

The Artist is Absent

Reactivation: The 9th Shanghai Biennale

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Shanghai has always been a cosmopolitan place, the only mainland Chinese metropolis comparable to Hong Kong or Taipei in terms of internationalism, and fierce competition is now on to build cultural attractions to secure a winning lead. While ground was only recently broken on Hong Kong's mammoth West Kowloon Cultural Precinct, Shanghai on 1 October opened the doors to two major state-owned institutions, both housed in expensively-converted buildings in the rather characterless and sprawling 2010 World Expo zone, which spans both sides of the Huangpu River, south of the historic centre. The China Art Palace, a showcase for Chinese and international art (pre-1980), is situated in the bright red 'upside-down pagoda' of the Expo's former China Pavilion, with 64,000 square metres of exhibition space. Shanghai's culture chief Hu Jinjun grandiosely compared it to New York's Metropolitan Museum and Paris's Musée d'Orsay, plainly evoking its ambitions rather than its collection, which will absorb that of the existing Shanghai Museum of Art and be augmented by international touring shows, loans and a suitably large budget for new acquisitions.

The other new addition, and home to Shanghai's 9th Biennale, is the 40,000-square-metre PSA (Power Station of Art) housed in a former power station, with distinct echoes of London's Tate Modern. Any international exhibition with nearly 100 artists is a big undertaking, more so in a building that is itself still being finished

during the exhibition's installation. There was apparent grumbling about lack of technical resources and expertise in the launch lead-up, with security a major issue; one artwork (Sui Jianguo's giant mobile silver sphere, appropriately titled *Wanderer*, 2012) escaped its moorings and went 'rollabout'. Despite a couple of evident no-shows the PSA was ready for its public by the time of the *vernissage*, and frustrations appeared forgotten as an undeniable 'wow' factor kicked in. With its light-flooded seven-story void and matrix of stairways and escalators, the building offers enticing glimpses of its multiple levels, and invites exploration with a promise of spectacle.

This is established at the outset by Huang Yong Ping's five-storey-tall Duchamp-inspired human 'bottle-rack' *1000 Hands of Guan Yin* (1997-2012), which shares the ground floor space with Chico MacMurtrie's much-photographed *Totemobile* (2007), a silver-painted Citroën DS which periodically deconstructs itself into a sculptural edifice. Also commencing on this level are two 'columnar' works which extend (by implication if not reality) through the concrete slabs, all the way to the huge level 5 outdoor terrace. These are Switzerland-based Pascale Marthine Tayou's precarious pillar of Chinese vases (*Pascale column*, 2011) and Ouyang Chun's *Infinity Column* (2012) made up of incongruously varied objects – furniture, stuffed animals, electronic goods. Another visually arresting multi-level work is Wang Yuyang's *Light, Falling Like a Feather* (2012) consisting of hundreds



Ryan Gander, *Arrows*, 2012, (detail) mixed media installation



1/ Huang Yongping, *1000 Hands of Guan Yin*, 1997-2012, (detail) mixed-media installation



2/ Rafic Talifo, *The Hurricane Project*, 2007-12, (detail) mixed-media installation



