

SAM BARDAOUIL and TILL FELLRATH

Diversity as Context

BY NICK YU



Portrait of SAM BARDAOUIL.
Courtesy Burger Collection.



Portrait of TILL FELLRATH.
Courtesy Burger Collection.



Exterior view of Hamburger Bahnhof—National Gallery of Contemporary Art in Berlin. Photo by David von Becker. Copyright the National Museums in Berlin and David von Becker. Courtesy Burger Collection.

Each issue, ArtAsiaPacific presents a critical essay in collaboration with Burger Collection, a Hong Kong nonprofit that partners with many institutions to support contemporary art worldwide.

In June, I spoke with Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, directors of Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof and the curators of this year's forthcoming Taipei Biennial. We discussed the joys and intricacies of working as a curatorial duo, the dialectic of cosmopolitanism and locality, institution-building with the support of the Burger Collection, and the role of art as a tool to tell stories and express human yearnings in different contexts.

Having worked in close collaboration for more than a decade, how do you two operate as a collective? What are the advantages of working together?

Sam Bardaouil (SB): As a duo, we come from a mix of cultures, languages, formal disciplines, academic backgrounds, and lived experiences. The starting point for our project is much richer because we are not dealing with a singular perspective. Although different opinions can occasionally create confrontation, that's where the magic happens.

Till Fellrath (TF): We both have a lot of complementary strengths. A daily part of our work is stepping back and letting something go. Sometimes, when the other person is self-assured about a topic, I'm going to trust their instinct that this is the right direction and artistic position.

SB: Instead of resisting another opinion, we often lean into it even more if it's coming from a place of strength—for example, when someone is good with structure, or when someone's forte is historical research. It becomes a matter of malleability and fluidity.

As a curatorial duo, do you have an affinity for artist duos and collectives?

TF: Most artists work collaboratively. It's a question of how strongly there are two or more minds at the core, or whether there's one mind cooperating with close confidants or trusted studio managers, or even a partner that is not formally recognized. For instance, we've worked with Nadia Kaabi-Linke and her husband, Timo. While she's the artist at the forefront, they are, in fact, an artist duo. They decided early on in their practice to run with her name, because Nadia was already more established. There are all kinds of visible and invisible synergies, but the truth is that nobody is truly a lone wolf.

We freelanced for so many years around the world, self-organizing our projects and defining our own structure. In that sense, we can probably relate better to how artists work than someone who has always been in a very rigid institutional setting.

You have worked on many projects with different institutions at varying levels. How does it feel to take the helm at Hamburger Bahnhof?

SB: It fits like a glove! This is because we have built our careers as independent curators through being involved in every aspect of every undertaking. Aside from generating content, thinking of exhibition design or publication, we have been equally involved in fundraising and talking to patrons, creating structures, advising on strategy—the whole gamut of institution-building. The only difference now is that we have more time, and it's not just centered around one specific project. While this comes with greater responsibilities, it also gives us a certain freedom. It's an opportunity to dig deeper, build more, and dream bigger.

TF: When we joined the Hamburger Bahnhof, we were clear about the challenges. The buildings were owned not by the public sector but by real estate developers, which had to be solved. There were so many things that the institution needed as it moved toward the future. Within the context of the National Gallery in Berlin and its overarching bureaucracy, we hope to contribute to society by demonstrating how a museum should operate.

We've worked with over 70 museums and institutions around the world that all have different budgets or structures of governance. There's never a "small" exhibition or project, because they're each important within their respective framework.

One thing that we have consolidated throughout our careers is finding out the project's rationale and locality. This contextual focus allows us to deeply and honestly delve into the essence of an artistic practice, so the place of origin does not become the main entry point.

SB: How do you change the institution from within? It is about creating possibilities for new members to join the education department, the curatorial department, and the production team. If people who have lived in different places and social realities work together every day, the way we think on the inside inevitably transforms.

Who our patrons are is additionally transformational. We have established a group of supporters worldwide called International Companions. Monique and Max Burger, who are the founding members of that group, share our beliefs that art does not exist in a single bubble. It's about connecting with people and how art can be used to bridge the divides between different communities.

The International Companions creates relationships for the museum with different parts of the world. And through these

connections, the network evolves, the possibilities evolve, the thinking matures, and the institution increasingly reflects the state of our world today—or at least represents where we want the world to go, when so many forces are now trying to build up the barriers again, to put people in boxes and say that we're too politically correct or too woke.

