

comparison between Asia and the West, or Europe and America, in your discussions. I wonder what your view is on this issue of understanding another culture, or making a culture be understood.

**Apinan Poshyananda:** I think it is very difficult to take art from one local nodal point and display it in a foreign space. There are always going to be certain expectations and preconceptions from the viewers' point of view. This is where the arbiter, the interpreter, the curator comes in. How he/she chooses certain kinds of work to display is very important. Mr. Elliott gave an example of "Cities on the Move," of which I also experienced a similar feeling. I saw it in Bordeaux and Vienna. This show has many exciting ideas initiated by the curators. Although they tried to avoid the exotica, they ended up displaying other kinds of exoticism. In this case, certain expectations of urban cities in Asia result in a kind of mismatch of activities, and you go through a kind of a mini-festival, mini-entertainment parlor. That, I feel, brings down the quality of some of the artists seen in the eyes of foreign viewers in a foreign space. Asian art exhibitions in Europe do not give a chance to fully appreciate those very talented artists individually because the whole thing is seen more like an anthropological survey. That is one obstacle in showing Asian works in a different cultural context.

The other point I would like to make is that we are very concerned about Asianness. At times, we fall in a trap of being too Asian-centric and almost putting ourselves in this kind of reflection, of being opposite, of the West. In this sense, we ignore other areas and other places, such as South America and Africa. We tend to look at or project Asianness in the context of the West. By trying to get or gain prestige in international arenas, we create our own international arenas within the region here, I mean the Asia or Asia-Pacific region. While we actually create our own club, and exclude others, we create our Asian-centric paradigm and do not actually consider the artworks or the discourse in Europe or America because we feel that we have had enough of that. In this context, we create our own kind of self-enclosed approach where we do not take in the creativity outside our paradigm, and actually miss out on a lot of the good things that are going on in the West because a lot of times we say, "You know, they dominate too much. We should have our own space." But I feel that we should see others much of the time in the same context. Here, I have to mention the example of the exhibition "TransCulture" in Venice in 1995, where a lot of the Asians were seen in the context of other artists' works and this is a part of life. We cannot create our own illusion and mirage and see this as the world that we live in. We do not live in Asia, we do not live in the Asia-Pacific, we live on the globe.

**MC (F. Nanjo):** I think that is a very good global vision. The "Cities on the Move" exhibition has been mentioned several

times. I also had an opportunity to see it in Vienna. The exhibition includes many artists and architects representing the urban culture of Asia. Some of the them are very well-known artists, but each of the works was of very small-scale and they were exhibited next to each other in a random manner, creating a space that looked chaotic overall. Walking through the exhibition was like walking through a busy street, as Mr. Elliott has described. Particularly, the works by the architects, which normally deal with three-dimensional objects, could not be fully understood with few photographs on display. It was very difficult to focus on the meaning of the individual work or artist.

From a different perspective, the exhibition in its entirety could be seen as an artwork created by the curator. Each work is a part that helps constitute the whole. This is a new curatorial approach, and that in itself could be praised. But the artists might have felt that they were not given the greatest possible opportunity.

I would like to encourage other opinions on how to promote understanding, or avoid stereotyping, or how to apply these ideas in organizing an exhibition. Mr. Mizusawa, please.

**Mizusawa Tsutomu:** My name is Mizusawa and I am a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura. Curating an exhibition involves physically moving and arranging works of art. The work could travel over the Pacific Ocean, or be moved from one table to another. Whatever the distance, the artwork, when moved, acquires a different meaning. An artwork is constantly handled in this way, traveling a certain distance, and slight errors in understanding occur, every time it moves. I think it is the curator who first decides whether or not the artwork should travel or not. Some epistemological discrepancies always occur in the process. I think this is what happens fundamentally, whether handling art from Asia or Europe. I believe that there are "Black Holes" in Europe, too.

If there is an element that hinders understanding, an exhibition should be held to bridge the gap. If you cannot bridge the gap, you should not attempt to organize an exhibition. Not holding an exhibition maybe a positive curatorial decision, as paradoxical this may sound.

There are objects which do not want to be exposed to the gaze of the audience; objects that want to stay where they already are. But a decision can be made as to whether or not they should be ultimately relocated to a different time zone, or from Asia to Europe, or vice versa. If the decision is consciously explained, communication can be achieved.

When this decision is not properly explained, a conflict occurs. Instigating a conflict is one possible strategy, but if you assume that human beings have the ability to understand each other, the initial decision would be the primary concern in organizing an exhibition. What I would like to ask Mr. Elliott is, what do you mean by the "Black Hole" you describe at the end of your paper? Your concluding thoughts are very literary

and suggestive, but I wonder exactly what you mean by "Black Hole."

**MC (F. Nanjo):** Mr. Elliott, what do you mean by the third "Black Hole" at the end of your paper?

**D. Elliott:** I think what I was talking about really was the stereotypical nature of the "Cities on the Move," when I referred to that particular "Black Hole." Although this is an exhibition which in the Western curatorial context is very advanced, new, very funky, and it was an attractive physical experience to go around the exhibition, but also it is a stereotype of teeming, "exciting," exotic urban Asia dressed up in new clothing. That is really what I meant. Just to reflect on Mr. Nanjo's question about how to counteract the stereotype, I guess the thing is that in different places there are different stereotypes. I have been talking about my or our stereotypes over there in the West. Here you have different ones. Maybe the idea of an "inner other" about the art of the rest of Asia is a stereotype. This could be a reference to spirituality, maybe. But Asian art is not just about spirituality. I think really that, as the previous speakers have said, we are at a stage when we are talking about frameworks. When you are talking about frameworks, you are really talking about art. You are trying to draw up lines and words on which you can all agree what the meaning is more or less, and then what the territory is that you are trying to deal with as a curator or as an artist.

An artist has the same problems. I think that we are trying to come to some sort of workable discussion about Asia ... I am not suggesting that we do not use the word. It is a perfectly good word. It is just when you are trying to define it, and someone, a curator of a big exhibition, a heavy institution, tells me Asia is all about "Cities on the Move." I say, "No, it is not. I know something about Asia. It is mostly agricultural rural land. Hundreds, thousands, millions of artists are out there working. You just do not tell me about them. I know they are there. I do not know if they are any good, but I know they are there." So it is this. I think that we now all have a responsibility in this, as people who show other people's things and represent certain power systems in different ways, different authorities, and different institutions. We have a responsibility to try and give a reasonable reflection of what it is we say we do. If we talk about Asian art, we have to not just take it as a given, but say what kind of Asian art we are referring to. It is just like a Trade Description Act. If you are selling something, and you say you are selling mangos and you sell peaches, you are in trouble. It is the same kind of transaction, but a little more intellectual and emotional! And it is kind of important because the whole world has this problem. I am working in Eastern Europe at the moment and terminological, semantic, language problems are very marked in what you call the former communist countries, the Soviet Union and East

Europe. You cannot believe it. I mean they all have different words they use to call themselves. We ended up just calling it the East. Eastern Europe, it is not perfect, but it offends the minimum number of people, and it is not telling any lies. I know this is a bit dry. It is a bit boring, of course, but we have to go through this stage before we can go onto the next stage after we have acquired a common consensus about language and terms.

**MC (F. Nanjo):** In listening to the discussion, I felt that since the world is full of misunderstanding and prejudice, it is difficult to find the truth. This is not true of art but of things in general. Since language is the mediator, the gap in language is at the very heart of our problem. The word "Asia" is itself the issue. The same can be said of "art" or "culture."

We have not heard much discussion on identity, which is often the topic that comes up in symposiums like this. In discussing the single term, "Asia," we are discussing the topic of "Asian identity."

Perhaps there is not one single identity that defines Asia. Asia almost seems like a mixed bag of various elements piled into one. Asia may be a geographic classification, with some common threads, but a collection of diverse cultures. Mr. Elliott seems to acknowledge the fact that Europe is not like this at all.

In September last year, at the 1998 AICA (International Association of Art Critics) Japan Congress, Mr. Minamishima Hiroshi, a Japanese critic, presented his opinion on how identity is not necessary. That led to a heated discussion. Perhaps, for those who create art, identity is not the goal of their activity, but something that may surface as the result of their work. Is there anybody who would like to comment on this issue of identity?

