

Frankly, if you have the first without the second, it is not worth much. Being accorded space and recognition — representational parity, if you like — in the cultural sphere isn't worth too much if you do not have social security rights. So these two aspects of multiculturalism — the representational and the civic — cannot be disconnected.

The final issue I would like to raise is one on which I'd welcome hearing the views of others, as it is something that I do not know a great deal about but am interested in. In so far as we are discussing the role of art museums and biennials in a number of different Asian contexts, how do these institutions that have been marked by their Western origins and the histories of their translation into other cultures — how do they stand in relation to other, more local, indigenous traditions of collection and exhibition? Who is involved in the latter that are not involved in the former? Are there important differences in the social forms of participation between the two? While I don't know what the answers to these questions are, I sense they might be important. Questions concerning the role of exhibitionary institutions in the promotion of various forms of social self-shaping and the influence of these on Asian identities do not just concern those art institutions with Western origins.



Moderator (S. Yoshimi): Thank you. You have all brought up points of mutual interest. As Professor Tatehata mentioned earlier, as we discuss the proliferation of biennials and the expansion of multiculturalism on the one hand, we must also examine the two sides of this phenomenon. However, this duality is related to the two-sidedness of Asia referred to in yesterday's discussion, Asia considered in terms of the logic of resistance or liberation from colonial conditions and the opposite idea, a framework of oppression, exclusion, or making things invisible. These opposing sides correspond to each other.

Professor Tatehata spoke yesterday of how U.S.-Japan relationship or the U.S.-China relationship still dominates the world affairs, and the hegemony of the old Western-centric system still has a powerful presence in today's art and culture. Therefore, we must not forget that we are discussing these issues in this context.

With the growing prominence of multicultural exhibitions, what will be the relationship between exhibitions in art museums as opposed to anthropological and ethnological museums? It is also important to think about the relationship between art museums and visitors, citizens, or the audience in the broadest sense.

Before expanding our discussion into these areas, I would like to take questions from the audience. Ideally, I would like to have each person ask their questions themselves, but due to time constraints, please allow me to read the questions.

First of all, I have two questions for Professor Lee.

One is, "How was 'shamanistic ritual' incorporated into the Gwangju Biennale?"

The other question is, "Why are these exhibitions not organized annually, but organized in biennial and triennial forms? My understanding is this. Rice is harvested every year in the autumn, but also collected to pay the annual tribute. It is not every 2 years or 3 years. So, could we not say that biennials and triennials, which happen every 2 years or 3 years, are events that resist such authoritarian power? Do they not embody an anti-authoritarian attitude? If so, what does it mean for the biennials

and triennials to acquire commercial and entertainment qualities? Does it not mean that they have submitted to authority?"

To Professor Tatehata.

"Many Asian artists who are represented in international exhibitions have studied in the West or developed countries. What do you think of the gap between artists who are rooted in their own native country, and artists who are engaged with the elitist global community?"

Another question to Professor Tatehata.

"If an aspect of early Cubism was cultural colonialism and exploitation, it goes along with the idea that Euro-American culture is superior to others. But I wonder if such hierarchical relationships exist in the first place. What do you mean by exploitation? Looking at the issue from a different point of view, could we not call the 'transplantation' of European cutting edge art to Asia 'exploitation' of the West by Asia?"

The next question is addressed to Professor Bennett.

"The Tate Modern in London seems to attract a large audience owing to its interesting exhibiting style. But considering what I saw when I visited the museum last year, there were hardly any Asian artists exhibited. I do not mean to advocate regionalism, but what do you think of their exhibition policy?"

There are other questions from yesterday that relate to today's presentations. I think it would be relevant to bring them up now and have our panelists discuss these topics, so I would like to introduce these questions.

This question refers to Professor Sakai's keynote speech.

"I was very interested to hear the explanation of how the concept of Asia and its identity was constructed through configurative identification and cartographic imagination. My first question is, how could we suspend and reconstruct subjectivity and identity in a framework other than that of a colonial relationship? My second question refers to the concept of Asia and its inherent violence. Are there people, such as Amerasians, who may be excluded from Asianness? Do you have an idea about dismantling the concept of Asia?"

The next question is directly related to Mr. Mohamad's

presentation, but it is also relevant to today's discussion.

"I wonder how Mr. Mohamad, who I understand is a Muslim and a cultural activist, feels about the diverse powers in Asia and how they could contribute to the entire world?"

I believe this question refers to the present global landscape after September 11th, in which the world is heading in the opposite direction from promoting dialog. Since this question points to Asian power or multiculturalism in the present global context, I thought it might be relevant to today's discussion.

I hope the panelists can respond to these questions as much as possible. Could we first have Professor Lee respond?

Y. Lee: I wonder if I understood the question well. I am not a shaman, of course, so I did not play a shamanistic role. There were plenty of different roles I had to play at the initial stage of the Gwangju Biennale.

In Gwangju, we did not have any exhibition spaces other than the municipal museum, which is a nice place, but not large enough to hold an international biennial. I had invited more than 180 artists. So I had to argue with the municipal government regarding construction of a new biennial hall, like the Documenta hall in Kassel: a huge, very simple, functional building. Anyway, my proposal to build a new space for the Biennale was accepted by the municipal government. When we asked architects to design a functional building, they tried to make it into their own work, which made it difficult for us to create the kind of space we wanted for large, experimental installation-type art. I had serious arguments with two architects because they wanted to create their own work, whereas I wanted a very simple, functional space. In the course of the construction, the two architects disappeared and the construction company changed. So my role was not really shamanistic.

Let me give you another example. We invited a very young Cuban artist, who was 25 years old at the time, selected by one of the commissioners Kathy Halbreich, the director of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, who took charge of the section for modern American art. Unfortunately, at the time, Korea did not

have any diplomatic relationship with Cuba. But my policy was to bring all the participating artists to Korea and have them work on-site to build a kind of team spirit. First, I asked the artist to send me the drawings of his installation. But he did not have his own fax machine, so he had to go to the government office in Havana just to fax the material. It took 5 days for the documents to arrive. Next, I had plans to fly him through Los Angeles, but the American authorities naturally rejected him. So I decided to go through Spain, but they rejected us also. The French government also rejected us. I had invited Paul Schimmel, the chief curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, as one of the jury members. So I asked him to help me because I had to have this artist at least two days before the opening ceremony. In the end the artist was able to come to Korea.

But the artist made very tough demands. He told me that he needed 100 thousand empty beer bottles. Could you imagine, collecting 100 thousand empty bottles in two days? It is not easy. Fortunately, I had a friend who worked as the branch manager in the Gwangju area for the OB Beer Company. I asked him to give me 100 thousand empty bottles. He said yes, but under the condition that we could not take off the label.

The artist also asked me to find a wooden boat. I discovered that finding a wooden boat is very, very difficult. Most boats were made of plastic, and there were no wooden boats available. So, during my interview with the local TV station, I mentioned that I was looking for a wooden boat. Then a person from the local sanitation department found me a green wooden boat, which was perfect for our purpose.

The artist finally arrived just two days before the opening ceremony. He created a nice map of Cuba with the empty bottles and the wooden boat on top to describe his idea of Cuban boat people. It was very beautiful. When the five juries gathered, because we had a prize system at the time, they unanimously agreed to give this artist the grand prize.

