

just said about somebody who is bored with being in a local forum and wants to get more information in a larger forum. Nevertheless, afterwards, after about five years of experience of being involved in regional exhibitions, artists and curators like me can see a clear benefit of being included in regional forums. The process of discoursing is just one example, in the sense of not just discoursing within a certain country but also discoursing at regional level. Once a regional art discourse is established and mediated by a New World art discourse, the contribution of the "brought-in" artists will become clear.

To answer Dr. Poshyananda's question, yes, there was a reaction and even some debate over whether it is significant to enter the regional or international forum. The reaction was, "There is nothing important to be gained in getting international acknowledgement." This statement is based on a kind of nationalistic attitude. The artists included in regional exhibitions didn't give serious attention to this kind of accusation. In fact they are no longer committed to nationalistic exclusivism.

A week ago, when you (Dr. Poshyananda) joined a discussion in Jakarta you witnessed another kind of reaction. Artists, critics and scholars insisted that we, as "brought-in" curators, draw up a strategic plan for changing the world art. They suggested we should not just accept the concepts given by international forums or the regional forums organized by Japan and Australia. We answered that we became curators by accident because nobody else could do the job. We stated that it is not that easy to draw up the sort of strategic plan they have in mind and that it is more important to develop our awareness and anticipate whatever conditions may occur. Nearly in the same way, regional exhibitions have developed through many coincidences and it is not clear anymore who needs whom in developing regional forums.

On the post-Suharto trend, I think it is difficult to identify a trend. As I have stated before social commentary in Indonesian artworks are not dependent on particular political conditions. It could not be said that artists stopped creating works after the political pressure ended. Yes, artists joined the rallies during the political reform that brought Suharto down and created instant works in the middle of the rallies. As I mentioned in my presentation, the instant works were not interesting. I got the impressions that artists had lost their confidence. I was upset to hear from many artists that they are not interested in art anymore because art is useless in the process of political change.

To me, the fact that a social dimension in contemporary artistic representation is not dependent on the political situation can be seen in the emergence of the unexpectedly critical attitude towards the political elite which I have mentioned before. Artists have maintained an oppositional position, yet it is not a political opposition. We should include Moelyono in this tendency. Previously Moelyono was the most radical artist. His political representations intensely criticized

Suharto's regime.

With respect to Taring Padi group and Apotik Komik mentioned by Dr. Poshyananda, yes, Taring Padi tries to continue the revolutionary criticism shown by works in Suharto's time. These artists claim they are leftist and committed to social realism. In my opinion, the representations in works done by Taring Padi artists are less relevant to today's political condition. Their radicalism, for example, doesn't take risks in comparison with the radicalism of artists in Suharto's time. I don't believe that they really understand what social realism is, or even what socialism is. Apotik Komik is a bit different because, beside political matters, they represent the actual situation. Their idea of creating huge comic strips in public spaces is interesting.

**MC (A. Miki):** I would like to invite Mr. Tani to respond to the presentation on India.

**Tani Arata:** I am Tani Arata. I work at the Utsunomiya Museum of Art. I must confess that I am not that well-informed about the Indian situation. But quite recently, in connection with next year's third Kwangju Biennale, I had an opportunity to go to Mumbai (Bombay), where I met Mr. Hoskote who helped and assisted me.

I should like to mention here that Mr. Hoskote explores the issue of curation at length, an issue about which Mr. Shioda questioned Mr. Supangkat. In referring to the phrase the "Third World," one aspect of the issue is how the West views this world. In this respect, Japan's involvement is also an issue and Mr. Hoskote perhaps took this into account.

You point to internationalization as one of the major aspects of Indian art in the 1990s. You describe this aspect from two sides; one being the artists' motivation to engage with the world outside, and another being the problems in doing so. You seem to always be looking at both sides of an issue, and thus coined the term, "kaleidoscopic realism." Can you elaborate on what you mean by "kaleidoscopic realism" and touch on the issue of the "gaze of the others," or the issue of curation as a catalyst. Also, can you talk about the relationship between internationalism and regionalism?

Furthermore, you write about Bhupen Khakhar and describe his work as deceptive. From my experience of seeing Khakhar's works in the "Private Mythology" exhibition last year here at this venue, I feel that Mr. Hoskote distinguishes Khakhar's work from that of Group 1890 or its antithesis, the Neo-Tantara movement. The same can be said about Nalini Malani or Sudarshan Shetty. Can you comment on your views?

**Ranjit Hoskote:** There is quite a range of issues to be looked at. Let me try and begin with this conflation of the contemporary with "internationalism" that has taken place in the Indian art circles. The context for that is, really, the sense

of belatedness which has always haunted Indian art — the sense that the action is probably elsewhere while we are always in a lag twenty to thirty years behind these developments. Suddenly, in the 1990s, the lag or the belatedness seems to have been closed and what we are looking at is a kind of crisis that emerged out of this development. I think our main problem is that so much of, if you like, the content of contemporary Indian art comes out of local history and local concerns. On the other hand, the language which had been proposed, the pictorial languages, the image-making languages, are all in some sense non-local or international. That has been a debate that has haunted modern Indian art since the early 1900s, the idea that the language itself or those languages might somehow be irrelevant to India's social mainstream.

I think what we are looking at here is the contradiction between a generic cosmopolitan language of image-making, on the one hand, and an individualistic localism, on the other. I am sorry to deal in these very broad and general labels, but that seems to be the only way of compressing what is at hand. I think international curatorship tends to become a problem because there is a sense that certain options, certain alternatives are privileged over certain others. This leads many Indian artists and critics to worry about whether it is, in fact, all that important to be represented in an international arena because representation then, as we all know, becomes a very political act. The question is, "Does this strategy or perspective of the curator produce a skewed or partial image of what might actually be happening on the Indian art scene?" I do not know if this will lead to answering the questions you had in mind, because the curatorship issue has somehow got mapped onto the avant-garde issue.

The main thrust of Indian art criticism, as developed largely through the work of Geeta Kapur, suggests that the main propulsion in any art scene comes out of the constant updating of oneself, through the supersession of one image-making language by another. That is effectively the theory of the avant-garde. I am sure many critics and artists today wonder about the viability of that way of looking at things. It does seem that in a highly plural situation, where ambient reality is being addressed in a variety of ways, it is a little difficult to apply that highly linear model. A variety of ways of approaching reality through art may all be equally valid, which is why you have the coexistence of abstraction drawn out of a traditional tantric symbolism on the one hand, and cutting-edge video and conceptual art on the other. It is very difficult then to make a value judgement on what is more contemporary or international and what is not. Because the real problems, it seems to me, are of a very different order in India. The main problem is the uncertainty of the audience. You have artists who might even take on popular idioms of representation, but then classicize them in such a way that they no longer remain comprehensible to the viewing public. It is really that issue

which exercises observers of Indian art today — the question of how the artist is always on a seesaw between a contact and an alienation from the viewing public. What we might be looking at is a question of possible incompatibility between form and content. On the one hand, richly veined stories have been told by artists, but it seems as though the audience or the public may not have developed a way of comprehending and accepting those stories. So the search is really for a common ground where artists and their public in India might actually have something to say to one another. It is in that sense an internal linguistic problem. So, consider how much more complex the question would be when all of these art practices are exposed before a global audience, which would also have to have a fair degree of acquaintance with the history from which such art emerges. I do hope that this has helped to clarify something.

**MC (A. Miki)** : I have been struck by the difficulty of trying to sum up the past decade. As we had feared, we have run out of time for further discussion, but I would like to take one last question from the floor or the panelists.

**Question (Kawachi)** : My name is Kawachi and I am a freelance film producer and director.

Recently, China and Asia seem to be the focus of attention in the United States. For example, Iris Chang's *Rape of Nanjing* has become the *New York Times* bestseller. In the West, there seems to be movements that protest against China's policy on Tibet.

I had a chance to see Ma Liuming's performance at NIPAF between 1995 and 1996, and sensed a strong emphasis on personal expression. My question is what do Chinese artists think about communication with the Western audience?

**L. Leng**: Concerning communication between China and the West, it has gone through many different stages of a process. In the 1990s, Chinese artists were very much isolated from China itself although they actually lived there. They were actually living in China and creating "Chinese" works, often playing a role that satisfied Western curatorial eyes. This relationship between Chinese artists and the West in the 1980s was not a very substantial relationship. But at the end of the 1990s, the artists turned to local concerns. This localism was connected to social practices and emerged everywhere, regardless of the geographical region.

