

## BREAKING DOWN BORDERS

Fikra Graphic Design Biennial 01, Sharjah, UAE  
9–30 November 2018



*Monstera Deliciosa*, by Manuela Eichner part of Department of Non-Binaries

For many people, the role of graphic design is limited to the representation of existing ideas, rather than their creation, development or disruption – and yet graphic design shapes and influences almost every communication we send or receive in our public lives.

According to convention, 'good' graphic design is clean and clear, smooth and efficient, and the unexpected, rough-edged, or confrontational is not something to celebrate. The UAE-based design practice and platform **Fikra** disagrees.

This year, the inaugural **Fikra Graphic Design Biennial 01 (9–30 November)** sets out to re-evaluate everyday assumptions and challenge conventional views of graphic design, undertaking a bold and wide-ranging exploration of the discipline's meaning, impact and changing purpose in the 21st century. What does graphic design denote in the present? And what might it mean for our future?

The first event of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa region, Fikra's biennial brings together designers, institutions, and influencers from across the global graphic design spectrum for a multi-part exhibition and three-week programme of talks, workshops, performances, and other events that collectively challenge and build upon preconceived ideas of graphic design and of the role of the graphic designer. In total, the exhibition and event programme includes more than **40 collectives and individual participants from over 20 countries**.

Based in **Sharjah, UAE**, the biennial serves as a global platform for Middle Eastern creative practitioners to participate in global design discourse, to nurture local and international collaboration, and to explore the evolving role of graphic design in an increasingly complex and culturally fragmented world.



Press release | October 2018

Fikra Graphic Design Biennial 01 will be the final event to take place in the city's iconic **Bank of Sharjah** building on Bank Street, built at the height of Arab modernism in the 1970s, but now set to be demolished to make way for the Heart of Sharjah restoration project.

## Ministry of Graphic Design

The biennial takes its thematic inspiration from the innovation-driven administrative structures of the UAE (which now include both a Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence and a Minister of State for Happiness). As conceived by the exhibition's Artistic Directors, **Prem Krishnamurthy, Na Kim, and Emily Smith**, 'Ministry of Graphic Design' is a playfully formulated but serious-minded pop-up institution to

create a starting point for continued dialogue, research, and understanding within the graphic design field – locally, regionally, and internationally.

The Ministry is made up of distinct departments, each of which focuses on a different aspect of historical or contemporary graphic design:

- Department of Graphic Optimism
- Department of Non-Binaries
- Department of Flying Saucers
- Department of Dematerialising Language
- Department of Mapping Margins

as well as:

- **Office of the Archive** – a meta-department responsible for monitoring and reflecting on the event as a whole.

The departments are led by a diverse curatorial team, with each 'Head of Department' responsible for the contributors and content.

---

*'I think we are at an exciting time with graphic design – the lines between different disciplines are becoming so blurred, the question of who graphic designers are, what they can do, how they 'design', and who they design for are increasingly worth reviewing. I would like to think of the Biennial as 'un-defining' graphic design, challenging preconceived ideas of the discipline and providing an unexpectedly broad array of graphic design works, concepts, and initiatives.'*

– **Salem Al-Qassimi**, Founder and Director, Fikra Graphic Design Biennial

---

## Department of Graphic Optimism

Head of Department: Alia Al-Sabi

The starting point for the entire Biennial, the Department of Graphic Optimism looks back at the changing role of the graphic designer in the UAE since the country's formation. Writer and curator Alia Al-Sabi begins the exhibition with a survey of the visual trends and cues that were in circulation in print, newspaper, and media during the 70s and 80s. Encompassing a range of governmental and non-governmental publications and magazines, this section considers such early modes of visual production and how they reflect the nation's identity at the moment of its formation.

The department also includes an extensive range of work from the design archives of **Hisham Almadhloum** – a cultural administrator with a parallel practice as a graphic designer who contributed enormously to the direction of UAE graphic design in the 1980s and 90s. He represents the discipline's capacity to combine the administrative and the artistic, the coordinating and the creative.



(Left) Department of Graphic Optimism will present publications and graphic ephemera from the 70s and 80s in the UAE.  
(Centre Left) Archival material from Hisham Almadhloum. (Right) *Flowers for Immigration*, Lizania Cruz.

