

North of the World

The web of global entanglements and flows described by *A beast, a god, and a line* at Kunsthall Trondheim omits the exhibition's immediate context.

By Ragnhild Aamås 21.01.20 Review Artikkel på norsk



A beast, a god, and a line, installation view from Kunsthall Trondheim. Photo: Aage A. Mikalsen / Kunsthall Trondheim.

My childhood was filled with situations where my siblings and I sat on the floor in front of the television, playing Japanese console role-playing games. There is a connection between hearing the sound of Japanese voice actors, the symphonic background music, and the animated sequences that saturated our little living room on the Norwegian west coast, and my encounter with the exhibition *A beast, a god, and a line* at Kunsthall Trondheim, an exhibition that examines the circulation of “ideas and forms across a geography commonly called Asia-Pacific.” For how does one connect one’s intimate familiar surroundings to the wider shared world still characterised by colonial predation?

A beast, a god, and a line

Kunsthall Trondheim, Trondheim
30 November 2019 — 16 February
2020

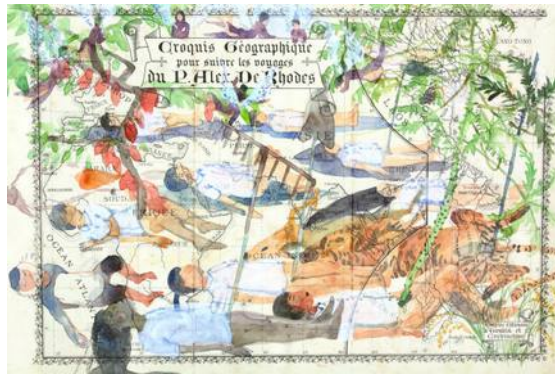
Originally conceived for the Dhaka Art Summit 2018, *A beast, a god, and a line* has visited Hong Kong, Yangon in Myanmar, and

Warsaw in Poland before arriving in Trondheim; its next stop is Chiang Mai in Thailand. The exhibition is an exemplary global travelling exhibition, right down to the format's difficulty with overcoming the inherent distance to the various local contexts it visits. Although the premise of curator Cosmin Costinas (director of Para Site in Hong Kong) is that of "an already fragmentary and decentralised art world," it is likely that visitors with in-depth knowledge of South East Asian culture and history will get the most out of many of the works. At the same time, the geographical area addressed here is too extensive for any individual to have deep insight into all of the regions represented. Costinas predominantly highlights the shared features of the regions' cultural identity, such as textile production and trade, folklore, and the smothering aftermath of the colonial era. "Welcome to the postcolonial hangover," as Ming Wong – one of the featured artists – puts it.

The venue is spacious, but even so, every surface, including some of the beams, has been pressed into service to accommodate the more than fifty artists, all of whom are connected to the Asia-Pacific. The exhibition can be tentatively parsed into three overarching themes – although it is by no means restricted by expository narratives which inhibit the statements made by individual works. The first theme explores the oppressive tendencies of neo-nationalism and religion; the second deals with traditions, environmental consequences, and personal stories related to textile production and trade; the third concerns the golden age of the island world created in the Asia-Pacific region by the Austronesian expansion that took place some four thousand years ago, the most extensive prior to Western colonialism.

The three works by Vietnamese artist Thảo Nguyên Phan touch on all of these themes. Her examination of the history of the Mekong River is close to the fabric of things. Sometimes she just passively registers, as in a 2014 photograph of three large stones which were once used to crush jute fibres, but now lie inactive and mute under a tree. At other times her work takes on more dramatic forms, such as *Untitled (Heads)* (2013), a large sculpture made of jute twigs dangling from the ceiling and hung with parts of grinning bronze heads and sickles. Created in collaboration with practitioners of traditional hand embroidery and textile work, *Man looking towards darkness* (2014) is a wall-sized piece of jute textile filled with the silhouettes of small figures, singly and in groups, similar to those found in technical manuals. The figures' bodies perform actions associated with jute production, a practice enforced during the Japanese occupation (1940–45) at the expense of rice production, with famine as a result. *Voyages de*

Rhodes (2014–17), in which watercolour figures are painted on the pages of found books mounted out from the wall so that both sides of the page are visible, mixes fact and folklore in ways which capture the complexity of colonial history's material aftermath. Plant-like limbs grow from human figures painted translucently over a missionary's travelogue, speaking of the dehumanisation of the colonised subject by identifying it with vegetation and fauna. However, the flora can also be seen as an emblem for a long-suppressed expressive potential that is now emerging.



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Voyages de Rhodes* No. 1, 2014–17. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Aage A. Mikalsen / Kunsthall Trondheim.

In an exhibition like this, which – with its many works and lean context – runs the risk of letting the unfamiliar remain exotic, it is necessary to open doors to other realms of knowledge. In this respect the video works have an advantage as they allow for the incorporation of sources and archives, conveying information by narrative means. This is exemplified in Vietnamese filmmaker and video artist Nguyễn Trinh Thi's essayistic documentary film *Letters from Panduranga* (2015), in which two narrators exchange clips accompanied by voice-overs of landscapes, people, and cultural-historical artefacts which bear traces of American bombings. Among other things, they discuss the Vietnamese central authority's censoring methods and the government's plans to build nuclear power plants in this area sacred to the matriarchal Cham people of South Vietnam without consulting the locals. How to address local knowledge without overshadowing it oneself is an issue close to the two filmmakers' hearts.

