

## Asia: The Possibility of a Collaborative Space

—Under Construction Project

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The economic development experienced by Asia over the last 10 to 15 years or so, has culminated in Asia achieving a well-established position as the growth center of the world. At the same time, this development has resulted in the further growth of the relationship of interdependence within the region, broadly and deeply influencing one another's societies and cultures. Through its encounter with Western modernity in the 19th century and through its history of resistance and development during the 20th century, Asia, which has always been comprised of diverse ethnic groups and cultures, is now, in the 21st century, entering a dynamic era of transformation. The information revolution and the wave of globalization are further accelerating this change. Americanization, represented by the capitalism-based mass consumer culture of the post-World War II era, has penetrated Asia to become integrated into Asian society. People have begun to question their own identity, and at the same time, to transcend their own national boundaries to seek a dialogue with their neighbors on the subject of the future direction for Asia. It is within this context that "Under Construction," the three-year, Asian-based progressive, joint-curatorial project began in April 2000. After the process of building, of preparations, of creating something, the project will finally reach its culmination in December 2002 in Tokyo.

### What is Asia?

People's idea of Asia differs depending on where they are in terms of time and space. The origin of the word "Asia" lies in the ancient Assyrian word for "sunrise." In Greek, the "land of the rising sun" was contrasted with the "land of the setting sun," eventually giving rise to the words "Asia" and "Europe" as used today. In this sense, the ideas of Asia and Europe were, from the beginning, one of opposition, and it was believed that they were mutually complementary territories, both of which were essential for "the world" to become complete. When considering Asia in geographical terms, apparently it was not until the second half of the 16th century, the years following the Age of the Great Voyages, that the word "Asia" was used to describe the vast territory that covered the Eurasian continent, which remains much the same today. [1] Until then, Asia had been seen in a temporal and spatial context, but a hierarchical value was applied as we

entered the modern era. As result, an idea of Asia based on Western modernism that perceives Asia as a region "other than" the West prevailed over the idea of Asia represented by the Asians themselves. The progressivism and universalism of the humanities of modern times has, from its Western-centric viewpoint, constantly defined "the other" as something distinctive. This has preconditioned Asia and its peers among the "others" to maintain their positions based on a colonial differentiation, and to reinforce the position of the West.

Discussing Asia in Japan is a perplexing and awkward business, probably because the complex circumstances in the prewar days and the memories of war that follow have not been properly reconciled, and remain an issue. The historical past of Japan's aggressive war on, and colonial control of, East and Southeast Asia was an Eastern version of modern Western imperialism, and has continued to have a subtle effect on Japan's relations with other parts of the region, preventing any real development in Asian cultural exchange. For example, art programs that promoted Asian art in Japan were initially regarded as orientalism-based cultural imperialism on the part of an economically better off Japan by the relevant Asian countries, and were at times criticized by the arts professionals in the region. Both those criticizing and those being criticized could not help but be sensitive to the memories of the past.

Today, in order to solve the region's common problems which have increased as a result of the rapid formation of an interdependent structure, the Asian countries have had to transcend the confines of nation and state and to jointly address particularly urgent issues. And, in order to address this reality, what is required is not so much an Asia as defined in a historical and abstract sense, but "Asia as a method" [2] or "Asia as a function." This does not mean an Asia that functions for the benefit of an individual nation, as Japan did before the war. Rather, the expectations are for Asia to function as part of the process in which people in the region question their own identity or acquire a new identity.

### The Transformation of the Asian Art Environment

Due to the profound relationship between Western and Asian countries since the advent of modernism, there has been a

- ① Ito Shuntaro. "Koten kodai ni okeru asia" (Asia in Classical and Ancient Times), "Tokushuu asia to wa nanika" (Special Issue - What is Asia), *Kokusai Kouryu*, 71, 1996, pp 36-39.
- ② The words "Asia as a method" to describe the process of its formation was first used by Takeuchi Yoshimi. Takeuchi Yoshimi, "Houhou to shite no asia" (Asia as a method), (First published in 1961 by Soubunsha), *Nihon to asia* (Japan and Asia), Chikuma Shobou, 1993, p. 469.
- ③ Refer to the chart at the end of the catalogue (pp.204-205) for details on the project's overall structure and process.

