

Mudbricks In The Desert

Artist *Elín Hansdóttir* went to the Marrakech Biennale



"I worked with eight local men, who understandably were all a little sceptical of the project in the beginning. I speak a little French, and so do they, but we obviously also had to invent another way of communicating. Since we only had ten days to finish the construction, we had to make very quick decisions together based on their expertise and my experience. Both the team and people passing by kept asking questions like "What is it and what is it for?" I don't believe there is an answer to that question, other than "What do you think?" It seems that the question as such is the greatest importance, not necessarily the answer. But after a rabbit had been sacrificed for lunch once and cooked in a tagine inside the spiral, the friendship had become grounded enough to forgive any kind of nonsense."

Artist Elín Hansdóttir is describing her work on a project for the Fourth Marrakech Biennale in Morocco, which started in late February and will still be on view until early June. Elín tells me

Words

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Photography

Elín Hansdóttir

she received an invitation and an artist's residency grant at Dar Al-Ma'mûn, about 14 km outside of the city of Marrakech. "Since I arrived in Morocco in December," she says, "I had been questioning the meaning and purpose of an arts biennale in North-Africa. I decided that it made more sense to me to develop something with locals out in the field in the village next to where I live, rather than showing something in the offered exhibition space downtown."

THE EFFECTS OF GLOBALIZATION

She tells me more about how the growth of biennials and art fairs all over the world is obvious evidence that globalisation has had an immense impact on contemporary art practice in the past twenty years. "This has led to a kind of 'international style' of works which, despite their differing quality, simply appear to be the same in any kind of location," she explains. "In response to this, many biennials have recently sought to encourage a direct 'engagement' with the 'cultural specifics' of each location, which can be tricky in a post-colonial era. From my perspective creating a large-scale site-specific work that costs the equivalent of an average Moroccan worker's two year salary is a huge responsibility. The stakes are high for experimentation in a country where most people strive for food."

When she got to the site she became interested in the traditional

Berber mudbricks (made from earth, water and straw), which most buildings in the village are built from. "What fascinated me was the fact that unlike us in the West, they hardly use tools during construction, instead they mainly employ manpower and imagination on site," she says. "Furthermore, it is interesting that they use the soil of the construction site to produce the building material. This results in whole villages almost seeming to mutate out of the landscape."

That was something Elín could re-

MOROCCAN SPRING?

Neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt have been in the news over the last year and a half, due to the Arab uprising. Morocco has stayed in the shadows, yet reports of human rights abuses have been many. But does Elín feel the winds of the Arab spring are reaching Morocco? "The protests in Morocco were quite peaceful in comparison to other Arab countries, although there were casualties," she says. "Morocco's King Mohammad VI proposed the writing of a new constitution, with the aim

organised a philosophical banquet in the village next to Mud Brick Spiral, where Driss Ksikes, a controversial Moroccan journalist and playwright, talked about art in public space which then opened up to a public discussion. It was very touching to see people of all ages who have never been asked their opinion take the microphone. Dar Al-Ma'mûn's team wants to organise similar events every month in the future, which hopefully will encourage people to share their knowledge and discuss relevant issues. I always intended for Mud Brick Spiral to be an excuse for random encounters, functioning as a kind of magnet or meeting point for other things. If the public space around the piece, which before was an empty dusty field, is being used for events like the before mentioned banquet, then I believe there is hope for art in public space."

Finally I cannot resist asking her about 'Nói albnói,' the film most of us saw her in first. She played Elín, Núi's girlfriend, and has very good memories of the project—but hasn't acted since. "I have never thought of pursuing an acting career, there are too many incredibly talented professional actors out there. But if I would someday be invited to be a fly on the wall in an interesting movie, I might accept the offer, out of curiosity. Film sets are fascinating places." 🍷

of increasing the power of the elected government, gender equality and to improve civil liberties. But since the security services, cabinet positions and religious appointments remain under the control of the king, it is questionable whether these reforms go far enough, for a country that has been accused of human rights abuse in the past. Despite all the changes, Morocco remains a very corrupt country, but it will certainly be interesting to follow the reaction of the younger generation on a long-term basis."

She didn't discuss the political situation much with the men with whom she was working. "But Dar Al-Ma'mûn

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late to: "An element of a site is altered and sometimes reproduced to create a different context. In the end we built a large scale spiral-like structure using mudbricks and attached mirrors that divide the viewers' movements into separate and distinct moments, as they walk past."

What will happen to the structure after the biennale ends? "The bricks will be distributed and re-used by the team that helped me build the structure. The mirrors will also be given away to the families in the village. The piece will disappear but the material will just be shifted to another setting."

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