

A large, high-ceilinged industrial hall with a complex network of steel beams and scaffolding. Several cars are suspended from the ceiling by thin wires. A large white car is prominently displayed upside down on the right, with numerous bright laser beams radiating from its base. Other cars, including a yellow one and a white one, are suspended further back on the left. In the foreground, a group of people are walking on the polished floor, looking up at the installation. The lighting is dramatic, with warm spotlights and cool blue light from the ceiling.

# On Curating 2 paradigm shifts

Interviews with Fourteen International Curators

by Carolee Thea

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**Nancy Adajania // Wassan Al-Khudhairi // David Elliott //**

**Mami Kataoka // Sunjung Kim // Koyo Kouoh //**

**Carol Yinghua Lu // Gerardo Mosquera //**

**Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi // Jack Persékian //**

**José Roca // Bisi Silva // Alia Swastika // WHW**

**foreword by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev**

**edited by Carolee Thea and Thomas Micchelli**



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Cai Guo-Qiang, *Inopportune: Stage One*, 2004.  
Nine cars and sequenced multichannel light tubes.  
17th Sydney Biennale, 2010. Courtesy 17th Sydney Biennale  
and Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Robert M. Arnold,  
in honor of the 75th Anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum.  
Photo: Ben Symons

## **contents**

6 // Foreword by **Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev**

8 // Introduction by **Carolee Thea**

### **Interviews**

18 // **Gerardo Mosquera**

30 // **José Roca**

42 // **Bisi Silva**

52 // **Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi**

62 // **Koyo Kouoh**

72 // **WHW**

82 // **David Elliott**

94 // **Nancy Adajania**

**Wassan Al-Khudhairi**

**Mami Kataoka**

**Sunjung Kim**

**Carol Yinghua Lu**

**Alia Swastika**

118 // **Jack Persekian**

128 // **Contributors**



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62 // **Koyo Kouoh**

72 // **WHW**

82 // **David Elliott**

94 // **Nancy Adajania**

**Wassan Al-Khudhairi**

**Mami Kataoka**

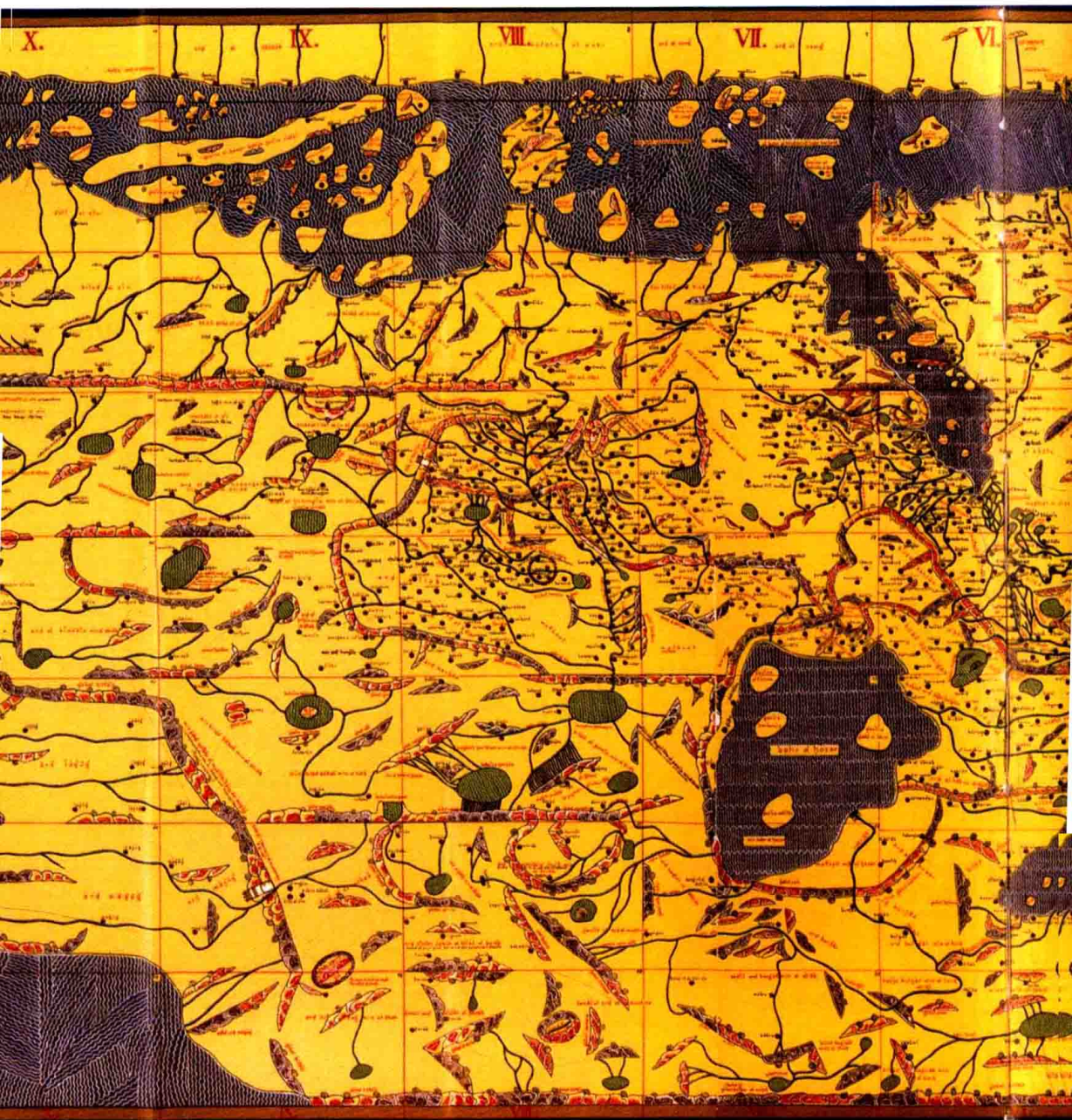
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**Carol Yinghua Lu**

