

The Shifting Site

– Nadim Samman

What are biennales for? Another contributor to this volume has outlined the historic national, governmental and diplomatic motivations for establishing events of this kind.¹ The efficacy of such undertakings as prestige-enhancing, tourist-enticing strategies is also understood by politicians worldwide. Proof of this is the profusion of biennales and triennales—more than two hundred and counting. Given this large field, it is worth commenting on the operational conditions that underpin the Marrakech Biennale. Such observations contextualize its fourth edition, both in terms of the festival's institutional development and its visual artistic program for 2012.

Unlike the only other “biennale” to involve Morocco—the itinerant Arab Art Biennale, staged in Rabat (just once) in 1976—and unlike almost all of the international festivals mentioned in Anthony Gardner's article, the Marrakech Biennale is an independent non-profit initiative. It was founded in 2005 by Vanessa Branson, a British philanthropist and businesswoman based in London and Marrakech, as a response to the frosty relationship between the Islamic world and “the West” during George W. Bush's War on Terror. Branson intended the festival—then named the Arts in Marrakech Biennale (AiM)—to serve as a cultural bridge that would bring international and Moroccan intellectuals together in dialogue. In this first iteration a greater focus was placed on literature and film than visual art. It was a small-scale event, largely cloistered in Branson's *riad*, with the exception of the exhibition of her Wonderful Fund Collection at the (privately owned) Musée du Marrakech. At this initial stage, AiM was closer to a salon than a public festival.

The second AiM largely followed the same model, but its art component doubled in size to include both the photographic survey exhibition “9 Perspectives from South Africa” at the Musée du Marrakech—curated by Ross Douglas—and “L'appartement 22 Rabat/Marrakech,” a survey of works in various media by contemporary Moroccan artists at the L'École Supérieure des Arts Visuels (ESAV), selected by Abdellah Kharroum. The latter would curate the ambitious main exhibition of the next biennale in 2009, entitled “A Proposal for Articulating Works and Places.” It is worth noting the relevance of one of this exhibition's key gambits, namely, its exploration of correspondence between continents and different geographies. This is encapsulated, for example, by Francis Alÿs project “Don't cross the bridge before you get to the river” (2009), which examined both the physical and the intangible borders between Africa and Europe. Moving beyond the traditional gallery-style presentation, a special project also brought the biennale out of the museum into the street: Julien Fisera and Laurent P. Berger's *Stories of Order & Disorder* was a successful community-oriented artwork that took on the Moroccan storytelling tradition by deploying thirty bards—both professional and amateur—and a fleet of fifteen petit-taxi drivers to regale unsuspecting passengers and passers-by.

Carson Chan and I were determined that our own curatorial project should take up and extend the third biennale's promising inroads towards grassroots community engagement and its successful artistic commissions for the public realm. Moreover, as non-Moroccan/Maghreb art specialists, we did not desire to produce a summary of national or regional artistic practice. Much less, to apply the reductive bracket of *authentic* Moroccan identity *fait accompli* to artists who may not agree with our designation. Given the preparation time available, any attempt to achieve the first would have either reiterated a stale status quo or advanced a woefully reduced snapshot of local practice and intellectual agendas. In the second, the spectres of ethnic essentialism and marketing expediency would have rendered such an approach unhelpful. Hence, we invited a broad selection

of international artists to envisage how the particular physical and cultural context of an exhibition in Marrakech might feature within a macro circuit or transcendent condition. The results were surprising and exhilarating, all the more so because they combined sophistication with successful strategies for communicating to a wide audience from disparate backgrounds.

Higher Atlas

The exhibition was to be called “Higher Atlas.” High connotes reverie and transcendence. “Higher Atlas” suggests a cartography of the beyond. The title of the main exhibition of the 4th Marrakech Biennale also refers to an element of the local geography: the Atlas Mountains, which are visible from the venue. In this respect the site is the starting point or “ground” for a series of trips, both virtual and physical. The key theme is that other worlds begin where one is standing; beyonds are closer than one might think. This thesis is explored through site-specific interventions by international contemporary artists, architects, a composer, and a writer. In doing so, a complex experience of site emerges from the particularity of the venue, encompassing a nexus of local and global conditions. The exhibition creates numerous vantage points, making strange the ground beneath one’s feet. Amongst the proposals we received, some moods emerged: shifts in scale from small to large and vice versa, from surface to depth, from ground to figure, inversions and parallax; passages from social to mystical and the other way around.

