

3rd Guangzhou Triennial

Guandong Museum of Art

Large-scale international exhibitions with an elaborate curatorial concept often suggest the existence of direct links between theoretical analysis and artistic production. In the case of the 3rd Guangzhou Triennial, however, it was advisable to deal calmly first with one before moving on to the other.

The catalogue opens with rewarding essays by the three curators: Chang Tsong-zung, Gao Shiming and Sarat Maharaj. Maharaj, Professor of Art History and Theory at Goldsmiths College, London, eloquently describes the complexity of the current situation surrounding the theme of the Triennial: 'Farewell to Post-Colonialism'. History, understood as a social development of the 'colonial' mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, is not linear but transversal. Instead of being discrete chapters of the past, pre-modernity, modernity and post-modernity are linked by an interlocking set of tensions, as Maharaj illustrates with a wealth of material ranging from Eastern philosophy and poetry to John Milton, Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx. Using neologisms such as 'see-think-know', 'feel-know' and 'no-how', he describes the age-old gap between theory and practice, knowledge and experience – a core issue in the debate on artistic production and its reception. A major strength of his essay is that it does not pass over these issues in favour of a more politically effective perspective. Instead – possibly at the expense of accordance with theoretical precepts and to the benefit of intuitive understanding – that is the task of the exhibition itself.

Maharaj's co-curators, Gao and Chang (both also writers), situate this complex discourse in the fabric of China's various Maoist and capitalist phases of 'modernization'. To a large extent the show was put together by seven additional curators, whose collective expertise covers the entire globe. Their praxis branches out spontaneously in a tangle of directions, resulting in a show featuring 178 artists that more closely resembles the tumult of a bazaar than the clean structure of most museum exhibitions. It is precisely this lack of (world) order that allows the works to appear independent

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By *Saskia Draxler*

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from the overarching concept. Yang Fudong's new installation about a village that produces stone lions and statues of Buddha which are supplied throughout China (Cyan Kilin, 2007–8); Christian Jankowski's commissioned paintings produced by copyists from Dafen, China (China Painters, 2007); Uriel Orlow's factual/fictional take on the story of the theft of the Benin bronzes (Benin Project, 2008); conceptual artist Xu Zhen's collection of video stills showing villains with 'Arab' faces from modern Hollywood productions (Not over my dead body!, 2008); even two paintings by Neo Rauch owned by the Korean collector Ci Kim (Wasser, Water, 2004 and Modellbau, Model Making, 1995) – though the works were sourced from, or dealt with material from, all four corners of the globe, the end result was impressive. Star theorist, star artist, star curator: strictly speaking, the latter didn't apply here, and this opened up a space in which theory could relate to practice without pseudo-explanatory accompaniment – well undone!

Four large squares of black linen hung from the ceiling of a rectangular space at the centre of the Guangdong Museum of Art's exhibition hall, the Triennial's main venue. Designed by Chilean artist Felipe Mujica, they are partitions, curtains and flags, architecture and exhibit all in one (No State, 2008). They are embroidered with white lines based on linocuts made by Alexander Rodchenko in 1921, the year when, as a 'state artist' who stood by the ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, he took a radical ideological step away from creating artworks concerning formal experiments with lines, colours and structures to focus almost exclusively on applied arts and art in the service of social change. The tension between creative production and socio-economic productivity – Maharaj paraphrases from Karl Marx's *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy, 1857–8): 'Who is the real worker: piano maker or piano player?' – is presented by Mujica using means which themselves oscillate between applied and fine art.

Zhao Gang's two-channel video installation *Long March Project: Harlem School of New Social Realism* (2002–ongoing) captures debates between intellectuals of various nationalities and backgrounds in order to bring about a discussion between the fictional 'Harlem School of New Social Realism' and its Chinese counterpart, the real Long March Project, aiming towards a new political and aesthetic Internationalism. In the context of China, both the works of Zhao and Mujica cast light on the fundamental contradiction between the 'Western' understanding of art that has been in effect since the age of the Enlightenment, in which 'art' is viewed as a substantially autonomous entity, and an 'Eastern'

understanding of art which leans more towards the applied arts and rejects the categories of 'genius' and 'substance'. A new 'art of the future', of the kind pointed to by Maharaj, Gao and Chang in their essays, has yet to be conceived. When it comes, it will refocus attention on this contradiction – currently blurred by the art-market hype surrounding China and India – and perhaps take it to a new level.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

Saskia Draxler

Frieze

3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270