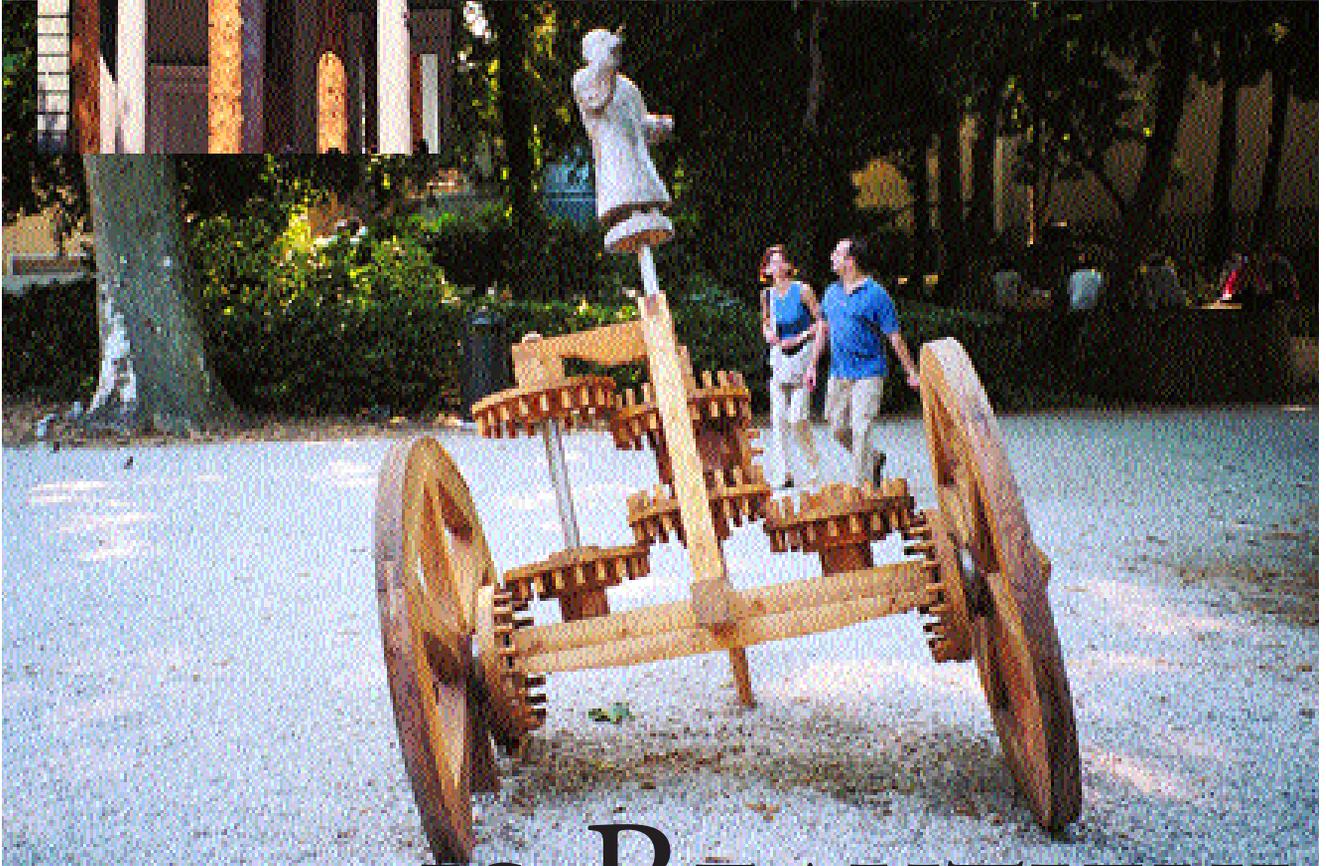




The
Extreme Situation



IS BEAUTIFUL

An Interview with Hou Hanru

by Carolee Thea

Independent curator and critic Hou Hanru embodies the new globalism of the contemporary art world. Born and educated in China, he has been based in Paris since 1990. While architectural projects have a special significance for him, his shows also explore the opposition between tradition and modernity in novel ways, and present a unique vision of cultural intersection. His exhibitions include "Singapore 99" at the Singapore Art Museum, "Gard d'Est—the Parisian Art Scene Today" at the Forum of Contemporary Art, Luxembourg (1998), and "Traffic Jam" at the Bürofriedrich in Berlin, and he also co-curated "Cities on the Move—Asian Contemporary Art," a traveling exhibition with venues in Austria, France, the United States, Denmark, Britain, Thailand, and Finland (1997–2000), and the French Pavilion for the 1999 Venice Biennale.

