

ECHIGO-TSUMARI ART TRIENNALE 2018

The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (ETAT) is the pioneer of land art festivals in Japan. First presented in 2000, the event germinated from discussions on Asiatic globalization, localism, symbiotic ecosystems and protests against forgetting. Rather than focusing on the itinerancy of city life, as in Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist's three-year traveling exhibition "Cities on the Move" (1997–99), where similar topics were broached, ETAT's founder Fram Kitagawa instead wrests with the static, socio-topographic features of rural Japan and the drying up of its economic wellsprings due to severe depopulation.

The 51-day, seventh edition of ETAT featured 133 newly commissioned artworks among the existing 354 across six areas in Echigo-Tsumari, Niigata Prefecture. The most explicit reference to environmental awareness was found in Chinese artist Xu Bing's *Background Story* (all works 2018), an iteration of his large-scale lightbox installations, in which hemp fibers, leaves, newspapers and other dried, vegetative materials are pasted onto a vertical rice-paper screen. When viewed from the other side, the resulting silhouette creates the illusion of a traditional Chinese landscape painting. While the series follows on from Xu's protean investigations into form and tradition, one can't help but see a more ironic aspect to the work: the exposed lightbox reveals humankind's practice of destruction in order to re-create "nature."

Several artists focused more on archiving the culture of the region. At the newly built Hong Kong House (a venue and cultural platform initiated by various government-supported and independent organizations in Hong Kong) was *Tsunan Museum of the Lost*, a series of new and old photographs presented by artist-couple Leung Chi Wo and Sara Wong. As an act of remembrance, the artists appropriated the poses and dress of half-hidden figures or those with their backs turned in old images sourced from the Tsunan community, attempting to recreate their forgotten stories with accompanying narrative-style notes. Looking more closely at documenting the present is Japanese artist Teppei Kaneuji, who spent several wintry months in the region with snowplow workers. For *Summer Fiction*, he filled a suffocatingly humid warehouse with four doctored pick-up trucks—stuffed with ice-hockey sticks and other paraphernalia associated with snow—along with videos, canvases, light installations and audio recordings of the grinding vehicles and his interviews with the workers. The phantasmagoric Gesamtkunstwerk embodies the strangeness of visualizing snowfalls in summer—what Kaneuji calls a "pleasant horror story."

Throughout the region of the triennial, sharp contrasts of localism and globalism framed quiet, day-to-day existence. South Korean artist Lee Bul



refurbished a disused hospital with mirrored shards and silvery foils, reflecting the traditional interiors and arranging an anachronistic juxtaposition of her constructivist, Soviet-futurist themes with archaic medical equipment. On a village road in Kawanishi, famed for its rice drawn from riverbanks, Berlin-based Ahmet Ögüt re-created a Saudi subculture, in which youths engage in drifting or hang out of their vehicles, by installing a real-life car with its cutout reproduction featuring a keffiyeh-wearing man. While at first glance the installation appears to be a commentary on globalism and out-of-context incongruity, the vehicles actually highlight the stunted youth culture in Echigo-Tsumari as well as the similarities between Kawanishi and the small-town history of the cars' Japanese manufacturer, Toyota, originally called Toyoda—"fertile rice paddies"—after its founder.

While not a direct promotion of agrarianism, ETAT is a study of the hundreds of archipelagos comprised of farms and villages that are losing young people to metropolitan cities and culture. On our last day at the festival, we drove to Matsudai to view a new installation by Beijing artist Wu Jian'an, who had collaged the walls in a converted Japanese-style house with voluminous, calligraphic strokes on paper. We were joined by a photographer—from Tokamachi—along with a local family and three elderly women, who were feverish with anticipation to see the work. ETAT could be more selective, polishing its program and curatorial statements until it resembles the more radical biennials of South Korea or Europe, and drawing millennial collectors and visitors to the region—but to what end? In a way, ETAT has already fulfilled its early mission: to archive the past and bring in young volunteers so that, in Kitagawa's words, "the lonely old people left behind can regain their smile."

YSABELLE CHEUNG

HO TZU NYEN

ONE OR SEVERAL WORKS

Opposite page

AHMET ÖĞÜT

"The Drifters" Version 2

2018

Mixed-media installation with two Toyota Land Cruisers, dimensions variable.

Installation view at Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale, 2018.

Photo by Ysabelle Cheung for ArtAsiaPacific.

