Asian Biennials Forum

Submitted by Susan Kendzulak on Thu, 2008-11-13 20:16

Asian Biennales: Nationalism in a post-colonial world

Internationalism versus Nationalism

Currently, one third of the world’s biennales take place in Asia, with the first being the Tokyo Biennale in 1952. Yet, the international art biennale started with the Venice Biennale which was founded in 1895, a year before the Olympic games, at a time when world’s fairs and international exhibitions started growing in popularity with the idea that nations can showcase the best of their talents. However, this type of showcasing of national pride often leads to nationalism and sometimes to conflict.

What do you think about exhibiting art in national pavilions? Are artists and their works defined by their birthplace, their nationalities or their current places of residency? Isn’t this idea of nationalism carried over into today’s biennales? In the case of Taiwan, I would say yes, as the artists representing Taiwan, either in the Taipei Biennial or in the Taiwan Pavilion at Venice, are ethnic Chinese/Taiwanese and never aboriginal, Japanese or Western. Contrast this with Singapore that includes a diverse ethnic population of its local artists in its biennale.

Post-colonialism

“Farewell to Post-colonialism” is the theme for this year’s Guangzhou Triennial. For the catalog essay, curator Gao Shiming wrote: “Of course, the Triennial is primarily a reflection on the exhibition experience and its “internationalism”. The questioning of the international exhibition platform is not new. In 2007, a book titled The Next Documenta Should Be Curated by An Artist was released at the opening of Documenta 12 in Kassel. It alluded to the fact that artists’ discontent with curatorial practice had reached an intolerable capacity, compelling one to ask: What, exactly, are artists dissatisfied with? Are they unsatisfied with the international exhibition system, the spectacle of discourse, or the plethora of euphemistic cultural-political strategies deployed in curatorial practices? All these troubles seem to stem from the “international” element. However, for contemporary artists, what kind of space is considered “international”? and: “If the key issue of post-colonialism in international curatorial practice is negotiating value, then is the final value based on a consensus? Or rather, do we need to reach a consensus? Can the consensus eliminate difference?”

Let’s also discuss the political issue of the biennale’s structure and organization, and in particular the selection of biennale curators. In the case of Taiwan, since 2000, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum first picks a Western curator via committee. The appointed Western curator then chooses the Taiwanese curator. This happened in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008. I find this highly problematic.

Art Compass 2008

September 2008 saw several Asian biennales and triennales: Sydney(6/18-9/7) http://www.bos2008.com/app/biennale, Gwangju (9/5-11/9) http://www.gwangju-biennale.org, Busan (9/6-11/15) http://www.busanbiennale.org/, Guangzhou Triennial (9/6-11/16) http://www.gztriennial.org, we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
Asian Biennials Forum
Published on northeastwestsouth.net (http://northeastwestsouth.net)

With so many Asian biennales, what does this say about the current art situation in Asia?

What is the function of a biennale?

In the mid-90s, biennales tried to link the local scene with the international scene. This helped to shift focus from the dominant western art centers to other locations. It helped strengthen local artist-run spaces while introducing different ideas into the local art scene. Does this paradigm work anymore? Or has the biennale just turned into a tourism-culture industry? Which audiences does the biennale serve: the frequent-flying art world or the local population? Can it serve both audiences?

Does it help promote local artists? And WHO are these local artists? In the case of this year’s Singapore Biennale, 15 percent of the artists are from Singapore and were funded to create new works, thus giving a generous boost to the local art scene. Compare this to Taipei’s, where only 4 out of the 47 artists are Taiwanese artists (and one of the Taiwanese works a spray-painted graffiti-like mural).

How do cities change after a biennale? In the case of Taiwan, in addition to the Taipei Biennial, biennales begin flooding the country like fake Louis Vuitton handbags. There is the Kuandu Biennale located at the art school Taipei National University of the Arts (nicknamed “Kuandu”), the in-planning-stage Taiwan Biennale at the Taichung Museum, and the Fushing Biennale in Changhua County which has a theme: Asia/Contemporary/Post-colonialism, but its website is only in Chinese, thus limiting its audience.

This is just the beginning of the provocative discussion about Asian biennales and I look forward to your comments and insights. Since I am based in Taiwan, I mention Taiwan as an example.

Let the discourse begin!

I look forward to your comments, Susan Kendzulak November 11, 2008 p.s. This made me chuckle, even funnier, no comments. The Taipei Fine Art Museum’s official website posted my critical blog entry here: http://www.taipeibiennial.org/2008/ContentPage/Contents.aspx?ID=4&SubID=... What do you think of this being posted on their site?

Institutional/political context of biennials II

Submitted by Ingrid Commandeur on Fri, 2008-11-14 17:04

Dear Susan Kendzulak,

we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
Thank you for your kick-off. I would like to respond by diving a little deeper in the context and theoretical framework of the Guangzhou Triennial, which I think is very useful for an overall discussion about Asian Biennials.

To me as an art critic, two recent scholars/art historians that are the most inspiring to me are: Isabelle Graw, whose new book about the relation between the art and market is to be published soon. ('Der Große Preis. Kunst zwischen Markt und Celebrity Culture') and the debate issued by the curators of the Guangzhou Triennial: Sarat Maharaj, Gao Shiming and Chang Tsong-zung. Together they (Isabelle Graw and the GZ-curators) open the debate to two today's most pressing issues: the increasing hegemony of the art market within the artworld, which is a result of the neoliberal society and economies. And as result to that: the political and financial stakes for contemporary art that go along with this, in other words it's widespread financial and political usefullness, which is unprecedented in the history of contemporary art (prestige, city promotion, hedge funds investments, political tool et cetera) Naturally the so-called biennalisation of the artworld is closely linked to these aspects.

Gao Shiming wrote an excellent essay in the catalogue about the theme of the exhibition 'Farewell to Post-Colonialism' of the Guangzhou Triennial. He wrote the following: (the main part of his essay can be found to the left, under Books, under Asian Biennials Forum Library: http://northeastwestsouth.net/?q=node/282) 'Post-colonialism had earned a place in the enclosed and dominant worldview history of nation-states. It has been integrated with various social movements in the past 40 years and cleared new critical and narrative ground. Its merits are obvious in literature, the arts and politics. However, there merits have quickly degenerated to routines within within the last 20 years. For instance, we often see and hear symbolic forms of cultural critique in various international exhibitions and seminars labeled with key terms like: 'identity', 'migration', 'diversity', et cetera. Today (...) these concepts and ideas that once possessed revolutionary critical force have become another form of dominant power discourse, this time in the name of political correctness.' Gao Shiming also states: 'After post-colonialism, the main task for the artist is to escape from over-politicised international art sites.'

One of the questions he raises is: Has art activism degenerated into a "pseudo-representative regime" in major international art exhibitions? I think this would certainly be an interesting question to raise in our discussion.

The "farewell to post-colonialism" actually means a farewell to the inherent politicised international art exhibitions, that are somehow the heritage of the post-colonialism-debate. In trying to formulate an answer or counterposition to that the triennal advocates a strong return to the individuality and creativity of the artist. This also fits in a much larger discourse, namely that of a general feeling of being tired of the theme-exhibitions and theoretical frameworks and feeling an urge to go back to the individual creativity, the monograph and the single ouevre exhibitions... this might the wider issue to be debated in the context of the Guangzhou Triennial.

