

there had been no major shows of contemporary Asian art except for two shows, both of which dealt with Japanese art in the U.S., and the U.S. was quite far behind the Japanese museums, particularly Fukuoka. Similarly, Australia, through Brisbane's Queensland Art Gallery, had already begun to take initiative in making their audiences familiar with the works of artists from South and Southeast Asia. Thus, we felt that we could afford to have a slightly different organization and a somewhat narrower focus for our exhibition. I hope that we will have a chance to talk about this exhibition with Apinan, as well, because although this was very much a team effort, the ultimate focus and vision for the show very much was Apinan's.

Clearly, a very heavy burden was placed on this first major exhibition, in terms of the expectations, not only of the Asia-Pacific region itself, but also in the U.S. While we had tried to be very clear about what the exhibition could or would and could not do, the fact that, on a number of counts, it was organized differently from other major exhibitions or Biennales and Triennials of contemporary Asian art created major challenges for us. Somebody told me once that it created challenges because we were just a little bit ahead of the times. I would like to think that that was the case. Some of these challenges were something we anticipated, others, we actually did not expect. These challenges came, at times, from the scholars in these individual countries. For example, Korean art curators absolutely did not feel that Korea should be part of this group, because Korea should always be with China and Japan. There were issues, of course, about Apinan being a Thai curator. What is he doing in a place like India? How do we really go beyond that?

I think there were also questions that dealt with funding. We are a private museum. The government funding for these kinds of art exhibitions is not very forthcoming. One of the most interesting things for us was to recognize that, indeed, multinational corporations, which we thought were an exact parallel to us, as they are involved in all these countries and would want to be involved and support us, were very nervous about supporting art that might be perceived, in the country where they do business, as politically sensitive. So we found ourselves having tremendous difficulty finding support for this show. It also has to do with the fact that, in America, this was relatively new and young, and people actually didn't know what to expect. The foundations and corporations were particularly interested with our first major contemporary show of Asian American artists, because it dealt with some of the issues that were very hot in America at the time, namely, the multicultural debate, etc. But when it came to this show, people were a little bit more nervous. They didn't know what to expect. It is also interesting that the venues, especially American museums, felt that there were "too many countries." Contemporary art museums do shows that deal with, maybe, a few artists or one country. How do we handle so many countries? They all wanted to know more about our contemporary Chinese show because they thought that's something they might be able to handle. I bring all this up because I think that it's very important to recognize the institutional context as well as the cultural context of presentations of materials like this. And again, I recognize that

these may be particularly American perspectives, but as we begin to talk about presentations of contemporary Asian art in international arenas and places outside the region, it may be useful to think about this issue.

I think another challenge for us, because we thought that it was a relative advantage, was that we are known as an institution. For more than forty years, the Asia Society has been known for presenting the best of pre-modern traditional art (fig. 1). This is very true of most American encyclopedic museums as well. In the context of contemporary art, some people might have seen this, in fact, as a limitation.

We felt that it was an advantage that the Asia Society is not simply a museum, but also an institution with a very active program in economic and political affairs, and that we really are about teaching and exploring ways to expand American understanding in all aspects of Asia to bring the kind of cultural understanding and nuances and specificity to the work that perhaps might not be available elsewhere, like the Museum of Modern Art, or the Guggenheim Museum. We looked at this as a strong incentive for us to do something that would create an alternative model to presenting, seemingly, international, Westernized art, one that could provide a kind of cultural specificity to our appreciation of this work. In that sense, we felt that we had something to add to this dialogue (fig. 2).

