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AR (气chi) Tecture: art, consciousness, architecture

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the changing relationship between East and West, and art and architecture in the context of a transient cultural consciousness emerging out of the urban phenomenon of the twenty-first century. Focusing on the curatorial practice of Hou Hanru, this paper addresses how Hou's mode of practice — that is, designing cultural interspaces where intersections between artists, architects, publics and urban space take place — and reflection on that practice, critiques shifting conceptual boundaries. I argue that while a study of Hou's practice is not definitive in its value, the observation and analysis of such modes of practice, in particular those emerging out of the Chinese experience of rapid urbanisation, contribute to a fuller understanding of the nature of the shift in consciousness towards East = West, and art = architecture, through the prism of 'urbaness'¹ or the urban mindscape.

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Chinese-born curator, Hou Hanru says of himself: 'I am not a Chinese curator'.² As simple a statement as this may seem, it in fact encompasses complex conceptual changes in consciousness. It is at once a contradiction and a cultural signpost. Hou Hanru was born in 1963 in China where he graduated with a degree in art history from the Central Institute of Fine Arts in Beijing. He moved to Paris in 1990, which was his base until 2006 when he took up the position of Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs at the San Francisco Art Institute. Moving to Paris heightened Hou's first hand understanding of the shifts taking place in cultural consciousness. His experience of challenge to cultural perceptions was one of being Chinese in a French city. This brought with it a sense of being an outsider not only in France but also in relation to looking back to China. He refers to himself as 'a half outsider',³ simultaneously interpreting a new global culture from the eastern and western perspective, or one could say, from the perspective of transience. While born into a substantially closed China, his consciousness has emerged from a rapidly urbanising China, networked across the world. Such a network creates a continuously circular mode of movement between urban spaces. China has demonstrated the capacity not only for an unprecedented urban leap into this connected urban world, but also a leap from imperialism to communism to socialism with Chinese characteristics or, as it is often referred to, as capitalism with Chinese characteristics. Each has brought with it a change in consciousness. It is the last of these, the urbanisation of China, that has gone hand-in-hand with a shift towards capitalist modes of practice that are impacting on consciousness like nothing before.

Global technology and its endless networks create new cultural imaginaries or mindscapes and questions that challenge concepts such as 'being Chinese', or for that matter, being Australian, German and so on. So Hou is right, he is, in this transient world, not a Chinese curator. In the context of the movement of people to urban spaces, and between city networks, what does it mean to be Chinese if you are living

1. McCormick, 2009, p. 1.

2. Hou, 2007, p. 85.

3. Hou, 2002, p. 12.

in or between Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taipei, Vienna or Melbourne, or in Hou's case, between Beijing, Paris and San Francisco? Even within China itself, "Chineseness" is a contradictory and diverse concept. The Han Chinese may dominate in numbers within the geographical space of China, but some fifty-six different groups co-exist within China's borders, twenty-three million Taiwanese on its geographical border, and endless diasporas beyond its borders. All are testament to the idea that Chineseness, like other cultural constructions, is highly contestable in today's networked urban world. Discussion outside of China often revolves around issues of political shortcomings and human rights. While these are, of course, of great importance, the focus of this paper is on the role of those who emerge from the Chinese experience, not in relation to the world-wide economy, but in relation to world-wide moves in understandings of self and other. In particular the paper addresses the understanding of East and West, and art and architecture, not as oppositional positions but rather as new relationships.

Observing from within a society, as well as outside of a society, makes one more acutely aware of change and its impacts. Hou has positioned himself not only between inside and outside of East and West, but also between an artistic curatorial practice and an architectural practice. Viewed from this position, Hou works within a highly constructed practice designed to facilitate East and West, and artistic and architectural fluidity. Like his statement that he is not a Chinese curator, his practice is both contradictory and revealing. He is a highly regarded curator who is sought after as both curator and commentator. Both aspects of Hou's practice play a role in revealing signposts as to the nature of changes in cultural consciousness, as well as the changing relationship between East and West, and art and architecture. Beginning with 'Cities on the Move', which commenced as the twentieth-century came to an end, one can observe that Hou uses both a constructed curatorial practice and reflection on that practice as a methodology for understanding the impacts of the transient nature of the twenty-first urban century — the world as 'The Transient City'.⁴

Hou's practice interrogates cultural contradiction thrown up by urban transience and concepts of what Rem Koolhaas calls 'World = City',⁵ and of what Manuel Castells calls a 'space of flows'.⁶ Such ideas now are part of our vocabulary, as experience concurrently confirms and creates urban theory. Names like Koolhaas as well as Chen are building the new Beijing and the most popular greeting in Melbourne after 'hello' is 'ni hao'. Flow across all manner of borders is not new, of course. What is new is the ubiquitous, urban and transient nature of twenty-first century flow. But as Koolhaas points out, the urban state of mind that emerges from this urban flow and all its ramifications is 'least understood at the very moment of its apotheosis'.⁷ Mindscapes are in a process of change, from an emphasis on difference towards placing a greater value on an interurban state of transience in creating perceptions of identity. Consciousness has moved well beyond 'topophilia'⁸ or love of place or even 'urbophilia',⁹ that is love of urbanity, and towards 'transphilia' instead.¹⁰ Not just

