

## RENEWING THE CONTEMPORARY

Patrick D. Flores

When I went to Bali, Indonesia for the research phase of the project *Under Construction*, I got the chance to encounter a work at the Seniwati Gallery, an art space run by women and their advocates, that was to prompt me as a curator to profoundly rethink the notion of contemporary art. It was a traditional Balinese calendar painted by an old woman, nearing her seventieth, made in the present. The Gallery's director, Mary Northmore, told me that the woman painstakingly attends to the demands of the process of realizing this calendar; to commit an error might trigger some cataclysm, a disorder of the world around her and which her calendar ordains. I asked myself, "Is this contemporary art?" Something that is unequivocally rooted in custom, brooks no deviation under the auspice of original genius or unreplicable energy, and eschews any errance? Something that resists critique, innovation, and is sacredly committed to a seemingly changeless and unchanging world? Something that is made possible by an old woman who did not study the fine arts and is not traded in the market as an artist?

But why not? Is it not made in the present and is, in fact, "before" me? Is its presence not enough, evoked by the subjectivity of an ethnic and gendered subject of an earlier generation? Does not its calendrical discourse ensure passage and posterity for a history that so subtly turns in the long haul, a movement in time to the degree that it indents transformation though not necessarily progress or development, a reckoning of the inheritance of the past, a renewal (and therefore modernizing but not modernist) of a culture's life and the furtherance of its moral world? In a context defined by an Islamic state, a Dutch colonial past, a hectic tourist industry, Hindu spirituality, and a specific accounting of 'woman' within the sphere of solidarity with others, these questions mattered greatly and led me, who is by training an art historian and critic, to ponder the parameters and politics of the contemporary — its radical edge and its deep heart of home — and its time and place in Asian art, and, surely, the other way around as well.

In coming to grips with the contemporary, we are moved to mark the contemporary in history. The idea of history itself, we realize, is a contested one, and therefore renders our dilemma all the more vexing. The works of Ashis Nandy have drawn our attention not to alternative histories, but "alternatives to history."<sup>[1]</sup> According to Nandy, the dominant, and therefore naturalized, estimation of history is "derived from the links the idea of history has established with the modern nation-state, the secular worldview, the Baconian concept of scientific rationality, nineteenth-century theories of progress, and in recent decades, development."<sup>[2]</sup> There ought to be other intuitions of movement, flux, velocity, traffic, trace, and transformation.

The categories of time and space are instructive, nevertheless. Following earlier attempts to posit context in history, we may ask the questions: When is the contemporary? Where is the contemporary? To a great degree, these inquiries have been addressed. Jim Supangkat, for instance, insists that it is impossible to make sense of Indonesian contemporary art outside the purview of the politically committed art of the 1970s, an art historical program that is supported by Alice Guillermo, who also situates Philippine contemporary art in the upheavals of the same period in which social realism emerged as a cogent alternative to the State-sponsored internationalist art. Another colleague, T.K. Sabapathy, reviews Southeast Asian historiography to critique the discourse of Asia as a Great Tradition and Southeast Asia as a tributary or a diffusion of the said greatness.

A salient notion in this reevaluation is the memory of modernity. John Clark has extensively remarked on the politics of "transfer" in the intervention of colonialism in Asian art and the production of an alternative modernity that might, in fact, prove to be inimical to the project itself. Geeta Kapur has also adequately commented on the matter in her book that recalls Raymond Williams's own question about the time of the modern. If the contemporary proceeds from the modern in a range of ways as a furtherance or a critique, a development or a disavowal, how do we contemplate it and how do we contemplate the contemplation of this history? Several options have been raised. Some observers resolve to foreground a certain postcolonial modernity that views

<sup>1</sup> Arif Dirlik. *Postmodernity's Histories: The Past as Legacy and Project* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p.133

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



modernity as a Derridean “critical inheritance” and a positive future. Homi Bhabha, Néstor García Canclini, and Arjun Appadurai have theoretically weighed in through this trajectory. In another register, feminists have aspired to a “posthumanist future” that envisions a world conceived by and conceiving of a “posthumanist” personage:

I want to set aside the Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity, the bearers of rights, holders of property in the self, legitimate sons with access to language and the power to represent, subjects endowed with inner coherence and rational clarity, the masters of theory, founders of states, and fathers of families, bombs, and scientific theory... and end by asking how recent intercultural and multicultural feminist theory constructs possible postcolonial, nongeneric, and irredeemably specific figures of critical subjectivity, consciousness, and humanity — not in the sacred image of the same, but in the self-critical practice of “difference,” of the I and we that is/are never identical to itself, and so has hope of connection to others. [4]

