

# 6th Taipei Biennial



Ziad Antar  
Wa  
2004  
Video still

## Various venues, Taipei, Taiwan

All too often, international stopover curators pay little heed to the intelligence of the home audience or art community. But the 6th Taipei Biennial paid respect to its location by presenting works fresh to Taipei and integrating a significant number of local artists and concerns. Biennial curators sometimes forget that the home crowd may have existed for years without recognition beyond their own region, and therefore might have high hopes for the exhibition to produce a critical dialogue noticed at home and abroad. But word on the street in Taipei was positive, which dampened my initial scepticism about the focus on artists already associated with the curators.

Like many recent biennials, this exhibition was essentially 'about' the host city. Curators Manray Hsu and Vasif Kortun imagined their exhibition as an enquiry into the neo-liberal redevelopment of Taipei in the time period since the launch of the Biennial in the late 1990s. Taipei is the world's principal producer of Internet router and modem technology, and is prospering accordingly. As

societies grow financially they tend to cede their menial labour to migrant workers, and the situation in Taiwan is no different. A number of works in the exhibition addressed the fate of immigrants from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam who bear that burden. This was one of the Biennial's enlightening aspects, as discourses of migration in art tend to concentrate on east-to-west and south-to-north movements, obviating east-east and south-south economies. I was unaware that mail-order brides or human sex trafficking were so prevalent in Taipei until I watched *Chicken Soup* (2008) by Mario Rizzi - a documentary video shot in Vietnam about a young Vietnamese woman forced into the sex industry in Taiwan (but who managed to escape home).

The more widespread topics of urban redevelopment and encroachment of private interests on public spaces are addressed in site-specific projects located around the city such as Lara Almaraz's *An Empty Terrain in the Danshui River, Taipei* (2008), aimed at saving an inner-city wetland; Burak Delier's *Counter Attack: The Intervention Team* (2008), a protest against shrinking indigenous community housing; and Jun Yang's *Contemporary Art Centre, Taipei (A Proposal, 2008)*, which promulgated the establishment of a contemporary art centre in Taipei. The →

to be in place: in her handover briefing with technician the director laconically remarks that unfortunately this year's acquisitions budget has already been used up. What has taken place here? Is exchange of roles in effect merely staged, or is it really affecting the institution's infrastructure with calculable results? Ultimately it's impossible to tell whether or not such a risk was ever really taken. One might ask, however, if it really matters whether the exchange of roles was actually sustained in everyday working life during the entire run-up to the show. It should suffice that the story of the film is convincing. After all, Jankowski's work has focused more on questions of belief between artist and audience. He has often delegated realization of his works to specialists in faith: television astrologer made prophetic predictions about the artist's life and work (*Telemistica*, 1999), and a professional public speaker delivered a glowing eulogy for all the artists short-listed for a prestigious art award (*Congratulations*, 2000). The recent series of commissioned paintings, ordered from Jankowski from Chinese copyists (*China Painters*, 2007) also bring together belief, prophecy and art: photographs of the unfinished shell of a Chinese museum supplied a backdrop against which the painters were asked to paint their ideal image of a future exhibition there. In these delegations Jankowski is able productively to test both his own role as an artist and that of his accomplices in the context of economic and media frameworks. Unfortunately, in *Briefing* the artist largely fails to reflect on his own activity.

It is true that a few of the ideas proposed by the members in the film were actually realized in the exhibition. An African artist, a friend of the new director's from the cleaning staff, was allowed to hang several of his brightly coloured canvases in the museum. But when the protagonists are followed into the museum, the revelations that reveal nothing but their shortcomings, the humour is not subtle any more and becomes cynical. The museum's new funding manager, newly employed as a caretaker, is hopeful of raising fresh money as he sets off for a meeting with the sponsorship department of a well-known insurance company. But the caretaker's communication skills quickly fail him, and after a few minutes the interlocutor from the PR department shows him the door with a mixture of professional friendliness and veiled discomfort.

The exhibition catalogue perfectly highlights the director's dilemma. The freshly appointed director is asked to pen an amusing foreword, and the new director conducts a brief interview with the artist, but the game is over. Obviously the 'actual' director did not refrain from adding an afterword in form of an 'erratum' note. As usual, the 'former' curator and several 'former' curatorial assistants exercise their defining authority over the meaning of the artwork in a number of essays. Jankowski's attempt to turn an institution's working methods on their heads, at least within the parameters of his own work, gets lost somewhere between a parody of business consulting and scripted reality television.

