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REVIEW: Shanghai's West Bund 2013 Biennale

Courtesy Sam Gassin

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Inside the 'Reflecta' exhibition.

by Sam Gassin

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The **West Bund 2013 Biennial of Architecture and Contemporary Art** opened on Saturday 30 October. Housed in the repurposed Shanghai Concert Hall and several large oil tanks nearby, it's a huge endeavor, with works numerous and large enough to fill the outized structures.

Curator in chief **Yung Ho Chang** has brought together a very wide survey of Chinese sound and video art, performance, and architecture.

The event has been organized by the **Shanghai Xuhui district government**, with support from **Tongji University**, and the **China Academy of Art**.

As is so often the case with major art initiatives in Shanghai, real estate development seems to be a driving factor behind the biennale, with the aspirational "Bund" of the title stretching the usefulness of the term way beyond breaking point. (The West Bund Biennale takes place southwest of the cranes and climbing walls of Xuhui Riverside Park, at least a half hour taxi ride from Shanghai's historic Bund). The **Shanghai West Bund Development Group Co. Ltd.** is another of the event's co-organizers.

The indoor exhibition, mostly contained in a "homogenizing silo" the size of a circus big top, is called "Reflecta". A shaft of what at first seems to be sunlight shines in from 50 powerful bulbs at the structure's apex, falling on a massive crane and conveyor belt, around which art works and architecture models are exhibited.

The sun lamp is one of the most impressive aspects of "Cloud Theatre-Shanghai Odyssey", a six-part performance including ballet, spoken word, and animations that ran from October 19-21. While the programming was hit and miss, lighting director **Xiao Lih** brought the cavernous space to life with projections, co-ordinated dangling bulbs, and lasers, which remain on show throughout the exhibition.

Videos include engaging works by **Cheng Ran**, **Lu Yang**, and **Yi Lin**'s surreal "The Wailing of Insects", a three screen video installation that spends considerable time following the bollocks of an ambling pig, though its hard to enjoy the videos in the space, where they're crammed in among so many other works.

The architecture exhibits are a rather uninspiring collection of descriptions and models of too many projects from around China, arranged in a ring around the silo. More interesting is the "Fabrics" outdoor exhibition of pre-fabricated and in-situ experimental architecture featuring works by architects including **Zhang Yonghe**, **Atelier Deshaas**, and **Schmidt Hammer Lassen Architects**.

The strongest facet of the biennale is its presentation of sound art. Five large oil tanks with phenomenal acoustics house a wide variety of sound art experiments, the best of which is a composition by **Samson Young**, entitled "Chamber Music - Homage to Morton Feldman and John Cage's 'Radio Happenings'". The work features a fountain splashing in a paddling pool, synthetic sounds, a fan blowing a page of paper, and several silent objects.

The inaugural West Bund biennale is too large, with works collected rather than curated — much more editing and explanation would make for a much more powerful show — but there are still some exciting discoveries to be made.

West Bund 2013: A Biennial of Architecture and Contemporary Art takes place at 2350 Longten Dadao from 10am-9pm, Tuesday-Sunday, through December 19. (Last entry 4.30pm).

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