

Why are there short curatorial courses during biennials? A case study into Shanghai Curators Lab

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Prof. Wang Dawei, Executive Dean of Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts (SAFA) granting certificates to participating curators. Photo: Shanghai Curators Lab

Biennials and curating are two global booming phenomena integrated since the 1990s where biennials, as suggested by Bruce Altshuler, offered ‘imaginative curatorial concepts’ and ‘active curatorial interventions’.¹

Biennials have contributed to the visibility of curating and the evolution of curatorial practice, with lectures, discussions, screenings and other more discursive and participatory events alongside the exhibitions.² The biennial as a site for curatorial education, however, especially the phenomenon of short curatorial courses hosted by or concurrent with biennials, has not received much review. This article tries to understand why and how these courses are happening, through a case study into Shanghai Curators Lab (SCL) in China and its relation to Shanghai Biennale, and its predecessor Gwangju Biennial International Curators Course (GBICC) in South Korea.



Participating curators presenting their exhibition proposals in groups at TANK Shanghai. Photo: Shanghai Curators Lab

Through my research across this new field, two clear aspects have emerged from my interviews with participants and available materials. SCL gathers international, and often intergenerational, practitioners together, creating an important site for research, discussion and also raising publicity — often lectures are open to the public too. As a result, some short curatorial courses have developed their own agenda instead of providing an overview of the curatorial theme of the biennial itself. Secondly, if these courses successfully encourage students to actively contribute and create an atmosphere of trust, they can lead to inspiring conversations, questions and explorations, which is of particularly high value for the participants. The courses effectively create temporary collectives composed of curators with different backgrounds and experience, with this shared knowledge formed together in friendships, becoming the most valuable and irreplaceable aspect.

Background

It is not clear when the first short curatorial course was set up in alignment with a biennial, but Gwangju Biennale in South Korea was one of the first biennials to develop and promote its own curatorial course starting in 2009. Its one-month course built up a worldwide reputation among emerging curators for its emphasis on participatory workshops, site visits and generosity: it has previously granted free tuition and accommodation to all eligible participants under 35. Sometimes, the course starts before the biennale and includes the installation process of the biennale, with this consideration of the backstage contributing to its success, alongside an impressive set of alumni statistics. For example, Michelangelo Corsaro, one of the participants of GBICC in 2012 is now appointed as Assistant Curator at Gwangju Biennale 2020.



Prof. Yongwoo Lee, lead professor of Shanghai Curators Lab (SCL) 2, speaking at the Opening Ceremony. Photo: Shanghai Curators Lab

GBICC's sincere imitators include Lagos Biennial in Nigeria, initiating its first one-week Curatorial Intensive Programme in 2019, with a strong focus on African narratives and perspectives. These short curatorial courses are usually part of the education programmes of biennials and involve organising lectures, often overlapping with other public-facing activities in the biennial. In 2012, the ninth Shanghai Biennale, with its theme of 'reactivation' aimed to centre education as a core role in art and society, initiated a temporary school instead of holding forums or lectures. It collaborated with California College of the Arts and the Chinese Academy of Art to coordinate a two-week curatorial workshop.³ However, this temporary experiment was not carried on to the later iterations of the biennale. Shi Hantao, the Chief Coordinator of the 12th Shanghai Biennale in 2018, states that this reflects the instability of funding and the organising system of the biennale

itself. As the different iterations of the biennales are organised by different curators and often discrete management teams, the design of the education programme consequently goes through multiple incarnations.⁴

Courses mentioned above are directly managed by biennales, but there are others organised by independent institutes. For example, a three-month summer course has been held annually by the School for Curatorial Studies Venice during the biennale since 2004, providing a comprehensive education on curating. In 2019, there was also a five-day workshop, *Curating on the Move in Venice*, initiated by Zurich University of the Arts to assemble researchers and curators to discuss Venice Biennale itself and how changing global conditions have influenced curating. Both of them charged tuition fees.

As for SCL, it is very likely that SCL was also inspired by GBICC, as its current director Yongwoo Lee served as director of Gwangju Biennale Foundation from 2008 to 2014. SCL began as a partnership with Shanghai Biennale in 2018 and like GBICC it is also a one-month course that takes place at the same time as the opening of the biennial (November).⁵ Similar to GBICC's requirements for young curators under 35 years old, SCL also supports tuition fees and provides free accommodation for around 22 students under 33 years old. But SCL does not entirely follow the tide of Shanghai Biennale. For example, SCL held its second edition in 2019, a year without an actual biennial but still taking advantage of the annual art fairs and 'art week' in the local ecology.