Carson and I imagined an exhibition whose elements would be completely conceived in response to the site and physically produced in Marrakech. In this way, we hoped, the biennale could further satisfy its mission to produce international cultural bridges through an exhibition project while avoiding the pitfall of content-importation that is blind to context. In pursuing this agenda we were keen to manage the participation of foreign artists so that they would not merely play the role of tourists—bringing with them precious material baggage in the form of art objects. Instead, they would have to undertake two residency periods—one during the research stage of their work, the other during its production. Nevertheless, we were aware that this strategy would not, by itself, avoid demonstrating the “nomadic principle” which Miwon Kwon has identified as a defining condition of capital and power in our times.² The freedom that would allow many of our artists to produce “site-specific” projects is unequally distributed among creative professionals with different passports.³ Recognizing this critical appraisal of the relationship between the traveling cultural worker and a global status quo, we sought to avoid commissioning works that might valorize exotic changes of scenery—benign displacement—enjoyed by frequent-flyers and those proffering dubious notions of cultural “hybridity.” Such shibboleths are, as Jonathan Friedman has observed, a well-known posture in the contemporary artworld:

In the work of the post-colonial border-crossers, it is always the poet, the artist, the intellectual, who sustains the displacement and objectifies it in the printed word. But who reads the poetry, and what are the other kinds of identification occurring in the lower reaches of social reality? [...] The global, culturally hybrid, elite sphere is occupied by individuals who share a very different kind of experience of the world.⁴

On a more concrete level, we initiated series of structured interactions between biennale artists and mentees from the Université Cadi Ayyad—the latter tasked with playing key roles in the production of the former’s works. Each of the practitioners was paired with students—most of whom, it was established during the application process, had never left Morocco. These young persons were to help locate and negotiate with artisans, communicating both artists’ visions and the artisans’ proposed translations. Thus, the exhibition would not involve outsourcing the fabrication of already complete designs but, instead, constitute a platform for conversation between three demographics,

and drawing mobile and less-mobile stakeholders into a shared dialogue in order to produce new, consensual, realities. The biennale also extended the creative space to workshops, led by biennale artists, with primary-school children and young orphans.

Within the spectrum of contemporary artistic practice, attention to a “site” need not be limited to demonstrating how the physical elements of an actual location can formally condition art objects.⁵ While actively encouraging works in this vein, the main exhibition is also informed by approaches that revel in a semantic slippage between site and content—which proffer “multiple definitions of the site, [that] in the end find their ‘locational’ anchor in the discursive.” This is a method that deems as sites “cultural debates, a theoretical concept, a social issue, a political problem, an institutional framework [...] a community or seasonal event, a historical condition, even particular formations of desire.”⁶ According to this understanding, for the biennale to be a fruitful investigation of “site,” our project would have to contend with narratives and ideologies as much as material exigencies.

Beyond artists’ projects engaging with the discursive vectors outlined above, and the workshops with varied stakeholders, it was clear that a research focus on the history, problematics and possibilities for exhibition making in the city and—more generally—Morocco was called for. In attempting to understand these issues during our early preparation we were struck by the lack of available written information. Dedicated public archives do not exist, and foreign resources are rather limited. The existing scholarship—such as Katarzyna Pieprzak’s *Imagined Museums*—was most useful in outlining the dearth of non-profit institutional support for contemporary artistic production, exhibition and discussion within Morocco—to say nothing of the awkward and frequently orientaling parameters by which expatriate Moroccans find visibility abroad. Consequently, we have attempted provide a platform for the exchange of historical and methodological knowledge—which we have pursued through this publication—as opposed to a basic catalogue—and the *Marrakech Biennale / Dar Al-Ma’mûn Conversations* series.