As part of the lecture series 'Now is the Time. Art & Theory in the 21th century', (organized by the art magazine METROPOLIS M in cooperation with the University of Amsterdam and a few dutch art institutions), this week Hou Hanru and Julian Stallabras came to Amsterdam to debate the topic of the globalisation of art. (see www.nowisthetime.nl) Of course one of the main topics proved to be the biennial versus globalisation.

Julian Stallabras' conclusion or view on the international biennial-structure shared the critical position that I would like to advocate but I guess he was even more negative. A very, very brief summary of what he argued: along with the globalisation goes a free circulation of money and goods and a shrinkage of space, this is closely linked to and made possible by the ideology of neoliberalism, resulting in some deep and rapid financial and cultural changes (for instance the emergence of China and India as new cultural and economic powers) and a general undermining of the
nation-state. Since there exists a profound tension between the neoliberal ideology and the artworld, this ideology has gone into hiding. That is to say: the artword itself as become an integral part of the neoliberalism but this is not outspoken: it’s there everywhere but has gone underground. An example of the way ‘the biennalisation’ has become part of this system strategy is the fact that Stallabras stated, that allthough biennials allways have a theme, they have no content. The themes are so broadly set that you can interprete it any way you want. And often it goes along with promoting an international, multicultural Utopia without really acknowledging what this would actually mean, besides inviting artists form all voer the world. (and that’s just exactly what the curators of the Guangzhou triennial wanted to oppose with their theme!). So biennials are in fact the very propaganda-tool for the virtue of globalisation and neoliberalism. Curators should take up a much more critical position in this. His main question would then be; what kind of curatorial strategies could the anti-biennial entail?

As a curator Hou Hanru explained that his position was somewhat different: he wants to make the problems and pressing issues visible through the way artists react on it (in his case privatisation of public space, politics of the spectacle in China) and will use existing structures like biennials as a platform. And that’s of course this also a position one can take....

'To be or not to biennale?'

Submitted by Thomas J. Berghuis on Sun, 2008-11-16 17:07

"The stream of cultural capital? But that’s me, Marie tells herself, while watching the baggage return rotate at Narita airport. A little stream, but still a stream. Cultural, that’s for sure, but they buy culture from me. Capital too. I’m not the owner, thank God, nor the manager. Just a little cultural labor force they can exploit. But correctly, under contract, let me add, and with my signature. No great discovery here. Half wage earner, half craftsman. That’s how you wanted it. You rush around Europe, the continents, airplanes, faxes, telephones, mail to the four corners of the world. It’s hard, really hard. Fun, but hard. Once it was fun. And on top of it you still have to work. You can’t always sell the same product. You have to invent, read, imagine. [...]"


So here we are: writing from all four corners of the world. Some are even taking the right not to write. Maybe some of us have become wary of commenting on a topic which has been discussed for a number of years now. After all, who is still listening? At least in the past we could pause for 2 or 3 years before moving on to the next topic. Or we could even spend a few more years dealing with some of the world’s more pertinent issues. After all: it usually takes time before one can tell. At least, this was the case before the introduction of cultural capital, or streams thereof. Some even give themselves 5 years, or 10! Now we are left counting, endlessly.

I have heard people say how they love to ‘do biennales’. I keep asking myself, what exactly ‘do you do’? Let’s hope looking is one of the many performances that people undertake when they do these events. And I mean looking, not just seeing and be seen.
"If everything goes right, there’s a hostess (I see her, that’s who’s coming, I’m sure of it) or some assistant who comes by the airport to give you a lift. A half hour at the hotel to freshen up. Sometimes, it’s after eighteen hours of nonstop flying, huh? Cocktails and dinner, then the lecture and a drink. Or a cocktail and the lecture, than dinner. It’s the same thing everywhere in all the cities of the world. Sometimes the’re anxious, sometimes excited, or a bit mean. And sometimes too, there’s a real friend. Always smiling, Marie, even when you sweetly tell sinister stories during your talk. I’m able to sell anxiety, it sparks interest, but in a friendly way. Tomorrow or the day after we part, we embrace, we exchange offprints, books, addresses, embrace again, till later, stay in touch, OK? It’s a small world, a wave of the hand, a momentary melancholia, suitcases passing through the metal detector. — Hello, are you Keiko? Thank you for coming to get me. Is Keiko just a little stream of cultural capital? Obviously."
[Lyotard, “Marie Goes to Japan, 4]

Last year it seems everyone was in Europe. Instead, I decided to stay in Sydney, where I worked on a catalogue essay, as well as on preparing a forum that investigated the interrelatedness between art and the built environment in Asia. I kept myself updated, tracing the cultural caravan by reading some of the reviews on Venice, Kassel, Munster, and Basel. I recall seeing a whole load of pictures of parties and sprees near the Grand Canal. “Was that really Naomi Campbell?” I also recall hearing the news about a major installation being struck by a storm. “Thank God, no-one was hurt!” I remember reading a report of a reviewer who after Venice decided to take a plane to the northern tip of Norway to watch the icebergs melt away. I apologize for not being able to reference this particular review, but it does paint the picture of how someone, at least, wanted to see some reality unfold.

"In the shower, Marie remembers that their prof was explaining to them that capital is not time is money, but money is time. The good stream is the one that gets there the quickest. An excellent one get’s there almost right after it’s left. On radio and TV, they call it real or live time. But the best thing is to anticipate its arrival, its “realization” before it gets there. That’s money on credit. Its time stocked up, ready to spend, before real time. You gain time, you borrow it. You have to buy a word processor. Unbelievable, the time you can gain with it. — But what about the act of writing? You can gain write faster, page layouts, footnotes, corrections, you see? Poor Marie, you won’t get rich, you like scribbling on your piece of paper, to bad for you. You are a slow little stream. You will be passed by fast little streams."
[Lyotard, “Marie Goes to Japan, 5]

So here I am, writing on biennales, or perhaps not? Perhaps I am just scribbling notes on a piece of paper. What am I supposed to write? Maybe I am too slow? I am definitely not good at producing singularities. Yet, following Lyotard “What cultural capitalism has found is the marketplace of singularities."

"The streams must all go into the right direction . They must converge. Why all this cultural busyness, colloquia, interviews, seminars? Just so we can be sure that we’re all saying the same thing. About what then? About alterity. Unanimity on the principle that unanimity is suspect. If you are a woman, and Irish, and still presentable, and some kind of professor in Brasil, and Lesbian, and writing non academic books, then you are a real good little stream. Cultural capital is interested in you."
[Lyotard, “Marie Goes to Japan, 6]

Today’s stream is focused on biennales, or not? Perhaps it is focused on post-colonialism? Or maybe on a farewell? To biennales? Next, we come to discuss nationalism, internationalism, or perhaps we should turn out attention to capitalism?

Earlier this year I raised two open questions to Robert Storr, following his presentation on the “notion of dialogue”, or as I saw it, on the idea of the
'democratic spectator’, in relation to the 2007 Venice Biennale. The talk was given at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, during the time of the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, which was titled: Revolutions: Forms That Turn and curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev.

My questions to Storr were formulated around the idea of: “How do we deal with the concepts and realities of insurgency?” and “Are we talking revolution, or reformation?”

Unfortunately, the discussion quickly turned sour, as earlier discussions played out in Artforum started to flare up again. The feud caused a spark amongst the Sydney art community and also received some attention in Broadsheet. Yet, the questions posed continue to ask for a discussion.