**Niranjan Rajah:** I think I have two points. Both of which stem from Mr. David Elliott's presentation. The Asia question — I think it is not really important to try and decide whether there is such a thing or there can be such a category. Nevertheless, I would like to make one or two observations to indicate that there might be. If you think along the lines of Genghis Khan, the waves that moved across the region, there are other less violent waves that covered wide geographical areas which almost describe Asia. The religions of Hinduism and Buddhism spread practically across most of Asia, except for what is called the Near East from the Western point of view. So it seems there is such a thing as Asia and Asian identity, but what I really want to say is that it is not important in a descriptive sense. I think what is important is "Asia" as a prescriptive term. As something we could strive for as people living in a certain area. If it suits us, if we find it strategically, culturally or even geopolitically useful, if we can negotiate it and we like it, we can work with it, why not? Historical or geographical logic is not the point here. So this is the first point

about Asia. Do we want to be Asia? Can we negotiate it?

The other point, I think, is more interesting. Mr. Elliott really stated his position with absolute clarity, which allows me to throw it back, not at Mr. Elliott, but perhaps at the rest of the panel. "Art has no function, but to be itself." Now for me this is very much a definition of art that can only come from the Western view, a post-Renaissance view, at least. Art as not having a function. Amongst other discussions we have had from Indonesia, Mr. Supangkat's idea of discourse, art and society. Here we began to talk about function—the failure of art when it overreaches aesthetics into pure politics. So many discussions like this have actually been about function. The function of art in Singapore is nation building. So I wonder, if the difficulty for modernism in Asia, the reason it has been slow, is because it is anathema to our culture.

It is not normal for "us" to make an object and look at it and say that is beautiful. It is new, it is modern. Tanizaki Junichiro has stated the Japanese position on the impact of the modern aesthetic. We have all gone through the same resistance at various stages, but the wave is too powerful, and we have all succumbed to this, and everybody in this room is involved with art that is actually detached and devoid of function in a traditional sense. Nevertheless, I think one of the characteristics of culture in the East is a resistance to this contemporary art. It is not treated in the same way as in the West. There are religious traditions, rituals and performances that overpower and overshadow the rituals of contemporary art. Perhaps in the West, rituals of art are more powerful than the rituals of church or some other traditional form. So the question to finish my little speech is what the other panelists think about art and function for Asia in the future.

**MC (F. Nanjo):** I was also thinking about this point: "What is art for the human being or for the society at large?" Things taken from everyday life are now turning into subjects for art. There is more art that is related to actual society. Such art is more accessible to the audience, as if it took on a kind of populism or enlightenment. Images of familiar things are presented instead of abstract images. This helps the audience in viewing contemporary art, which is commonly seen as difficult. So this may be one of the trends today. But what can we say about the function of art? Mr. Supangkat, or Mr. Leng, you seem to suggest that art should not have a political function. So, what should the role of art be in society at large?

**Jim Supgankat:** I never stated that art should not have a political function. Let me describe my opinion. If we think of politics in terms of major political changes, art, in fact, could never have a political function. As we know, political art has never resulted in a revolution. If we consider political art as art that represents political tensions, no doubt there is a strong connection between art and politics. The whole development of contemporary art in Indonesia has shown this fact.

Nevertheless, since art doesn't have a practical political function, in speaking about a possible connection, I raised the question why art should be committed to politics, particularly to certain political ideologies and as a result, lose its critical sensibility.

To answer Mr. Nanjo's question, I think there is distance between a political function and the function of art. Nevertheless, in the case of Indonesia, there is a connection between politics in art and the function of art.

As has happened in many other countries, the question of what art means for the society has continuously been asked in Indonesia. The discussion surrounding this question showed significant progress after Indonesia got involved in regional forums, something that I have identified as the discoursing process. By observing the social dimension in representations in contemporary art, a search emerged to find a paradigm for art practice in Indonesia. Through discussions, awareness started to grow that the social dimension might be the bottom line of artistic representations in Indonesia and, thus, the paradigm of art in Indonesia is probably this tendency to demonstrate a moralistic social commitment. This is why the representations that tend to defend the grassroots by criticizing any power that oppresses the people can be seen in the paintings of Sudjojono, the pioneer of modern art in Indonesia, and also in Heri Dono's installations. This awareness has potential for advancing discussion on the function of art in Indonesia. In a sense, art representations can show social changes, which is overlooked by most official observers who tend to see only the good outcomes of what has been called progress. It is of course difficult to consider the function I just mentioned as a social function since art representations are only discussed within limited circles. If discourses or thoughts later emerge, art could be seen as contributing to those discourses or thoughts.

As has happened in many other countries in Asia, in Indonesia, there is still a distance between art and the society. It is hard to imagine that art could lead to social enlightenment as it has done in the Western world. Due to the moralistic stance shown in most of Indonesian art works, the absence of avant-gardism is a matter of course. In fact, it is hard to find representations that criticize society in order to bring about progress.

**Leng Lin:** Art might have a variety of effects or roles in society, but I think that one of the examples we see in China is its role and function as a subculture. In China, the very existence of subcultural art creates a new space that never existed in the society before. At the same time, one aspect of this trend is responsive to, or can adapt to, what the West demands of art and culture from Asia.

I found Mr. Elliott's point interesting; he described how one cannot escape from the stereotype which the West has created. He also pointed out how the reproduction of

stereotypes is dangerous. But the threat is self-initiated, and not forced upon the West from Asia. In other words, there is self-awareness of the danger. I thought that this idea was very interesting.

**MC (F. Nanjo):** That is a very interesting point, an unexpected view on the issue. It seems to touch the heart of the matter. Those looking at Asia from the outside think that they should not stereotype Asia, while those of us in Asia are not aware of such an issue.

**D. Elliott:** When I introduced my talk, I was saying that stereotypes are not confined to the West; there are completely different stereotypes in this part of the world, about other parts of Asia, and also about the West, but I was asked to speak about the Western view. I am not saying it is the true or only view. But the subject of my talk was how Asian art is perceived in the West. So I took this example and bits of historical examples as well and unpacked this particular stereotype about Asia within a colonial and historical framework. So yes, he is absolutely right.

**MC (F. Nanjo):** What you are talking about is about our stereotypes about the West. But leaving that issue aside for a moment, Mr. Hoskote, Mr. Seo, have you any points that you would like to make relating to the role of art in society? Why do we need art?

**Ranjit Hoskote:** We talked about art as a language. I think that the minute you talk about language, you are also talking about competence. There is a framework of competence in a certain language which determines who can understand it and participate in it and who cannot. I think that the main problem in India is that contemporary art—whether modern, modernist, or postmodern or postmodernist, whatever category you want to apply—is in fact available to a metropolitan minority. This is largely because it comes out of a metropolitan art school, arts academy kind of context. So unless you are competent in the language, you do not understand it. If you do not understand it, it makes no connection with your life. So given that India is a largely rural and semi-rural country, it stands to reason that the kind of art that we would speak of is not very germane to most people's lives and that is the situation that Indian artists live with—which opens us to the question of what other kinds of artists are available, really. And I think that that is where many of the debates in India are being fought. Because there is a whole range of art practices that we, from our point of view in the city, describe—deride really—as folk forms or decorative art. Our categories were first put down by the British during the colonial period, which we continue to use. I think that the divide has occasionally been bridged, as for instance in the recent collaborations between Navjot Altaf, who is a metropolitan artist, and Shantibai, who is a craftsperson or a

village artist, whatever term you want to use. So you find that it is really the taxonomy or the classification which has produced these problems. We tend to believe that folk artists or craftspeople are stuck in history and they go on reproducing ancestral patterns. That is hardly true. I think they are approaching historical experience in their own highly individualistic way. But the curatorial acumen for acknowledging this is often not in place. Fortunately, experts like Jyotindra Jain, who is the director of Crafts Museum in Delhi, are taking the initiative to break down the barrier separating contemporary metropolitan artists and contemporary non-metropolitan artists. I think that I would also like to point out that the institutional framework of contemporary art in India itself is alien to most people. The studio-gallery-museum system is not one that makes particular sense to the majority. And the challenge here for artists centered in cities is to find new forms of address, new institutional forms by which more people can be brought into the ambit of art, and this too is happening in a small, but significant way. In a sense, the great example of the bridging of the urban/rural divide in India is the Hindi movie, the popular Hindi film, but that is, intellectually speaking, a low-demand cultural form. So the challenge for art which is in any way reflexive is to that extent far greater—to find a language that is at once intellectually stimulating and popularly accessible. That is the meaning of the seesaw of contact and alienation I spoke of earlier, on which the contemporary Indian artist is balanced. So all notions of the artists' role in society come out of awareness of being in this predicament.

**MC (F. Nanjo):** I would actually like to ask more people to speak, but we have already overrun our scheduled time.

I must first apologize for not being able to round up the discussion smoothly. I found the presentations to be very interesting. I think that we were able to examine the structure of the issue through the views of those presenting the art and those being presented. We have been able to look at this issue from a point of view different from that of the previous symposiums held at the Asia Center.