There were a lot of difficulties working with younger artists, who are notorious for demanding a lot in equipment and other things. The local audience in Gwangju did not understand new

media art and cutting-edge installations at all. They wanted to see very important pieces, such as Picasso paintings, Brancusi sculptures, and other Western masterpieces. So, when they came to see the Biennale, they found it boring. But they knew how to enjoy some pieces. They were eager to understand the context of the huge installations. They immediately understood the content of the work by the Cuban artist.

So if I was playing a Shamanistic role at all, it was a great fun. The question is why are we so enthusiastic about creating this kind of international art event? I mentioned that the number of biennials organized today is about 120, which is a scary number. Why do we need so many art events, today? I was at the opening of the Shanghai Biennale, but many of my colleagues also went to see the Guangzhou Triennale in China. You will see another one in China next year, the Beijing Biennale. The Chinese organizers were very stimulated and encouraged by the founding of the Shanghai Biennale. I am not suggesting that Beijing is always opposed to Shanghai, but they say that Shanghai is the center of contemporary art act. People from Beijing did not want an art event called a biennial.

In response to the second question, which refers to biennials as forces for anti-institutional art, biennials must be distinguished from museum exhibitions. Museum exhibitions are important and they involve historical research. Museums are also very institutional and systematic, and they have a kind of internal vanity, whereas biennials have the freedom of choosing artists, organizing committees and functions. So I think biennials are basically anti-institutional or anti-establishment, and provide a great way to interpret contemporary art.

Moderator (S. Yoshimi): Professor Tatehata, please.

A. Tatehata: I would like to respond to the questions raised.

It may be true for artists from other regions, too, but it is certainly true that many Asian artists have studied in Europe or America. This is a fact. There was a question regarding these artists and the discrepancy in their identity. It is true that

'magiciens de la terre' are rare. If there were any artists who were purely magicians, it would be a miracle. The person would have to have lived in a remote hinterland, completely cut off from any information. But, the fact is, many artists study in Europe or America, or study about modernism in their local art schools.

Although, there is a gap in their identity, the situation is not so simple. When artists and art professionals return from overseas to their native country, a high percentage of them go back to identifying themselves with their native context after some time, rather than keeping up with a Euro-American discourse. In extreme cases, they become advocates of nationalism. We have seen examples of this in Japanese history from the Meiji era on, and we could probably say that this is still the case in the present day Japan.

So, because there are such contradictory elements embedded in the structure of identity, it is not as simple as questioning the gap between elite artists and 'magiciens de la terre.'

My response to the other question also relates to this. I did say that there was an element of cultural colonialism and exploitation in early Cubism. And I agree that the the West is put in a superior position in the hierarchy and that there is exploitation. But the issue at hand is not so simple.

Let's say that I am deeply moved by an early Cubist artwork, but my value system says that responding to it in this manner is considered wrong. In such a case, we would have to debate whether or not the artist is right or wrong before we discuss whether or not the artwork is moving or not. If I were to appreciate this artwork that was produced through exploitation, although it was considered wrong to do so, I would have to question the education that nurtured my taste, namely Euro-American modernism. Furthermore, if I were to understand that my educational background is an outcome of historical process, I would have to overcome my own history and improve myself to become a progressive person. This means that I need to continue creating a history that overcomes my past. I will continue to become a better person as I reflect on and regret my past. But I think this could lead to a serious problem.

Although we may know that the artwork is an outcome of exploitation, we could hold to our illusions that we have universal values for recognizing good art. To acknowledge this is painful, and we could recognize this as the pain in the concept of Asia that Mr. Mohamad spoke of. It may be necessary to relativize the self while feeling this pain in a gray zone, to maintain a strong will even though one occupies a half-way position. This may be somewhat rhetorical, but in considering the gap between the identity of elites and that of the magicians and the issue of colonialism, I think that we should not simplify the issue. Perhaps it is irresponsible to advocate ambivalence but it would be more dangerous if we simplify this problem.

Moderator (S. Yoshimi): Thank you. Professor Bennett, please.

T. Bennett: With regard to the first question about whether or not European art and art institutions are exploitative of Asia, I am not sure that “exploitative” would be the best way of dealing with the complexities and nuances of such relationships. What is at the back of my mind in saying this is best clarified by recalling the work of writers like James Clifford and Mary Louise Pratt whose notion of “contact zones” suggests a different way of describing colonial relationships between Western and “non-Western societies.” For it allows you to think about how, in the context of colonial histories, processes of artistic and cultural exchange involved the mutual traffic of artifacts and artistic practices — not just a one way transmission from west to east. I don’t think “exploitation” — given its stress on domination and subordination — is able to encompass all that happens within such exchanges.

The second question concerned what I thought about the Asian collections and exhibits at the Tate Modern. I’m afraid that I cannot answer this question because I am not familiar with the current exhibits in adequate detail.

What I wanted to pick up on, finally, was one of the questions relating to yesterday’s discussion concerning the breakdown of the notion of Asia and what we think of that. I

would like to speak about the questions this raises at a more general level, because it seems to me that it is not just an Asian problem. All of the relational identities that were organized and constructed in relation to one other in the history of colonialism are now in a process of falling apart and being reconstructed in the context of the new relations that are emerging between them.

I could well imagine that, although it would be different in its particulars, a similar meeting held in Europe to this one asking about European identity would not be different in the kind of issues it would raise. In contemporary Europe, of course, there are ongoing discussions about "What is Europe?" As Asia redefines itself, so does Europe. The issues about who should be involved in discussions about European identity at the moment are pressing ones in the context of debates around the enlargement of the European Union. What does it mean to think of Turkey becoming part of Europe? What does this mean for Europe as an identity? Identities are always relational and they are organized in complex relations to one another. The history of Europe's identity is shaped not just by its relationship to Asia, but also by its relationship with Africa and others.

Mr. Mohamad talked about how Europe had organized itself by cutting off and denying any notion that its origins may lie in Asia. The same is exactly true for its relationship to Africa. In the 19th century, very complicated debates emerged denying any possible line of connection running from Greek civilization back to Egyptian civilization, because that would have meant that white European civilization would have had to acknowledge its origins in black African civilization. The more general point, though, is that if colonialism organized a series of relational identities, what we are now living through is a period in which all of these are coming unstuck from one other and being redefined. We won't be able to deal with the question of Asia meaningfully if we isolate it from this more general process.

Moderator (S. Yoshimi): Thank you. The title of Session II is "Asia that is Exhibited / Asia that is not Exhibited." But throughout today's discussion, continuing from yesterday's, we have started

to see the theme “beyond the borders” first presented by Professor Lee in his Gwangju Biennale as the underlying theme.

I think the example of the Cuban artist is a vivid portrayal of what it means to go beyond the borders, genres, art systems and institutions, or differences in knowledge. We are talking about practices that go beyond the borders. Biennials and triennials are, according to today’s discussion, a place where the practice of getting beyond the borders in a multicultural way is forcefully demonstrated.

Through today’s discussion, it became apparent that when we speak of going over the borders in the context of globalization, political economy, and the direction of power and capital, money is what takes us over the borders — cash and multinational financial capital. It takes us over borders with great speed.

So what context should our discussion take place in? For example, when we discuss Asia, it only exists as a constructed framework. Therefore, we must think on our own about institutions of art, biennial, and other cultural institutions in the context of this multicultural Asia that we desire. We need to address the issues through dialog from many different perspectives. I find it very important that we make critical assertions or ask ourselves over and over again about the representation of Asia and its transgression in the context of society, history, politics and economy.

