The Interscale
Art after Neoliberalism

Brian Holmes

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Now that neoliberalism seems to be in decline, Brian Holms wonders what this will mean for the emergence of Asian biennials. In reference to the concept of the sixth Taipei Biennial – undeniably a neoliberal stronghold – and a few of the works of art presented there, he discovers possibilities to imbue this transcontinental exchange with new meaning on various scale levels.

You enter a typical white cube, with four evenly spaced rectangles on the wall in front of you. One is an ordinary window looking at the world outside. Another is a video monitor with a recording of the view. The two remaining screens oscillate between bright colours – pink, blue, yellow – and scenes of a woman's hands with polished red fingernails, deliberately cutting out pieces of some black plastic material. There is a soundtrack: ambient bustle, as though you were waiting for an office worker to pick up a dangling phone. Words appear on the screen: *So, I just want to know about uncertainty … and knowledge … and if everything can be calculated and known?* And now you begin to hear a voice, speaking about mathematical models and what insurance agents do for a living. 'The less we know, the higher the risk. Risk always has a price, of course,' explains a specialist. The work, *Estimations* (2008) by Katya Sander, is a series of disembodied conversations with anonymous interlocutors, about the calculability of disaster and its uncertainties. [1]

Outside the window, a typhoon lashes the distant trees. The woman's hands assemble a black box with four rectangular windows: a scale model of the room you're in. Halfway around the world, on Wall Street, a financial maelstrom topples a huge investment bank, then threatens the insurance giant AIG. Its derivatives unit, located in the City of London, had specialized in credit-default swaps: sophisticated mathematical models assembled in the black box of a computer, to hedge against the risks of equally sophisticated mathematical models.

The Sixth Taipei Biennial, curated by Manray Hsu and Vasif Kortun, was a show of political art from around the world, including a core group of directly activist works. The exhibition focused on 'a constellation of related issues arising from neo-liberal capitalist globalization as seen in Taipei and internationally'. I arrived on 12 September, amid the first gales of the typhoon. The following day all the public buildings in the city were closed for the storm, and the panel on the present situation of international biennials was cancelled. The Internet was full of stories about Lehman Brothers, which collapsed that weekend, and AIG, which went into government receivership just a few days later. Our cancelled panel was held that evening in the lobby of the hotel, with the artists and the curators, plenty of free-flowing drink and gusts of rain that kept blowing through the swinging glass door. 'We came here for an exhibition about neoliberalism,' I said as an opener. 'But that Utopia is over! Neoliberalism is dead. Now we have to wake up to the world of regions.' Controversy ensued until late in the night, a fantastic discussion in the

eye of the storm. What I'd like to do here is to revisit that glimpse of the past and the future.

Gilded Era

What exactly *was* neoliberalism? Projected on an entire wall, Mieke Gerritzen's typographic film *Beautiful World* (2006) served as a manifesto for the Taipei Biennial. It's a hilarious piece of graphic nihilism. One scene shows the continents merging into a compact mass, what the geographers call 'Pangaea'. For the Dutch designer, neoliberalism is the Transcendent Blender that makes the world one. In another sequence the theme of *Jesus Christ, Superstar!* rings out against rows of famous faces, spinning around like fruits in a slot machine: King Tut, John Wayne, George Bush, Bin Laden, Hu Jintao, the Dalai Lama, Grace Jones, the Mona Lisa … It all lines up on Mickey in the end. Elsewhere in the film, a block of text displays these shifting statements: 'Religion: In God We Trust / Politics: In Formation We Trust / Economics: Information We Trust.' But that last holy dogma has finally come into question.

Neoliberalism was a reformulation of classical economic liberalism after the Great Depression and the Second World War. The keywords were global currencies, free trade, direct foreign investment and financial markets. What it was *not* about was sovereign nations. In a brilliant study, David Westbrook shows how the architects of the Bretton-Woods accords in 1944, then of the European Economic Community in the 1950s, set out to establish a system of purely financial governance that would make the peoples of the world interdependent, thus rendering the national rivalries of the two World Wars obsolete. It was supposed to be the end of history. The tools of the transformation were complex monetary treaties, deliberately impenetrable to all but specialists. The result, after 30 years of work in the shadows, would be a far-flung community of bankers, brokers, corporations, regulators and private investors, equipped with the latest communications devices and able to determine the outcome of world affairs by decisions that always made them money. Westbrook calls this transnational polity the 'City of Gold'.[2]

