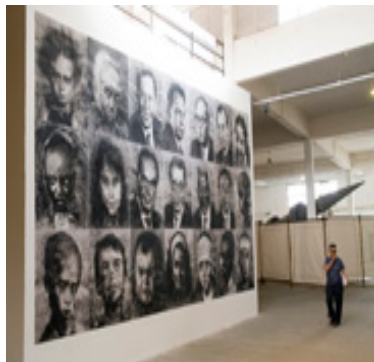


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Yan Pei Ming, *from worldwide to International*



Ken Lum, *House of Realization*



Huang Yong Ping, *Construction Site*



Huang Yong Ping, *Construction Site*

Istanbul Biennial

by Carolee Thea

The proliferation of Biennial, often criticized for their spectacularity have otherwise yielded models in relation to place, to other exhibitions and to the practice. Fueled by the conditions of the moment they stimulate new curatorial perspectives while their thematic range follows the logic of globalized capital highlighting our relationship to global, local, and trans-local journeys.

Hou Hanru, the curator for the 10th Istanbul Biennial, left China in the early nineties, lived in Paris where created exhibitions in all corners the world. Presently the Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs at the San Francisco Institute of Art, he has been described as one of the first curators and thinkers to examine postmodern issues of nomadic identity, hybridity, globalized mobility, and in-between-ness. With anarchistic and anti-institutional tendencies, he often employs chaos and contradiction to expose and overthrow existing curatorial canons. By choosing Hou Hanru, The Istanbul Biennial Foundation showed its muscularity.

His overall theme, Not Only Possible But Also Necessary -- Optimism In The Age of Global War, a phrase from Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (*Empire*, 2000), is an updating of the Marxist formula in which capitalism digs its own grave. Hardt and Negri describe the process as the transition from the nation-state to global empire, a transnational entity comparable to ancient Rome in which hybrid masses of scattered identities developed.

The Antrepo, The AKM, The Istanbul Textile Trader's Market and the after dark streets of Istanbul were among the venues for the exhibition. The Antrepo, a former customs warehouse sits along the Istanbul harbor. At the entrance, Yan Pei Ming's, *from worldwide to International*, is a grid of watercolor portrait posters glued to the wall presented a pensive/ blue chip introduction to Hanru's theme, *Entre-Polis*. Hanru's concept brings to bear the social and economic dysfunctions of voluntary or forced migrations that result in the diffusion of identity, confusing absence of an ideology, the emergence of undifferentiated fears and the rise of the human spirit. Complimenting this is Ken Lum's *House of Realization*, an installation composed of a darkened chamber surrounded by three long corridors. The first corridor, mirrored on one side reflects the opposite wall on which a thirteenth-century Turkish poem by a Sufi poet, written backwards, can be read (or decoded) on the parallel-mirrored wall. Continuing on to the next corridor reveals the other side of same mirror as a one-way silvered type often used in surveillance. Walking through this was a sinister and contemporary variation on Lewis Carroll's, *Through the Looking Glass*.

Most all of the works at the Antrepo, boast curatorial terpsichore. Allora-Calzadilla's, *There is more than one way*, and Rainer Ghanahl's video, *Voice*, abut. Each employs a bicycle to link the past and present. The first video is shot in an underpass bicycle shop in Istanbul where a musician from the Kackar mountains using his wind instrument (a tulum) while filling the tire of an old bicycle, shrill notes of air filling the tire, pierce a busy intersection. Ghanahl's video, *Voices* portrays the artist cycling between locations in Istanbul where, in recent decades important journalists have been assassinated. (Hrant Dink, a prominent editor of the Armenian-Turkish-language weekly, was killed there in January 2007.)

Illustrating today's virtual and complex world, Cao Fei's installation, *RBM city projects* digital images on curtains that enclose her *Second Life* adventures. With China Tracey as her avatar, the artist explores land development and capitalism with a mutable fantasy of architectural similes inviting visitors to create their own interpretations on stationed computers. Another interactive work, a game by Porntaweesak Rimsakul, *RGB's War*, sits on a platform-like game board where viewers can grasp a joystick and guide helmet topped miniature cars into collisions and war games.

