



ART AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific

EDITED BY CAROLINE TURNER

Pandanus Online Publications, found at the Pandanus Books web site, presents additional material relating to this book.

www.pandanusbooks.com.au

ART AND SOCIAL CHANGE

ART AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Contemporary Art in Asia and the Pacific

Edited by
CAROLINE TURNER

PANDANUS BOOKS
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Cover: *1001 Earth Humans*, Dadang Christanto.
Project Ancol, Indonesia. Image courtesy the artist.

Copyright for texts in this publication is held in each case by the authors and may not be reproduced without the author's permission. Text has been supplied by the authors as attributed. No photographs may be reproduced without permission of the copyright owners. Every effort has been made to obtain copyright clearances and contact owners of works. Further information is welcomed by the editor.

This book is copyright in all countries subscribing to the Berne convention. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission.

Typeset in Goudy and printed by Pirion, Canberra

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Art and social change: contemporary art in Asia and the Pacific.

Bibliography.

Includes index

ISBN 1 74076 046 8

1. Arts — Asia. 2. Arts — Pacific area. 3. Art, Modern — 21st century. 4. Art museums — Asia. 5. Art museums — Pacific area. I. Turner, Caroline. II. Title.

700

Editorial inquiries please contact Pandanus Books on 02 6125 4910

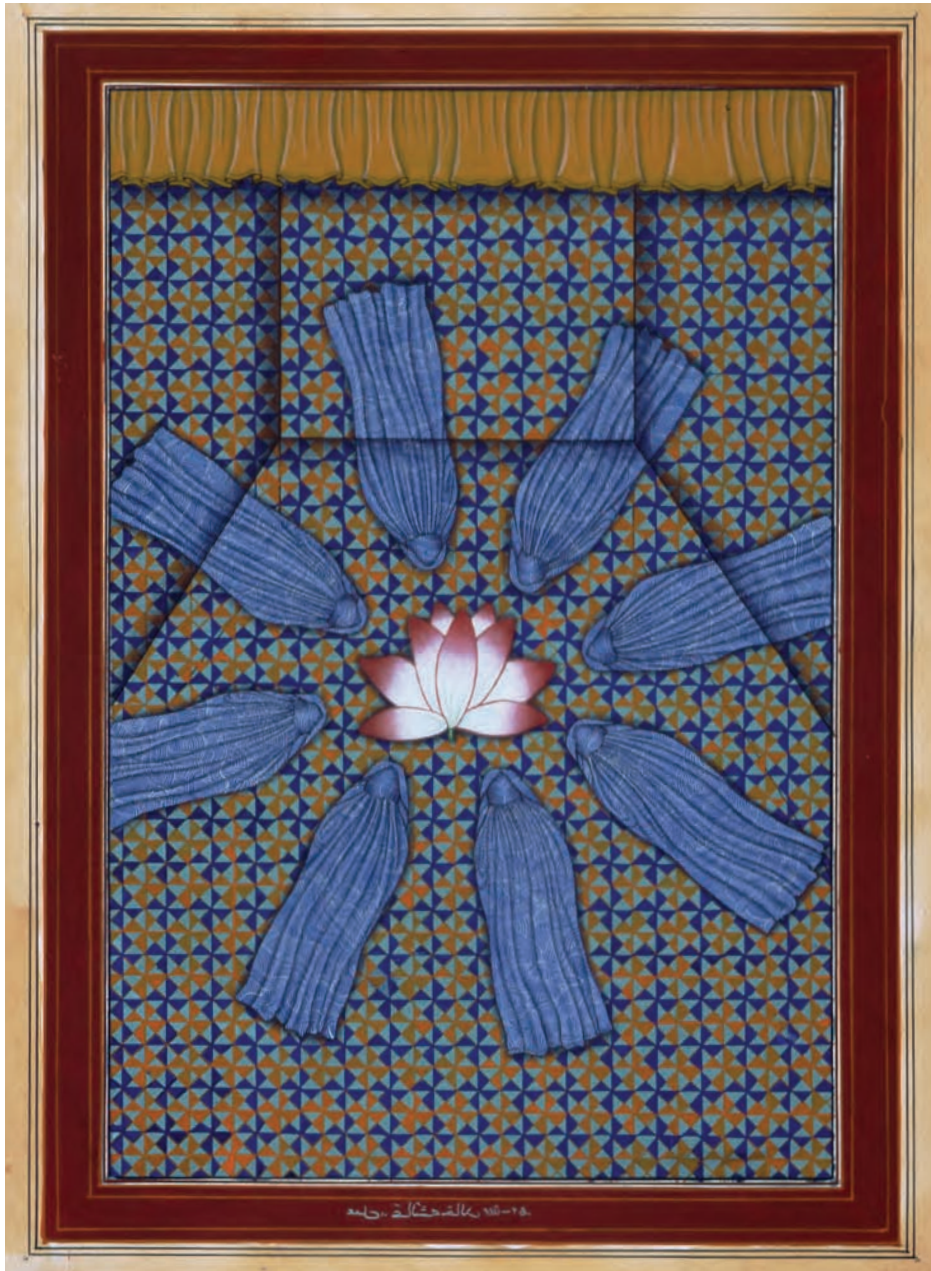
www.pandanusbooks.com.au

Published by Pandanus Books, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies,
The Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200 Australia

Pandanus Books are distributed by UNIREPS, University of New South Wales,
Sydney NSW 2052 Telephone 02 9664 0999 Fax 02 9664 5420

Publisher's Editor: Jan Borrie

Production: Ian Templeman, Justine Molony, Alex Leonard and Emily Brissenden



Aisha Khalid (Pakistan), *Form x Pattern 1*, 2000
Watercolour on wasli, 35 x 25.6 cm
Collection: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	x
Art and Social Change <i>Caroline Turner</i>	1
Geopolitical Changes in Asia and the Pacific <i>Glen St. J. Barclay</i>	14
Art in a Globalised State <i>Jen Webb</i>	30
A CHANGING WORLD ORDER	
Dismantled Norms: Apropos other avantgardes <i>Geeta Kapur</i>	46
The Spectre of Being Human <i>Charles Merewether</i>	101
REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES	
SOUTH ASIA	
A Stake in Modernity: A brief history of modern Indian art <i>Geeta Kapur</i>	146
Tracing the Image: Contemporary art in Pakistan <i>Salima Hashmi</i>	164
Contemporary Art in Sri Lanka <i>Jagath Weerasinghe</i>	180
SOUTH-EAST ASIA	
Indonesia: Art, freedom, human rights and engagement with the West <i>Caroline Turner</i>	196
Art and Politics in Indonesia <i>Jim Supangkat</i>	218

Different Visions: Contemporary Malaysian art and exhibition in the 1990s and beyond <i>Michelle Antoinette</i>	229
Brief Survey of Philippine Art <i>Alice G. Guillermo</i>	253
Singapore: A case study <i>Caroline Turner and Glen St John Barclay</i>	267
Developments in Contemporary Thai Art <i>Somporn Rodboon</i>	278
The Extended Matrix: New dimensions in Thai printmaking <i>Anne Kirker</i>	297
Vietnamese Fine Art Finds Itself in Respect of Aesthetics <i>Dang Thi Khue</i>	310
EAST ASIA	
Chinese Art <i>Xu Hong</i>	330
Taiwan: A location of construction and synthesis <i>Yulin Lee</i>	360
The Enigma of Japanese Contemporary Art <i>Caroline Turner</i>	385
Korean Contemporary Art Opens Towards Polyphonic Voices as Cultural Criticism <i>Soyeon Ahn</i>	431
AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC	
Art in Movement Across the Pacific <i>Susan Cochrane</i>	446
Australian Art: Examining its past, re-imagining its future (a partial itinerary, 1970–2000) <i>Bernice Murphy</i>	460
The Politics of Visibility: How Indigenous Australian art found its way into art galleries <i>Margo Neale</i>	483
He Kahui Whetu Hou Contemporary Maori Artists: A new constellation <i>Jonathan Mane-Wheoki</i>	498

PARTNERSHIPS

A New Tide Turning: Australia in the region, 1993–2003 516
Pat Hoffie

Choppy Waters: Arts Infrastructure and Networks in Asia 542
Alison Carroll

Distinctive Voices: Artist-initiated spaces and projects 554
Christine Clark

CHALLENGES FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM

Krishna's Dilemma: Art Museums in Human Development 570
Amareswar Galla

Author Biographies 584

Further reading 591

Credits 592

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks are extended by the editor to all the authors of the essays and to all the artists, museums, galleries and owners of art works reproduced here. The credit lines for the illustrated works do not adequately reflect the generosity of those making works available for this publication. Particular thanks must go to the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum and the Singapore Art Museum as well as to the Queensland Art Gallery. I also extend my thanks to Queensland University Press, to Tulika Books, India and to *Yishu-journal of contemporary Chinese art*.

The Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University has strongly supported this project and I am most grateful to former Director Professor Iain McCalman and current Director Professor Ian Donaldson and my colleague Dr Paul Pickering at the HRC. The editor gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Research Council for research undertaken on grants for which I was Chief Investigator and also the assistance of a Faculty grant from The Australian National University.

Particular thanks are also due of course to Ian Templeman, Justine Molony, Emily Brissenden and the team at Pandanus Books. I wish to thank research assistants and those at the HRC who worked so hard as assistant editors, especially Christine Clark, Rachel Eggleton, Melinda Sung, Harry Wise and Michelle Antoinette.

The field of contemporary Asian art is now a rich scholarly area. Key individuals and publications are detailed throughout this text. This study is indebted to that international scholarship. My personal thanks must go to the many artists, curators, writers and scholars from Australia and the Asia–Pacific region with whom I have worked over the last twenty years and I would like to acknowledge the support of the late Dr Richard Austin AO, former Chairman of Trustees at the Queensland Art Gallery.

Caroline Turner

ART AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Caroline Turner

THE OBJECTIVE of this book is to map the dynamic developments in contemporary Asian and Pacific art. The emphasis in the essays is on linking art to the extraordinary changes that have taken place in this region since the early 1990s.

In the past decade the global geopolitical tectonic plates have shifted dramatically. The turn of the century has witnessed the beginnings of an astonishing alteration in the balance of power towards Asia, militarily as well as economically, signifying perhaps, as many experts suggest, the impending close of five centuries of global domination by first Europe, then the United States. The first years of the new millennium have also led to a rethinking of world relationships, many of which have been transformed by globalisation and more recently by the 'war on terror'. Art in the region has mirrored and reflected these events.

The geopolitical and economic changes in the world have also been accompanied by dramatic shifts in the international art world. The absolute dominance of the older centres of Western Europe and the United States has been challenged by artists from the peripheries; and artists from these peripheries, in Eastern Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Middle

East, are now seen in major world exhibitions in increasing numbers. A new international art has emerged in the past decade.

An example of these changes was provided in November 1999, as the world waited for a new millennium. Chinese artist Cai Guo Qiang, one of the new superstars of the international art world, launched an extraordinary work over the skies of the Austrian capital, Vienna — a gunpowder explosion which created in the sky the outline of a Chinese dragon. Cai's provocative statement may well have heralded what many commentators have begun to call the Asian century. It certainly marks the arrival or re-arrival of Asian art on the world stage.

It is not the contention of this book that art is to be confined to a national sphere or artists confined to a national space. Most of the writers address the issue of art and social change through specific local and regional perspectives. In so doing, they provide a logical and necessary comparative framework. They also look closely at contested ground in art production and theory in relation to issues such as multiple and hybrid identities, indigeneity, minorities and multiculturalism within nations and internationalism in art. It is clear from the essays in this volume that the histories of particular countries, as well as contemporary political and social changes within those countries, have had a

Cai Guo Qiang
(China/Japan/USA)
Dragon Sight Sees
Vienna: Project for
Extraterrestrials No. 32
1999, Project installation
Vienna, Austria
Image courtesy the artist



tremendous influence on the development of art practice. It is equally clear that art is now practiced within regional and global networks which transcend national boundaries and simple local/global dichotomies.

Geeta Kapur, one of the pre-eminent writers on art in Asia today, describes the context for Indian (and by extension, I would argue, many Asian) artists as 'a civil society in huge ferment, a political society whose constituencies are redefining the meaning of democracy and a demographic scale that defies simple theories of hegemony'. It is still true that the factors to which Kapur refers are characteristic of the Asian region more than of any other. Ferment of course does not necessarily mean instability, although in the past decade, regime change has occurred in some of the countries in question. But the existence of ferment in various forms cannot be disputed. China and India are undergoing the most rapid social and economic transformations in history. All other Asian countries discussed in this volume have, in varying degrees, experienced economic meltdown with its consequent social dislocations. All are in varying degrees resuming their economic expansion, with the inevitable attendant aspects of consumerism and materialism. Regime change has occurred in Korea, Indonesia and Pakistan; Thailand has known coup and countercoup; and Sri Lanka has only just attained what may be the close of more than 20 years of civil war.

The late Chinese artist Chen Zhen confronted Asia's economic imperatives in 1999, when he created a *Crucible of Washing Fire*, as, in his words, a 'medical-alchemical treatment for the inner disease of Asia's success and its crises'. The crucible was constructed of hundreds of abacus beads, old wooden chamber pots from Shanghai, where the artist was born, and broken computers and electronic parts. Chen Zhen questioned the speed of economic growth and urbanisation and asked if this would generate a better life for the people of Asia. Other artists of the Chinese post-Tiananmen diaspora have addressed issues relating to world communication, such as Wenda Gu (known in China as Gu Wenda) in his remarkable United Nations series consisting of words made from human hair donated by hundreds of thousands of individuals from all over the world.

The Pacific has also undergone dramatic change in the past decade, and the indigenous artists of the Pacific have responded to such change by producing inspiring art works related to cultural



Wenda Gu (China/USA)
*United Nations-China
 Monument: Temple of
 Heaven*

Installation with screens of human hair with pseudo characters in Chinese, Hindi, Arabic.
 396.2 x 1585 x 609.6 cm
 Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art and a site-specific installation commissioned by the Asia Society for the exhibition *Inside Out*, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York, United States, 1998
 Image courtesy the artist.
United Nations has been on-going globally since 1993. Thirty national monuments have been completed. 1.5 million people have donated their hair.

survival. Michel Tuffery, a New Zealand artist of mixed Pacific Island heritage, has created a series of works which exemplify this theme, including his magnificent bulls used in street performances with energetic dancers. The bulls are constructed from 'bully beef' tins (referring to the devastation of Pacific Island garden economies through colonisation) but in no sense are these performances anything but a vital statement of cultural survival.

Artists can, through their work, reflect the values and aspirations of their own society and of humanity. While some react with cynicism and even despair, others produce an art of resistance. Over the past decade, many artists in the Asia-Pacific region have protested colonialism and neo-colonialism; global environmental degradation; cultural loss; illness due to poverty; sexual exploitation; social and political injustice; war; violence and racism. Their work is in the broad area of social justice. In confronting such issues, artists have addressed their art to, and involved, whole communities in order to help them confront poverty and trauma (caused by both natural and human disasters) and preserve traditions and values: in other words, their art contributes to cultural survival.



Art is important to communities in many ways. Artists can transcend and perhaps even change society as well as reflect its tragedies. This is so even though, as Masahiro Ushiroshoji from the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum Japan, has recently suggested, it is no longer possible to believe naively that art is all that is needed for achieving an understanding of other cultures and values or to heal rifts between societies and people.

