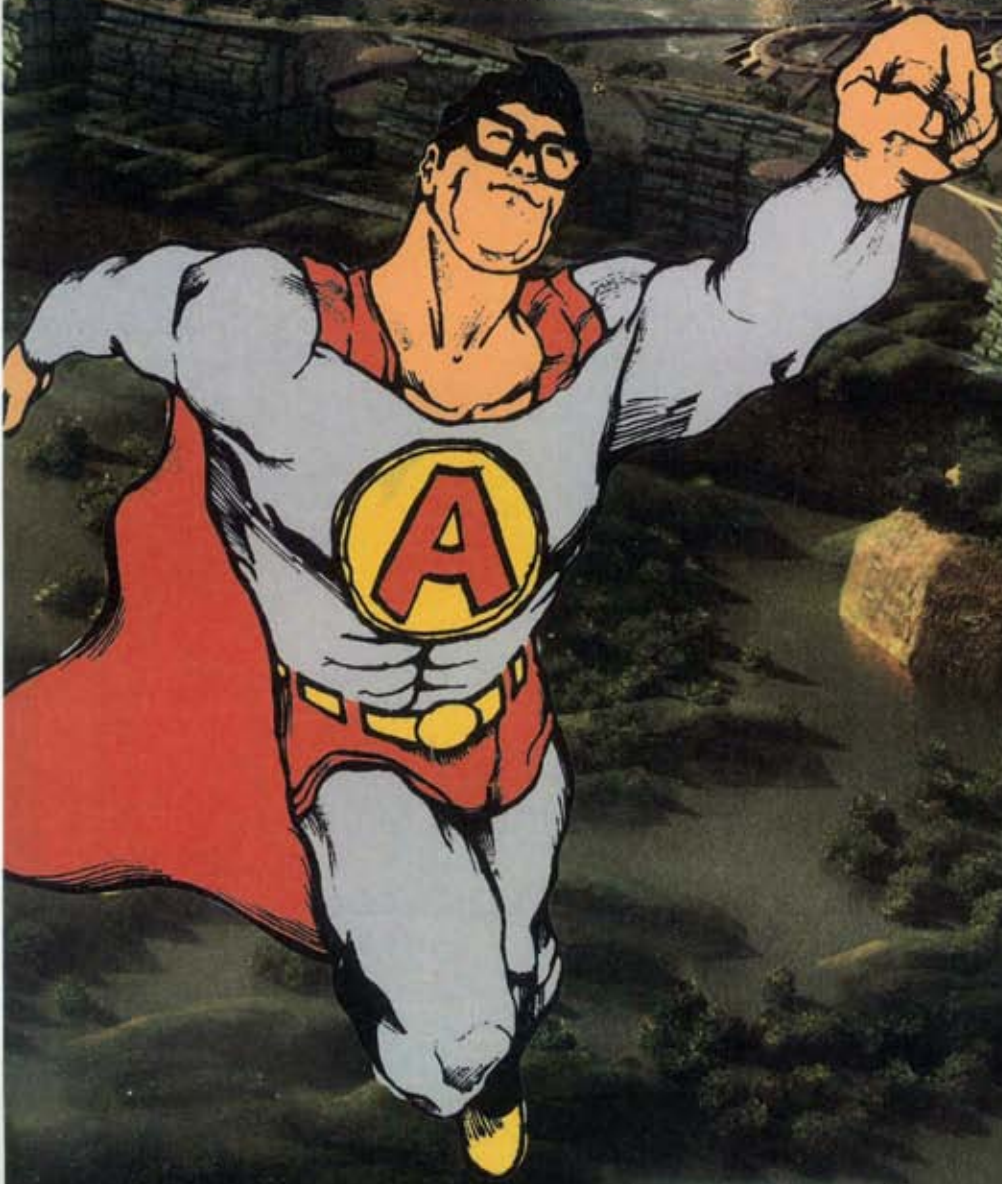


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SHENZHEN
深圳

HONG KONG
香港

ONE COUNTRY, TWO BIENNALES

2009 Shenzhen and Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture
6 December 2009–31 January 2010

An ambitious attempt for a Bi-city collaboration results in two separate artistic dialogues. WINNIE SO reports from China.

