

Death and the Library – fears and reflections

“Art and culture are some of the very best instruments for promoting mutual understanding and co-operation between different peoples and cultures.”

Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qassimi, Ruler of Sharjah, UAE

Sharjah, Feb. 2000

“It is important, when developing the Islamic and Christian identities, that we consciously describe “the other” in such a way that he does not appear as a threat but as a worthwhile human being.”

Khaled Akasheh, Catholic father in the Vatican State

Kristelig Dagblad 19.09.01

“The most effective attack on Bin Laden, from the point of view of destruction, is not via cruise missiles, but a financial strangulation carried out via the Internet.”

Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, war strategists

Information 20.09.01

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Considerations

What imaginary or symbolic building can be constructed to counteract the fear that is terror’s most important weapon? I have asked myself this before, here in Denmark, and do so again now, so as not to surrender to the apocalyptic visions of violence and terror; to the spinning and exploding confusion of old and new world orders; or even to the sight of strangers on the street. Now, where every foreign face (every fluttering headdress or, conversely, skin-tight pants, or different opinion or action) will, at first glance, be seen as a shadow representative of a terror network – and therefore give rise to genuine fear.

Reflections

Tuesday, 11th September, stuck in the traffic while the news from the radio hits me, I looked into the eyes of a dark-skinned man in a car in the opposite lane. He looked anguished and horrified. In Upper Gladsaxe, I heard about a dark-skinned man walking around in amongst a group of white women, shouting with upraised arms, “ I am not a Muslim, I am a Protestant”. In front of the local supermarket, I caught the eye of a dark-skinned woman, and her gaze was the same as mine because we were thinking the same thing, were in the same place, and through our gaze, we were joined in pain.

Wednesday, the 12th: in the kiosk, under the stony gaze of the owner whose rolled-up sleeves revealed a tattoo with Arabic lettering, I did not dare buy either of the tabloid newspapers, only *Information*. I thought that this man had probably seen so much blood that it had figuratively congealed in his own veins. I can well understand why. Reflections, like congelation, are both processes and maybe one ends before the other even sets in.

While the WTC can be rebuilt as a monumental symbol of Western freedom and capitalism, Bin Laden’s face can never be eradicated by a real bomb; such a bomb would merely cause his image to splinter, and multiple into countless reflections worldwide.

To sum up the considerations of reflective people over the course of the week, the terror network can only be bombed from within – just as we know it from the countless hacker

invasions into our computers – through knowledge, recognition, discussion and, not least, the acceptance of differences. How does one now, with a “white heart” as the Arabs so beautifully put it, dare to confront these differences? How does one learn, let alone change?

An example:

Artists and researchers on an expedition to the Arab world

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) there is an emirate called Sharjah. It is the third biggest of the seven emirates and has a population of about 500.000 stemming mainly from Asia, the other Arabic countries and Europe, including England (which occupied the territory until 1971 when the UAE became an independent nation). Many will have heard of Dubai with its large international airport, fewer possibly of Abu Dhabi, the regional capital, and fewer still will have heard of Sharjah, which is nevertheless the UAE’s “cultural emirate”. Sharjah was named cultural capital by UNESCO in 1998 and Dr. Sheik Sultan bin Mohammed al Qasimi, a historian educated in England, leads the emirate under the dictum, “Art is the only way to an understanding between cultures”. Within the last five years he has established up to 30 cultural centres for children and a whole series of museums and educational institutions. He has founded two large universities, the Muslim Sharjah University and, at the same time, The American University. In other words, the Sheik would like his people to be highly educated, clearly understanding that even his world looks different today than it did 50 years ago when Sharjah’s income was based on pearl diving and minor trade. To increase his people’s cultural and historical awareness, he has entered into co-operation with the Iraqi chief archaeologist, Dr. Al Azzawi, in an effort to maintain and restore Sharjah’s ancient city centre.

In the spring of 1999, I received a fax from Sharjah inviting me to exhibit at The 4th Sharjah International Biennale whose theme, and accompanying international symposium, was “The Local and the Global”. Contrary to normal practice, I only received four days to consider the offer, but nevertheless said yes, filled as I was with wonder and delight. Without ever having visited a Muslim country, I rushed off, a single woman alone. After only a few days, where I experienced extraordinary hospitality, I was invited to hold a large solo exhibition at the Sharjah Art Museum in January 2000, only nine months later; in other words, another lightning invitation to 40° C, and another big project in the pipeline. This rather skewered time element, which was like starting to read a book in the middle, was not, however, the worst possible starting point. Against the background of the symposium, which concluded with a declaration that art education at the highest level is (also!) of great importance to Arabic cultural awareness and identity - not least in relation to globalisation. I reacted as chaotically fast as they had, and issued a reciprocal invitation. This developed into the cultural project “Overlaps: North-Southeast” and was completed in February 2000, barely ten months later, under media coverage which can be compared to the Cannes festival. Or perhaps even to being X-rayed!

