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**Universalism in Art and the Art of Universalism**

**Thoughts on the »globalization« of the art system, taking the United Arab Emirates as example**

»The Dubai Model ... has been cultivated mostly by semi-public companies based in Dubai and Qatar: Emaar, Sama Dubai, Nakheel ... DAMAC, and Qatari Diar. These corporations have established a euphoric construction zone of shopping centers, Mediterranean-style homes and luxury hotels within the largest swath of the globe barely touched by globalism. This once-ignored void ... can now be listed alongside other world-class luxury destinations. Resorts, second-home villas and greened deserts are now the tell-tales of a new hybrid money management and foreign policy. Emaar claims that among its built and proposed projects, it will ›cover‹ 1.5 billion people more than China's population.«<sup>1</sup>

The above quote is from the compendium »Al Manakh,« which shows the topography of a new belt of luxury quarters and business-oriented cities that begins in North Africa and ends in China. These insular economies are the result of consistent neo-liberal international finance policies: free trade zones and luxury tourism in countries where the majority of the population lives far beneath the poverty level, but whose GNP is high due to global investment funds and their local sweatshops. But Mediterranean-style villas, wellness oases, malls and amusement parks with good public transportation are not enough for the new class of nabobs and their executive employees. Dubai has added a Healthcare City with the best clinics and a Knowledge City with branches of elite universities including Harvard and the Sorbonne to its numerous free trade zones. We don't think the current implementation of art systems in these optimized residential realms is merely about commerce,<sup>2</sup> but rather that it is about laying claim to a political space that is critically joined to the powers that have allowed it to be. The Abraaj Capital corporation offers an art prize of one million US\$ for artists from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (Mensasa): »Abraaj Capital is empowering artists (from the region) to play their part in the renaissance of our societies and cultural heritage ... Well-functioning societies are not built only on net profit margins, indeed, tolerance, mutual respect, community involvement and free flow of ideas are essential components in addition to economic growth, and the arts provide a privileged medium to foster such things.«<sup>3</sup> If art is connected to a legitimizing function (for instance as a placebo for freedom of expression), then that means everyone who participates in this area has the chance to decide whether they want to obey this function or oppose it. This is not a voluntary

appeal for a boycott or intervention (as if that were so simple), but first an appeal to focus one's attention on the fact that a political space is being opened that invites all those concerned, and that includes us, to react. It can also be the beginning of a discussion about a political self-image within the current internationalization of art systems that cannot be satisfied with including all the regions in the hegemonic world of art. This transfer from the fringes to the centers is not emancipatory per se. The United Arab Emirates are an example.

### Culture of superlatives

In March, the Dubai Art Fair took place for the second time in the hotel, shopping and conference complex of Madinat Jumeirah, a private and discreetly monitored part of town built in an oriental old-fort style. The fair's focus is on contemporary galleries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Its buyers are the new upper classes from Russia, India, China and the Gulf States. The Art Fair is part of a series of regional and international galleries, biennials and ambitious museum projects. Just like Dubai is known as the airport, finance, gold, cruise, container, media etc. hub, the fair wants to be the »hub« of the contemporary art trade for Middle and East Asia. Like every other ambitious fair, this one is also accompanied by a think tank. In talking about the Global Art Forum, we first have to remember to describe our own prejudices. First of all, we are bored by an agenda that initially seems like the self-legitimization of all fairs: two days of »Art Patronage in the Business Age«<sup>4</sup> to weigh the possibilities of Public Private Partnership and Corporate Collecting, which is nothing other than a showcase for the invited culture and business management functionaries, followed by – as if it were the counterpoint in a conventional musical score – »Artists in Public Space,« interview marathons hosted by Hans Ulrich Obrist that always leave behind white noise, including Culture Ltd. Ai Wei Wei and the Iranian artist Monir Shahroudy Famanfarman, along with presentations of the »superlabel labels« Tony Cragg and Daniel Buren. This point in the program is irritating in a city that is almost exclusively made up of private areas. Apparently, the term applies to sculptures in front of hotel and bank lobbies. So we tend to feel the same contempt toward these speakers as if we were at a Global Art Forum in Berlin; we're confronted with the same stupid pat phrases of corporate self-apologetics, the same mixture of money laundering and cultural philanthropy as in Basel or Miami. Program topics like »Building Cultural Cities,«<sup>5</sup> however, show that this is not merely a refocusing of the Public-Private-Partner self-image in its historical surroundings, but rather that an entire system of art and culture is being planned anew. Maybe our astonishment is as culturally pessimistic as that of the Europeans who observed the pioneering cultural spirit of the USA in the early 20th century.

