

Dialogues

Conversation with Cosmin Costinas of Para Site

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Artistic director of Kathmandu Triennale 2020

By Ian Tee

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Cosmin Costinas is the Executive Director of Para Site, Hong Kong since 2011. During his tenure, the institution underwent a major expansion and relocation to its current venue in the Wing Wah Industrial Building. Beyond running Para Site, Cosmin was also guest curator at the Dakar Biennale (2018), curator of Dhaka Art Summit 18' (2018) and co-curator of the 10th Shanghai Biennale (2014).

In this conversation, Cosmin speaks about Para Site's latest exhibition 'Garden of Six Seasons', the Kathmandu Triennale 2020 as well as the landscape of exhibition-making in post-pandemic times.





'A Beast, a God, and a Line', 2018, installation view at Pyinsa Rasa Art Space, Yangon. Photography by Pyinsa Rasa



You studied art history and history at the Babes Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and began your career as an art writer and critic. What were important experiences or jobs you took early on that shaped your outlook?

I was close to artists of my generation in Romania and started to be active during my university years. It was an organic, communitarian relationship where I started writing for them and moved into curating. My first formative experience was being affiliated with a magazine called *IDEA*, and based on my work there, I was invited to join the magazine project team at Documenta12 in 2005. There were five to six editors who were coordinating a network of 100 magazines around the world.

Bear in mind this was 15 years ago, so it was a different moment in the globalisation of contemporary art. It was an interesting effort in trying to create horizontal structures for internationalist discussions and brought me into touch with different perspectives and individuals from around the world. It was also the first sustained collaboration with different institutions and organisations in Asia. I was an independent curator for a few years and later worked at *BAK*, an art centre in the Netherlands, for three years before joining Para Site.





'A Beast, a God, and a Line', 2018, installation view at Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, Poland. Image courtesy Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw., photography by Daniel Chrobak.

One of your major projects is 'A Beast, a God, and a Line' (2018-2020) which was first shown at Dhaka Art Summit 2018 and subsequently travelled to venues in Hong Kong, Yangon, Warsaw, Norway and Chiang Mai. How has the exhibition evolved in each iteration?

It was the longest touring exhibition we've done. We try to avoid the term "touring exhibition" because they are very different enterprises, usually packaged shows which travel unchanged from institution to institution. 'A Beast, a God, and a Line' was co-realised and significantly altered in relation to each venue and hosting institution. As the exhibition travelled into different contexts, research continued and new artists were added.

From a conceptual point of view, it was important to open in Dhaka, as the show was primarily imagined for local audiences there. The exhibition was on view for a little more than a week but was seen by thousands of people. Bringing the exhibition to Para Site was a homecoming and we were able to consider scenography in a different way by constructing specific settings.

Staging the show in Yangon was significant because one of the exhibition's starting points was to look at South and Southeast Asia, and how these two constructed regions connect with each other. Of course, the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh was one of the hottest borders at that time because of the Rohingya crisis. This unfolding tragedy was in many ways related to the histories discussed in the exhibition. It was presented in the Secretariat, which was the headquarters of the British administration of Burma and where General Aung San and his cabinet were assassinated. It's an extremely loaded context and a building with many ghosts in Burmese history.

When the exhibition moved to the two locations in Europe, we saw it as a chance for European audiences to participate in a conversation that was initiated in an Asian context. This involved looking at issues affecting Europe as well as learning about a distant locale. Topics such as the resurgence of politicised religion, rising populism and the loss of faith in a liberal idea of democracy are relevant across southeast Asia and in many parts of the West, certainly in Poland.

What are your thoughts about the future of large-scale travelling exhibitions?

I think a certain type of expensive, institutional blockbuster show is under question. However, it is important to mention that the shows we did were much cheaper and involved significantly less logistics and infrastructure than large-scale packaged travelling shows. A nimble, strategic and affordable formula can be adopted in the years to come. It has to be one that fosters international conversations and connects

communities with shared interests, without depending on resources that might not be available in post-pandemic times.



'Koloa: Women, Art and Technology', 2019-2020, exhibition installation view at Para Site. Photography by Kitmin Lee.

You are a collector of textiles and have incorporated fabrics into the exhibitions you curate. Many works in 'A Beast, a God, and a Line' are connected in their use of the material, while 'Koloa: Women, Art, and Technology' (2019-2020) was Para Site's first exhibition of textiles. What are your reflections about its currency in contemporary art?

Textile is a very generous instrument to bypass borders that are erected around contemporary art by various dominant forces. A patriarchal and Eurocentric understanding of art history has created very narrow definitions of what gets considered artistic practice, and has excluded various types of vocabularies associated with women and non-European locales. This segregation certainly applies to various traditions of painting done outside Europe.

There is a progressive case to be made for looking at textiles as they occupy a very interesting position. They are connected to specific places, but can also be circulated, adopted and appropriated in different contexts. This makes textile a particularly important instrument in a broader process of decolonising our frame of reference of what art is, and what kind of practices we should be engaging with. There's also something universal in their relationship with the sacred. The market, in its constant insatiable eagerness for novelty, has arrived at textiles in recent years.





'Garden of Six Seasons', 2020, exhibition installation view at Soho House Hong Kong. Image courtesy of Para Site, photography by Kitmin Lee.



'Garden of Six Seasons', 2020, exhibition installation view at Soho House Hong Kong. Image courtesy of Para Site, photography by Kitmin Lee.