We also wanted to create audience awareness. Since our own audiences traditionally had come to look at things like the 10th-century Indian sculpture, or the 16th-century Japanese screens, we needed to really prepare them even before the exhibition opened. So we started a series of public programs in which we brought contemporary artists, both Asian and Western, to talk about contemporary trends or even contemporary artists' reactions to traditional art. Part of it was to really de-exoticize the traditional, and provide new perspectives on the traditional, as much as to bring contemporary perspectives into our building. We also developed collaborative relationships with other institutions. Our partners, in this particular exhibition, were two additional museums. One was the Grey Art Gallery at New York University, which is very much a downtown institution (fig. 3), especially under the leadership of the former director, Tom Sokolowski (a member of our initial round table and he remained a very active participating member of the advisory committee). With his thoughts and input, we were also able to expand our horizon which, I felt, was very important for my staff, particularly the staff that was much more used to looking at traditional art than contemporary and modern art. The other institution was the Queens Museum of Art. I urge you to go to Queens when you are in New York, because it does very many interesting shows. For us, the Queens Museum had added a number of different advantages. One advantage was their curator, Jane Farver, who has been a very thoughtful curator and has done interesting shows of contemporary Asian art in smaller scale with a number of different countries. The other advantage was that they are based in a very strong Asian American community of new immigrants, and we wanted to make sure that those Americans of Asian origin would have a way to participate in this exhibition in a way that

the Upper Eastside, Manhattan, location of the Asia Society might not be able to provide (fig. 4). We thought a lot about the institutional context from the perspective of the audience and about preparing them.

We also were aware that this was material that was very new to most people. We discussed, at length, the kind of labels we would have and the kind of text panels we would have. We took a decision that was quite non-traditional in the contemporary art context, and had our labels written in a number of different formats. Sometimes a label was in the form of a quote by a famous writer of a given country that the artist felt was the closest to his or her work. Sometimes we had the artist write the label himself, or herself. Sometimes, the label was written by Apinan, and rewritten by one of us, and vice versa. At other times, we also thought about creating associative images from literature, from newspaper accounts, that really would give people a way into these works. We thought that it was a very important way to subvert the notion that the things may look superficially one way, but you may not be able to access the cultural nuances of the work that the artist had very much intended.

So indeed these interpretive strategies were something that were very conscious and thought through, just as it was in the case of the catalog. We decided that the catalog was not simply a check list of the exhibition. There were essays by our country advisors, all of whom wrote not just about the work in the exhibition but much more about the current condition of the art world or the art practices in their individual countries. We also added a chronology in the back, because we realized that this would be a book that could become a reference book later on. There are a lot of things that we would have liked to have done, that we weren't always able to do as well. But the important thing was that we really wanted to present it in a way that we thought would be most useful for our diverse audiences.

Indeed the response, the critical response and the audience response to the show, was particularly fascinating for us. We were very grateful that a small grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation was given to specifically study the audience response to the show. We were aware that the Asia Society was one kind of venue, and other two institutions were other kinds of venues. So, what were audiences bringing to this show? Much to our surprise, we found that our traditional Asian art audiences who actually had shunned us, when we did the Asian American show three years ago, had been prepared, came to the show, and often wrote down things like, "My God, I never knew these things existed in Asia, and I have traveled to Asia many times." On the other hand, the contemporary art audiences, especially those younger audiences that go downtown, were exhilarated by the show. They said, "I've never seen work like this. There's so much dynamism and energy. How come I've never seen this before? And I thought in New York I saw everything!" There was one comment that said, "If I hadn't seen it, I really thought it didn't exist." You had to remind them that this is a typical New York-centric view of the world. If it's not in New York, it can't be anywhere else. At the same time, there were traditional, art historians and scholars who, with the exception of a few, also began to say that you