While cultural exchanges are not always on terms of equality, the long histories of engagement, which have occurred over the centuries in the Asia–Pacific region, show that all dynamic cultures draw on ideas from other cultures. Art and creative practice cannot be isolated, locked into a set of traditions or frozen in time. Too often discussion of tradition is related to outdated claims of the ‘authenticity’ of tradition. Cultural interaction is no new phenomenon in the region. Distinguished Thai art historian Apinan Poshyananda has written of cultural syncretism as a key element in art, and we have seen this in formation over the centuries. Some examples: Buddhist artistic styles from India adapted within a century in China to Chinese aesthetic sensibility, Tang dynasty painting from China adapted by

Michel Tuffery (Samoa/
New Zealand) and Patrice
Kaikilekofe (Fortuna Island)
Povi tau vaga
(*The Challenge*)

1999, Performance
Third Asia–Pacific Triennial
Queensland Art Gallery
Installation comprising
corned beef can sculptures,
wooden sculptures, video
2 sculptures: 200 cm x
300 cm x 90 cm (each)
4 sculptures: 59 cm x
109 cm x 38 cm (each)
2 sculptures: 75 x 150 cm
diam.

Collection: The artists
Image courtesy Andrea
Higgins

the Japanese to create the *yamato-e* style of Japanese painting; Indian, Khmer and Chinese influences in Thai art and Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam synthesising with Javanese mysticism in Indonesia. Today's contemporary art in the Asia-Pacific is undoubtedly a product of long centuries of tradition, historical cultural encounters and, in more modern times, the confrontation and engagement with the West.

Western colonialism (which of course did not affect all countries in the region) and Western modernism made a great impact on art in the region, but the cultures and countries in the region have differing histories of traditional art production and have also developed their own versions of modernity as Professor John Clark has demonstrated in his seminal work on modern Asian art. Contemporary art cannot be understood by looking only at the engagement with Western modernism that set art in the region on a new trajectory. Contemporary art in the Asia-Pacific region cannot be judged, defined or confined by a dominant 'Euro-American paradigm'. Perhaps the most conspicuous feature of the art of the region today is its rejection of a hierarchical internationalism in art, particularly that aspect which was a feature of United States foreign policy during the Cold War.

The 1990s witnessed an energetic rethinking of such cultural hegemonies and the then still dominant 'Euro-American paradigm'. T. K. Sabapathy, writing in 1996, pointed out that there had been in the region 'a wariness towards accepting or succumbing to orthodoxies emerging, imposed or acquired, from the West'.¹ In Beijing in 1994, Chinese artist Xu Bing offered a brilliant analysis of Western cultural hegemonies in a work called *Cultural animals: a case study of transference*, in which a pig whose body had been painted with Latin words, representing the West, was sexually mounted by a male pig covered with Chinese writing.² Malaysian artist Wong Hoy Cheong, like many other artists in the

Wong Hoy Cheong
(Malaysia)
Re: Looking

2003, Video still
Video in collaboration with
Arifwaran Shaharuddin and
website, [www.looking-
mbc.com](http://www.looking-
mbc.com) (in collaboration
with Chimera Design
2002–2003)
Image courtesy
Asia–Australia Arts Centre,
Gallery 4A, Sydney



region, has also treated the issue of colonisation in a video which turns Western colonialism on its head and in which an imaginary Malaysian colonial empire ruled, and continues to exert control over, Austria.

The region has developed its own forums for art and there has been an explosion of biennales and other such recurring exhibitions in the Asia–Pacific region, particularly in the past ten years. Three of the earliest, beginning before 1990, were the Indian Triennale, the Bangladesh Asian Art Biennale and the Fukuoka Asian Art exhibitions in Japan. Most include international art along with Asian art; some, such as Fukuoka, the Pacific art festivals and the Asia–Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Australia, are defined by their specific focus on the region. All provide a forum and space for artists from the region. The Asia–Pacific Triennial which began in 1993 is an example of development of a regional consciousness that encompasses countries such as Australia and New Zealand.³ Zhang Qing, one of the curators of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, wrote in the catalogue to that exhibition: ‘Art exhibitions are springing up everywhere: Yokohama Triennale, Kwang-ju Biennale, Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (i.e. Brisbane), Singapore Biennale, Taipei Biennale, opening up new possibilities on the international stage. Each show with a unique perspective and approach, vigorously examines the status quo and discusses the future of Asia–Pacific culture.’⁴

What is Asia–Pacific culture? This question is complicated by the fact there is no homogeneity in the region. The Asia–Pacific is a problematic construct, which encompasses less a geographical definition than a means of communication between neighbours. It can only be used a similar way to a definition such as Latin America, not implying an historical or cultural identity.⁵ A recent (2002) Japan Foundation forum concluded that Asia is also a problematic concept. Professor Mizusawa Tsutomu speaking at that forum said: ‘Nationalism and Asian self-awareness came together over a century ago and, as it were, caught fire, leading to the formation of many theories of the identity of Asia. The existence of these theories, besides raising the question of what Asia is in real terms, demonstrates the historical fact that Asia has been a form of discourse.’⁶ Many speakers at the same forum suggested that Asia is not so much a geographical entity as constructed as an idea in counterpoint to Europe or the West. But

many contemporary writers — for example John Gray — have suggested that there is also no such entity as the West, which, it can be argued, has ceased to have a definite meaning except in the United States.

Over the past decade important exhibitions and their catalogues as well as books and journals have documented Asian and Pacific art in new ways. Important new resources for the study of art have developed within the region. An impressive range of publications have been produced in the decade. Academic courses in Universities have begun to examine modern and contemporary Asian art (much less emphasis has been placed on contemporary Pacific art) and collections have been formed of the contemporary art of the region (examples are the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, the Singapore Art Museum and the Queensland Art Gallery collections).⁷ Asian, if less often Pacific, artists are now seen in world survey exhibitions including at the Venice Biennale and *Documenta* in Kassel, Germany. Nonetheless, despite the professions of inclusion, they are seen in lesser numbers than would reflect the dynamism of the region artistically. Many exciting and important exhibitions have provided new frameworks for understanding world art which do not rely on old hegemonies of exclusion or outworn paradigms. Examples are the exhibitions of the Asia Society, New York under Dr Vishakha Desai and Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist's *Cities on the Move* held in several European cities, New York and Bangkok from 1997–99.

It is certainly possible to argue, as Hou Hanru has done, that global perspectives are now increasingly important in contemporary art. But that does not mean that regional perspectives are not equally significant. There is no doubt that understanding local contexts is still vital in analysing the links between art and social change. The importance of specific contexts comes through most clearly when we examine one specific issue: human rights.

It can be argued that human rights has already emerged as the most critical issue of the 21st century. At a conference I convened in 2003 at the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University, the effects of globalisation were examined in relation to issues such as indigenous reconciliation, ethnic conflict, new religious divides, war, and the situation of refugees and asylum seekers. There is without question at times a clash between individual and community rights, and between

national interests and universalist values in the contemporary globalised world. The divide between the have and have-not nations throws up new challenges. The limits of tolerance are being tested by these issues.

At the conference, Mbulelo Mzamane, South African poet and activist, spoke of the need for human rights definitions to be broadened to encompass issues such as cultural survival and health — life and death issues for the inhabitants of poorer countries — and for artists and writers through their art to build communities committed to a vision of what Christine Chinkin, a human rights lawyer at the London School of Economics and a judge in the ‘comfort women’ Tribunals in Tokyo, has called the dignity of all people.

Hilary Charlesworth, Director of the Centre for International and Public Law at The Australian National University, pointed to the ‘silences’ in international human rights legal frameworks for marginalised groups subject to disparities in power, including — in many societies — women, children and indigenous peoples.⁸ The rights of women and children are often subsumed and lost in discussion of broader issues of community rights. Of course, this situation is not confined to developing countries. But for the developing world in particular, the framework of rights as posited by the West can be seen as a rhetorical mask for neo-colonial oppression.

We do need then to acknowledge the significance of historical contexts and the reading of so-called universalist principles or ideas in specific local contexts. Indonesian artists, for example, have over the past decade produced a powerful body of work opposing human rights abuses in their country, and have often faced personal danger in so doing. Dadang Christanto is one such artist who has been passionately committed to creating work exposing horrific human suffering, not confined to Indonesia, in order to illuminate our humanity. Christanto, along with three other Indonesian artists, participated in the Indonesian pavilion in the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003 under the theme ‘Paradise Lost: Mourning the World’. This theme, as Commissioner Amir Sidarta noted, had been adapted from Nehru’s reference to Bali as ‘The Morning of the World’. The works in the pavilion commemorated the Bali bombings in which over 200 Indonesians, Australians and other nationalities died. The theme of Christanto’s work ‘raining tears’ was both specific and universal.

Human rights and human freedom are critical issues not only in Asia and the Pacific but in the world today. Many of the writers in this volume demonstrate the strong commitment to such ideals in Asian and Pacific art. Vasan Sitthiket from Thailand recently addressed the issues of war in Iraq and corruption in Thailand in *The Truth is Elsewhere*, a work utilising shadow puppets. After the coup in Thailand in 1992, he had expressed horror at events in his country in a painting entitled *If Buddha Returned to Bangkok*, showing the Lord Buddha amidst scenes of corruption and social dislocation. Thailand, the 'land of smiles', provides us with an example of a country where art has generally been thought to be divorced from social issues but where artists have, nonetheless, produced extraordinarily passionate and committed work about political and social corruption, sexual exploitation, Aids, and ecological destruction. Cultural and spiritual values were invoked in the protest art of the 1980s and 1990s, with artists opposing themes of Buddhist philosophy to the rampant consumerism and materialism of the age. Thai women artists have created work focussing on poverty and social oppression, an illustration of another important theme in this book: the immense contribution of women artists and curators, even in countries where the dominant ethos is still profoundly male.

A deep concern with existing social situations persists within the ongoing social and economic transformations, as Asian and Pacific artists use their personal experiences and those of

Vasan Sitthiket (Thailand)
The Truth is Elsewhere

2004, Shadow
puppet performance
Image courtesy Asia-
Australia Arts Centre,
Gallery 4A, Sydney



society at large as inspiration for their art and as a means of resisting injustice. Many artists have dedicated their work to themes of healing, as in the art of the late Montien Boonma, one of the great artists to emerge from the region.

Tragically, over the past decade many of the most talented artists working with their communities in Asia and the Pacific have passed away at relatively young ages: Montien Boonma, Roberto Villanueva, Santiago Bose, Chen Zhen, Lin Onus, to name a few. They have been a great loss to the region.

Australia is another country in the region where artists have responded to recent events. The traumatic events of the past few years — 11 September 2001 in the United States, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and their aftermaths, and all the on-going events surrounding the ‘war on terror’ — as well as in Australia the continuing issue of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and the refugee crisis, have created among Australians both a heightened awareness of our own vulnerability and an urgency of response. In the last issue the greatest security for a nation lies in the belief among its component communities and internationally that individual rights for all are acknowledged with tolerance and understanding. Many Australian artists have confronted disturbing events, using the episodes of the *Tampa* (a ship that picked up asylum seekers from a sinking boat but was denied entry to Australia by the Australian Government) and the ‘children overboard’ affair (another incident involving seaborne asylum seekers who were falsely accused of throwing their children overboard) and Woomera (a detention centre for asylum seekers in the Australian desert) to create powerful images of a common humanity. Examples are the paintings of Pat HOFFIE, John Cattapan, and Juan Davila.

Australian artists have dealt with the continuing and universal themes of war and migration — for example, Ian Howard and Guan Wei. Howard has

Pat HOFFIE (Australia)
assisted by the Galicia
Family (The Philippines)
The Children Overboard

2002, Acrylic on fabric
Installation view at
Brisbane Powerhouse,
Australia
Image courtesy the artist





Jon Cattapan
(Australia)
Peeling

2003, Oil on canvas
Image courtesy the artist

created a strong body of work on the military-industrial complex and society's relationship to war. Guan Wei's painting *Dow Island*, is a magnificent statement about the movement of people from land to land in all cultures in all times and the fortunes and misfortunes of these migrations.

At the recent conference entitled *Asian Traffic*, which sought to examine critically the issues of cultural movement, 'global itinerancy' and diaspora, Binghui Huangfu, Director of the Asia-Australia Art Centre in Sydney, stated:

... I am often asked if there is a definable difference between contemporary Asian art and contemporary Western art. The more and more I consider the question the more I realise there is difference and the difference in the motivation of the artists. Contemporary Asian artists come from an environment that is undergoing extraordinary change. This background influences their work and is underpinned by a belief that what they are doing has a real possibility of participating in those changes.⁹

Whether or not Asian and Pacific artists can make a difference, there can be no doubt that many are committed to doing so, as the essays in this volume demonstrate. Almost all the studies of national and regional art scenes presented here support the proposition that many artists in the region are critically involved with their societies and communities. Nothing is more striking than the expressions of passionate social engagement that they record. This is the case in countries with regimes that might be described as relatively authoritarian, as much as in countries more readily identifiable as democracies. Optimism may be modified, but hope is not.

NOTES

- 1 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Developing Regional Perspectives in South-East Asian Art Historiography', *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996, p. 13.
- 2 Quoted in Claire Roberts, 'The Revolution Reinvigorated: art as cultural strategy — Chinese art in the 1990s', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial*, p. 40.
- 3 For a comparison of the Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibitions and the Fukuoka Asian Art shows, see Caroline Turner, 'Cultural Transformations in the Asia-Pacific', paper presented at the conference *Our Modernities: positioning Asian art now*, Asia Research Centre, Singapore, February 2004. <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/conf2004/asianart.htm>
- 4 Zhang Qing, 'Beyond Left and Right', Introduction, *Catalogue of the Shanghai Biennale 2000*, Shanghai Art Museum, 2000, page unnumbered.
- 5 Gerardo Mosquera, 'Good-Bye Identity, Welcome Difference: from Latin American art to art from Latin America', *Third Text*, Vol. 56, 2001, pp. 25–32.
- 6 Mizusawa Tsutomu, Session I Introduction, *Asia in Transition: Representation and Identity*, The Japan Foundation 30th Anniversary International Symposium 2002, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 2002.
- 7 Examples of resources are the Asia Art Archives in Hong Kong; of critical writing, the work of John Clark in his seminal studies on modern Asian art; and of new types of academic courses Amareswar Galla's courses on sustainable cultural heritage through the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University.
- 8 Speeches delivered at the *Art and Human Rights* Conference, Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University, August 2003. Unpublished.
- 9 Binghui Huangfu, *Asian Traffic* Conference, University of NSW (COFA), June 2004. Unpublished communication with the author.

GEOPOLITICAL CHANGES IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Glen St. J. Barclay

ASIA

‘Asia is the Future, China the Key.’ So said, in November 2003, Martin Sorrell, CEO of the WPP Group, the world’s third-largest advertising and marketing organisation.¹ Sorrell’s basic reasoning was that a disconnection seemed to have occurred between what had been viewed formerly as the world economy and the Asia-Pacific region, in so far as regional economies were now driven by China and consequently did not necessarily go into a decline when the United States economy faltered, as was still the case with the United Kingdom and Continental Europe. Former Australian Ambassador to China and Director of the Asia-Australia Institute at the University of New South Wales, Professor Stephen FitzGerald, had written back in 1997 that there was ‘already in train across Asia a change which is taking place on many fronts, whose effects will be greater than anything we have seen since post-war decolonisation. This change will work itself out over a time-span ranging from now forward over the next 30 years. By the end of that period the United States will not be the power in East Asia that can enforce its will. That will be China.’² His prophecy now gives every indication of

being accurate. The tectonic plates are shifting: what political philosopher and geopolitician Carl Schmitt called the 'identity of the period' of the last century, was the movement of the balance of world influence westward across the Atlantic from Europe to the United States.³ What will provide the identity of this century is the continuing westward movement of that balance across the Pacific to its logical locus, the home of more than three billion people, more than half the population of the world. The geopolitical implications of this process would represent the fulfilment of Halford J. Mackinder's vision of the end of some six centuries of what he called 'navalism', the period of the 'geopolitical counterassault against the pattern' of traditional predominance by the Asian heartland, beginning with the irruption of the European seapowers in the 15th century, and culminating in what may prove to be the brief global hegemony of the ultimate seapower, the United States.⁴

President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan summed the situation up with military succinctness when he told Chinese business executives in October 2003 that 'The past belongs to Europe, the present to the United States and the future to Asia'. That future is taking shape already in economic terms: on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) calculation, which incidentally is what the CIA uses to assess relative international economic capacity, China is already the second-largest economy in the world, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) 57 per cent that of the United States; Japan is the third-largest at 35 per cent and India the fourth at 27 per cent. And the Chinese economy has been growing consistently at an annualised rate of 9.1 per cent, with every reason to expect continued growth of this order. The Indian economy actually achieved the highest rate of growth in the world in the first quarter of 2004, with more than 10 per cent, and the ever-cautious Reserve Bank of India is anticipating a growth rate of about 7 per cent in 2004–05. Growth rates in the United States have, by contrast, fluctuated between 1 and 4 per cent during most of the past 12 months, and the United States external debt has grown by more than \$US100 billion.

