 2010, came as a surprise for most of the public outside Egypt; many thoughts towards this Biennale as a brand new initiative, was to be added to the melting pot. In fact, having faced oblivion in the international circuit, the second art biennial exhibition to be founded (along with the one in São Paulo, Brazil, in the same year of 1951) changed course, entailing major modifications with traits of a true rebirth. More than just one more on the long list of Biennials, this version in Alexandria resurfaced on its 50th anniversary as an international event that was worthwhile to visit.

The implementations are part of a larger governmental program focused on contemporary art initiated by Mohsen Shaalan, head of the Fine Arts Department of the Ministry of Culture of Egypt. The new guidelines aim to revitalize the sector: A young generation of curators was appointed to run some of the public spaces, while both of the country's art biennales, Alexandria and Cairo (the latter in its 12th edition in the latter part of 2010), were recently restructured.

While the artistic directions undertaken in the federal art spaces still retain ties to traditional art, does not mean much of a rupture with old conceptions, but the transformations to both Biennials did represent a twist towards becoming relevant meeting points for contemporary art in Egypt on the international platforms.

In 1948, 53 years after its inception, the Venice Biennial also underwent substantial change, leaving behind academicism to embrace Modern Art, which had never been accepted and presented in previous editions. The social moment urged a new proposal. Under a reconstruction of having been defeated in the Second World War, Italy needed to reshape its image as a free modern country, and much like Documenta did years later, the Venice Biennial repaired mistakes from the past through the adoption of an art that symbolized progress and liberty.

During the press conference the evening before the Alexandria Biennial's opening, Shaalan, who is an artist himself and also the president of both Egyptian Biennial-

es, stated there was no leeway left for mistakes and it was time that the Alexandria Biennial repositioned itself on the contemporary arena. For the first time in its history, the event was sponsored by the government's Fine Arts Department. Another fundamental shift was to discontinue the "diplomatic representations," that is usually recognized by the participation of artists through consular nomination. This endeavor conferred the curator, also for the first time, an autonomy to conduct the entire selection and means to disrupt conservative conventions, assuming an approach to visual arts that is contemporary to that celebrated in the art centers of reference.

With an interesting combination of artists and a high standard of artworks, the 25th Alexandria Biennale - conceived under the curatorship of Egyptian artist Mohamed Abouelnaga - fulfilled its goal of presenting an up-to-date panorama of artistic practices in the Mediterranean region. Traditionally focused on artists whose origins lay in that area, in its last edition the event constituted a major source for the discovery of Mediterranean artists as well as making it possible to view some of its best-known figures.

Two guests of honor, Italy's Michelangelo Pistoletto and Suha Shoman from Palestine, were invited - not only for their achievements as artists but also for their contribution to younger practitioners and society in general through the art foundations they idealized and run (respectively Cittadellarte in Biella (Italy) and Darat al Funun in Amman (Jordan)). For the local public it was a fantastic opportunity to view Pistoletto's mirror installation - this time part of the performance "Ten Less One" (2009), in which nine of the ten large-scale mirrors were shattered in front of the public. The work was an unfolding of a similar piece done at the 53rd Venice Biennale (2009) and the Yokohama Triennale 2008 (Japan).

Shoman present three works that when showcased together highlighted the evolution in her oeuvre. In the video "I Am Everywhere" (2006) the artist combines the flight of a bird, abstract images of a changing ray of light on a wall and ancient hand imprints to allude to the idea of presence/absence, visible/invisible, past/present, nature/civilization in a depiction of existence as

dialectics. The work inter-punctuates the passage from a more formal research, in which spirituality and mythical references play an important role, to a more direct and political approach. If the former was characteristic of Shoman's paintings - here represented by the series "Petra III" (1997) - the latter is strongly present in her videos, which recurrently make use of found footage, documentation and journalistic images to comment the recent history of Palestine, as in the harsh family-biography-based video "Bayyaratina" (2009).

