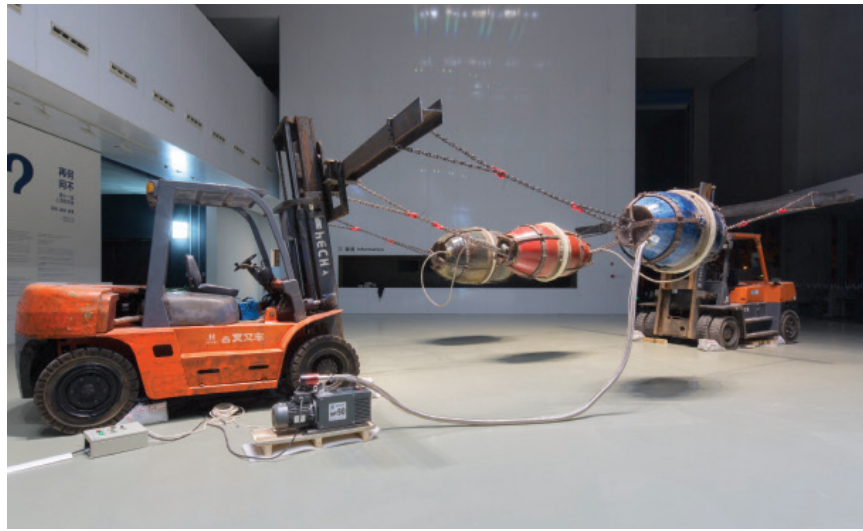


WHY NOT ASK AGAIN: ARGUMENTS, COUNTER-ARGUMENTS, AND STORIES



Navigational instructions were scant at the 11th Shanghai Biennale, leaving viewers to plot their own alternative itineraries. Perhaps you brushed past a pimped-up car installation by Lantian Xie parked on the outdoor pavilion, before entering through the main doors of the Power Station of Art (PSA) to find two forklifts engaged in a Sisyphean tug-of-war dreamt up by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu. Or you snuck in through the back, facing off with Yin Yi's grid of 49 fans that produced gentle, purring sounds, although the expected breeze was strangely absent. Maybe you heard whispers about an installation by Vishal K. Dar in an area of the building that is hard to access, and you zoomed up the staircases and out onto the narrow bridge to reach the PSA's disused, 165-meter-high chimney; inside, three beams of light collided and mingled before blazing the surface of a reflection pool.

These divergent beginnings demonstrated the peripatetic nature of the Biennale, titled in full "Why Not Ask Again: Arguments, Counter-arguments, and Stories." Recycling the biennial format as a political statement, curators Raqs Media Collective—Jeebesh Bagchi, Monica Narula and Shuddhabrata Sengupta—referenced two major sources in assembling the exhibits: *The Three-Body Problem* (2006), a science-fiction novel series by Liu Cixin, and the film *Jukti, Takko aar Gappo* (1974) directed by Ritwik Ghatak. In both, contemporary sociopolitical agendas are addressed via derailed storytelling. Ghatak synchronically surveys society in Asia from a biographical standpoint, tapping into concerns that galvanize many contemporary artists living and working in the region. Liu focuses on a real-life conundrum, which fascinated polymaths such as Isaac Newton and Galileo Galilei, as they believed it was the key to understanding the interdependence of celestial bodies: When two large objects, such as planets, orbit each other, their trajectories are

easily predictable. However, when a third body is introduced, the system's orbital complexity becomes increasingly chaotic.

With these two origins in mind, Raqs invited visitors to bin conventional narrative forms, allowing for unchecked interactions with works by 92 artists and artist groups. There were three subprojects sprinkled within the PSA: "Terminals," consisting of four major installations by Marjolijn Dijkman, Ivana Franke, Regina José Galindo and MouSen+MSG; "Infra-Curatorial Platform," in which seven curators—Sabih Ahmed, Ivan Isaev, Srajana Kaikini, Mouna Mekouar, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, Liu Tian, Didem Yazıcı—developed mini-exhibitions; and "Theory Opera," a cluster of events in which theories of science, literature, art and music were transcribed into performances as coordinated by Liu Tan and Yao Mengxi. Together, these undertakings acted as gravitational anchors to the other presentations.

Unfortunately, these works eclipsed other exemplary stand-alone installations. This included the palm-sized wall annotations "Will Draw" (2016) by Gagandeep Singh, whose humorous meta-philosophical impressions were easy to miss unless you stumbled across them, or happened to know where they were. Similarly, one could walk past a series of didactic plaques without realizing they transmitted phantasmagorical fictions about the art world in "Story Series" (2013–) by Lu Pingyuan. One of these, *The Groupie* (2013), tells the story of a novice art lover who was invited to an exhibition opening, where he was received as a guest of honor and spoke at length with a woman dressed in black. After imbibing heavily, he passed out on the gallery sofa. When he came to, the sofa had floated off the ground and the wallpaper had been shredded into confetti. Most disturbingly, he found old photographs depicting the same woman he had spoken to that night. These absorbing tales reflected rabbit-hole scenarios that were present throughout the PSA—new universes were imagined, and an untrammelled flow of questions, stories, people and landscapes coalesced within.