I think that the issues of stereotypes and identity are two sides of the same coin. We could spend days discussing this issue. It would also be very effective to hold a symposium like this during an exhibition. I hope we will have another opportunity of this kind in the future. Thank you.

## The Sea of Diversity: Divisions and Syntheses

Nanjo Fumio

Independent Curator

David Elliott spoke of the West's stereotypical view of Asia, using the word "Black Hole." This problem of stereotypes is related to the larger question of how it is possible to understand and make aesthetic judgments about the art of a culture other than one's own. In fact, this question of the possibility of understanding is endemic to all art and one of its most interesting aspects. Even if the artist stays aloof and tries to create sublime beauty that is beyond the ken of the masses, all art is made on the premise that someone, sometime and somewhere, will understand and love it. In a sense it is like a diary. The writer of a diary has no intention of showing it to anyone else, but he writes as if someone were going to read it sometime, somewhere. In other words, artworks are ultimately meant to communicate or at least be seen and appreciated by other people.

If so, the desire to be understood by others of a different culture is a fundamental condition of all art. Even if art is strange and exotic or based on extensive research, it cannot fulfill its mission unless other people understand it. Therefore, artists and others involved with art must work actively to encourage understanding, communicating and exchanging ideas with others, even if there is no foolproof method for doing so and it may not always be possible. Mr. Elliott affirmed that contemporary art is a global language and at the same time seemed to be saying that the possibility of communication in this language depends on the quality of the work.

Rhana Devenport gave practical suggestions on method in the next presentation. Ms. Devenport was involved in the curation of the second and third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) in Brisbane. In both shows, the curators attempted to take a neutral position between two cultural contexts, avoiding unilateral decisions by long stays and careful research in the field. They took the time to hold extensive discussions and listen to the opinions of many local critics and curators. On the one hand, this method helped correct the tendency to nationalism in the viewpoint of local art professionals. On the other, it provided opportunities for local people to gain insight into the gaze of the other. Through this intensive communication process, the curators also gained knowledge of the practical effort required to make the gaze of the other, which can easily slip into stereotypes, meaningful in academic work.

However, the gaze of the other and the local context do not always accommodate each other comfortably. Ahmad Mashadi

spoke about a local context in which the values and the moral, political, and cultural situation cannot be changed easily, discussing possible responses to this situation and ways of creating hope. He talked about the existence or lack of free expression in contemporary art under strict governmental restrictions and how "Nokia Singapore Art 1999" became a model exhibition which gave hope to artists.

The fourth speaker, Nakamura Hideki, focused on the problem of the gap between specific contexts and the gaze of the other. He attempted to address the doubts raised in Asian countries about the active efforts over the last ten years by Japan and Australia to study and exhibit Asian art. He stated that the purpose of these exhibitions was to carry out a dialog with the "internal other," and sought the understanding of the audience.

Whenever exhibitions of Asian art are mounted, there is an undeniable tendency to read some sort of political intention into them. It comes down to the questions of "who" holds the exhibition, "for what purpose," and "for whom."

In his paper, Mr. Nakamura said that research and exhibitions are not carried out for the sake of the Asian that are their object, but to help the Japanese, whose identity is ambiguous, understand themselves and their situation in their own country. He made the statement that these exhibitions are intended to implant the eyes of the other within the Japanese.

After the initial presentation of the papers, the panelists raised a number of important questions. Shioda Junichi, commenting on Mr. Elliott's presentation, spoke of the uncertainty of the definition of Asia and the difficulty of choosing two methods for mutual understanding of the different cultural contexts of two different countries. In response, Mr. Elliott said that curators should use an approach to the exhibition that makes some sort of dialog possible, at least in the country where it is held, and he said that this could be assured by "quality."

Shimizu Toshio directed a question to Ms. Devenport. He said that Australia had introduced the art and culture of Asia to its own country on a number of occasions, but asked what had it sent or returned to Asia. I believe that this question should be pondered as a question for Japan as well. Ms. Devenport mentioned numerous examples of exchange programs and collaborations carried out between Australia and Asian countries. These were carried out between artists, between cities, or were related to specific projects, and it seemed to me that they represented a substantial effort.

Ushiroshoji Masahiro asked Mr. Mashadi why he made so much of the "Nokia Singapore 1999" exhibition as a model. Mr. Mashadi replied that there are sensitive moral and political problems unique to Singapore which need to be discussed with greater relevance to reality in the forum of art. He said that he was convinced that "Nokia Singapore 1999" was a site where this goal was actually achieved.

The last panelist, Tani Arata observed that the Asia Center

had been very active for the last ten years and that the conditions surrounding the programs of the Asia Center and the contemporary art of Asia have undergone enormous change during this period. He recognized the significance of the meaning of the words "inner other" used by Mr. Nakamura in his final paper, but he objected to the narrowness of the term and to the idea that this is the main goal of studies of Asian art in a place where the art of diverse Asian countries is discussed. Mr. Nakamura said that by the "inner other" he meant the other inside each individual rather than the gaze of the other in Japan.

In the ensuing discussion, there were a number of comments on Mr. Elliott's contention that regionalism and internationalism (or universality) do not necessarily conflict. This was also additional discussion of the importance of discourse or "discoursing," which had been brought up in Session I.

Mizusawa Tsutomu used the words "small journey" to describe the crossing of the slight gap in awareness that occurs in exhibitions that involve two different countries. In an honest and delicate statement, he suggested that exhibitions were held when it was necessary to have people make that journey.

Niranjan Rajah stated that there is no need to define the geopolitical region represented by the word Asia or the identity of Asian art. He maintained that this word need only be used for strategic purposes. He also suggested that art does not have a practical function, eliciting a response by Jim Supangkat about the role of art in Asian society.

Leng Lin spoke about Mr. Elliott's criticism of stereotypes, stating that this might be a crisis for the West but did not seem to be such a big problem from the Asian side. He pointed out that, from the opposite point of views, the stereotype of the West seen from Asia probably fits. This was related to a comment by Apinan Poshyananda. Ranjit Hoskote of India mentioned the special position of contemporary art in India, declaring that the ultimate effect of art is different from popular media like film, that it is connected to a search for the existence of the self.

Many themes emerged in the preceding discussion, but they could be summed up as a concern with the problem of Asian identity, although Mr. Rajah would deny its importance. Another way of stating this problem is to ask whether global, universal standards can exist for art, or whether it differs according to each specific cultural context. That is, are the standards necessarily different for postmodern, divided, regionally specific cultures?

If, as Mr. Elliott believes, contemporary art provides a forum for international dialog, there is no basis for such a divided vision. Although they approach the problem from different angles, Mr. Leng of China, Mr. Hoskote of India, and

Mr. Rajah of Malaysia seem to accept this conclusion without reservation. Dr. Poshyananda of Thailand actually suggests that it is inevitable.

Others expressed a strongly opposite view, that standards exist for Asian art that are different from those of the West. They believe that art is defined differently in Asia. These differences of opinion surfaced in the discussion of art and craft in Session III, and they seem to come from differences in the history of the participants' countries.

The main question is whether one thinks that a global dialog is possible under present conditions in contemporary art or whether one thinks that such a dialog is difficult or impossible. This question does not require a correct answer but rather an expression of the will to answer in the affirmative. It is a matter of ideals. Denying the possibility of a global dialog means rejection of the *raison d'être* of art, its fundamental hope to communicate.

It was not possible to adequately discuss the many different views that emerged during this symposium, but with further discussion it may be possible to arrive at some sort of consensus. Even if this were possible, however, I believe that it would only be tentative, a matter of convenience. In order to be honest to history and the facts it is necessary to accept the diversity of Asia, taking the attitude that chaotic conditions making strict definitions impossible is a cultural asset. For us this attitude could be truly meaningful.

Our future is carried on shifting vessels of different sizes drifting on a sea of diversity.

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)

Session III

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General Debate:

In a Global Context: Asian Art in the 21st Century

Session III

**General Debate: "In a Global Context: Asian Art in the 21st Century"**

In this session, the possibilities of Asian art in the 21st century will be explored through a free-ranging debate based on the previous discussion of issues related to Asian art of the 1990s in Sessions I and II and further stimulated by the comments of three critics with perceptive views on the future of Asian art.

1. "Asian Art and the New Millennium: From Glocalism to Techno-Shamanism"  
Apinan Poshyananda (Associate Director, Centers of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University / Thailand)
2. "Asian Art after the Internet: Transcending the Regional Arenas of the Late 20th Century" Niranjan Rajah (Art Critic / Malaysia)
3. "Turning Our Eyes to Individuality"  
Tatehata Akira (Professor, Tama Art University / Japan)

Discussion

Report and Comment on Session III

"Toward an Anonymous Individuality"

Mizusawa Tsutomu (Chief Curator, Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura / Japan)



## Asian Art and the New Millennium: From Glocalism to Techno-Shamanism

Apinan Poshyananda

Associate Director, Centers of Academic Resources,  
Chulalongkorn University

As we rapidly shift into the new millennium, it is time for anticipation, speculation and anxiety. We look ahead in hope that somehow when the clock finally turns the year 2000 will usher in a fresh new era. For Asian watchers, they anticipate that in politics, economics, religion as well as art and culture, Asia will blossom with pride and glory.