This localism of the 1990s art revived an aspect of the history of Chinese art in the past one hundred years. What I mean is that there was a similar trend of localism in the 1930s. So, although what is happening in the 1990s is not related to what had happened in the 1930s, history seems to be repeating itself when we look at the phenomenon in historical terms.

When we discuss the communication between China and

the West, we must look at it from a long-term point of view, examining the historical context, and look to see if there are any definite paths.

**MC (A. Miki):** We did not have enough time to sum up the past decade. We were only able to run through some basic issues, achievements, and key factors. Since we were not able to have a closer look at the issues, I hope we will have that opportunity in Session II.

As I mentioned at the opening of this session, it would be impossible to map all the activities, issues, and achievements of Asian contemporary art from the examples drawn just from four countries. I hope there will be other opportunities where other countries will also be examined.

In discussing Asia, with its religious and ethnic complexity, national borders often hide the essence of things. Many artists are crossing the borders and are involved in activities in different regions. I would like to add that, as I listened to the discussion today, I also saw the importance of observing artists who were born or live in certain countries in a framework that is different from a country-by-country analysis.

## Recognition and Action : Issues to be Solved in the Next Stage

Miki Akiko

Independent Curator

This symposium brought to the same table eighteen art professionals from Asian and Western countries. Most of the panelists must have come away with a similar impression of how difficult it is to hold a discussion when not all the participants share the same frame of reference. Of course, this is a difficulty that can be expected at any international symposium with a large number of participants. When the theme is broad, it is inevitable that the construction of an effective argument will not be simple. In this, the third symposium in the series, there were more participants from the West and more from a younger generation, yet everyone invited had experience in organizing exhibitions of Asian contemporary art. Compared to the previous symposiums, I believe that an effort was made to advance the discussion on the basis of a shared awareness of the issues. Personally, I expected that the discussion would focus more on the problems of curation and organization of exhibitions, and that there would be an active debate about the problems involved in introducing and being introduced. However, things did not turn out as simply as I had imagined. In addition to the differences and complex circumstances of each country, I felt the presence of an invisible, subtle divergence of outlook that permeated the proceedings like a fine mist and hindered the development of the discussion.

In Session I, representatives from China, Korea, Indonesia, and India gave a general account of the art in their countries during the 1990s and discussed its connections to the international art scene. The session was intended to explore the achievements and problems of the decade in contemporary Asia art, taking the viewpoint of the "introduced" as reflected in the experience of these four countries.

Discussion of this subject might focus on any one of three areas, the artists and their art, presentation such as exhibitions and the relationship between those two. The reports from China and Korea, with some differences of emphasis, touched on all of these areas. However, the reports from India and Indonesia seemed to place more emphasis on the second point. The Indonesian report in particular concentrated mainly on curatorial activities restricted to the Asian region, giving a clear explanation of the problems involved.

There is a need for an orderly analysis of the achievements and problems of the last decade in the contemporary art of Asia, but it proved impossible to achieve this during the limited

time available, either in the main presentations or through the questions and responses given by the other panelists. So I would like to tentatively list what I see as being the main areas of achievement and the main problems mentioned in each presentation. The purpose of this list is to summarize and clarify the main points, some of which may have been left ambiguous during the session. There may be others that I missed while reading (or listening to) the reports. It should be noted that the content reflects the opinions of the individual speakers representing the various countries. Also, although the explanations of local circumstances provided a general understanding of what has been achieved, they were somewhat short on specifics, so I would like to mention some of the trends and changes which I see as being especially positive. Some developments are ambiguous, and might be considered either positive or negative depending on one's point of view. Before making such a judgment, however, further research and analysis is needed, taking in other countries and regions besides the four considered here.

### 1. China

#### Achievements

- A shift away from copying of Western concepts, pursuing the autonomy of art, and making antisocial art toward attempting to depict concrete realities of which the artist is immediately aware; that is, greater individuality and a closer connection to society.
- Obtaining freedom from the rule of conventional structures.
- Creation of new spaces for art in society.

#### Problems

- Lack of a domestic audience.
- Tense relationship with domestic market (relating to attempts to create an artistic style specific to China to adapt to the expectations of an overseas audience).

### 2. Korea

#### Achievements

- Growing awareness of national identity in Korean art.
- Appearance of a new generation with a new sensibility, more vigorous expression, and diverse subjects and methodologies.
- Popularization of art (subjects and modes of expression rooted in familiar reality).

#### Problems

- Confused artistic sensibility in the new generation, overemphasis on ideas.

### 3. Indonesia

#### Achievements

- Increased general understanding of art within the country (resulting from participation in art activities limited to the region).
- Shift from the politicization of art that has occurred in some

quarters in recent years to more cultural expressions.

#### Problems

- Problems in determining which countries participate in exclusively regional exhibitions.
- Limited modernist perspective in selection of artists and works; excessive influence of politics.
- Conflicts between countries involved and the sponsoring country when organizing regional art activities (in selection of artists, intentions).
- Bipolar understanding of contemporary art within the region (need of *discoursing*).
- Different levels of development of commercially viable art and internationally-oriented art.

#### 4. India

##### Achievements

- Emergence of artists who create identity, more interesting and diverse subject matter and modes of expression.
- Less sense of a time lag, of being behind the West.

##### Problems

- Internationalism as a form of neocolonialism.
- Risk of bipolarization between cosmopolitan art and art rooted in regional traditions.
- Problems in curation by outsiders (advanced countries)
- Problems of international cultural dynamics.

The reports from each of these four countries made it clear that their art has been tremendously influenced by the much closer relationships between art communities within Asia and between Asia and the rest of the world resulting from the rapidly expanding globalization of the 1990s and the escalating development of information media and technology. More contacts and interaction with "others" has made the art scene more active and diverse, but this trend has also caused problems that are increasing in severity. Although the content, development, and extent of these problems is different in each country, some of the most commonly cited problems were: *bipolarization and dual structures in art, problems of curation, problems of international cultural dynamics and modernism, and problems with theory and criticism*. However, these problems do not affect every country in the same way. Furthermore, the divergences in outlook that pervaded the symposium took the clear form of different ways of using the words "art" and "contemporary," words that are essential to creating a shared frame of reference that makes discussion possible. The need for greater knowledge of the context and cultural and historical background of each country became obvious, but the differences in outlook made it easier for us to perceive various levels of difference. Paradoxically, I believe this was one of the main achievements of this symposium. However, how can these differences in outlook be overcome, and how can we begin solving the problems listed here? What needs to be done? While pondering these questions, I

recalled a number of words that came up during the symposium, for example, Apinan Poshyananda's "glocal" and Jim Supangkat's "discoursing." There was also Nirnanjan Raja's question, "What does Asia want to do as a region?" And the word "cooperation" was mentioned by a number of people.

These words suggest the need for a more careful approach to examining the conditions of each country and region, more academic research and historical investigation, and the building of theory for speaking of Asian art. Systematic, long-term, cooperative action is needed on a pan-regional level and with an international viewpoint and a concrete vision. Actually, there is nothing new about any of this. Many experts have already raised these points. Caroline Turner, organizer of the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT), gave especially specific and effective recommendations at the previous Asian Center symposium in 1997 ("Asian Contemporary Art Reconsidered"). Although we know what needs to be done, we have yet to find practical ways of doing it. We have not taken the necessary concrete steps (at least, with some exceptions, on a significant level) because of the overwhelming scale and difficulty of the problems. This is the problem that we face.

One of the Japanese panelists who has long been involved in this field declared that "we have come to a turning point." I agree with this in general. With the tremendous expansion of the Asian contemporary art scene, we have arrived at the stage where we need to take a more serious, strategic, and cooperative approach, rather than the scattered, hit-and-miss attempts of the past, to carry out our tasks. Everyone who is attracted to today's Asian art and has any hope for its future should be thinking seriously about the concrete methods we need to adopt.

In order to explore the possibilities for concrete action and to continue deepening our mutual understanding, it is extremely important to create more opportunities for meetings of concerned individuals. In addition to large-scale symposiums which include the general public, such as those organized by the Asia Center or the APT, it might be a good idea to hold meetings of smaller groups on a regular basis, dealing with more focused topics as a way of preparing for these larger symposiums. Also, how about forming a professional association for people involved with Asian art along the lines of other academic and professional associations? There may be other, more effective methods.

