

Taipei Biennial 2014

TAIPEI FINE ARTS MUSEUM, TAIWAN



1 Curated by Nicolas Bourriaud and entitled 'The Great Acceleration: Art in the Anthropocene', the Taipei Biennial 2014 bills itself as 'a tribute to the coactivity amongst humans and animals, plants and objects', and is often preoccupied with the polymerization of these things. Featuring 52 artists and artists' collectives from countries ranging from China to Sierra Leone, this is a show about spectres and networks, soft bodies and hard machines, remainders and contaminants. It measures the speed with which we summon data from a server farm in a faraway continent, or the slowness of imperceptible mineral growth. Like Bourriaud's 2009 Tate Triennial, 'Altermodern', (and his tragically underfunded and underreported 2011 Athens Biennale, 'Monodrome', co-curated with Xenia Kalpaktsoglou and Poka-Yio), 'The Great Acceleration' is, at base, an attempt to describe the present. Readers of the curator's essay, available on the biennial's website, will note his engagement with the body of thought commonly dubbed Speculative Realism. This is not to say that Bourriaud's exhibition is a straightforward paeon to Object-Oriented Ontology. As he put it in a recent interview: 'We need to expand the presence of the human, not to fight against a so-called anthropocentrism.' Our species – the only one that makes art – remains a central concern, but here Bourriaud extends his interest in the relational to include not only the human kingdom, but also the strange domains that abut it.

The overwhelming majority of works in 'The Great Acceleration' were made long after an article in a 2000 issue of *Global Change Newsletter*

proposed that the world has entered an 'Anthropocene' epoch – denoting the determining impact of human activity on the planetary lithosphere. However, Bourriaud spices the gumbo of his biennial with some historical works. Among these is Ola Pehrson's *Yucca Invest Trading Plant* (1999), in which an antediluvian desktop computer scrolls stock values transmitted via electrical currents to the fronds of a potted palm, providing it with a jolting education in the vagaries of the market. To drive this home, the plant's supplies of light and water are index-linked to the performance of commodities. We might think, here, of contemporary high-frequency trading, in which near-sentient algorithms shape our world at inhuman speed, from the price of food to government policy.

If Pehrson's yucca palm is subject to data pollution (and, who knows, it may one day imbibe enough to turn into a trader) then Tetsumi Kudo's *Meditation in the Endless Tape of the Future-Past* (1979) is a vision of information overload from the analogue era. In this intense little reliquary, a lime-green birdcage imprisons a putrefying human head, whose eye sockets reel in threads from two oval spools of cotton: one pale and one dark. Kudo's zombie could be the ancestor of Timur Si-Qin's *Premiere Machinic Funerary: Part 1* (2014), in which a trade fair booth becomes the site of a wake for a disembodied, 3D-printed skull, which resembles an early hominid super-evolved into the gleaming robot from James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984). That film's action turns on an internet-like artificial intelligence system, SkyNet, achieving

self-awareness in the year 1997. Looking at Si-Qin's memorial, I wondered what strange heirs might mourn the passing of the deceased, and what tears might flow (water? oil? code?) from their stricken, red-rimmed eyes.

Entropy and mutation, the ending of one state and the beginning of another, characterize many of the works in 'The Great Acceleration'. Marlie Mull's resinous 'Puddles' (2014) glisten like pools of acid rain or primordial soup and Peter Buggenhout's vast, grimy corpses of exhausted industrial machinery (*The Blind Leading the Blind #63 & #64*, 2014) seem to anticipate their eventual transformation into dust, a fate that has already befallen the atomized passenger-plane engine of Roger Hiorns's *Untitled* (2008), a work that takes on new resonance here, its particles like the grounded ghost of an airborne toxic event. In Yu-Chen Wang's pencil drawings, among them *This is the end ...* (2014), techno-organic forms turn in a widening gyre, while in Gilles Barbier's hyperrealist sculptures, *Still Man* and *Still Woman* (both 2013), human figures appear to sprout from, or be mulched into, a fertile forest floor. A deadpan exercise in archaeological compare and contrast, Shimabuku's *Mobile Phone and Stone Tool* (2014) places various Apple devices beside Palaeolithic axes of similar size and shape. This, though, is very far from a teleological display in the vein of the 19th-century museum. For the Japanese artist, Neanderthal technologies 'have "memory" just like mobile phones. You could imagine "calling" or "taking a photo" with a stone tool.'

Our prehistoric forebears are a repeated motif in Bourriaud's show, from Tala Madani's pithily



2

amusing animation *Old Factory* (2014), in which a cave painter flings shit at the screen in what could be a dirty protest or an *avant la lettre* attempt at Abstract Expressionism, to Nathaniel Mellors's fantastic new film *Neanderthal Container* (2014). In this heady Möbius strip of past and future, interior and exterior, a talkative Neanderthal in a fetching floral tracksuit upbraids us for 'stealing [his] DNA', while his effigy (who, we are informed, 'is actually a spaceship') free falls from an aircraft over the California desert. It recalls James Lovelock's words, in his book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979):

1
Shezad Dawood
Towards the Possible Film, 2014,
HD film still

2
Tetsumi Kudo
Meditation in the Endless Tape of the Future Past, 1979, mixed media,
33 × 19 × 27 cm

3
Hung-Chih Peng
The Deluge- Noah's Ark, 2014, mixed
media, dimensions variable

'the outstanding spin-off from space research is not new technology [but] seeing from the outside our azure-green planet in all its global beauty', although Mellors's hairy Satan-cum-Icarus plunges not towards a verdant paradise, but a parched and used-up plain. Shezad Dawood's *Towards the Possible Film* (2014), a 20-minute sketch for a sci-fi movie that attempts to be at once the biblical books of *Genesis* and *Revelations*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Planet of the Apes* (both 1968), inhabits similarly pre-lapsarian and post-Fall terrain, while the demonic drones that populate Abu-Bakarr Mansaray's drawing *One of the African Black Magic. The Witch Plane* (2008) promise nothing but death from above. How then, in our accelerated epoch, might 'humans and animals, plants and objects' make good their escapes?

One answer is provided by Hung-Chih Peng's *The Deluge - Noah's Ark* (2014), a life raft in the form of a twisted model cruise liner, 3D-printed on site over the course of the biennial: a work that combines a nod to Taiwan's industrial heritage with a wink to the possibility that the 'just in time' manufacturing practices favoured by late capitalism might not be enough to save us from the coming floods. In the absence of a more equitable model of 'coactivity' with our planetary partners, perhaps what we need is a whole other world. Bourriaud posits this idea with his inclusion of a suite of drawings and sculptures from Charles Avery's *Islanders* project (2004-ongoing), in which the artist records the topology, cosmology and inhabitants of a fictional territory. At the centre of the installation stands an ornamental fountain, the shallow waters in its white basin stirred by a family of black and glassy eels. These primitive beings – linear, directional embodiments of will – nose blindly about their environment, a blank universe-inside-a-universe-inside-a-universe, their bodies transformed into winking starscapes by the overhead lights. At the centre of the fountain is a steel plug. We can only speculate about what will become of them if somebody, or something, were to remove it.

TOM MORTON



3