

In conversation with

Hou Hanru

on “The Spectacle of the Everyday”

By Anna Schneider

2009 is yet another year full of international art events: Venice Biennale, Basel Art Fair, Biennale in Thessaloniki, Athens, Istanbul and in September the 10th Edition of the Lyon Biennale. These and other large-scale exhibition productions compete for the attention of art professionals and vie for the affection of general audiences. The composition of a compelling and energizing choice of works in effort to raise timely and critical questions while taking into consideration local, regional, national and global contexts is only but few of the great challenges of the conceptualization of such events. Rather, it is the successful juggling act of all these tasks combined whilst attracting enough visitors to justify the budgets provided from the various sources. In particular, the current climate of economic crisis has turned these sources into a highly-competitive and formative terrain.

Hou Hanru, curator of this year's Lyon Biennale responds to these demands with a set of questions. As the title, “The Spectacle of the Everyday”, points to a main focus is an investigation into the realm of the everyday and its potential of being a space of resistance and political activism. The other major concern is the format of the biennale itself which he aims to challenge through the engagement with the heritage of thinkers such as Guy Debord and the Situationists, who diagnosed that we live in the irreversible condition of the society of the spectacle. Central to their claim is that capitalist structures have created the prevailing condition for all aspects of life, that is, being mediated through images in order to spark the consumer's desire. However, implicit in this mediation is that capitalist structures produce frozen and distorted images of the actual social relations.

Guy Debord's particular concern in visual culture has turned the term of the spectacle into a productive platform of friction for the discourses of contemporary art and its formats. Today, the discourses on visual culture are even more than in the past entangled into global markets and the imaginaries of cultural values and incorporated into a system of commercial entertainment media hype and cultural tourism. Nevertheless exhibitions also provide the potential to negotiate this condition critically.

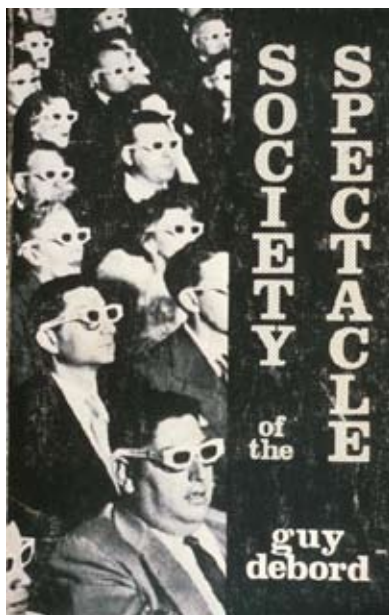
In the following interview Hou Hanru speaks about the strategic reasoning and intellectual inspirations that drive his vision for the Lyon Biennale.

AS: First of all, in your conceptual introduction you describe with reference to Guy Debord that the fundamental condition that we live in is the society of the spectacle, a society that doesn't provide the option of an inside and an outside anymore, but only consists of inside. Could you elaborate further how these notions impact the conceptual framework of this year's Lyon Biennale?

HH: At first I have to say that the question of the biennale has been debated a lot along with the boom of the art scene and its markets. The question is what is the real nature of contemporary art activities today? For me it is clear that they

are becoming increasingly an industry of creativity but also clearly an industry of entertainment. Another question for me is how much through this tendency is it possible not only to preserve, but to develop the function of contemporary art as a space for intellectual reflection on the society and as a space of critique. How much is this still possible? How much can contemporary art open up a proposal for different ways to look at the world develop, looking at a whole set of notions related to our perception of the world, such as beauty or policy. And also, more importantly, whether contemporary art can still have a function as a way to propose different projects for social life - political, social, cultural, economic and also individual concepts for life.

