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Gwangju Biennale and Taipei Biennial

VARIOUS VENUES

Philip Tinari

IT HAS BECOME A COMMONPLACE to note that the fundamental tension of the biennial is between the local and the global, perhaps nowhere more than in the democratized reaches of East Asia, where such exhibitions were introduced in the 1990s, aiming both to examine regional culture and to propel their host nations into the international art world. But this initial impulse has recently matured. Gwangju (founded in 1995 in the dedicated Biennale Park to commemorate the casualties of the 1980 student uprising that upended the South Korean dictatorship) and Taipei (initiated as a series of periodic surveys launched as martial law there was ending, morphing in 2000 into a show curated by a foreign and Taiwanese duo, and moving onward to a single-author model with the 2012 edition), by now the most prominent and consistent examples of such exhibitions, have become durable institutions, tracking recent shifts in the broader geopolitical, informational, and commercial landscapes, exploring timely aesthetic questions, and creating organic artistic dialogues. They also boast major audiences: Gwangju this year attracted visitors in numbers that rival Documenta and the Venice Biennale.

That is the deep background to this year's complementary editions of Gwangju and Taipei, Jessica Morgan's

"Burning Down the House" and Nicolas Bourriaud's "The Great Acceleration." Morgan borrowed her title from the Talking Heads' anthem (itself inspired by George Clinton and P-Funk), framing her show as an exploration of "the process of conflagration and transformation, a cycle of obliteration and renewal." Morgan used this focus on fire as a way to advance an aesthetic agenda while looking at "the efforts made by contemporary artists to address personal and public issues through individual and collective engagement." It also allowed her to engage with the thematic of memory and history in transitional societies, Gwangju's perennial subtext.

Bourriaud twisted political economist Karl Polanyi's famous thesis about the triumph of capitalism, *The Great Transformation* (1944), into a meditation on the Anthropocene. In a world already irreparably remade by human impact, Bourriaud argues, "the relationship between the living and the inert has become the main tension of contemporary culture." This framing offered an effective conceit to pull an exhibition entirely away from older shades of identity politics that have so often prevailed in Asian biennials. It also allowed Bourriaud to articulate a relationship between his earlier and current interests, between relational aesthetics and the so-called post-Internet: The coming crisis asks us to "rethink and renegotiate our relational universe and reconsider the role of art"; the artists who do that most effectively are those who "live within the technosphere, as if it were a second ecosystem."

Both exhibitions opened with bold moves. Morgan's exhibition greeted visitors with graphic wallpaper from the design firm El Ultimo Grito, in which monochromatic pixelations of a smoky scene ran throughout the Biennale Hall, instantly if provisionally muting the tired problematics of the white cube. From there Jack Goldstein's *Burning Window*, 1977–2002, flowed poignantly into Lee Bul's endurance work *Abortion*, 1989, projected among a series of soft sculptures. In the following rooms an assemblage of burned works teased out valences of the titular theme:

Camille Henrot's *Augmented Objects*, 2010, found and coated in tar and clay; Rosemarie Trockel's glazed ceramic "O-Sculptures"; and Cornelia Parker's charred fragments of trees from a fire in a Florida forest, *Heart of Darkness*, 2004, to name just a few. These fed into larger rooms where extended tableaux such as Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz's political dystopia *The Ozymandias Parade*, 1985, and Jane Alexander's processional of animal-

Some of the most powerful works on view in each exhibition were those that thoughtfully probed the collisions of history, geography, and culture that define the biennial format itself.

headed figures, *Infantry with Beast*, 2008–10, gave voice to some of the show's more social concerns.

Bourriaud chose to open with a grand overture, a sweeping open hall prefaced by Inga Svala Thórsdóttir and Wu Shanzhuan's *Thing's Right(s) Declaration*, 1994, an article-by-article copy editor's proof of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with *human* replaced by *thing* and an elaborate series of equivalencies suggested. It set up one question basic to Bourriaud's theme: Where is the line between animate and inanimate, and how do nonliving objects mediate human subjectivity? Farther inside, Haegue Yang's totemic rack sculptures played off decades of hitherto-unknown *Sterling Ruby* collages and the grace notes of Marlie Mul's strikingly quotidian sand-and-resin *Puddles*, 2014, massage sculptures by Henrot (again), and the late French-Japanese experimentalist Tetsumi Kudo's ecologically driven assemblages. Each of these works gestures toward the biomorphic or broken down, and each is a postapocalyptic vision of the degraded materials, machines, and bodies of the Anthropocene.



From left: Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, *The Ozymandias Parade*, 1985, mixed media. Installation view, Biennale Hall. From the Gwangju Biennale. Photo: Stefan Altenburger. Marlie Mul, *Puddle (Black Grit)* (detail), 2013, sand, resin, plastic, 36 1/4 x 32 1/2 x 3/4". From the Taipei Biennial. *Sterling Ruby, Stoves*, 2014, stainless steel. Installation view, Biennale Hall. From the Gwangju Biennale. Photo: Stefan Altenburger.