But in reality the path to global nirvana may not be sprinkled with jasmine and roses. Earlier this decade global economic restructuring and explosive growth in Asian economy caused East and Southeast Asian countries to be nicknamed the rising tigers and dragons. But as we know two years ago Asia got mired in an economic mess. Consequently, it has been hard for these tigers and dragons to keep their stripes and ferociousness. We are still asking how much longer will the Asian economic crisis continue?

Global integration and turbo-capitalism on a world scale appear unstoppable yet they are destroying foundations and undermining democratic stability and the state's ability to function. The pace of change and redistribution of power have eroded the old social entities to the point that globalization has become a trap where developing countries in Asia are caught in the game of catch up.<sup>1</sup> Global village and New World Order attempt to make the world become one. Ironically, the New World Order is full of chaos. The dictating powers dominate through the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization. If these international economic organizations do not work then strong-arm tactics are carried out by world police in the name of global peace as demonstrated in Yugoslavia and Iraq.

Politics, trade, religion and foreign relations in Asia will always play crucial roles. The region has been relatively peaceful but there are areas of tension that are ready to explode. For instance, confrontations between North-South Korea, Pakistan-India, China-Taiwan and turmoil in Indonesia and Cambodia have enormous impact on the region. Trade wars and the coming of the second Cold War will have direct consequences on our lives.

To comply with the new rules of globalization some weaker and less influential countries fall in rank with global hierarchization. Others react against globalization by turning towards local and indigenous values. Some countries attempt to assimilate both global/local which result in a myriad of "glocalism." This kind of hierarchical integration will continue into the next century to have consequence on politics, trade,

foreign policy, art and culture. Therefore in this paper I will present my view on the future of contemporary Asian art as seen through the process of cultural hegemony and the "othering" discourse that relates closely with "civilizing" missions and display of the "exotic."<sup>2</sup>

### Hierarchical Integration of Asian Values

Economic dynamism resulting in the Asian miracle in the late 1980s and 1990s caused considerable interest on the "Asian Way" and "Asian Spirit." Asian attitudes and regional particularities and various cultural and religious backgrounds tend to be different from those of the West. However, attempts to relate everything into a single factor—Asianism or Asianness—makes it easy to simply skim the surface and ignore the multifarious layers and complexities of Asia.<sup>3</sup> As scholar Edward Said points out, for Europeans, the term "East" primarily denotes the Near East. While the term "Far East" or "*Orient extreme*" reflects the region's remoteness. Culturally constructed images of "otherness" in Western discourses such as orientalism often place Asia to be on opposite side of the West. Systematized cultural meanings tend to simplify "us" and "them" while the concept of national imaginary is constantly redefined, reworked and circulated. Consequently, in the past Asia has been interpreted as "exotic" and "timeless." While Asian artworks have been categorized as "ethnic," "primitive" and "folk."<sup>4</sup>

The 1990s continued to witness various forms of cultural stereotyping in Asian art exhibitions which stress on "national self" and "national others." The process of exhibiting modern and contemporary Asian art has been a vehicle to promote Asian identities that are seen as different from others. Notably, outstanding exhibitions "Asian Modernism," "Modernity and Beyond," "The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia," and "Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future" were conceived primarily for viewers in Asia. Asian-centric paradigm replaced Euro-american centrality. These groundbreaking shows were constructive but their exclusivity on the concept of "Asia for Asians" became self-enclosed approaches as "Asian values" were analyzed for their own sake.

Exhibitions of contemporary Asian art outside Asia require preconditions for creating interest for audiences to appreciate "Asian values." The process of exhibiting in the foreign space demand negotiating cultural meaning across heavily controlled domains. Still, preconceived ideas by the West remain that, like festivals, Asian art has been the repository of imagined communities and reinvented traditions. Many Western viewers still expect contemporary Asian art to reflect exotic characteristics.

Several traveling exhibitions in the 1990s tried to shift away from the "exotic." Instead of the rubric of magical/spiritual in the exhibition "Magiciens de la terre" organized in 1989 in Paris, traveling shows such as "Against Nature" (1990), "Traditions/Tensions: Contemporary Art in

Asia" (1996), "Inside Out" (1998) and "Cities on the Move" (1998) focused on the demystification of Asianness and Asian exoticism. Despite avoiding stereotypes, ethnocentrism or seeing the world in our own image, these exhibitions still aroused the mystery of "curiosities," "oddities" and "eccentrics" from peripheral territories. Perception and reception from the public in the West varied accordingly. Many appreciated the brave new artists from Asia; others found them to be derivative and inauthentic.<sup>5</sup>

The prospects for the future will be that commodification as well as demystification of contemporary Asian art will continue as clashes of cultures and civilizations on world arena demand art organizers to be responsible for these "civilizing" missions. Cooperation among Asian organizers need to be focused in order to avoid divisiveness and lack of cohesion. Leading Asian countries such as China, Japan and South Korea must be careful in their construction of Asianness or "Asia as One." The gaze at their Asian neighbors/non-Asian others will shift and change according to specific sites and local audience.

#### **Commodification of the Exotic**

In art practices, conceptions of culture and difference have been heavily entangled with the process of art exhibition and audience participation. Frequently, the notion of strangeness is normalized so that art can be spoken in the same breath as entertainment. In order to anticipate the futurity in contemporary Asian art let us look at expositions in the past that revealed how taste, values and cultural hierarchy were constructed.

International expositions in Europe and America such as the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia (1876), the Exposition Universelle, Paris (1889) and the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago (1893) showed phantasmagoria of national identities and how nation-states represented themselves.<sup>6</sup> These great world's fairs became arenas of civilization, international trade and world peace. Representative countries became members of the cultural elite. For instance, the foreign villages of the Midway Plaisance, Chicago (1893) displayed strangeness of the ethnic people from Turkey, Egypt, Persia and Morocco. Portrait types were displayed as curiosities while thousands of viewers flocked to experience foreign cultures from far away places. Later, it became fashionable to attach art exhibitions to world's fairs and Olympic Arts Festival.

In the case of Venice Biennale, established in 1895, permanent art pavilions were built for invited countries to join the hierarchy of the art world. Notably, the venues at Venice became prototype for display of power, culture and dominance. Apart from Japan, the emergence of Asian artists in Venice has been relatively recent. Korean and Taiwan pavilions reflected financial support from local governments and patrons. The opening of the Korean pavilion in 1995

comprised of many Korean monks and national dancers to promote Korean exotics.

The presence of numerous Chinese artists in Venice Biennale in 1999 ushered in a breath of fresh air from Asia. The selection by Harald Szeeman, the general commissioner, indicated that Chinese artists are taking the lead into the next century. The prospects look bright for Asian artists. We might also observe that many Asian artists are from East Asian countries with strong economic resources that have political and trade interests to the West. Notably, due to lack of sponsorship and governmental support the number of artists from South Asia and Southeast Asia continue to be scarce.

Still, curiosity about Asian artists will continue to play an increasing role in international art scene. There are two main reasons involved. The transnational use of art exchange as lubricant for "economic intercourse" and fascination "to frolic with our friends abroad" are the paradigms for intercultural encounter.<sup>7</sup> The desire to experience thrilling strangeness will increase exchange-value of art commodities and entertainment industry. Entertainment may be in the forms of "cultural baggage" ranging from myths, rituals, carnivals, culinary, reinvented traditions and fascination of the Asian races. The dizzying array of diversity arouses a sense of discovery and excitement of heterogeneous elements from peripheral territories.

Some of trademarks of contemporary Asian art are now familiar. Cai Guo Qiang's gunpowder and explosion; Gu Wenda's "hairy" calligraphy; Xu Bing's computerized "Chinese" characters; Feng Mengbo's interactive CD-ROM; Zhang Huan's body experiments; Miyajima Tatsuo's metaphorical digital numbers; Soo-ja Kim's Korean textile bundles; Choi Jeong-Hwa's sensuous inflatable sculptures; Lee Bul's cybernetic females; Montien Boonma's installations with medicinal herbs; Rirkrit Tiravanija's *pad thai* performance/installation; Navin Rawanchaikul's *tuk tuk* and billboards; Lee Wen's *Yellow Man*; and Manit Sriwanichpoom's *Pink Man on Tour*.

