

# Hou Hanru

Edited by Natalie King and Victoria Lynn







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# Introduction

For every great artist there is something familiar about the contour of each artwork even when the content is radically different. The same is true of curators. After the long haul trans-Pacific flight to Melbourne, Hou Hanru declared with a wry smile that he was exhausted. “I’ve done 120 exhibitions. What’s next?” The question can be answered, in part, by noting the pattern that underlies all the different projects. Does this place that is constructed in each exhibition, and is constantly renewed in the imagination, draw from an inexhaustible source of hope?

Throughout Hanru’s career five key principles seem to be at work. There is an enduring confidence that artists, collectives and the public in general can self-organize. This was evident in the landmark Gwangju Biennale *Pandora’s Box* (2002) when the exhibition space was developed in collaboration with the participating artistic collectives.

Nighttime has a special fascination. It is a time when we conventionally rest and young people come out to play. For most of us it is also the suspension of work time and at the best of times it is a zone in which we catch a glimpse of freedom. Hanru’s projects often come alive when the sun goes down. The dark skies and neon cities provide the backdrop to new interventions and inventions.

The informal spaces that exist at the edge of society, or lurk in the gaps of the centre are also a focal point. These rough or empty sites often contain rusty histories and vague possibilities. It is a terrain that both holds on to its secrets in a furtive manner, but is also open to creative adaptation. Over and over again Hanru finds himself returning to these places, and discovers it is here where artists are already working.

Democracy is a gift that thrives on self-critique. For Hanru the benefit of an open society is not just the opportunity to express a view and contest the prevailing dogma, but it also obliges us all to contemplate our limitations and leave a space in which we can entertain doubt. *The Power of Doubt* (2011) was the name of an exhibition, but it is also a metaphor for the process by which self-critique moves between radical indignation and creative imagination.

Art and life are not the same things, but there is always a process of learning and change that keeps the two together and apart. This feedback can start in a studio; it can lead towards the production of a laboratory. The studio/lab complex is a process of testing and living with ideas.

Hanru’s work as a curator is driven by these five principles and it is sustained by the faith that social transformation does not occur from a single authoritarian vision from the metropolis. It tends to occur through a myriad of practices and visions that first appear in the periphery and then infiltrate and reshape the structures of the centre. The example of this dynamic can be seen in the trajectory of the biennale. It began in the nearly sinking and almost forgotten tourist backwater of Venice in 1895. The model that has now become a global phenomenon was first adopted in Sao Paulo Brazil, the introduction of curatorial vision was developed in Sydney Australia, and the critical adaptation of thematic and geo-political focus was pioneered in Havana Cuba.

Professor Nikos Papastergiadis  
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## Hou Hanru in Conversation, April 2013

*On the eve of the 5<sup>th</sup> Auckland Triennial, Natalie King conducted a candid, public conversation with acclaimed biennial curator, Hou Hanru at Asialink, University of Melbourne. Prior to installing the Auckland Triennial, Hou visited Melbourne for the first time to reflect on his biennial trajectory while illuminating a precise and sensitive approach to curating in Auckland and the cultural specificity of New Zealand. Hou provided insights into exhibition modalities that interact with artists, audiences, cities and communities to envisage possible futures. Like a laboratory, Hou is preoccupied with open and evolving exhibition platforms and the social agenda of locality and place.*

Natalie King [NK]: There is an urgency to dialogue and prioritise face-to-face encounters despite our preoccupation with globalisation and networking 24/7. Our conversation is a rehearsal or a prelude to the Auckland Triennial and a unique opportunity to discuss your ample biennial trajectory. We will look at the particular nuances of place, site and city but also consider what is the residue of a biennale, when the event ceases. Originally, you trained as an artist at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China. I'm interested in your early forays working as both an artist and a curator in China in the 80s and 90s.

Hou Hanru [HH]: Your question is like an inquisition because when I was in the Central Academy, I was studying art and art history, majoring in mediaeval art. I was the only one in China from my generation who was interested in barbarian church and sculpture. At the time, it was fashionable to burn those who think strangely or have other ideas than the official ideology. This is what motivated our generation of artists and intellectuals to come up with the China avant-garde. How can art bring a special liberty of fantasy and imagination by proposing a different way of looking at the world? Practising these alternative ideas ran the risk of being censored or imprisoned.

Today, contemporary art can be appreciated and consumed but it's important not to forget that there is a constant effort to resist this situation as normal. In the 80s and 90s, our generation proposed other ways of practising art that is not simply an extension of the official ideology. Our thinking was a social project involved with art production and writing. We had to be self-organised to make this voice audible; to make this secret visible.

NK: This predicament seems antithetical to the current situation in China with the propulsion of new museums and statistics tell us that there are currently 1,200

museums under construction. The arts ecology is totally different from when you originally started.

HH: We didn't expect contemporary art to become something normal. I think it's good that artists don't have to be turning themselves into an oppositional or social instrument to gain an independent position as an individual. There are also new challenges being posed as normalisation becomes too normal, there is a reduction of the meaning of creativity. At the turn of the 80s, there was no way to return to the China avant-garde as it was a typical classical modernist belief in progress. I think it is necessary to rethink what progress actually brings to us and being progressed in a way that is not only believing in one system of progress but much more about a possibility to continue questioning what is established. This has intellectually and politically driven the work of many people including myself.

NK: Let's look more closely at the biennales that you have curated in Asia in particular Shanghai, Guangzhou and Gwangju and the shifting gravity from West to East in what Okwui Enwezor has described in his essay for the Gwangju Biennale (2008) as the "opening up of cultural seams".

HH: I would like to start with this image of a detail presented in the Gwangju Biennale (2002) by Chinese artist Yan Lei. (Fig. 1) It's a gift that people can share; it's a metal plate with white powder spelling the word "biennale". When you get closer, you can smell it. You get very high. This is the perfect image of a biennale and why we need the biennale. It's like cocaine. It's an addiction. This addiction has generated a global map of biennales published on the website of the Biennial Foundation based in Amsterdam. Interestingly, what you don't see in this map is time. You only see the geographic distribution of biennales yet the first biennale is Venice Biennale, then São Paulo and later on Sydney.