In my view the same type of questions should be asked when confronting ourselves with the discussion of the recent biennales in Asia, and in particular when dealing with the issue of a possible “Farewell to Post-Colonialism”. So far, the discussion seems to be located in a blind trust in the role of the biennale, as well as in the role of its curators to lead the way towards creating for ourselves a brave new world.

Yet, before we start to feel completely at ease in our self-motivated zones of comfort that we surround ourselves with when merely following the ‘role of biennales’, I would like to propose looking at some of the issues that are affecting communities across the world — including in our own backyard.

Surely it is interesting to see that Hou Hanru (following the posting by Ingrid Commandeur in her comment on Asian Biennales) “wants to make the problems and pressing issues visible through the way artists react on it”. Yet, who decides on what these problems and pressing issues should be? Lyotard writes how “True universality, they say today, is singularity.” So in the proposed stream of cultural capital we are supposed to follow the universality of biennales, biennale curators, biennale artists, and those who pride themselves on writing biennale reviews?

Instead, I would like to post a link to a program that was recently broadcasted on Australian Television (ABC 4 Corners). The program delves into the issue of the recent intervention in indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. I am almost certain that nobody outside Australia would know of the intervention, and especially in the biennale realm, it would not have been a point of discussion. Therefore, before anyone starts to tackle the proposition of a “Farewell to Post-Colonialism”, or before anyone starts to propose using biennales as a platform for dealing with problems and pressing issues, perhaps ask yourself why no biennale has yet been able to pay attention to such issues as the intervention, whereas a documentary film crew has?

"At one in the morning, the hotel foyer is full of businessmen. They’re making deals, in all the languages of the world. What the fuck are you doing here, Marie? Is it that the little jewel of reflective thought keeps its hand in? There is still some capital interested in it, isn’t there? Some collectors? For how long? We’ll see soon. But you, maybe not, my old dearly. Try not to smoke so much."
[Lyotard, “Marie Goes to Japan, 15]

ABC 4 Corners “Tracking the Intervention” http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2007/20071105_intervention/interv...

Further resources:

we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
The biennale as "experience" or "rhetorical object"

Submitted by Lee Weng Choy on Sun, 2008-11-16 17:11

Thanks Susan for starting this forum.

Your comments raise some very important issues. But what worries me is how we have been framing biennales. I'm not sure if your opening remarks, whether inadvertently or otherwise, frame the biennale as a “rhetorical object”, or as an “experience”. (Do let me know what you understand by my use of these terms, and if indeed your remarks lean one way or the other.)

We talk a lot about biennales: we talk about the curator's themes, positions, and arguments; and about the criticisms of biennales (whether from artists, other curators, or critics and historians). We talk about the ideas behind them. We talk about post-colonialism, internationalism, how we need to move on from this or that position, into this or that new position.

So, there is this thing, the biennale, as a product of curatorial rhetoric, and of critical rhetoric.

But what about the experience of the exhibition? What I find problematic in a lot of biennale reviews is that the writer, usually after only a two-day visit, assumes to be able to judge the whole thing, and as if it were indeed a whole thing. As if the experience were not profoundly fragmentary, where it is not a given that the many works will eventually add up to some grand statement by the artistic director or curators. Sure, it is unsatisfying to experience such exhibitions only in fragments. You like some art works, you don't like the rest -- where does that get you? It has to be more than that. Perhaps. But I think we need to be more patient with how the experience adds up. We need to give these things a lot of time, to understand and experience them.

Like a lot of people, I've had biennale on the brain over the last few months. In fact, over the last few years. And I've been writing quite a bit about these things. If I may, let me link and excerpt a few of my previous texts, to expand on the comments I've made above ...
In 2006, I wrote something for Eyeline magazine in Brisbane, in response to Artspace’s “Critical Reader”, which reviewed Charles Merewether’s “Zones of Contact” Sydney Biennale. Here’s an excerpt:

To caricature the argument I’d like to make, there are two kinds of discourses about biennales. The first kind, which purportedly explains the art works and curatorial concepts, is a demonstration of intentions accomplished, and often celebrates new ground being broken. One is tempted to say this discourse should not be taken seriously, as it merges with marketing and publicity, despite its often sophisticated language and numerous citations of theory. The other kind, which is indeed taken seriously, too seriously, criticises the biennale – in the particular and in general -- and is ultimately dismissive. Between the two, the second kind of writing is more demoralising for the art world. In the first, the space between thinking and selling collapses; in the second, however, the collapse is between knowledge and despair. The critic is always more clever than the biennale curator, who inevitably fails to realise his or her ambitions, does the opposite of what he or she claims, and so on. The critic may be best able to see and say all this, but then criticism becomes strangely impotent: it is a discourse of the symptoms of a hopeless situation.

***

Lastly, I interviewed Joselina Cruz and Matthew Ngui, the curators of the 2008 Singapore Biennale, as well as general manager Low Kee Hong (who worked together with artistic co-director Fumio Nanjo). Here are excerpts from the introduction to that interview, which was published in Broadsheet this September.

In September 2006, Singapore launched its first biennale. Earlier that year, Joan Kee, Ray Langenbach, Paul Rae, June Yap, Cyril Wong and yours truly — a small sample of local and regional writers and curators — participated in a roundtable called “Calibrated Expectations”, which was published in Broadsheet (Vol. 35, No. 3). The topics we discussed ranged from overreaching ambitions — “for many curators, the opportunity to do an international biennale poses an irresistible chance to create one’s own vision of the universe” (Kee) — to questions of what will be “the Biennale’s position on works ... that are explicitly critical of the Singapore government” (Langenbach); from doubts whether Singapore can “open up and see what freedoms we can actually enjoy” (Yap), to worries over “the erasure of great distances ... without demanding the full costs” (Lee); from wondering if we can “move beyond cynicism” (Rae), to a sense of resignation that we are already living in a dystopia where “visibility is everything” (Wong). We were mindful of the ever increasing verbiage on the subject of biennales, and didn’t want to merely add to the noise, but somehow to be reflexive about the habits of those discourses.

As I argued in my introduction to the roundtable, if critics want to fault the conceits of biennale curators, they too must recognise that they have a responsibility. Ironically, yet not surprisingly, the rhetoric curators use to articulate their exhibitions is in good measure criticism refracted, processed and incorporated. So perhaps we might have “better” biennales, if our criticisms of them were also better. In our roundtable, we only managed to spell out an incomplete catalogue of diverse demands. It was hardly the ushering of the “better criticisms” I had called for, but such is an endeavour worth pursuing, and writers haven’t hesitated to further ponder upon that thing, the biennale.

... Far too many discussions of these exhibitions are characterised by the rush to judgement, and by the assumption that a biennale is indeed a thing in itself, rather than a phenomenon that may not quite cohere. Would it be more accurate to consider each one as an odd assemblage of several parallel if not separate micro-verses which exist in multiple times? For this interview, rather than directly addressing such larger issues as this year’s theme -- which, incidentally, is “Wonder” -- or the challenge of doing a second Singapore Biennale, or the state of contemporary art in Asia, I've
decided that the important thing, sometimes, is to privilege the details. As a way of attending more carefully and taking more time to look at the
whole process, I've asked curators Joselina Cruz and Matthew Ngui, as well as general manager Low Kee Hong, questions about the process of
selection -- from the artists to the artistic director. Fumio Nanjo is again in charge of the island city-state's big show. By having a relatively tight focus
I do not mean to lose sight of the bigger picture. The tendency to talk about these grand projects in grand terms often is at the expense of closer
engagements — engagements which require time, and usually only yield very partial and incomplete understandings ...