Carolee Thea: *Art functions in a place of anxiety and questioning: a curator's job is to discover the themes which underlie the prevailing mood of a society. Regrettably, some curators create exhibitions in the service of their own ideas, contributing to their own power.*

Hou Hanru: Curating an exhibition can be a very contradictory practice. The role of the curator contains a delicate, sophisticated, and subtle borderline. It is the worst of circumstances to use the artist just as an illustration of your ideas.

CT: *How would you describe the curator's role?*

HH: The role is to pose a question, and the artist should participate in the formation and the answering with different solutions so that the process is a collaboration. But yes, there are moments when you can see the excessive hand of the curator.

CT: *Is the show you did for Apex Art (New York, 1999) with the architect Yung Ho Chang an illustration of a collaboration?*

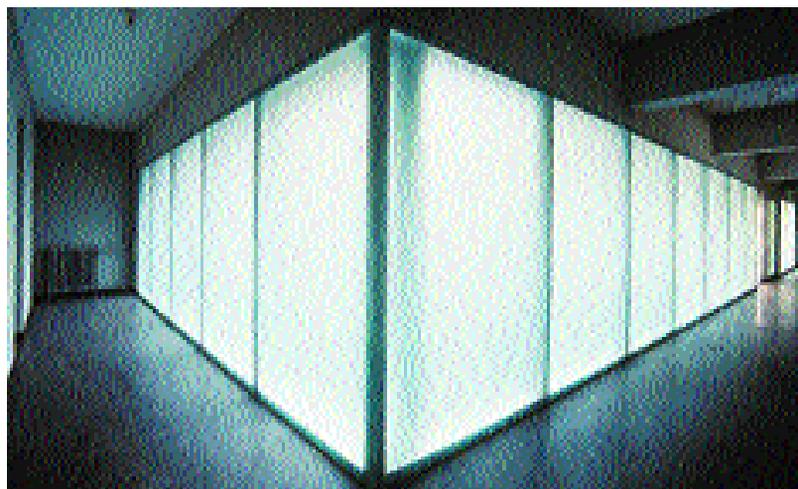
HH: In that program, I and Evelyne Jouanno, the co-curator, attempted to analyze what occurs when a curator is asked to do a group show that ends up being rather conventional, mainly due to the limits of budget and space. It is a difficult condition.

CT: *Don't you usually work under a variety of constraints?*

HH: Well yes, it is challenging. If you have a lot of money and space it's easy to do a standard group show. The creative aspect of Apex is that their conditions test how far they can go. For me, curating is a mixture of experiences coming together, and the program at Apex is a condition of timing, finances, and spatial concerns. I decided to introduce architecture, which is the natural result of what I've been doing in projects like "Hong Kong Etc." (for the second Johannesburg Biennial) and "Cities on the Move" (co-curated with Hans Ulrich Obrist). These shows talk about urban issues, how art can reconnect itself to visual culture, and how architecture becomes a means to proclaim certain visions as well as to add a spatial condition.

CT: *How did you become involved in architectural projects?*

HH: It came so naturally, because at a certain time in the early '90s all of these kinds of selfish expressions—the body and sexuality—had become so academic and egotistic. For



Opposite: Huang Yong Ping, installation, French Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1999. Exterior view. **This page, top:** Shen Yuan, *In Threes and Fives, or in Knots*, installed in "Parisien(ne)s," Camden Arts Centre, London, 1997. **Bottom:** interior of the Morningside Center of Mathematics in Beijing, 1998.

me, it was a symptom of how a generation of artists had lost the capacity to recommit themselves to reality. They just created very enclosed circles, like masturbation.

