

VARIOUS SITES, MARRAKECH

MARRAKECH BIENNALE 5

Founded by Vanessa Branson, the Marrakech Biennale had its fifth outing this year (26 Feb-21 March). Jareh Das headed to Morocco to see how the event shaped up



'Bienvenue à Marrakech' by Hicham Benhoud, commissioned by the Marrakech Biennale, courtesy of the artist. Photo by Pierre Antoine

In the last few decades, art biennials have flourished in locations outside of traditional Western art centres, with cities such as Bogota, Istanbul, São Paulo and Singapore now acknowledged as setting new agendas for contemporary art through their successful biennials.

The theme of the fifth edition of the Marrakech Biennale, *Where are we now?*, riffs on the Moroccan city's positioning as a site for local-global exchange and art production, and its status as a meeting point of different cultures. Dutch-Moroccan curator Hicham Khalidi led the visual art programme this year, which positioned artists in dialogue with both an international art scene and the wider African continent. With 452 participating artists, from more than 25 countries, and over 120 local craftsmen and suppliers involved, this year's programme seemed to address some of the criticisms about previous editions of the biennial, notably the charge that the event seemed to engage only with an incoming international audience.

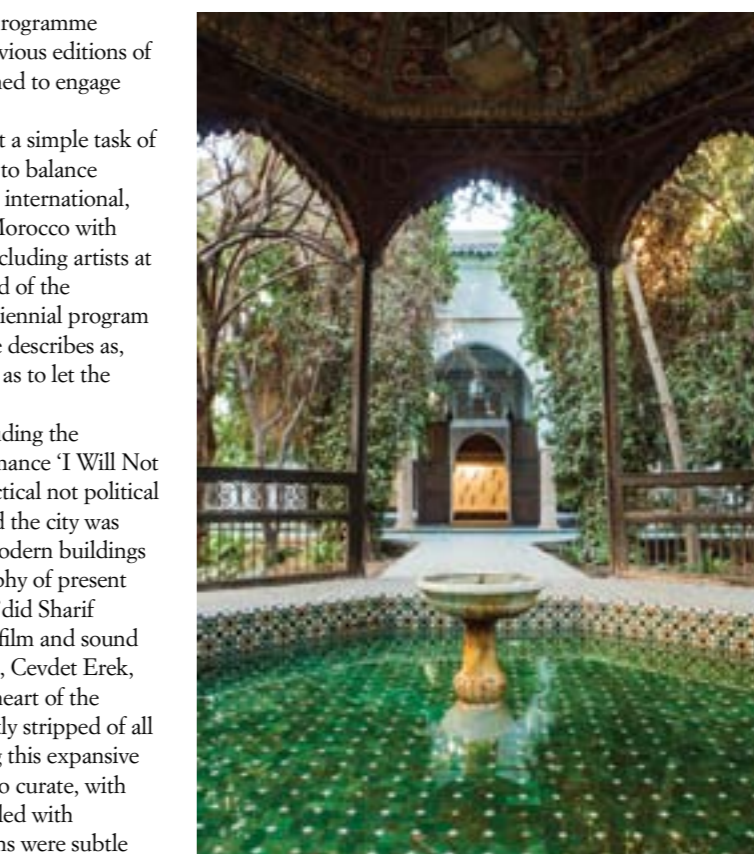
With this in mind, curating the biennial isn't just a simple task of dominating the artist roster with local talent. It has to balance emerging artists with the established, local with the international, and ultimately ensure a biennial that's relevant to Morocco with international appeal. Khalidi approached this by including artists at different levels of their career based in Morocco and of the Moroccan diaspora, and was able to implement a biennial program that was vibrant, engaging and ambitious, which he describes as, 'Trying to present the artists without a hierarchy so as to let the works speak for themselves.'