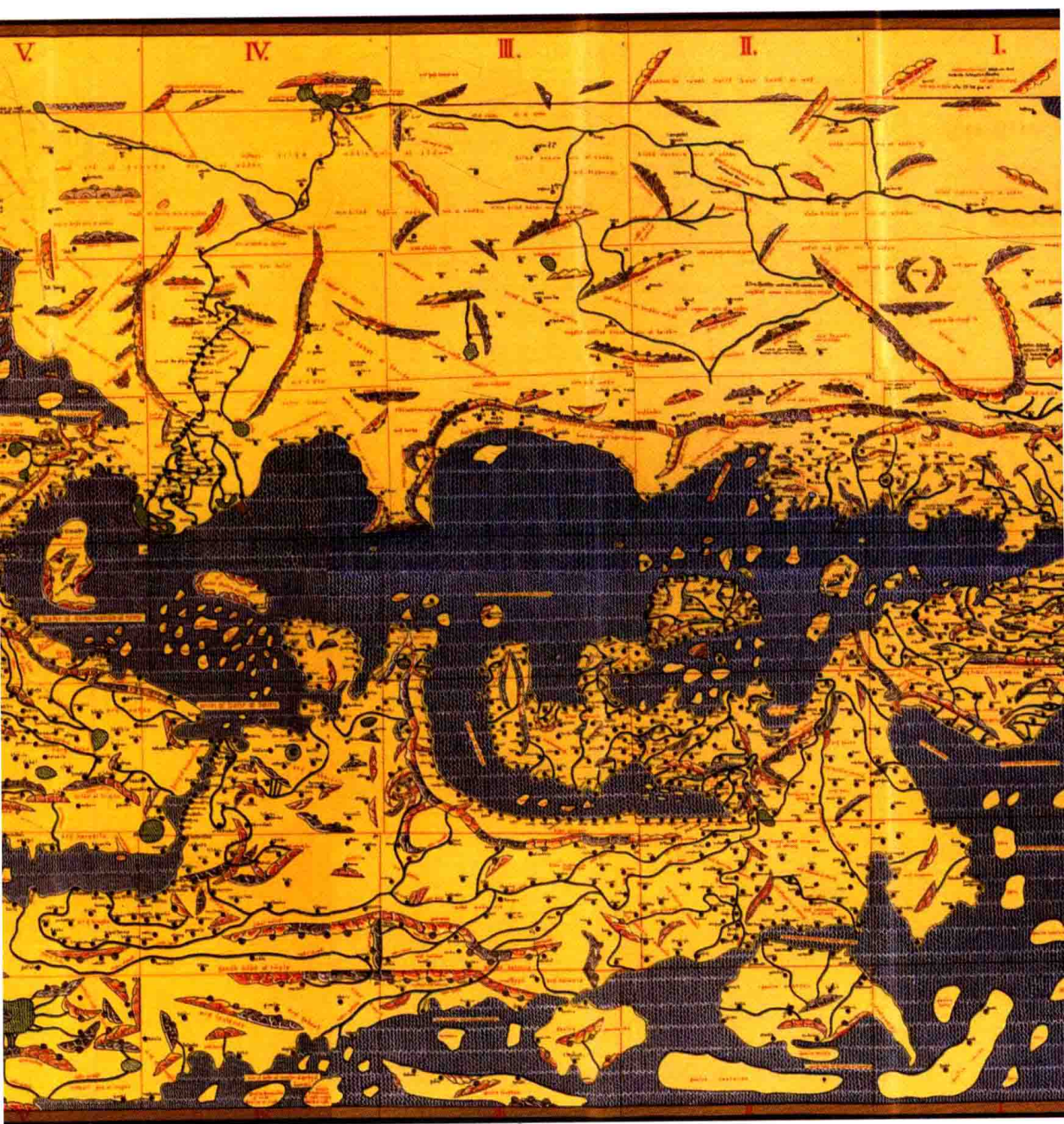
**Alia Swastika**

118 // **Jack Persekian**

128 // **Contributors**







Al-Idrisi, *Tabula Rogeriana*, 1154.  
Exhibited on Reading Table,  
9th Gwangju Biennale, 2012

## Foreword

This is a beautiful book, a polyphony of voices struggling to envision with artists a better world than most people on the planet inhabit today, amid shards of war, its rubble, environmental catastrophes, and forced diasporas. Carolee Thea thinks about this world through art, but she does so mainly via the visions of people looking at art and contemporaneity, engaging in the world through what they do with art and artists in exhibitions. In particular she is fascinated by the story, implications, motivations, and meanings of the large scale ("global," "international," "transnational," etc.) periodic shows that have characterized recent years: the biennials, triennials, and Documenta exhibitions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This is narrated through dialogues with curators—those intelligent people, individuals or collectives, who travel the world and put these projects together with all their energy, vitality, optimism, and imagination.

In her first book of interviews with curators, called *Foci* (2001), Thea mixed the founding generation of exhibition makers (*Ausstellungsmacher*), such as Harald Szeemann and Kaspar König, with emerging curators of the time (Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hou Hanru, and Maria Hlavajova), focusing on the form and methodology of curatorial practice.

In her second book, titled *On Curating* (2009), she broadened her perspective to include an artist-organizer (Rirkrit Tiravanija), performance art (RoseLee Goldberg), the crisis of Eurocentric perspectives (Okwui Enwezor), as well as the crisis of "curating" in relation to the notion of the contemporary itself and its compromises with power and the market of art (her interview with me was included in the second book).

