



process of selection

2008 singapore biennale interviewed

lee weng choy with singapore biennale curators joselina cruz and matthew ngui, and general manager low kee hong



LEE WENG CHOY

In September 2006, Singapore launched its first biennale.¹ Earlier that year, Joan Kee, Ray Langenbach, Paul Rae, June Yap, Cyril Wong and yours truly—a small sample of local and regional writers and curators—participated in a roundtable called ‘Calibrated Expectations’, which was published in *Broadsheet* (Vol 35 No 3). The topics we discussed ranged from overreaching ambitions—“for many curators, the opportunity to do an international biennale poses an irresistible chance to create one’s own vision of the universe” (Kee)—to questions of what will be “the *Biennale’s* position on works... that are explicitly critical of the Singapore government” (Langenbach); from doubts whether Singapore can “open up and see what freedoms we can actually enjoy” (Yap), to worries over “the erasure of great distances... without demanding the full costs” (Lee); from wondering if we can “move beyond cynicism” (Rae), to a sense of resignation that we are already living in a dystopia where “visibility is everything” (Wong). We were mindful of the ever increasing verbiage on the subject of biennales, and didn’t want to merely add to the noise, but somehow to be reflexive about the habits of those discourses.

As I argued in my introduction to the roundtable, if critics want to fault the conceits of biennale curators, they too must recognise that they have a responsibility. Ironically, yet not surprisingly, the rhetoric curators use to articulate their exhibitions is in good measure criticism refracted, processed and incorporated. So perhaps we might have ‘better’ biennales, if our criticisms of them were also better. In our roundtable, we only managed to spell out an incomplete catalogue of diverse demands. It was hardly the ushering of the “better criticisms” I had called for, but such is an endeavour worth pursuing, and writers haven’t hesitated to further ponder upon that thing, the biennale.

Earlier this year, *Broadsheet* published an essay of mine, ‘Biennale Demand’ (Vol 37 No 1), in which I argued for the importance of asking, not just what we—audiences, critics, artists, whomever—want from these types of exhibitions, but what ‘they’ demand of us. I suggested that, more than our attentive adoration, our collective gasp in awe of their spectacle, what they really want is something at once more modest but also much more demanding—our time. Far too many discussions of these exhibitions are characterised by the rush to judgement, and by the assumption that a biennale is indeed a thing in itself, rather than a phenomenon that may not quite cohere. Would it be more accurate to consider each one as an odd assemblage of several parallel if not separate micro-verses which exist in multiple times? For this interview, rather than directly addressing such larger issues as this year’s theme which, incidentally, is ‘Wonder’—or the challenge of doing a second *Singapore Biennale*, or the state of contemporary art in Asia, I’ve decided that the important thing, sometimes, is to privilege the details. As a way of attending more carefully and taking more time to look at the whole process, I’ve asked curators Joselina Cruz and Matthew Ngui, as well as general manager Low Kee Hong, questions about the process of selection—from the artists to the artistic director. Fumio Nanjo is again in charge of the island city-State’s big show. By having a relatively tight focus I do not mean to lose sight of the bigger picture. The tendency to talk about these grand projects in grand terms often is at the expense of closer engagements—engagements which require time, and usually only yield very partial and incomplete understandings, which in turn may provoke us to spend even more time, trying to figure what these things called biennales really want from us.

LEE WENG CHOY: Low Kee Hong, my first question to you concerns the reappointment of Fumio Nanjo for a second *Biennale*. I’m sure you’ve heard some less than positive responses from the local arts community about Nanjo’s reappointment—if only because it seems like the safe choice, and it forecloses other possibilities. These reactions seem less about Nanjo himself, than about the Singapore National Art Council’s reasons for choosing him again. These reasons have been expressed in the press releases accompanying his reappointment, and I don’t want to rehash them here at length.² Rather, I’m interested in finding out more about the process of deciding on Nanjo again. Could you tell me who was involved in the decision, what the process was, as well as the time frame?

LOW KEE HONG: The process was quite straightforward, actually. The discussions about continuing with Nanjo started even before the first *Singapore Biennale* opened. There was mutual interest in continuing the relationship, and once that was established, a recommendation was put up to the Ministry of Information Communications and the Arts for approval and endorsement. It is perhaps more interesting to think about the editions of the *Biennale* as a whole body of work, if you will. The reasons provided in

the various press releases you refer to communicate very clearly the importance of continuity, especially for a young biennale like Singapore's. But more to the point, one has to think about the methodology of creating new biennales—taking into account the context and strategies that work for a place like Singapore. Remember, you are talking about the positioning of contemporary art in a city that is still quite new to the whole experience. I think to say that reappointing Nanjo is a “safe choice” reflects a lack of appreciation of the exigencies at stake; one has to think beyond the short term, and develop a proper approach to ensure the longevity of the *Singapore Biennale* and contemporary art in the country.

