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ArtAsiaPacific

6 October 2026

A Low Hum: The 16th Gwangju Biennale

The biennale treats transformation as something layered across scales and rhythms, at times seismic, at times imperceptibly slow.

Louis Lu



Installation view of JAMES T. HONG's *Apologies*, 2012– , at "You must change your life," the 16th Gwangju Biennale, 2026. Photo by Jeon Byung Cheol. Courtesy the Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

Each evening, the façade of the Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall lights up with James T. Hong's *Apologies* (2012–), an ever-expanding anthology of government officials and heads of state offering contrition. It is, in Hong's words, "a timeline of political progress as unrepentant recidivism and contrite repetition." The reel begins in 1937 with Japanese ambassador Hiroshi Saito regretting the sinking of the USS Panay, followed by German chancellor Willy Brandt falling to his knees before the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising monument, and closes in 2023 with the Dutch king apologizing for his nation's role in slavery. In between, we see a procession of presidents, prime ministers, and a pope begging pardon for inherited legacies of discrimination, dispossession, and crimes. Delivered years, decades, sometimes centuries after the fact, these gestures accumulate into a tedious spectacle. What Hong's work exposes, ultimately, is a paradox at the heart of any political change: the token of penitence stages transformation precisely in order to defer it. This monumental record of inertia is one of the few works in this year's Gwangju Biennale that interrogates its title directive, "You Must Change Your Life," showing how fast the imperative to transform can settle into ritual.

The directive itself is lifted from the closing line in Rainer Maria Rilke's 1908 sonnet "Archaic Torso of Apollo." Artistic director Ho Tzu Nyen has spoken of encountering the poem on an exhausted day and feeling an "expanded capacity." The line carries urgency: it insists you change without explaining how or toward what. That openness allows Ho and his co-curators (Gahee Park, Brian Kuan Wood, and Che Kyongfa) to treat transformation as something layered across scales and rhythms, at times seismic, at times imperceptibly slow.

That split tempo is made tangible in the opening section, “Molecules and Me,” where Goldin+Senneby’s *Resin Pond* (2026) pools nearly two tons of pine resin across the floor into a luminous amber slick. Within the living tree, resin is at once a toxin that repels pests and fungi, and a sealant that closes wounds. It is also energy-dense, terpene-rich, harvestable for refinement into biodiesel and aviation fuel. Jakob Senneby, one half of the duo, lives with multiple sclerosis, a condition in which the body’s defenses chronically turn against its own nervous system. This experience with autoimmunity has reoriented the duo’s longstanding scrutiny of capital’s absurdities. *Resin Pond* proposes that the generative and the destructive are no longer separable—not in climate crisis, not in geopolitics, not in technology, and certainly not in the poison-cure logic of a market that carries within it both its own overcoming and its catastrophe: a perspective that regards change less as directional than conditional.

In the curatorial statement, Ho frames practices as techniques “repeated at regular intervals either to control or to conduct change,” and the tension between repetition and rupture runs through the exhibition. Scattered across the floors are clusters of volcanic rocks from Jeju, their contorted forms holding, within a single mass, radically unequal durations: the slow accrual of sediment, the violence of eruption, the long aftermath of cooling and weathering. Equally threaded through the space, and functioning as the exhibition’s connective tissue, are Sasaki Ken’s more than 60 small paintings of unremarkable things—a pair of Converse sneakers, workers’ boots, a light switch, a tennis ball. One of the canvases depicts an ominously overcast sky: Sasaki’s record of the Tokyo sky in the days after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, when fears of radioactive drift from Fukushima hung in the air. Dispersed as they are, the rocks and the mundane paintings can feel opaque, even excessive. Yet their sheer persistence makes the argument that change moves at no single speed and takes no single form, and that it is often already underway, lodged in the textures of the everyday. Whether this constitutes a veiled hope for transformative force, or an oblique salute to Gwangju’s own insurgent heritage, the exhibition leaves deliberately open.

“Molecules and Me” rewards sustained looking, and it repeatedly nudges the viewer toward the unfinished. Maya Watanabe’s *Liminal* (2019), a single-channel projection on a tilted, engulfing screen, offers extreme close-ups of human remains exhumed from mass graves of Peru’s internal armed conflict, which took place between 1980 and 2000. Decades later, roughly tens of thousands of the victims are still missing or nameless, and many crimes remain unacknowledged. Watanabe’s camera shifts constantly between focus and blur, refusing to let atrocity resolve into a fixed historical image. Even death, the work implies, withholds closure: mourning persists, identity stays suspended, and the past exerts its pressure from within a near-molecular anonymity.

Historical wounds and their seepage into daily life come to a point in the second section, “Bodies and Bonds,” where Mona Benyamin’s two videos furnish the exhibition’s most bracing case for art as a means of processing trauma. Her parents, who lived through the mass displacements of Palestinians during the Arab-Israeli conflicts, the Nakba (1948) and the Naksa (1967), are featured as performers cast into the formats of a sitcom and a newscast. In *Trouble in Paradise* (2018), they run through comic bits about the eradication of Palestinians, broaching the subject through gallows humor delivered with a Brechtian affect over a canned laugh track (“How do you make a Palestinian

cry? You kill his family”). In *Tomorrow, Again* (2023), they reappear as anchors and bystanders: a newsreader who cannot stop weeping, an eyewitness to one disaster after another. Benyamin creates a condition of perpetual emergency and then asks, with a sardonic edge, how one is meant to change a life whose ground state is recurring ruin.

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Installation view of JACQUELINE KIYOMI GORK’s *Not Exactly BPM (Variation Rrose)*, 2026. Commissioned by the 16th Gwangju Biennale, Supported by National Center for Art Research, Japan (NCAR), Tanoto Art Foundation (TAF), and Empty Gallery, Speaker equipment provided by Meyer Sound, Berkeley, CA.

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gork’s *Not Exactly BPM (Variation Rrose)* (2026), presented in the final section, returns the focus to the body. It is a deconstructed nightclub built from centrifugal blowers, feedback, and transparent, sound-absorbing inflatables that swell into a sensory enclosure and then slowly exhale. A hypnotic score of kick drums and phase-shifting loops, built with the psychoacoustic artist Rrose, moves the room and its occupants alike. But instead of the euphoria of the dancefloor, the installation’s eerie self-awareness yields a low hum of anxiety and suspended anticipation, an artificial burnt-orange light filtering through vinyl walls.

Gork confronts the conceptually dense, politically freighted, and emotionally taxing works in the exhibition with a visceral reset, displacing intellectual reflection into corporeal attention: breath, pulse, the instability and the pleasure of an enclosed and rhythmic collective. If the biennale has spent its length imagining a “life elsewhere,” this last environment stages the pause before departure. It leaves the beholder with the question—how, having seen and felt all this, does one return to the world changed?

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OCULA

24 September 2026

On the Ground During Art Season in Korea, a Country in Flux

Art month in South Korea is busy: the Busan Biennale, Frieze Seoul, Kiaf, and the Gwangju Biennale. Ocula's Zian Chen reports on satirical mannequins, classroom subversion, and the politics of biennales themselves.

Zian Chen

Where Busan's biennale is still relatively regional, in Gwangju, a city in which the Biennale was founded to commemorate the 1980 uprising, the institution faced a test of its commitment to resistance. This year's edition began with what its president described as its best-attended press conference to date, a distinction owed at least partly to controversy surrounding the Taiwan Pavilion, whose name the Gwangju Biennale Foundation had replaced with the participating museum's initials, thereby removing the word "Taiwan", drawing accusations of censorship amid China's interest in the island.

The Biennale apologised, following internal pressure from artistic director Ho Tzu Nyen and his curatorial team. Yet in that crowded room, he started his press-conference speech with what struck me as a notably private account of change. Having completed a touring survey of his career in 2024, the celebrated Singaporean artist found himself depleted. Then, during an otherwise unremarkable commute, he encountered the closing line of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* (1908): "You must change your life." The sentence restored his sense of possibility. Its force, Ho suggested, lay in its openness: it demands change without prescribing what one should become.

Ho took Rilke's injunction as a response to a midlife crisis of sorts; it became the biennale's guiding question. Seeking "the intensity of attention", the team has used the biennale's purpose-built hall rather than sprawling across the city. They themed five galleries as different sites of change: *Molecules and Me*, *Bodies and Bonds*, *Landscapes and Learning*, *Cosmos and Change*, and *Air and Articulations.*

In the opening chapter, *Molecules and Me*, volcanic rocks from Jeju, the country's largest island, introduce ideas around pressure, eruption and solidification. At the centre of the room, occupying much of the floor, is Goldin+Senneby's photogenic *Resin Pond* (2026), which comprises two tonnes of amber pine resin that have been poured on to the floor to create a room-sized pool. Rooted in Jakob Senneby's experience of multiple sclerosis, the piece takes a secretion from a tree (part of the tree's system for healing its own wounds) and casts it as a metaphor for an autoimmune condition in which the body's defences turn back on themselves. Dotted around the pool, Jean Barth's human and mechanoid avatars appear to fracture, melt and re-form, drawing on the artist's experience of gender transition. Filipino artist Kiri Dalena's portraits of activists wearing plaster masks, taken at protests against martial law in the Philippines during the 1970s, are described in the accompanying text as "volcanic individuals".

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Sunik Kim focuses on South Korean history in *The Light in the Factory* (2026), a 496-hour sound installation. He cuts and stretches minjung kayo, protest songs from the 1980s, into dense, abrasive noise, punctuated by fragments of a banned 1978 musical drama of a similar name (a cassette of which sits in Christian Nyampeta's library elsewhere in the exhibition). Kim's accompanying pamphlet, Threading Zero, offers perhaps the biennale's bleakest account of art and politics: he proposes that the things that help resistance spread can also make it easier to co-opt. The shared sound that let protest songs circulate anonymously under repression later made them easy to reproduce and sell.

In Gwangju, he argues, where the biennale was founded on fiercely political grounds, "The Anti-Biennale was subsumed into the Biennale just as the Biennale subsumed the Rebellion through art." He follows this logic into South Korea's state-backed electronics boom and Samsung's suppression of unions, recounting the struggle over a union-organiser's funeral before turning to the vast art collection of the company's late chairman. His verdict on art's capacity to resolve such contradictions is bleaker still: "Art relieves us of the pressure to change life."

The sounds of Kim's broadcast can be heard over James T. Hong's film installation *Apologies* (2012–), an archive of official apologies by various heads of state projected across the façade of the building that houses the biennale's main exhibition. Resting in the plaza on opening night, I watched visitors stop to watch South Korea's first civilian president Kim Young-sam's landmark 1993 statement on Gwangju as it appeared on the projection. "Let us not forget, but forgive boldly and reconcile anew," urged the former opposition activist, himself a victim of military repression. Emblazoned across the façade, he appeared in a different light: a president asking others to forgive before the full extent of the violence inflicted was known. That turn from acknowledgement to closure recalled the city government's apology over the Taiwan Pavilion naming dispute, followed at the press conference by an appeal to leave politics aside.



Installation view of JAMES T. HONG's *Apologies*, 2012– , at "You must change your life," the 16th Gwangju Biennale, 2026. Photo by Jeon Byung Cheol. Courtesy the Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

There is a sure hand behind the curation—the question is whether it makes for a good biennale. Its curators reshape our attention as we encounter the works and move through the building, but do less to reimagine the institution itself. At its most ambitious, a biennial is a public experiment in which artists shape political debate, thinkers work through art, and a city's residents can challenge the stories told about their home.

I also question the exhibition's reading of Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* does not end merely with an open invitation to improve oneself. Read that way, its command slips into the language of self-improvement. Collective crises are relabelled as personal, solvable by individual action: sharpen your attention, build resilience, change yourself. Rilke's command, instead, is delivered through a reversal of the gaze. Although the sculpture has no head, its body still sees the viewer: "There is no place that does not see you." Confronted by that intensity, the observer becomes the observed and is obliged to answer it.

In Gwangju, that returning gaze came less from the artworks than from the people living in the city. Citizens and 24 regional arts organisations challenged the foundation's removal of the name "Taiwan Pavilion". "Erase the name and face, then say everything else is free," they said, demanding the name's restoration, an account of the decision and an apology. The exhibition attends closely to Gwangju's history of dissent; the biennale proved less willing to answer the dissent directed at it now.

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e-flux Criticism

17 September 2026

16th Gwangju Biennale, “You must change your life”

Stephanie Bailey



Installation view of JAMES T. HONG’s *Apologies*, 2012– , at “You must change your life,” the 16th Gwangju Biennale, 2026. Photo by Jeon Byung Cheol. Courtesy the Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

Unsurprisingly, the first question at the 16th Gwangju Biennale’s press conference addressed the diplomatic firestorm surrounding the Taiwan pavilion. In early August, promotional materials were released by the Gwangju Biennale Foundation identifying “NTMoFA” (after the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts) rather than “Taiwan” as an exhibitor, prompting condemnation from Taiwan’s Ministry of Culture, an official correction, and the China Pavilion’s subsequent withdrawal citing the “One China” policy. Quick to separate the central show from the pavilion program, artistic director Ho Tzu Nyen passed the question to Youn Bum-mo, the Gwangju Biennale Foundation’s president. Youn promptly apologized for the fallout before asking the press not to overlap art and politics—a dissonant request given the Biennale’s founding in 1995 to memorialize Gwangju’s May 1980 democratic uprising, a defining event in South Korea’s postwar democratization struggle.

Still, Youn’s response felt fitting given two works in the central show that are literally directed at the institution. James T. Hong’s single-channel *Apologies* (2012–ongoing) is a growing video compilation of apologies broadcast by heads of state or government: “a timeline of modern political progress as unrepentant recidivism and contrite repetition,” Hong notes in a wall text. That critique is anchored by the work’s nightly screening on the Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall’s facade, which faces the Foundation’s offices across a public plaza, in front of which a kiosk broadcasts Sunik Kim’s 496-hour sound work, *The Light in the Factory* (2026). Named after a 1978 norae-gut (“song-ritual”) written by Kim Min-Ki to support the labor movement amid military dictatorship, Kim’s reworking draws on the banned performance’s decomposition through

cassette reproduction. Extending that logic of dilution is “Threading Zero,” an accompanying essay written by Kim and distributed as a pamphlet and PDF, which describes the Gwangju Biennale Exhibition Hall as “a monument to the failure of the revolutionary movement,” given its absorption into the business of commemoration.

With that, *Light in the Factory’s* accompanying description poses a vital question: What can a work of art “still do inside the very machine that would absorb it”? The question’s relevance to art workers, including those in institutions, felt palpable at the press conference, when Ho closed the gap that Youn opened between art and politics by differentiating “artistic time” from the present’s “limited attention span” in his response—a neat conceptual return to the central show that he curated with Gahee Park, Brian Kuan Wood, and Che Kyongfa. Quoting the last line of Rainer Maria Rilke’s 1908 poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” “You must change your life” considers transformation as multi-scalar, intergenerational, and ever-evolving: a perspective that transcends the temporal limits of nationalism and institutional inertia.

Rilke’s poem is printed on a glass wall at the exhibition’s entrance, behind which Goldin+Senneby’s *Resin Pond* (2026), two tons of pine tree resin poured on the floor to produce a luminous pool, materializes the encounter with the sublime that Rilke describes. A protective toxin, wound sealant, and industrial material for biofuels, pine resin is something of a pharmakon: an embodiment of generative and destructive forces that the wall text relates to Jakob Senneby’s multiple sclerosis, an autoimmune condition in which the nervous system attacks itself. In both cases, landscape and body encompass contradictory conditions: an oscillation that “You must change your life” traces across five sections, starting with the volcanic rocks from Jeju Island that appear throughout as gauges of deep yet present time. Each is a portal, given the place rocks have in East Asia, from suseok to gongshi (also known as scholar’s rocks): natural forms selected and often enhanced by humans as objects for contemplating one’s part in an ineffable whole. They also invoke Jeju 4.3: the April 1948 uprising on the island against Korea’s division and US occupation, and the brutal military response that South Korea’s government only apologized for in 2003—events that resonate with the state violence inflicted on Gwangju’s protestors and citizens in 1980, and the years of silence that ensued.

Fragments are both limits and expansions. Take Kiri Dalena’s *Erased Slogans* (2008–ongoing), more than 130 photographs of Philippine demonstrations from the 1950s to the ’70s with placard slogans digitally erased, installed in section one, “Molecules and Me,” opposite Sasaki Ken’s *List* (2024), a small painting of a notebook referencing Sasaki’s father’s involvement in the Japanese University Uprising of 1968–69. Or Amanda Heng’s *Another Woman in Gwangju 1996, 2014, 2023* (2026): photos of Heng and her mother spanning three decades presented in section two, “Bodies and Bonds.” That visceral interplay of continuity and rupture expands from the familial to the artistic in a capsule on *Ullimsanbang*, a century-spanning South Jeolla artistic tradition, from founder Sochi Huh Ryeon’s 1890 ink-on-paper suseok diptych *Goeseokdo* (literally: “Painting of Strange Rocks”) to Huh Moon’s minimalist accumulations of ink wash and negative space on paper from the 2010s. These are presented in the following section, “Landscapes and Learning,” alongside tea-themed ink paintings by Huh Baek-ryun. Huh co-founded the Gwangju Agricultural Technical High School in 1947, the year before the North and South governments were formed, on the basis that art is inseparable from

community; he helped support it by selling paintings and cultivating spring snow tea on Mount Mudeung, whose name translates to indivisibility by rank. The tea is served in a gallery overlooking a garden through a window wall, connecting suseok and its animist resonances with shanshui landscapes, where representations of the land function as meditations on interworldly relations.

That multidimensionality continues in Maya Watanabe's single-channel video installation *Liminal* (2019) and CAMP's seven-channel video tapestry, *Bombay Tilts Down* (2022). Viewed on a tilted screen within a cavernous nook, the former scans terrain marked by crimes committed during Peru's internal armed conflict from 1980 to 2000. The latter is presented like a scroll across hanging screens, with CCTV images recorded from a Mumbai high-rise weaving top-down and bottom-up views of a sharply divided city, as a song describes bricks workers made from mud and mortar to build palaces reaching the sky. Geological time thus weaves into political time. That reality reverberates across generations and geographies: the full accounting of people killed or missing in relation to May 1980 in Gwangju remains unresolved, just as thousands are still missing from Peru's internal conflict.

Hence the need to not only retell history but find forms capable of expressing its complexity without collapsing into ornamentation. The "Cosmos and Change" section navigates that problem poetically. Installed on a monumental screen at the back of a darkened hall, Saodat Ismailova's enigmatic video portrait of eighth-century prophet-rebel Al-Muqanna, *Melted into the Sun* (2024), conducts a powerful video chorus with soundtracks harmonizing across open space to create a curatorial score—from Bhenji Ra's single-channel *Biraddali Dancing on the Horizon* (2024), following the artist's personal encounter with pangalay, a dance practiced among the Tausug of the Sulu Archipelago, to Sohrab Hura's *The Coast* (2019), following Kali worshippers reveling in the night sea in Tamil Nadu. Known as "the Veiled One," Al-Muqanna, played by Uzbek poet Jontemir Jondor, moves across rivers and deserts, perching on archaeological and Soviet-era constructions, as his companions refract the sun with mirrors. Voices whisper ancient questions: "Who had plunged us into the vortex of endless repetition?" and "Where is our will?"

Wang Tuo confronts those queries in Chapters 1 and 3 of *Critical Theory of Absence* (2026–ongoing), presented on back-to-back screens in a black box. Commissioned for the Biennale, Chapter 3, *Ratchet Drill* (2026), follows young people rehearsing a play ostensibly based on the Gwangju Uprising, though details remain vague enough for the story to resonate with other state-suppressed liberation movements. Caught in what feels like limbo, footage of a terrified young soldier clutching his gun in the chaos is spliced with scenes of him at home alone holding a pistol to his head. In the end, the revolutionaries bow in silence to an empty theater, suspended by the gravity of liberation in practice. It's a haunting gesture in times and places like these, recalling the line in Rilke's poem that precedes its famous imperative: "for here there is no place / that does not see you."

ARTFORUM艺术论坛

16. 9. 2026

轻与重

栾诗璇在2026年首尔艺术周、光州双年展和釜山双年展现场

栾诗璇



洪子健，《道歉》，2012至今，光州双年展现场.

我在围绕光州双年展国家馆争议和一系列韩国本土及济洲岛刑事案件的媒体报道热潮中抵达了首尔，却发现首尔艺术周出乎意料地松弛。今年是Frieze Seoul最后一年在COEX举办，明年将搬至Zaha Hadid设计的建筑地标DDP（Dongdaemun Design Plaza）。首尔众机构与之同期的展览似乎并不急于争夺国际观众的注意力：无论是徐道获在MMCA的大型回顾展，还是Leeum三星美术馆的Koo Jeong A个展，以及聚焦1950至70年代女性艺术家环境艺术实验的历史性群展，信息都不算密集，也明显没有什么争奇斗艳之意，甚至带着些许随意，尽管艺术周晚上的派对仍然挤得水泄不通。

在被首尔一众波澜不惊的机构展览洗礼后，我们决定前往Leeum位于首尔郊外的分馆——HoAM美术馆。这里的群展“一间每台收音机都调到不同频道的房间”（ARoomWhereEveryRadioIsTunedtoDifferentStations）意外地充满张力。我们一边被美丽的韩式庭园和石雕吸引，一边默默被美术馆的经济实力所震慑。院子里，Rachel Youn巨大的人工棕榈树含蓄地旋转着树冠，似乎无意间与展览中Elia Nurvista幽默的影像作品《种植园悲剧》（Plantation Tragedy,2026）形成了呼应。一进门，艺术家陈若璠标志性的作品用充满戏剧感的坍塌房屋结构，在光影和物质碎屑中默叙创伤与劳作的关系。Musquiqui致颖的新作《再铸》（The Recasting, 2025）尤其令人惊喜，艺术家虚构了三件博物馆文物的鬼魂，让它们在京剧吟唱中对话，回述一段几近被遗忘的共同历史。

在首尔停留两天后，我起身前往光州。关于国家馆的讨论，让所有关注过今年威尼斯双年展争议的人都产生了一种强烈的似曾相识感——艺术界独有的一种奥林匹克式的存在主义危机：无论我们对于国家馆的存在提出多

少非议，它似乎都永远不会消失。不过，在光州参观各种国家馆、机构馆倒也还算愉快，穿梭于优雅的韩屋、古朴的故居间，观展本身变成了一次城市漫游。

光州双年展的主题“你必须改变你的生活”（You must change your life）取自里尔克（Rainer Maria Rilke）的一首诗。这个主题从字面上看带有强烈的劝说和警示意味，以及对危机的暗示。同时，从主展馆多个展厅中均可以看出对于日常、重复的强调，由艺术家何子彦带领的策展团队在其策展声明中也写道：“我们将实践视为一种技术，通过有规律的重复来控制改变，或促使改变发生。”虽然我并不确信重复一定能带来所期许的改变，毕竟重复和改变之间本身就存在某种概念上的冲突，而重复和陈规（cliché）之间的距离又是如此难以把握，但我对这种乐观主义精神充满敬意。改变生活和改变自我并不是一回事——关于“日常”（the mundane）的讨论，让我隐隐有些不安，可能因为生长于后社会主义遗产中，我太熟悉所有的日常都可以逐渐被扭曲为一种景观式的刻奇。

这次双年展有不少让外部观者感觉晦涩之处。其中最令人困惑的也许是策展团队试图用日本艺术家佐佐木健（Sasaki Ken）的近60幅描绘日常物的绘画串起整个双年展。此外，展厅角落随处可见的瑞典艺术家组合Goldin+Senneby的乐高计步器，以及反复登场的济州岛火山石，都让我和一众同行在开幕观展期间产生了共同的迷惘。这些作品/物品的反复出现，使它们显得更像某种展览设计的元素，一种近乎功能性的空间标识，观众解码进入作品的欲望在这种重复中被逐步消解，最后反而留下一种恋物的印象。

在巨大的群展中去分别论证个体艺术家在自身实践中的改变是一个并不讨喜的策略。不过相对于具体的策展技巧，我更关心的是策展人如何用一种新的态度来面对光州双年展与生俱来的历史遗产——任何一届双年展都无法回避对五·一八事件以及光州在韩国民主运动中的纪念碑地位进行再思考和演绎，比较可惜的是，尽管此次双年展上Christian Nyampeta、“五月母亲之家”、许百炼（1891–1977）等艺术家或社群团体的作品都直接或间接回应了光州事件及其遗产，但策展团队针对这一民族性的本土议题却没有提出太多独特或鲜明的讨论角度。当然，我知道这是一个不可能完成的功课，就像作为大陆人的我始终找不到合适的距离来谈论这次国家馆的争端一样。在策展框架里我们读到了身体，景观，空气，分子，甚至宇宙等关键词，但看不到此刻塑造这一言说方式的背后的手。我们心知肚明，身在艺术界的我们都承受着话语的重压，而试图改变现状的个体努力往往如此徒然，真正重要的话题似乎永远难以被拿上桌面。不知道为什么，看着这个努力去振奋人心的双年展，我反而陷入了某种悲观。

当然，展场还是不乏相当精彩的瞬间。策展人将洪子健（James T Hong）的经典作品《道歉》（2012–）投射在主场馆广场的大屏幕上，在这一轮新闻热潮减退之际，看着各国政客在屏幕上轮番道歉，感觉尤为讽刺和荒诞。巴勒斯坦艺术家Mona Benyamin的两件参展作品对我来说是用艺术来处理历史伤痛的典范。她邀请自己的父母来扮演影片中的角色，包括无法停止失声痛哭的新闻播报员和路上的目击者，或者戏仿美国情景喜剧桥段的演员，将巴勒斯坦的灾难用“地狱笑话”的方式演绎出来。这种聪明的荒诞和调侃之所以触动我的神经，是因为艺术家抛出了一个更

加有效的问题：当日常是重复发生的灾祸，那我们又该怎么面对，怎么改变人生？韩国艺术家权炳俊（Kwon Byungjun）和朴赞庆（Park Chan-kyong）合作的作品《增强》（Bullim,2026）是本届双年展上给我留下最深刻印象的作品：艺术家们从本地居民处征集金属材料，并以之制作出模拟萨满鼓、多米诺骨牌等形式的声音装置，重现韩国村庄募捐金属并祈求平安的萨满仪式，这可能是在今天对于光州历史和社群精神最恰切的一种回应。