In this admirable and refreshing third collection of interviews with curators, Jack Persekian in Jerusalem says, "In areas that are very close to here, you see all these wars, you see all this destruction, because people are hopeless, and hopeless people, desperate people, do desperate things." This seems to be a leitmotif among all the curators of art exhibitions in the Global South and in former socialist countries today, areas that are the particular focus of Thea's present book. Whether from Asia, Latin America, Africa, or other regions, they all concur in viewing the biennial as a place of potential emancipation, often emerging from artist-run or non-governmental alternative spaces. Uninterested in the compromises with power in the Global North, they journey on to investigate, critique, and offer alternative models of living through their practice as exhibition makers.



The interviews with Gerardo Mosquera, Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, Bisi Silva, Koyo Kouoh, José Roca, Jack Persekian, WHW, David Elliott, and the curators of the 9th Gwangju Biennale (2012)—Nancy Adajania, Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Mami Kataoka, Sunjung Kim, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Alia Swastika—all resonate with these questions and urgent issues.

Art can change the world, it seems. Additionally, the experience of art distracts from daily hardships and inspires people to imagine other ways of living that are less painful and more flourishing. Its experience proposes a more fulfilling life. After all, joy is an inalienable human right, and we in art believe in joy and life.

I salute this book and am honored to participate in sending it out into the world.

—Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev  
Istanbul and Chicago  
October 2015

## / Carolee Thea

### Introduction

After 20 years of research, travel, and interviews with international curators, I can confirm that a lively system of art biennials is thriving around the world, and especially outside Europe and America. Spawned by their more formal Western predecessors and motivated by the forces of history and politics, the newer incarnations of the biennial often occur in the cities of the postcolonial world and the Global South, as well as countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. The new generation of curators who are organizing these surprisingly provocative and experimental exhibitions are the subjects of the interviews collected in this book.