CT: *Do you think this is a personal or cultural issue relating to your Chinese background?*

HH: Yes, my generation of Chinese has been fighting for more fundamental issues of humanity. For us, the first necessity of art is never to return to the enclosure of the self. The second thing is to see how modernity rewrites the process of social transformation in different conditions, and then how it is visualized. Architecture and urban issues become important because they're the most general expression of this kind of project.

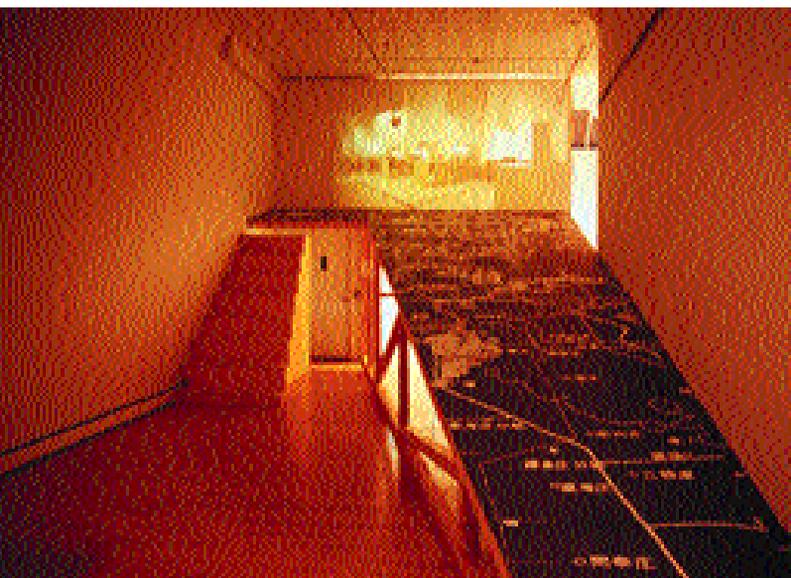
At the same time, my experience gives me the opportunity to look at a more global situation from a different point of view. The way I talk about the relationship between art,

was not my idea; the artist came up with it. I was so excited, because it had a resonance in the back of my heart, and I said that he had do this...but also in terms of timing and physical conditions in Venice, and so we did it together.

But let's get back to Apex. We decided to do an architectural project and to introduce a Chinese architect, Yung Ho Chang. Chang created a site-specific installation and provided the audience with a direct and corporeal experience of his architectural vision. It's very important that architecture has a voice in this discourse. Yung Ho Chang spent 15 years in the States to study and teach, and he decided to go back to China to set up the first private architectural firm.

CT: *This also becomes a story of how modernity travels through continents.*

HH: Modernity is a global thing, and usually the process of Western culture has been connected to other cultures through



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society, and everyday life is very different from that of most of my colleagues in Europe and the States, because of different personal stories. I went to art school and became committed to this domain (it's never really a profession), because I wanted to contribute my efforts to change reality, to have more relevance. Maybe visual art is irrelevant to me.

CT: *Were you trained as an art historian, a critic, an artist, architect?*

HH: I had an interest in all these things but was trained in art history in Beijing. I also did painting, performance, installation, and architectural research at school. The main subject for my degree was medieval sculpture and churches, how the relationship between visual art and architecture evolved because of social change.

CT: *I see a direct connection now between the work you curated for the French pavilion and your former studies. Columns topped with a Chinese bestiary juts through the Neoclassical pavilion roof, and there is a chariot outside. You and the artist Huang Yong Ping have created a kind of medieval courtyard.*

HH: Not only medieval in its form but an overlapping of two histories through two different architectural systems. But this

colonization: the African mask influenced Picasso, and Frank Lloyd Wright was inspired by Chinese Zen and Lao Tsu, the first Taoist philosopher. When you talk about Western modernity, it is such a complexity. Exchanges or confrontations with artists of different cultures help us discover universal aspects, which can stimulate other projects. Thus, where the social conditions in places are different, the social exchanges are very important.