与光州相比，今年釜山双年展“异议合唱”（Dissident Chorus）的处理方式相对轻盈，也更强调感官体验。由Amal Khalaf和Evelyn Simons联合策划的本届双年展探讨声音蕴含的韧性和抵抗力，没有沉重的历史包袱和媒介上的相对集中让它能够提供更加直观和轻松的观展体验。其中最值得看的一个场地是影岛上的废弃高中。场地内由铁丝网框架和石块构成的展台气质独特，让人联想到光州作为“作品”出场的火山石，两个双年展似乎都对石头情有独钟，但处理方式完全不同。艺术家们对于这个极富特点的场地都给出了聪明的回应，其中我个人最喜欢的是蒙古艺术家Jantsankhorol Erdenebayar在教室中呈现的古怪的椅子雕塑，假皮草和其他现成材料散发出一种迷人的气质。Fatima Kaleem Khan利用头发、刺绣、纸上绘画等围绕玉米片创作的装置也是一大亮点。

为什么双年展复活废弃建筑的尝试永远是讨喜的？可能因为它会给你一点城市探险的感觉，一点时空穿梭的错觉，尤其是在釜山这样一座广阔、分散，随处可见美丽海滨的城市。比如这座仍保留着旧日气息的高中——一个曾经拥有具体历史和功用的场所，总是比美术馆空间能提供更多的线索让策展人和艺术家去回应，去改造，或至少是改装。果然最终我们还是痴迷于改变，并且笃信艺术能带来的改变的力量。

OCULA



展览现场：洪子健，“道歉及其他忏悔”，Empty Gallery，香港（2024年6月8日至8月17日）。图片提供：Empty Gallery。

洪子健在 Empty Gallery 的展览“道歉及其他忏悔”（2024 年 6 月 8 日至 8 月 17 日）的开场以剧场般的光线呈现《背后捅刀》（Stabbed in the Back, 2023–）：一把来自二战时期的日本刺刀，垂直插入浑圆的假石中。“鬼子的刺刀”是中国现代民族国家建立过程的历史叙事中耳熟能详之物，不过，若非军事爱好者或藏家，普通观众们其实并不常见到它。近距离观察刺刀陌生的形态、旧物的包浆，还有疑似血迹残存的暗沉斑痕，这是一件真正的杀器。与此成对比的是石中剑的安装方式，以及迪士尼乐园式的泡沫塑料假石显得颇为滑稽，和作品名称一样令人莞尔。

继续深入展厅即是录像作品《道歉》（Apologies, 2012–），作品以三屏形式轮流播放洪子健多年来收集的各国政要代表其国家和政府进行公开道歉的影像，总时长已达七小时，并仍在不断增长中。艺术家尽量排除个人的意志编辑这些存档，将 1970 年至今 160 多组共涉及 20 多地的道歉影像，按时间排列，进行马拉松式的漫长播放。

这不只是一件在概念层面运作的作品，现场观众多能饶有兴致地看下去，背后的原因是多重的。首先，集中的存档和展示意味着对抗无知和遗忘，将许多区域性与世界性的恶行汇编成册，将无数悲剧的历史事件及其政治道歉从广播电视和互联网的信息洪流中打捞了出来。国家道歉的编年史本身指向的就是一部人类不断犯错的历史，在时间线上不断遗忘和累犯，在地理层面上此起彼伏，有着多样的形态和同构的本质，为攫取而





展览现场：洪子健，“道歉及其他忏悔”，Empty Gallery，香港（2024年6月8日至8月17日）。图片提供：Empty Gallery。

杀戮，为统治而压迫。于是，观众各自从影像中唤起久远的回忆，或是获得全新的历史信息。同时，这种强化的历史性认知改变了我们面对政治道歉时的思考维度，观众将不再满足于道歉所代表的一次正义的伸张，而是转而思考人类作为一个物种如何系统地失败了，思考我们今日所称作的正义事业和必要暴力又将如何面对未来人们相似的审视目光。

其次，公开道歉的影像视觉是具有表演性的，和广播电视技术的发展与民主政治的兴起不无关系，它的运作又带着所属文化的强烈特质和时代痕迹，这让集中的观看变成了充满趣味的比较文化观察。可以想象，在不同的地区，为了让国家道歉变得有效，剧本文字是如何被定向书写，道歉场景是如何被强化设置，以达到所期待的表达效果。这并不是说国家道歉就必然是虚伪，而是说即使再真诚的道歉也有其必要的实施办法，和矫饰的和虚伪的政治修辞一样服从于某种文化规律。更有趣的是，影像记录的事无巨细在此担当起重要的再历史化责任，因为无论这种正式道歉的计划设计得多么缜密，摄影机都有能力捕捉一种超量的信息，例如空洞话语间隙之间并不匹配的身体语言、怪异和不合时宜的空间和背景、偶也有镜头捕捉到观众（有时是被道歉对象或代表）茫然不知所措的脸庞，都让再次回看变成一次发现意味深长细节的冒险之旅。对于某些政治集权国家来说，偶然发生的政治道歉则成为人们窥视其特殊文化景观的猎奇窗口——例如朝鲜为新冠疫情和经济发展不佳的两次电视道歉。

在展览最后，一群“石中剑”再次出现了，不同样式的刺刀插在大小不一的假石中，像是形态各异的暴力都已鸣金收兵。恶行，忏悔，道歉，杀人的武器被插回石中，似乎暂时不再是令人感到危险的东西。某种程度上说，将石中剑和亚瑟王的传说向全球传播的重要推手正是人畜无害的迪士尼动画电影《石中剑》（1963）。它的流行也暗合了人们往往以前现代的模式理解国家主权和正义。在这个本就充满卡通色彩的故事中，能拔出石中之剑的人是品德高尚的天选之子，理应成为英格兰的国王，体现封建帝国“君权神授”的魔法。

洪子健的“石中剑”看似是其当代戏仿的亚洲版本，指向的却是不可回避的人类暴行历史和众多现代民族国家从漫长政治传统中继承而来的普遍运作逻辑——无论国家的主权赋权来自何种方式，其不断追求自洽的永恒需求和潜藏的武器化暴力一直存在着，并以现代国家的名义不断引发对个体和群体的种种暴行。有因才有果，有了不可回避的暴行，才有了展览中作为主体的政治道歉集锦视频。这就是为什么“石中剑”必须成为展览的重要引子。也正是因此，为展览撰写导言的穆柏安（Brian Kuan Wood）在开头直接切入讨论“绝对的主权”（absolute sovereign）自身内在逻辑的天然缺陷。穿透国家道歉的凝视目光所抵达的正是其背后围绕主权运行的各种政治机制，是外化的政治表演的根本内因。

不过，我们也都知道，正因为我们还未从历史里获得足够的智慧，或有勇气去真诚面对它，武器随时可能被再次拔起，历史将借着同一种正义的表述重复自身。更何况，在《道歉》的汇编之外，还有多少历史上的暴行未被正式道歉过；同时，就在此时此刻，还有多少带血刺刀正在被义正严辞地挥舞着，施暴于最边缘弱势的群体。洪子健说他自己是一个悲观主义者，可能正是因为他在做这个作品的漫长时间里，看到的人类悲剧远超于《道歉》所能记录的。



展览现场：洪子健，“道歉及其他忏悔”，Empty Gallery，香港（2024年6月8日至8月17日）。图片提供：Empty Gallery。

ARTFORUM
艺术论坛



洪子健，《道歉》截屏，2012年至今，标清录像，时长7小时7分49秒.

洪子健（James T. Hong）在香港Empty Gallery的最新个展“道歉及其他忏悔”（Apologies and Other Regrets）呈现了一件创作跨度长达12年，影像时长超过7个小时的三通道录像《道歉》（Apologies , 2012—），及一组名为“石中剑”（Stabbed In The Back, 2023–24）的雕塑。在全黑的展览空间中，取意于英国亚瑟王传说的该系列雕塑将二战时期的日本军刀插在仿制岩石中，暗示施暴者的转换与暴行的交错。空间最深处则播放着洪氏收集的161段道歉视频，这些原始的影像素材几乎没有经过任何剪切、加工或重新编排，如实展现出现代政治进程的一条历史时间线。“这是一个可怕的，可怕的错误”，不断播放的政治悔过记录让整个展场看起来既像一个秩序井然的历史档案空间，又如一个即将滑向失控的政治表演现场。展览将持续到8月17日。

2012年的时候，我在中国大陆的农村进行有关日军在中国实施细菌战的作品调研。当时的村里人时常向我提起他们对日本（人）的痛恨，因为日本政府不曾为20世纪上半叶在中国犯下的战争罪行道歉。我试图跟村民们解释，日本政府曾经公开道过歉，但是他们并不相信。那时起，我发现“国家道歉”是一个很复杂的概念——道歉使用的字眼、道歉的形式、道歉的人，以及接收道歉的人，这些因素都决定着道歉是否有效，甚至是否存在。后来我开始去找这些有关日本公开道歉的视频，在找的过程中，又发现了更多国家的政治道歉。由于我平时看的新闻大多是英文，所以最早的一批素材集中在西方国家的道歉，像是第一段素材就是前西德总理威利·布兰特（Willy Brandt）在访问华沙犹太区时为纳粹罪行道歉，以及对掠夺原住民土地的致歉。



洪子健，《道歉》，2012年至今，标清录像，时长7小时7分49秒. 摄影：Michael Yu.

这件作品发展到今天，已经是第十二年，未来它会随着越来越多的政治道歉的出现，时长变得更长。基本上，我对道歉视频的选择并不参杂个人情感和立场，而是取决于两个基本条件：它得是一个国家的道歉，以及这段道歉曾经被放在电视或网络媒介上。关于素材本身的内容，我无意做任何改变，这些视频基本都没有经过剪辑或艺术加工，有一些道歉视频结束得很突然是因为它本身就没有播完。只有加拿大总理贾斯汀·杜鲁道（Justin Trudeau）对LGBTQ群体道歉的那段视频我剪掉了一些。因为它真的非常长，杜鲁道用英文道歉完，又用法文再念了一遍。这就是一段

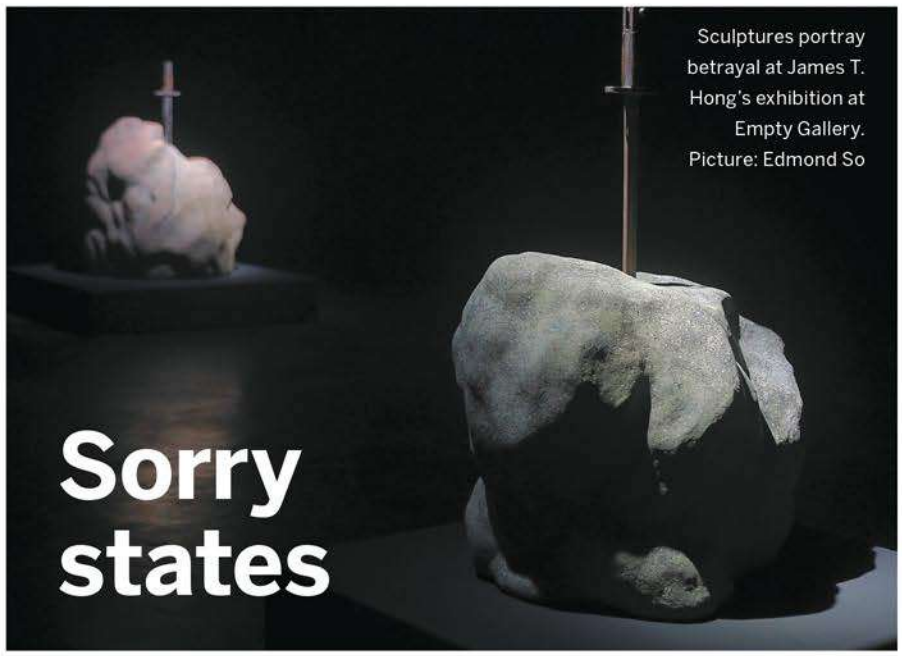
非常典型的“表演的政治”（Show Business），目的更多是为了获取对其有利的政治资本，比如少数群体的选票。

整件作品是按照线性时间来排列的，其实我也考虑过以道歉的主题来进行分类，比如向大屠杀受难者的道歉，向被历史性压迫的少数群体的道歉；向未被法律保护的未成年受害者的道歉等。但后来发现，线性时序似乎能更好地展现出一段完整的，只关于“道歉”的历史，从而让人们意识到这个世界上有更多我们未曾可知的恶行。曾有国家道歉的官方新闻宣称道歉的力量在于——建设新的未来，并不是推翻过去。然而这些道歉往往在使用相似的话术，即“我们今天已经道过歉，所以希望此后各位不要再执着于过去的问题。”道歉之后，过去就被悄无声息地掩去了。因此，我做这件作品很重要的一个目的在于重新揭开被掩去的历史。与此同时，线性时序提示着“道歉”正在成为一种加速发展的政治手段，尤其是西方推崇自由主义秩序的国家开始更多地道歉，从而获取民众的信任，塑造进步的国家身份，以及获取外交的主动性。然而，在越来越密集的国家忏悔中，我们发现很大一部分的道歉是在对历史中的亡者致歉，对过往执政者犯下的错误致歉，而不是对正在发生的恶行或罪行进行陈述与忏悔，比如我并没有找到美国政府对今天在美国的黑人所经历的种族歧视有过道歉。

另一个重要的角度是，在这段道歉的历史中，缺席的是什么？比如那些曾经是共产主义政府的东欧国家和一些集权政治的亚洲国家往往找不到多少政府道歉的记录，我就没有找到越南、泰国的道歉，北朝鲜的道歉在作品里也只有两段，一段是因为新冠疫情，另一段则是因为经济发展不好。俄罗斯道歉的议题则是普京说他们国家的鸡蛋太贵了。除此之外，我也并没有找到以色列的道歉。所以，你开始会去想为什么这些国家没有道歉，或者换一句话说，为什么他们不需要道歉？这次除了三通道录像之外，我还在展览里放入了一组名为“石中剑”（Stabbed In The Back）的雕塑，讲述了一个关于背叛的故事——它不仅仅指涉了国家最高权力意志者对人民的背叛，亦是人对人的背叛。



洪子健，“道歉及其他忏悔”展览现场，2024. 图为系列作品“石中剑”，2023–2024. 摄影：Michael Yu.



Sculptures portray betrayal at James T. Hong's exhibition at Empty Gallery. Picture: Edmond So

Sorry states

James T. Hong's video installation of 161 political apologies shows the performative nature of nations addressing their humanitarian crimes.

BY **MABEL LUI**

On December 7, 1970, German chancellor Willy Brandt famously fell to his knees after laying a wreath of white flowers at the foot of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, in Warsaw, Poland. This gesture of penance, on behalf of Germany for crimes committed by the Nazis, was one of the first political apologies that was broadcast on television for the public to see.

Today, that video clip constitutes the opening of *Apologies*, a three-channel video installation by Taiwanese-American artist and filmmaker James T. Hong. Featuring 161 televised political apologies, the work showcases politicians from around the world – including presidents, heads of state and cabinet ministers – offering apologies for their nations' various crimes against humanity.

The installation, currently on show at Empty Gallery in Tin Wan as part of Hong's solo exhibition "Apologies and Other Regrets", was first presented by the artist in 2012. Back then, the video lasted around an hour; now, it runs for a total of seven hours and seven minutes, with the apologies appearing in chronological order: from that of Willy Brandt in 1970 to Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte's 2022 apology for the Netherlands' role in slavery.

Hong came up with the idea after encountering many Chinese people who claimed that Japan never apologised for the second Sino-Japanese war. At the time, he was interviewing and conducting research on the victims of political and biological warfare for his documentaries.

"Originally, I would correct them and say that Japan actually did apologise a few times," he says. "But the Chinese I encountered never believed me, so I started compiling these apologies, starting with Japan, and then it spread to other nations."

Year after year, the artist updated *Apologies* with new recordings. Today, it provides a snapshot of modern history while accounting for some of the world's most egregious atrocities.

The clips include United States president Ronald Reagan's 1988 apology to the Japanese-Americans who were interned during World War II; Guatemalan president Alfonso Portillo's 2001 apology for the Dos Erres massacre of more than 200 villagers; Pope Francis' 2014 apology for church sexual abuse; the 2015 apology of Japanese minister of foreign affairs, Fumio Kishida, on behalf of prime minister Shinzo Abe, for the Japanese military's use of South Korean comfort women during Japan's occupation; and French President Emmanuel Macron's 2021 apology for French mistreatment and abandonment of Algerian Harki fighters.

"I'm a completist," Hong says of his decision to include every relevant apology he can find. "That's why it's over seven hours long."

For visitors, these seven hours offer much to dissect and consider. First, there is the inherent performative nature of these political apologies – often, they feature a sense of false sincerity, passive language and narrative arcs that appeal to people's emotions.

"Most of the apologies, to me, are bulls***," Hong says. "This is just the truth. Not all, but most, deal with unpardonable crimes against humanity. I doubt there are politicians who just feel bad about something and want to apologise for it [...] The point of an apology [is] to gain political capital."

If visitors watch *Apologies* from start to finish they will see that Western and liberal nations tend to apologise more, given the need for their politicians to sustain widespread public support and thus maintain influence, but other nations have become increasingly willing to apologise as well, Hong explains. Over time, the apologies have got longer and more polished; the subject matter addressed has also evolved, he says.

"There is a liberal progression of topics that can be addressed and can be apologised for," he says. "When Germany was first apologising for the Holocaust, just a few decades after World War II, one would never think of apologising to African-Americans, to Native Americans, or to the LGBTQIA+ [community]."

What is also interesting is not just the countries that choose to apologise but the ones that do not. Certain Eastern European countries that had Communist governments, for example, do not tend to apologise – there is only one clip in *Apologies* from Russia (it doesn't feature Vladimir Putin) – and there are certain non-democratic countries in Asia that refrain from televised apologies as well.

"I don't have any state apology from Vietnam, and there are no apologies from Thailand, which is a monarchy – which is fascinating," Hong says. "Thailand is a developing country with human rights abuses every day. You'd think they have a lot to apologise for, but Thailand never has, not that I know of."

And while the frequency of apologies has accelerated over the years, Hong is generally critical of them because they rarely lead to change. "It's not the apology that's so important. It's the accountability and justice that's more important."

Aside from *Apologies*, Hong is also showing Stabbed in the Back, a series of four sculptures that portray the state of betrayal. Inspired by the British fable of the Sword in the Stone, the sculptures each feature an artificial styrofoam rock being stabbed by a real bayonet used during the second Sino-Japanese war, which Hong sourced from collectors and Japanese soldiers.

"This relates to *Apologies*, too – how governments are supposed to protect their citizens, but in the end, oppresses them," he says. "I thought more about literally being stabbed in the back, so about a best friend gossiping on you, a spouse divorcing you, a family member betraying you, and how this idea of trust and betrayal becomes a universal experience that we all have that doesn't necessarily result in death, but still can result in psychological trauma." ■

"Apologies and Other Regrets", Empty Gallery, 18-19/F, Grand Marine Centre, 3 Yue Fung Street, Tin Wan, Tue-Sat 11am-7pm. Until August 17.





Far left: Pope Francis apologises for church sexual abuse in Hong's video installation *Apologies*. Picture: Edmond So
Left: Hong at Empty Gallery in Tin Wan. Picture: Mabel Lui

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香港热

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在策展方法上可堪比较的展位不少。例如，Empty Gallery搭建了一个半开放的黑盒子舞台空间，只展出一件作品——洪子建的双屏影像《关于鸦片战争的三种论述》（2015），在喧闹的人流中显得颇具吸引力。战争期间激烈对抗的意识形态和宣传叙事被并置于左右两屏，配以对各种英雄纪念碑的近距离凝视和沿水路行进中拍摄的中国现代城市景观，一段历史的幽灵仿佛在浮动的日常图景中显形。那些难以辨明又令人感到如鲠在喉的问题，今天是不是愈发明确了呢

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胡筱雯，Art Central, Art Basel 從本地到國際輕藝術家施展魔法藝力，*Ming Pao*, 05-27-2022

明報

副刊 D1

編輯：蔡曉彤 美術：張欣琪

2022-5-27 星期五

明報 文化力場

Art Central、Art Basel從本地到國際 年輕藝術家施展魔法藝力

近年Art Basel和Art Central一起舉辦的那個星期，媒體都會用「藝術大爆炸」去形容，今年貴賓預展當天較多媒體報道的可能是以MIRROR為題的作品，但值得留意是香港新畫廊與藝術家如何大放異彩，由大型雕塑作品到獨立藝術家作品皆有。在Art Central較能看到香港藝術家及其作品的活力，而Art Basel相對國際化，其展出的大型裝置亦值得留意。

文：胡筱雯

在文化經濟學家、Arts Economics創辦人Clare McAndrew撰寫的《巴塞爾藝術展與瑞銀集團環球藝術市場報告》提及，2021年香港高淨值藏家相對其他地區，較願意向新畫廊及新藝術家購藏，今年Art Central有41間新畫廊參與，Art Basel則有約30間新畫廊。Art Central的展會總監Corey Andrew Barr表示重視本地藝術，本地畫廊佔參展畫廊約79%，而Art Basel一如以往地國際化。

罐頭中的風景 劏房中的衣服

Art Central有一個甚有意思的新項目是「香港製造」，讓香港獨立藝術家投稿藝術創作，共收到逾650件報名作品，最後策展顧問**瞿暢**選出40名藝術家共65件作品展出。對瞿暢而言，她挑選作品時會看藝術家的作品集和藝術風格等，但如果要以內容來概括，她說：「我很喜歡一些很個人的作品……我覺得作品要帶着日常生活的溫度，是會比較打動我的。」她再精選幾件作品介紹，大部分都反映了個人情感與城市景觀，例如藝術家**劉寶欣**2件作品：*Spectacle*是在空罐頭中畫了香港城市風景，而*Crowd space, the sub-divided flat*系列則繪畫了劏房中堆積的衣服。如想支持未有畫廊代理，或者年輕的香港藝術家，此部分值得一逛。

看藝博會，各種大型藝術裝置總會吸引觀眾。Art Central便有「異體雕塑及裝置項目」，展出6名藝術家的作品，當中最矚目便是入口位置掛了藝術家**杜煥**的作品《神荼鬱壘不在場》，神荼鬱壘是中國民間信仰的門神，而杜煥的作品主要是竹紮雕塑，用上竹和紙傳統的物料，創作出的奇幻生物卻有歐洲立體主義畫作的感覺，既像東方又像西方藝術，作品無法歸類，正如香港中西突雜傳統下誕生的新文化，杜煥的策展人Laure Raibaut欣賞作品有解構主義意味，突破觀眾想像。

這年「異體雕塑及裝置項目」主題是「魔法念動」，其他作品亦有強烈的幻想成分，令觀眾初看時一頭霧水，仔細看卻像在作品中遊戲般甚有趣味，例如藝術家**李思汝**的*The Magical Hoop*，以洗衣店爲主題，但挖一個洞讓觀眾穿梭至歐陸風的房間，瞿暢認爲這寓意了從無力的等待找到行動的希望的過程。



Spectacle

今年Art Central設有「香港製造」項目，策展顧問瞿暢挑選有日常生活溫度的作品展出，特別提及藝術家劉寶欣在空罐頭中畫香港城市風景的作品*Spectacle*。（胡筱雯攝）

Art Basel今年沒有請策展人負責策展大型藝術裝置，相對之下記者好奇瞿暢角色是什麼。瞿暢表示從策展角度，她重視作品是否回應現實，「當整個世界都依賴理性，好難想像新的世界與新的現實，新的與人關係和思考邏輯等，那magical thinking可以幫助你打開新的思考」。所謂魔法就如文學中的「奇思」，而在瞿暢介紹下，亦會覺得Art Central的裝置作品相對Art Basel的來得連貫，魔法主題同時亦提升了Art Central相對貼地而有活力的形象。

「志忑」樂章 聽心跳聲

另一個要看大型裝置的原因，是這些可能高超過10米的裝置難以在畫廊或藝術空間展示，只能在藝博會或博物館才看得到，例如Art Basel中藝術家**冰逸**的《黑洞波相，地質波相，水生波相》及藝術家**陳麗雲**的作品*Dreconstructing*皆由高空懸掛，下垂至地，視覺上甚爲震撼。而視覺之外，以聽覺效果爲主的裝置作品，有媒體藝術家**梁基爵**2015年創作的《志忑》，作品由40個播放器組成，他錄下自己的心跳聲播放，心跳聲是低頻的，播放帶來的震動能驅動動力裝置，使裝置像樂器般發出聲音。梁基爵認爲「音樂不止聽得見（audible），亦可以轉化成能量」，透過編排心跳聲的音量與速度，變成「志忑」的樂章。他所屬的藝廊漢雅軒另展出他的幾幅平面作品，亦是在視覺上呈現聲音與音樂。

彩燈下膠袋刺繡 金魚街印象

在Art Basel現場觀察，最多人駐足的裝置作品卻是較輕巧的「膠袋」——藝術家**許開嬌**的作品《膠袋刺繡：香港金魚街二》。許開嬌表示創作之初，她希望可以用膠袋爲物料，輾轉想到人們在金魚街買金魚用的膠袋。她想到在膠袋刺繡，於是請蘇州繡娘刺繡，最初有不少繡娘拒絕，但在溝通下她們願意走出comfort zone在膠袋刺繡，許開嬌認爲能夠做到「當代與傳統對話」，亦令記者聯想到杜煥在Art Central的作品。在展覽現場，許開嬌刻意用亞加力膠箱與彩燈展出作品，「這就是我對金魚街的印象，因爲我覺得金魚街有很多冤虹燈，水箱的燈光在地面反射，加上高樓大廈的倒影，很五光十色，很香港」，本土情懷與佈置吸引觀眾走入作品細看拍照。

個別可留意的藝術家，在Art Central中，就是與**李安姿**當代空間合作的藝術家**黃詩慧**。記者約於晚上7時到訪其攤位，發現其作品已全數售出，畫廊敢以一個攤位呈現一個藝術家的作品，已突顯了畫廊對藝術家的信任。展出作品當中，最大型畫作是《消失的管理員》（已售出），會看到似是在大自然中的廢墟景色，期泊中的粉紅椅子、滅火筒、白雨傘，岸上的手推車和垃圾膠袋等都是日常總被遺忘的物品，黃詩慧說作品以「記憶」爲主題。她的創作手法獨特，先在畫布上塗抹泥土再作畫，是受敦煌莫高窟的古代中國壁畫和東歐中世紀時期壁畫啓發，加上她用礦物顏料繪畫，塗抹很多層顏色，而顏色又與泥土結合，層層變化對她而言，「和人在記憶的過程中好似，人的記憶會慢慢減退，而遺忘是重要的，因爲你要遺忘才開始有想像」。畫中安靜的空間，是藝術家尋找面對變化極快的世界中，一個可以安頓自己的空間。

而Art Basel，有些非本地藝術家亦值得留意，例如Empty Gallery只展出一件作品，是美籍亞裔電影製作人**洪子健**的雙頻道風景電影，他將鴉片戰爭遺址的歷史片段，以及現代中南海和香港天際線影像在雙頻道對照，對香港觀眾而言，相信會有不少啓發，亦甚多人坐下觀看。另外本年Art Basel不太有互動藝術作品的蹤影，但泰國藝術家Rirkrit Tiravanija的作品《無題2022（明天才是問題）》，寫有「明天才是問題」的乒乓枱十分搶眼，畫廊neugerriemschneider的職員手持可借用的乒乓拍，但是否有人敢在眾多藝術品旁打乒乓球？此張力是對藝術與藝博會本質的詰問。



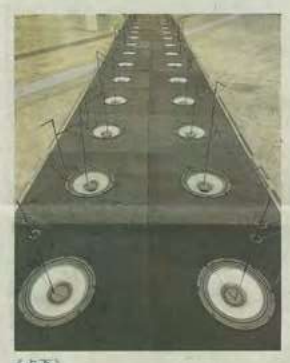
《膠袋刺繡：香港金魚街二》

Art Basel的大型裝置作品中，藝術家許開嬌的作品《膠袋刺繡：香港金魚街二》較多觀眾參觀及拍照打卡。（畫廊提供）



《神荼鬱壘不在場》

踏上Art Central門口最先會留意到藝術家杜煥的竹紮雕塑《神荼鬱壘不在場》，懸掛在當眼位置，配合門神的主題，而觀眾又會被作品的奇異形態吸引。（Art Central提供）



《志忑》

媒體藝術家梁基爵在2015年創作《志忑》，此聲音藝術裝置會播放梁基爵錄下自己的心跳聲，而低頻的心跳聲又會驅動動力裝置並使其發出新的聲音。（胡筱雯攝）

網上買賣 衛星展位增

在疫情下香港的旅遊限制未完全解除，Art Basel繼續有網上買賣的形式，衛星展位由上年的55間增至74間。在藝博會與商業畫廊之外，別忘了Art Basel還邀請文化機構任文化合作伙伴，它們亦有攤位，如沒有看中藝術品，或者藝術品太貴買不起，可以去一趟獨立及非牟利當代視覺藝術組織Ta space的攤位，其中有個可入錢的透明箱，中間一幅細小畫作寫有Donation for an unknown advertisement，是藝術家**程展緯**的作品，程展緯近日在港鐵任清潔工，關注工人權益，他希望能夠集資1萬元在港鐵買一個廣告，每人最多可投放100元，這會是另類的藝術品購買體驗。

Art Basel Hong Kong 2022

日期：即日至5月29日

地點：香港會議展覽中心1樓

網址：bit.ly/3tWk8VT

Art Central

日期：即日至5月29日

地點：香港會議展覽中心3樓

網址：bit.ly/3LBvsPP

OCULA

Art Basel Hong Kong Artist Highlights: Contemporary Focus

Ocula Magazine was on-site to highlight some of the emerging and mid-career artists to watch at Art Basel Hong Kong 2022.



