

# <sup>54</sup> Hou Hanru: Art, *ev+a* and the global bazaar



The title of this year's *ev+a*, "Too early for vacation," was inspired by the busy schedule of its curator, San Francisco-based Hou Hanru. Having curated over fifty exhibitions, including touring shows such as *Cities on the move*, Hou admits to finding little time in his career to take a break. However, clearly he enjoyed curating *ev+a*, describing Ireland as an "exotic, idyllic and even somehow spiritual destination for vacation" and Limerick as a "remote" city situated in the Mid-West of the country. While for most Irish people, the notion of Limerick as remote may be a novelty, Hou's description of it as "one of the most desired places" on the tourist map will certainly please Fáilte Ireland.

The exhibition that Hou has curated however, has wider horizons. One aspect of his curatorial approach is a search for meaning, not just in art itself, but also in the way it is presented and viewed. While Hou's comments on Limerick may seem idealized, with a gentle, deft touch he has brought cities to life in unexpected ways. In 2007, as curator of the *Istanbul Biennale*, Hou utilised textile markets, liner terminals and other everyday buildings as places to exhibit art; this creative approach he has repeated in Ireland. He describes his approach as follows:

It is important to ask questions about art in general, to see how it is deconstructed, modified, in terms of its relationship with the world. Events such as *ev+a* and biennales are necessary. A biennale is more like a box; you fill it up with things and then you close the lid. Whereas here [in Limerick] we are trying to break the box, and rebuild the relationship between the inside and the outside. The obsession is with breaking the box.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect of Hou's curating is inspired by a critique of art museums and the ideologies within which they flourish. However, that said, it must be admitted he has spent a good deal of time over the years working with museums and visual-arts institutions, such as the Vienna Secession Gallery, PS1, the Louisiana Museum in Denmark, Kiasma in Helsinki and the Hayward Gallery in London. But it is clear Hou is uncomfortable with static collections: he characterises museums as operating in a world of their own creation, oblivious to the pressures and concerns of society. In place of their cool, controlled atmosphere, Hou prefers the ebb and flow of the market place, the energy of the street, the colourful ephemera of the bazaar. Along with Han Ulrich Obrist, he curated an exhibition of Asian art at the Vienna Secession Gallery, when that venerable institution was celebrating its centenary in 1997. During the exhibition, Hou also rented out the gallery space for weddings, transforming, as he put it, the exhibition into "a real event in life." But in defense of museums, it should be pointed out that renting museum spaces for social events has been normal for decades, and nowadays

museums take it for granted that they and their staff are 'a real event in life', with a mission to contribute to society, on many levels. But essentially, Hou has a point: "The structure can be modified because of momentum" and in Limerick, this momentum does appear, although not perhaps as much as he would have wished.

Hou's critique of the hidden hierarchies of display is perhaps best revealed in Limerick's Hunt Museum. The atmosphere at the Hunt, historic, muted and discreet, is entirely apt for *Of the departure and arrival*, a series of small ceramic sculptures by Ni Haifeng, the display of which spills over into the nearby former Motor Tax Office. Born in China, Haifeng now lives in the Netherlands. At first glance, his blue-glazed ceramics blend perfectly with the museum's display of historic objects, but on closer examination, they turn out to be miniature models of vacuum cleaners, cleaning-liquid bottles, mobile phones and other everyday objects. This installation, nondemonstrative and subtle, successfully questions long-established conventions of historic art-museum displays. Also in the Hunt Museum, *Mias gallúnach (soap dishes)*, a display of elegant white rectangular soap dishes by Catherina Hearne, underscores again the highly artificial world of such displays. Hou's resistance to museums stems more from his questioning the politics implicit in their displays: "We should transform the institution in terms of display," he stated at the opening of *ev+a*.