## Department of Non-Binaries

*Head of Department: common-interest (Nina Paim and Corinne Gisel)*

Curated by Basel-based non-profit cultural association **common-interest**, The Department of Non-Binaries celebrates hybridity and ambiguity, crosses boundaries, subverts conventions and defies expectations.

Filling the second floor of the building, a highly eclectic selection of 21 international designers, artists and multidisciplinary practitioners have been invited to present projects that resist simple categorisation and



Press release | October 2018

explore the world through a 'graphic-design gaze'. They are all critically attuned to the power that tools of communication assume in our increasingly designed society, while also being conscious of their own ways of presentation and representation. This department rejects smooth-edged simplicity and clear labels, and recognises the complexity associated with **graphic design**, **human culture**, and **personal identity** today.

Exhibits include:

- Journalist **Alexandra Bell's** visual interrogation of newspaper bias through redaction and annotation in her piece *A Teenager With Promise (Annotated)*.
- Netherlands-based duo **Oddkin's** board-game interpretation of the moral implications of industrial livestock farming, *Today's Success Is Tomorrow's Disaster*.
- Designer/researcher **Paula Minelgaite's** study of the hidden causes of the UK's cultural divide: *Brexit: Why did it happen?*
- UAE designer **Shamma Buhazza's** study of cultural identity *Disorientation*, which fuses elements of the flags of Somalia, Bahrain, the UAE and the UK to express her own fragmented identity.
- Dominican artist **Lizania Cruz's** *Flowers for Immigration* – a participatory, photography project featuring the personal stories of undocumented flower workers told through their flower arrangements.

All exhibits will be positioned in the open-plan space with no predetermined navigation between them, leaving visitors to forge their own path and discover new juxtapositions.

## Department of Flying Saucers

*Head of Department: Hala Al-Ani*

Named in recognition of the Sharjah Art Foundation's Flying Saucer building, the Department of Flying Saucers is a transient exhibition that will see four independent initiatives rooted in graphic design take turns to occupy a space in the building for a workshop, project, performance, or installation. Curated by Dubai-based designer Hala Al-Ani from **Mobius Studio**, the Department invites each 'flying saucer' to leave traces of their project behind when they depart:

- Seoul design café **Seendosi** transforms the space into a lounge on the theme of 'rest' and organises the opening music event.
- Los Angeles-based curatorial project **Public Fiction** organizes an exhibition of new laser sculptures by artist Nicole Miller and conceptualises a publication and performance-lecture on site.
- Amsterdam/Cairo-based agency **Foundland** explores concepts of immigration and community via a series of workshops with Syrian refugees.
- Amman design studio **Turbo** commemorates the last days of the Bank of Sharjah building, through a silk screen printing workshop and pop-up shop.

## Department of Dematerialising Language

*Head of Department: Kith & Kin*

Aiming to relieve language of its tangible trappings, this ministry department explores the communicative potential of objects and symbols beyond the written word and introduces transient, participatory, performative, and unexpected modes of communication.

Eight projects are dispersed across the floors of the Biennial, interrupting the overall structure of the Ministry of Graphic Design. Co-artistic directors Na Kim and Emily Smith – a.k.a. Kith & Kin – have marked the department with custom-designed Mobile Units or site-specific locations, each containing works that challenge the assumed limitations of language. They include:

- Sound works by **Astrid Seme** and **Dina Danish** – both incorporating Kurt Schwitter's avant garde classic 'Ursonate', but from different cultural perspectives;
- **Uta Eisenreich's** Dadaist object/sound alphabet *EiEiEi*; Johannes Bergerhausen's project decoding 109,242 Unicode characters.
- **Video Snack**; an informal screening series by Lauren Francescone and Zeynab Izadyar
- **Knoth & Renner's** *Common Canvas* – a collection of prompt-driven mobile phone creations from art and design programmes around the world;
- **Studio Moniker's** *Dazzle Fungus* – an ongoing mass-participatory installation by graphic designer Luna Mauer.



(Left) *The Stand In (Or a Glass of Milk), Phase 1: An Unbiased Teal*, presented by Public Fiction. (Centre) *Dazzle Fungus*, Studio Moniker  
(Right) *Common Canvas*, Knoth & Renner.