Para Site's latest exhibition 'Garden of Six Seasons' is a "precursor" to the Kathmandu Triennale 2020, for which you are serving as the artistic director. Could you share more about the exhibition title and premise? And how does 'Garden of Six Seasons' set the stage for the upcoming triennale?

The title is borrowed from an existing garden in central Kathmandu, better known as the "Garden of Dreams". Its original name is the Garden of Six Seasons, and was built as an English Edwardian garden 100 years ago, in 1920. The six seasons were famously associated with Kathmandu and its bountiful crops, which placed the Nepalese city at the centre of many trade routes. However, this name is now obsolete as the garden no longer

has six pavilions, and climate change has altered the number of seasons in Kathmandu. Today, one is lucky if they can identify four seasons.

The subject of gardens and its visual language is at the core of this exhibition. Gardening, agriculture and aesthetic forms of landscaping are all culturally specific ways of negotiating our relationship with the environment. These conditions are linked to medicine, healing and ways of mapping the world and the cosmos.

'Garden of Six Seasons' touches on a number of issues the triennale is concerned with in a concentrated form. It is presented across two locations, with constructed spaces that are quite different from each other. The triennale will unfold at different venues in Kathmandu, with many of them being heritage buildings. The experience of seeing the city will be an important factor in how one perceives the triennale.



From left: Rajani Shrestha Joshi (Ombahal Tole & Daya Foundation), Sheelasha Rajbhandari (Curator, Kathmandu Triennale 2077), Neeva Mathema Pradhan (Former President and Founding Member of Daya Foundation), Cosmin Costinas (Artistic Director, Kathmandu Triennale 2077), Hit Man Gurung (Curator, Kathmandu Triennale 2077), and Sharareh Bajracharya (Director, Kathmandu Triennale 2077). Image courtesy of Sheelasha Rajbhandari.





Research trip to Bhaktapur, Nepal. Photography by Hit Man Gurung and Sheelasha Rajbhandari.

Kathmandu-based artists Hit Man Gurung and Sheelasha Rajbhandari are joining you as curators of the Kathmandu Triennale. What are the individual responsibilities and working processes behind such an undertaking?

Hit Man and Sheelasha are old friends and brilliant artists whom I have collaborated with in the past. They are at the core of many developments in the artistic scenes of Nepal and Southeast Asia in the last few years. Their practices engage with different communities of artists and makers, so the transition into a more formalised curatorial position is a very organic process. We share a lot of common research interests and processes, and these synergies make the workflow very smooth.

How have plans for the triennale been affected by the outbreak of Covid-19?

We are quite lucky because we started planning two years before the scheduled opening. This is relatively early, if one were to look at the sorry situation of many recurrent exhibitions, such as biennales, that often start preparation at the last possible moment. Intensive research work and travelling happened last year so we are able to establish the triennale's premise and have things in place.

We were certainly planning to have more research trips and in-person meetings happen this year, in Kathmandu and elsewhere, but all of that have to happen virtually. We also had plans for a number of residencies to happen which are now postponed or adapted. Everyone is keen to preserve as much of the show as possible, so we have not dropped a single artist or artwork because of Covid-19. In many cases, production processes have to be altered. The Kathmandu Triennale is still set to open in December 2020 as scheduled, but there is a backup plan to shift it to April 2021 if the situation requires.





Para Site shopfront, Kennedy Town, 1996. Image courtesy of Para Site.

Para Site was founded in 1996 as an artist-run space and has since grown to be one of the leading art institutions in Asia. How has its role evolved throughout the years?

The core of our work at Para Site is to be a platform for establishing dialogue between the critical community of Hong Kong and international circuits. We remain faithful to this mission and connected to artists here. Many other things have nevertheless changed, such as the scale of the local art scene which pushed us to grow and mutate in order to remain relevant. The way we understand the international has also evolved, and we became more committed in looking at the larger Asia region and non-western contexts around the world. In a way, things had to change in order to remain the same.



2020Solidarity special edition poster designed by Thao Nguyen Phan.

Recently, Para Site supported the Hong Kong arts community in its recovery from the impact of Covid-19 through the PS Paid Studio Visits and the Hong Kong Collective

Independent Art Spaces Fundraiser. How have responses from different stakeholders in Hong Kong and international supporters been? And are there any observations or lessons learnt that can be carried forward into long-term programmes?

The PS Paid Studio Visit programme was more an initiative on our part. Recognising that artists are the most affected people in our community, we needed to respond quickly to support as many of them as possible. We wanted to support them in terms of visibility, communicating their work to audiences; and financially, because so many sources of their income have been suspended indefinitely. The Paid Studio Visits seemed like an easy yet effective solution to achieve both goals. Responses have been great and we have received more online audiences than expected.

There has also been an acknowledgement internationally that things have to change. This has partly to do with the pandemic but it is also about structural problems that have been around for a long time prior. There needs to be increased support for people who make this system possible, towards artists, young curators and employees of institutions. We can't have a section of society that claims to be harbouring the most progressive ideas and yet have the most blatant forms of exploitation towards the people who keep it alive. We brought our modest contribution to this conversation of how an institution should prioritise what it does, what it stands for and what it spends money on.

I think the lesson that should be learnt is of solidarity and of responsibility. We will not be able to maintain our relevance in the long term if we don't practise what we preach in this field and if we don't maintain our solidarity with our community of artists, the people working for us and within the institution.

Para Site's 'Garden of Six Seasons' is on view till 30 August 2020.

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Cosmin Costinas, Para Site Hong Kong, Kathmandu Triennale

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