3/ Brook Andrew, *Time*, 2012, (detail) mixed-media installation

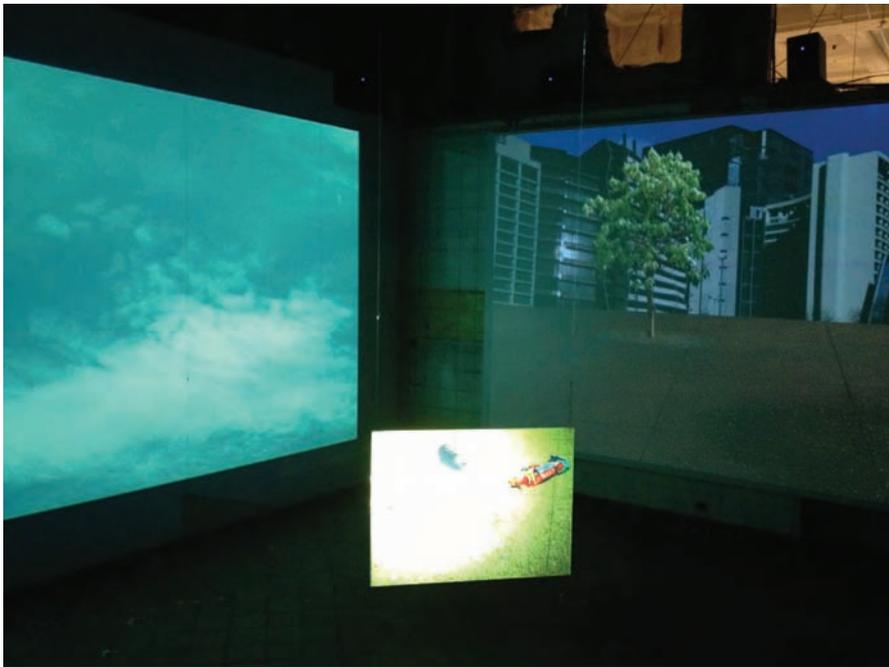
of suspended fluorescent tubes. On the main staircase is British artist Simon Fujiwara's witty take on the famed Terracotta Warriors (*Project of Social Intervention: Rebekkah*, 2012). Some other standouts: Ryan Gander's starkly graphic *Arrows* (2012) installation; Wael Shawky's beguiling marionette video *Cabaret Crusades* (also seen at *Documenta 13*); Chen Wen's *Salt City* (2012), Sophie Calle's eloquent photomedia works; and Taiwan-based Rafic Talifo's *The Hurricane Project* (2007-12) in which worn rubber thongs are a potent metaphor for the wanderings and displacements of Austronesian peoples.

These works all belong to different sub-themes of 'Reactivation': *Resources*, *Revisit*, *Reform* and *Republic*, which appear largely interchangeable on the ground. There is a great deal to see, and as I moved through the spaces, an unease began to develop, a feeling that here was 'yet another' mildly interesting review of world contemporary practice which offered nothing truly memorable, no lurching shifts in consciousness. Though *Reactivation's* chief curator Qiu Zhijie and his co-curators Boris Groys, Johnson Chang and Jens Hoffman have selected well beyond 'the usual suspects', both nationally and internationally, it all seems too safe and somewhat bland.

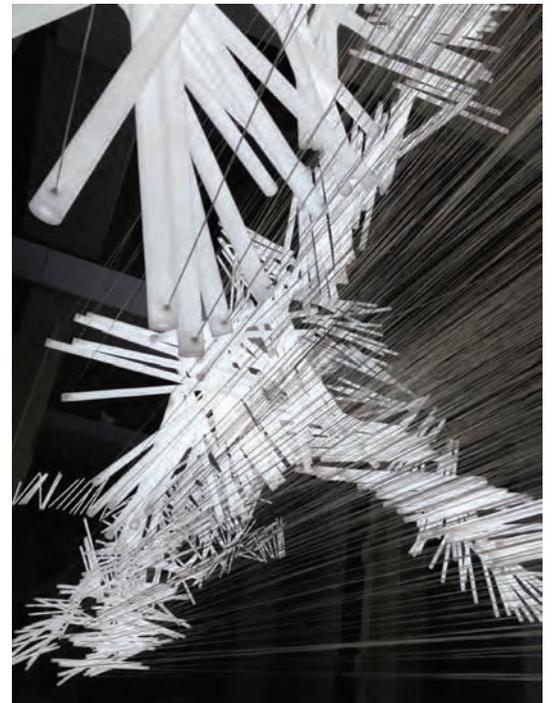
A large satellite project, *City Pavilions*, is perhaps most symptomatic of this broad approach, with independently-curated projects from thirty world cities. The actual pavilions for Shanghai's 9th Biennale were far lesser entities than this title might suggest (such as at Venice's Giardini, or a World Expo), largely situated in

makeshift spaces and marked by a lack of resources and adequate security. A few of the pavilions (Amsterdam, Bandung, Istanbul, Lagos, Lyon, Mumbai, Moscow, Palermo) are situated on the top level of the PSA, in effect reading as part of the main exhibition, although at the opening marred by an absence of clear attribution of works. The other pavilions are situated some kilometres distance, in colonial-era buildings in Shanghai's central Bund area, most of which are in poor condition and awaiting major restoration.