It is worth reemphasizing that the biennale has not operated as if it were here to fill in a *tabula rasa*. At least two generations of post-colonial artistic strategies exist and are alluded to in this volume. However, perhaps the biennale’s most serious task is to make a visible representation in contemporary Moroccan cultural space for others to push back against. To the same degree that the essays herein will be informative we expect them to be disputed by Moroccan artists and other specialists. Let us hope that our endeavor provokes at least as much as it pleases. To increase the likelihood of this happening a bilingual publication was imperative. In sum, our attempt to address “site” in the broadest sense led us to a critical re-fashioning of the purpose of the biennale as an organization—and the wider social and intellectual engagement that has been inaugurated by this process will continue in subsequent editions.

The Shifting Site

Before taking up our curatorial posts we were informed that the exhibition venue would be the sixteenth-century ruin of the El Badi Palace—built by the Saadian Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur, located in the *medina*. Its immense complex of crumbling rooms, sunken gardens, reflective pools, pavilions and a dungeon seemed to offer an unparalleled set of creative opportunities. Discussions between the biennale and the authorities in charge of the site had already taken place with positive results, and the former had been informed that timely submission of appropriate documents to designated bureaucrats would seal the deal. However, with just three months to go before the “site-specific” exhibition—and after all our artists had already conducted preliminary research trips—we received an unequivocal letter from the Ministry of Culture informing us that, due to renovation work, the palace would not be available after all. Without a physical site, we asked ourselves, what would be

specific about our exhibition? So began the urgent process of re-imagining each artist's biennale project.

Under these circumstances, the biennale's status vis-à-vis the public life of a country undergoing great social change was an open question. For all our intentions of cultural "bridging" I could not help recalling Werner Herzog's diary for the making of *Fitzcarraldo*—a film shot on location in the Amazon whose production was interrupted by war; whose lead star was incapacitated by dengue fever before quitting halfway through and being replaced; a shoot in which the crew's camp was set alight by arsonists; a film that, even before any of this happened, seemed a near impossible project to its director. "We are like workmen," he wrote, "appearing solemn and confident as we build a bridge over an abyss, without any supports."

Some of the uncertain conditions that shaped this edition of the biennale are hardly novel. The previous installment also suffered a last minute change of venue. Originally set to take place at the Musée du Marrakech, a disagreement between the two organizations necessitated a move to the Palais Bahia—a beautiful, state-owned nineteenth-century complex in the heart of the medina which was formerly the residence of General Lyautey—head of the French colonial army in Morocco—before becoming one of the city's key tourism sites. What Kharroum's exhibition lost in the field of planning through the venue change it gained in the form of a wider audience. However, the Bahia did not come without its own strict conditions, including a prohibition on affixing objects such as framed photographs to walls and, as Holiday Powers has noted, more poetic difficulties in the form of stray cats making physical alterations to an artwork that featured live goldfish. In Morocco, it has been said, anything is possible but nothing is certain. Although we bore this maxim in mind at the start of the "Higher Atlas" project its sagacity would become more apparent. Not in terms of some kind of ethno-cultural "truth" but, rather, as a summary of the biennale's potential in a state where public/museum spaces that can accommodate contemporary artistic practices are exceedingly thin on the ground.

This uncertainty constituted a major site-specific condition to be addressed on the administrative level. In order to intervene in the chosen architectural space we had to engage the particularity of its political nexus. As an independent organization founded by a non-Moroccan, operating in a field unrecognized by government policy, this was by no means straightforward. We had to work hard to discover how and where power and permission to use the state-owned venue could be exercised *for us*. In pursuing our agenda the original meaning of the name Marrakech—"to cross and hide"—seemed apropos. Moreover, while chasing our goals the nascent uncertainties of the historical moment in the form of the Arab Spring became an unexpected factor. While we originally expected to locate "consent" to use the Badi somewhere within a spectrum of royal prerogative and national bureaucratic process, the dynamic emergence of democratic reforms—in public and private—meant that we found ourselves pursuing a shifting target.

