

In Conversation with Bernd Behr

Esther Lu *Chronotopia* unfolds with three historical references to Taiwan in the twentieth-century: the last World War II soldier to surrender, Attun Palalin Teruo Nakamura Lee Guang-Hui; architectural remains of the Futuro cabins; and the culture of silent film narration in the figure of the *bianshi*. How did you come to these subjects, and how do they relate to each other for you? How does their historical nature correspond to what you have described as historiography?

Bernd Behr I'm not sure how I first encountered the story of Lee Guang-Hui, but it has been with me for several years now. On the surface, it's a compelling image of someone stepping out of the flow of history, running on a parallel track. His discovery and reentry into "our" time, however, confronts us with questions about how history is perceived and the conditions of this perception. Imperial Japanese Army holdouts across Southeast Asia may have been perceived to exist in this limbo outside history, but the differences in their respective receptions by the Japanese public in the various decades of their discoveries after the end of World War II, ranging from celebration to embarrassment, point to the historicized nature of their limbo. Beatrice Trefalt's study on this subject, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, is, in a way, a history of the reception of those perceived as having stepped outside history. The differences in their reception over time show how history is constantly negotiated and produced out of the present, that in place of history there is only historiography, or, literally, "the writing of history." Who is writing what, where, and when; in other words, what are the conditions—the subjectivity—that underlie this writing? You could say historiography is the event of the writing about events, and the naming of events becomes a key aspect in this operation. When a single event has multiple names, it usually infers competing versions of history being claimed by different geopolitical constellations. Individuals with multiple names, on the other hand, might bear witness to these competing versions through the passing of time. So with Lee Guang-Hui, the fact that he had three names points to his existence across both distinct and overlapping social, political, and historical spheres: Attun Palalin as a member of the Amis indigenous tribe of Taiwan, Nakamura Teruo as a subject and soldier of the Japanese empire, and Lee Guang-Hui as a reconstituted citizen of the Republic of China after his repatriation.

Similarly, architecture embodies this process of historiography through the accumulated changes a building experiences to its physical fabric over time: the additions, removals, or alterations that have brought it to the present moment. These permutations to its fabric are often a cause for anxiety, and conflicting values about our relationship to the past play themselves out in the opposing camps of restoration and preservation. While the former advocates the return of a historical building to its original

unifying design (even if that "original unity" may never have existed), the latter accommodates and celebrates all of the changes to that initial structure in the intervening years. This dilemma doesn't just apply to buildings centuries old. The Futuro cabin designed by the Finnish architect Matti Suuronen in 1968 is an emblematic icon written in past future tense, a future-that-was, now mothballed in the museum of the ever-expanding present. The restoration of this recent relic has its own historiography, from Carsten Höller's 1996 exhibition at the Vienna Secession to a more recent museological presentation in Rotterdam. Others are being restored as far as Australia and Japan. There are bound to be differences in these restorations which, in turn, will reflect the values of the time and culture of each restoration project. These subtle variations will, eventually and inevitably, form their own history of restoration. The Futuros found in Taiwan are adaptations of the Finnish design, but, just like a physical photograph, any reproduction inevitably enters its own passage through time and acquires a history of its own. As copies they are excluded from the official narrative of Suuronen's Futuro, but this parallel existence is precisely what interests me. Historical specificity has a funny way of clinging onto anything, whether original or copy, by means of narratives that establish that specificity.

The Taiwanese *bianshi*, as an off-shoot of the Japanese *benshi* introduced during the occupation, is a figure that can be located culturally and film-historically as appearing simultaneously with the introduction of silent movies. It offers an interesting model for the reflexive emergence of cinema. The *benshi*'s commentary amounts to a kind of meta-narration in a Brechtian sense, as the audience is constantly reminded that they are watching a film whereby the meaning of the sequence of images resides externally to them. This would explain audiences going to see the same film narrated by different *benshis*, for example. But the *benshi* is also a continuation of the ancient storytellers who would ply their trade on market squares before the advent of cinema. The figure of the *benshi* is thus simultaneously modern and premodern. With the Taiwanese *bianshi*, the scope of further reflexivity involving politically subversive commentary about the occupation may be a historical uniqueness as much as a retrospective desire projected by postcolonial film scholars.

These three aspects of *Chronotopia* occupy historiographic conditions embodied in the various permutations of names amongst them. I am interested in the way a plurality of seemingly unrelated subjects with their own historiographies might be approached not as distinct subjects of study, but separate terms with each one refracted through the next, embracing the paradox of looking directly at something with only peripheral vision. Any metaphorical operations occurring here are equally undermined by the specificities of each of these elements. The figure of the *benshi* has, in some ways, become a central axis of the work, reflecting the polyphony of narrations and often conflicting

memories that I have encountered in the process of researching this project. In previous works I have explored the question of how an image “flips” as an understanding of its particular history is introduced. This question of the narrated image and the forms this narration can take has been key to my work. In many ways it has been the *failure* of an image being narrated that has allowed the possibility of work to emerge. That is to say, the moment in which the complicity between image and text breaks down is the moment at which history loses its coveted legibility, or place in time.

Lu Let’s talk about time then, since questions of time pervade this work on multiple levels. Your research of events and cultures across time may be synonymous with the time travel appearing in your narrative at one point. How does shifting time and space offer you an artistic strategy to speculate on and make visible that which has been overlooked or forgotten?