All the possibilities should be explored from all relevant points of view, believing in the possibility of new development in artistic creation in Asia and more effective ways of studying them that are hidden behind the mists of misinterpretation and exotic fantasy.

(Translated by Stanley N. Anderson)

Session II

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Examining Asian Contemporary Art of the 1990s,  
Part 2: Perspectives of the Presenters

Session II

**"Examining Asian Contemporary Art of the 1990s,  
Part 2: Perspectives of the Presenters"**

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989, there has been an urgently felt need to reassess the Eurocentric view of art history and attempts have been made to construct new systems of value. An active effort has been made to study and exhibit the art of countries previously considered marginal, and this has meant renewed attention to the contemporary art of Asia. Contemporary Asian art of the 1990s has been discussed in terms of the various theoretical trends of the time, including postmodernism, Orientalism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and globalism.

In this session, the achievements and difficulties of the decade will be covered by representative curators and critics from Europe, Australia, Singapore, and Japan, places that have been active in exhibiting the modern and contemporary art of Asia.

1. " 'Asia': Enduring Stereotype or Black Hole ?"  
David Elliott (Director, Moderna Museet, Stockholm / Sweden)
2. "Why Australia?"  
Rhana Devenport (Senior Project Officer, The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery / Australia)
3. "Appropriating Alterity: The Museum and Contemporary Art Practice in Singapore"  
Ahmad Mashadi (Curator, Singapore Art Museum / Singapore)
4. "Who 'Introduces' What to Whom and Why?"  
Nakamura Hideki (Professor, Nagoya Zokei University of Art and Design / Japan)

Discussion

Report and Comment on Session II

- "The Sea of Diversity: Divisions and Syntheses"  
Nanjo Fumio (Independent Curator / Japan)

## "Asia": Enduring Stereotype or Black Hole?

David Elliott

Director, Moderna Museet, Stockholm

"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea."

(Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Kubla Khan*, 1797.)

"Kurt Wachtveitl, *doyen* of the world's top hotel managers, runs the Oriental [Bangkok], a pearl of the east. He said recent political and economic events in south-east Asia had dented western confidence in the region. 'People are cancelling,' he said. 'Americans hear that people are hitting each other in Indonesia and cancel their trip.'"

(Peter Whitehead, "Good times, golf and 'Gucci'," London, *Financial Times*, May 15, 1999, p. xxi.)

### *Plus ça Change?*

Wachtveitl's understanding of his customers' comprehension of current realities in Southeast Asia has a distinctly old-world ring. It could have almost appeared in a novel by G.A. Henty, a Victorian *doyen* of the Imperial adventure story in which the Anglo-Saxon races were forever confronted by an inchoate, inscrutable and above all unpredictable mass of subjects. When the Dacoits got "uppity," the Malays ran amok or the arrows started to fly we used to "teach them a lesson," but now, in a postcolonial world, the sensible white man either ducks or cancels his trip.

### **But How Should We Approach What Asia is Today?**

There is a problem in comprehending its vastness. Asia is the largest of all the continents and comprises a huge number of different cultures, nearly one third of the world's land mass and more than half of its population. It is an unmanageable and perhaps an unimaginable category — a eurocentric construct of ancient Greek cartographers — rather than based on any social, political, economic or cultural coherence.

In looking for some historical precedent for unity within this vast expanse only the Mongol Empire during the first part of the thirteenth century fits the bill. Under the brilliant leadership of Genghis Khan, his sons and grandsons, this, for a short time stretched from Java and Korea in the east to Poland in the west, from the Arctic Sea in the north, to Turkey and Persia in the south. But it rapidly began to fragment. This was the largest land empire in the history of the world.

Perhaps we in Europe have some kind of submerged collective memory of the Mongol Hoard sweeping in from the East? Certainly this is still an active part of tradition on the eastern borders of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and of European Russia. The word "Asia" itself comes from the Greek and is probably derived from an Assyrian, Semitic or Sanskrit root which refers to the dawn or the rising of the sun. Such collective "memories," however, are primarily associated with cruelty, destruction and what appeared like godlessness. And if you put the two sets of associations together, as did the Russian poet and novelist Andrei Bely in the early years of this century, you have an inevitable apocalypse before a new dawn. An apocalypse on a grand scale in which the Mongol horsemen and their heirs far outnumbered the four pestilences in the Book of Revelations. To Western eyes these people all looked the same and they moved over the countryside in such closely packed waves that everything crumbled in their path; they seemed to be more like insects — or machines — than humans!

The pressure and raw energy caused by teeming numbers, their lack of individuality, cruelty, irrationality and "godlessness," became compounded in the Western stereotypical view of Asia. The fact that it was not a single region or place heightened the sense of threat and fear. From Genghis Khan, to Marco Polo, to Anthony van Diemen, to Sir Stanford Raffles, to E.M. Forster, to the *Financial Times* — no one could predict what was going to happen next. But the best form of defence is attack and to protect itself the West has in turn mounted wave upon wave of religious, economic and cultural crusade.

Religion and economy were decisive but there was also a strong sense of difference — of the dark and exotic — which stimulated desire. Early attractions to the continent were the spice and opium trade, but the pretext — the reasoning — for colonization was often couched in terms of the "civilizing mission" of the West — Kipling's *White Man's Burden*. Furthermore within the Christian world view, redemption had to be achieved within the span of a single life unlike the longer path of birth and rebirth which was fundamental to older Eastern animist, Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. For us there was no second chance and this contributed a sense of both positive ardor and feverish desperation to the whole colonial episode.

Of course, rooted in antiquity there had been many great Eastern civilizations — most notably in the Middle East, India and China. Trophies from these had been taken back and displayed as a form of hubris in the great Western imperial capitals because these cultures had long since entered a state of entropy and decline. The reasons for this were thought to be quite simply lack of both christianity and industry — both in the people, who were often characterized as chaotic, passive or lazy — and in the economic infrastructure. Yet with its natural and human resources, Asia also seemed like a large, luscious,



ripe fruit waiting to be picked — if only it was not so frightening!

Fear and desire go hand in hand — and as good Freudians we find ourselves incapable of accepting death without a good helping of sex before it. This now brings me, perhaps rather indelicately, to the central metaphor of the Black Hole and what relationship this has with Asia. The first obvious association is with events which took place in Calcutta late in June 1756 when the surviving members of the East India Company Garrison were thrown into gaol by the victorious Nawab Siraj-ud-Dawlah of Bengal. The Black Hole of Calcutta, as it was called, became a *cause célèbre* in the idealization of British Imperialism in India and has subsequently been subject to a number of revisions. The original story, based on the East India Company report, was that 146 prisoners had been confined in the summer heat in a space of 5.5m by 4.5m with only two small windows. Not surprisingly only twenty-three emerged alive and this was taken as confirmation of British heroism and the Nawab's callousness. In 1915 the historian J.H. Little questioned the veracity of the whole affair implying that it was imperialist propaganda; in 1956 the Black Hole was reinstated in history when Brijen Gupta established that the incident did occur but not on the scale that was originally claimed: the Nawab was negligent rather than cruel and only sixty-four entered the prison out of which twenty-one survived. Phew! The Black Hole survives in the English language as a figure of speech for any dark, smelly and cramped place.

The second "black hole" has less squalid connotations; it is that invisible region in outer space with a gravitational field so intense that no matter or radiation can escape from it. These are thought to be formed when massive stars become exhausted and collapse under their own gravity. No one has ever seen a black hole but we know that they exist. Perhaps this is similar to the status of Asia as a viable cultural locus? No one has ever seen its whole body, yet we know it exists. But why does it exist and what is its function other than as an exotic screen on which the West can project its fears and fantasies?

In the contemporary world I find this question difficult to answer. The four continents (Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas) are the product of an antique pre-Enlightenment categorization of geography yet, with the exception of Asia, all cover discrete and easily identifiable land masses or have more or less cohesive cultural traditions.

And there are groups of countries which we regard as "Asian" simply because there is no other workable description. Those for instance situated in Asia Minor, Central Asia, East Asia or Southeast Asia do not quite correspond to other subcontinental or regional Asian identities like the Middle East, the Far East, Arabia, the Himalayas, the Indian subcontinent and Indo-China. And we may ask what all these different Asias now have in common if the whole of Asia as a concept is to be regarded as more than a Black Hole, an enduring stereotype or a rather unsatisfactory geographical

category?

