

...need him to continue his studies at the Higher School of Fine Arts (HDK) in Berlin.

...rather like spelling the comedian Ali G's name Ali Gee.

...initiative Arte East. One work after another fea-

...from a territory as mysterious as the Mount Kaaf for which

...visit www.artecol.org and email on "Virtual Gallery."

Four nights on the borders of art and politics at Cinema Sofil

Jim Quilty

Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: Lebanese, it sometimes seems, are nearly as consumed by film as they are by politics. Beirutis will have a chance to slake their yen this week when the International Festival of Creative Film and Video (IFoCFaV) occupies Achrafieh's Cinema Sofil.

The "consultant" who's assembled the four-day festival is Ricardo Mbarak, a professor of video art at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA).

First launched in March 2004, IFoCFaV's second edition was, like so many cultural events last year, postponed after the assassination of former Premier Rafik Hariri.

What makes IFoCFaV distinct among Beirut's bouquet of little film festivals, Mbarak says, is that "it's a meta-festival,

assembling many festivals. We deal with curators rather than individual artists."

Mbarak says IFoCFaV is interested in the inter-relationship of art, society and politics. He's been careful to invite curators "concerned with socio-cultural considerations, the conditions in which artists generate art. That doesn't mean aesthetic considerations are absent, simply that the curators have a social conscience and in their own way all view art in terms of social politics."

Each evening there will be a pair of lectures by artists and curators from Lebanon and overseas, followed by a selection of films from a different festival.

The opening night features talks by Lebanese filmmaker Lamia Joreige and independent Dutch curator Nat Muller followed by a 10-film sample from Muller's Xeno_tech Festival.

Xeno_tech is a research pro-

ject interested in how cultural difference works with media and technology to influence artistic practices and cultural representation. This selection of films considers matters of identity and politics, particularly the confluence of gender, ethnicity, political and technological "otherness."

"The Xeno_tech program is oriented to the Middle East but according to outside criteria," said Mbarak. "It suggests how interested people from elsewhere perceive the region."

Day two will see talks by Lebanese video artist Akram Zaatar and German curator Thomas Munz. A run of 16 shorts will follow – eight from Berlin's Munz's transmediale festival, eight from Italy's PESARO festival.

Transmediale represents itself as a platform for artistic presentation and critical reflection on the role of digital tech-

nologies in society. Its annual festival provides a forum for communication between artists and academics.

"Transmediale is known for its formal audio-visual," remarks Mbarak. "This selection is more accessible but ordinarily their videos reflect the artists' extreme aesthetic and formal decisions and positions."

|| 'We deal with curators rather than individual artists'

"PESARO is a much older festival. Unlike Transmediale it's interested in narrative forms. This program, though, is taken from the festival's experimental section."

Lebanese artist Shawk Youssef and ALBA's School of Fine Arts director Nicole Mal-

hamé Harfouche will give lectures on day three, followed by a night of videos from ALBA students.

"People ask me why just ALBA students," Mbarak says. "First it's justified by the structure of the festival, whose units are institutional rather than individual. So we decided the student night should feature work from one school only. Next year it might be IESAV (Université St. Joseph's Institut d'Études Scéniques, Audiovisuelles et Cinématographiques).

"Second I don't believe in mixing everyone together all the time just so that you can say 'We're all in this together.' This is appropriate if you work at the level of individual artists but we're presenting institutions: each fine arts school cultivates its own aesthetics and it's good to present a profile of what that is. It's good to know the taste of what you're eating,

We don't need to always consume cocktails."

The final evening will present talks by theorist and writer Jalal Toufic, followed by co-presentation by Lebanese producer Wadiah Safieddine and film critic Philippe Azoury. Safieddine and his colleagues from Lebanon's Ne a Beirut Festival will preside over the final selection of shorts.

Folks are sometimes heard lamenting the rarity of non-political art in Lebanon and some complain that art here is subservient to politics or contaminated by it. Himself interested in the interface of art and politics, Mbarak thinks there can be no non-political Lebanese art.

"I believe in the geography of art as much as the history of art," he says. "Art addresses a culture's predominant interests. If you look at art in Lebanon there are certain recurring elements –

religion, politics, even food.

"We can't really ask why opera isn't working in Lebanon, because the form doesn't address the interests of local culture. In Vienna, on the other hand, opera is deeply embedded in the cultural consciousness. It's not just an art form: it's an identity form.

"So art is particularly political in the Middle East art because socio-politics is part of the spatial identity of the art in this region. This condition was reinforced after 9/11 when the globe focused on Middle East society and politics.

"I don't like to frame art in the political sphere but this is the nature of life here."

The Second International Festival of Creative Film and Video

is being held at Cinema Sofil (Achrafieh) from 2-5 March. Tickets go for LL3,000 per screening. For more information see www.lfivc.com.

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