

Biennials, Triennials in China

Editorial

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As one of the earliest 'exhibitions', the first Paris Salon was held in the Palais-Royal in 1667, and by 1699, the growth of such public events prompted a move to the Grand Galerie of the Louvre. Salons thus became the public space for art in the modern sense. Soon after, in the eighteenth century, art exhibitions proliferated throughout Europe and in Britain, most notably, there has been the annual summer show of London's Royal Academy which was first unveiled in 1769. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, European cities and states began to sponsor large international art exhibitions to build up and secure their identities as cultural centres, including the Venice Biennale, founded in 1895, as the world's oldest biennial and one of the most enduring examples (Altshuler 2008). Since the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in the last three decades, we have seen more and more biennials and triennials established as international art events, and importantly, as vital instruments of economic and cultural development worldwide.

The 1993 Venice Biennale, *Passaggio a Oriente* (Passage to the Orient) marked a debut of Chinese contemporary art on the international art stage presenting 14 Chinese artists. Since then, Chinese contemporary art has been frequently contributing to those long-standing biennials, triennials and art fairs, in cities like Venice, São Paulo, Kassel, Sydney, Istanbul, Sharjah and many more. As expected, China soon had its own.

Today, biennials and triennials have become one of the most significant phenomena in the globalised art world. In 1996, the inaugural Shanghai Biennale appeared as the very first art biennial in Mainland China but had restricted itself to traditional forms of Chinese art, its second edition was also parochial in its vision. It was only opened up to welcome international artists and their work from its third edition, *Shanghai Spirit*, curated by Hou Hanru in 2000. Soon after, the Guangzhou Triennial was initiated by Wang Huangsheng at the Guangdong Museum of Art in 2002, and its inaugural exhibition curated by Wu Hung et al., *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art*, aimed to review historically the

experimental art in China in the 1990s. Simultaneously, we gradually see many more established in various cities in China – the Shenzhen Sculpture Biennial (est. 1998), the Chengdu Biennale (est. 2001) and the Nanjing Triennial (est. 2002) and later Yinchuan Biennial (est. 2016) for instance, as well as in Taiwan, such as the Taipei Biennial (est. 1992) as the oldest biennial in Greater China and the Kuandu Biennale (est. 2008). And more recently, 'biennial' events were parachuted in towns and villages including, Wuzhen town (Art Wuzhen, est. 2016) and Fenghe village (Airport Biennial, est. 2019), as part of the biennial institution, whilst in addition, international art fairs, e.g., Art Basel Hong Kong (est. 2013) and West Bund Art & Design in Shanghai (est. 2014), emerged as part of the urban culture.

With their different lifespans, short or long, bi/triennials in China have attracted art professionals and audiences around the world. This issue presents a collection of papers discussing biennials taking place in different cities and regions in China and beyond. They provide a range of perspectives to examine critically the history and development of China's bi/triennials in the international context, the agenda and strategies of local authorities, policy makers and art museums, the roles of bi/triennial curators and artists, gallerists, collectors and funders, Curating, translating, making and censoring bi/triennials in China, and the impacts of bi/triennials on local art ecology, urban identity and tourism development.

My first curatorial experience of biennial/triennial started in China. Soon after the 2008 Third Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*,¹ I prepared my proposal, *The Unseen*, for its fourth edition. In late April 2009, I flew to Guangzhou to present it in person to Wang Huangsheng who had been Director of the Guangdong Museum of Art for nearly a decade. At the meeting, he was positive about the idea, and showed his hospitality with Pu'er tea, but it was not revealed that he would be leaving Guangzhou for his new position in Beijing shortly.² There wasn't too much discussion about the curatorial concept itself, but more about a possible co-curator for a complementary contribution to the project.

¹ The Third Guangzhou Triennial, *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, 6 September to 16 November 2008, curated by Gao Shiming, Sarat Maharaj, Chang Tsong-zung.

² Wang Huangsheng was appointed as the first Director in 2009 to lead the newly established Art Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

Jonathan Watkins arrived in Birmingham in 1999 after he curated the 11th Biennale of Sydney, *every day*, to take the post of Director of Ikon Gallery. The Gallery is only 10-minute walk from Birmingham School of Art, where I first landed from China in 1998 to study my postgraduate in fine art and have stayed on thereafter. I was an artist myself and would have hoped to stage my solo show at Ikon one day, until my practice-based PhD killed my artistic life, soon enough. Since then, Jonathan and I had worked together on various talks and symposia but never curating. He is certainly more proficient, and has made a number of biennial/triennials, including his China adventure – as one of the co-curators of the 2006 Shanghai Biennale. In late 2009, when we sat at the Ikon café starting to discuss our first curatorial collaboration on the proposed topic, I was offered a flat white.