Despite the proliferation of biennales from the late 80s to the early 90s, many started in places outside of traditional centres, creating a new global situation. Havana, Istanbul, Gwangju and Johannesburg present a new, territorial model in terms of the connection between contemporary art and social mobilisation and therefore artistic activities. These biennales occur where there is no established infrastructure and traditional museums allowing biennales to play a new institutional role by proposing a different kind of organisational paradigm and relationship between expression and social transformation. The boom of biennales outside the West has impacted within Europe with new biennales such as *Manifesta*, Lyon and Berlin – a reverse influence from the outside. This transformed the definition of "global" beyond the traditional idea of international based on a Western model.



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This partially answers your question about why there are so many new museums being built in China. It's not only to reproduce a kind of international, cosmopolitan culture but also in the formation of these museums, a new typology of museums can be imagined and tested.

NK: You touched on the proliferation of biennales globally as a phenomenon and yet your biennales are focussed on locality, place and situational kinds of practices.

HH: Being someone from China but living in the West, you are confronted with how cultural identity is related to your locality. The first thing is to negotiate a locality as a mobile process by continuing to redefine one's home identity. A biennale is about the possibility of bringing an alternative or transformative reading of reality. I have written a paper called "Towards a New Locality: Biennials and 'Global Art'", published in my book *On the mid-ground* (2002). It's about the idea of a biennale as a location-related event and bringing a new quality to the locale. This is why, for me, a biennale has always started with studying and researching the locality but in the meantime, trying to propose another way of reading those localities.

The Shanghai Biennale was about Shanghai with commissions related to the locality while bringing critical, deconstructed proposals to the site. This is Huang Yong Ping's work *Bank of sand, sand of bank* (2000). (Fig. 2) He went to Shanghai to research architectural history especially the most important building on the Bund built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, formerly the headquarters of Hong Kong Shanghai Bank HSBC. He proposed to reproduce this building as not only the first colonial bank in Asia but also the most powerful bank in the world. Eventually, this building became the City Hall and then party headquarters then it became a new bank enabling the government to accrue funds to develop the city of Shanghai. This building represents the whole history of a city like Shanghai and the transformation of locality.

His replica was constructed entirely in sand, slowly collapsing during the biennale. It's a perfect image of modernism in China. The biennale, of course, has a different kind of social function by proposing other institutional paradigms. For Gwangju Biennale (2002), with co-curator Charles Esche, we considered the biennale as a complex issue within Asia. (Fig. 3) We had seen a boom of biennales and new institutions in Asia but naturally people think we should reproduce something that we had already seen like the Venice Biennale or MOMA or the Tate. Often, we forget the most dynamic institutions in Asia.

We were interested in self-organisational kinds of initiatives such as artist-run spaces and independent galleries. We decided to emphasise this as a model rather than reproducing existing biennales. I had this crazy idea: after visiting hundreds



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of spaces in Asia, Latin America and Europe, I proposed to reproduce and invite twenty-six groups or spaces and then reproduce their architectural structures. All the structures are exact replicas of the floor plans of those buildings from Singapore to Beijing. Then, we gave curatorial decisions to those groups allowing them to decide what goes inside. This platform gathered independent organisations as a major part of the biennale. The entire biennale space was planned like a huge city so you could navigate through the streets and then come into these houses by opening a door.

Istanbul Biennial (2007) is about negotiating local conditions in terms of how art relates to urban transformation. (Fig. 4) Basically, I was looking into the meaning of the biennale as a marker of modernisation of the city and how we can reconnect to the history of the formation of this modern city. The making of the Turkish Republic is one of the best examples of the formation of multiple modernities. We researched building sites designed as a type of non-western modernism such as the Ataturk Cultural Centre or the textile market, relating to how the economy has developed as a central power in the Middle East. We rented tourist shops in the textile market and asked artists to do interventions. We also developed a series of projects related to how conflicts in the public space has symbolised the geopolitical transformation in the region. This happened prior to the Arab Spring but you could feel tension so this is why I titled the biennale *Not only Possible but Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War*. Despite a global war, one has to be optimistic to propose new possibilities.

The influence of biennales on the West is prescient with the Lyon Biennale (2009) titled *The Spectacle of the Everyday*. (Fig. 5) The question of critiquing society of the spectacle and critiquing the everyday has been an important intellectual core of French thinking about contemporary society from the Situationists such as Guy Debord and Michel de Certeau. I tried to bring back this particular thinking to the Lyon Biennale (2009) by negotiating sites from the factory to the museum itself.

NK: I would like to discuss the role of night and the way you have made the nocturnal visible in many of your projects including the Luxembourg cultural capital projects of 2007, *Dream House* in Istanbul Biennial where people were invited to spend the night and actually sleep in a pavilion. (Fig. 6) Your recent exhibition at Rockbund Museum in China, *By Day By Night* (2010-11), also navigates the idea of insomnia. As cultural workers, our role is to wake people up as a form of inducement.

HH: In 1997, I was working with Hans-Ulrich Obrist on *Cities on the Move*. I grew up in Asia so it's normal that nobody sleeps. You always have flea markets and go out at midnight to eat with friends. For Hans-Ulrich, it was a shock as





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he is usually the only one who didn't sleep in Europe; he works day and night. He decided not to sleep during our trip so when we were in Singapore we didn't have enough money and shared a hotel room. We started our visits from six in the morning till two in the morning. We came back to the hotel and he continued to work. I said: "I want to sleep. I'm tired" but he said "I don't want to sleep". I said: "I don't want to die" and since then, we came back to prepare for a show in Vienna and then one of the obsessions for him was to look at the publicity slogan of the City Bank, it's called "The City Never Sleeps".

For me, the obsession with sleep, not sleeping, started with directing the 2004 *Nuit Blanche* in Paris, (Fig. 7) initiated by the Paris Government, to create public events once a year from eight to eight; all the museums were open with site-specific projects. I found it extremely interesting how nightlife can bring a new dimension to public art. Often public art is an extension of public museums without understanding what the public means to institutions. When you talk about the public, it's about the possibility of proposing and sharing alternatives that transform the established rules of the public. The situation in the night is the most interesting condition for this discussion because it's beyond the working hours, beyond the control of bureaucracy. You can say crazy things. You can go mad. You can get drunk. You can have love affairs under the shadow of trees, hidden in a garden. I think a *nuit blanche* reflects such a radicality in terms of the revelation of freedom. We occupied the city university with a noise festival involving musicians doing dangerous kinds of sound activities.