I would like to encourage further discussion this afternoon that follows up on what we have discussed so far in this session.

Could I ask everybody to give our three panelists a hand? Thank you.

## Session III

### “Asia that is Represented / Asia that is not Represented”

How is the image of Asia created and updated within the rapidly transforming cultures of today? In Session III, we will ask this question by making references to different areas of art, such as contemporary art, performing arts, and film. Which Asia does a curator organizing contemporary art exhibitions choose to show? How does a cultural policymaker develop the relationship between the traditional and contemporary forms of performing arts, so that it adapts to the contemporary society? Furthermore, in film and other familiar image industry, how are the issues on nation-state and gender in Asia represented and interpreted? We hope to engage in these important issues during our discussion.

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Moderator: Yoshimi Shunya

1. David Elliott  
“Art and Trousers”
2. Anmol Vellani  
“India in Performance”
3. Rey Chow  
“Zhang Yimou’s *Not One Less*: The Fable of a Migration”

Discussion

## Art and Trousers

David Elliott

Director, Mori Art Museum

Thank you for again asking me to speak at the Japan Foundation Asia Center at a Conference on the subject of “what is Asia?” It’s an impossible question, of course, and three years ago when I last responded to it, my answer was something like “it’s a Black Hole which can attract and absorb all things with its mass” or “it’s like a blank screen onto which any fantasy may be projected by the rest of the world”. You could say that this was hardly the most precise of answers and you would be right, but the topic is not precise either when each of us have a different idea about what it is we are thinking about. In short, Asia to the insider, the resident of Asia, could never be the same as it is to anyone else. Time and space change the perspective on what is viewed.....and then there is the further vital question “who is actually wearing the trousers?”<sup>1</sup>

Now, the role of the trouser is well-known in history as the civilizing force with which the West conquered the rest of the world. Throughout the 19th century, the trouser — a product of the Industrial Revolution — as well as of the desires and the attitudes it engendered, seemed like an invincible force. The Lee Enfield and Martini rifle may have won the battles of Empire but it was the trouser that cemented the peace. In combat with nakedness or looseness of garb, and the immorality that both inevitably brought in their wake, the trouser became the bedrock of social decency and the hierarchical chain of relationships upon which this depended. Sometimes it was imposed by military victory — and many African, Asian and Latin American people no doubt still feel that the trouser was cruelly forced upon them — sometimes it was eagerly embraced, as was the case in Japan, by people who wanted to modernise, to get rid of their past and adopt progress. Virile and dynamic (in that it allowed unfettered movement of the legs), the trouser became a symbol of being a winner in the world — no, not just winner — a dominator.



David Elliott

1

In English the popular expression “who is wearing the trousers?” is often used to refer to a couple when it is expected that the woman maybe the more dominant. By extension this now also applies to same sex couples.

And from the outset it was Men who wore the trousers — so much so that the trouser became the symbol of their power, and women had to fight their own battles so that they too could become empowered by the magic of this garment.

Now you may be wondering what bearing this may have on the subject of this conference namely, “The Asia that is represented or NOT represented in exhibitions?” Well, the trouser in itself is not a particularly interesting garment, yet in symbolic form it expresses a whole range of shifting values relating to power throughout the world since the age of the European Enlightenment. It seems to me that any discussion about the summation of images and ideas in exhibitions relating to Asia [or anywhere else that is not Europe or North America] needs first to clarify its relationship to the Trouser. Or, to put this into a less condensed form, art exhibitions are not only cultural but also strategic. To understand their significance one must first examine both their purpose and the contexts in which they are made and released; only then may the attitudes which they express start to become clear.

When I last spoke at the Japan Foundation I touched upon the danger of perpetuating negative or misleading stereotypes in large-scale summarizing exhibitions about Asian art and culture. Such temptations are strong because they pander to widely held preconceptions or prejudices about Otherness — the very wellsprings of Trouser Power. I do not propose to discuss this again other than to say that I believe that we are at a stage now where we can start to use such stereotypes against themselves in exhibitions. We — or perhaps I should say Asian cultures — are now strong enough, and the appreciation of them outside Asia starting to be sufficiently developed, to start to play with prejudices in this way. But care still has to be taken.<sup>2</sup>

Neither do I intend to discuss here the large Government-sponsored, often reciprocal, exhibitions or festivals of art from different Asian countries that regularly spring up in various world capitals. Many of them contain excellent presentations and performances yet their aim is essentially political and they form part of an overall strategy to cement other strategic, often political or economic ties.

What interests me more is the way in which the discourse about contemporary art has been changing since the early 1980s and how

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In 2005 the Mori Art Museum is planning a large traveling exhibition of Asian art called “Hot ‘n’ Spicy” which will also include examples of design, fashion, film, music and popular culture from seven Asian countries. The content, balance and perspective of this exhibition will play upon the complex associations of its title.

this has enabled Asia to be now included — some would say incorporated — in it along with other equally unfashionable parts of the world. My brief irony here does not mean to imply that *because* Asia is now becoming more “fashionable” this is the *only* reason that Asian artists are increasingly included in monographic, thematic and geo-politically based exhibitions of contemporary art. Other deeper and stronger forces are at work to have changed world perspectives over the past 30 years. Some are demographic, some political and economic — and they are not confined to Asia. In every sense we now feel we are all part of the same set of systems whether in the art world or in the hazy category of “Globalism”. But because they are new, the nature of these systems is not yet clear to us and we cannot really say where decisive power lies within them.<sup>3</sup>

On a demographic level Britain, Europe, the USA and Canada have over the past 50 years absorbed many people originating from Asia and Africa. Compared to what it once was Britain is now multicultural, as are France and Germany. Particularly in Western Europe, children of Asian parents have become absorbed and naturalised and although some tensions remain, their music, food, fashion and many words have penetrated the cultures of their adopted countries.<sup>4</sup>

Economic emigration from Asia and elsewhere is a continuing and longstanding phenomenon which continues to change the face of the world. The great fear of this has been hybridization — or to put it in its racist garb *mongrelization* — the fear of being swamped, polluted and changed forever. Yet in spite of intercontinental moves and intermarriages there is no sign of anything like this happening or of *homogenization* — everything gradually becoming the same. Diversity seems to be working and although all cultures must adapt to survive, there is nothing to suggest that they are all heading in the same direction.

And then there have been the completely unpredictable ideological changes: the death rattle of Colonialism with the end of Apartheid in South Africa; the demise of the Soviet Union and of the East-West balance of power upon which the Cold War depended, the modernization of politics in China and the opening up of markets.

My own professional encounters with Otherness have, not surprisingly, changed in step with the openings up I have just described. Working initially in Britain at the Museum of Modern Art

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The resolution of the unresolved discussion between the US Government and the United Nations on Iraq regarding “regime change” on one hand and “weapons inspection” on the other will significantly help crystallize a view on where power lies in current world governance.

4

In Britain this process started under the Empire. It was at this time that curry became part of the English cuisine — although a special “curry powder” was invented to make the preparation easier and more to the English taste. Interestingly it was through the agency of the British navy that kari (and curry powder) came to Japan in that Japanese sailors took a liking to it when they visited British messes and then “imported” it into Japan where it quickly became popular. Nowadays most middle class British cooks use individual spices rather than curry powder.

in Oxford I was, from the late 1970s, able to start a discussion about the nature of contemporary art which had little to do with a desire for the exotic — one of the main failings of the landmark exhibition “Magiciens de la Terre” which took place in Paris in 1989<sup>5</sup> — but that was generated more by the need to establish more stable and transparent criteria for the evaluation of quality and to map out a territory which was not wholly delimited either by tradition or the market.