One notable and admirable feature was that Raqs had reconfigured the cultural and historical epicenter of the world; they had placed Asia as the dominant—in fact, only—point of focus from which these tales disseminated. Inevitably, recollections of the political and personal variants reared their heads. On level two was Bahar Behbahani's "Garden Coup" (2015–16) series; large panels layered with spills of ochre and oxblood paint were overwritten with tense, black redaction bars, recalling the shocking 2013 CIA report that revealed Donald Wilbur, a once-revered scholar of ancient and modern Middle Eastern culture, as a spy complicit in the 1952 Iran coup d'état that overthrew the prime minister and strengthened monarchical rule. One level up, cupboards, mirrors, desks, shelves and other domestic bric-a-brac collected from a now-demolished block of apartments in Chongqing were stacked together in the installation *Seven Days* (2013) by Wang Haichuan; each dent and etch in the abandoned furniture was a reminder of the tenants who once possessed them, yet the plush blue carpeting and well-lit hall of the PSA created an alien environment that released them from biography.

The same level held "Estoy Viva (I'm Alive)" (2001–), a series of photographs and videos that documented Regina José Galindo's performances. Her body was a vehicle to demonstrate cases of rape, genocide and torture in her native Guatemala, such as in *Tierra* (2013), in which an oversized bulldozer aggressively digs holes around Galindo's naked figure, invoking the massacres of 1982, when former president José Efraín Ríos Montt ordered mass killings of Maya civilians and their disposal in clandestine communal graves in villages across the country. Two exhibitions also adopted the human form as a site of resistance against racial conflicts: curator Didem Yazıcı included Etel Adnan and Şener Özmen, among others, for "Freedom Is a State of Mind," in which the artists confronted recent warfare in West Asia with elegiac poetry, and attempted to speak to a dove about peace, respectively; and the film exhibit *Zero Latitude* (2014) by South Africa's Bianca Baldi in the Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi-curated "Future of the Past" featured two faceless, white-gloved attendants unpacking a portable bed built

for a European explorer on his way to the Congo. The artifact's luxurious and functional design might be gratifying, and yet the artist submits it as a symbol of colonial trauma.

Everywhere I turned, possibilities unfolded, blossomed and multiplied in mitosis, reaching even beyond the confines of the PSA. In a series of events titled "51 Personae," Shanghai was mapped out according to the deeply personal perspectives of 51 Shanghaiese citizens and international artists. This included a 16-year-old podcasting his memories of the city, which could be heard after scanning a QR code with a smartphone while riding the transparent sky train; and transvestite performer and Lai Lai Dance Hall owner MinMin, who invited 70 guests to watch a documentary about her life at the low-key, queer-friendly landmark, where one might find middle-aged men slow dancing, cheek-to-cheek, to Cantopop star Teresa Teng's songs.

Ultimately, responses to the Biennale were ones of both awe and confusion. Some described it as chaotic, both in experience and in curation. My anxiety swelled once I was inside MouSen+MSG's dystopian spaceship installation *The Great Chain of Being – Planet Trilogy* (2016), triggered by the seemingly never-ending chambers that included a glass capsule in which a tree succumbed to the inevitability of apian invasion. Truthfully, in this powerful rearrangement of perspectives and multiplicities, how much could viewers absorb within their limited, chronological schedules? Perhaps this was an irony only understood by Raqs, whose namesake can refer to the state reached by whirling dervishes after relentless spinning. However, moments of clarity and connectedness did surface. Visitors were drawn to Lee Mingwei's silent, meditative performance of a monochrome-clothed dancer gently sweeping gold rice grains, and Ivana Franke's sublime *Disorientation Station* (2016)—three chambers that immersed visitors in blinding, blinking lights and optical illusions—was a welcome refuge. I spent my lunch break dodging Chinese government officials and public relations hawks milling around in the PSA. Inside this darkened dome, tiny dots glided like shooting stars across a glassy surface on the ceiling, and routed again and again to unknown destinations in boundless space.

YSABELLE CHEUNG



Opposite page, top

SUN YUAN and PENG YU

So Far
2016
Two forklifts, three pairs of crocks and vacuum pump, dimensions variable.
Courtesy Power Station of Art, Shanghai.

Opposite page, bottom

WANG HAICHUAN

Seven Days
2013
Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable.
Courtesy Power Station of Art, Shanghai.

This page, top

LEE MINGWEI

Our Labyrinth
2015–
Live performance with rice, grains, seeds, costume and dance.
Courtesy Power Station of Art, Shanghai.

This page, bottom

IVANA FRANKE

Disorientation Station
2016
Circular rooms, polystyrene panels, white LED-lights and micro-controller, dimensions variable.
Courtesy Power Station of Art, Shanghai.