Our desire to be more civic facing, and reliance upon opaque bureaucracy to help facilitate this outreach, seemed to leave us with few public options following the formal rejection of our application to use the Badi. The alternatives available were mostly limited to numerous resorts and private leisure facilities, such as golf courses, hotels and restaurants—contexts whose economic and cultural circuits exclude most Moroccans. But for a partnership with the Marock Jeunes—a local youth arts organization—who helped us to secure permission from the Mayor of Marrakech to use the Théâtre Royal, the biennale might have retreated into the gilded cocoon of the tourism industry. Instead, however, the new collaboration, venue and interaction with local authorities has further integrated the biennale within the city of Marrakech. It has also situated our project within the devolution of power from national to municipal structures that has emerged in the wake of the significant November elections.

(Web)site Specificity

Despite the change of location, it was clear that some of our key curatorial concerns remained valid. A fundamental question, whose answer problematizes fixed conceptions of site and, consequently, identity, remained relevant: Namely—*What is a threshold today?* The question is difficult: physical and virtual walls are penetrated—other content pours in through fissures. Our distributed network technologies effect a layering or compression of spatial, temporal and cultural relationships, the production of knots which incorporate physical and virtual sitehoods, locality and globality.⁷ As the philosophers Galloway and Thacker have it:

[I]nside the dense web of distributed networks, it would appear that *everything* is *everywhere*—[there is] little room between the poles of the global and the local. Biological viruses are transferred via airlines between Guandong Province and Toronto in a manner of hours, and computer viruses are transferred via data lines from Seattle to Saigon in a manner of seconds.⁸

Thus, the notion of a threshold allows us to delineate particular nodes within a network but not necessarily the spectrum of content that passes through them—or, put otherwise, links to other nodes. With a little attention, differences in physical/spatial sites are revealed in their subordination to the planetary dimensions of business, finance, trade and information flows; as set within a continuous net.

“Higher Atlas” stages the Théâtre Royal as a junction.⁹ The various interventions on-site, about site, around and above it map an expanded field of “location”—they are a series of connections to a node, shooting off in multiple directions towards other spaces, both physical and virtual. In this respect the exhibition is conceived in a manner antithetical to the widespread “white cube” staging techniques of many Western galleries and museums.¹⁰ It performs *sitehood as a point in a constellation*, figuring the theater as a super-node in a multi-dimensional web of connected physical and discursive locations. Thusly, the works in the show textualize space and spatialize discourse.¹¹ The artworks in the “Higher Atlas” flip the viewers’ perceptions, so visitors can consider sitehood (and cultural identity) as a series of connections.

One way to understand the above is through recourse to Gestalt psychology’s interest in the conscious negotiation of *figure* and *ground*. Together, these concepts make up the totality of what is perceivable. A general characteristic of our treatment of this totality is that visual scenes involve attending to the figure and not the (back)ground. Put otherwise, it is the figure on which perception is focused—it appears structured while the ground is undifferentiated. This tendency is highlighted by the well-known reversible/double images of Toulouse-Lautrec’s *Old Woman/Young Woman* drawing and the more ubiquitous black-and-white *Vase/Faces*.¹² In each example, to “see” one of the two inherent percepts involves the other receding.¹³ Viewing both requires a kind of intentional switching back and forth—toggling—whereby ground flips into figure and vice versa. The relevance of this phenomenon is not limited to such drawings. Indeed, McLuhan used the concept to discuss the “satisfactions” and “dissatisfactions” of technology.¹⁴ In a related manner, this exhibition re-figures the Théâtre: it is a mapping or figuring of the area of inattention that surrounds and subtends the stage. The knotted/networked ground ceases to be a generic condition and is instead brought into focus, given various structures and forms through artists’ works.