It takes only 45 minutes to get from Central to the border crossing into Shenzhen by car. Yet, once the car is on the bridge crossing the Shenzhen River that separates Hong Kong and Shenzhen, it is immediately perceptible that we have arrived in Mainland China. The feeling of exiting one city and entering the other is akin to wandering from the Meatpacking district into Greenwich Village, Shibuya into Meguro or Happy Valley into Causeway Bay. This feeling is present when visiting the Shenzhen and Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism\Architecture, which has been organised for the third time since its launch in 2005.

The ambition of this innovative two-city format was to present "One Biennale, Two Cities," mirroring Hong Kong's "One Country, Two Systems" status that allows for its supposed political and economic independence. In this age of globalisation, where political and economic interests of sovereign countries are inextricably linked, so too are Hong Kong's interests intertwined with China and its neighbouring city of Shenzhen. Despite this fact—and not unlike the cultural divide between the two cities—the two biennales remain separate and distinct.

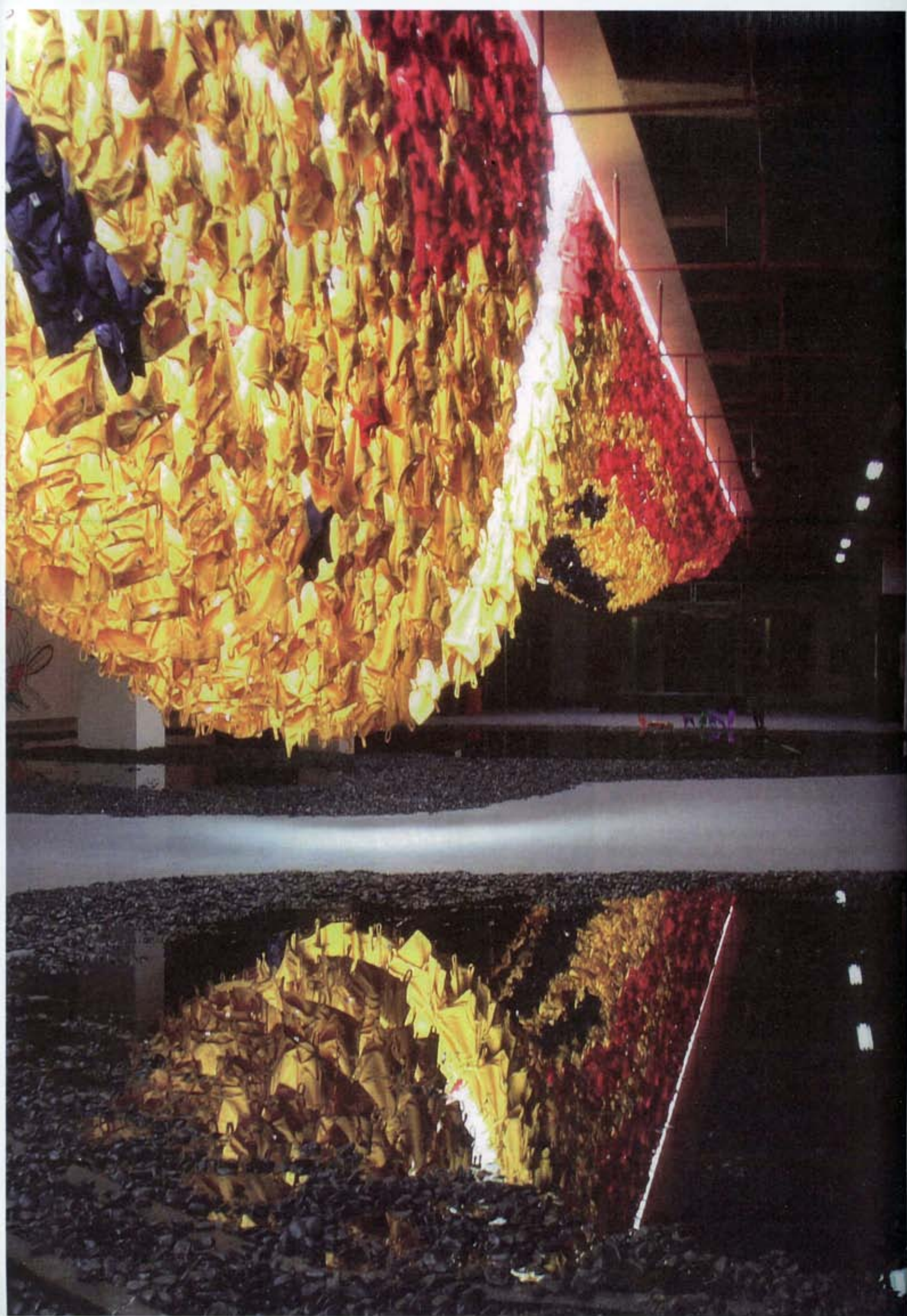
This year, the theme for the Biennale is "City Mobilisation." Hong Kong's tagline for the Biennale is "BYOB" or "Bring Your Own Biennale," mobilising the city's residents to take part in the creation of a biennale of their own making. Even the