James T. Hong, *Three Arguments about the Opium War* (2015) (still). Courtesy the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong.

James T. Hong at Empty Gallery

Sometimes, it's important to remember where we are—something that Empty Gallery highlights at Art Basel Hong Kong with a challenging, two-screen video by James T. Hong, Three Arguments about the Opium War (2015).

Images of Hong Kong are juxtaposed with shots of monuments, military sites, and bunkers in China, while subtitles draw from historic texts by Chinese and British individuals who witnessed the British intervention in China, which inevitably led to the secession of Hong Kong.

The work pull no punches; there are those Chinese who blame the weakness of their own ministers, and others who ask how much British banks and businesses have profited from the enslavement of the Chinese. The British views, in turn, are abhorrent: 'The whole civilised world ought to work together and teach these Chinese wretches the common principles of humanity,' reads one statement.

Hong's work forms an alliance with one piece showing in Lucie Chang Fine Art's solo presentation of writings by the late, enigmatic outsider artist, King of Kowloon, whose scrawls usually fill the image plane with a squash of characters. On a small piece of paper, the King wrote just one thing, '1841', the year the colonial period commenced in Hong Kong. Lest we forget.

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Meuko! Meuko!, 鬼島 *Ghost Island:* 都市念佛法會 Metropolitan Sutra Gathering (Music Video/Audiovisual/VR), 2018.
© 2020 Meuko! Meuko! & NAXS corp. Courtesy: the artists

This Piece of Land, These Bits of Sea
by *Robin Peckham*

This piece of land is an island. It is no accident that Taiwan's best-known contemporary artist, Tehching Hsieh, arrived in New York in 1974 to begin his artistic career as a sailor on an oil tanker. By metaphorically jumping ship, leaving home via its maritime connections to the global economy, he repeated his first performance, *Jump Piece* (1973), in which he jumped out of a window in Taiwan and broke his ankles. Landing at the center of the art world one year later, he left one island for another, traversing two oceans and no continents on his way. In that special genre of world-swallowing historical grand theories, the dialectic of blue and green across the surface of the globe assumes a special importance. Fernand Braudel inverted the commonplace geography of Western civilization by re-centering the Mediterranean sea rather than the European landmass as the cradle of globalization.[1] Carl Schmitt, writing during World War II, saw world history as a procession of battles between "sea powers" and "land powers," a metaphysical distinction that has since lost many of its politically problematic original overtones in the now widely accepted distinction between the occupying continental empire and the trading naval empire.[2] Schmitt's arguments for the territorial integrity of Nazi Germany in the face of liberal Britain have largely been consigned to history, but have recently enjoyed a surge of interest in China, where they were introduced around fifteen years ago by Liu Xiaofeng and quickly made their way into the corridors of power. Unity, integrity, and the consolidation of a domestic nation via opposition to an external enemy: useful tools for any state, these tenets have created a back door for broader geopolitical philosophies of land and sea.

1 See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean in the Ancient World* (London: Penguin, 2001).
2 See Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Meditation* (1942; repr., Washington, DC: Plutarch, 1997).

ROBIN PECKHAM is a curator and editor currently living in Taiwan, where he is codirector of Taipei Dangdai. He previously served as editor in chief of *LEAP*, the international art magazine of contemporary China; founded the Hong Kong exhibition space Saamlung; and organized exhibitions for Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Fosun Foundation, K11 Art Foundation, M Woods Museum, and City University of Hong Kong. Peckham sat on the jury for the Hugo Boss Asia Art Award in 2015, and for TAICCA's Cultural Content Technology Application Innovation Industry Flagship Project in 2020. He was on *Apollo* magazine's "Thinkers" list of "40 under 40 Asia" in 2016, and had one of his shows listed by *Artnews* as one of the twenty most important exhibitions of the 2010s. His writing and lectures focus on technology, immersion, wellness, and popular culture. Peckham is also the founder of Friends and Family, an initiative to celebrate the cultural family and support and serve families through culture.



Whale Island (still), 2020. Directed by Huang Chia-chun. © O-Turn Films Co.



Meuko! Meuko!, *Ghost Island: Innervision* (鬼島:獃覷), 2018, installation view at *Sub Zoology*, 2020 Taiwan Biennial. © 2020 Meuko! Meuko! & NAXS corp. Courtesy: the artists



Whale Island (still), 2020. Directed by Huang Chia-chun. © O-Turn Films Co.



Yunyi Liu, *Landscaping from History – The Cross I*, 2018. © Yunyi Liu. Courtesy: the artist



Ni Hao, *Thalassophilia*, 2020, *01_LOVE* installation view at the Digital Art Festival Taipei, 2020. Courtesy: the artist; T293, Rome; Gallery Vacancy, Shanghai

Traditionally, China has considered itself a land empire (indeed, both the Yuan and Qing dynasties arrived via the overland routes of the Central Asian steppe). There is the anecdote of Empress Dowager Cixi rebuilding the Summer Palace after the Second Opium War (1856–60) in which she requisitioned funds intended for the modernization of the imperial navy to fix a decorative marble boat. This case, of course, is largely overblown. China's merchant marine played an active role throughout Southeast Asia, but the perception often exerts more historical force than the reality. Taiwan, like many of the islands on the edges of the Chinese empire, was drawn into the global fold of maritime trade first by the Portuguese and the Dutch, then later by Koxinga, whose loyalist pirate kingdom in the Qing interregnum defined the territory as a place simultaneously within and beyond the imperial fold. Today, diplomatically isolated and subject to cyclical brain drain, youth in Taiwan live on both "treasure island" (one translation of the Ilha Formosa) and "ghost island" (a place with no future and no hope). This second figuration is adopted by Meuko! Meuko! and NAXS corp., the of-the-moment subcultural power couple, in their *Ghost Island: Innervision* (2018), a VR installation and live AV performance in the 2020 Taiwan Biennial, which works through the phantasmagoria of our technologically networked present to reposition the "ghost" as a future-oriented being.

It is almost a cultural truism that sailors can't swim; there is a parallel in the mythology that islanders can't sail. Director Huang Chia-chun captures this supreme irony in his documentary *Whale Island* (2020), which follows writer Liao Hung-chi and photographer Ray Chin as they challenge traditional cultural perceptions of the ocean as an essentially unsafe place. In choosing these two figures, though, Huang actually strengthens the notion that a love for the sea is fundamentally eccentric and antisocial: Liao is largely estranged from his family as he spends weeks drifting on a raft taking measurements along the Kuroshio Current, and Chin is clearly bored with his own children when he returns home from whale-watching expeditions. The ocean is for outsiders. Ultimately, *Whale Island* turns the oceanic into a political imperative through Lin Sheng-xiang's inescapable score. The refrain: Taiwan is "not an island, but a whale" that needs to start moving and swim, swim, swim.

An instinctive fear of the ocean is often chalked up to a combination of belief systems derived from mountain traditions (on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, from the Hakka to the aboriginal) and the lurking possibility of amphibious invasion. For her photographic project *Landscaping from History* (2018), Yunyi Liu visited the Kinmen Islands, a liminal territory administered by Taiwan but located just kilometers off the coast of Xiamen in mainland China. There she documented in highly formal terms a full catalogue of armaments and defenses, as the entirety of the coastline has been militarized to repel a strategic threat. In aesthetic terms this work makes visible the hidden infrastructure of security that is presumed to be everywhere; in metaphysical terms, on the other hand, it redefines the porosity of the shore, turning the sea into a medium of both transport and danger. In Liu's photographs, however, everything stands in ruins—an outmoded and forgotten system that nevertheless sits squarely in the public mind.

Back on the main island of Taiwan, the government has spent the last few years pushing for the development of a recreational yachting industry, an effort that necessitated transferring the regulation of certain ports from the Fisheries Agency to other state bodies. In several areas, private yachts and the fishing fleets now commingle. One measure of the success of this campaign, and the broader movement toward an acceptance of the ocean: Ni Hao's installation *Thalassophilia* (2020), commissioned by the Digital Art Festival Taipei in 2020, which collages together underwater profile pictures shot by female Tinder users



Charwei Tsai, *Lanyu - Three Stories* (stills), 2012. In collaboration with Tsering Tashi Gyathang. Courtesy: the artist and mor charpentier, Paris



James T. Hong and Taiwan Public Television, *Terra Nullius or: How to Be a Nationalist* (still), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong



Sow-Yee Au, *Prelude: Song of Departure and 1.1 Tiger Cave*, part of *The Extreme Journey of Perwira and the Calm Sea: In 3 Acts*, 2019–20, *Sub Zoology*, 2020 Taiwan Biennial installation view at the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Arts, West District, Taichung, Taiwan. Courtesy: the artist

interested in free diving, snorkeling, and other aquatic hobbies. Ni sees in this trend an embrace of the ocean in the name of globalization and looking outward, albeit looking outward in a very immediate sense—one can't get far by fin, after all.

In attempting to read and understand works like these that engage the land-sea dialectic over and through Taiwan, I have come across two broad categories. One is discursive where the other is material; one is cultural where the other is biological. One looks south and east, following policy and retracing the routes of ancient seafarers, while the other looks down, testing out the hardness of rock and the wetness of water.

This first group maps the sea through the land, bringing a terrestrial logic to maritime space. Charwei Tsai's *Lanyu - Three Stories* (2012) is an ensemble of three video vignettes shot on Orchid Island, a small volcanic island off Taiwan's southeast coast. Tsai finds in the island's indigenous Tao people a spiritual dimension. Two of her stories are actually portraits, capturing subjects performing rituals in which they commune with the seas or the spirits within them: an elderly man requests the soul of his drowned grandfather, while a group of women supplicate for the safe passage of their husbands.

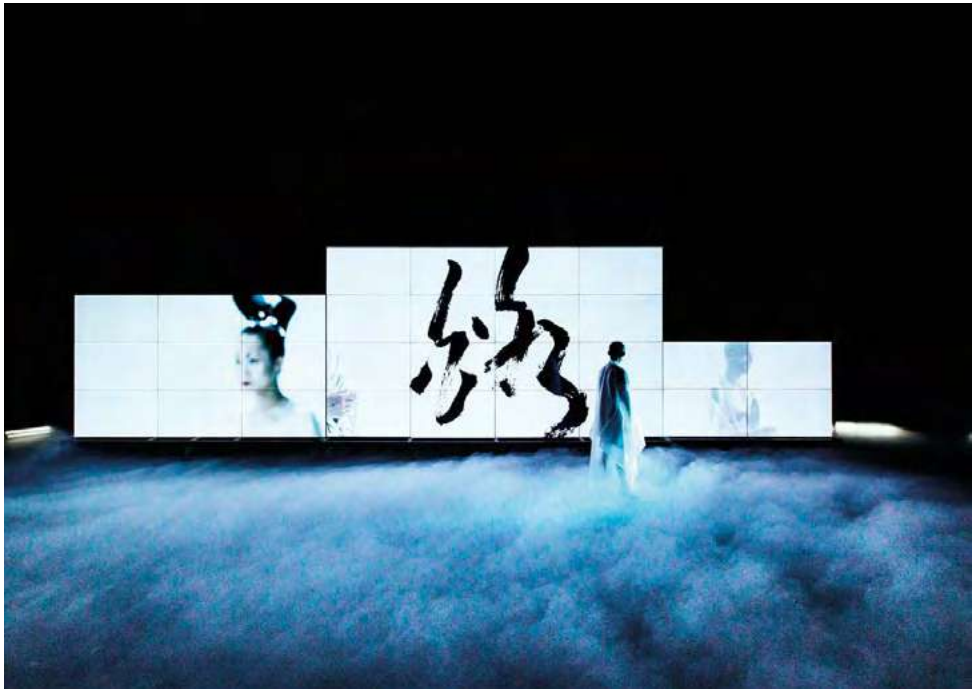
Similarly focused on small islands, Hsu Chia-Wei's *Marshal Tie Jia* (2012–13) returns to the Taiwan Strait, where the Matsu Islands are situated adjacent to Fujian in mainland China. Hsu was fascinated by the discovery of an islet under the legal ownership of Marshal Tie Jia, the Frog God, and documented the process of approaching the deity for permission to visit the island; he later traveled to Jiangxi province, where the Frog God was born before moving to Matsu. Off the west and east coasts, these islands play a strong role as mediums for divine communication, defining inside and out as sites for the beginning and ending of all journeys.

Islands can be tricky things when it comes to identity. James T. Hong's film *Terra Nullius or: How to Be a Nationalist* (2015) centers on the controversial Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, claimed simultaneously by Taiwan, China, and Japan. While Hsu Chia-Wei was able to successfully open a channel of communication with the Frog God and negotiate territorial questions with the netherworld, Hong had no such luck communicating across this impossible nexus of identitarian bureaucracy. In attempting to access the islands from all three political portals, he ultimately documents the civic groups that advocate on their respective states' behalf—an awkward dynamic that seems worlds away from the people-government conflicts we observe on other islands.

Au Sow-Yee's ongoing series *The Extreme Journey of Perwira and the Calm Sea: In 3 Acts* (2019–20) pushes these transnational networks of migration, identity, and (it must be said) duplicity into further configurations centered on the character of Tani Yutaka, a Japanese intelligence agent who was active in Malaysia in the 1940s as a state actor and a bandit. Embracing the geographical relativism of this region, Au is fascinated by how the colonial Japanese understanding of Taiwan as the "northernmost point of the south" dovetails with the Taiwanese government's current New Southbound Policy, which recalibrates international cooperation and exchanges toward eighteen countries across South and Southeast Asia as well as Oceania and the Pacific.

Other artists map the land through the sea, using the materiality of water to destabilize the cultural order of land. This has been a dominant trend in Taiwan's landmark exhibitions over the past year. For the 2020 Taipei Biennial, titled *You and I Don't Live on the Same Planet*, curators Martin Guinard and Bruno Latour invited the artists Chang Yung-Ta and Su Yu-Hsin to participate in a series of residencies spanning the Taroko Gorge in Taiwan and





Su Hui-Yu, *The White Waters*, 2019–20, *Re:Play* installation views at C-Lab, Taipei, 2020. Courtesy: C-Lab, Taipei. Photo: Bat Planet





Hsu Chia-Wei, *Marshal Tie Jia – Jingxi Village* (stills), 2013. Courtesy: Liang Gallery, Taipei



Chang Yung-Ta, *scape.unseen_model-T*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum





(Top) Su Yu-Hsin, *Frame of Reference I, II*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum; (Bottom) Yang Shun-Fa, *Taiwan To Go – No 02*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist



Wu Chi-Yu, *The LED Future* (stills), 2020. © Wu Chi-Yu. Courtesy: the artist



Luo Jr-shin, *Like a filter, matters passed through you and became a part of you*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist

Lu Yu-Jui, *Fishing Area: Overfishing*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist



Lin Chuan-Chu, *Mount Nanputuo II*, 2018. © Lin Chuan-Chu. Courtesy: the artist and Mind Set Art Center, Taipei

a research lab in Berlin, both resulting in digital Land art projects that represent and transubstantiate the materiality of the earth in novel forms. Chang's resulting work, the *scape.unseen* series (2020), consists of tall, transparent columns in which water slowly erodes soil and rock, mimicking the geological processes of Taroko and paying homage to Carl Cheng's iconic *Erosion Machines* of the 1960s. Su's work, *Frame of Reference* (2020), for its part, hones in on the visual politics of representing this kind of scientific research, creating an immersive environment in which the viewer becomes overwhelmed by the presentation of information—scientific data as cable news.

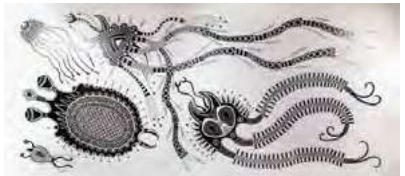
Having premiered at C-Lab this past fall and produced in collaboration with Performa New York, Su Hui-Yu's *The White Waters* (2020) is a retelling of a retelling: his direct inspiration was a 1980s play of the same title from Critical Point Theatre Phenomenon, an experimental theater group involved with AIDS activism, which rewrote the ancient legend of the monk Fahai and the White Snake, two spirits battling over the right to immortality. In Su's version, these characters face off on a series of flat-screen monitors on wheeled dollies while a dancer spins them around at a dizzying speed, forcing the audience to step quickly over spooling wires and continuously move around the exhibition space in order to get a view of the action between constantly reconfigured video walls. Water becomes a primordial force, this time drawn straight out of accretions of history and tradition. Wu Chi-Yu portrays something similarly elemental in *The LED Future* (2020), imagining a time without natural light. Intriguingly, Wu begins this four-channel essay film, ostensibly all about the sun, with a long look at maritime connections and the fiber-optic cables that run light beneath the sea. The question, always, is what these elements, these materials, these substrates, want with us and how we can engage with them after we have relinquished the fantasy of control.

This material dimension continued in the 2020 Taiwan Biennial, a separate large-scale exhibition curated by artist Yao Jui-Chung. There, Luo Jr-Shin installed the environmental work *Like a filter, matters passed through you and became a part of you* (2020), an expanded version of an ongoing project that brings together urinals, sticky floors, and snails in a meditation on the chemical changes that occur through and around us on a daily basis. Luo is particularly fascinated by the process of fermenting beer before it is then swallowed, digested, and exuded again. Pointing to the high percentage of bacteria within other organisms, from trees to the human body, he wonders if the things that colonize us might also control us. Zooming out, Yang Shun-Fa's masterful project *Taiwan To Go* (2018–19) captures wild dogs on the tidal flats of the west coast, variously wading, swimming, and running across and between sandbars, mapping an ever-shifting topography through the direction and redirection of their own bodies. The lines they draw define the physical boundaries of a place where regulatory borders break down—somehow, it is nonhuman life that brings meaning, context, and grammar to the social. Lu Yu-Jui pushes this borderless network further afield with *Fishing Area* (2015), which tracks a Taiwanese fishing fleet harvesting squid half a world away, off the Falkland Islands. Where the viewer expects a conservation narrative, we are struck instead by the sheer density of life, as shot after shot frames so many millions of squid bodies that the mind can hardly keep track. Lu is absorbed into the metaphor of the squid fishing boats as a hungry beast absorbing the marine creatures day and night; the fishermen seem to work on a time zone of their own making, without recourse to rest until their holds are full.

Shifting borders between the social and the geological are particularly evident in the recent work of Lin Chuan-Chu, whose plein air landscapes of shores and hills seem at first to fit into the familiar genre of the literati retreat to

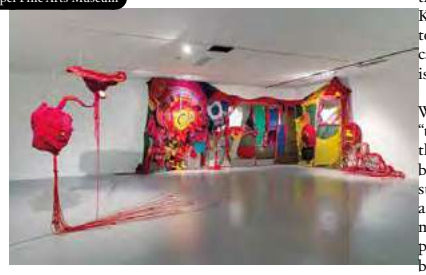


Saverio Tonoli working on the *Self-Absorbed on the Rocks*, Taipei, 2020. Courtesy: Wu Chi-Tsung studio



Cemelesai Takivalet, *Virus Series*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum

(From left to right) Aruwai Kaumakan, *The Axis of Life*, 2018; *Vines in the Mountains*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Taipei Fine Arts Museum



nature modulated in a contemporary language—the artist studied ink painting, after all, and spent time depicting the forms of scholars' rocks. Looking deeper into his practice, however, reveals an obvious ecological bent. Lin's major intervention came in 2007, when the JUT Foundation invited him to produce a work on the bare site that would soon become a museum. In the resulting *Rice for Thoughts* (2007), he planted the entire city block with a functioning rice paddy, echoing Agnes Denes's *Wheatfield* (1982) but bringing his life in the art world together with his childhood in a farming village. Wu Chi-Tsung, whose own work with cyanotype seems to contain both towering mountain peaks and cresting waves all at once, further brought the outdoors in when he invited the artist Saverio Tonoli to produce work in Taiwan with their shared medium of *xuan* paper. To make *Self-Absorbed on the Rocks* (2020), Tonoli impressed a long roll of paper directly onto wet rocks in the east coast tidal zone, then took the material back to the studio and used ink wash to complete the composition. Here nature as signifier is completely subsumed into nature as material, an intentional misreading of the sea as an open space that then allows it to be rewritten as a cultural territory.

In the *longue durée* of geological time, Taiwan refers to a dramatic spike that occurred when the Philippine Plate collided with the Eurasian Plate. Increasingly, the language that describes Taiwan is drawn from this definition: the phrase "this piece of land" seems, anecdotally, to be slowly replacing the more standard references to political jurisdictions, specific cultural backgrounds, and shared immediate histories. It is a phrase that recognizes a complex reality, including the arrival of successive waves of colonizing and occupying powers, settler societies, and the displacement of Indigenous peoples. In extending this claim to geo-ontology, contemporary Taiwan subsumes Aboriginal historical time in a way that could be seen as either inclusiveness or appropriation, and no doubt contains elements of both. The 2020 Taipei Biennial integrates the work of Cemelesai Takivalet and Aruwai Kaumakan, both of the Paiwan tribe. Takivalet contributes *Virus Series* (2020), a site-specific mural depicting a virus in a quasi-traditional motif; while the subject is somewhat on the nose in the age of COVID-19, this virus actually refers to a mysterious illness the youths of his tribe contracted when visiting an ancestral site several years ago. In *Vines in the Mountains* (2020), Kaumakan adapts a traditional circular weaving technique to bring her community back together after a forced relocation, physically weaving the social fabric anew. Culture is materiality, and biology is culture.

When we turn from "this island on the edges of empire" to "this piece of land," an accidental displacement occurs within the logic of land and sea. Returning to Schmitt, there can be no appeal to territorial contiguity where we stand now; strictly speaking, there is no land. Instead, Taiwan writes a new dialectic between mountains and sea, between the materialities of earth and water, with the speaking subject pinned along a narrow strip called civilization wedged in between the two. If there is a universalism to be discovered here, it is in the ecological nature of the consciousness that is created in this matrix of desires. Mountains and seas do not provide source matter for stories but rather become the very substrate of what can be said. In our moment we can no longer speak of empire as an organizing principle. Even the most aggressively expansionist polities cannot compete with the network effects of social media, financial instruments, and semiconductor supply chains, all of which are alternately pressed into the service of the state only to find themselves suddenly breaking loose. Without empire, these fragments of geology, these pieces of land, offer something like a grounding reality so seductive that no dating app profile is left bereft of mountain, sea, sky: a shared dream of a better world.

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http://moussemagazine.it/this-piece-of-land-these-bits-of-sea-robin-peckham-2021/



Brady Ng, *Critical Conditions: The Book of The Thing: Remarks on politics, art, morality, and Taiwan*, James T. Hong, Art Asia Pacific Issue 117, P. 97

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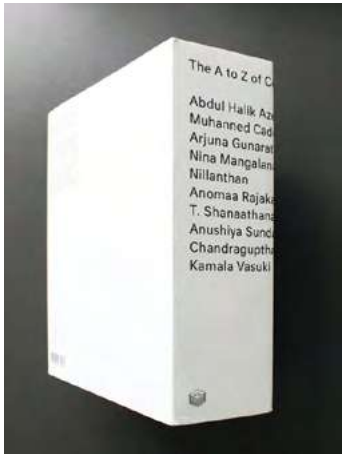
Critical Conditions

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ESTHER CHAN

THE A TO Z OF CONFLICT
By Abdul Halik Azeez, Muhanned Cader, Arjuna Gunarathne, Nina Mangalanayagam, Nillanthan, Anomaa Rajakaruna, T. Shanaathanan, Anushiya Sundaralingam, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, and Kamala Vasuki
Commissioned and published by Raking Leaves, Colombo, 2019



Discoveries and paradigmatic shifts call forth new terminology for describing what was previously never, or differently, conceived—changes assiduously preserved in lexica, from ancient Sumerian-Akkadian cuneiform tablets to today's Dictionary.com.