In neighboring Abu Dhabi, museum models for Saadiyat Island, planned for 2012, are on view at the Emirates Palace, a luxury hotel that also functions as an exhibition hall. The island will feature a branch of the Guggenheim (designed by Frank Gehry), the Louvre (Jean Nouvel), a theater and performing arts center (by Zaha Hadid), a maritime museum (Tadao Ando) and a cultural heritage museum. They'll all be grouped in a park with 19 biennial pavilions designed by younger architects. The entire project is part of a \$175-billion transformation plan with which the Emirate intends to develop a large-scale economy based on tourism, service and finance. In an interview with the magazine »Art,« Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim director responsible these days solely for Abu Dhabi, says that a museum of these dimensions (30,000 m<sup>2</sup>) in this location redefines what a museum can be today: »It's about long-term survival and lasting relevance. If we're successful here, we can become a platform for global culture.«<sup>6</sup> With that statement, he falls into line with often-formulated fears in the media of losing the connection with the global cultures of superlatives such as China or the Gulf States and thus forfeiting historic importance.

What does this culture of superlatives look like? The first room in the exhibition shows a large portrait of patron Sheikh Hamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan with a falcon on his hand in front of the blueprint for a national museum. The models in the other rooms are accompanied by a master plan plotted on the walls, courtesy of consulting group Booz Allen Hamilton: »A major feature of the Saadiyat Island proposal is the creation of a world-class culture district that anchors the island's tourism activity by providing compelling cultural experiences for tourists and residents.«<sup>7</sup> The master plan lists the criteria taken into account in the planning: international benchmarking, studies on consumer behavior, demographic profiles, etc. The prince with the falcon and the master plan are not gestures critical of the institution; they are an affirmation of what has long been clear, long before the last wave of globalization spread its exploitative diversification networks across the planet: that the authoritarian system is the ideal political partner in a so-called free market. At the Emirates Palace, the strong and invisible hand celebrates itself, the rigidity of economism and of a regime that can push through such superlative projects unhindered by democratic procedures of consensus.

You need slaves to build pyramids. It is by now a well-known and ongoing scandal that the UAE has working conditions that are close to slavery. About 90 percent of Dubai's population of 4.1 million are estimated to be migrant workers, most of them from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. In 2005, more than 600,000 of these migrant workers were employed as construction workers, while others worked in hotels and homes.<sup>8</sup> Their residence permit is linked to the work contract; the employers collect their passports upon arrival and before they start earning money, the workers must first pay off a placement fee

and their airline ticket. They live in so-called labor camps under unacceptable conditions. Officially, they earn \$175 per month (usually a lot less) in an economy that has pretty much the same prices as in Europe. Unions and NGOs are prohibited. Security on the construction sites is often careless. In 2006, the government reported 34 deadly accidents on construction sites, but Human Rights Watch estimates the actual figure to be much higher.<sup>9</sup> Since the major spontaneous strikes in the fall of that year, the government has promised to introduce minimum wages and safety rules – a promise that can be brought up in disagreeable discussions.<sup>10</sup> But the Internet forum for workers in the UAE, Mafiwasta, has many contradictory examples: »The UAE Ministry of Labour has acted swiftly and decisively ... in deporting and handing out lifetime bans to 200 ETA-Ascon workers accused of violence. The workers, who earn between \$150 and \$177 per month for upwards of 250 hours work, had apparently demanded an increase in basic pay and annual leave with an air ticket. The company offered an increase of 2 dirhams (54 cents) per day and a return ticket every two years. It's worth repeating that again ... The Ministry of Labour, no doubt eager to placate ETA-Ascon, who are run by the powerful Al Ghurair family, have ... agreed to compensate ETA-Ascon (consolidated sales for the year 2005, US\$ 3 billion) to the tune of 250 free work permits.«<sup>11</sup> Human Rights Watch wrote letters to Louvre and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, urging protest against such working conditions.<sup>12</sup> Neither institution reacted to the letters.

