

Communicative Approach, from Asia

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Sharing gaze to everyday life

November 2000: early winter in Beijing — Curator Kim Sunjung from Seoul and I were busily visiting artist's studios, guided by fellow curator Pi Li, who is based in Beijing. The streets were filled with Chinese characters, but the simplified style of characters commonly used in China was less familiar to me than the Western alphabet that can be seen everywhere in Japan. Our research for our project began by talking to Chinese artists, a profession that is becoming increasingly international in this rapidly changing country. China is so close to Japan, yet so unfamiliar that I had no clue how to find my way around. We communicated with the artists by writing in Chinese characters and using English along the way. In the past, Japan had used its position as ruling power to force other countries to use Japanese. But today, English, due to its pervasive use in cyberspace, is the lingua franca that enables us to communicate on an equal basis. To non-English speakers, using English as a communication device enables us to work in a new framework for our dialogue, despite the fact that the local language is being endangered by its pervasiveness. We have benefited from speaking English and being able to communicate with Asians who do not speak our own language.

One of the discoveries we made during our research was the common use of some words in all of the three languages — Japanese, Korea, and Chinese. The word for “art” is one of such words “美術” pronounced in each language as *bijutsu* in Japanese, *mi-sool* in Korean, and *mei-shu* in Chinese. The original word was invented by the Japanese secretariat [1] to translate the German taxonomical word for the Vienna Expo in 1873. All three countries have been using this Japanese invention.

It was a surprising to realize that the notion and category of “art” has been used for less than 150 years, and that we share the historical background of absorbing the art from the West since the start of the modern era. Recognizing the lack of Asian-Asian relationships and dialogue, meaning that we had not shared an awareness of issues until now despite sharing the same circumstances, was a starting point for re-considering our artistic expression within the broader context of Asia.

In 1994, Wong Karwai's movie “Chungking Express” was premiered in Hong Kong, and was distributed in Europe, Japan and the United States with the acclaim of Tarantino. The movie captured everyday life in a contemporary Asia, conveying the atmosphere of its speed. Born in Shanghai, Wong moved to Hong Kong and worked at a TV station before going into movies. He turns his gaze to the nitty-gritty of the urban landscape, such as convenience stores and fast food shops, and to sights from everyday life where elements of culture from domestic and foreign are all mixed, such as scenes of slurping up noodles or cramming mouths full of rice at roadside stalls accompanied by western music. Everyday life comes across as stylish and ever so attractive in his portrayal. There are two intersecting stories in “Chungking Express,” Wong directs with the sensuousness of a DJ, using sampling techniques that owe much to absorption of the subculture. What emerges from it all is the reality and the fantasy that belong to Asians in an age where things, information, and people are all moving. Beijing-born cantopop star Faye Wong sings “Dreams” by Irish pop-rock band The Cranberries, but she sings it up-tempo with the lyrics in Cantonese. This cover takes a metaphorical roll to represent the hybridity and speed of Asian cities that allow changes to be accepted without hesitation.

The gaze of new-generation Asian artists onto their everyday lives overlaps with that revealed in the movie of Wong Karwai, in which he is inspired by urban daily life. Mobile phones have suddenly become ubiquitous, and people are using computers, connecting to the Net on line and editing, all the while enveloped by TV, magazines, advertising, music and other media inextricably linked with everyday life. Surely we can see present Asia in the expressions and

[1] National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo(Ed.), *Kataru Genzai, Katarareru Kako, Nihon no Bijutsushigaku 100-nen* (The Present that Tells, The Past that is Told of: 100 Years of Art History in Japan), (Japan: Heibonsha, 1999), p.317

narratives grounded in the everyday experiences that have undergone such dramatic changes.

Based on the revelation I had when I began my research, we took "Everyday Life" as one of the keywords in starting a touring exhibition in Seoul, Beijing, and then Tokyo, as a small step towards answering the big question of "What is Asia?" Beginning with the alluring cultural differences in food and eating, Asia is full of variety, including ethnic and cultural variety. Accumulating discoveries through directly experiencing things myself was the only way that appeared to provide the chance of being able to properly see the Asia where we now live. The process of setting up an exhibition through dialogue between curators and artists provided a further opportunity to look carefully at Asia.

