

Gwangju Biennale and Taipei Biennial

VARIOUS VENUES

Philip Tinari

It has become a commonplace to note that the fundamental tension of the biennial is between the local and the global, perhaps nowhere more than in the democratized reaches of East Asia, where such exhibitions were introduced in the 1990s, aiming both to examine regional culture and to propel their host nations into the international art world. But this initial impulse has recently matured. Gwangju (founded in 1995 in the dedicated Biennale Park to commemorate the casualties of the 1980 student uprising that upended the South Korean dictatorship) and Taipei (initiated as a series of periodic surveys launched as martial law there was ending, morphing in 2000 into a show curated by a foreign and Taiwanese duo, and moving onward to a single-author model with the 2012 edition), by now the most prominent and consistent examples of such exhibitions, have become durable institutions, tracking recent shifts in the broader geopolitical, informational, and commercial landscapes, exploring timely aesthetic questions, and creating organic artistic dialogues. They also boast major audiences: Gwangju this year attracted visitors in numbers that rival Documenta and the Venice Biennale.

That is the deep background to this year's complementary editions of Gwangju and Taipei, Jessica Morgan's "Burning Down the House" and Nicolas Bourriaud's "The Great Acceleration." Morgan borrowed her title from the Talking Heads' anthem (itself inspired by George Clinton and P-Funk), framing her show as an exploration of "the process of conflagration and transformation, a cycle of obliteration and renewal." Morgan used this focus on fire as a way to advance an aesthetic agenda while looking at "the efforts made by contemporary artists to address personal and public issues through individual and collective engagement." It also allowed her to engage with the thematic of memory and history in transitional societies, Gwangju's perennial subtext.

Bourriaud twisted political economist Karl Polanyi's famous thesis about the triumph of capitalism, *The Great Transformation* (1944), into a meditation on the Anthropocene. In a world already irreparably remade by human impact, Bourriaud argues, "the relationship between the living and the inert has become the main tension of contemporary culture." This framing offered an effective conceit to pull an exhibition entirely away from older shades of identity politics that have so often prevailed in Asian biennials. It also allowed Bourriaud to articulate a relationship between his earlier and current interests, between relational aesthetics and the so-called post-Internet: The coming crisis asks us to "rethink and renegotiate our relational universe and reconsider the role of art"; the artists who do that most effectively are those who "live within the technosphere, as if it were a second ecosystem."

Both exhibitions opened with bold moves. Morgan's exhibition greeted visitors with graphic wallpaper from the design firm El Ultimo Grito, in which monochromatic pixelations of a smoky scene ran throughout the Biennale Hall, instantly if provisionally muting the tired problematics of the white cube. From there Jack Goldstein's *Burning Window*, 1977–2002, flowed poignantly into Lee Bul's endurance work *Abortion*, 1989, projected among a series of soft sculptures. In the following rooms an assemblage of burned works teased out valences of the titular theme: Camille Henrot's *Augmented Objects*, 2010, found and coated in tar and clay; Rosemarie Trockel's glazed ceramic "O-Sculptures"; and Cornelia Parker's charred fragments of trees from a fire in a Florida forest, *Heart of Darkness*, 2004, to name just a few. These fed into larger rooms where extended tableaux such as Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's political dystopia *The Ozymandias Parade*, 1985, and Jane Alexander's processional of animal-headed figures, *Infantry with Beast*, 2008–10, gave voice to some of the show's more social concerns.

Bourriaud chose to open with a grand overture, a sweeping open hall prefaced by Inga Svala Thórsdóttir and Wu Shanzhuan's *Thing's Right(s) Declaration*, 1994, an article-by-article copy editor's proof of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with *human* replaced by *thing* and an elaborate series of equivalencies suggested. It set up one question basic to Bourriaud's theme: Where is the line between animate and inanimate, and how do nonliving objects mediate human subjectivity?

Farther inside, Haegue Yang's totemic rack sculptures played off decades of hitherto-unknown Sterling Ruby collages and the grace notes of Marlie Mul's strikingly quotidian sand-and-resin *Puddles*, 2014, massage sculptures by Henrot (again), and the late French-Japanese experimentalist Tetsumi Kudo's ecologically driven assemblages. Each of these works gestures toward the biomorphic or broken down, and each is a postapocalyptic vision of the degraded materials, machines, and bodies of the Anthropocene.

The first floor ended with a room by Harold Ancart, including *Buk*, 2014, a red bucket containing a smartphone looping Elvis Presley's greatest hits. Described by the artist as a totem for the future homeless—who will be warmed electronically, abandoning trash-can fires to convene around humble purveyors of information-as-entertainment—the sculpture, featuring a mobile device branded with the logo of homegrown electronics brand Acer (which also provided the projectors used in the biennial), spoke as eloquently to the economically driven aesthetics of the present as to those of any imagined future.

