

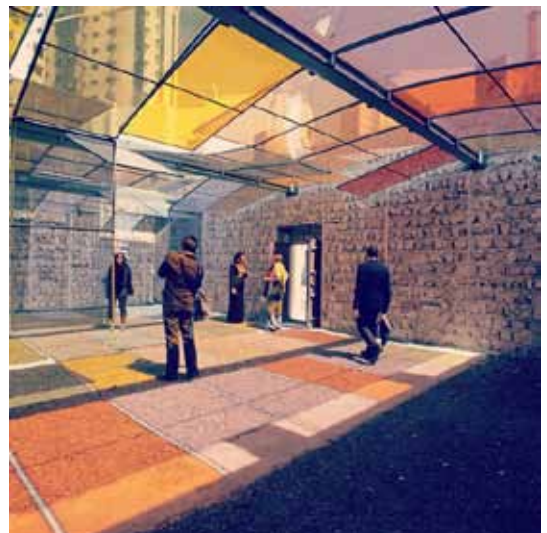
Interview

Going Both Ways

Yuko Hasegawa in
conversation with
Walter D. Mignolo and
Stephanie Bailey

Yuko Hasegawa is the Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, who was invited to curate Sharjah Biennial 11 – *Re:emerge, Towards a New Cultural Cartography*, staged for three months from 13th March through 13th May during a glorious 2013 Gulf spring. It was a contentious biennial for all the opposite reasons of the 2011 Sharjah Biennial 10, which raised debates and discussions that have been written about relentlessly, and which extend beyond the discourses of art and into the politics of the region. In 2013, Hasegawa, declared Sharjah Biennial 11 a biennial for the ‘Global South’ – one that entered into the world of the locality; exploring it and easing its way into a polyphonic discussion. It was an event that felt like a fresh start – a new beginning; one Hasegawa elaborates on

Lucia Koch, *Conversion*,
2013, at Sharjah
Biennial 11. Image
courtesy of Sharjah Art
Foundation.



in this discussion between herself, Walter D. Mignolo and Stephanie Bailey.

WM: I wanted to start with a statement you have been quoted in several news releases, and which I came across while in Hong Kong between January and June 2012:

My natural response to its dynamism is to produce a biennial, which asks questions through art, and creates a dialogue that liberates us from Eurocentrism, 'Globalism', and other relevant -isms.

I wonder if you could expand on this statement and I tell you in advance why I am interested in your statement. One of the reasons I was in Hong Kong (and travelling around East and South East Asia) was to learn more about a tendency, diverse indeed, from the politico-economic sphere to the religious one, from epistemology and science to art, that could be summarized as 'dewesternisation'. Stephanie Cash, in an article for *Art in America*, on the Sharjah Biennial, made references to comments you made during the presentation of the Istanbul Biennial in 2001, in which you talk about 'decentralising the West'. I was in Istanbul in October of 2012 and the conversation has changed: the key phrase seems to be 'normalizing the West', which I understand as a reducing of 'the West' to size. In Malaysia, 'dewesternisation of knowledge' is employed next to 'de-colonising our university' and 'Islamisation of knowledge'. The Museum of Islamic Art in Doha seems to respond to the same need of recovering an identity that the 'West' taught them to despise. All of these emerging concepts and conversations seem very close to you.

Francis Alys at Sharjah Biennial 11. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation.



YH: Comparing my experience with the Istanbul Biennial, at that time I was concerned with the distinction between 'East' and 'West', because Istanbul's location is very much in between Asia and Europe. I was concerned about being somewhere or something in between, and this is how this concept came up. These ideas of new subjectivity and European individualism, and of sharing ideas around consciousness, played into my ideas. But here in Sharjah, I am shifting my point of view from the east to the region, and it has completely changed my vision and perspective. Here,

my understanding is that it belongs neither to east nor west. I am also shifting my ideas regarding why people come here and stay from various places: South Asia, Russia and Central Asia, the Arab region, and also South Africa and some of Europe. It is a very diverse location, and about 75 percent is a migrant population. Again, this is not a country like Australia, where you have both the Aboriginal people as well as people from other places who come to make a new life. People are living here, trying to maintain local and cultural histories, while incorporating the histories of this migrant influx. Thus the situation is completely different. The most important point is how to make a dialogue between nations or nationalities.

The second thought was about global dynamism and what is happening right now: ideas of trade and globalism followed by cultural and global exchange. I've been thinking about how cultures interfere and interrupt each other. From here, I see an interesting map; I have been paying attention to the 'global South' and artists producing work around this idea in the last ten years. In the 1990s, I had seen many artists working with these ideas but not many artists I could qualify back then. However, in the last ten years, these artists have really grown and are learning how their knowledge of their cultural backgrounds can be articulated through what they have learned of western art forms and languages.