It is hardly possible to overstate the growing economic power of China. It produces more steel than the United States and Japan combined; it is the world's largest recipient of foreign direct investment; it has the world's fastest-growing car market; it is developing the world's largest electricity grid; it is the world's third-largest shipowner and the world's third-largest shipbuilder, and



Chinese Political Poster
*Grasp Revolution to
Promote Production —
Fight for a Great Leap
Forward in Steel*

1970.

Collection: Jon Sigurdson
(from collection belonging to
Sigurdson Consultancy AB)
Image courtesy
Jon Sigurdson

is on track to become the world's largest in 20 years; and it is already the world's fourth-largest trading nation. And the need to fuel this colossal production has had the effect of reversing trends in world commodity prices, to favour exporters of raw materials against exporters of manufactured products for the first time in over fifty years, since the end of the Korean War, in fact. It is also of more than symbolic significance that China is the world's third nuclear power and became on 15 October, 2003 the third nation to achieve a manned space flight.

But it is all too easy to overlook the advance of India. The Governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia, Ian Macfarlane, observed that Australians had lost sight of the importance of Asia to their economic future, particularly by failing to observe that 'China is the big story just as India will probably be the next'. Indeed, some economists argue that India's growth model promises more stable and more sustainable expansion than China's, as well as offering bigger returns for investors. It would certainly seem to be remarkably different: the State in India plays almost no interventionist role in the economy, other than the highly interventionist role of enforcing privatisation and deregulation; its rate of savings and investment is



Chen Zhen (China/France)
1955–2000
Invocation of Washing Fire

1999
Installation comprising
timber frame, metal, sound,
abacus beads, wooden
chamber pots, red light
globes, broken calculators,
cash registers, computers
and television sets
300 x 240 x 240 cm
(approx.)

The Kenneth and Yasuko
Myer Collection of
Contemporary Asian Art.
Purchased 1999 with funds
from The Myer Foundation,
a project of the Sidney Myer
Centenary Celebration
1899–1999, through
the Queensland Art
Gallery Foundation
Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery

Chen Zhen questions the
speed of Asia's economic
growth in this installation.

less than half that of China's; and its main growth is in the area of services, rather than manufacturing. All this could, of course, merely be symptomatic of the present stage of economic development in India. And there is no question that India has a lot of catching up to do. It is the second-largest recipient of foreign direct investment in the world, but the annual rate of foreign investment is still only one-fourth that of China's; its literacy rate is only 58 per cent compared with 93.3 per cent in China; and 25 per cent of the population of India still lives below the poverty line, compared with 10 per cent in China (which is less than in the United States). Standards of poverty are, of course, relative, but then so are standards of misery, as Marx said.

All these optimistic prognoses necessarily depend on peace and stability being preserved in Asia. The fact is that Northeast Asia 'presents a paradox in political, economic and security environment', as Professor of Southeast Asia and Southwest Pacific Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Dr Baladas Ghoshal, has observed:

On the one hand there is a high degree of economic interdependence among the countries of the region leading to an integration of their economies spurring growth and prosperity in the whole of East Asia ... On the other hand, the security situation in the region is highly volatile and can trigger into a conflict involving not only regional countries but also external powers ...⁵

'For 400 years,' Australian defence analyst Mark Farrer declared, 'the engine of global tension has been Europe ... We are now witnessing the start of a remarkable historical turning point ... The central long-term generator of strategic tension is switching from Europe to North Asia.'⁶ The permutations of the 'War on Terror' driven by Washington and London have reinforced this view, more than could possibly have been imagined when Farrer was writing in 2001. United States Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was displaying an authentically neo-conservative comprehension of world history when he asked rhetorically what the Germans and French knew about war. But it is a fact that the very concept of international war in Europe has ceased to retain any reality. The most useful and profitable function of the European arms industries is now to provide the Asians with the most advanced weapons systems they can produce, at least until such time as the Asians are producing such systems in sufficient quantities themselves.

It is not only in economic terms that the balance of world power has shifted. The figures tell the story again: the combined defence forces of East and South Asia, regulars and reserves, number some 18 million, six times as many as the combined defence forces of Western Europe. Arms expenditure in East Asia has increased by over 22 per cent in the last decade, against a global trend of only 3 per cent. China has the largest air force in the world, ahead of the United States and Russia. India, Taiwan, South Korea and North Korea have the fourth-, fifth-, sixth- and seventh-largest, respectively; and India, China and Japan have the second-, third- and fourth-largest surface fleets. That this trend also is liable to continue is indicated by the fact that Asian countries are planning to double their expenditure on naval vessels, while the Europeans are reducing theirs by 20 to 25 per cent. Quantity is indeed almost irrelevant in military matters compared with quality. But the fact is that many Asian powers are engaged in acquiring the best weapons that money can buy, and they are acquiring more money than anybody else except the Americans, to be able to indulge that preference. China in fact has now the second-largest defence budget in the world and India the third, in terms of PPP, displacing Japan, which now lies fourth. There is also the factor of the great equaliser — nuclear weapons. China is the world's third nuclear power, with 400 such weapons, India the seventh and Pakistan the eighth; and North Korea owes



Gordon Bennett (Australia)
Camouflage # 7

2003
Acrylic on linen.
Collection: The Australian
National University
Acquired 2004
Image courtesy
The Australian National
University and the artist

Ian Howard (Australia)
Signs of Life

1990
Bitumous plastic, silver
65 x 118 x 18 cm
Collection Australian War Memorial
Image courtesy Australian War Memorial

Howard documented monuments across
Europe to create a series of works on the
relationship of human beings to war.



much of its immunity from direct United States intervention to the fact that nobody is sure whether it actually has nuclear weapons or not. China's 400 weapons, admittedly, are a very minor affair compared with the 11,000 possessed by the United States; but you only have to kill somebody once, as Charles de Gaulle observed.

Nor is there any lack of situations which could logically precipitate a catastrophic resort to arms in Asia. A list of the most obvious potential flashpoints would include the Korean Peninsula, where 11 million men and women are enrolled for national defence; Kashmir, where nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have confronted each other for more than 50 years; the Taiwan Straits, where Beijing and Taipei have confronted each other for almost as long; and the Spratly Islands, regarded by Asian analysts as the most dangerous of all because what is at issue is the most valuable prize in material terms, namely oil, and because of the number of the disputants, namely China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines.

But potential is not actual. India and Pakistan have gone to war three times already and the Kashmir issue could well remain a permanent cause for tension, simply because it could be in the interests of both Delhi and Islamabad that it should remain so: countries vexed with internal stresses to the degree that India and Pakistan both are can always use an extra unifying factor; and the most effective unifying factor for any nation is a readily identified external enemy. But this is the best possible reason why neither should seek to eliminate or even seriously degrade the other: India needs Pakistan and Pakistan very definitely needs India. There is also the very simple fact that Pakistan cannot afford another war with India and cannot possibly defeat India in any case, while India has absolutely nothing to gain by going to war with Pakistan: the last thing India needs is more Pakistanis. And finally there is the ultimate restraining factor of Mutually Assured Destruction: one can never be certain that conflict between two nations possessing nuclear weapons will not escalate to a point when one will employ its arsenal, which means that the other will respond in kind. And one can say with assurance that nobody wants that to happen. Nothing, in fact, is more evident than the present determination of Delhi and Islamabad to develop and maintain a *modus vivendi* which will enable both of them to pursue peacefully the economic development which their people need so urgently.



Guan Wei (China/Australia)
Looking for Enemies: No. 4

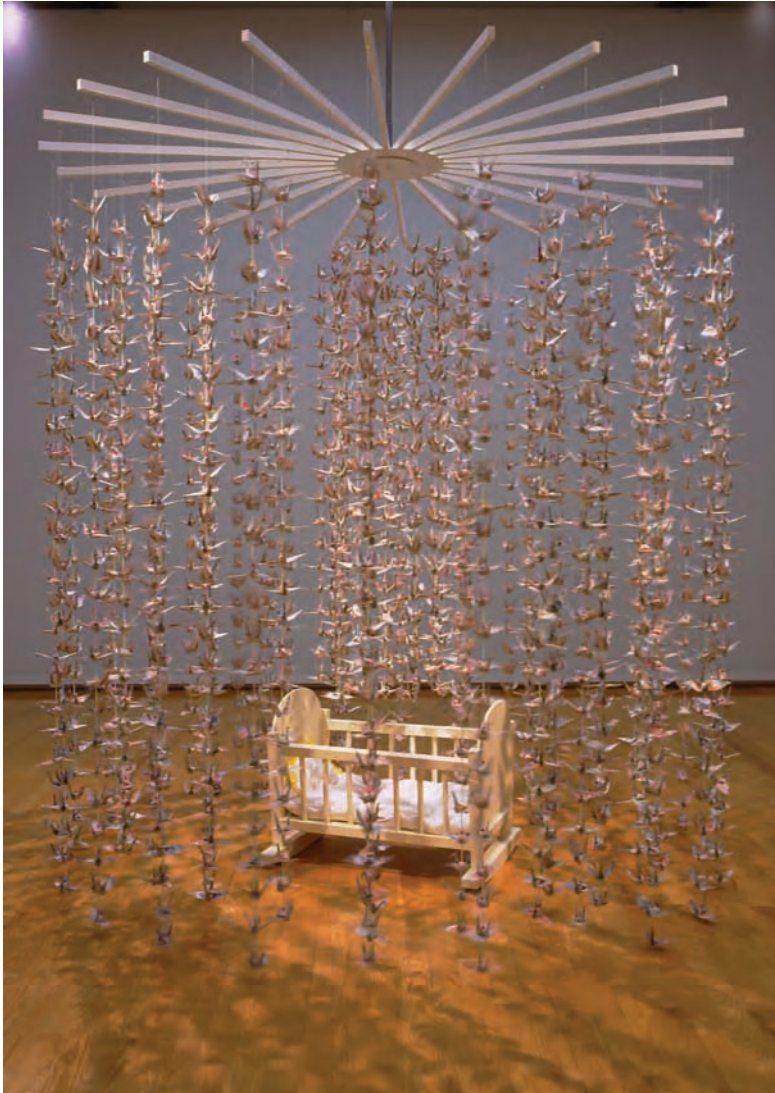
2004
 Acrylic on canvas, diptych,
 140 x 60 cm each panel.
 Courtesy the artist and
 Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

One cannot have quite the same confidence about the Korean situation: paranoia is by definition unpredictable, and the North Koreans have every reason to be paranoid, having been subject to blockade and every kind of threat from the United States for more than 50 years. Their paranoia could only be increased by the fact that President Bush has ruled out of consideration any prospect of a non-aggression treaty, which is the primary request that the North Koreans have made as a precondition for abandoning their nuclear program, apart from economic aid. But the North Koreans are secure from armed aggression from any quarter at least as long as their nuclear capacity remains credible; and they are not going to initiate serious hostilities themselves with the countries on which they depend for assistance for their own survival.

The even longer continuing crisis across the Taiwan Straits has to be viewed in the overall context of long-term Chinese diplomacy. The bottom line here is that, in simple terms, China

cannot afford and has no time to be an aggressive nation, as the Chinese themselves hasten to insist.⁷ But China does have a foreign policy: it is a policy of being a good neighbour and a good international citizen. China achieved recognition as a constructive economic player on a global scale when it literally rescued the region and very likely the world from economic catastrophe by determining not to devalue the renminbi yuan during the Asian economic crisis in 1997. Japan, as a matter of interest, was preparing to achieve exactly the opposite by devaluing the yen until warned by Beijing that a devaluation of the yen would be followed immediately by a corresponding devaluation of the yuan. Since then, China has joined with India and Brazil in spearheading a push by developing nations at the Fifth Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization in Cancún, Mexico, to put pressure on the wealthy nations to eliminate their subsidies on agricultural exports; it has joined with India in signing the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) and has concluded a 'Strategic Partnership' agreement with ASEAN, defined as 'non-aligned, non-military and non-exclusive'; it has concluded an agreement with the ASEAN countries to establish a free trade area affecting more than two billion people by 2020, with a projected Northern Asia Free Trade Agreement encompassing Japan and Korea and a pan-regional East Asian economic and security community giving all members a collective voice; it has acted as the only possible mediator in negotiations on nuclear disarmament with North Korea; and it has balanced relations with the subcontinent delicately by conducting separate naval exercises with both India and Pakistan, as it has also done with France and the United Kingdom, extending the goodwill still further afield.

China does not therefore appear as a potential disturber of the peace. But Carl Schmitt had posited another vision of history: of a fundamental confrontation between land and sea powers. China is the ultimate land power, as the United States is the ultimate sea power. Australian strategic analyst Hugh White has argued that China has a deeply and systematic competitive relationship with the United States. There is no doubt about the reverse in the case under the present United States Administration. American politicians have always understood free trade to be a one-way street. They now blame China for the loss of nearly three million jobs from competition by China and outsourcing by



Yanagi Yukinori (Japan)
*One Thousand
Money Cranes*

2002
Installation
Printed paper, metal,
wood, motor, computer
Image courtesy of Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

Yanagi used banknotes
from an imaginary
currency folded into
origami cranes to
reference World War II as
well as the domination of
rich countries over poor.
See p. 408.

American corporations. Tennessee Republican Lamar Alexander has declared that the biggest economic challenge for the United States ‘over the next dozen years ... will be how to keep too many of our jobs moving to China’. Protective tariffs and quotas have indeed already been invoked against China. 400,000 jobs have also been lost to India already, with more than another two million likely to go. But American analysts consider that ‘there’s no constituency for bashing India ... There are only two countries that get an applause when they’re bashed [by the United States]: China and France’.⁸

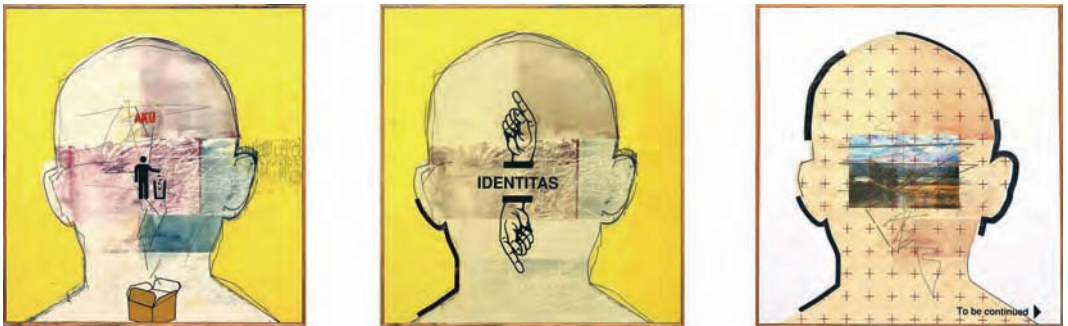
Retired Royal Australian Navy Commodore and strategic analyst, Sam Bateman, observed that any threat from China's growing maritime power would arise only if the United States and its allies attempted to contain it. There was, he considered, 'plenty of evidence that China is behaving responsibly. The challenge is to accommodate the inevitability of it all.'⁹ And not only at sea: the Chinese insisted that the success of their manned space mission highlighted 'China's persistent stand for peaceful exploration and exploitation of space'. But a senior American military commander announced to a geo-spatial intelligence conference in New Orleans only hours after the return of astronaut Yang Liwei to Earth that, in his view. 'It will not be long before space becomes a battleground ... Our military forces rely very heavily on space capabilities ... They can see that one of the ways they can certainly diminish our capabilities will be to attack the space systems. Now how they do that and who that's going to be I can't tell you in this audience.' He didn't need to.