LWC: Joselina Cruz, obviously a large part of what the three of you do, Nanjo, Matthew Ngui and yourself, is select artists. But before that happens, you deliberate upon and develop the frameworks that underpin the selection process. Could you describe this framework and perhaps talk about some of the discussions that you have had? And could you also talk about the overall process of how you chose artists? I imagine that you three go in your separate directions, then come together periodically and discuss the artists that you've met and are inclined to choose, and then come to your final decisions. Could you tell us more about this?

JOSELINA CRUZ: Coming from very distinct backgrounds, I suppose we had different expectations about how the framework was to come about. Fumio of course had a greater sense of how the wheels of large-scale exhibitions work, and, with this being his second time working with the *Singapore Biennale*, he was also more familiar with how the NAC (National Arts Council) functioned. Matthew too has held advisory positions with the NAC, and knows more people in the Singapore arts community than I, and he's quite influential in the field—at least from my point of view. Both Fumio and Matthew have also dealt with public art on many levels—one with commissioning, the other with production. How you imagine the process is correct—we went our separate ways and came together with lists of artists whose works or practices we thought relevant. I suppose any decision-making process is similar. I imagined it to be a bit more stringent. But perhaps with the *Biennale* being young, and needing to be flexible in finding its footing, I guess it was a bit more loose than I had initially imagined to be. Or perhaps wanted it to be. But with this also came many of the decisions being more democratic—not in terms of the choice of specific artists, but on how these choices were spread out. As a curator I also started out with a mental list of artists with whom I wanted to work with—most of whom made it to the list, but I didn't get to work with all of them during the entire process. I think that has always been one of the most exciting aspects of working as a curator—working thoroughly and closely with an artist to see a work to the end. I learned that this was not always the case—at some point, there are artists whom you didn't know about, but then when you learned about the work—wow! You want to work specifically with them. But then when working together as a curatorial team—there's always the jostling around for the best fit as well as accommodating the compromises. The whole lot of us—artists, organisers—we're not a homogenous lot to start with.

How does one choose artists? People think there must be a lot of conceit that goes into the choosing of artists—but at the end of the day it is rather overwhelming—again, this is the case for me, at least. To see so many interesting practices (and bad ones too). I'm as interested in the artists I put forward, as in the artists that the other curators put forward. The artists represent an incredible wealth of knowledge, and I felt privileged to have been able to see the complexity and the imagination of such a variety of work each time we sat down for curatorial meetings.

I suppose the overall selection of artists is already somewhat decided when the curators are selected—things are narrowed down by virtue of the people placed at the helm of choosing. I imagine we were drawn to work that we were interested in and found exciting, and perhaps found these works in as many places as we found ourselves in—biennales, galleries, artists studios, exhibitions, openings, trips, reading, etc. The social and cultural capital we carried informed much of what we brought to the table.

LWC: Matthew Ngui, as one of Singapore's better known contemporary artists, what was your response when asked to become involved as a curator? How do you think you approached the selections of artists differently from Nanjo and Cruz, if at all? Could you talk in some detail about your own process of selecting artists? Are there any typical examples, or is each meeting quite different, and could you talk about one or two examples in particular?

MATTHEW NGUI: It is always great to be approached to do a job; any job! I wasn't sure if I would make a 'good curator', but whatever the outcome, in accepting the position, I was sure that I would learn considerably.

As an artist I've always endeavoured to be self-reflexive, to understand my own practice and the contexts in which it exists, through a process of making, adaptation, experiencing and change. As a curator, I don't consciously seek out artists or their work as knowledge/material, or categorise them in groups from which one could select examples for various exhibition purposes. Individuality is crucial. My contact with other artists has usually been through friendships and acquaintances while working with them in local and international exhibitions. On top of this, I did a fair amount of reading.

Hence, I'm especially interested in the processes artists engage in the making and thinking about art. And my selection is based on this interest. I find that I am much more attracted to these processes than with the finished product. One could position my selection criteria squarely on considerations of the potential of a work in relation to the *Biennale's* theme of 'Wonder', rather than on works already made—I guess this may be a key difference in my approach. I should add that this is perhaps not the most convenient approach, for if a work is as yet unrealised, it's a worry, and any commission or new project necessitates more work and money.

Examples of artists with whom I am currently working would include Perth artist Rick Hadlow, who has made highly interesting mechanised work but has not exhibited widely, and is now (July 2008) in the process of making a new work that considerably extends his practice. The final outcome may not be exactly as projected, as the artist engages with his own process of creative research and development, but I'm most interested in giving these processes a chance.