These themes played out as the shows unfolded across additional floors and halls. Morgan hit a high point in the third of four identical Biennale Hall galleries. Here, a full-scale model of Urs Fischer's New York apartment, covered in trompe l'oeil wallpaper depicting the accommodation's various interiors, *38 E. 1st Street*, 2014, became a backdrop for pieces ranging from George Condo's gilded busts to Heman Chong's durational performance *Simultaneous (Gwangju)*, 2014, in which a novel is translated, live, from Korean to English. At the threshold of the apartment was Pierre Huyghe's *Name Announcer*, 2011, in which a caller announces the name of each newly arrived viewer to those already inside, this frenzied cacophony expressing the creative destruction implied in Morgan's choice of "Burning Down the House." Yet the element of critique presaged by this title was constantly present. Beyond this structure, on the dimly lit fringes of the gallery, Renata Lucas's window, *until it becomes an inconvenient stranger*, 2014, bored into the hall's exterior, aped the hundreds of identical residential windows visible directly through it, a gesture that seemed to acknowledge the homogenizing pressures of global development pressing in on all sides. In a far corner, two Ruby woodstoves—identical to another set constantly belching smoke on the hall's outdoor plaza—were paired with a Dan Flavin, in an intergenerational juxtaposition that further articulated the idea of liberation through material transformation. Moments like this one outweighed several pairings—particularly that of Xooang Choi's suspended heads and the late Tetsuya Ishida's paintings of collective dystopias—where figurally or conceptually similar works were placed too close for comfort, as well as a preachy preponderance of testimonial realist painting (Gülsün Karamustafa's "Prison Paintings," 1972–78, made in a Turkish women's prison during the artist's political detention; Liu Xiaodong's "Battlefield Realism: The Eighteen Arhats," 2004, a series of monumental portraits of Taiwanese and Chinese soldiers stationed on opposite sides of the strait). In the final Biennale Hall gallery, these tensions were resolved poetically as viewers exited the house through Carsten Höller's mirrored *Seven Sliding Doors*, 2014, a visual echo chamber in which the future reflects the past until the former, too, recedes.

Upstairs in Taipei, a constellation of younger artists, many of them concerned with the future of art after the Internet, offered propositions for what Bourriaud calls a world in which what matters "is no longer things, but the circuits that distribute and connect them." Ian Cheng's game-based simulations, Timur Si-Qin's funerary presentation of a prehistoric man, Alisa Baremboym's broken-down trappings of industry, Tala Madani's paintings and animations, Pamela Rosenkranz's projections onto and through Wahaha water bottles filled with variously colored solutions—works such as these together offered a miniature survey of an emergent generation. Such rooms were punctuated by competent presentations by more senior artists—a predictable if always entertaining room filled with industrial thread waste by Surasi Kusolwong, Charles Avery's articulation of an imaginary society through totemic drawings and sculptures. At the conceptual center of it all lay *Floating Chain (Fake Wall)*, 2014, a wormhole installation by Jonah Freeman and Justin Lowe that led viewers into imaginarily abandoned museum offices and through a sequence of subverted museological displays, conjuring the logical conclusion of the acceleration in question.

While both exhibitions demonstrated a welcome evolution beyond simplistic plays on political identity and anemic gestures toward local context, some of the most powerful works on view in each remained those that thoughtfully probed the collisions of history, geography, and culture that define the biennial format itself. In Gwangju, Minouk Lim's highly orchestrated performance *Navigation ID*, 2014, arranged for families of victims of anticommunist civilian massacres in the 1950s to arrive at the Biennale Plaza on opening day to reclaim the recently unearthed remains of their loved ones, which simultaneously arrived in shipping containers. Although critic Kevin McGarry has likened this work to reality TV, the piece was perhaps closer to what Tino Sehgal might call a constructed situation: Far from festival-like, this somber, scripted encounter was able to ground the entire enterprise in its place. In Taipei, an installation by En-Man Chang, *Decriminalization of Taiwanese Indigenous Hunting Rifles*, 2014, addressed a law preventing indigenous islanders from making and owning hunting rifles, producing some of the same effect.

It certainly attracted the attention of local visitors, for whom the intertwined questions of non-Han identity, disappearing rural lifestyles, and the plausibility of armed resistance must have seemed particularly pressing. Unfolding during an autumn that will probably best be remembered for the student movements in Hong Kong, which revealed the tenuous nature of the city's political equilibrium as it aspires to a greater role in the regional cultural landscape, these exhibitions were perhaps most valuable for reminding us that there are (still) places in East Asia where an open conversation can take place through art.

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