

10th Taipei Biennial

Taipei Fine Arts Museum,
Taiwan



It would take someone better versed than I in Foucauldian notions of genealogy to parse for you curator Corinne Diserens's title for the tenth Taipei Biennial. 'Gestures and Archives of the Present, Genealogies of the Future: A New Lexicon for the Biennial' takes place across two floors of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (with one work offsite at Taipei Artist Village) and includes contributions by more than 74 artists from over 20 countries. The exhibition's three structuring methodologies – performing the archive, performing the architecture and performing the retrospective – shed a little light on the theme, with their treble insistence on the activation of histories, spaces and biographies that have been hitherto overlooked

(or, at least, looked at askance). It's a show seeking to find new ways to tell old stories: a recuperative curatorial teleology that Dieter Roelstraete, in his eponymous 2009 essay, astutely (and not uncritically) called 'The Way of the Shovel'.

The hope – and it is almost always misplaced – is that a different way of looking at the past might lead us to a better future. However, if the works in this sober and rather austere biennial attest to anything, it is mankind's repeated failure to learn from our mistakes. The litany of human-on-human tragedy is enacted literally in one of the show's most striking pieces. *Citizen's Forest* (2016) – a half-hour, black and white film by [Park](#)

[Chan-kyong](#) – tracks a ghostly procession of victims of modern Korean tragedies, including the 1894 Donghak rebellion, the 1950–53 war and the 1980 Gwangju uprising, through a tranquil forest: the thickets of collective amnesia.

Sovereignty and subjugation are insistent themes here, whether political, economic or physical – or, in the case of Chen Chieh-jen's compelling project *Realm of Reverberations* (2014–16), at the interstices of all three. Four contemplative black and white films play in parallel to tell – obliquely, movingly – the story of Taipei's Losheng Sanatorium. Built in 1929, during the Japanese colonial period, to house victims of Hansen's disease (leprosy), in the 1990s, the site was acquired by the city's

Department of Rapid Transit Systems to construct a depot. This has necessitated the eviction of the sanatorium's hundred-or-so inhabitants, many of whom were forcibly institutionalized as children or young adults. (In one of the videos, sombre portraits of the residents on mobility scooters are accompanied by their names and the year in which they were admitted to Losheng; the earliest date I noted was 1942.) After many years of protest by a self-organized residents' group, along with students and other solidarity movements, at the time Chen's project began in 2014, 70 percent of the complex had been demolished. Hansens's victims are pariah figures *par excellence*, and Losheng's doubly so – a colony within a colony – and Chen's film demonstrates how those on the periphery can act as a society's conscience. It's also a film about temporal disjunction: the outmoded term 'leper', with its attendant stigma, is avoided as anachronistic. The remaining residents, who cannot walk unaided, are displaced to facilitate mass, high-speed transit: a powerful, literal metaphor (one of many in this exhibition) for the advance of modernity and those it leaves behind.

Where once there were colonizing national powers, now we face the implacable empire of globalized, or globalizing, capital. This was the precondition for 'The Great Acceleration' – Nicolas Bourriaud's speculative, future-oriented 2014 Taipei biennial, in many ways the antipode of the current exhibition – and it recurs here. In the ground-floor foyer, a presentation of drawings and documents relating to Cambodian architect Pen Sereyphagna's *Genealogy of Bassac* (2014–ongoing) and *The Vann Molyvann Project* (begun in 2009, with assistance from an international group of architects, students and researchers) charts the evolving cityscape of Phnom Penh. In particular, it documents historical buildings designed by Vann Molyvann – the foremost exponent of Cambodian modernism or 'new Khmer architecture' – in the first decades following the country's independence in 1953. Having endured a *coup d'état*, the cataclysmic years of the Khmer Rouge and subsequent occupation by the Vietnamese, many of Vann's buildings are now at risk of demolition through rapacious urban development – a story playing out in cities the world over. (On the floor above, an installation by Seoul-based Minouk Lim, which fills its own cave-like room, contains works that map the soon-to-be-demolished contours of urban sites through linoleum and latex. In the artist's hands, these take on the eerie animism of shed snakeskins or religious relics: ghostly communions with dead spaces.)