ASEAN itself continues to present an image of resolutely non-intrusive cooperation, symbolised in the picture of ASEAN officials, eight male and three female, standing together, arm-in-arm, at the close of their meeting in Jakarta in September 2004. The meeting itself had been of signal importance: they had agreed on a timetable for free-trade agreement talks with China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, aimed at creating by 2020 what would be by far the largest economic grouping the world, and probably also the one with the highest degree of genuine free trade. It would also be the one the members of which had the most compelling reasons, strategic and diplomatic as well as economic, for mutually beneficial cooperation. It is of course true that all the ASEAN countries are vexed with internal security issues of varying degrees of severity. But it is also true that these issues have endured so long as to seem virtually part of the essential nature of the states concerned, as would appear to be the case in so many European instances. The Philippines and Indonesia at least will presumably never be without their internal stresses. But no one in the region imagines that they will ever cease to exist as states. The speed with which they all recovered from the trauma of the financial meltdown is convincing evidence of their capacity for survival. All are now recording growth rates decidedly more impressive than Australia or New Zealand, let

alone the sclerotic economies of the European Union and the United States. The Asian tigers are roaring again.

NOTE: POPULATION FIGURES:

Australia, 20 million
China, 1.3 billion
India, 1.1 billion
Indonesia, 235 million
Japan, 127 million
Korea (North), 23 million
Korea (South), 48 million
Malaysia, 23 million
New Zealand, 4 million
Pakistan, 151 million
Singapore, 5 million
Sri Lanka, 20 million
Taiwan, 22 million
Thailand, 61 million
The Philippines, 85 million
Vietnam, 82 million



FX Harsono (Indonesia)
Identity

2003
Screen print on canvas
93.5 x 89 cm (3 panels)
Image courtesy Cemeti Art House,
Yogyakarta and the artist.

THE PACIFIC

If there were anything that could be spoken of as a general truth about Asia, Inoue Tatsuo observes, 'it would be its religious and cultural diversity', much greater, he points out, 'than that of the West'.¹⁰ But if the essence of Asia is diversity, that of the Pacific would have to be similarity. 'Pacific Islanders,' as head of the Gallery of First Australians at the National Museum of Australia, Margo Neale, puts it, 'tend to see themselves as part of one community, albeit diffracted in many ways'.¹¹ The Pacific nations are all islands; they are all small, with the obvious exceptions of Australia, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, ranging from the merely small to the microscopic; they are all majority Christian in religious affiliation; and their cultures show, in general, remarkable affinities. The contrast with Asia could not be more striking. More than three billion people live in Asia. China and India are the two most populous nations on Earth, with a combined population of close to two and a half billion. The total population of the Pacific Island nations is barely 11 million, or 6.5 million, excluding New Zealand. Individual population figures range from about five million for Papua New Guinea to 2,500 for Niue. The economic contrast is even more striking. Asia contains the second-, third- and fourth-largest economies in the world and has a total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of about \$US11,250 billion. The Pacific contains many of the smallest economies in the world, with a total GDP of about \$US96 billion, or \$US29 billion if New Zealand is excluded. Figures of GDP per head are correspondingly low, although it is interesting to note that by far the most advantaged in this respect are the people of the French Overseas Territories of French Polynesia and New Caledonia, while among the most disadvantaged are those of the territories associated with the United States, American Samoa and Micronesia. Asia is the manufacturing workshop of the world. The Pacific Island states have virtually no manufacturing capacity, apart from New Zealand; and only Papua New Guinea and Fiji have any significant mineral resources. Asia contains five or six of the largest military establishments in the world outside the United States and Russia, with nearly 10 million people under arms overall, not counting reserves. Only New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji can really be said to have military establishments at all, and these amount to less than 20,000 personnel overall.

Military and economic insignificance and cultural affinity do not, however, add up to tranquillity. Small, even tiny populations can contain a multitude of radically different language and ethnic groups. And the Pacific peoples are fantastically diverse in their variations of language and ethnicity. All contain significant ethnic minorities: Maoris and other Polynesians account for 18 per cent of the population of New Zealand; in Fiji, 45 per cent of the population are Indian and, in New Caledonia, 34 per cent are of European origin. Papua New Guinea contains at least 812 distinct language groups, mutually unintelligible in most cases. At least 90 Indigenous languages are spoken in the Solomon Islands, which has been vexed by tensions with Papua New Guinea over Bougainville and by secessionist agitation in the past 13 years in three of its provinces, entering into a spiral of escalating violence in 1998, which gave the occasion for an Australian-led multinational intervention in 2003. Australia is preparing a similar intervention in Papua New Guinea, which has its own problems with political instability, secessionist strife and serious disorder within its defence force.

Then there are the wider complications of international diplomacy, arising in the case of Papua New Guinea from the activities of the anti-Indonesian Free Papua Movement in West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya), and in the case of some of the micro-states from their attempts to gain financial advantage from Chinese-Taiwanese rivalry. The Solomon Islands (pop. 450,000), the Marshall Islands (pop. 66,000), Palau (pop. 18,000) and Tuvalu (pop. 11,000) had already given diplomatic recognition to Taiwan when Kiribati (pop. 86,000) announced in November 2003 its intention of doing so, which would have made it the only nation in the world to have diplomatic relations with both Beijing and



Michael Mel (Papua New Guinea)
Il Iamb Nai? Kundulul molga Pombraal?
(*Who is This Person? White or Black?*)

2003
Performance
National Museum of Australia
Image courtesy National Museum of Australia

Taipei. The Chinese, however, promptly responded by sending a technical team to dismantle a key satellite-tracking station which they had established on the island group in 1997. Similarly, China rewarded Samoa with a \$US12 million loan after the Samoan Prime Minister became the first foreign head of government to visit China after the Tienanmen Square incident. China has also given \$US65 million in aid to Papua New Guinea and made a \$US2.4 million loan to tiny Nauru, when the island state switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing after receiving \$US5 million from Taipei to assist in hosting the Pacific Islands Forum meeting in 2001. Taiwan also gave \$US25 million in aid to the Solomons. It has been noted that both Beijing and Taipei are fully aware that 'if they fail to respond to requests from Pacific politicians, the leaders simply call up their rivals'.¹²

The Asia and
Pacific region

The fact is that the microstates, in particular, need all the extra financial support they can get. They have no manufacturing



industries, almost no mineral resources, the land available for agriculture is being steadily eroded by population pressure and the encroaching ocean, in some cases, threatens eventually literally to submerge them. It is thus remarkable in the highest degree that the Pacific peoples have preserved such dynamic and evolving cultures.

NOTES

- 1 'Asia is the future, China the key', interview with Martin Sorrell, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 30 October, 2003, p. 34.
- 2 Stephen FitzGerald, *Is Australia an Asian Country?* Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997, p. 140.
- 3 See for example Jean-Francois Kervegan, 'Carl Schmitt and "World Unity"', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, Verso, London, 1999, pp. 5–73.
- 4 Paul Kennedy, 'Mission Impossible?', *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LI, No. 10, 10 June, 2004, pp. 16–19; Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Greenwood, New York, 1981. The process would of course be completed if the authentic heartland power, Russia, were to become effectively affiliated with India and China in opposition to the United States. See, for example, Baladas Ghoshal, 'China, India and Russia: the troika in Asia's balance of power', *Asian Defence Journal*, May 2002, pp. 4–7; and Kenneth R. Timmerman, 'China and Russia align against U.S.', *InsightMag.com*, 26 July, 2001, kimmerman@InsightMag.com.
- 5 Baladas Ghoshal, 'Security situation in Northeast Asia', *Asian Defence Journal*, March 2004, pp. 4–8.
- 6 Mark Farrer, 'North Asia: tensions, trends and travails', *Asia-Pacific Defence Reporter Annual Source Book 2001/2001*, Ventura Media Asia-pac Pty Ltd, pp. 8–10.
- 7 See Fu Bo, 'Les silences diplomatiques de la Chine', *Le Monde diplomatique*, 588, 50 année, Mars 2003, p. 26; and Evan A. Feigenbaum, 'China's strategy of weakness', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 1 March, 2001, p. 29.
- 8 Murray Hiebert and Joanna Slater, 'In search of a ready scapegoat', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 13 November, 2003, pp. 14–16.
- 9 David Lague, 'The making of a juggernaut', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 September, 2003, pp. 30–32. allay
- 10 Inoue Tatsuo, 'Critical perspectives on the "Asian Values" debate', in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel E. Bell, *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1999, p. 42.
- 11 Margo Neale, 'Pacific: a place to stand', in *Beyond the Future: the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999 (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb), p. 90.
- 12 Rowan Callick, 'Chinese storm in a Pacific teacup', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 4 December, 2003, p. 16.

ART IN A GLOBALISED STATE

Jen Webb

ART AND THE NATION-STATE

Some two to three centuries ago, the modern nation-state came into existence, and with it came a new set of doctrines, institutions and social games that affected, among other things, the world of art. As many commentators have pointed out,¹ one of the important indicators of nationhood was the identification of a distinctively 'national' body of art; indeed, it became practically mandatory to possess national art in order to claim the status of a modern nation. Consequently, art took on (or was put to) the work of promoting the nation with which it was identified, and nations looked to art, and artists, to represent them to the world.

The attention thus paid art by national governments is predicated on the fact that what is turned into art signifies what is perceived as worthy of attention. This means artworks can act as 'vehicles of social meaning'² which both represent and realise 'the world'; and as a corollary can confirm (or deny) the stories of nationhood. Not just any art could become metonymic of the nation, of course. The art selected to inscribe national identity tended to be works that relied on orthodox images (J. M. W. Turner's landscapes for 'British art'), and/or reinforced dominant

and homogenising stories (Nolan's Ned Kelly series for Australia; Socialist Realist art for the old USSR). Works given prominence in the institutions that are themselves metonyms for the nation — national galleries, parliament houses, embassies — typically reflect something authorised about that nation, its traditions, myths of origin and its worldview.³

Recognising this, national governments have instituted procedures to manage the field. Many have established national endowment funds, built and maintained national galleries and produced policies and legislative acts that define and determine what is done with and for art: from the various Copyright Acts among the Berne Convention signatory nations to the acts that regulate the creative industries. This is neither simple maintenance of an industry nor simple altruism towards the arts; as cultural policy analyst John Pick writes, 'government subsidies are plainly a good way of controlling artists and art'⁴ because they exchange financial support for the compliance of practitioners in producing officially sanctioned images. Certainly, Australian policies clearly and unabashedly spell out where support is to be directed. The Australia Council's statutory obligations, for example, include the responsibility to 'foster the expression of a national identity by means of the arts'.⁵ Australia is not alone in this approach: Singapore's Creative Industries Development Strategy (2002) looks to the arts to propel the nation's economy and provide it with a face in the international arena;⁶ Bangladesh's Constitution articulates the centrality of art to national culture;⁷ in New Zealand, the arts are identified as promoters of a New Zealand identity;⁸ and Britain, the United States and various European nations have comparable statements in their own arts and cultural development policies. Such aims, along with their unproblematised assumption of the national community's presence, both draw on and realise the fiction of a unified, ideal 'us', and make clear connections between that community and what is authorised as representative art.

This is not just the task of governments: curators, art writers and reviewers do the same sort of thing in the way they receive and classify art works. They insist on tracing the provenance of works and the biography of the artists as though, in knowing where the artists were born, worked and lived, and where the works have been shown and exchanged, some light would be shed on their

meaning and identity. Books are written on 'Indonesian art' or 'Pacific art' or 'British art'; collections are organised into 'Asian' and 'contemporary Asian', 'early European', '20th-century American' art and so on. The national biennales and triennales, the international shows where artworks are identified by their producers and the producer/artists by their place of birth and residence: these, too, indicate the way we cling to the fantasy of the nation-state as significant for artists and their work. And whatever artists may believe themselves to be doing and saying — and however effective and evocative that doing and saying may be — as soon as work enters the community through exhibitions, official commissions and purchases, reviews and so on, it begins to be put to tasks other than the aesthetic, exploratory or communicative.

Not that artists necessarily take this taxonomical task lying down. Salima Hashmi, artist and art theorist, describes the way in which Pakistani women artists have consistently refused to comply with such imperatives, especially those that would constrain women's imagery or actions. Her own painting, *The People Wept at Dawn*, delicately but insistently inserts a female iconography into the work, in the form of the labial flower emerging from and against a fracturing built structure. But perhaps the most confrontational instance I have seen of resistance to the call of the nation or the controlling effects of cultural policy was an installation by the Campfire Group, an Australian Indigenous



Salima Hashmi (Pakistan)
The People Wept at Dawn

1994
Mixed media on paper
50.8 x 76.2 cm
Private Collection
Image courtesy the artist

artists' collective. Their work, presented in 1996 at the Queensland Art Gallery's Second Asia-Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, satirically exposed the relationship between Indigenous and mainstream art. Titled *All Stock Must Go!*, it comprised a cattle truck loaded with Aboriginal art, mass-produced tourist kitsch and other objets d'art, located just outside the gallery, the items labelled with price tags and available for sale. The artists staffing the truck and the hand-lettered signs displayed about it urged consumers to 'Buy! Buy! Buy!' Visitors to the Triennial, and passers-by on their way to the Southbank playgrounds — myself included — were not sure whether they were looking at an art exhibit or an oddly misplaced shop filled with Aboriginal artefacts. *All Stock Must Go!* deliberately announced, in its striking of this reflexive pose, the extent to which Indigenous Australians have been treated — as commodities — and how their art remains at least partly separate from the mainstream. In the process, it pointed to the problem with conceiving artworks as exemplars of the truth of a nation rather than exchange objects, or expressions of an individual aesthetic. The official 'truth', the work suggests, is true only in the Nietzschean sense; that is, it is only

A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding.⁹



Campfire Group (Australia)
All Stock Must Go!

1996
Second Asia-Pacific
Triennial of
Contemporary Art
Queensland Art Gallery
Installation and performance
event comprising truck,
tent, artworks, merchandise,
video and mixed media
Dimension: variable
Collection: artists

The flimsiness of art as metonym of the nation is paralleled by the flimsiness of the nation-state itself. Although it has been a pervasive fantasy through most of recent history, the notion of a permanent, stable and ontologically discrete nation-state is being shaken by radical globalisation and its transformative effects. Indeed, in the moment of history that lies between 1996 installation and 2004, the changes across the globe may mean it has become unfeasible to talk about local, national or regional factors of any sort. The task for artists, according to some commentators, is no longer to respond to the imperative of nation-building, but to resist being gobbled up by the universalising, homogenising work of the global economy.

THE GLOBALISING EFFECT

Artists and nation-states are not the only ones threatened by the forces of globalisation. Globalisation theorists John Beynon and David Dunkerley argue convincingly that 'globalization might justifiably be claimed to be the defining feature of human society at the start of the twenty first century',¹⁰ one that informs the lives of everyone on the planet. Even in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York, which plunged the United States back into its old isolationist posture (the United States vs the world), and reinforced the even older posture (the West vs the Muslim world), globalisation remains highly significant. People are moving, voluntarily or involuntarily, in great numbers around the globe and, in crossing borders (legally or illegally), they bring with them stories, languages and cultures now juxtaposed, cohabiting in and thereby transforming local spaces. The interweaving of currencies and trade has an even more profound effect on our everyday lives, since changes in Tokyo, Berlin or New York stock markets impact on us all, while the mass media's movies, television shows and popular music provide a look (and sound) to much of the population of the globe.

