



Performance view of Lee Mingwei, *Our Labyrinth*, 2015–, performance installation with rice, grains, seeds, costume, and dance.

11TH SHANGHAI BIENNALE

POWER STATION OF ART, SHANGHAI
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This past November, Shanghai's art season opened with a week of frenzied activity that comprised more than 60 events, all timed to coincide with the Shanghai Biennale, now in its eleventh edition. Among those events was the third iteration of the tony West Bund Art + Design Fair; the second Art021 art fair; a pop-up retail store opened by MadeIn Company (an "art

creation" concern whose only "product" is the artist Xu Zhen); the opening of blue-chip gallery ShanghART's new space in the up-and-coming West Bund art district; Martin Creed's performance at Qiao Zhibing's nightclub following the opening of Creed's solo show at Qiao Space; curators Hans Ulrich Obrist and Amira Gad's art salad of an exhibition combining New Zealand artist Simon

Denny's work with that of 11 China-based artists; and, per tradition, art dealer Pearl Lam's exclusive 66-seat dinner.

Opening while fair participants and attendees were still hungover from the previous night's parties in Shanghai's famous karaoke lounges, the Biennale, which occupied the entirety of the Shanghai Contemporary Art Museum (also known as Power Station of Art),



Olivier de Sagazan, *Transfiguration* (performance still), 2016, clay, paint, and hair residue.

moved the conversation in a very different direction from the commercially oriented ones between dealers and collectors. Curated by the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective and titled “Why Not Ask Again? Arguments, Counter-arguments, and Stories,” the exhibition was ominous and chaotic, and debuted one day after Donald J. Trump’s unexpected election to the presidency of the United States.

Since its founding in 1992 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Raqs—the name is an acronym for Rarely Asked Questions, as opposed to FAQs, or frequently asked questions—has played multiple roles in contemporary Indian culture. Raqs members are artists, film and theater producers, curators, and editors. Their projects

tend to be the result of collaboration—with architects, computer programmers, writers, and other professionals—and such was the case with their curating of the Biennale, one of Asia’s most prominent showcases for new art.

Site-specific installations, moving images, and theater prevailed in this exhibition, which reflected Raqs’s ongoing concern with geopolitics, the history of colonialism, and the individual in late capitalist society. The feeling of the show, in keeping with its title, was more meditative than confrontational.

That tone was set at the opening night’s performances: Lee Mingwei’s durational performance *Our Labyrinth* (2015), for which a dancer swept the floors of the galleries with a mixture of

grains, purifying a path for visitors; Aki Sasamoto’s *Delicate Cycle* (2016), which included such domestic objects as washing machines and bundles of clothing; and Olivier de Sagazan’s *Transfiguration* (2016), in which de Sagazan used clay, paint, and hair to transform himself into a shamanistic figure.

Raqs’s production had a more diversified lineup than previous, Chinese-centric iterations of the Biennale. There was a large helping of artists from South Asia, as well as artists from the Middle East and Africa. But, in keeping with Raqs’s ethos, there was also a local aspect—“Theory Opera” events put together by Liu Tian and Yao Mangxi, and “51 Personae,” an ongoing series of happenings coordinated by Chen Yun and the Dinghaiqiao

Mutual Aid Society—that engaged Shanghai’s society, cityscape, and history. There was a collaborative dimension as well, with seven “platform” exhibitions, each presented by a young curator from a different part of the world.

Four commissioned solo projects (or “terminals”), each representing a specific inspiration for, or influence on, Raqs’s methodologies, helped visitors navigate the exhibition, both physically and psychologically. The largest of these, *The Great Chain of Being-Planet Trilogy* (2016), realized by Chinese director Mou Sen and his MSG theater collective, occupied the museum’s entire second-floor atrium. Its title a reference to Liu Cixing’s popular sci-fi series, *Three-Body Problem*, a touchstone for Raqs’s show, the work is a massive theater space entered through a crashed airplane. In its mazelike interior, visitors encounter sinister recordings of political speeches, a beehive, and an imagined post-human environment. Additional projects by Croatian artist Ivana Franke, Regina José Galindo, from Guatemala, and Netherlandish artist Marjolijn Dijkman, represented perception, the body, and speculation on the future, respectively.