With the worldwide interest in the contemporary culture of Asia which has developed over the past decade, this question has become particularly acute. What should an exhibition of Asian art look like and what would the artists have in common, other than some abstract, and almost certainly by them unacknowledged, "Asianness"? At one time being Asian was a near synonym for being a member of the Third World but this is just another manifestation of the Black Hole which may be applicable to some parts of the continent but certainly not to others. No one would disagree that large parts of Asia are less well developed than some parts of the West but Asia also includes populous, vital cities like Mumbai, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Tokyo as well as vast tracts of undeveloped countryside and agricultural land. In fact, the state of industrial and technological development is such that the city and country still live together in dynamic tension, the one literally feeding off the other as was the case in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the cannibalization of country by town is something that can now be regarded as quintessentially "Asian"?

But no good art exhibition can seriously claim to take the continent in which its participants happen to live as a central theme. The Council of Europe has sponsored exhibitions of young European artists and this is a nonsensical category. Such displays are only ameliorated by the quality of the work of individual artists which remain the same whatever the quality of the exhibition. For me there are only two possible approaches in organising regionally-based exhibitions of art. They should either introduce into the discourse of contemporary art previously unseen work from unknown territories or search for some common history, experience, belief or approach which surfaces in the work. In addition, the work selected has to be defensible as being of high quality *according to values held in the place where it is shown*. Anything less is anthropology. A common history, experience, belief or approach gives a specificity both to the art in exhibition and to its place of origin in that the work could not have been produced anywhere else.

This may seem to run counter to the argument that visual art is a universal medium but this is not the case. While some people maintain that if art is not universal it must be either provincial or unintelligible, I would argue that there need be no conflict between the specific and the universal. Contemporary art is a universal, international discourse yet to have life and quality it must also, at some level, be rooted in specific, real feelings and experience.

The large exhibitions of contemporary art from Asia which have so far taken place — in Brisbane, Fukuoka and New York — have been presented in the spirit of opening up a region to a new audience with varying degrees of thematicization. In Delhi the Triennale has long been established, but not with a purely Asian remit. In all these exhibitions the art came first

and was exhibited as it would appear in any large group exhibition in the West; some curators felt the need to add a large amount of didactic material or to organize the work on a national basis, others didn't. The Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale is perhaps slightly different in that it has been organized by a museum and curators who feel themselves to be part of Asia, but the other exhibitions, although not situated in Asia, have employed curators from the continent. The definitions of what constitutes Asia as reflected here have differed wildly. Some times India has appeared, at others not, but the Middle and Near East, the Himalayan states and Central Asia have been largely shunned as have "problem" countries like Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and North Korea. Reasons for this may be that nothing that we would understand as being contemporary art is being made in these places or that their regimes are unwilling to cooperate, but I suspect also that these places are still in a sense Black Holes in the collective curatorial memory — we know they exist, but we have never seen them. Is this really just a matter of poor quality hotels?

Of equal concern is the omission of virtually all of the Islamic world — with the exceptions of Pakistan and Indonesia. It seems that to both East and West this remains a vast Black Hole but one with a strong sense of its own identity, with strongly competing ideas about what constitutes modernity and a vigorous internal market and infrastructure. Perhaps this is the point, it can exist in its own right and on its own terms without affiliation with either "Asia" or the West. Also the Western demonization of Islam following conflicts in the Middle East has led to reluctance on both sides for an opening up which is only now beginning to evaporate.

The most recent exhibition to take a look at contemporary art in Asia is "Cities on the Move: Urban Chaos and Global Change, East Asian Art, Architecture and Film Now" curated by Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Hou Hanru. The exhibition has been shown in a number of European cities and its form changes from place to place. In its London manifestation 107 artists, architects and filmmakers (Asians as well as non-Asians who have worked in the continent) were included in a tightly designed installation by Rem Koolhaas which recycled parts of previous exhibition installations at the Hayward Gallery. Walking around it is a physical, chaotic and noisy experience, and is intended to be rather like that of passing through an Asian city. But is this experience so different from walking around any busy city — Asian, American, European or African? I don't think so. And where does art fit in? Unfortunately the curators do not answer this question because art to them here is a symptom of modernization and urbanism. In their own words " 'Cities on the Move' celebrates the contemporary East Asian urban condition as shifting, expanding, modernizing, unstable and exciting."

It is true that in both Asia and the West contemporary art is in a sense marginal and from this paradox derives much of its power. Also a number of artists like Rikrit Tiravanija or

Kawamata Tadashi have left the white cubes of galleries and museums to make social sculpture which directly interacts with lived experience. But this cannot be the point that the curators are making because they have re-entered the space of the museum or gallery to make it as much as possible like the city outside. The effect of this conceit is that the art is downgraded to little more than a curatorial accouterment. And the impression that this makes — as it is the first large exhibition of contemporary Asian art to be seen in London — is that in some way this art is inferior because it is not given its own space like the art shown in other exhibitions in the same space. Everything is subordinated to the overriding modernizing ethos of the exhibition itself and the art in it does not seem to be taken seriously in its own terms.

An opportunity to carry out serious research presenting the exhibition from the perspective of what artists are actually doing and thinking in East Asia has been missed to be replaced by what seems like a contemporary reworking of an all too familiar view of the teeming, exotic and chaotic East.

So what are we left with? Another Black Hole. A stereotypical, technocratic, post-*Bladerunner* image of the city of the future where East meets West, chaos meets order and apocalypse meets utopia. Unfortunately it also seems to be the kind of place where buildings and machines are treated better than people.

## Why Australia?

### Rhana Devenport

Senior Project Officer, The Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Queensland Art Gallery

#### Location

As part of René Block's 1990 Sydney Biennale, Ben Vautier's work declared, "Am I or is Australia too far away?" In response to the title "Experiences in Australia," I speak directly from my own experiences since 1993 working with the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT) as performance facilitator for the first Triennial and as co-ordinator for the second and third APTs. This paper offers one perspective among many varied opinions on the Australian scenario.

In 1997, soon after the second APT, while walking into the city, I noticed a tattoo on a young girl's arm — it was Murakami Takashi's "Mr Dob" — the key promotional image for that APT. It is rare that any cultural event in the country would inspire a sixteen year old country schoolgirl to tattoo! Indeed, the APT seems to connect with audiences in direct and personal ways. During the 1990s, the APT has established and extended its audience base to an estimated total of 400,000 visitors — with one in ten Brisbane residents attending the 1996 APT. The conference is now the largest arts symposium in Australia. Audiences, particularly the young, now expect to be "entertained" and "educated" — even amused and swayed by their experiences with APT. This has occurred in a climate where contemporary art in Australia has apparently earned a reputation amongst some sectors of the community as impenetrable. In contrast, the artists involved in the APT offer experiences that are translated as genuine and moving by those who visit. Why this response? Why here? Why now? What next?

Firstly I will briefly address the context of siting this project, from its inception a decade ago, within the Australian demographic and cultural situation. Secondly, through discussing its intentions, achievements and difficulties, I will consider why the APT has drawn favor and attention within Australia. Thirdly, "Prospects for the Future" will be addressed with regard to engagements with Asian contemporary art as they may unfold within an Australian context.

(The art that accompanies this paper is from the APT which opened on September 9, 1999 in Brisbane.)

#### Context: Australia — A Decade of Shifting Focus

Before discussing Australia's current cultural context, I will briefly sketch out aspects of Australia's populace. Of the

almost 17.9 million, 4 million (26%) were born outside Australia with just over 1 million (5.7%) born in Asia or in nearby Pacific islands. The highest proportion of Asian-born Australians are from Vietnam and China. In Australia, 350,000 (2%) are indigenous (Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander). Both these percentages have almost doubled since the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup>

How do Australians engage with the arts? Current figures note that 17% visit art galleries (more than twice the number who attend cricket matches). 83% of the adult population are involved in some form of cultural activity. 7% of the Australian workforce earn some income from arts related work with 400,000 defining themselves as "practising professional artists."

Who supports the arts? Total monetary contribution of the arts and culture related industry accounts for \$19.3 billion (2.5% of gross domestic product). Australian governments provide \$3.1 billion each year to arts, recreation and cultural activities.<sup>2</sup> Corporate support is fledgling with only \$65 million contributing to the arts in 1996.

How do Australians perceive "Asia"? Australia's geopolitical and economic context is a dynamic that has certainly fuelled a refocusing in the 1990s towards a more active engagement with Asia. The term "Asia" (itself an impossible clustering of cultures and peoples) is perceived today in Australia as both "neighbor" and "future," as both "foreign" and "close-by," as originator of ancient cultural treasures and fabulous food, and as "tourism partner." Governments, particularly the Labor Governments, during the 1970s and again in the early 1990s drew attention to Australia's particular form of "multiculturalism" and our relationships with our Asia-Pacific neighbors.