The constitution of the City accelerated in the 1970s, when post-war investment barriers were broken down and floating exchange rates were introduced between major currencies. The deregulation affected America itself, though it remained at the centre of the system. Around this time two significant things occurred. One was that Western bankers began to recycle excess capital – particularly petrodollars – into Third World loans for gigantic modernization projects that very often failed. The International Monetary Fund stepped in to impose its austerity plans, effectively taking over governments in exchange for more lending. Meanwhile in Latin America, dictatorships arose to destroy socialist development programs, in order to open the borders for capital investment from the USA. When the governance of the City emerged in broad daylight, it did not appear as a glittering tower on a hill, but instead as poverty from the barrel of a gun. Neoliberalism was first perceived as a nightmare.

After 1989, the City of Gold provoked some very different changes. The end of the Communist system opened borders, not just to money and goods but to vast flows of people. Free trade and foreign direct investment became the drivers of development, alleviating poverty for hundreds of millions. At the same time the Internet emerged, extending to the global middle classes the kind of communications that had formerly been reserved for denizens of the City. Travel costs dropped, migrant workers were hired everywhere, tourism became commonplace and millions of people began dreaming of a better life in a brand new world. The violence of the early years – which hadn't necessarily ceased – merged together with its dreamlike opposite, producing the postmodern paradoxes of Mieke Gerritzen's film. Neoliberalism had become a kind of Utopia. Its happy isles were the global cities. And this is where the biennials came in.

Single Language

The perfect image of the global biennial was developed decades ago by the British group Archigram, in the comic-strip *Instant City* (1970). [3] A link is made between a sleepy Town Hall and the local IC headquarters. Together they call for a specially outfitted airborne zeppelin. Equipment and people pour out of the heavens, the central square becomes a theatre, the sky becomes an open-air cinema. The event reaches its peak with the artistic and commercial saturation of the town. When the zeppelin leaves and the hubbub subsides, the town has been turned into a permanent media spectacle and the InfoCenter sports an immense new antenna, connecting it to an urban network. Of course this same networking procedure applies to a football championship, a trade fair, an IMF summit or – as Archigram would have it – a rodeo.

The naked opportunism of urban promoters using art to put themselves on the world map has brought serious critique, accusing global biennials of cultural imperialism. In a memorable text, Elena Filipovic claimed that despite their mandate to represent a specific place, and despite their inherent differences from museums in terms of funding, organization and temporality, biennials have not created a new context for artistic practice in the processual life of culturally specific urban environments, as the curator Carlos Basualdo had hoped. Instead, what they have done is to 'show artworks in specially constructed settings that replicate the rigid geometries, white partitions, and windowless spaces of classical museum exhibitions'. In short, the globalization of the Western white cube. [4] This is the kind of frankly polemical critique that makes you immediately want to disagree. But first let's translate it into the grammar of neoliberalism.

David Westbrook points out that across the world, the inhabitants of the City of Gold speak a single language, which is the language of money. Unlike Chinese, English or Swahili it has only a few words, one for each asset you can invest in. And unlike the vocabulary of a common tongue, these asset-words are in necessarily short supply: you can't just freely exchange them with your neighbour. What's more, the only thing these words can 'say' is that they are fractions or multiples of each other. Yet their owner can exchange them for anything that a market can offer. Under the laws of the City, the language of money is of strictly private significance: it means nothing for society at large, but for the individual it means everything. Is there not some resemblance to the abstracted artwork, open to infinite interpretations within the neutral environment of the white cube? Has contemporary art not been the perfect vector of accession to the neoliberal economic system, precisely because of its undecidability of meaning and its freedom from traditional authority?