At this point I need to explain a little about the crisis in Contemporary Art and its institutions which hit Western Europe and America — the heartland of Trouser Culture — in the middle of the 1970s. To put it in a nutshell, the old avant-garde rolled over and died. The loose alliance between radical art and [western-style] radical politics which had fuelled the movement of “-isms” since the middle of the 19th century had come to an end. After Minimal and Conceptual Art, there seemed to be no further place to go. The only way was back and the historicist strategies of figurative painting began to dominate the scene. But a number of the painters who came into fashion at this time had been working and exhibiting for at least 20 years. This led me to ask myself a number of questions: “if these painters were good 20 years ago, why did we not know it then?” — or, more to the point, “what prevented us from seeing it?” As all this had occurred on our doorstep and we had been oblivious of it, my third question was “what else have we been prevented from seeing?” — or, more to the point, “what else have we prevented ourselves from seeing?”

My main historical interest at this time was in Russian and Soviet Constructivism of the 1910s and 1920s and what had been clear in working on this field was that western critics had completely misunderstood, or had chosen to ignore, what the artists themselves had thought they were doing in their work and how they evaluated it. The politics had been censored out of the discussion leaving it with only conferred meanings. Like orphans from some distant country these works had been adopted by the West and made as one of their own.

There is no time to enter here into a discussion about the pros and cons of Intentional Fallacy but you could say that during the 1980s and early 1990s understanding intentions, discovering new histories and removing the blinkers from my own eyes became the

distinguishing elements within my work as a curator. I pursued this not out of any sense of altruism or desire to be fair but out of the simple realisation that contemporary art was being made everywhere in the world. Following on from a statement made by American artist Donald Judd in the 1960s, the question was not so much whether what we were looking at was “contemporary” but whether it was any “good”.<sup>6</sup> Clarification of the different elements that under different circumstances can confer “goodness” started and continues to be my major project — what I realised was that the conventions I had learned at school and university could be of little help. Its close relationship with the market, combined with desperate conservatism, made the contemporary art world seem self serving, narrow and ignorant about anything beyond itself. In spite of its often radical credentials, and the personal convictions of many of its members, as an institution it seemed to operate a kind of cultural apartheid.

So showing contemporary and modern art from Russia, Latin America, Africa and Asia became an integral part of the program of the Museum of Modern Art Oxford — this was not cordoned off from the rest of our activities but was integrated into a programme which also showed what we thought was the best in western art. Only in this way — on equal terms — could a dialogue be established.

Some people felt at this time that focusing on regions, countries or schools was not the right way to go forward because it typecast Otherness and was therefore retrograde. It was better, so they argued, to integrate artists from “outside” into mainstream thematic or group exhibitions. I felt that this was not helpful because it led to tokenism with the same artists, from Mexico, Japan or Cameroon for example, appearing in big international shows. Their argument was that you somehow diminished artists by characterising them as “Mexican”, “African” or the like because they were part of an international community. This was, I feel, a little disingenuous as it revealed how negatively the art world regarded those whom it did not think were part of it — and, of course, any outsider quickly realised this (and quickly reached for the nearest pair of trousers). But I was equally interested in the *sans culottes* and for me it was vitally important, if I was going to be working in a system I believed in, to see for myself the art that was actually “out there”. Programs of research needed to be set up and then an assessment made about whether what one had “found” deserved a place in the exhibitions, critiques and history

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Judd was talking about a definition of art in a post-Duchampian world. By the 1960s virtually any form of production could be named or made as “art”. The issue for Judd was one of quality not of nomenclature.

books of modern and contemporary art. We then began to talk about *histories* rather than just history and our world seemed a much less monolithic place. The 1980s for me were a decade of reassessment and discovery. Inevitably, in the process a number of difficult issues were raised.

In 1982 a series of three exhibitions held in Oxford: "India Myth and Reality aspects of modern Indian art"; "The Other India seven contemporary photographers"; and "Gods of the Byways Wayside shrines of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat"<sup>7</sup> examined respectively the development of Modernism in India from the 1940s, art and documentary photography and folk art relating to the pre-Hindu popular religions in parts of Northern India.

Britain has had many strong links with India because of its imperial past but it still has no Museum devoted to the art of India nor any Professor nor University Department of Indian art. These art exhibitions showed how modernity had developed painfully and precariously in the still colonially-conditioned climate of Independent India. The laboured self-consciousness and obvious pain one could see in the Fine Art, contrasted with the spontaneous creativity and bright colours of the Folk Art. Issues of derivation arose as well because so many of the artists had studied in British Art Schools and had been strongly influenced by their teachers there. In terms of photography, India seemed to be almost too big a subject for anyone to grasp: we decided that we would not cover the standard views of temples and picturesque customs but try to present a picture that reflected only current situations.

Out of this encounter with India other exhibitions subsequently developed: of film posters and film (1982), of the paintings of Rabindranath Tagore (1986), of "glass" paintings on perspex by K.G. Subramanyam (1988) and of sculpture by Mrinalini Mukherjee (1994).<sup>8</sup>

But the main show of Fine Art met with a rather bemused response from the audience. It was just not cool in spite of the fact that a young Anish Kapoor had, after considerable hesitation, agreed to be exhibited as a "young Indian artist". And, looking back, its unashamedly didactic structure seems to creak a little. Works were grouped under such headings as "The hinterland of Myth": Husain, F.N. Souza, Satish Gujral; "Nature as pictorial metaphor": Raza, Padamsee, Ram Kumar; "The Dislocated Persona" Mohan Samant

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E. Alkazi, D.Elliott, V. Musgrave (eds) *India Myth and Reality aspects of modern Indian art*; D. Elliott (ed), *The Other India seven contemporary photographers*; E. Alkazi, U. Anand *Gods of the Byways Wayside shrines of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat* all published by the Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1982.

8

R. Monk, A. Robinson (eds) *Rabindranath Tagore: A Celebration of his Life and Work*, Rabindranath Tagore Festival Committee/Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1986. D. Elliott, *K.G.Subramanyam Fairy Tales of Oxford and other Paintings*, Museum of Modern Art, 1988. C. Iles, D. Robinson *Mrinalini Mukherjee Sculpture*, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1994.

Tyeb Mehta, K.G. Subramanyam; "Social Satire and Political Protest": Krishen Khanna, A. Ramachandran, Bikash Bhattacharjee, Jogen Chowdhury, Rameshwar Broota, R.S. Kaleka; "Strangers in the City": Gieve Patel, Sudhir Patwardhan; "Middle class alienation": Nalini Malini; "New Myths New realities": Mrinalini Mukherjee, Anish Kapoor. While undoubtedly content (and this here was related to chronological development) provided a way into the exhibition for the observer, we should have been prepared to let the art speak more for itself. I would now only use categories which the artists themselves would readily recognise or, alternatively, as in the case of the exhibition of Japanese avant-garde that followed two years later, make the groupings more chronological and neutral.