The role of language in indexing social, political, and conceptual realities is the basis of Sri Lankan nonprofit Raking Leaves' *The A to Z of Conflict*, a compendium of words pertaining to violent strife for every letter of the Sinhala, Tamil, and English alphabets. Over the course of five years, the publisher invited ten Sri Lankan artists to produce illustrated entries inspired by the format of children's alphabet books. Each script takes up a section of the book, which comes in six versions, spanning all chapter permutations, to avoid any inference of linguistic hierarchy. This remains a sensitive issue in Sri Lanka, where the brutal civil war (1983–2009) between minority Tamil insurgents and the Sinhalese-Buddhist ruling majority casts a long shadow.

What *A to Z* brings to the fore is how ordinary terms become inflected with violence in conflict situations. The Sinhala word *arinna* (open), for instance, is defined as an order given by military personnel during routine searches, as in "open the bag/trunk/door." T. Shanaathanan captures the word's connotation of invasiveness in a drawing of a featureless figure tearing open its rib cage, with entrails pouring out. The artist's entry for *pottu*, the Tamil term for the red dot applied between the brows of Hindu and Tamil women, features an outline of a head in profile with a bullet entering the forehead, portraying how certain cultural markers can become a death sentence in times of ethnic strife.

Anomaa Rajakaruna's haunting black-and-white photographs of Sri Lanka's scarred post-civil-war landscape captivate with grave poeticism alongside seemingly banal terms. A derelict building with crumbling doorways accompanies the entry for *uluvahu* (Sinhala: doorframes), which clarifies that "missing doorframes were a noticeable feature of abandoned houses" during the war. By contrast, Nina Mangalanayagam's photographs of nature are decoupled from the Sri Lankan context and invite non-anthropocentric readings, evidenced by the image of a cleared forest ironically representing "civilization."

Additional explanatory notes would have been helpful for images bearing text, such as Kamala Vasuki's cartoon of a woman conversing with the Buddha for the "Gautama" entry, which I sadly did not understand. Sidestepping the language barrier, Anushiya Sundaralingam's abstractions stood out for their allusive power among the profuse literal representations. "Johnny Batta," a colloquial term in Sri Lanka for a landmine, is illustrated with a spray of light-toned blotches on an inky background—a beautiful print made disturbing by its context.

A to Z asserts that context is everything, and that the ugliness of a context seeps into the vernacular, encoded for as long as the lexical records we keep.

OPHELIA LAI

RONGRONG'S DIARY: BEIJING EAST VILLAGE
Photographs by RongRong
Texts by RongRong, Silvia Fok, and Artur Walther
Published by Steidl, Göttingen, 2019



In the 1990s and early 2000s, young artists, musicians, and writers moved from all over China to Beijing, then a hotbed for underground culture. One of these "Beijing drifters," RongRong relocated to the capital in 1993 from his hometown in Fujian province. At the time, he was a student about to embark on the study of photography. Unable to afford a proper apartment in town, he and a group of artists resided on the capital's eastern fringes, in an impoverished suburban area, where they shared cigarettes, cheap beer, and inspirations.

For almost a decade, members of the village's artist community—including performance pioneers Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, Cang Xin, and Zhu Ming—were the subjects on which RongRong trained his lens. His photos from this period form one of his best-known series. Assembled roughly chronologically in the monograph *RongRong's Diary* alongside his personal journal entries, letters to his sister Lu Yali between 1993 and 1998, and his reflection penned in 2002, after the village was demolished, the images provide an account of the development of performance and conceptual art in China at the end of the 20th century.

Printed on the book's cover is a photo of Zhang's performance *12 Square Meters* (1994), which took place at the village's public toilet. Coating himself with honey and fish sauce, Zhang quickly became covered in flies—an iconic moment captured by RongRong that alludes to the difficult living conditions and the perseverance of the artists in the East Village. RongRong struggled himself, writing in his diary: "Photography, my heart—why can't I abandon it? . . . What are you doing, RongRong? Why?"

Despite questioning himself about his decision to pursue the arts, RongRong was unrelenting with his camera, just as his neighbors forged on with some of China's earliest, most significant conceptual performances, including Zhang's *65 Kilograms* (1994), where the artist chained himself to the ceiling and drew 250 milliliters of blood from his body. In another shot, Ma Liuming is seen adopting his female persona, cooking naked, with makeup on his face, in *Fen-Ma Liuming's Lunch* (1994)—an act that led to his arrest. There are also blurry snapshots taken at the birthday party of critic Karen Smith, portraits of Stars Group artists Huang Rui and Ai Weiwei, and many more who frequented the hub.

RongRong's Diary preserves the courage of the avant-garde in the late 1990s, which thrived in a liminal realm between ruins and accelerated economic development, and the wayward spirit that it continues to inspire.

PAMELA WONG

THE BOOK OF THE THING: REMARKS ON POLITICS, ART, MORALITY, AND TAIWAN
By James T. Hong
Published by Theory of the Partisan and Empty Gallery, Hong Kong, 2019



John Carpenter's 1982 film *The Thing* uses science fiction and horror to unpack many themes relevant to America during that decade, from the AIDS epidemic and an insurgent counterculture, to more abstract ideas about the paranoias that are entrenched in our minds, at the time heightened by the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

Taiwanese-American filmmaker and artist James T. Hong references Carpenter's film and loads its disquiet into a pocket-size monograph. *The Book of the Thing: Remarks on Politics, Art, Morality, and Taiwan* was published to accompany "The Thing," an exhibition at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery in which the artist explored how objects and concepts are interpreted and exist in our consciousness, tying into the present age of rampant misinformation and disinformation.

With gold-rimmed pages bound between embossed dark-blue covers, the book comprises nine sections—"Thingness," "Status Artis," "Res Moralia," "Omnium-gatherum," and more—in which Hong grates readers with his observations, "some possibly of wisdom, some probably of total shit," he admits. He begins by dunking on democracy, riffing off the idea that democracy is at the root of the world's misery, put forth by controversial film director Hans-Jürgen Syberberg.

Fair enough. Recent democratic elections have placed nativists, authoritarians, nationalists, and fearmongers in top political office. Even the internet, which was once talked up as a democratic realm, has failed to live up to the hype; now, digital natives must constantly slog neck-deep through a swamp of mendacity.

With the ken and instincts of a news junkie, Hong proceeds to question other foundational concepts that formulate our political, economic, cultural, and egoist systems. Joining a constellation of thinkers spanning millennia and civilizations, the artist construes the "thing" and "thingness," which has been imbued with shifting meanings according to varied interests and purposes. Follow Hong's train of thought and we arrive at Carpenter's Thing, an alien that, perhaps merely to survive, consumes living organic matter to create new bodies for itself, never taking the same appearance twice.

Hong applies that line of thinking to artists, curators, critics, collectors, and gallerists: could there be a Thing that lurks in the art world's collective cognition? Are art professionals merely going through the motions to maintain someone or something else's interests? Hong throws shade at art world celebrity, the unhindered flow of bent money, the biennial glut, and the unbridled self-aggrandizement found in the scene.

The Book of the Thing is salty. Anyone who picks it up will likely be guilty of a moral fault that Hong points his finger at. But the artist isn't hostile in his words; he's compelling. The text is Hong's attempt to rectify inconsistencies in the systems we drift in. We're left with dour and ambiguous direction, just like the ending of Carpenter's greatest film.

BRADY NG

JAMES T. HONG

ARTFORUM

September 20, 2016 • James T. Hong talks about his work in the Taipei Biennial



James T. Hong, *Nietzsche Reincarnated as a Chinese Woman and Their Shared Lives*, 2016, four-channel video projection, color, sound, 45 minutes.

James T. Hong is a filmmaker and artist based in Taiwan. His performance and installation Nietzsche Reincarnated as a Chinese Woman and Their Shared Lives, 2016, is featured in the tenth edition of the Taipei Biennial, "Gestures and Archives of the Present, Genealogies of the Future," which is curated by Corrine Diserens and is on view at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum from September 10, 2016, through February 5, 2017. Hong's performances will occur on November 19 at 7 PM and November 20 at 3 PM.

I FIRST HEARD OF NIETZSCHE as a critic of Christianity ("God is dead and we have killed him") while I was in high school, but I didn't study him until college. Like many other disaffected young people, I was drawn to Nietzsche's writings as a sort of antidote to mainstream malaise and as a weapon against the status quo.

I was actually led to Nietzsche via Schopenhauer, as I was studying Western philosophy and interested in the metaphysics of the will and theories of truth at the time. By graduate school I had grown beyond Nietzsche, or so I thought, but I always returned to his writings for inspiration or simply out of boredom.

Two things inspire my current project: I had been researching the concept of morality in East Asia and then I got the chance to revisit Nietzsche's grave and birthplace in Germany. Nietzsche's critique of morality and my own research took some similar roads, though I am now more influenced by Buddhist and Confucianist thought than by any antiquated critique of Christianity. I remembered that Nietzsche claimed to be the "Buddha of Europe" in a crazed letter, and then the project just crystallized. My experiment is not a strict Buddhist interpretation of Nietzsche's thought (to me this doesn't work), but rather a quasi-Nietzschean interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism vis-à-vis morality—if that makes any sense.

The performances entail a live monologue that takes place inside a sizable room bounded by four large video screens—a chamber of thoughts and images. Since the screens are arranged in a square, only two adjacent screens are completely visible to the viewer from any particular perspective. Screens that face each other cannot be viewed simultaneously; one must turn one's head. Thus different perspectives will offer different combinations, different interpretations. Audience members are invited to sit on benches in the center of this room, though they are free to move around (or leave), if they so choose. I can't say much more about the installation, as some details are still in flux. My inspirations include live theater, benshi (the Japanese art of narrating silent movies, which was also performed in Taiwan during Japanese occupation), karaoke, and propaganda rituals in schools that indoctrinate students with state-sponsored ideologies.

As an experiment, I see this project as an unusual biography, not of Nietzsche's life, but rather of his afterlife. Relative to the metaphysical chronology of my project, "soul number zero" refers to Nietzsche himself, as the work begins at his death in 1900 and proceeds through a number of his post-1900 incarnations, souls, and memories—as a single-celled organism, an invertebrate, a bug, definitely a worm, and eventually a Chinese woman—metempsychosis on four video screens. The woman as narrator will mention the idea of the eternal recurrence, while images will illustrate it in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Incidentally, some metaphysical aspects of Buddhism echo Nietzsche's thought of the eternal recurrence.

I am also interested in the translation of Nietzsche's work into Chinese, which is definitely more interpretatively violent than translating his original German into English. How will the meanings change in Chinese? Only those well acquainted with his writings will appreciate this aspect of the work. It is an object example of the translation of Western philosophical ideas not only into the Chinese language but also into a Chinese ideology.

Since Nietzsche is involved, this experiment definitely involves critique, sometimes with a hammer. And why is this project necessary? Because we living in East Asia, we Han Chinese in particular, are the largest herd in the world. In Nietzschespeak, morality today in East Asia is herd animal morality—sick, deceitful, and obedient at the same time.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler

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https://www.artforum.com/interviews/james-t-hong-talks-about-his-work-in-the-taipei-biennial-63513

「上則星辰，內則德律」——訪談藝術家洪子健、陳瀅如

2016/02/20, 藝文



鄭：在「上則星辰、內則德律」這檔雙人展中，一開始討論的方向是關於「藥物」，這個主題能談的點非常多。你們共同創作，但切入點不太相同，James談鴉片戰爭、現代化過程與現代性；瀅如談意識轉換。你們的共通點是什麼？各別的發想又是什麼？

陳：我們共通之處在於，當James討論在一個歷史時刻中，「現代性」被打開，所帶來的徵兆或是後續的影響。而我談的是當現代性走到一定地步時，我們會想要回溯前現代，這是我們的連結點。這個展覽從發想到成果其實差蠻多的。我認為，創作最終還是得回歸討論跟自己相關的，我一開始想的是當時自己在服用的藥品，像菸酒（但都是過去式了）。

但我最終認知到關鍵在於「意識轉換」——無論是透過菸、酒、抗憂鬱藥物、大麻等方式，都是源於對現狀不滿。像以前我寫作和剪接時，一天得抽兩包菸，因為我要把分散的思緒集中；喝酒則是相反。由此我找出了一個脈絡，這些東西的用途是把你當下的情緒或意識轉換。

歸納之後，我開始思考人類歷史中，發生意識轉換的動機是什麼？接著，我從DMT開始，而後是麥斯卡林。這兩者在意識轉換的過程之於人類歷史是比較重要的，它的文化背景會牽扯到印第安文化、薩滿等等。不論是娛樂用藥，還是以巫術的途徑去進行意識轉換，最終目的都是離開目前的狀態，而後去跟「某個東西」結合。



所謂「某個東西」是什麼？我藉由直覺、經驗和閱讀所研究的結果就是跟有意識的「宇宙」結合。薩滿可以用音樂輕易地轉換，而大部份的人都需要靠藥物進行意識轉換。展覽中的DMT跟麥斯卡林，只是眾多藥物、方式的兩個例子而已。以研究資料來看，DMT是其中最強烈的，更何況我們自身體內的松果體就能生產DMT，松果體就是所謂的第三眼，這便是我整個展覽的作品結構。

James：當我們一開始籌備這個計劃時，認知到要做一個不同以往並且更有意思的展覽。雖然藥物這個主題會跟嬉皮有些關聯，但這些人的目的跟薩滿不同。我調查第一次鴉片戰爭跟現代性的關係，「鴉片戰爭」最重要的不是鴉片，鴉片就像其中「麥高芬」（MacGuffin，電影用語，語出希區考克，指在電影中可以推展劇情的物件、人物或目標，但它本身是什麼反而不重要）。

也就是說，我並不是在討論鴉片本身，它只是這個讓敘事能夠進行的東西，若其中沒有這種敘事，會讓我感到無聊。所以我們一開始就知道我們的故事得從前現代開始，由現代化之前到現代性，這就關乎了鴉片戰爭。展場中展示的是一種鏡像。在我的作品中，你會看到清朝中國人描繪英國人的繪畫，以今觀之，他們都是非常原始並且愚蠢的，但在瀅如的作品裡，談的卻是薩滿要回歸到那種狀態。

當我們有了這個故事後，便可以開始做作品；並非開始做作品時才加入故事。先有框架，再填入內容，這也是來自於康德的哲學。康德認為世界先有一種結構才有意義，人們才得以理解世界，這是一種隱喻。因為先有了康德和這種敘事，我們開始這個創作計劃。

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羅：在你的論述中，出現好幾次康德與海德格，他們對你的影響為何？

James：我以前主修德國哲學，花很多時間閱讀海德格，但若要研究當代西方哲學，每一位哲學系的學生都應該從康德開始，如果你不懂康德，你就不算懂當代西方哲學。在西方歷史中最重要的兩位哲學家，一是海德格、二是維根斯坦。海德格的議題關注於「人的存在」、維根斯坦談「語言」，雖然我也喜歡維根斯坦，但我認為他比較無聊。

海德格則不只是討論「我們在想什麼？」而且談「為什麼我們會有這種想法？」所以當你要思考為何西方世界的思想，像是資本主義、帝國主義等，都需要透過閱讀康德，因為他的思想貫穿了海德格和維根斯坦。

另外，瀅如的部分有提到笛卡兒所說的松果體，但如果你只有讀笛卡兒，你也不會懂西方哲學，應該要看康德。 譬如說道德、美學、政治、聯合國（Unite Nations）等概念都是由此而來，當今的美國政府仍是維持這種康德式的思考。我們展覽主題引用了康德說的「上則星辰，內則德律」，我認爲這總結了康德所有的思想。當我看到一個展覽題目不夠好時，我便會想這個展覽可能也不太好，所以當我們決定用康德這句引文作為主題時，我們自己都很滿意。

鄭：這一句話力量很大，裡面其實有很強的辯證性－是你們展覽的核心。你們個別的作品裡面也存在著辯證，包括瀅如所談：現代與巫術，或者是說前現代，而James作品裡談的，中國在鴉片戰爭這個歷史時刻面臨了現代的大軍陣臨，被迫走進現代。請談一下，為什麼最後選擇以鴉片戰爭為主題？

James：中國現代歷史中最重要的就是鴉片戰爭，而我選擇鴉片戰爭這個議題，除了是因為看到中國大陸「鴉片戰爭博物館」作得很差勁之外，我沒有看過其他藝術家關注此事件。如果我們是藝術家，為何要做容易的事？應該做其中最為複雜的部分，這樣才能夠砥礪我們自身，即便這件作品或計劃有可能會失敗。

我總認為自己沒有任何理由去執行一個絕不可能失敗的計劃。目前我們正值壯年，還可以去這些地方拍攝、調查，但二十年後的我可能無法做這樣的事了，所以現在我會碰觸一些其他人不選的議題。另外，我也想補充康德的部分。我們在想藥物的議題時，有兩個因素：一是意識；二是身體。

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在「上則星辰，內則德律」中，「上則星辰」並不僅指太空，而是指涉我們的身體；「內則德律」則是指我們的意識。而毒品跟藥物，會影響我們的身體和意識，但我們目前還不清楚這之間的關係。我們有「內則德律」的原因是因為我們擁有自由，致使我們能夠自主思考的內在世界，在此同時亦有外在世界的存在，但總結來說內在世界相較外在世界來說更為重要，這些是康德的哲學。而其中，藥物則是能夠同時影響身體與意識這兩個世界的。

羅：我覺得挑鴉片戰爭作為主題的有趣之處在於：它對中國人來說是一種歷史上的恥辱，但你採取了另一種角度－鴉片戰爭的確也是讓中國邁向現代的一個關鍵點。可是如果單從藥物的角度看這個議題的話，正因為它是「國恥」，以致現在在華人談到藥物這個議題時，仍無法超脫道德的框架。而在現在歐洲、美國等則會以醫學、科學的角度談論它是否應該被禁，或是應不應該被如此嚴禁等等，就算法律上是禁止的，可是在科學上的討論是可以發生的。

但這件事在華人社會是不行的，即使是理性討論我認為都有問題。所以我的重點是說，藥物這個議題在華人社會中，本身就成為一個道德律法的底線，你不能去談論它的合法性。譬如說談大麻合法化，連美國都已經在談合法化了，可是目前的台灣，這件事連開啟討論的可能性都沒有。

James：「道德」在亞洲跟在西方是不一樣的，康德的哲學是，道德是存在於每個人的內在意識；但亞洲不同，道德是從大眾集體、羞恥而生的，所以我們所引用的康德哲學，對於部分的台灣來說是無效的。但台灣是已開發國家，受到美國、日本很深的影響，我覺得部份的台灣人有認知到所謂的「德律」。

鄭：其實這個展覽的主題在台灣的確是一個挑戰公共領域的禁忌話題，當談論到某一個點，大家就不會繼續深入了。可是在另一方面台灣人又喜歡透過一些常民習俗，不論是巫術或是類似儀式，接觸到另一種精神狀態（altered state of consciousness）。台灣這種奇特的接合狀態，既現代又前現代。好比說一個上班族下班後可能有一個身份是乩童。西方人可能會用「新世紀」（New Age）來談，但我認為這並不適用於台灣的狀態。瀅如的作品部有採訪巫師，自身也有接觸，你是怎麼看待這件事？

陳：在整個展覽的框架下，我的部分，討論薩滿和致幻劑，內容是屬於現代之後，然後透過回歸追尋前現代的、非科學性的方式，探問它們是否能夠彌補現代性帶來的空洞。也就是說有時候要藉用薩滿儀式、藥物經歷這段過程，才會感覺到原來我們過得如此空洞，而後才會開始追求靈性的、跳脫現有狀態下的生活。

譬如說，展覽裡有很多動物照片，標題都是力量動物，這是為何呢？因為當你經過這些使用藥物的儀式時，你會變成動物。很多巫師說他們會變成老鷹、熊。可是他們不是真的在外在轉變成熊，而是裡頭（腦內意識）變成熊，外表還是一樣的。可是你說他真的有變嗎？他真的變了，只是你看不出來而已。

我覺得現代性社會就是什麼都要眼見為憑、科學可以證明的。這部分對於我來說才是造成心靈空洞的原因。人們覺得巫師認為自己變成了一隻烏鴉，是他瘋掉了，可是他真的就是一隻烏鴉，僅僅因為你看不到而已。在現代社會中，有些人會透過練習去追尋意識轉換。但這些事情，在西方強迫東方開啟大門之前，都是很正常的，沒有人去質疑，直到過了一個世紀後，西方都才開始重新質疑。



James：瀅如的關注是「意識」，我的部分是「身體」（殺人）。如果人的生命是最重要的，如同前面所說，任何一件事都是關於如何防止殺戮。我認為很多New Age嬉皮都會有這樣的想法，譬如說捐款給非洲難民或是幫助美洲原住民等。在西方很多人有這種想法，可是他們從未提到最關鍵的部分：殺人。不僅是一個人殺了另一人，更甚者是由政府建立的制度殺人。雖然鴉片戰爭已經過了很久，但這個問題一直存在。譬如說落後的伊拉克與現代美國的戰爭也是一樣的，這是我的想法。

對我來說，如果要批判、反抗西方文化，你得用他們的武器，那他們的武器又是什麼呢？是像康德、海德格這些哲學家的思想。我從小在美國長大，每一天我都認知到自己不是一個美國人，每天都會被欺負或是被告知自己是移民，而我知道自己必須用屬於他們的武器才能反抗。就好比說很多在美國的華人都上哈佛或史丹佛大學，這是為什麼？因為身為移民的我們被教導，要學好英文，而且我們的英文程度不能跟一般白人一樣，還得要比他們更好，因為英文就是一種武器。

但僅有英文是不夠的，還必須要有思想，所以我學習西方哲學。我曾經對於中國哲學，如老莊思想很有興趣，但我發現這種哲學在西方是無效的。若我要以此作為武器，便得學習最高層次的哲學，如康德等。如果我生長在台灣或中國，可能我的興趣便會有所不同了。

我發現這邊（台灣／亞洲）很多人對西方哲學有興趣時會看書。但我認為他們在閱讀時並不會有跟我一樣的感覺，他們在看西方文化時有一種異國情懷，那就像吃一塊鹹派、法國起司之類的。當我在閱讀時，因為我本身的經歷所以我會看西方歷史，那種「要壓倒其他人」（keep everyone else down）的歷史。

鄭：瀅如過去的作品也常提到西方歷史，談論現代醫學，可是又連結到前現代的鍊金術，以及「陰謀論」（Conspiracy theory）是否談一下這部份。

陳：其實我開始對陰謀論產生興趣也是因為研究松果體，在做研究時對於陰謀論越看越入迷，幾乎與最初提到的藥物脫軌。當講到松果體就會談到埃及的荷魯斯之眼，而這在美國國璽上也有一個。因此我找到更多資料討論為何美國國璽上有全知之眼（同荷魯斯之眼），另外又為什麼上面有一隻老鷹，後來發現不是老鷹，而是鳳凰。

為什麼會這樣想？為什麼同樣是金字塔，我們查到它其實是帝王的墳墓；有一說是那三座金字塔會指向天狼星；另一說指出其實金字塔是太空船；又有人說其實金字塔的人面獅身像下面有一座地底城市等，眾說紛紜。

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但我認為這種眾說紛紜，反而是一種創作的助力。因為一樣的物件，卻有這麼多不同的解釋。譬如說，麥田圈是外星人製造的，陰謀論者，對此深信不疑，我覺得他們其實和做創作差不多。我覺得自己的思考能力跟想像力能夠跟他們平行，接收到一樣的頻率。而我之所以會對這方面有興趣，全部都是從研究DMT開始。雖然我沒有用過DMT，但為什麼我會有經驗？這是因為當你注射或吃下DMT後，它最主要的作用就是將身心分離。每個人的經驗不同，有些人會看到外星人、有些人直接到了宇宙、另外像是薩滿會變成動物等。然而我有「身心分離」的經驗，所以我才可以認同DMT，所以才會去做（這件作品）。



我的「身心分離」經驗是有一次睡夢中忽然醒來，但是醒來後我卻看見自己。當時我想：「喔，我這一次是用陳瀅如這個名字。」我記得很清楚，也確定不是在做夢，然後就開始有瀕死經驗時會出現的幻燈片，確定這一世用陳瀅如這個名字後，就開使從3歲、5歲、6歲…看起，那幻燈片不到十張…。我相信那段時間不到五分鐘，可是卻非常的清楚。然後一下子又合起來，很明顯地從上面下去再合起來，而後我又醒來一次，而這一次視覺又不同。

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所以我看那些研究DMT的書，無論是用醫學或巫術的觀點出發，其實他們訪談、描述的內容都與我那次的經驗很相像。重點不是你的靈去了哪裡，是你很清楚地知道你的身體是一回事，而你的意識是另一回事，所以即使我自己沒有用過DMT或麥斯卡林，但單從他們的描述，我便能立刻知道那是怎麼一回事。

James：其實我們每個人體內都會自然產生DMT。

蔡：瀅如談DMT是說它要走進自己的意識，然而使用藥物的結果，則會讓你的身體跟心靈是完全分開的。可是在前現代、巫術的時代，他們其實在談的不是要分開，我覺得這比較像後現代的談論，將身體跟心靈抽開，否定掉意識跟靈的部分。在前現代的部分，談的應該是你意識到自己的意識跟身體分開，可是兩者卻又要結合在一起。那個合一不只是身跟心的合一，包括個人小我跟整個宇宙都是一體的概念。所以這部分會不會有衝突？就是使用藥物的時候，它讓你有一個錯覺是體內還有一個靈，讓你有分離的感覺？

陳：有衝突，其實我會以用藥的目的是什麼來做解釋。因為其實現在大部份使用致幻劑的人都是娛樂性用藥，像是為了party而用。所以他們才會說「迷幻」（psychedelic），但是迷幻是科學用字、「身心分離」是身心靈用字，講的是同一件事情。

我們訪問的薩滿也提到，他說：「精神病患者和薩滿的區別在哪？為什麼有人是精神病患者？為什麼我們是薩滿？因為薩滿知道回來的路；精神病患者就在他的意識裡頭迷路，而且回不來了。」因為薩滿要處理的，畢竟還是你的身體。因為你不可能只有一個靈在飄蕩，沒有身體，那是另外一回事。可是你最終要處理的還是身體。

鄭：這展覽的主題還牽涉到「控制」這件事情，譬如說世界各地法律對大麻的控管方式不盡相同，它有些國家已經除罪化或合法化，同時在其他國家使用大麻仍是犯罪。它似乎又變成一個具有兩面性的東西，在某些方面它可以有治療作用，把它當成好的；可是用在非醫療用途又是不好的。所以這跟「控制」的意識是相關的嗎？如同你們在展覽新聞稿中有寫到，有一個更大的系統，意圖去控制人如何面對這些事情。