The traditional Western biennial has also metamorphosed. In recent years it has become a transnational marketplace for elite consumers and an emblem of the new corporate imperialism that stems from the neoliberal economic policies, which favor the deregulation of markets and industries, the diminution of taxes and tariffs, and the privatization of government functions. The Venice Biennale of 2015 epitomizes the paradoxical nature of the mainstream twenty-first-century biennial. Titled *All the World's Futures* by its curator, Okwui Enwezor, it was a critique of capitalism and consumerism, a denunciation of the growing distance between rich and poor, and a reminder of the plight of the politically oppressed in these and other turbulent times. Live readings of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* were contrasted with the evident partiality given to the high-end galleries that financed the participation of their artists in the show, and the presence of the mega-yachts of billionaire collectors moored in the Venice lagoon.

The most innovative and thought-provoking biennials are now to be found elsewhere. More elastic in form and more politically pointed, these exhibitions are not as heavily invested in the capitalist-driven Western art market as are the traditional biennials in the Global North. In Africa alone there is the Dak'Art Biennial, in Dakar, Senegal; Bamako Encounters: African Biennial of Photography, in Mali; the long-running International Cairo Biennial; the Marrakech Biennale, in Morocco; and, recently, Picha, the Lubumbashi Biennale, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Luanda Triennale, in Angola. Today a biennial in the Global South can serve as means of mobilizing Latin American and Caribbean solidarity, promoting Afro-Asian unity, or introducing emancipatory politics that transcend longstanding antagonisms, as in post-apartheid South Africa. These are some of the examples of how the paradigm shifts have become manifest; others continually evolve.



The biennial evolution into the twenty-first century began in 1984, when Gerardo Mosquera founded the Bienal de la Habana. This exhibition became the fourth major international biennial—after Venice, São Paulo, and Sydney—and the sixth international periodic art event to be established, following the above-mentioned shows, the Carnegie International, and Documenta. Truly global, the Havana Biennial included the art of the Third World, and had a tremendous influence on the subsequent emergence of a dramatically expanded art world. Cuba set out to assert itself as a Third World cultural leader within and on behalf of the Soviet bloc. The biennial's geographic location in the Caribbean, and in the Western hemisphere, as well as its emphasis on artists from developing countries in the Southern hemisphere, made this a significant move. State-sponsored and anti-capitalist, it began in the waning days of the cold war and was emblematic of the cold-war divide that lasted from the late 1940s until 1989. This global political partition into power blocs, and into a hierarchy of more developed and less developed nations, provides the starting point for understanding the emergence of today's transnational system of biennials.

During much of the cold-war era, the First World was defined as the richer, more developed regions of North America, Western Europe, and parts of East Asia. The Second World was made up of the 19 Socialist states under the influence of the Soviet Union. The partition also gave rise to the Non-Aligned Movement, founded in 1961, which advocated a middle course for states seeking to find their own path between the Western and Eastern blocs. It included Ghana, India, Indonesia, and Yugoslavia. The Third World (in today's parlance, the Global South) encompassed the poorer, less developed regions in Africa, Latin America, and developing Asia as well as the Middle East. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 presented catalytic moments in the move away from the three-world partition of the cold war and toward a new world order. The old political categorizations were increasingly replaced by an economic global stratification that divided the world into developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries.

The newer incarnations of the biennial often occur in the countries of the Global South, the nations of the former Second or Third World. For them, such exhibitions are useful tools for economic and social development, encouraging the host cities to expand their artistic and cultural infrastructures. Seen as an alternative to existing cultural institutions, museums, or historic ruins, these shows can stamp a city with a new reputation as a go-to place. Biennials can also offer a country the opportunity to display its international or local cultural consciousness, and to stimulate education, architecture, tourism, and finance.

In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, historians have been searching for a new kind of internationalism, one that tracks mass movements and communications across and beyond nations, for example, the diasporic movements of our time. This kind of historical vision looks beyond the nation-state. It is interested in the things ordinary people do in spite of or even against the state. Issues such as universal human rights, gender equality, or protection of the environment all highlight the local while interweaving the global. One of the curators interviewed in this book, Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, emphasized that all art is connected to local communities: "An artist in the West is no different from an artist in Lagos who engages or understands the international through the local." Another, Gerardo Mosquera, acknowledges that internationalism or globalization in art will not erase cultural individualities. He remarked in his interview here, "Many artists are using a sort of English, a sharing of certain codes and methodologies that allows us to communicate. Within that, artists are doing different things that evolve from their cultural, personal experience."

