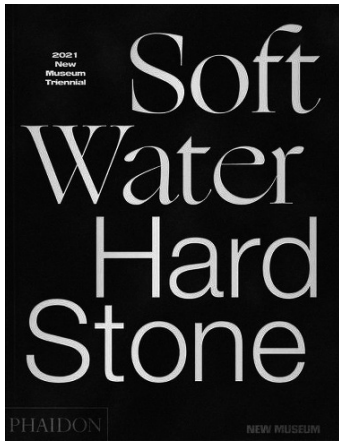


**The Ghost Ship and the Sea Change. The 11th Gothenburg International Biennial for Contemporary Art (June 5 – November 21, 2021)**  
**Soft Water, Hard Stone, New Museum, New York (October 28, 2021, January 23, 2022)**



Seachange is a term coined by Shakespeare to describe changes wrought by the ocean, placing blame on inevitable forces beyond human control. The contemporary context of global trade perpetuates this passive use of the expression: seachange is something that happens to us rather than the result of our own making. The Gothenburg Biennial, however, suggests some human responsibility in the constant interpolation of land and sea. The New Museum's Triennial "Soft Water, Hard Stone" similarly

sets water and land in an alchemical detente. Perhaps water – in its resistance to containment and insistence on flow – might threaten those structures which claim a certain irrefutable solidity. In 1784, a plot of land on the East side of Gothenburg's harbor was traded with France for the Caribbean island of Saint Barthelemy, a hub for Sweden's participation in the transatlantic slave trade before slavery was abolished in 1847. For the 11th edition of GIBCA, curator Lisa Rosendahl considered this plot – the so-called "French Plot" today known as Pakhusplats – as both a site and narrative device by which to examine Sweden's underacknowledged colonial history. Constellating outwards – from the museum of world culture to a community arts center – visitors criss-crossed the city, catching glimpses of major infrastructural projects. As Gothenburg is poised to become an international hub, with train tracks rapidly laid for the transport of people and cargo, the Biennial aims to tell cautionary tales of conquest by summoning the ghosts whose stories have been suppressed. In the dimly lit cavern of the Röda Sten Konsthall, visitors stumble as if through the dark hull of a ship. In Hira Nabi's 2019 film *All that Perishes at the Edge of Land*, which documents workers dismantling a sea vessel while recalling the lives they've left behind, commentary comes from the ship herself, who has seen more than anyone. Elsewhere, Ayesha Hameed's spiced burlap triangles – turmeric, cinnamon, coffee, barbary fig – encircle

visitors in a sensuous cocoon from which emanates a soundscape charting entanglements of colonialism and ecology. Further inland, at the Goteborg Konsthall, Jonas Magnusson & Cecilia Gronberg map typologies of land with a Warburgian display of research on mountains. In Dutch landscape painting, as academic Lytle Shaw observed at an accompanying talk, mudscapes document human intervention: the containment of water in earth to maximize commodifiable land. For Shaw, underappreciated are the ways that Dutch painters abused their own landscapes – making deep impressions in canvas or leaving whole swathes naked – to grapple with colonial conquest across seas. Many of the works on display at the New Museum Triennial enact the titular aphorism as strategy: tiny, shiny beads fill cracks and corners throughout the Museum's imposing concrete floors in Jeneen Frei Njootli's *Fighting for the title to not be pending* (2020) – bringing attention to the institution's fissures and faultlines – and in the most literal instantiation, Gabriela Mureb's *Machine #4: Stone (Ground)* (2017) wears down a rock with sustained tapping over time. Seeking daily modes of resistance, we appear to be amidst a fungal zeitgeist, a mycorrhizal moment, taking strategy cues no longer from the unstable, untrustworthy structures that loom large but instead from the insights of mold, spores, and rhizomatic networks which destroy them in the crevices. Jes Fan's sculpture circulates black mold through glass tubes as a substance worthy of sustained

contemplation and Laurie Kang celebrates the lotus root by casting its form in aluminum. Many works honor material that is often cast off, tenderly forming cityscapes and characters from discarded detritus. Iris Toulia-tou's dwindling fluorescent light pieces are constructed of bulbs scavenged from offices in the near-bankrupt city of Athens, while Bronwyn Katz's striking "Xǎe" – the title is part of a made-up tongue the artist invented based on research into lost languages – transforms mattress parts into pillars that bear the softness of their former role. Blair Saxon-Hill fashions whimsical portraits of everyday objects such as tinsel and squeegee and Nadia Belerique's "HOLDINGS" (2020) makes industrial barrels into prismatic scenes composed of tender fragments, as if peering into the straggling flowers of yesterday's party. The two shows share an impulse to categorize materials, to sort materials by their properties, amidst the decay and disintegration of a world falling apart. But where the Gothenburg Biennial situates itself within wider global movements while reckoning with the specifics of its own colonial history, the New Museum Triennial reflects a more generalized impulse towards strategies of incremental change. A seachange might begin by acknowledging that water is not just a metaphor, but a finite resource that runs around and through us.

Shanzhai Lyric