In the recent exhibitions and programs of the Hamburger Bahnhof, I'm excited to see new energies and names being represented, such as Berlin-based Asian artists like Haegue Yang and Isaac Chong Wai, whose works are displayed in the permanent collection. This is a refreshing change from previous presentations, which were characterized by a markedly introspective national narrative of postwar Germany and its vassalage to American cultural hegemony. What are your plans for the institution that reflect the cosmopolitanism of the arts community?

TF: You summarized it perfectly. This is exactly what we're doing with the rehanging of the Hamburger Bahnhof collection for its 30th anniversary next year. It is about showing the cosmopolitanism of the city that we serve. When we, a national gallery, talk about an artist from Berlin or Germany in general, we are referring to all the artists who have been living and working here, as well as those who have come here to study or stay. For example, we collected works by Carrie Mae Weems, who spent a significant amount of time in Berlin through her DAAD residency about 20 years ago. Even though she no longer lives here, she continues to be connected to the city.

The museum's collection, program, and people have to mirror the particular facets and diversity of the city. Still, one of the primary issues is that, as an institution, we constantly produce exclusions. By deciding whom we're exhibiting or collecting is, at the same time, a decision of whom we're not showing or collecting. There's no way around this sort of elitist picking of what we think is relevant or interesting.

What we can do, however, is be fluid about these boundaries, and find different ways to allow the artists and the community to feel that they are welcome to engage in the conversation—that they have a voice and can even contradict our choices in a respectful way. That's why our educational and outreach initiative is key in bringing in all kinds of communities that call Berlin home.

Another highlight is our annual open house weekend, where we grant free admission while presenting a lot of exciting programs. This project returned in June and was made possible by Monique, Max, and the TOY family. Last year, we had 30,000 museum visitors in three days. It is an overall wonderful opportunity to open the doors, literally, and let people see the storage, the restoration maps, the directors' offices, and participate in all kinds of tours.

Closer to home, I'm keen to hear more about the upcoming 14th Taipei Biennial, which you are curating. In the past, you have curated exhibitions about West Asia and its diaspora, such as the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013 and "Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)" at Paris's Centre Pompidou in 2016-17. How do you bring your interest further to East Asia, the Asia Pacific, and in particular, the complex historical and geopolitical context of Taiwan?

SB: We've immersed ourselves in a lot of conversations and research, not only in the art world. We've spoken to literary figures, film experts, artists, historians, and more. We wanted to understand the context of our host institution, the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, and how the previous editions were. These different



Installation view of **HAEGUE YANG's** *Windy Eclipse*, 2013, fans, powder coating, steel tube, case with rotating platform, speed controller, dimmer, castors, 130 × 85 × 85 cm, in "Nationalgalerie: A Collection for the 21st Century," Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2023. Photo by Jacopo La Forgia. Courtesy the artist and the National Museums in Berlin.



Installation view of **CARRIE MAE WEEM's** *Pergamon Museum* from *The Museum Series*, 2006–, digital chromogenic print, 183 × 152 cm, in "Nationalgalerie: A Collection for the 21st Century," Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, 2023. Photo by Jacopo La Forgia. Courtesy the artist and the National Museums in Berlin.



ISAAC CHONG WAI, *Breath Marks: Mother with Her Dead Son*, 2022, archival print, etching on glasses, 14 panels, wooden base, dimensions variable. Photo by Chroma Istanbul. Courtesy the artist; Burger Collection; and Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong.



Installation view of NI HAO's *Athletic Student (After a Basketball Game)*, 2024, polyester socks purchased from the Taiwanese online foot fetish marketplace on Twitter, spandex and resin over handmade paper on 3D-printed PETG plastic base, monitor, video of the seller wearing and removing the socks, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

data points slowly coalesced and became the springboard for a biennial, an exhibition that we think of as a framework and a platform through which to instigate certain dialogue.

Titled “Whispers on the Horizon,” the biennial is inspired by three objects—a puppet in Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s film *The Puppetmaster* (1993), a diary from Chen Yingzhen’s short story *My Kid Brother Kangxiong* (1960), and a bicycle from Wu Ming-Yi’s novel *The Stolen Bicycle* (2015). Can you tell us how you came about these sources and what they signify for you?

SB: Our first trigger was the amazing collection of the National Palace Museum, one of the first places that we visited in Taiwan. You go in there, and these objects work their magic on you; they are a reflection of custodianship, of the people who claim to be their rightful owners. In this case, it’s the Kuomintang that came here after the Chinese Civil War, who thought they would eventually retake mainland China from the Communists, restore the Republic of China, and bring these treasures back to the Beijing Palace Museum.