Who are the curators interviewed in this book? Gerardo Mosquera organized the first, second, and third editions of the Havana Biennial. WHW (What, How & for Whom)—a Croatian curatorial collective made up of Ivet Ćurlin, Ana Dević, Nataša Ilić, Dejan Kršić, and Sabina Sabolović—was responsible for the 11th Istanbul Biennial. Six Asian women served as the curatorial team for the 9th Gwangju Biennale: Nancy Adajania, Wassan Al-Khudhairi, Mami Kataoka, Sunjung Kim, Carol Yinghua Lu, and Alia Swastika. Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi co-curated Dak'Art 2014. Bisi Silva co-curated an earlier and formative edition of Dak'Art, in which her appreciation for alternative independent spaces in Africa became paramount. Koyo Kouoh worked on three Documentas and founded RAW Material Company in Dakar, Senegal, as a place where contemporary visual artists could discuss their practice in a critical and intellectual environment. David Elliott, a cultural historian and curator focusing on the visual cultures of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and the non-Western world, organized the 17th Biennale of Sydney in 2010. José Roca directed the 8th Bienal do Mercosul, in Brazil, and Jack Persekian is the artistic director of the first, second, and upcoming third (2016) Qalandiya International Biennial, which takes place across Palestinian cities, towns, and villages.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the demise of the global Communist bloc that had extended from Eastern Europe and Berlin to Cuba. But for curators of the WHW collective, Communism remained something not to be forgotten or suppressed. "The only horizon of our political imagination is capitalism, as we now know it, which is not so great," the curators said. "It presents itself as the only natural solution to human problems, a stance that should be reconsidered." Citing Milton

Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics, they regarded the idea "that the market will regulate all the needs of human society" as "a complete illusion (just as communism was), an ideological construct."

The theme of WHW's Istanbul Biennial, *What Keeps Mankind Alive?*, refers to a song that appears in Bertolt Brecht's play *The Threepenny Opera*. Reviving Brecht was part of their attempt to think about the role of artistic endeavor under the conditions of contemporary capitalism, to examine anew the nature of today's cities bursting with immigrants looking for work, and to reevaluate our everyday practices, value systems, and modes of operation. Many of the works by the artists they selected were based on the idea of social critique. Often using "poor" materials they emphasized artistic procedures that could be carried out without any kind of institutional support, and some artists, such as Sanja Iveković, combined this aesthetic with feminist messages about the state of women in Turkey today.

One of the greatest curators of the twentieth century, Harald Szeemann, set out to systematically trace the relationship of visual forms of expression to reality. He said, "The changes you see with artists' works are the best societal seismographs. Artists like curators work on their own, grappling with their attempt to make a world in which to survive."<sup>1</sup>

The civil uprising in South Korea in 1980 was a result of the violent repression of the Gwangju Democratization Movement in that country. Reflection on this uprising may help to deepen our understanding of the cold-war climate that condoned repressive regimes within the U.S. orbit as long as they were sufficiently anti-Communist. The 1980 events remain an ever-present memory in Korea, and the aftereffects of the uprising provided the impetus for the launch of the 1st Gwangju Biennale, in 1995. Sunjung Kim, one of the curators of the 9th edition, held in 2012, states, "The military killed so many citizens here. I know the history and everybody in Korea knows this history. I'm from Korea. Foreign curators, though they knew of this civil uprising, did not share my more emotional approach to it."

1. Carolee Thea, *Foci: Interviews with Ten International Curators* (New York: ApexArt Curatorial Program, 2001), p. 17.

The 9th Gwangju Biennale brought together a team of six female curators from different Asian countries. The title they chose for their biennial, *ROUNDTABLE*, reflected their response to the unusual situation in which they found themselves. How could six individuals who did not know each other prior to this encounter collaborate on a biennial? Sitting at a round table in a Chinese restaurant one day, after months of struggle to formulate their concept, one curator spontaneously suggested, "How about the idea of 'roundtable'?"—and so the curatorial vision began to crystallize. Each curator selected artists, artworks, projects, and programs that would allow for the creation of a unique condition in which dialogue could be



pursued around a number of issues. *ROUNDTABLE* explored issues of isolation, migration, and mass communication, as well as the relationship between group trauma, memory, and history. The curators presented a cornucopia of artworks that was minimally cohesive but as enlightening as art can be. Perhaps the biennial could best be seen as an experiment to determine if art can play a redemptive role for greater understanding among nations?