That transformation is less evident at the Limerick City Gallery of Art, where *ev+a* 2008 fits comfortably within the old Carnegie Library building, and its handsome new extension. What Hou does do, however, is to use the different possibilities offered by the building to good advantage, in an exhibition that contains virtually no weak points. A thread of everyday life runs through the exhibition: Maeve McElligott's *Newspaper spread*, with pages by the artist reprinted in editions of the *Limerick Post*, effectively transcends the barriers of the museum walls, while Martina Cleary's photographs *The Wind* have a genuinely zany and humorous quality, an aspect of art to which Hou is particularly responsive, and that appears also in Jennifor Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla's video *There is more than one way to skin a sheep*, a work also shown last year at the *Istanbul Biennale*. Downstairs, the video installations include Sarah Hurl's prize-winning *Dark roots*. This black-and-white work, filmed in the style of an early Nosferatu movie, with a dark secret in the attic, is imaginative, entertaining and compelling.

[opposite]  
Sarah Hurl  
*Dark roots*  
video projection  
Limerick City Gallery of Art  
courtesy *ev+a*

Also downstairs, *Extraterritorial spaces*, a series of photographs by Fiona Hackett, documents the rooms used by embassies and diplomatic missions. Haegue Yang's *Holiday for tomorrow*, an installation consisting of screens, blinds, platform, and a video projection, also concerns itself with domestic spaces, albeit on a more modest scale. This theme continues in Ian Kiaer's *Endless house project: Limerick*, while in *Public address, the people's wall*, Angela Derby and Robert Peters' installation of banners and posters, the public arena of art is addressed. (Derby and Peters also made a work celebrating people's birthdays, in the Vienna Secession exhibition.) The concept of 'home' reappears in Ailbhe Greaney's *Here and there* photographs, where the artist documents her life and that of her family, both in New York and in Galway, while Adrian Paci's video *Centro di permanenza temporanea*, made during the Milan-based artist's residency at New Langton Arts, San Francisco, is based on the camps in Italy where immigrants are temporarily housed while the government decides on their legal status.

As Hou is partly based in San Francisco, teaching at the Institute of Arts, there is a strong influence of that city's contemporary art scene in this year's *ev'a*. However, as a curator born and educated in China, Hou is also very familiar with contemporary art from Asia. He remains in touch with what is happening in cities such as Tokyo, Hanoi and Shanghai:

The most exciting activities are not the things happening in the museums, but the things happening on the street. But the street itself is changing, because of the new economic growth. Asian cities are being expanded at a rate that is incredible. The artists have to break down the boundaries, because they have to deal with rapidly changing realities. They have to collaborate with architects and others concerned with urban realities. There is also a possibility to look at art not from a museological way, but from the viewpoint of real life.

Upstairs in the Limerick City Gallery, an installation by Tsuyoshi Ozawa, *The Carpet from the sky*, documents the artist's visit to Tibet's sacred Mt Kailash, where she collected discarded plastic rubbish, and then commissioned a firm in China to recycle the waste into polyester fibre to make a carpet. The installation also includes a mound of futons, that visitors are invited to climb. Tsuyoshi also joins with two artists, Chen Shaoxiong from China, and Gimhongsok from Korea, in an artists' collective called the Xijing Men. Their installation *Do you know Xijing?* documents a Quixotic search for an Asian utopian city that does not exist. The responses they receive to the question are varied, and often humorous. Also in the City Gallery, in a darkened room, Ruth LeGear's *Tear drops in wonderscape*, a projection through phials containing

diluted tears, creates a magical effect, while Shahzia Sikander's *Pursuit curve* is a digital animation, with a soundtrack composed by David Abir. One of the few artists to have succeeded in uniting aesthetics traditionally considered 'Western' and 'Eastern', Sikander has based *Pursuit curve* on a complex mathematical function. Issues of international relations between territories are implied in *Fantasia (Empty flag)*, a spectacular installation by Moroccan-born, and French resident, Latifa Echakhch, that consists of bare black flagpoles radiating outwards from the walls of the gallery.

