

1. Could you tell us about the work you're showing in the Biennial?

2. Could you have possibly made this work outside of Sharjah? How is it of this place, if at all?

3. What challenges have you faced so far in thinking about and realising the work?

4. Who is this work for?

We're producing a new video for the Biennial, with the working title "Smile, you're in Sharjah." The title, as anyone who's been to Sharjah might guess, comes from this Emirate's own brand of welcome sign, spelled out in rocks and flowers in the middle of a traffic circle. The video will basically be a study of the patterns and rhythms of movement through shared spaces of the city-state, with a slight twist: we'll be intervening in some of the patterns that we film. We'll be identifying places and moments in the city and its suburbs/exurbs where inhabitants' movements are already somehow or somewhat choreographed / ritualized / syncopated. In some of those places, we'll film what we find; in others, we'll give the actors we find there some minimal choreography to enact, which will heighten or make more evident for the camera their already existing patterns of behavior. Our final movement study, a kind of choreography of/ for Sharjah, will emerge in the editing of the different elements together. We're hoping to construct a video that gives the viewer a sense of the cycles of this particular place - day to night, weekday to weekend, construction to demolition, labor to leisure - but also to explore the different currents of commuting and consumption required to connect and sustain those cycles.

The project is designed specifically for Sharjah, and Sharjah will be the protagonist of whatever narrative develops in the final video. We're also taking a lot of cues for our selection of places to film from interviews with inhabitants of Sharjah, which we're conducting as part of our preparation for the shoot. So the project could not be made outside of Sharjah. The greatest challenge we've faced in thinking about this project has in fact been making it specific enough to make sense within our collaborative practice, which is based on site-specificity, without having a prior long-term engagement with the place. At the proposal stage, we evaded this problem by drafting a concept for Dubai, which Mariam does know pretty well, and which allowed us to explain our methods with some specific referents. The first question that Jack had after reading the proposal was naturally, "Intriguing, but how would you do this in Sharjah?"

M: I responded that I would need to spend some time in Sharjah to figure out exactly what we could do there. The Biennial promptly flew me out for a quick research trip (at the end of October). I explored the city on foot and in cars, took photographs, talked to people informally and also recorded interviews with students at AUS about their perceptions of and relations to Sharjah as city. After reviewing together what I saw, heard and photographed, we put together the new concept. When we go back to shoot in Sharjah we will conduct several more rounds of interviews with people from various sectors of the city, which will most likely not make their way into the final project, but instead will inform our decisions on the final set of locations and shooting script. The challenge in realizing the project, meanwhile, will really be realizing the choreographic interventions, as that will involve obtaining permissions and collaborating with several different groups.

E: Having never been to Sharjah, the United Arab Emirates, or any other country nearby means I have no visceral impression of that part of the world. I have a conceptual impression from my research, but nothing sensorial or tangible. My inexperience with the

social / natural environment particular to Sharjah means that I will have to develop movement that embodies characteristics of Sharjah very quickly, without months upon months, or years upon years of refinement. I think, though, that challenge will keep the work very fresh, very present. We also plan to be working with and choreographing people with no dance/acting experience, which will be something new for me, but it is actually something I am quite excited to do. Because we'll also be improvising with people in the moment / on the spot, I won't have worked with them at all until just before we shoot, and so I won't know the range of movement of which their bodies are capable, or what they are willing to try. I will have to find a language to extrapolate movement out of these bodies that I have never worked with before. Improvising performed responses to specific sites has become common practice for us over the years of our collaboration; the new element here will be working with non-performers as 'performers' in the improvisations. While all of our collaborative projects share the common objective to film performances that are equally specific to the medium of video and to the place where they were made, this project will also, I think, link our collaborative work more closely or more evidently to some elements of my individual practice - for example, my work about the reconstructions of the city of Kabul and my 'warm data' projects, which are structured around questions and answers, like the interviews that are feeding into this project. With this project I am able to continue exploring the environment's effect on people, and people's effect on the environment. A subtle thread of this exploration is woven through each previous video piece, without overt proclamations or judgments - rather, the theme is embedded in the way the work presents a symbiotic relationship between site and physicality.

We are making this work, selfishly, for us first - the project presents so many new opportunities and challenges and problems to be solved. For those who live / work / study in Sharjah, second, because hopefully the process of engaging with us and being asked to think through (in the interviews) and act out (in the video) their relationships to the city will be enjoyable for them. For the international Biennial audience who are most likely to see the final video, third, because it might offer them a different perspective on the city and the roles that even they might play while passing through it.

5. If you weren't an artist, what would you be doing?

6. Where do you do your best thinking?

7. How do you feel about artist statements?

Perhaps I would be a botanist or a geologist because, in my present incarnation, in my free time I like collecting rocks, bones, feathers, plants and flowers. I do my best thinking while taking a walk, after dancing, and in the bath.

I think my alternate-world career paths are probably anthropologist, semiotician, or sysadmin. In this world, if I couldn't be an artist, I would probably be a professor (which I am anyway) or a programmer. I do my best thinking in hotel rooms, airports, and on my living room couch, almost always while seeming to do something else entirely. As far as artist statements are concerned, I find that writing about specific projects can be surprisingly helpful - sometimes you discover a lot about your work while trying to describe it - but writing an all-purpose artist statement is almost always painful, because trying to define your entire practice in perpetuity is fairly futile if that practice is (as it should be) flexible and changing. What disturbs me most about artist statements is generally the lack of proofreading.

8. What rhymes with Sharjah?

Not a whole lot in English - but a few words in Arabic, maybe?