

I'll Be Your Mirror

BY KEVIN JONES

The confounding strategy of GCC



GCC, *Figure A: Amalgamated City*, 2013, wallpaper, fireworks projection, sound on headphones, 4 x 30 m. Photo by Achim Hatzius. Courtesy the artists and Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin.

“Why are you making fun of us?” Artists don’t usually get questions like this one, asked by a local visitor to Kuwait’s venerable Sultan Gallery during the opening of an October 2013 exhibition entitled “A Space for National Achievement.” The first solo show of rising artist collective GCC—a prolific bloc of Gulf-hailing artists, designers and writers—seemed as hard to pin down as the collective itself. Showcasing (literally) the penchant of Gulf nations for lavishing awards on their citizens’ seemingly most insignificant accomplishments, the work in the show provoked both ire and awe, ruffling some patriotic feathers while beguiling those with a taste for boundary-blurring art. Of course, this blurring starts with the collective’s identity: GCC share their name with the acronym of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the intergovernmental federation of six Arab states that constitutes the group’s primary field of exploration.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, GCC (the collective) do not simply spoof the weighty bureaucracy and ritualized pomp they observe in their namesake’s proceedings. Instead of irony, they opt for a wry brand of earnestness: they take protocol seriously, employ perfect bureaucratic language and abide by a charter. Like any self-respecting

collective (or pan-geographic, intergovernment council, for that matter), GCC has a manifesto, having hijacked the Gulf Cooperation Council Charter, a 1981 document that formalized the GCC’s birth, customizing it with word swaps such as “artists” replacing “states,” “art” instead of “Islam,” and so on. So, far from “making fun,” GCC employ strategies of mirroring and excavation in their exploration of how power is articulated in a deliberately straight-faced manner. Reflecting rather than confronting, recontextualizing rather than criticizing, GCC’s approach enables them to be both innocent and subversive. Much like the bureaucrats infusing their texts, they appear both sincere and insincere at once.

Born in the VIP lounge of Art Dubai 2013 (a circumstance that one GCC-er admits is “already really telling”), the collective currently counts nine members: Khalid al-Gharaballi, Nanu al-Hamad, Sophia al-Maria, Abdullah al-Mutairi, Fatima al-Qadiri, Monira al-Qadiri, Aziz al-Qatami, Barrak Alzaid and Amal Khalaf. Their individual trajectories, crisscrossing throughout the Gulf and beyond, have overlapped at times in the past, but their shared aesthetic and conceptual bent often reach back to the “image bank” of their respective childhoods. Glimpses of what this visual depository might contain

appeared in writer/filmmaker Sophia al-Maria’s and artist/composer Fatima al-Qadiri’s interrogations around “Gulf Futurism,” their term for the all-conquering, kitschy modernism, master-planned sprawl and unbridled consumerism of the Gulf in the 1980s and ’90s, and its impact on a generation of youth. This exuberant, vaguely sci-fi world is echoed and updated in GCC’s *Figure A: Amalgamated City* (2013), a 30-meter-long wallpaper installation that appeared in the September group show “Speculations on Anonymous Materials” at Kassel’s Fridericianum that marked their first appearance. Projected fireworks explode above a glittering swathe of Gulf coastline, bristling with fantastical skyscrapers, both real and imagined. The work, crowned by its rousing “Ana Khaleeji” (“I Am a Gulf Arab”) sound track, seemed to revel in the glitzy glee of it all, without a tinge of irony.

Collectives, particularly those of the critical ilk, are rare in the Middle East—Walid Raad’s shadowy Lebanese-wars-focused Atlas Group (of which he may well be the sole member) and the enterprising Slavs and Tatars (whose geographical remit is the area east of the former Berlin Wall and west of the Great Wall of China) are perhaps the most noteworthy. Homegrown Gulf collectives

are unheard of. GCC members attribute this to both human nature (“It’s hard to work with other people”) and culture (“Art in the Gulf is largely the work of individuals”). They themselves contemplated the idea of anonymity—hiding their individual names behind the collective front—but ultimately opted for accountability. “We couldn’t simply prop up this idea of the collective as the only dimension to the project,” admits one member. Despite this, the group functions like some multiheaded, single-voiced corps, watchfully weighing its words in statements that encompass the viewpoints of, and are attributed to, all. At a Fridericianum-hosted talk in November 2013, the two GCC members present on stage, Aziz al-Qatami and Nanu al-Hamad, dutifully WhatsApped the absentees, folding their replies into a roundly democratic response. “Organically” is a word frequently used to describe how they move from idea to outcome. “No one person has ownership of an idea,” they claim.