* * * * * *

More later ...

Art ‘after’ the biennale

Submitted by Thomas J. Berghuis on Mon, 2008-11-17 05:12

It is good to read the comment by Lee Weng-Choy on the biennale as “rhetorical object” or as “experience”. These points will hopefully allow some of
the discussion so far to be critically informed, without having to move through the process of having to reiterate many of the past discussions again.
It is clear that the topic of biennales is not a new one. Already for a number of years, biennales have been the focus of numerous discussions.
Important questions have been raised on the experience of the biennale, and significant research has been produced on the overall performance of
the biennale, including on its relation to the complex field of Asian art. There is no need to reinvent the wheel with this discussion.

The critical discourse surrounding biennales indeed needs to move on. This means that discussions on the (curatorial) rhetoric behind biennales have
to be critically informed. Surely, we can all (re-)read the catalogue essay for these biennales, or reiterate some of the debates that were issued by the
curators of these recurrent art events. If we are privileged enough, we can even visit some of these exhibitions and produce a quick review of them,
before moving on to the next one. In other words, we can choose to ‘do’ biennales. At the same time, we can also choose not to ‘do’ them. Maybe the
second option allows reinvesting some of our time in dealing with the long-term history, formation, and function of these biennales. We can ask
ourselves what these biennales have actually produced — in terms of a critical discourse, an understanding of the complex field of contemporary art,
or in terms of a better public awareness of the multiplicity of pressing issues that are facing societies across the world. So far, the discussions have
been largely focused on the manifestation of biennales: in terms of their locations (9 biennales in Asia), their concepts (post-colonialism, globalism,
liberalism, capitalism), and their function (generating streams of cultural capital). What about their function? Indeed, what do biennales offer beyond the initial spectacle of the temporal, event?

The questions that are raised by Lee Weng-Choy are important. At the same time I am wondering if anyone is listening. A critical rhetoric is useful as long as it is capable of drawing an audience, a readership, and a broad public response. So far, many of the discussions on biennales seem to take place within the confined context of the biennale itself — leading to close cohort discussions amongst its organizers, participants, and followers. The biennale has become a society, generating a societal ordering of cultural capital and labor. The need for more intricate engagements with the broad field of culture becomes imperative, but perhaps we need to allow ourselves to move on from the biennale, or at least ask the biennale to move on. What happens to art ‘after’ the biennale? What about the act of writing? Or, the act of reading, seeing, looking, and discussing? Less and less attention is paid to the laboratories of artistic and cultural, and more and more attention is given to the spectacle of the periodic event.

In September of this year I was in Singapore for a week of teaching. On the last day I visited the Biennale, and moved myself along many of the sites that had been selected for this major art event. It was two weeks after the official opening. By this time, the entrance of City Hall — one of the main sites for the biennale — had been blocked off by barbed wire fences. A huge stage in front of the museum marked the coming of Singapore’s ‘real’ major event, the Formula 1. Once inside, I was able to see a multitude of works. Some works I had seen at previous biennales, some I had never seen before, and some I had been able to see emerge out of the studios of the artists. The picture soon became clear; there are a great number of artists who are working themselves to extremes for us, generating pertinent discourses on cultures and societies across the world. Artists across Asia have managed to occupy platforms for broader public engagement.

Inside one of the spaces a group of students were introduced to the some of the multiple layers of complexity behind the work of the Japanese artist Ryuro Fukuda. The caption at the entrance of the exhibited photographs (simply) read: “While neither of these photographic series document ‘real’ scenes, these images by Ryuro Fukuda explores the beautiful global environment that surrounds us, evokes possible scenery, and creates a unique perception of the smallness of humanity. It is true the beauty that Fukoda makes us aware of the wonders possible in the world.” — “Maybe there is also more to this work than the mere ‘wonders of the world’?; Maybe the work proposes a form of critique on the environment and on the world at large?”, the teacher suggested to the students. For the next few minutes a lively discussion emerged.

A few hours later I was looking at the work of Liew Kung-Yu, ‘Cermelang, Gemilang, Terbilang’ (‘Excellence, Glory, Distinction’). The work offers a brilliant visual display of national Malaysian symbols, combined with the word ‘Merdeka’ (Independence/Freedom). In the room opposite Liew’s work, Sherman Ong’s ‘Banjir Kemarau’ (‘Flooding in the Time of Draught’) was being screened. The work consists of a series of (directed) conversations between different people in Singapore on the topic of water, one of the main issues for the long term survival of Singapore. The quality of the works should be praised, as well as the curatorial decision to work with the two artists and put these two works in close proximity to each other. Yet, my ‘moment of wonder’ came when reading the official Biennale statement that was placed in the hallway separating the two works, including the way it described how “the nuanced word of wonder suggests that we consider the world from different points of view”. Why was this statement placed in between these two works? Is it the function of the Biennale to seek a ‘nuanced word’ that allows us to ‘consider the world from different points of view’? This would explain the overwhelming emphasis on the curatorial theme. Yet, why is it not possible for the biennale to allow a set of discourses to emerge based on direct contact with the work? The audiences are not stupid, you know? All of the local audiences who were present at the time seemed perfectly capable of seeing and discussing the multiplicity of issues that were raised by these two works. They did not necessarily wonder, but seemed generally engaged with the issues raised by the works.
After City Hall, I moved to the South beach Development, one of the alternative sites for the biennale. By then the temperature had risen to 38 degrees Celsius. The next thing I remember was wondering how quick I would be able to get out of one of the plastic toilet cubicle that was placed on the site to accommodate the visitors. As I moved myself through the depleted compounds, I was reminded of an article by Elena Filipovic on the “Global White Cube”, published in “The Manifesta Decade” (MIT Press, 2005). In her conclusion Filipovic points out how “The now global white cube certainly should not be supplanted by another model that will become ‘the’ biennale standard. Merely inserting works in crumbling industrial buildings or any number of other ‘exotic’ locales is not the solution either. Instead, the future of biennials is to be found in a sensitivity to how the coincidence of works of art and other conditions (temporal, geographic, historic, discursive, and institutional) ‘locate’ a project and how that ‘location can be used to articulate a project that is respectful of its artworks and speaks to its viewers.” Unfortunately, the South Beach Development produced neither, a number of works were invisible, badly installed, or simply took up too much space. The audiences were all wondering: where to go next.

Meanwhile, the biggest challenge in Singapore has not been raised. Several months before the Biennale I also visiting Singapore and was struck by the news of a great number of artists having to leave their studios and residences as the rents had been doubled (or sometimes tripled) due to a high demand on the housing market. Clearly, these developments puts great pressure on the art community of Singapore, with many important sites of production having disappeared in the two years between the first and the second biennale. What role does the biennale actually have in generating new platforms for art in Singapore, especially now that many artists are not even able to afford a place to live, let alone a place to work? I am left wondering: “How?”

**Experienced Biennales**

Submitted by Susan Kendzulak on Mon, 2008-11-17 15:51

Thank you Ingrid Commandeur, Lee Weng Choy and Thomas Berghuis for your thoughtful replies.