Behr There is a recurring image in this work of an exile outside time, and yet, as is the case with history, there is no position outside of time to validate such a scenario. So perhaps it might be more appropriate to talk about temporal conditions, or temporalities, in order to acknowledge different forms or experiences of time, as well as the socio-historical contingency of subjective experience. I am interested in how approaching this question of temporalities is done through the operations of language—whether verbal, written, physical, spatial, or image- or object-based—by locating pasts and futures not in time but in their articulation in the present. This articulation of a temporality is, of course, itself temporally contingent: the verbalization of an event in time itself becomes an event in time. Or, to use the example of a photograph again, it may age differently from what was photographed, but the salient point is that it ages as well. So, while this work addresses events of the past, I am interested in exploring the temporal conditions of their narration, and the possibility of inhabiting different presents of that articulation.

To speculate on unfamiliar temporalities is not unlike an encounter with the other. Claude Lévi-Strauss problematized this encounter within his field of anthropology through the implication of language (and its vested interests) in the construction of “our” time versus “their” time. So if my considerations of other temporalities are likely to already be framed by values embedded within my questions, then perhaps language itself becomes a site for temporal speculation. With this in mind, consider how the Amis tribe of Donghe, Taitung County (where Lee Guang-Hui settled after his return) count their generations in five-year intervals, giving each a name marking a unique aspect of each period. When Attun Palalin left Taiwan in 1944, a new generation was designated “La Sikag” (“volunteer”)

that same year to reflect the fact that the village was encouraging its youth to join the Imperial Japanese Army at that time. By the time he returned as Lee Guang-Hui, the village had celebrated six new generations and had named its most recent generation “La Segtay” (“modern”) for the introduction of electrical products ushering in the modern era.

Lu Wayward instances of modernist architecture continue to be a central concern of your practice, and I wonder if the built environment offers you a way to reflect on how our existence, identity, and ways of living today are influenced by or negotiated within the limits of our physical situation and corresponding power structures? Is modernist architecture an embodiment of human activity for you, or how does it reflect your personal experience and wider histories? Your work seems to address values or perspectives in contrasting notions of construction and ruins.

Behr I think of architecture, in the widest sense of the word, not as a physical limitation but as a structure of our daily lives that is as limiting as it is enabling: it encompasses both ideology and its subversion. For example, an early work led me to seek out the place where French artist Yves Klein performed his *Saut dans le vide* (*Leap into the Void*, 1960), and I was immediately struck by the architectural remains of the wall which he had jumped from: it embodied the material conditions that his romantic gesture aspired to overcome, and yet it was this architecture that enabled the gesture in the first place. It was a set of material conditions that shaped his approach—one may even say that it structured the very idea. In this way, physical and mental experiences of and through the built environment compose something comparable to language and its operations. Modernist architecture, in turn, embodies a physical and spatial language of political and emotive discourses of the twentieth-century whose sites of construction and ruin are the correlative of having an idea and then forgetting it.

Lu Speaking of writing, it seems to be increasingly important to your practice overall, and this project, too, builds a relationship to its subjects through strategies of fiction. Are there any authors or specific texts that were of inspiration while working on *Chronotopia*?

Behr A few books come to mind in relation to this project, offering a literary dialogue with the indexical nature of photographs and objects, questions around historiography, and the reliability of the narrator. There is Roberto Bolaño’s novella *Distant Star* (1996), which is structured around a search for an elusive historical figure in which photographs offer forensic and ontological evidence. If, by the end,

his actual existence remains doubtful, however, it has also ceased to matter: the object of the search is replaced by the materiality, the language, of the search itself. Victor Segalen's *René Leys* (1922) inhabits a similar circularity, whereby any disclosure of the object of the protagonist's fixation is shown to be wholly framed within the cultural conditions of that desire. This form of projection by the protagonist is reversed in Camara Laye's *Le regard du roi* (*The Radiance of the King*, 1953), a postcolonial gesture that turns Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* inside out. Talking of inside out, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) is set in an alternative postwar scenario with the city of San Francisco occupied by Imperial Japanese forces. This may well have been one of the many assumptions played out in the minds of the Japanese holdouts across Southeast Asia, including Attun Palalin Teruo Nakamura Lee Guang-Hui. The novel introduces a fictional book about an alternative history in which the Allied Forces win the war, leading the reader to presume that he or she is, in fact, living in this alternative history.

Bernd Behr

Bernd Behr, born 1976 in Hamburg, Germany and raised in Malaysia, is a German-Taiwanese artist based in London. Behr studied at Goldsmiths College, London. Working across video, photography, sculpture, and writing, his practice operates a speculative archaeology at the historical junctures of images, narratives, and the built environment. Often engaging with specific architectural sites and their associative histories, his work inserts itself into these subjects through modes of research and fiction.

Selected solo exhibitions and screenings include *The Hepworth Wakefield*, 2011; Bloomberg Space, London, 2010; *High Desert Test Sites*, California, 2008; *Alexia Goethe Gallery*, London, 2008; *e-raum*, Cologne, 2007; and *Chisenhale Gallery*, London, 2006. Selected group exhibitions and screenings include *Whitstable Biennale*, 2010; *Württembergischer Kunstverein*, Stuttgart, 2010; *Storefront for Art & Architecture*, New York, 2009; *Lewis Glucksman Gallery*, Cork, 2007; *Chelsea Space*, London, 2007.