

ARTNEWS

'Why Not Ask Again?': Shanghai Biennale Addresses Contemporary Social Issues, With Spectacle and Grace

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Georges Adéagbo, *The revolution and the revolutions...I*, 2016, found objects, artifacts, texts, paintings, magazines, installation view.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

A case can be made that the Shanghai Biennale, widely regarded as a perfunctory affair, too disorganized and lackluster to justify its existence, now has the potential to intelligently introduce international contemporary art into a scene until recently dominated by Chinese art. And this year, that goal seems within reach, under the curatorial stewardship of Raqs Media Collective, three artists from India, who brought with them a host of Southeast Asian artists. Some 92 artists from 40 countries fill the cavernous galleries of the Power Station of Art, a reconfigured structure that opened as an art museum in 2012. The venue is a vast improvement over the biennale's former locale—the old Shanghai Museum of Art, located in a colonialist building that was once the racecourse-clubhouse. Given its vastness, the challenge for curators was to fill the space without overwhelming and confusing viewers.

This year's exhibition, titled "Why Not Ask Again: Arguments. Counter-arguments and Stories," successfully, for the most part, strikes a balance by raising questions with artworks that tend to engage viewers visually rather than through conceptual propositions. Right from the start, one encounters an outstanding spectacle: three mammoth vacuum-sealed ceramic crocks suspended by chains between two forklifts pulling in opposite directions in a futile attempt to open them and reveal their contents. This work by Beijing duo Sun Yuan and Peng Yu represents a duel between modern machinery and ancient artifacts, casting doubt that the "new" could win out over the "old." It's a theme evident in many of the works on view here, which look at such social issues as the destruction of the environment and the impact of globalization. Nearby, in *Our Labyrinth* a performance choreographed by Lee Mingwei who was born in Taiwan but lives in the United States, a dancer silently swept piles of grain into delicate patterns.

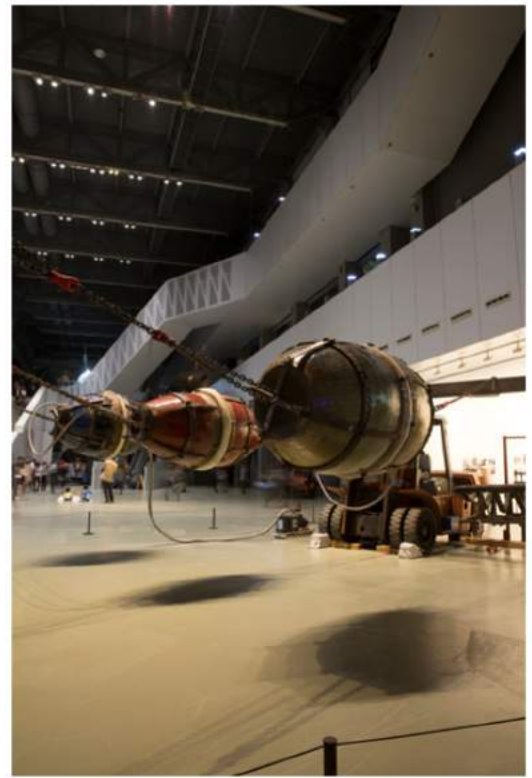
In the past, the Shanghai Biennale was a showcase for Chinese artists like Lee, exhibiting them alongside international art stars to elevate their status in the art world. This year however, the curators sought to abandon any East-West competition by incorporating artists from many countries at the periphery of the art world, drawing connections between artists from a variety of regions. Indian artists are particularly well represented. Indian director Moinak Biswas contributed *Across the Burning Track* (2016), a two-channel video that captures contemporary citizens watching a 1974 film set in the turmoil of 1970s Bengal, thereby adding a layer of complexity and pathos to the melodramatic original. Another take on India's upheavals in the 1970s is Rabin Mondal's "The King Series" (1975–77), with its surreal scenes of an impotent sovereign. Sabih Ahmed from Delhi adds a moving cross-cultural dialogue by creating an undulating wall installation consisting of tiny images of family albums, archives, and magazine covers from the contact sheets of a late Hong Kong itinerant photographer.

In addition to including Indian artists, this biennial breaks new ground by inviting many African artists to participate—a surprising decision, given China's incursions into many of those territories. Nigerian artist Olu Oguibe, who now lives in the United States, presents blocks of wood topped by tribal masks laid out across the floor like Egyptian sarcophagi. Georges Adéagbo created *The revolution and the revolutions...!*, an installation containing original paintings, newspapers, and ephemera picked up in Shanghai stalls, demonstrating how much of Africa can be found in China and vice versa.

But Chinese artists also make illuminating contributions to this dialogue. Echoing the poetic take on social issues found in many works here, *Disguise* (2015) by Yang Zhenzhong follows the slow movements of factory workers costumed in white theater masks, turning their daily routines into a silent opera. Liu Yujia's *Black Ocean* (2016) is a mesmerizing film focused on inhospitable oil fields in the Gobi Desert. Another work that could be interpreted as an equally polluted, desolate landscape (though it was made just as globalization was being introduced in China) is Wang Gongxin's historic *Dialogue*, (1995), a table brimming with black oily water that almost spills over as two blinking light bulbs take turns descending from the ceiling and touch its surface.

There is one work in the exhibition that is so terrible and so big that it almost steals the show. Titled *The Great Chain of Being—Planet Trilogy* (2016), the mammoth installation invites viewers to enter the fuselage of an airplane, which leads into a claustrophobic maze of rabbit holes reminiscent of a suburban haunted house. Created by Hangzhou theater director MouSen and his MSG project, it was funded by official government agencies, which may mean that the organizers had little choice in including it. Making up for this travesty is a condensed retrospective of Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo, whose videos are alternatively funny and harrowing as in the case of one where Galinda stands naked and motionless as a bulldozer digs a deep circle around her, leaving her on an inescapable island of sod in the middle of a field.

On the whole, the good works outnumber the mediocre ones, and that is quite a coup for an exhibition of this size, especially one at a state-run museum that must, all times, struggle with government interference. One work succinctly summarizes the themes of this show: Patty Chang's *The Wandering Lake* (2009–present), featuring a series of disjointed screens showing the artist washing the surface of a rusted boat, stranded in the desert at a site that once was a lake and caressing the carcass of a beached whale—both situations the result of global warming. Chang's role as handmaid to such shocking realities gently coaxes viewers to confront troubling aspects of the real world. Many of the other works in this exhibition do the same, employing spectacle while delivering a deeper meaning. The Chinese art scene surely benefits from such subtlety and grace, and for that, the curators of this year's Shanghai Biennale should be congratulated.



Sun Yuan & Peng Yu, *So Far*, 2016, two forklifts, three pair corks, and vacuum pump, installation view.

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Moinak Biswas, *Across the Burning Track*, 2016, two-channel video, installation view.

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MouSen+MSG, *The Great Chain of Being — Planet Trilogy*, 2016, experimental theatre space, videos, sound, objects, and bees, installation view.
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