The Japanese artist Masato Nakamura directly addresses this issue of the global(ised), commercialised 'look' of the world. Many of his works make use of commercial signage, usually illuminated objects that are the same or very similar all over the world. He has, for instance, used Korean barber poles (almost identical to Japanese barber poles), and layered convenience store signs over

one another in the form of a giant painting, in installations. His installation for the Queensland Art Gallery's Third Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1999 was one of his several works that display multiple McDonald's 'golden arches'. In using what are obvious markers of multinational, market-driven value, Nakamura produces visually stunning works that illustrate the effects of globalisation, and interrogate the notion that the nation-state has a unique identity. If such signs are identical or near-identical across the globe, he seems to be asking, what discrete identity, or national integrity, can be owned by a particular country? And, by lifting these signs out of their urban context, where they can go practically unnoticed, he forces us to recognise them as artefacts of global capitalism which are standardising urban landscapes around the world.

Capitalism is, of course, the motor of globalisation, but what gives the effect its power is, arguably, the development and proliferation of digital communication technologies. These have gone a considerable distance to collapsing space and time, and to limiting the success of any government that seeks to control the flow of images, information and ideas into and across its territory. In the past, a state could exercise a reasonable amount of control over the movement of ideas and images because they were usually disseminated in the form of objects capable of being excluded or destroyed in a way that the ephemeral forms of virtual texts (soft copy) cannot. Now, however, information and ideas flow (relatively) freely across borders, disturbing 'the limitations of geography'.¹¹ But this does not signal a new democracy of images, ideas or values: because most of the handful of companies that control the international media are American-based and because so much of the material distributed via the Internet is English-language and American-produced, for many commentators globalisation equals Americanisation. Ihab Hassan, in this respect, speaks of the colonisation of the imagination by US media — especially its entertainment arm. When young people in Fukuoka, Sao Paulo and London are all humming the same Eminem tune, quoting Bart Simpson or ordering a Big Mac, how can it be feasible to insist that local stories and images still mark the tastes and knowledge of any individual, or any nation?

It is important, though, not to overstate the effects of globalisation on everyday life or on the practice of artists. Global sceptics point out that much of the 'truth' of globalisation,

especially its potential to break down national boundaries and revolutionise ways of thinking and seeing, rests on that epidemic spread of communication technologies. But only a very small percentage of the world's population is actually in the loop of the network society. And besides, local cultures have always been supremely good at picking up just enough of a colonising or influencing culture to enhance their own practices and worldviews — as the Catholic Church could attest. Despite its incredibly successful spread across the globe, what it means to be Catholic, and how worship is both conducted and understood, is deeply inflected by local, rather than universal or Vatican, accounts of the same. The Mono-ha School of Japan — perhaps best known through Lee U-Fan's minimalist paintings — is a clear example of this effect in the creative field: its members asserted that their artistic developments were driven by local interests, tastes and issues, rather than simply by a response to European or US aesthetics. So, while artists may draw on alternative traditions, they do not, in that process, necessarily lose or jettison their own. As Vietnamese artist/writer Dang Thi Khue points out:



Lee U-Fan (Korea/Japan)
With Winds

1990
Oil on canvas
227.5 x 182 cm

The Kenneth and Yasuko Myer Collection
of Contemporary Asian Art. Purchased
1998 with funds from Michael Simcha
Baevski through and with the assistance of
the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy Queensland Art Gallery

Direct exposure to and contact with the world's art has widened our artists' views and perspectives, helping them see more clearly the worldwide artistic panorama, and to establish therein a position of their own, an orientation for the development of their own art ... Our choice is to accept selectively, as a necessity, the influences of modernist and postmodernist art from the outside world and retain, as a constant value, our original artistic traditions with their spiritual core.¹²

So, despite the preponderance and proliferation of global communication, media, economy and cultural forms, there is no totalising force. If anything, the pressure that globalisation brings for homogeneity is equalled by the pressure brought to bear by the (re-)emergence of local interests and identities. Benjamin Barber writes:

Just beyond the horizon of current events lie two possible political futures — both bleak, neither democratic. The first is a retribalization of large swaths of humankind by war and bloodshed: a threatened Lebanonization of national states in which culture is pitted against culture, people against people, tribe against tribe — a Jihad in the name of a hundred narrowly conceived faiths against every kind of interdependence, every kind of artificial social cooperation and civic mutuality. The second is being borne in on us by the onrush of economic and ecological forces that demand integration and uniformity and that mesmerize the world with fast music, fast computers, and fast food — with MTV, Macintosh, and McDonald's, pressing nations into one commercially homogenous global network: one McWorld tied together by technology, ecology, communications, and commerce. The planet is falling precipitately apart AND coming reluctantly together at the very same moment.¹³

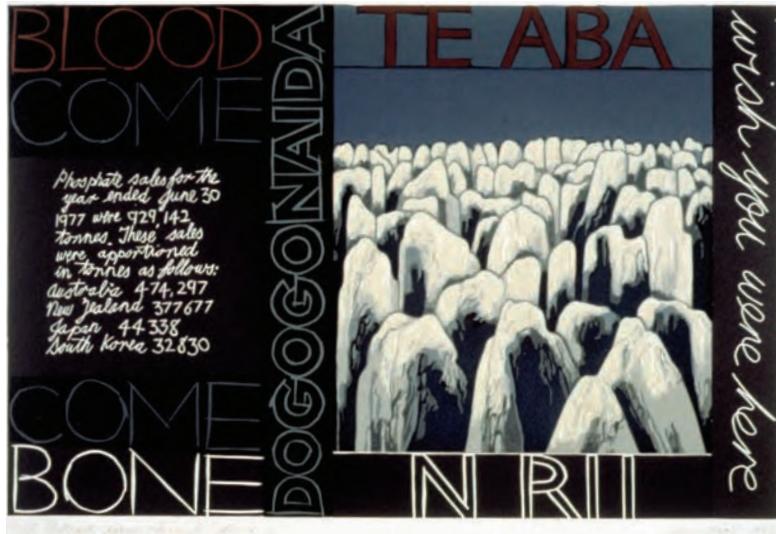


Dang Thi Khue
(Vietnam)
A Soul

1996
Installation; bamboo,
wood, silk,
240 x 290 x 80 cm
Image courtesy the artist

Robin White (New Zealand)
*Postcard from
Pleasant Island*

1989
Colour linocut
Edition of 30
30 x 45.2 cm (image)
Image courtesy
Helen Maxwell Gallery,
Canberra and the artist



GLOBAL(ISED) ART

Perhaps these polarised futures will cancel each other out, at least in their worst manifestations, because these somewhat depressing ideas and facts may not, in fact, necessarily mean all that much for creative production in the contemporary world. Although art — as indicated above — has been used to serve national priorities, many artists have been ignored during their own lifetime, or have ignored the demands of policy, instead making their work according to their own aesthetic. Then, too, except for artists who work under overwhelming obligations — those living under dictatorships, for instance — few have seen themselves as necessarily committed to, or purely informed by, a unitary national sensibility. Robin White, formerly from Kiribati and now living in New Zealand, produced a chilling print series, *Postcards from Pleasant Island*, which depict the effects of phosphate mining on Nauru, and the changes from a Pacific paradise to Te ABA N Rii: a desolate ‘land of bones’. She draws, thus, on three national contexts to critique the preoccupation with ‘development’ in a way that exemplifies the interchange that has always obtained between artists across national and regional boundaries. And many artists have drawn on something other than the national tradition in making their work: local traditions are more important for some; specific cultural elements within the nation as a whole for others. Maori artists, for instance, have often been far more concerned with the particularities of Maori culture than with New Zealand’s

traditions per se; Aboriginal Australian artists, too, have paid more attention to the Indigenous meanings and functions of their work than its marketability as 'Australian'. As the artist Galarrwuy Yunupingu writes:

When we paint — whether it is on our bodies for ceremony or on bark or canvas for the market — we are not just painting for fun or profit. We are painting, as we have always done, to demonstrate our continuing link with our country and the rights and responsibilities we have to it. We paint to show the rest of the world that we own this country and that the land owns us. Our painting is a political act.¹⁴

Even artists who are not overtly political or clearly identified with an Indigenous or other local community are not necessarily coopted by other political imperatives: the alternatives to nationalist production are not only localism or globalism. Despite the formidable effect of globalisation on the lives of everyone, there can be no such thing as a truly global arts culture, and hence no general homogenisation of image or practice, because identity and cultural attachment — which are expressed through art — rely on emotional and traditional resonances. The Coca-Colonisation of the (Mc)world can't hope to achieve this because it is comparatively recent, manifestly commercial and lacks the specific signifiers of cultural identity to which people can relate. Globalisation theorists Held and McGrew write, 'There is no common global pool of memories; no common global way of thinking; and no "universal history" in and through which people can unite.'¹⁵ This lack limits the capacity of globalised capitalism to move the people of the world or to delimit artistic practice in any genuine or sustained way. While the markets and the international media have certainly been captured by global capital, the idea that we are seeing a cultural homogenisation and/or the Westernisation of the globe is not borne out by practice. Curator and critic Hou Hanru makes this point in discussing the interaction between Western and Chinese art:

After some initial moments of excitement and hope, Chinese contemporary artists' contact with western-dominated global art has been disappointing and frustrating, which has pushed many artists to reconsider their relationship with the international art world. On the one hand, they confirm the

necessity to search for a space for expressions which are both personal and universally significant. On the other hand, they recognise that it is now time to restructure the art world and create a genuinely global scene.¹⁶

The flow of cultural images and ideas, then, is never one-way, but more like a spiral — one that in its movement always (re)turns on itself. This is productive, for art and artists. The ready and frequent passage of people, objects and images around the globe means that artists in, say, Shanghai and San Francisco can be in instantaneous communication with each other, and ideas and stories can circulate freely across the globe and throughout cultures. So, while globalised capital may in some fields be elbowing traditions out of sight (and, perhaps, out of mind), artists can attach to those aspects of global culture that are attractive and valuable, while remaining attached to those aspects of local traditions that serve their aesthetic and meaning-making aspirations.

The artist Chaco Kato is a case in point. While her compatriot Masato Nakamura traces and contests the homogenising effects of mainstream global culture, Kato traces instances of diversity, and the small, often hidden everyday experiences of people not just transformed by, but transforming, their contexts. Named a ‘transculturalist’ by Monty DiPietro,¹⁷ she has lived, worked and been trained in Japan, the United States, France and Australia, and now exhibits mainly in Japan and Australia. While the influences of these various cultural contexts are evident in her work, she retains a clear and idiosyncratic focus on the values that come from her Buddhist worldview, and her concern for the lives and stories of ordinary people, especially those displaced from their homes. This was manifest in her 2003 installation *Breathing Soil*. This work reprised ideas she has been developing in the past years about how and for whom we live; ideas about diversity; and concerns about ways of defamiliarising, and hence receiving anew, the everydayness of contemporary urban life. Set in the gardens of Collingwood College, Melbourne, the work comprised a number of clear perspex drums that squatted quietly among the trees and smaller plants. The vegetable matter that filled them was arranged in layers of sawdust, bright radishes, green matter, woodchips and coloured sand, and the containers themselves were placed between the geraniums and daisies, silverbeet and spring onions, cornflowers and lobelias that filled the gardens. The ‘breathing’

and decaying contents of the compost bins moved through stages of beauty and sublimity to produce, at the end, soil — the matter of life. Kato writes thus about the background and motivation of this work and her work:

I think artists have a responsibility to show how we interpret the current world situation. We don't have to make work about it; we can create and express whatever we want. But it does come through naturally, without our attempting to show it. For instance, I hear all kinds of stories every day through the media, friends and family. Those things slowly sink into my mind and body, then spin and form stories and images. Certainly this affects my thoughts a great deal, especially if it is about something close to my own situation as a migrant and a minority in Anglo society. The situation challenges how I understand and face it at a much deeper level. For example, my work deals with the idea that everything is moving and transforming and re-cycling: that is also the interpretation of the current situation of 'human traffic' or 'migration' as well as my own everyday experience. It is also about my Buddhism, and resonates with the idea of ecology. That idea applies to my compost project 'Breathing Soil' which people might think of as an eco-concerned work. But in fact it is about migration.¹⁸



Chaco Kato
(Japan/Australia)
Breathing Soil

2003
Installation
Vegetable matter and
perspex drums
Collingwood College,
Melbourne, Australia
Image courtesy the artist

So, at its most basic, *Breathing Soil* was about the decay and disintegration of vegetable matter, and its translation into compost — ‘breathing soil’. But, at other levels, it worked to remind audiences of the principles of unification of and in nature, and of Buddhist notions of impermanence and alteration: not something to be rejected or feared, but part of everything in the world, and part of the continual process of transformation.

What we see in the work of artists such as Kato or Nakamura, Hashmi or the Campfire Group is a refusal either to be bound by or to reject tradition, and a recognition of the impact of global and national pressures on artists. At the same time, each shows a confidence in their own artistic vision and practice. Each artist is able to synthesise disparate elements and craft an environment in which dominant values and images can be quoted, critiqued and recontextualised, but without becoming infinitely substitutable and hence contextless, meaningless or valueless. Each artist speaks across all the social strata that have made them individuals, and draws on whatever is appropriate to make the works that allow them to communicate, to themselves and others, what is burning to be said.

POST-NATIONAL, NON-GLOBAL

Nations are perhaps being fragmented by the effects, on the one hand, of globalisation, and on the other, of localism; artists are perhaps being pulled about by contradictory imperatives and pressures; and yet both remain, and continue to carve their own identity in the world. Perhaps what this suggests is that artists are more lightly touched than are other communities by the depredations of globalisation because of the benefits of what globalisation theorists call ‘cultural hybridisation’. This, the blending of foreign and local to make a new form, is evident in the contemporary work of artists who are rarely just *local*, *national* or *global* in their approach, but who manifest the effects of a two- or multi-way traffic in the flow of cultural ideas and images. With globalisation, clearly, things change; old cultural forms may be swept away or replaced, or they may absorb and re-form the new cultural products that impinge on their space and sell them back to the centre. But what does not happen is a universalising of cultural forms and values, or an impossible division between them. Rather, we see the proliferation of ideas, signification, visions and practices that provide artists with new pressures and tensions, but also new ways of making work.

NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Donald Horne, *Arts Funding and Public Culture: cultural policy studies*, Occasional Paper No. 1, ICPS Griffith University Press, 1988, p. 4. Or, Anne-Marie Willis, *Illusions of Identity: the art of nation*, Hale and Iremonger, Marrickville, 1993, p. 27.
- 2 Cesar Grana, *Meaning and Authenticity: further essays on the sociology of art*, Transaction, New Brunswick, 1989, p. 21.
- 3 Janet Wolff, *Hermeneutic Philosophy and the Sociology of Art*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1975, p. 118.
- 4 John Pick, *The Arts in a State: a study of government arts policies from Ancient Greece to the present*, Bristol Classical Press, Bristol, 1988, p. x.
- 5 Australia Council Act 1975, Sect. 5, a. v.
- 6 Singapore Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, *Creative Industries Development Strategy*, 2002, p. 2.
- 7 Article 23 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (passed by the Constituent Assembly on 4 November 1972) reads: 'The State shall adopt measures to conserve the cultural traditions and heritage of the people, and so to foster and improve the national language, literature and the arts that all sections of the people are afforded the opportunity to contribute towards and to participate in the enrichment of the national culture.'
- 8 The Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa Act 1994, Part 1, Section 7(1), states that one of the principal functions of the Arts Council is (c) 'To promote the development of a New Zealand identity in the arts'.
- 9 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On truth and lies in a nonmoral sense', http://users.compaqnet.be/cn127103/Nietzsche_various/on_truth_and_lies.htm, 1873 (accessed 11 April, 2002).
- 10 John Beynon and David Dunkerley (eds), *Globalization: the reader*, Athlone, London, 2000, p. 3.
- 11 Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1996, p. 15.
- 12 Dang Thi Khue, 'Contemporary Vietnamese Art: a new stage', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999, p. 162.
- 13 Benjamin R. Brisbane, 'Jihad vs McWorld', *Atlantic Monthly*, Vol. 269, March 1992, pp. 53–65.
- 14 Galarrwuy Yunupingu, 'Indigenous art in the Olympic Age', *Art and Australia*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1997, p. 65.
- 15 David Held and Anthony McGrew, *The Global Transformations Reader: an introduction to the globalization debate*, Polity Press, Malden, MA, 2000, p. 16.
- 16 Hou Hanru, 'On the Mid-Ground: Chinese artists, diaspora and global art', in *Beyond the Future*, p. 191.
- 17 Monty DiPietro, 'Command N's Sukima', <http://www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/Sukima.html>, 2001 (accessed 20 November 2003).
- 18 Chaco Kato, personal communication, August 2003.

