

are rhythmically swept over the smooth floor of the atrium into gentle arcs and then gathered back together in a tight round pile. The work turns labour into a graceful but pointless dance.

Everywhere you look there are proposals that reflect on the past as a flawed and redundant project. In *Empire of Light*, 2015, Marina Androsovich salvages old lamps and repairs them with concrete, suggesting a loss of faith in their crystal illumination; Susanne Kriemann's *Pechblend*, 2016, presents dim projections of miners' tools and equipment, jobless objects literally almost faded away; and Farzana Ahmed Urmi's paintings, 'Known Unknown; Gaza Series', 2014, are portraits of anonymous people semi-obliterated as if they are no longer relevant.

Shanghai's scale and kaleidoscopic diversity present a real challenge to the Biennale in seeking to make art topical, or even visible, in its host location. The massive Power Station of Art (PSA), the exhibition's primary venue and China's only state museum of contemporary art, is an insignificant vibration in the cultural dynamic of the megacity. Taxi drivers still shake their heads and reach for the satnav to deliver you there. 'Why Not Ask Again' has an almost even split of Asian and western artists and the event has a stab at answering some challenges, recently identified by Yongwoo Lee, that perturb biennale curators, 'why don't they collaborate with local communities more actively?' and 'is the biennale still the liveliest example of a working social medium, an avant-garde form of cultural activism?'. This Biennale intends to evolve through its run, generating new incident, or at least new counter-arguments and stories.

Despite strenuous developments over the past couple of years that have yielded more consolidated cultural offerings, there remains the sense that contemporary art in Shanghai is an elitist pursuit and that PSA is insulated and aloof from life. Cao Feile's project *51 Personae*, however, introduces a ripple of social practice to the spectacle and steps out of the institution. The project features 51 real-life scenarios over the duration of the Biennale: an audience joins with enthusiasts in various fields, be they street peddlers preparing food or sharpening knives, teams of arm wrestlers or delivery agents. The events are disseminated into a million pockets via the ubiquitous Chinese social-media platform WeChat.

Back at PSA the conditions are generalised and polarised, the detritus that can be gleaned from the past takes many forms. Hao Jingban's *Off Takes*, 2016, presents an affecting collage of found footage showing the burgeoning fashion for ballroom dance in Beijing. These are the scraps left from other documentary projects. The image quality, connoting memory, draws attention away from the dancers to the presence of the camera at specific historical moments. By contrast, Georges Adéagbo's *The revolution and the revolutions ...!*, 2016, brings together material artefacts that stand for an eclectic individual archive, only the collection is recent, accumulated from junk stores. The experience,

memorialised in these collected emblems, never happened. The material signs of memory endure when the people who cherished them have scattered.

The Shanghai Biennale suggests that the present and the past are many stories continuing to unfold. But for the future, it seems, it remains easier to envision disaster scenarios than to imagine change. ■

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## Kochi-Muziris Biennale: Forming in the pupil of an eye

various venues Kerala

12 December to 29 March

It is difficult to consider the 3rd Kochi-Muziris Biennale in Kerala, India without the context of the shock overnight demonetisation of the 500 and 1,000 rupee banknotes in November by right-wing prime minister Narendra Modi, leaving millions of ordinary Indians cashless and long lines at non-functioning ATMs for weeks. Also, the amazing distance the Biennale has travelled between its chaotic first edition and this slick and well-marketed and sponsored third edition. Almost the first thing you see when you enter the beautifully shaded Aspinwall House, part of the Biennale compound, is a working ATM. A masterstroke. It charges 200 rupees for the privilege of not queuing.

Hard marketing and outreach include stickers 'It's my biennale' on chai stands, 100 art-trained auto-rickshaw drivers (called 'Arto-rickshaws'), Student Biennale, Children's Biennale and 21 collateral exhibitions, including an 'outpost' of the Srishti Institute from Bangalore. Demonetisation, while causing untold misery, has been a boon to this Biennale's image. Winter tourism to Kerala bucketed sharply, many visitors swiftly changing their winter sun destinations to Thailand and Sri Lanka when they realised there was no money to be had. The Biennale has reversed this trend, contemporary art tourists being made of sterner stuff.