All these issues are actually related to the real world in which things are continuously changing. But in the meantime, the way that we try to grasp this movement of the changing world is very often limited and frozen in a certain framework, a certain system of thinking; in a system of perception as well as one of consumption and communication. And that is exactly what is problematized by Guy Debord in his critical examination of the society of the spectacle. On the one hand, we have a tendency to turn things into a spectacle so we can grasp it, so we can freeze the image, so we can turn in into an object of commercial exchange and therefore consumption. This is a crucial thought. This is why Guy Debord's notion to describe the condition of the post-war capitalist situation is still valid today. What is even more interesting is that we are living in a time where things are becoming more complicated. On the one hand this tendency to become a spectacle is becoming immense and more powerful in a time in which we are talking about the empire. The empire, in the way people like Antonio Negri talks about it, is something that is impossible to escape - the imperial grasp. On the other hand, because there is no more outside, there is no more possibility to be visible and communicated outside of the spectacle. One has to actually imagine new solutions to continuously negotiate this condition and produce alternative possibilities, strategies, visions, projects, actions to deconstruct it. So what is important here is to look at the crash of the world of the spectacle and the world of the real. Then again, it is impossible to stand on one side or the other. We have to find a way to create something, to transgress this condition in the process of having this conflict, to make use of the dynamic, the tension generated in this confrontation.



Another focus is the introduction of the idea of a reinvention of the everyday life. This also goes back to the tradition of Guy Debord and the Situationist and today is very much discussed by Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre. They think about the question how one can actually use the different aspects of the everyday life and objects and events, and surroundings and things that we do in our proximity.

AS: So, does this mean that the everyday can become a domain of resistance for artistic production?

HH: Yes, totally. And that actually helps us to look beyond the conventional forms of producing things and the framework of the established institutions. You need to look outside the institutional frameworks and look into the spaces of real life. Especially urban spaces, the street, the places, etc.

AS: You mean as exhibition spaces?

HH: Well yes, as exhibition spaces, but also as a space of action. My opinion is that we still can be very hopeful that the format of the biennale is the right tool and space to come up with experiments of this negotiation.

AS: So, then how do you manage the internal conflict of working with artists that you have asked to be part of your biennale, that is, as soon as they agree to contribute work enter yet into another cycle of production and commercialization?

HH: Well, once again almost no artist today can escape from the system, right? The alternative is, that you don't exist as an artist. But on the other hand, if you look closely most of the artists started with doing things outside the system until they become part of the system where they then are constantly trying to get out of the system. What is interesting about this "in and out" process is that these people are producing something that very often is hard to describe in a conventional language. And very often it is very hard to exhibit them in a closed institutional space. So I think that the format of the biennale allows us to be open in order to respond to these possibilities. This is why before talking about the artists, I am thinking of the structure of the exhibition in regards to several criteria.

First, the Biennale of Lyon is already in its tenth edition. Second, one has to acknowledge that this biennale is a typical product of a French institution. It developed out of a proposal of a contemporary art museum headed by the museum director and one of the first biennale that clearly emphasized

the role of the curator. That is why they called it the biennale of the author. They started with people like Harald Szeemann, Jean-Hubert Martin down to Hans Ulrich Obrist, Nicolas Bourriaud, Jérôme Sans, to name a few. And each of these people brings a very different energy and a different vision. So this biennale has a very interesting framework. It has a very clear site. It's not like in Istanbul where the site of the exhibition changes every time. It has a rather stable structure. The question for me is, how to negotiate more of an opening within this structure. And on the other hand, coming back to the question of the spectacle and real life, I want to raise the question what a biennale is and how we can improve or open up the system of the biennale in order to embrace real life. This for me is at the centre of this project. This project has a different function that a biennale in Istanbul, Shanghai or other places.

AS: I assume the city of Lyon is always in competition with Paris, the centre of culture of political power, but also with Marseille, the second largest city in France. The traditionally centralist structures of France reinforce such relations. As a result the format of the Lyon Biennale certainly also has the concrete function of vitalizing the image of the city.