James：我們的提問是：需不需要政府告訴我們，這個不能吃、這個可以吃？我覺得要給人選擇、尊重。理想上，如果每個人都像康德一般擁有理由和認知，能夠自己選擇是否要用藥，即便會因為用藥危險而死亡或是用作自殺等，這也是他們的選擇。但在現實中，很多人仍然像小孩一般並無這樣的認知與理解。我們的展覽中沒有提到吸毒成癮，唯一稍有觸及的是展覽作品之一〈I Can’t Breathe〉。

假設要辦一個專門談成癮性藥物的展覽，這是政府作的事，但不是我們要作的。像緬甸有一間毒品博物館，美國有緝毒署博物館（DEA Museum）。但這種類型博物館的展覽中往往只有標明毒品有多麼危險，完全不會提到其自由、益處以及有趣的部分。所以我們在展覽中不再贅述成癮性藥物的部分，有興趣的人可以去那類博物館看這種展覽。我們處理其他的議題。雖然我們一開始就知道這個議題太大，但有很多題材可以談，所以我們只有選這個部分。



蔡：James提到毒品／藥物，最終的目的可能要走向自由。我認為這句話很有意思，裡面還有很多可以討論的東西，就是那種自由是什麼樣的自由？是要逃脫什麼的自由？這部分好像又會走到瀅如所討論的關於陰謀論的議題，甚至是民主社會中陰謀論的問題，一切其實都是被控制的。表面上就是被政府控制，其中有太多的政策在運作，而我們就在這樣的框架下。另外，嬉皮想要追尋的「自由」又好像不是絕對的「自由」。

鄭：在這個展覽中，你們兩人的作品之間一直有對話，只是切入的角度不一樣。James一直以來的創作內容都是與集體狀態比較有關——關於人的集體意識，人在什麼樣的意識下會去做什麼事，或是會去接受什麼事。而瀅如比較會從自己出發，可能是自身的經驗，或是自己曾經有過的，譬如說身體、自己的追求，然後進入到這個裡面來。而你們兩人之間的對話，是發生在個體還是集體之中的呢？

蔡：就像是不同的路徑。可能有一類人的思考方式會從James這一端走到瀅如那端；另外一種人則是從瀅如這端走到James那一端。

James：我覺我們目的不太一樣，瀅如的目的比較像「去科學」。

陳：其實我的目的是想要說，宇宙是有意識的，我們都是棋子。在我的作品中，所謂的自由就是當你意識轉換後，你可以試著把自己和這個有意識的宇宙結合時，那個時刻你就自由了，我是這樣覺得。

James：我認為每個人都應該會為其所做的事情負責，就算我們嗑了藥在腦中起了作用，我們還是有責任。所以當我們願意負起自己的責任，便擁有自由；反之，如果不願負起個人的責任，我們就沒有自由。

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https://www.thenewslens.com/article/36324

THE CUBE

一個中國佬的機會

對日本來說，獨島與尖閣群島代表了相反的紛爭。日本向南韓爭奪獨島的主權，反之，日本控制了尖閣群島，但中國和台灣都宣稱擁有其主權。南韓政府並未正式承認獨島主權有爭議，且同樣的，日本也沒有正式承認中國與台灣的宣稱。數十年來，二者爭議日益加劇，但釣魚台／尖閣群島衝突在近幾年顯得特別險峻，因為它涉及了中國的崛起與美國的重回亞洲。

〈一個中國佬的機會（獨島與尖閣群島）〉於兩地拍攝。一個是南韓治理的群島，名為「獨島」，日本政府則宣稱其名為「竹島」。南韓與日本之間的紛爭其實波及這個小島選圍的海洋——一般稱為日本海，但南韓政府稱其為「東海」。另一個地方是中國東海同有主權爭議的島嶼，中國稱為「釣魚島」，台灣稱為「釣魚台」，日本稱為「尖閣群島」。（洪子健）

A Chinaman's Chance

For Japan, Dokdo and Senkaku represent conversely polarized disputes. Japan contests South Korea's sovereignty over and administration of Dokdo, whereas it controls the Senkaku Islands, which China and Taiwan both claim as their own. The South Korean government does not officially admit of a sovereignty dispute over Dokdo, and similarly, Japan does not formally recognize China and Taiwan's claims. Both of these disputes have been festering for decades, but the Diaoyu/Senkaku clash has become more dangerous in recent years as it involves a rising China and an Asian-pivoting U.S.

A Chinaman's Chance (Dokdo and Senkaku) was shot in 2 locations. The first is the South Korean administered group of islets called "Dokdo," which the Japanese government also claims and labels "Takeshima." This dispute between South Korea and Japan actually spills into the islets' surrounding ocean, which is commonly called "The Sea of Japan," but which the South Korean government dubs "The East Sea." The second location is the East China Sea group of disputed islands called "Diaoyudao" in China, "Diaoyutai" in Taiwan, and the "Senkaku Islands" in Japan. **(James T. Hong)**



〈一個中國佬的機會－獨島東側〉，雙頻道錄像，12'30"，2015
A Chinaman's Chance – Dokdo East island, dual-channel video, 12'30", 2015

台灣大規模毀滅性武器

〈台灣大規模毀滅性武器〉原發表於2012台北雙年展，作為其中微型博物館「歷史與怪獸博物館」的核心作品。這個微型博物館以展示於玻璃櫥窗中的多種歷史物件和文檔所組成，因此很容易被認知為檔案庫。裡面的每件物品都代表著台灣化學、生物，或者核武器計畫中的一個里程碑。用班雅明的話說，每件物品實際上都「同時是一份野蠻的文檔」。

國際社會已經採取了諸多措施來禁止 WMD（大規模毀滅性武器）或者至少控制其擴散，但是台灣不是該國際社會的官方成員，由於台灣（「中華民國」）是在一種例外情況下，因緊急狀態而誕生的，而 WMD 特別適合這樣的情況和緊急狀態。換言之，在不顧一切的絕望時期，生產這樣的武器具有國家意義。

由於公眾普遍憎惡任何形式的 WMD，任何涉及到這樣的武器或者其運用，都可能引發激烈的爭議或強烈的譴責。典型社會自由主義對於 WMD 的成見與偏見，如核能、化學，或是生物武器，大過於任何對武器的爭議，如武器之自衛功能或是發動戰爭。甚至連一個虛幻的 WMD 都可能具有國際威脅的功能並成為戰爭的起因。不過，核武器依然被視為必要的威懾物，至少它還存在於九個國家的軍械庫中，並且，全世界私下秘密進行的生化武器研發計畫仍繼續得到其政府的支持。儘管存在反對的偏見，WMD 依然有其道理。（洪子健）

Taiwan WMD

Taiwan WMD was originally presented as the centerpiece of *The Museum of the Monster that is History* — a mini museum within the 2012 Taipei Biennial. Composed of various historical objects and documents in vitrines, this mini museum is easily recognized as an archive. Each object represents a milestone in Taiwan's chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons programs. In the language of Walter Benjamin, each object literally "is at the same time a document of barbarism."

The international community has taken steps to ban or at least control the spread of WMD's (weapons of mass destruction), but Taiwan is not officially a part of this international community, and since Taiwan ("The Republic of China") was born as a state of emergency in a state of exception, WMDs are especially well-suited for just such states and just such emergencies. In other words, in times of great desperation, the production of weapons like these makes national sense.

Since the public generally abhors WMD's of any sort, any reference to or application of such weapons would generate vigorous controversy or condemnation. Typical social liberal prejudices and biases surrounding even the idea of WMD's, be they of nuclear, chemical, or biological origin, probably overdetermine any arguments for their utility as self-defense or to make war. Even a phantasmic WMD can function as an international threat and *casus belli*. And yet, nuclear weapons are still considered an essential deterrent in at least nine national arsenals, and clandestine chemical and biological weapons programs around the world continue to be supported by their respective governments. Despite the prejudices against them, WMD's still make sense. **(James T. Hong)**



〈台灣大規模毀滅性武器〉，複合媒材裝置、文件，2012
Taiwan WMD, multimedia installation and documents, 2012

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Psychedelic and Power Trips: An Exhibition Contemplates Drugs

Lilly Lampe September 29, 2015

HYPERALLERGIC



James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen, "I Can't Breathe…" (2015), multimedia installation (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

TAIPEI — Climbing up the steps to TheCube Project Space in Taipei as the city prepared for Typhoon Soudelor, the last thing I expected to see was a reference to Eric Garner. A single Marlboro cigarette on the wall emblazoned with "I CAN'T BREATHE" — Garner's gasping words as a policeman strangled him in a chokehold, a move long banned by the New York Police Department (NYPD) — brought my concerns back to the United States. It was a disorienting start to an exhibition interested in drugs and the way they can alter consciousness or, conversely, are wielded as substance and symbol by governing bodies as a means to power. The mind is never allowed to settle in The Starry Heavens Above and the Moral Law Within, a joint show by artists James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen, which tackles society's relationship to substances in ways both critical and ambiguous.

The Starry Heavens… features several collaborative works, as well as individual installations by each artist. The works range in tone from open-ended curiosity, in Chen's portion, to critical and at times combative in Hong's section. The collaborative works feel less personal and, surprisingly, looser, allowing for more interpretation on the part of the viewer. The wall text for the Eric Garner piece, which is a collaborative work by both artists, "I Can't Breathe…" (2015) is an article by CNN describing the event and subsequent reactions from Garner's family, the NYPD, journalists, and Mayor de Blasio. The weight of that event is funneled into the single cigarette, serving as a reminder that the supposed catalyst for the events leading to Garner's death was that he was selling cigarettes illegally. The intense focus of "I Can't Breathe…" is crushing and expands rapidly as the exhibition progresses and the works jump wildly across issues.



Installation view of Yin-Ju Chen's "Notes on Psychedelics" (2015) at TheCube Project Space

From “I Can’t Breathe,” which is affixed to a wall that bridges two rooms, the exhibition splits: on the left, an installation by Hong called “Three Arguments about the Opium War”; on the right, Chen’s installation “Notes on Psychedelics.” Each artist takes the theme of drugs in a starkly different direction. Hong’s “Three Arguments” is dominated by a dual-channel video installation that tackles the history of the Opium Wars. One channel scrolls through scenes of China, ranging from bridge and water views to shots that pan the skyline, as a narrator intones historical notes on colonialism and the Opium Wars; the other dictates arguments for European colonization. Both mention the ways opium was used as agent of and argument for control. A collection of materials — toy soldiers representing Chinese and British soldiers stand poised to battle in the room’s center, and reproductions of sketches and paintings from the Opium Wars, organized by nation of origin, line the walls — add visual interest to the installation, but seem peripheral to the videos. The videos’ narrator comes across as critical of both China and Great Britain; aligning with neither, the narrator resides in a third point of view, acting as judge rather than participant. It’s worth mentioning that Taiwan is a young island nation whose independence from China is inconsistent in global recognition (the United States, for example, has abided by an ambiguous one-China policy since Nixon’s presidency, which acknowledges that China sees Taiwan as part of China, but does not necessarily state that the US agrees with this) and is flatly viewed as illegitimate by China. While this issue dominates Taiwanese politics, Hong’s critique of China stands apart for its fixation on a historical episode. This is refreshing in a country where the news is dominated by reactionary, polarized opinions; however, the work is also strikingly anachronistic and individuated.



Detail from Yin-Ju Chen’s “Notes on Psychedelics” (2015), multimedia installation

Chen’s “Notes on Psychedelics” takes a biological and cultural approach to drugs, as opposed to Hong’s historical one. Objects and images too numerous to list — including visualizations of the brain, a bottle of melatonin, photographs of the Earth and other celestial bodies from outer space, a plastic lizard, an Eye of Horus, and the head of a small Buddha statue — fill the room. Some have obvious connections to drugs, particularly the idea of them as “mind-opening,” but the presence of other objects feels more associative than necessary. There’s more intrigue in the installation’s video and text component, which features writers, artists, philosophers, and public speakers openly discussing their experiences with drugs — many in a positive manner. One video in particular stands out. It features the TED talk of Graham Hancock, titled “The War on Consciousness,” in which Hancock argues in favor of the use of hallucinogenic drugs, not for recreation, but as an aid in spiritual growth and self-improvement. TED organizers removed the lecture from their main site, though it is available, for those who have the correct Vimeo password, on another portion of TED’s site, along with details of its decision to remove the talk (for those who’d rather bypass the hoops of the TED site, the video is available on YouTube). While this backstory isn’t necessarily clear in the exhibition, most viewers would likely recognize the controversial aspects of Hancock’s talk and the other texts and video in “Notes.”



Detail from James T. Hong's "Three Arguments about the Opium War" (2015), multimedia and dual-channel video installation

As is likely already apparent to the reader, I found little cohesion in this exhibition, which grasps at several topics at once. But if The Starry Heavens Above meanders, perhaps it's appropriately so, given the subject matter. In its very form, The Starry Heavens represents the difficult status drugs — hallucinogenic, high-inducing, or prescribed — have had both historically and in contemporary culture, as well as their connection to countercultures and power structures. Yet the lack of focus inherent in the unwieldy sprawl felt appropriate that day, and ever since, my mind has returned often to "I Can't Breathe," and that single cigarette, so small, so innocuous, yet an apt precursor of the storm to come.

The Starry Heavens Above and the Moral Law Within continues at TheCube Project Space (2F, No 13, Aly 1, Ln 136, Sec 4, Roosevelt Rd, Taipei, Taiwan) through October 4.

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https://hyperallergic.com/240680/psychedelic-and-power-trips-an-exhibition-contemplates-drugs/

Anselm Franke, "The Making of the Body Politic through Violence", wekleitz Utopien vermedien 2013

Anselm Franke

The Making of the Body Politic through Violence

On James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen

The degree to which a certain society is bonded by ideology can be assessed by its relation to violence. Ideology is what renders violence legitimate. It produces a certain kind of agreement of what counts as acceptable and as necessary violence, an agreement that saturates the social body to the level of the micro-economy of aesthetic feelings and the margins of what is deemed tolerable. Much more than the infamous self-willed social contract, it is these agreements that produce the modern body politic. The body politic of modernity is made through a certain form of primary violence, not by the individual choice of entering subjection under a common law. The name of this violence is colonialism, discipline, and various forms of terror. It is a primary violence that foregoes social order, a negative zone of lawlessness on which positive order and the law will be based. Any contemporary utopian project will have to come to terms with this constitutive blind spot of modern politics.

The ideology that perpetuates such violence and maintains it is not necessarily an ideology from the books or otherwise written in explicit form. It is negative as opposed to positive, and hence covered up within a silent normative core, implicated, inhabited and embodied. At the same time, it is being exported into imaginary outsides, projected onto a certain typology of others, figures of difference and transgression. Yet it can certainly be recognised by its patterns, symptoms, and discourses. These discourses prominently include historical truth. This is not limited, but particularly obvious under the grip of nationalism and imperial schemes. A high degree of ideology shows itself in societies whose bond is maintained by collective denial, typically when perpetrator collectives dictate national memory, counting on the implication and complicity of a large amount of the population. In such cases, a society's ideology typically begins to border on fiction and make-believe. Collective reality itself then is saturated by the negativity of violence and begins to show symptoms of the psychopathological. This is because such fiction turns reality as such into a war-zone, a battlefield of dominance and subjugation. "Ideology", in such case, is itself the medium and milieu of the perpetuation of violence.

The collective lie and denial dialectically produces the language of propaganda.

It delineates a field of action in which certain forms of violence are pre-scripted by the past, that is, by the very form of the body politic. These scripts merely await someone to respond to their call, to become subjected. It is to these scripts that the work of James T. Hong is dedicated. They are the scripts of nationalism, imperialism and racism. Without an essentialist conception of historical truth, James T. Hong dissects the architectures of power that produce the historical lie. To this end, he often embraces the internal dialectics of concealment and revelation at the heart of the language of propaganda, which at the occurrence of the slightest moment of difference can begin to "exhibit" itself.

With the exception of *The Duck of Nature / The Duck of God* the films in the programme presented at Werkleitz engage with controversies over historical truth, with ideological mobilisation and the status of state violence in modernity. *Apologies* is a captivating collection of statements made by leaders of governments and militaries across the globe. What these statements have in common is that they bear the character, to varying degrees, of official apologies. From Willy Brandt to Henry Kissinger and Richard von Weizsäcker via Ronald Reagan, Japan's Tomiichi Murayama, Bill Clinton and Donald Rumsfeld to John Allen of the International Forces in Afghanistan, to name only the most prominent few, they unfold a panorama of horrors leading to the aforementioned underside of the modern body politic, the blind spot of their systemic transgression of the law, the zone where they harbour terror. The necessary humble gesture of the performance of an apology is an inverse mirror to the heroic, ideology infused body language of the typical 20th century perpetrator. The "genre" of the state apology emerges only in the 1980s.
Perhaps only then does a certain recognition of the character of modern body politic become possible. But why? This is a pertinent question that poses itself throughout the film. How is our relation to the violent histories in which we are inscribed changing?

Cutaways of Jian Chun Gen, co-directed with Yin-Ju Chen, is part of an ongoing project dealing with the aftermath of WWII in East Asia, particularly with the experiments with biological and chemical weapons by the Japanese. The film's protagonist is a Chinese farmer who fell victim to Japanese biological warfare (glanders) in 1942, at the age of only two years, and has since survived with open wounds. The related documentary film *Lessons of the Blood*, also co-directed with Yin-Ju Chen, engages with history textbook controversies, and the Japanese denial of the extend of the terror they inflicted as part of their racist, imperial scheme during WWII.
The film repeats an assessment familiar from Jean-Luc Godard, namely that fiction is the genre in which the imaginary of the winner articulates and asserts itself, while the victim can only resort to the language of the documentary. The battles of power, representation and consciousness saturate the aesthetic, the field of form, expression and genre.

Yin-Ju Chen's work leans towards the side of fiction on this battlefield. It is to the inner working of such fiction and its relation to power that her work is dedicated. How does fiction make itself evident as social fact, as fact of power? Together, Chen and Hong have produced the installation *The Turner Archives*, a video installation on the borderphobias and phantasms of racism, leading us into a room where an attack on the multicultural order and government of the United States is being plotted. It is based on the novel *The Turner Diaries*, a bible of American white supremacists, which describes the battle and victory of the white race against coloured people. The work can be understood as a study of an immunological delirium: phantasms of power and purity that are raised against the foil of invasion, hybridity and contagion: a theatre of monstrosity producing an inverted logic of identification, through which its subject ultimately turns into the dialectical monster that it projects onto its environment.

In her video installation *One Universe, One God, One Nation* Yin-Ju Chen digs further into the laws that govern the constitution of power in the realm of collective fiction. The particular moment evoked here is the age of space exploration in the 1960s, juxtaposed with the forms of imperial, ideological, and totalitarian power existing at that time. The inspiration for the work came from Hannah Arendt's analysis of space exploration as a form of "world alienation" and from the astrological horoscope of Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Kuomintang nationalist government of China that had been defeated by Mao in 1949, and who became the authoritarian ruler in his exile, Taiwan, in the aftermath. What interests Yin-Ju Chen in the mythologies and ideologies of government in the 20th century is its irrational underside, the way it is dominated by particular characters and their charismatic aura, as was the case with Chiang. What interests Yin-Ju Chen furthermore is the constitution of the collective as a mobilised collective, seemingly self-moving in the specular image of its charismatic leadership. This mediumistic interplay of charismatic power and the people reminded Yin-Ju Chen of the mirroring relationship of micro- and macrocosm that is a fundamental assumption of an overwhelming amount of pre-modern and obscure belief systems. In between grandiose imagery of the cosmos, the final frontier and dream condition of "other worlds" during the second half of the 20th century, and images of military drill and collective devotion to power, Yin-Ju Chen inserts the horoscope of Chiang Kai-shek. Inevitably reminiscent of the tradition of divine kingship that stood for millennia at the centre of the Chinese empire, this horoscope seems indeed to predict, and hence to grant, the future leader a heavenly mandate to rule.

What *One Universe, One God, One Nation* achieves then is to evoke a sense of closure, of coming full circle, of a dialectical collapse: The "other world" will always return as the same. The logic of power and its constitution in the domain of fiction and charisma seems to constitute a trap of cosmic dimensions. And it is this very dynamics of power that we find at the heart of the modern predicament with utopianism. To avoid utopia hence means perhaps first and foremost to avoid falling prey to a certain logic of division and closure, that renders the utopian ideological, and that becomes operative the moment it projects itself into an imaginary elsewhere and sets itself apart in the real world. The only modern utopia that will always survive such historical dialectics is that of stepping outside the spell of the horoscope and the "cosmos" of charisma.

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The Museum of Babel

The 2012 Taipei Biennial contains work from 50 international contributors who attempt to re-discover what is enjoyable about the museum experience

TAIPEI TIMES

Sun, Sep 30, 2012 By David Frazier / Contributing reporter

Franke, however, sees this approach as hitting a dead end, and proposes instead to rediscover what is enjoyable about the museum experience.

"I'm trying to understand what's good about museums," says Franke. "The whole idea of using a biennial for some critical position is just dead. You need to know instead what a museum can do, and from there you can go ahead and explore the possibilities."

To this purpose, Franke has commissioned around a dozen mini-museums within the larger exhibition. They have curious titles and even more curious pretenses: The Museum of the Infrastructural Unconscious, the Museum of Stones, the Museum of Incest, the Museum of Martyrs and the Museum of Ante-Memorials, just to name a few.

These mini-museums have little to do with categorical thinking — this biennial seems violently opposed to rationalist ideas, which it equates with modernism. They are all quirky and idiosyncratic. Most are at least amusing, several are simply boring, and a few are incredibly fascinating. I suspect that everyone will have their own favorite.

My personal favorite was the Museum of the Monster that is History, by Franke and James T. Hong (洪子健). It's most astonishing component is a history of Taiwanese weapons of mass destruction, or WMDs, which details a history of Taiwan's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

The display includes a vial of radioactive uranium ore, a history of Taiwan's nuclear program, precursor chemicals for nerve gas, and parts from a dual-use centrifuge that can be used to either produce industrial fertilizers or else enrich uranium or plutonium. In 2005, Taiwanese companies were investigated by US authorities for exporting these machines to Syria using invoices that stated, "Not to be used for WMD purposes." Taiwan cannot join treaties that limit such sales to countries like Iran and Syria because it is not allowed to join the UN. Details of the US investigation were discovered on WikiLeaks.

Hong also created a House of Mini-Traitors, 20 GI Joe dolls in various costumes representing famous figures of historical betrayal, from Judas Iscariot to Hitler's would-be assassin Claus von Stauffenberg and other 20th century newsmakers.

"These are mainly just products of my own obsessions," says Hong. "I'm not sure if they have any educational value or not."

Another exhibit, The Antiquity-Like Rubbish Research & Development Syndicate, by Taiwanese artist Yeh Wei-li (葉偉立) is perhaps the largest single exhibit in the museum. It contains all manner of junk and artifacts that Yeh found on the beaches of Taoyuan and abandoned factories in the industrial countryside of northern Taiwan. There is a case of placards inscribed with factory slogans, a crate of speaker cones, lumps of melted plastic resin, a foam model of Taiwan with little toy penguins, a crate of dog skulls, and long tables of arranged wooden beams, chair legs and similar detritus. In one sense it is just the collection of a packrat, but on display these objects are often fascinating and even aesthetically mesmerizing. Yeh claims he is trying to probe the strange and arbitrary divisions that separate art and antiques from garbage. In the context of Taiwan — and I doubt this exhibition would work anywhere else — they also awaken ideas of nostalgia and ecological devastation.

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December 16, 2011

Krvavé lekce – dokumentární filmy od GAO XIONJIE a JAMES T. HONGA

Haruna Honcoop
本幸保・五匡・春菜
independent filmmaker

Letos jsem měla štěstí se seznámit se dvěma pozoruhodnými osobnostmi čínské dokumentaristické kinematografie. Prvním z nich je profesor filmu a dramatické výchovy na pekingské univerzitě, GAO XIONGJIE, který v Karlových Varech uvedl svůj první celovečerní film WANG LIANG DE LIXIANG (Wang Liangův ideál), a druhý je JAMES T. HONG, americký nezávislý dokumentarista taiwanského původu s živými vazbami na pevninskou Čínu, kde natáčí dokumentární filmy. James T. Hong byl porotcem letošního jihlavského dokumentárního festivalu. V roce 2010 měl premiéru jeho film LESSONS OF THE BLOOD (Krvavé lekce).

Oba filmy se zabývají závažnými společenskými problémy dnešní Číny – první se zabývá čínskou současností a druhý historií druhé světové války, která je však v Číně aktuální i dnes. Je zajímavé srovnat pohledy a metody dokumentaristů ze dvou odlišných konců, pekingského pedagoga a taiwanského emigranta do USA a posoudit jejich míru nezávislosti na současném komunistickém režimu Čínské lidové republiky. Pozoruhodné je zejména to, že pekingský režisér je k režimu více kritický než newyorský tvůrce, který ovšem disponuje bohatstvím různorodého dokumentárního materiálu, který by v Číně nemohl získat a možností natáčet jak v Číně tak Japonsku. Zajímavá je i srozumitelnost a univerzálnost obou témat.

GAO XIONGJIE natočil celovečerní hraný dokument resp. film s dokumentaristickými prvky na téma otrockého postavení žen v rodině a extrémní chudoby na současné vesnici. Scénář filmu sám napsal podle skutečného kriminálního příběhu, který našel v novinách a celý případ pak ve filmu rekonstruoval. Po neúspěšném pokusu získat povolení k natáčení filmu v Pekingu se Gao vydal natáčet do své rodné provincie Zhejiang, do vesnice Yongkang, kde pro svůj film najal místní neherce.



Hlavní hrdinkou je dvacetiletá Li, která vždycky snila o vzdělání a o životě v blahobytu města. Její chudá rodina ji však provdala za místního řezníka, aby se měli lépe. Dívka však s mužem odmítla žít a utekla z primitivních podmínek čínské vesnice, aby se mohla emancipovat, vydělávat a studovat a v čínském velkoměstě. Konkrétně se jedná o starobylé město Hangzhou, kde se dívce brzy zhroutí ideál o studiu, na které nemá peníze. Začne si vydělávat v masážním salónu jako prostitutka, protože jiná práce pro ni neexistuje. Když ji její manžel ve velkoměstě po dlouhém pátrání konečně najde a chce s ní strávit placenou noc lásky, vyhřeznou všechna strádání obou zubožených lidí a film končí ukrutným mordem emancipované hrdinky.