These emerging Asian artists play important role in art extravaganzas and celebratory events of the post-industrial age. They can be interpreted as "urban shamans" who offer sensational experience through their inventiveness and theatricality. But unlike troupe performers, acrobats and indigenous dancers seen in international expositions, these artists are elevated to a prestigious status due to curatorial guidance and art institutional endorsement.

#### **The Future of Asian Cultural Arenas...Who Will Lead the Flock?**

Looking closer within Asia the fast pace cultural activities have proven that international biennales and triennales are means to plug contemporary Asian art into global art network. Nodal points in East Asia such as Shanghai, Kwangju, Fukuoka, Taipei, Osaka and Yokohama are becoming Asian art capitals

equipped in art infrastructure and financial resources. Like in trade, Japan is often seen as metaphor for the Asian brain or Japan leading a V-shaped flock of flying geese.<sup>8</sup> In the future, China or South Korea may take turns to lead the V-shaped flock but the pattern of hierarchical integration will be initiated in East Asia. India, Pakistan and Southeast Asian countries will remain to play subsidiary roles. Because Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia do not host such international art events they have limited control in selection and curatorial rationale. While Singapore claims to be the art center of Southeast Asia, it still remains to be seen how the flock will be led.

It is predictable that art circuits in East Asia will dictate the trends of "who's who" and "what's hot" in contemporary Asian art. In turn, these art circuits will feed information and promote selected Asian artists into international art arenas in the West. Like fashion, the kind of art regarded as chic, stylish or "artrageous" will be transported and exhibited like "hot" commodities. International art events in Asia will be the safe and appropriate spaces to be different, to be "ethnic" and "national." The jumble of foreignness will be pulsating with excitement and entertainment. Here, artists do not have to produce heritage-related arts that continue the purist roots and indigenously. On the contrary, they are free to create hybrid and avant-garde works that evoke dynamism related to the buzzwords such as multiculturalism, heterogeneity and polycentrism. By pluralizing Asianness into the context of international the asymmetries of power are shifted. As a result, biennales and triennales are at once catalytic and celebratory events that attract audience, mass media and tourism to these nodal points.

In conclusion, I see the future of contemporary Asian art to be extremely challenging and exciting. The roles of art organization, art management and curatorship will be essential in international art circuit. Instead of self-enclosed approaches of "Asia as One," Pan-Asianism or universal Asian values, contemporary Asian art will have a wider scope in relation with its counterparts in Europe, America, Africa and the Pacific. The more international art events take place in Asia the increase in the flows of exchange-value commodities and entertainment will occur. Predictably, this will bring exposure to artists in this region but hierarchical positioning will be essential as the leader of the V-shaped flock of flying geese will take on the prominent role of domination and entertainment.

#### Notes:

1. For discussion on globalization and global disintegration see Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann, *Global Trap: Globalization and the Assault on Prosperity and Democracy*, Zedd Books Ltd., London and New York, 1997.
2. See related article on self-exoticism and cannibalism, Apinan Poshyananda, "Eat Me," *XXIV Bienal de São Paulo*, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, 1998, pp.164-178.
3. See discussion on Asian identity in Francois Godement, *The New Asian Renaissance: From Colonialism to the Post-Cold War*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, pp.3-5 and Richard Maidment and Colin Mackerras (eds.), *Culture and Society in the Asia-Pacific*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp.1-5.
4. For articles on authenticity, primitive and folk art and collecting culture see Georeg Marcus and Fred Myers (eds.), *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995, and Ruth Philips and Christopher Steiner (eds.), *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.
5. For example, see Alice Yang, "The Plurality of Contemporary Asian Art," *Why Asia?: Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, New York University Press, New York and London, 1998, pp.79-86.
6. See Curtis Hinsley, "The World as Marketplace: Commodification of the Exotic at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893," Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Smithsonian Press, Washington and London, 1991, pp. 344-365 and Babara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Confusing Pleasures," *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, pp.203-248.
7. See Apinan Poshyananda, "The Future: Post-Cold War, Post Modernism, Post Marginalia (Playing with Slippery Lubricants)," Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change*, University of Queensland, Brisbane, 1993, Emmanuel Torres, "The Pinoy Visual Artist and the Asia-Pacific Century," *Pananaw Philippine Journal of Visual Arts*, National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 1995-96, pp.10-19; Babara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The Agency of Display," *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*, pp.17-78.
8. Richard McGregor, *Japan Swings: Politics, Culture and Sex in the New Japan*, Butterworth-Heinemann Asia, Singapore, 1996, pp.50-54.

## Asian Art After the Internet: Transcending the Regional Arenas of the Late 20th Century

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Art Critic

### Beyond Regional Hegemonies

As we approach the new millennium we find that the contemporary arts of Asia countries are no longer "developed" solely by national institutions in terms of an indigenous art discourse. In art as in other areas of the emerging global order, decisions of powerful International institutions now impinge on national scenarios. Art from the "Asia Pacific," "Asia" and "Southeast Asia," has been gathered together and exhibited in various centers with superior cultural infrastructures. The administration of these expansive and comprehensive exhibitions, curated on the basis of national sections has produced what can be described as neocolonial curatorial hierarchies with national curators feeding powerful central selection committees. Invariably there seems to be an insistence on national particularities to which regional co-curators are obliged to comply.

In the course of these developments an auto-orientalism has emerged in which Asians understand each other in terms of national idioms. This new orientalism in Asian art is more insidious than its colonial predecessor, as the rationalizations of postmodern theory belie a "taxonomic" construction that is, in the final analysis, not far removed from that of the "World's Fairs" of the early twentieth century. There also seems to have been an overt promotion of politically critical art in these regional arenas, echoing the hegemonic "democracy" rhetoric of the "new world order." Indeed, the "grand narratives" of the Asia-Pacific Triennial, the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale and the Kwangju Biennale are underpinned by the cultural agendas of their respective host nations. It must also be noted that, when art from Asian countries is gathered and exhibited in Singapore, Japan, Australia or Korea cultural "resources" are diverted from the "regions" to fuel production in their respective culture "industries."

As the world stands today, it is undeniable the "regional" is constituted in terms of the "national" and some nations are in a position to dominate their respective regions. Nevertheless, the instantaneous connectivity of the new computer mediated communications seems to be eliminating geographical distance and signaling the end of physically rooted notions of community, culture, economics and politics. It is even possible that, nationality itself will eventually be displaced, as various overlapping "virtual communities" emerge with identities and allegiances of their own. Indeed, regional and national characteristics seem less relevant to the

digital artifacts of new medium. As Asian artists develop a new networked multimedia art in online interactive transactions, they are contributing to the shape of what will, arguably, become a truly global arena for twenty-first century art.

### A Universal Interactive Aesthetic

If the elitist distinction of art from craft and from popular taste has been the rationale of international art of the modern period, the pluralism of postmodern culture and the technologies of the information age promise to dissolve this dichotomy. As the future promises to catapult the arts along with all other aspects of life into a digital realm, the interactive mode of this media seems to be undermining artistic authority. At the cutting edge of the new multimedia arts we find the collaborative construction of interactive domains and artists are already working very closely with industry and exploring the latest technologies. The emerging interactive forms are far removed from the "stand alone" art object of modern art.

In traditional Asian cultures the artist's role has always been to articulate the expressions of a symbolic order derived from scripture or folklore. Be it in Islamic geometry, Hindu sculpture or Chinese painting, or in the roadside icons of the Indian subcontinent the expression of individual personality and perspective is the least of the artists concerns. In the traditional aesthetics of Asia there is no separation of art from craft and the artist did not make objects or images solely for the purpose of aesthetic contemplation. The artists of Asia should find it easy to respond to this new scenario as it is quite simply a return to the traditional Eastern mode of artistic production.

### New Media in Malaysia

If Malaysian artists were less prepared than their fellow Southeast Asian artists — Thai, Philippine and Indonesian artists to indigenize and exploit installation and performance art of the last decade, with the implementation of the Multimedia Super Corridor Malaysian artists have the opportunity to lead the region in the new digital media. We have a strong tradition of electronic art that will lead us to the future forms of multimedia, Internet, Telematic and Virtual Art. The visionary Ismail Zain has paved the way for us in the critical engagement with digital technology. He was quick to grasp the computers capacity to dissolve the oppositional or structural aspect of the play of signs in collage. As early as the 1980s he produced a consolidated body of digital prints — his *Digital Collage* series. Beyond this, he constructed the theoretical framework for the absorption of technology and the critique of globalization.