“Higher Atlas” constitutes a series of explorations of the figure/ground nexus as it pertains to a particular node in our planetary and informatic networks. It is a series of mapping exercises that engender “recognition of things that were already present although not central to the culture’s perception of itself.”¹⁵ Though—frequently—background, these things are never a passive container

but, instead, an active part of reality. This curatorial rubric proceeds according to the following insight by Peter Lunenfeld:

Being able to flip between ground and figure is central to everyone's use of the culture machine. What we all [...] need is a catalog of strategies to help us understand what we download and contribute to what we upload. The ways that we figure words, sounds, images, and objects from the ground of information will define how and what we are able to produce with the culture machine.¹⁶

We need an art that takes into account global networks/ground in a manner that goes beyond the kind of disenchanted postmodern impasse asserted by Baudrillard in *Simulations*—the image of a map of such detail that it comes to cover the whole earth, obscuring more than it reveals. We need artists whose work updates the conception of mathematical sublimity for the magnitudes of the information age—projects that act as catalysts for the viewer's apprehension of almost limitless information, inhuman speed and exponentially increasing space as an expanded field of moral/practical competence and interpersonal cooperation.

Needless to say, the totality is both Moroccan *and* global. Our hope is that the artist's works will begin to expose the mutable contours of placehood in an empowering way. This is not a case of a neo-colonial overturning of authentic and previously unthreatened "Moroccan" values on the part of the exhibition's (foreign) curators and artists. Not least, because alleged corruption of tradition can easily be employed in defense of an ossified political status quo. Moreover, as Abdellah Laroui notes, "the disavowal of Western culture cannot in itself constitute culture." To repudiate it in preference for indigenous traditions—of putative pre-colonial provenance—is an essentialist, Arabocentric approach that relies on dubious myths of origin. Just as elsewhere in the world, many seemingly indigenous traditions are in fact diasporic cultural constructs and hybrid phenomena when viewed according to the perspective/ground of the *longue durée*.¹⁷ Note, for instance, the fact that the El Badi Palace was built by Portuguese slaves, that it was formerly clad in Italian marble from Carrara and that its design is informed by the Alhambra in what is now Spain. In relation to the last of these points, the historical conditions referenced by the designation "post-colonial" are here of the reverse order, with Southern Spain (Al-Andalus) only attaining independence from Moorish control in the fifteenth century.

Given these considerations, our commissioning for "Higher Atlas" is not concerned with establishing a kind of product differentiation for Marrakech—highlighting the city as a unique location within the global tourism market.¹⁸ A classic strategy in this respect would be the production of Orientalist and self-orientalizing images, obscuring the unfinished project of Moroccan modernity. Instead, artistic toggling from "local" figure to global/network, from contemporary to historical and vice versa brings this ongoing process to the fore.¹⁹

Jon Nash's *Burnout* is key example. While using YouTube to research Marrakech online, the artist observed that "traditional" tourist imagery of sand dunes and camels vied for attention with radically counter-hegemonic content: Next to a video of a *Morocco Fantasia* he encountered a clip called *Fast and the Furious: Morocco Drift* featuring a young man in a beaten up Mercedes performing an extensive donut skid in a suburban street of Gueliz. The name was a modification of the Hollywood film title *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* and the clip was set to the movie's theme tune. The fact that Moroccan teenagers are exposed to American cultural exports—and that these products influence their interests and behavior—is not a revelation. This is happening all over the world.²⁰ What interests Jon is the collapse of real and virtual social space indicated by this content. This is a "post-internet" condition in which Web 2.0 architecture do not just record goings on "in real life" but, instead, facilitate the creation of virtual communities which go on to become actual

groups in offline space. Once the virtual ground is prepared, so to speak, the real world moves. In the words of the critic and artist Artie Vierkant: “Just as Barthes’ proclamation of the ‘death of the author’ is a celebration of the ‘birth of the reader’ and the ‘overthrow[ing] of the myth,’ Post-Internet culture is made up of reader-authors who by necessity must regard all cultural output as an idea or work in progress able to be taken up and continued.”²¹ The rev-head uploaders are thus the estranged cousins of Egyptian youths in Tahrir square, and Nash’s project—which involves communicating with them in both virtual and real space before participating in their activities and, eventually, inviting them to present their content at the main exhibition space of biennale—is a true international cultural exchange.

Another work, Jürgen Mayer’s sculptural re-imagination of a satellite dish, also draws our attention to the link between immaterial data flows, physical architecture and the constitution of social identity. The dishes of the medina are a clear counterpoint to the traditionalism commonly attributed to it. Beaming down to earth amid “authentic” Moroccan accoutrements such as donkeys and jellabas are moving images of the utmost (post)modernity—analogue to the crop-topped tourists who arrive from the sky on regular flights from Western Europe and beyond. Here is an apt figure for the constellations—metaphorical and cosmic, but ultimately worldly—of which Marrakech partakes; the same constellations that Jon Nash explores in his participant-observer role.

