Art from Asia is on the rise — or so it must seem. From Sydney to Shanghai, Busan to Berlin, Asian artists are all over the place. The year 2008 was a banner year for biennales in this part of the world. September alone saw several biennales and triennials opening, including Gwangju, Busan, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Singapore, Taipei and Yokohoma. However, research and analysis of contemporary art from the region have not kept pace with the spectacle of exhibition. And it’s arguable that this underdeveloped state of discourse is an urgent concern. What we need, perhaps, is less chatter, and more reflection. Hopefully, in this forum here, we’ll be able to serve up some of the latter along with some of the former. The Asian Biennales Forum, Part II, is a follow-up from the forum which took place in November 2008.

I’m Lee Weng Choy, an art critic based in Singapore, and artistic co-director of The Substation arts centre. I’ll be the moderator for the forum, which begins 17 March 2009, and continues till 22 March. With me are the following panelists: Susan Kendzulak was the moderator of the first forum; she is an artist and critic based in Taiwan. Thomas Berghuis teaches Asian art at the Department of Art History & Film Studies at the University of Sydney. Joselina Cruz is an independent curator based in Manila; she was one of the curators of the 2008 Singapore Biennale. Michael Lee is an artist based in Hong Kong and Singapore. Carla Bianpoen is a senior editor of C-Arts Magazine. Phoebe Wong is head of research, Asia Art Archive. Tiong Ang is an artist, and a co-founder of the n.e.w.s. foundation. To start off, I’ve invited the panelists to consider the following four registers: i) the epistemology of the biennale — what do we know about these events, how do we know these things, and what forms of knowledge do these events produce? ii) field notes — specific observations drawn from our own individual experiences as visitors to these events; iii) reflections on the making of biennales — comments from curators and participating artists iv) the discourses of biennales — reflections on the criticism, art history, and reviews of biennales.

What follows are the opening remarks of the panelists, as well as my own contribution. The forum is open to everyone to comment. Please join us.

Opening remarks by Susan, Michael, Carla, Thomas, Joselina and Weng Choy.

Susan Kendzulak

The Asian Biennales Forum, Part I, began with a discussion of the biennale as “experience” or “rhetorical object”, and ended with confirmed interest to critically explore the aftermath of these exhibitions under a macroscopic lens.

To generalize, the biennale has helped in the process to positively shift the focus of art away from predominant European and North American art centres. This biennalization allowed art practice to become more encompassing, while allowing voices from diverse areas around the world to be heard. Art as we know it in 2009 is much more inclusive, more racially and culturally diverse, and much more interesting as compared to 1980. [1] When the biennale is at its effective best, it often functions as a site of experimentation to explore the urban fabric and its relationship within the process of globalization, which means parts of the exhibition occur outside the traditional “white cube” museum spaces. For the viewer, the biennale then becomes a local history lesson (Sydney Biennale 2008 Cockatoo Island), or a walking tour (Singapore Biennale 2006), bringing the viewer to both
physical and metaphorical places that transcend time and space. At its worst, the Biennale can become a tool of the bureaucrat. [2]

Cities saw the need to initiate their own biennales as development tools which explains why there are over 60 biennales around the world today as compared to just a mere 17 biennales during the hundred year period from 1890 to the 1980s. [3] On the negative side, the biennale was a cultural cannibal disembarking in foreign lands seeking its next meal; yet to its benefit, the biennale has broadened the art discussion both for the local and international art communities.

The biennale was a model that worked well for the past twenty years, but it seems to have reached its expiration date. The biennale as we know it may have reached its saturation point as it too often results in an art festival extravaganza that is easily consumed. The world has changed a lot since 1989, with nano and internet technology, the global tentacular reach of financial markets, devastating wars and human crises. It is now time for cultural production to accurately reflect today’s world.

Thomas Berghuis wrote that we put “blind trust in the role of the biennale” without really examining why some issues are deemed pressing to the exclusion and omission of other issues, and more importantly, he wonders who selects the issues. Since one third of the world’s biennales take place in Asia, perhaps Asia can start the discussion.

Notes

1. In 1980, I was a student at School of Visual Arts, NYC where the discussion of the time was, who was a better painter: Salle or Schnabel?

2. “Shanghai (Biennale) has become a weak bland affair, in part due to the interference of ministry of culture officials in the curation of the show. It never takes on tough political issues — though this year’s did include a video on coal miners by Yang Shaobin — and it never ever critiques the market. Taiwan, whether intentionally or not, embodied the virtues of democracy, in comparison.”