I learned one thing: the engagement of contemporary arts or creation with society not only happens during working hours but the most interesting thing is to provide a moment beyond the bureaucratic organisation of time. For different projects, I start with night. For example, this is Carl Michael von Hausswolff's project for the Luxembourg Cultural Capital in 2007. In the railway station you are not allowed to put on red lights as it is in conflict with the signals. We managed to negotiate to set up a red light projection on the roof of this building which completely transformed the perception of the railway system. We also worked with a restaurant, only open in the night, in which we gathered cooks from different cultures to prepare a new menu.

This is another project for *Nuit Blanche* called *Dazibau*. (Fig. 8) During the Cultural Revolution in China, Mao mobilised young people to write open critiques against the bureaucracy of the party. All the students, intellectuals and workers were encouraged to write critiques on this large piece of paper in response to corrupt officials so it became a violent open forum of radical democracy. When I was a student, we spent a lot of time doing these kinds of things. For *Nuit Blanche*, I was asking myself "what is really the most radical democratic format of expression today?". It's video. I decided to make a project called *The Dazibau*



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*of the Image*. We published an announcement in newspapers asking people to send their videos and made a selection that was projected on to a 200-metre wall in the city.

The participation of normal people was part of *Nuit Blanche* and inspired me to continue this idea as part of the Istanbul Biennial. During the night, I asked five young curators from Istanbul to curate 150 films projected from a truck, going around the city to different locations bringing contemporary art into urban places. For *Dream House*, I wanted to provide a place where people can come and spend the night so we decided to build on the second floor in a major warehouse space overlooking the Bosphorus. During the night you could come and lie on this bed designed by Sam Samore. You could sleep there, listen to storytelling, watch videos and have a beautiful view of the sea.

This is *By Day By Night* (Fig. 9) in Shanghai at Rockbund Art Museum, a museum funded by a private developer who transformed an Art Deco building. I proposed this project called *By Day, By Night, or some (special) things a museum can do*. During the day you can see installations in the building but at night part of the museum was transformed into a temporary university or meeting point and a film festival site.

NK: Let's discuss your rubric for the Auckland Triennial, *If you were to live here...*

HH: I always try to reach out to non-conventional sites within a city, especially in suburban areas with social interventions. The title of the Auckland Triennial, *If you were to live here...*, tries to reconnect artists with the specific conditions of place. A triennial or biennale is always a site-specific project; it's about a new social relationship being generated out of the process of living. For Auckland, I commenced research by studying both institutional and social sites to understand those places. The Auckland Triennial started with the Auckland Art Gallery with a new extension that re-opened last year. (Fig. 10) I commenced when this extension was under construction so I tried to understand how to turn that transformation into spaces for real life, not only for exhibitions. There are some interesting, site-specific interventions into the historical part of the building as well as events that reach out into the city itself.

After some research, I came up with this challenging task of how to deal with the new waterfront area typically occupied by new restaurants, shops and public art. I am working with artists in this area such as Ryoji Ikeda's soundscape in a silo. (Fig. 11) Of course, for the first time the triennial has to negotiate with the city government authority and the developers.



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NK: Can we look at The Lab structure that is an open and agile system that you often imbed within your biennales and will be a feature of Auckland?

HH: For the first time, we managed to have eight different institutions from traditional museums to contemporary art galleries work together with suburban communities. (Fig. 12) We are trying to respond to emergency questions raised by the earthquake in Christchurch and the question of urban transformation. How can institutions position themselves in this process? How do they respond to challenging conditions through artworks and intellectual exchange and knowledge production? I decided to develop The Lab by working with different faculties including architecture and design in three universities and then invite international professionals to propose different ways of dealing with various issues. (Fig. 13) Five themes emerged relating to these questions with The Lab taking over one of the central galleries in the building as an ongoing platform in which people will come to do symposia, lectures, and discussion and also show models and designs. We recycled the storage crates in the museum by turning them into lab furniture. The Lab is a kind of brain; an intellectual resource that produces ideas, energy, and publics.

This is the Luxembourg lab during the European Cultural Capital project. This is another laboratory I built with four architectural firms and five universities from different parts of Europe who sent students and teachers. Every three months, a new group came to undertake research about the future of Luxembourg. Then, they developed urban interventions working with the local community, even producing a hamburger called the “Luxemburger”.

The Guangzhou Triennial was the first lab in 2005. We took over one of the biggest exhibition spaces in the museum in Guangzhou and turned it into an ongoing laboratory for eighteen months. We invited hundreds of people to come and we did research into the region. Rem Koolhaas produced specific work for the exhibition and Wong Hoycheong discovered Guangzhou has an 8<sup>th</sup> century mosque when Arabic traders came to China and one of the oldest Muslim communities. Wong Hoycheong transformed part of the museum into a mosque like an illegal building without a permit. Five times a day, we broadcasted prayers and there was a huge scandal in the city.

One of the outcomes of this triennial was the production of a new museum by Rem Koolhaas on top of a highrise residential building. (Fig. 14) The Guangdong Museum of Art collaborated with the developer to build an extension that was proposed during the Lab as part of the 2nd Guangzhou Triennial (2005). Rem Koolhaas wanted a site that reaches directly to the street but there was no site so we proposed to graft a structure onto the existing building on the 19<sup>th</sup> floor. On the 14<sup>th</sup> floor, we took over two apartments and transformed them into residential



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spaces for artists and a family museum so your home becomes a public museum. This museum is directly connected to housing which is wonderful. From the windows of the museum you can see people cooking, washing clothes and taking showers. In this situation, you have to rethink what you do with this museum as you cannot shift major sculptures to the roof as the elevator is very small. We had to rethink the function of the museum and how to connect with the local community. As advisor to the museum, I proposed the museum as an engine to produce cultural activities in the community.

NK: That is a perfect place to end with the way in which museums can be embedded in habitation and dwelling. Thank you for your whirlwind and dense account of your biennale trajectory.

Audience Question: I'm wondering what art could possibly do, in a biennale context, to solve problems like sustainability, urban congestion and problems of social issues?