Another Palestinian artist, Tayseer Barakat, marked his presence in the event, having received one of the three Biennale's Award for his "Dust-Dialog-Iron" (2009), which combined abstract yet pictorial images carved on earthy materials and poetic citations on the harshness of life in Palestine. California-based Lebanese artist Doris Bittar and Moroccan artist Safaa Erruas were granted the other two prizes of 35,000 Egyptian Pounds (the equivalent of around 4,500 Euros). Bittar, who makes frequent use of layering and the sense of interweaving, showcased two of her latest research projects, in which she explores maps. Although cartography has been widely used by other artists, Bittar's "Occidental Orients" (2009) - one of the three works presented - proposes an uncommon perspective for making a parallel of maps from different timeframes and conquest campaigns in addition to a coat of Middle Eastern patterns. Perceived at first as light reflections - as if coming from Oriental-style windows -, the images are made up of actual paintings layered over maps, walls and the floor. The effect destabilizes the viewer's perception, in that what seemed ephemeral suddenly materializes in a still subtle but continuing presence. Intertwined with Europe's colonial points of view about the world, the paintings mark the Arab presence as an enduring cultural influence despite all the transformations and power changes civilization has gone through.

Based in Tetouan, Erruas is one of a number of female artists from Morocco who, for about the last decade, have been addressing gender issues in their work, such as sexuality, femininity and the position of women in today's Arab society. Lalla Essaydi, who was also participating in the Biennale with her large-scale portraits

of women covered with henna writings in objectifying poses taken from classical Orientalist paintings, is probably the most internationally known of them. But Erruas emerged as a fresh and poetic approach to the subject through her installation “The moon inside of me” (2009). The use of simple daily objects (commonly from the feminine universe in a minimalistic aesthetic of rather abstract forms created subtlety and a sort of screaming silence.

Another representative of feminist art in the show was notorious Croatian artist Sanja Ivekovic, who presented the unsettling recorded performance “Übung macht den meister” (“Practice makes the master,” 2009), the restaging of a 1982 performance by the artist in which, with her head covered with a plastic bag, she rehearsed suicide attempts.

Slovenian couple Nika Oblak & Primoz Novak’s video-installation “Box 2.0” (2009) was more than a gimmick that fascinates the public with humor and special effects. Presented on a pink TV-like monitor, the video – that could be a comment on alienation – depicts youngsters in a narrow neutral space as if they were indeed inside the box confined to the boundaries of the monitor. As each of them start jumping, punching or kicking the surroundings of the image, the pink box expands as if indeed hit from inside. It’s impossible not to refer to early videos that explored the specificities of the medium, such as the horizontality of the moving image. But in “Box 2.0” the contemporary approach allows it to exceed the limits of the image invading the hors-champs and, by that, turning the video-installation into a sculptural piece.

The Biennale exhibited the works of a somewhat more than 30 artists, occupying the two floors of the Alexandria Fine Arts Museum, whose rooms were all refurbished for the project. Its scale made it comfortable for visitors to easily invest as much time needed viewing each work. It was wise of the curator to keep the project concise, so as not to compromise its quality by surpassing the magnitude the event was capable of carrying. But at the same time, and even though such dimensions are far from the marathon proportions of some other Bien-

nales, it is important to consider in the near future that to attract large numbers of international art travelers, especially the ones coming from afar, it will be necessary to grow in size, offering the visitors more to see.

In any case, for the moment, the quality of the works in general added value to this new phase of the Biennale, and some discoveries led the jury committee to grant two honorable mentions. One to probably the youngest participant, Nadia Linke, a Berlin-based Tunisian artist, who showed two outstanding pieces, “Don’t drop it” and “Switch on the light” (both 2009). In the first, Linke transcribes informal street notices on the museum wall, gathering in an almost overlapping manner a variety of phrases requesting or demanding not to throw garbage on their door. While the appropriation and recontextualization of the signs bring together the public and the private as well as popular expression and art, the content implies the problematic encompassing the relation of man with the space and with the other. The sense of carelessness through a very simple daily manifestation suggests diverse interpretations, from the ecological to the political points of view. In a tiny contiguous room, the second work is plastically compelling. The warm colors, the dim lighting, the sensuality of the melting wax in a composition of ordinary elements invite the viewer to a closer look. And a sign directs him/her to switch on the light. By that act, the warmth of a lamp bulb placed inside a candle-like object starts melting the wax, which drips into a bucket. Through the necessary interaction for the transformations to happen, Linke refers to our daily actions as responsible for what unfolds, this time specifically in relation to the environment.