CT: *Do you think the exchange that's taking place at the Venice Biennale is forced? Everyone is uncomfortable about the number of works from so many Chinese artists, similar to when Russian art was imposed on the Biennale.*

HH: And then it disappeared in three years. This is not the first time the Biennale has had a Chinese presence at such a scale, but it's the first time you have so much propaganda. The last time, for the Biennale of 1993, the first Chinese avant-garde was exhibited in the pavilion where you now have the press service. It was an insulting presence of Chinese contemporary art, which stole the name avant-garde and showed the most cynical works. It was the first marketing of so-called Chinese Political Pulp. There's a huge difference not only in propaganda but in the selection and artistic

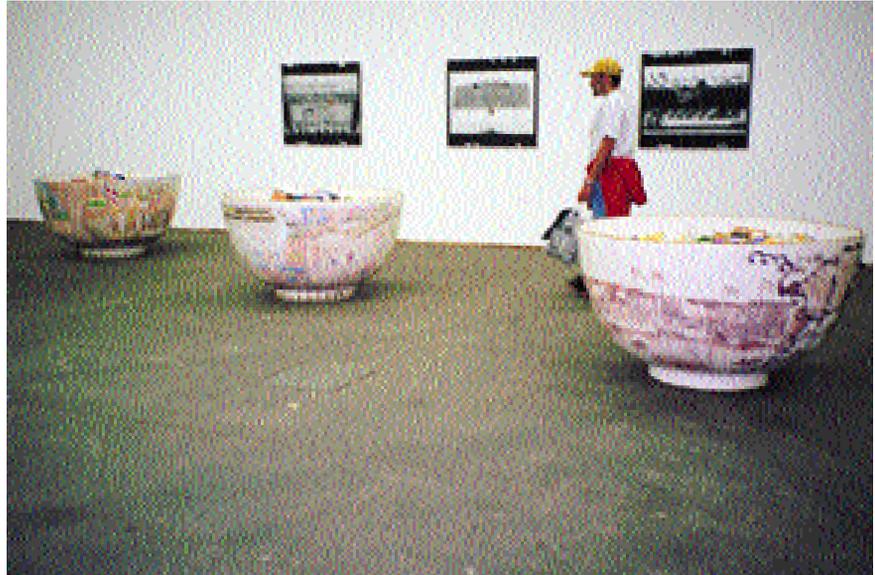
interpretation of this situation. And the main progress is that this time the Chinese works are shown inside an international show. It's true that there are very strong Chinese artists here, ones that you have not seen in previous Biennales, and there's also an intimate and personal decision by curators linked to personal or marketing interests.

CT: *With the curatorial idea of globalism, a decision was made to democratize the Venice Biennale, the bastion of Western art, to describe this issue of the moment.*

HH: Until the whole thing becomes normal—then we will have achieved a kind of goal. In the French pavilion you have Chinese and French, and that's great, but what will

Opposite: View of the "Street Theater," exhibition, held at Apex Art in New York, 1999.

This page, right and detail: Huang Yong Ping, *The Last Judgment, Da Xian—The Doomsday*, 1999. Mixed media, view of installation at the Basel Art Fair.



CT: *I understand that the Chinese works exhibited in this Biennale are from one collector.*

HH: Not all, but many. Two years ago, with such a heavy American presence, no one raised the question, "Why the heavy American presence?" American and European art has been seen for years and years, and it's taken for granted. Why do we ask about so many Chinese? But, this is boring to me. I am more concerned with what happens in the next Biennale; will we see the same quantity of Chinese art?

happen next: have an African and Icelander representing the French? But if next year people say, "we've done the Chinese thing, now let's go back to France," then that's the disaster. There are different ways of consuming this thing.

CT: *If the market and institutions come in too fast, it's the speed of consumption that becomes the subject matter. Globalism is a utopian concept, and strategies that take place in these brief periods witness a culture returning to itself.*