With regard to the locus and address of the contemporary, the exhibition titled “Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s” organized by the Queens Museum of Art in New York in 1999 refers to the plural instantiations and emplacements of global conceptualism, seemingly the basis of what is known as the “contemporary.” In the introduction of the catalogue, Stephen Bann makes the case for a “contemporary” that “breaks decisively with the heritage of modernism — and — rejects the customary practice of plotting out the topology of artistic connection in terms of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’: Paris or New York in relation to the various satellites that have come within their sphere of influence.” [5] In the exhibition’s alternative framework of the multiple points of origin of conceptualist art, it surveys expressions from Japan, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, North America, the former Soviet Union, Africa, Korea, mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South and Southeast Asia and are discussed by critics and historian from these places.

## Curating Asia

With these frameworks and perspectives on the table, how do we craft Asia in the economy of curation? In trying to imagine the varied impulses and interventions rippling across the contemporary arts of a contemporary Asia, it is best to probe the contexts within which communities of people generate material culture. This generation of culture entails aesthetic encounters between the body and the world; the political economies of action and exchange; and the practices of meaning making across positions of “reciprocal critique.” To embody our current complex reality in the limited concept of “art” compels us to effect the necessary turn from the linguistic to the performative, an initiative that reinstates the “aesthetic” [6] in the discourses of the body politic. By aesthetic we mean the process of negotiation between the social person and the social world to materialize possibility and its condition, the enabling act of sensing and making sense in history. Needless to say, the “world” we are discussing here is “Asia” and its historical transformations.

## Theme: Movements and Mobilities

In this proposal, we dwell on the terms movements and mobilities as tropes of translocality, or the condition of place and the process of path making. In coming to terms with these concepts, we turn to meditations on the idea of a local moral world and of globality as main frame of reference.

The local moral world is a domain of experience in which people live out a system of accountabilities pertaining to what it takes to be human and how one could achieve it given the constraints and prospects at hand; within it, “the micro-level politics of social formations and social relationships, in the setting of limited resources and life chances, underwrite processes of contesting and negotiating actions.” [7] The local moral world is sustained by an emotional economy grounded in norms about the decency and dignity of human life and its defense against forces hostile to its enduring and sustenance. It constitutes a scheme of expectations, stakes, reciprocities, values, and sanctions in which the person “affectively” struggles and seeks well being. This struggle defines a social movement that, because redemptive and transformative, is mobile.

Globality refers to the circulation of transitional finance and capital across markets worldwide and the conscription of labor and needs also from these sites of asymmetrical co-

[4] Donna Haraway quoted by Avtar Brah. “The Scent of Memory: Strangers, Our Own and Others.” *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture* (Eds. Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes). (London: Routledge, 2000), p.272

[5] Stephen Bann. “Introduction.” *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), p.3

[6] See the works of Robert Desjarlais, Bertolt Brecht, Raymond Williams, and Pierre Bourdieu.

[7] Arthur Kleinman. “Pain and Resistance: The Delegitimation and Relegitimation of Local Worlds” *Pain as Human Experience: An Anthropological Perspective* (Eds. Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good et al.). (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p.19

operations. This dissemination organizes a mode of mobility that, because displacing, incites movements of contestation in the dominion of money.

With these contexts in mind, we can fruitfully construe Asian contemporary art of the moment as participating in the transformation of material culture across the terrain of movements and mobilities. In this light, we focus on the aesthetic agency as the condition of possibility for “art” to gain presence and present-ness in Asia. Therefore, to implicate Asia in the discussion of contemporary art is to compel ourselves to be aware of the range of literature on the subject from other disciplines, making any form of art criticism, art history, art theory, and curatorship of Asian art resolutely transdisciplinary.

In the attempt at discerning the contour and content of contemporary Asian art, we offer the following themes for deliberation:

### ① Body as Performative Technology

Amelia Jones, in discussing the specificity of body art as distinguished from performance art, defines the body/self as an experiencing, intersubjective agency that is “technophenomenological: fully mediated through the vicissitudes of bio- and communication technologies, and fully engaged with the social.” [⑦]