And from the central hub of the City Gallery of Art, the exhibition itself radiates outwards, encompassing sites and buildings across the city. The thread of domesticity reappears in Taro Shinoda's *Telephone line (moon)*, a work comprising a large circular dais, with pillows and cushions. The work is installed in a bare concrete space, in Cathedral Place. The idea, that the viewer lies back and enjoys watching video projections on the ceiling, was, however, perhaps conceived for a warmer environment than a March day in Ireland. Another installation with domestic references – in this case flyswatters – is *A Room full of domestic bliss*, by James Hayes, at the A. Brooks Properties office on Henry Street. While conventional exhibition spaces, such as those at the Art Gallery, and at City Hall, are central to the exhibition, Hou has a clear preference for also using everyday spaces, such as offices, business premises and commercial units. This model of curatorial practice was evident also during his curating the 2007 *Istanbul Biennale*, where, rather than utilizing Byzantine churches and Roman temples, Hou chose instead to focus on 1950s modernist office and factory buildings. These concrete-framed buildings, examples of which can be found throughout the world, can be read as being more democratic and less loaded with cultural references than elaborate classical buildings.

Hou seems less comfortable using sacred spaces – Shahzia Sikander's video projection *Dissonance to detour* in Limerick's St Mary's Cathedral is an exception – but he does not hesitate to take advantage of King John's Castle, the medieval architecture of which provides an eloquent context for Malachi Farrell's *Bomb holiday* and Seamus Farrell's *Neo ruin/ sign of times*. Mark Clare's lookout tower, *Splendid isolation*, also looks very much at home in this context. Elements of *ev'a* can also to be found on the streets of the city. John Reardon's *Fire* – painted plywood flames leaping from the upper windows of Merriman House – are characteristic of the curatorial approach: the works in *ev'a* alert, excite, and intrigue. Hou clearly likes artists who get to the point, and make artwork that exists easily in the present. He has both a sense of humour, and a deft curatorial touch.

Humour and theatricals abound in the Belltable Arts Centre, the foyer of which lends itself to video installations. In *Comic battle*, by Common Culture (David Campbell, Mark Durden and Ian Brown), three monitors are set side by side. On each, a man talks into a microphone. The three men, one sporting a strikingly unfashionable moustache, talk nonstop, but after a while it becomes evident that they are being filmed, on three separate cameras, in the same room. This is a quietly subversive and captivating work, albeit one that lost out somewhat to the frantic family antics depicted in Alan Bulfin's video, *Killing Hur*. This short film, as funny as it is disturbing, was shot using just a mobile phone and won Bulfin a prize. In the former Motor Tax Office, an air of barely suppressed hysteria pervades David O'Kane's *Babble*, a video in which three actors, playing respectively Flann O'Brien, Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges, discuss their approach to art and life, with mutual comprehension a difficult goal, as all three speak only in their own native language. Drawing on diverse sources such as Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*, and Gerard Byrne's dramatisation of vintage *Playboy* interviews, this work by O'Kane is both cheerfully irreverent and beautifully and seriously realized.

Hou holds that the models of curatorial practice he has created for events such as the *Istanbul Biennale*, the Vienna Secession, or *ev\*a*, are a radical departure from what has gone before, but this is not easy to substantiate. His model of practice draws heavily on the Modernist canon of the early twentieth century, where utilitarian buildings gradually replaced Beaux Arts architecture, where 'everyman' was assigned a central position in cultural debates, and where it was envisaged that art would merge with society. This philosophy is reflected in Hou's preference for having artists make work on site, and his interest in creating 'villages' of artists, rather than expending budgets on transporting works across the globe, divorced from their cultural roots. Modernist theory saw the world of art becoming one with the everyday world, with the work of art as normal and integral a part of life as a spanner or a sweeping brush. The Vienna Secession Gallery was founded in the late nineteenth century, to promote Modernist arts and crafts. In the mid twentieth century, Joseph Beuys invested the theory with new life, while Michael Craig-Martin and others have refined and re-invented it in the present day. The curatorial model offered by Hou has its roots in the late nineteenth century, when the Arts and Crafts Movement hailed those who made creative and unique objects, rather than anonymous mass-produced consumer items. His curating is an act of resistance to the globalization of consumer society, hence his interest in having artists engage with a local environment, and in showing artwork within spaces that speak of the everyday world, rather than a heavily conditioned 'art' environment.