Realm of Reverberations' themes of protest, failure and the unevenness of modernity recur in the work with which it bookends the ground-floor galleries. Vincent Meessen's excellent film installation, *Un. Deux. Trois* (One. Two. Three), was made for the Belgian pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, but is shown here to much greater effect on three large screens, in darkness and with surround sound. The film revolves around a lost protest song, composed by the Congolese situationist Joseph M'Belolo Ya

M'Piku in May 1968, which is re-created with the help of a group of young female musicians. As M'Belolo narrates to camera his involvement with the situationist international and the aspirations that drove the group, the women meander through the empty passages of *Un Deux Trois* – one of the famous Kinshasa nightclubs formerly run by the Congolese musician Franco Luambo – on a musical *dérive*, improvising a melody as they go. This is a dense video with sticky themes: bloodshed and failed revolution, colonial legacy, the queasy complicity of art and power (Luambo was a friend of the infamously kleptocratic dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, until they fell out and Luambo was forced into exile) and Western stereotypes of African culture, which it plays both with and against. It is also, unlike many of the works here, somehow hopeful: the song can be written anew; the show will go on.

Though elegantly installed and paced, the biennial tends, in palette as in tone, towards the monochrome – a fact that perhaps has something to do with the old situationist aversion to spectacle. The whole exhibition is tinged with a lingering infatuation, still prevalent in French academia, with the politics of 1968 – a leftism that now feels outmoded, if not unattainable. At one point in *Un. Deux. Trois*, M'Belolo declares: 'The word "revolution" is not outdated.' It's a quaint thought with which to conclude a summer of biennials that began in Berlin with

a show that was celebratorily capitalist-realist. The revolution may yet be coming but – in Europe and North America, at least – it seems more likely to stem from the populist right and looks scarily close to regression.

A case in point: the first work visitors to the Taipei Biennial encounter comprises piles of printed booklets (20,000 in total), containing images of *39 Strike Objects* (2016), by French artist Jean-Luc Moulène. Each photograph shows a modified product made by striking French workers between the 1970s and '90s, accompanied by a short text in Chinese and English. They are fascinating objects and beautiful images – and the piece sets the tone for a biennial that requires a lot of reading. But its placement here is curious and the nostalgia it evokes for the heyday of Western industry and post-'68 worker solidarity is jarring. The irony, of course, is that many of the jobs so bitterly fought for and painfully lost in France, as across the West, moved to the Far East: to the extent that 'Made in Taiwan' sounds very much like the funeral dirge for Western manufacturing. Taiwan, which was ruled under martial law until the late 1980s, has no history of a strong trade-union movement. Installed so prominently here, the work reads ambiguously: on a sliding scale from provocation to patrician pedagogy, or perhaps, more simply, a symptom of the periodic contextual oversight that can afflict international biennial curators.

Another blind spot: in an exhibition so focused on regional histories and colonial legacies, it seems odd that, in contrast to the 34 Taiwan-based artists, the biennial includes no work by artists from mainland China. Taiwan's hugely complex and uneasy quasi-colonial relationship with the People's Republic is the factor that will, perhaps more than any other, shape the island's future: that this has gone unacknowledged feels like a notable omission. When asked, Diserens explained to me that she had felt that she had insufficient time, in preparing the biennial, to adequately research the extensive and established Chinese contemporary art scene. 'But,' she told me, 'China is everywhere [in the show]. The question, always: when to put the shovel down?'

AMY SHERLOCK

1
Park Chan-kyong
Citizen's Forest, 2016,
video still

2
Chen Chieh-jen
Realm of Reverberations,
2014–16, video still