We surmise that when Jones stresses the idea of mediation and “the social” in the practice of embodiment, she does not reduce the technology of making bodies and body making to an object, nor does she foreclose the materiality of “the spiritual” as a form of presence; her reckoning simply foregrounds the sense of limit and finitude in humanity’s apprehension of and intervention in the world. This world has undergone rapid changes in recent years, thrusting communities from all over to shift in uneven ways from the “age of mechanical reproduction” to the “society of the spectacle,” from analog to digital and hypermedia systems. These play out in a cyberspatial matrix and are “intertwined with the needs of global information and entertainment industries and with the expanding requirements of medical, military and security systems.” [⑧] This world pushes the limits and finitude of both biology and ecology through almost rapacious and ravenous alterations, and the body cannot but be, in the words of a philosopher, “enworlded.” In the face of this reality, the aesthetic agency that is the embodiment of art’s condition of possibility is compromised to the degree that it might just repeat the logic of the world’s simulacrum of appearances. Jonathan Crary cares to ask, therefore, if the aesthetic agency or body — which is becoming a part of the “new machines, economies, apparatuses, whether social, libidinal or technological” [⑨] — can operate “outside the imperatives of speeded-up consumption and circulation of image-and-information-based commodities.” [⑩] In other words, can the body be deterred from reiterating the logic of capital, if it is to change it by re-performing its subjectivities?

### ② Ethnography of Everyday Experience

As contemporary art in Asia discusses the various translocal moral worlds that it inhabits, its practice must be viewed not within a frame of random phenomena, but rather in the context of a history rooted in everyday struggles of defensible survival and humanity, and in the “social life of things” experienced by human agencies. In this struggle there emerge various kinds of ideological programs operating in discrepant political ecologies. Néstor García Canclini locates this transformative politics in the tension between rupture and retention through the process of reconversion. The Latin American critic assumes that “when a tradition or a form of knowledge no longer yields revenues,” [⑪] there is no total or complete break from its perceived trajectory or mystified origin. Rather, there is “an invested affective baggage, a mourning to go through when it is lost.” [⑫] In Latin American contemporary art, this reconversion is best described by Andrea Giunta when she speaks of the tactic to “devour, mix, appropriate and reappropriate, invert, fragment and join, take central discourse, penetrate and cut through it until it becomes a useful tool for the search for and creation (plagued with achievements and failures) of our own subversive discourse ... (and) ... the programme of a liberational culture.” [⑬] This taps the vein of the sensibility of the inventive and poaching bricoleur who gathers and galvanizes bits and pieces of material culture to create almost magical artifacts that offer alternative political economies of materializing the “aesthetic.”

Confronted by recent changes in the political makeup of an increasingly globalizing world, the concept of identity, which has been the lynchpin of multicultural struggles against master narratives in the 1960s and 1970s and has ironically cohered into an essence by itself, is put to task

⑦ Amelia Jones. *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p.235

⑧ Jonathan Crary. “Visual Technologies and the Dispersal of Perception.” *Jurassic Technologies Revenant* (Sydney: 10th Biennale de Sydney, 1996), p.17

⑨ Ibid.

⑩ Ibid., p.26

⑪ Néstor García Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. Lopez.). (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p.273

⑫ Ibid., p.274

⑬ Andrea Giunta. “Strategies of Modernity in Latin America,” *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (Ed. Gerardo Mosquera), (London: Institute International Visual Arts, 1995), p.64



by the likes of Judith Butler who introduces the theory of the performative in the construction of subjectivity, or the “aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names.” [16] This contra-identitarian position, however, is quickly put to task by a contemporary Marxist like Slavoj Žižek who believes that Butler is squaring off with the wrong enemy; the real enemy is not “identity,” but “multiple identities.” This multiplicity, according to Žižek, “simply describes the conceptual structure of late capitalist subjectivity” [17] as well as its attendant liberal-democratic/humanist seductions; Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson have also raised this point.

Canclini is, therefore, led to ponder how one can be radical and at the same time resist fundamentalism [18] in this age of intense dispersal and partisanship. To this conundrum, Žižek interjects a critique of the capitalist mass media as response: “Isn’t it deeply suspicious that the common denominator of all those they attack — Arabs, terrorists, etcetera — is that they are designated as “fundamentalists, the ones who over-identify?” [19] This is, indeed, a tricky issue. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe endorse “the radicalization of the modern democratic tradition” [20] in the context of plural alliances and agenda of action among social movements. And Durrill Cornell quotes Jacques Derrida’s rereading of Marx as a reiteration of the emancipatory desire and its indestructibility and utmost necessariness. Cornell, in a poststructuralist move, revives “the emancipatory” as something that cannot “ever be either erased or fully actualized,” [21] its dislocale, or “its impossibility of ever being located, is its infinite possibility.” [22]