The question that started brewing in our minds was: how can an object of art or cultural production become a tool to put forward a narrative that reflects a certain yearning? We felt we needed to go beyond just looking at the Palace Museum collection. Through literature and film is where our encounters started to happen.

My Kid Brother Kangxiong is about a young man who killed himself, and his sister who reads his diaries filled with a yearning to belong and make sense of the world and the past. In *The Stolen Bicycle*, the protagonist tries to find his father by looking for the latter’s stolen bicycle, and during that process, he learns about the history of Taiwan.

So you won’t see a bicycle, a puppet, or a diary in the exposition. But what they symbolize is echoed throughout the biennial, because the exhibited artworks speak to this sentiment of longing—whether it is for a person, a memory, a place of childhood, or a certain utopian future. When you yearn for something, you believe, “Once I get this specific thing, I will feel complete.” Yet, as you get closer to it, it keeps slipping through your fingers and disappearing.

I was reading about your previous show in the Gwangju Museum of Art, titled “Songs of Loss and Songs of Love: Oum Kulthoum, Lee Nan-Young and their 1967 ‘Almost’ Encounter” (2014), which is based on the fictional encounter between the titular Egyptian and Korean singers. What is the role of fiction and storytelling in “Whispers on the Horizon”?

SB: Fiction is a soft but powerful tool to critique politics, history, anthropology, and any other possible kinds of human experiences, because it’s not confrontational. You are hiding behind a reality that is imagined and, thus, seemingly does not exist. It could be a parody, a second step removed from a situation that is very real, lived, and felt. It’s like putting together a play, where the audience accepts the lie and goes along with you. And at one point in the middle of the lie, it hits them that you’re actually talking about them. Starting with fiction—whether it’s literary or cinematic, or just storytelling—you can tackle difficult contemporary questions about politics, gender, belonging, equality, political parity, and more.

TF: I think many artworks and artists have an element of fiction in them, perhaps in a poetic sense, but also as a transcription of some sort of reality or feeling that you want to express, or a state of being. In a literary context, a great writer bases their works on lived experiences, imagination, or fantasies. Great art doesn’t have words and is able to express whatever you can’t verbalize.

Can you highlight some artworks or artists from the Taipei Biennial that exemplify this way of storytelling or expression of yearning?

SB: This is really hard because I feel like I’m picking my favorite children. I will give you three examples and no more. We are showing Mona Hatoum’s work from her important *Cellules* series (2012–13), which features beautiful, almost organ-like, red glass sculptures trying to push their way out of gridded cages made of construction metal rods, wishing to be free.

Isaac Chong Wai’s newly commissioned site-specific installation is a maze of glass panels bearing faint imprints of touch. You move past opaque surfaces that catch shadows when light spills from the large glass wall in the room. They become like bodies, like presences. How do you navigate visibility? Who is visible and who is not visible? When you see something, can you unsee it? Does it disappear? The work plays with illusion—fiction’s close kin—tugging at the desire to grasp what you sense but cannot hold. It’s a very poetic, formal, and spatial way of responding to the theme.

Ni Hao goes in a completely different direction by looking at the subversive side of underground culture, the world of fetishism and kink. His multimedia installation stages the used socks he buys from people online. Customers pay a premium if the socks come with a video showing the seller wearing them as provenance. Here, yearning is not only poetic or conceptual, but very visceral, sexual, and sensual. Interestingly, why do we think of some yearnings as more appropriate and loftier than others?

Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath are the directors of Hamburger Bahnhof—National Gallery of Contemporary Art in Berlin since January 2022. Prior to this, they were associate curators at the Gropius Bau from 2017–21. They have collaborated with over 70 museums worldwide through their interdisciplinary curatorial platform Art Reoriented. They were curators of the 16th Lyon Biennale, titled “Manifesto of Fragility,” in 2022. At the Venice Biennale, they curated the French Pavilion in 2022, as well as the pavilions of the United Arab Emirates in 2019 and Lebanon in 2013.

Nick Yu is an independent curator and writer based in Hong Kong. He previously served as associate director at Blindspot Gallery in Hong Kong (2016–22), public program curator at Asymmetry Art Foundation in London (2023–24), and curatorial associate at the Lahore Biennale 03 (2024). Together with Junko Asano, the research and curatorial duo is the recipient of the CHAT 2025 Research Grant.