#### Dishwasher eschatology

The compendium »Al Manakh« that we mention several times here was created as part of the International Design Forum in May 2007 in Dubai. In the foreword, Rem Koolhaas counters the critics of Dubai's exploitation structures: »It is particularly cruel that the harshest criticism comes from old cultures that still control the apparatus of judgment, while the epicenters of production have shifted to the other end(s) of the globe.«<sup>13</sup> Criticism of a Western claim to supreme global moral judgment has become evident at the latest since the last US interventions and the Western world's numerous entanglements in deportation, torture camps or arms deals. It often leads people to understand the appeal for a universal validity of human rights as hegemonic interference in the integrity of another culture, however. But what if »the other culture« turns out to be a stage in one's own exploitation structures, in an economic system that outsources its business to places where adhering to human rights does not pose a hindrance to maximizing profits? What kind of a bird's eye view must one have to deconstruct one's own feeling of what is just – which after all can't simply be turned on and off, but is instead an inner certainty – as a private feeling? »Al Manakh« practices a universalism that makes people immune to the false subjectivity of indignation. It is the universalism of the equality of categories. The statistics on »How much

is a Billion? / Look at relative Value» manage to illustrate on the same level the earnings of a construction worker, the entire sum of expenditures for construction in the Gulf and the costs of the Iraq War.<sup>14</sup> They should have included a telescope (or a **lorgnette**) and an electron microscope to adequately portray the dimensions of the difference. This equality of categories says: »We all participate in money circulation to the same extent«. This is undoubtedly true, but the truth is as vulgar as, several pages later, the list of safety risks involved in fleeing Africa, and the solutions on offer that range from »The eradication of hunger and malnutrition« to »Learning how to swim« and the construction of security fences by the company FRONTEX.<sup>15</sup> It is as cynical as the series of photographs »Workers City,« which portrays a labor camp in Dubai where stacks of bowls in a courtyard become a collective kitchen for lack of other cooking sites, where a vegetable stand turns into a miniature supermarket with »at least twenty different kinds of fresh produce«, where the loneliness of the men who only see their families once every two years is reformed into a »Maleness ... counterbalanced with neatness, upkeep, cooking, sewing, soaps, music and friendship«<sup>16</sup>. In the world of universal equality, there is only a gradual difference between the vegetable stand and the exclusive buffet. Grading what in substance is equal is the quintessence of middle-class emancipation and its dishwashing eschatology. It only tolerates the »and« and the »is« as a true link between things, but no dialectic. It conjures the entities »life,« »cooking,« and »friendship« between the labor camp and The Palm Jumeirah, ignoring the twist – the rope’s noose – in between that turns one into misery and the other into a poor copy of soap opera happiness. It forgets about power relationships, although it is a part of them. It has to live with the accusation of a conflict of interest.

#### Critical blind spots

In »Desperately Seeking Paradise«, a side show in a simulated harbor basin at the Art Fair’s Pakistani pavilion, three of the works shown directly alluded to migrant workers. Huma Mulji showed a camel stuffed into a suitcase as a symbol for the Pakistanis’ yearning to travel, Sophie Ernst exhibited interviews with Pakistani workers about their dreams of America, and a community project displayed the results of a photo workshop with workers: flowers, parks and fruit. The last biennial in the Emirate Sharja under the motto »Art Ecology and the Politics of Change« used artist Tea Mäkipää’s work as an agenda for a ten-point program ranging from »Do not fly« and »Avoid any products with plastic packages« to »Do not produce more than 2 children«.<sup>17</sup> The biennial is hosted by a regime that leaves the world’s largest ecological footprint. The last example shows that the categorical imperative – the possibility of one’s own actions becoming general law – minimizes power relations to following personal ethics. The media has meanwhile discovered the »problem« of the economic miracle in Dubai and often describes the workers’ situation by focusing on one

individual fate,<sup>18</sup> in order to emphatically fixate the attention of the readers, who identify wholly with the system perpetuating the situation, on that lone individual.