Film je rozdělen do několika kapitol – každá kapitola začíná tradiční čínskou baladou, tzv. quyi, jejíž kaligrafická podoba je uvedena na začátku každé kapitoly. Gaovi se tak podařilo surové skutečnosti filmu odlehčit a proložit drsné, naturalistické scény tradičním literárním, poetickým vypravěčstvím. Film je sice natočen jako fikce, ale využívá mnohé dokumentaristické postupy a užívá i nefixovanou a dynamickou ruční kameru. V mnohých scénách ve veřejném prostoru Gao zjevně nezískal povolení natáčet, a tak jeho kamera autenticky zachycuje reálný život jak na čínské vesnici, tak v čínském městě. Ve své emocionální působivosti a syrovém realismu je dokument překvapivě ostrou kritikou současné čínské společnosti, která neřeší svízelné, ba drastické, postavení vesnické chudiny, jež je nucena prchat do měst za obživou, kde končí v nelidských podmínkách. Je i obžalobou přežívajícího patriarchálního systému s nucenými sňatky, kdy se žena stává otrokyní svého manžela a jeho rodiny. Univerzálním tématem je zde touha mladého člověka naplnit své sny a ideály, která naráží na společenské bariéry, ale nezastaví se ani před zkázou.

I druhý film nese krev a násilí jak v obrazech, tak v samotném názvu filmu: JAMES T. HONG (ve spolupráci s Yin-Ju Chenem) se ve filmu KRVAVÉ LEKCE vrací do historie 2. světové války – konkrétně k velmi citlivému tématu čínsko-japonských vztahů a použití biologických zbraní vůči čínskému civilnímu obyvatelstvu. Hong se rozhodl natáčet poté, co v Japonsku vyšla v roce 2005 učebnice historie pro střední školy, která popírá některá a zamlčuje jiná fakta o krutostech Japonců vůči Číňanům za 2. světové války. Hongův film je reakcí na tuto historickou křivdu. V Číně se tehdy zvedla spontánní vlna odporu, kterou Hong ve filmu dobře zachytil. Ve velkých městech lidé rabovali japonské obchody, v Pekingu útočili na japonské velvyslanectví. Jádro dokumentárního filmu ale tvoří svědectví dosud přežívajících obětí japonských útoků biologickými zbraněmi v provincii Zhejiang, kde po japonských leteckých náletech mezi květnem a červencem 1942 zemřelo na tyfus, mor, otravu vody a záhadnou gangrénu 200 000 civilistů.



I Hong má potřebu rozčlenit film do kapitol – rozděluje ho do 11 lekcí, prokládá ho množstvím komentářů historiků a politologů z obou stran sporu a četnými dobovými dokumenty, včetně amerických komentářů. Potud je film stavěn jako typický americký historický dokument. Výchozí tezí filmu je otázka, zda lze revidovat historii. Každý národ si utvoří svou legendu kolem dějinných událostí a opravit zažitý pohled na dějiny je velmi obtížné. Japonci mluví o 2. světové válce jako o patnáctileté válce a hrozivé zločiny v Číně a v celém Tichomoří označují za epizody ve spravedlivém boji Japonského císařství za silné postavení Východní Asie, kterou od 19. století kolonizoval a vysával světový kapitalismus. Číňané hovoří o hrdinné čínské vlastenecké válce proti japonským okupantům. Prof. Martin Formanski ve filmu sice uznává, že se v Číně děly hrůzné věci, ale dodává, že fakta nemají tváře a povědomí o zločinech Japonců v Asii vybledla v mysli Američanů již dávno, ačkoliv za války byli Japonci úhlavní nepřátelé USA. Když v roce 1964 proběhla v Tokiu úspěšná Olympiáda a Číňané naopak zkoušeli v mongolské poušti atomovou bombu, znaménka sympatií vůči oběma zemím se obrátila. Dnes je situace taková, že se japonský premiér chodí klanět obětem války do svatyně Yasukuni v Tokiu a v učebnicích dějepisu se tak těžké válečné zločiny, jako byl v roce 1937 masakr v Nankingu, kde japonská vojska zavraždila 300 000 civilistů, relativizují následnou atomovou obětí Japonců v Hirošimě a Nagasaki v roce 1945.

Pomalu blednou i svědectví o hrůzném užití biologických zbraní, které japonský speciální vojenský útvar 731 zkoušel a vyvíjel v mandžuském městě Harbin už od okupace Mandžuska v roce 1930. Japonští vědci a lékaři tam vyráběli zvlášť zákeřné zbraně biologické zkázy, které pak masově nasadili právě v Číně. Tříměsíční biologické útoky na čínské vesnice hluboko za frontou v provincii Zhejiang svržením pytlů nakažených blech a jedovatých posypů byly odvetou za pomoc místních lidí pro americké letce, kteří v této oblasti havarovali s 16 letadly po prvních bombardovacích útocích na Tokio v dubnu 1942. Americkým letcům z operace Doolittle tehdy došel benzin právě nad touto venkovskou oblastí a museli přistát padáky. Jen posádky dvou letadel dopadly japonské okupační armády, zbytek zmizel v čínském zázemí s pomocí prostých venkovanů. Odvetou Japonců byly celé vesnice s otrávenými a zmrzačenými mrtvolami. Stovky Lidic. Přežilo jen několik jedinců, tehdejších dětí, kteří vesměs trpí syndromem tzv. shnilých nohou, kdy jim maso na nohou bolestivě hnije po celých šedesát osm let od událostí japonské msty. Několik starců a stařen demonstruje své příšerné rány na kameru a mluví o japonských ďáblech.

Většina ze dvou set tisíc obětí těchto „ďáblů" za strašných bolestí zemřela, jen malá skupina přeživších starců s pomocí místní právničky se u japonských soudů bezvýsledně domáhala bolestného a odškodnění. Čínská vláda jim v tomto procesu jakkoliv nepomohla. Mlčí i velký mramorový pomník, který pro vynálezce biologických zbraní z útvaru 731 dosud vévodí hřbitovu u svatyně v Tokiu. Japonská vláda odškodnění čínských obětí nikdy neuznala jako problém „kulturně složitý". Premiér Koizumi se před pěti lety Číně formálně omluvil, ale japonský císař ještě dosud ne.

Režisér Hong se tématem biologických zbraní zabývá dlouhodobě a detailně – již v roce 2007 natočil dokument o jednotce japonské císařské armády 731, která během čínsko-japonské války testovala biologické zbraně na civilistech a přivodila smrt 200.000 obyvatel. Ve filmu Krvavé lekce toto téma dále rozšiřuje o nové pohledy a další svědectví a prohlubuje kladením nových otázek. Ukazuje, že historie je stále otevřená k poučení i pro dnešní svět. Univerzálním tématem filmu taiwanského Američana je historický revizionismus. Objektivní pravda o dějinných událostech se musí vyjevovat, i když lze jen těžko změnit pohled na historii. Dokumentární film je pro tento úkol ideálním médiem a oba čínské dokumenty to pádně a drasticky dokazují.

https://harunahoncoop.com/2011/12/16/krvave-lekce-do-kumentarni-filmy-od-gao-xionjie-a-james-t-honga/

James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen



Lessons of the Blood by James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen 105 minutes 2010

This hysterical history lesson offers up a smorgasbord of industrial film clips, televisual moments, Olympic triumphs, and poison gas victim testimonies. Heated up with martial music and a sometimes delirious collage, its restless intelligence offers peekaboo glimpses of Japanese history . Meanwhile in China, survivors of Japanese biological attacks during the second world war offer their broken faces, their burned and miscoloured ankles, to show the effects of the poison gas, even all these years later. They have grown into these damaged bodies. This biological warfare is going on today, carried forward in their daily struggles. And still the Japanese government insists it never happened.

The Epidemic Prevention and Water Purification Corps, established by the Japanese in China, was the centre of their biological warfare. The remains of buildings dedicated to frostbite experimentation (because of the anticipated Russian invasion) are waiting to be named. Test subjects were frozen and thawed, people were hung upside down to see how long it would take people to die, some choked to death in order to study asphyxiation. Bacterias were injected, and food laced with anthrax was served, all observed by scientists as the test subjects slowly died. Dissections occurred before inmates expired, so that internal organs could be examined. Deadly bio strains were harvested from barely living subjects cross-bred for maximum strength so that enemy food supplies could be poisoned. And how could these plagues be delivered to enemy populations? Rats were bred and infected with poisons. But when war ended, the biological units in China were ordered destroyed, and all of the prisoners were executed and burned. Though traces still remain. For decades the human experimentation data was sealed and protected by the United States government. Who else?



As the movie progresses, it finds its way, it has so much to tell, about the secret war criminals for instance, the repression of the Nanjing massacre and the cult of the war dead in Japan. “Here there are no war criminals only war heroes. Some of whom massacred and raped civilians, tortured POWs, and murdered slaves. Even animals that served the emperor get their due.”

The filmmakers show us how history has been scrubbed clean of its atrocities, its victims rendered silent, its dissidents corralled and excluded. State museums demonstrate that every war was conducted in self defense, and how they aided liberation struggles abroad, inspiring, amongst others, Ghandi in India. The only victims of war since time began were the Japanese.

Meanwhile, after the 1942 bombing of Tokyo by 16 American planes, the carriers were too low on fuel to make it back to the carriers, and crash landed in China. They were taken care of by Chinese peasants, and in retaliation, the Japanese army killed 1/4 million people, and instituted widespread biological warfare in Zhejiang Province. The survivors can’t heal, but lived while everyone in their families died. “These people are unique in the sense that their own bodies have responded to the germs causing the ulcers, the rotten leg syndrome, and have worked out a relationship where the germs can’t kill them but their bodies can’t heal.” They’re poor, and many can’t afford medications. Because the Japanese refuse to acknowledge they engaged in biological warfare, there is neither recognition or compensation. They have been left behind to await amputations or death. What a long war it has turned out to be, like every war.



THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

JAMES T. HONG with Penny Lane

OCT 2010

Although expressly political, James T. Hong is not your typical activist filmmaker. He has said, "I don't think movies always have to have socially uplifting value. For the most part, if they do, it's boring." Rather, he provokes people to reconsider their own ideology, biases, and received wisdom. He refers to San Francisco, usually thought of a progressive haven, as a "White Asshole Paradise" [Behold the Asian: How One Becomes What One Is, 2000]. His titles can be sarcastic, such as A Portrait of Sino-American Friendship [2007], which depicts a chubby American businessman yelling into a cellular phone while a prostrate Chinese woman massages his feet. The xenophobia of America is mocked by with millions of ants swarming over a map of America (Total Mobilization, 2006], and exposing China's "Million Flower Movement" to subjugate White America [The Coldest War, 2006]. In other films, he takes on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, the legacy of Hitler's Germany, white guys' love of Asian women, the global influx of American "crap," Plato's cave as allegory for the Iraq War, and more.

Hong's style reaches its apotheosis with Lessons of the Blood, a feature length documentary (co-directed with his wife and collaborator Yin Ju Chen), which took six years to make. An expressive visual style – heavy contrast, aggressive music, deadpan voiceover, meticulously edited archival materials – energizes what could have been a straightforward effort to simply educate and outrage viewers. This movie pierces the miasma of politeness currently enveloping most avant-garde filmmaking (even that which presents itself as "oppositional"), and demands a response.

Lessons of the Blood centers on Japan's covert use of biological warfare before and during World War II. Hong and Chen deftly examine the issue through a myriad of lenses: historically changing relations between China, Japan, and the U.S.; Japanese revisionists who deny the Nanking massacre and other war crimes committed during the Sino-Japanese War and World War II; the complexities of ideology, imperialism, nationalism, and economic empire; a visit to the remains of Unit 731, where Japanese scientists committed atrocities; and the devastating lives of elderly Chinese suffering the horrific results of Japan's biological warfare to this day.

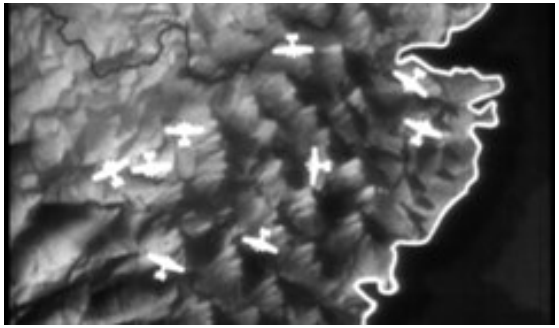
Lessons of the Blood opens with a quotation: "History is complicated. Nations are complicated. The political is complicated. Suffering is not."

Lessons of the Blood will receive its New York City premiere at Anthology Film Archives on Monday, October 11, at 7:30pm. This event is presented by Flaherty NYC, a monthly series of risk-taking documentary films sponsored by The Flaherty. James T. Hong will also present "Some Works for Everyone and No One," a selection of his short films and videos, and selections by his major influences Werner Herzog and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, at UnionDocs on Sunday, October 3, at 7:30pm.

Penny Lane (Rail): Can you share something about your background? What brought you to filmmaking?

James T. Hong: I was born in Minnesota. I majored in philosophy at a few different universities, but graduated from the University of Minnesota. I went to grad school for a PhD in philosophy at Urbana-Champaign. In grad school, I realized that academia was mostly unpleasant, and mostly just kissing ass. Also, my specialty was German metaphysics. It's not so easy to get a job in that. I always had an interest in film, especially because of my two favorite filmmakers at that time, Werner Herzog and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. I applied to film schools, and I got into USC in 1994 or 1995. I learned some technical things, but I didn't enjoy USC. There was no art or documentary; it was all commerce. I dropped out and moved to San Francisco in 1996, because there were people there whose work I respected, like Craig Baldwin and Bruce Connor. It was easier to support myself there than it was in L.A. So that's how I started making movies. Craig Baldwin has been a big influence on me. I owe Craig a lot. He was the first person to support my work. And at one time, San Francisco was a nice place. I think the dot-com revolution changed it irrevocably. Foodies are the worst.

Rail: You've made a lot of short films and videos since then. How did you come to make Lessons of the Blood, your first feature and your first straight-up documentary? When did you first become interested in the subject?



Hong: Actually, the first feature I ever made is called The Spear of Destiny: A Film for Everyone and No One (2000-2004), which ended up more for no one. [The background for Lessons is that] my father was born in Taiwan, and my mother was born in China, so I always heard stories about how Japan invaded Asia. I knew that the Japanese did horrible things, and that they've never really dealt with this issue [as a nation]. I was always interested in that. The second impetus was a Japanese high school textbook from 2005 called The New History Textbook. It's a whitewashing of their history. It seemed interesting to me that Japan could not only ignore the issue, but that they could [actively] change their history to make it nicer. The third inspiration was Iris Chang, who wrote The Rape of Nanking, a bestseller that pushed the issue onto the international arena. She killed herself in 2004 or 2005, and her death sort of motivated me. With all that, I went to China to research the issue with my wife, Yin-Ju Chen, who was essential in the making of the documentary. We became caught up in this issue of biological warfare.

Originally, we didn't want to make a film about biological warfare, because it's really gruesome to see some of the victims. It's terrible. I thought, "How can we film this? Who would want to see this kind of movie?" But every time we went back to China, more relatives of these victims would contact us, and tell us, "You have to film these people before they die, so they can tell their story."

Rail: What is the meaning of the title? Why did you structure the film as a series of "lessons"?

Hong: In Chinese, "lessons of the blood" is a very common term. It's used to describe anything traumatic. It doesn't sound so profound in Chinese, but it sounds really strong in English. Also, the movie is sort of structured like a history textbook – lessons. Blood, obviously, connotes suffering and war, and also poison in the blood – the biological warfare that poisons your blood. Some people criticize it. They think it's too strong, too unsubtle. But generally, I don't think my work is particularly subtle.

Rail: You open with a quotation: "History is complicated. Nations are complicated. The political is complicated. Suffering is not." I felt that the structure of the film mirrored that quotation; you start with a really complex political history, and by the end, you're left with the horrendous suffering of one woman who is literally dying, rotting away, before your eyes. Were you consciously mirroring that quotation with the structure, or did I just make that up?

Hong: Yes. It goes from macro issues – historical issues, conflicts between nations, the war – and it gets smaller and smaller in focus until it is about one person. The reason has to do with the idea of proof. When dealing with Japanese revisionists, they try to debunk any type of data [that proves their responsible for war crimes]. So the film proceeds from a certain plausible deniability to the suffering that is undeniable. It becomes proof. The woman at the end [who is dying] – when I filmed her, it was the first time I had met her. Her family had asked us to go find her. We went with some local party officials.

Rail: Why did you want to bring the government officials there?

Hong: Because the higher echelons of government don't acknowledge the issue at all. [The existence of these victims] is just an embarrassment to the government of China. China's supposed to be this economic superpower, but they don't give a shit about these aging victims in the poorer hinterlands. They're just waiting for them to die. The reality is that history moves on, nations move on, but these people got crushed. They got stepped on, and nobody remembers, and nobody cares, and there is no uplifting end. They just suffer, and then they die.

Rail: In the film, we meet some historical revisionists who claim that the Nanking massacre never happened, that biological warfare never happened, and so on. I found these people frightening, but pretty wacko. I wonder if this is a fringe movement in Japan, or if this kind of revisionism is more mainstream?



Hong: It's true that the activists you see in the movie are more on the right-wing fringes. I wouldn't say all Japanese are right-wing fanatics, but the mainstream is very conservative. There is also a lot of ignorance. In fact, I can't show this movie to my Japanese friends. We can't talk about this issue at all. And these are people who are artists, people I think are generally left-wing… but I guess not about World War II. For example, we needed some translation, and we asked some Japanese people in San Francisco to help. I thought they were hippies – they had long hair, they were musicians. But once they realized what they were translating, they wouldn't do it. They said that they loved the emperor, and that everything we were saying was a lie. I'm telling you, the [Japanese] people who do know about it still don't believe it, or they don't want to believe it. In fact, I challenge you, if you have Japanese friends – not Japanese-American, Japanese friends – to ask them about Japan's war crimes against the Chinese. There are Japanese activists who are trying to promote the issue and make Japan deal with their history. But it's a very small minority.

Rail: Why do you think this is?

Hong: There's a joke. A Chinese, a Japanese, and a Korean get into a fight. The Chinese goes home and gets his family. The Korean goes home and beats up his own brother. The Japanese goes home, and brings back his entire country. In Japan, there is a real ethos of working together, of sticking together. They have an idiom: "The nail that sticks out will be hammered down." This is, of course, a stereotype, but I think it's true in some ways.

Rail: I understood the documentary to not be criticizing Japanese people per se, but more a nationalist agenda that refuses to admit any criticism of its own history. But you also criticize certain ways that China has used the 300,000 dead from the Nanking massacre as its own kind of nation-building, political tool. Were you worried at all that your film could be used for Chinese propaganda?

Hong: I understand that it's possible. There's nothing I can do about the potential use of [my movie and the history it depicts] for nationalistic purposes. I think that the Nanking Massacre has the potential to function in China similarly to the way 9/11 functions in the U.S. But I still think it's good that the government would support remembrance and memorials of the Nanking massacre, because the fact remains that a lot of young people in China have never heard of it. Or they have, but they don't care. The analogue would be the Holocaust. Israel uses the Holocaust toward political ends. This is a fact. But still, regardless of what Israel has done to the Palestinians or what crimes they have committed, the Holocaust will remain a horrible crime. It still deserves to be recognized. It's the same thing with China. No matter what China did or does, there were certain crimes that were committed against the Chinese and they will always be crimes. We need to know about those things, too, and that was my aim with this movie. All cinema functions as a form of propaganda. Movies are designed to manipulate you to act in a particular way or believe in a particular way. Yes, even experimental films. And Lessons of the Blood is no different. But I can't show Lessons of the Blood in China anyway, so I don't know how it could function as nationalistic propaganda for the Chinese.

Rail: You can't show this film in China?

Hong: No, because it's critical of the [Communist] party. We have a version that we can show in China, and we will try to do that. All references to politics are removed. It focuses only on the story of biological warfare. That's it. We showed that version in Singapore, because even in Singapore it had to go through censors. We also have another version that's only ten minutes, to show party officials, so that they will support a bill to help [the victims of biological warfare] and get them free healthcare. There's also a version that's four hours long. But even my wife couldn't sit through it. Only I can sit through it, and I fall asleep.

Rail: What was the most important thing you think you learned in making the film?

Hong: It's that some of these people who have these wounds, they just go on with their lives. Some of them are married. Some of them have kids. They just live. I think for us in the west, to live like that would be like a living death. They just persevere. It's something I suppose I couldn't do. The other important thing I realized was that some of [the victims] didn't even know what had happened [to them]. They didn't know why they've had these horrible wounds for so many years. It wasn't until very recently that [the issue of biological warfare] has come to light.



Rail: You dish out criticism for plenty of historical actors in Lessons. But don't you think you take it pretty easy on Communist China? I think you breeze past the Great Leap Forward, which caused the deaths of maybe 20 million people, as "some disastrous social and economic programs." I think that to elide that part of China's history is a provocative move. Right now, everyone in the west prefers to criticize China. Did you want to intervene in the common view of China in the west?

Hong: Yes. China is the bogeyman, just like Japan was in the 1980s. When I was growing up, my family would never drive a Japanese car, because we were afraid people would hate us. On TV, Americans were smashing Japanese cars, because Japan was so rich and stealing jobs and buying American property. I understand this kind of fear mongering, this hatred of China. But for me to support the idea of China as the enemy is just not very interesting. Actually, I've seen many, maybe too many, movies about China made by Westerners. I would be curious to see more critical documentaries made by Chinese about America or Germany or the Netherlands.

Rail: It's amazing how quickly America's least favorite Asian nation can change.

Hong: I agree. In foreign policy today, it's just: China enemy, Japan friend. But I'm certainly not the only filmmaker that has made a film critical of Japan lately. The Cove is highly critical of Japan. I'm not a huge fan of Japan, but I found that movie kind of unfair. And it won the Oscar.

Rail: You said before that your films are not subtle. I read a review by Jaime Mendoza, who described your work as "literally screaming bloody murder." All of your films do have a very aggressive style and often take on unpopular opinions in a pretty loud way. Why are you drawn to that style of filmmaking?

Hong: Well, I'm an Asian-American. And that term "Asian-American" sort of groups us all together – Hmong, Vietnamese, Koreans, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, etc. It's a misnomer, because in Asia it's a huge deal to be Japanese versus Chinese, or Korean versus Chinese. And this idea of Asia is itself a convenient fiction. But here, I'm just an Asian-American. And the way that we are supposed to function here is to be quiet, and to assimilate, and become doctors and lawyers and professors. So the way that my work developed originally, the impetus, was to try to find a form that was very strong – that wasn't this way of just listening and assimilating and being quiet. It was a way to be heard and to be stronger. Also, personally, from an aesthetic point of view, the works that I like are works that are stronger and not subtle. Even if I don't like the movie, at least I will remember it.

Rail: I wondered also if it might be a kind of statement about how polite people are in the art world. For all of the noise we make about being radical or provocative, within the art world there's not really all that much vocal disagreement on political issues.

Hong: I think most contemporary art that I encounter is just apolitical, or it supports the status quo of consumerist cynicism. But yes, Americans tend to be pretty polite. In Germany, people will yell at you from the audience. Americans tend to be nicer. For me, I only learn through criticism. I don't learn from compliments. That's how I learn what people like and don't like. But sometimes I make movies that I know nobody will like. That's the whole dilemma: how to make a movie that many people will like, so you can make some money. To make [art] a career, and to stay alive is a hard thing to do. I think in Europe, the climate is better. There's more state support.



Rail: Is that why you and your wife have been living in Europe?

Hong: Yeah, we're only in it for the money. My wife applies for grants, and I apply for grants [in Europe]. I have a distributor, and every now and again I get a hundred Euros or something, but it's not really enough to live on. I can tell you, it's not going to last forever. Eventually, I'll have to get a real job. It's just a fact. But I do want to make a super successful children's movie that will make me self-sufficient. That's no joke. I will work on it.

Rail: I want to ask you about your use of humor, especially sarcasm, that's very prevalent in your work. It's an interesting tension, because your films are usually pretty heavy thematically, but they're also really funny. Why do you use humor?

Hong: I don't know what's funny. I've never thought that I was particularly funny, and my intent is not to be funny. It's just the viewer's interpretation. I can't explain that.

Rail: Wait, really? Because there are certain things you say in your films, or say with your films, that are pretty hilarious. Like in Behold the Asian, when you call San Francisco "the white asshole paradise," is that not supposed to be funny?

Hong: No! To me it's really depressing. It's not funny at all. I don't know. I don't laugh very often. So maybe that's why I can't understand the [idea that people find humor in my work]. It's my own idiosyncrasy. I don't know. But it's for other people to interpret. I am not frequently the best interpreter of my own work.

Rail: Let me think about it. Sometimes I laugh because you make me uncomfortable. So that's one kind of laugher you sometimes provoke: nervous laughter. Maybe a better description would be "irony," rather than "humor." A certain kind of bitter sarcasm, and an irony that is reminiscent of the filmmakers you mentioned earlier, Herzog and Syberberg. Does that make more sense?

Hong: Well, Steve Seid at the PFA called my work "a sump-hole of chilling irony." I like that. I pick topics and issues that interest me, and that I think others frequently ignore or don't want to say. I think we all disagree a lot more than we think. And the asshole in the so-called Asian-American has to be shown more often.

Rail: How do you collaborate with your wife?

JH: Usually, one person has to take the lead [on a particular project], because if we try to make a movie where both people are leading, we could never complete it. Like editing, right? Somebody has to make the final decision, or you'll never finish. We don't work on everything together. There are some projects that are just hers or just mine. For example, I made a movie called Taipei 101. It's about white guys who date Taiwanese girls. And she hated it. She thought the movie was terrible, and she wouldn't have anything to do with it.

Rail: What kinds of conversations do you want your audiences to have with each other after they see Lessons of the Blood?

Hong: Well, I want them to think about their own education. I never learned about the Nanking massacre in high school. The only thing I was taught about World War II was that Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, and then we nuked them. If the audience realizes that their education was biased to reflect a particular nationalistic concern, then they can begin to doubt what they think they already knew about what happened in World War II.

Rail: What kinds of criticism have you gotten about the movie?

Hong: Nobody has said it's too uplifting, that's for sure. There are some people who can't sit through the ending. It's too gruesome for them. But one of the points of the film is that some of these stories just end in pain and death. It's just the reality.

Rail: I have to tell you that I absolutely love this movie. It moved me deeply, and it educated me, and it made me think. I think it's really beautiful and extraordinary. And also extremely funny!

Hong: I think that's great. It's always nice to find people who like it. I mean, it's not a movie you're supposed to like.

Rail: What are you working on now?

Hong: I think I'm going to go back to China in January to film more of this one man. If he's still alive. I don't know if he's still alive. He's a victim of biological warfare who is briefly featured in Lessons of the Blood. He was infected when he was two years old. He has no memory of not having this wound. Now he's seventy-eight years old. He's poor. He's illiterate. I want to make a movie just about him. It's a view of human life that I just can't understand. Lessons of the Blood is more complicated; it's about history and the way we see things. This would be a simple documentary. But again, it would be really depressing, I guess.

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https://brooklynrail.org/2010/10/film/james-t-hong-with-penny-lane

James T. Hong: An Antidote?

