

ARTREVIEW ASIA, 8th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale We Have Never Participated, Text/Yung Ma, P98, Autumn Winter 2014

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Whenever the term 'participation' is associated with artistic practice, the intrinsic response – however romantic – is to feel that it revolves around ideas of inclusion, democracy and perhaps even resistance. In a country in which participation in the public sphere is largely prohibited, the title of the 8th Shenzhen Sculpture Biennale is, to say the least, suggestive. Curated by Marko Daniel with Lu Pei-Yi, Claire Shea and Wenny Teo, this exhibition takes its lead from Joseph Beuys's notion of social sculpture and contextualises it with what the curators refer to as 'postparticipation' – a statement of how participatory art has evolved from its radical and marginal status to its current position as a mainstay in contemporary art exhibitions.

The selection of some 30 artworks, many of which take the form of installations and moving images, by a mix of international artists and collectives, across all three factory-turned-exhibition spaces of the OCT Contemporary Art Terminal (OCAT), certainly reinforces the Biennale's move away from the more traditional forms of sculpture, as cemented by its predecessor *Accidental Message: Art Is Not a System, Not a World*, curated by Liu Ding, Carol Yinghua Lu and Su Wei in 2012. Taking into account the current trend for megastructural formats at biennials, the modest scale of this one is definitely refreshing. Nevertheless, as a result of the curators' decision to underscore the notion of how participatory practices have entered into the postparticipation era and

thus have become a norm in recent years, its outcome ultimately feels rather predictable, leaving surprises few and far between. Indeed, despite the fact that there are 14 new works on show here, one cannot escape the overall feeling of *déjà vu*.

On the other hand, ideas and aspects of sociopolitical engagement are evidently present in the exhibition, which includes a number of works that connect international subjects with local everyday realities to re-sounding effect. In *Production Line – Made in China* (2014), by Taiwanese artist Huang Po-Chih, a worker, a sewing station and 40 wardrobelike structures form a small production line producing blue shirts for the duration of the exhibition. With the shirts being made and hung inside the wardrobelike structures by the worker, this performance-turned-installation evokes issues surrounding the relocation of manufacturing industries and its impacts, with Shenzhen being within the large manufacturing hub that is Guangdong; the project also makes visible the complex (economic) dynamics between mainland China and Taiwan with its planned reappearance as *Production Line – Made in Taiwan* at the Taipei Biennial later this year.

Known for his obsessive, detectivelike investigatory works, Chinese artist Song Ta's *Civil Servants* (2009) is a monumental exercise in implication, illustrating a web of state power through hundreds of loosely wall-tacked cartoonlike drawings of every employee from

his hometown's municipal government, including personal details from some of these officials, such as mobile and license plate numbers. The biggest, and best, surprise comes in the form of an offsite lightbox display by the now disbanded New York AIDS activist/artist collective Gran Fury. Their famous 1989 poster image, *Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*, a campaign and retaliation against the US governmental and institutional inaction towards the AIDS crisis, is reproduced as an advertising lightbox, showing three kissing couples of different races and sexualities side-by-side under the Chinese translation of the work's title. While public opinion has progressed, homosexuality and undoubtedly its graphic representation remain taboo in many parts of this region. Though it is partially censored (the sentence 'Corporate Greed, Government Inaction and Public Indifference Make AIDS a Political Crisis', which appeared on the back of the work's first outing as postcards and apparently redacted in its subsequent incarnation as posters on New York City buses, is nowhere to be seen in China) and has been threatened with removal due to complaints, the inclusion and, more importantly, decision to exhibit the work in a predominantly public space (metro stations) indicates a degree of subversiveness that recalls Beuys's belief in the potential of art to transform society. Had more of the Biennale displayed this attitude, it could have been a more expectation-defying experience. Yung Ma



Cheng Ran, *Always I Trust*, 2014, HD video, lightboxes.
Courtesy OCAT Shenzhen