Even with the old colonial powers gone from sight, new abuse still takes place. The living conditions of guest workers is a particularly poignant example. Thai artists Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chai Siris's *Dilbar* (2013) is a single-channel video installation projecting onto a suspended piece of prepared glass that reflects the images up against the wall and onto the

floor. Landscape sounds are mixed with the rhythmic thumps of machine-assisted manual labour, like the pulse of an organism. The video alternates between a sleeping guest worker, machine operators, and scenes of dusty urban landscapes. Critic Jonathan Crary has described sleep as the only condition not yet colonised by capitalism's transformation of human life into an incessant generation of economic value, but in Weerasethakul and Siris's vision, dreams too are feverishly filled with work.

Paul Pfeiffer's *Incarnator* (2018) addresses fan culture's treatment of Justin Bieber as a present-day incarnation of the infant Christ, bringing out the complex interplay of innocence and complicity that characterises the global advancement of popular culture. Local woodcarvers who previously crafted sacred images are now whittling away at effigies of Bieber; three versions of such figurines, in varying stages of completion, appear alongside the video. The soundtrack reverberates throughout the entire exhibition when two girls in T-shirts bearing pithy messages – "my mascara runs faster than you!" – sing a cover version of Bieber's cover version of Luis Fonsi's 'Despacito' (2017). How sweet isn't it for a fan to hear her own language issue from an idol's lips?



Paul Pfeiffer, *Incarnator*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Aage A. Mikalsen / Kunsthall Trondheim.

In a group show as comprehensive as this, works will inevitably bleed into one another. This does not feel disruptive, but rather contributes to the general backdrop of entanglements and relationships. Another musical element that helps establish the soundscape of the exhibition is Ming Wong's performance of the song 'Bali Ha'i' in the video work *Bloody Marys – Song of the south seas* (2018). The Berlin-based artist gives his own interpretation of the character Bloody Mary from Rodgers & Hammerstein's *South Pacific* (1949), interspersed with previous performances of the musical. Wong uses visual and auditory

overlaps and flickering clips to unpack the production of racialised stereotypes and their continuation into the era of the colonial hangover.

A beast, a god, and a line is accompanied by a catalogue that provides brief information on various issues, for example on the social hierarchy applying to different textile types and other fundamental insights that help viewers decode some of the works. There is little in the exhibition, however, that situates the Norwegian audience “on the same map” as the South East Asian artists – to borrow a metaphor from Susan Sontag’s 2003 essay *Regarding the Pain of Others* – which is relevant to the experience of becoming a spectator of hurt. Even without fully understanding my own relationship to all this, I can certainly feel the Protestant joy of a non-specific sense of guilt spreading from the flush of my cheeks down through my spinal cord.

Most merchandise moves deftly and effortlessly across contexts, but something happens to artworks which criticise this flow when the exhibition itself displays a corresponding indifference to context. This is perhaps the predicament of any travelling show: should selections be altered with each relocation? One way to place us in the north on the same map would be to vary the works displayed and include local issues relevant to the overarching narrative of the circulation of forms and ideas. The Northeast Passage, which is steadily widening due to ice melting, and which is mentioned by Trondheim Kunsthall’s Director Stefanie Hessler in her preface to the catalogue, is one aspect that might have established a link between Trondheim and South East Asia. Being delegated to the catalogue, however, this link remains apropos. The exhibition’s silence on the subject of China as a centre of power in the East was made all the more conspicuous by the Hong Kong riots taking place when I viewed it. Deafness to changes in its environment and on the political arena risks making the travelling exhibition an artefact of a specific place and a particular moment of production, its relevance to the audience left to chance.



Ming Wong, *Bloody Marys – Song of the*

South Seas, 2018, still from video. Courtesy
of the artist.

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With Ampannee Satoh, Anand
Patwardhan, Anida Yoeu Ali,
Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Chai
Siris, Chandrakant Chitara, Charles
Lim, Christy Chow, Cian Dayrit,
Daniel Boyd, Dilara Begum Jolly,
Etan Pavavalung, Garima Gupta,
Gauri Gill, Huang Rui, Ines Doujak,
Jaffa Lam, Jakrawal Nilthamrong,
Jimmy Ong, Jiun-Yang Li, Joël
Andrianomearisoa, Joydeb Roaja,
Jrai Dew Collective (curated by Art
Labor Collective), Lantian Xie,
Lavanya Mani, Malala
Andrialavidrazana, Manish Nai,
Ming Wong, Moelyono, Munem
Wasif, Nabil Ahmed, Nguyen Trinh
Thi, Nontawat Numbenchapol,
Norberto Roldan, Paul Pfeiffer, Raja
Umbu, Rajesh Vangad, Rashid
Choudhury, Sarah Naqvi, Sarat Mala
Chakma, Sawangwongse
Yawngghwe, Sheela Gowda,
Sheelasha Rajbhandari, Simon Soon
(med RJ Camacho og Celestine
Fadul), Simryn Gill, Su Yu Hsien,
Taloï Havini, Thao Nguyen Phan,
Than Sok, Trevor Yeung, Trương
Công Tùng, Tuguldur Yondonjamts,
and Zamthingla Ruivah.

Curated by Cosmin Costinas.
