

Let Me Entertain You:

A Consideration of Context and Audience in Curating the 4th Marrakech Biennale

– Carson Chan

Caught in the frantic, tangled, real, and imagined flows of twenty-first-century culture, the simple act of displaying art becomes an *exhibition*. A distilled compound of social mores, physical constraints, artistic desires, and personal ambition, every exhibition cannot but express the space between its curatorial inception and its public confrontation. As spatially arranged artworks and artifacts, projected images, sounds, smells, texts, and performances, exhibitions are powerful social technologies: an exhibition absorbs the perceptual differences inherent within a community of visitors while maintaining an internal unity. That no two persons can ever *see* the same show is a truism, but one that speaks of social dynamics at work—between cultural artifacts, the public sphere, and the individual. To the degree that any particular thesis or theme could be imparted through the selection and placement of artwork—and barring the rhetoric of accompanying texts, like the one you're currently reading—"Higher Atlas," the three-month-long art exhibition curated by Nadim Samman and myself, seeks to be an exhibition conscious of the sociopolitical and artistic context in which it operates.

This consciousness, though ever present, was nevertheless willfully submerged beneath the ultimate demands of public exhibition making. For whatever its worth, through actual experience or contemplative intellect, an exhibition should be a source of pleasure, if not entertainment, to investigate.

One of the primary concerns in organizing the Marrakech Biennale has also been the most fraught and plumbed. The brainchild of British arts patron, Vanessa Branson, the biennale's administration is based jointly in London and Marrakech, and operated by a team composed of both British and Moroccan citizens. Since its inception in 2005, the relationship between the biennale and the city of Marrakech remains in a dynamic juggle of hopes, plans, and expectations. Combine this with an attendant host of cultural observers, critics, artists, and curators in Morocco and abroad, and what the event should accomplish becomes even more contested.

Well aware of the potential colonial reading of the Marrakech Biennale as an institution—though anachronistic and demeaning to the Moroccan state as this reading may be—"Higher Atlas" was formulated as an response to the history of art exhibitions in Morocco, and the uneasy relationship they have had with a non-elite public. This, rather than the desire many biennales have to survey the newest artistic trends, has been the curatorial theme and context of "Higher Atlas."

The exhibition is dispersed over the Théâtre Royal, the half-finished royal commission designed by Tunisian architect Charles Boccara that remains incomplete after a decade of stalled construction because of fundamental design flaws; the Koutoubia cisterns, which lie beneath the foundations of a previous mosque; and the Bank el-Maghrib building, located on the south side of the perpetually bustling Djemaa el-Fna square. Building upon Miwon Kwon's conception of site-specificity, and further updated from the term's 1960s' geographically indexed meaning to one that takes into account the fluidity with which contemporary art moves between form and discourse,¹ curator Maria Lind proposes "site-sensitivity" or "context-sensitivity" as a way to shift the locus of meaning from the work to the viewer. "Context-sensitivity," she states, "can naturally encompass site-specificity, but at the same time it offers space for much more: the reflective, sensitive subject, for instance, and the personal contribution."² The artwork's significance, far from being externally determined and imposed upon the viewer, is reformulated as a subjective construction, its meaning fathered by the

viewer's aesthetic and intellectual reaction to it. Curatorially, this shift in agency was important for "Higher Atlas," sustaining an ambition to present contemporary art from around the world in a city that has traditionally been exposed to very little of it. Shirking any teleology that organizes art by nationality, participants were largely selected for their ability to project "context-sensitivity" through their work, the universality of the ways in which their work communicate, and that they all privilege the primary experience of the senses. These three elements establish rich content through which audiences with varying degrees of exposure to contemporary art can find enjoyment. Though deep scars remain from its status as a former French protectorate, Morocco has been independent for more than half a century, and no longer should foreign information, knowledge, or technology brought to the country be seen as an act of colonization.³ Part of an international community, foreign knowledge in Morocco is not taught, but shared. Knowledge then is not so much given from without, but taken from within.

In her book *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco*, Katarzyna Pieprzak outlines Morocco's twentieth-century artistic heritage, a history of the control of art, which was both externally prescribed and self-regulated, before and after the country's independence.⁴ For Maurice Tranchant de Lunel and Prosper Ricard, the first two directors of the Protectorate Fine Arts Administration, Moroccan art—including carpet weaving, pottery, monuments, and so forth—was something to be *saved*.⁵ Schools were founded to teach a protectorate codified version of silk dying, illumination, bronze engraving, and embroidery—often in forms that had naturally ebbed from practice, but institutionally revived for the pursuit of a Western projection of Moroccan authenticity.

