

Bringing something of Hong Kong to the rest of the world

Newly appointed Para/Site's executive director and curator Cosmin Costinas talks to Cristina Sanchez Kozyreva about general directions for the local art space, global shifts in the art world, bubbles of privilege, freedom of speech, repression that makes good art and more.

Cosmin Costinas was born in Romania and studied art history at Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. He worked in the Eastern European region as a writer and curator and in 2005-2007 he joined the team at the Documenta 12 magazine project as one of the editors. "It was an amazing formative experience from many points of view. It was also then that I had my first contact with Hong Kong, where we organised the first Trans-Regional Magazine Meeting in 2006. I was fascinated and seduced by the city, but there was an underlying melancholy of sorts and much more insecurity than now," recalls Costinas, stressing the fact that the position of Hong Kong was then perceived as a problem, falling between the Chinese economical boom and other

developments in the region. "And here we are, five years later, in one of the most self-confident places in Asia and the world; that understands its position as a benefit - a platform for the whole continent - and takes the lack of a strong local identity as an asset in being able to translate and mediate between all the others contexts, identities and spaces," he adds.

Prior to joining Para/Site, Costinas was a curator and editor at Bak (basis voor actuele kunst) in Utrecht. In 2010, he co-curated, with Ekaterina Degot and David Riff, the first *Ural industrial Biennial* in Ekaterinburg, *Shockworkers of the Mobile Image*, in reference to the term "Udarnik of Communist Labour", the recompense offered to exemplary super-productive workers in the USSR.

"The idea was to reconvert the industrial spaces into creative spaces. The main venue of the biennial was a former printing press in the very centre of the city," explains Costinas. "We are moving from an industrial society to a post-industrial society where creativity is the main field of labour. What the *udarniki* were for the ▶



Collage by the employees of Ural Worker Printing Press, 1990s.
Photo: Andrei Luft



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Fordist Soviet nation is pretty much what the artists are supposed to be for our current creative economy,” he explains about the idea behind the biennial.

He agrees that interesting works can only be made by repressed artists but stresses the fact that there are “different ways in which one can experience the situation of being repressed. It can be very personal. Great artists are caught up in a sense of repression. Based on personal identity, family, gender - and they sublimate it through making art within an otherwise free society”, he states.

Interested by the way in which art speaks about the world, as well as the transformation that is occurring as the scene shifts from a western hegemony towards other centres, Costinas notes the changes: “The way it has been structured up until 20 years ago -

not just as a western issue but an affair between five major cities in North America and Europe - where art history was being written and presented to the world; and the canons being formed. That model is completely non functional anymore and nobody takes it seriously now,” he says. “Wealth and power were concentrated [...] if you think of class and collectors and so on, one’s nationality - such as belonging to a British system - was absolutely defined. Now there is a class of very privileged people and globalised participants in most countries of Africa for example, who take part in the global economy much more so than the middle class British person. This would have been inconceivable 20 years ago. It also happens in Asia and means that all of these people need to be part of the global culture and the global culture needs to happen in their places as well. They are not only trying to live the privileged life in the West, in London etc, but you have these bubbles in Lagos and Hanoi.

Contemporary art has always been one of the best instruments to help it happen. It has the marks of edginess and all the right elements [...] and all the institutions, from curators and artists-run spaces, to the bigger Kunsthalle and reconverted industrial spaces are now reproduced everywhere, from Chile to Hong Kong,” he says, adding that it is still in process and that while European countries with public money for the arts - who can bring and show artists from other parts of the worlds - still play an important role, it does not make them more defining, “Belgium is not currently more defining than Taiwan.”

Taking up his role with Para/Site was a vote for Asia of sorts, and especially for Hong Kong. And to a certain extent, against Europe and the current situation there, says Costinas: “A bubble that does not reflect the real world, an interesting situation, perhaps in a cynical way. It is reinforced with the political situation

and the populist waves, the fear and frustration that really are felt across all countries in Europe. Holland, which was one of the most open and tolerant places 20 years ago, is now a place where people feel scared and invaded by foreigners, with the hidden fear that they will lose something. They feel threatened by the rest of the world - I prefer to go to the rest of the world,” he says.

Vivid exchanges of ideas and moving forward are important factors within art practices for the young curator - and Hong Kong was the natural choice for Costinas to make his move. “It has the potential to be a platform for Asia because, to a certain extent, of its freedom of speech. The other places in Asia that have freedom of speech are mainly interested in themselves, such as Korea and Japan - where you could talk about the rest of the continent freely but they would not care so much,” he says. “Despite being a small scene, Hong Kong is a very heterogeneous one - and with different layers. You have artists from different positions and issues. A small version of a healthy scene that you can find in many other parts of the world; you have the successful painter and videomaker, the political artists and community artists, and everything in between,” he notes, adding that it is very different from other scenes in the region who are the product of a recent bubble with the ones who ‘made it’, based on a formula, and the ones who ‘did not yet’, based on that same formula, where same style, genre and language are used.

About his plans for Para/Site, Costinas mentions a first exhibition in December - with details to come - but as for his intentions, he says that he would like to transform the institution into a centre for art and thinking. “Para/Site not being defined anymore by what it shows in its small space, it should be much more of a free-floating agent, not only making exhibitions, but

also organising talks and making publications; show in other parts of the world - as an agency bringing something of the city, of the experience of what the city is going through, its developments in the arts and in society. In that sense it should be a very Hong Kong space, working with Hong Kong topics and responding to what is relevant here, even if it is with artists coming from Brazil [...] and not necessarily showing Hong Kong artists.”

“I am very sceptical of the institution of curators, although I am one, and I am very sceptical about curatorial courses - even though we might re-start the current ones at Para/Site,” he chuckles. “But in general, I am sceptical because of the way the curator is structured as a mediator that is lacking any personal colour. For most cases, they are traders of sorts, without their own contribution - aesthetic or intellectual.” Reading the curatorial text after seeing an exhibition is when the choice made by the curators is understood, specifically why they presented the exhibition the way they did and not perhaps only as a text explaining the works. “I like writing and it is part of my practice, but I think that the curator’s job is really to construct an experience within the exhibition. An objective, imperceptible, and thought through construction” he says, also adding that it is better made in a way in which they remain invisible, because it is not about abusing the artworks and creating themes that force a meaning on an exhibition.

Costinas doesn’t agree with the term “young curator” and compares it with the one of “emerging artist”. They come with a set of expectations; an implied career path and a few dominant models that are judged in relation to the set of expectations of how an emerging artist - or a young curator - should carry themselves. ■