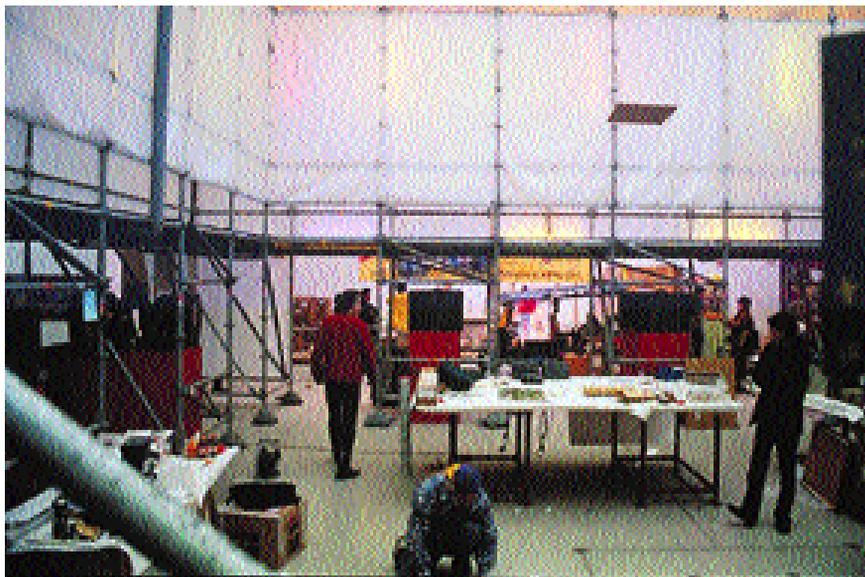
HH: Yes, but I have used this occasion to turn it into some-

thing else. There are different ways of consuming the idea of globalism. For instance, in the French pavilion, the two curators presently living in Paris, myself from China and Denys Zacharopoulos, originally from Greece, presented two artworks that were very separate but functioned under the same roof, but not as a two-person show. Rather it is an enforced

context and contribute to a new intellectual and cultural scene with global significance.

CT: *There are 200,000 Chinese living in Paris. Some, like Huang Yong Ping and yourself, are making strong work integral to the scene.*

HH: He has proved that he is inevitable at the moment.



Two views of "Cities on the Move 1," Vienna Secession, Vienna, 1997. Exhibition co-curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist; space designed by Yung Ho Chang.



Opposite: View of "Cities on the Move 4," Louisiana Museum, Denmark, 1999. Exhibition co-curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist; space designed by Yung Ho Chang.

juxtaposition equivalent to mutual interpenetration. This is part of my personal agenda. In the past people have spoken of globalization as taking Western modernized life and economies and altering underdeveloped countries, but you rarely hear of how non-Westerners are functioning in a Western society.

CT: *Some people are expelled from their own culture, as in Kosovo, and there are those who choose to relocate.*

HH: It doesn't matter how they left their countries. What is important is that they become even more open to other cultures in their new countries and develop their own cultural

CT: *How do you react to the dichotomy of traditional versus modern cultures?*

HH: The traditional versus the modern has been an obsession in certain periods of history and development, especially in cultures where modernity is a new thing; people are obsessed because there is a necessity about it. But I think this question has been solved in life situations, where you have to deal with it in concrete and fragmented ways. Innovation and tradition constantly interweave. An image that people talk about is the fundamentalist Islamic soldier who uses advanced technology to make religious wars. On one hand

they forbid television, but on the other they use satellites. Another image is the poorest Indian man drinking Coca-Cola and wanting Nike shoes, a strange mixture of modern Western products and non-Western traditions. We need to look at the world in a more diverse way and use different elements as a strategy for critical intervention.

CT: *The mythological bestiary surmounting Huang Yong Ping's columns in this 19th-century Neoclassical pavilion is an ironic reference to the past. Do you know who the architect was?*

HH: I was told that he was an Italian mimicking the Neoclassicism of the French.

CT: *Huang's columns topped by mythological beasts insert the Chinese into French culture—this ironic gesture is also perhaps a mocking one.*

HH: The strategy that Huang carries out is a fundamental aspect of his thinking; he uses different elements in particular contexts. In China, he organized a group called Xiamen Dada

It's my duty to explain the work, but they always ask the wrong questions; they think the audience doesn't want to know more, so they shorthand the information.