Richard Meltzer

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

# Abraham Crisan



Biennial's principal venue, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, housed works by 43 of the 47 participating artists and artistic groups. The temporary walls within the museum were left raw or unfinished, producing a *déshabillé* effect. The show was divided into two thematic sections: the major part of Hsu and Kortun's exhibition; and a section curated by Oliver Ressler, 'A World Where Many Worlds fit', a display of archival material and art works produced via artist-led social activism and focusing on actions conducted at the WTO, IMF, WEF and G8 summits since 1999. Fortunately, the curators included enough politically oriented work in the other part of the exhibition to avoid making Ressler's contribution seem ancillary.

There was also enough humour throughout the Biennial for a productive coexistence of comedy and *realpolitik*. Humour is too thin on the ground in most biennials, even in Taiwan, a region well known in Asia for its comic turn. Luckily it was in evidence here: the best-known Taiwanese slapstick performance artist Kuang-yu Tsui presented a new multi-channel video installation *Invisible City: Taipei York* (2008) in which domestic soap operas are played out in the shadows of architectural icons (the Eiffel Tower, the Brooklyn Bridge), which are later revealed to be reproductions of these monuments, located in Taipei suburbs.

In their respective videos, Turkish artist Nevin Aladag and Lebanese artist Ziad Antar compose DIY electronic music and home videos of rapping, break-dancing and singing. Aladag's video *Family Tezcan* (2001) reveals that African-American street culture can be a potent source of self-transformation for a Turkish family displaced in Germany. Antar's combination of two children, a Casiotone and one note could easily be a chart-topper; titled *Wa* (2004), the video shows the kids with their synthesizer, singing 'Wa' instead of 'La'. Both of these works reveal that talent and self-belief, even when possessed by six-year-olds, is potent enough to trump the excesses of *Pop Idol* and MTV, and provide a giggle. *Dialectics of Subjection #4*, Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkacova's video of two Russian girls in their 20s lying in bed in their pyjamas discussing the relative sexiness of world leaders, is not your average

yardstick: 'George Bush's eyes are too close together and he looks like a monkey. Tony Blair's alright but his ears are too big. And as for Prince Charles his eyes are even closer than Dubya's and ears bigger than Blair. Putin is just alright ...' It's a refreshing reminder that the internet generation doesn't believe in what it reads and sees, despite the best efforts of makeovers and 'spin'.

Malaysian artist Wong Hoy-Cheong installed *Maid in Malaysia* (2008), a pristine suite of light boxes, in a downtown MRT station (the new Metro system symbolizes Taipei's regeneration). It is hard to distinguish Wong's light boxes from the regular commercial product - especially the one at the station's entrance advertising his '0800-Super Maids' from Southeast Asia (with requisite free-dial and Internet listing details), depicting a smiling child tucked under the arm of a flying and caped domestic crusader. The light boxes at platform level are more narrative than advertorial, each one showing another amazing service that a 'super maid' can provide for your day, ranging from the prosaic task of getting your child to school on time to the heroic act of disarming a group of gun-toting burglars. In this image, even the husband stands cowering behind his 'super maid'. There's the rub: economies of exploitation are emasculating and represent a failure of self-respect. One hopes that Taiwanese commuters are now wise to the fact that affluence and progress, such as the MRT that is endlessly celebrated on each station's plasma screens, can generate some social ills - and contemporary art has a role to play in raising social awareness.

Simon Rees

# Giuseppe Gabellone

greengrassi, London, UK

Giuseppe Gabellone's art is always somewhere else. With a deft sleight of hand, his sculptures leap between dimensions, collapse into photographic images or, like a rabbit from a hat, re-emerge into life. Gabellone's ontologically uncertain work has a specific heritage traceable back to the Land art of the 1970s, which inadvertently flattened vast clumps of Utah desert by the simple action of depressing a shutter release. Robert Smithson's massive *Spiral Jetty* (1970) on Utah's Great Salt Lake is really a film; Michael Heizer's spectacular hillocks appear today, squashed like daisies, between the pages of coffee-table books. Sculpture today must contend with photography's unmatched powers of storytelling; the object's traditional mnemonic purpose as memorial or epitaph has been usurped. Sculptural monuments, we might conclude, are doomed to obscurity, to squat and rot in far-flung places.

Gabellone acts as a counterforce, siphoning power back into the sculptural carcass. In an untitled work from 1997 the artist encased an entire stretch of street - car, pavement, barrel and nearby wall - in robust steel plating, as if he had followed the logic of car wheel-clamps to its most absurd conclusion. This, not coincidentally, is also the brutish logic behind civic monuments:

Lara Almarcegui  
*An Empty Terrain in the  
Danshui River, Taipei*  
2008  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable

Giuseppe Gabellone  
*L'Assetato  
(The Thirsty)*  
2007  
Iron  
Sculpture: 120x42x22 cm  
Pedestal: 80x112x112 cm