HH: In a way you can probably interpret it this way, but I think I would like to see the relations in a larger, European perspective. You know next to Lyon you have Manifesta, Venice, Documenta, Münster, Berlin Biennale, Liverpool, even Brussels. This becomes a very interesting situation. There is also a new organizational structure called European Biennial Network. They are developing the organization of a network among all these events, to not only compete with each other, but also form a new space of discourse beyond the traditional museum. In my opinion that is becoming a very interesting and important innovation for Europe. How we use this tool is crucial.

For me the question of the spectacle and the everyday, the frozen and the alive is all part of that discussion and I think it is important to address this in particular after twenty years of executing this event through an established institution; especially as an answer to the current crisis. Can we still be hopeful to make proposals in this moment of crisis?

AS: What is interesting about all the biennales you have mentioned is their location. Most of them are located in off-centered places or regions. Few of them take place in capitals. The series of all these events make clear that the format of the biennale has become an effective tool for the reinvention of the image of cities.



Société Réaliste,
EU Green Card Lottery - The Lagos File, 2009
 Installation view, Centro Cultural Montehermoso,
 Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain

HH: Yes, clearly we talk a lot about biennales having the function of producing infrastructure for local communities. And even in the European situation where there are a lot of institutions and public and political support, we still need a much more alive context for contemporary art. So that the exhibition space can become a space that is connected with real life; that is important for this project, where I came up with a new structure to tackle this challenge. A structure that is divided into four plus one chapters.

AS: One thing that I find interesting about Lyon and the evaluation of its 9th Biennale is the aim to attract young people. This desire is rooted in the fact that Lyon, although having a stable population has a shrinking young population. The administration tries to counter this tendency, for example, with contemporary art events.

HH: Yes, exactly and this is a very important issue for me too. How to connect the biennale with the actual social life of the city?

AS: Congratulations to Appadurai's contribution to the Biennale. His notion of a bottom-up or alter- globalization

plays an important role in the concept of the 10th Lyon Biennale. Could you elaborate on the connection between Appadurai's thoughts and the artists projects?

HH: I think it is not primarily a question on how Appadurai's ideas are affecting the artist's work. What is interesting is not if an artist simply takes a theory and responds to it with images or some other project. What is important is that Appadurai, along with many other scholars today, gain their influence by really researching, analyzing and theorizing some very crucial phenomena, events and situations. That shows how much one can look at different situations within the process of globalization, which are not only becoming more and more complex and dynamic, but also increasingly inventive. This sense of innovation, these different forms of creativity shows a possibility to look at the world-system from a totally different perspective. One that is no longer dominated by merely one way of thinking, one logic of social organization or one logic of economic and cultural production. Furthermore it is interesting that many artists although working in different contexts research about similar situations. They come up with similar ideas and imaginations and projects, which then can be put into comparison with the research of scholars.



Oliver RESSLER, *What Is Democracy?*, 2009. 8-channel video installation (video still). Courtesy of the artist

This creates a very interesting dialogue. Through that I see a new form of artistic production put forward. In the case of the Lyon Biennale, what is interesting is not only to have images and theory as a mutual illustration, but really create a dialogue, one that needs to be generated in order to provide a common ground for the creation of new energy. In that regard Appadurai's work has always been an inspiration for me.

AS: Yes, and in that sense Appadurai's notion of "local communities" could be translated into artistic production, in particular when we look at artists that work as collaboratives. The inclusion of collaboratives is also an emphasis you make in the conceptual framing.

HH: In the artistic context there are several points that one has to look at. First, art is traditionally romanticized, considered a pure creation done by an individual. This notion is also at the core of the whole system of bourgeois cultural production and consumption. This is resonating and in itself a product of the economic system of a capitalism, which is based on the rise of the individual. From a historical point of view, we have to look back and investigate whether there are things that have been excluded because of the dominant system, the things that have been excluded ironically in order to increase the profit of the individual. Namely we have mobilized the society to work for the individual in the form of industrial mass production while it is exactly the industrialization process with its organization of labor that is