### ③ Places

In this moment of our lives, as we are whisked from one site to the next in the globe in various ways, it is imperative to insist on our (trans) localities. Saskia Sassen speaks of a “global geography of strategic places as well as the microgeographies and politics unfolding within them.” [23] In other words, in spite of the vertiginous rate of change in our current lives and even in the heart of cities which Sassen situates as versatile but volatile nodes in the production of the global economy, there are places and people who realize the work process — that is, “a complex of workers, machines, and buildings that are more placebound than the imagery of the information economy suggests.” [24] Sassen regards this space as transterritorial “because it connects sites that are not geographically proximate yet are intensely connected to each other,” [25] but also at the same time place-bound. This place-boundedness on mobile ground remakes the people who make up the space — the various migrants, commuting business executives, and displaced communities — in an image which traverses their modernist “identities” and secures for them new notions of “community, of membership, and entitlement.” [26] Against this bruising ethnoscape “disparities between the urban glamour zone and the urban war zone ... (and) the extreme visibility of difference (are) likely to contribute to further brutalization of the conflict: the indifference and greed of the new elite versus the hopelessness and rage of the poor.” [27] In this milieu, the different aesthetic articulations reveal themselves quite tellingly: access, flow, regulated liquidity, agglomeration, hypermobility, centrality, totality, violence, discrepancy, inequality, incompleteness, viscosity, fragmentation, discrimination, presence, power, porosity contend on the stage of a global economy that is also a potential transnational civil society of emergent solidarities at once beyond and within national and corporate discipline.

### Exhibition Strategy

The theme that we are proposing can best be actualized in an exhibition setting through a curatorial direction of Asian contemporary art that is both creative and critical. In view of the explication of the said theme, we propose the following to be the key terms to guide the exhibition strategy and implementation, in other words to serve as a museological aesthetic. The latter, in consideration of the issues raised in this proposal, makes sense of the works in the exhibition not as “art” as we know it, but as expressive material culture and aesthetic project.

Connection. Works must reveal a keen sense of “reciprocal critique” through a capacity in crossing certain gaps and divisions imposed by geographical and ideological structures. Most fruitful here is the transgression of tenacious binary divides between high art and indigenous craft, or spiritual iconography and popular culture, or nature and mass media, or museum and communities. From a state of antinomy, the curation can put in place the dialectic of continuity and contingency. Moreover, connection does not only pertain to the disposition of collaboration in the making of the work, but also to the reception of audiences as co-makers of art that is as imaginative. And by

① Peter Osborne ed. *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.112

② *Ibid.*, p.4

③ Néstor García Canclini. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, p.4

④ Peter Osborne ed. *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, p.41

⑤ Chantal Mouffe ed. *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (London: Verso, 1992)

⑥ Peter Osborne ed. *A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals*, p.149

⑦ *Ibid.*, p.151

⑧ Saskia Sassen. *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: The New Press, 1998), p.213

⑨ *Ibid.*, p.22

⑩ *Ibid.*, p.32

⑪ *Ibid.*

⑫ *Ibid.*, p.33

collaboration, we also mean a sense of travel, exchange, engagement, confrontation, encounter, and sharing of particular burdens and hopefully of blessings.

**Complicity.** There is a need to underscore how bodies and the processes of embodiments are exposed to an array of vulnerability and volition. This "exposure" connotes infection, staining and tainting, risk, conspiracy, belonging, affinity, involvement. In this respect, the "visual" arts must give way to other endeavors that harness the faculties of the other senses in the thoroughgoing attempt at rounding out a sociosomatic humanity, with all its contradictions and possible confluences.

**Conversation.** The art that we bolster must be generous enough to sow the seeds of a climate of discussion and telling stories. The art of our time must learn to converse across persuasions and predispositions in the postcolonial task of re-search. It must foster the articulation of sentiment, the negotiated narration of feelings, the critique of suffering and the celebration of sufferance, the sorting out of fears and futures. Arising from this conversation is urgent knowledge that is able to grapple with globalization. Appadurai has alerted us to the gap between the globalization of knowledge and knowledge of globalization, and that this discrepancy must be crossed through emergent traditions of inquiry [10]. In this endeavor, we must be aware of the reality that, though it is pervasive on many levels, globalization is a "partial condition" that is critically mediated by "social thickness." [11]

With the explanation of the theme and the exhibition framework, we hope that the contemporary art of Asia and its curation be not only recognized, but also acknowledged as a potent and transformative force in renewing a world that seems to be weary of its people yet hopeful still of a possible history-in-the-making.

(This essay draws on the "First Working Seminar on Asian Art" sponsored by the Japan Foundation Asia Center, August 3-4, 2000, Tokyo, Japan, but has been amended and modified.)

10 Arjun Appadurai. "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," *Public Culture* Winter, 2000

11 Saskia Sassen. "Spatialities and Temporalities of the Global: Elements for a Theorization," *Public Culture*, Winter 2000