"Reconstructions: avant-garde art in Japan 1945-1965" (1985) was curated by Kaido Kazuo and myself, based on her doctoral research at the University of Oxford.<sup>9</sup> It is fair to say that Japanese modern art was almost totally unknown in Britain at this time and even in Japan itself this period was often reduced to little more than a consideration of Gutai and *informel* painters. The immediate post-war period was regarded as too political and the early 1960s too avant-garde then to be taken seriously. Nevertheless through the help of Oshima Seiji, Director of the Setagaya Art Museum, we managed to get the support of the Yomiuri Shimbun and the Japan Foundation which made the exhibition possible. It began with a section called "Surrealism and post-war reconstruction" in which Okamoto Taro's large painting *The Law of the Jungle*, (1950) was the big star. In mid-1980s Britain the image of a huge, brightly coloured shark bisected by a zip fastener — long before Damien Hirst's famous shark in formaldehyde — was an arrestingly punk-like image. And the show continued in this way combining good serious work with big surprises — such as Kawara On's shaped canvases of a *Black Soldier* (1955), or *Bathroom (pregnant woman)* (1954) — of a woman being dismembered, Yamashita Kikuji's exposé of Tokyo under the American Occupation in *The Tale of New Japan* (1954) — or Ishii Shigeo's *Dance* (1956) in which Japanese bobbysoxers desperately bop while the city falls around them. The second section, "Gutai, Informel and Abstract Art", covered the fields of Gutai, performance and abstraction right through to the mid-1960s. The last section ran parallel to this and was called "Neo-dada, High Red Center — the art of the Sixties"; it contained the youngest generation in the show:

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D.Elliott, K. Kaido (eds)  
*Reconstructions: Avant-garde art in  
 Japan 1945-65*, Museum of  
 Modern Art Oxford, 1985.

Shinohara Ushio's violently coloured and roughly made update of a traditional Japanese screen and Kusama Yayoi's seductive yet threatening phallic chair were big hits as well as was a very early film by Ono Yoko.

What impact did this surprising exhibition really make? It's hard to say. People were polite but they did not really know how to react. It did not relate to anything thing within their experience. What was clear was the incredible energy and vision among these artists that had been completely neglected in the histories. The exhibition was like a depth charge: it was good but not fashionable and no one really knew how or why it was good. The catalogue appeared in the Japanese language a little later as an issue of the magazine *Art Vivant* but it was not until the beginning of the 1990s that exhibitions of this scope started to appear inside Japan.

We wanted to make an exhibition of Japanese *Manga* immediately after "Reconstructions" because this seemed the most attractive, active and innovatory field within Japanese visual culture at that time but it was difficult to find enthusiasm among either funders or manga publishers for such a project. We also hit the rocks in trying to put together a large exhibition on the art and films of Kurosawa Akira — a follow-up to one we had already made on Sergei Eisenstein in 1988. The film-maker was not actively against such a project but I think that he regarded it as too much of a memorial at a time when he was still hungry to make new films. But a number of follow-ups did result, the earliest being in August 1985, a commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the dropping of the A Bomb in the form of paintings and drawings with memories of that time by *hibakusha*, borrowed from the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation.<sup>10</sup> "Black Sun: The Eyes of Four" (1986) a dark, brooding exhibition on post-war Japanese photography<sup>11</sup> and in 1988, with the Musée d'Art Moderne in Calais, a retrospective of the work of Kusama Yayoi.<sup>12</sup>

After making "Reconstructions" our thoughts immediately turned to what had been happening in China, then still in the process of recovering from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution. Progress was slow both in getting support and in finding funding. A visit to Oxford in 1986 by Wang Meng, the Chinese Minister of Culture, was encouraging but little happened afterwards. Meanwhile a whole generation of artists was emerging which finally exhibited together in

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The book of drawings by Atom Bomb Survivors published in English by NHK served as the catalogue for this exhibition. The time this exhibition took place (1985) was marked in Britain by the stationing of US Cruise Missiles on British soil and many public protests against this.

11

M. Holborn, *Black Sun: the Eyes of Four* (contained work by Eikoh Hosoe, Shomei Tomatsu, Masahisa Fukase, Daido Moriyama), New York, Aperture, 1986.

12

No catalogue published.

"China Avant-garde" in the large exhibition hall on Tianenmen Square in Beijing in the spring of 1989 just before the historic Students' Revolt. After the suppression of this by armed troops no Western country could sustain cultural relations with China — but we still continued to collect material and research. By 1992 the international situation had settled down and we started planning again. At this time we heard that a German and Dutch group working for the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin were also working on a similar project. Some leading western Sinologists were involved in this, while we were more interested in how this work related to other contemporary art. With some misgivings we decided to combine our forces and an excellent catalogue *China Avant-garde* was produced by the German side.<sup>13</sup> The exhibition however was less inspiring in that it included historically important work made since the beginning of the 1980s but concentrated too much on the "Pop Art" — a tendency that was being strongly pushed in the commercial galleries. For this reason in 1993 we immediately followed "China Avant-garde" with another exhibition "Silent Energy: New Art from China" which was put together to concentrate on the installation and site specific work being made by the younger generation.<sup>14</sup> This was the first museum show to put the work of Cai Guoqiang, Chen Zhen, Gu Wenda, Guan Wei, Huang Yongping, Wang Luyan, Xi Jianjun and Yang Jiechang in this context and aroused immediate public interest — there was even a scandal: a famous children's broadcaster denounced the Museum for cruelty to animals in showing Huang Yongping's installation *Yellow Peril* which put together five scorpions in a perspex cage with two thousand locusts.

In working with artists from abroad the Artist in Residency schemes operated with University of Oxford and the Southern Arts Council were helpful and enabled us to support artists while they prepared work for exhibitions. K.G. Subramanyan made all the paintings for "Fairy Tales of Oxford and Other paintings" while he stayed for three months at St Catherine's College, working every day in his studio in the roof of the old tower of the Museum. Heri Dono from Yogyakarta worked in old industrial building in East Oxford during the winter of 1995/96 preparing his exhibition "Blooming in Arms" which took the precarious situation in Indonesia as its main theme.<sup>15</sup> This work was on a vast scale in keeping with the artists' previous paintings and installations and drew positive Press and

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J. Noth, I. Poehlmann, K. Reschke (eds), *China Avant-Garde*, Berlin, Edition Braus/Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1993.

14

D. Elliott, L. Mephum *Silent Energy: New Art from China*, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1993.

15

D. Elliott, G. Tawadros (eds) *Heri Dono*, INIVA, London/Museum of Modern Art Oxford 1996.

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Fukuoka Art Museum seems to have been the first museum to have made an exhibition of contemporary Asian Art in 1980, the second took place in 1985 and in 1999 the fifth Asian Art Show was transformed into the First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale.

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*Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* (1994) and *Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia*, (1996), the latter exhibition was curated by Apinan Poshyananda.

18

John Clark (ed), *Modernity in Asian Art*, Sydney, Wild Peony Press, 1993.

Public reaction, however in one particular case this was a little too positive as a representative from the Indonesian Embassy visited the exhibition after seeing a review in *The Times* and then demanded that the catalogue be withdrawn on the grounds that it made "untrue statements" about the Military regime. As the artist was still resident in Indonesia a compromise was found to settle this.