This results in the production of very strong forms. Brazil, for instance, has a very strong culture: after the change of government, artists started to learn from 'Tropicalism' or 'Tropicalia', with its roots in the 1960s, because it was prohibited under the military government. In this instance, you see a generation that created their own languages from discovering this cultural knowledge. By the mid-1990s, you could see artists with a voice, a quality and a very strong presence. For me, such new voices and creations have come up in the last ten years and it's fascinating to see this kind of 'global south' or a re-emerging of a 'Global South', which is an important global discourse. I am referring here to the important idea of the world system, which Immanuel Wallerstein talks about. Before the sixteenth century, Asia and the East were at the centre and only after that did things shift to the west, with the Renaissance and particularly the Industrial Revolution.

Tarek Atoui's *Within*
being performed at
Sharjah Biennial 11.
Image courtesy of
Sharjah Art Foundation.



Another important scholar is Andre Gunder Frank, who wrote *Re:Orient: Global Culture in the Asian Age* (1998). In the book he mentions mainly China, the northern part of Asia and also the Middle East, because they have a very special balance in that the way of controlling culture—though typical in many ways—is very generous. Each place directs its own culture, and places that do not have any clear cultural borders drift very organically. Thus, real cultural growth can happen. But Gunder Frank did not mention much about culture. He really focused more on governance and how this might affect cultural exchange, but this raised a lot of ideas and for me was very interesting because Gunder Frank describes the same situation in terms of what has been happening in the last ten years.

WM: But being from Japan, what is the context in which you took such definitive direction in terms of the Sharjah Biennial? Would you expand on your idea of ‘decentralising the West’ and how art, museums and theoretical discourses could contribute to that project?

YH: In terms of my personal perspective, I was already thinking about position and my own point of view. When I was studying the Japanese side, I was already thinking about the distinction between the ‘East’ and ‘West’ or the orient and the occidental. At the end of the twentieth century, modernisation and civilisation happened, so Japan tried to westernise and start a process of ‘Japanisation’ – they began digesting western culture so as to form Japanese culture through this hybridisation. This influence of the occidental and the ideas of the ‘West’ is very strong in Japan because there is an intense political dimension to it and it also creates a very nationalistic reaction: this is us, this is Japan, this is Asia. It is the articulation of a cultural identity. Ultimately, I feel this is a very reactive process and something is ultimately missing in between, so that’s my point.

SB: It’s interesting because with Sharjah Biennial 11, it doesn’t feel so much that the postcolonial is asserting itself as much as it is being fleshed out or ‘re-regionlised’. This ties in with your idea about the ‘Global South’. Thinking about all those common discussions around the postcolonial and the distinctions that have come out of it, such as ‘East’ or ‘West’; this problematises the idea of globalisation when considering how you said, the last time we spoke, that you are more interested in how this biennial engages with the flows of globalisation in the context of how people stay in a place, rather than how they move through it.

YH: Yes.

SB: Given the nature and identity of Sharjah and the wider issues surrounding the U.A.E. and the region as a whole, the approach taken by SB11 feels more natural and organic – an understanding that things take time. This biennial has been active in terms of producing a more polyphonic sensitivity. In working both with the locality while engaging with the global art world, the biennial interrogates, by implication, the complex processes of globalisation. Can you talk about this?

YH: I always try to make a balance; it's a very assimilating or progressive idea to declare this idea of the 'Global South' as a new statement to international art people. But also I just wanted it to be a very open conversation – I wanted to give information and invite involvement from both the art world and local people. I do both, as always. Because this is responsibility. I always like to be at the borderline as a curator. It's a lot like the exhibition of Andy Warhol I did at the 21st Century Museum. 200, 000 people came to that exhibition and people continued because the program was all contemporary art. It's that. The way of the art world and the idea of how we can make a social space, to create a space to educate and host people and also to give a space for the people; this is art. This is also an invitation.

Sarah Abu Abdallah,
Saudi Automobile, 2012,
at Sharjah Biennial
11. Image courtesy of
Sharjah Art Foundation.



SB: It's very sensitive, this biennial.

YH: Absolutely, I'm so sensitive! Because people are sensitive.

SB: And it has been really beautiful to see people of all ages interact to the event, Tarek Atoui's epic *Within* being a truly remarkable interactive series of performances. But a lot of people were expecting *Re:emerge* to be more political, which has not only been an expectation on the Sharjah Biennial itself, but also on art from the region. Did you think about the political connotations and expectations of both presenting and producing art in the region while producing Sharjah Biennial 11?

YH: I try to find ways to express the political aspect of the exhibitions discreetly, because sometimes speaking in a direct manner is not as accurate. Art often keeps a distance from what is happening on the outside in order to delve deeply into other manners within different and diverse parameters. Information can be transformed and to transform the instant impact of a political event into art manners takes time and has to be very considered and consistent; this was my thinking. For example, the combination of works in the old Islamic Bank Building, this is my statement. It has different levels and provides different backgrounds on different political and social situations. I always try to achieve balance without having to make a declaration, because this is a new kind of statement. I want a very

open conversation, giving information to and inviting involvement from the art world and the local public, as this is a responsibility. I am interested in how to make a social space, a place to educate people or host them, or even give a space to the people directly. This is art, but it is also an invitation.

SB: It does feel like this has been a biennial of and for Sharjah in that it has been dictated by the needs of Sharjah...

YH: Yes. I was told a number of conditions should be avoided and I avoided those things. One of those things was representation of the prophet and no nudity. Those were the two things and other than that I was totally free. When you say this biennial is less political and boring, you have to remember that art is also metaphor, not just instruction, or a direct statement. If you start talking about things directly, the conversations become similar to a broadcast on CCTV or a documentary on the BBC. Sometimes, people forget that.

Shilpa Gupta, *Someone Else – A library of 100 books written anonymously or under pseudonyms*, 2011, Sharjah Biennial 11. Image courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation.



WM: Can you talk about the focus on the courtyard in this biennial? I am from Argentina, so although not of Spanish descent I am very familiar with the history of Spain. Since one of my own concerns is the foundation of western Civilisation in the sixteenth century, and its consequences, I am acquainted with Moorish Spain, Andalusia, and with the courtyard. The second *coup de grace* was when I read that you took the courtyard as a metaphor, model or inspiration, as a central concept for the Biennale. It was a coup because I saw both 'decentralising the West' and 'the courtyard as model' as interrelated. Would you expand on the links between the overall orientation of 'decentralising the West' and the particular structural principles of organising the Sharjah Biennial 11 around the idea of the 'courtyard'? What does this allow you to do and what makes this exhibition different to other biennial exhibitions, either curated by yourself or by your colleagues?

YH: Looking at it from a simple level, a person thinking about making a constellation conceptually and also historically with the conditions here, will consider the new space and realise luckily the design is very relevant to the courtyard style. There are a lot of in-between spaces. Then there is Bank Street, which is kind of problematic as the space

is interrupted by what was once a car park. When the excavation started on the road of an old home, I invited artists Superflex to work with this middle space and create bridges in between with the idea of memory. This is important to me in terms of social and gathering spaces – this is my concentration. It is about trying to transform the city structure through intervention as a curatorial practice. This process of individualisation is very important because the people become aware that the city is changed and is different, that's the beginning, because this transforms thinking. They understand that this is a city that has changed; a city that I can stay in. That is very important in terms of thinking about the local population. In terms of scale, this is a very different curatorial project from what I have previously done because you are working with a city. The courtyards have really been activated, which was my intention. Everything has been activated in a different way.

SB: So this has been a different experience for you as a curator.

YH: Definitely.

SB: The other interesting thing about the courtyard is the metaphor. It is a space where the public and private coexist – a space where the owners of the so-called 'house' invite guests into their space. So you have sort of staked the situation of entering a sovereign space such as Sharjah and the U.A.E. quite clearly.

YH: Well you also have to think about the local people and consider these different mentalities. Why not? We are all different characters; we have differences. Curators have to think about this. That is hospitality. An invitation for people to be together. To have open and frank conversations.

Yuko Hasegawa is Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2006–present) and is also a Professor at Tama Art University, Tokyo, where she teaches curatorial and art theory. Previously, she was Chief Curator and Founding Artistic Director of the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa (1999–2006). Hasegawa has worked on many international biennials, and has held such positions as: Artistic Advisor of the 12th Venice Architectural Biennale (2010), Co-Curator of the 29th Sao Paulo Biennale (2010), and Co-Curator of the 4th Seoul International Media Art Biennale (2006). Hasegawa has curated major thematic group exhibitions, and solo exhibitions by such artists as Matthew Barney, Marlene Dumas, Rebecca Horn, and Atsuko Tanaka. She has served on advisory boards for the Guggenheim Museum and the Venice Biennale, and has authored curatorial essays in publications for museums including The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).