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Michael Lee Hong Hwee

In contemporary art biennales, the genre of the artist’s book faces a threefold challenge. The first is barrier to entry. Especially when (or since) biennales are heavy-handedly curated and invested with multiple interests and anxieties, there exist a variety of fetishes (a.k.a. “trends”) that favour certain art forms, scales and sensibilities over others. International contemporary art events have deep sympathy for large-scale installations, conceptual pieces and hi-tech gadgets that may be overlooked by the gallery market or art fair circuit, while biennales focused on artist’s books tend to have a preference for the handmade and bound, the one-off and the use of paper. Unless it is monumental (like Xu Bing’s Book from the Sky), or conceived by a mega art superstar, cerebral or hand-crafted, an artist’s book or book work rarely finds its way into an international biennale. This creates gaps that book artists, or artists whose practice includes the production of, or engagement with books, can identify, explore and promulgate.

The second challenge lies in presentation and relatedly, preservation. If a book’s primary function lies in extending space by containing information to
be revealed to a select audience, and compressing time, ideas and effort within the predefined space or volume taken up by them, then the most important use of an artist’s book or book art is necessarily and invariably its uselessness. This uselessness is the genre’s strength and liability. Offset prints (i.e. those with a print run of 1000 or more) presented in a biennale for visitors to take for free tend to be quickly lumped with collaterals (i.e. deemed as useful or useless as an exhibition catalogue) and easily forgotten. Unique pieces are gazed at, photographed and again, conveniently done with. If unprotected in a vitrine, one-off book pieces (especially if made of ephemeral material like paper) tend to be mishandled beyond recognition and recovery over the course of a biennale, which usually lasts at least two months. The third is sale. Book works do not have a readily receptive and respectful market. They are not paintings that can be hung on the wall and expertly preserved (as they are usually not made with more longlasting materials like oil and canvas) and yet they are also not quite sculptural (i.e. solid and hardy). Even when they exist three-dimensionally and “interactively”, they resemble catalogues and collaterals too closely to appeal to an art collector, or to fetch a good price. Its likely recourse is to blur the boundaries between the artwork as the primary content of an art exhibition and the published volume as its secondary content. Contesting this hierarchical division, a book work may engage (i.e. appropriate) the ideas and forms of art forms such as painting, sculpture, installation, video and performance, whilst revisiting and revising the histories of book conception, production, presentation and distribution. In my next post, I’ll talk a bit about an artist’s book project that I did as part of the Third Guangzhou Triennial in 2008.

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Carla Bianpoen

My “experience” with international Asian biennales is somewhat minimal, having seen only the first and second Singapore biennales, the Biennale of Sydney, the CP biennales in Indonesia, and the recent Jakarta Biennale. Of these, the biennale of Sydney and the Jakarta Biennale 2009 (JP09) were, for me, the most impressive — by their honesty of vision, by not pursuing “international” at all costs, and following the flow. I also appreciated their clear focus and professional display of art works. Amidst the rush for Chinese art at that time, the Sydney Biennale was an oasis, the quality of which was even more explicit by the thorough elaboration and integrity of concept of artistic director Caroline Christov Bakargiev. Amidst the flurry of commercial art domination at the time, the Biennale of Sydney 2008 provided alternative perceptions and basic norms. In the case of the Fluid Zone part of the Jakarta Biennale, the young curator Agung Hujatnikajennong had a fresh vision making a breakthrough by selecting for the first time promising artists from the region and all in their thirties, and with a display that we have not seen before. JP09 also did not have an objective economic, touristic or city-boasting objective as did other biennales. Small in size (only 39 participants in total, consisting of 14 Indonesian, 14 regional and 11 foreign artists who had had a residency in one of the countries in the region), it was like a boutique biennale — well cared for, crisp, innovative and visionary. The Jakarta Biennale, at least the part curated by Agung, provided a new vision and “mapping” of emerging young artists from the region, and could be a possible model for the future. The CP Biennale in 2003, launched Jim Supangkat’s statement of “Art with an Accent”, meaning that contemporary art from Asia was no less art than that from the West. Chinese artists like Gu Wenda, Yue Mingjun and Fang Lijun, endorsed the idea with enthusiasm. The statement refers to the reality that the English language has a different accent in England, America, Singapore, Australia, India and so on. But the various accents do not erase the fact that the language is still English. Looking back at the Singapore biennales of 2006 and 2008, the first Singapore Biennale was interesting, particularly the installations in Tangling Camp. But the second Singapore Biennale, I found less interesting. The theme “wonder”, I found too loose, and it did not seemed backed up with thorough conceptual elaboration. The City Hall spaces were not suited for the installations, and the large space at the Marina Bay development (Shigeru Ban) was not utilised enough. In addition, the latest Singapore biennale seemed too driven by the Singapore government’s economic agenda. While this is not necessarily bad, it might hamper the free flow of creativity, and innovation of curators. The linking of the Singapore biennale with the Singapore Showcase Art Fair — though it was unofficially linked, but it certainly appeared intentional — leaves a bad taste. For C-Arts magazine, as far as I am concerned, the
important things is how biennales are able to support the basic values of art and how they provide new perspectives in seeing, creating, and performing — in short, how significant could they be for the understanding, development and future of art. C-Arts magazine is interested in new developments and innovations in Asia, and Southeast Asia specifically. It was established in November 2007, amidst the lack of inside information about the Asian contemporary art scene. Its aim is to be a bridge facilitating information on what is really happening inside our world of art, and in so doing facilitate Asian contemporary art to take its place on the world map of art.