That Moroccan artisans did not seek a scaled practice of mass production was perceived as a *failure* of Moroccan culture. Through the introduction of machines and factories, "Moroccan arts would be brought into the industrial era, [...] however premodern characteristics would be protected."⁶ Art exhibitions of this period, organized explicitly for an audience composed of tourists and Moroccan elite at institutions like the Dar Bartha Museum in Fez, consisted of salon-style hangings of carpets, painted dishes, pots, carved wooden furniture, and filigreed metal ware. The authenticity sought by the French was in fact the exoticism they imagined—an image ultimately as foreign to them as it was constructed to Moroccans. Some of the artifice has become native. Today, many Moroccans will concede that hadiths (Islamic practices gleaned from Muhammad's actions) ban the depiction of figures, and Islamic art is made expressly to celebrate the divine. A myth originating from this time, this convention has become a socially enforced directive that has prevented Moroccan artists from developing a truly independent, artistic cultural identity.⁷

After Morocco gained independence in 1956, its museums were transformed from being storehouses of colonial ideals into institutions for the broadcast of national identity. As in many newly independent states free from their recent colonial past, Moroccan modernity, with its tenets of democracy, education, and religious freedom, is characterized by a process of legitimization through tropes set by Western powers. Appearing modern, ironically, was a project in continuing the very narratives that bound Moroccans to the past. In the 1960s, Moroccan artists adopted canvas painting, often of the abstract expressionist type, the medium and contents of which sought to appear both *authentically* Islamic in its rejection of figuration, and as modern as their Western counterparts in New York or Paris.⁸ Educated, well traveled, and internationally connected, only the elite population of the country understood the implication of this cross-cultural conversation. Just as it was subject to French oppression, modern, independent Morocco had similarly marginalized its non-elite population. Art, understood as an aesthetic expression done not purely for an instrumental reason (like decoration, or religion), was never available, in any institutional sense, to the general population.

In organizing the 4th Marrakech Biennale, this condition presents a double bind. Understanding the biennale as a biennale like any other, as Morocco is a country like any other,

relinquishes the exhibition from having to make concessions to a *uniquely different* public. Such a view would only legitimize the binary and stereotypical view of the world as West and East, haves and have-nots. In his preface to the twenty-fifth-anniversary edition of *Orientalism*, Edward W. Saïd enforced that it was the role and responsibility of the intellectual to complicate this facile perspective. Where collective passions boil into abstract fantasy, the intellectual must sustain a logical discussion to dismantle these distorted claims of perceived differences.⁹ On the other hand, neutralizing historic difference in the development and reception of art is to intentionally omit the local audience from the biennale's equation. How does one curate around historic narratives of power without replicating them in the negative? And does the very conception of this problem already sanction it as a problem?

Charlotte Bydler observed that if the recent proliferation of international art exhibitions coupled with the intensification of near instant multimedia communication in the twenty-first century has homogenized art practices around the world, it has also destabilized the West's hegemonic control over the fundamental definitions of the field.¹⁰ The global dispersion of Western institutions of art making and display—including education, exhibitions, public discussions, publications, symposia, and, of course, biennales—does indeed promote a preestablished (Western) mode of operating in foreign contexts. However, this does not immediately disable the potential for these activities to develop into their own. In fact, non-Western contexts for Western institutions, like the biennale, sponsor conceptual and intellectual developments that would have found fewer stimuli in native structures. In a globalized world, Western art shown in the East, for example, stops being *Western*, as it is interpreted, and thus imbued with meaning, by the local public. Art's significance, its interpretation, cannot be distributed globally. For the period of its exhibition, it must be considered local.

Biennales not only bring with them a diversification of how art is defined and culture disseminated, but the financial incentives from cultural tourism (i.e., increased hotel, restaurant, retail, and transportation revenue) and the suggestion of societal maturity have a visceral effect on the local economy and culture. The Gwangju Biennale in South Korea is a case in point. Since it started in 1995, the biennale, which many call the first major international contemporary art biennale in East Asia, helped heal the wound of the May 1980 civilian massacre, which followed the democratic uprising against then military dictator Chun Doo-hwan. The biennale implemented in Gwangju not only provided a new cultural outlet for the city, but it also serves as a reiterating avowal, a living monument, of Gwangju's commitment to open, individual expression.¹¹