4. McCormick, 2009, p. 1.

5. Koolhaas, 2001, p. 19.

6. Castells, 1996, p. 412.

7. Koolhaas, 2001, p. 27.

8. Yi Fu Tuan 1974, p. 1.

9. Radovic, 2007, p. 1.

identity located in the experience of transience, but formed through a love of urban transience itself — ‘urbaness’.¹¹ Such times of change in perceptions can be confusing and problematic in their challenge to accepted paradigms grounded in nation, ethnicity or religion. As cultural analyst Wu Hung points out though, this is also a time full of potential for ‘new human values and aesthetic standards’.¹² This is the transient urban territory of blurring boundaries that Hou explores. His approach is very much in the vein of setting out to understand contradictions between East and West and art and architecture as challenging, but also as an opportunity for re-invention.

Reflection is an integral part of practice or what has been termed ‘material thinking’.¹³ The analytical tool of reflection is as applicable to curatorial practice as it is to artistic practice. It is within the reflective process that one’s initial intentions are weighted against the outcomes and in the process knowledge emerges. Hou is a regular cultural commentator at conferences, biennale events and in journals. Most importantly though, in 2002, Yu Hsiao-Hwei edited a collection of Hou’s writings that drew together elements of Hou’s reflections from 1994 to 2002. What is revealed here is that far from being simply a need to articulate curatorial decisions made earlier, a sort of defence of one’s practice, Hou’s texts have an internal consistency. It is within this consistency that a number of aspects of changes in cultural consciousness and their influence on the relationship between East and West, and art and architecture emerge. Although not his first curatorial project, ‘Cities on the Move’ is significant in that it drew one of the early inter-disciplinary, inter-cultural, inter-urban maps across a new conceptual territory. At the time, its structure and intention was unusual on the international exhibition circuit. Today, one can see its threads of influence in almost all inter-city curatorial practice. Several key elements re-occur in Hou’s reflections on his practice: the idea of ‘trans’ and transformation; the recognition of the mid-ground and the possibility of beyond; the redefinition of collaboration and dialogue between curator/artist/public and urban space. All of these are present in ‘Cities on the Move’.

Jointly curated with Hans Ulrich Obrist, the idea for ‘Cities on the Move’ grew out of a meeting of the two men, one Asian and one European, in the multi-faceted cultural space of Paris. Obrist might equally have been the focus of this paper in relation to reflective practice. Obrist has taken it one step further than Hou by extending his reflection to the practice of others in his on-going projects, the *Interviews* and *Conversation Series* and *A Brief History of Curating* (2008). Hou, unlike Obrist, however, has the additional interest of his own self-perception of ‘not being a Chinese curator’ as discussed earlier. The nature of the curatorial collaboration between these two men is of interest here, as it is one of the reoccurring aspects of Hou’s practice that goes beyond a conventional collaboration to engage in a multi faceted co-existence not only between curators but between curators, artists, architects and urban space.

The title ‘Cities on the Move’ aptly described what this ‘event’ at the turn of the twentieth-century revealed about the twenty-first century. The title perhaps reflects Hou’s high regard for urban theorist Saskia Sassen’s work. Sassen is credited with the

10. McCormick, 2009, p. 19.

11. McCormick, 2009, p. 1.

12. Wu, 1999, p. 128.

13. Carter, 2004, p. 1.

term ‘Global City’ that she used to explain the networked nature of cities and the flow of money and people between cities as key financial hubs operating outside of national scenarios in the early-1990s.¹⁴ Although Sassen does not focus on the idea of transience as a key factor in consciousness change, Hou’s work does. The city, the global city, and now the world as transient city, needs its ‘transfrontalier’, or cross-mentality of ‘transportation, transactions, transmission’ and even ‘transgression’, but equally important: ‘transformation’.¹⁵ Hou says ‘*Trans* is the key word’.¹⁶ It is an essential word in understanding today’s consciousness. In Hou’s terms, this also means a trans-frontier between East and West, art and architecture. This is the inter-space in which he challenges ‘the question of identity as a static, stable, kind of closed system’.¹⁷ As a process of evolution itself, Hou’s practice and reflection asked a direct question: ‘how can one turn the exhibition into an act in which the process of de-identification, re-identification, and re-invention of the self by merging with the other happens?’¹⁸ To understand changing consciousness, patterns of urban experience that embrace transience as a space of belonging or perhaps put more aptly as spaces of ‘unbelonging’, such as Hou’s constructed spaces, need to be taken into account. Such spaces are ‘not so much the addition of information as they are the active processes of unlearning ... which can be translated into active positions of unbelonging’.¹⁹ They are performative and transformative.