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Thomas J. Berghuis

Excess Denied / Access Granted

With three days to go before the start of the Asian Biennales Forum (Part II), multiple streams of thoughts rush through my mind. Could it be adrenaline that I am experiencing, or perhaps it is anxiety? Usually a session at the local gym, or a run around the track is what gives people an adrenaline rush. I wonder if “doing” a Biennale, Triennale — or a whole stack of them — can give the same adrenaline rush. No sweat, at least …

Art has the power to provoke, or maybe that is just part of my personal anticipation. I am sure most of us are familiar with the pure pleasure in the encounter with its audiences, particularly at openings: “Wow!” “Great!” “Amazing!” “Wonderful!” At the same time, discussions continue to emerge on why art matters. “Why?” A sporting facility matters by providing a space for physical exercise by a community. Physical exercise matters because it produces a healthy body, right? By now, I am starting to feel I deserve the “right to sleep” — reflecting on the well placed comments made by Stephen Wright on n.e.w.s. in the discussion of “Contemporary Art: Now or Never?” Then again, Lee Weng Choy’s question of “What do Biennale’s want from us?” (Broadsheet, Vol. 37, No. 1) is depriving me from sleep. Caution is also required, as to the use of “art” and “contemporary” (following comments by Weng Choy in the previous biennale discussion on n.e.w.s.). “Art matters” (art matter, art substance, art material, art materialises …). George Bataille already reminded us in the 1940s how, “Every time the meaning of a discussion depends on the fundamental value of the word useful — in other words, every time the essential question touching on the life of human societies is raised, no matter who intervenes and what opinions are represented — it is possible to affirm that the debate is necessarily warped and that the fundamental question is eluded.” The “accursed share” is destined for “waste”, and nowadays we also know that excess leads to effluence. How then do we explain biennales? As major art events that occur every two years? Now we are discussing “Asian Biennales” — that is, nine of them, or more — does it really matter? Does it matter that these Biennales are Asian; or Biennales? Doesn’t that open the discussion up to the same dubious political circumstances that invite discussions on Asian values? or, for that matter, on (what is) Asia(n)? What drives the quest for this distinctiveness? Are we maybe trying to prevent in some way to talk more directly about art; or, for that matter, about substance? In economic terms, the world has recently awoken to the fiscal consequences of excess. What about the consequences for art, or for biennales? I am certainly interested in reading during the course of the forthcoming discussions about “observations on individual experiences” of these biennales. Yet, I am also interested in reading thoughts on experiences that are more or less external to these biennales, and the time and space of their occurrence. Indeed, as proposed in the announcement for this forum, to read about personal experiences “after these biennales have left”, and even about when they did not even occur. “No Biennale, this year”. Does this mean that the biennale did not have a function, or substance? In 2007, I was able to reflect on these questions. At the time it seemed everyone was going to Europe to “do” the Venice Biennale, Documenta, and the Munster Sculpture Project. For me, excess was denied. Instead I spent some time writing a catalogue essay for an exhibition in Sydney, and took the opportunity to read through the publications of all five platforms for the Documenta 11 (between 2001 and 2002), next to a whole stack of research materials. I also took quite some time reading through many of the online publications in the Documenta 12 Magazine Project. The biennale that I regretted not seeing was this year’s Jakarta Biennale XIII, but also the 2005 Istanbul Biennale. Not only did I hear it was “good”, but much more importantly I got the impression that these biennales made a significant contribution to the locale and the community where they were held. The same is the case for a number of artworks that...
have been produced over the years, as well as a great number of international performance art festivals that have been organised (including more than 20 in Asia over the past 10 years). If only more documentation, critical analyses, and research materials on the contribution of these events to society, culture, and community would be generated; that would generate better awareness of their long-term significance beyond the event.