HH: I don't think a biennale can solve those problems but we can create a public forum in which these questions are discussed and explored. For example, many years ago at the Venice Biennale I did a project called *Zone of Urgency* (2003). Surasi Kusolwong, a Thai artist, proposed building a transparent box inside the Arsenale as a dedicated smoking area, like what you see in airports. This was initiated during the time that Italy forbade smoking in interiors. The biennale refused permission because it's against the law. He found another radical solution and created an oxygen bar with fresh oxygen. Artists can provoke different ways of thinking and responding to urgent questions.

In Auckland's The Lab, participants explore what is hidden behind a phenomena and what kind of human and cultural problematics can be navigated through discussion. We worked with Maori architects who excavate historical processes of how the Maori idea of land, water and orientation are being gradually eliminated by the modern city from colonial time to now. This approach is not about proposing a technical solution, how wide a highway should be, but it's about engaging with deep problems within a democratic system.





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# Hou Hanru Curatorial Lab

## April 2013, Asialink, University of Melbourne, Australia.

“If you were to live here...”

Presented by Utopia@Asialink and TarraWarra Museum of Art.

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY NAOMI MILGROM AO.

MODERATORS: Natalie King, Director, Utopia@Asialink, University of Melbourne & Victoria Lynn, Director TarraWarra Museum of Art and Curator of turbulence, 3<sup>rd</sup> Auckland Triennial.

**Natalie King:** Using the *5th Auckland Triennial* as a case study, this closed colloquium with emerging and established curators from a range of organizations in Australia will uncover experimental exhibition modalities by undertaking a close analysis of Hou Hanru’s biennial trajectory while facilitating an open dialogue amongst participants. The workshop will revolve around four core modalities with select respondents.

**Victoria Lynn:** Hou Hanru strives for his exhibitions to tackle a series of political and theoretical questions. These questions are dealt with through artistic practices and processes and he brings together the informal connections between artists and process-orientated artworks and/or events. Hou Hanru describes himself as somebody who believes in self-organization. Believing that life itself can be a way of critiquing power, he believes in the capacity of art to propose social transformation. He has also highlighted how many early biennales and triennials around the world were established in peripheral cultures and the ways in which the periphery can actually have an effect on the centre.





## **MODALITY [1] Process of research and conception of of a biennial: what kind of methodologies are deployed that are socially engaged?**

What was the first thing that came into your mind when beginning your research for the 5<sup>th</sup> *Auckland Triennial*?

**Hou Hanru:** What is important is how much every individual, every institution in Auckland can contribute with their active participation, their talents and their capacities to make this project relevant to the place. We need to understand what kind of ecology makes up the artistic production in a city. What kind of different social agendas are being expressed through institutions?

Going to New Zealand or a place like New Zealand, at first you would think this is an exotic country, very distant from anywhere else. In reality, a place like Sydney or Auckland or Johannesburg is no longer distant. It is much more about how people like us are trying to connect our understanding with the social reality, the reality of life and the cultural reality of place. Of course, this is not only about me having these experiences, but also about the question of what contemporary art means to everyone involved with this activity, from artists to the audience, from students to professionals.

Why is there interest in events like a biennial or triennial? I think this need is no longer simply a kind of spectacle or object of consumption. Instead, it is important to understand that this is a way for us to connect with the work. Through every little action that we are doing in the process of making the event, we are actually generating a new knowledge about this work. This approach has made me understand the necessity of not only research but how to work with people who live in the real situation by coming up with something that is actually talking to the momentum of the place. This is why I came up with the title, probably two or three days after my visit *If you were to live here...*

Our work relies on intuition that comes from a long period of testing possibilities, trying to understand this connection. An event like a biennial or triennial generates alternative forms of organization and understanding of what an institution would be and how much you know. By taking this approach, you can create a dialogue with the institution to understand the relevance or the irrelevance of context. Context is not only local politics but also a kind of global transformation. Once an organization or structure relates to this transformation, you create a collective action or common understanding to make the institution more relevant.

Our role as a curator in the context of biennales is not simply to produce an interesting expression with interesting artwork. Of course, that's a natural part but it's also about contributing to institutional critique. It's a new responsibility that curators should try to propose possibilities for institutional transformation.

I want to come back to the informal. I don't think this is informal in the sense that you might call it alternative, but in fact, when you look globally, most art productions are happening in situations and not within the established institutional framework. What we call the formal institutions are in fact minorities.

In his book *Planet of Slums* (2006), Mike Davis said sixty per cent of urban spaces in global cities are slums: which part is the formal and which part is the informal? The economic system of market capitalism imposes a lot of rules, not only in terms of economic exchange but also political structures of societies. When you really look at it, this imposition comes from the most powerful but mostly minority of centres.

Globally, the resistance to this so-called imposition of a formal structure is much bigger than we know. How do we define contemporary activity? What is contemporary art for us? Do we all have to continue with a certain kind of historical trajectory? Coming from Duchamp to minimalism to Pop Art to now, what we call the neo-conceptual, we should be open to other ways of defining what we are doing. This is also a very important question.

**Victoria Lynn:** Can you talk through one particular example of an artist who is included in the triennial, who, for you, has picked up on the momentum of the place of New Zealand, whose work will reorientate the structures of one of the institutions that you're working with in this way?

**Hou Hanru:** Well-known New Zealand artist, Peter Robinson, who is a Maori descendant uses the Auckland Museum which is a strange post-colonial institution that gathers natural history and several collections of Maori and Pacific artifacts and objects. His proposal is to create a series of sticks as a resonance of the Maori spiritual stick used for ceremony. In the museum, a welcome ceremony is performed daily. Peter will intervene with these sticks by starting with a ceremony in the middle of the hall, and then, he will mobilize museum staff to pick up the sticks and place them in different parts of the museum as a new way of working in the museum. Colored sticks reflect different moods. Then, the sticks go into different parts of the museum, especially in the Maori hall.

This process involves the participation of every individual in the museum. As a professor in the art school, his students will carry the sticks like a parade or traditional procession from the art school to the museum. Robinson creates an urban event integrated into the museum context.

**Charlotte Day:** I am curating the Anne Landa Award for New Media Arts at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. I am interested to intervene in the gallery, into the museum space in some way. The exhibition is housed in the upstairs galleries with traditional light locked spaces. I also wanted to include the experience of

performance. Every day at 12:30pm, Alicia Frankovich's project involves a call out over the speaker system. Then, a group of people that have jogged for the last hour will come into the space and occupy it for five to seven minutes while they cool down. It ends up being a relation between the joggers and the museum audience. Frankovich considers the body in space and the context of the museum within a park.