How do Australians perceive their cultural diversity? From 1995 until 1998, debates concerning immigration, race, ethnicity and multiculturalism in Australia heightened intensely given the alarming rise and rapid fall of the One Nation Party. This has been a volatile (and highly embarrassing) phase of Australia's history which hopefully, has reached a positive outcome. The front page of Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* newspaper on July 10, 1999 stated: "Queensland has embraced multiculturalism in an extraordinary turnaround since the emergence of Pauline Hanson four years ago." Good news! However the events of the last four years came as a sharp reminder to those of us involved in cultural practice, that vigilance is always required. Brisbane artist Gordon Bennett in his series, "Notes to Basquiat" speaks to his personal experience with textual and linguistic racism through a coalescence of disparate images referencing American cult cartoon "The Simpsons," Basquiat's iconic imagery, Australian indigenous art, historical and recent Australian events as well as the powerful legacy of language itself.

Entities such as the Federal Government funded SBS TV station respond directly to Australia's cultural diversity. While

Australian soap operas, American sit-coms and "real-life" police dramas clutter other stations — SBS screens Chinese news broadcasts, Filipino soap operas, language instruction, Kurosawa and Fellini films, experimental video art, and Japanese *manga* to 6.3 million (35%) of Australians per week. Meanwhile, within the Australian fashion milieu, the current "star" is Japanese-born, Sydney-based Isogawa Akira. The Asian-Australian community will be more closely involved with APT3 as Filipino artists Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan are working with those who have departed the Philippines for Australia — it is their collected memory tokens, sourced from the private realm of the home that will form the artwork — a communal sea of recollection.

### **Context: Art-wise**

The nature of today's engagement between Australia, Asia and the Pacific through contemporary art is multi-faceted — it includes cross-cultural exchanges, the exhibition of contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific in Australia and the recognition of Asian/Pacific-Australian artists.

From the 1950s, the cultural expressions of migrant populations, (initially from England and Europe) have contributed substantially to Australian cultural life. Welcomed to Australia (like so many Chinese in 1990 after the Tian'anmen Square incident) Sydney-based artist Guan Wei teases and interrogates his own location and dislocation with insight and wit. Collaborations by Australian artists from varied cultural backgrounds are also increasing. Sydney-based artist Tim Johnson's collaborations with Tibetan-Australian, Vietnamese-Australian and indigenous Australian artists draw references from popular culture, music and spirituality as a hybrid iconography is formed through a process of cultural production unique to this particular moment of making.

The artists and communities of Australia's "cultural diversity" (and particularly the promotion of "cultural understanding") has recently been identified as one of three priorities for the Australia Council's 1999-2001 policy (support for the artists and communities of rural Australia and of Australian indigenous peoples being the other two).<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, the APT did not develop in isolation. Over the past decade three important contributors to Australia's cultural engagement with Asia and the Pacific have existed. One influential project is ARX (Artists Regional Exchange). Organized in Perth since 1987, ARX occurs every two years as a forum for exchanges between Australian and (South and Southeast) Asian artists. ARX is residency-based with an emphasis on discourse and experimentation rather than being exhibition-focused.

Another major contributor to Asia-Australia relations over the past decade is Asialink (The Asia Education Foundation based at the University of Melbourne). Since 1990, hundreds of Australian artists, writers, performing artists, curators, arts and festival managers have undertaken studio residencies in

thirty locations in Asia. Additionally, Asialink runs an active exhibition program of mostly Australian art to 140 exhibition venues in Asia as well as initiating professional development programs for Asian and Australian arts professionals. The continuing relationships formed through these residencies have generated numerous projects as well as stimulating substantial shifts in perception and understanding.

Additionally, a number of universities (in Brisbane, Lismore, Nepean, Wollongong, Canberra, Sydney, Perth and Darwin) have played a key role in the exchange of research, discourse, ideas and scholarship between Asia, the Pacific and Australia. A recent direction has been into the territory of cross-cultural and cross-discipline research. Partnerships between the Gallery and universities have been important.

### **APT: Intentions, Methodology, Achievements, and Difficulties**

Why the APT? The intentions of the Triennial project could be summarized as firstly, a desire to enhance cultural understanding through long term engagement with contemporary art and ideas of Asia and the Pacific; secondly, a commitment to co-curatorship and consultation as a methodology to realize the project and thirdly, the location of the artist and the artist/artwork/audience relationship as central within the entire process.

The Queensland Art Gallery developed the Triennial project in the early 1990s following an exhibition co-curated by staff of the Gallery and the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama in 1987 and 1989 which presented Japanese art in Brisbane and Australian art in Saitama. Soonafter, in the early 1990s, a number of exhibitions such as "India Songs" at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and "Zones of Love," "Mao Goes Pop" and "Art Taiwan" all at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney were received in Australia with interest and excitement. More recently, on the west coast, Apinan Poshyananda's Asia Society show "Traditions/Tensions" drew positive responses.

Perhaps one difficulty encountered has been a "suspicion of intention." In 1993 there were claims that the project was a guise for Australia's pursuit to be part of Asian's economic "miracle." The "miracle" is somewhat more pragmatic at this end of the decade, but the Gallery's interests are still as intense. Some have seen the project as an attempt to colonize — a form of dominance of a cultural kind over an artificially created region. With such a small population and meagre global importance, Australia could hardly hope to exert influence over the complex, layered and varied cultures that comprise this multifarious, immense "Asia." One of the central ideas of the project is its potential to provide a space for conversations to be started (if not finished), for art to be seen — and for ideas to be discussed. The Gallery intends to facilitate not dominate communication. So rather than being a difficulty, perceptions over the last decade have changed as

intentions have hopefully become clear through action and practice. The integrity of the project should be self-evident—scrutiny and discourse welcomed.

One of the most enlivening aspects of any ongoing project is its ability to adapt and respond to new circumstances. There are a number of new dimensions within the APT project which evolved from the layering of experience, memory and innovation by those involved with the project over the past decade. These include the adoption of the theme, "Beyond the Future," the inclusion of artists selected through the "Crossing Borders" curatorial avenue; the Virtual Triennial (a web site, online exhibition and discussion group), Screen Culture (short film, video and animation screenings) and a special focus on young audiences through the introduction of Kids' APT (interactive and online programs as well as artworks specially devised by participating artists for children aged 3-12).

For APT3, around twenty artists were selected through the "Crossing Borders" curatorial avenue which focused on "globally-mobile" artists and collaborative practice. Today, cultural and social forms travel as influences, appropriations and hybridities take place. "Transexperience" is a term used by artist Chen Zhen to refer to a new formation of experience grounded in the ungrounded. Simryn Gill is an artist who references her own "transexperiences" and cultural memories that include Malaysia, India, Singapore and now Australia. Through the persona of costuming, through dressing plants as people and people as plants, Simryn explores the notion of "naturalization" and displacement as both a botanical and political term, creating an uneasy disturbance between photographic "documentation," anthropological "findings" and botanical "truth." Simryn offers a fascinating take on a particular nuance of the formation of identity within an Australian context.

Certainly the positive reaction from audiences has been a central achievement. The exhibition attracts a wide cross-section of general visitors, families, students and scholars. The public goes to the Gallery and the Gallery goes public. Australian audiences have been intrigued, confronted and informed as artists invite audiences to consider their own perceptions, prejudices, relationships and understandings. It is this connection with audiences that I think defines why this project has captured the imaginations of Australians—triggering a direct connection between memory and identity as explored by the artist and by the visitor. The APT is now part of the Queensland secondary school art syllabus. A consideration of audience response has always been a critical factor in the final selection of artworks presented in the Triennials.