Relational art in Asia

"I began by having a show at the art space in my university. But people did not come to see it. The art world is very small wherever you go. But it is completely isolated from the community in my home town. I realize it was much more meaningful and much better to communicate directly with people in the local community." [10] Thai artist Navin Rawanchaikul's forthright confession is an unembellished account of the situation the young generation of artists were facing in Asia in the 1990s, and of their motives for changing the form of expression they chose for their work. Venues for art were limited, and isolated from the artists' ordinary lives. There was no particularly dynamic market for art, and art space provision could in no way be considered comprehensive. Such an environment increased the doubts and frustrations of the young artists as expressionists, but they did more than just complaining about the situation; they responded to their predicament with humor and wit. In 1995, Rawanchaikul changed a Taxi into a gallery, and used it as a mobile art space that could be inserted right into the middle of public spaces. If there's no venue and no budget, then use what the town is full of instead, was the flexible response. The star of the Bangkok traffic jams, the taxi, made a quick change into a gallery. What is more, I was able to encounter this sort of flexibility of expression all over Asia. If something is not available, make it. In an environment where the cultural infrastructure is not in place, or where there are far too many limits, then take a back route. This optimistic and positive approach is one characteristic of artistic expressions originating in Asia.

From the first half of the 1990s, the artists took to the street in Tokyo, too. In April 1993, Nakamura Masato played a central role and college friend artists co-organized in initiating guerilla-like events in Ginza under the name "the Ginburart." They perform and exhibit various works on the theme of artists breaking free from the gallery system. [11] Ginza is a place of consumption, with high-class shops standing side by side, and also a place where there are lots of galleries available for rent. It was also the site of the performance, "Tokyo Cleaning Promotion Movement," in 1964 by Hi-Red Center, the collective formed by Takamatsu Jiro, Akasegawa Gempei, and Nakanishi Natsuyuki. The pioneers of creating formless works through collaboration in the 1960s provided a trigger for the artists of the 1990s who took over from them.

One of the participants of the Ginburart, Ozawa Tsuyoshi, used the milk delivery box often placed outside the doors of Japanese houses in the 70's, making mobile galleries that he called "Nasubi Gallery" ("Egg Plant Gallery"). The galleries were painted white inside to make a white cube, and although they were miniature, they were actively able to hold all sorts of exhibitions, with visitors opening the tiny doors to peep inside. These gallery spaces were Ozawa's protest, a humorous way of countering the usual Japanese system of 'rental galleries' where artists had to pay for use of a space to show their works. The "if it's not available, make it" approach had blossomed here in Tokyo, too. From the late 1980s, Japan saw the establishment of many art museums, but they were not linked in a way that was receptive to the actual activities of the young generation of artists, leaving those artists to make their own venues for expression here in Tokyo, too. The readily moveable miniature galleries that could easily be shifted site to site — from a roadside tree to the corner of a shop, perhaps — or even taken overseas, were pointers to the growing interest in collaboration between the artists showing their work and the people viewing it.

In 1995, an exhibition, *Traffic*, at the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Bordeaux [12] focused on a range of artists whose means of building a relationship with the viewers of their works. "Their works highlight social methods of exchange, interactivity with the onlooker within the aesthetic experience proposed to him/her, and communication process, in their tangible dimension as tools for linking human being and groups to one another. So they are all working

⑩ Interview of Navin Rawanchaikul by the author. "In the Asian Density: Navin Rawanchaikul and Tsuyoshi Ozawa," *Cross*, (Italy: Ed. Giulio Lacchini, 1999), p.26

⑪ Other participants included Murakami Takashi, Iwai Shigeaki, Aida Makoto and others. The following year (1994), the venue shifted to Kabukicho in Shinjuku, with a total of 85 artists, some accepted from public application, working on the street project Shinjuku Shonen Art.

⑫ 28 artists contributed, including Maurizio Cattelan, Liam Gillick, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Carsten Holler, Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Jason Rhoades, Rirkrit Tiravanija.



within what we might call the relational realm," [6] wrote curator Nicolas Bourriaud, pointing out the relational aesthetic seen in artists who emphasized the process of making a work rather than its final product. As we entered the 1990s, interest in the multicultural grew, leading to Biennales, Triennales, and many other international exhibitions being held all over the world. These gave artists the opportunity to move from place to place on a regular basis, providing a stimulus that gave them a greater interest in others. As the forms taken by exhibitions become more fluid, there was an increasing need for works to be more flexible and site specific, and these changes in the forms of works provided additional stimulus.

The international exhibitions provided Asian artists with more opportunities to exhibit in Europe and America. They had strong interests in communicating with onlookers and in relating to the place where they were exhibiting that overlapped with those of their contemporaries based in the Western countries. As the venues for artists' activities shift from local ones to the stages provided by exhibitions in the Western countries, they attracted more international interest, and many were "discovered." However, when we look at this again from Asia's standpoint, we can see that they were not "discovered" within the stream of Western art. The expressions of their works had emerged from their local context. For the artists in the Western countries, there was a need to shift away from established art systems to liberate the potential of their expression. For artists in Asian countries, this contrasted with the need to create a platform where they can express themselves and go out to public places to increase their interaction with the public. Looking back, these two approaches started from very different points, but their methods of making works to embody their interest in dialog are similar.

