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Utopia Rises Amid Singapore Construction; Also Maggots, Aliens

Preview by Adam Majendie



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Sept. 10 (Bloomberg) -- On reclaimed land next to the financial district, Singapore has built a utopian city.

You will find it inside a stack of shipping containers, hemmed in by the construction site for a new financial district, the construction site for a new casino and the construction site for a new hotel and shopping complex.

``Utopian City'' is an art installation by New York-based couple Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, featuring a wooden model of an ideal city inside a cave-like enclosure lit by a single skylight. Tiny box buildings are scattered around eight mountains that perform such esoteric functions as viewing civilizations on other planets or harnessing cosmic energy. The place doesn't seem to have any casinos or banks.

The work is inside a temporary building made of shipping containers, paper screens and chipboard flooring, itself an installation by Japanese artist [Shigeru Ban](#). The recyclable structure, built on reclaimed land, is one of the three venues for [Singapore's second biennale](#), which opens to the public tomorrow.

In the tropical noonday heat inside the pavilion yesterday, the biennale's artistic director [Fumio Nanjo](#), director of Tokyo's Mori Art Museum, and his curators introduced the two-month event to journalists, outlining the theme of ``Wonder.''

``I think wonder is essential to art because art is about beauty, about something unusual and sometimes maybe to make us think,'' said Nanjo to reporters and VIPs fanning themselves with press releases in the heat.

Slippers on Sticks

Even before the biennale began, wonder had already started in the local press. One editorial wondered how the exhibit next to Ban's pavilion -- Alfredo and Isabel

Aquilizan's "Flight," a field of hundreds of plastic slippers stuck on bamboo poles -- could be called art. Another wondered why the budget this year had been slashed to S\$6 million (\$4.2 million) from S\$8 million in 2006. A journalist near me wondered why the press conference couldn't be held in a venue with air-con.

The real wonder for me is how far Singapore's visual arts scene has come along since I arrived on the island a decade ago.

Against a background of incessant pneumatic drilling from across the road, [Lee Suan Hiang](#), chief executive officer of the National Arts Council, reeled off statistics showing how the government has expanded the artistic pool: a doubling of visual arts groups, a 25 percent increase in exhibitions and so on.

The real test, though, is how much people are taking notice, how much they are questioning the meaning of new works; how much people are being forced by art to think.

Giant Maggots

So go, if you can, and see Pham Ngoc Duong's giant maggots in City Hall or Leeroy New's aliens invading the courtyard. Get lost in Fujiko Nakaya's artificial fogs under the Esplanade bridge. Enjoy Hans Op de Beeck's winter scene with bare trees and fake snow (The one exhibit where a bit of aircon might not go amiss.)

A favorite of mine is a room in the South Beach Development containing [Shubigi Rao's](#) "The Tuning Fork of the Mind". Around the wall are glass cases and displays that look like the exhibits of an old science museum.

The one that caught my attention was a large electrical box in the corner with handwritten instructions to attach the two dangling electrodes to your temples, put on a pair of headphones and push the red button. You are now, the sign said, listening to the sound of your brain being damaged by art.

All I could hear was the sound of static with dogs barking in the background, which must mean something.

Army Base

South Beach, one of the three main venues of the biennale, along with City Hall and Ban's pavilion, is the old, art-deco army base opposite Raffles Hotel that has been empty since 2000. Wander through the dilapidated corridors and rooms puzzling over unusual installations -- piles of dirt, floors covered in pieces of black paper, strange video projections.

One door was marked "knock before entering." I dutifully did so before going into a dark room with an arrangement of lengths of white plastic and other debris on the floor. It took

me a minute to realize that this was not an art installation at all, but simply some old electrical conduit left behind by the army.

The biennale runs until Nov. 16, giving plenty of chance to annoy, amaze, entertain and make us think.

Hopefully we will see more uncomprehending editorials, more acerbic blogs, more irate letters. Let's have critics apoplectic with rage, passers-by pointing and laughing, exhibition visitors demanding to know why.

That would be wonderful.

([Adam Majendie](#) writes for Bloomberg News. Opinions expressed are his own.)

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