CT: *People aren't given enough time to absorb anything and although we consume culture on the run the brain seems to be mutating. The "body" subtext in this Biennale deals with anxiety about multiculturalism but also anxiety brought on by pc-encoded, biotechnological, millennial gluttony.*

HH: The body is being transformed in a process of spatialization as it disintegrates into space. In visual art there are many expressions of this flux between the material and immaterial, existing only in time, in spatialization, rather than in a fixed existence. The challenge for the media, institutions, and the audience is to confront these expressions, to respect and understand them, and help make them visible. In large exhibitions like the biennial you need time, but how much time can you afford to sit in front of a video projection that lasts 60 minutes? This is a challenge to curators. Sometimes you

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and introduced modern Western art elements (Duchamp, Dada, Cage, and Beuys), while in the West, he introduced Chinese mythologies. His employment of Chinese elements is not to elicit a belief in them—he doesn't believe in them either. He uses systems in a strategic way to show you that there are different ways of looking at the world. It's a question of which system of knowledge has been empowered, how a dominant system has become a hegemony, how other cultures can resist this in an active way. Not only to claim their identities but to propose alternative projects. The French pavilion is an example of this, using these ideologies to show another way of seeing the architecture and its symbolic function.

CT: *It becomes a dialogue.*

HH: And a negotiation. When you look at his version of Chinese mythology, it's so contradictory; he shows the interior contradictions among those images. It is a destabilizing intervention into fixed ideas.

CT: *The contemporary art media don't always react to an instability but to an intervention.*

HH: I have to work with journalists and television reporters.



have to do a show, and you need to view a piece five or six times to understand it, but you decide to use the piece and don't have time to view it. It can be a disaster. It's a kind of curatorial schizophrenia, to deal with this anxiety. I don't think artists are rarified; they're part of our communication system, and they play the game of this new dialogue, dealing with the issue of excessive information, lack of time and space, and how to handle it. Contradiction and chaos have the same value as reasonable knowledge. And maybe there are new artworks that are challenging because they're structured in a very fragmented way. You can go into a room with a projection and spend all day with it or five minutes and say I've seen it, it's an interesting negotiation. It's important that we discuss this.

CT: *How do artists deal with this notion of time at the end of the century?*

HH: To analyze the situation in a critical way, on the one hand, is impossible and contradictory. On the other hand, perhaps it gives us the opportunity to invent new models of communication and to create new possibilities and alternatives. For instance, you can have a film that goes on for years

and another for five seconds, and these can exist side by side with the same importance. Artists propose very different projects, but the goal is how to present them in a public space, and that's our job.

CT: *Are you finding new forms in artists' studios that confront the compression of time?*

HH: Forms are not a big issue for me. Any expression is fine, as long as it has something to say in the right context. A good example is the first version of Douglas Gordon's movie *24 Hour Echo*, the one where he slows the Hitchcock movie



into 24 hours. It's an amazing and impossible experience, because you have to be sitting there for that time. I think the extreme situation in art is beautiful. Fifteen years ago, Huang did a paradigm of this in the piece called *Photographing things you don't want to look at*. It was really an impossible situation. In a Gabriel Orozco work, the fact that he uses two kinds of "pool" tables isn't the most important point, it's that he sets up an impossible condition for you to be there in front of the work.

CT: *Do you mean time or split screen or...*

HH: Or a mental situation, a challenge whether to look or not. Like David Hammons's talk about fetish. How much

you will pay for a snowball of different sizes? It is such a beautiful gesture, a touching, delicate, sophisticated moment of existence and knowledge.

CT: *Yes, it is about about the contemplation of life and death, the body vs. the mind.*

HH: Yes, you have to make a decision for yourself and your destiny. You can complain about power, but the extreme moment is when all of this is fading away and you still want to catch it and hold it.

CT: *And the snowball has this resonance because it's ephemeral.*

HH: It covers the issue of consumer society, cultural difference, social space, sensuality and beauty, and you don't know how to handle it.

CT: *And it implies the body, as its temperature will melt the snow.*

HH: The snowball vaporizes, is gone, and you feel a loss in your body, making you think your body should take a different form, to look at your body in another way.

CT: *You're saying that in corporeal disappearance we can rebirth the mind. Do you know other artists who do this?*

**CORRIDORS ARE PROBABLY
the most interesting
spaces in buildings;
THEY ARE LIQUID AND NEED
DEFINING. They are also
transitions from PRIVATE
TO PUBLIC SPACE.**

HH: One piece Huang proposed, but which hasn't yet been realized, was around the glass wall at the Centre Pompidou, a clear tube sitting in the corridor between the first and second layer of glass around the contemporary gallery, in which he wanted to put hundreds of different insects that eat each other, at the end you have one or two left.