When asked why the GCC (the political and economic council) is their territory of choice, responses range from attitude-laden quips—“Qatar just bought Europe. Pay attention!”—to a deeper, more critical avowal—“What makes the GCC interesting to explore is their cultural mores, their inconsistencies, their brazen hypocrisy.” Yet such critique never surfaces in the work. At the clan’s for-camera “inaugural annual summit” held in Morschach, Switzerland, in August 2013, their mirroring strategy was at its peak. Staged amid lakes and mountains that they describe as “sickeningly photogenic,” the members seemingly simulated the leisurely lot of true GCC delegates: documents were scrutinized, committees convened, hands shaken and awards conferred. But this is not mere aping: the group had an agenda (it was in Morschach that they devised the brisk roll-out of their Kassel-Kuwait-London-Berlin cycle of shows, all of which opened within one month of each other) and their own proceedings unfurled with a sincere sense of purposeful pomp. While there is deliberate *mise-en-scène*, there is no easy mimicry. The GCC appropriate the hollow ceremony, recontextualize it, and reflect it back, self-congratulatory trophies and all. It is the artistic equivalent of deadpan.

“We are not interested in the political commentary,” reveals a GCC-er. “We are interested in that *performance*.” Accordingly, the collective’s platform for its cycle of shows was “self-congratulant,” a widespread Gulf bureaucratic practice that provides ample material for the group to explore how power “performs.” No GCC show is complete without a self-conferred trophy to exalt it, from the plump GCC-emblazoned pearl nestled in its splayed oyster at the Fridericianum to the synthetic-diamond-encrusted ship’s wheel for the show “Ceremonial Achievements” at Berlin’s Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler gallery,

which launched in November 2013. It appears that a Kuwaiti petroleum company was sourcing the very same wheel trophy for its own, more earnest use. “We had to run to negotiate with the manufacturer to secure them,” enthuses a GCC member. This is precisely the kind of boundary-blurring, art/life overlap that the collective relishes—the ultimate payoff for the strategy of mirroring.

GCC’s works consciously toy with the moment when first-degree “excavation” (nabbing the wheel trophy for their own use) teeters into a second-degree “reading” (inviting us to behold the hollow self-congratulant). Such was the case with the pieces devoted to ribbon-cutting shown by GCC at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. A propped tablet displays Sophia al-Maria, abaya-clad and iridescent as if clumsily backlit, presenting a soundless slidefest of ribbon-cutting close-ups in a strange how-to/best-of hybrid. Elsewhere, a montage of found YouTube clips documents a wealth of Gulf ribbon-cutting ceremonies, replete with gilded scissors poised on tassel-cornered pillows, flower petals cast by fidgety young girls and successive stomach-level shots of dignitaries waddling into camera. Corny PowerPoint-style editing techniques (the page flip and the pixel fade) transition the viewer from one jubilant event to the next, while the sound track—a remastered version of the cloying 1930s song “Parlez-moi d’amour”—hints at the deep love affair between Gulf bigwigs and low-grade spectacle.

During the opening of GCC’s “Achievements in Swiss Summit 2013” show at London’s Project Native Informant in October, a Rolls-Royce stood ready to whisk guests around the gallery’s Mayfair neighborhood. The text of the GCC’s appropriated manifesto (specially recorded by Kuwaiti anchorwoman Maha Motawi in a performance long coveted by GCC-ers enamored of her distinctively overenunciated English-language accent) purred out of the car’s sound system in an “immersive performance” that echoed the group’s own self-staging. Similarly, at the

Berlin show, the collective shot themselves in the ballroom-like belly of an ornately handcrafted *dhow* for a 360-degree video, *Ceremonial Achievements* (2013), in which the camera hovered above a ring of GCC-ers as they ceremoniously snipped a ribbon. Round, bird’s-eye photos of the event dot the walls. Printed on aluminum, the photographic images have been burnished at carefully chosen spots, echoing the handmade glamour of the bulky *dhow* while recalling the steady geometry of arabesque motifs.

Many collectives do not produce actual art, perhaps focusing instead on research, archiving or just creative hacking. So it is somewhat surprising that GCC’s output seems destined for the white cube. While they insist this is not preplanned, their aesthetic nonetheless fits within a certain “global contemporary” zeitgeist, sparking the interest of international curators such as Suzanne Pfeffer, who has seized on GCC’s generation-sensitive, desubjectivized approach to everyday objects and images. On the home front, some in the Gulf art world criticize the safety inherent in the strategy of simply reflecting, and dismiss GCC for pandering to Western excitement at (finally?) seeing art that probes the self-aggrandizing hubris of the Gulf states. They have even clinched a “one-year retrospective” show at New York’s MoMA PS1, scheduled for March. “Ours is a contemporary aesthetic that spans beyond our region,” retort GCC. “It is lost in translation to people consuming art in the Gulf because it is so familiar.” Yet somehow, GCC’s appeal, at least for now, lies in its very aloofness—in its clever mirroring and earnest staging. One can’t help wondering, though, if this strategy is not akin to a child who echoes back a parent’s questions, refusing to provide an answer. “It’s going to be a slow process,” say GCC, “for people to put things into perspective in the things we are addressing.” The question is, will their signature disingenuousness and easy strategies sustain them as audiences wrestle to understand their true intentions?



Installation view of GCC’s “A Space for National Achievement” at Sultan Gallery, Kuwait, 2013. Courtesy the artists and Sultan Gallery, Kuwait.