

Sharjah Biennial 7

6 April-6 June
(www.sharjahbiennial.org)

Review by **Dustin Ericksen**

Roza El-Hassan, a self-described 'European/Arabic' artist, began her performance for the Biennial by telling the audience that the autobiographical text about to be read by her friend was available to read on a laptop – as long as one could understand Hungarian or Arabic. Her colleague then read the text, in Arabic, for about 20 minutes. People seemed to enjoy listening to her funny tale. I didn't understand a word.

Located at the geographical intersection of Africa, Asia and Europe, the UAE seems almost perfectly situated to host works dealing with trans-nationality or trans-continentality. El-Hassan's performance exemplifies the strengths of curator Jack Persekian's sensitive approach to the Biennial's corny-sounding theme: 'Belonging'.

The best work in the Biennial brings the idea of belonging to a compelling level of empathy. Beat Streuli's touristy slide show accepts the terms of the European artist's outsider status in a brave and pragmatic gesture. Recognising the high ratio of expatriates in the UAE, Pio Diaz's ice-cream stand encourages non-Emirati residents to exploit loopholes in the regulations that prevent them from engaging in profitable activities.

A more subtle polity is evident in the twin projections of teens from Ramallah dancing in turn to pop music in Phil Collins' *They Shoot Horses* (2004). Awkward, graceful, stylish and self-conscious, these kids are somehow hyper-normal and beautiful; only the title of the work refers to the potential for



desperation and sadness outside the frame of the video. Zeyad Dajani's single-screen animation and architectural model, *As is When*, turns a severe formal exploration into an issue of great emotional and political depth.

Jayce Salloum's multi-monitor, projection-filled room, *everything and nothing and other works* (2001), almost serves as a model for the larger project of the Biennial. Displaced persons, torture survivors and others from eastern Europe, Palestine and Central America are interviewed in thoughtfully presented and persuasive videos. But the significance of the installation lies in the specificity of each person's story in relation to a greater context. Reflecting a problem within the biennial phenomenon, this work interrogates the benefits of the global view to those whose lives are negatively affected by the broad strokes of international events.

Similarly focused is Mario Rizzi's six-screen projection *Out of Place (Images Deracine)*. Years of documentary footage of several different members of Parisian immigrant communities slowly reveal both universality and oppositions of identity. Constituencies become confused for the subjects themselves, and the question of the value of cultural heritage is immanent. The inclusion of works such as this successfully reflects the local context of Sharjah and its relation to the theme of this Biennial.

Above: Beat Streuli, *Alaroba Road*, 2005, digital slide projection, detail

Philippe Parreno

2 April-7 May
Friedrich Petzel Gallery,
New York (1 212 680 9467,
www.petzel.com)

Review by **Ben Davis**

It's a tribute to the richness of French artist Philippe Parreno's project at Friedrich Petzel that it provokes questions on at least three distinct levels. The first set of questions comes when one attempts to make sense of the relations between the physical components of the installation. A flashy neon marquee located outside the gallery trumpets the exhibition's name, 'The Boy From Mars'. But the brazenness of the sign that calls you inside is contradicted when, upon entering, a discreet white shelf stocked with a nondescript display of DVDs appears to be the sole component of the show. That is, until one realises that the shelf is actually a secret panel that swings open like a revolving door to reveal the empty spaces of the galleries behind. Traversing these, one finally discovers a film playing quietly in the darkness of the final room.

Interpreting the film, one is confronted with a second, distinct set of questions. It offers images of a silent landscape in rural Thailand, dominated by an enigmatic, tent-like building. A series of glowing forms rising from the tent might be interpreted as extra-terrestrials. But any futuristic intimations are counterbalanced by the revelation that the building (Parreno brought in architect François Roche to make an actually functional structure) is decidedly low-tech in design, apparently powered by water buffalo, the only living creatures that can be identified in the film. A third level is encountered



when one returns to investigate the contents of the shelf, for it turns out that visitors are encouraged to walk away with the DVDs from the show, offering them their very own copy of *The Boy From Mars* film to take home. The sleeve explains that the disc is treated with a special process that will cause it to self-destruct 48 hours after the visitor opens it. One is then beset by questions about where, exactly, this 'work' is located in time and space: is the DVD a souvenir of the exhibition, or does the special treatment indicate that the exhibition itself is just a teaser for the DVD project?

Like the individual components of Parreno's installation, these different layers of questions overlap but do not intersect. In each case, the ambiguities seem to point to some missing signifier, some key that is needed to make sense of the relationships between conflicting elements. But, aside from this, the levels have no clear theme in common except for the willful failure to add up; the goofy disjunction between physical objects in the installation seems to have little to do with the stately meditations of the film or the issues raised by the decaying DVD. In this way, 'The Boy From Mars' manages to form an almost perfect intellectual maze, each new turn sending one back to the beginning.

Above: Philippe Parreno, *The Boy from Mars*, 2003, 35mm transferred to high-definition video