CT: *Very fat ones.*

HH: It's like a ball rolling through the tube and almost invisible. If you stand in the wrong place, you don't see the piece, just a transparent tube. For the work to exist and for you to exist, it is a perpetual struggle and pushes a confrontation with a huge problem, an aspect of being. Earlier I spoke of being interested in urban architecture; it's such a complex system.

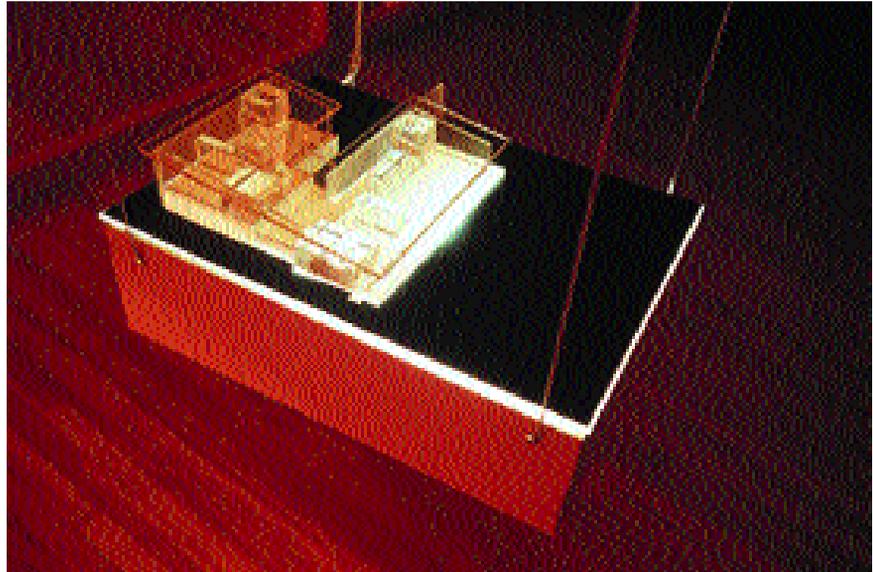
CT: *Yes, how do social spaces present an opportunity for imagination and transition? Tell me about your corridor projects in Paris.*

HH: Social spaces are complexities where the individual

spaces connect and network, and where certain transformations take place. The corridor project is an earlier one that I did with my wife, Evelyne Jouanno, when we had no money or place to stay in Paris. We found a small apartment on the top floor. Here there was a triangular corridor, five meters long and one meter wide with a sloping roof. When we moved into the house we changed the wallpaper and painted everything white and then questioned why white? The main

weeks opening it to people. In one night we could get a hundred people. The first artist we chose was Thomas Hirschhorn, who filled the place with cardboard and wood and rubbish so that you can hardly go through. The next artist removed the tapestry, the window, put in gas heating and electricity—and well, this game went on for 13 months. The only month we didn't do it was when our daughter was born.

Opposite: View of "Cities on the Move 1," Vienna Secession, Vienna, 1997. Exhibition co-curated by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist; space designed by Yung Ho Chang.



This page, top and bottom: Two views of the "Street Theater," exhibition held at Apex Art in New York, 1999.



reason was what we see in galleries and museums, and now we had to figure out what to do with it. We saw this useless corridor and we decided to make it into a project area. Corridors are probably the most interesting places in buildings, because they are liquid and need defining and redefining constantly; they are also transitions from private to public space. We decided to invite a different artist each month. Yes, it was crazy, and we had to live with it. Every month we would spend a week helping get the piece done, then three

CT: *Did your wife give birth in the corridor?*

HH: Almost. The hospital was only 100 meters away! Now we have moved out of the house. We only wanted to do the project for a year. It wasn't an alternative gallery, just the right place to raise the right question.

Carolee Thea is a writer and a contributing editor for Sculpture. Her review of the Venice Biennale appeared in the October issue.