If not truly global then at least consistent within democracies where a high level of freedom is given to personal expression, the social dynamics between individuals, public space, and art objects provide the first step in understanding how exhibition making can participate in developing cultural identity. Art historian Charlotte Klonk has defined exhibitions as cultural manifestations that give space to a particular realm between the (semi)private institution and the public sphere, allowing for cultural values to be both inscribed collectively and experienced subjectively.¹² The knowledge produced by the exhibition experience, beyond the particular facts imparted, comes from the unique, empirical sensations specific to the self-directed way each visitor moves about and takes in the exhibition. The exhibition experience, impossible to fully predetermine, can nevertheless be scripted and choreographed by the curator in a way that best conveys both the exhibition's and the artists' intentions. The exhibition, as it were, is activated into existence jointly by the space, artwork, curator, and visitor. For Jacques Rancière, the characterization of the viewer as an active spectator begins the process of independence from hierarchical mandates of power, colonial or otherwise. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière discusses the mutability of categories like *active* and *passive* (powerful and weak). In the past, landowners who watched over estates were called *active* citizens, while the workers that toiled the land, incapable of political involvement, were *passive* citizens. Rancière continues, stating that:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing, and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place.¹³

This process, like Lind's inflection of site-specificity as context-sensitivity, transfers the signification of the object at hand, the exhibition, away from the artist, curator, and itself, to the audience. To paraphrase Rancière, there is no exhibition without the spectator. Furthermore, shifting the significance of exhibitions from the producer to visitor echoes Edward W. Saïd's concept of anti-dynasticism, a possible strategy for escaping the Orientalist framework. In the first of three Harry Camp Memorial Lectures delivered at Stanford University in 1992, Saïd explained that the anti-dynastic is generated from an individual position, rather than one institutionally ordained.¹⁴ Uneasy with being understood as a product of a specific education, and equally uneasy about producing a line of thinking in which others follow, Saïd formulated the anti-dynastic intellectual as someone whose key motives and interests spring forth from personal experience. What is important for our discussion in this concept is that independence (as a visitor or citizen) can be gained, not solely from distancing oneself from an institutionalized system (like colonialism or Orientalism), but from identifying personal experience as the discrete and non-transferable marker of selfhood.

The biennale form is of Western origin. Stemming from European trade shows of the eighteenth century, which led to the world expositions of the nineteenth century, the biennale, as a large-scale international iterative art exhibition, carries with it the ideology of universal signification, the ideal of a globally shared culture, and the desire to participate in a community bound by the appreciation of aesthetic experience. The sequestering and ideology building of nations through art as exemplified by the national pavilion model of the Venice Biennale evolved into the documenta model, which has always included artists from around the world as individuals and not national representatives. Traditionally, the biennale format reflects a commitment to the continued renewal of culture, an institutional claim for the local within the international sphere, and an offer of first-hand experience of the wider world.¹⁵ Though noble as these aims may be, they hardly define the total range of form and intention biennales can take. Yet this Western biennale imperative is so strong that iterations in non-Western locales are often judged against this model. Some observers criticized the first edition of the Dakar biennale, Dak'Art, in 1992, for being both not enough like the Venice Biennale, and too directly inspired by the large-scale 1989 exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" held at the Pompidou Center and La Villette, in Paris. The Dak'Art curator, Yacouba Konaté, pointed out that artists were grouped by nationality (as in Venice) in the catalog only, and that in none of the written or spoken communiqué had the Senegalese organizers of Dak'Art made any mention of the Parisian exhibition.¹⁶ Curator Okwui Enwezor notes the problematic dichotomies of African/Western and modern/primitive that some exhibition makers and museums find themselves grappling with. The Musée du quai Branly in Paris, built in 2006 and displaying a collection of artifacts from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, and the poorly named 1984 MoMA exhibition, "'Primitivism' in twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern," are ready examples. Enwezor sees exhibitions of African art falling often into ethnocentric, genre, hybrid, or postcolonial models; though in Susan Vogel's exhibitions of African art,¹⁷ he identifies a postmodern model that combines various genre, practices, methods, and localities that require audiences to "speculate on the meaning and status of objects, images and ideas."¹⁸ In the 1988 exhibition "ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropological

Collections” at the Center for African Art’s former New York space on Park Avenue, Vogel presented African “readymades”—coins, fabric, farming and hunting implements, and the like—rendering textile reminiscent of Paul Klee, metal works evocative of Minimalist Art.¹⁹ Presented on pedestals and lit with a soft glow, the objects’ presentation resembled the installation of Western art’s most celebrated objects, rather than the curiosity cabinets once standard. Charged with an ethnological exhibition, but breaking open the walls of interpretation, Vogel exposed the possibilities of colliding the culturalist/contextualist frames with theoretical/conceptual ones. Kasai metal currency, presented as a unique thing of reverence rather than a specimen of a class of objects, removes the viewer’s ethnographic blinders and places the object on a wider, richer plain of existence. Perhaps the most powerful idea to come out of this exhibition is that the exhibition space had become the new *site* for the work. The work’s new potency, its enlarged cultural purchase, was gained by the handling of its presentation in space.