However, investing of belief in the power of environment to condition art can imply that art itself is weak, and secondary to a grander scheme of things. When Hou invited artists to participate in the Vienna Secession, their work was shown in conditions more approximating a department store than an art gallery. In such cases, the voice of the curator can become predominant. In *Nuits blanches* in Paris, Hou had over one hundred videos projected simultaneously on a wall one hundred and fifty metres long. The one hundred short videos were selected from over seven hundred entries. He spoke of those who had submitted videos – both amateur and professional artist, with no distinction being made in the presenting of the work – being proud of their work being shown in this way. One wonders how artists, who spend much of their time preparing the presentation of their work, would react to having their artwork displayed in this way.

In the commercial flux of the entrepot bazaar, market forces rule, without restraint, and without social conscience. In describing his work at the Vienna Secession, Hou says:

The classic way is to combine architecture, art, and films, so we did all that. ... The centre was empty, the urban analogy is that the cities start from an empty centre. Then we have a very busy area, where the artists' work is displayed, like an urban situation in the street. Everyone has to be mingled with the others. This was a gesture to challenge the autonomous role of the artist as a romantic hero figure.

Hou describes Asian cities as "tropes," presumably meaning that they serve as metaphors for future cities. He clearly prefers the market street, full of noise, chatter, colour and visual excitement, to the repetitive robotic music and heavily controlled environment of the shopping mall. However, it can be argued that by adopting this approach, by focusing on an apparent chaos of street markets and people living in a state of constant improvisation, he offers a Romantic view of Asia not radically different from the exotic impressions offered by nineteenth century Orientalist painters. An instance of this exoticisation is the recreation by Surasi Kusolwong of an oxygen bar of Bangkok – a real necessity for survival in that heavily polluted city – as an art statement within the Corderia at the last *Venice Biennale*. (In 2005, Surasi Kusolwong was commissioned by the National Sculpture Factory, Cork, to do *BangCork*, a street market transformed into an art event, as part of *Cork Caucus*, a free-ranging forum for discussion, events, artworks and critical dialogue that represents perhaps the closest manifestation in Ireland of this approach to curating, and it is no coincidence that a collaborator with Hou, Charles Esche, along with Annie Fletcher, was closely involved with the *Cork Caucus*.)

In the exhibition *Cities on the move*, shown at several venues, including PS1, street scenes of Tokyo, Shanghai and Hanoi were presented as visions of the future. But this referencing of streets and markets, of the busy chaotic lives of rapidly growing cities of Asia, can also be seen as retaining aspects of the Victorian view of the world at its core. Chaotic market places are portrayed as an unchanging standard, whereas in fact they are part of a commercial vortex, pulling together tens of thousands of participants, and allowing some to filter through to increasing wealth, power and success, while obliging others to remain eating at the noodle stand.

In Hou's world, those ordinary dreams of success are seen as an unattainable utopian ideal. He is interested in the aesthetic of the everyday, of the noise, colour and confusion, that characterise street markets the world over. In Bangkok, Hou was able to utilise half-finished skyscrapers for *Cities on the move*, but the economic downturn that led to these buildings being available passed quickly enough. It can be argued that in these exhibitions Hou gives a partial view of 'real' life, while his work with Rem Koolhaas, for instance, looks increasingly dubious, as that architect advances grand dreams of creating sprawling metropolises such as the proposed Waterfront City in Dubai. Hou calls for the designing of new cities in the most rational way, but he acknowledges that such super-designs often end up surrounded by shantytowns. He even advocates the building of massive new structures without essential services such as water, access and power; a recipe for a certain type of dystopia if ever there was one. For Hou, however, "slum spaces are the most interesting spaces," a view shared by many imaginative architects, only a very small number of whom, it has to be admitted, themselves live in slums.