Only knowing beforehand that Ingrid wanted to discuss the Guangzhou Triennale as “rhetorical object,” my initial text also tried to keep the topic broad to encompass a wide array of voices and viewpoints. Thomas’ question “Who decides on the pressing issues?” can be applied to politics as well.

I’m interested in the biennale as “experience”: its transformative properties on cities, its platforms for art, and also its platforms for dreaming in how it inspires audiences to live after the biennale experience.

Let’s contrast 2 cities: Singapore and Taipei. To coincide with the opening dates of this year’s Singapore Biennale, there was the first international art fair ARTSingapore (with 110 participating galleries), the Singapore Showcase (a commercial fair of 23 galleries), a museum survey exhibition of Wong Hoy Cheong’s work, and a conference at Substation. And as I mentioned earlier 15 percent of the Singapore Biennial artists live and work in Singapore and were fully funded to create new works compared to barely 10 percent of Taiwanese artists in the Taipei Biennial. Also Taipei’s art fair we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
never takes place during the same time as its biennial. As you can see Taipei’s biennale approach vastly differs from Singapore, making the Taipei experience resemble a museum art exhibition.

It’s also telling that after 3 weeks into the Taipei Biennial, several of Taiwan’s leading art figures told me they hadn’t even seen the Taipei Biennial yet, but these same people discussed the ideas and art works from Guangzhou and Singapore.

What are your insights regarding the various Asian Biennales this year? Please feel free to comment.

‘Keeping track of things’

Submitted by Thomas J. Berghuis on Mon, 2008-11-24 10:46

The most vivid 'experience' of a biennale was at the opening of the Venice Biennale in 2003 -- It was my first Vernisage! I even dressed for the occasion. In 1999 I also visited the Venice Biennale, but this was weeks after the official opening. Everyone had already left, so instead I looked carefully at the work. In 2003 time I was there to meet people, otherwise why would one go to the Vernisage? At the same time, I remained hopeful during the entire 3 days of the opening that I would find the time to see some art ... maybe even look at some of it. Yes, I know... I was a bit of a freshman! I arrived on a press card. It gave the impression that one could go places with it. Sure enough, I was allowed to stand in line for an opening party. Instead, I decided to walk to the Arsenale. It is such an amazing site, you know? A lot of history ... so I’ve heard people say.

I do remember being captured by the communist headquarters, located in one of the alleyways leading to the Arsenale. I am sure you have seen it, right? Very interesting. In case you haven’t seen it, I will attach an image later. This building would certain offer some competition to the ‘actual’ biennale, the communist flag, the sign, the jesus. It would offer some competition to the artists, their work, and to the curators as well, maybe.

Before, in Beijing we often spoke amongst artists, critics, and curators how the entire city was one big exhibition of some of the best artworks ever made. No, I am not talking about the hip and trendy, lofty spaces at 798. This was before Beijing's Soho. They did not even have latte in Beijing, back then. I am talking about the times spend traveling back from the (then) rural artist village of Songzhuang in a tiny taxi-van (which were called 'loaf of bread' -- 'mianbao'). The temperature was -20 Degrees. A dense, eerie fog is covering the road back into the city. Trucks are passing by. Will I be okay. The next thing you see are 10 lorries, the back doors are kept wide open and inside are dozens of animals cut in half, dangling in these trucks – pigs, sheep, cows! Hirst eat your heart out! This is the real stuff! This is what they call ‘Niubi!’ People who understand this, will also understand works such as 'Wudian Shuoming – Chi, He, La, San, Shui' by Song Dong in 1998. “No?” What about ‘Gonggong Shenghuo’ of 1994 by Qiu Zhijie. “Surely everyone will know, about those ‘things’ we need to know about Chinese contemporary art?” Yes, those ‘things’, remember? “No?” What about ‘Jinqin’ by Wu Ershan (1994)? “Oh, I see I am using Chinese to talk about Chinese art! I meant: Song Dong, ‘Five Types of Explanation – Eat, Drink, Shit, Piss, and Sleep’ (1998); ‘Public Life’ by Qiu Zhijie (1994), and ‘Close Relatives’ by Wu Ershan (1996). Maybe still not sure...

we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
I am sorry, I got distracted a bit. I was again “scribbling” on a piece of paper, like Marie. Too bad for both of us, “we won’t get rich”. But, we do seem to know a fair bit about art… “slow”, “little streams” of art. Too bad we are constantly being passed by “fast little streams”. I am sorry, I got distracted again. Where was I? Art, latte, latte, coffee, ... Oh, I remember! Venice! The Arsenale! Where the first thing that one encounters when walking into the exhibition is an Illy Coffee Stand, followed only second by a ‘Utopia Station’, and a ‘Z.O.U (a ‘Zone of Urgency’), ... Video works not working, good paintings hanging in a corner next to a ‘Cantonese express installation’ made out of plywood, cardboard, electric cables. Ah, Venice! The Vernisage! Wow! The temperature (outside) rose to 42 Degrees Celcius. Yes, me wearing a black suit; to look good, to play the part, to get involved with the art. Venice! The Desert of the Real! The last thing I remember is standing on a Vapareto, taking with one of the invited artists. A friend, and well know as well. He explained to me that they were all staying in a hotel on the mainland, at least one hour by boat, bus, and an additional walk. “We don’t get to go to many of the parties, because we need to take the last bus back to the hotel” the artist explained. As we were talking about his problems, we were passed by a speedboat, zooming right towards one of the islands. “Wasn’t that ‘the curator’?”, I asked?... “Yes”. We continued left towards the Giardini.

When I logged in to n.e.w.s. I only wanted to post a simple idea: A GPS tracking device for curators, artist, and critics, ... who are linked to the biennale. Instead, I got distracted by the discussion on the biennale “experience”.

I am logging of again. Hopefully someone else will keep track for me.

---

**Part One: Shanghai**

Submitted by Tiong Ang on Tue, 2008-11-18 11:20

Part One.

My name is Tiong Ang, artist. I live and work in the Netherlands and I have participated in this year’s 7th Shanghai Biennale. I am not the art critic here so I am not giving you a detailed survey about the show and its glory or predicaments. I’m also not a curator, but it is interesting to witness the curatorial directions in this project from close range. Later on I will inform you more about my own project.

Entitled ‘TransLocalMotion’, the 2008 Shanghai Biennale exhibition was curated by three very different curators: Zhang Qing is the artistic director, he is curator of the organizing Shanghai Art Museum. The invited foreign curators were Julian Heynen from Germany and Henk Slager from the Netherlands. Their contribution to the curatorial concept was to make a much more streamlined exhibition. Instead of inviting more than one hundred-and-twenty-something artists they invited less than sixty, allowing the work of each individual to be more extended or complex. Their attempt to break with some basic rules gave way to some new perspectives regarding this biennale. They thematized local transformations in the social, cultural and urban fabric and invited at least one third of the (foreign) artists to produce new, site- and context-specific work supported by we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
intense artistic local research, or using existing local infrastructures. An extensive documentary section in the exhibition on the museum building itself and its extended surroundings (the vast People’s Square, which used to be the horse race track built by the British in the 1920’s, the current museum building being the clubhouse) provided local historical features for a better ‘understanding’ of the contemporary works.