The developments in Malaysian art in the late 1990s reflect the nations push towards being a fully developed nation by the year 2020. Technology is high on the agenda and Malaysian artists have engaged fruitfully with new media, albeit on their own terms. The National Art Gallery's "First Electronic Art

Show" in 1997 gave a historical review as well as an overview of current practice in electronic media, including video, video installation, computer print, computer animation, CD-ROM projects, Internet work, Smart board/VRML "painting" and real-time computer animation/performance. This exhibition has served as a focus and a catalyst for the growing artistic involvement in the new media.

### Web Art

While Malaysia is by no means the leader in Asian digital media today, the following pioneering Internet artworks from Malaysia give us an indication of the Asian art of tomorrow. In *The Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even* (1996) at <http://www.hgb-leipzig.de/waterfall/> Niranjana Rajah (the author) locates a critique of European aesthetics as a site-specific installation in the World Wide Web. While interrogating the ontology of the image in computer-mediated communications, this work also attempts to mark the problem of cultural constituencies in the Internet. In *Mondrian in Action!* (1997) at <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Bistro/6268/index.htm> Ling Siew Woei deconstructs a great icon of modernism. *Composition with Red, Yellow and Blue* is extended into the third dimension and rendered interactive in VRML. As we pan, rotate and zoom in and out of the now sculptural copy, we overcome the humility with which we would have approached the original.

In *La folie de la Peinture* (1998) at <http://www.artpages.de/installation> Niranjana Rajah examines the ontology of installation art as photographic documentation of past "site-specific" work is reinvested with online interactive presence. In *Tortoise Zone* (1998) at <http://westwood.fortunecity.com/gucci/369/index.html>, Ting Ting Hook invokes a slightly hallucinatory mode as the viewer's impressions of a disembodied virtual place impinge on his or her encounter with an analogous physical site. The differences between the outdoor site and the online one increase with time, as the tropical climate rapidly takes its toll. Documentation of the real site was uploaded to the Internet site as the event progressed.

John Hii's *Rain* (1999) at <http://surf.to/hii> evokes a Zen-like poetics of interactivity. The surfer encounters a black page that is transformed into a pool of water when an animated leaf floats down to strike the "surface" causing a ripple and a sound. The viewer finds that he or she can make rain by clicking the mouse. As the surfer "immerses" in the experience, the rain intensifies in visual and aural interference patterns. *Prasembah 2000 — An Antologi Ia!* (1999) by Hasnul Jamal Saidon is a long downward scroll in illustrated verse at <http://meltingpot.fortunecity.com/ukraine/240pra2000/antologila.htm> Delivered in a combination of erudite and colloquial Malay this piece draws from the Malay Annals to address contemporary culture and politics in a veiled yet critical, abrasive, even cynical, mode — radical content well suited to the independence of Internet publishing.

### The Shape of Things to Come!

It must be acknowledged that any universal interactive aesthetic will have to be developed "over" existing institutional structures and regional arenas. While the Internet revolutionizes contact between those who are so far apart that they cannot meet, its greater impact is in the way it heightens communication between those who can. Although the Internet transcends the physicality of location, the people who use it are geographically rooted. Face-to-face interaction will continue to be important in human relations, and this primordial form of networking is more easily achieved between "neighbors." Indeed, Asian cultural institutions must develop a regional agenda of facilitating an online dialog involving research, information dissemination, networking and creative collaborations between technology based artists and organizations.

Some Asian countries have poor infrastructure while others have poor human resources even if the infrastructure is available and others still have no concept of the fruitful engagement of art and technology. Indeed, business comes first in many Asian Internet initiatives and state media hegemonies prevail. Concern has been expressed in the ANAT's (Australian Network for Art and Technology) program statement for 1999 at <http://www.anat.org.au/99program/prpgram.htm> for the plight of artists in "techno-aggressive localities" facing "techno obsession" and "state information controls."

There are also signs of an emerging "techno-orientalism" on the part of international curators. Preference being expressed in some international electronic curatorial initiatives for digital extensions of indigenous traditions over attempts by Asians to address the universal issues of art and technology. The implication is that the center stage should be left to those in the West, while the "others" simply ornament the periphery. In constructing the new digital aesthetic, it is important to recognize that our Asianness will prevail even where it is not expressed explicitly. We should aim to determine the center and will be more influential if we are less tokenistic in our expressions of difference.

I conclude this paper with an agenda that must be addressed urgently if the new interactive arts are to take Asian Art beyond the present hegemonic regionalism and to transport us to a truly global paradigm in Art.

1. The Domestication of Technology in the Arts — We develop the applications of digital technology in arts without recourse to superficial cultural tokenism.
2. Theorizing the New Aesthetics — We must theorize the emerging art of immersion and interactivity (the demise of the stand alone art object!) in terms of traditional Asian aesthetics and metaphysics.
3. The Transformation of Artistic Production — Cultural Institutions must develop funding and administrative

structures for the collaborative approach required by the new technology based arts in which the artist will lead and collaborate in the manner of film director.

4. New Curatorial Strategies — We must develop more open curatorial strategies that will integrate the gallery with the virtual art space. Any rift between new media and old will in the short run stifle the new arts, but in the long run it is the physically rooted art that will be left behind.
5. Art Education — We must develop new curriculums and reorganize art educational institutions for an age of technologically induced disciplinary convergence.
6. The Interaction between Art and Industry — The fast developing countries of Asia must instill the culture of long term corporate investment, sponsorship and technical support for art/technology research.
7. The Technology Gap — Asian arts institutions must address the technology gap in both machines and manpower between developed and developing countries in Asia.

Note:

This paper has been developed from ideas previously presented in "Curating Southeast Asian Art into the 21st Century: A Malaysian Perspective" presented at the "Asian Art — Towards the 21st Century" seminar at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum 1999, "Regionalism in a World of Borderless Transactions: Networking the Art of the Asia Pacific" published in *Australian Network for Art and Technology Newsletter* #37, June 1999 and in "art@faca.unimas.my: Media Art from the Faculty of Applied and Creative Arts, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak," published in the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial catalogue, 1999.

## Turning Our Eyes to Individuality

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In exhibitions of Asian art, there is a tendency to see the identity of the individual artist as inseparably connected to the collective or communal identity of Asia. In spite of the good intentions behind these exhibitions, there is a danger that they might function inadvertently as systems that repressively control the gaze of the viewer. This may be inevitable in this "age of exhibitions," but I would like to take a hard look at this difficult-to-avoid reality and suggest the possibility of reviving the practice of gazing at the particular and the individual as a reasonable "third discourse."

The attention paid to Asian contemporary art in the 1990s has almost always been accompanied by the discourse of regional identity in one form or another. We have continually made the identity of Asia an issue whether from an inter-regional point of view or from the external vantagepoint of North America, Europe, or Australia. This concern with identity has been applied to the specific categories of nationality, ethnicity, and religion as well as to Asia as a whole.

This approach has not been limited to the field of art, and in general terms, the examination of national or ethnic identity is clearly an extremely effective way of understanding cultural phenomena. However, after observing the many exhibitions of Asian art that have flourished in recent years, I am concerned that we have gotten things turned around by making art into a field of discourse on group identity. If works of art are reduced to convenient data for demonstrating the nature of regional identity, then the exhibitions are not fulfilling their fundamental purposes even if they succeed in satisfying or entertaining the audience.

In an art exhibition, naturally enough, a number of artworks are simultaneously put on display. Inevitably, however, the more effectively organized the exhibition is, the more it suppresses the viewers' awareness of the unique world expressed in each individual piece. A show organized around the name of a particular country, for example, will be appreciated in proportion to how well it incorporates the identity of each artist into a national identity through a process of juxtaposition and comparison.

There is little resistance to this arrangement because the philosophy of multiculturalism, a dominant idea in today's art world, sees collective or regional identity as something that is essentially good with hardly any qualifications. While the hegemonic fantasy of international sameness and simultaneity

can no longer be sustained by the contemporary art of North America and Europe, it is being recklessly replaced by another beautiful fantasy, that of the identity of non-Western regions like Asia. We should not forget that this theory of the essential goodness of collective identity is politically dangerous since it can lead to the suppression of the individual under a facade of seeking compensatory justice.

At the colloquium of the 1998 AICA (The International Association of Art Critics) Japan Congress, the Japanese critic Minamishima Hiroshi gave a polemical presentation entitled "Toward Oblivion of Identity." In it he said:

"We admit that Said's model of the world where identities coexist and Theodor W. Adorno's idea of 'Discrimination without Domination' as well had effects on the late 'São Paulo Biennale' and 'Kwangju Biennale.' These concepts have been widely accepted by non-Western countries including Asian countries, as powerful text to encourage them to be conscious of their identities..."

But I'd like you to stop for a while and examine the boom calmly. You will see the boom means that identity and memory play a key commercial factor in a certain industry. It may be the reality of the boom that "cultural struggle" is the alias of identity as an industrial source to contribute to the narcissistic national profit, and it has only been supporting the late capitalism...