Australians particularly enjoy festivals and spectacle—for example over two decades Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has attracted increasing street crowds—reaching 650,000 this year with a TV audience of 1.7 million. In an

entirely different way, the "spectacular" exists within APT art and events. How this idea of "spectacle" is deliberately employed by the APT artists in turn provides for intriguing analytical possibilities. Especially when some of this material has developed out of deeply personal, often painful environments. The APT has shifted perspectives of how Australian audiences think about contemporary Asian art, how they think about contemporary art in general and most importantly, how they think about themselves. The art, through allowing us to look at "the other," provides a way to look at oneself. The negotiation of life occurs as artists and audiences shift the ground between them and touch on issues of what it is to be human—to be gentle, to remember, to breathe, to forgive, to seek justice. How do we look at ourselves? How do we look at others? The Netherlands-born, Yogyakarta-based artist Mella Jaarsma has fashioned the skins of chicken, fish, frog and kangaroo into elaborate and bizarre *jilbab*-like cloaks. Mella invites audiences to think about the transformations that these costumes—these skins—make to those wearing, and to those watching the wearer—emphasising aspects of difference while revealing the shared human condition. She provokes us to consider how it might be to look at the world through the mantle of another's skin, how it might be to be seen through another's veil.

Another achievement of the APT is its ability to stimulate and support a network of artists, curators, writers and scholars through the exhibition, research (with over 3,000 on the Gallery's Asia Pacific Artists Database) and what is now recognized as Australia's foremost Collection of contemporary Asian art (with around 200 works). Given that the project is integrated into the Queensland Art Gallery's operations, there is a sense of continuity and longevity as research is undertaken and expanded. This institutional connection has dangers but also strengths. A number of curators involved with APT have said that the intricate process of co-curatorship has been simultaneously the most challenging and rewarding project experienced to date. At the last Japan Foundation Asia Center symposium in 1997, "Asian Contemporary Art Reconsidered," Vishakha Desai made a plea to support younger curators and scholars—this is something that the APT project is now responding to in more depth with a number of postgraduate scholars from Japan, the Philippines, Singapore and Australia undertaking substantial internships with the project and another forty student postgraduate volunteers. Additionally with over eighty-five catalogue writers and more than fifty curators involved, fresh invigorations are constantly occurring.

During the last APT the "Asia-Pacific Artists Solidarity" was formed by artists (in amongst the official events) and has continued to exist as a non-institutional, global network of ideas and art making. Although it would be entirely naïve of me to suggest that the water ponds and concrete walls of the Queensland Art Gallery are in any way "neutral spaces," (any

museum, any institution, any site of engagement is loaded, subjective and local) — there are particular conditions that provoke particular results in the location of the project in Brisbane. The power and dynamism of projects initiated from cities that may be considered “marginal” in some spheres (e.g. Kwangju, Fukuoka, São Paulo, Havana, Johannesburg, Istanbul) have made a immense difference to contemporary art discourse in local and global territories. The APT is an exhibition constructed around particular geo-cultural terrain — a terrain, as today’s brief states, “previously considered marginal.” The perspective from and within “the margins” generates unique conversations.

The inclusion of work by artists from Australia and artists from the Pacific alongside the work of artists from Asia creates sometimes unexpected, often discordant but always an enlivening dynamic. The exhibition does not claim to be a singular curatorial vision but rather a platform for many voices, many languages. The APT has created a new platform for engagement between audiences and art — perhaps an unlikely juxtaposition but certainly a context generated from within a local situation. The art of the Pacific, particularly by indigenous artists, has contributed substantially to the discourse associated with the APT — perspectives are constantly evolving. New Zealand artist Michael Parekowhai speaks enthusiastically of the utterly successful appropriation by Maori people, of Western rock’n’roll in his work, *Ten guitars*.

Within any inter-cultural project, the complexity of multiple languages is both a difficulty and a strength. Iwai Shigeaki’s *Dialogue* project, provokes a metaphoric questioning of experiences and communication in “multicultural” environments. Translations and mistranslations, cultural understandings and misunderstandings: these challenges take time to unfurl. Composer Richard Barrett has noted the complexities of translation and mistranslation in relation to his forthcoming collaboration with Indonesian artist, Heri Dono and Australia’s Elision contemporary music ensemble:

“It’s a truism of art and music history that the creativity of each generation has its roots in misunderstanding that of the previous one. On the other hand, collaborations across artforms and across cultural geography are usually characterized by over-polite mutual accommodation, each participant tiptoeing around in an attempt to understand and show respect for the other, resulting in dilution and compromise of both. Heri Dono and I are committed to misunderstanding one another.”

Finally, there is no question that funding is always a difficulty. Although the Gallery has recently attracted considerable private support towards the collecting of contemporary Asian art, the APT project relies heavily on major support from the Queensland Government and from the Australian Government through the Australia Council and the

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade with some (usually in-kind) support from the corporate sector. There is always much more we would like to do in connection with artists, their work and audiences. For APT3, partnerships (with multimedia centers, with government education departments, with new media arts festivals, with universities) have provided practical and creative avenues towards the realization of shared visions, research and cultural endeavors.

### **Prospects for the Future: Beyond the Millennium?:**

#### **Looking Back**

In Australia, links with Asia have long existed, the second major Australia-Asia encounter was formed in the gold fields in Victoria in the 1850s when thousands of Chinese immigrants “prospected” to find gold in the Australian earth — the gold was the basis of the nations’ wealth at the time. Controversial scientist and writer Tim Flannery suggests<sup>4</sup> the first major Australia-Asia encounter was a more ancient one — being the journeying by sea across the “littoral zone” by the Banda people from Southeast Asia some 60,000 years ago — to what is now Australia’s Northern Territory and Papua New Guinea, probably through Timor. Much later, around 3,500 years ago, the sea-faring Lapita peoples populated the entire Pacific excluding Australia and New Guinea. (The Lapita were also probably from Southeast Asia — their language was similar to both Bahasa Indonesia and Maori and was connected to the Austronesian language family which traced back to China and Taiwan dialects some 6,000 years ago).

#### **Looking Forward**

There is no doubt that in Australia now, references to “the millennium” are strewn across newspapers, magazines and TV. Whether the references are to “bugs,” the information economy, the Olympics, or planes falling out of the sky — the promise of the year 2000 is undeniably looming large for many Australians. But an essential question remains — whose millennium is it? Of course there exists, simultaneously, many global calendars, the West’s is but one.

“Beyond the Future” is the theme for the forthcoming APT — an intentionally ironic and paradoxical title, asking more questions than it answers. The theme has come to be more of a launching point for ideas. Issues of indigeneity; of re-energizing traditional practice; of moving towards the past, from the future, through the present; and of parallel or cyclic but separate time zones are some of the ideas stimulated by discussion on the theme. So how does one move beyond the future? How does one “prospect the future?”

The APT project has shifted memory and identity within Australia, it has become part of a changing consciousness that penetrates beyond a fashionable, surface tattoo, becoming part of a fractured and constantly re-forming cultural landscape. The art, the process, the discussions, the networks and the communications associated with the project are now

embedded in the cultural life in this country. In his artist statement for APT3, Dadang Christanto writes, "And communication through dialogue can set us free — I hope to shock the APT audience, a shock of emancipation. A shock capable of illuminating our sense of humanity."

Through entering the now of their times, through negotiating cultural moments and memory, contemporary artists in the Asia and the Pacific can offer critical, intimate, powerful and idiosyncratic perspectives to those who encounter their work. There is a particular resonance between these perspectives and Australian audiences. Vietnamese writer Dao Minh Tri states in the APT3 catalogue, "The world is immense, concepts are immense, technology is immense. So, one can only choose to work with things that are close to oneself." It is hoped that the Queensland Art Gallery's continuing work with the Triennial into the next decade and continuing engagements with the current cultural practice in Asia and the Pacific will assist in this evolving, and energizing conversation between people.

Notes:

1. *Australian Bureau of Statistics: 1996 Census of Population and Housing.*
2. *Cultivating our Culture*, Australia Council, June 1998.
3. "Major Council Policy Statements" in *Australia Council Policy Directions 1999 - 2001*, p 13.
4. Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An ecological history of the Australasian lands and peoples*, Reed New Holland, 1994.