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Joselina Cruz

It seems that Weng’s introduction is entrusted to initiate, in some cases insinuate, certain issues regarding aspects of biennales that have been critiqued, or continue to be critiqued. That biennales have reached our part of the world in abundance reflects the continued hold of this particular exhibition model; it also tells of the economic ascendancy and cultural ambition of the cities/countries in which these events have taken place.

Somewhat similar to the Asian penchant for re-working out a tried and tested model, biennales have become commodified. A model easily copied and inserted into contexts, each one striving for content and relevance. This phenomenon of the influx of Asian Biennales may in fact be a new paradigm, re-configuring how biennales are produced. The model is simple enough to copy. For Singapore Biennale 2008, I worked with Fumio Nanjo and Matthew Ngui. The three of us shaped this specific biennale. Our discussions looked at what might be relevant for the local population, but also something that had some resonance amongst international peers. I can say that I was hoping for a more incisive and tighter biennale. I think it was smaller, and tighter. Whether it was incisive is open to interpretation. When Weng asked me to participate, I knew I wanted more than anything to look at the work I/we had done in retrospect. However I was also sure that I didn’t want it to be simply a critical finger pointing out “what should have been”, or that of a defense of its failings. Neither would have been productive. Instead I am keen to hear what everyone else has to say and respond.

All biennales seem to me as having the desire to show something, relate something, expound something, explore something. An international biennale has the added burden of the word “international”. An international biennale raises expectations of a democratic stance that allows access across all genres and sub-genres, genders, races, geographic location, etc. Curators who have been tasked to work on a biennale all have the curse of figuring out what this something is. Often curators and/or artistic directors have specific interests they have been looking at for a time. Sometimes, they look to the art world to see what is, or what is not, current. They may respond, react or reject. Curators also look at the context of where the exhibition will be held. How it will work locally, what the social temperature is, how locals might react. Unlike product tests, artworks cannot be tested on the public to see their reaction. There are no product launches to introduce the art to be consumed. Most exhibitions hedge on previous experience (curators, artists, artworks) from the public. Despite having been shown elsewhere, the reaction to some works cannot be predicted in a different context. Biennales, literally, mean nothing except that of an exhibition produced every two years. What has been copied across the world is that of the Venice Biennale, the original Biennale that reached outside of Europe to include art from other nations. From this, has spawned a body of derivatives from Documenta’s every five years, to Manifesta’s moving location. Each has kept one element or another from the original. I like reiterating the obvious because oftentimes these are overlooked due to the density of the discussions and thinking. We can forget. I once said in a talk that the discussion of biennales is like beating a dead horse. This is not to say that biennales are dead, however the discussions that have surrounded biennales have proved to be less than thought-provoking. Biennales are what they are, and continue to be: large-scale exhibitions that take on international art works as one of its defining elements. Marian Pastor-Roces has described the biennale as akin to that of 19th-century expositions and the re-creation of the world in miniature. Such desires to represent the world are stronger with biennales, as Marian pointed out, due to its roots in 19th-century exhibitions; the Venice Biennale model of having international pavilions; also because most biennales are funded by local or national governments. Weng also pointed out that biennales have conventions, but not tradition (“Biennale Demand”, Jan 2008). This may be true to an extent, but following his definition of tradition, biennales, either through the foundations or offices that run them, or through the curators chosen, are hardly oblivious to past biennales that occur...
around the world. The derivative models from Venice’s formula are a reaction to the original biennale’s framework. The exhibition concepts, thematics, ideas are never realized while the curator is unaware of what’s been done elsewhere. Curators and directors are hardly, never reflexive. Most are. And the biennales they come up with are products of these. Are these then not the creation of a tradition?

