



Do-Ho Suh, still from *A Perfect Home: The Bridge Project* 2010, synchronised four monitor animated digital slide presentation; image courtesy the artist

Machines of knowledge & experimentation

NATALIE KING & HOU HANRU

On the eve of the 5th *Auckland Triennial*, Natalie King interviewed internationally renowned biennial curator Hou Hanru via Skype from his office in San Francisco. Hou has foregrounded experimental biennial modalities that interact with artists, audiences, cities and communities having curated numerous exhibitions including *Cities on the Move* with Hans Ulrich Obrist (1997-2000); Shanghai Biennale (2000); Gwangju Biennale (2002); Venice Biennale (French Pavilion, 1999; Chinese Pavilion 2007); 2nd Guangzhou Triennial (2005); 2nd Tirana Biennial (2005); 10th Istanbul Biennial (2007); and the 10th Lyon Biennale (2009). More recently, he co-directed with Ute Meta Bauer the inaugural World Biennial Forum in Gwangju, Korea, 2012.

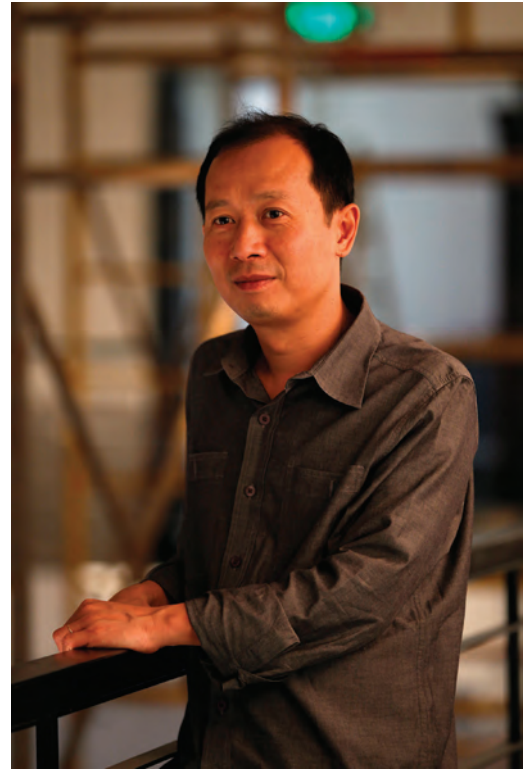
Natalie King: Can you elaborate on your rubric for the Auckland Triennial, *If you were to live here ...* and how you are working with this platform?

Hou Hanru: I start a project by researching the context. Many people think New Zealand is a remote place, more exotic than real. In our time, it is important to understand the world is no longer separated only by distance but we live in a kind of layered reality. A triennial in Auckland is about negotiating this different reality rather than a representation of existing artworks. Art should be a living process of experience, reflection and production. It's about living in context and exploring questions of culture, society and everyday life. For me, a triennial is about living, engaging people with place, and local people with the work. It's a mutual interaction. I decided to centralise the triennial project around the

question of how to live this process of engagement. I was exploring the art scene there, the culture, the question of what are the most relevant issues especially how New Zealand society is changing to a multicultural identity in a time of maturation; a time marked by the intensity of global circulation of people, information, and capital.

The question of living becomes a question of how to negotiate a new cultural society and urban context. I decided to combine these aspects as the context for the artist to explore by developing site-specific or context-specific projects with artists from both New Zealand and outside. There would form a temporary community to live together within local conditions. On the other hand, I also think a triennial, biennial or an exhibition is no longer a representational device. It's about creating a site of production of various ways of inhabiting, living, producing knowledge, imagination and conversation.

I also decided to work with three local universities and other institutions to do something ongoing at the site of research and debate. I came up with this project of the Lab functioning like a research body inside the gallery; a temporary gallery space with a themed structure within the art institution. In this place, you can not only meet with people and present their projects, it's also possible to explore different curatorial models and how to modify the operation of an institution. The triennial is not only an exhibition but a machine of knowledge, a machine of experiment – the lab is the whole brain of the project. It turns the whole project into a living body, a real space you can live in. Another important aspect is how to engage the triennial with – and also contemporary art in general – with local communities to



create another social relationship and a social network.

We started collaborating with the two major university galleries but then I worked with more traditional museums with Maori and Pacific collections.

I intervene into these contexts while reaching out to the suburbs outside conventional contemporary arts institutions with different audiences. I try to build this collaborative relationship between artists and their local communities. We worked with Fresh Gallery Otara which is located in the Otara shopping centre and adjoining Otara market.

NK: Have you been undertaking research in Christchurch which is an obliterated city and community?

HH: Yes, I did go down to Christchurch for my research and exchange with the art community there. It was very inspiring for the definition of the whole triennial project. The very issue of urgency in life becomes crucial. In the Lab, this issue is central.

NK: How are you going to navigate Maori culture that is politicised and strident in New Zealand, and embed it within the Triennial? Are you working with any Maori curators or what kind of consultation are you undertaking?