## Appropriating Alterity: The Museum and Contemporary Art Practice in Singapore

Ahmad Mashadi

Curator, Singapore Art Museum

In his introduction to a session on contemporary art and cultural institutions in the last symposium organized by the Japan Foundation Asia Center, Apinan Poshyananda outlined a principal concern which is the need for a critical look into exhibition practices via the rethinking and relooking into the "authority of cultural and curatorial arbitage" through three interrelated issues: museums as potent forces of ideas and places that collect and curate contemporary art, cultural arbiters as innovators and agents of change in contemporary Asian art, and, processes and issues of collaboration between cultural arbiters and artists. In the ensuing discussion that followed, four models were introduced, each highlighting the varying and differing attention given to presentation and representation, its inclusivity or exclusivity, curatorial negotiations and involvement, centering predominantly on international initiatives of presenting Asia, implicitly referring to the regional mediations that were taking place through such projects.<sup>1</sup>

In Singapore, popular discourse on the development on art has been very much centered on its infrastructural determinant.<sup>2</sup> Its early development has been associated to the formation of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1938, while its contemporary development often referenced against the state's changing attitude and policy for the arts and culture towards the later part of the 1980s, after thirty years of unrelenting economic pursuit, with the formation of new arts institutions and facilities. By and large, artists and their practices were consigned as results and manifestations of that infrastructural development. With the many state initiatives, including the formation of a Ministry of Information and the Arts in 1990, the National Arts Council in 1991, the National Heritage Board and the museums in 1993, the arts were seen to have flourished through state support. The now yearly Arts Festival, which concentrates on the performing arts (music and theater), is seen as a testament of the growing national emphasis on the arts. Artists' initiatives were discussed within the evolving national regard for culture, contextualized to the economic affluence and achievements and creation of a "culturally vibrant" society.<sup>3</sup> This last term "culturally vibrant" is an operative term; used within the Singaporean public discourse on the culture and arts to suggest alignment to a widely held view that the arts is a necessary symbol of a maturing nation, signalling economic achievements, and the role of the arts in nurturing and sustaining the well-being of Singaporeans for the

sake of further economic progress. Further to the idea of the arts as an extension of economic status, its other roles has also been emphasized as those that: firstly, referential to the Singaporean concept of multiculturalism and various traditional cultures of the major ethnic groups (political categories much more than anthropological ones), the arts serves a cultural ballast against the seeming threat of individualism, the code for Western liberalism. Secondly, maintaining links to notions of economic pragmatism, the arts is also to be seen as a potential *industry* that contributes rather than drain economic resources, thus preferably revenue oriented and having populist appeal. Needless to say, these requirements can be at times be contradictory to each other having to be referenced to narratives on nation and nationhood concomitant to ideas of progress and maintenance of the traditional ethnic cultures, but at the same time accessible, lucid, popular and profitable. This cursory and preliminary comments that I have just made provide an insight into the structure of cultural production in Singapore and the institutional logic which to some large extent governs cultural institutions like a museum. What I am interested to do here is to generally outline their implications on the development of contemporary visual arts in Singapore, which by its very nature, have to play a role of questioning and deconstructing the very propositions proselytized within the popular discourse on the arts as hosted by the state.

What I hope to do in this paper is to briefly elicit some general remarks on the curatorial mediations that take place in Singapore, particularly looking into the relationship between the Singapore Art Museum and contemporary art. Such relationship is both collaborative and tense, bearing in mind the differing basis and rationale of museums as a national expression of culture and contemporary art as means of breaking down set categories, myths, texts and narratives. I will outline this differing trajectories in later paragraphs. Convergences or associations between the two, not merely incidental but at times necessarily programmatic, takes place intermittently where each, the Museum and contemporary body, attempt to seek validation, consolidate and appropriate each others goodwill as well as resources.

### Earlier Artists Initiatives and Emerging Concepts of Alterity

Looking at Singapore contemporary art over the past ten years, it may be said that one of the key moments was the establishment of Artists Village in 1989, led by Tang Da Wu. It operates principally as an alternative space, both notional as well as physical space, that is "dedicated to the promotion and encouragement of experimental and alternative arts in Singapore."<sup>4</sup> While the operational term here is "alternative" (contesting the market driven value system of art practices then), conditions for practice was not held exclusive to the initiatives and resources of the Artists Village. Collaborations



with state institutions were strategic tools in expanding the group's programs. In the same year of its establishment the Village worked together with the National Arts Council in the Council's Arts Festival's fringe program in presenting a series of performances at Orchard Road, a shopping center district in Singapore. In 1992, again during the period of the Arts Festival, the Village was able to secure a large abandoned warehouse and presented an event called "The Space." In both instances, the collaboration had enabled the Singaporean audience to witness differing modes of artistic production including installation and site specific art as well as performance art. In 1991, the Village was again prominent co-organizers of Sculpture Seminar held in-conjunction with the National Museum's "Sculpture in Singapore" exhibition where notions of sculpture were effectively expanded to include the performative, process and the ephemeral. Collectively these events were statements, both by the national bodies and the Village, of the congruous nature of contemporary practice to the cultural aspirations determined by the state, a case of mutual appropriation. Particular to those events, contemporary art was seen to be exploratory, grounded on the quest for progressiveness, thus relevant to the evolving national discourse on culture. In collaborating with the state, Artists Village widened its option and access to necessary resources, although mindful that the very co-option by the state would render problematic its very assertions on alterity and its peripheral position.

The establishment of Artists Village also paved the way for the formation other loose or formal groupings and other initiatives, emphasizing diversity of contemporary responses to the evolving, economic, political and social conditions in Singapore. Other groups or organizations that followed after Artist Village's establishment included the artist-run space called Fifth Passage and recently PKW (Plastique Kinetic Worms). I will return to Fifth Passage later on in this presentation. PKW, run by artist Vincent Leow echoes the very idealism of the Artist Village, aiming to "create a platform for young contemporary artists."<sup>5</sup> But such idealism is intervened and counter-balanced by its interest to co-opt the devices of the commercially run galleries with works displayed in clinical white-cube spaces and mostly for sale. In many instances in the organization of their exhibitions, the groups had sought and obtain some financial support from National Arts Council, the main arts funding body for practising artists and art groups.

### **The Singapore Art Museum and Engagement with Contemporary Art**

The Museum is part of the state's cultural articulation thus embodying the values and precepts held by the state. To many commentators, Singapore having gained its political independence only slightly more than thirty years ago, is still in a stage of nation-formation.<sup>6</sup> As such for the state, cultural apparatus like the Museum play vital roles in the further

articulation and transmission of desired values and thus held as strategic component of the state's cultural infrastructure, hence the many exhibitions on art celebrating the achievements of the nation and its multiracial people. Differences if any were leveled out and culture and the arts demonstrates notions of nation-building, communitarian idealism, communal harmony within the context of multi-cultural and multi-religious Singapore.

The Museum's role is made complicated by the concurrent need to identify itself to and gain validation from a group of differing if not contesting parties. In identifying its institutional objective, the Singapore Art Museum's promotion of contemporary art has to be concomitant to the state's rationalization of museums and their ascribed roles. As arbiters of cultural knowledge, it needs to demonstrate abilities to partake into two discourses. Firstly, administrative rationalizations based on the state's own vocabulary and cultural rhetoric. Secondly, it has to engage into the contemporary discourse that more often than not, offers criticism against the state's prescriptive cultural formulations and expectations. As a mediatory entity, the Museum's primary role of accommodating the state's interests is made complicated by having to rationalize to and gain support and endorsement from the state, its interests and policies on contemporary art.

While the rationalization in favor of contemporary art projected to the state by an art institution such as the Museum is often based on the very vocabulary provided by the state, it can also become difficult once the state itself directly defines the value and currency of contemporary art and its formal constituents, for example performance art. Here I shall return to Fifth Passage. In 1994 the National Arts Council announced that it will no longer fund performance art, following a media outcry over a performance by Josef Ng in an event organized by Fifth Passage.<sup>7</sup> Performance art was not banned. However, the impact was significant as official perceptions to the term "performance art" since 1994 were clouded by uneasy association to the "distastefulness" or "vulgarity" of Josef Ng briefly exposing part of his posterior in his Fifth Passage performance, as well as the perception that performance art allows for an artist's persuasive psychological control over his audience. Before the incident, performance art through the activities of the Artist Village was gaining ascendancy, even having been included in the National Arts Council funded "The Space," an Arts Festival Fringe in 1992. Having to respond to the media outcry of 1994, only scripted performances are allowed to be presented in public. As such, the featuring of any performance art pieces in any context or event is to be handled sensitively, fulfilling the various concerns laid out by the state through the Arts Council and preempting any possible media attack. Aside from those that comply by submitting scripts before each performance to be approved, some artists had also since look into ways to

circumvent the obstacles levied against performance art including organising private rather than public sessions, and recasting performance art as theater productions. The result is a performance art scene that is mindful of public and official gaze, if not surveillance, and reflexive to the very problem of categorization and its implications.

Art museology in Singapore is at its infancy. As the only major gallery or art museum in Singapore, it becomes necessary for the Singapore Art Museum to embrace and allow space for contemporary practice as an integral part of its programming rationalized by the value of contemporary art as a subject of cultural discourse as well as institutional positioning within a network of international museums and the many contemporary art events taking place.