Aside from a few opening night setbacks – including the rescheduling of Nigerian artist Jelili Atiku's performance 'I Will Not Stroll With Thami El Glaoui' (rescheduled for practical not political reasons) – the sheer breadth of work placed around the city was commendable and the use of both historical and modern buildings to site these works presented an engaging cartography of present day Marrakech. The sixteenth century palace of Sa'did Sharif Ahmad al-Mansur, for instance, was used to house film and sound art commissions by Katinka Bock, Shezad Dawood, Cevdet Erek, Can & Asli Altay and Asim Waqif. Located in the heart of the walled Medina area of the city, the palace is currently stripped of all its glorious ornamentation and lies in ruins, making this expansive site the most minimal and, perhaps, most difficult to curate, with large courtyard areas that could easily have been filled with monumental pieces. Instead, the palace commissions were subtle and contemplative of the site itself.

Waqif's installation 'Pavilion of Debris' stood out as a fun, interactive installation that emitted sounds as you walked over the salvaged material used to construct the piece. Made from material sourced in and around the palace, the work emphasises how discarded materials can be recycled to form new ideas. Turkish artist Cevdet Erek's sound installation 'Courtyard Ornamentation With Sounding Dots and a Prison' is part of an ongoing series of works placing acoustic sound in various sites; in this case, repetitive clicking noises emanated from speakers placed strategically in sunken areas of the palace's former courtyard.

Other works included Katinka Bock's 'Red red red', whilst in one of the indoor spaces was a looped screening of Shezad Dawood's 'Towards the Possible Film'. Shot on the otherworldly landscape at Legzira Beach in Sidi Ifni, Morocco, this video work draws on the region's history and past wars.

Bank Al-Maghrib is the central bank of Morocco and this now-abandoned building in Marrakech formed a central biennial venue.



(Above) Altay and Asli Can's 'An Archipelago from the Mediterranean', courtesy of the artist and Marrakech Biennale (Left) Dar Si Said, one of several illustrious residences around the city used as a biennial venue. (Below) Turkish artist Cevdet Erek's 'Courtyard Ornamentation With Sounding Dots and a Prison', part of a long-term sound art project infiltrating historic spaces with aural interventions. Here, Erek placed speakers throughout the courtyard of Sa'did Sharif. Commissioned by Marrakech Biennale and supported by SAHA Istanbul. Photographs by Achraf Bendaoud



The bank lent itself particularly well to paintings by the Khamlichi sisters. Above the entrance was a portrait of the young ruler of Morocco, 'The King Inspires Me' by Zaynab Khamlichi, with the title suggesting the popularity of the country's present ruler, while a particularly striking work by thirteen-year-old Hiba Khamlichi, 'Duplication of the Abstract', is a fusion of repeated geometric and tribal motifs – exceptionally intricate and well-executed, the work demonstrates Hiba's potential as a painter.

Placed in one of the bank vaults below, Younes Rahmoun's '77' is a hauntingly evocative light installation of copper lamps made in collaboration with local craftsmen. The work, in its title, references the seventy-seven branches of the Islamic faith.

Meanwhile, Lili Reynaud-Dewar's 'Teaching as an Adolescent' was inspired by seminar groups the artist held in hotel rooms in Geneva. Live conversations between Reynaud-Dewar and her collaborators were streamed from Geneva into the first floor of Bank Al Maghrib. Visitors were invited to sit on rugs and listen to the participants relating their encounters with Moroccan society and reading out pre-prepared texts on these experiences. According to the artists, these narratives offer an alternative way to travel through time and space: 'The circulation and flux taking place between the selected writers is what we are interested in,' said Reynaud-Dewar. 'These books we read are not philosophical or theory-based. On the contrary, they deal with very personal even autobiographical narratives. By reading them out loud we make them public, but they keep the intensity of very intimate narratives.'