*Artforum* said of the first edition: 'Barely half installed, the exhibition was a wreck, a treasure hunt with no map and potentially no treasure either ... tilting toward despair in a wincing vision of shipping crates, stalled labour, discarded tools, half-cleared piles of trash and thoroughly despondent artists.' In fairness, the second edition, 'Whorled Explorations', fared much better. Curator Sudarshan Shetty has covered his bases in this third edition, 'Forming in the pupil of an eye', describing it as a 'hidden river' in progress and cleverly noting that absences would be 'part of it', but during the press preview things were



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**Aki Sasamoto**  
*Memo Random 2015*  
 performance



still being frantically finished. By opening day, however, there were only a few absences, notably that of the Scottish artist Charles Avery, whose work had been held up at customs in Bangalore. The Biennale has an admirable blanket policy of refusing to pay bribes, which apparently caused the delay

So what of the work? There were a number of devices that attempted to lead the viewer, from an entire novel stretching across the walls of the city by Sergio Chejfec in *Dissemination of a Novel*, to Abhishek Hazra's faux guided tours which invented fantastical back stories for each work in *Submergent Topologies*. Tracing 'new affinities', the walks 'parasitically consume the content of another artist's practice' and create 'slippage between fiction and fact'. With a mobile loudspeaker and dressed in semi-military gear, Hazra adopts the persona of a crazed pundit or Speakers' Corner visionary as he weaves between different works each day parsing ever more diverse and absurd narratives.

The same function is performed by Lundahl & Seidl's *Symphony of a Missing Room – An Imagined Museum*, continuing throughout the Biennale, in which members of the public are apparently led in pairs through the exhibits wearing sightless goggles and headphones. But the event is not all it seems. Either one or both of these pairs is a trained performer masquerading as a guide, using movement techniques to create an immersive experience for the other. In a Biennale which unashamedly draws on literature, poetry, music and theatre, it is also pleasurable to see how installations spring into life in performances, like Anamika Haksar's *Composition on Water*, a heady mix of fire, water and performance about the exclusion of the Dalit caste from fresh water and their resulting conversion to Buddhism.

Significant centrepieces include Bob Gransma's enormous hole and chunk of landscape with its archeological layers exposed in *riff off 01#16238* and Aleš Šteger's *The Pyramid of Exiled Poets*, a massive maze-like imaginary tomb 'populated' by a polyphonic experimental poem, referencing the pyramid of Khufu in Giza, Egypt. But the big talking point was AES-F's lavish *Inverso Mundus* in a spice warehouse and its controversial counterpoint *Défilé* in the main Aspinwall site. In the group's characteristically sumptuous manufactured

imagery, beautiful young actors in high-fashion garb invert the world: the poor give to the rich, women torture men and the rubbish collectors rule the world. Although AES-F has spoken against Vladimir Putin and the 'New Russia', it is clear that a section of the oligarchy loves these ageing subversives, judging by the scale of the sponsorship and resources they command. I was left with a slight feeling of distaste. But this feeling was counteracted by the audacity of *Défilé* – a simple photo display of startled people, again in high-fashion attire, some old, some young, all looking slightly zombified. I read the caption again and realised that these were recently dead people photographed from above shortly after death. How was this done legally – by bribes to the mortuary attendant? Artist Vivek Vilasini, who was in the first Biennale, himself no stranger to visual trickery, pointed out that the tradition of dressing the dead is not unusual and had these individuals given their permission then it could have been achieved. It is an open question whether this controversial depiction of the dead is more or less taboo here in India as opposed to some western cultures.

The other main talking point was Raúl Zurita's *Sea of Pain*, in which the viewer had to paddle through an expanse of seawater to read a poem about Galip Kurdi, the brother of the drowned Syrian boy Alan Kurdi. After the controversial action by Ai Weiwei in January 2016 in which he positioned himself in imitation of the photograph of the dead boy, one may feel artists have said enough here. However, this poem was about the five-year-old brother who appeared in no news photographs and the poem was hidden from view unless you walked through the water. The artist positions himself as 'a kind of father' to the dead boy, calling us to immerse ourselves in an almost religious fashion in the 'sea of pain' of the migration crisis. I heard a local member of the public trying to explain to his daughter – who of course was splashing joyfully through the water – what would drive people to leave their homes and risk their lives at sea.

Proof that this Biennale is indeed a river of ideas and an unfolding story comes with the numerous concurrent events, such as the high-profile Current Convening, a debate about the future of oceans which featured luminaries such