It is interesting to note that while the Sharjah Biennial eschews Venice-style national pavilions, it also goes so far as to not mention the artists’ nationalities in texts and wall labels. Freeing the artists from ethnographic categorization—albeit a problem that dogs artists from emerging art scenes outside the United States—Plot for a Biennial is refreshing and places primary on the artworks and the dialogues created among them.

One of the most captivating works was Richard Bighy and Marilou Lemmens’ Supply and Demand for Immortality (2011), an enormous red text pasted at two ends of the Sharjah Art Museum’s façade—one version in Arabic and the other in English. The work is a speculative computing tool in the form of a supply-and-demand graph, with the Y-axis representing “price of glory” and the X-axis corresponding to “quantity of power.” Within this graph, phrases that chart one’s demise or demise toward immortality range from “Doesn’t give a damn” and “Causes to be active once livelihood is assured” in the bottom left to “More eloquent than most rock stars” and “Feels like they’ve always existed” in the top right. Automatie witty, Bighy and Lemmens offer a tangible representation of the omnipotence that comes when one’s name and reputation outlives one’s lifespan.

A true collaborator with the characters and narratives distinct to Sharjah, Rayyane Tabet thoughtfully delves into the city’s history of cricket with Home on Neutral Ground: A Project in Three Parts (2011), a multipart work teeming with irony. In 2010, the Afghan national cricket team was gifted the Sharjah Cricket Stadium, built in 1981 by an Emirati entrepreneur who had become cricket-obsessed while living in Pakistan. Home on Neutral Ground is compited of a Google Maps aerial photograph of vacant land in Afghanistan printed to scale on a cricket-pitch cover and installed at the Sharjah Cricket Stadium on March 18. Meanwhile, one day of uninterupted video footage of the stadium from 2010 is projected onto two screens in a narrow gallery within one of the heritage buildings, which also contains a floor drawing of a cricket pitch. Lastly, the artist distributed 740 portfolios which in Farsi is a play on the famous Iranian proverb Esfahan nesob jahan (“Esfahan, half the world”), which in Farsi is a play on the famous Iranian proverb Esfahan nesob jahan (“Esfahan, half the world”). The video work referring to Esfahan’s glorious architecture at a time when the city was not only the Persian capital but also one of the world’s largest cities. Slavs and Tatars explain that by substituting Slavs and Tatars pay tribute to a lesser-known period of Esfahan’s history during World War II, when the city served as a sanctuary for Polish refugees from Liberia. It was known then as the City of Polish Children.” True experimentalists who have created an interdisciplinary practice linking history, political science and cultural studies, Slavs and Tatars bring to our attention obscure but profound connections between two apparently unrelated countries.

Video works and films abound throughout the biennial, often reconsidering and reviewing faded histories and bygone political movements. Naeeem Mohaiemen presents The Young Man Was No Longer A . . . Part 1: United Red Army (2014), which is part of a larger research project that focuses on the fall of radical and often violent ultralefist movements of the 1970s. The feature-length film depicts the Japanese Red Army’s hijacking of Japan Airlines flight 472 in 1972, which landed in Dhaka. The video is in part narrated by Mohaiemen, who adopts a matter-of-fact tone even when tying the narrative to his childhood recollections of the event. He also allows much of the story to tell itself by presenting a taped dialogue between one of the hijackers and the Dhaka-based negotiator (in English but with subtitles due to the thick accents of the speakers). With this film, Mohaiemen creates an opportunity to ponder what drives radical insurrection and life-threatening devotion to extremist movements that promise a more ideal world.

Exposing our assumptions about history, sense of self and collective identity. “Plot for a Biennial” attests to the resilience of humanity and energy of political, historical and personal transformation. This approach is a timely echo of the transformation that is sweeping this region and the world, allowing for fresh visions and realities—a new plot that is taking shape at this very moment.

Isabella Ellahem Hughes