Asia has started to become much more of a subject. Fukuoka Art Museum began making sporadic surveys of Asian Art from the beginning of the 1980s,<sup>16</sup> and in 1987 the first Istanbul International Biennale started although at this time it did not have an Asian orientation. But things really got moving at the beginning of the 1990s: Vishaka Desai organised a Round Table for curators across the whole region at the Asia Society in New York in 1992 at which many people met for the first time, and followed this up with two exhibitions<sup>17</sup>; the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane and a the first compendium on Modernity in Asian art both appeared in 1993<sup>18</sup>; the Japan Foundation set up its ASEAN Culture Center (reorganized as Asia Center in 1995) in 1990. Magazines devoted to contemporary Asian Art were started in Australia and Hong Kong and since that time countless books, catalogues and exhibitions devoted to contemporary Asian art have burgeoned throughout Asia, Europe and America. These and the discourse they have generated have had a huge effect on curators all over the world and have signalled a real change in attitude towards the whole region. People have become interested.

My position now is that, as Director of the new Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, I have been living and working in Asia for over a year — the boot now is on my other foot and I am part of something which I used to look at from afar. It is expected that I will bring new perspectives to running museums in Japan while supporting the different cultures of the region and this, as well as showing unforgettable exhibitions, will be one of my main objectives. The new Museum, which will open in autumn 2003, must provide a platform for East and South East Asian creators to be launched into the international arena. A stronger, more critical discourse about contemporary culture also has to be generated to encourage a greater self confidence amongst creators and an urge to engage with the world at large.

Then, once our own, elegant, and rather differently cut, trousers

are firmly buttoned up, we can decide for ourselves how we really want to dress.

## India in Performance

Anmol Vellani

Executive Director, India Foundation for the Arts



Anmol Vellani

I do not have the knowledge or experience to speak about the 'Asia that is represented/Asia that is not represented' in the arts. It is hard enough, if not already too ambitious of me, to reflect on the 'India that is represented/India that is not represented' in and through the performing arts. I refer, of course, to the India that might be present or absent in, or represented through, Indian performance, and not other Asian or even non-Asian performance. To make my task less daunting, I propose to look at the question of representation not in relation to all the performing arts, but largely with reference to theatre in India.

How, then, is India represented in its theatre, and by agencies that make it their business to present theatre? In looking for an answer to this question, it might be fruitful to pursue a two-track inquiry. Firstly, we might want to find out about the 'theatre that is represented/theatre that is not represented' by those who are influential in bringing it into wider public view. Are performance presenters and sponsors — either because of their own perspectives, partiality or taste, or because of the nature of their audiences, or other aspects of the context in which they present performances — inclined to ignore or neglect certain types of theatre and, by implication, the India that these might represent? And what ideas of India are projected or suppressed in their representation of the theatre that they do present or sponsor?

Secondly, we might need to examine how the market that exists for the presentation of theatre, which is controlled by performance promoters and presenters, itself exerts a strong influence on the direction, substance and form of Indian theatre, and also on the artistic identities of its practitioners. Beyond this market, we may need to look at other features of the environment to which theatre adapts, and which, therefore, might have an impact on the India that is represented or not represented in its theatre.

The second track of our inquiry is important because performance presenters and sponsors cannot represent an India through theatre that theatre itself does not represent — unless, of course, they misrepresent the theatre that they present, or it is distorted by the context in which it is presented. And theatre, given its fragile position, is inevitably under strong pressure to tailor itself to the market, to take its cue from the behaviour of arts patrons and donors, to 'adjust' to the profile of a targeted audience, or to 'collude' with the dominant politics of nation, language and identity.

To advance along the first track, I would like to flag and discuss in turn those presenters and/or sponsors of Indian performance that are based in India, namely (1) Corporations, (2) Independent festival organizers, (3) Government and (4) Local cultural organizations.

#### (1) Corporations

The business community in India does not see it as its social responsibility to assist the arts. Instead the corporate sector draws on marketing budgets to sponsor exhibitions, performances, arts festivals and tours. Image-conscious companies, viewing arts support as a brand promotion strategy, are naturally inclined to assist the highly visible, influential, well established, safe and 'respectable' in the arts world. In sponsoring art events and programmes, moreover, their primary interest is in reaching audiences that their products target.

Corporations rarely support rural theatre or contemporary theatre in the various regional languages. Cigarette and liquor companies, however, have a long history of sponsoring English-language theatre, despite the fact that it is commonly regarded as a vestige of colonialism and receives no encouragement from the government. The reason is simple: it is good for business. These companies are prohibited from advertising their products in the print and electronic media, and see English-language theatre as attracting the natural clients for their premium brands.

What is more relevant for our purposes, though, is how companies represent the theatre they sponsor to the audiences they target. Consider the most recent example of corporate sponsorship of theatre. On October 22 this year, McDowell's and Co. of the UB Group announced its plans to sponsor a series of theatre festivals under the banner of Signature, one of its more expensive brands of whiskey. A report in *The Asian Age* said: "What makes the

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'Giving theatre the Signature touch', *The Asian Age*, October 23, 2002.

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'Audiences look forward to unique entertainment', *Bangalore Times*, October 24, 2002.

McDowell's theatre fest different from other festivals is that it will enable...cities in the country...to appreciate theatre from other metros."<sup>1</sup> In an interview in the *Bangalore Times*, Mr. Vijay Rekhi, the President of the UB Group's Spirits Division, characterized the first of these festivals, to be held in Bangalore, as "an effort to bring audiences here some of the best theatre that Mumbai has to offer."<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Rekhi did not clarify that by 'the best theatre' he meant 'the best *English-language* theatre'. At no point did the report in the other newspaper make this important qualification either. Surely Mr. Rekhi is aware that English is not the only language of contemporary theatre in Mumbai, although he may not know that it is possibly the only city in the world where major theatre activity is pursued in *four* languages — Marathi, Gujarati and Hindi, apart from English. Surely, too, he is aware that the best theatre to be found in Mumbai is not necessarily in English.

Mr. Rekhi's unqualified statements, however, are unlikely to be challenged by the audience he is addressing. Most of the people who will be looking forward to the Signature Theatre Festival only see plays in English. His erasure of theatre in other languages will not be noticed by an audience in whose mental landscape such theatre does not exist. It is an audience that belongs to a world sealed off from the social milieu and urban realities within which theatre in languages other than English operates. English-language theatre reflects the social isolation of its audience, both in its content (largely Western plays) and how it is represented — as if no theatre exists in India apart from it.

Corporate sponsors are able to represent English-language theatre in this fashion because of the profile of that theatre's audience. Put simply, they represent the theatre they sponsor in the way its audience would represent it. It is not surprising that corporations should do so: after all, they sponsor art to fulfill the desires and expectations of the consumers of their products.

But how widespread is this phenomenon? Are Indian theatre presenters, and not just corporate sponsors, also as influenced by the profile of their audiences in deciding what theatre to present and how to represent it? Are theatre artists similarly passive, taking their lead from the existing market in determining how to shape or represent their work? Are traditional forms of theatre modified by their representatives to suit the audiences that they wish to attract for

them?

## (2) Independent Festival Organizers

Corporate sponsorship, I have said, favours Indian theatre in English, but there is an exception to this rule. Companies also support theatre festivals, featuring productions in different languages, which are organized by independent arts groups. Corporations associate themselves with such theatre festivals because they attract larger audiences and make a bigger splash in the media.