The condition of the work in the global biennial should also be seen from the viewpoint of the artist. It partakes of the scalar relationship between black box and white cube, as in *Estimations* by Katya Sander. This is a relation between the global and the local, or more precisely, between computerized abstraction and the intimacy of experience. The work commissioned by the biennial is projected from elsewhere, beamed down from worldwide circulation into the actual space of exhibition. The location is a black box for the artist, whose real conditions she must estimate: the only thing she knows is a set of measurements, an abstract model. This void must be filled with a calculus of possible meanings. As Westbrook points out, to ease their anxieties about the possibility of future earnings, investors require legal and institutional conditions as close as possible to their environments of origin. Thus, in art, the demand for the security of the white cube. But another scalar relationship continually threatens this contract, which is the collapse of the global into irremediable intimacy. What if the situation proves incalculable? What if the model breaks down? What if the risk of the real intrudes through an open window?

Cracks in Pangaea

One way to understand the ambiguities of art in the global biennials is to consider an installation like *We Are All Errorists* (2008) by the Internacional Errorista. The work is composed of over three dozen standing figures made from photocopies of media images pasted onto hinged black backings and held up by thin wooden struts: you see artists, intellectuals, journalists, politicians and above all protesters, most of them with a flag or a word-balloon expressing a reflection, joke or slogan. There is much self-satire in this artistic representation of a demonstration in a museum: the original Spanish title, *Gente Armada*, refers not only to the arms that some figures carry, but also to their condition as fakes or set-ups. But the real question is this: would any visitor recognize these figures as references to the Argentinian insurrection of 19-20 December 2001 – the first popular revolt against neoliberal globalization?

Of course, Taiwan also has its own political culture, marked in recent times by massive protests. On opening night the president had to offer a humorous remark about the need for revolt in a good exhibition – a touchy subject for an incoming leader who has already seen so many people in the streets. One could conclude that the image of protest, neutralized in a museum, is more comforting to politicians than the real thing. In an interview with Jacques Rancière, the artist Fulvia Carnevale suggests exactly that: 'As soon as there are political subjects that disappear from the field of actual politics, that become obsolete through a number of historical processes, they are recuperated in iconic form in contemporary art.' [5] But one could also radicalize the interesting series of answers that Rancière gives to this line of questioning, by saying: these iconic images condense memories of historical experiences, which are latent in societies and can always suddenly spring back into reality, as living inspirations for new political forms. The question then becomes: how can such latencies travel over the immense cultural gaps separating Taiwan and Argentina?

The *Errorist* figures are self-consciously two-dimensional representations of the popular response to an immense crisis which closed all the banks and halted most economic activity in Argentina for a period of a year, in 2002. Similar crises have torn the fabric of daily life in countries scattered across the earth, with increasing frequency since the global implementation of neoliberal policies after 1989. The largest and most significant for the countries of Asia – but also for Russia, the former Eastern Europe and Brazil – came in 1997-1998 in the form of a currency and stock-market crisis that devastated economies and led to a change of regime in Indonesia, with ongoing consequences of poverty and seething revolt. With each of these crises, the utopian image of neoliberal globalization is shattered for millions of people, and elements of the historical past – the 'nightmare' to which I referred earlier – filter back into waking awareness in the form of intense scepticism, anger and desire for another life. It is under these conditions that global biennials, particularly from 1998 onwards (but much earlier in some places) became hybrid social vehicles, dominated by the standardized trappings of the world-class cultural event, but also traversed by artists, curators, critics and visitors seeking some other reality than the City of Gold. Each of these people – consciousness, sensibility and expression – embodies a break in the 'one world network' of the transcontinental financial order. Cracks in Pangaea.

The particularity of the Sixth Taipei Biennial was to exemplify this ambiguous status of political desire within one of the showcase institutions of the neoliberal city. Consider, for example, a performance-based work on the borderline of activism such as *Backpacks* (2006-2008) by Nasan Tur. These are portable kits of materials for public speaking, demonstrating, cooking, sabotage and fan-worship, to be appropriated by interested people in each place of exhibition. We know that such works are primarily performance concepts, used at each site by artist-friends under relatively controlled conditions for the production of the videos that accompany the work. Yet these pieces also express a

subversive youth and student culture, constructed around casual mobility within a far-flung support network and open to quick politicization, which has worried authorities since the 1960s. What is the message: neutralization in the museum, or the continuing spread of a culture of disobedience?