If Marrakech provides the context (Lind) for the biennale, then the Théâtre Royal, Koutoubia cisterns, and the former Bank of Morocco building are the sites (Vogel/Enwezor). And if the biennale model of exhibition making is descended from the West, then perhaps a Moroccan form of display, the arts festival, can be used as a model for the Marrakech Biennale, in particular, the “Higher Atlas” exhibition. As detailed by Pieprzak in this catalog, over the past several decades, arts festivals in Morocco have become populist venues, ones that, by the 1990s, became part of the entertainment economy.²⁰ Extremely well attended, arts festivals often combine live music, theater performances, film screenings, readings, art exhibitions, and workshops within several days of programmed activities. Between June and August of 2006, Pieprzak counted fifteen such events in Morocco. Since its inception, the Marrakech Biennale has sought to deliver art, film, and literature to the city over the course of several days. This has remained the case, though for “Higher Atlas,” we have chosen to include music, architecture, and literature within the remit of the *art* exhibition so as to intensify the simultaneity of disciplines. Bringing work from other disciplines to an art exhibition is, of course, nothing new, though within a Moroccan context, it serves as recognition of an established local form. Christopher Mayo, a composer, was commissioned to write a chamber piece; essayist Gideon Lewis-Kraus, a text; the band CocoRosie, a sonic installation; and architects Barkow Leibinger and Jürgen Mayer H. were asked to construct a spatial reaction after a site visit. Along with more than thirty artists and exhibitors from around the world, “Higher Atlas” will site these participants in such a way that they produce conditions embedded in shared experience.

The above considerations served as both yardstick and lodestar in the preparatory year leading to the opening. As mentioned earlier, after these lessons simmered in our thoughts, they were duly buried to make space for the true pleasures at hand. An exhibition is also called a show, because in the end, it should be a space of entertainment, of amusement.

- 1 Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997).
- 2 Maria Lind, "The Discursive Sculpture," in *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, ed. Brian Kuan Wood (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), 54.
- 3 A more accurate description of Western projections of Morocco would be "simplistic," rather than colonial. Morocco is often lumped together with the "Middle East" (the Persian Gulf), with which it shares little in common. Otherwise it is checked under North Africa, a designation that confuses Morocco's geographic affinities to Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan with its governmental, religious, and social ones.
- 4 See Katarzyna Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 5–6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 98–99. Pieprzak cites two fatwas (legal pronouncements) declared by religious clerics in the 1920s that condoned artistic representation of images. Sheikh Muhammad Abduh legitimized the practice of fine arts, and Sheikh Muhammad Bakhit legalized photography.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 9 Edward W. Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), xvi–xvii.
- 10 Charlotte Bydler, "The Global Art World, Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art," in *The Biennial Reader*, eds. Elena Filipovic, Marieke van Hal, and Solveig Øvstebø (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2010), 393.
- 11 Western examples include documenta, founded in Kassel in 1955 and recurring every five years, and the Venice Biennale, which began in 1895. To eradicate the specter of Nazi ideology from postwar Germany, the first documenta featured many artists, like Picasso and Kandinsky, featured in Hitler's Degenerate Art exhibition of 1937. The Giardini site of the Venice Biennale was chosen to reclaim for it a national identity. The garden was created by Napoleon after he conquered it in 1797.
- 12 Charlotte Klouk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 13 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009), 13.
- 14 Edward W. Saïd interviewed by Joseph A. Buttigieg and Paul A. Bouvé, *boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* 20, no. 1 (1993), reprinted in Edward W. Saïd, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Saïd*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 186.
- 15 See Caroline A. Jones, "Biennial Culture: A Longer History," in *The Biennial Reader*, 66–87.
- 16 Yacouba Konaté, "The Invention of the Dakar Biennial," in *The Biennial Reader*, 113.
- 17 Susan Vogel is a professor of art history at Columbia University, New York. She was the founder and director of the Museum for African Art in New York. Her academic background has perhaps allowed for a more informed position from which to curate, as opposed to other curators whose practice is more often defined by the form of the exhibition itself.
- 18 Okwui Enwezor, "Topographies of Critical Practice: Exhibition as Place and Site," *The Exhibitionist* 2 (June 2010): 48.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 20 See Katarzyna Pieprzak, "Taking Moroccan Art to the Streets: Ephemeral Engagements and Sustained Community Practices" in the present volume, 280–311.