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Lee Weng Choy

Some time ago, when writing about epistemology and contemporary visual art, a phrase came to mind which I thought apt in the way it characterised the dynamics of the “our” in “our contemporary art world”. My proposition was this: that knowledge about art is changing, radically and irrevocably, and in part because of some historical irruption on the global art scene called the rise of contemporary art from Asia. By the 1990s, art world professionals from everywhere — whether artists or critics, curators or academics — had decidedly acknowledged that the future of the field no longer belonged to the “West”, but to the whole wide world. And it was as if “Asia” had become the exemplary signifier for this increasingly integrated world system, with “China”, in particular, acting as a metonym for all of the region. The specific phrase I had in mind was: “the distance between us”. (One can imagine, in a black and white nineteen-fifties film, one of the spouses in a long married couple saying this phrase to the other, as they each finally recognise their irreconcilable differences, and go their separate ways. The image of history as cinematic montage, à la Walter Benjamin, is not irrelevant, but let us not detour too far from the point.) The “us” in “the distance between us” suggests a “we” which is comprised of a pair, if not a larger set, of actors. Those grand categories, geographically defined, the “West” and “Asia” — or at least Asia as a code for the “Rest” — they are separated by a distance and, yet, one can still assert a conjunction. The West and Asia constitute an “us” — an integrated global system. But within Asia there are as many distances and differences. Perhaps the more interesting and relevant ones are not the distances between the West and Asia, but for those who live in the latter, the distances within — the contests of what is, and where is, Asia — these may be more relevant and urgent. Or perhaps these too are more red-herring concerns. The actors evoked by this “us” are not only defined geographically, they are also temporally, that is, historically, placed. What the conjunction “and” tries to bring together is a profoundly disparate, unbounded field of actors — various pasts, various presents, and various places and peoples. In “the distance between us”, maybe the accent should lie not on the “us”, but on these multiple “distances”. Of the many cultural phenomena that are exemplary of late capitalism, spectacle and globalization, the international biennale (and similar exhibitions of contemporary visual art) has a certain pride of place. It is arguably the paradigmatic form of bringing together for display a certain “us”, at a certain moment in time, while eliding the great distances between. Geography and ethnicity are privileged in biennales, to the extent that one could describe their mode of knowledge as ethno-geographic. Moreover, there is an assumption that, no matter how great the distances — mainly in space, occasionally in time — art works from all over the world can be presented together, that is, seen together as part of an increasingly globalized world. But is this assumption valid?

Shanghai Biennale Part #3: Models for (the) People

on Tue, 2009-03-17 15:54  Tiong Ang  Submitted by
Shanghai Biennale Part #3: Models for (the) People

Some notes by Tiong Ang

1. The installation Models for (the) People, specially developed and produced for the 7th Shanghai Biennale, consists of disparate elements. A large, solid yellow wall has been erected in the main exhibition hall, in such a way that by color and spatial placement a site of ambivalence is created. Two large paintings are hung on the wall, each depicting a horse’s ass. The paintings are stretched with a black transparent veil, making the image appear darker and disfiguring the painterly quality of the images. The pictures flank a large slogan stuck on the wall, it reads – in pinyin and in English: Buy African Goods. There are also two pedestals with objects, placed in front of the wall; at the left there’s a pair of horse riding boots, at the right an African wood carved sculpture of a man and his horse. A large plasma screen is placed in the middle of the whole installation and its video dominates the scene. The video features an African man who has just landed in the city of Shanghai. He seems to embody different roles (role models); merchant, magician, poet, intellectual, gangster, entertainer, diplomat, but it is never obvious which role he represents each time we see him, as if the roles are interchangeable. He meets and interacts with two Chinese girls - one is a contemporary student, the other a mysterious blonde wigged karaoke singer- in a variety of seemingly unmatching scenes.

2. The works’s aim is to evoke a distinctive gaze of dislocation. I am referring to a blankness that allows the individual to rethink one’s state of belonging and alienation within our global sphere. In order to reach this vacuum, this momentum of carelessness, I lead the viewer through a stream of imaginary situations. Examining the visionary potential of Shanghai’s old and new history within the social, economic, political, ethnic and cultural relationships of our hybrid global reality, I have composed a hallucinatory, visual narrative along different tracks of transformation, questioning the credibility and persistence of its origins and bearings.