Perhaps the most unconventional works in *ev'a* – unconventional in the sense that they are painted with acrylic paint on stretched canvases – are two large 'fragmented' paintings, *Incompletable writings I & II*, by Chen Wenbo, exhibited in City Hall. One depicts a keyboard, the other a wastepaper basket. They give a flavour of the large-scale ambitious painting that is being produced in vast quantities in China today. In the same gallery, *UFO Series*, an accomplished essay in photo-montage by Allan de Souza, also depicts a fractured, or mirrored, world. A colleague of Hou's at the San Francisco Institute of Art, de Souza has spent many years documenting sites of alleged alien encounters. As well as fractured and dislocated worlds, Hou is clearly fond of assemblages of wood, brick and other basic building materials, works that speak of immediate human needs, and again suggest a domestic environment. Suspended in the corner of City Hall, *Broken Icarus* by Terry Markey is a nest-like sculpture of timber planks. More timber, stacked and teetering on the edge of collapse, can be found in the Motor Tax Office, in *Constructed action* by the same artist.

*10% of a glass mountain (Szklana Góra)*, a timber framework designed by Henna-Riikka Halonen and assembled by Polish workers resident in Limerick, also looks at housing. A homage to Constructivism, this sculpture takes a sideways look at the Irish obsession with trophy houses, and the use of migrant labour to construct idealised dwellings. Halonen is alert to the irony that the new Irish utopia, with its heavy carbon footprint, is being assembled by workers obliged to leave their own homeland, itself once a Utopian social experiment. The title refers to a Polish folk tale, while an accompanying video shows the workers making the piece. Yang Jiechang's *Eurasia* is installed in the unassuming spaces of the Tax Office, as is Aideen Doran's *Invisible cities*, complete with tiny model landscapes on vinyl records, rotating on a variety of turntables. For the most part these are works that concentrate on models and forms of society, rather than personal and individual identity.

1 All quotes in this essay are taken from a talk given by Hou on Saturday 8 March 2008; the talk, *Hou Hanru in conversation with Annie Fletcher*, in Limerick, was part of the National Sculpture Factory's lecture programme.

[opposite]  
Ruth Le Gear  
*Tear drops in wonderscape*  
installation shot, *ev'a*  
courtesy *ev'a*

Sex, gender and intimate autobiography do not feature much in *ev'a* 2008. In reacting against the politics of the body and of identity, a central motivating force in contemporary art in the 1990s, Hou draws closer to early Modernist theory, that idealised vision of society where art was held to have universal values, inimical to the notion of local or individual identity. In Hou's Vienna Secession exhibition, the artist's date and place of birth was recorded on the labels, but not their nationality. In *ev'a*, only the title of the work, artist's name and year of work is recorded. One reason for this is to protect artists, particularly those from Asia, from being singled out in commentaries that define art principally in relation to its place of origin. Perhaps unbeknownst to Hou, the one-page press release does give the nationalities of the artists, in brackets, after their names, in a notation familiar from many biennales and exhibitions. Hou's strategy of eschewing nationality does allow a glossing over of the reality that some of the most outstanding contemporary Asian artists are in fact resident in Berlin, Paris, New York or Los Angeles, having been drawn to these cities by opportunities for advancement, not least the advancement offered by those cities' museums

and art galleries. A proto-Socialist philosophy, an awareness of the basic needs of humanity, and an openness to the future are characteristics of Hou's approach. However, the clarity of this identity-lite approach is blurred somewhat when Hou states "We need art because we need difference," thus begging the question, what does difference define, if not identity? In working with architects such as Rem Koolhaas, who maps out grandiose Utopian projects in the Gulf region, Hou again makes explicit the connections with Modernists such as El Lissitzky, Corbusier, and Vladimir Tatlin, thereby referencing the great Socialist movements of the early twentieth century. This seems apt in the Irish city that in 1919 was home to the short-lived 'Limerick Soviet', and now welcomes a curator, born in China during Mao Tse Tung's cultural revolutions, who is helping to define the shape, content and meaning of contemporary art across the globe.

