



## The next big thing

In a world hungry for contemporary art, Saatchi Online transcends geography and dealers to enable artists from anywhere to sell directly to collectors everywhere. Already a huge success in its English and Mandarin incarnations, it is now poised to add a Middle East version. Charles Saatchi discusses the possibilities with *Ara Finek Honigman*.

Today's art world boasts an ever-expanding pool of collectors with an insatiable desire for contemporary art and countless glossy publications primed to publicize new artists. Yet high-profile galleries are still all but inaccessible to aspiring artists without already marketable names. At first, the advent of the Internet promised to help artists bypass the everyday gallery system, but only recently has a website been established which makes this promise a reality.

Though less than two years old, Saatchi Online has radically altered the way in which art is sold and information about artists and their work is disseminated throughout the world. Founded by prominent and influential international art collector Charles Saatchi, the site is often billed as a MySpace for artists. In this capacity, Saatchi Online effectively overrules geography, biography and dealer representation to enable artists from anywhere to sell directly to collectors everywhere.

Now Charles Saatchi is planning to launch an Arabic-language version of Saatchi Online for the Middle East (it already exists in English and Mandarin versions). The Arabic-language version, which Saatchi is developing in collaboration with Dubai-based partners, is intended to replicate the enormous success of the Chinese version of the site and bolster the visibility of artists in the region. As Richard Crossland, chairman of ABL Consulting, an art consultancy that brokered the UAE negotiations, recently explained to the *Financial Times*, 'Charles represents an entrepreneurial approach to contemporary art which is



Opposite: UK DJ David Navarro's artwork, 'Amen', presented to Qatar in 2004. Below: Ali Alami at 'Stage', where he is resident DJ.



not universally popular but is a rather good fit with the Middle Eastern way of doing things.'

The Emirates deal with the Louvre demonstrates the extent of their move to become the artistic and cultural hub of the Middle East. Saatchi explains in an email interview: 'And they would probably like to see the thousands of artists working in the whole region being able to use the site to display their work to a worldwide audience. We are perfectly happy that the Emirates would want to make a key part of the site focused on the Middle East with a fully interactive Arabic facility, like the one we developed for China.'

For art to sell, collectors need to see the work and know the artists' names. Art fairs and big Biennials introduce dealers, collectors and critics to talent beyond their home bases, but most established artists tend to show in only a few regional spaces. As a result, the same names can usually be seen dominating the booths at the fairs or top-ping curators' programmes. And artists living away from major cities such as New York, London or Los Angeles,

where the contemporary art world is centred, have less access to collectors who might be interested in their work. Moreover, dealers in these cities tend to limit their risk-taking in new artists to the ones who are recommended by artists already on their roster, by their regular collectors or by people they know. The anecdotes about dealers signing up fresh artists who mail in slides or drop off images are

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the stuff of legend in most major cities, precisely because this hardly ever happens.

In contrast to the usual networks that artists use to gain access into the established art world, Saatchi Online offers a non-judgmental platform where artists at all levels can show. Artists post profiles consisting of one representative image of their art in a general unsorted list, and then