3. The work is a range of disparate images juxtaposed in both sequential and spatial environments. Video images, paintings, objects, songs and words in three languages are united in a display that generates a ‘contradictory space’, where differentiation and mutual contestation rule. All these images carry with them both the moment of desire and that of opportunity. The work alludes to cinematic estrangement, the collisions of cultures and trades, the alienating impact of exoticism, and its parallels with our multifaceted society as a succession of displacements.

4. The work stems from refusal. We have to refuse the cliché, we have to refuse all expectations. That is, the expected public face we have to display when we wrap ourselves in national flags, when we bury our minds in the fetish of commodification, in the codified adaptation to the so-called globalized world. Then we can embrace new models, just because we have to. To prove that everything is related.

5. The work continues with a lie, a good lie, a whole range of good lies. (Who told me it is better to tell a good lie than a bad excuse?) The boots are not African, they are made in China. The cut is French, or British. Fluorescent yellow is a difficult color to use as a backdrop; all photographers tell me that we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
everyone will appear dark in front of it. Shanghai girls wearing blonde wigs in itself is a very good lie. The African intellectual, the poet, the magician
carrying a box of equestrian boots. African sculpture is hugely popular on the Chinese art market.

As the differential modes of presentation intertwine, I am curious to see whether the installation manages to liberate the audience’s perception of the museum building and its function. After all, especially during the Biennale, the museum should be regarded as a condensation of public space. But I perceive it as a contradictory public space, where once horses were kept. The work cannot be launched from a nostalgic viewpoint, but horses lived in this building; the Shanghai Art Museum once housed the British Jockey Club. The work offers confusion, embarrassment, lamentation, contamination, historic devaluation. That is a horse’s ass.

The slogan ‘Buy African Goods’ (Gou Mai Fei Zou Shang Ping) came as an afterthought, and usually these are eventually left out, but this time I kept it in. Because I mean it, and it seemed legitimate that in light of the promotional aspect an event like the Biennale conveys, the work would include a counter-scheme. African presence in China is still extremely limited, and the introduction of an African man dressed in traditional costume walking on the streets of Shanghai appears to call for more consideration of alternative viewpoints other than the axiomatic discourse between China and the West.

I want to end with the lyrics of a song to accompany the images, which came up as a reminder of a time not so long ago when Western values were scarcely permitted in China. It sounds like a simple lovesong, but somehow defines Shanghai’s relationship with the rest of the world quite well. The question is, who is the groupie, and who is the idol?

Superstar
(written by Leon Russell & Bonnie Bramlett / performed by the Carpenters, 1971)

Long ago and oh so far away
I fell in love with you
before the second show

Your guitar, it sounds so sweet and clear
But you’re not really here
It’s just the radio

Don’t you remember you told me you loved me baby
You said you’d be coming back this way again baby
Baby, baby, baby, baby, oh, baby, I love you I really do

Loneliness is such a sad affair
And I can hardly wait
By public relations, I'm not just talking about publicity, but how the experience of visiting a biennale might prompt the viewer to think about the relations between the art on display, and the publics that this art addresses, both in its original context (where it was made) and its exhibition context (the city of the biennale). How do smaller exhibitions engage this question of "public relations" differently from larger shows? Where is the public in the biennale? (I think your work tries to address this.) How do biennales construct their publics? And are smaller shows necessarily more intimate, and thus more engaging?
As a participating artist from the Netherlands, carefully guarding my so-called cultural identity as a faux-Chinois (this said jokingly), I was aware of my distanced knowledge of the audience in China, and my rather blurred relationship with its complexion. In recent years there has been intense traffic between the West and China (or if you want: Asia), where most Western artists came to Asia ‘for inspiration’, and most Asian artists came to the West ‘for opportunities’, to put it blandly. How did this paradigm shift? How to categorize myself? How to address my expectation that the Chinese audience would not be impressed at all by my sense of belonging or not belonging. What would they care?