strong interest amongst Asian countries in American and European art movements. However, little was known about the art of neighboring Asian countries, and this situation prevailed until the early 1990s. However, the exchange that took place from the 1990s within the Asian region gradually strengthened their peer-to-peer relationships. Examples include: the exhibitions with a focus on Southeast Asian art which Japan and Australia have been actively involved in organizing; the building of new modern and contemporary art museums and the establishment of art collections in Korea, China and Singapore and others; thriving large-scale international exhibitions such as the biennales and the triennales in East Asia; and the prominence of Asian artists in the Western art world based on a postcolonial discourse. Although these trends hinged upon cultural policies that were in turn linked to the political and economic policies of each country and region, the advent of the information age in the late 1990s resulted in a further upheaval in the structure of the art world. For example, through the growth of the Internet, collaborations transcending borders began to take place between alternative spaces and small creative units in countries that lacked an art infrastructure. A situation has been created in which different types of artists can become involved in the creative process in a range of art environments, from a national through to an individual level, and as the relationship of artistic exchange becomes increasingly complex, there is also increasing freedom of choice. And the driving force behind this trend is the young generation, baptized by media globalization and the members of which share the sensibilities of the times.

The primary aim of the Japan Foundation Asia Center's art activities, spanning more than a decade, has been to introduce contemporary Asian art to Japan. However, there have also been ongoing initiatives to identify modern Asia through, for example, the "Asian Modernism" exhibition (1995) and to create a forum to encourage dialogue on Asian art by organizing international

symposia. However, the dynamism of Asian society and the accompanying changes in the art environment have exceeded the pace of these attempts. This is encouraging a process of freeing oneself from preconceived ideas of art, and at the same time, leading us towards a new level of questioning of what Asian art is. In other words, a search has begun for Asian art that does not represent a Western definition of Asian art, but which is something that is defined by Asians themselves. And a new theory and a methodology are required now for this to be realized.

And here, we turn to the discussion of "Under Construction." The power of imagination akin to that of an astronomer, has always beckoned us, through the ages, into a somewhat romantic world. At the same time, this imagination has given us opportunities for new and unexpected progress. "If several small exhibitions, all based on the same theme, were to be held in various Asian locations at the same time, and these were to be all viewed from afar or compiled into a catalogue, they should appear as one large exhibition." A conversation along these lines that took place one day, at the turn of the century, provided the idea for this "Under Construction" project. The aim was to organize a series of independent exhibitions in different Asian locations, and at the same time, to present them as a single exhibition. The project was to plot multiple dots of equally borderless values that exist at the same level, but for the multiple dots, at the same time, to create a single space. The keyword for linking these multiple "dots" can be "Asia" as a function. A space named Asia could be conceived in this way ... Although the image was nebulous and abstract, we instinctively felt that this was the primary theme and practical method that was most appropriate for our search for a new relationship with our neighbors with diverse backgrounds. We wanted to capture Asia as it is today, as well as its future direction by creating a collaborative space through which an exhibition would be organized based on the theme "What is Asia?" and thus to question our identity and



relevance. Asia will be defined by Asians, instead of just being a historical concept rooted in memories, and this task is one that only we who live in the same age and space are able to do. The framework for this project was set, based on these principles. [5]

### Creating a Collaborative Space

Creating the collaborative space for “Under Construction” has been a process of trial and error. The curators who came together for this project were all young in their twenties and thirties. History has no direct relevance to them. They live in a global, media-based society, and share the same sensibility rooted in their cultural environment. There may be a slight discrepancy in the quantity of information among some countries, but essentially they have been each required to understand the international art scene and at the same time to address the local art scene. However, none of the curators had met each other before, and the prospects were daunting when it came to actually putting together the exhibition. The initial catalyst in the birth of a common awareness among the curators was the research trip that was carried out in different Asian countries with the curators offering each other their support. This became the first step towards creating a collaborative space and made a major contribution to facilitating the process that followed. Nine curators from eight Asian countries initially participated in the project in response to an invitation by the Asia Center. However, this number was reduced to eight curators from seven countries by the second meeting. This drove home the difficulties of forming relationships and the fact that relationships are not always as harmonious as anticipated.