Short curatorial courses are also becoming a part of the wider phenomena of 'biennial season', a term that describes how all of the museums, galleries and other art organisations synchronise their openings with the openings of major biennials to create an art world moment for that city or place. The place increases its visitors for that time and aims to become a temporary centre for the contemporary art world: for a limited window, the local is international. Such phenomenon is more visible in Shanghai as two art fairs in the city — West Bund and ART021 — are also arranged at the biennial opening week. During that week — alongside the main biennial exhibition hosted by Power Station of Art — Shanghai's art fairs, private and public museums all create a mass of activity, expanding out through lectures, seminars, performances and exhibition openings happening around the city. Whilst providing visibility, 'biennial season' also often produces competition for attention and resources.

Shanghai Curators Lab

SCL was developed with a strong emphasis on 'the ecology of curatorial practice'.⁶ Moreover, SCL also self-identified as 'an artistic agency to intervene in and interpret the meaning of artistic and cultural production'.⁷ Then, what is the agenda of this 'agency'? Looking into the background

of SCL, I consider it actually demonstrates an intention to combine urban development with the art ecology.



Sam Bardaouil & Till Fellrath (Art Reoriented), lead professors of SCL2; seminar with participating curators. Photo: Shanghai Curators Lab

SCL's initiation 'has been jointly organised by a university, a museum, a biennale and an art city'.⁸ The term 'art city' is not simply referring to Shanghai but more specifically, Shanghai International Art City. SCL is hosted by Shanghai Academy of Fine Art, Shanghai University (SAFA) and Shanghai International Art City Development Research Institute, in collaboration with Shanghai Biennale. The Shanghai International Art City (SIAC) is a long-term project developed in Wusong, Baoshan District, in North Shanghai and by the seaside. This 26 square kilometre area used to be the main facility area of Baosteel Stainless Company (which was later merged into China Baowu Steel Group) with enormous industrial buildings. In 2012, the company reached a deal with the municipality on transforming its factory, agreed to be closed down by the end of 2017, into a redevelopment scheme. As part of this industrial transformation, this factory area will become a sub-centre of Shanghai in 2035 with all the infrastructure of an art ecology, such as museums, academies and studios. For example, SAFA, one of the hosts of SCL, plans to move to its new campus in refurbished industrial buildings in this area in 2020. The Development Research

Institute of SIAC, another host of SCL, was co-founded by Baowu Group and Shanghai Academy of Fine Art in 2017 to provide strategic consultancy, research and publicity management. Yongwoo Lee was appointed as the Artistic Director of this research institute from its inception.⁹

Shanghai International Art City (SAIC) is expected to revive the empty spaces left by the heavy industry with ‘artistic “natives” and a “neighbourhood” of artistic and educational resources’ in only 15 years.¹⁰ This might sound similar to American economist Richard Florida’s advice for cities to cultivate an environment with attractive soft policies for the creative class to revive the economy.¹¹ However, SAIC is different in the fact that it is managed as a whole project to bring in artists, curators, students, collectors, audience and the related entities like studios, academies, museums and galleries. In other words, it derives from centralised planning and is policy-driven. On the other hand, as the current redevelopment examples in China like 798 Art Zone in Beijing or M50 in Shanghai are much smaller and simpler (just designated areas for galleries), there is no mature experience that SIAC could learn from. Then, it is understandable that the Development Research Institute was set up and Yongwoo Lee was invited to develop specific strategies. Lee has demonstrated a strong interest in ‘artistic production’ as a methodology for ‘social justice and movement’ and this interest could also be read as a continuing clue of Lee’s practice from biennials to other projects.¹² Lee organised the first Gwangju Biennale in 1995 in memory of the spirit of civil uprising and subsequent repression of the Gwangju Democratization Movement in 1980. As the first director of the International Biennial Association, Lee is also concerned with how biennials maintain their ‘radical, experimental and discourse-focused’ features instead of turning into institutions, especially when he observes that Asia has been the most dynamic area in the global growth of biennials.¹³ After he resigned from Gwangju Biennale Foundation, Lee has worked on the Shanghai Project (2016–2017) that brought artists and researchers to explore the sustainability of human nature. SIAC and SCL are also aligned with his opinion that art and society are organically connected, and that art can perform an active role in social transformation.



