

GWANGJU AND TAIPEI

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Anna Daneri



Hans Haacke, *Wide White Flow*, 1967-2006. Electric fans, white silk fabric. Exhibited as part of "On the Road," Gwangju Biennial, 2008. Installation view. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Gwangju and Taipei Biennials, respectively at their seventh and sixth editions, offer interesting points to reflect on today's state of art. Similar in that neither resort to a leading theme, aware of the impossibility to rigorously 'put in boxes' the complexity of contemporary society and art production, these two exhibitions carry out very different approaches in the choice of the itineraries: poetic-visionary in Gwangju, politic-rebel in Taipei. Curated by Okwui Enwezor, together with international curators Ranjit Hoksote, Hyunjin Kim, Patrick D. Flores, Jang Un Kim, Abdellah Karroum, Sung-Hyen Park and Claire Tancons, the Gwangju Biennial focuses on the concept of collective authoriality that can account for "a critical transregionality: to configure new continents of affinity, which correspond more genuinely to our desires and aspirations than the geographer's superseded, merely physical, fictions. When we show, tell, and read across cultures, we don't only traverse cultural differences. Crucially, we also traverse different relations between poetics and politics, between expressiveness and criticality, as phrased by individual artists." (Ranjit Hoksote). With the aim to carry out a detailed reconnaissance on the present of the art, by following critical lines that seem to develop and get over the more purely "political" approach

revealed in Documenta XI, Enwezor and the whole GB7 team have conceived an operating curatorial structure in accordance with a non-unitary, even less univocal, concept of space and time. Hence the decision to title the Biennial "Annual Report." The exhibition is fluidity composed, with sections that display some of the most significant exhibitions presented in museums, galleries and nonprofit spaces during the 18 months before the Biennial ("On the Road"), along with curatorial experiments ("Position Papers") and a broad number of commissioned projects ("Insertions"). This "open" and articulate look is echoed in the works of the 127 artists on show, linked by a poetic force that seems to meet the exhibition's statement of openness: "Art should be flexible enough to act as an index for the future and a reflection of present realities, yet be rich and mature enough to maintain traditional values in our lives and thinking." In venues all around the city, including a cinema, the Uijae Museum, dedicated to the master of Korean modern art, and a traditional market that the Biennial projects intend to revitalize in the long term, many visual and visionary universes unfold, among them the harrowing installation by Isaac Julien, on the tragedy of migrants drowned in the Sicily sea (*Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007), the itinerary

in the dark of Ken Lum's work, the installation of carpets and drawings by Stefano Arienti (*The Asian Shore*, 2007), the small and intense pictures realized by Praneet Soi (*Distaster of war*, 2007), the surreal and alienating video by Nina Fischer & Maroan El Sani (*Spelling Dystopia*, 2008) and the works and performances of the young Cuban artists who are students of Tanja Bruguera (*Arte de Conducta*).

However, it is perhaps the experiment curated by Claire Tancons — to organize a show in the form of a parade-manifestation by drawing on the subversive practices of carnival (Spring) — that deeply embodies the feel of the Gwangju Biennial, since the causes of its foundation retrace the places of the bloody popular revolt against dictatorship in May 1980.

Counting on more limited means in comparison to Gwangju (second only to Documenta in terms of budget and visitors), the Taipei Biennial, curated by Manray Hsu and Vasif Kortun, presents works that in the main were produced for the occasion and which investigate the present and explore possible alternatives for the future. The decision to leave the walls that separate the works "unfinished" denotes the will of the curators to concentrate on the essentiality and necessity, beyond an empty idea of 'beauty,' of an ecological approach towards reality. The city of Taipei is pervasively scattered with works

that compete with the working beer factory, such as the installation by Bert Theis, created according to traditional building techniques in bamboo, forming a meeting and resting place for both workers and visitors (*Asian Pentagon*, 2008).

A lightbox by Hoy-Cheong Wong portrays in an epic way the job of the migrant carers seen as heroines (*Maid in Malaysia Series*, 2008) and the question of speculative building is raised through the "valorisation" of an old house in ruin in a piece by Lara Almarcegui (*Removing the Wall of a Ruined House, Qidong Street*, 2008). Works characterized by a more explicit denouncement, such as the video by Mario Rizzi on the trade of wife-slaves in Taiwan (*The Chicken Soup*, 2008) or the film by Matei Bejenaru on the Romanian migrants into the sea (*Maersk Dubai*, 2006-2008), are alternated with projects of practice, such as the actions of Mali Wu on climatic change and energy problems (*Taipei Tomorrow as a Lake Again*), or the oneiric re-appropriation of the no man's land between Ramallah and Jerusalem enacted by fantastical bread-made beings by Yochai Avrahami (*Rocks Ahead*, 2006-2008), until we close with the rhythm produced by the simple beat of our own body in the video by Ziad Antar's *Tambourro* (2004).

(Translated from Italian by Francesca Cogoni)

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