A CHANGING WORLD ORDER

DISMANTLED NORMS: APROPOS OTHER AVANTGARDES

Geeta Kapur

THE NORMS

Indian art reflects the cultural agendas of the past 50 years in its forms of modernity. At one end there is a sustained attempt to give regard to indigenous, living traditions and to dovetail the tradition/modernity aspects of contemporary culture through a typically postcolonial eclecticism. At the other end, there is a desire to disengage from the overarching politics of the national by a reclusive attention to formal choices that seemingly transcend both cultural and subjective particularities and enter the modernist frame.¹ My intention here is to step outside this by now familiar paradigm and recognise alternative forms of self-designation by the artists, as also non-conventional attributes for the art works. At an empirical level, it means attending to the changing art forms in the current decade. At a theoretical level, it means that we foreground disjuncture and try to name the possible avantgardes. But first, a countdown on the norms as these have characterised the decades preceding the 1990s.²

Secular identity

Given the variety of well-appointed actors in the theatre of Indian art there was, until recently, an aspiration for the artist to become a central national figure. It was hoped that the artist would articulate in work and speech a historical position that would clearly demarcate a hospitable national space. This ideal of an integrated identity had something to do with the mythic imaginary of lost communities. It had to do with nationalism, Third World utopias and postcolonial culturalism.³

Between the 1940s and 1960s, the integrated identity of the Indian artist was, in an anti-imperialist sense, political. Somnath Hore was part of the Communist movement, J. Swaminathan was a Communist–anarchist, and K. G. Subramanyan a Gandhian. Most contemporary artists, prominently M. F. Husain and Satish Gujral, were privileged members of the Nehruvian liberal ethos. Until recently, the identity of the Indian artist was largely modern and secular. While there might have been conservative artists, there would hardly be a fundamentalist among them. And if that identity questioned modernity it did so on the basis of a tradition that was, despite the invocations of sacred myths and symbols, ‘invented’ during a nationalist resurgence and was therefore sufficiently secularised.

Or this seemed to be so until we began to interrogate this past. In doing so we recognised in hindsight a bad faith in some of the terms of nationalist cultural discourse. In particular that the sectarian pulls of religion and caste had not been fully considered, making both the modern and the secular well-meaning but recalcitrant ideals.

In the post-Independence ethos Maqbool Fida Husain characterises the ‘function’ of the national artist: he marks the conjunction between the mythic and the secular and then between secular and aesthetic space. Husain, along with some of his peers (F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza and other members and associates of the Progressive Artists’ Group of 1947), has helped to give modern art in India an autonomous status — an autonomy that was, however, already institutionalised in the West a century before. At the same time, because of a socialist register in the liberal society of post-Independence India, an artist like Husain has occupied a converse status — that of peoples’ representative. The two contradictory modes of formalising the Indian artist’s identity — as autonomous



M.F. Husain
The Last Supper

1991
Acrylic on canvas
213 x 488 cm
Collection: Pundole Art
Gallery, Bombay, India

and as spokesperson of the people — are held together by an idealised notion of the artist's access to subjective and cultural plenitude. To further facilitate this utopian identity, Husain invokes a pantheon of benign gods in a reworked iconography. They are the artist's mascots in the ideological terrain of national culture.

Today, Husain is a controversial public figure. He has been close to State power and to the bourgeoisie. For the people, for the layperson, the lure of Husain's bohemian persona and what he produces — a modernist/populist update on the Indian heritage — are attractive. By this logic it is not Husain's intention to provoke on the basis of class, sex or religion. If any form of subversion can be attributed to him it comes from the inherent tendency in modern (expressionist) art to put an autobiographical stamp on the image. Thus references to myths and epics carry the same libertine style of representation that the artist's self may sport, and the authorial signature enhances the complicit nature of all iconographical renderings, including the more erotic among these. The artist, making an expressly personal intervention in epic realms, can appear to be driven by hubris or, on the other hand, by unjustified intimacy.

The unfolding 'case of Husain' in the past few years proves that whatever was sanctioned in progressive politics of the post-Independence phase — by a centrist State, the national bourgeoisie, a secular people — has come to be desanctioned by the Hindu right wing.⁴ Precipitated by the charge that Husain is a Muslim artist playing with Hindu myths and religion, the controversy is about the right of representation through images and

whether this right is bound by community (inevitably embedded in religion). It brings up the necessary role of the Muslim artist/intellectual in defining the nature of Indian secular culture. It raises questions about the status of mythology in contemporary life, of the relation between cultural symbols and secular politics. It also brings up the fate of modern art in the developing orthodoxies.

From an opposite pole, the more radical exponents of democratic culture have expressed some discomfort with an artist's presumed expertise in slicing through the layers of this stratified society; with his right to draw imaginative inspiration by touching simultaneously high-caste, *dalit* and tribal cultures while leaving the source compressed within a too-steeply hierarchical structure. What has also been challenged is the mapping of the artistic imagination on to a transcendent horizon, for this is the scale at which the heroic self-designation of the national artist is pitched.

Even as cultural imperialism dressed up in euphemistic phrases becomes globally more rampant, our redoubled critical task is situated in the framework of a national culture. But from the other end, as it were. I would maintain that the norm of a modern, secular identity is honourable, but that its gestalt has to be rethought. At the same time, the normative profile that Indian cultural practitioners, artists among them, have hitherto adopted needs reconsideration.

Living traditions

At an ethical level, the votaries of a nationalist position will expect to fulfil the responsibility of always contextualising their artistic choices, situating them within the continuum of a living tradition. This is felicitous. Sensitive handling of living traditions helps maintain the sense of a complex society which informs and sometimes subverts the modernisation that the very institution of the nation-state inaugurates (and the market promotes).

Ritual arts of the rural communities and everyday artisanal practices are part of perennial life-processes until today. They are also part of daily drudgery, as they are now part of an openly exploitative capitalist economy. In economic terms this phenomenon provides a lesson in humility because the terms of survival are so hard. It is a lesson that Meera Mukherjee lived in her life and art, using tribal metal-casting techniques, using imagery from everyday cultures including the iconic condensation of folk forms. She referred especially to the compassionate traditions of Buddhism and to the itinerant mendicants, the *bauls*, of her native Bengal. Furthermore,

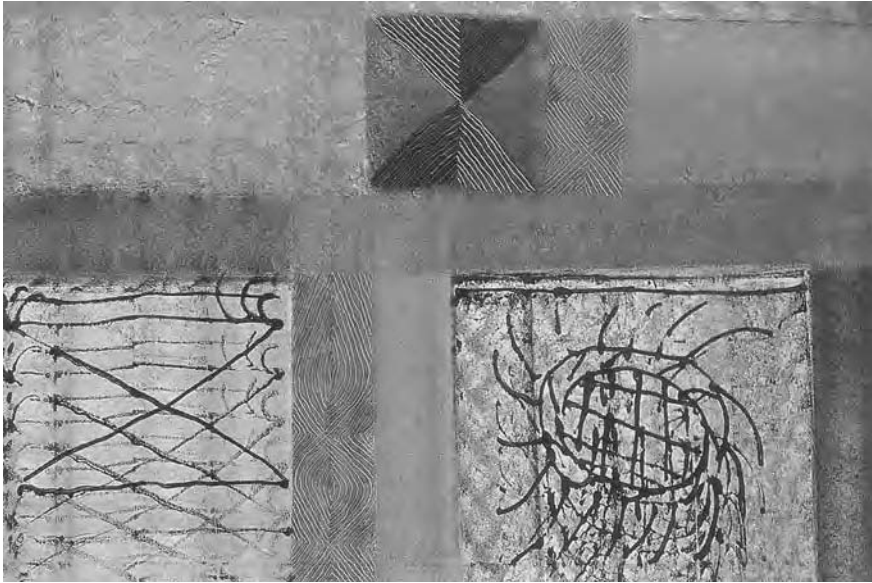
she found a personal stylistics, going 'beyond' the matrix of tradition and technique to a contemporary vision of the working people. In cultural terms this can be understood through a radically revised ethnography as well as from within the imaginative universe, by using the sympathetic sensors of art language itself.

In continuation with his Santiniketan training K. G. Subramanyan has conducted something like an ongoing workshop without walls around artisanal practices. His pedagogical role in the fine arts faculties in M. S. University, Baroda and Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, and his status within the Indian Government's policy initiatives on the handloom and craft sectors are well known. As a practising artist, he has evolved modes of interaction with the polyvocal languages of the folk, especially the terracotta and *pata* traditions; more importantly, he has found a new syntax for the material vocabulary of artisanal forms. Thus he has contributed to extending this living tradition into and beyond the closed circuitry of traditions — and I refer to both repetitive craft traditions as well as to the repetitive 'tradition of the new' in Western modernism.

Another kind of relationship was nurtured by artist-critic J. Swaminathan with the primordial, the *adivasi* (in terms of ethnic designation, the tribal) artist: this was first offered as a speculative possibility when he formulated the manifesto for Group 1890 in 1963. Later, in 1982, he institutionalised this into policy on becoming director of Roopankar, the twin museums of contemporary urban and tribal art in Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal. Swaminathan claimed existential continuity with the primordial imagination in the creative act itself. His kind of metaphysical formalism involved a conversion of cultural symbols and formalised icons into the more elusive numen; it led simultaneously to a pristine aesthetic, to structural readings of the symbolic in tribal communities, to linguistic play in modernist art:

It would seem that there is nothing which comes in the way of our direct appreciation and apprehension of what is commonly termed as tribal art ... Further if ... we take recourse to ethnological or anthropological methods, or if we refer to archaeology and history, our aim and intention should never be lost sight of — to emphasize the numinous function of art, neither to replace, nor to subordinate [it].⁵

The lessons that Meera Mukherjee, Subramanyan and Swaminathan offer are decidedly different, yet each of them



J. Swaminathan
Untitled

1993
Oil on canvas
117 x 173 cm
Collection:
Glenbarra
Art Museum,
Himeji-City, Japan

implies that modern artists in India must start from degree zero of their existential ambitions as they stand at the threshold of a culturally rich and materially pauperised hinterland. A hinterland that holds living traditions with a vast number of differentiated skills and vernaculars which it must somehow be the ambition of the modern artist to know and decipher. This requires not just ethnographically correct answers but a generosity that can encompass and contain the loss of 'superseded' culture.

It needs to be noted, however, that living traditions are now subject to the ever-revised categories of anthropology. The tradition-versus-modernity argument was high on the common agenda until recently; later, structuralist assumptions about conceptual commonalities between cultures came to the fore. All these are subject to new critiques. Artistic choices, once globalised, enter the new (or non) ethics of postmodernism. This celebratory neo-traditionalism is based not so much on material practice as on the appearance of simulacra. This has to be taken on board in any further discussions on the subject.

Eclectic choice

The more polemical aspect of the ethical proposition about living traditions (or the perennial contemporaneity of all creative expression) is the ideology of cultural eclecticism. Artist-teachers in India (going back from Gulammohammed Sheikh to K. G. Subramanyan and K. C. S. Paniker, and further back to Benodebehari

Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij and Nandalal Bose) have persuasively argued that colonial cultures achieve a synchronous complexity by intricately weaving local, vernacular and ethnic strands around a 'standard' heritage.⁶ By extension, national cultures in their post-Independence status achieve certain lost parities with other civilisations.

Further, eclecticism serves to emphasise the democratic right of politically subordinated cultures to invent new syncretic traditions of their own and thus to participate in an international discourse of modernism through such (usually nationalist) mediations.⁷ Decolonisation is an especially propitious moment to open the floodgates of the national/modern imagination, rupturing its too-conscientious project of identity with heterodox elements from the rest of the world. It is this dismantled identity that then enlarges the scope of contemporary art practice.

Within the terms of a colonial–postcolonial transition, artistic eclecticism corresponds to the polemic around an Indian identity. There are artists who make free use of tradition by proffering mythic attributes and invented ancestral origins in their work — A. Ramachandran, Ganesh Pyne, Laxma Goud are examples. Thus eclecticism can be a defensive rearguard action. It helps to balance nostalgia and derivativeness up to the point where sources are transformed into independent creative expression and serve to distinguish contemporary cultures.

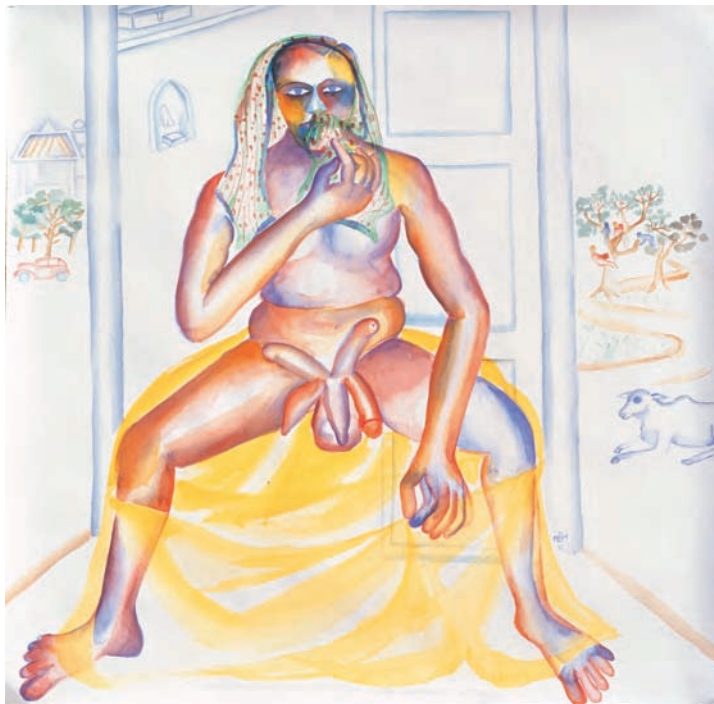
Conversely, the use of iconography can become an act of subversion. Sustained at an ironical level by older artists such as M. F. Husain, F. N. Souza, K. C. S. Paniker and K. G. Subramanyan, iconographical devices continue to be generative among the next generation of artists. Consider the infusion of the erotic in the fabled, miniature-inspired narratives of Gulammohammed Sheikh. Consider Jogen Chowdhury's attenuated representations, his ever more provocatively staged encounter with figures from his own Bengali middle class and their peculiar body language mediated through the stylistic conventions of the Bengal *pata*. Consider the homoerotic tableaux of Bhupen Khakhar, who takes Indian popular art from the 19th century across the modernist crucible and, in a painterly sleight of hand, arrives at a kitsch-sublime of his sexual fantasies. Almost more than any other Indian artist, it is Khakhar who has helped to dismantle the incumbent norms.

Bhupen Khakhar, Jogen Chowdhury and Gulammohammed Sheikh were three among six artists (the other three were Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani and Sudhir Patwardhan) who presented



Bhupen Khakhar
*How Many Hands
Do I Need To Declare
My Love To You?*

1994
Watercolour on paper.
122 x 122 cm
Collection: Bohdi Art,
Delhi/Singapore



Bhupen Khakhar
*An Old Man From
Vasad Who Had Five
Penises Suffered From
a Runny Nose*

1995
Watercolour on paper
116 x 116 cm
Collection: The Estate
of Bhupen Khakhar
Image courtesy
The Fine Art Resource,
Mumbai, India

a seminal exhibition titled *Place for People* in 1981. They made urban narratives and representational fantasies into an ideological choice. Creating a combustion in the heart of Indian modernism, they set apace many pictorial (auto)biographies along the Baroda, Bombay, Kerala trajectories.