The other special mention from the jury went to Spain’s Valeriano Lopez for his “Top Balsa” (2007) – a combination of a photograph and a video-installation from the homonymous performance. In a reference to Géricault’s “Le radeau de la méduse” (“The raft of the medusa”), the artist deals with the issues of immigration through the placement of a raft inhabited by a group of Sub-Saharan Africans immigrants on a sea of CDs shaped as the African landmass on the streets of Granada (Spain). The work brought locals and immigrants face-to-face in a confrontation about the subject that usually keeps them

apart. But although “Top Balsa” evokes the idea of piracy and illegality, the performance proposed a different approach in which the sense of exchange is privileged. The public bought CDs with legal content from the immigrants, the making-of the performance itself.

Immigration was also the central point of Egyptian artist Wael Shawky’s video “Telematch Crusades” (2009), the recipient of Biennale’s Grand Prix of 100.000 Egyptian Pounds (the equivalent to around 12.850 euros). Beautifully executed, the video shows a pilgrimage of white tunic-dressed Black men on donkeys crossing a long and empty beach carrying a green flag, until they reach what to seems to be a fortress with Crusades-like flags, which they inevitably stay away from. While the title refer to today’s crusades as televised matches - maybe suggesting that immigration, displacement and forced territorial occupation issues today are diluted and made banal by mass media - the video portrays the Crusaders as having already settled and empowered themselves while the simple indigenous peoples are prevented to transit or are unwelcome in their own lands.

Skeptical of the fact that practically only Arab artists received awards in the Biennale, journalists and artists questioned the jury committee¹ during a press conference, asking the reason why, to which we attested, no cultural or nationality criteria were involved in the decisions but simply a qualitative matter. Not entirely

satisfied, a question that goes beyond the jury’s purview and seemingly was what mainly triggered the first inquiry echoed beyond the Biennale’s premises. Why is it that outside of the Middle East the situation tends to be the reverse?

That problem does not reside on the results of the awards, but rather on the reality abroad. It is undeniable that Arab artists in general have less space or recognition outside of their countries of origin; which also is the case of Latin Americans, Africans, Asians. It is true that despite some representatives of these areas being celebrated world wide – many times, even more than in their own country – most are limited to exhibitions of territorial or cultural approaches, being rarely remembered in other types of group shows. There is a problem, in fact, a problem with multiple causes that can range from practical reasons to pure prejudice. But one should not only blame the other. It is somehow understandable that facing so many urgent matters, as is the case for most of the countries from these continents, Art and culture in general became pending matters. But, it is necessary that our governments seriously and continuously invest in Art – in the artists themselves, the museums, education, publicizing, specialized literature - in order to make the artists visible and accessible.

The good news is that Egypt is on its way.