responsible for the erasure of the individuality of the worker. On the other hand the social relationship of the working class, and I mean the term working class in a large sense, not only factory workers and farmers, but people like us, also have been created as a means of survival in structures of collective organizations in the name of different communities, social classes, etc. That form of organization is often positioned in opposition to the dominant system and has been largely marginalized. I wonder how much can this be brought back as a new foundation of how we define creativity? Interestingly through the progress of scientific innovations, and again, I mean this in a large sense, we understand that creation in the contemporary conditions is less and less an individual process. It is much more a product of a complex interaction between individuals and often takes place in the context of collective action. This collective intelligence gave us a very interesting perspective on contemporary art as well. In this case the introduction of the notion of the collective as something that is different from the conventional distinction between the individual and society. There is a new way of understanding the notion of the collective. It is continuously moving, a very dynamic space beyond the traditional notion of the private and the public and opens up a whole set of new perspectives on the discourse on society.

AS: Working in a collective effort often also makes greater research projects possible. Do you feel that this form of practice has also changed the seriousness and the dimension of the work that is presented?

HH: Yes, I would say it created a new complexity. The traditional concept of people and mass as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt discuss it in their book *Multitude* and also Giorgio Agambem addresses, has changed. What is multitude? A collective form, a grouping of diverse individuals? People have very different backgrounds, thoughts, value systems, but often come together in a specific context of globalization and make proposals to diversify the logic of the mainstream. That actually created interesting actions in a dynamic full of contradictions and conflicts and sharing. This dynamic provides a great starting point to think about what an artist is today. Is the artist simply a little god, sitting there, creating in his own world? Or is he/she performing a form of social activism? I really think that we are seeing an important shift.

AS: Let's talk a little bit about Lyon's national, European and global context in particular in comparison to other biennales you curated? For example in Istanbul one of your major themes was the visualization of the negotiation between

the global and the local. Will these themes play a role again in Lyon and how will you translate them into the context of Lyon?

HH: Well, the Lyon Biennale has been a more classical institutional project that was based on the initiative of a museum team. The aim was to create a festival, a big art event for the city. That happened at a time when Europe didn't have many new biennales. A lot of large museum exhibitions existed, but there was nothing like a biennale in France. Of course the Venice Biennale remained important, but that was a very classical format with its pavilions and one theme show. The impact of new biennales such as Istanbul, Havana, Sidney or Sao Paolo hadn't happened yet. At that moment the French institutional system looked into possibilities one the one hand to present contemporary art in a more spectacular way, on the other hand to implant this contemporary art as a facet more into society. One important choice that the Lyon Biennale made after the first edition which was directed by the museum director Thierry Raspail and his team was to invite different curators. The decision to position the individual curator as author was pretty audacious for its time. Of course after twenty years this biennale has become very established in the art world. But this art world is now facing a new challenge. The globalized situation has caused an emergence of a multitude of different kinds of biennales that all compete with one another. Many of them are essentially related to the histories of the local context. Interestingly these global developments pushed the Lyon Biennale to look at their format from a more universal position and sparked interest to investigate the negotiations between the global and the local in a new way. However, for me it is important to not simply consider the horizontal divisions of the globe, I see the situation as a complex grid. We need to look at the global confrontation and the dialogue between the mainstream and all the marginalized micro worlds. This is why I came up with the observation and the proposal to say, this is the time to deal with the format of the biennale itself, but from a critical perspective of the mechanics of the global system which is based on the system of the spectacle.

AS: This sounds like an interesting parallel to last year's Gwangju Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor which had the title "The Politics of the Spectacle." Is there a dialogue not only between scholarly approaches and art work framed in a particular biennale project, but a continuous, sustainable dialogue happening between the different events? Obviously there are common threads and I think that it would be exciting to follow up with that dialogue over longer time periods.

