



Taipei Biennial 2016: Interview with Guest Curator Corinne Diserens

For five months, Taipei will be at the centre of the art discourses. This is not at all a new endeavour for a city whose Biennial has historically hosted the most important thinkers and cultural operators, from Nicolas Bourriaud (2014) to Nanjo Fumio (1998). The biennial has broadened Taiwan's artistic vision and its exposure to international media, quickly becoming the main symbol of Taiwan's contemporary art development and the epicenter of international artistic exchanges.

For this edition, the guest curator is French Corinne Diserens, former director of ERG, Brussels higher art and research academy, and of French and Italian modern and contemporary art museums. The title of the biennial is "Gestures and Archives of the Present, Genealogies of the Future: A New Lexicon for the Biennial" and comprises a program of exhibitions, performances, screenings, symposiums, conferences, and workshops.

The Taipei Biennial 2016 is reflecting on the big themes of memory, future and narration, with artists working around a question: what our present reality is made of?

TEXT: Naima Morelli



Corinne Diserens, Guest Curator of Taipei Biennial 2016. Courtesy of Taipei Biennial 2016

Among the wide spectrum of themes we see in this Biennial, an important topic is the role of museums as knowledge systems. What are the biggest challenges museums are facing today?

The sphere invested by the Biennial explores “performing the archives,” “performing the architecture,” and “performing the retrospective,” as well as artistic resonances, and it refers to a “space” from which we can address questions related to memory (as a question of the future), context, and narrative construction.

The Taipei Biennial 2016 gives considerable attention to the museum context, as Taipei Biennial has been organized by TFAM (Taipei Fine Arts Museum) for 20 years. It is the role of the museum to make use of its heritage and its multidisciplinary to serve as a major cultural player both locally and internationally, multiplying perspectives, reflecting on forms, and questioning their modes of presentation and reception in diversified contexts and networks of knowledge and experience sharing.

Today more than ever it is crucial that we address the question of the museum's role in a world in a state of rapid technological, economic, and social transition, where the conditions for the transmission of knowledge and experiences have changed significantly.

Heritage is a very strong element in designing the programming of trans-disciplinary temporary exhibitions (including performative modalities in the 20th and 21st centuries) and mechanisms engaging questions both historical and contemporary. The museum endeavors to generate potentials that activate dialogues, research, archives, experiments, and discussions in a multiplicity of experience modes, and to activate the power of art, to do justice to the event.

This edition of the Taipei Biennial aims to build a uniquely pan-Asian and Taiwan-specific vision, to promote exchanges in regional and international art circles. How will you articulate this dialogue?

The Biennial has invited Asian artists from different generations and contexts, from Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and East Asia to contribute to the exhibition, performance, screening, symposium, and conference programs. Some of the Taiwanese artists have been selected through the organization of an open call which gave me the possibility to meet young artists and be in contact with some artistic practices that I may not have encountered otherwise. It also generated rich discussions.

With the production and co-production of artworks from Asia, the biennial is a major actor supporting contemporary art. A number of Asian researchers and theorists among other international speakers are contributing to our symposiums and conferences programmed during the five months. History and theory are not being regarded as entities separate from art practices but, on the contrary, as necessary and inherent to any relevant project in today's artistic context.

"The Editorial," a critical editorial platform organized in collaboration with Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong and Vernacular, will look at the role and expanding network of independent art publishers in Asia.

Pen Sereypagna, Typology of Built-out Spaces, 2015, Analyzed drawing, Courtesy of Genealogy of Bassac

One of the references for your curatorial vision is David Graeber's book "*The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*." In the book, imagination is described as crushed and strangled by bureaucracy. Do you see bureaucracy permeating the art world as well?

How to formulate a coherent critique of institutional bureaucracy so that radical thought does not lose its vital center. How to neutralize the bureaucratic apparatus and the structural violence it produces, the machinery of alienation, the instruments through which the human imagination is smashed and shattered. These are questions explored by David Graeber.

It is through the sharing of common concerns and investigations that a number of artworks and research studies invited to contribute to the biennial resonate with Graeber's book. In pointing to what risks staying invisible when only archival bureaucratic handling of documents is at work, anti-archival gestures keep alive the collective, imaginary memory.

The so-called "art world" is not a "world" outside of social, political, economic, and institutional contexts and realities.

Graeber writes: "For much of the last century, the great revolutionary question has thus been: how does one affect fundamental change in society without setting in train a process that will end with the creation of some new, violent bureaucracy? Is utopianism the problem – the very idea of imagining a better world and the trying to bring it into being? Or is it something in the very nature of social theory? Or is the notion of revolution itself fundamentally flawed?"

He analyzes the history of a critique of bureaucracy starting from 19th-century liberalism, in middle-class circles in Europe in the wake of the French revolution to today's almost inexistent critique in relation to market theories. He underlines the fact that historically markets simply did not emerge as some autonomous domain of freedom independent of, and opposed to, state authorities. Exactly the opposite is the case.

Historically, markets are generally either a side effect of government operations, especially military operations, or were directly created by government policy. In this regard, I would like to refer the reader to He Dongsheng's monologue in the book *The Fat Years* by Chan Koonchung.

As Graeber's notes, this is an era of "total bureaucratization." What does it mean?

Bureaucracy has become the water in which we swim. We may no longer like to think about bureaucracy, yet it informs every aspect of our existence.

About social structures and the collapse of the old welfare states, Graeber states, "as the language of antibureaucratic individualism has been adopted, with increasing ferocity, by the Right, which insists on 'market solutions' to every social problem, the mainstream Left has increasingly reduced itself to fighting a kind of pathetic rearguard action, trying to salvage remnants of the old welfare state: it has acquiesced with—often even spearheaded—attempts to make government efforts more 'efficient' through the partial privatization of services and the incorporation of ever-more 'market principles', 'market incentives', and market-based 'accountability processes' into the structure of the bureaucracy itself.

The result is a political catastrophe. There's really no other way to put it. What is presented as the 'moderate' Left solution to any social problems—and radical left solutions are, almost everywhere now, ruled out tout court—has invariably come to be some nightmare fusion of the worst elements of bureaucracy and the worst elements of capitalism."

I am equally interested in Graeber's analysis about research development, looking at various factors, one being broadly political, having to do with conscious shifts after the Cold War and the Soviet/American competition in the allocation of research funding; the other bureaucratic, a change in the nature of the systems administering scientific and technological research. His critical view should inform the current development of artistic practice-based research PhD programs that have emerged in universities worldwide.

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Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator with a focus on contemporary art from the Asia Pacific region.

She has written for ArtsHub, Art Monthly Australia, Art to Part of Culture and Escape Magazine, among others, and she is the author of "Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione" a book focused on the

development of contemporary art in Indonesia. As a curator, her practice revolves around creating meaningful connections between Asia, Europe and Australia.