HH: I do my research through conversations with local artists, curators, including those of Maori origin, and many other people. Their inputs have been very important in defining the concept and structure of the project. Their opinions are very present. I don't particularly think an artist is defined by where he lives or nationality but really a way of engagement with social reality which is multidimensional and multicultural. This is how I understand the local.

Questions of migration, urban expansion and the tension between Maori and the white population as well as immigration from Asia are not explored in a literal way as illustration although there will be some references to social events. This is explored more in terms of a social psychology, the mental structures, and the symbolic languages behind this phenomenon. These issues can be understood by the tension between local and global. Importantly, I am not doing any kind of straightforward social activism.

NK: If the Lab is the brain of the exhibition, what is the heart of the triennial?

1/ Do-Ho Suh, still from *A Perfect Home: The Bridge Project* 2010, synchronised four monitor animated digital slide presentation; image courtesy the artist

2/ Hou Hanru portrait

HH: The heart is this sentiment of being engaged with reality, going beyond the boundary of representation and stepping into the process of real life. That's the heart. I call it a provocative and critical attitude towards life.

NK: In terms of migration, the Diaspora, and displacement, how do these circumstances relate to your own personal history and your current situation of being in between cities and places?

HH: My personal case is part of the common experiences of many people living today. We continuously define who we are by living in different places, by engaging with different work, different social relationships, with places, communities, and so on. The world has been redefined because of this new situation of people travelling, displacing, and engaging in different places. Travel and migration have become established systems, systems on the move.

NK: Actually that's what Miwon Kwon writes about in her essay 'The Wrong Place' (2000). She talks about not being at home, of always traversing through elsewhere, the whole idea of ungrounded transience and that we are often out of place as cultural workers.

HH: It's important for every individual to look into oneself and one's relationship with the outside. That is what makes you feel alive.

NK: Do you think there are still possibilities for innovation and experimentation within the biennial or triennial model?

HH: Yes, we have biennials and events that are not controlled by established institutions and the logic of the bureaucracy, and the markets that push you to work at a simple kind of image and commodity production. Luckily, we can use the unclear structure of the biennial to



1/ Ho Tzu Nyen, still from *Earth*, 2009, single-channel HD video projection, 42min; image courtesy the artist



2/ Anri Sala, still from *Tlatelolco Clash*, 2011, video: Dolby surround sound 5.1, 11:49min; image courtesy the artist, Kurimanzutto Gallery, Mexico City; Marian Goodman Gallery, New York; Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, London; Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

important because I think working as a curator we are not simply exhibition producers. We are more like cultural workers, researchers, and organisers. New forms of art experiments require new forms of organisation to support it. The institution has to change and evolve, along the logic of this experiment. For Auckland, there are five major themes within the Lab: Rural vs Urban (as living space); Christchurch / Emergency Response & Recovery; Multicultural Impacts on Urban Transformation; Ideal home; Informal Markets.

NK: Can you elaborate on Informal Markets?

HH: It's a grassroots way of organising exchange and how that influences our way of using the city and urban spaces. Informal architectural design, driven by 'informal economy', actually builds reality. Favelas, slums, and street life should be considered to counter official urban planning.

NK: What are your thoughts on some of the mistakes or failures that can take place when you are working with a more open structure or agile system?

HH: Successes and failures are not absolute. It depends on how you measure it. Time is the most expensive thing, the most difficult thing to gauge.

Hou Hanru will visit Melbourne 15 to 16 April 2013 for a public in-conversation as a prelude to the Auckland Triennial, presented by Utopia@Asialink and proudly supported by Naomi Milgrom AO; courtesy of the 5th Auckland Triennial, 10 May to 11 August 2013; organised by the Auckland Art Gallery and major partner AUT University:

Natalie King is the Director of Utopia@Asialink, a pan-Asian incubator, and an independent curator/writer: asialink.unimelb.edu.au/our_work/arts/utopia

negotiate the space in which one can do things which are not limited by the established approach to life. It's also a chance to think about how to escape or how to resist this cultural fear imposed by the market force and political bureaucracy. We should insist on this experimental space and the uncertainty of being freely able to try things that are not there.

NK: Can you take me through some of the core artists who you are working with?

HH: We have about thirty-five artists including Amie Siegel from America, Claire Fontaine, Allora & Calzadilla, and, of course, Australians like Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro; Ho Tzu Nyun from Singapore, Anri Sala, Michael Lin, Do Ho Suh from Korea, and Atelier Bow Bow.

NK: Did your research focus on Asia?

HH: This came quite naturally. But I have not only limited the 'focus' on Asia. In Asia, there are a lot of people who are emphasising their understanding of multicultural identity and collaboration with local communities. There is a focus on the question of the urban context as a context for intervention. These are the main guidelines when I select artists. **NK:** How have these ideas of locality or the Lab been part of your ongoing curatorial trajectory?; they are modalities that you have used in Luxembourg and within a number of biennale contexts.

HH: It's a modality that I have expressed for the last ten years including Gwangju Biennale (2002), the Guangzhou Triennial (2005), the Luxembourg projects in 2007. The Lab has been central. It became



Brook ANDREW *Men* 2011, rare postcards, sapele and neon
Courtesy of the artist and Totarno Galleries, Melbourne

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