

Asia's Art Map

I happened to be in Washington DC exactly one year after 9-11. I realized, once again, that more than any impassioned speeches by politicians, it was the cries of grief from individuals whose personal ties with their family and friends had been severed that has resulted in this event which threatened the entire world being etched permanently into our memories. Although we have been hearing about globalization for a long time, the phenomenon of globalization isn't the result of promotion on the part of governments or politicians. It is the result of the rapid development in communications technology that has reduced the sense of distance for all of us throughout the world. However, globalization does not mean that the world is becoming a uniform place. Rather, the real significance of globalization is first manifested when there is an understanding and respect not only for the equality of individuals, but also for the differences in the historical and cultural backgrounds that shape each individual.

The world of art is no exception. Many exhibitions based on the theme of multi-culturalism are being held in Europe and the United States, symbolizing a society that is becoming increasingly multi-cultural and which is confronting issues related to migration. Art is becoming increasingly de-centralized, as has clearly shown in the Venice Biennale of recent years as well as at "Documenta XI", the international exhibition that had such an impact this summer. Concomitant to this trend, there has been a steady growth in interest in Asian nations by Europe and the United States, although much of this interest has yet to transcend exoticism. During the three years since the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery opened, we have attempted to introduce international trends in contemporary art by organizing special exhibitions from a wide variety of viewpoints. The issue of how to translate and present the phenomenon of globalization to the visitors in the locality called Tokyo is one issue that the Gallery

has had to address. Specially in Japan where there is no land borders with other countries, and encounters with other cultures have been relatively restricted, we have to keep addressing this issue over the long term if Japan is to develop the ability to look at different cultures in a more realistic context.

The "Under Construction" project, initiated by the Japan Foundation Asia Center and its "collective exhibition" to be held in Tokyo, presents one direction that can be taken to address the issue. Over the last ten years, the Japan Foundation Asia Center has earned a name as one of the institutions most active in introducing Asian culture to Japan. Suppose we call the results of research carried out by Japanese curators and art critics in other Asian countries which were linked together into a single exhibition "Stage 1," after this, the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery participated in the project by devising a plan for curating the exhibition, or "Stage 2". Significantly, this involved young curators and art critics from locations around Asia visiting each others' countries to re-evaluate "contemporary Asian art" from their own viewpoints. We were also reassured by the fact that beyond every email — an essential tool in the process of gathering the diverse points of view found in the different Asian countries into a single collective exhibition — there were individuals, on partners, sharing the same time frame and belonging to the same times. Rather than being an examination of "Asia" from the outside, this internal Asian network, created by members sharing a common understanding of the times, generated a great deal of expectation.

This exhibition is subtitled "New Dimensions of Asian Art." As the curators chosen for this exhibition were all born in the 1960's and 1970's, most of the artists that were selected happened to belong the same generation. Many of the artists had directly experienced the international art scene either by studying, working as artists-in-residence or exhibiting in the West. And, as mentioned above, the shift in interest by the international art scene towards non-Western nations, including

Asia, is creating a change in the artists' working environment. In recent years, large-scale international exhibitions have been held in Asian venues such as Kwangju in Korea, Taipei, Shanghai and Yokohama, as well as in India and Bangladesh, signaling increasing opportunities for accessing the global art scene. In addition, rapid economic and social changes have created a situation where the hybrid and multi-leveled environment found in the gap that lies between traditional and modern society and between urbanization and rural life has become the norm. This has resulted in more natural demand for the particular everyday environments that form the identity of each individual.

An interesting aspect of this exhibition is the fact that many of these "new generation" curators visited other Asian countries for the first time during their initial research for the project. The fact that we, for whom art history has always been Western-centric, shifted our gaze to the interactive vector of the Asian nations, which in the past had always played a secondary role, and discovered a commonality and a sense of familiarity absent in the West, in actually very different cultures, was an enormous bonus. The Asian art map for each curator was a personal map that began when partners were found in different Asian locations, and from these locations, the map began to be drawn, evolving from dots through to lines and surfaces, gradually taking on detailed form. And, based on these Asian art maps, seven local exhibitions were held along with the context of each art environment and art infrastructure.