now make it hard for us to justify why we don't look at 20th-century art. Museum curators and directors began to call me and say, "But where would you launch it? I want our curators to think about it, but should it be an Asian art curator, or contemporary art curator? And, since we can't figure it out, maybe we won't do it." My response was that perhaps you have to come up with alternative strategies and models of how you're going to work together. There were a number of art historians who also said that their younger students were demanding that 20th-century art be considered as part of the curriculum and they didn't know how and where to go. I was very gratified to hear these conversations as I was to hear from some major museum directors who decided that they wanted to buy some of this work. There were galleries who began to think about representing some of the artists in the show. All of these were the kinds of roles that we had envisioned this kind of exhibition could provide, a kind of a catalytic role. This would be the beginning of a movement or a system building, which is very important. Often it was the traditional art audiences who would look at a work like Dadang Christanto's and they would immediately react to it's seemingly traditional quality but, once in a while, would also write, "You know, I like this but I wish it wasn't so morbid," or, "I wish it was more serene the way traditional Asian art is." I was also concerned with the critical response, especially that of the Western art specialists'. Interestingly, many of them wrote and talked about how important this show was, but there was a quality of a somewhat begrudging sense of what they thought of the show. It was not so much what they thought of the show, but the kind of things they said. Some of the comments are in the paper.

One of the most exciting things that happened was that the *Sunday New York Times* Art and Leisure Section, which is the bible of the art world in America, featured this exhibition as the first major lead article. That article began, and I quote here from Holland Cotter :

"'Contemporary Art in India? There is no contemporary art in India.' So an academic friend tartly reminded me only a few years ago. How could an avant-garde art exist anywhere in the 'timeless' cultures of what we monolithically call Asia? If it did, it could not be any good. Too Western. Or too Asian. Or too little of one or the other."

Cotter went on to say that such views, while understandable, were completely wrong. He talked about how Americans need to learn what is going on, and that the kind of prejudices they bring to this work are not acceptable. Nonetheless, the inherent prejudice of the earlier remark which pitted the traditional in opposition to the modern and Western, in contrast to the Asian, persisted in the comments of many other critics. While most of them acknowledged the importance of the show, many of them talked about the work they particularly liked. What was really striking was that many of these critiques were unable to look beyond the Western prism that they brought to the work and through which they judged it. Some comments were: "The show is too full of installations. Installation, of course, is the cool potato in New York now," "Sexually specific art may still be considered radical in Indonesia, but it is definitely passé here," or "You know, it's

very important that we recognize that there are some built-in liabilities to the show," "Politically and socially charged art was the fad of the 1990s in New York, and it feels a bit behind the times here." I think what these kinds of comments imply, first of all, is that one can immediately put in a certain judgmental quality that closes down the in-depth exploration of the work. It's a labeling that, instead of opening up, really shuts down a discourse. I think it also does not allow for a discussion of the kind of charge that these kinds of works would have in their own social or political context. We had a rather unique experience with a group of curators who were working on a contemporary Islamic show, which subsequently was shown at the last Venice Biennale. Some of you may have seen that. They all came to the Asia Society and were completely struck by the painting *Linga Yoni* by the Indonesian artist, A.R. Maihini. They were shocked that it came from Indonesia. The kind of charge that this kind of work would have had, both in Indonesia and in the Islamic world, across the world, was something that was very palpable to them but, of course, was completely missed by most of our critics. There were comments like, "Installation art, a fad of the yesteryear, is now employed by the Asian artist in full-force." The work has so much socio-political content that you might realize that if you didn't know those nuances, you're not going to get this work. Rather than saying, "you're going to have to do that homework and learn properly when you go in," these comments had a somewhat disparaging tone. By allowing the works to be dismissed more readily, critics could not go the extra step in engaging with them. In this regard, I think that the next comment I make would be particularly helpful for us to think about why it is that many of the Western critics look at this work the way they do. This particular quote that I am going to use is actually a quote from another critic, a very well known critic, written as part of the review for the exhibition, "Scream Against the Sky : Japanese Art since 1945" :

"The pain of confronting culture as alien to the Western minds as Japan's, only increases as its forms converge with ours... Now, we must deal with the screechy feed-back of our own influence...which can make a Gutai abstraction...or the Neo-Dada Organizers seem at once childishly obvious in style and utterly opaque in nuance of intention. Recognizing the what, and the how of many a work at a glance, I grasp for the why, and I come up empty."

