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Selected Texts edited by YU HSIAO-HWEI published by; timezone8, ltd 2002
by Carolee Thea

For the international curator, Hou Hanru, art is the most efficient way to develop alternative strategies; to negotiate the standardization and sense of alienation of human life driven by globalization, of new technologies and capital monopolization. Art is a virus dispensed and penetrating into the system of global communication provoking a resistance in the post-national global world. Hanru says, "It is the trope of our times, to locate the question of culture in the realm of this beyond, this mid-ground, where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion".

With generous illustrations of artworks and references to contemporary artists and thinkers like Edward Said or Homi Bhabha, this book makes visible the influences on Hou Hanru's strategic practice. The 281 pages of selected texts, and interviews are challenging yet illuminating. In eight point type with intervals of white on grey, without index, makes the going rough but On THE MIDGROUND is a 'must read' for those of us involved in contemporary art and culture. Having followed his work for the last seven years, I am convinced that Hou Hanru is one of the most significant international voices in the evolving chapter on contemporary curatorial practice.

Born in 1963 in Guangzhou the curator trained in Beijing as an art historian and artist. He moved to Paris a little over a decade ago, where he entered a burgeoning trans-identified community of Asian artists and intellectuals. Here his ideas and practice regarding the meeting of Eastern and Western philosophical contexts and the evolution of Asian cities were formed.

Hanru's aim is to weave a new 'textuality', by creating experiments in exhibitions and other related activities, to renegotiate or bypass models currently in vogue as well as to reconfigure the western centric vocabulary of peripheral, multi-culturalist, post colonialist or hybrid. At Korea's Gwangju Biennial of 2002, Pause, co-curated with Charles Esche. the center was exiled leaving a space for the "periphery to enter." The exclusion of American artists was astonishing for me, but recent disappointments regarding late capitalism permit me now to defend the move.

Emerging global cultural systems, filled with ironies and resistances create tensions between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogeneity. By developing different imaginations, including a nostalgia for the present, Hanru quotes Arjun Appadurai, who says, "the immigrant communities will construct their own cultural milieu while positioning themselves within the mainstream of Western and global culture." Artists who live in displacement, especially from non-western countries, are confronted with resistance from the terms exile and marginalization and may make use of their situation as a way to survive in the Western art world. Yan Pei-Ming, for example, works with the purest invention of western art on portraiture, oil painting. His work deals with the fusion of a newborn commercial consciousness as well as with individuality. It is deconstructive, He paints anonymous or obfuscated portraits, a strategy in the confrontation of difference. Artists from the "New Measurement" group, Chen Shaiping, Gu Dexin and Wang Luyan based their work on numerical relations between things; a reaction to eurocentric knowledge and ethical values, which places subjectivity as the essence of the humanist claim for "humanity."

Certain artists might appropriate alternative concepts, like Chinese Zen Buddhism, to bridge "Eastern" and "Western" concepts. Other strategies by Gu Wenda and Wu Shanzhuan provides information beyond the reality created by contemporary mass media and factual reality. Huang Yung Ping uses the yi ching, to go beyond personal choice or subjectivity. Chen Zhen, described, "trans-experience," a mode of thinking and method of artistic creation capable of

connecting the preceding with the following. Qin Yufen achieves a personal aesthetic by poetically reinterpreting Chinese aesthetic traditions.

Indeed, the creation and expression and the emerging network of global cities have impacted everyday life. "Cities on the Move", co- curated with Hans Ulrich Obrist, attempted to show that urban space and its relationship or interaction between art and architecture and urbanism, is a focus for a repositioning of imagination. "My Home is Yours, Your Home is Mine, raised the question of what constitutes home." This was discussed in an interview with curator Jerome Sans. "Comprising the immediate and imperative changes happening in both our surroundings and within our lives, new forms of homes are being fashioned, ones that fulfill more innovative living conditions," said Hanru.

Efforts in architecture are provoking a subversion of the established universal order of social, economic political and of course, cultural life. The Malaysian architect Ken Yeang's plan for a tropical skyscraper is biochemically considerate. Hou Hanru believes the stabilization and normalization of flexible and open forms of creativity will break the boundary of art, Museums counterbalancing central institutions and the creation of new biennials in Havana, Guangju, Johannesburg, Istanbul, Dakar and Taipei, as well as new museums, galleries and centers of art (evidence of innovative and chaotic activities.) He cites Gordon Matta Clark's "wall cuttings" and the entropic ideas of Robert Smithson, as innovative strategies of deconstruction that transcend the established cultural walls. Hanru's wish is to provoke instability and multiplicity, and to set the center into a chaos that leads to an irreversible process of transformation. This un-groundness, is not an existential despair, but a freedom and lightness that upends subjectivity to bring about alternative and imaginative new understandings and opportunities for contemporary urbanites to become anyone rather than someone; a place 'a mid-ground' for an endless invention."

Hou Hanru often engages in irony or imaginative strategies of discourse and where the dialogs in the book may be truly dry, like most important manifestos, they are indispensable, if not always immediately digestible.

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