There are only two independent theatre festivals in India that are held on a regular basis. One is the Prithvi Theatre Festival in Mumbai, which has gathered momentum since the early 1990s, and now takes place almost every year, sometimes travelling to other cities as well. The Festival does not have a consistent character: it can be local or national in scope, and one year it was exclusively devoted to European theatre. But when it goes national, the Festival accommodates Indian theatre in the broadest sense. In 1997, for example, it showcased a wide range of contemporary theatre in different languages, and even featured the work of a dance group and a folk narrative performance. The second is the Nandikar National Theatre Festival in Kolkata, which is older but smaller. Organized by a local theatre group every year since the early 1980s, it presents theatre from across India and occasionally also from other countries in South Asia.

The dissimilarities between the two festivals are less significant than what they have in common. An independent theatre festival in India, or its various editions, might exist for different purposes. For instance, it might want to counter the state's perspective on Indian theatre, presenting work that is ignored by the government. It might want to bring neglected aspects of Indian theatre to the fore. Or it might want to present work focused on specific experiences and aspirations, which mainstream theatre does not portray. But Prithvi and Nandikar's choice of productions does not appear to be driven by a particular position on Indian theatre, or an interest in making a specific intervention in the field, or even a desire to forge a definite identity for their respective festivals.

As a result, these festivals sport a bland 'neutrality'. It is never clear on what basis a theatre group or production might find itself excluded from their purview in any year. It is not any developed

concept or specific terms of reference for the festival that determine the choice of productions in any year, but the reputation of the theatre group, or the popularity of its last production at the festival, or the word-of-mouth about its most recent work. The Director of the Nandikar National Theatre Festival has called me on more than one occasion to ask: Seen any good productions lately?

But in thinking that this is the key question to ask in selecting productions for a national theatre festival in a country like India, he is making some assumptions about Indian theatre and its audience. He is assuming that the urban middle classes all over India, which form the bulk of the audience for contemporary theatre, have a shared aesthetic, and that Indian theatre is sufficiently homogenous across the country not to need unraveling for his audience. He is assuming, in effect, that Indian theatre is not as diverse as the contexts in which it is created!

The Festival Director's assumptions are not entirely groundless. For various reasons that I will not explain here, much of contemporary urban theatre in India has a sameness about it, and boasts a striking similarity in its concerns, which is somewhat surprising in a country as diverse as India. The theatre productions seen at festivals in India are mostly based on familiar myths, legends and histories, simple folk tales, classical Sanskrit plays, or the personal dilemmas and other issues that the middle classes commonly confront in the country. The India that is represented in the theatre of the festival circuit, therefore, is by and large an India that is shared by its middle classes. It is a theatre that speaks to what unifies the middle classes, not to those aspects of their identity that might set them apart because of regional differences of language, history and culture.

This is not to say that all contemporary theatre in India is connected to the shared world and imagination of the middle classes. There is theatre that grapples with its immediate environment, and is deeply engaged with very local sensibilities, history, concerns and worldviews, but for that very reason, a great deal of the import and significance that it might have in its own context, for its own audience, will be lost on the national stage. If such theatre finds its way into a national festival, and it sometimes does, it is by accident. Festival directors would not knowingly invite a production whose meaning or relevance is not accessible to their audiences. Their interest is in showing 'good' productions, not in presenting theatre

that needs to be 'translated' for their audiences. In other words, they are not consciously committed to opening a window to the multiple and different realities of India that might be found in its theatre.

### (3) Government

The national government is both a sponsor and a presenter of Indian theatre. With funding from the Department of Culture, the National School of Drama (NSD) has been hosting *Bharat Rang Mahotsav*, an annual national theatre festival, in Delhi since 1999.

This huge festival presented 144 performances in 2002. There is little to distinguish *Bharat Rang Mahotsav* from the independent theatre festivals except its size. One will search in vain in the voluminous publication that accompanied the 2002 edition of the festival for a statement of guiding principles or perspectives to offset the distinct impression that utter arbitrariness and lack of discrimination was involved in the choice of productions.

Instead the publication carries many introductory statements by ministers, bureaucrats, NSD office-bearers and a 'media critic', which reveal an obsession with statistics. What is repeatedly underscored is how many plays are being performed, from how many states, and in how many languages. What matters is that the festival is "the biggest ever organized... in the country"<sup>3</sup> and that it is growing in size every year.<sup>4</sup> What is important is to establish that the festival is as widely representative and inclusive as possible, presumably to demonstrate the government's impartiality and evenhandedness. The festival embraces every conceivable kind of contemporary theatre. Even political street theatre, which has been staunchly and consistently anti-government in its stance, finds a place. State sponsorship of street theatre would have been unimaginable a few years back.

The government's concern to appear neutral in the field of theatre is of recent origin. For many years it aggressively promoted 'indigenous' contemporary theatre. In the 1980s, the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the state's agency for the promotion of the performing arts, supported directors to develop stage productions based on folk performance forms in their respective regions, and presented those productions at regional and national festivals. This was expected to lead to the emergence of a contemporary theatre that was 'genuinely' Indian, chasing away the 'unfortunate' spell that Western dramaturgy had cast over it. A preoccupation with the question of identity lay

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*Bharat Rang Mahotsav IV – An Overview* (NSD, 2002) p. viii.

4

*Ibid.*, p. xii.

For an insightful critique of the 'theatre of the roots', see Rustom Bharucha's 'Notes on the Invention of Tradition' in *Theatre & The World: Essays on Performance & Politics of Culture* (Manohar, 1990), especially pp. 266-270.

behind the state's encouragement of the 'theatre of the roots', as it was called.<sup>5</sup>

Directors who constructed their artistic identities to accord with the norms of the 'theatre of the roots' also benefited from the government's partiality for representing and promoting their work at international festivals. Celebrating 'Indian-ness' rather than engaging critically with India's present realities, this theatre projects India to foreign audiences as folksy and exotic, attached to a pre-modern past, instead of as a society confronting the contradictions and strains of being tribal, feudal, modern and post-modern all at once. Missing, too, from this officially sanctioned theatre, and its portrayal of India, is an acknowledgement of the existence of overlapping and mixed identities, the syncretizing and hybridizing impulses in Indian culture, and the history of cultural interconnections that cross the current political boundaries of the states of India. These realities cannot be recognized in a contemporary Indian theatre that derives its impetus from the politics of language and regional identity.

The government's support for the 'theatre of the roots', although now withdrawn (partly I suspect on account of the controversy and criticism it generated), has left its mark. It spawned a generation of directors whose theatre primarily addresses national and international audiences. They recreate a tired theatre formula, using and reusing a familiar range of techniques and conventions to retain their hold on a distant market for their products. They are least concerned about whether their productions hold meaning for audiences in their immediate environment. Not surprisingly, some of them are celebrated nationally and internationally, but meet with indifference if not hostility in their own states because their work is seen as far removed from local issues, concerns and realities.

The 'theatre of the roots' relies heavily on physical movement, group composition and visual spectacle to achieve wide recognition and acclaim outside the regions in which it is produced. Mr. Balwant Thakur, the director of Natrang, a leading theatre group in Jammu, defends the minimal use of language in his theatre on the very grounds that the "conception realized through the body of actors becomes more communicable than the power of the word. I want to break the language barrier. Images have their own language, poetic sensibility and universality."<sup>6</sup> But how can the images that Mr. Thakur uses in his theatre, which would need to be rather simple to

'In Search of a New Living Theatre', *The Hindu*, June 22, 2001.

communicate universally, possibly explore the specific, complex and tragic realities of Jammu? How, without drawing on the power of language, can his theatre speak with any depth and nuance about the physical and psychological scars of a people living constantly in the shadow of terrorism? Is it surprising that Natrang's theatre is silent on the very subjects that one would expect it to speak most about?

