

TAIPEI BIENNIAL FINDS BEARINGS WITH ART COMPASS

NEWS / TAIPEI

By David Frazier

Addressing poor VIP attendance at the 2006 Taipei Biennial, Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) director Hsieh Hsiao-yun announced in December that the 6th Taipei Biennial in 2008 will “compete” with eight other biennials occurring simultaneously in East Asia and Australia. TFAM, which supervises the Taipei Biennial, plans to schedule the September opening during a frenzied two-week run of kick-off events at the start month. Additionally, the Biennale of Sydney, which opens in June, will hold its closing activities in September as part of Art Compass, a coalition of five festivals including the Yokohama Triennale and the Gwangju, Shanghai and Singapore biennials, which provides a platform for coordinated programming and international cross-promotion.

Revitalizing the Taipei Biennial is one of Hsieh’s major projects after assuming her position as director of TFAM in August 2007. Hsieh agrees with critics that the previous Taipei Biennial was “marginalized” because of its November launch, two months after the opening of Asia’s other major biennials. For this year’s edition,

Hsieh has met with city and museum officials in Singapore and Busan to coordinate opening events and festivities.

To further the Taipei Biennial’s competitiveness, Hsieh also announced that TFAM will increase the biennial’s budget to TWD 34 million (USD 1 million) from TWD 20 million (\$600,000), where it remained for years even as spending skyrocketed elsewhere. “Biennials are major avenues for cities to market themselves and show their competitiveness,” said Hsieh. Pragmatic and outspoken, she called Gwangju a major draw and matter-of-factly referred to the Shanghai Biennial as “a black hole—everybody goes.”

Although the Art Compass exhibitions announced their schedules at the inauguration of the Venice Biennale in June 2007, TFAM never announces its biennial plans more than a year in advance. In prior years, curators have had as few as six months to prepare the show, which generally includes around 40 international artists. This year’s curatorial team of Vasif Kortun, director of Istanbul’s Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, and independent Taiwanese curator Manray Hsu, has a 10-month lead time. Kortun has worked on biennials in Istanbul (1992 and 2005) and São Paulo (1998) and directed Turkey’s national pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale (SEE P. 82 & AAP 53). Hsu was the first Taiwanese co-curator of the 2000 Taipei Biennial and was a co-curator of the 2006 Liverpool Biennial.

After less than a month on the job, the pair had yet to announce a theme, but they have declared that a biennial cannot be “imported purely as a final product,” indicating that community involvement will be a focus. Unlike the previous five biennials, this one will overflow the Taipei Fine Arts Museum into other city spaces.

INDIAN ARTIST COMMEMORATES HOLOCAUST WITH NEW COMMISSION

NEWS / CHICAGO

By Dyer Cushman

A Holocaust memorial by New Delhi-based painter and video artist, Ranbir Kaleka, is now a permanent fixture at the recently opened headquarters of Chicago’s Spertus Institute for Jewish Studies, inaugurated in November 2007. Titled *Consider*, after the 1946 poem “Schemà” by the renowned author and Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, Kaleka’s memorial, a hybrid video-painting, occupies the 30-foot atrium on the ninth floor where Spertus’ permanent collection of Jewish objects is on view.

Though Kaleka is not Jewish, Spertus senior curator Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek approached him to create the tribute. Heimann-Jelinek had originally approached German photographer and filmmaker Lisl Ponger, who then recommended Kaleka after Heimann-Jelinek expressed her desire that the piece involve imagery from an account by an Auschwitz survivor known only as Nowak, a textile sorter who describes the gruesome day he was ordered to sort human hair including the pigtails of girls from Greece.

Kaleka initially had reservations about accepting the commission and he suggested that the installation feature non-Europeans. Heimann-Jelinek agreed and gave Kaleka free rein on the project.

Rather than follow the tradition of a monolithic memorial, Kaleka’s *Consider* is projected onto two canvases mounted on the atrium’s far wall and is only visible at a distance of 80 feet from a small viewing platform built specifically for the piece. One of the two

canvas screens is painted with the figure of a nine-year-old Indian girl. A video projection of the same girl is perfectly overlaid onto the figure, but periodically flows onto the second canvas as the girl revisits dream-like memories. The projection is accompanied by a recorded reading of Nowak’s first-person account.

Kaleka told *ArtAsiaPacific* that the work addresses a “continued threat today to minority communities from those that are more powerful.” Kaleka elaborated, saying: “My intention in the installation is to say that all life, irrespective of difference, is precious and thus to shift the purely Judeo-centric reflections of the memorial in order to touch other peoples’ lives.”

Kaleka’s sentiment was echoed by Spertus Institute Museum director Rhoda Rosen, who reiterated to AAP, “We did not want to commission a memorial that was of stone or one that offers to repair the past. Instead, we trusted Ranbir to produce a work of ephemeral materials that both speaks to this unique horror, while reflecting on the enduring beauty in life.”



RANBIR KALEKA: CONSIDER (2007), Video still. Photo by James Prinz. Courtesy Spertus Museum, Chicago.