Nigerian artist Jelili Atiku's 'I Will Not Stroll With Thami El Glaoui' was performed in Jemaa el-Fnaa, the city's central square usually home to hawkers, countless tourists and snake charmers, and a space where Moroccan tradition encounters modernity. Drawing on Yoruba *Egungun* masquerade, Jelili's performance sought to animate and engage with this very public space: Wearing an elaborate white Akhnif and riding a Caleche (horse-drawn carriage), the artist arrived in the square accompanied by fifty rams swathed in colourful cloaks, symbolic of a dual-relationship of leading and following. Jelili describes the performance as 'An ode to the reinstitution of Amazigh values that were previously suppressed in Morocco.' Atiku's research into the Arabisation of the Amazigh indigenous people of Morocco stems from his interests in social activism and liberation of the oppressed. For Atiku, the recent reinstating of the use of the Amazigh language in Morocco forms



(Above) Alexander Ponomarev's massive bamboo sculpture 'Voice In The Wilderness', recreates the shipwrecked Costa Concordia. Image courtesy of the artist.
(Left) 'Teaching As An Adolescent' by Lili Reynaud-Dewar. Photo by Achraf Bendaoud

part of a wider context of liberal reforms.

The complexities of creating a sustainable biennial are not solely economical, but are as much about dealing with issues of access and interpretation, especially when biennial organisers seek real engagement with the people of the city in which it is staged.

Where are we now? addresses some of these issues but it also needs further editions to build on. Whilst the biennial has come a long way from previous editions with an ambitious and well thought-out programme of artists, sites and parallel projects, there is still work to be done in clarifying who the Marrakech Biennale is for – is it for the people of Morocco or for the international jet set who hop in and out from country to country, biennial to biennial?

When organisers were questioned about the future of the Marrakech Biennale during this year's press conference, institutional support and sponsorship, they said, were stronger than ever but it became apparent that governmental support would be needed to secure its future long term. We asked Hicham Khalidi what the legacy would be if this were the last Marrakech Biennale. He was confident the biennial would continue, and reflected on this quite poetically: 'Anything you do has impact,' he said. 'Whether they are small things or big things. It is very difficult to measure the outcome of this, but there is an outcome. Simply, the energy you put into something never goes in vain.'



A still from Keren Cytter's 'Siren', which examines the mass-circulation of imagery and video via mobile phones. Courtesy of the artist and Marrakech Biennale

RUNNING ALONGSIDE THE MARRAKECH BIENNALE WAS A HOST OF SIDE-PROJECTS. HERE ARE FOUR THAT CAUGHT OUR EYE

Hassan Hajjaj's café take-over at L'Blassa With signatory Hajjaj fabrications (an energetic clash of Arab and African design aesthetics), the café offered a place to stop for tea before heading into the labyrinthine art-deco L'Blassa which was host to 3D printing workshops by African Fabbers, who interrogate the relationship between new tech and traditional culture

Pimp my Garbage by the Z'bel Manifest An immersive and participatory eco-installation in which the viewer had to wrestle through a plastic bottle doorway to get in. The work made visible the sheer abundance of manmade waste and urgent need for more recycling

Voice in the Wilderness by Alexander Ponomarev This monumental bamboo replica of the sunken Costa Concordia ship, perched atop a hill in the Agafay desert, appeared like a mirage when viewed from a distance

Freq_Out 10 by Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary A take-over of Marrakech's half-built Theatre Royale by the Austrian art collective, featuring sound installations and performances that brought this exceptional space to life and made us wonder why such an acoustically accomplished building was never completed



(Left) Scenes from Jelili Atiku's performance piece, 'I Will Not Stroll With Thami El Glaoui'. Photograph by Mahdi Messouli.
(Below) Austrian art collective Freq-Out commandeered the half-built Theatre Royale in Marrakech, bringing sound art and performances into the space. Photograph by Achraf Bendaoud



(Below) 'Pimp My Garbage' by the Z'Bel Manifest turned a room into an eerily comfortable shrine to manmade waste. Photo by Othman Zine