Wael Shawky, *Telematch Crusades*, (2009) – video still

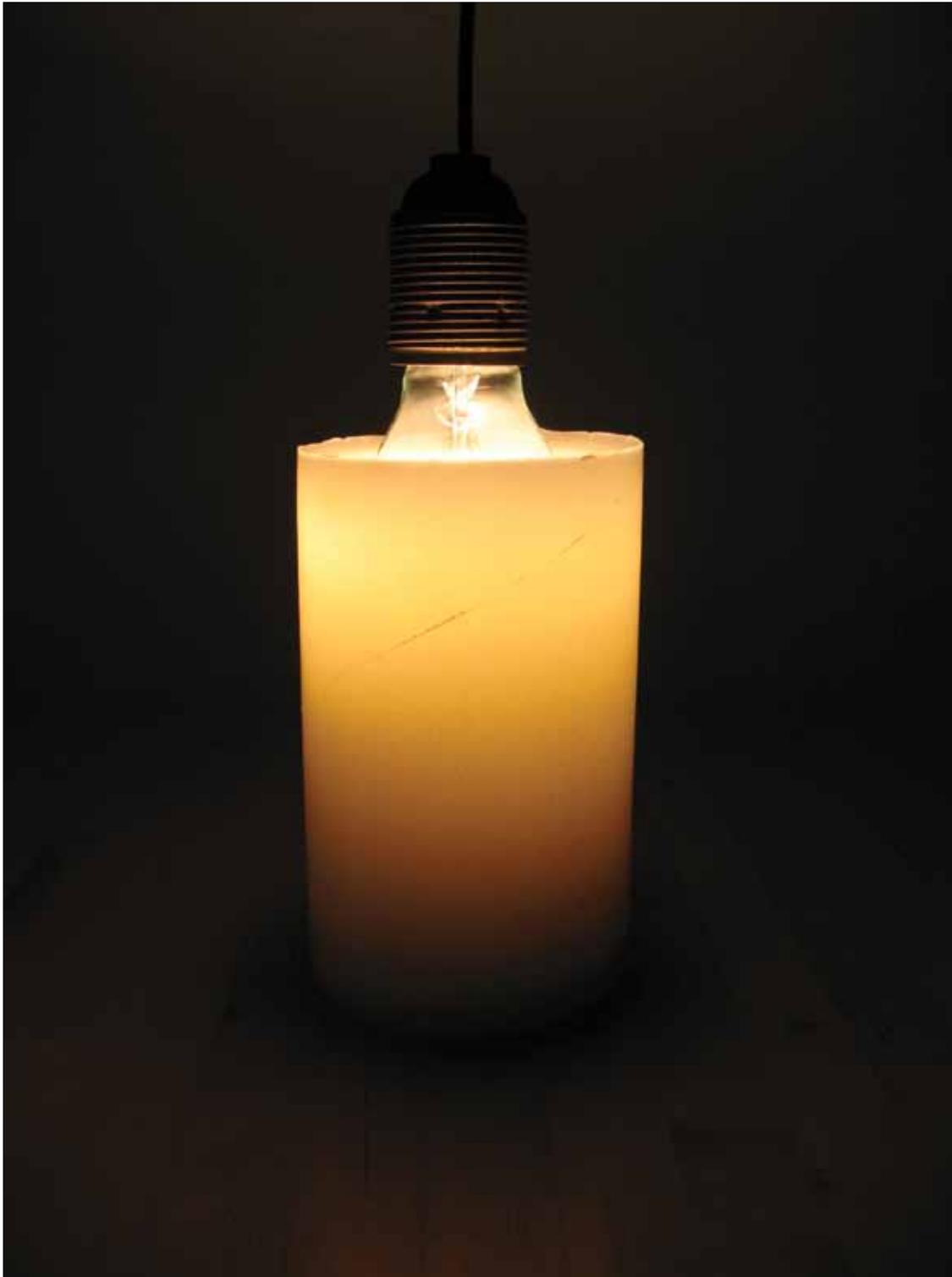




Valeriano Lopez, *Top Balsa*, (2007) – photograph



Sanja Ivekovic, *Practice makes the master*, (2009) – video still

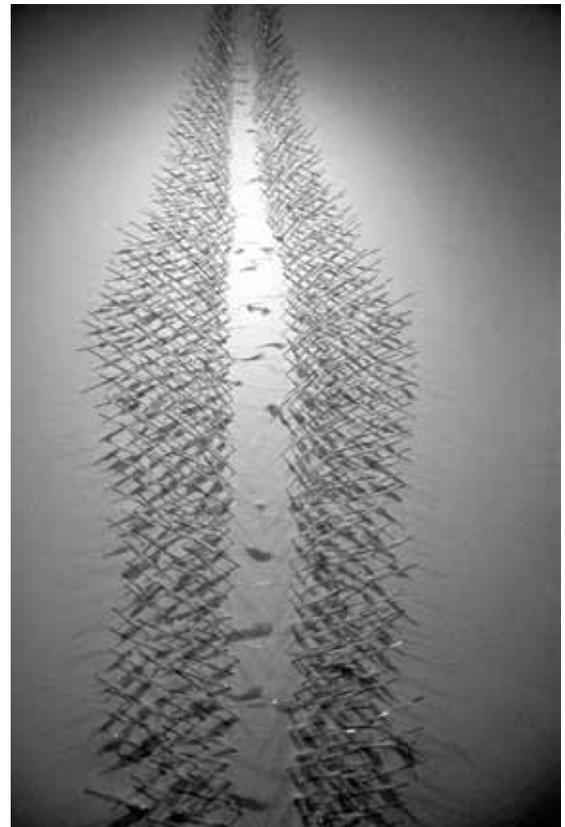


Nadia Linke, *Switch on the light*, (2009) - detail





Michelangelo Pistoletto
Twenty two Less Two, 2009
Mirror, wood, 22 elements, 300 x 200 cm each
Courtesy the artist and Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Le Moulin
Photo: Ela Bialkowska



Safaa Erruas, *The Moon Inside of Me*, 2009