Modernist 'integrity'

The terms national, secular, modern are so familiar in Indian cultural discourse that modernism as such is not always examined. The formal logic, the stylistic dovetailing and contending ideologies of modernism are not systematically investigated in the sometimes fortuitous, sometimes passionate syncretism of contemporary Indian art. The modernist enterprise is made up of aesthetic choice, existential temperament, recognisable style and the auteur's characteristic signature. But that these modernist assumptions, when placed in a nationalist paradigm of authenticity, may present a paradox becomes evident only when the formal regimes of modernism are foregrounded.

In the context of these developments, it is important to emphasise that Indian artists do occasionally work with developed adaptations of expressly modernist canons and, indeed, with a modernist poetics. There is a short but intense history of Indian modernism that is perfectly consonant with economic and political modernisation: it does not require a hermeneutic of tradition, nor a demonstrable nationalist purpose, nor even the alibi of post-colonial eclecticism.

The first phase of *self-declared* modernism in India dates from the 1940s (triggered, as I mentioned, by the formation of several 'progressive' groups). It coincides with the immediate post-Independence decade. Typical of several mainstream modernists from this generation is an expressionist aesthetic. Let me take Tyeb Mehta (a later associate of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group) as an example to examine the representational procedure of these artists. Mehta accepts the necessity of art-historical cross-referencing but privileges the analytic mode of structuring references. He thus makes the sources formally coeval and the image symbolic in the universal sense of that term. Tyeb Mehta's inscription of a figural metaphor for terror on a brilliantly painted ground reads like a death mask in the context of late 20th century art. This painterly double-act of mourning and celebration places him with

internationally situated modernists devoted to existential paradox and formal mediation. Mehta's figural ensembles invoke not only the arcadia of classical modernism (Matisse and Leger) but also politically pertinent mythology: for example the near-nihilist celebration of corporeal devourings by goddess *Kali*, the apotheosis of the buffalo-demon *Mahishasura* by goddess *Durga*. His recent work is wedged like a historical marker in the project of Indian modernism; it is subliminally mapped over contemporary tragedies such as the marginalisation of his own Muslim community within what is designated as a national–secular space. Mehta works towards synthesising the image, resolving it into an iconic poise that engages but also transcends cultural and subjective particularities. He thus offers, in a sense, one 'solution' to the paradox that is Indian modernism.

The iconic has had a central space in modernism since the beginning of the century. An important category of modernism, it transposes romanticist impulses to abstraction. After the 1960s,



Tyeb Mehta
Mahishasura

1998
Acrylic on canvas
260 x 175 cm
Collection:
Glenbarra
Art Museum,
Himeji-City, Japan

one part of the modernist-expressionist enterprise moves towards contemplative imagery: the works of the trio S. H. Raza, Akbar Padamsee, Ram Kumar, belong here. There are artists — J. Swaminathan, Biren De, Prabhakar Barwe — who, in deference to the modernist principle of condensation, convert lyric images into spiritual numens. And others who convert numens into airy grids — V. S. Gaitonde, V. Viswanadhan, Nasreen Mohamedi. We thus have a body of work that makes virtue of (nature-based) abstraction to gain metaphysical ends.

There are successive generations of modernists, Jeram Patel, for example, who work out their subjectivities through a vestigial expressionism to arrive at a discrete form that yields a graphic trace and artists' *écriture*. A condensation of form through metaphor appears also in the work of sculptors like Satish Gujral, Himmat Shah, Nagji Patel, Mrinalini Mukherjee, who convert objects into contemporary icons and icons into hermetic form, thereby emphasising the significance of material immanence in modernist art.

Modernism has valorised the near-autonomous logic of the hand, sign and metaphor in the making of art works. This connects the modernist with the 'primitive' or tribal artist by a looped argument, giving the former the privilege of possessing a visual language and the latter that of contemporaneity. This universalised notion of the image can be positioned as the common norm of modernist formalism, also often standing in for 'integrity'.

For a younger generation of artists it is precisely the displacement of these three authorial elements — hand, sign, metaphor — on to other more problematic levels of materiality and semiotics that is important. It causes a disjuncture of meanings and loosens up new chains of meanings. It is in this manoeuvre within the conceptually open, half-empty space of modernity that the more fraught social identity of the contemporary Indian artist abides. And it is in the moment of historical mortality, in the death-act of making and destroying the (art) object that the new politics of art practice takes hold.

AVANTGARDE ALTERNATIVES

In his formulation of the historical avantgarde, the German theorist Peter Burger identifies some key characteristics, one of which is anti-institutionalism — including opposition to the institutionalised autonomy of art. The establishment of autonomous art within

bourgeois culture is interrogated, a reconnection between art and life and an integration of high and low cultures is encouraged.⁸

I will argue that if the avantgarde is a historically conditioned phenomenon and emerges only in a moment of real political disjuncture, it will appear in various forms in different parts of the world at different times. To develop this point, I extrapolate from the American critic Hal Foster's reflections on the subject. Although indebted to Burger's concept of a historical avantgarde, Foster takes issue with Burger's sectarian position on the avantgarde of the 1920s:

[H]is very premise — that one theory can comprehend the avant-garde, that all its activities can be subsumed under the project to destroy the false autonomy of bourgeois art — is problematic. Yet these problems pale next to his dismissal of the postwar avant-garde as merely neo, as so much repetition in bad faith that cancels the prewar critique of the institution of art.⁹

Clearly, a historicism that designates cause and effect on the presumption that the prior event produces the later one is not acceptable to Foster, and he goes on to say:

Despite many critiques in different disciplines, historicism still pervades art history, especially modernist studies, as it has from its great Hegelian founders to influential curators and critics like Alfred Barr and Clement Greenberg and beyond. Above all else it is this persistent historicism that condemns contemporary art as belated, redundant, repetitious.¹⁰

Hal Foster takes a position in favour of successive vanguards precisely to make contemporary practice viable, claiming that it is as advanced and ambitious in its critical stance as the 1920s' historical avantgarde. I am suggesting that we extend the argument by a deliberate deflection: the successive forms of the vanguard are extended to include hitherto unlogged initiatives. Initiatives taken outside the West and vetoed out of modernist and avantgarde histories on the ground that these initiatives are belated and repetitious. This deflected argument will rebound as a critique of Foster's own (Euro)Americanism, of his indifference to non-Western ideologies of plural modernities/alternative vanguards.

Once we admit history — over and above art history — as the matrix from which the notion of the avantgarde arises, then

there are always plural histories in the reckoning. For a long time now Latin American cultures have followed a radical agenda that has developed into a cultural dynamic quite independent of their Euro-American antecedents. Similarly, an African or Asian avantgarde will come into its own if at least two moves take place simultaneously. One, a move that dismantles the hegemonic and conservative features of the national culture itself. Two, a move that dismantles the burdensome aspect of Western art, including its programmatic vanguardism. That is to say, such an avantgarde would have to treat the avantgarde principle itself as an institutionalised phenomenon, recognising the assimilative therefore sometimes paralysing capacity of the (Western) museums, galleries, critical apparatuses, curators and media.

Who's afraid of the American avantgarde?

Here, a quick retake on the American avantgarde might help since it so mediates and dominates the art-historical discourse on the subject. It is worth remembering that, in the American context, the parameters of the debate on the avantgarde are conditioned by the Americans' own telescoping of modernism. The first great phase of modernist art in the United States emerged as late as the 1940s. By the 1960s, American art critics had already marked the end of modernist art *per se*. American modernists, having pushed an ideology of freedom in the Cold War years on the single ticket of heroic abstraction, brought it to a quick impasse. With the next generation of more academic art historians in the lead, American artists became exemplars of a disciplined vocation. The positioning of the 1960s avantgarde was fitted out as a recuperative strategy within an already established teleology of advanced art, indeed of an overall American *advancement*.

The avantgarde of the 1960s — pop art and minimalism (in Europe: fluxus and *arte povera*), positioned in critical relationships to the suppressed histories of dada and constructivism — did respond to the outwardly directed radicalism of the decade. And the conceptual opposition to the modernist aporias of the period were based in some part on the intrepid stand of youthful revolutionary energy intent on upturning, as in the decade of the 1920s across Europe and Russia, the last bastions of bourgeois modernism. But if the American neo-avantgarde replayed the 1920s' battle with modernism, we should remember that it was in

terms of a very reduced notion of this modernism and of modernist painting: Marcel Duchamp was face to face with Pablo Picasso; A. M. Rodchenko with, say, Max Beckmann; but Donald Judd faced only a Kenneth Noland — one formalism against another. A too-precise battle, too easily won, straitened the discourse of the neo-avantgarde into retinal epiphanies versus bodily encounter. It needed the feminist-led extension of the conceptual art movement, with its emphasis on the political import of phenomenology and semiotics, to give the avantgarde some bite in the 1970s.

Not only is there no reason whatsoever for the rest of the world to subscribe to the vocational stringencies of the American vanguard, there are other larger battles to be taken account of: alternative avantgardes must emerge in opposition to the American power structures of art, academia and, above all, politics. They do in fact emerge — and within the United States as well — to challenge the biggest monolith of all: the American State and its capitalist fundamentalism.

Political forms of cinema and magical narratives in literature from Latin America have knocked preemptorily at the gringo citadels since the 1960s. Enough has been produced in the visual culture of the neighbourhood to break any notional monopoly of the American avantgarde. Other parts of the world find their own cultural equations and make precise linguistic choices. Clement Greenberg's aesthetic, for example, meant very little in Asia; there was always a greater attraction for eccentric and excessive acts of art-making and therefore other models served the purpose to make up alternative modernities. In the post-1960s period, for example, pop art and the attenuated forms of narrative reflexivity that R. B. Kitaj and David Hockney developed apropos what came to be known as the School of London find reverberations among the narratively inclined Indian painters. The new-image painters of the 1980s, such as Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz, Sigmar Polke in Germany, or the more florid Italians such as Francesco Clemente and Enzo Cucchi, strike a chord in Afro-Asian postmodernisms, given the expressionist bias of the first-generation modernists in several of these cultures. On the other hand the contrary, the mythic-romantic, aspect of the conceptual art practised by Joseph Beuys and his followers has fascinated artists in many parts of the world, including younger Asian and Indian artists. Feminists have learnt from each other across cultures and this brings into the orbit

of imagination artists as disparate as Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Nancy Spero and Cindy Sherman.

An Asian/Indian artist does not aspire to be part of the monumental trans-avantgarde of Europe; for the same reason, the American avantgarde is seen as a discrete phenomenon within mainstream internationalism. Even renegades from the American canon — from the painterly to the minimalist, from the post-painterly to the conceptual — gain other meanings in other contexts. The continuing debates on the avantgarde, invigorating as they are, cannot — precisely because the avantgarde is not a moral or academic but historical force — claim a determining discourse on the avantgarde *elsewhere*. Once they are unstrung from the logic of a Euro-American master discourse on advanced art, Third World vanguards can be seen to be connected with their own *histories* and to mark that disjuncture first and foremost.¹¹

It is true that in the (still operative) imperialist phase of internationalism, plural histories are hierarchised in terms of effective agency. But this view has been repeatedly challenged since liberation politics came on the agenda. The discourse of decolonisation has staked the claim that these cultural alternatives, positioned as they are at the cutting edge of poverty, are as valid as any criterion that we recount in conventional art history. Contemporary Euro-American cultural discourse cannot function without a recognition of the major shake-ups that have taken place in its hegemonic assumptions: just as Mexico and the Soviet Union challenged Europe in the prewar era, and Cuba and Vietnam challenged the United States in the 1960s, Asia may well be the economic rival and cultural nemesis of Euro-American power in the coming decades.

Asian art: a poetics of displaced objects

Asian cultures are faced with multiple paradoxes barely covered by art-historical debates in the Euro-American context.¹² It needs to be emphasised that if a rehistoricisation of modernism has been undertaken in Western art history via the very distinction made between modernist and avantgarde ideologies (as, for example, the issues around the 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: affinity of the tribal and the modern*, and how these were reversed in the 1989 Centre Pompidou exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*¹³), then this form of exposition is

wide open for interventions: the disjuncture of decolonisation makes a particularly useful vantage point.

We can now speak of the *co-production of modernities* as between the colonial and the colonised, and quite certainly of the *co-production of postmodernism* on the elaborately theorised experience of postcolonialism. Indeed, one may now pose a somewhat parodic question: whether it is time for avantgarde initiatives in the non-Western world to place qualifiers around Euro-American art and treat it as ethnographic source material for *their* productions.

An *anthropological* intent that figures alterity is now active in the Asian arts. The point is to go beyond the well-known primitivist trope; to open out the sacred, the self-incorporating secret with which art objects in traditional societies are imbued. There is an interest in tribal materialism and cosmologies as these concern indigenous peoples in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, Australia and the Americas. The counter-taboo against any interference by metropolitan artists in the life-world of tribal artists was based on one kind of ethic. This has been broken to the extent that interaction between so-called closed and open communities is inevitable in the present electronic age. Every space has been invaded or will be shortly. Artists bear witness to the fact that a new ethics of reciprocity has to be devised that is wary of the ethnographic sentiment for conservation, of an art-historical desire for a traditional aesthetic, of national appropriations, of imperialist robbery. And of artistic masquerades on behalf of the people.

In most Third World countries indigenous and civilisational values are covered over by more recent manifestations of *nationalism*, of national struggles and, in some cases, of the revolution. Not surprisingly, the Mexican mural movement is the monumental representational project in this regard. In the Philippines allegorical painting, somewhat like the Mexican mural movement, is still strong, ranging in more recent years from, say, Edgar Fernandez to the surreal mappings by the artist-couple Reamillo and Juliet, to the collective work of the Sanggawa Group.

While national liberation movements — their triumphs and their occasional reversals — are a continuing subject of cultural creativity, the representational projects are now accompanied by strategies of future survival. The relay of blood and memory in the history of the nation yields a simultaneous vision of material and

cultural transformations under way in specific locations. There is cleverly coded *political art* in Indonesia with artists like FX Harsono, Heri Dono and Dadang Christanto making up an advance guard. They use aspects of the Javanese tradition of puppetry and pantomime, converting theatric traditions to conceptual and political ends, staging strange artefacts, macabre figures, disciplined robots with a precisely calculated charge. These works mount a cumulative critique: on the hegemonic role of Western art, on the consequences of coercive globalisation and, more specifically, they represent as well as act out the tragic affect of an oppressive State machinery at home.

Many Asian societies have witnessed a dispersal of their populations through successive waves of migration, and are therefore subject in their cultural manifestations to mediations of diasporic, now *global*, concerns. The immigrant simultaneously questions imperialism as s/he does the ideology of nationalism, thus deprivileging the hierarchies set up by local interests. Equally, however, the deconstruction of capitalist myths is acted out more and more outside the West; it now takes place in Eastern locations where transnational corporations resituate themselves for surplus profit. So the issue of location is once again important, this time inversely, as a site of global exploitation and of cruel profit through local collaborators. The work of the Thai artists, Vasan Sittthiket, Kamol Phaosavasdi and Navin Rawanchaikul finds ways to show how people's ecological integrity as well as political sovereignty is being destroyed daily and precisely in the Third World. A landscape with debris forms the basis of 20th century political imagery that is still, in our part of the world, finding new forms of articulation.

What we are dealing with is *transcultural signs*. For, if national allegories and their deconstruction are foregrounded in many of the Asian countries, the various forms of cultural creativity are based precisely on a metamorphosis of the inputs I have been speaking about: anthropological resources, national ambitions, transnational capital, economic and ecological devastation. It is this conjuncture that has, in the past two decades, produced a volatile situation and an avantgarde in Asia.