There is also Sergio Prego, who I visited in New York and Joselina got wind of him while researching in Spain. His past work has been strong and it would have been easier to pick a couple of his videos and re-exhibit them. When speaking with Sergio, he indicated that he was developing a new line of work he was keen to continue and if things worked out, we should show this, or some of this new body of work. As it turned out, we agreed to something in between, where he would make a new work in one of the courtyards in City Hall based on one of his multiple camera shoots of an explosion. Another artist is Felice Varini, whose work fits well within the theme of “spatial looking with curiosity”. In the case of Felice, his work is site-specific and as such, we agreed to have him design and install a new work for the *Biennale*.

Selection, depending on the exhibition, is about the interplay between choosing the artist, a particular artwork, a body of work or the potential for a work. Selection however, is only a part of the process of bringing a work into fruition. Dialogue with the artist, the type and scale of the work, the research, extent of financial assistance and the particular needs of the art and artist are the other decisions that also need to be made in relation to what might be the outcome of the whole process.

LWC: Kee Hong, I'd like to ask about your own role in the artistic decisions of the *Biennale*. Of course, your role is to support the artistic process, to support the director and curators, but as we all know, there are always negotiations, and one cannot clearly separate artistic decisions from administrative ones. Could you talk about this? The decision about the Art Fair (*Showcase Singapore*) showing during the *Vernissage* period at the City Hall *Biennale* exhibition site for example, has generated discussion in the local media and within the arts community. Would you like to address this issue, or is there another issue where there have been negotiations between the interests of the NAC and the wishes of the artistic team?

LKH: You can never fully separate the artistic decisions from the administrative as the negotiations occur simultaneously at multiple levels. Sometimes the production logistics will impact upon the artistic and curatorial process or vice versa. Hence, it has been quite important for me to be in the selection/curatorial process right from the start. The artistic director and his curators will of course make the final decision when it comes to the content of the exhibition, but they are always exercised with inputs from the administrative team, taking into account budgets, logistical possibilities, clearances, etc. Personally, I think making a biennale is very much an integrated process—from the content, to the marketing, sponsorship, education and outreach components. It is only then that the clarity of the exhibition will translate into the multiple facets through which audiences encounter the *Biennale*. It is not always easy but it does (hopefully) get a little better as you move from edition to edition. There is a little trial and error, experimenting with methodologies and strategies which will make the *Biennale* more distinctive, interesting and relevant to the city and the people.

As for the second part of your question, I would like to first clarify that *Showcase Singapore* is not a *Biennale*-integrated art fair. It is not organised by NAC but by a private company. The NAC's primary role is one of facilitation since this platform was brought to the table. Of course, twining with the *Biennale* was an important strategy, more so if you fully appreciate the contemporary visual arts ecosystem. You can't run away from talking about the art market when it comes to how we are engaging with contemporary art today. Some may choose to deny this relationship or may even go to the extent of violently objecting to such liaisons, but it is a fact you cannot ignore. The desire to develop solid critical discourse about contemporary art in Singapore that you, Weng, have taken on as your "cause", can only happen if the entire ecosystem is in place. At the moment, there are many gaps that we are trying to address and supporting the development of a new art fair will hopefully jump-start stronger interests in contemporary art in Singapore and the region.

LWC: Kee Hong, I'm sure you'll agree that the most interesting or substantial criticisms about art markets don't concern the fact of their existence, but precisely the ways in which they determine value in the art world, which are at times in antagonism with the interests of various artists, publics and so on. But I don't want to get side-tracked into a debate about the commercialisation of art. Let's stay with the process of selection. Joselina, basically the same question that I asked of Matthew—I'd like you to single out examples of your choice of artists, and if you would describe in some detail that process or the circumstances of those choices.

JC: One example is Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. I'm mentioning them as I really wanted to have them in the *Biennale* from the start—but I was also very keen on bringing in one particular piece, *The Palace of Projects*, one of the most amazing installations I had ever come across. Matthew has seen it too, and, of course, Fumio knows the Kabakovs. I think it took a bit of convincing to get the others on board—pointing out the work's (and their practice's) relevance to our themes. I think the fact that they were biennale staples didn't help in their favour. Finally, it was agreed and we set about getting in touch (through Fumio) and asking about the possible loan of the work. The Kabakovs were not so keen on having this particular project loaned for the *Biennale*. However, they were keen to be part of the exhibition. There were a number of works which they asked us to consider—we ended up agreeing upon *Manas*. It was in 2007 *Venice Biennale*, but its resonance here in Asia will be very different. There were other works or artists which we wanted and agreed upon with no argument, but the works ended up being too expensive or too difficult, or the artist too busy—Olafur Eliasson, Anish Kapoor, for instance. I suppose these things happen in every biennale. Works or artists that will give the exhibition a dimension you wanted, have to be dropped because of one thing or another—budget on your part, time or interest on their part, or other considerations. We also had to work with each other and see arguments coming from the other side of the room. Matthew was keen on indigenous Australian artists, with their works about their 'dreaming'; Fumio was keen on some big sworks and he was very aware of specific areas which he thought needed them; I was trying to bring in some works which might be deemed too esoteric, political, or quiet.