The intensity of local transformations, the role of mobility and local, national and international migrations have been made extremely visible in a city like Shanghai. Everyone who has visited the city in recent years can see that. China as a whole is going through tremendous transformations, in every thinkable layer of society, and this is also something of common knowledge nowadays. The Chinese artworld has quickly become the powerhouse of the Asian art market, and Beijing and Shanghai are full of foreign artists, curators and dealers who don’t want to miss the opportunity and have flocked in to see what’s in it for them. In this tremendous flux of developments one easily forgets that China is still The People’s Republic of China, still under the tight rule of one political party that doesn’t allow any other political orientation to intervene. But the powers that be have understood that contemporary art provides the arena ‘pur sang’ to play the international game of cultural prestige and economic wonder. At the same time the world is upgrading its critical look upon China, geared by the huge airplay of the Beijing Olympics.

This context, and more, gave this year’s Shanghai Biennale its urgency - perhaps in a somewhat naive way - but it was fascinating for me as an artist to be able to work in Shanghai with local people on local themes in this timezone. The two foreign curators showed courage and obstinacy to come up with a working method for the Biennale exhibition that searched for alternative ways to face the image of contemporary Shanghai.

(to be continued)

Part Two: Shanghai

Submitted by Tiong Ang on Mon, 2008-11-24 11:47

An invitation to produce a new work for the Shanghai Biennale is not as normal as it might sound. Usually large exhibitions like Biennales are filled with quickly chosen existing works from artists’ studios that are readily packed, transported and installed on the exhibition premises. The Shanghai 2008 curators wanted to partly break with this and invited a number of artists to use the social and urban context of the city itself as a research ground for new work, to be produced in the city, with support from local organisations and individuals. A temporary focus on localities and the attempt to de-institutionalize the institution with the help of international artists has become a common practice in many western art institutions, but in China the proposal was little less than revolutionary. One must not forget that the Shanghai Biennale, as it is organized by the Shanghai Art Museum, is a truly governmental instrument. The reason of existence of the Biennale is not at all to witness the exhibition as a zone of activity, but to underline a state of authority that principally goes beyond the understanding of contemporary art. The foreign curators, inexperienced in the mystique of Chinese bureaucracy, had to manoeuvre their concepts carefully yet blindly through the various stages of implementation. Numerous academic committee rounds were held and all details of the project proposals were checked, screened and evaluated outside of the curators’ and artists’ scope. Perhaps it was precisely this tension between domestic bureaucratic control and the imported urge to unpack local relationships that
made the Biennale an adventurous balancing act for some of the artists. It also let some of the artistic projects stand out and lifted the entire exhibition above a common exposé of international art.

It was also interesting to clearly see the distinction between three different curatorial practices. Henk Slager from the Netherlands was the most outspoken advocate of artistic research based on social interaction and personal engagement. He invited artists who spent considerable time and energy in the city to develop their project, while Julian Heynen from Germany opted for a more distanced approach, leaning heavily on Western established positions. Zhang Qing, the domestic Chinese curator, was responsible for the choice of Chinese artists, understandably a large bulk of them. This is where the show found its disbalance, since the choice for Chinese artists seemed to be based on less transparent motives. There was a lot of painting that rather illustrated the themes of mobility and urban turbulence but had little interaction with works that were more complex in their mediation of research and involvement. And there was a heavy presence of monumental or even bombastic sculpture that was a little predictable in using motives of mobility (planes, trains, automobiles, migrating ants and yes, suitcases). One wonders whether there were no other Chinese artists who would have proposed a more sophisticated approach, and could have introduced a more critical domestic viewpoint into the exhibition.

These three streams of curating were carefully mixed into the exhibition that became the 7th Shanghai Biennale. At this point I don't want to say too much about it. The majority of the audience didn't seem to care for any curatorial distinction. People came in flocks and flocks; more than half a million people have visited the show. It’s this massive Chinese audience, its motive, its make up, its behaviour, that from the very beginning was my point of departure for my project proposal.

(to be continued)

Asian biennials and the old ideological cartographies

Submitted by Ruben de la Nuez on Tue, 2008-11-25 02:10

Dear all, thanks for the invitation and for your contributions that eased the way for mine.

I would like to continue the analysis of Asian biennials under the postcolonial perspective addressed by the Guangzhou Triennial. I will speak from my experience with the three biennials/ triennials I had the opportunity to visit in 2008: Gwangju, Singapore and Guangzhou.

The most notorious aspect, I found in my encounter with Asian biennales was the “deteritorialization” of the objects on display. Any aprioristic assumption on how an Asian cultural product should look like, or to what social or cultural agenda it should be committed to, vanish in the complexity of the iconosphere exposed in these events. Spiritualism, high-tech, Chinese political pop or any other container generally settle as a framework for a
reading of Asia art appear irrelevant. Not even the subject matters are subjected to geo-cultural territories. A large number of non-Asian artists were exploring Asian issues and vice versa. Of course, there was a downside in this. It was obvious that some non-Asian artists were invited because of their interest on Asian concerns. This is not a problem as long as the theme is not privileged over the poetics.

In such a context, to proclaim a “farewell to post-colonialism” as a topic for an international art event is disturbing but not unjustified. It is not until we read the clarification made by the curator Gao Shiming that we momentarily undress any postcolonial experience and enter the discursive arena proposed by the curatorial concept of the Guangzhou Triennial. The inscription Farewell to Post-Colonialism hanged in the façade of the Guangdong Museum of Art was roughly made in polyurethane foam and not in a solid material as it appears from a distance. In the same way, what appears a lapidary statement on a reality exposes soon its illusory nature, its theatricality. The issue at stake is the “welfare” of post-colonialism, the profit of its mise-en-scène. It is not a coincidence that the “politics of spectacle” have been debated in some of the recent Asian biennales.

There is a dichotomy between the theoretical tools of the discourse on post-colonialism and the predicaments of today’s art in Asia. This issue is not only addressed by the Guangzhou Triennial. Okwui Enwezor’s introductory text to the Gwangju Biennial elaborates on the increasing irrelevance of the traditional ideological map under the condition of cosmopolitanism and of the global market. On the echo of this condition in the arts he comments: "In the past, artists from what was then known as the margins, were eager to enter what was then considered to be the center or mainstream, and the strategies of the artists were usually aligned to accomplish such an objective, namely to join the cosmopolitan sphere of artistic visibility, both in the art market and museums. However, as the idea of centers and mainstream become part of the anachronism of the cultural politics of the past, artists have oriented themselves not toward centers and mainstreams, but towards a more transversal process of linkages, networks, and diverse communities of practice." [O. Enwezor: “The Politics of Spectacle”, The 7th Gwangju Biennale: Annual Report, Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2008, p.12]

I would not fully endorse Okwui’s optimism. The new scenario east-west uttered in the Asian biennials has not an equivalent in the traditional relationship between north and south. The consecratory promenade from south to north and backward is not yet an anachronism in the art world. To use Asian state of the arts, as the reference for the current postcolonial condition would undermine the most obvious fact: the Asian economical growth as a foundational plateau. This has affected the cultural system as a whole, from contemporary art to popular culture. Recently, I heard Gong Li (the famous Chinese, and now Singaporean actress) recognizing the Asian heightened status as the reason of why she no longer goes to Hollywood but rather Hollywood comes to her.