Consider *Welfare State / Smashing the Ghetto* (2006) by the group Democracia: a more spectacular and disturbing work of political art, which consists of a four-screen video projection showing the real destruction of a Roma settlement on the edge of Madrid by men in bulldozers backed up by the police, while cell-phone sporting yuppies stand applauding and cheering on bleachers built specially for the occasion. The piece can be read as the ultimate cynicism, since you, the spectator, are also invited to watch this event on specially built bleachers, where you can enjoy the thrill of other people's pain and gaze with fascination each time the camera zooms in on a glitter-trash graffiti tag reading 'Democracia'. What is the message: the social insignificance of the artistic signifier, or a forceful restatement of the critique of capitalist democracy by a philosopher like Alain Badiou?

Open questions like those above typically define the limits of acceptability for political art in public exhibitions. This is why it was a relief, in Taipei, to see a special section entitled 'A World Where Many Worlds Fit', curated by videomaker Oliver Ressler and including 14 artist-activists who formed part, in one way or the other, of the counter-globalization movement. They were able to help create a very different kind of 'Instant City': carnivalesque protests and critical counter-summits at the sites of international meetings where global policy is set. The shared experience of engaged cultural producers gave rise to a museum presentation that did not pretend to be a 'direct action kit', but instead offered a wealth of insights, techniques, images, knowledge and reflection to any visitor involved in radical social activism, or simply curious to know how it's done. There was an interesting atmosphere of self-questioning among this group – to which I belong, in reality – due to the feeling that our movement passed its peak a few years ago. Yet even as these doubts were expressed, events in the financial markets were vindicating every criticism that had ever been voiced in the chaos of the carnivalesque protests. Outside the museum door, the City of Gold seemed to be dissolving into its own empty equations.

Towards the World of Regions

What happened in the weeks that followed the bankruptcy of Lehman and the bailout of AIG? The keyword is panic: a sudden retreat to private self-interest, when world-spanning networks of confidence collapse to the scale of frightened individuals. Rather than global institutions with a robust rationality and an embodied sense of history, banks, insurance brokers and hedge-funds revealed their incapacity to admit basic realities, such as precarious workers who cannot pay their debts or housing markets that fall instead of rising. Apparently there were no words for such events in their impoverished vocabularies.

No one knows what the geopolitical consequences of this meltdown will be. But since the crisis was largely due to the overinvestment of Asian funds in corrupted American markets, the global claims of US-centred capital networks will undoubtedly decline, and humiliating retreats from both Iraq and Afghanistan could even trigger a new period of American isolationism. Chinese self-assertion and a stronger pattern of regional exchanges is likely to emerge in East Asia, following on the construction of the Eurozone and the more recent Latin American convergence (UNASUR). If the continents tended to merge together over the last 30 years, they may now start drifting apart again. The question in our circles is what will art – and 'global biennials' – be able to achieve at the regional scale?

It was surprising to see such a small number of Asian artists at the Taipei Biennial (which

in that respect was very much a 'global' exhibition). Yet there was some striking work from the region, for example a series of lightbox photographs entitled *Maid in Malaysia* (2008) by Wong Hoy-Cheong, installed in a busy subway station. These staged images evoke a social phenomenon that is also common to Taiwan and Hong Kong, namely the massive presence of Filipino and Indonesian women as in-person servants, clean-up workers and 'massage girls'. 'For US$200 a month,' reads the faux-advertisement introducing the series, 'you will never have to worry about your family and home again.' The prejudices of Western and perhaps also Chinese viewers are overturned as dark-skinned, upper-class Malaysian children are shown in the company of fair-skinned Filipino maids, transformed into extravagant superheros! At last the artworks had left the white cube, to directly engage with the urban territory.

What was really missing in Taipei, however, was a self-organized group of Asian activist-artists to dialogue with the constellation of counter-globalists who had come together around the street demonstrations. The powerful social movements of Indonesia and Thailand were invisible in the show, undoubtedly because the kinds of mediation between militancy and aesthetic practice that exist in Europe and Latin America have not yet been recognized in the corporate boomtowns of Asia. How can critical artistic production develop in a fragmented region, still deeply in thrall to Anglo-American models and now influenced by the trends of authoritarian Chinese society, with all its subtle and explicit prohibitions? Yet there is a potential here for entirely original activist art forms, as witnessed in the film *Promised Paradise* (2006) by Dutch-Indonesian director Leonard Retel Helmrich, which follows the shadow-puppeteer Agus Nur Amal as he interpellates startled passers-by with *dalang*-style chanted speech, asking them piercing questions about incidents of terrorist bombing in the archipelago. **6** These kinds of productions require serious cultural translation. But only when people have intensely local stakes to lay on the table can there be any real communication between the historical languages, which, unlike money and its mathematical derivatives, convey a typically human excess of meaning.