October 10, 2010 by Colin Beckett

James T. Hong is on to something. At the conclusion of the hour-long discussion that followed his Sunday night screening at UnionDocs, a friend turned to me and said: "I think I found a new hero". That exhilaration, shared by myself and, it seemed, everyone I spoke with, is difficult to account for given that Hong showed only 45 minutes of his own work. On top of the two short shorts of his own, Behold The Asian (1998) and Taipei 101 (2004), he presented excerpts from films important to his development. He is as canny a programmer as he is a filmmaker, and with these clips he created a context for himself that offers some hint of what he is up to. Hong works within established forms — experimental documentary, and the video essay, mainly. Both of the shorts he screened begin in familiar territory. But each of them move quickly towards less comfortable ground and by the time they end, it is hard to be sure of what you have just witnessed. Hong's confrontational films explode the established pieties of the political avant-garde, re-drawing the map of territory claimed long ago.



James T. Hong (right) in conversation with Chi-Hui Yang.

In 2003, just after SARS panic had peaked, Hong traveled to Taiwan to explore Taipei 101, then the world's tallest building. He was sick when he returned, and though it wasn't SARS, he chose to structure the video he shot there around the symptoms of his illness. But Taipei 101: A Travelogue of Symptoms diagnoses more than a respiratory condition. Hong is instead concerned with what he calls Taiwan's "schizoid relationship with the United States". He finds signs of the affliction in the skyscraper's mall, an almost parodic celebration of American style consumerism, and in the scapegoating of East Asia occasioned by recent pandemic scares. The one scene shot inside the Taipei 101 mall captures a landscape indistinguishable from the United Sates save for the face masks worn by shoppers. Savaging American capitalist hegemony and the fealty paid it by the Taiwanese government in recent years, Hong draws an equation: America + SARS = Taipei 101. But he finds the cardinal symptom elsewhere: the streets dotted with white American men who flock to Taiwan for sex. Hong reserves his greatest scorn for these dehumanizing sexual appetites, grown in the backwash of racial exploitation. Despite the diagnostic overtones, his narration sounds nothing like the dispassionate language of medical observation. This is a full-fledged harangue, riddled with vulgarity and a loud, overdriven recording of Hong's hacking cough. The 'sensitive version' he presented at UnionDocs, his preferred cut, censors the expletives as well as large portions of Hong's analysis — a variation on the old Allen Funt trick that here wrings comedy from fury.

The gallows humor is not unlike that of Tribulation 99 (1992), Craig Baldwin's found footage classic, from which Hong excerpted at the beginning of the evening. But Hong's mixture of laughter and rage is thornier than Baldwin's elegantly ironic indictment of the United States' 20th century ventures into Latin American. Hong was raised in the U.S., but his parents come from Mainland China by way of Tawain. In Taipei 101, and its streamlined companion, A Portrait of Sino-American Friendship (2007)*, he takes a personal stake in the fraught, uneven relationships between the United States, China, and Taiwan. These films are salted with a disgust that Hong does not reserve for general questions of policy. Cheap Taipei 101 oozes spleen, and not without reason. In Taiwan, he finds manifestations of white supremacy, internalized and imposed, at every turn — from "Whitemen" brand toothpaste to the economic instability of national art cinema. Coughing and swearing into the microphone, and rubbing our noses in things we would rather not see, Hong spares the audience none of his contempt. During a montage of white man-Asian woman couples he has recorded in the streets, he singles out a particularly schlubby male specimen and invites his viewer to "imagine this man on top of you". Hong coats already ugly scenes with bile, ratcheting up the discomfort until you have to laugh, a provocation made doubly potent by the knowledge that Hong is dead serious.

"I have seen a lot of movies about identity politics, and I think they're stupid", Hong said following the show. While many of his films contend with the particularities of Asian American experience, he picks up few of the protocols developed since the emergence of Asian American and other minority cinemas in the 1970s. In too much of this work, Hong sees weakness that he finds whiny and ineffectual, and that, in the Asian American films, recalls the stereotypes of model minority complacency. Instead, he wants to make movies that "come from a position of strength". Hong is not the first person to lodge this criticism, but his counter tactics are unusual; his films are free of both the tortured rhetorical maneuvering typical of more academic approaches and the bland affirmations of liberal variations. Other artists want to contest or problematize issues. Hong wants to brawl.

Hong's other film in the program, Order Behold the Asian: How One Becomes What One Is, is an Asian American riff on Nietszche's Ecce Homo, from which it borrows its title and the inspiration for its boastful chapter headings. Pictured in stark black and white 16mm, a man (played by Hong) wanders through Death Valley clothed in a conical hat and black clothing. The narration, cast in the introduction as the final recordings made by a friend who recently killed himself, charts an acquisition of political self-consciousness that moves from the overcoming of internalized racism to amor fati and culminates in a violent promise of Asian world domination. As the narration swells, Hong's rhythmic editing becomes increasingly hypnotic. When the voiceover concludes, the figure in the desert reaches his destination. He sits down and shoots himself in the mouth, the camera held close on his face as blood pours down.

Elsewhere in the program, Hong offered clues to the meaning of this film's bewildering progression. Among the films by other artists Hong screened were clips from Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's Hitler: A Film From Germany (1977) and Wu Ziniu's Nanjing 1937, a 1996 Chinese feature about the Nanking massacre, from which Hong excerpted a five-minute scene of mass execution. These works are formally apposite to Hong, but they also showcased his twin obsessions with Nazism and Japanese nationalism. He showed neither of his two films about Japan's experiments with biological warfare– a short, 731: Two Versions of Hell (2007), and a new feature, Lessons of the Blood (2010)* –or any of his works that explore various facets of the post-Nazi aftermath —Die Entnazifizoerung Des MH (2006), Führerbunker: Touristen, Purchase Neo-Nazis, und Andere Cheap – 30 April 2009 (2009), and Surveillance of a Camp In Spring (2010). In these films, Hong charts the echoes of Japanese militarism and German National Socialism that ring throughout the present, but he also summons them in his complex engagement with what must be crudely termed "identity politics".

In Behold the Asian, the prophesy of racial supremacy, even that of a currently marginalized minority, delivered in the Nietszchean vocabulary of will, fate, and purity alludes directly to Nazi ideology. The narration is laid over the soaring, Romantic music of Wagner and Grieg, two of Hitler's favorite composers. Hong's productions are too modest to attain the monumentally of Nazi propaganda, but the forceful emotional clarity of his images would not be out of place there. And the film's depiction of a lone figure struggling through a stark expanse of harsh nature calls to mind the German mountain films that so impressed themselves on the Nazi film industry.

The position of power from which the film issues is not one of autonomy, self-determination, and difference in the face of bigotry. Hong places himself at the extreme pole of curdled racial and nationalist pride that birthed the Nazis and the Japanese Statists. In the hands of a lesser artist, this would appear as cheap, reactionary irony — a slippery-slopism that conflates the very different contexts in which these two types of pride grew and the uses to which they have been put. Hong's politics are not always easy to parse, but his goals do not ultimately seem that different from those of the identity-oriented filmmakers whose strategies he avoids. Projecting these shadows onto the screen of minority cinema, Hong creates a kind of stereoscopy whose very instability provokes its viewers to reconsider hardened certainties.

By putting rightist aesthetics to left wing ends, Hong rebukes not only the cinema of identity, but the the bulk of the post-60s leftist film tradition. Behold The Asian Pills subverts the most persistent axiom of left political filmmaking: that truly radical content film must locate an authentically radical form. Films like Syberberg's negotiate the toxic legacy of Nazi propaganda by adopting a distancing, analytical style denuded of the emotional appeal made by propaganda. For Hong, this is no solution. All media, and film in particular, manipulates its viewers, no matter how transparent it pretends to be. Instead of coasting on borrowed righteousness, Hong risks monstrousness in order to imbue his films with a volatility and confrontational power that was long ago sapped from more orthodox films. However true or useful the idea of legitimately leftist form may be, Hong demands its possibilities be reimagined.

In these few films and videos alone, Hong takes greater risks than most of his contemporaries in the world of experimental documentary combined. He is not unknown, but he his work has received nowhere near the attention it deserves. Hong's willingness to do the wrong things commands an urgency missing from contemporary films and videos that are in many ways better than his. His show at UnionDocs abutted a particularly rote edition of Views From The Avant-Garde, the New York Film Festival sidebar that is supposedly the year's premier experimental film event. In the discussion that followed the screening, programmer and writer Chi-Hui Yang noted Hong's preoccupation with sickness. Ironically, Hong's complex, dynamic work seems like an antidote to a malaise that has long afflicted artists patrolling the same beat. Were he accorded a greater prominence, Hong's provocations could well start the kind of fight needed to jump start the sputtering engine of experimental leftist documentary.

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https://uniondocs.org/james-t-hong-an-antidote/

Bumper Crop of Local Asian-American Docs

by Mara Math



Autobiographical Docmaker Deann Borshay shows the three orphan girls who were Cha Jung Hee.

It's been a banner year for locally made documentaries at the 2010 Asian American International Film Festival, running March 11-21 all over the Bay Area from the Castro and Kabuki to the Asian Art and San Jose museums - see: http://www.asianamericanmedia.org. Cultural identity is a central theme with these films, whether uncovering the intersection of politics and personal history, limning biography, recounting communities coming to power, or revealing the evil that can emerge when "The Other" is dehumanized.

One exception to this trend is this year's potential sleeper, "Scrap Vessel," which began as director/producer Jason Byrne's thesis for his CalArts film MFA. The astoundingly beautiful 51-minute short bears witness to the last voyage of the 30-year-old coal freighter "Hari Funafuti" as she sails from Singapore to be dismantled in Bangladesh. Every nook and hidden corner of the scarred workhorse is lovingly recorded, revealing a weird beauty that recalls the industrial photography of Steichen and Abbott and the lyricism of Edward Weston: the pleasing colors of two waste barrels side by side, the wake viewed over the anchor, the surprisingly sinuous snaking of the anchor chain.

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Film, art and ideas for N. California

Byrne and cameraman Theron Patterson follow the "Hari Funafuti" to the Bangladeshi beach where she is dissected, listing to one side like a wounded elephant, and to the inland steel mill in Chittagong where the slabs cut from her cladding are re-milled. Nearly dialogue-free, "Scrap Vessel" is a poignant meditation on aging, obsolescence, and capitalism.

"In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee" a Korean-born adoptee, Deann Borshay, takes a second crack at searching for her true identity - the first was explored in her much-lauded 2000 doc, "First Person Plural." Borshay returns to Korea looking for the orphan Cha Jung Hee, in whose place, and under whose name, the orphanage sent her to her American adoptive parents.

Borshay laughs, with only a minimal regret, at how appropriate her first film's title would have been for her second film, since her identity proves even more "plural" when she uncovers a third girl who figured in the orphanage's chain of deception. Since the shoes her adoptive parents sent to the original Chan Jung figure prominently in this film, Borshay says she was tempted to use variants of the "in her shoes" clich, for the title. "But, in the end we felt 'In the Matter of Cha Jung Hee' represented the story the best."

Asked if she sees any similarities between her experiences, where her family denied the reality of her past, albeit with benign intentions, and those of incest survivors, whose families often insist that the survivor's reality is untrue, Borhsay agrees. "I imagine that some of the themes are similar. I think the difference I felt while I was growing up was that I developed amnesia. Memory is fascinating. If you haven't experienced amnesia or the recovery of repressed memory, it's easy to dismiss."

Despite the human mind's affinity for triads/threes/trilogies, Borshay has no intention of making a film about the unknown third girl. "Never! No, no, NO! I feel that my search has been satisfied. Initially, I set out to find the right woman, but a good part of what I ended up learning was how much of my own life I hadn't claimed because I was supposed to be her. In the end, it was about coming to the resolve that I needed to embrace my own life, that it was my own life. That's why the film took so darn long to make."

Two very different biographies provide more explicitly political personal histories. In keeping with this year's festival's spotlight on Filipino culture, Tom Coffman's "Ninoy Aquino and the Rise of People Power" details the life and assassination of the beloved activist/politician who took on the powerful dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Curtis Choy ("The Fall of the I-Hotel") paints a more impressionistic portrait in "Manilatown is in the Heart," a "poetic documentary" about the late San Francisco poet, activist, and "manong" protector, Al Robles.

"My last doc was about Frank Chin, the playwright, so I called that one 'a novel doc,' just a cheap joke," Choy says, "but this time I meant it. Al lived a non-materialistic life along with his kind of Zen background. He lived in a world that is much more spiritual than the one that most of us know. I wanted to make an allusion to something other than the typical Ken Burns documentary - to remain true to what Al was."

Choy vehemently rejects voiceovers to fill the gaps that arise from his inability to penetrate Robles' fierce sense of privacy. "I grew up watching cinema verite, I always hated the idea of narration of any kind. To me, the narrator has to be organic to the subject, it's not the voice of God. Generally, I don't like to explain what can be shown."

Robles was reluctant to be his old friend's documentary subject, Choy says. "The ground rules were that basically I would not make him 'act.' Typically, if you shoot a documentary - well, how many times on PBS have you seen a professor walk across the campus? That's a setup shot. I could not do that with Al; I had to catch him doing whatever he did. Which was fine with me. That's why I don't like Errol Morris, he shoots with crane shots in 35 [millimeter film]. That's Hollywood bullshit."

Intensely modest, Robles was a challenge to shoot. Preternaturally aware of where the lens was, he'd instinctively turn his back when the camera started rolling. "I'd almost surreptitiously film him," Choy recalls, "sometimes without even looking at the finder, and when he caught on that he was being filmed, he'd gesture with his hand in a way that blocked his face. He wanted you to see his good deeds and emulate them, not celebrate them or him for doing them."

The development of community-wide rather than individual activism is depicted in Leo Chiang's "A Village Called Versailles." The largely Vietnamese community of Versailles in eastern New Orleans was roused from passivity to its first broad-based political action when the city, in a bout of blatant environmental racism, decided to situate a dump for post-Katrina debris, much of it toxic, next door. Chiang, having emigrated here himself at 15 with almost no English, was inspired to make the film when a friend, who was studying the recovery of communities of color, told him about the Versailles struggle.

"Being an immigrant myself, the idea of claiming your home and claiming your American identity resonated with me. I asked if I could tag along." Chiang hopes audiences, especially those from immigrant or disadvantaged communities, "and most especially, young people, will come away from the film saying, 'We can do something about the things that are wrong; we can get involved; civic engagement is worth it; go register to vote!'"

Chiang's current doc project springs directly from the community's empowerment: he's following the re-election campaign of Versailles resident Representative Joseph Cao, who was the first Vietnamese-American ever elected to the U.S. Congress, not coincidentally in the wake of the Versailles political invigoration.

Perhaps the most controversial of the locally-connected docs is "Lessons of the Blood," in which James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen conclusively reveal the horrors still lingering from Japan's bio-warfare experiments during World War II. During the Japanese occupation of China, Unit 731 conducted experiments on Chinese civilians, the horrors of which are still active in those who survived. It's a corrective particularly relevant in the Bay Area, given that just an hour north of San Francisco, the Travis Air Force base hosts the Jimmy Doolittle Air and Space Museum. As "Lessons" documents, the (in)famous Doolittle Raids in China were among the events whose terrible reality has been obscured by propaganda and mythologizing.

Hong and Chen's decision to make the film was sparked by the publication of a new Japanese high school history textbook in 2003 withih which the Nanking Massacre was described as an 'incident' and relegated to a footnote. While working on "Lessons," which took six years, Hong made the 2007 short "731: Two Versions of Hell," which Chen describes as "two different perspectives on one historical issue. You see no talking heads, no interviews, and no human subjects in that movie."

Hong's take is slightly different. "The '731' movie was an experiment with some of the footage. There was always the intention of making a longer film that dealt with more historical issues. The issue of 'balance' comes up a lot. But what balance is there when one side just says it isn't true? It seemed essential to me to address the prejudices we have when we hear about China or Japan."

The former San Franciscans left their home of twelve years to complete "Lessons." "We moved to Berlin in 2008 because we got a grant from the German government to finish this movie," Hong explains. "I'd applied for a lot of grants in the U.S. and got almost nothing." He agrees that one likely reason the German government supported the making of "Lessons of the Blood" was to show that the Nazis weren't the only war criminals. But in Europe there's more support for the arts generally, it's easier to get funding here, it's not easy at all in the U.S." The couple currently lives in the Netherlands, where Chen has a multi-media artist's residency.

It addition to its excellent docs, this year's festival has ample local features of interest, notably "Dear Lemon Lima." Director/writer Suzi Yonessi's debuts feature-length film, it is centered on a 15-year old half-Yupik girl (who, blue-eyed and fair-skinned and unacquainted with her absent Native father, identifies as white) and her high school environment, adults as well as teens will enjoy this witty, intelligent film. The uniformly excellent cast includes Melissa Leo in a radically different role the always-interesting Beth Grant.
Posted on Mar 01, 2010

http://cinesourcemagazine.com/index.php?/site/comments/bumper_crop_of_local_asian_american_docs/#.Xc-ok5MzbBI

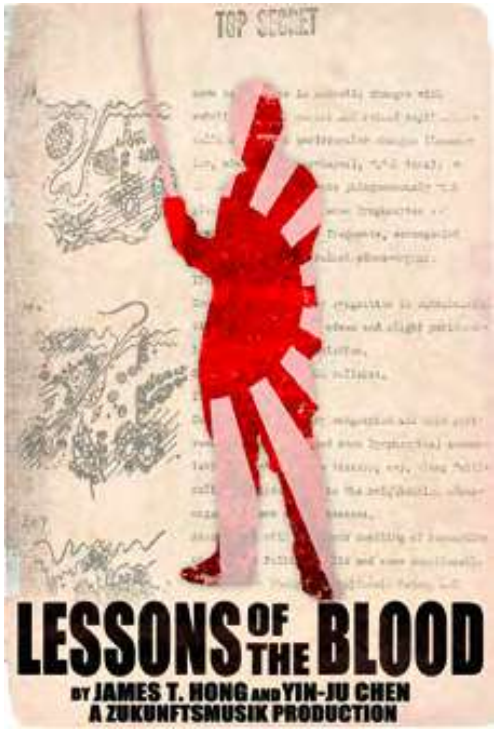
MONDAY, APRIL 5, 2010

My Cultural Landscape

In order to understand the controversy covered in Lessons of the Blood (an engrossing documentary written and directed by San Francisco filmmakers Yin-Ju Chen and James T. Hong), it's important to consider the role of propaganda during wartime. December 7, 1941, became known as a day of infamy following Japan's sneak attack on the naval base at Hawaii's Pearl Harbor.

In retaliation, the United States launched the famous "Doolittle Raid," targeting the island of Honshu. In order to succeed, 16 American B-25 bombers took off from the deck of an aircraft carrier in enemy waters, the U.S.S. Hornet.

Following the raid, their flight paths took the bombers over Japan and headed toward China. With their planes low on fuel, the American pilots were forced to choose between a crash landing, ditching at sea, or parachuting somewhere over eastern China's Zhejiang and Jiangxi provinces.



Although most of the American pilots made it to safety (thanks to the help they received from Chinese civilians), the Japanese military followed up with the Zhejiang-Jiangxi campaign, a brutal military onslaught that killed nearly a quarter million Chinese. Unbeknownst to the Chinese, Japan's military was also experimenting with biological weapons by testing the use of weaponized fleas that could spread anthrax, plague, cholera, and typhoid in the area along the Zhejiang-Jiangxi railway.



In 2005, there were still several hundred people suffering from incurable, open wounds on their rotting legs. These survivors, who live in remote enclaves known as "Rotten Leg Villages" were young children or teenagers when Japan tested its biological weapons on the Chinese. For nearly 70 years they have suffered from horrible pain and ugly, open Glanders lesions that never have (and never will) heal.



Lessons of the Blood educates audiences about Unit 731 (the Kempeitai Political Department and Epidemic Prevention Research Laboratory), where the Imperial Japanese Army conducted research into ways to develop and deploy biological and chemical weapons. According to Wikipedia, under the direction of microbiologist Shirō Ishii, experiments such as the following were carried out:

> "To determine the treatment of frostbite, prisoners were taken outside in freezing weather and left with exposed arms, periodically drenched with water until frozen solid. The arm was later amputated; the doctor would repeat the process on the victim's upper arm to the shoulder. After both arms were gone, the doctors moved on to the legs until only a head and torso remained. The victim was then used for plague and pathogens experiments."

Unit 731's two-room facility, which has since been converted to the Japanese Germ Warfare Base Museum near the district of Pingfang (about 15 miles southwest of Harbin, China), is now a tourist attraction.

Lessons of the Blood also examines the controversy surrounding the Yasukuni Shrine, a Shinto monument in the Chiyoda district of Tokyo dedicated to the spirits of soldiers who died fighting for Emperor Hirohito. Due to the insidiousness of Japan's war crimes, the Japanese government's attempts to make amends to China's victims of germ warfare are an essential part of this film's story.

Lessons of the Blood is not an easy documentary to watch. Like many films about the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, it offers a model lesson in the cruelty of man. Here's the trailer:



https://youtu.be/9mpuoBsUDt4

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https://myculturallandscape.blogspot.com/2010/04/political-history-its-more-than-just.html

New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film,
Volume: 6 | Issue: 2

Conference Report

New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film Volume 6 Number 2 © 2008 Intellect Ltd.
Report. English language. doi: 10.1386/ncin.6.2.145/4

Panthers vs. Vixens: Report on the 54th International Short Film Festival, Oberhausen 1–6 May, 2008

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The frustration of experiencing and writing about the Oberhausen Film Festival is that of trying to avoid generalizations on the one hand, whereas on the other necessarily searching for a general trend or underlying tendency, or shared sensibility, that can be detected across the new films, or some new films, in competition. This is true of all film festivals presenting new work of course, and so one often reads that Cannes (or Edinburgh or Toronto) has been 'political' one year, 'American' the next, critically dominated by the New Romanian (or South Korean or Iranian, etc.) Cinema, or evidences a return to New Wave (or Neo-Realist or Social Realist and so on) aesthetics and so forth. But the short film is a more sensitive weathercock. The short film, with freedoms relatively greater than those of the feature-length film, invites such a consideration of the new. Short films (and here's the first generalization) tend to come from those newer to filmmaking, and/or whose limitations in terms of resources or finance demand creative responses and pragmatic solutions to questions that may not face those with the provision for standard, release length, films. Therefore – and it's from this assumption that a certain tension arises, as Oberhausen short films did not suggest as much this year – this freedom facilitates a less compromised, more experimental approach; without need to seek or win favour so much, or even generate revenue, the short film can be experimental (or, more particularly, an experiment per se), can trade on daring or charm alone, play the gadfly, be confrontational if needs be. A viewer's patience can be sought for twenty unusual minutes in a way that it cannot be for two hours twenty minutes (outside of the expectations afforded to films from Gasper Noé et al.). Thus avant-garde traditions have historically loomed large in the heritage of short film. And, although the feature film can be said to be historically and conceptually related to the novel and theatre in narrative terms, and the symphony in aesthetic terms, the short film is understood to be closer to the economy of poetry, the compact narratives of news bulletins or reportage features, or even the shaggy dog story or pop promo single-mindedness. (Indeed, Oberhausen has a strand devoted to pop promos). This is not to say that the short film is to be considered in relation to that which it is not. Some films, such as the in-competition *Obsedenost* (*Obsession*, Marina Gržinić and Aina Šmid, 2008), for example – projections onto a naked woman, monologues and lectures, quotes from Bourdieu, a questioning of the roles of radical filmmaking and radical philosophy, the name 'Žižek' scrawled into a pool of white sugar – need such a nimble vehicle; the fireworks and provocations fit snugly into its confines. One final proviso: even with the repetition of competition film programmes, I only managed to catch a fraction of the many on offer; and these 132 films in competition were drawn from the 5,840 submitted. The abundance of this harvest is a tribute to the generosity (and non-bureaucratic entry procedures) in place at Oberhausen, and the stoicism of the selection committee members. This is all the more laudable in relation to the way in which 'the cultural value of short film is increasing in inverse proportion to its market value' (even at a time of the consolidation of technologies for digital dissemination), as Festival Director Dr. Lars Henrik Gass notes in his introduction to the festival programme.

One retrospective strand, curated by Ian White, concerned the notion of history – specifically, 'Whose History?' – which sprang, in part, White explained, from the mantra-like invocation of the term 'history' (as judge, as moral compass, as some sort of meta-political concern; as ideological *aporia* therefore) from Tony Blair in relation to the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. White (and here's another advantage of the short film), assembled clusters of films that ran with, extended or undermined, proposed and denied, a variety of understandings of history – the 'unravelling of authority' which occurs once the question 'whose history?' is posed. A counter-balancing second retrospective strand, 'Border-Crossers and Trouble-Makers', curated by Sherry Millner and Ernest Larsen and introduced in the festival programme as 'Reclaim the Future', sought to find a historical/cultural foundation, specifically Situationist-inspired (citing the Retort collective's writing, which draws on Debord), for contemporary directions in activist/interventionist film- (and, presumably, trouble-) making. Thus, a welcome selection of Alexander Kluge shorts[1] were counterposed with agit-prop work from film collectives (such as the Groupe Medvedkine, the Groupe Politique et Psychoanalyse and the Chiapas Media Project) and more local, activist film-making. As Alonzo Crawford, who was in attendance with his *Crowded* (1978), put it: he saw himself as a 'neighbourhood, not Hollywood' film-maker. Thus, slyly situationist films, including Millner's 1979 *Shoplifting: It's a Crime?*, talked to outright, even naive, political reportages such as *Perfect Film* (Ken Jacobs, 1986) and, for the 'Breaking News' sub-strand, *James McGreevey, Governor of New Jersey resigns after admitting his homosexuality* (which was little more than a YouTube clip; curator-as-downloader). This element included a rare outing for Agnès Varda's *Black Panthers* (1969) too.

And yet the film that gave rise to a mildly heated discussion was the only 'non-authored' (as White described it) entry: *Children for Peace* – a video made under the auspices of Lambeth Council in 1985, by its Peace and Nuclear Affairs Unit.[2] *Children for Peace* can be described as a found artefact; it would be interesting to know whether its participants (Neil Hannon and his pre-teen daughter, Natasha) are aware of its afterlife, let

1 Disappointingly, the Kluge films were not projected from celluloid, as hoped; Kluge was apparently reluctant to locate the prints in his cellar.

