

Flown In, Zoned out

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David Barret on the 50th Venice Biennale, Italy

As you enter Hou Hanru's 'Zone of Urgency' ('ZOU') your heart sinks. Chaotic scenes await and you're not yet halfway through the massive Arsenale section, a section that in itself would have as much exhibition space as the whole of Tate Modern, if Tate Modern had two turbine halls. But what is so draining is the sight of a new mezzanine level ... obviously 14,000m² of floor space just isn't enough.

While crushing the viewer's spirit may not be the best way to start an exhibition, visitors should persevere, because 'ZOU' is the strongest single component of the Biennale. And anyway, it revives your flagging spirits immediately with Yang Zhenzhong's playful Let's Puff! This two-screen video projection occupies opposing walls of the entrance. To the right is a roaming street-level view of Shanghai. To the left, a young Chinese woman staggers back and forth, exhausted, trying to catch her breath before stepping forward and blowing at the camera for all her worth. Comically, her puffing causes the street scenes opposite to whiz into fast forward. For such a simple, disarming piece, it says a lot about both the desire for everything to happen faster, and the effort required to keep up. At this point in 'Dreams and Conflicts', we know how she feels.

'ZOU' overwhelms visitors because two different art groups have constructed encompassing architectural installations. The entrance is underneath a ramp-like mezzanine by Yung Ho Chang/ Atelier FCJZ that reaches ground level in the middle of the space, just as an elaborate chipboard construction by Canton Express begins, filling the rest of the zone.

This overcrowding reflects Hanru's concern that modern urban spaces are being developed as reactive responses to critical problems, rather than as a consequence of advanced planning. Canton Express - a loose collective of four separate groups comprising 18 artists in total - explores precisely this issue: the group has been closely following the urbanisation of the Canton-Pearl River Delta in China, an area rapidly swelling through internal migration. The most successful of the collective's contributions, which take up almost half of 'ZOU', is The San Yuan Li Project by Ou Ning and Cao Fei of the U-theque group. This moody, black and white quasi-documentary on the daily life of the region is an enigmatic video work that sucks you in at the time, and then returns to haunt you later.

Another work that suggests over-rapid urbanisation is Capsule Hotel Project by Japanese artist Tsuyoshi Ozawa, which consists of a cyberpunk homeless shelter containing several 'rooms' from a capsule hotel. The capsules are both tiny and comfortable, which prompts two questions: why don't all cities have capsule hotels, and why are so many people homeless when we can produce decent shelter so easily?

Much of 'ZOU' is a curious mix of the cute and the provocative, none more so than the crude, computer-based line animations by Chinese artist Gu Dexin. These playful scenarios involve various stick figures and usually end in death - by arrow, bullet or rocket. But the animations are set to repeat so they never really end, and the black comedy becomes a perpetual cycle.

If the experience leaves you feeling weak you can always stop to catch your breath in Thai artist Surasi Kusolwong's Oxygen Room (Breathing Beauty). Lie back, fix a nasal cannula, and enjoy the reviving properties of a 95%-oxygen gas mixture. President Bush Jr would undoubtedly need this if he encountered Tadasu Takamine's video installation, God Bless America. This stop-motion film covers, at very high speed, several days in which the two artists lived with a massive clay head - resembling a Steve Bell cartoon of George Dubya - in the middle of their room.

Being ostensibly a clay-mation film, the artists periodically work on the head, which occasionally breaks into a high-pitched warble of 'God Bless America'. Just as the world is waking up to the fact that it has to live with Bush as the head of a lone superpower, here that situation is made stupidly literal. It is a profound, hilarious and beautifully made work. Perfect biennale fodder.

The messy, provisional nature of 'ZOU' doesn't suit every work (or visitor). But Yan Pei-Ming, a Shanghai-born artist now living in Dijon, rises above the chaos. His vast, 3.5m-square paintings dominate one corner of the Zone. The black and white Self-Portrait as Anti-Riot Cop, for example, looms with dumb, faceless menace - a brutal, impassive painting that relies on none of the clumsy allegories that had marked previous Chinese painting at Venice. (At last! A curator at Venice confident and knowledgeable enough to avoid the marketable Chinese painters of the mid 90s, and the occasionally brilliant but patchy performance/installation artists that followed them.)

Another Chinese émigré now living in France, Huang Yong Ping, presents Bat II, a follow up work to a project the artist produced in Shenzhen, China, but which was halted by the authorities at the last minute. They took exception to the artist constructing a life-size replica of the US EP-3 spy plane that, in 2001, was clipped by a Chinese fighter jet and forced to land on Hainan island. China refused to give the plane back, which rather upset the Pentagon at the time. Now it's the Chinese authorities that don't want to be reminded of the event, what with their new-found internationalism.

The friendly face China is trying to project in its dealings with the international community has little to do with the multi-national 'ZOU', but it is emphasised elsewhere in the Biennale. Fan Dian, Chinese pavilion curator, writes in the catalogue: 'China's establishment of a National pavilion at the 50th Biennale in 2003 demonstrates yet again that China has become an inseparable part of the international community.' Unfortunately, the Chinese pavilion has been holed below the water line by SARS, and it hasn't left Beijing although the Hong Kong pavilion did make it to Venice. A card missing from the Biennale's deck? Surprising, considering Francesco Bonami's 'to do'-style of management: Arab issues? Check. Post-colonialism? Check. The everyday? Check. Asian artists? System's based? Art-as-social-experiment? Check, check, check. The result is too much of everything, with visual languages and issues clashing unproductively, and only blowsy concepts as glue. If the viewer is meant to be the dictator here, then much of the exhibition shows little sense of duty. This giant biennale, like some all-consuming star, is in danger of collapsing under its own sense of gravity.

But there are moments of brilliance, and they're usually shot through with humour: Vladimir Dubossarsky & Aleksandr Vinogradov's cheesy Under the Water painting in the Russian pavilion; Santiago Sierra's perfectly realised one-liner for Spain; Yuri Leiderman's endearing attempt to make friends with electrons in 'Individual Systems'. Damien Hirst's vast pill piece in 'Delays and Revolutions', with its biennale-proof title - Standing alone on the precipice overlooking the Arctic wastelands of pure terror - says so much about disposability, the contemporary sublime and temporary solutions to fundamental problems that it could easily fit into 'ZOU'.

And yet amidst this hullabaloo, the Biennale's defining work is a remarkably quiet piece in 'Delays and Revolutions': True Colours by the Stockholm-based Uruguayan artist Juan-Pedro Fabra Guemberena. Four monitors are showing shots of the landscape. They could be stills, but for the odd breeze rustling the leaves. Look closely and you'll see figures in the landscape, military figures. They're members of the Swedish Army (which hasn't fought a war for more than a century), arranged pictorially by the artist. The media glamorises the military anyway, so why not abandon the fighting altogether and just let them look pretty? And if you can find an alternative use - a decorative use - for something like an army ... well, perhaps the dictatorship of the viewer has something going for it after all.