

Artists reflect on age of anxiety in Sharjah

A group of contemporary artists explore the ways everyday technologies have altered our collective consciousness and created the age of anxiety, but the exhibit in Sharjah has been postponed due to the coronavirus outbreak.

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Author: Naima Morelli

An art exhibition on collective anxiety and how online technology and communications feed it seems more relevant than ever today amid the global fears due to the coronavirus outbreak and the extensive information available.

"Art in the Age of Anxiety" is based on the premise that today's connectedness is unprecedented in terms of mobility and access to technology. The exhibition, curated by Sharjah Art Foundation's senior curator Omar Kholeif, brings together more than 60 works spanning sculpture, prints, video, virtual reality, robotics and algorithmic programs by more than 30 international artists. They all deal with the dominant sentiment of the coronavirus-prone world of today: collective anxiety.

But just like many art events that have been canceled or postponed due to precautionary measures against the outbreak of the virus that causes COVID-19, the new exhibition, which was to be opened at the Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), was also postponed.

"We seem to be living in an age of anxiety now more than ever," Kholeif, who is also the SAF director of collections, told Al-Monitor. "At this moment, the thought of catching influenza streams across an RSS feed and within days [it has created] global chaos, which now halts events, gatherings and global unions."

"We are constantly scrolling through Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and our messages trying to discern if something has shifted in our universe," Kholeif said, noting that people want to exit the "age of anxiety," but at the same time we are on edge because of the attention-grabbing design of our devices that push us to look for the "next bad thing" to happen.

The exhibition, which reflects Kholeif's 10-year research on technology-driven anxiety, shows different artists' take on how everyday devices, technologies and digital networks have altered the collective consciousness.

The "post-digital" condition is investigated across a range of media by contemporary practitioners including Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Cory Arcangel, Wafaa Bilal, Cao Fei, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Joshua Nathanson, Trevor Paglen, Siebren Versteeg, UVA, Guan Xiao and YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES.

The immersive exhibition includes portraits referencing Facebook's facial recognition system, installations representing virtual dystopian cities and giant screens transforming

newspaper headlines into abstract paintings. Jenna Sutela's *Nimiia Cetii* (2018) exploring consciousness and Lynn Hershman Leeson's *Shadow Stalker* (2019), which looks at predictive policing, identity theft and the dangers of data mining, is also part of the selection.

In the particular context of Sharjah and the UAE — a hub for technological research — the curator wanted to push the boundaries of exhibition design and worked with architect Todd Reisz to create a physical maze of corridors and experiences that would fully immerse the viewer.

“I chose the works and worked collaboratively with Todd to create a scenography that would allow visitors to understand and feel their complicity in this digital realm,” he said.

In setting up the show, Kholeif also considered the fact that Sharjah has been a trade route and a site of continuous migration since the 1700s. “I draw a correlation between that and the very concept of communication technologies. The internet is the network of all networks after all,” he said. “It is about the movement and migration of information, people and ideas — so that idea feels particularly relevant.”

Kholeif is aware of the impact the shows he puts together have on the local art scene in Sharjah, the UAE and the art world in general. “[SAF] President Hoor al-Qasimi has tasked me with an incredibly rich, challenging and exciting job — the responsibility to shape and tell a global history of art from a non-Western perspective, as well as helping shape one of the preeminent collections of international art in the region,” he said.

Since its beginning, the foundation, as well as the Sharjah Biennial, have juggled freedom and control, socio-political denunciation and care not to cross red lines. It did not always manage to maintain this balance. During the 2011 event, Sheikh Sultan fired the program's curator Jack Persekian for the “public outrage” caused over an art installation by Mustapha Benfodil.

Benfodil's installation consisted of 23 mannequins wearing T-shirts and some graffiti painted on the walls of a courtyard. The text of the graffiti and the T-shirt slogans were sexually explicit and anti-authoritarian. It was considered inappropriate, given the location where the work was installed: a public space close to a mosque.

“Certain topics need to be approached in a different way in the Arab world versus the West. There are definite limits to what can be said, but if approached differently anything is up for debate,” Atteqa Ali, associate professor of art history and curatorial practices at Zayed University in Dubai, told *Al-Monitor*. “Artists here have to negotiate a line between what is acceptable and not.”

Ali's research is focused on the use of historical references in art to reflect on current social and political events, and in her field she still feels that SAF is supportive of artists and researchers. “In addition, the foundation actively tries to engage the local community through educational programs and commissioning artists that develop projects with the community,” she added.

And there are indeed many projects SAF is conjuring up, despite the global uncertainty. These include growing the collection through strategic acquisitions anchored around the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, casting a new lens on the global history of art. Also planned are touring shows across the globe, raising the profile of art from these regions.

“The goal with the collection is to think holistically about the whole Emirate of Sharjah and the diverse audiences we serve and creating activations across multiple sites. So look out for more things happening across Sharjah soon,” Kholeif concluded.

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