**Natalie King:** This project extends ideas of rhythm within the museum and how museums are navigated while pace is accelerated.

**Charlotte Day:** Yes, it's like you come to the museum and you are expecting to behave in a certain way. With a lot of relational projects, artists make those conditions more obvious and sometimes usurp them in particular ways.

**Emily Sexton:** We are working on a biennial structure for the Next Wave Festival. There are two questions that have become really pertinent for our practices that we return to again and again. The first one is "who it's for?" We ask artists to be very specific about their intentions, not just for the work and not just for their area and practice development but also in terms of their relationship with audience.

The second question that has driven us is: "Who is not here?" There is always someone else who could have been part of that conversation. When we communicate, we don't want the things that we make to go from me to someone like me. It has to go from us to someone who is not like us, so that there is actually something profound being exchanged.

**Hou Hanru:** "Who is not here?" Actually, it is all about that. The title *If you were to live here...* contains an "if". Yesterday, Nikos Papastergiadis said one thing to me while we were sitting at the beach: "I like your title because there is an 'if', that means actually you are not actually living there."

Art is about creating an imagined space in which you are not there but how you can communicate – you might call that utopia or you might call it imagined space. That is the interesting tension between our production and the public. What makes a difference between an artist and an audience is not simply one is actually offering the food and then the other one is going to eat it. It's much more about the artist proposes a certain kind of food that is not edible. Then, you invite the audience who has different expectations of this food and they find out what they get is not actually what they wanted.

This tension is at the heart of the contradiction of our desire to be open to audience participation. What makes an exhibition or a museum or an art institution a meaningful space of presentation? It's because it is a space of presentation of the impossible. For me, this is a foundational principle and why we still need artistic





production in society that is full of other kinds of possibilities of producing images, objects and decoration.

Art continues to make sense because it proposes this impossibility. This absence of the real is part of how the real is being constructed. All my projects are related to this concept especially the idea of having part of an exhibition happening only in the evening or after midnight or in a secret place. This dynamic of making art continue to exist is very interesting. How can you integrate an artwork when it is not supposed to be interpreted? That is the tension surrounding this notion of the real that makes curating extremely interesting because it's about how to propose a way to read something which is not supposed to be read in a common sense way.

## **MODALITY [2] Situational and context-specific artworks: what is the role of commissioning?**

**Natalie King:** What about the possibility of a commissioning residue? Biennales are high intensity events and is it possible that commissions can endure beyond the biennale timeframe?

**Hou Hanru:** Contemporary art can allow a cultural rebellion against the control or order of things imposed by mainstream power. I am from the so-called Chinese contemporary art avant-garde who revolt against totalitarian power. One is constantly being put into this exotic reading of the other. My early work, especially from the late 90s, was about how to develop visions and strategies to refuse to be identified as the other. For me, exhibitions are a process of working with artists to produce this presence, a constant presence of the now, to refuse to become a representation of a certain kind of objectified category in society.

This is why I emphasize the necessity of an exhibition as a process of production. It's not only producing objects but producing a presence of social structures, social relationships and knowledge. Conceptually, I try to do as much as possible for the commissioning part of an exhibition by providing artists the possibility to reinvent themselves in dialogue with the context.

**Victoria Lynn:** Can you talk about specific commissions for Auckland?

**Hou Hanru:** Amie Siegel (Fig. 16, 17) is an American filmmaker and I have become interested in her work because she did one piece called *Black Moon* (2010). Basically, it's a partial remake of the famous Louis Malle 1975 film of the same title. She used that structure to talk about the sub prime crisis in America. War and crisis came together in this film. I was interested in this connection between the housing crisis, the economic crisis and space production. I have wanted to show her film and in the meantime, I thought it would be great if she could do



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a new project about New Zealand. She immediately became very interested in how New Zealand has been created in mythology around crisis and utopia. For example, the film *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) along with the architect, Ian Athfield, who is the godfather of utopian architecture in New Zealand. His studio and home is a kind of science fiction building. Amie started research on this film and architecture and then related it to the whole idea of emergency crisis. She wanted to create a film that has a live performance component.

**Naomi Cass:** How engaged are you in the commissioning process?

**Hou Hanru:** I look at every detail and then we have constant conversation.

**Sarah Tutton:** Warwick Thornton is a filmmaker famous for *Samson and Delilah* which won an award in 2009. He is embedded in the film world rather than the contemporary art world. ACMI approached him to produce a commission at the same time as *Documenta 13* so we formed a partnership and presented the film in a van. At *Documenta 13*, it moved around and it is called *Mother Courage* (2012). In the rear projection, visible from the back of the van, an indigenous woman is painting with her grandson who listens to the indigenous radio channel.

At ACMI it couldn't move anymore but we will try to tour it. This work has raised many issues for us in terms of storage, and where the art work begins and ends. For example, the van sits on a large piece of board to spread its weight. We have had a huge conversation at ACMI about what is the art work and what is the prop.

**Hou Hanru:** That is just actually a very basic question, a Duchampian question. It's how you'll decide in the moment that it's a ready-made. It is almost like a kind of automatism for many museums now. They have something that came from a performance and then, they put it on a structure. It's interesting how we are so obsessed with this idea of boundary and preservation of the original, basically, as a way to stop the evolution of the work.

### **MODALITY [3] Locality and place – mobilizing local audiences through collaboration with institutions: is it possible to modify and expand audience expectations?**

**Victoria Lynn:** For the first time in Auckland, you are using a number of locations for the Triennial that have not been used before. Could you talk through some of those venues, perhaps the ones that are not necessarily typical art institutions? What are your principles in terms of the audience?



**Hou Hanru:** The first thing I considered is what is usual for contemporary art and what is not. Auckland Art Gallery is clearly separated into sections: contemporary collections, 18th Century and 19th Century paintings, Maori art and so on.

I have tried to disturb the order in an attempt to bring contemporary art into the historical sections. For example, this is the gallery where you have the colonial building with the Maori collection and also works from the early colonial periods, in particular, a famous painting of Maori arriving in New Zealand, but painted in the style of *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819) by Théodore Géricault. Immediately, I was thinking about a dialogue.