Page 160: Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Manas*, 2007
Photo courtesy the artists
Page 161: Leonid Tishkov, *Private Moon*, 2004–05
Photo courtesy the artist

We had our disappointments with not always getting the sort of work or artist we wanted to include. We tried to keep a sense of internal balance for the *Biennale*, one which consisted of creating an even keel among the forces that were working within this *Biennale*—Matthew, Fumio, myself, the NAC and the *Singapore Biennale* organisation. Matthew recently suggested that perhaps the *zeitgeist* in the artworld really is "wonder"—this moving away (I'm thinking momentarily) from discursive and theory-laden exhibitions. We've been seeing small exhibitions around the world that have curiosity as an undercurrent. I'm guessing that this is, I'm hoping it turns out to be, a biennale that's relevant to current thinking in the twenty first-century, or maybe, of the twenty first-century, a biennale we can be happy to have worked for.

LWC: Matthew, at the time of this interview the *Biennale* is just months away—I'm sure that all of you are being pulled in so many directions, that there are still so many things to decide, negotiate and accomplish. But could I ask you to try and for a moment step out of the present, and go back to the time of when you were appointed, when you just started thinking of some of the artists that you might be interested working with? Have you ended up choosing artists different from who you thought you might? If so, how has the process of research, travelling and meeting people changed your ideas of who you were interested in? If you haven't changed your perspective all that much, tell us how the process has affected you?

MN: I had not thought of any artist or work upon my selection as curator. I was prepared to engage with Fumio and Joselina in brainstorming and finally arriving at a theme before thinking about any artist or artwork. If I had carried out a preselection before the theme was decided upon, that preselection would then have impacted upon my contribution to the discussion on the theme, which really should be best discussed in relationship to the previous *Biennale*, Singapore and the *zeitgeist* of the contemporary artworld. What I have learnt from Fumio and Joselina is that there are various ways in which to curate an exhibition in relation to the parameters imposed. I found it difficult to adhere to some of the accepted norms of curating. I feel that it is important to make an exhibition according to one's own instincts, as long as we collectively understand the theme and the main parameters. It's important for decisions to be based on the kind of wonder one gets from being in the physical presence and the historical/social contexts of artworks. Although some rationalisation is required for national or geographical distribution, and overtly visible and marketable art a big 'no-no' for 'serious' biennales, I believe that any selection should be based on the specific theme and collective knowledge of the curators, not general information available to all curators or the formulae that supposedly make 'good exhibitions'. It is necessary to give expression to personal and idiosyncratic responses, so that exhibitions with personality may be given expression.

Notes

¹ The 2006 *Singapore Biennale* was titled 'Belief'. Its artistic director was Fumio Nanjo, then deputy director of the Mori Art Museum in Japan, and now current director. Nanjo brought together the curators Roger McDonald, who is based in Tokyo, has collaborated with Nanjo on a few projects and works with Arts Initiative Tokyo; Sharmini Pereira, an independent curator and founder of the publishing organisation *Raking Leaves*; and Eugene Tan, then director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts Singapore, and now program director, contemporary art, at the Sotheby's Institute Singapore. 'Belief' was installed in over sixteen sites across the city, ranging from mosques, churches and temples to the former City Hall and now-defunct Tanglin military camp, and featured ninety-six artists from thirty-eight countries and regions. See: <<http://www.singaporebiennale.org/2006/about.html>>

² In the press release published 7 June 2007, Lee Suan Hiang, Chairman of the *Singapore Biennale 2008* Steering Committee, and Chief Executive Officer of the NAC, said: "We are glad to appoint Fumio Nanjo as Artistic Director SB2008. The opportunity to work with the same artistic director for the sophomore edition allows for greater continuity for an event that is still new and for the project to deepen in its reach and engagement with the city and audiences. In addition, it also presents the unique opportunity for the artistic director to reflect on what was created for the first edition and together with a new team of curators, respond to the process and methodology of exhibition making. We had a very good working relationship with Nanjo for SB2006 and are pleased that he has agreed to work with us again to build on the foundation of our successful first Biennale." Also in the same press release, Nanjo said: "With the organisation of just one biennale under its belt, there is still a lot more room for growth and advancement. The people of Singapore still have a lot to learn about contemporary art and I believe that working on the biennale only once, is not enough. I feel a sense of responsibility to continue to nurture arts appreciation among the local audiences and to further deepen the experiences that the local community can gain through the biennale."