The mind space of urban transient space is a cartography built on cultural unlearning and active re-assembly brought about through the contradictions of what urban theorist, Henri Lefebvre termed ‘arrhythmia’, that is, the moment when extreme difference is encountered and creates change,²⁰ or what architect Rem Koolhaas terms today as ‘exacerbated difference’.²¹ In today’s context, it is not so much discordant as it is revealing in its constantly changing connectedness, its transience, not only within and between, but also beyond. At the time of the original publication of Lefebvre’s *Elements of Rhythmanalysis* a year after his death in 1992, the idea was not as highly regarded as his other urban analyses. As Stuart Elden notes, rhythmanalysis is an idea ‘born posthumously’²² as the world is increasingly described by terms like flow and liquidity that inform urban and cultural understanding. The contribution contemporary art practice brings to an analysis of the urban century is often underestimated, but not by Lefebvre. His life intertwined with artists of his time, such as his long time friend the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, and later, the Situationist Guy Debord. Manuel Castells once said of Lefebvre that he sensed what happened around him ‘like an artist’.²³ Such an observation reinforces the value of the theorising capacity of artistic and curatorial thinking and practice in understanding the world we find ourselves in.

‘Cities on the Move’ had arrhythmia and exacerbated difference at its core, even if Hou does not express it in these terms. Hou drew together more than one hundred urban positions growing out of the Asian experience and presented to audiences

14. Sassen, 1991, p. 1.

15. Hou, 2007, p. 7.

16. Hou, 2007, p. 7.

17. Munroe, 2008, p. 79.

18. Munroe, 2008, p. 79.

19. Rogoff, 2000, p. 3.

20. Lefebvre, 2004, p. 16.

21. Koolhaas, 2001, p. 21.

22. Elden, 2006, p. 185.

23. Merrifield, 2006, p. 22.

grounded in the European experience. Included were *Horizontal City and Vertical City, Walled City and Elastic City, Thin City, Fuzzy City* and *Time City*. Within this cacophony of eastern and western, artistic and architectural contradictions, art is no longer artefact and architecture is not shelter. Rather, metaphor emerges as a unifying factor and a space in which today's urban consciousness can begin to be understood. Rem Koolhaas from Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) is a Hou favourite and one can understand why by observing how Hou's curatorial strategies are played out by Koolhaas. Koolhaas's *Hyper Building* for 'Cities on the Move', for instance, is more metaphor than human shelter. The concept 'attempts to achieve urban variety' through 'spontaneous diversity' caused by creating a vertical population density comparable with, and reflective of, the density, complexity and diversity of thirty-six square kilometres of horizontal central Bangkok.²⁴ In part, the metaphor lies in the contrast of proposing this hyperspace to be located in virginal parkland. Such metaphorical thought is essential to our capacity to make sense of our experience.²⁵ Metaphor is the territory of artistic thinking and analysis.

'Cities on the Move' celebrated the centenary of the Vienna Secession. The Vienna Secession was formed in 1897 by a group of artists who resigned from the more conservative Association of Austrian Artists housed at the Vienna Künstlerhaus. The avant-garde in Vienna had a close connection with Asia through a kind of exotic desire that expressed itself most predominantly as a projection of Japan as the style *Japonisme*. Works by the first president of the Vienna Secession, Gustav Klimt (1862–1918), reveal such influences in his exotic and erotic subjects and his opposition to more conventional academic styles via the lack of perspective, asymmetry and flat planes. Hou broke with stereotypical traditions of how Asian artists were portrayed in a western context, and broke with visual exhibition traditions in general by combining visual arts and architectural concepts and practice and by having no fixed form as these urban concepts moved from city to city: Vienna, November 26, 1997 – January 18; CAPC, Bordeaux, June 5 – August 30, 1998; PS1, New York, October 18, 1998 – January 10, 1999; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, January 29 – April 21, 1999; Hayward Gallery, London, May 13 – Secession, June 27, 1999; Bangkok with Thomas Nordstad and Ole Scheeren, October 9 – 30, 1999; Kiasma Museum Helsinki, November 5 – December 19, 1999. In so doing, 'Cities on the Move' ushered in a view of twenty-first century consciousness in much the way that the Vienna Secession ushered in twentieth-century consciousness.