The Chinese avantgarde bursting forth in the aftermath of Mao's Cultural Revolution (and subsequent death), produces bitterly parodic pop paintings. Zhang Xiaogang, Feng Mengbo,

Wang Guangyi, and Yu Youhan are examples. More recently, elaborate and ironical forms of installation and performance art have multiplied: the work of Xu Bing, Wenda Gu and Chen Zhen are formally as complex as they are flamboyant and provocative. The installation/performance projects of the Chinese artist, Cai Guo Qiang, include the spectacle of exploding Chinese fireworks; the making of a mock-primitive boat armed with arrows after a wisdom tale from Chinese tradition about the tactics of warfare with the enemy; and, in his Venice-based project, *Bringing to Venice What Marco Polo Forgot Project* (1995), the historical reversal of the theme of voyage, discovery, trade, whereby he suggests an ethics of reciprocity in current times.

Along with the articulation of a new cultural cartography (charged with a geopolitical force), the Asian region is rich terrain for the formation of new subjectivities, especially female and *feminist subjectivities* long held captive by the heavily guarded patriarchies of the region. It is while interrogating hegemonic aspects of collective consciousness and national allegory, both personified by male protagonists, that female artists such as Imelda Cajipe-Endaya of the Philippines and Arahmaiani from Indonesia signal solidarities with victims of global capital. In the process of radical recodings, as in the case of Thai artist Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, the transition from the social to the familial to the subjective takes place through a relay of melancholy metaphors that can be seen, together with artists such as Suzann Victor from Singapore, Chen Yan Yin from China and Bul Lee from South Korea, as a corporeal and immanent language of dissidence. Asian feminism stakes claims as a contemporary intervention, revealing culturally rich female self-knowledges where family, self, social abandonment and the erotics of pain are all put out for scrutiny.

We have to consider the status of the object in relation to *indigenous crafts* as in Asian countries objects, sculptures and installations are produced from materials and skills quite different from the West. We must remember that in Asia materials are still connected with live artisanal practices. There are artisans in transitional stages within the village and urban market economies who have traditional skills; correspondingly urban artists have access to vestigial skills. Consider the work of the Indonesian artist Nindityo Adipurnomo who melds ancient and new eroticism through the use of exquisite craft, making the act of handcraft itself

a voluptuous, if also ironical, 'gift'. And of Soo Ja Kim from South Korea, using traditional/fake silk and brocade textiles as ornamental flourish and floating arabesques, as deliberately devalued stuffings in migrants' bundles.

There is here a question of skill as paid labour and the problem of exploitation of indigenist art practices. There is also a question of authenticity — not an issue of being within a tradition, but of possessing a language that transcends it while respecting the material conditions of artisanal practice. It is not enough to fabricate in order to textually deconstruct an art object for its own sake. We have to find new ways of speaking about the material predispositions of Asian artists as well as their neo-conceptual operations on the notion of a raw indigenism.

The object in the installations of many Asian artists signals an in-between stage of use and exchange value. In a situation of incomplete modernisation and uneven market economy, there is a quasi-commodification at work: older forms of fetishism survive within new forms of reification in a consumer culture. The object installed within such a context is neither fully functional nor sacred nor entirely part of commerce. There is reference to all three aspects at once, and to a fourth aspect: the making of art with its own parameters stretched between art-historical context and formal autonomy, with the paradoxes and ironies this enfold. This in-betweenness can give the object in the installations a peculiarly liminal presence.

We must further remember that the object of art, both by itself and in the theatrical *mise en scène* of the installation, is quite differently conditioned in societies that have an active tradition of *magic, fetish and ritual*, including elaborate performances. In the Philippines, in the small town of Baguio, artists have construed an indigenous aesthetic with poor materials and shamanistic performances to 'appease' destiny: I am thinking in particular of the late Roberto Villanueva and Santiago Bose.

Incarnate experience, in the larger phenomenological sense in which these traditional cultures mobilise the image, should now include a new poetics of space. I am speaking of the *contemplative aesthetic* introduced by Chinese artist Xu Bing with his monumental scroll *A Book from the Sky*, and other language-based works mimicking, invoking, provoking, upturning, civilisational pedagogies. In the work of the late Thai artist, Montien Boonma,

the suggested circumambulation and peculiar sensory saturation resulting in a condensed 'aura' produces a form of hypostasis. His modestly installed temples are designated as precincts of meditation that give to the act of spectatorship a deliberate reticence and to all the senses together an indexical charge of mortality that is both pain and *jouissance*.

Many sculptural ensembles by contemporary artists from Asia, such as those of Filipino artist Agnes Arellano, tend to redefine identity through mythic concreteness — a resurrected body in the *iconic* mode, a numinous presence in the dismantled condition of self. It is no wonder then that the theatric temporality of the installation form experienced as a secular site for benediction has been so optimistically pursued in Asia in recent decades.

Because the civilisations of the Asian region hold a continuing lure for the transcendental, there tend to be revivals of a scriptural/metaphysical aesthetic. Similarly, there is a subtle diffusion based on the enshrinement of mystical desire in the heart of dissenting cultures. A creative relationship between the classical, the mystical and the everyday secular which demands what I called living solidarities, is precisely the range of contradictions contemporary Asian artists constantly tackle.

Given that Asian/Indian art has been so dominated by the metaphorical — the metaphors heavy with civilisational values — the assembly and installation of objects in foregrounding metonymic meanings perform a crucial function. The processes of condensation are eased and the artist is able to introduce both the *poetics* and *politics* of displacement. The installation form, presenting a phenomenological encounter based precisely on the act of displacement — of found and sited objects, concrete and ephemeral ideas — produces propitious results for Asian art. It raises questions on the notion of the artist's proper domain; her/his entry into public spaces and the discourse emanating therefrom. It reflects on the equation between the citizen–subject, the artist and art work in the imaginary (evolutionary) public sphere.

I will now take up implications that emerge from the developing Asian/Indian situation. The first is the recurring status of the hybrid sign within colonial discourse as it pertains to contemporary art works. The second is the politics of place in the global context with specific reference to postcolonial discourse, and the actual production and exchange of art works.

Heterogeneous/heterodox

By confronting these [historical] issues, perhaps we can understand more clearly the cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of transition and transmutation. In the process, the concept of homogenous national Asian cultures seen through consensual art traditions can be redefined. Indonesian installations that represent the violence and burden of postcolonialism can be contrasted to Korean history painting of resistance during the colonial period; Philippine mural painting that makes allegorical reference to the Roman Catholic faith can be compared to a Buddhist-inspired medicinal-herb installation from Thailand or a cow dung painting from India; the native female body is examined as the focus of sexual desire and physical abuse in works by Indian, Philippine and Korean artists. This is not the 'clash of civilisations' ... it is the chink and clang of the heterogeneities and hybrids that make contemporary art from Asia so full of surprises and expectations.¹⁴

The pleasure of heterogeneity is also a claim to heterodox politics, which is what the definition of the avantgarde in Asia may most closely approximate. I will add a rider here so that the issues do not get stereotyped on the other side of the divide. Playing the devil's advocate, I will suggest that colonial–postcolonial cultures in Asia have been too ready to capitalise on eclecticism. I am in favour of the honourable conventions of eclectic art practice, taking it as a privilege of complex civilisations that have strongly syncretic aspects. But I take a critical position at this juncture because, as a multicultural norm (which is itself constituted in large part through the debates raised by the diverse cultural processes released in the postcolonial period), it can mask the sharper contours of an identity forged by the pressures of modernity, de-colonisation and global capitalism.

A continued insistence on eclecticism and its conversion to various ideologies of hybridity within the postmodern can serve to elide the diachronic edge of cultural phenomena and thus ease the tensions of historical choice. It can lead not only to nostalgia but also to a kind of temporal recoil. For in societies where traditions are part of the material life of living peoples and modernity is still and again besieged — by religions/fundamentalisms of every kind

— recycling tradition is anything but an unproblematic business. It can help the right-wing propagandists and suit their tastes. This is what we have to remember apropos postmodernism itself. Global-scale eclecticism can lead to the kind of *laissez-faire* where every choice and combination is ratified by the participatory spirit of postcolonial/postmodernism.

To put it in more ideological terms, we must look not for hybrid solutions to the tradition/modernity dichotomy but for a dialectic. The heterodox elements from the national culture itself — which is to say the counterculture within it — must first be put into the fray: the visual inputs of the popular, the marginalised cultures of tribal communities, of minorities and *dalits*, of women. A space for contestation has to be recognised within the national/modern paradigm so that there is a real (battle) ground for cultural difference and so that identities can be posed in a far more acute manner than postmodern notions of hybridity can accommodate.¹⁵

This may be the precise time to reconsider why postcolonial artists may, in fact, refuse the passport of cultural hybridity into the postmodern. That is, of the postmodern that promotes simulacra based on attenuated cultural mediations of the contemporary. It may also be the time for these artists to treat plurality as a means of posing a series of alternatives that have some bite left from the earlier, more dialectical notion of contradiction.¹⁶ Modernism has (a still unrealised) revolutionary history — even if it is at present in retreat; postmodernism, even if it is ascendant, coincides with a retreat of all anti-capitalist ideologies. I would like to revert to a historical dialectic developed in the radical strains of 20th century avantgarde art and to link modernism and postmodernism by that means.

Geopolitical tremors

Globalisation and its contingent ideologies make up the kind of postmodern space that requires new mapping strategies. Multiple places and plural histories are yanked together as sites of speculation, as sites of operation for the TNCs (transnational corporations), and for their sheer exploitability in the labour and consumer markets.

Moreover, the TNCs force a form of multiple interference that dislodges the earlier international consolidations and splits it into the local and the global. It thereby also reinscribes artists into

an anthropological discourse and gives them a command over otherness that is, by now, largely emblematic. It is this that is prone to be trivialised both by postmodern discourse and by the kind of postcolonialism that reduces itself to ethnic banalities. We have to make sure that otherness has less to do with the fancy dress of multiculturalism and more to do with political reflexivity and cultural action of a kind that opens the possibility of direct, democratic address.¹⁷

Even anthropology — the most located of all disciplines — makes sense in its excessive forms at the brink: of subjectivity in *extremis*. Indeed, if otherness is not to become another kind of an ecriture you have to position both the self and art practice in a critical dimension: where linguistic investigation remains distinct from yet another indigenist style and cultural translation foregrounds its political agendas.¹⁸

The possibilities of redefined location are coming to be better understood by artists of the Third World as they stake their position within the terms of a new global culture. In that respect, it is not surprising that Asian art has come into an avantgarde aspect at the point of double reckoning with old and new imperialisms and at a moment when the fruit of the economic miracle begins to taste bitter at the core. If the Asian avantgarde is based on a sense of the future, as it must be, this lies in the enlarged theatre of political contradictions.

The question, then, is not of reinventing discrete national traditions nor of manufacturing something like an integrated Asian/global tradition. This politics requires the harnessing of countercurrents — currents that carry and sublimate civilisational values crisscrossing those that painfully desublimates them.

Nor is such transgressive energy to be nurtured in the raw; the aesthetic is elaborately coded in Asia and the recoding requires adequate formal means. It requires an understanding of the classicising principle; it requires considerations due to surviving artisanal practices in the commodified context of globalised economies. There has to be an ethics of identity in Asian societies that requires not only posthumous retribution on behalf of destroyed cultures but also devalorisation of the self, of subjective indulgence, in an act of living solidarities with the cultures that survive. To reiterate an earlier proposition: acts of radical desublimation that avantgarde art practice requires are that much more complex in cultures based on a sublimation of civilisational ideals through centuries.

A hermeneutic must be put to work in the art of Asia today; it is a major excavation of precisely the geopolitics of place that includes tradition *and* the TNCs. Marion Pastor Roces dramatises this to excellent effect:

The vocabulary of geology is especially useful in visualizing the ground of tradition as active and substantial and subject to dramatic or imperceptible processes of subduction. Slippage, fissuring, accordioning, folding in, absorption, collapse; building up — all irruptions within highly local dynamics — elude confinement in fixed strata. Specialists need to direct their attention toward volatile chemistries and tracteries of ancient and current traumas. And if potential for equilibrium or disaster is calibrated with a healthy respect for the indeterminate, it may be possible to gain an understanding of forces that reverberate jaggedly and fracture the binary formulations so fundamental to Western epistemologies into capillaries — not just vivid fault lines — of stress.¹⁹

The politics of place

I want to introject the notion of an avantgarde into the specific cultural dialectic in India, or what one might call a politics of place.²⁰

There are two major opposing forces in India's social terrain. The claim of the Hindu right to a hegemonic status mounting in moments of crisis to a near-fascist use of majoritarian power. And the equally massive force at work within the nation towards the realisation of a more radical democracy and the recognition of economically backward and socially oppressed sections of the polity: *dalits*, religious minorities, women. These volatile forces threaten to pulverise the centrist State and throw up styles of identity which shake the certitudes of its progressive nationalism.

Stepping back along the tracks of change, it may be worth mentioning the two prominent approaches deployed to deal with the stress of change in Indian cultural history. Terms such as continuity, eclecticism and reinvention all try to work through the more elastic substances of old civilisations — from tradition to modernity. The subalternist's response privileges transgression, subversion, hybridity, and proposes another style of (or even exit from) modernity.

Once norms such as cultural sovereignty, (autonomous) high art forms and an institutionalised aesthetic devised alongside the compound canon of the national/modern come to be dismantled under pressure from globalisation, the transformative and the transgressional approaches break down. Once the State and the national bourgeoisie begin to play out the game of economic liberalisation, the Indian artist is certain to have to shed 'his' singular identity, to arrive at a more polyvocal presence. It is no longer a matter of pitching into an indigenous identity (frequently hijacked by cultural conservatives), nor of self-representation through existentially authenticated art forms. Even the strategies of subversion will need to be worked out into a new style of making, of placing, of reconstituting the world of objects and values in the fragmented gestalt of our times.

Is there a substantive aspect to cultural differences within a changing India? How do production values supersede the demands of conservative elites and avid consumers — as also conventions of Third World radicalisms established elsewhere? How do we relate with the radicalisms immanent in the social terrain at home, how should we recognise and name an *avantgarde* in India?

The argument I want to introduce is that the model for an *avantgarde* in Indian art could be part of the same dialectic that is motivating social theory. Consider how Indian historians further the methodology that breaks down the national narrative, the cultural paradigm, the object of attention and the very subject of history; how they seek to replace teleologies (which happens to be the mode of projecting modernist art) with phenomenological encounter and discursive analysis (which coincide with the mode of apprehending the historical *avantgarde*).

Developing the analogy further: Indian social historians now frequently work with the idea of the fragment, accepting that it provides a part-for-whole significance in the moment of loss — the loss of a humanist utopia, for example, the very evacuation of which has to be understood within the terms of a (failed?) historical vision.²¹ The fragment may be seen as something split off because of an ideological disengagement from the pressure of a given hegemonic culture. Or it may be an element that was never integrated and which further devolves to withstand assimilation. This could be the point at which the feminine transforms itself into a feminist position, or at which the *dalit* consciousness performs an act of cultural secession in order to create a state of extreme alterity.

The cultural dialectic in India requires that analysts and practitioners — artists among them — foreground positions of marginality and reveal such contradictions that bring creativity to the brink. Indeed one may argue that any cultural creativity requires the deployment of social analysis on the one hand, and a commitment to avantgarde practice that deals with materiality and process and facilitates transformation, on the other.

Thresholds have to be crossed once nationalist protectionism in art (as in economics) is dropped and the vexed category of the Indian/modern stands exposed. Dating from the middle of the 1980s, changes have occurred in art practice that have now, in the 1990s, acquired an edge. A newly differentiated politics emerges along with a long overdue art-historical retrospection on sources and language.²²

INDIAN ART IN THE 1990s

Before going on to a more detailed exposition of the work of some of the key players, I want to map the significant trajectories in the Indian art scene. