

## Abu Dhabi museums are becoming game-changers back in the West

Sharjah opens its New Art Spaces with extreme creations

By Anna Somers Cocks. Published online: 01 January 2014



Ryoji Ikeda's 49 xenon searchlights on Flag Island in Sharjah shone into the stratosphere for five nights

Which is more important: a high level, formal announcement confirming what is already a certainty except for its timing, or high level, informal behaviour of an exceptional sort? We saw both at Abu Dhabi Art, a fair with sophisticated cultural trimmings that takes place in the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) once a year.

At the fair's opening on 19 November, Aurélie Filippetti, the French minister of culture, announced that the Louvre Abu Dhabi would be inaugurated on UAE's National Day, 2 December 2015. Although there was a blip in relations in 2012, when Abu Dhabi complained that Agence France-Muséums, the organisation that is responsible for the French side

of the project, was behaving in a high-handed and distant manner, the project was never in real doubt because it is a matter of state, with defence and trade interests also deeply involved.

The other episode happened the following day, after the worst storm since 1993, which caused the sand dune-shaped, metal roofed pavilion in which half the fair was housed to leak during the night. Although only one stand suffered damage, the whole fair was closed for much of the second day, and Hasenkamp shippers packed up the stands of the dealers in the pavilion. What was exceptional was that Sheikh Sultan bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, the member of the ruling family who is the head of the Tourism Development and Cultural Authority, was on site until 1am, directing operations, reassuring affected dealers that most of their stand costs would be waived, and phoning cousins and local businesses to come down to the fair and start buying.

In a country where the sheikhs do not get their hands dirty, either metaphorically or literally, and snap decisions are rare because matters have to rise to the top of a very sharp pyramid of authority, this suggests a real change of attitude, which is important because Sheikh Sultan is also in charge of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the Zayed National Museum projects.

Richard Armstrong, the director of the Guggenheim, said that he also noticed a new pragmatism and absence of protocol at meetings. So while a few dealers, especially from the region, still grumbled, none talked of suing the fair organisers and some even reported more sales than before.

As in previous years, there was a combination of international galleries such as Gagosian, Cheim & Read (which had a spectacular stand with Louise Bourgeois's cage installation with water, Cell XV (for Turner), 2000, rumoured to have been presold to Abu Dhabi), Galleria Continua, Kamel Mennour and Hauser & Wirth, which are present largely to develop their relationship with the region's future museums and galleries, such as Dubai's Isabelle van den Eynde, or that deal in the art of the region, such as Leila Heller from New York.

But the divide between the two is much less than it was even five years ago when the fair started. Armstrong said that the process of planning the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi, which will tell the story of 20th- and 21st-



century art in the context of the Middle East and beyond, was actually globalising his museum's presentation of art back in New York, despite initial resistance from some curators and trustees.

The French are also adapting, and Filippetti said that at the same time as the 300 masterpieces stipulated in the contract are being chosen from their museums for the initial loan, they are expanding the range of the Louvre Abu Dhabi's collections into the 21st century, to include Emirati culture and artists.

Meanwhile, two hours' drive away in the emirate of Sharjah, the funkier art scene in the Middle East by far, the New Art Spaces of the old city opened with "I Look to You and I See Nothing" (until 16 February), an exhibition literally about how we see and feel, with the most alarming art experience I have ever had, Kurt Hentschläger's Zee, which is a smoke-filled room through which you walk guided by a rail, seeing nothing but a violent strobing light; a guard hovers outside to rescue anyone who is overcome. To mention just a few of the artists in the show, which originated in Mona, the Tasmanian-based collector David Walsh's museum: Penone, Pistoletto, De Dominicis, Anish Kapoor, Lawrence Weiner and Sophie Calle. Ilya and Emilia Kabakov have a personal show at the same time (subtitled "A Collective Memory", until 23 February), with a sly exhibit that gets us kneeling in a carpeted room with a kind of mihrab (the niche in a mosque that indicates the direction of Mecca) up high because that is the only way we can study the postcard-sized works all around the skirting. Is it about the idolatry of art or is it a Kabakovian joke? Whatever it is, it is quite edgy in a neighbourhood with two popular mosques just round the corner.