'Cities on the Move' did not fictionalise Asia, but rather redefined the relationship between the East and the West. Celebrating this major European anniversary through an event created by Asian artists and architects working together within the fabric of the city itself, was recognition of the influence of Asia on western identity beyond concepts of eastern exoticism and beyond narrow one-way views of the influence of the West on the East, as well as recognition of the impact of growing urbanisation on these changing attitudes. The Secession challenged paradigms of practice through uniting different forms of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). With no fixed form, 'Cities on the Move' extended a challenge not only to practice but also to cultural perceptions, by re-shaping itself each time it moved to other cities. Above the entrance of the

24. Koolhaas in Hou and Obrist, 1997, p. 35.

25. Lakoff and Johnston, 1980.

Secession building in Vienna, a sign reads in German 'To the Age Its Art. To Art Its Freedom' (*Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit*). Although specific to its time in many ways, the words ring equally true of the art of the urban age and its freedom created through transience.

Although one can challenge aspects of the success of 'Cities on the Move', it is from the perspective of its influence on, and clarification of, the relationship between East and West, and art and architecture that marks its significance. The conceptual framework that emerged from this turn-of-the-century work is now ever present, as almost a given of the times. Hou's model of constructed interspaces designed to facilitate exchanges between artists, architects, publics and urban environments, sets out to question everyday understandings within urban space. Hou poses such encounters as performative and transformative rather than an event for spectators. It is, he says, 'art as ... dialogue' and 'uncertainty is totally a part of this process'.²⁶ Hou says:

an exhibition is not an end in itself; it's the beginning of a long process of coming up with ideas for the future, for society. It's not just a display of objects — a presentation — but a setting in which to start thinking about what we are and what we're doing here.²⁷

In such an environment, art and architecture, like East and West, go beyond binary oppositional frameworks to a position in which East = West, and art = architecture.

Concepts conceived in 'Cities on the Move' were expanded in Hou's curatorial model for the second Guangzhou Triennial in 2005. Titled 'Beyond: An Extraordinary Space for Experimentation for Modernization', it did indeed go beyond conventional curatorial models in its implications for the relationship between East and West, art and architecture, and the experience of urban space. Hou worked again with Obrist (in association with the curator and director of the Guangdong Museum Guo Xiaoyan and Wang Huangsheng). The intention was to interrogate the Pearl River Delta as an urban performative space rather than set out to represent the changes taking place. Connecting Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Macau, the Pearl River Delta is one of the Special Economic Zones set up by Deng Xiaoping as part of the Open Door Policy in China. Hou's theoretical underpinnings are evident in his curatorial framework. 'Beyond' extended over a time frame that incorporated the D-Lab (Delta laboratory) that ran from 2004 to 2006, before and beyond the triennial itself. Regular sessions were held every two to three months. The outcomes were interpreted by artists and architects within what Obrist describes as a 'reciprocal contact zone'.²⁸ Again, East and West, and art and architecture were drawn into an arrhythmic zone of unlearning that Hou describes as an interspace of 'confrontation, negotiation, and mutation between different counterparts of the world, surrounding the issue of culture'.²⁹ Koolhaas appeared again in 'Beyond', this time working with Alain Fouraux to insert a new museum into what was originally designed as a residential block development. By distributing the museum over several floors, multiple points of diversity and contradiction created metaphorical references again and explored further his ideas of

26. Wallace, 2010, pp. 90–93.

27. Tenth Biennale of Lyon, 2009: www.biennaledelyon.com; accessed 7 April 2010.

28. Obrist, 2005, p. 22.

29. Hou in Guangdong, exh. cat. 2005, p. 32.

Hyper Building as seen earlier in 'Cities on the Move'. The museum concept intersected artistic thinking with architectural outcomes. Throughout Hou's urban practice this intertwining of art and architecture, and East and West, thought and space both contributes to, and reflects upon changing perceptions of cultural consciousness.

The title of this paper, AR (气chi) Tecture: art, consciousness, architecture, deliberately plays a visual game in order to convey its content. This paper investigates the inter space of Hou Hanru's curatorial practice and reflection in order to understand more clearly the impact of a changing urban consciousness on the re-conceptualisation of the relationships between East and West, and art and architecture. Throughout all his work, Hou regularly uses the term mid-ground as recognition that we are in the midst of a process of re-belonging. Urbaness is posed as the energy integral to Hou's constructed practice and reflection that repositions cultural consciousness to align with the contemporary experience of transience as arrhythmia, exacerbated difference and unlearning, which combined hold the key to the capacity to understand a cultural beyond.

Dr Maggie McCormick's research focus is on the relationship between urbanisation and cultural conceptualisation and how this is evidenced in contemporary art practice. She has published and presented papers as well as exhibited and curated exhibitions in Australia, Europe and Asia. She has a particular interest in contemporary China, where she has undertaken a research residency and exhibited in Hangzhou, Shanghai and at the 798 Art District in Beijing. She is a tutor at The University of Melbourne in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, and the School of Culture and Communication, and a lecturer at RMIT University, Melbourne, in the School of Art, Master of Art (Art in Public Space). maggiemccormickcv.blogspot.com

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