What is absolutely remarkable to me about that quote, every time I read it, is that somehow, the critic thinks that it's the fault of the work that he, the critic, comes up empty. He does not seem to acknowledge that, perhaps, it is because he is not prepared to know the "why," or that he would never dare write about contemporary Western art without all of the information at his fingertips. For many people, it is still easier to admit the "otherness" or the exoticism, or the foreignness of Asian art. Pre-modern Asian art is still easier for many people to absorb and appreciate. It has a lot to do with the long held prejudices and the kind of conceptual framework that we bring to that work.

Oftentimes, people would say that it is hard enough to understand traditional art. But at least we do the homework. If we look

at a classic Indian Buddhist image of the 6th century, we learn about Buddhism. We learn about what that was like in the 6th century. We bring that knowledge to the work. When the work looks deceptively similar to the kind of thing we are used to, when it becomes more hybrid, the harder time we have. That means that, if we are to work with contemporary Asian art, especially in the Western context, we must begin to think about how to subvert that notion of channel surfing, where there is a notion that "I see it, I recognize it, it looks similar to something I know, and I move on." We must make people stop, think, and look again. That is what people find more difficult to deal with.

I think that we have some enormous challenges but also opportunities as we look ahead into the 21st century. We need to create more in-depth sense of scholarship and a new kind of definition of hybridity, which is not simply about connecting of one to the other, or inter-penetration of the two, but a third space that these kinds of hybrid expressions create. We need to understand that third space, both with its cultural depths as well as its international or lateral context. I think that the specific cultural context of Asian art along with historical context, modern as well as the pre-modern context of contemporary art, is something that we need to pay more attention to. There are people who have done a great deal of work on some of this, Dr. John Clark being one of them. We need to begin to develop the new form of scholarship that is required. It also means new kinds of partnerships, so that may mean that we do more work with our colleagues, people who know contemporary Western art as well as people who know Asian art. We need to think more about the relationship of contemporary art to modern art. That also means we need to recover some of the trends of the 1940s, 50s, 60s, that we haven't always thought about, in their relationship to and their implication for the later trends, as well as connections to the pre-modern. We need more curators ; with this flurry of activities in the last decade or so, the same people are running around the globe. We are meeting each other in the airports all the time. How can we really train more people, younger scholars, newer people, who also can begin to get involved in this arena? How do we also really begin to do the right kind of homework, where you don't simply pick one artist who was seen in one show which goes directly into another show? We must also encourage younger artists to become part of this system.

At the conceptual level, we have an enormous opportunity. The opportunity has to do with what the artists do for us on the eve of the 21st century. In the new globalizing world, we often talk of the transnational economies and even transnational geography of the metropolitan areas that function beyond national boundaries. In this particular regard, or in this new world order, or "disorder," the contemporary urbanized art world also needs to be seen as an important part of what Saskia Sassen has called "strategic geographies" ; places and projects where one functions in a language that is at once transnational and locally specific. Indeed, in that notion of inter-penetration of culture, we really have to remind ourselves that it is the contemporary artists, not just in Asia, but elsewhere in the non-Western world, who pave the way for us to envision new transnational realities, full of exhilarating

and exasperating complexities that will form the back bone of the new millennium.

MC (A. Poshyananda): You have aptly raised several valid points regarding receptivity and responses in organizing "Traditions/Tensions." Now I can summarize several points, for example the burden you had to face, in convincing the trustees or the sponsors to support challenging projects, such as "Traditions/Tensions," or how to shift American preconceived notions and the risk of dismissing contemporary Asian art as not different enough, or too similar to Western art. Especially you touch on the point on reception of the show in New York. How most critics were afraid to engage with the artwork and directly write about it. In hindsight, do you think New York art scene was ready to receive contemporary Asian art?