Realizing the reality, we have to acknowledge the fact that no matter what place we stand on, no matter how conscious or unconscious, we, art critics, have been obviously selling and buying identities in the market of criticism and art exhibition."<sup>1</sup>

Minamishima rejects the logic of the powerful nations, that "human existence cannot be assured unless identity is clarified," but he sees the same logic being applied in the ideas of Asianism. His paradoxical position is to oppose and rebel against this logic through "the oblivion of identity." Minamishima attacks both collective identity and individual identity from the same point of view and his thinking may be a bit reckless, but his statement deserves attention because it reveals the hidden political agenda that ties us to a repressive system when art exhibitions, the usual form of appreciating a group of artworks, are joined to the set of concepts, "nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender."

I do not mean to reject the structure of the artist's identity itself as being tied to the logic of domination. In fact, my position is just the opposite. That is why I believe that paying attention to the particularity of the work of each artist is essential in curating future exhibitions of Asian art. Of course, it has been necessary to hold exhibitions devoted to all of Asia or particularly countries in order to educate and enlighten the public, and it will be necessary for art museums to continue doing so in the future. However, it is also necessary to go

beyond this education function so that exhibitions will be something more than explications of regional and collective identity. As the next stage, I believe it is important to move the emphasis to introducing individual artists. The greatest specific need right now is to present substantial one-person shows.

Artists do not make their art as reference materials for regional studies or as a means of cultural exchange. If we evaluate artworks purely on the basis of a sense of our cultural mission, art could be brought down to the level of a tool for misguided ideologues. If curation itself is a creative activity, it may be logically possible to have a first-class exhibition composed of second-rate art, but this is a discouraging scenario.

An exhibition devoted to an individual artist does not necessarily preclude a gaze directed at group identity. In some cases, the individual exhibition can represent a point of view that supplements the context of a group exhibition. It makes the idea of identity relative rather than absolute in the manner of a group show. It is not unusual for artists to have double or triple cultural "nationality," and the conflict that takes place inside each artist may provide fertile ground to nurture powerful, innovative art.

The factor most likely to create an "age of the individual" in Asian art is the advent of heroes and heroines. Frankly, while it may be somewhat irresponsible of me, I am personally hoping for the emergence of a superstar. I believe that if a few giants appear in Asian art, it would be enough to quickly transform the situation. And if opportunities are given to promising artists this dream may very well come true. Conversely, the fashion for Asian art will not become firmly established if we spend so much time examining the overall trends that no one remembers the names of individual artists.

In thinking about what it would take to bring about an "age of the individual" in Asian art, I would like to point to an example from a quite different field, Latin American literature. Up until the 1960s, hardly anyone in Japan paid attention to the literature of this region, but in the 1970s, as you all know, it became a major topic of interest here. This was also true in the United States and Europe, with some difference in the timing.

The interest in this new literature took root and continues to this day, not because we learned about the general state of literature throughout Latin America but because we were exposed to translations concentrated on a small group of impressive writers. Whether or not talents appear in Asian contemporary art of the magnitude of Borges or Garcia Marquez, the boom will sooner or later fade away if the names of individual artists continue to be absorbed into a context of excessively group-oriented identity so that it is difficult to discern their particular qualities. We need to look at the individual as well as the group.

The age of the individual exhibition was proclaimed by Baudelaire, who said, "I see only the individual." From a certain point of view, what I am advocating may seem to be a

reactionary return to modernism. The concept of the one-person show might be criticized as being based on an excessive, unconditional, and naïve faith in individual identity. Some observers may be afraid that it will lead to the arrogance of "the legacy of reductionism" attacked by Minamishima. I am not so optimistic as to expect that gazing on particularity will solve all problems. I simply want to examine the fundamental figure of the "other" that still resides in much unrestrained thinking on group identity tied to "nationality, ethnicity, religion, and gender." As I stated at the beginning, I want to explore the possibility of a "third discourse" to treat the issue of identity.

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)

Notes:

1. Minamishima Hiroshi, "Toward Oblivion of Identity," *XXXII AICA Congress, 1998 AICA JAPAN CONGRESS, TRANSITION: Changing Society and Art Report*, International Association of Art Critics, Japan / AICA Press, Tokyo, p.55.



**MC (Mizusawa Tsutomu)** : My name is Mizusawa from the Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura. This is a two-day symposium, but some of you may not have been able to attend yesterday, so let me briefly explain the program. We have three sessions. In the first session, reports from a number of Asian regions were made, and in the second session, we heard about the issues involved in introducing Asian art in exhibitions from the presenter's point of view. David Elliott reported on how these issues have been dealt with not only from the Asian point of view, but also from that of the West. There were also reports on the current situation and the principles used in organizing regional exhibitions in Singapore and Brisbane. These two sessions took place yesterday and led to discussions on many topics.

How we focus on specific issues in a discussion is always a challenge in a symposium on Asian art. There are so many and such diverse problems related to this topic that we learn new things about each country every time we meet. To acquire knowledge of the regional issues at these occasions is worthwhile, but if I were to ask myself if I now share a certain perspective with other participants on these problems, I would have to say that I do not really know, although I have attended many of these symposiums.

Although Mr. Elliott described Asian art as being a "Black Hole" in European eyes, I would also add that we have a problem here in Asia, in which we cannot see each other all that clearly either. Mr. Nakamura raised this issue yesterday as he described a rather complex concept, the "inner other." With these issues at hand, we have continued to explore Asian art without a map. Mr. Tani and Mr. Nakamura have been involved in presenting Asian art in Japan, but they both agreed that these activities have reached the end of one cycle, and are now at the beginning of the next one.

If we are to move on to the next stage, how should Asian art be discussed and presented in the future? On what principles would we be able to base a forum on Asian art? These are the topics we would like to explore today. That is why our session today is titled, "In a Global Context: Asian Art in the 21st Century."

Having had the three speakers make their presentations, I find it very hard to find a common topic, but one of the things that I would like to pick up on is Dr. Poshyananda's view on Asia. Dr. Poshyananda said that he is not presenting Asian art to show "Asia as one," a Pan-Asian perspective, or a universal Asian value, but to seek new values through having dialogs with the West, Africa, or the Asia-Pacific. The word, "Asia," should not become oppressive or coercive. A more open approach to art should be possible, in expression on the Internet or in what might seem to be an opposite type of concern, the pursuit of separate or individual forms of

expression.

Now, I would like to go into the general discussion. First of all, I would like to invite the commentators to make brief comments, raising some of the key issues related to each of the three presentations. Through this exchange of opinions, I would like to search for a common ground on which we can base our discussion.

Before we continue, I have a question for Dr. Poshyananda. Your presentations always show an awareness of art world politics. I would like to ask a question about your use of the word, "glocalism," also used by Mr. Elliott during yesterday's session, since you did not elaborate on it in your presentation. Is it correct to understand the word as not describing the contrasting ideas of global/local, but describing a condition in which the two are complementary to each other?

**Apinan Poshyananda:** I think it is a term that expresses a binary opposition such as center/periphery, regional/international, or global/local. With popular use of the pair global/local, some scholars have shortened it to "glocalism." It's not my invention. In my paper it refers to local nodal points in various places that either resist or go along with the impact of globalization. But I feel that in places such as Southeast Asia or in many developing countries, the initial resistance to globalization might take the form of turning inward, toward tradition and old values and heritage. That is the first reaction to globalization. So it becomes almost nationalistic, reinventing or reviving local values, but as time goes on, it becomes clear that the impact of globalization will not go away. On the contrary, it will remain more and more, and I think the local values or the effort to revive these values gets blended with the effects of globalization. That's why I feel that you cannot just talk about localism or local values. It's enmeshed with globalism and the two must be seen hand in hand. It could be seen as a hybrid phenomenon.

**MC (T. Mizusawa)** : I would like to first invite Mr. Ushiroshoji to comment on Dr. Poshyananda's presentation.

**Ushiroshoji Masahiro:** I would like to ask one question. You have helped me in organizing the "The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: Artists and Movements," the exhibition which you describe as "exclusive" since the organizers have focused on the concept of "Asia for Asians." On "Traditions / Tensions: Contemporary Art in Asia," you commented that it "focused on the demystification of Asianness and Asian exoticism." You have categorized the exhibitions into these two groups, but other than the fact that one group was held in the domestic arena of Japan and the other in an international arena, mainly in Europe and America, are there any other reasons that you categorized them in such a way?