As manifestations of current cultural discourse, contemporary art becomes partly the subject that the museum seeks to explain and unravel via its primary role of classification and orderings of historical categories. We may also inverse the relationship between the contemporary and historical categories. Selective representation of contemporary art serves to test or validate the historical assumptions made by the museum thus deconstructing or enforcing a constructed narrative of art, given that the museum is a pursuant of such constructions and reviews of art history.

Further, contemporary art provides access for a museum to connect to an ever widening international discursive interest while concurrently disconnecting or distancing from the narrow interests that are defined by immediate participants within its locality. It allows the museum to enquire into systems and values that pervade the manner in which structures are organized including the Museum itself thus affiliating itself to the very concerns held by the contemporary practitioners. It also allows the museum to validate itself by way of its suggested alignment with a wider international value system that pervades the circles of contemporary art shows. Contemporary art thus is a necessary tool for a museum to extend its assertion as a conduit of knowledge, testing and even validating its treatment of the past art historical categories, by its continual assessment of the constituents of art and their relationships. Contemporary art also serves the practical function of connecting institutions to with a larger international fraternity due to its vigorous engagement with or against systems and values, while at the same time provide a channel for intermittent foray beyond familiar grounds and terrains.

Since it began operation in 1996, the Museum had organized a number of exhibitions featuring contemporary art. This includes a series of exhibitions that exemplify practices by artists graduating from or associated to the various art schools in Singapore — National Institute of Education (1996), Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (1998), and LaSalle College of the Arts (1999) — thus demonstrating the differing perspectives of art education and its impact on contemporary

practices and pointing towards the possibility of the presence of a discernible set of institutional values in operation. The Museum also presented "Trimurti & Ten Years After" (1998) which examines the practices of three contemporary artists of differing ethnic background and their responses to notions of multiculturalism. The Museum had also presented contemporary art of Germany, China and India. In these instances, the placement of the contemporary art is unproblematic, as they provide extensions to larger issues of art history and modernity. Nevertheless, where political contents referential to the Singaporean condition of an artwork may operate against the goodwill and relations between the Museum and the state, aspects of contemporary art can be problematic. In 1998 the Museum presented "ARX5: Processes (Artist Regional Exchange)," an art residency and exhibition project in collaboration with several co-organizers including the ARX of Australia and Hong Kong Arts Centre. The withdrawal of a single piece of a Hong Kong cartoonist by the organizers<sup>8</sup> brought about intense discussions about issues of censorship, and artist's loss of agency over the treatment and presentation of his works.<sup>9</sup> The incident had also highlighted the subjective reading of the rights and values of contemporary art across geopolitical spaces, and ensuing it, the severe difficulties in mediating differentiated or opposing values; between hosts and artists, between context and universality. While contemporary art initiatives in Singapore emanating from artists and art groups since the 1994 performance art incident have somewhat been overcome by a lack of confidence, it becomes necessary for institutions like the Museum to encourage the growth of artistic space through the careful management and nurturing of official perceptions on contemporary art. The withdrawal of the work by the organizers, which featured a caricature of two of Singapore's leaders and suggested the nature of their political relations, was to be the final act after an impasse in the frantic negotiations between the organizers and artist regarding the extent and manner of presentation.<sup>10</sup> Viewed from the institutional perspective of the need to guard further depletion of space (notional and physical) available to contemporary art, the preemptive request made to the organizers of ARX5 for the removal of the work may be justified. The showing of the work may result in another public outcry and further, an arbitrary policy shift similar to that in 1994 in the state's attempt to placate the Singaporean public for its outcry against art's perceived transgressions. However, not showing the work have also meant denying the contemporary art's potential role in the wider public discourse on culture and politics. Art can also be a vehicle that activate civil initiatives. It was a clear dilemma, the risk of backlash from action (withdrawing the work) and non-action (allowing the work to be exhibited) emanates from both sides. To a limited extent, this response by the Museum in advising the ARX5 organizers for the withdrawal of the work, can be contextualized to the

government's firm response to commentaries in 1994 made by a well-known Singaporean fiction writer, Catherine Lim, which were political in nature. For the government, political commentaries is to be made within a delimited institutional space, thus allowing for its clear management. As such private individuals should enter into political parties before partaking in public political debates.<sup>11</sup> An implication one may suggest from here is the consignment of individuals into their ascribed sphere of "competence." The artistic space is to be differentiated from and should not overlap the political space and thus, practitioners are expected to refrain from blatant commentaries or references to local political issues or situations. Having said this, it is important to note that there is no professed interests by the state to closely monitor contents of art being presented anywhere in Singapore.<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusion: "Nokia Singapore Art 1999" as a Model for Future Engagements?**

Alterity in art, by its very definition defies appropriation and control. To maintain its "alternativeness," it has to continually reinvent itself as its past propositions become accepted thus consigned into historical categories. For the practitioners, access to the Museum is both desirable and undesirable. Desirable for the opportunities of representation, by way of acquisition and exposure via exhibitions. Undesirable due to the very logic of alterity itself, where the monoliths or canons of the establishment are to be deconstructed and criticized, and the Museum is exactly that — establishment. While the Museum may understand the need to allow contemporary art to remain as an evolving entity mutating beyond set categories by way of acknowledging its key devices such as initiatives, reflexivity and activism, in summoning support and appropriating it for the Museum's practical and pedagogic ends, contemporary art has to be conceptually dislocated from its oppositional stance, explained and realigned in officious term to the public as elements that help mobilize the state's vision and thinking, however at the same time utilising the devices of museological didactics (wall captions and exhibition catalogues) to surface the many issues of the arising from contents.

Given the complex sets of motivations at play, the relationship can be tense as demonstrated by the case from the ARX exhibition. In December this year, the National Arts Council and the Museum, will co-organize a contemporary art event, "Nokia Singapore Art 1999." Given the background of engagements between the Arts Council and the Museum with performance art and political commentary respectively, this event should provide some useful observations from which we may draw further implications on the place of contemporary art within the activities undertaken by state supported institutions. The national art event is backgrounded by a complex and meandering history, having been revamped and renamed several times since its inception in the late 1960s. Traditionally

the event is an open exhibition where all artists were invited to submit pieces for selection, display, and sale. Later, consistent as an event that operationalize official views on art and culture, another element was added in, an exhibition section featuring artists that were conferred with national awards. By 1990s, where the state's objective was to develop "Singapore into a gracious, cultured and well-informed society," this exhibition series became a clear an example of the state's value system at work, where rationalizations were made stemming from notions of artistic and cultural acquisition as indicator of social maturity of a nation; artists, although often consigned to their sphere of technical competence i.e. art, as participants of nation-building; and art exhibition as a demonstration of communitarian idealism including multiculturalism and meritocracy, coupled with material pragmatism, an economic principle applied to culture and the arts.

The event for 1999 will maintain the interest for an "art fair" concept of mass participation as well as further provide recognition to artist-recipients of national awards. In other words, it is still an exercise to demonstrate the very idea of community and nation building. Included for the very first time in the bi-annual event will be a "curated section" featuring a selection of contemporary artists and expressions.

The "Nokia Singapore Art 1999" serves as a multi-coded spectacle; its meaning shifts from entity to entity. For the state that enables and hosts it, it celebrates a specific notion of nation and progressiveness. For the contemporary practitioners, the event represents on one hand an avenue to articulate propositions, and on the other an interesting or perhaps insidious attempt by the state to appropriate and thus neutralize some of these propositions. As an apparatus thus complicit to the state, the Museum manages the representation of contemporary art by referencing it to the values of the state, strategically highlighting to the state elements that can be allied to its objectives and negotiating those that are problematic. By remaining mindful of the boundaries and engaging carefully with these boundaries, artistic spaces becomes protracted, hoping that it may grow sequentially. That is to say, the Museum must necessarily play a pragmatic role, as one that enhances the opportunities for contemporary art while acknowledging and understanding the dynamics and relations between artistic space and the state, expressed through policies. T.K. Sabapathy wrote in 1993:

"Collaboration between establishment and art groups or institutions and individuals need not entail absolute correspondences of aims and ideals; neither does co-operation necessarily imply co-option. Both collaboration and co-operation can lead to tolerance of divergent values and agendas; this is essential as the practice, production and propagation of art will increasingly require an ever-widening base of both institutional support and the active