Ho Tzu Nyen's work *Earth* (2010) (Fig. 15) talks about a generic human drama, but with a mise-en-scene like a living painting, in dialogue with the collection. The other piece will be in the middle of the space, which is Michael Lin and Atelier Bow Wow's collaborative project. It was originally made for Rockbund Museum in Shanghai. *Model Home* (2013) (Fig. 19) is a prototype house, a model house for immigrant workers coming from the countryside to the city. The collaborators hired immigrant workers to build a house and they lived inside during the preparation, and before the opening they moved this house into the museum to become a part of the exhibition.

For Auckland, we are installing a new version of this model home, which is not an exact reproduction but using a different technology and material such as paper as well as working with architecture students. Then there is another space, the Mackelvie Gallery, which is a 19th Century European painting collection. Claire Fontaine will install a series of neon signs in the middle of the space called *Foreigners Everywhere*. (Fig. 20)

The Gus Fisher Gallery is a part of the Elam Art School. It's an early 20th century building designed for the radio of New Zealand. It's a neo-gothic attic, a strange building with a roof tower. In the beginning, this building was one of the most visible buildings in Auckland, and now it has become totally hidden by surrounding skyscrapers which are banks and insurance companies in the middle of the central business district. It's really ironic if you put this neon sign on the roof of this building saying "Foreigners Everywhere." It's written in Maori and other languages.

I always think biennials or triennials should be an urban event that connects with different communities living in the city, especially people who are not used to going to art exhibitions and museums. I did this already in 1997 for the Johannesburg Biennial. I did one thing which was, at that time, quite crazy. In the 70s, there was no DVD, only VHS tapes. I collected about 40 or 50 tapes of works by artists, a lot of performances and films. We drove a car through the townships around Johannesburg, from Soweto to some very poor areas. We tried to meet with people and find out which cafés or restaurants are the most popular,



where people meet. We found out that it doesn't matter how poor the communities are, there are always televisions where people come to look at football, sports and soap opera. I decided to convince restaurant owners to use them to put on the videos. The people coming to the bar, they can order from the menu or kind of take what they want to look at. We hung around in these eight cities and gave them the tapes. It was a really interesting story.

In Auckland, I insisted on looking at the suburban situation. The Otara City is one of the famous kinds of communities from Pacific highlanders, Pacific immigration from Fiji, Samoa and Cook Islands in the southern part of Auckland. I don't think many people from the center would go there. There is a gallery there called Fresh Gallery, which is surrounded by an outdoor market and a shopping area. This gallery has been focusing on presenting Pacific artists for a long, long time.

I invited Rigo 23 from San Francisco, Emory Douglas minister of culture for the Black Panthers in collaboration with Wayne Youle from Christchurch who is also from Maori origin. Then there is Mounir Fatmi from France who is a Moroccan French artist who has been living in one of the toughest suburban areas outside of Paris for four years and he was documenting the incredible stories there. There is also Keg de Souza from Australia and Makeshift from Sydney. The project interrogates the question of the suburban and collaboration between different communities.

Another less conventional place is the waterfront development which is the last industrial area in the city. I have decided to use the silo in which the Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda, the sound artist, would do a specific work inside the silos.

**Natalie King:** In terms of the audiences that will come to these sites, it would be a real mixture of people who would come across things accidentally as well as a conventional museum audience. Is this what you are anticipating?

**Hou Hanru:** It takes time for the general public to get something from a biennial. But on the other hand, it's really important to have certain numbers involved. It's not simply tourism. I don't deny the effect of tourism but how can you create a kind of so-called pedagogical program with strategies to create a more focussed discussion around what is happening there? I also think the art world itself ignores the possibility of going out to the real spaces of the city. It's a two-way interaction.

**Victoria Lynn:** It's a strategy you used in Istanbul with the textile market.

**Hou Hanru:** That market has a very interesting history. It's on the main street from the airport to Taksim, which is like the European centre. It's a perfectly modernized building but it's used for all kinds of shops such as craft or textiles.





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This is a place for people who migrated from the Middle East or Central Asia. It was designed in the 50s as one of the first big projects of the modernization of Istanbul. Then it was commissioned by the Federation of Textile Industry producers. On the surface it looks like a Corbusier kind of white boxes but when you look at the floor plan, it's a traditional bazar.

There are 2,600 shops so I wanted to have about 20 projects called *World Factory* so we managed to negotiate about 16 shops for interventions. For me, discovering these kind of venues is also discovering the society and bringing artists to work with them.

**Nicole Durling:** One point that interests me is how do you move the boundaries within the institutions? Are we part of the problem? What I have often said is where do these rules come from? At MONA, we started with no rules so we've been making them up as we go along.

I'm not a curator, but I often think that my role is about communicating and allowing people ways to engage. My director David Walsh is anti-museum, whatever that might mean; an evolving institution will create something new. One of the reasons we have been able to attract such different demographics is that we have multiple points of access. It is not just about the art, it might be about music. We have introduced ideas that make it easy for people to trust us or we provide a safe environment in which to engage. I'm very, very aware that the way my colleagues and I work is very much community-based and if that's something that we can continue to do, I think it will continue to be successful. We use the technology of the 'O' tour, where the visitor is not told what to think and we encourage them to behave differently in the space.

**Victoria Lynn:** It's been enormously successful bringing planeloads of people into Tasmania to experience the kind of social and cultural engagement you are talking about. Hanru, do you also have some thoughts on the differences between popularity and democracy.

**Hou Hanru:** I think more and more we reduce the idea of democracy into numbers, into a kind of a generalized equation of things rather than understanding democracy is about a social contract, a social consensus that provides spaces for diversity, for complexity and for mobility among the diverse spaces. Often, we turn democracy into simply a system of election.

The situation of the art world should serve society but this is contradictory and problematic. If serving society means having the biggest numbers in the box office, there are increased pressures from government and sponsors for the institution to do things. If you look into the public aspect of an institution it's not simply about how many people come in. It's about what kind of quality public sphere we are actually creating through our programming, through the making

of the institution. This also partially answers the question of what the public gets from the things they see.

This leads us to the question of the lab which is about creating a public sphere in which diversity is tried out. It's not simply about checking how many people are sitting there everyday.

**Natalie King:** Can we discuss how MONA breaks museum and institutional conventions particularly with the display? There are no wall labels and almost no white walls. Over the last couple of days, Hanru has revealed that he doesn't work with conventional museum height. He doesn't work with a level, preferring to install works in relation to your own body. When you started working in San Francisco, you completely demolished the idea of the white cube and every exhibition had a different color.