#### (4) Local Cultural Organizations:

The contemporary 'theatre of the roots' is not alone in constructing itself with a national or international audience primarily in view. Traditional theatre has also modified itself to overcome its essentially regional appeal. Phillip Zarrilli has described two initiatives undertaken by local cultural organizations to create a new style of Kathakali, the celebrated dance-drama form of Kerala, for audiences outside the state.<sup>7</sup> The specific reinvention of Kathakali in both instances, Zarrilli suggests, is driven by a desire "to make Kathakali a 'universally' communicable art form."<sup>8</sup> Thus, for example, realistic Western conventions of staging have been introduced, the use of language has been minimized, and the emotions of everyday life have been emphasized.

Zarrilli observes that "rather than attempting to 'educate' the new audience into received conventions and traditions," the two makeovers of Kathakali "choose to alter and adapt the system itself to meet what they *think* the new audience wishes to see and appreciate."<sup>9</sup> In other words, both seek to enable new audiences to have *unmediated* access to Kathakali.<sup>10</sup> It is worth recalling that the contemporary 'theatre of the roots' has exactly the same aspiration — to create theatre that does not need to be further elucidated or unpacked for any audience. It is clear, too, that theatre festival authorities, whether private or public, do not see it as their role to 'educate' their audience. Instead they expect the theatre that they present to speak for itself. This general unwillingness to take on the responsibility for conceptualizing, curating and educating, results in a failure to communicate the complexity and difference of specific theatre productions and traditions. But, more seriously, it goes hand in hand with a regrettable tendency to create and present theatre that *avoids* complexity and difference.

It might be argued that often there is no option to reconstructing forms of pre-modern performance to bring them 'closer' to new

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See his 'A Tradition of Change: The Role of Patrons and Patronage in Kathakali Dance-Drama' in *Arts Patronage in India: Methods, Motives and Markets*, edited by Joan L. Erdman (Manohar, 1992), especially pp. 130-140.

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Ibid., p. 132.

9

Ibid., p. 135.

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For another example of the deliberate reinvention of traditional theatre for new audiences, see Rustom Bharucha's 'Notes on the Invention of Tradition' in *Theatre & The World: Essays on Performance & Politics of Culture* (Manohar, 1990), especially pp. 261-266.

audiences or make them viable in new contexts of performance. Mediation will not help in the case of performance forms that simply cannot be presented to audiences and in contexts other than their own without serious distortion. This is because the import and meaning of certain forms is almost entirely derived from their community setting, and closely tied to rituals of worship, rites of passage, festivals, and the rhythms of life.

Not that this has prevented the government from presenting Theyyam, for instance, to audiences abroad as a dance form. Theyyam is in fact a ritual performative form of Kerala, through which gods, demons, epic characters, snakes, demons, spirits, ancestors or heroes are invoked and worshipped to fulfill various human desires or avoid particular hazards and perils. Even local cultural groups in Kerala have taken to describing Theyyam as a dance form. Such a description, by suggesting that Theyyam requires spectators rather than participants, facilitates its consumption by unsuspecting audiences from far and beyond. What it is about Theyyam that might be concealed by this new description, or lost in the new context in which it is presented, is usually passed over in silence. If the government must decontextualize Theyyam, the least it owes to the 'performer' and his 'audience' is to explain how this 'representation' distorts the identity of the form. Otherwise it would be reasonable for the audience to assume that it is witnessing a fairly faithful simulation of the original context of a Theyyam 'performance'. In such a presentation of Theyyam, where little attempt is made to represent the form in other ways, the counterfeit parades as the real.

In pursuing the first line of our inquiry, we have performed had to make reference to issues that had been reserved for discussion as part of our second track. We have indicated how some performance presenters and sponsors exercise a strong influence on the development of Indian theatre. Equally, we have suggested that theatre of its own accord is given to marking out a course for itself that is in line with an imagined, projected or real audience or market for its offerings. Are there other forces or circumstances to which theatre adapts, and restricts the India that it is capable of representing?

I have already had occasion to mention the politics of language

and regional identity, although I have only made passing reference to its possible role in shaping the agenda of contemporary Indian theatre. I would like, in closing, to elaborate on how and why its influence on Indian theatre is indeed more profound than the behaviour of sponsors, presenters, audiences or markets. This is so because it has shaped how theatre people define and even fabricate their artistic identity.

Since linguistic criteria have determined the political boundaries of Indian states, language has become an increasingly important marker of identity. A state government's awards, scholarships and grants in the field of culture and the arts are reserved for individuals who can be 'recognized' as belonging to the state by virtue of their mother tongue. Artists and arts groups also require the endorsement of their respective state governments to access much of the funding available from the national government. And the government, one must not forget, is far and away the largest source of assistance for the arts.

To attract public funds, therefore, theatre artists and groups need to establish that they belong to, and their work is rooted in, the state in which they reside. It is rare to find an artist with a mixed identity, with parents hailing from different states, being projected or promoted by any state government. To find favour with the state government, however, it is more crucial for theatre persons to establish their regional bona fides through the nature of their theatrical output. Their theatre must be conducted in the official language of the state. It helps, too, if the themes and style of their productions have an identifiably regional character.

As a result, Indian theatre — whether in the area of playwriting or production — has rarely reflected the multilingual realities of the country. In Bangalore, for instance, many people speak four languages. It is also routine for Indians to shift constantly between one language and another in the course of a conversation. Furthermore, we are now witnessing a remarkable and growing interpenetration between languages. This is leading to a kind of creolization, such as is represented by Hinglish, which is a coming together of Hindi and English. In Hinglish, almost every sentence will contain words drawn from both of the source languages. Hinglish is becoming the language of youth in many parts of India. Advertising, MTV, soap operas and popular cinema in India mirror

this linguistic phenomenon as well as contribute to its further growth and development. By comparison, the language of theatre seems caught in a time warp, cut off from how many Indians actually converse today. How people speak, moreover, is a reflection of how they see themselves. But Indian theatre is unable to come to terms with, let alone capture an India defined by these new and altering identity formations.

The politics of language also drives theatre artists to suppress their own multiple or overlapping identities, resulting in a kind of 'self' denial. If their self has been formed by mixed linguistic origins, it will not, in all likelihood, be revealed in their work. (It is interesting, too, that Indian theatre, while it might address caste or religious conflicts, does not focus on the personal conflicts of people with mixed caste or religious backgrounds.) Nor do the new identities that people acquire by itinerancy, displacement or emigration find expression in theatre. Still to emerge in Indian playwriting and production is work that explores, say, the experience of people from one Indian state settled in another, or the predicament of someone from the Indian Diaspora who chooses to return 'home'. Most noticeably, artists are under pressure to exorcise the West that is in them, to disown the impact of India's colonial history on their identity/identities. Not surprisingly, therefore, Indian theatre has lacked protagonists who see themselves as belonging to many places at once or to no place at all.

If the India that spans different worlds, or occupies the interstices between them, has not found proper or full expression in its theatre, it is at least partly because playwrights, directors and actors here have not allowed their real selves — partitioned, unresolved and often contradictory — to speak through their art. Their work, as a consequence, disregards the world that many Indians inhabit — a world of divided loyalties, of hyphenated existences, of identities too versatile to be co-opted, of tensions and conflicts but also of new visions and freedoms that come from belonging on the margins.