One last example: in the film »A Bird's Nest for the People,« Christoph Schaub and Michael Schindhelm, Director of the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority since March 2008, interview the architects Herzog and de Meuron about the construction of the stadium in Peking. They discuss to what extent it is justifiable to »build in an undemocratic country like China that ignores human rights ... The working conditions on the construction site are not a topic at all.«<sup>19</sup> It is easy to interpret this blind spot as mere self-censure in the name of the client. It seems to be a task of idealistic art to ease the insoluble conflict between being involved in an outrageous societal reality and a universal participation in Being. This is exactly the point where it puts a big blind spot in the eye by creating generally accepted images: a camel in a suitcase, the dream of America, a personal code of conduct, the beautiful drama of an exemplary fate. This universality preemptively clogs the channels of criticism with meaning, with a pre-stabilizing harmony in order to prevent the divisiveness that criticism produces, to hinder our own aloneness and its irreconcilability. This universality opposes the universality that demands rights, because it cannot allow negativity in a world that is everything, which it in fact is.

In an article about the history of slavery, Alain Gresh recounts the voyage of the ship Comte d'Herouville in 1766, where Voltaire's drama »Alzire or The Americans« was performed on deck. The fate of the Inca princess Alzire touches the audience as a moral call to free the Indians from Spanish bondage, while in the hold the African slaves lie penned up.<sup>20</sup> This reminds us of the story about Gericault's »Raft of the Medusa« and Delacroix's »Freedom on the Barricades«, which Peter Weiss believes demonstrate the difference between operative and idealist aesthetics. It likewise recalls an entire tradition of Marxist theory of art and literature that transferred the criticism of the categories of bourgeois thought to the art production that was en vogue at the time <sup>21</sup> and whose avant-garde visions would look so foolish from the hindsight of history.

But we are confronted with societal contexts that are in need of careful description and analysis in order to understand them at all intellectually and emotionally. We can remember that in these embarrassing theories lie analytical tools that remain applicable and necessary. Marxist criticism of fetishism – the objectification of social relations – has rightly been applied to the history of leftist theory and its political epistemology.<sup>22</sup> We have the impression that this process of turning their own discussions into a fetish is not a specific mark of an explicitly leftist theory debate, but that this hardening into clusters of argumentation is also happening

at the moment in debates about the self-image of »globalized art.« Here, the contradictions seem to be as cemented as the moves in chess games, repeated again and again: the embarrassment of picking out as a central theme an injustice that occurs in relationships one is a part of; the phobia concerning the problem of substitution that only allows standing up for one's own interests and condemns criticism of the regional identity; respect for the »other culture« that is in fact a national mask of confidence in the ubiquitous structures of exploitation; the decline of formerly discussed artistic methods to become a mere vehicle for **unreflected** political information or an intolerable nostalgic transfiguration of Modernism. »Globalized Art«, the art centers in Beijing, Shanghai or Moscow, the museum districts, fairs and biennials in Berlin or Miami, take place in nations that are part of a new totalitarian capitalism. We've all been invited to these biennials; we present our magazines there or exhibit our work. Sometimes, we even play the role of major or minor functionaries. We should begin to think about this participation from a different perspective, taking into consideration all the consequences for the political and artistic self-images involved.

In his essay »Partitioning the Sensual,« Jacques Ranciere says that the creation of dissent is what allows a political space to come about in the first place.<sup>23</sup> This can be understood as a rejection of society as it is. But it is not about one's own inclusion; it is about changing society. The paradox inherent in this dissent is that rejection is not linked to disappearance – to non-existent alternatives – but rather to a presence in the very thing it denies and to the insistence that this society can be changed. Staying is a perpetual imposition. It is also a question of psychic energy; it can be as exhausting as screaming to interrupt the leaden, obsessively repeating narration of a nightmare.

Of course, magazines, panel discussions and exhibitions aren't usually nightmares. And one shouldn't scream in them. This text is meant more as a break in the routine instead, and as an appeal to continue within that break.

Appendix: On May 7, the directors of the Dresden Art Collections, Berlin State Museums and the Bavarian State Painting Collection signed an accord with the Dubai Culture and Arts Authority on the creation of a universal museum. The press conference was on May 29. The museums are to take over the architectural, technical and logistical planning, training museum personnel and creating corresponding study courses. Cooperation is planned with the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the British Museum. The museum is part of the cultural development project Khor Dubai, including an opera house, ten museums, 14 theaters, 11 galleries and nine public libraries. Rem Koolhaas has been commissioned to build an interim exhibition pavilion in 2009. »Here,

projects can be realized that are committed to the ideal of a universal museum as a place of global understanding.« (press statement)

1 »Export Dubai.« *Volume / Al Manakh*. ed. by Ole Bouman, Mitra Khoubrou and Rem Koolhaas. Dubai 2007, p. 202.

