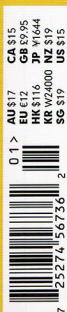


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Contemporary Visual Culture

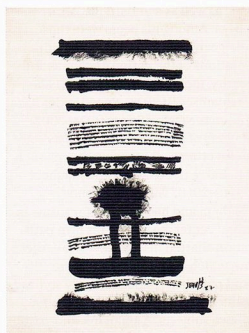
BASEL ABBAS & RUANNE ABOU-RAHME, CHOSIL KIL
HUANG YONG PING, ROBERT H. ELLSWORTH, YOGYAKARTA

ISSUE 92 MAR/APR 2015



138

New York

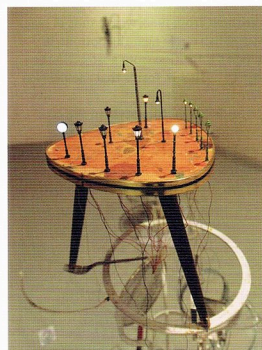


VS GAITONDE

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

144

Hong Kong



**UNSEEN EXISTENCE:
DIALOGUES WITH THE
ENVIRONMENT IN
CONTEMPORARY ART**

Hong Kong Arts Centre

140

Melbourne



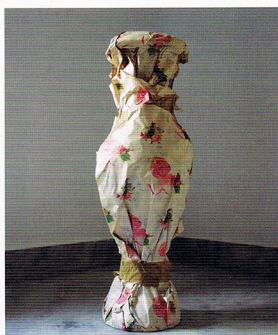
YANG FUDONG

Australian Centre for the Moving Image

Reviews

148

Dubai



MARIAM SUHAIL

Grey Noise

142

Seoul



**BEYOND AND
BETWEEN**

Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art

153

New York



NAM JUNE PAIK

Asia Society Museum

UNSEEN EXISTENCE: DIALOGUES WITH THE ENVIRONMENT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

In explaining current generations' disconnect with nature, American author Richard Louv uses the term "nature-deficit disorder," claiming that modern enhancements have suppressed our ability to relate with the environment. Similar concerns were brought to light in Hong Kong Arts Centre's (HKAC) exhibition "Unseen Existence: Dialogues with the Environment in Contemporary Art." Conceived by Taipei-based collector and curator Rudy Tseng, the show featured 12 international artists whose works address topics of urbanization, the loss of natural resources and the ongoing changes to our lifestyles and surroundings.

Visitors first entered the exhibition through a dimly lit room, which housed Thai artist Sutthirat Supaparinaya's three-channel video installation, *When Need Moves the Earth* (2014). Employing screens hung from the ceiling with charcoal briquettes piled beneath them on the floor, the work features footage of the Srinakarin Dam and the Mae Moh Lignite Mine. Both the largest of their kind in Thailand, they generate electricity; yet the video suggests that such land excavations also have other undesirable effects that are less visible. Continued work on these sites, which sit on active fault lines, could result in tremors that slowly shift the region's tectonic plates and trigger larger earthquakes. In highlighting natural sources that we often take for granted, Supaparinaya asks viewers to consider the magnitude (and repercussions) of human intervention on nature.

Elsewhere, the harmful effects of coal were further explored by artist Maya Kramer in her three protruding wall sculptures (all 2014), which resemble tree branches and feathers. The sculptures are cast in coal dust, whose grime seems to absorb the life from the natural objects they are portraying, denoting the extent to which our daily output of pollution is harming the environment.

Other works focusing on the carelessness of urbanization included Taiwanese artist Yao Jui-chung's ongoing series of black-and-white photographs of abandoned buildings, entitled "Roaming Around the Ruins" (1993–). The images speak to the rapid economic growth that Taiwan experienced between the 1970s and 1990s, which sparked waves of public construction projects that ultimately failed due to their dependency on unstable financial sources.

The bottom level of the exhibition displayed Hong Kong artist Nadim Abbas's *Zone II* (2014), comprising 56 plastic containers that resemble the city's notoriously dense housing blocks. Arranged in a uniform grid, each box contained waste accumulated from the show's installation process, conveying that what we discard as trash does not readily disappear. In addition, four robotic vacuum cleaners aimlessly roamed and bumped into the containers, signaling to us the

need for (eco)conscious living. Debris was also used in Yuko Mohri's found-object installations: in *Urban Mining* (2014), exposed cables, fans and kitchen accessories were configured to generate electricity for a series of miniature lamps placed on a metal stool, reinforcing the recycling potential of unwanted materials.

Promoting a connection to and awareness of our environment were ideas most evident in the works of Ang Song Ming and artist-duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. During the opening week of the exhibition, Ang invited participants to lead others around the HKAC's local Wan Chai district for his project *Silent Walk* (2014). Walking in total silence, viewers were encouraged to engage with their aural and visual senses and tune into the dynamics of the environment. For their video *Apotomé* (2013), Allora and Calzadilla worked with Tim Storms, a vocalist who can sing the lowest note produced by the human voice. Vibrations made on a vocal register such as Storms's can be used to communicate with certain animals. In *Apotomé*, the artists asked Storms to sing to elephant remains—to create a spiritual reconnection between humans and the natural world.

At times the exhibited artworks seemed misaligned from the curatorial focus. Masaya Chiba's six paintings and performance video, for example, were more a study of human perception. The exhibition also felt somewhat disorganized—only after reading its text did one realize the show was divided into four sub-themes, as the display did not effectively communicate this concept. Nonetheless, "Unseen Existence" brought forth timely discourses surrounding our environment, in a moment when sensitivity toward such topics has become crucial in moving society forward.

SYLVIA TSAI