**Hou Hanru:** I think we must understand the history of exhibition paradigms. There was a reason why the white cube was created in the very important circumstance of the transition from 19th century salon display to modernist ideas about the autonomy of art. The ideology behind it is about an avant-garde thinking that has its own autonomy. We continue with this cliché of the convenience of keeping the white cube because, I would argue, it's the best way to preserve the economic value – the fetishism of the art object. It has lost the original social meaning, but it becomes a kind of convenient mindset. I think it is also important to look at other possibilities provided by people who are working from the grass roots not necessarily to subvert the white cube, but at least to provide alternatives to this one dominant model.

Part of our curatorial mission is not only making exhibitions, it is also putting on the table a discussion about the institution of the future through a concrete and physical structure. When I got the chance to run the exhibition program at the San Francisco Art Institute, and the building itself is a typical, Corbusier building, I decided to do something quite theoretical especially for America, which is the home of the white cube. As a leader of the Exhibition Study Program, I also wanted my students to participate in this process so we decided not to use white paint. I was kind of joking, telling my assistant, "From now on, we don't have a budget for white paint." Every time I worked with an artist we discussed, "Apart from white walls, what do you want?" In addition, the programming was actually built on five issues over time. It's a symbolic gesture, but also a physical gesture. An exhibition has to run for three months. Why? Exhibitions can run for three minutes.

Art is not democratic per se. In the process of making or thinking, it's an outcome of conduct into subjectivity. An individual decides what he or she does. Our mission is to try to understand the quality of his or her thinking, the mission, and to articulate the quality.

**Amita Kirpalani:** Can a building impose a kind of ‘fascist’ set of principles, ie. be too restrictive?

**Hou Hanru:** Yes, that is inevitable when you have a physical structure, you have to have some rules. Nobody can escape from that. I don’t think it’s fascist, but rather a kind of given.

The other day I was reading Roland Barthes ‘Lesson in writing’ in *Image, music, text* (1977). He said, “Language by definition is something fascist.” You have a language, it’s already a kind of imposition, but this imposition is not about forbidding you to speak. You have to speak. The question is, once you have the language, you have to use the language and you have to speak in a way that language is defining you to speak. That was a very interesting definition of ‘fascism’. How do you fight against fascism? It’s to create tricks. The trick is in the literature. Literature is not about telling you clearly what the meaning is, it’s about creating a disturbance of the normal order of language and this is literature. In a way, our job is to create literature, under this inevitable fascist kind of a tendency. So what can we do?

The only way is to create the social consensus to understand that there are a lot of things that we cannot explain, we cannot talk about, we cannot fully understand. They exist, they are a part of our cultural product and we have to share them. We have to share the misunderstanding. I think that’s the best way of public dialogue. It creates a space in which one can project one’s imagination and misunderstanding as well. That’s about tolerance, about openness, that’s not about correctness. There is a fundamental difference there.

**Kyla McFarlane:** How do you penetrate Otara Market? I was also thinking about time, and the concept of time that is around a market?

**Hou Hanru:** That is one very basic kind of element that they have to think about. For example, Otara Market only happens on weekends. The rest of the time is not a shopping situation. A few projects like the Makeshift project would happen during the market time, be active, and after that, what do we do with this stupid object being there? We are still discussing where to put this object. How can we continue to activate them, to use them as a way to incite more dialogues? Of course, I don’t think we have a perfect solution yet but we are testing.

**Naomi Cass:** Sometimes I think there are so few spaces where there is no text or discussion. Sometimes it’s nice to come into a space and to think quietly and to focus on something that someone has made. We don’t have many temples.

**Hou Hanru:** Sometimes its totally necessary to have in an institution or in an exhibition, spaces which are empty, isolated, which are totally dark or whatever; which also can only allow one person to be in there at once. Coming back to this question of public is an ideal situation of a democratic system, it's about allowing people to do things to create space, to do things which are totally useless, totally unpopular and so on and so forth.

In Singapore, it's illegal to be naked in your own house, once you are exposed to the window. This is an outcome of the so-called democratic system. Can we impose a law that everyone has to be naked inside their own house?

**MODALITY [4] The Lab structure as an active and embedded format within biennials utilised by Hou Hanru in Gwangju Biennale (2002); 2<sup>nd</sup> Guangzhou Triennial (2005); Luxembourg Cultural Capital projects and Auckland Triennial: how does this cross-disciplinary system operate?**

**Natalie King:** Let's move on from nudity to the lab structure, which is mobile, agile and often structurally embedded within your biennales starting with Gwangju and culminating with Auckland. Hanru has taken over an entire floor of the Auckland Art Gallery and used this lab structure for workshops and seminars so it will incite dialogue.

**Hou Hanru:** By definition, artistic practice is about experiments. It's about doing things that are lonely, exceptional and uncommon and also, it's about trying to propose things which are not yet there. By definition, art practice is a laboratory; a kind of experiment. For me, an institution is the laboratory of impossible things.

In mainstream situations, this laboratory is not emphasized. It's much more about a kind of representation of commonly accepted ideas rather than a presentation of tales. In my projects, I try to bring back this idea of experimenting with the unknown. An exhibition is a process. It's not a fact with an end but an opening towards something else. It's not only about presenting the present but exploring the unknown. It's also about generating dialogues around the unknown as well.

Politically, an exhibition is a constant action of occupying. It sounds very trendy, occupation, but I've tried working with this idea of so-called autonomous zones, temporary or permanent. My last exhibition was called *Autonomous Regions* (2013) at Times Museum, Guangzhou. It's about how to use the occasion of an exhibition to generate such a space.

Laboratories can take different forms and usually, it's a complex system that brings discussions and presentations of ideas focusing on certain themes defined

for the project. It could also be a space of residency for artists coming to do research and open to all kinds of improvisation or performance.

I have been doing this in different occasions and especially in 2005 with Hans Ulrich Obrist. We were working on this project for the *Guangzhou Triennial*. I was the director of the triennial and he was my co-curator. The triennial was focusing on exploring the case of Guangzhou and the Guangdong province especially the Pearl River Delta region, from Hong Kong to Guangzhou to Macau, which is a triangle area traditionally a laboratory of modernization for many years; not only today but 2000 years ago.