The differences in cultural backgrounds that could be glimpsed through gaps in the discussions have been particularly important when considering the identity of Asia. English has been the common language used in the meetings. There have been

several instances where there was a clear difference in opinion between those who think in English and those who think in their native language. This tendency was conspicuous during the process of deciding the exhibition title, “Under Construction.” The native English-speakers pushed for the use of “Remix” on the premise that the Third World image conjured up by the words “Under Construction” conveys a negative impression. In contrast, those for whom English is a foreign language and simply a means of communication, did not have the same impression. They saw “Under Construction” as a positive phrase symbolizing the entire progressive project, and chose to use the words as a powerful means of promotion. A whole day was spent with both parties trying to persuade each other while, at the same time, understanding opposing views, and in the end, everyone agreed on this title. No doubt we could go on to examine the cultural theory surrounding the issue of the use of English in Asia, but this will not be attempted here. Reaching a consensus was the first task achieved by all participants, and signified the fact that a range of different Asian identities is able to create a single, common platform through a process of extensive and committed dialogue.

The next major step was to address the issue of how each curator was going to express the aim of this project through the seven local exhibitions, which were to be organized in venues unique to each Asian city. There were several symbolic incidents that addressed this challenge: the construction of the Fabriek (“factory” in Dutch) Gallery in Indonesia and the shocking burglary that followed; the Beijing local exhibition became the first Government-approved contemporary art exhibition to be held in China. In a fluid cultural and social environment, the curators played the role of a medium for encouraging change in their respective societies, by presenting works of art from their own country and other Asian countries. Putting together the local exhibitions enabled all participants to recognize, once again, that art in Asia is not “something that lies within a system,” but a function in a living

relationship with society.

The difficulty of the final Tokyo exhibition lay in the actual collaboration among the nine curators, who, while respecting the context of the seven local exhibitions, had to create a single exhibition by reorganizing the 43 artists/groups that first appeared in the local exhibitions, and separating them into two different venues. And, this was to be carried out within Tokyo's local art and social context. This process required a many-sided and multi-leveled imagination due to the fact that there were several curators involved. In other words, the process challenged the accepted theory that curation by a single curator, as opposed to a team of curators, is better at producing an exhibition with a strong impact. If this Tokyo exhibition, which is the result of this collaborative effort, were to end up disappointing the audience, it means that it has no more significance than any other existing type of group exhibitions in which the participating artists are selected by nationality. This could not possibly be a new Asia-based exhibition. Will the curators be able to disprove this accepted theory? That answer depends completely on the process to date and the firmness of the collaborative space that is to be created while sharing an awareness of issues and carrying out ongoing discussions on these issues. Naturally, the amount of work involved has increased dramatically. In addition to the work involving the exhibition itself such as public relations, preparation of the catalogue, transportation, inviting the artists, and administrative work such as budget management, a large number of e-mails are exchanged on a daily basis between the curators, artists and organizers as well as the designers, shippers and printing companies. Emails are truly a godsend of the IT revolution. No borders exist in this collaborative space. What does exist is the determination of everyone involved to put together this one exhibition, the bond that exists between these individuals and their power of imagination. It is here that we discover a space, our initial vision of a multiple but, at the same time, a single space, in its creation.

### Conceptualizing Asia through a Collaborative Space

The three years of "Under Construction" have gradually unearthed areas that were initially not apparent. If one were to try and express in a few words what has been attempted during this three-year process, it could be described as an attempt to conceive Asia's present identity through art. It can also be seen as an attempt to search for Asia as a "subject" instead of an "object" — a self-defined Asia instead of an Asia defined as a remainder of the West. This can only be realized in a collaborative space where many related people carry out equal and mutual exchange. In this space, curators from related but different cultures, by practicing translation of culture through the arts, have found themselves in a situation that can only encourage dialogue or discussion. Although they have faced difficulties, they have been able to proceed towards their goal through a process of understanding and misunderstanding. And through this process, the roles of each individual have changed and have been reinforced, resulting in the formation of partnerships and bonds. Our wish is for the binomial opposition between the West and the rest to be transcended and instead, for diverse relationships to be embraced, and moreover, a response to be evoked amongst Asians living in the same age or people living amongst different cultures. We also hope that the future is taken into consideration. That is what "Under Construction," our joint Asia-based project, is all about. We hope that at the Tokyo exhibition, all the curators and artists involved in this project will direct the question "What is Asia?" to the audience, and that the exhibition will be a catalyst for considering what Asia actually is. Here lies the potential for our collaborative space to expand even further.

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