Nevertheless, what seems undisputable is that the proliferation of international blockbuster exhibitions outside the Western circuit is less conditioned by the ideological corpus of post-colonialism. We are away from, for instance, the eighties, when events like the Havana Biennial were created to voice vast cultural zones poorly represented by the so-called international art. If we assume a new cartography where ideology have been absorbed by the market (Enwezor) and post-colonialism have been entrenched under globalization (Shiming), we might ask if there is a space were an art object could prevent commodification under the global standards.

Shiming’s concern about the critical edge of art being abducted by political correctness is rather visible in these recent art events. Social criticism as the core of the artistic paradigm established by the avant-garde is loosing its gravity as transformed into a “friendly” commentary. It seems that the achievement of the Asian biennials when freeing the art objects from the burden of their geo-cultural identification has been negotiated by a commitment to harmony. This term, so much used by political discourse in Asia, is an antonym for the dissonant, the jangling, the “mis-readable” and other terms traditionally related to the lexicon of the avant-garde. Perhaps, the advent of the new world that Asian biennials are foreseeing will...
demand a reconsideration of the artistic paradigm most of us have been educated on.

View from the other site

Submitted by Yuliya Sorokina on Tue, 2008-11-25 09:38

Dear colleagues, I following all of your comments and agree with your remarks in general. I would like to make a replica from the other position. As I already mentioned earlier, the situation within contemporary art in the part of the world, where I am operating is different from the situations in Europe or even in South-East Asia. That’s why the viewing on the Biennale points will be positioning from some other point of view – the view of stranger/alien.

1. We have not biennale for contemporary art in Central Asia. Tashkent Biennale is not at all contemporary even if it has the same name. Art community here either do not know at all or understand clearly what is it contemporary art. Governmental structures and business corporations are absolutely virgin in this point. And all of them are quite aggressive to contemporary art movement in the region (which involves around 50 people per 4 countries). Contemporary art is not at all the tool of marketing or PR, or policy for local officials. So, we have not this model at all – biennale is not a brand here, like Olympic games or Championship.

We have the only one exhibition which looks like a biennale more or less – Bishkek international exhibition for contemporary art, which is going also every 2 years, but we never called it “Biennale”. It is organized with the very low budget covering by grants of international foundations and enthusiastic volunteer efforts of our people. Most of us percept it more like experimental space, then like a biennale as it is. It is quite a marginal for being biennale.

A Biennale looks like an event, which makes a kind of overview of achievements in some area. Any biennale tries to bring together the best from all over the world and discover this quality through some contextual prism of place, problem, person etc. And real biennale must have some extra quality. I think this is a point which makes all biennales very close by sense of structure and working scheme. Biennale can not be experimental it should be “eatable” for art-professionals, sponsors, mass-media, officials and finally just people. To be honest - it is all about money, policy or demonstration of power of some country/government/idea. Nevertheless Biennale model has it’s pro and contra arguments.

2. What do we lose not having biennale here? It seems to me that first of all we lost the opportunity to mark our territory on the “map” of contemporary art. Our artists are well known internationally, but the territory itself is almost not branding like a legal territory of contemporary art. Our business and governmental structures don’t have any example and necessity to put money into art development. It is not there cup of tea. So, we have not funds and support and have not contemporary museums, residencies, exhibition halls, magazines – we have not contemporary art infrastructure... We try to support each other and to grow up young artists, who coming, but it’s going in such a marginal “home-made” way. So it is quite a strange position to be a contemporary artist/curator in Central Asia. That’s why we are just a few.
3. What do we achieve not having biennale here? Again – we are just a few, but not crowds of fancy contemporary artists, who desire to be famous and rich. We are not involved in some qualities mainstream because of our marginal position. We can use world-wide biennale market for establishing our policy of art-traffic. What else? So, what is better – to have or not to have?

4. For the most of Central Asian artists International Biennale are the only possibility to represent themselves and the region on professional level. It is also the possibility to learn the lesson of global artistic qualities as well as to discuss these qualities, or at least to ask questions, which we try to discuss here.
Concerning the Asian Biennales it seems that these events demonstrate a kind of balance in world-wide economy/policy. We are living in the other world, where Singapore, Bussan, Shanghais and other centers of Asian culture can establish a high level art-event. Sometimes these events look like a bit standard, but biennale is a standard. Very often I remember some artist or art piece, but can not realize on which biennale did I see it. But even then me myself and I am sure all of us will come to see next Venice and next Istanbul and next Sydney. We have not another possibility to come all together and react in some way to the work of our colleagues – curators and artists. We will set up another discussion within globalization, post-colonialism, or role of curators. And maybe this discussion and professional reflection possibility is the main value of such a controversial event like a biennale.
At the end I would like to quote the article “Reflections on the Global South” by an International curator from Turkey Beral Madra. She overview here Turkish contemporary situation, which is similar enough to any Asian cultural situation, I guess: “After decades of absence, modern and contemporary art in Turkey should not remain at the mercy of investors, but become centers of discussion for the local and international public, to quote Adorno: “culture is a paradoxical commodity. So completely is it subject to the low of exchange that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly consumed in use that it can no longer be used.” And, to continue in his words: “The culture industry has taken over the civilizing inheritance of the entrepreneurial and frontier democracy, whose appreciation of intellectual deviations was never finely attuned.” We need the intellectual support of our international colleagues who visit Istanbul to explore its artistic and cultural panorama. We will appreciate if they take the Istanbul culture industry seriously in a critical spirit.”

publics for critical reflection

Submitted by Lee Weng Choy on Tue, 2008-11-25 18:37

Hi, I’d like to comment on remarks by Susan, Yuliya, Ruben and Thomas.

Susan, in her opening remarks, asks, what does the flourishing of biennales in Asia say about the situation of contemporary art in the region (this is something that Thomas takes up in his own remarks). Susan also asks how do cities and local arts communities change after the arrival of a biennale. In a later post, Susan raises the question of specific comparisons, such as between Taipei and Singapore.
Not having seen the Taipei show, unfortunately, I can’t follow through on that comparison. But for some time now, I’ve been thinking about the comparison between Hong Kong and Singapore. Why doesn’t Hong Kong have a biennale yet? To what extent has the biennale, as one of a city’s major cultural events, become a certain performance indicator of “arrival” or “competitiveness”. Singapore and Hong Kong compete as gateways to Asia. To a lesser extent, Taipei competes in this regard, but certainly it is in the game as a producer of mass culture products (e.g. television programmes and pop music) that circulate widely in East Asia. Hong Kong competes in this game, but Singapore is not even close.

But why have I foregrounded a comparison between cities with comparisons between culture industries? Can we not think the biennale outside of such instrumentality? If we follow through with Susan’s question about how local arts communities change (rather than asking how the city changes), then we also get to the first of her questions which I’ve reiterated -- what do Asian biennales say about art in Asia. And here again I would caution about being too quick to settle on generalisations. I have nothing against making speculative observations about what is happening in the region, outside of the biennale, and what is happening inside the region’s biennales. But while we all proffer hypotheses, and I encourage the proliferation of such, we should also test them more rigorously. That’s what I mean by being cautious about “settling” on generalisations.

So, do I have any generalisations of my own to offer, to be tested? Well, I’ve been talking about how we talk about biennales. And I’ve made some remarks on that subject. But what about the art?

In Singapore, most mainstream media commentators assume that looking at a painting is easier than looking at an installation. In October, while the Singapore Biennale was ongoing, I went to the ARTSingapore art fair, and if I were someone quick to judge, I’d say it was a big disappointment. But the point I want to make is that the experience reminded me how difficult it is to look at painting. There were works I found simply unappealing; others looked technically accomplished but conceptually bankrupt. These were just quick impressions, inadequate to the task of an honest judgement.