In dialogue with the curators and director while visiting Power Station of Art (PSA). Photo: Shanghai Curators Lab

So why would SIAC Development Research Institute initiate SCL and what else has it organised? Since 2017, SIAC has co-organised two iterations of SCL and two forums titled respectively as ‘Urban transformation through Art’ and ‘Art as An Urban Face’.¹⁴ For these forums, they brought together global experts and scholars in architecture, urban planning, museums and other fields to address directly the transformation project of Baowu Steel Factory. As for SCL, its connection with SIAC might well lie in the emphasis on the potential of education and Yongwoo Lee’s interest in the curatorial as an approach to social intervention. Despite the context of urban transformation, it is not listed explicitly in the introduction of the course, which aims to conduct research and experiment together with visiting lecturers and students on a range of possibilities. The courses and the forums also serve as platforms to connect SIAC internationally, as well as obtaining visibility in the international art scene for Shanghai. SCL also works as a great opportunity for SIAC and Shanghai Academy of Fine Art to collaborate with other local institutes in Shanghai on art education to develop lasting partnerships. With all of this context in mind, I spoke to previous participants to establish how this course agenda translated into individual experience.

Interviews with the participants

I interviewed three participants/students of SCL in 2018, Cecilia Giurgevich, Canan Batur and Yang Tiange about their experience: why they applied for the course, what impressed them and what they benefited most from it.¹⁵ All of them graduated from a MA degree in curating in 2017, so I also wanted to understand why short curatorial courses are needed in addition to postgraduate courses, and what would be further gained from these?

All three participants I have interviewed were impressed by the intensity and lecture-based design of SCL. However, Cecilia and Canan recalled that as there was no schedule of SCL available, when they applied they had imagined SCL would give them more independent time to research and explore the city. In other words, they had expected it to be more like a curatorial residency with people of similar minds. When they arrived, they found that most times they would attend arranged lectures and events during the daytime and they were also expected to collectively curate an exhibition at the end of the course. Possibly due to this intensity — which proved difficult to manage for both participants and the organisers — the collectively-curated exhibition has been replaced with a competition for proposals, to be realised at local institution Tank the following year. It seems SCL could do more to manage the expectations of the participants in advance.

The students on these courses (more often referred to as participants) reflect on their active practices as curators. Indeed the lecturers and students are more likely equal participants in the art world more broadly, with this course being a unique opportunity to learn more about contemporary art in China and the Shanghai ecology. In fact, though there are already 30 biennials in Asia, opportunities to comprehensively study a local field is rare in this region where few universities offer long-term curatorial education programmes and curatorial field trips.¹⁶ The participants here were not necessarily after a dedicated or accredited course, and so actually the lecture heavy structure went against some of the initial attraction, that of engaging with the local art scene. In the case of Cecilia and Canan, they hoped to find more routes to follow their own interests and curiosities in the city.

On reflection, SCL and short curatorial courses need to articulate their agenda and curriculum design very clearly from the beginning. For example, SCL could bring the theme of urban transformation up front and encourage the students to engage with the development of SIAC more directly, allowing the students to connect with the local situation in a more question-led and research-oriented approach. They should also consider it their role to create a sense of community: to provide an encouraging atmosphere for participants to talk, share, question and discuss. However emerging, these participants all come with diverse experience that provides an excellent framework — whether formal or informal — for peer learning together. Canan emphasised the word ‘intimacy’ several times when I interviewed her.



Discussion regarding art collection and public art space management on visit to TANK Shanghai. Photo: Shanghai Curators Lab

The main benefits of SCL were considered as networking and local experience. Networking beyond a familiar environment is an obvious motivation and benefit, and the ability to meet influential lecturers as well as the other practitioners on the course. Canan later asked one of the lecturers for a recommendation letter that brought critical impetus to her career; Tiange, from China, befriended a German participant Yasemin Keskinetepe, and they co-curated an exhibition in the Goethe Institut in Beijing in 2019. Living in the city for a month was hugely important for those outside of mainland China to understand the challenges of working there. Cecilia noted it was particularly illuminating to hear Shi Hantao's messy and often trivial problems in coordinating the Shanghai Biennale.

Re-imagination

Short curatorial courses during the biennials are an interesting and accessible format for continuing professional development, though they would benefit from added imagination and a more innovative course design, and acknowledge peer-related activity and research time. They can directly address the biennial concerns or theme, yet also be responsive to participants'

demands whether exploratory, participatory, collaborative, educational, research-oriented, cross-generational, mid-career focused, etc. When I ask Canan why she applied to SCL when she already held a MA degree in Curating Contemporary Art, surprised by my question, she said that she believes to carry out a curatorial practice is to keep researching and keep updating oneself — ‘there is no situation like enough!’

Podcast



Xiaoyi Nie, recorded with Cecilia Giurgevich and Canan Batur.

If you are having difficulties playing the above audio, listen or download the podcast here.
(<https://soundcloud.com/engageinthevisualarts/why-are-there-short-curatorial-courses-during-biennials>).

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