Press release | October 2018

---

## Department of Mapping Margins

*Head of Department: Uzma Z. Rizvi*

The Ministry's principal critical engine is curated by anthropological archaeologist Uzma Z. Rizvi. The Department of Mapping Margins presents a programme of talks, events, and interactions that create opportunities to reflect on the state of contemporary graphic design, highlighting regional research, addressing cross-cultural questions, and unpacking the overlaps between working methods, conditions, and models. Discussions feature leading thinkers and graphic design practitioners both from the UAE and internationally including Dr Elizabeth Tunstall, Dean of Design (OCAD), Mitch Sinclair, Creative Director (Palmwood, Dubai), and Santi Lawrachawee, Co-founder of Practical Design Studio, Thailand.

---

## Office of the Archive

*Head of Office: Tetsuya Goto*

The Office of the Archive documents the activities of each department in the Ministry of Graphic Design and aims to connect the past, present, and future. The archivist team, consisting of Osaka-based curator **Tetsuya Goto** and assistant **Saki Ho**, will be working in a mobile office on the top floor of the biennial, which will be open to public participation throughout.

In addition to the departments, standalone exhibits include a ground-floor presentation of posters and videos from 'Jeff Talks', initiated by Istanbul-based designer, editor, and publisher **Esen Karol**. On the exhibition's top floor, a suite of holographic posters by **Arcadian Studio** play with conventions of 'arabizi' or 'arabish' (Arabic texting and chat culture).

---

## Notes for Editors

Fikra Graphic Design Biennial 01: Ministry of Graphic Design

[fikrabiennial.com](http://fikrabiennial.com)

#ministryofgraphicdesign

## Organisers

Salem F. Al-Qassimi

Maryam Al Qassimi

Eleonora Cervellera

---



Press release | October 2018

---

### Artistic Directors

Prem Krishnamurthy  
Na Kim  
Emily Smith

### Advisers

Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès  
Muroga  
Pascal Zoghbi  
Catherine Ince  
Uzma Z. Rizvi

### Head of Departments

Alia Al-Sabi  
Nina Paim and Corinne Gisel (common-interest)  
Hala Al-Ani (Mobius Studio)  
Uzma Z. Rizvi  
Tetsuya Goto

### Participants

Alexandra Bell, Anja Kaiser, Arcadian Studio, Asad Pervaiz, Astrid Seme, Bayn Journal (Elham Namvar and Rasha Dakkak), Benedetta Crippa, Cheb Moha, Christopher Benton, Danah Abdulla, Dina Danish, Elizabeth Tunstall, Esen Karol, Foundland, gideon-jamie (Gideon Kong and Jamie Yeo) & Singapore Graphic Archives (Justin Zhuang), Hisham Almadhloum, Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès, Johannes Bergerhausen, Jonathas de Andrade, Josh Begley, Knoth & Renner, Krishna Balakrishnan, Lawrence Lemaohana, Lizania Cruz, Loraine Furter, Mitch Sinclair, Oddkin, Paula Minelgaitè, Public Fiction, Manuela Eichner, Naz Naddaf, Santi Lawrachawee, Seendosi, Shamma Buhazza, Sina Fakour, Studio Moniker, Thaakierah Abdul, Turbo, Uta Eisenreich, Video Snack (Zeynab Izadyar & Lauren Francescone), and more.

### Strategic partner

Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development

### Official airline

Air Arabia

### Sponsor

Shurooq  
Heart of Sharjah

---



Press release | October 2018

---

### Media Partner

Harper's Bazaar Art Middle East

### Graphic Design

Wkshps, New York

### About Fikra

Founded in 2006 by Salem Al-Qassimi, Fikra is a Sharjah-based design studio and educational platform comprising, a co-working space, café, gallery, library and educational programme. The studio launched the Fikra Graphic Design Biennial in 2018 as the next step in its mission to spur innovation in graphic design, broaden public understanding of its scope, and rectify the historic neglect of Middle Eastern design on the world stage.

[fikradesigns.com](http://fikradesigns.com)

[@fikradesigns](https://twitter.com/fikradesigns)

---

### Contact

*Fikra Graphic Design Biennial: Ministry of Graphic Design runs from 9–30 November. For more information, images and interviews, please contact Dorothy Bourne at [dorothy@zetteler.co.uk](mailto:dorothy@zetteler.co.uk) or on +44 (0)20 3735 5855.*

---