V.N. Desai: I think what was really exciting is, first of all, nobody dismissed the show. Every single major art critic, newspaper and magazine felt they had to deal with it. I think, in that sense, they at least knew this was important to do. Were they ready? Had they done their homework? No. However, there is always a beginning and I am very optimistic because you have got to begin somewhere. And I think what has happened is that since then more people are asking us, "What is your next contemporary show?" More museums have called us, and said "We really want to take the shows that you're doing." All of that suggests to me, that after the first barrier, you at least have an easier time.

MC (A. Poshyananda): In comparison to the reception in New York, I felt that the reception by artists and audience in Vancouver was much warmer and greater. It was arranged so that the artists from "Traditions/Tensions" actually participated with the local artists. Could you make a comparison?

V.N. Desai: I actually should say that the art world, in terms of artists in New York, also were really thrilled with the show. Those were the people who were most excited. The program in Vancouver had artist discussion, where a local artist was paired with one of the Asian artists. In hindsight, that would have been one of the really strong ways for us to create partnerships. While we had informal partnerships, we should have done more of that at the formal level in New York. I should also say that the critical response, the reviews in Vancouver, were very directly devoid of this comparison of installation artists being passé, etc. This was not unlike the comparison of reviews of "Scream Against the Sky" in New York versus San Francisco. So clearly, there is a certain kind of New York-centric art world's closed mindedness.

Question (J. Clark): Who made the comment about "Scream Against the Sky"?

V.N. Desai: Mark Stevens, *New York Magazine*. The study of "Scream Against the Sky" reviews was very helpful to me, because it showed how often people felt completely open about saying things like, "You know, if I really want to learn about Japan,

why would I not look at Zen? Why do I need to look at this stuff that looks like works made in Soho?" People said that all the time. They didn't feel that that was objectionable.

MC (A. Poshyananda): Thank you very much. I would like to move on to our next speaker, who is from the other side of the globe, from Brisbane. She has played a significant part in promoting and supporting contemporary art in the Asia-Pacific region. Dr. Caroline Turner is the deputy director and manager of exhibitions and cultural development of the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, Australia. Dr. Turner was the manager and coordinator for the ground breaking exhibitions, the first and second Asia-Pacific Triennials in 1993 and 1996. She currently is planning the exhibition, "Asian Modernism" (tentative title) for the year 2000. The title of her talk today is, "Enriching Encounters."

Caroline Turner: In 1993, a noted Asian historian, professor Wang Gungwu, wrote:

"I would like to believe that artistic exchanges enrich the cultures involved. How enriching, however, depends on whether the imaginative and sensitive exponents of any art receive the respect of those who support and judge them."

Professor Wang's comments are especially relevant to the aims and processes of the Queensland Art Gallery's Asia-Pacific Triennial project.

The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art was conceived by our Gallery as an exercise in building long term relationships based on mutual respect in order to open up a genuine dialogue among the artists, art critics, academics and writers within the countries of the Asia-Pacific region, including Australia. We concentrated on the Asia-Pacific so that Australia can be included in this grouping. The project is focused on the living art of today, and seeks to fill a significant gap in Australia-Asia cultural exchanges.

The Triennial was the first attempt by an art museum in Australia to undertake a long term commitment to the contemporary art of the Asia-Pacific region in an ongoing series of major exhibitions, which, we now believe, will continue into the next century, as well as conferences, publications, education programs and acquisitions. My role in this project has been, with my director at the Queensland Art Gallery, Mr. Doug Hall, to conceive the project and, for six years, to develop the policy, to direct the curatorial philosophy and to guide the day to day management of the project.

Our own involvement with Asia-Pacific contemporary art, interestingly, stemmed from exchange exhibitions which Doug Hall and I organized in the 1980s. With the Museum of Modern Art in Saitama, we began an exchange of Australian and Japanese contemporary art in 1987 and 1989. This experience gave us the idea to continue and expand our program to a much wider consideration of Asian contemporary art. Cultural exchanges between Australia and Asia are now growing and gaining momentum. These exchanges reflect changing perceptions at the end of the 21st century in Australia and the growing realization and understanding of Australians that our geographical position and future lie within