The first Islamic influence in China occurred there as early as the 8th Century. It still has a mosque. Over time, this region has become the experimental zone of Chinese modernization. We wanted to focus on the question, “What kind of specific modernity has been generated in the process?”

The idea of laboratory is central and we decided to convince the museum director to give us the biggest exhibition room in the museum to turn it into a laboratory. Basically, we occupied the area for eighteen months before the opening of the exhibition. Every two weeks, we had a new group of people presenting events. Like an ongoing university space, there were five sections. An outcome of the lab was to build the Times Museum that Rem Koolhaas designed, grafted into a residential building.

From there, I’ve done a few more lab projects including the Luxembourg project which is *Trans(cient)City* (2008). I proposed two projects. One is an exhibition called *Multiplicity*, inspired by Antonio Negri’s idea of multiplicity and multitude, bringing people from different cultures to meet in Luxembourg. Another one is *Trans(cient)City*, a public art project that is not about making sculptures. It’s much more about creating infrastructures, temporary infrastructures, to bring different communities together. We defined three typologies. Some are mobile, travelling around the suburban periphery while others are more stable but it’s connecting different communities. The third one is performative by including social events, temporary markets, restaurants and cinema.

The local population came with their own films to create a film festival. There was also an opportunity to develop a research body by connecting different models of education to generate ideas for the future of the city because when you talk about the European culture capital, it’s about using the opportunity to talk about the transformation of the city. I invited five different universities in Europe with their design, architecture, visual art and multimedia departments. Each university sent five students every two months and we took over former industrial sites or old factories by turning them into a laboratory.

I also thought that it’s important to have a laboratory especially since the Auckland Triennial has a very close collaboration with universities. One of the

major universities, AUT, is a co-sponsor of the project. We worked with three different architecture and design faculties from three different universities in Auckland to create this program comprising a temporary structure made from wooden crates. During the triennial, there will be sections for discussions and forums around five major themes: informal market, ideal homes, multicultural impacts on urban transformation, rural urban as living space, emergency response and recovery. We are using Christchurch as a case study because after the earthquake, Christchurch became a national drama for New Zealand. It also generates interesting solutions for recreating the city.

#### CURATORIAL LAB PARTICIPANTS

Serena Bentley, Artistic Program Manager, Next Wave Festival, Melbourne  
Ulanda Blair, Assistant Curator, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne  
Naomi Cass, Director, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne  
Rebecca Coates, independent curator and writer, Melbourne  
Charlotte Day, Director, Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne  
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Nicole Durling, Curator, MONA, Hobart  
Melanie Eastburn, Curator, Asian Art, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
Kelly Fliedner, Program Curator, Westspace, Melbourne  
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Emily Sexton, Artistic Director, Next Wave Festival, Melbourne  
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Bala Starr, Senior Curator, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne  
Fiona Trigg, Curator, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne  
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#### MODERATORS

Natalie King, Director, Utopia@Asialink, University of Melbourne  
Victoria Lynn, Director TarraWarra Museum of Art and Curator of *turbulence 3<sup>rd</sup> Auckland Triennial*

#### ASIALINK ARTS

The role of Asialink Arts is to expand opportunities for cultural exchange, and develop the international capability of the cultural sector based on the principles of partnership, collaboration and reciprocity.

Utopia@Asialink is a pan-Asian incubator; a network of partners who converse, collaborate and develop responsive and pertinent working methodologies that connect diverse geo-political regions and communities.





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© Huang Yong Ping  
Courtesy Huang Yong Ping

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<http://ashanghaistory.tumblr.com>  
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Auckland Triennial

The Lab is a joint project between the  
architecture and spatial design faculties  
of AUT University, The University of  
Auckland and UNITEC.

Courtesy Auckland Art Gallery Toi o  
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Courtesy the artist and Auckland Art  
Gallery Toi o Tāmaki



Hou Hanru was born in Guangzhou, China in 1963 and completed degrees at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing before moving to Paris in 1990. He is currently Artistic Director of MAXXI, Rome. He worked at the San Francisco Art Institute as Director of Exhibitions and Public Program and Chair of Exhibition and Museum Studies from 2006-2012. He has curated numerous exhibitions including *Cities on the Move* (1997-2000) with Hans Ulrich Obrist; Shanghai Biennale (2000); Gwangju Biennale (2002); Venice Biennale (French Pavilion, 1999, *Z.O.U., Zones of Urgency*, 2003, Chinese Pavilion, 2007); *Nuit Blanche* (2004), Paris; 2<sup>nd</sup> Guangzhou Triennial (2005); 2<sup>nd</sup> Tirana Biennial (2005); 10<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial (2007); 10<sup>th</sup> Lyon Biennale (2009) and 5<sup>th</sup> Auckland Triennial (2013).

He has been a consultant and advisor to many international institutions including Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York), Kumamoto Museum of Contemporary Art (Kumamoto, Japan), De Appel Foundation (Amsterdam), Rockbund Art Museum (Shanghai), Times Museum of Contemporary Art (Guangzhou), Today Art Museum (Beijing), Deutsche Bank Collection (Frankfurt), Kadist Art Foundation (San Francisco/Paris), Asia Art Archive (Hong Kong), and served on juries of many international awards including the Hugo Boss Prize (Guggenheim Museum), Chinese Contemporary Art Award (Beijing), Ars Fennica (Helsinki), Credit Suisse/Today Art Award (Today Art Museum, Beijing) and Hugo Boss Prize China (Rockbund Art Museum, Shanghai).

He has also taught and lectured in various artistic and educational institutions including Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten (Amsterdam), HISK (Antwerp/Ghent), and numerous universities, museums across the world.

A selection of his writings was published in *On The Mid-Ground* by Timezone 8, 2002. His recent books include *Paradigm Shifts, Walter & McBean Galleries exhibitions and public programs, San Francisco Art Institute, 2006-2011*, San Francisco Art Institute, 2011 (with Mary Ellyn Johnson). A frequent contributor to conferences, catalogues, magazines and books of contemporary art, he is also a guest editor for international art journals including *Flash Art International, Yishu, Art Asia Pacific* and *LEAP*.

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## The 5th Auckland Triennial

*If you were to live here...* organised by Auckland Art Gallery with major partner AUT University









