

Practicing Exhibitions to Re-map Asia

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REFERENCES

A History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979-2006, Manchester: Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014. Sous la dir. de Biljana Ciric

Burning Down the House: Gwangju Biennale 2014 Exhibition Catalogue, Bologne : Damiani, 2014. Sous la dir. de Jessica Morgan

Busan Biennale 2014: Inhabiting the World, Busan : Busan Biennial Foundation, 2014. Préf. d'Olivier Kaepelin, Sou Hyeun Kim

SeMa Biennale Mediacity Seoul 2014: Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers, Seoul: Biennale Mediacity Seoul, 2014, 2 vol. Préf. de Park Chan-Kyong, Kim Hong-Hee

Social Factory: The 10th Shanghai Biennale, Shanghai: Shanghai Biennale: Power Station, 2014. Préf. de Hu Jinjun, Gong Yan et Anselm Franke

- 1 The (post-)global context of contemporary art biennials in Asia poses a scientific, creative and political challenge for a frenzied productivity, where the processing and rapid recycling of concepts and objects hallmark the spectacular growth of countries like China, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia—with Japan in its own particular place. Precisely where artworks, ideas and identities are caught in an ongoing flow of events, the challenge consists in observing how, within an Asian context, biennials and their meta-discourses do or do not reiterate expected truths and aesthetics, usually already “universalized” and “globalized” in and by the West. Unless, that is, they enclose contemporary art in local areas and fixed identities, forging a perception of Asia as monolithic, exclusive and “foreign” blocs? Or, alternatively, are they cultivating unexpected trajectories which go beyond geopolitical and cultural areas, and draw maps of contemporary art invented by artists and exhibition curators themselves?
- 2 First point: the 2014 crop of contemporary art biennials in Asia was principally the brainchild of western curators: Jessica Morgan, curator at Tate Modern in London, for the

Gwangju biennial *Burning the House*; Olivier Kaepelin, director of the Fondation Maeght at Saint-Paul-de-Vence, for the Busan biennial *Inhabiting the World*; and Anselm Franke, in charge of visual arts and film at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, for the Shanghai biennial *Social Factory*. Only the Seoul biennial *Ghosts, Spies and Grandmothers* decided to invite the Korean artist and film-maker Park Chan-Kyong. The invitations extended to western curators to coordinate biennials in Asia do not stem from a simple dutiful wish to internationalize biennials; rather, they underpin and repeat a post-colonial history in which the signature of a western curator unconsciously guarantees the prestige and “quality” of the projects presented, as well as the attention and positive reception of the international media. In the different Asian countries, organisers of biennials unfortunately feel guilty about inviting local curators, even though the young exhibition curators’ scene is extremely rich, especially in Korea and Southeast Asia, and these curators are inventing concepts, intra-Asian networks and exhibition formats which deserve to be recognized and legitimized around the world.

- 3 This said, certain curators of 2014 biennials managed to devise projects that were not mere applications of European concepts in Asia: they tended rather to kindle a local “strangeness” where the exhibition concept and the liaison between Asian and international artists pinpointed more specific and interesting locations than localism and ambient nationalism.
- 4 This is the case of Anselm Franke who, in Shanghai, managed to give a sensitive and critical human quality to a biennial accustomed to monumental, spectacular and often not very meaningful installations inside an oversized building. Many shrewdly set video installations punctuated the huge site of the Power Station of Art, letting human subjects be developed and giving access to varied and critical narratives: for example, the video narratives produced by Chen Chieh-Jen involving the transformation-translation-rewriting of social realities and critical issues related to migrations between Taiwan and inland China; likewise, the sublime videos of Zhao Liang, made up of stills of workers filmed at their industrial production sites, restore a poetic dimension to societal issues which are being formulated light years away from capitalism, communism and socialism. On the other hand, unlike many biennials in Asia, the contributions of international artists in the exhibition do not intervene here as the added value or the western surety of a conceptual and critical apparatus, but take part in a subtle dialogue between what Franke calls diverse forms of societies which are being constructed by a whole host of actions, habits, linguistic effects, and subjectivities. To be sure, it is easy to identify the western theoretical influences of Franke (Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Alexander Kluge), but the way in which he combines them with the artworks produces a sense of being in between boundaries which redraw an Asian map of contemporary art that is rich and complex. This mapping of art sometimes has nothing to do with the nationalist geographical partitions which form Asia, or, alternatively, it is overlaid on the map of economic and geopolitical challenges associated, for example, with the various cold wars between Japan, Korea and China, and between Southeast Asia and the West. In the end, this mapping goes beyond the perception of an Asia frozen in its great blocs and traditions.
- 5 In a quite different way, Park Chan-Kyong focused on anchoring the Seoul biennial in a painstaking investigation of the links that contemporary art, in its different Asian and international contexts, makes and unmakes with spirituality, fiction and myth, and also with politics. This approach is vital and extremely interesting for anyone wishing to

understand the challenges of contemporary art in Asia, because it is based on what is nowadays ideologically excluded from contemporary discussion in the West, namely contemporary artistic narrative in its working-through associated with memory and the historical construct, critical re-invention and current uses of ritual, the dogmatization of tradition in traditionalism, and, on the contrary, its re-invention in our living contemporaneity. The book breaks with other biennial catalogues, because Park Chan-Kyong has cleverly engaged researchers, curators and artists in order to question and conceptualize such challenges: so Wang Hui, a professor of Chinese literature and history, singles out the significance of the analysis of “historical relations outside the nationalist narrative”¹, made up of breaks and transformations from the Chinese dynasties to the present day, thus running counter to the prejudices of a timeless and continual history of China, also opening up new prospects for thinking about the use of traditions. Then there is the testimony and fiction of the artist Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand), the writer Li Ang (Taiwan), and the anthropologist Cho Han Hae-Joang (South Korea), who show the importance of spiritual beliefs in the power of ghosts and grandmothers, because these figures play an essential role in the construction of stories and current events peculiar to Asian societies.

- 6 Based on two radically different viewpoints, Anselm Franke and Park Chan-Kyong thus cultivate these in-between boundaries which lend visibility to changing trajectories of cultures and Asian contemporary art, transplanting images and ideas, artists and intellectuals from one cultural context to another. They authorize the keen observation of locations, together with their differences and their interconnections, rather than an obsession with reproducing an image and a homogeneous and “globalized” area of Asia. These in-between boundaries kindle friction between immigration and emigration, between identities and the “other”, between experience of exile and experience of places.
- 7 So the most interesting contemporary art biennials in Asia are those which manage to display and underpin the cross-cultural aspects of the contemporary arts in Asia, going beyond the conventional definition of Asia as it may be formulated in the West, or as it may be imposed inside Asia within authoritarian ideological systems.
- 8 Jessica Morgan and Olivier Kaepelin have, for their part, explored deliberately broader themes stemming from Western (post)modern thinking, such as forms of construction-deconstruction (*Burning the House*), and nowadays globalized universalism (*Inhabiting the World*). Jessica Morgan is interested in the processes of destruction-transformation, and obliteration-renewal which form the present-day globalized world. There is no deliberate specification of context both through a curatorial choice of showing the diversity of personal and collective commitments within cultures and systems of thought, but also because of the restrictiveness of local contexts, such as Korean censorship banning the exhibition of major works such as Pablo Picasso’s picture *Massacre in Korea* (1951).
- 9 Olivier Kaepelin is involved in a modernist quest to do with possible ways in which art can go beyond contexts of crisis and history, displaying the biennial like a “promenade” or a “stage” where “the art works will always reject language, languages, narratives and different interpretations”.² Although the list of artists is mixed, it is still, for the most part, made up principally of Western artists. On the sidelines of his project, Olivier Kaepelin proposed a parallel biennial project, *Asian Curatorial*, inviting young curators from Yokohama, Shanghai, Singapore, and other cities to introduce projects in several sites in Asia. It is a pity that this project is not present in the catalogue for the biennial, because it would have offered interesting counterpoints to the exhibition curator’s ideas.