Sydney did better than most, securing a ground-floor corner site on Nanjing East Road, the busiest shopping street in the city. Titled *The Floating Eye*, curator Aaron Seeto (Director of Sydney's 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art) selected five mid-career artists (Brook Andrew, Shaun Gladwell, Raquel Ormella, Khaled Sabsabi, Shen Shaomin) and one collective of three emerging artists (Bababa International) to represent Sydney, allocating each artist a discrete space, with Bababa's spacial interventions/interruptions manifest via a shifting configuration of temporary walls and ducting. Sabsabi shows his five-channel 'video cube' *Hush* (2012), along with a compelling new two-channel work, *Syria*. Ormella shows a three-channel work, *Here we are* (2012), and Gladwell a single-channel video, *Pacific Undertow Sequence (Bondi)* (2010). Brook Andrew presents a new series called *Time* (2012) consisting of large stretched canvases hung in space at varying heights and angles. The canvases support large screenprints, on textural fields of



Raquel Ormella, *Here we are*, 2012, (detail) three-channel video installation



Wang Yuyang, *Light, falling like a feather*, 2012, mixed-media installation.

silver and gunmetal, based on photographic images drawn from diverse Australian and Asian archival sources – lending Andrew’s installation a heightened lyricism within the dusty, ruined grandeur of the high-ceilinged space. Shen Shaomin installed a new work, *Landscape of Confinement* (2012), in which buried refrigeration tubes create a bed of toxic-looking ice on a raised platform, a quiet and typically cryptic meditation which in the artist’s words ‘dramatises the precarious relationship between human evolution and the preservation of the natural world’. *The Floating Eye*, despite an at times frustrating battle for resources, showed what can be achieved by a small and determined group, and I can personally attest to the patience, diligence and remarkable good humour of all concerned, including 4A’s valued supporters.

Other cities also present ambitious projects, with a wide variety of offerings, curatorial approaches and degrees of success. The city of Pittsburg (curated by Chelsea Haines) has a large and poignant jumble sale of personal effects from the estate of one real family, whose things were selling like hotcakes. The city of Berlin created a ‘tea pavilion’ (*The international ghost I*) from the original windows of a building by the revered Bauhaus architect Richard Paulick – a tribute to the time he spent in Shanghai. The city of Lima features Jose Carlos Martinat’s large installation of old electric fans (*All the Republic in One – Stereoreality environment*) which endlessly blow bits of coloured paper around an otherwise empty space. Auckland, the only other Antipodean pavilion, also features a single artist, Vincent Ward, who lucked out with the recently-renovated Union Church, which he has transformed with an evocative installation of sombre, banner-like paintings and spectral videos (*Destinies Lost and Found*).

To the Western visitor, Shanghai’s sparkling new art institutions and upmarket private museums (Museum of Contemporary Art – MOCA, Rockbund Art Museum and OCT Contemporary Art Terminal, for example) suggest a cosmopolitan ‘art city’ comparable to any in the world. But hints of an authoritarian state keep peeping

through the glossy surface, not least in the form of phalanxes of PLA soldiers, unarmed but implacably lining major streets in large numbers during the holiday celebrations. In this same week Ai Weiwei, arguably China’s most significant artist (so eloquently absent from the Biennale roll-call), lost his final appeal against massive fines for ‘tax offences’, had his company’s ‘business licence’ revoked, and failed to have his passport returned, meaning he could not travel to Washington DC for the opening of his major survey at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum on 7 October. Behind the ‘Great Firewall’ there was no knowing of these developments, but it’s safe to say that worldwide this news overwhelmed any positives about the new museums. Weiwei suggested to Western media that his absence from the Hirshhorn opening would have a bigger impact than his presence ever could. Despite attempts to forge ‘a new national identity based in culture and humanity, I still think it’s very old, cold-war thinking’, said Weiwei: ‘I think that the thing they are afraid of most is freedom of speech – the spirit of freedom of speech is the number one enemy for a totalitarian society.’

So, returning to the Biennale, and those feelings of disquiet. It’s impossible to separate the societal and political context from any critical appraisal of contemporary art, especially an international biennial, which by its nature seeks to take the creative pulse of a city, nation or region. The 9th Biennale contains many fine works, many resonances, many connections and ‘activations’. A success? – undoubtedly ... a very creditable affair. But at its heart I felt a strange absence of conviction.

Reactivation: The 9th Shanghai Biennale is showing at the Power Station of Art, Shanghai, China, 1 October 2012 to 31 March 2013: www.biennialfoundation.org/biennials/shanghai-biennale; www.4a.com.au/tag/shanghai-biennale/

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