Encounters involving religion and war emerge with Huang Yong Ping's *Construction Site*. Set

Hamra Abba, *Lessons on Love*

within a flowing linen tent, the nose of a huge Minaret is poised as a projectile missile. It was stunning! Pings sculptures have recently seemed large for the sake of scale but this one was epic in nature that if smaller, would have miniaturized the message. Lessons on Love, by Hamra Abbas is composed of three sets of life sized, gaudy hued souvenir type figures posed in karma sutra fornications where, sort of a double entendre, the male ready for defense wields an attack weapon. (?According to artforum online, the work has since been damaged by children due to lack of security guards. The Istanbul press sabah also incited speculation that the damage was done by radicals as a protest against the work's sexual content and threatens to backfire for the artist in her home country, Pakistan.? Given the change of mood in Turkey from secular to the more sacred, I suspect the vandalism was politically motivated (artforum on line International news digest).

Didier Fiuza Faustino, *Pandora's box*

Strewn with hot pink pillows, Sam Samore's, *The Magic Bed* enlists the lyrical. Here, an elevated bed, meant for reclining and casually viewing Samore's surreal film on monitors attached to the ceiling or viewing boats on the Bosphorus, communing with friends or simply, to relax. At night, bedtime stories penned by Samore were read by a famous Turkish actress in her tongue. The success of the project lay in its sensitivity to the viewer who often needs a rest and as a nod to Creolist, Edouard Glissant, for whom the personal narrative is a key to transforming mentalities and reshaping societies.

Lee Bul, *Weep into stones*

A second venue in Taksim Square, The Ataturk Cultural Center (AKM) is a major public site of cultural and political ceremonial events. Built in the archetypal socio-modernist style it symbolizes the secular and progressive vision of the Turkish Republic as seen by Ataturk. Reconstructed in the 1970s, it's now slated to be torn down and replaced by a larger center.

At AKM, the curator's motif, *Burn it or Not*, plays with the fashionable concept of utopia. Well illustrated in Didier Fiuza Faustino's. *Pandora's box*, a collapsing wooden construction, posed as a symbol for our expectations and lost illusions. Vahram Aghasyan's *Ghost City*, a stream of photographs of an abandoned city in Armenia that the Soviet government built as a residential area for those made homeless by an earthquake. Never completed and left to time and weathering it's a ghostly specter of Modernism. Lee Bul's fantasy sculpture, *Weep into stones*, fuses a narrative of collective utopian dreams and failures with the artist's memory and perceptions. Xu Zhen's work, *Untitled*, is a faux display of the materials and hilltop relating to his group's idealistic operation; climbing Everest, cutting a hilltop, and bringing it down the mountain, intact.

It was at the Istanbul Textile Trader's Market, a vertical mall built for the industry where Nancy Davenport, Julio Morales, Teddy Cruz, Tadao Ando and eighty-five others exhibited works refer to worker outsourcing, pushcarts, sex-workers, global corporations and the closing of factories in Europe and their opening in Asia. Often Hou Hanru consults with an architect to design temporary exhibition spaces where chaos may reign. Here, the existing structure offered the armature for the curatorial pandemonium.

The abundance of international biennials could suggest that the arts are a vehicle for change and to that purpose, biennials must be a forum for experimentation, engaging more complex or destabilizing motifs that embrace all kinds of mutations and institutional critiques. Toward this end, the curators of the previous 9th Istanbul Biennial, Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun, who in refraining the use of dazzling historic sites, spread the artworks into contemporary urban sites. With this move, they stimulated interchanges between invited international artists in residence, viewers and city-folk to experiment in all, with a different form. Where this was willfully disorienting and edgy, their more conventional show at the Antrepo left me yearning for beauty and stability. Can we have it both ways? Can we have the Break dance and the waltz?

Hanru's attempt to integrate artist and public and to shake up the conventional was found in *Nightcomers*, where 150 short videos, chosen by five curators from an open call, were projected after nightfall in Istanbul's public spaces. This scheme was inspired by protesters from the 1960s and 1970s who after dark, placed posters, in guerilla fashion on street corners during the Cultural Revolution in China. Where it's interesting to see exhibition modalities tracing back to a curators personal history, this one was tamed by time and place and was interrupted by the opening parties. Not only possible but also necessary? Optimism In the Age of Global War, was in short, a careful show, one that bugled for the unsafe, the disruptive and the chaos, the distinguishing mark of Hou Hanru's exhibitions.