Moving image works ranged from surrealistic to documentary. On the first floor, Moinak Biswas’s two-screen video *Across the Burning Track* (2016), housed in a wedgelike structure designed by Berlin-based architects Nikolaus Hirsch and Michel Müller, reprised Bengali film director Ritwik Ghatak’s final movie, *Jukti Takko Ar Gappo* (Reason, Debate, and a Story), 1974. Ghatak’s original film, which provided the title for the exhibition, is autobiographical, telling the story of an intellectual (played by Ghatak) searching for meaning amid the political upheavals of 1970s West Bengal.

In Hangzhou-based artist Yang Zhenzhong’s five-screen video installation *Disguise* (2015), assembly-line workers wearing white masks based on their own features go about their usual tasks, but with their movements choreographed to read as ritualistic, rather than rote, transforming a dehumanizing activity into something bordering on the spiritual. In Tao Hui’s *Talk About Body* (2013), the



FROM TOP Performance view of Aki Sasamoto, *Delicate Cycle*, 2016, kinetic sculptures, washing machines, video, and performance. Rheim Alkadhi, *Night Taxi*, 2016, video and paper, infinite loop.

artist dresses as a young Muslim lady, describing herself in anthropological terms to an assembled audience. The Indian duo Desire Machine Collective’s video *Noise Life* (2008–14) employs ethnographic language to explore how we develop our self-image. Superflex’s humorous video *Exchange of Pigs and Bits* (2016), which

has a pig as narrator, uses the history of China and Denmark’s pig trade to demonstrate how different cultures can intersect in unexpected ways.

Projected onto folded cardboard, American artist Patty Chang’s poetic and politically charged moving-image work *The Wandering Lake* (2009) documents



Patty Chang, *The Wandering Lake* (detail), 2009–, cardboard installation with photographs and projections, dimensions variable, installation view.

Chang's search for the Wandering Lake of Xinjiang, a migrating body of water in the Chinese desert; her subsequent travel to the shrinking Aral Sea, which has lost 70 percent of its water as a result of Soviet irrigation projects; and her tracing of the course of the aqueduct that brings water from Southern China to Beijing. Along the way, she pumps her breast milk into cans, washes the corpse of a sperm whale, and pees into the aqueduct, connecting bodily functions with geopolitical forces. Travel also figures in Iraqi-American artist Rheim Alkadhi's *Night Taxi* (2016), a video loop of a taxi meter, showing the seconds before the vehicle arrives at a border crossing. In that moment,

according to a poem by the artist, "the world groans sideways . . . [and] our edges meet in unfamiliar gravity."

The exhibition abounded with opportunities for contemplation. One-named Chinese artist Nabuqi's sculpture of tiny street lamps, *Strange Views* (2016), cast shadows that seemed in tune with our dark times. Real events propel Mumbai-based Navjot Attaf's video *Soul Breath Wind* (2014), which explores the conflict between the local government and indigenous peoples in Chhattisgarh, India. Elsewhere, as in "The Indian Never Had a Horse and Other Poems" (2016), a recording of poems by Lebanese writer and artist Etel Adnan, history and geography lose their meaning entirely, becoming

ing disconnected points in space and time.

The overall message of "Why Not Ask Again" seemed to be that didactic, generalized, or dualistic thinking do not do justice to the full range of human experience. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently wrote about "a leadership class and an experience of globalization that is from the world of *Gesellschaft*: where systems are impersonal, rule based, abstract, indirect, and formal." Raqs appeared to counter this with a return to ethics, and the individual. Their biennial might finally be said to be itself a performance—a reflective, if not entirely reassuring, offering to the uneasy citizens of the world.

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