Mami Kataoka, the curator from Japan, explained, "This was not meant to be an exhibition with one single viewpoint. The decision to invite women from other Asian countries was a structural issue." Carol Yinghua Lu, from China, and Wassan Al-Khudhairi, originally from the Middle East, remarked that being together, despite the difficulties, opened up possibilities for learning about their colleagues, who might have been geographically close but not in curatorial approach. I asked the curators if they thought that this multi-community discourse could be seen as an embodiment of Pan-Asianism, and Nancy Adajania, from India, remarked, "The focus on China, India, or Southeast Asia today owes more to the idea of the Asian Century, and is premised on a model of economic advancement, not on their cultural dynamics. I am, therefore, suspicious of present-day notions of Pan-Asianism, which are more about opportunism than about seeking affinities. The idea that Asians will speak in one voice is a fallacy." Lu added that Pan-Asianism is "a symptom of the anxiety of self-definition among practitioners in Asia. The more connected we become through globalization, the more anxious people feel about defining their own identity. This anxiety has intensified over the past years." For Lu, this was exemplified in her call for artists to look inside themselves and their culture as source material.

Alia Swastika, from Indonesia, discussed the political aspect of artworks in her country: "We don't have an infrastructure to disseminate knowledge of contemporary art history, so everything is really do-it-yourself in terms of art and the cultural sector. Artists in Indonesia are always acting as activists in this sense. In fact, you cannot be just an artist."

Adajania unveiled a surprise at the entrance to her show in Gwangju, one that is especially relevant to this book. She presented a photograph of a South-oriented map by the twelfth-century Andalusian geographer Al-Idrisi, who was commissioned by Roger II, the Norman king of Sicily, to produce a comprehensive map of the world and the largest atlas to date. Al-Idrisi's map introduced a completely different way of imagining the known world. It continued Pharaonic Egypt's south-oriented geography and cosmology, and also emphasized the importance of the African and Indian Oceans in the context of Mediterranean trade, culture, and power. Expanding on this geographic notion, Adajania talked about "the Silk Route and its adjunct cultures as 'globalism before globalization,' [where] goods, arts, ideas, and narratives came together. These were stages for cultural



encounter and experimentation, with far-reaching consequences for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and eventually Islam, as well as the societies in which these religions flourished." Al-Idrisi's southerly oriented map provides a startling context to an exhibition devoted to the Global South, as well as an icon for aesthetic and political evolution.

I interviewed David Elliott in 2011 about his views on interdisciplinary exhibitions as vehicles for social change—a concept that reflects his perception that the European/U.S. power nexus is over: "Today we're entering another world in which power is distributed differently. I am not implying that the West is finished but it's no longer calling the shots and can no longer claim the moral high ground in the shameless way it tried to do before."

As artistic director for the 17th Biennale of Sydney, *THE BEAUTY OF DISTANCE: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age* (2010), Elliott was concerned with both aesthetic and critical distance to reflect "on the history of [Sydney] in particular and colonization in general, and on definitions of contemporary art, especially in relation to such 'excluded' practices as the art of First Peoples and folk art."

One of Elliott's more arresting selections for the exhibition was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Biennial's largest exhibition space. He describes the objects on display as "110 vertical *larrakitj*, or memorial poles, which were made between 1998 and 2009 by 41 Yolngu Aboriginal artists from northeast Arnhem Land, in Australia." *Larrakitj* were not originally considered art; rather, in precolonial times they had a funerary function, to store the bones of the deceased. After colonization and conversion to Christianity, the ritualistic aspect faded and they are now made solely for aesthetic reasons.

In contrast, Cai Guo-Qiang's *Inopportune: Stage One* (2004), another major work shown in Sydney, illustrates the dangerous age in which we live, representing both an aesthetic and political position. Made up of nine cars with a syncopated system of LED tubes radiating off of them, it evokes "a car crash or a huge explosion," Elliott says. "In its grisly beauty the work refers to terrorism and the precarious age in which we live, a theme that ran through this exhibition in many different ways. Cai wrote about his fascination with the incandescent beauty of the terrorist act as well as his incomprehension about why someone should sacrifice their own life for such a cause."

In another timely piece, Fiona Hall, a contemporary artist from Australia, created *The Barbarians at the Gate* (2010), an installation revolving around ecology, paranoia, and racism. Comprised of functioning beehives painted in military camouflage, whose tops were carved into the shapes of iconic buildings from around the world, the work was originally meant to host foreign bees, which, unlike native Australian bees, have the ability to sting, but customs officials prevented the artist from using them.