Keywords that tie Asia together

After the local exhibitions, held until the end of March 2002, the curators of each local exhibition came to Tokyo to meet with the organizers of the collective exhibition and advisors for the project at the Third Working Seminar held in Tokyo in April. The three days of solid meetings began with reports on the local exhibitions, after which many hours were spent

discussing how the seven local exhibitions could be best combined into a single, collective exhibition. Everyone recognized the difficulty of producing, in the different location of Tokyo, a single narrative from the local exhibitions, each of which reflected the local contemporary art environment. There was also a sense of unease about dismantling the structure of the local exhibition, each of which was based on a theme conceived by its curator and which had its own context. At the same time, everyone understood that the aim of the collective exhibition was not simply to line up the seven local exhibitions in one place, but that the "Under Construction" exhibition should present the individual elements of the local exhibitions as a whole. By the end of the seminar, the mood had shifted to one of expectation and anticipation of the image of the new generation of Asian art that would be created by remixing and reconstructing the whole.

One concrete issue that had to be considered was the fact that the venue for the collective exhibition would be divided into two separate venues — the Japan Foundation Forum and the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery. Since the context of the exhibition would be split into two due to the physical separation of the venue, we had to work on maintaining continuity of concept while at the same time applying keywords to each venue, using these as a basis for the exhibition to evolve. As some of the keywords have more than one meaning, while each work expresses several concepts, the relationship between the work and the keyword do not necessarily have a direct relationship with each work — the links between work and keyword are more abstract and flexible.

The keywords for "Asia" suggested by the curators symbolize the diversity and multiplicity that is Asia. At the same time, they are words that are found in the international art scene.

©Daily Life / Habitation / Subculture / Place / Working with Community

- ◎Hybrid / Process of Exchanging / Transforming / Economy / Mobility / Here & There / Sea
- ◎Memory / Enigma / Fantasy / Dream

"Daily life" was also a theme of the local exhibitions held in Seoul and Beijing. However, in the way that "daily life", or the everyday and familiar, becomes something that isn't from an outsider's point of view, this keyword also provides a departure point for considering issues of identity, including our position in this diverse environment and the nature of the environment that determines who we are. The same can be applied to "habitation" and "place". Meanwhile, "subculture" and youth culture are keys for understanding the multiple layers of contemporary Asian society, while we can discover our own environment through "working with community".

As a result of rapid urbanization, cities are vibrant, chaotic places. However, gaps with the rural areas, or, gaps in memories, traditions and experiences are also being generated. "Transforming" and "hybrid" are symbols of this reality, while words such as "economy" and "process of exchanging" express the values and economic sensibilities that have been transformed over a short time span. Meanwhile, words such as "here and there" and "sea" stem from the "mobility" and sense of non-belonging that accompanies change.

And, "memory", the purpose of which is to confirm our identity, "enigma", "fantasy" and "dream", all of which stem from our imagination that unfolds to embrace an unreal or surreal world including religious beliefs, as well as from our longings and hopes for the future, are all arguably vehicles to maintain peace of mind, to fill in the gaps in a society where diverse elements coexist.

As far as the placement of these keywords was concerned, we took into consideration the spatial features of the venues - the artificially lit theatrical space of the Japan Foundation Forum versus the naturally lit white cube of the Tokyo Opera City Art

Gallery. As a result, works containing elements such as "memory", "enigma", "fantasy" and "dream" were placed in the Forum, where they could be exhibited in a theatrical environment. The first works placed on display at the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery were those evoking "mobility", to signify a connection between the two venues. These were followed by works based on the themes of "daily life", "habitation" and "subculture", and finally, works containing elements symbolizing "place", "transforming", "economy", "process of exchanging", "here and there", "hybrid" and "sea".