- 10 Collecting, understanding and interpreting the archives of contemporary art exhibitions in Asia represents another decisive contribution to the art histories and curatorial practices which are being constructed beyond the usual East-West dichotomies and references governing a (when all is said and done, Western) definition of contemporary art in the age of globalization. In this sense, Biljana Ciric's book, *A History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979-2006*, is an invaluable contribution because, in the face of the absence of memory and rigorous scientific research into contemporary art in China, this archival work sheds light on hitherto forgotten, overlooked, or vaguely mentioned contexts, which have nevertheless constructed the Shanghai and Chinese art scenes, which are extremely busy and creative, but still either little known or totally unknown locally and/or in the West. Although the analysis of contemporary art exhibitions undertaken by Biljana Ciric is focused on Shanghai and exclusively on the history of exhibitions held by artists themselves, it nevertheless offers multiple access for learning about and constructing a Chinese history of contemporary art which no longer depends solely on references to the art market, which has enclosed Asian artists within an extremely simplistic and limited (albeit international) circuit, excluding many artists who, as a result, are still sadly invisible in the West. An initial challenge for Biljana Ciric has been to locate and analyze specific documents and contexts within which artists have carried out a real task involving the production of works, conceptualization, exhibition practices, and resistance, in order to bring their art projects to fruition. At the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1978 and at the dawn of China's opening up to the international market, Chinese artists had no exhibition venues (an absence of museums, galleries, art centres and foundations, and any other form of exhibition associated with the white cube), and no wherewithal for producing and disseminating their works. The spontaneous *Twelve-Man Painting Exhibition* held in 1979 at the Palace of Youth in the Huangpu district thus marked a turning point in the capacity of the twelve painters to organize themselves in an independent way and create their own show, beyond any theme, aesthetics, or ideological diktat.
- 11 Revealing imminent new exhibition practices, the unique project of the artist Qiu Deshu was to create, in 1980, a structure titled Grass Society, within which an independent spirit encompassing artists and exhibition formats alike was expressed. The manifesto was in this sense masterful: "Grass—symbol of the strongest vitality in nature—which grows everywhere and forms vast steppes, can also take root in remote soil-less deserts, dangerous shores, and precipitous cliffs, is so widespread, ordinary and resilient, yet brings to the world, year after year, luxuriance and hope."³
- 12 The exhibition spaces limited to associations of students and basements of universities or cultural centres have, as a result of constraint, prompted artists to broaden and invent interesting exhibition formats, well removed from any established code, such as, for example, the *Cloth Sculptures* project initiated in 1986 by Ding Yi, a major figure in abstract and conceptual painting: wrapping themselves in a simple white cloth, the three artists Ding Yi, Zhang Guoliang and Qin Yifeng put on a series of performances in different sites in the city of Shanghai, as much in suburban areas as downtown, as well as in huge shopping malls. This was also the case with the immaterial and international exchange of concepts in the exhibition *Let's Talk about Money: Shanghai First International Fax Exhibition* presented in 1996 at the Huashan Art School, devised by Frank Bull, involving a group of major artists in Shanghai's art community at that time, including Ding Yi, Shi Yong, Shen Fan and Zhou Tiehai. That exhibition would subsequently have

an influence on the *Art for Sale* project shown in 1999, in the form of a supermarket, brainchild of the young artist Xu Zhen, today internationally recognized for the dexterity with which he handles his own exhibition formats.

- 13 Biljana Ciric's book contains a wealth of exhibition archives. It opens up a decisive breach in favour of a history of exhibitions and a contemporary art which is no longer content with the art market and the museum structures which are thriving in China, well removed from any concern with historical research, and curatorial and scientific vision in favour of the future development of art in China.

NOTES

1. Wang Hui, "How to Interpret China and its Modernity: Rethinking the Rise of Modern Chinese Thought", in cat. *SeMa Biennale Mediacity Seoul 2014: Ghosts, Spies, and Grandmothers*, Seoul: Biennale Mediacity Seoul, 2014, p. 30
2. Kaepelin, Olivier. "Inhabiting the World", in cat. *Busan Biennale 2014: Inhabiting the World*, Busan: Busan Biennial Foundation, 2014, n.p.
3. Qiu Deshu taken from the manifesto of the *Grass Society in A History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979-2006*, in *A History of Exhibitions: Shanghai 1979-2006*, Manchester: Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, 2014, p. 23