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HO TZU NYEN

One or Several Tigers

2017

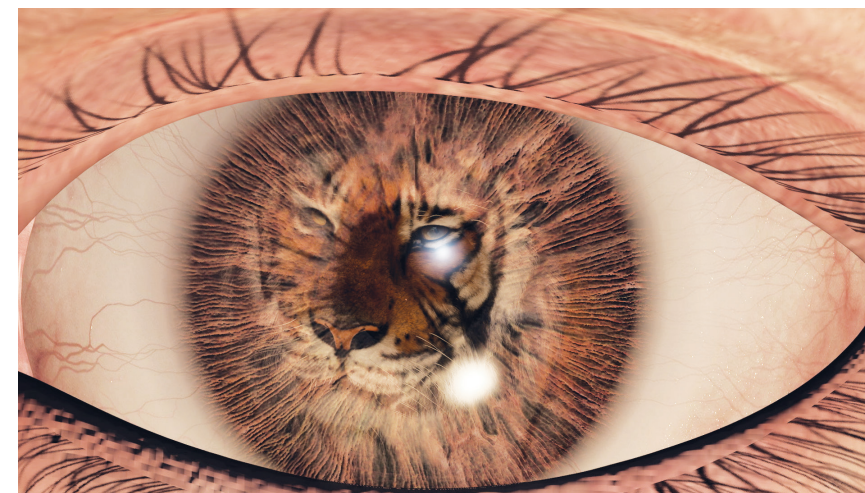
Synchronized two-channel HD projection with automated screens, shadow puppets, 10-channel sound, smoke and show-control system: 33 min 33 sec.

Courtesy the artist.

Ho Tzu Nyen is a narrator of speculative fictions. The often crisscrossing timeframes in which his works are situated stretch from one million BCE to 2045. Building on his exhaustive ongoing project, *The Critical Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (2011–) —an archive of films gathered via internet-based algorithms and an accumulated set of concepts of what constitutes Southeast Asia—his solo exhibition "One or Several Works" at Shanghai's Ming Contemporary Art Museum was a sweeping view of Singapore, and a microscopic dissection of its prehistory and potential catastrophic future.

The exhibition was guided by three narrative strands: the weretiger mythology of Malaya; the influence of the Communist Party of Malaya and its enigmatic secretary general Lai Teck during and after the Second World War; as well as Singapore's potential inhabitability in the future.

Though familiarity with these histories and mythologies is not a prerequisite, as the storytelling of the six displayed videos is both dense and accessible, stamina is required. The two-channel film, *One or Several Tigers* (2017), begins with two animated characters: George Coleman, Singapore's first government superintendent of the Public Works department; and the tiger that destroyed his surveying equipment. Their lines are delivered in an initially irritating singsong style, but which quickly burrows into one's mind, like a shamanic chant. The work is a tour-de-force of stagecraft: the two projections intermittently reveal backlit shadow-puppets, while the space was filled with smoke. Ambitious in its presentation and subject, as Coleman and the tiger sing a duet that condenses one million years of Malayan history, myths and ecological evolution, it was well worth watching the entire 33 minutes. Sadly, most viewers left after five minutes, and I cannot help but think the unconventional, repetitive narrative style and musical English dialogue were responsible.



In a cavernous room upstairs, *The Nameless* (2014) and *The Name* (2015) were projected on opposite sides of the same suspended screen. The former takes as its subject Lai Teck "the nameless," a Sino-Vietnamese triple-agent serving the French, British and Japanese, while the latter is centered on Gene Z. Hanrahan, the first writer to record the history of the Communist Party of Malaya, and a suspected ghostwriter with links to the CIA. The works intersect around the investigation of authorship and authenticity in relation to history, but where *The Nameless* represents Lai Teck using scenes of smoking figures drawn from pieces of Hong Kong cinema, endlessly lighting and relighting cigarettes, *The Name* represents Hanrahan with edits of Hollywood actors ceaselessly in the act of writing. With no partitions in the room besides the screen, the soundtracks of the two videos inevitably merged, and separating the narratives was impossible, no matter where one stood. As an artistic device, this arrangement is simple yet effective, reminding viewers that narratives are personal, histories unstable—and not only is the narrator unreliable, so is the position one adopts in relation to shifting information.

Earth (Cinema) and *Earth (Black to Comm)* (both 2009–12), the final works visitors encountered, and the earliest of Ho's films, were perhaps the exhibition's outliers. Featuring slow pans of postapocalyptic scenes that reference classical European paintings, accompanied by experimental music, they felt disconnected to the overall project, if nonetheless visually arresting.

Initially, the exhibition's acoustic design seemed chaotic. However, as one delved deeper into the content, a logic became clear: the overlapping sounds express the multitude of participants in the shaping of Singapore as a nation, adding to how the show, as a whole, contained the many parts that make up the complicated history of Malaya.

On viewing "One or Several Works," one couldn't help but be reminded of the short story by Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science" (1946), in which the cartographers of a mythical kingdom decide to create a one-to-one-scale map in order to represent the territory exactly. However, the map must be laid over the kingdom itself, inevitably suffocating its development. One hopes that Ho, in his obsession to scrutinize and chart the semi-fictional history and future of Singapore, avoids a similar fate.

WEI HAO QI

*Visit our Digital Library at library.artasiapacific.com for more articles on Ho Tzu Nyen.