



Mazen Kerbaj and below, his 2009 mixed media installation and performance, *Wormholes*, in Les Halles de Schaerbeek in Brussels. Images courtesy the artist and Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut.



Q&A WITH MAZEN KERBAJ

IN 2009, at Les Halles de Schaerbeek in Brussels, Mazen Kerbaj placed himself in a cage for all to see over the course of nine days. In that time, he created artworks that eventually hid him from view as they were gradually being placed across the cage's walls. Brought in through participating Beirut-based Galerie Janine Rubeiz (1M21/1S3), the Lebanese-born artist and musician reenacts the same experiment over the duration of Abu Dhabi Art. In a 2.5 x 2.5 metre open-top Plexiglas cage, Kerbaj will create artworks, which, by the time the fair ends, will be wallpapered on the cage, thus hiding him from view. A form of public intimidation? A social experiment? A psychological study? "I really just want people to see the process of the artist working," says Kerbaj.

What is this project's core premise?

The most important time for me is when I'm actually doing it, not after it's finished. It's born when I do it and it's dead when it's done. It's unlike musical performances – I get on stage, play the music and both the audience and I appreciate the output at the same time. With *Don't Feed the Artist*, it's born with the audience and dies with me.

How did you feel after the first time in Brussels?

By the time I was done, I wanted to give it its own life. I didn't want to look at it anymore. The moment of creation is the moment of reception. I'm not showing the artist or the work, I'm showing the artist creating his works until he disappears behind them, so it's all about the work in the end.

How does working in a cage differ from working in your studio?

It's a big difference. As a performance artist, I know that what I create in this cage is not like what I do at home or in my studio. I like that the habits change. At home, I'll take a nap, watch TV or just laze around, but in the cage, I know I have to work a lot faster.

How do you feel about being watched?

I really do feel like an animal in a zoo. In a sense, I do become that, but also, I eventually become unconscious of people looking at me. I disappear and in the process, the audience disappears too.

You lasted for nine days in the first edition. What did that tell you about yourself?

It taught me that what I can do in six months, I can do in nine days! When I put myself in extreme situations, work is way faster, and eventually I follow the work and not the other way round. I'm happy to be obliged to do this. I think dangerous and extreme situations push you – you either fight them off or embrace them.

These situations can breed creativity.

Absolutely. During the July 2006 war in Lebanon, for example, a lot of my friends couldn't go to work; but for me, as an artist, I continued to work, because there's so much information coming at you. You might be physically stuck at home but there's an outpouring, an artistic response to what you're being hit with.

A deadline can be considered an intangible cage.

It is, but there is something to be said about a physical cage: I really can't escape! I am not challenging the audience; I am challenging myself.

Since your artistic production increases when in the cage, why not do it several times a year?

The initial idea was to construct a 30 x 30 metre cage with an in-built bathroom and I would be fed, like an animal, and stay in there for a month. But I do think I need to do week-long experiments several times before committing to a one-month one. Who knows, I may not manage to do it!

What happens to the works after the project is done?

The works are either sold separately or the entire cage and its interior are sold to a collection or institution. When I did this in Brussels, I really wasn't happy to remove the drawings and in doing so, destroy the cage. I really think it should be sold as one entity. [v](#)

SUPERSIZED ARTWORK

Beyond – Abu Dhabi Art's showcase of oversized artworks is back with three works.

LAST YEAR'S MONUMENTAL artworks were erected outdoors around Manarat Al-Saadiyat; this year they're coming inside, where visitors walking through gallery booths can take in larger-than-life sculptures and installations. Athr Gallery from Jeddah, Sfeir-Semler from Beirut/Hamburg, and kamel mennour from Paris are all showing oversized art at this year's Abu Dhabi Art.

Sfeir-Semler has brought over an industrial, urban piece by Mexican contemporary artist Gabriel Kuri. The three powder-coated steel discs that make up *my 100%, yours, and their 100%, balanced* follow a mathematical coding system – like most of Kuri's work. Through his art, the artist explores contemporary consumer culture using unconventional or industrial materials like plastic bags, vouchers and newspapers, in order to demonstrate how materials are socially branded and coded, and how the economic system shapes day-to-day activities.

Athr Gallery is showing *The Bell* by Palestinian/Saudi artist Ayman Yossri Daydban, a piece that explores the issue of identity through the flag (Palestinian, in this case) and its paradoxical capability to create a collective identity through division. Based on a legend about a jaded ruthless king who, to encourage his quiet people to raise their concerns, put up a bell in the town square that they could ring when they felt wronged. When years passed without anyone ringing the bell, it disappeared under overgrown grass and vines – a passing grazing lamb bumped into it, and upon hearing the bell, the people finally rose. By using reflective stainless steel, Daydban ensures that everyone's lives are reflected in *The Bell*, leaving room for people to create their own narrative.

Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata began work on his sculptural installation *Chairs for Abu Dhabi* about a month ago; the colossal six metre-high piece is constructed from hundreds of chairs stacked in layers. Brought over to Abu Dhabi art by Paris gallery kamel Mennour, *Chairs for Abu Dhabi* is dedicated to the act of socialisation. [v](#)



Ayman Yossri Daydban. (Detail) *The Bell*. 2012. Stainless steel installation. Variable dimensions. Image courtesy Athr Gallery, Jeddah.



Above: Gabriel Kuri. *my 100%, yours, and their 100%, balanced*. 2012. Powder-coated steel. Three units, each disc 125 cm. Diameter: 62.5 x 60 x 125 cm. Image courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg. Below: Tadashi Kawamata. *Chairs for Abu Dhabi*. 2012. Wooden chairs. Variable dimensions. Image courtesy TCA Abu Dhabi.