2 »The future of exhibitions lies in commerce. Dubai is probably the place where this will happen, under the enlightened despotism of its emir.« Daniel Birnbaum: »Dubai.« *Texte zur Kunst*, 66, June 2007.

3 Frederic Sicre, Executive Director of Abraaj Capital, tender, [info@mailier.e-flux](mailto:info@mailier.e-flux), 15 May 2008.

4 Among others with Peter Aspden, art critic, Financial Times; Maria de Corral, Telefonica Collection and Reina Sofia, Madrid; Katherine Gass, curator at the Jumeirah Essex House in New York; Beatrix Ruf, Kunsthalle Zürich; Soichiro Fukutake, Benesse Corporation; Catterina Seia, Unicredit, Milan; Francesco Bonami, Frances Morris, Colin Tweedy, CEO Art and Business, London.

5 Among others with Paolo Colombo, Art Advisor, Istanbul Museum of Modern Art; Jemima Mantagu, Director Turquoise Mountain, Kabul; Zaki Nusseibeh, Abu Dhabi Authority for Cultural Heritage; William Wells, Townhouse Cairo.

6 »Neues Glück in der Wüste,« interview with Ute Thon, *art*, March 20, 2008.

7 Booz Allen Hamilton, *Volume / Al Manakh*, p. 78.

8 »Filipina housemaids ... may become a rarity under a Philippine government directive to reduce the number of its women working as domestic helpers overseas, in a bid to reduce labour problems. A majority of labour problems the Philippine Overseas Labour Office (POLO) in Dubai handle, involve housemaids who have run away because of unpaid salary, physical abuse, overwork and contractual disputes.« Nina Muslim, Gulf News, Dubai, April 30, 2007.

9 »Building Towers, Cheating Workers, Exploitation of Migrant Construction Workers in the United Arab Emirates,« Human Rights Watch Report, November 12, 2006.

10 As in the major »Spiegel« feature on Dubai in January 2008, Rem Koolhaas in the foreword to *Al Manakh*: »There is now the talk of three-dimensional legislation, which could define an Arab Existenzminimum and mass-produce it.« (p. 7).

11 Mafiwasta, Violence Is A Red Line, March 12, 2007. The website was recently blocked by the semi-nationalized provider Etisalat. »The website was blocked due to several complaints from members of the public about offensive content posted on it.«

12 »The French government should ensure that the reputation of France's foremost museum is not tarnished by labour violations at the Louvre's first branch overseas. The French Ministry of Culture should make a public commitment and take all necessary steps to prevent the exploitation of migrant labor at the Abu Dhabi Louvre.« Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East Director of Human Rights Watch, March 2006.

13 Rem Koolhaas. *Volume / Al Manakh*, p. 7. He draws especially on an article by Mike Davis: »Fear and Money in Dubai« *New Left Review* 41, Sept./Oct. 2006.

14 *Volume / Al Manakh*, p. 78f.

15 *ibid.*, p. 411.

16 *ibid.*, p. 308.

17 Tea Mäkipää: »10 Commandments for the 21st century,« *ibid.*, p. 427.

18 For example Jörg Burger: »Tod eines Sklaven,« *Die Zeit*, April 27, 2008.

19 Andreas Stock: »Vogelnest fürs Volk,« *St. Galler Tagblatt*, 12. February 2008.

20 Alain Gresh: »Lektüren zur Geschichte der Sklaverei,« *Le Monde Diplomatique*, German edition, May 9, 2008.

21 Peter Weiss: *Ästhetik des Widerstands*. Frankfurt am Main 1985.

22 For example John Holloway: *Die Welt verändern, ohne die Macht zu übernehmen*. Chapter 4. Münster 2002.

23 »Consensus is instead a form of societal symbolization that aims to exclude the actual agent of politics: dissent, which is not simply a conflict of values or interest between two different groups, but rather goes much further than that to juxtapose one possible common world with another one. Consensus tries to reduce every political conflict to a problem that is amenable to expert knowledge or a government technique.« Jacques Ranciere: *Die Aufteilung des Sinnlichen*. ed. by Maria Muhle. Berlin 2006, p. 96.