In addition to regional articulations, the question of transcontinental exchange outside neoliberal frameworks could take on a whole new importance in the future. When one recalls that the Bretton-Woods construction was forged against the dangers of bellicose nationalism as it had emerged in the crisis years of the 1930s, the cultural responsibility implied by this prospect becomes clear. What is needed, if we are to be precise and also bold, is a keen artistic awareness of the multiplicity of scales: from the intimate to the global, by way of the urban, the national and the regional, each of which has its own codes and contradictions, yet all of which continually intertwine under current conditions. Art can explore the relations between these scales, as a way of learning to live with their intersections and clashes. The multipolar world that seems likely to emerge is surely preferable to the neoliberal regime of continuous crisis, and to the collapse of abstract globalism into panic and self-interest. But the retreat from the global order could also lead to dangerous intra- and inter-regional conflicts. If transcontinental biennials have any *raison d'être* in the present, it may lie in a subtle apprenticeship of the interscale.

Inspiration comes from the Slovenian group IRWIN. Years ago, their *East Art Map* pointed beyond the non-places of the City of Gold, by way of a large-scale, long-term participatory project that aims to reveal the artistic latencies of the phantom region of former Eastern Europe. **7** IRWIN is part of the Neue Slowenische Kunst movement and is the founder of a transnational state, the *nsk State in Time*. The exhibition in Taipei provided an occasion to install an NSK passport office and to ask Taiwanese applicants what such a document could mean to them. Their responses and similar interviews were exhibited in a video archive about NSK state citizenship, with a particular focus on the tremendous boom in passport requests from Nigeria. Was it a simple misunderstanding, or an aspiration to a new state of transnationality in the twenty-first century? The activities of IRWIN offer the

example of an intimate circle of long-term friends, maintaining a territorial inscription in the city of Ljubljana while exploring national, regional and global destinies through the languages of art and the careful practice of cultural translation.

When the typhoon subsided, Manray Hsu and I went out to see the project by Lara Almárcegui, *Removing the Wall of a Ruined House. Qidong Street. Tapei 2008*. The single-story Japanese colonial dwelling, forgotten behind its mouldering wall, had been exposed for a few days to the gaze of passing neighbours. By the time we arrived, it had collapsed into a chaotic jumble of stones and broken planks, utterly destroyed by the storm. The question that arises before such a historical ruin is this: Do you rebuild it as a monument to its own terminal decay – or imagine something better?

Brian Holmes is a cultural critic living in Paris and Chicago. He holds a doctorate in Romance Languages and Literatures from the University of California at Berkeley, was a member of the editorial collective of the French journal *Multitudes* from 2003 to 2008, and has published a collection of texts on art and social movements entitled *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms: Essays in Reverse Imagineering* (New York: Autonomedia, 2007). His book *Escape the Overcode: Activist Art in the Control Society* is available in full at brianholmes.wordpress.com. Holmes was awarded the Vilém Flusser Prize for Theory at Transmediale in Berlin in 2009.

Footnotes

1. Documentation of this work, and of all those successively mentioned, can be found along with complete information about the Sixth Taipei Biennial at http://www.taipeibiennial.org.
2. David Westbrook, *City of Gold: An Apology for Global Capitalism in a Time of Discontent* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
3. The work, not included in the show, is reproduced in most retrospective catalogues of Archigram.
4. Elena Filipovic, 'The Global White Cube', in: Filipovic and Barbera Vanderlinden (eds.), *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Roomade/MIT Press, 2005).
5. Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, 'Art of the Possible', interview with Jacques Rancière, *Artforum* XLV, no. 7 (March 2007).
6. The film was not included in the show and has not yet been distributed in English. It can be viewed with Dutch subtitles at http://www.hollanddoc.nl/dossiers/34452838.
7. IRWIN, *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (Afterall Books, 2006), as well as http://www.eastartmap.org.

Tags

Art Discourse, Capitalism