catalogue title—"Biennale Blueprint: A Catalogue in Process"—reflects this biennale as a creative participatory process. Marisa Yiu, Chief Curator for Hong Kong, wrote in the catalogue: "BYOB makes the process of cultural production transparent, an approach that relies on the citizens and the city's infrastructure for our Bi-City engagement . . . This Biennale aspires to celebrate ownership and make oneself accountable in the design of your very own Biennale."

Whereas the Hong Kong curatorial team's approach was to build a biennale from the grassroots up, Shenzhen's approach was a more top-down call to action. As Shenzhen Chief Curator Ou Ning wrote in the catalogue foreword, "Let us revitalize the spiritual foundation of our society in a spiritually fragile time."

Both Biennales write their own stories. Hong Kong presents pluralistic perspectives on the themes of Cultural Education, Social Sustainability, Community and Heritage. Shenzhen is more introspective, examining the story of its own environment, development and possibilities for its future. Its exhibits are grouped under the headings: In the South, Losing the Countryside, City-Building Fever, Back to the Streets, The Amusement Park and Future City-State.

One of the projects at the Hong Kong Biennale that touches on all three themes is Xu Bing's Forest Project. Artist Xu Bing is best known



If the aim of the Bi-City concept is to bring the two conversations together into a single dialogue, then the challenge remains for the 2011 curators.

evidently abound in creating two Biennales that inform and speak to each other. Shenzhen curator Ou Ning explained that the obstacles were not differences in curatorial vision. Rather, they were issues presented by the two cities' different political, administrative and funding structures for the biennale. For the time being, he felt that it might make more sense for each city to have its own independent biennale. "It is a pity that the Bi-City actually did not happen this year. The Bi-City idea is a good idea, but it seems impossible to realise. It should be one chief curator leading the Bi-City—two cities with one exhibition, one theme, one catalogue and same visual design."

As Hong Kong curator Yiu elaborated: "The selection process of the Hong Kong Curator and Shenzhen Curator are independent processes governed by different procedures and organisations. Shenzhen moved ahead with one year of full planning and large media exposure. The Hong Kong side did not call for curators until May and we were selected at the end of June last year and only officially announced to the public in September. It would be great to still find the opportunity to cross and link more the Biennales of the two cities. Organising any large-scale event

is already a challenge. The attempt to cross boundaries takes even more collaboration and serious discussions and serious planning. This is perhaps what is needed: stronger governmental and organisation support to enhance this Bi-City Biennale and differences in approach of the two cities, funding and support to enhance stronger integration and links, and the desire to take new opportunities and risks. Curatorial vision is important but most important is the institutional backing and funding that allows the event to reach maximum potential."

For the time being, the Bi-City Biennale is evidence of the cultural divide that still exists between Shenzhen and Hong Kong. Before there can be any meaningful collaboration, there must be mutual trust and understanding. Physical barriers and distances are easily navigated and traversed, but the murky psychological terrain of divergent histories takes a lot more than two curatorial teams crossing a river to meet. It is the difference between a long-distance relationship and a marriage. ■

For more information, visit
<http://www.szhkbiennale.org/en/> and
<http://hkszbiennale.org/en/>.



OPPOSITE Ball-Nogues Studio's vibrant *Built to Wear* reflected in the water pools of Hideyuki Nakayama's *Walking on Water*. (Photo: Winnie So)

TOP *Water Wall (Pearl Water)*, Toshihiro Komatsu. (Photo: Toshihiro Komatsu)

MIDDLE *Water Wall (Pearl Water)*, Toshihiro Komatsu. (Photo: Sun Xiaoxi)

BOTTOM A still from the documentary *My Playground*, Kaspar Arup Schröder. (Photo: Winnie So)