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"Moderation(s)": Between Rotterdam and Hong Kong

by Darryl Wee 03/07/14 1:58 AM EDT



(Photo courtesy of Anne Schwalbe)

ROTTERDAM — When it comes to ambitious, long-term collaborative initiatives between partner institutions in the art world, few have the patience, rigor, and resources to sustain a meaningful dialogue across disparate cultures, contexts, and regions.

One such cross-continental initiative, which seems to put its faith in the momentum created by artistic exchanges between Asia, Europe, and the U.S. with relatively undirected ease, is an exhibition called *"The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part of Something Else,"* which runs at the Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam until August 17, 2014.

"The Part In The Story Where A Part Becomes A Part of Something Else" features works by some forty international artists, with a particularly strong contingent hailing from Hong Kong (where partner institution Spring Workshop is based). Although broadly divided according to general key concepts like time, duration and space, memory and inscription, pleasure, and encounters, the scope of the exhibition is ultimately guided by a keen awareness of how one work of art can "moderate" another, or act as a conducive guide to translating the manifold relations that might occur between two very different artists or artworks.

"The Part In The Story" is the final part in a broader project entitled *"Moderation(s),"* a long-term collaborative program between Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and the artist residency space Spring Workshop in Hong Kong. **Samuel Saelemakers**, associate curator at Witte de With, emphasized the ongoing, slow-burning nature of the collaboration, which unfolded in several installments from August 2012 to August 2014.

"I believe institutions such as Witte de With and Spring Workshop have the luxury, and as such the obligation, to dedicate resources — and, more importantly, time — to artists and the way they work. By letting this two-year project unfold in an often improvised way, we allowed the artists, writers, architects, and scholars we worked with to deepen their engagement with one another, to talk to each other in different settings, and to create something that they might otherwise not have."



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For guest curator **Heman Chong**, “The Part In The Story” is a defiant gesture, akin to flinging a spanner into the works of simplistic curatorial formulations about Asia and the art it is supposed to produce, as if notions of Asia “must often relate to cheap street food, rampant commercial sex, out-of-control urbanization, blatant censorship of ideas, mass production, and tropical beaches.”

For Chong, ambitious group exhibitions that purport to draw deceptively simple lines of continuity among disparate regions should be regarded with suspicion, because “relationships between people, countries and cultures are messy and hard work that needs to be constantly negotiated, and not reduced to easy, facile ideas of cultural exchange between entire, imagined contexts.”

“The Part In The Story,” then, is ultimately about drawing and highlighting lines of influence that have gripped artists from all continents. These legacies are global in the sense of how they have traveled far and wide beyond their originating contexts. Chong insists on acknowledging the specter of predecessors, even when they may not be immediately evident. “One cannot underestimate the shadow that John Cage cast over prevailing trends of utilizing conceptual forms on an artist like **Song-Ming Ang**. Similarly, one cannot deny how the materiality of **Chen Zhen**’s sculptures and installations have exerted an impact on generations of artists in China, including **Chu Yun** or **Adrian Wong**. All artists work within a historical framework of objects, images and situation whether they like it or not. We don’t really have a choice.”

Saelemakers also sees the exhibition as an experiment-in-progress that explores the question of “how to build international partnerships and encourage exchanges without the need or obligation to deal with any supposed continental or national identities.” In some cases, bringing together a group of artists who would never otherwise think to relate to each other’s work, and then thinking about their commonalities or contrast, is a limiting strategy. As Saelemakers notes, “the economy of difference leads us only so far, and often it is ridden with trauma and drama.”

If some of today’s global artists seek to disavow superficial cultural differences as the basis of a strategy of distinction for global audiences, Chong nonetheless acknowledges that these traits can be a useful starting point for elevating one’s work above the steady thrum of noise in the attention economy that prevails in the art world.

“I think many artists refer back to their cultural roots as a way of enacting some kind of local significance. This allows their work to develop an ‘accent’ that can easily be picked up by curators, so that their shows can assimilate these slants to perform diversity. As individual artists, we may be free to do what we want, but oftentimes what the exhibition circuit wants is for us to interpret our identity and its peculiarities as currency within an exhibition.”

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