**A. Poshyananda:** Thank you. In relation to "The Birth of

Modern Art in Southeast Asia," as well as "Traditions / Tensions," I think that I mentioned that both of them were important shows of the 1990s. In relation to the first show, "The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia," I think that it was absolutely necessary to have that show, even though it was created for mainly Japanese viewers. If I understand correctly, "The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia" didn't travel outside Japan, while "Asian Modernism" exhibition did. I felt that both shows were a learning experience and should have been exposed more widely. I feel that looking into the future, there should be more of these traveling exhibitions that give a chance for Asian artists to be viewed alongside other artists. This is what I feel should occur more in the future. We need to do this. In connection with "Traditions / Tensions," the show as you know opened in New York, then traveled to Vancouver, Canada, and Perth, Australia, and then to Taipei, Taiwan. To the audience, this show presented all Asian artists and again I felt that it was necessary to open the eyes of viewers in those particular localities. I felt that the artists were outstanding, and emphasis was placed on their individual achievement. But I feel that, in the future, if organizers such as the Asia Society in New York do a similar show again, I would encourage them to include other artists from outside the region of Asia. I hope I answered your question.

**MC (T.Mizusawa):** There is another thing I would like to ask. The "self-enclosed" approaches of Asian values may be technical or a matter of principle. Could you elaborate on this issue of how Asian art becomes "self-enclosed" as the result of showing it within Asia?

**A. Poshyananda:** For example, let me mention "Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future" that was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (MOT). Again, this was a very important show, designed specifically for the Japanese audience. I was surprised that it did not travel to Southeast Asia and other parts of world. I just felt that it became a kind of Asia looking at Asia. Had it gone elsewhere outside Japan or outside Asia, there would be more feedback and reactions by non-Asian viewers, critics, and curators. The same could be said of the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT). Held in an Asia and Pacific context, it drew the attention of viewers in the region. I know that the project, which is based in Brisbane, is so enormous that it's impossible to travel, but I feel that the definition of Asia-Pacificness defined by the organizers should be more open and porous. Why not look at the other side of the Pacific Rim? For instance the Pacific Ocean, if I know my geography correctly, the Pacific Ocean touches the coast of Los Angeles, San Francisco, right down to Mexico and South America. So why not expand the geography towards these areas as well. This would be a more enriching view for the next APTs.

**Rhana Devenport:** Thank you. I appreciate these comments by Dr. Poshyananda. I suppose I have two things to mention. Firstly, the "porousness" of the description of "Asia-Pacificness" is something we at the Gallery are quite concerned about, and this certainly relates directly, I think, to what Mr. Rajah was saying as well. Since launching the APT website, we've had more interest from Asian artists living in the United States than from Asian artists living anywhere else in the world with a large number of American West Coast based artists interested in participating in the project. In a way, we feel that there are other forums (perhaps in an American context) available to these artists, whereas we are perhaps more interested in engaging with those artists who may not have other opportunities open to them.

Also, there are such a large number of artists who are involved in this APT through the "Crossing Borders" curatorial avenue who are globally mobile (they may be located in a different place from wherever they were born — for whatever reason), or may be involved with collaborations or trans-practice. The inclusion of these artists has certainly changed the nature of the Triennial this time. We decided to be quite open as to who the final artists curated through "Crossing Borders" might be. There were artists like Cai Guo Qiang and Simryn Gill who were obvious considerations, but it ended up being much more complex and layered with the Indian tribal artist Sonabai from Madhya Pradesh, the Brahma Tirta Sari/Utopia Batik collaboration and the Elision/Heri Dono new music collaboration as well as other artists involved. These artists have certainly altered the nature of how the project has evolved to this point. So I am really looking forward to seeing how this curatorial innovation within the project comes together, and to the qualities that those artists bring to the dialog.

**MC (T.Mizusawa):** Thank you. I believe that Mr. Shioda will have something to say about Dr. Poshyananda's comment. Thank you, Ms. Devenport, for your hope-inspiring explanation on the future prospects of the APT.

Mr. Shioda, can we have a comment on Dr. Poshyananda's views, along with your observations about the Southeast Asian exhibitions?

**Shioda Junichi:** Yes. You pointed out that "Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future" did not travel outside of Japan. Yes, the exhibition was only shown at MOT and Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art. Perhaps, I can only say that Japanese museums do not have the know-how to send exhibitions overseas.

I agree that we should consider taking exhibitions of Asian contemporary art that we organize to other venues overseas, and not limiting the audience to the Japanese. This is as much as I can say on this point.

I would like to ask Dr. Poshyananda several questions

about today's presentation. Today...

**Niranjan Rajah:** I actually feel quite differently, having spoken about globalization and Internet. I actually feel that there is still a lot of work to be done with the notion of Asian art for Asians. I found myself very surprised, looking at examples, but the only example that comes to mind of what I think should be happening, is actually a corporate-sponsored exhibition, the ASEAN Art Awards in Southeast Asia. It's not a cultural institution. I won't mention the name of the corporation, but it's a corporation with very clearly stated motives and agendas other than art. But I think they are the only people who got one thing right. When they make a show from ASEAN countries, they make sure that it travels to all the ASEAN countries, as far as possible, that are involved. I think this should be an obligation for future curatorial programming agendas. Don't make a show if you cannot take it to the most of the places that you take people from. Then you can get real criticism about your recontextualization of works and so on.

**MC (T. Mizusawa):** Please continue.

**J. Shioda:** Well, I think Dr. Poshyananda's solution for the future is to hold international exhibitions, such as biennales and triennales, and that he puts his hopes into such international exhibitions. In these exhibitions, artists, not only from Asia but from Europe, North America, Latin America, and Africa, could participate and create new opportunities. To bring Asian contemporary art into the international art circuit, what kind of power politics would be more effective? I think one of the solutions that Dr. Poshyananda presents is holding international exhibitions.

There is the Kwangju Biennale in Korea as well as the Yokohama Triennale in 2001 that would realize your idea. I think they provide one kind of opportunity. But, even in big international exhibitions, there are bound to be some curatorial constraints. I believe that selection of artists, regions, or countries would be limited.

As Mr. Elliott pointed out in his examples of the regional "Black Hole," there are countries like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar that would probably also not be included in these international exhibitions.

Is it not possible to hold grass-roots international exhibitions that do not have the scale of those in Kwangju and Yokohama, but something that can be rooted in the region and held somewhere in Southeast Asia, even in Thailand? Once a Thai artist suggested the idea of a "Mekong Biennale," which would include countries along the Mekong River, such as Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, China, and Myanmar. Is such an exhibition impossible? What is your opinion?

**A. Poshyananda:** I would like to comment on your first statement regarding the MOT show. Because it was such a

good show that I felt that it was great pity that it did not travel outside Japan. I think that was one of the most important shows that I have experienced. This is "Art in Southeast Asia 1997: Glimpses into the Future." Okay, I would like to refer to something that was said in this room two years ago. In one of the articles that I wrote and papers that I presented, I said that there should be more cooperation and coherence between Asian institutions, that they should work together as a force to create coherence rather than divisiveness because I felt that they have the necessary muscle. Financial power cannot be overlooked. If our forces are combined, less fortunate countries, developing countries, will get the chance to be exposed more. Because when it comes to the grand shows, the big shows in the very big international arenas, these developing countries still lack the opportunities to be exposed. It is worth saying that these artists from the region here can be selected to be shown at these venues in Asia. But when it comes to very big shows outside Asia, these countries actually need help from what we can call patrons, whether it be Australia, Japan or Korea. What would happen if they could not obtain art funds or grants from those countries? We know that governments, especially the ASEAN countries' governments, do not tend to give support to artists to participate in biennales and triennales. Only a few artists from South Asia or Southeast Asia get the chance to participate, and we know that if there were financial backup, there would be space for them to participate in the shows. So, I just felt that, for instance, the Japan Foundation, ASEM or the Australia Council could combine efforts to really make these things happen, and then these countries' artists could get a chance to be exposed.

Now, the other point I want to make is on the constraints of grand biennales in Asia. Like a big giant, it cannot move freely. So we should consider more thematic shows, smaller shows, and give more emphasis, as Mr. Tatehata said, to the individual artist. Thematic shows can travel easily to ASEAN countries, where the audience can have a chance to see their own artists in the context of the selected artists. Those selected artists who get into the art circuit or art circus, whatever you to call it, don't get seen by their own local audience. And there are some dangers here — I discussed this with Jim Supangkat in Jakarta few days ago — that artists tend to get into the trap of this stick-and-carrot policy. If they get backed up and supported, they will create the shows. When artists create works according to the demand of those particular organizers, sometimes they lose their visions and they lose their main ideas.

Regarding the more grass-roots, more down-to-earth shows, I know that Montien Boonma has dreamed about this Mekong Biennale, and I really hope that it can be realized before anything happens to him. There are other exhibitions such as the Baguio Arts Guild, which was a very exciting experience I had in 1993, and that is going to happen again in