So, also in tune with the curator’s ‘commission’, the work was conceived and developed especially for this occasion, and my notions (based on strong assumptions, let me be clear about that) of the public were instrumental for the work’s direction. I knew that this Biennale was not to be an ordinary contemporary art exhibition, it’s quite something else. Its wide variety of discursive assets, from censorship to city marketing, from local authority to the Chinese wish to play a pivotal role in the world, has articulated the exhibition into a spectacle of values. These are cultural values, ethical, intellectual and artistic values even, yet downright economical values should not be overlooked. In retrospect, as we write in 2009 and the doors of the 7th Shanghai Biennale have been closed for 3 or 4 months now, in which the worldwide financial crisis has unfolded, we might have seen a Shanghai Biennale as an endgame of Chinese limitless financial muscle power – not in absolute terms perhaps, but definitely on a level of mindset.

(as I wrote before, most of the Chinese artists participating in this Biennale showed either very commercial paintings, enhancing their auction values, or monumental and expensive sculpture, with a high degree of entertainment value)

It might be somewhat offensive to say that it is (or was) this promise of something glittering that lured the masses to the Biennale, the growing, young, new middle class of Shanghai forming the largest bulk. Although biennales always present themselves as international, after the previews during the first few days and the art professionals had left, the vast majority of visitors is local. In Shanghai the number of visitors geared up towards a staggering 400.000 people (some say half a million). One should also assume that most people who visit the biennale rarely visit contemporary art exhibitions and have little specified knowledge of the mechanisms of art. What do all these people see? How do they see? Is the Chinese society that these people represent one of spectacle and entertainment, unavoidably supported by a system of merchandise and market values?

Monitoring the audience would be an interesting tool to turn my assumptions into a learning curve. I observed the audience during normal opening times quite well, but there ‘s a resistance inside my practice against a technocratic understanding of what I produce. My work for the Shanghai Biennale has been described by western critics as being an ironic critique on the Chinese adoration of commerce, and how this can be brought to a level of absurdity. Although this is accurate in more than one sense, I wanted to avoid a fixed reading of the work. Adopting a ‘commercial’ or ‘popular’ style – the installation was designed to resemble a kind of national promotion stand, but for the ‘wrong’ continent indeed, accompanied by a popular song that was featured in a smart looking video – was my temporary strategy to address this massive public on their assumed expectations and invite the people (The People) into the flow of different values that are at stake here. What they see and think, however, is not in my hands. If I would know, the work would have not existed.

On nooks, crannies and repentant wrigglers

we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
For the Third Guangzhou Triennial 2008, I made The Consolations of Museology (2008), as part of Organizing Mutation / Mutating Organizations (initiated by Leung Chi Wo and co-curated with Tobias Berger), one of the Independent Projects in the triennial.

My artwork is presented in 27 acrylic cubes stacked into a large (210 x 210 x 210cm) transparent cubic box. Peppered inside and across the cubes are 10 handmade books (each of B4-, i.e., 25 x 35cm, page size but different thicknesses). Each book refers to a hypothetical museum that consoles people of a common human weakness/failing: unpopularity, not having enough money, frustration, inadequacy, a broken heart, difficulty, stupidity, messiness, ugliness and cowardice (I added four to writer Alain de Botton’s six in Consolations of Philosophy, 2001).

Across history and cultures, three types of consolations prevail: The Wand (prevalent in key religions that demand the reduction or elimination of desires as a way to nurse pain and forestall difficulty); The Cradle (the mode of the medical sciences and consumer cultures, which diagnose and ease suffering by way of numbing), and The Library (which celebrates failures as part of the diversity of the world and urges all to enrich this diversity by way of reading, reflection and creation). It is this third type of consolation that my project engages and harnesses into allegorical museums of solaces.

Existing on a continuum of roles with one end marked by ‘repository’ (of objects and information of lasting value or interest) and the other by ‘regenerator’ (of meanings about human civilisations of the past, present and future), museums are investigators of large-scale problems (e.g., war, conflict) and custodians of lofty ideals/truths (e.g., save the earth). My project suggests museums to take on the additional, if seemingly counterproductive and ‘useless’, role of providing a public face to private, personal problems.

Each museum-book in my installation comprises an artifact and seven categories of text. The artifact is a three-dimensional form derived variously from techniques in origami, popup, paper-engineering and bookbinding. The seven categories of text are: museum name, museum mission, museum site, dedication, quotation, dual truism, and museum design & programming.

