

# Features

## A tale of three cities

*The quality of art is mixed at the Singapore, Shanghai and Gwangju biennales*

By Marc Spiegler

With Asia suddenly in the ascendant, the usual autumn travel madness kicked off with three biennales opening within a week of each other—a debut in Singapore, alongside the sixth editions of Shanghai and South Korea's Gwangju. But although there was an overlap in the international attendees, the three events were hardly of a kind.

### Singapore

First came the premiere in Singapore, a biennial conceived by the government to develop the nation's reputation into something more than "Asia for Beginners", a tidy place where everyone speaks English and corporations find friendly footing. Curated by Fumio Nanjo of Tokyo's Mori Museum, it was all over the place, both literally and artistically. Aside from obvious venues such as the National Museum of Art, works were displayed in the abandoned Tanglin military camp, the national library and former courtrooms in City Hall. Playing off the theme "Belief", works appeared in seven religious venues, ranging from a synagogue to a Hindu temple—although many pieces were placed outside main areas of religious activity.

Given the city-state's long history of quelling dissent, most visitors expected uncontroversial selections. After curators proclaimed to the press that the term "biennial" was a bit daring (since it implied a second one would definitely occur), expectations sank lower. And indeed many works proved either decorative or facile. That said, there were some excellent pieces, especially from abroad: Sweden's Mats Bigert and Lars Bergström's *The Last Supper* was a spellbinding documentary on death row meals; more lyrical was *Magical World*, a video by Johanna Billing in which Zagreb kids learn the uplifting English-language pop song phonetically; Cuban Wilfredo Prieto's *Biblioteca Blanca* inserted a few hundred shelf-feet of blank books into the National Library's main reading area (a subtle swipe at censorship?); and this mercantile nation seemed the perfect backdrop for the Argentine Gustavo Romano's *Time Notes* project, in which passers-by were asked to exchange something against currency with denominations such as *60 Minutes* or *Ten Years*. As for Singaporean artists, the art crowd's favourite was Ho Tzu Nyen's *Bohemian Rhapsody Project*, a video based on the Queen song and shot in City Hall as a camp courtroom drama. While riotous, it also played with the medium enough to evoke more than just head-banging humour.

Officially slated as part of the biennial's performance schedule, the opening night ceremony played to the local crowd, featuring an over-long fashion show inspired by Yayoi Kusama and the launch of hundreds of LED-filled balloons by Usman Haque, which had a rather fairground feel. The only highlight was a death-metal performance by Filipino Yason Banal. Yet that orgy of darkness was undercut by the rainbow-hued "Singapore Biennale" logos adorning the stage—symbolic of the event's attempt to embrace the cool of the art world, but only to a safe degree.



### Shanghai

The next morning, the jets started landing at Shanghai's Pudong airport. In stark contrast to Singapore, the Chinese art scene has become a frenzy of private speculation. For a week, nightclubs on the Bund teemed with young collectors, some on tour with American institutions such as MoMA and the Hammer Museum, many freshly arrived from bulk buying in Beijing, which has supplanted Shanghai as the Middle Kingdom's art market mecca.

This biennial's theme, "Hyper Design," perfectly matched Shanghai's current "Metropolis"-on-the-Pacific moment. But, on balance, the show disappointed—tending towards too-slick art rather than great design. Of course, any biennial this big has some excellent work. Korea's Lee Kyung-Ho showed a room full of toy backhoes and bulldozers, loudly whirring and grinding, which echoed the rabid construction outside the museum. Belgian Hans Op de Beeck's massive diorama, with its fluctuating video-animated core, played with the notion of the shopping mall as a modern temple, marketplace and motherboard for today's consumer culture. Swedish artist Annika Larsson's 2004 video *Hockey* remains eerily effective; the sport as a sensual waltz with violent overtones.

Granted, there was a certain seductiveness to quasi-design objects such as Chinese artist Shi Jinsong's Mad Maxian motorcycles, or the gleaming Formula 1-style vehicles of Japan's Tetsuya Nakamura. But this was only momentary lust, nothing deeper. The biggest disappointment was the Chinese art, which tended to dress up Chinese icons—Buddha, temples, monks, earthenware—in pop aesthetics or technical conceits.

Clockwise from above: Mats Bigert & Lars Bergström's *The Last Supper*, 2005, at the Singapore Biennale; Shi Jinsong's *Halong-Kellong No. 1*, 2003-05, at the Shanghai Biennale; and Song Dong's *Waste Not*, 2005, won first prize at the Gwangju Biennale



As "Entry Gate: Chinese Aesthetics of Heterogeneity", the exhibition at the Shanghai MoCA museum next door demonstrated, there are better, international standard artists working in the world's largest country, as did a show at the Zendai museum. Yet both MoCA and the Zendai are private institutions, sponsored by property moguls. (And unlike their counterparts in the West, they do not house the collections of their founders but function as part of larger real estate strategies.)

### Gwangju

After all the hype of the Chinese market, the Gwangju biennial, curated by Kim Hong Hee, proved refreshingly low-key. Although the bustling city is a backwater, the biennial has gained international respect for its seriousness, and this year's exhibition presented solid and sometimes spectacular works of art.

Paradoxically, China's contemporary scene proved better-represented in Gwangju than in Shanghai. Installation artist Song Dong created an ode to mourning—awarded the prize for best work at the biennial—neatly organising the detritus (empty packing boxes, half-finished medications, dried-out soda bottles, abandoned sandals and much more) that his distraught mother collected after his father died. Zhang Dali's archive of Communist-era government photographs—depicting Mao, his politburo and the heroic proletariat—and the originals from which they had been composed, gently revealed the mechanisms of the era's propaganda appara-

tus. Hong Lei, Liu Zheng and Xu Bing also adapt China's traditional motifs and myths to modern materials, but much more successfully than their compatriots in Shanghai.

European artists were particularly strong in video. *Matrioskas* by Lithuania's Deimantas Narkevicius explored the line between fiction and non-fiction, using the sex-trade axis connecting eastern and western Europe as a backdrop.

Not that Gwangju was flawless. A captivating exhibition devoted to Fluxus, rightly underlining its Zen antecedents, segued into Zen-related art that looked better suited to an Ayurveda spa in SoHo. Equally questionable was the biennial's "final chapter" targeting United States "fascism". On the other hand, this material would never have been considered in the more constrained setting of either Shanghai or Singapore. Then again, neither city would have staged a Fluxus performance that involved painting a piano during a VIP party—turpentine fumes drove the international art crowd outside into a "zen rave" party attended mostly by pre-teens. Even in Asia, apparently, one must suffer for art's sake. ■

□ Singapore Biennale: Beliefs (4 September-12 November), various venues and religious sites, including the National Museum of Singapore, City Hall, Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple and the Church of Sts Peter and Paul. For info: [www.singaporebiennale.org](http://www.singaporebiennale.org).

□ Shanghai Biennale: Hyper Design (5 September-5 November), Shanghai Art Museum, 325, Nanjing Road West, and other venues. For info: [www.shanghaiennale.com](http://www.shanghaiennale.com).

□ Gwangju Biennale: Fever Variations (8 September-11 November), Biennale Hall, Junggoe Park. For info: [www.gwangju-biennale.org](http://www.gwangju-biennale.org).