In comparison with the art fairs in Asia, the biennales present a much more dynamic situation. The regional art fairs may not be the most accurate representation of what’s really happening in the art markets, but they are an indicator nonetheless. And while there are many crossovers between the biennales and the markets, still, one can notice that the rise of the biennale in Asia has significantly diversified the production of art. This sounds all too banal, I realise, but perhaps it’s still worth pointing out. If we fault biennales for the sameness of their art, we shouldn’t forget to think about the sameness in the art markets.

Yuliya spoke about not having a biennale in Central Asia, and not being on the map. She also talked about the biennale being something of a standard. Ruben talked about the deterritorialization of the art in biennales, and raised, as well, the issue of centres and margins. Ruben cites Okwui Enwezor Gwangju essay, where the latter argues that today’s global art world is less about centres and margins than transversals and lateral linkages. Ruben says that he “would not fully endorse [his] optimism”. Yuliya’s remarks lend support to Ruben’s criticism of Enwezor, for jumping the gun and announcing a new order of things. What would be interesting is to think through how Ruben’s observations about deterritorialization squares with Yuliya’s comment about standards.

Lastly, a few words on Thomas’s comments about the publics for critical reflection on biennales. I have to say that I’m an optimist here. Or perhaps it’s not a question of optimism, but of necessity. If we don’t fight to establish these publics, the quality of our biennales in the region, and the quality of our art will suffer.

we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
There is no doubting the spectacle of contemporary art from Asia. Many commentators have repeated the refrain how in September 2008, nine biennales and triennials opened in Asia, from Singapore to Shanghai, Gwangju to Yokohama. Granted, that was an unusually busy month in 2008. But with each new year, there just seems to be more and more art in the region. But what about the state of art criticism in Asia over the past few years, it would be that our research and publication has lagged far behind from the churning out of event after event. The problem is not one of volume. While nowhere near in scale and speed as the proliferation of exhibitions, the production of verbiage about art from Asia has been increasing steadily. But what we lack most urgently is critical density in our discourses.

Consider the documenta 12 magazines project; it was instrumental in bringing together many of the editors of journals, websites and magazines from Southeast Asia: there were meetings in Singapore and Thailand leading up to the opening of documenta in 2007, where there were further meetings. Unfortunately, the momentum initiated by this project has not been sustained. What’s happened in 2008 to further develop these Southeast Asian conversations? That is a large part of the problem. We do meet, and regularly, but we still have to find ways to meet and talk and write that deepen our discourses, and not just increase its volume.

South Central

Submitted by Rich Streitmatter-Tran on Tue, 2008-11-25 21:06

With regard to Yulia’s general comments on Central Asia (View from the other site) and the region not having a biennale proper, it has had the ambition or organizational rigor to have represented its artists twice at the Venice Biennale at the Central Asia Pavilion. Certainly there may be a sea of difference between organizing/exhibiting locally and abroad, I don’t believe it’s fair to position Central Asia as being entirely marginalized, at least when it comes to the issue of biennales. In fact, the Central Asia pavilion was inspiring for our group of artists from Southeast Asia. Lee Weng Choy was on the selection jury for the 2005 Martell Contemporary Asian Art Research Grant organized by the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, the award that year was co-awarded to Leeza Ahmady’s research “Unveiling Contemporary Art in Central Asia: Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan” and myself, “Mediating the Mekong: Thailand Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos”. I believe the committee agreed the proposals would contribute to filling some of the gaping holes in both research and engagement in Central Asia and certain areas of Southeast Asia necessary to understanding a more balanced and holistic image of contemporary art in Asia.

While nations in Central Asia might not have the ability to establish high level art events individually, they have been able to realize them collectively, where as the cooperative spirit has yet to be seen in the Mekong region (Thailand has a pavilion at Venice). This of course has not addressed the larger and important issues that Weng, Yuliya, Ruben and Thomas raise concerning the merits of Asian biennales. But it does provide good transition point. Borrowing from Weng’s comparative take on Hong Kong and Singapore, I’d like to offer a second: Thailand and Vietnam.

In 2006 Vietnam launched Saigon Open City (SOC), intended to the nation’s entry into the international and regional contemporary art scene. The SOC originally started out at the Saigon Biennale and was only changed once the organizational managers agreed upon the final Artistic Directors,
Gridthiya Gaweewong and Rirkrit Tiravanija, from Thailand. To cut the end first, the SOC intending to be a project that would unfold in three phases over the course of two years, didn’t make it past the first phase. For reasons that aren’t particularly important for this discussion, it was a disaster and it’s traumatic after effects still linger. Yet, it’s failure provided us with a benchmark. We knew where we stood in respect to national ambition, government intervention, sophistication in curatorial and arts management and where the lines were drawn in the sand by the artists themselves. Artists in Ho Chi Minh City rarely mention this event any longer and have adopted new strategies for production and engagement. Establishing centers and large events simply is not feasible in Vietnam at this time, whereas in Thailand, despite its recent political instability, recently inaugurated the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre – a project a decade in the making. If a Mekong Biennale were to occur, it would certainly happen in Thailand. The question is, would they even want one?

Marginal inside

Submitted by Yuliya Sorokina on Fri, 2008-11-28 07:45

Just to reply to Rich’s statement about the position of Central Asian contemporary art – in my replica I meant we are more marginal inside the region – contemporary art is not “eligible” almost on our own territory.

So, I’m not sure myself that we need an event like Biennale here as I agree – we have more than a lot all over the world. But I percept such a big events like a political tool maybe even more then artistic. Such kinds of events are already a result, they represent some achievements and they must have this game of mixing creativity and policy, you know... And these events and these games are a part of the structure.

But I like more processual things which can blow up something strange and new and questionable. As for Biennale - to be honest, I like all of them more or less, as all of them are good done and achieve their aims somehow. I also trust each curator, as he/she has own position and experience and quality and point of view and finally original idea. I can see the difference in-between European and Asian biennales (not so controversial maybe, but why it should be like that?). Biennales like a tool have common charisma and policy, so, maybe that’s why they looks like a bit same? For me the biennales are more like an "archive" of the best (both artistic and curatorial) all over the world, then something innovative (in sense of tool or form). Of course there are some biennale curators, who can add the component of “the main question” of the time, place and so on. If so, I like the event even more than others, but mostly it’s going in the other way.

Sorry, I am looking from the position of the curator-manager, as nobody in Central Asia is going to give me money and to involve in some wave. I am totally free lance - I decided myself policy, budget, logistic etc. And maybe this is one more bonus of being situated on “marginal” territory...
Hello everyone,

I am Phoebe and I work as head of research at AAA (Asia Art Archive). I would like to say how much I enjoyed following the discussion the past two weeks and that I would hope we could pick it up at another place in time, maybe the end of January? My interest lies in developing a discourse around the role and experience of the viewers, the audience and therefore the city, the people in these cities, who attend the Biennials.

Here’s a short clip to end Part I.

http://hk.youtube.com/watch?v=uMV4VSfC2Uk

Looking forward to Part II, I hope there is more to follow.

That was really impressive. A

Submitted by concerto de parabrisas on Mon, 2010-10-18 08:46

That was really impressive. A meeting of real and true artist.