But perhaps more so than internet use, which requires a level of literacy ill-distributed throughout Morocco, the satellite dish performs an iconic function. Indeed, the artist Younes Baba-Ali—who has previously worked with the motif—asserts that these objects play an important role in educating his countrymen. Whether or not one views such an education as appropriate or, conversely, threatening, it is useless to deny its impact. With planetary space and time collapsed by digital communication, the proliferation of satellite dishes in the red city is akin to the construction of thousands of new doors (*babs*), portals to the beyond. Mayer’s contribution to “Higher Atlas”—a fissured iron dish comprised of many Arabic numerals, overlapping and sometimes inverted to form a complex pattern—approaches this issue. The pattern is appropriated from a data-protection design that would normally appear on the inside of an envelope containing a bank statement—it is, in this sense, a border mechanism which performs a threshold between public and private information, possession and dispossession. In formal terms, the numbers also carry the memory of Islamic pattern normally apparent in traditional Moroccan window screens; in a historical sense, they refer to the achievements of ancient Arabic philosophy while engaging the numeric encoding of digital content transmitted and received by the dishes. This occurs even while the content enabled by these achievements may be written off as alien. Here, then, is a vision of information that seems, at least in terms of route, to have arrived from beyond this world—even as it springs from the ground beneath one’s feet; a work that, like others in “Higher Atlas,” identifies the play between disappearance and revelation, location and loss, as a key cultural site.

- 1 Anthony Gardner, "Biennales on the Edge, or, a View of Biennales From Southern Perspectives," in the present volume, 90–123.
- 2 Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another: Notes on Site Specificity," *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 96.
- 3 As Zygmunt Bauman has noted, under the condition of globalization mobility "climbs to the rank of uppermost among the coveted values," with "the freedom to move [...] fast becom[ing] the main stratifying factor" today. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (London: Polity, 1998), 2.
- 4 Bauman, citing Jonathan Friedman, on traveling cosmopolitans. *Ibid.*, 100.
- 5 A strategy pioneered by artists including Richard Serra and Robert Smithson, amongst others.
- 6 Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another," 93.
- 7 In communication networks a node is a connection point, either a redistribution point or a communication endpoint. The term comes from the Latin nodus which means, literally, knot.
- 8 Alexander Galloway & Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4.
- 9 An appropriate choice given the fact that its walls were breached when the current ruling dynasty took Marrakech.
- 10 This is, as commonly charged, an amnesiac and decontextualizing approach to display that implies a formal, politically and economically neutral frame — a tabula rasa.
- 11 Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another," 95.
- 12 In the latter, you can see the drawing as either a central vase or two faces that are looking at each other.
- 13 When the old woman is figural all the rest of the picture is ground; when the young woman is figural the old woman disappears into the ground.
- 14 According to McLuhan, the technology of industrialization has human industry and commerce as its figure, and the natural environment/resources as its ground. However, when pushed too far this order flips: pollution and ecological disaster become figure, while the culture of factory work (consumerism) recedes.
- 15 Peter Lunenfeld, *The Secret War Between Downloading and Uploading* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 43.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 17 see Khalid Amine, "Crossing Borders: Al-halqa Performance in Morocco from the Open Space to the Theatre Building," *TDR* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 64.
- 18 Miwon Kwon, "One Place after Another," 95.
- 19 Acknowledging a reality encounterable just meters from Badi: the Cyberpark — a municipal park built in the 2000s by the local architect Amine Kabbaj, located within walls of the medina. This is a large public area with internet-ready computers installed for the use of all persons interested.
- 20 The name of the clip indicates this, even as it demonstrates Japanese influence on the US. The fact that the Moroccan clips do not measure up to the gloss of Hollywood is also of limited relevance.
- 21 Artie Vierkant, "The Image Object Post-Internet," <http://jst-chillin.org>.