2 Lambeth, along with the 'People's Republic of Hackney', was then in its fondly-remembered 'loony left' heyday.

alone the strange company it now keeps. The video, with opening credits that appear to have been designed on a BBC Micro Computer and accompanied by the obligatory burst of John Lennon's *Give Peace a Chance*, witnesses the unveiling of a dove-shaped climbing frame in a suburban London playground. The climbing frame has been designed by Natasha, who is then interviewed by her father, Neil, a local councillor. Both wear hand-knitted red jumpers with CND logos, and Neil seems a living embodiment of the 'right-on' parent; bearded, earnest and, at early middle-aged (and so most probably having politically come of age in 1968), a slightly older parent, acting on libertarian child-rearing impulses. Neil talks fairly awkwardly about engendering the mode of peace in children in a time of war and militarism and, during the post-unveiling interview, invites a seemingly heavily indoctrinated Natasha to deliver responses that seem very rehearsed; yes, there is reason for hope in such gestures, she says; yes, she and her friends are afraid of the future. The temptation is to smirk or belly-laugh – certainly, this was the audience response during the first screening. But a consensus emerged, in the post-screening discussion, that the intentions of the Hannons, clearly sincere and well-meaning, had been appropriately applied to a visual medium. The very existence of this elementary discussion can be accounted for by the way in which the *Children for Peace* video simply isn't as hip as a 1968 16mm predecessor also shown, the US Newsreel collective's *Garbage*,[3] although both films use reportage and reflection on the instances of activism they show for didactic ends, and both featured bearded, white males. The clumsy use of video technology in *Children for Peace* (technology which, in the mid-1980s, was not so easily available) evidences no artistic vision – indeed, no aspiration to or *use* for artistic vision – and no postproduction subterfuge. The politics of *Children for Peace* are simple and everyday rather than savvy and 'street'. Yet it was the Hannons, not the Labour Party, nor many '68ers then comfortably ensconced in, after their 'march through', the institutions, who were themselves an actually existing opposition front to Thatcherism at this time. We owe them a debt of gratitude and so not to feel this way (even if holding back knee-jerk reactions to the 'wrong kind of' naive aesthetics) – as was pointed out after the well-received '5 Historical Moments' screenings – was to fall into a nostalgic revelry for the canonical favourites of '68 avant-gardism. This was apolitical and self-indulgent at best, elitist and defeatist at worse. (Certainly, *Black Panthers*, as seen now, is highly culpable in this respect since the film seems pointedly aimed at the fledgling constituency of US middle-class leftists that would emerge from 1968). *Children for Peace* represents, in its activism and aspirations, in spite of its failings' (as rendered in the highly inappropriate context of a film festival), and in and for the age of local and neighbourhood film-making, IndyMedia and YouTube, like it or not, a model of *praxis*.

This debate began to occur at Oberhausen 2008. Thanks to the boldness of comments from those attending the screenings, and the individuality, even idiosyncrasy, of the programmers and curators, this is one fortieth anniversary of 1968 that was not content just to enjoy the flashback.[4] I would contend that this debate about art, *praxis* and political film-making during and for the era of the New Right, particularly in relation to its post-1968 prehistory of activist film-making, may therefore represent a timely starting point for retrospective screenings for Oberhausen 2009.

The historic strands at Oberhausen 2008 naturally provide a framework for a consideration of the new films in competition. A characteristic quality of Kluge films often comes from the tactile nature of their images – the very stone of *Brutalität in Stein* (*Brutality in Stone*, Kluge and Peter Schamoni, 1960) or the mesmerizing video fuzz of *Changing Time (Quickly)* (Kluge, 1988), for example – as contrasted with critical distance that Kluge finds or achieves from these images and the meanings and readings the images invite. The way in which Kluge then dives headfirst into the biggest of themes (so that he is the obvious contender for the consideration of 'what is history?') – and especially here, since Kluge was one of the signatories of the Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962), often leads to a sophisticated strain of humour as the films buckle under their own weight, or flirt with the ridiculous. As Olaf Möller noted in a recent career overview of Kluge, his films are more accurately described as sensual and hilarious over the common perceptions of intellectual and learned (Möller 2008: 42, 44). In *Frau Blackburn, geb. 5. Jan. 1872, wird gefilmt* (*Frau Blackburn, born 5 Jan. 1972, is filmed*, 1967), Kluge's seeming intention to conduct a straight interview with the ancient subject of the film (perhaps, one could reasonably speculate, in order to personalize a typical Klugian concern: a fascist or totalitarian mode or preference in Germany history, particularly from the late 1800s to the rise of National Socialism) is frustrated once Frau Blackburn turns out to be the consummate actress. She cheerily offers to act out various household chores, such as pretending to grind coffee, so that the documentary-makers can get the shots they need in order to fabricate their documentary.

Such a subversion or ironic undercutting of a sense of veracity to images, conspiring against a historical or social-historical cinema as straight, un-problematized reportage, while certainly a mainstay of Kluge's, was by no means particular to self-consciously Modernist film-making of the 1960s. *Aubervilliers* (Elie Lotar, 1945), a short masterpiece scripted by Jacques Prévert and the only film directed by Buñuel's cameraman of *Las Hurdes* (1933), was also shown. And, as with *Las Hurdes*, *Aubervilliers* tracks the wretched of the earth back to their environs. Thus Lotar penetrates slums on the outskirts of Paris and shows the degradation in which the inhabitants exist ('live' would be an inappropriate term in respect of such an existence; the VO commentary notes that the subjects are so beaten down that they do not realize the extraordinariness of their lives). But, as with *Le Sang des Bêtes* (Franju 1949), and unlike *Las Hurdes*, Lotar's use of banal and jaunty songs on the soundtrack creates something of a crisis for the viewer: what perspective is to be taken in relation to such reportage? Does the film seek to detract from the very horrors that it shows, or mimic the way in which polite French society or culture overlooks its underclasses, or mock the way in which film seeks to entertain or help pass the time with its documentation of real life, or cackhandedly romanticize scenes of contemporary despair (in the manner of the *Cinéma de Papa*)? The surrealist strategy of *Aubervilliers*, arising from an impossible fusing of the very gay with the very grave, prevents the viewer from

3 In *Garbage*, a posse of 'fuckin' beatniks' (in the terms of one of their onscreen detractors), in fact the Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers anarchist group, engage in much more symbolic protest: travelling with and then publicly dumping their refuse on the pristine marble steps of the Lincoln Center.

4 Although for those after a blast from the past, happening screenings were mounted: a retrospective of and with Lis Rhodes, including her 1975 two-screen piece *Light Music*, and Malcolm Le Grice's *Castle One* (1966), with Le Grice in attendance and operating the light bulb dangling in front of the screen. White also arranged a contemporary happening, with artist Sharon Hayes intervening from LA via a telephone-PA system, during a series of films.

accepting, uncritically, the images filmed, assembled and presented. And when the film-makers intervene in an entirely partisan way in the commentary, at the close of the film – the world shown 'absolutely has to change, one day' – is this to be taken as a threat, a call-to-arms, an inevitability, the condition of imminence shown, a judgement, a moral or a plea?

Such a destabilizing effect, which could be charted across further films shown, such as *Scum Manifesto* (Carol Roussopoulos and Delphine Seyrig, 1976), *It's not my memory of it: three recollected documents* (The Speculative Archive/Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, 2003) and, arguably, *Suprematist Kapital* (James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen, 2007), is an important lesson when it comes to questions of new cinema, and to the films in competition at Oberhausen 2008. Those that snagged prizes, discussed below, were not unrepresentative of the majority of the others in competition; these examples evidence exceptional sensitivity to subject matter, as realized with intelligence and verve, but at the same time illustrate an underlying trend away from such critical realism.

Kak stat stervoi (*Vixen Academy*, Alina Rudnitskaya, 2008), which took one of the two Principal Prizes ('For its poignant reflections on the reconstruction of femininity in post-communist Russia') concerns a sort of shabby, evening lessons-type finishing school for wannabe domesticated nymphets. These women, mostly in their late '20s, are out to secure their futures; one dreams of an oligarch but most simply want someone. They talk of despair and loneliness, and bond with each other in this and their 'education' at the hands of a burly instructor. A measure of material comfort, independence, social respectability and happiness has eluded them, and the possibility of failing to catch one of the relatively small number of Moscow males while (still only just) at the height of their womanly powers is very real. Outside the building, younger girls mill around; the desperate singles are aware that their stock value is diminishing every day.

The instructor puts the women through a series of humiliating exercises; they dance mechanically rather than seductively to cheesy and dated 'sexy' Western pop songs, they learn how to strip, strike porn star poses, domesticate wayward males, assume confidence upon entering a room, gaze levelly and exclusively at the object of their desire, and to dress in a way that leaves little to the imagination. When one baulks at the last exercise – entirely understandable in this case, and one wonders at what point an effective import ban was placed on feminism among the wonders of the Western 'way of life' apparently taking root in market economy Russia – she is told to get serious in her pursuit of love. This is a crash course in speed seduction, a 'shock and awe' securing of foreign (male) territory. Rudnitskaya captures the sorrow and the joy, hopes and fears – knots of conflicting emotions that refuse to separate out and breathe purely in their own individual scenes and moments – and so continually wrong-foots the viewer's expectations. The main auditorium of the Lichtburg Filmpalast had that odd, staccato sound of laughter in spite of itself. This is the kind of effortless film-making for which the director seems to become invisible, and the events filmed yield sufficient truth and battered humanity to point to both individual struggles and the bewildering political and social landscape after economic shock therapy.

The ghost of the British Free Cinema, or early Czech New Wave film, is here: the way in which Miloš Forman used to shoot young faces, or Lindsay Anderson (for *Raz, Dwa, Trzy* [*The Singing Lesson*, 1967], directed with Piotr Szulkin), with the whole world and the future of a character caught 'incidentally', in a glance, smile or a nervous hesitation. There is a genuine and specific fascination and concern for the everyday subjects at the centre of this exploration, giving rise to a dynamic which is antithetical to the grind of reality television (the genre most readily associated with *Kak stat stervoi*). But this deft teasing of human dramas out of the usual arenas of social performance now recalls the interpersonal tensions of *The Office*, and the honourable aesthetic practices of ethnographic *cinéma-vérité* now inhabit a world of *X-Factor* and one hundred and one other television talent shows. It is not that the approach has faltered, but the context in which this approach is made has changed: *actualité* has lost its radical import, and now seems to be the free stuff all around, to be marshalled and spread thinly across television channels. Gone, then, is a critical realism, or the aspiration to make critical the veracity of that which is filmed, and in its place comes an ontology of feeling – with film-making conceived as flowing from feeling, and aimed at showcasing and privileging such feeling. That is, as with the pop song, the competition films that document the everyday (as with *Kak stat stervoi*), or dramatize it (as with *Senko* [*Spark*], Kawamura Yuki, 2008, which took the Ecumenical Jury Prize), tend to be assembled around a desire to capture and communicate a certain feeling or ambience from the outset, rather than attempting to locate emotions that are contained, organically, in the material filmed. And so horizons necessarily close in: the personal, the family unit, the self, come to the fore in the exploration of the immediate surroundings, or an individual or family history, with ideological or social and historical concerns as deep subtext. These are peacetime preoccupations – an unashamedly being between the moments of historical events or, more precisely, feeling far away from them. Even found footage is heavily personalized, even fetishized – recontextualized so as to invest it with character-forming and character informing personal histories, as with the dazzling montages of 1970s Finnish home life through which Katja Pällijeff approaches and narrates her trauma at the divorce of her parents in *Aina Kunnollinen* (*Always Decent*, 2007). Even an outrageously or indecently political film, *Nezrimoe* (*The Unseen*, 2007, from last year's Oberhausen Grand Prize winner, Pavel Medvedev – this year he took the FIPRESCI Prize, and prompted the Jury to quote Brecht in its formal comment), veers in this direction.

Unlike the protestors on the outskirts of the 2006 St Petersburg G8 Summit, for *Nezrimoe* Medvedev, and his camera, conspired successfully to breach the inner sanctum, where he filmed Blair, Chirac, Merkel, Bush (who needs to be reminded by a flunky what 'EU' stands for) and others. They wait for press interviews to begin, shuffle into place for formal group photographs, take their seats for a meal, all the while making awkward small talk or congratulating each other, or remaining altogether silent, often staring blankly into air. It is in these 'downtime' moments of the summit that the spectacular vanity of these world leaders (and here we

have 'history' as a politician's personal style), since it *still* does not let up, is usefully exposed. And this vanity meets and mates with, in another of the film's strands (which itself is juxtaposed with an empty graveyard, closed for security reasons), the dishevelled press pack, ever ready to relay any incidental material as hard news. These silences and the shufflings, contrasting with the juggernaut motorcades rumbling through the militarized zone encasing the summit, throw new light on old grandstanding. The unseen now seen, in *Nezrimoe*, in entertainment terms, is pure Chaplin: purely physical and close to slap-stick.

Certainly this goes some way, showing the intertwining (synchronization, even) of self-importance and negotiation table *realpolitik*, and the empty preening and pseudo-chummy gladhandings of the denizens of this unreality bubble. But beyond this? 'Personality politics' (which, in this US election year, reaches new heights of Puritanism and self-righteousness) and the deconstruction of a politics of personality, discourses of the right and left respectively, are perhaps not so far apart in the constellation of the micropolitical, or the trend towards the focus on the micropolitical evident in the new cinema acclaimed at Oberhausen 2008. This was more the new cinema enthralled to a changed and changing world, and not of and for a world that 'absolutely has to change, one day'.

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Suggested citation

Halligan, B. (2008), 'Panthers vs. Vixens: Report on the 54th International Short Film Festival, Oberhausen 1–6 May, 2008', *New Cinemas* 6: 2, pp. 145–151, doi: 10.1386/ncin.6.2.145/4

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Lessons learned: SF artist James T. Hong's 'Lessons of the Blood' played the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, this year curated by Center for Asian American Media's Chi-hui Yang. (Photo by Jill Orschel, courtesy Chi-hui Yang)

A Week at Flaherty

Chi-hui Yang July 18, 2008

Curating the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar is, in a lot of ways, a film programmer's dream—an invitation to spend a year building a week-long documentary and experimental film program with complete creative freedom, for a venerable institution, backed by an impossibly supportive staff and board. The Seminar is also a kind of social Petri dish that annually brings together a different programmer, a captive and engaged audience, and filmmakers to present and talk about their works, all in a secluded upstate New York setting where, for that week, everyone eats, lives, talks and breaths cinema. What happens during this period is the stuff of legend and lore and never what one expects.

The Flaherty is a place to explore—and explode—ideas, which is exactly what took place June 21-27, 2008, at Colgate College when I unveiled 40 films and videos to a ready, trusting, but critical audience. The theme: The Age of Migration. The filmmakers: 13 from all around the world. The participants: 150 academics, critics, curators, filmmakers and students. The results: an intense week of debates, provocations, arguments and revelations; an exploration of the global moment and how media makers are responding to it.

An institution that has become one of the last outposts for committed, rigorous discussion of cinema, the Flaherty was founded in 1955 by Frances Flaherty, in memory of her husband, the pioneering documentary filmmaker, Robert Flaherty. Hundreds of filmmakers have attended over the years—Leacock to Rouch, Satyajit Ray to Agnes Varda, Heddy Honigmann to Marlon Riggs. The Seminar is legendary for its infamous battles and stir-ups; count Ken Jacobs in 1992 and Trinh T. Minh-Ha in 1983.

Central to the Seminar is its philosophy of "non-preconception," where no schedules are announced in advance, and participants come based on the themes alone. Viewers discover what they are seeing as the works unfold before them. (One very memorable moment from this year was Pedro Costa's murmur "best introduction to my film ever" when the only preface to his monumental and very difficult three-hour junkie-documentary/fiction hybrid In Vanda's Room was, "This afternoon you will see one film. It is 178 minutes longâ.") Lengthy and often contentious discussions follow each screening, where instead of festival-style Q&As, a decentralized conversation is held, where comments trump questions and filmmakers are only participants in wider-ranging sessions.

Each filmmaker I invited presented two to four films over the course of the week, all of which probed in myriad ways, ideas of migration in the global moment; the massive movement of individuals around the globe (exiles, refugees, economic migrants, soldiers, tourists), the forces compelling their movements (global capital, conflict, technology, culture), and how migrations are understood as lived experience.

This year's filmmakers included: Ursula Biemann (Switzerland), Pedro Costa (Portugal), Bahman Ghobadi (Iran), James T. Hong (US), Oliver Husain (Canada), Alison Kobayashi (Canada), Thavisouk Phravasath (US), Sylvia Schedelbauer (US/Germany), Allan Sekula (US), Renee Tajima-Pena (US), Lonnie van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan (Netherlands), Laura Waddington (UK), Lee Wang (US).

The range of works presented was expansive and inspired, and charted a voyage through contemporary non-fiction strategies as well as how filmmakers are mapping out new visual language to respond to the complex reality we find ourselves in. From Costa's exquisite, durational portraits of Lisbon's Cape Verdean community to the cut and paste, identity swapping, pop masterpieces of videomaker Alison Kobayashi, each screening revealed new entry points into a set of ideas that grew increasingly complex. The week's schedule was carefully planned to unfold in an arc balancing rigor with joy, theoretical with the lived, local with the global. Meanwhile, sub-themes percolated beneath the surface: the sea as a timeless, globalizing force, race and identity, the construction of histories, borders and geography, performance, and the role of the artist.

James T. Hong's brilliant, densely constructed essays on war and historical revisionism used both contemporary Jerusalem and WWII era Japan to mine ideas of truth and power while Lee Wang's powerful God is my Safest Bunker examined the wartime political economy of humans through the stories of Filipino migrant workers in Iraq. Sylvia Schedelbauer's deeply personal, found-footage collages probed the composition of memory and family histories and the nightmares of hybrid identity, while Lonnie van Brummelen's majestic, silent films showcased her unerring eye and fascination with borders; her Monument of Sugar is an artistic intervention into the sugar economy, post-colonial dependency and EU's increasingly tight-drawn borders.

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Migrating Talents: Inside the Flaherty Seminar

FILMMAKER

by Jason Guerrasio
in Festivals & Events
on Jul 16, 2008

The 54th edition of the notorious Flaherty Film Seminar (June 21-27) kicked off with some steamy words from president Patti Bruck. "We're not here to discuss film," she insinuated; "we're here to argue about film." Begun in 1955 when Robert Flaherty's widow Frances gathered filmmakers, critics, and musicians to discuss the potential of the moving image, the Seminar has evolved into one of the more idiosyncratic and invigorating stops in the film world, with an almost Nietzschean will for conflict. No titles or filmmakers are announced beforehand; all screenings, meals, and discussions are mandatory; filmmaker/audience hierarchies are abandoned in favor of a vast (and at times unwieldy) meritocracy, and argument is treasured as much as agreement. A dream scenario to some (and a nightmare to others), the result is an immersive groupthink experience unlike any other, where ideas and debates about film's past, present, and potential take precedent over usual festival conversations like "Why can't my badge get me into this party?"



This year's model, located on a leafy, suitably impossible-to-escape Colgate University campus, gathered approximately 150 filmmakers, academics, curators, and students for a week already pressed free of outside diversions: three screenings, three two-hour discussions, three communal meals, and one communal "happy hour" a day, all mandatory and enjoyed from the institutional comforts of "home," a communal dormitory (of course). A group experience this intense can only lead to either total immersion or reverse alienation, but either way it's memorable, if only to prove that even if you watched the same things with 150 people, at exactly the same time, then ate the same food, slept in the same dorms, drank the same beer, had the same discussions, etc, you'd still have little in common with about 140 of them.

At times unwieldy and unfocused (unavoidable in such a large seminar), the large-group discussions were divided between meandering and insightful, but at least served as seeds for more focused, intense conversations among smaller groups afterwards. "Somehow I was expecting the discussions to be more rigorous and critical in general," filmmaker and attendee Sylvia Schedelbauer told Filmmaker. "Most of the time, there was too little dialectical discourse, but rather a display and collection of perceptions, ideas, associations and questions, or even parallel monologues."

While it took awhile for the attendees to get going, the festival's rowdy paramilitary wing soon got their wish for argument, with early discussions more befitting sleepy undergraduate seminars giving way to those dreams of conflict. Even with calls for "a new paradigm" to capture just how supposedly unique and epoch-changing our particular era is (a refrain undoubtedly repeated every seminar since 1954), this year's most spirited discussions showed how little times had changed, with debates over such eternal questions of "intellectual" and "popular" aesthetics, art versus journalism, the human story versus a systemic approach, and issues of representation all at the forefront.

"The Age of Migration" was the seminar's theme, thoughtfully curated and graciously hosted by Chi-hui Yang of the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival, and within "the relationship between conflict, movement and transmission" lurked all manner of approaches and forms. Migration was tackled in ways both poetic (the impressionist videos of Laura Waddington) and highly personal (Thavi Phrasavath and Ellen Kuras' portrait of Thavi's Burmese family in the U.S., The Betrayal (pictured above); Renee Tajima-Pena's roadtrip through her husband's family history, Calavera Highway). Forms included the straight-forward, hard-hitting journalism of New Yorker Lee Wang (her provocative documentary on Filipino contract workers in Iraq, God Is My Safest Bunker), the multi-channel video-art chronicles of Austrian artist Ursula Biemann (Contained Mobility, The Black Sea Chronicles, and Trans-Sahara Diaries), photographer-turned-filmmaker Allan Sekula's intellectual cine-essays (the sprawling The Lottery and the Sea), and epic documentary/narrative hybrids from Pedro Costa and Bahman Ghobadi. Young filmmakers seized the stage alongside such established artists, with the emotionally charged found-footage essays of Sylvia Schedelbauer, the bemused identity-satires of Alison Kobayashi, Lonnie Van Brummelen's rigorous 35mm border-landscapes and James T. Hong's kino-fist provocations all pointing a way forward both aesthetically and ideologically from the rut several of the works appeared stuck in.

To merely list films and filmmakers gives readers some idea of who and what was there, but Flaherty's unique charm and devilish charge comes from the more undefinable, random dynamic between artist and audience, artist and artist, and even among the audience. Attacks and retreats, engagements and withdrawals ebbed and flowed through the seminar, mirroring the waves of Sekula's seabound works. Early sessions involved a feeling-out process, where those who spoke tended to be veterans comfortable in the environment, but by the third or fourth day a (dis)comfort zone was reached and a peak was hit, thanks in particular to the challenging work of Biemann and Sekula. The critiques then ebbed, either from exhaustion or propriety or from the becalmed, impassioned presence of Phrasavath, who spoke from the heart about his relationship with Kuras and the filmmaking process after his screening.

This year's attendees were indeed surprisingly accepting of the more populist, accessible styles of Calavera Highway or The Betrayal, with little questions asked about such traditional, P.O.V.-type modes of filmmaking. Meanwhile, Biemann and Sekula garnered the most critique and discussion. Was it indicative of a certain anti-intellectualism in the air (as the latter insinuated), with audiences merely not familiar with the kind of "artschool" European film aesthetics that fostered more difficult work? (Certainly, Sekula was more than happy to reel off his influences.) Possibly, but critiques can arise from individuals well-versed in such genres and aesthetics; they can arise not because the films are too challenging or "too rigorous," but because they are not challenging enough, and not rigorous enough. Indeed, several of the so-called "challenging" works on display were in fact safely ensconced in the kind of museum-installation or cine-essay traditions that have existed just as long as first-person television-ready documentaries, and are just as refreshing as the wilted iceberg salads the campus cafeteria served each day.

By the final day all decorum vanished, with a previous discussion on the issue of representation (in particular, whether Laura Waddington's impressionist and impassioned portrait of refugees in Border, complete with the director's voice-over intoning "It was all so sad and lonely," was truly capturing the lives of these refugees) boiling over into a filmmaker-on-filmmaker match that caught even the moderator (the same person who insisted we were all here to argue, ironically) a bit off guard. Some filmmakers took a defensive approach ("Who are you to tell us what we can and cannot film?," etc), while others lept to defend the integrity of the original question. One artist began a more antagonistic, prickly monologue ("You say we're all artschool zombies here! Well, I'd like to know, who's the artschool zombie here?!?"), while others looked on bemused ("I like zombies," Pedro Costa chimed in). The original question, the responsibility of the filmer to the filmed (especially when one is from a more priviliged background), seemed strangely, almost willfully disregarded. "That discussion has happened for two decades now," noted one attendee dismissively, which may be true, but what's depressing is that it still evidently needs to be discussed.

Artschool zombies and television rubes apart, it was emerging filmmakers like Hong, Kobayashi, Schedelbauer and van Brummelen that gave the seminar energy and hope. Refusing boundaries like intellectual and populist and the staid traditions and genres of prior generations, their works pointed towards a new kind of filmmaking. van Brummelen's landscape film Grossraum, which slowly pans over four different borders in four serenely long takes, may owe a debt to James Benning, but her 16mm silent film essay Monument of Sugar is all her own, part investigative report into European sugar tariffs and trade laws, satire on artistic commodification, revisitation of colonialism, and philosophical comedy of human and social errors all wrapped into an experimental silent film. Mixing family photos with found-footage and even found-sound, Schedelbauer's films turn historical documents into private poems, and public images into personal worlds. Mining her own remarkable family trove of images (jackbooted National Socialist pictures from her German grandfather; some lurid Tokyo nightclub scenes from her German father and Japanese mother), she turns the found-footage traditions of Bruce Conner and Craig Baldwin into something far more private, with secretly whispered narratives that feel as alive as any newly filmed image.

Similarly constructing new meanings from found items, Alison Kobayashi gave the seminar a different concept of migration, in terms of how stories and narratives can migrate from one person to another, from the teller to the told. Reimagining herself as every person who left messages on an answering machine in the remarkable Dan Carter, or as the teenagers from a love letter she found on a suburban bridge (From Alex to Alex), Kobayashi brings someone else's personal world into her own. Through empathy (or narcissism), we all imagine ourselves in every story we hear or read, so it makes perfect sense that Kobayashi literally sees herself as every character. Satiric, comedic, and utterly bizarre, her films are created in a private interior world as rich and strange as the original found items that she works from, and form some of the most idiosyncratic, individualistic works in recent memory.

Smart enough to question the very idea of "intellectual" cinema, James T. Hong pulls the cinematic form through the wringer, and not a moment too soon. Hong knows the power of cinema to sway and convince, and he's out to expose it, and you for ever believing it. His films question not just how cinema approaches truth (through manipulation, he argues), but the very concept of truth itself. "Why do we feel the need to prove what we already believe," he wonders in his This Shall Be A Sign." It's an appropriate musing for not only that film (an interpretation of the Israel/Palestine conflict), but for all filmmaking, and indeed for life outside of it.

"I doubt many minds were changed," he notes about the seminar, "and I think many world views, predilections, prejudices, and biases were reinforced rather than changed for the better or for the worse." "Why make movies that just support the status quo, progressive or otherwise?" he continues. "Is it enough to say that at least some people care about documentary and experimental film? I don't know." There are no answers to this, of course, but the glory of the Flaherty Seminar is that it calls up such discourse, and forces attendees to address it.

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