Expression internalizing dialogue

The attempts of artists to approach regions and observers unused to more openly communicative attitudes can be seen in this exhibition in a variety of forms. The new awareness has even penetrated through to artists who work in media like photographs and video, or in three-dimensional expressions. Their work is also broadening the range of approaches available for communication.

Kim Sora bought everyday products in Beijing in order to be able to exchange them one-for-one with things owned by visitors to the exhibition (pp.100-101). People visiting the exhibition are invited to join in the process whereby cash becomes a product, the product becomes an exhibit, then the visitor's belonging replaces the exhibit to become part of the art work. Noguchi Rika stayed in Beijing in mid-winter, taking photographs of the swimmers who brave the cold and break the ice on a lake so that they can swim (p.118). Her method starts off like a documentary, but Noguchi and the people she met were linked by the act of taking photographs. Making daily visits and showing the locals the photographs she had taken became a means to build up an involvement with the community despite being unable to understand each others' language. Jung Yeondoo also sees taking photographs as a means of constructing a relationship with the subject. He interviews young people that he meets on street corners throughout Asia, and in front of the camera he changes them into the image of their dreams for the future. The photographs he produces remain as witnesses of the collaboration with the subject (pp.064-065).

The work by Shinoda Taro, who creates mechanical objects, has been added to those that have been developed while the exhibition has been touring (pp.162-163). Shinoda searches for gardens as ideal spaces in the middle of everyday scenes, and is investigating an unknown town under the guidance of a fortune-teller. The irrationality of trying to become involved with the land through the folk beliefs found in every part of Asia is somehow humorous.

The works of these artists who place emphasis on process are not necessarily produced with consideration for making something that has sufficient durability and an appropriate form for adding to a collection, so they utilize inexpensive and ephemeral materials that cannot hold their shape for long. Mareeya Dumrongphol's works are the immaterial traces left after working with clay in a space (pp.048-049). Rhii Jewyo transforms everyday objects like plastic bottles and towels to make tools for retaining moisture and temperature, demonstrating gems of knowledge useful for daily life and providing a healing effect, however simple and small (pp.126-127). Gimhongsok's lifeboat is packed full of the daily necessities of urban life (p.054), and as it moves around the different cities, its load is replaced with local objects whenever it moors in the "harbor" of the exhibition venue. Since video makes it easy to record a process, Jiang Zhi

⑥ Nicolas Bourriaud "An introduction to Relational Aesthetics." *Traffic*, (Bordeaux: CAPC, Musée d'Art Contemporain, 1995)

borrow the line of sight of a small, carved wooden doll, and shows the scenes of Seoul (where he is an artist in residence) in conjunction with pop to classic music to produce a poetic video diary, and Yang Zhenzhong shoots urban everyday life in an impromptu manner (pp.178-179). Saki Satom uses performances such as going round and round in the revolving doors of an office building to make little changes through repetitive movements, intervening in the everyday world of the unindividual city (pp.156-157).

The way that these artists view everyday life is bringing changes to expressions that used to lack a historical dimension or political awareness. Through sincere attempts to view local circumstances, political themes are now being reflected in the artists' works, even if it is in a euphemistic manner with the addition of a peculiar humor. For instance, Ozawa Tsuyoshi takes portrait photographs of people holding weapons made with foodstuffs. He first makes the weapons with the ingredients of a hotpot dish recommended by locals, and then afterwards holds a party using the same ingredients for the food. His works use the same materials for both warlike gestures and peaceful actions, switching from one to the other simply by changing the way they are used. This can be seen as a metaphor for Asia's situation, where interpreting the same history in different ways has led to problems on numerous occasions. As such, it gives us something to think about. Ham Jin's imagination works have created fantastic worlds with dolls made from tiny everyday things like chewing gum or medicine capsules. He is now in military service, and his military life has inspired him to create miniature soldiers that make you think of the state of the world after 9.11 (pp.058-059).

Change from an Asia being looked at, to an Asia that looks

There is a trap in expression by artists reacting to the local context emerging from Asia. They tend to be aware of being looked at by the West, and spontaneously give in to the temptation of acting the role of being different and exotic. There is a tacit understanding that artists won't receive recognition unless they ascend from a western stage. The situation whereby even Asia-oriented actions issue via the West is caused by the vulnerable and undeveloped systems for supporting art in Asia. From modern art onwards, there has always been a feeling of being inferior to the West. However, the attitudes we have learned from our own experiences are our realities, incorporating both the admiration and the pain inherent in the conflict of meeting different cultures, and these are now emerging in the fields of view of artists in Asia. We should not be positioning "ourselves" according to the viewpoint of "others" who look at "us." What is important is that we need to memorize the dialogues exchanged between us, layering them one on top of the other as our experiences. It is time to change from an Asia being looked at to an Asia where we ourselves are doing the looking. "Under Construction" is just the first step in that endeavor. What we are trying to do has only just begun.