As a result, through the use of keywords in the collective exhibition, no theme of any local exhibition has been completely lost. Instead, a flexible connection with the origins of the local exhibitions has been maintained. Furthermore, a large number of new works within the context of either the collective exhibition or "Tokyo" have been included in this exhibition. These new works are primarily works-in-progress from the "Fantasia" exhibition that evolved in an artist-in-residence format from Seoul to Beijing and from the Ashiya and Manila exhibitions in which the same artists participated.

The creation of a venue for expression

Arguably, the most unusual aspect of the local exhibitions was the actual creation of a venue for expression. The Fabrick Gallery that was built for the "Dream Project - Under Construction" exhibition held in Bandung, Indonesia is the best example. The lucid dream that it represents is extremely persuasive in today's context of a generally-perceived genuine need for a venue that can provide a central pull for creation. Moreover, the atmosphere inside the gallery with its limited life span due to the fact that the land it was built on was on a temporary lease, was one of a heightened, but agreeable, tension coupled with a sense of unity created by the joint collaboration. In addition, modifications were carried out on Seoul venue Space



imA and the East Modern Artcentre where the Beijing exhibition was held. Particularly significant is the latter, in which the organizers received permission from the government to use 1500 square meters of space for the purpose of exhibiting contemporary art, a landmark in the evolution of Chinese contemporary art. Meanwhile, that the Bangkok exhibition was located in three different venues in that city symbolizes the contemporary art scene in Thailand, in which creative activities are carried out in small-scale, alternative venues.

There were concerns that this genuine and strong demand for creative expression and for a venue to present the work would be weakened if it was removed from the context of the local exhibition venue and placed in “a venue for exhibition” in Tokyo. In order for “the creation of the space itself” to be reflected in the collective exhibition space, the Fabriek Gallery, built in Indonesia, was recreated with slight modifications to its original size, in the center of the Japan Foundation Forum, resembling a play within a play.

Other aspects were taken into consideration when putting together the collective exhibition. The continuity of the exhibition space as it was being divided into two venues, the sense of presence of the many comparatively small-scale works from the local exhibitions when exhibited in a large-scale exhibition venue and how to recreate the alternative feel of the local exhibitions. A suggestion was made during the Working Seminar held in April to appoint an architect, and Atelier Bow-wow (Tokyo), a collective whose members belong to the same generation as the curators and artists of this project, was chosen. Everyone embraced Atelier Bow-wow’s breadth of vision that focuses on the existing environment rather than the building as an object or the newness of that building.

With the Fabriek Gallery in the center of the venue, its roof part was intentionally redesigned to maintain the same sense of scale and yet succeeded in creating a sense of openness. Meanwhile, at the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, the smaller

works were assembled in the centers of the two rectangular galleries to create intimate spaces, and the larger works in the wings of each rectangle. Visitors viewing Lee Mikyung’s work are led up a gentle slope to the upper level, dividing the space below the 6 meter high ceiling into two layers and providing observers with a multi-levelled viewpoint.

Beyond the boundaries of curation

The production of the collective exhibition was carried out by organizers, the Japan Foundation Asia Center and the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery in conjunction with Kamiya Yukie and Yamamoto Atsuo, the Japanese curators of the local exhibitions, with each responsible for different roles such as discussing the works to be exhibited, inviting the artists, transportation of the works and production of the publicity material. These tasks were carried out with frequent communication with the curators of the local exhibitions and the 43 artists/collectives. The communication network that was built during this time through the Working Seminars, the research and the local exhibitions, and which was reinforced by a sense of trusting each other as well as the open-minded and flexible attitude displayed during our discussions benefited the overall process. One of the themes of this exhibition, “Beyond the boundaries of curation” is more relevant to the art world and probably has no direct relevance as far as the visitors to this exhibition are concerned. However, I would like to stress that the group of works on exhibition is the result of a challenging collaboration by those living in neighboring countries and in the same age. It is my hope that the tangible network of real and visible people built as a result of this project will remain a network-in-progress, transcending the geographical framework known as “Asia” and continuing to expand on a global scale.

Kataoka Mami, (Chief Curator / Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, Japan)