HH: Yes, indeed. I think this is happening more and more. Actually, when you look back in the history of biennales they have been interconnected quite a bit. On the one hand through the multiplication of certain curatorial models, on the other hand through the topics that circulated a lot. For example in the beginning biennales have been more of a romantic individual curatorial project. Now a much broader discussion on globalization, multi-cultural societies, the emergence of the non-western world takes place. These have become central issues. Even in the heart of the West, in Venice for example or Documenta, these have inevitably become an important concern. On the other hand outside the west all these so-called new biennales and institutions are dealing with contemporary art like they were New York, Paris or London. I see an interesting reorganization happening. So clearly this dialogue happens. Also formally a lot of alliances have been created. Simply for practical reasons like structuring opening days in a way that the art world can actually come to the events, like the Grand Tour or Trés Bien. This is the most recent development. Many biennales actually plan regionally now on how they can connect to other biennales, like for example last year in Asia. This year for Lyon we try to organize something with Istanbul and Liverpool and others that belong to the European Biennial Network. You can call this global tourism, but it is also very much about finding practical solutions to mobilize the attention of media and professionals which then has an impact on local politics, concretely the

funding of such an event. The support of media and the visitors for example count a lot in the decision whether an event can survive or not. But at the end of the day the question is whether you make a good biennale, a good exhibition, a good event. And that largely depends on the curatorial project, the institutional support the financial system and, most importantly the quality of the art.

AS: Well, in that regard I would like to talk a little bit about your artist choice, especially the ones of the third chapter with the title "Another world is possible". Here you give the promise that alternative strategies to the capitalist world system will be presented. That is very exciting, especially in the current climate of crisis.

HH: Well, I don't want to simply present utopian solutions or alternatives, because as I said before, I think there is no outside anymore. But what interests me is to see how artists negotiate this conflict with a perspective in their mind and with a certain degree of utopian imagination to lead things towards a different dimension, which very often is unknown. These experiments very often include subversive, experimental, playful games. Nevertheless these experiments are not some other-worldly idea, but very much based in grassroots experience. Again the discussion of Arjun Appadurai's book in which he talks about the grassroots globalization is of interest. He explains how actually apart from the mainstream system

Carlos MOTTA, *The Good Life*, 2005-2008. Installation view at ICA, Philadelphia. Photo : Carlos Motta



of globalization you have anti-, alternative or however you want to call it globalization projects. This has an impact how artists from different places operate against the mainstream. In “Another world is possible” I bring some very political projects and some very individual and playful approaches; some subversive and provocative.

For example one project is something like a dialogue between Carlos Motta and Oliver Ressler, one of them is a Columbian artist living in New York, the other one is Austrian who was very active in Latin America. They also have been very involved with all the anti-globalization conferences from Seattle to Chicago to Genoa. I am presenting two projects of them. The one by Carlos is a series of interviews with people in different cities of Latin America on the question what good life is. The other piece, by Oliver raises the question through interviews with people in different parts of the world what democracy is. Next to that I want to have that group of three artists from China, Korea and Japan, Chen Shaoxiong, Gimhongsok and Tsuyoshi Ozawa who together call themselves Xijing Men. They have a completely imaginative project. It talks about western capital, which basically didn't exist in the Asian situation for a long time, because Tokyo is the eastern center of capital, Beijing is the northern center of capital and Seoul is somewhere in between. Together they imagine another place out there, which can't be shelled by people from these three backgrounds to identify as their capital, so they call it the western capital. But it is also a totally utopian place, full of ridiculous possibilities, absurdities and fun. So, I am looking at very different kinds of proposals. There will also be a very individual research project on the working class and the term of labor that is largely forgotten as a topic in the mainstream art world. We are working with an artist from France Agnès Varda and Robert Milin. And that is “Another world is possible” as well, a world that we have forgotten.

AS: Lastly, I want to say that one remarkable aspect I find in your work that although you are dealing with heavy and difficult issues you always keep a sense of optimism and humor. How do you manage to do that?

HH: I think it is very important not to forget that we live once and we should enjoy this life! We should do whatever we can to enjoy it!