In close co-operation with the Sharjah Department of Culture & Information, Else Marie Bukdahl, director of the Royal Danish Art Academy and others in “The Arabic Ray” created a cultural project which was the first Danish as well as the largest exhibition, seen from an artistic perspective, in the UAE’s short history. 21 artists took part, as well as architects, poets and researchers who together represented a substantial part of the field which the Royal Danish Art Academy traditionally covers in its teaching.

During the preparations in Denmark, co-operation was established with three resident Arabs: the Palestinian journalist, Hussein Shehadeh, the Moroccan linguist, Joshua Sabih, and the Iraqi astrophysicist and poet, Salim Abdali. They accompanied us to Sharjah, where they contributed as lecturers as well as extremely qualified, and acutely needed, simultaneous interpreters, serving to reduce the language barriers in a project whose starting point was fine art and architecture.

A number of lectures were given at both The American University and the Sharjah University on the relationship between Arabic and European culture within the areas of fine art, architecture, literature and music. The works at the exhibition were open to the public and we experienced both 15 men kneeling in prayer before one of the abstract paintings as well as laughter at the sight of one of the sculptures. There was a live, TV poetry reading, and Joshua Sabih and Salim Abdali were also in the studio for the live phone-in programme in which they had to justify their opinions and discuss their lives in Denmark. The programme generated so much interest, receiving telephone calls from all over the Gulf region, that it had to be extended.

At a special request from our hosts, a spectacular evening workshop was held in the desert separating Sharjah and Dubai where we, in co-operation with the architecture students from The American University and Dr. Al-Azzawi's staff, recreated a 1:1 ground plan of the oldest building in Sharjah, the Al Hisn Fort. The workshop received coverage from TV stations and the fire brigade as well a number of military helicopters were also present. After the workshop, many students commented that they had not given much thought to where we all respectively came from, but rather to what we were working on. This can be regarded as an inspirational epilogue to our exhibition as well as a promising prologue to future co-operation.

Finally, it should be mentioned that most of the documentaries made by Sharjah TV were repeated up to five times so as to show how the cultural exchange with Denmark had started.

An English/Arabic catalogue of more than 100 pages was published and included articles by, amongst others, the director of the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre, Dr Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, who contributed with an article on Søren Kierkegaard, the first text on Kierkegaard in Arabic. Else Marie Bukdahl wrote about the relationship between European and Arabic fine art and culture. Both her articles and a number of her lectures given at the two universities, dealt with the Alhambra in southern Spain where Christians, Muslims and Jews lived together and contributed to the prosperity of the region both economically and culturally. At the direct invitation from the Sheik, Else Marie Bukdahl lectured at the Muslim university on the radical American artist, Jackson Pollock to 200 black robed and veiled women. Dr professor Finn Ove Hvidberg found himself in a similar position when lecturing on Arabic inspirations in Danish literature.

Immediate consequences

As a result of the great success of "Overlaps. North-Southeast" Sheik Dr. Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi suggested the creation of an Art Academy in Sharjah and sent two officials to Copenhagen in June 2000 to see the Royal Danish Art Academy at work. This

suggestion has since been put on hold while a college is being established based on a plan put forward by the British Royal Academy.

In the field of research and literature, "Overlaps. North-Southeast" broke new ground for dialogue and co-operation. Joshua Sabih and Dr Per Aage Brandt have, for example, started preliminary discussions with Dr Sweed, professor in Islamic Philosophy at the Al-Ain University in UAE and educated at the Sorbonne. They are considering the establishment of a network for the Arabic world that will include Arabic Nobel prizewinners within various disciplines.

After the Sharjah expedition, Lars Bukdahl published his poetry collection "116 shocks for the Sheik", and Salim Abdali is working on an anthology of modern Danish poetry, which will be translated into Arabic. On top of this, a large annual book fair is held in Sharjah.

The 5th International Biennale, Sharjah, 17 - 27 April 2001

Else Marie Bukdahl and myself were invited to Sharjah for the 5th Biennale, myself as the official Danish commissioner and Else Marie Bukdahl as speaker at the symposium "Art and Cultural Dialogue" and as a judge on the international panel, which evaluated the artwork of 40 different nations. The panel chose the winners from the selected works after much open and intense discussion.