For example, I give the name A Loser’s Respite to the museum that consoles a freshly heartbroken person, suggest that the coolest party in town is a party of one, and propose to site it in a remote valley in Grand Canyon. This piece is created by handcutting into more than 500 loose sheets of paper to arrive at the form of a lone house in a deep valley. This gabled-roof hut for a single occupant/visitor is dedicated to Arthur Schopenhauer, who offers relief in his observation about the human search for love. He observes that human beings frequently confuse their biological instinct to procreate with their psychological yearning for love: “A man in love may even clearly recognise and bitterly feel in his bride the intolerable faults of temperament and character which promise him a life of misery, and yet not be frightened away... for ultimately he seeks not his interest, but that of a third person who has not come into existence, although he is involved in the delusion that what he seeks is his own interest.” (The World as Will and Representation, Vol II, 1819). I interpret Schopenhauer’s insight into a dual truism that embodies the primary mission of this museum of solitude:
Every aphorism attempts, for the sake of the force of a single-minded proposition, to conceal and cancel its other. By pairing one truism with its seeming opposite (I appropriate this method from architect Douglas Darden, particularly in his book Condemned Building, 1991), I hope to make plain that - as variants, critiques and extensions of each other – they can collectively illuminate and liberate ideas that previously seemed to be cast in stone. Finally, to conceive of a museum dedicated to healing one person at a time is to question both the modernist view that museums are for the select elite and its contemporary counterpart that museums can cater to the populace or popular demands. It is a metaphor for a modus operandi for self-development in the midst of community-driven aspirations and processes. It is a reiteration of the importance of daydreaming, an activity necessarily of solitude (Gaston Bachelard).

How does the installation work (or not)? Though comprising medium-size book pieces, the overall setup as a large cube first offers a visual hook by its size, then conjures the notion of a platonic form whose design and material transparency enact a sense of objects ‘floating’ in space, and also facilitates a voyeuristic sense of the curiosity cabinet by the barring of physical touch. Upclose, each of the ten books is seen opened to its most representative page-spread or placed to showcase its origamic architecture in a visually ‘displayful’ manner. Some reminiscent of children’s popup storybooks, others look like consumer products on display, and a few inviting viewers to stare into deep abysses, the paper architectures must have re-invoked a new/old way of looking, imagining and recalling. Select texts of each museum-book are readable upon close scrutiny and slow viewing.

The work probably fails miserably in consoling any broken heart, but it likely has something for a broad range of viewership, from the cerebrally-driven to the craft-demanding and camera-trigger-happy. That it was not heavy-handedly curated (mainly since it was not in the triennial’s main show), offers the twin advantage of (almost) free reign (for me) and surprise (for the audience). Though (more likely, because) not conceived to directly address the triennial theme, “Farewell to Post-Colonialism,” the work nonetheless engages contemporary debates in identity politics, the history and diversity of consolations, the dialogues between art and architecture, artists’ relationships with arts institutions, book art, production aesthetics and audience studies, which are perennial themes in the practice of many artists working in the contemporary setting. That I ‘self-helped’ - both the notions of independence and its outcomes - in producing two companion documents could have helped enhance the work’s appeal and its eventual sale to the Guangdong Museum of Art: The companion film, entitled Hinterlands, eavesdrops into the conversation of a couple who, on the brink of a breakup, goes on a final trip together and encounters the ten consoling museums; a post-opening companion publication to the work, entitled Foundations: The Consolations of Museology, which compiles images of the installation and texts by the project’s contributors in editorial (Nadim Abbas), criticism (Lilian Chee), design (Brendan Goh), film (Willie Koh), photography (han) and paper-engineering (Tang Kwok Hin), was launched during the end-of-triennial symposium.

In short, this book work had wriggled its way through the nooks and crannies of the usual biennale/triennial and publishing frameworks; engaging, contesting and appropriating some of their prevailing conditions and qualities along the way, and found itself a clearing to exist ‘refreshing’ and ‘engaging’ to a contemporary art audience.

On a personal front, I am glad that initial imposture (as a driver in contemporary book art discourse) has – with nervous panic and desperate regret, the overturning of a new leaf, sleepless nights, tight suspension of disbelief, a lot of gracious help from friends, and the many serendipitous encounters with materials and suppliers – amounted to some happy endings (mainly, the covering of high production cost) and new beginnings (e.g., we are supported by the enthusiasm and generosity of invisible people worldwide. are you invisible?
continued discussions of the work in the present forum and in Printed Projects issue no. 11, slated for launch during Venice Biennale 2009).

Images and related links:

http://studiobibliotheque.blogspot.com/2008/05/consolations-of-museology...