Its title, *The Unseen*, a simple term, is a point of departure for a vast range of possible meanings that touch on the complexity of ways of seeing, blindness and envisaging, especially with respect to visual art. It refers to the limitations of our sensory organs, the narrow confines of human perception on one hand; on the other, paradoxically, it gives rise to observations that transcend familiar experience. It is about epistemology, about what we know about our knowledge, our belief and the assurance of hope.

Since the departure of Wang Huangsheng, the directorship of the Guangdong Museum of Art was unoccupied for many months. Until a year later, in April 2010, I was then able to follow up our proposal with Wang's successor – Luo Yiping, an art historian, painter and former university professor. Luo was ambitious in his own way, making a greater structure for the 4th Guangzhou Triennial, which include the Inauguration Exhibition, a number of Project Exhibitions leading to the Primary Theme Exhibition, which was *The Unseen*.³ As one of the biggest art events in China, it took place at the main venue, a huge institutional space of the museum and other off-site non-art sites, such as the Grandview Mall – one of China's largest shopping centres, as I introduced in a previous issue, with a group of commissioned site-specific work.⁴ The outdoor opening at the plaza in front of the museum was a grand one to stage celebratory speeches. Group photographs would be inevitable at

³ The 4th Guangzhou Triennial (from 28 September to 16 December 2012) presented work by more than 80 international artists from 24 countries and areas, including, to name a few, Michael Craig-Martin (Ireland), Dan Flavin (USA), Ham Kyung-ah (Korea), On Kawara (Japan), Leung Chi Wo (Hong Kong), Cornelia Parker (UK), Giuseppe Penone (Italy), The Propeller Group (Vietnam), Sui Jianguo (China) and Tu Weizheng (Taiwan).

⁴ For examples of work, see Editorial, *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art: Chinese Art Outside the Art Space*, 5.2&3, pp. 113-4.

the end of the ceremony, with a calculated selection of government officials centred on a massive red carpet, boundless, extending to a next success.⁵

It is observed that in China, if the official institutions with large buildings – e. g., the Guangdong Museum of Art for the Guangzhou Triennial and the Power Station of Art for the Shanghai Biennial – were essential to the form of a biennial, then it seems to be a challenge for experimental art to be presented or to survive the duration of the exhibition, let alone sustain independent commentary and critical views by artists (Green and Gardner 2016). However, there is always a way to walk around through a creative path. Some twenty years ago, when reflected on the curatorial process, Hou Hanru (2002) noted that 'it is a long-term exercise of strategy, negotiation and determination to achieve fundamental changes in institutional structures and the ideology behind such structure'. This situation may evolve from time to time, particularly, when more biennials – official or non-official, institutional or site-specific – appear and disappear in the cultural transformations in China.

I am writing this Editorial during the lockdown due to the Covid 19 pandemic.⁶ I hope that I will be meeting with Jonathan, once we all get back to our normal life, before too long. We will probably enjoy reminiscing about our memories of China, Guangzhou and the triennial after so many years, and I know that the Ikon café now serves Pu'er tea to share.

References

Altshuler, Bruce (2008), *Salon to Biennial: Exhibitions that Made Art History, Volume 1: 1863-1959*, London: Phaidon Press Limited, pp. 12-3.

Green, Charles and Gardner, Anthony (2016), *Biennials, Triennials, and documenta: the Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art*, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 250-1.

⁵ In its 2015 edition, Luo Yiping made one singular international exhibition – the 5th Guangzhou Triennial and the 1st Asia Biennial – on the one hand, to sustain the established brand for the former and on the other, to respond to the One-belt One-road initiative of the state and to satisfy the request from the Ministry of Culture who nominated Guangdong Museum of Art as the first host institution for the latter. The Asia Biennial, however, does not happen again or tour to other cities afterwards as originally planned.

⁶ The UK lockdown for the Covid-19 started on 23 March 2020. JCCA have developed a special call for paper responding to the pandemic, please see p. xx.

Hou, Hanru (2002), 'A Naked City: Curatorial Notes around the 2000 Shanghai Biennale', in Yu Hsiao-Hwei (ed.), *On the Mid-Ground*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8, p. 238.