The Danish contribution to the Biennale was an internet-based TV studio, Moon Channel. The artists Annemette Larsen, Stig Brøgger and Øivind Nygård, in co-operation with the artistic group, Superflex, created the studio on site. During the ten days in which the Biennale lasted, the Danish Radio journalist, Christoffer Bruun produced 28 direct programmes on the Internet ([click here](#)) each with widely different content. The studio was open to everyone who had something to share, and consequently the programmes included everything from museum director Hisham Al Madhloum's general comments on the Biennale, to poetry readings, discussions about architecture, happenings and a children's pillow fight. Superflex managed to establish good ties with the American University's media school, which is interested in setting up its own permanent Super Channel studio.

A Nomad Academy in the UAE and an Arabic Library in Denmark

During our stay in Sharjah this time, we were invited by the UAE Minister of Education to outline a series of suggestions for workshops with educational aspects for children and youth. Their education is considered to be of paramount importance. Though Denmark, which as a democratic nation was not offered an institution first time round, we were given a Nomad Academy, which is not too bad, everything taken into consideration!

This invitation corresponded with a request from the Danish Ministry of Culture to discuss the possibility of having a direct cultural exchange with the UAE based on our relationship over the previous two years. It is hoped that the different projects, which were subsequently incorporated into this suggestion, will be carried out over a number of years. This suits the idea of a long-term reciprocal exchange and training programme rather than mere short-term festivals and "exotic" fusions. The proposal aims towards specific support

and visualisation of the existing and well-established initiatives, not least the co-operation and links between the artistic and university circles in the two cultures.

Almost everyone who has been to Sharjah has immediately been able to create new contacts and become involved in new artistic work and projects just from having been exposed to a different people, culture and natural environment.

To highlight the strength of our democracy, our weapon could be to create a House of Knowledge, e.g. an Arabic library, under whose imaginary roof we are already working at many different levels. To counteract brutality and the fear-inducing consequences of terror which lead to spiritual poverty and which in turn are a breeding ground for brutal regimes, we should, in these times, consider the establishment of just such a House of Knowledge here in Denmark; a house for both cultures, for a lively exchange of knowledge, instead of ejecting our foreigners in the fear of harbouring potential terrorist cells. What about supporting and utilising the existing knowledge cells? Contrary to religious and political institutions (which often act as impediments due to bias in both cultures), a library and our existent nomadic art academy could serve as good examples of integration since they are far better at creating an immediate dialogue between representatives of the different cultures.

Institute du Monde de l'Arabe, Paris

A excellent example of this type of House of Knowledge would be the Institute of the Arab World in Paris that has, through its mere existence, been seen as a symbol of French interest and thereby created a longing for mutual understanding and exchange between the Islamic and European cultures.

In Denmark, such an Arabic library with its affiliated institutions, e.g. a university institute in Arabic studies, a bookshop, a cinema, exhibition facilities, concert halls, auditoriums, etc. would constitute a similar and natural starting point for the development of a dialogue on a local and global plane. The translation and exchange of both Arabic and Danish literature is a necessary precondition for the establishment of such a library. This work has been in progress for a while, not least through the Arabic-Danish organisation, Asununu, which arranges an annual cultural meeting between Danish and immigrant Arabic poets as well as Arabic guest speakers (www.ainox.com). One could imagine a competition among the most internationally renowned Arabic architects to design the library in Denmark, similarly to the way the world famous Jewish architect, Daniel Libeskind, has designed the future Jewish museum in Denmark. The different qualified activities taking place at such an Arabic library, would demonstrate to the Danish public the breadth and depth of the Islamic culture and the historic interplay between Islamic, European and Danish culture. Carsten Niebuhr's Arabic Science Expedition in the 1700s could be named in this connection, sponsored as it was by King Frederik V (who to some extent, could be compared to the Sheik of Sharjah in his support of art and science). The archaeological digs carried out in Bahrain by professor P.V. Glob can also be mentioned. Our Nomad Academy in the UAE has already had a noticeable influence on creative art in Sharjah. Creative art is characterised by an inherent ability to be able to interpret time, space, the individual and the world in a nuanced fashion. A relevant collection of modern Danish art already exists at the Art Museum in Sharjah.

It might also be possible to learn something from the Sheik of Sharjah, despite or because of the absolute differences in our two cultures. He has, as a representative of an ancient nomadic culture, an ability to open up his country to the global nomadic world. This is not least evident in the simultaneous establishment of two universities, an Islamic and an American one, on the same campus in the full understanding that differences need to be accepted and made visible to allow for the enrichment of each other's thoughts and lives so as to enable us to live together decently. Thirty years ago, Sharjah was still a desert nation, but today the UAE is a high technology information society; a society in flux which results in numerous structural problems and concerns regarding national identity, problems and concerns which we are faced with too, though we approach them in a different way; problems and concerns, in fact, which are common to the whole world.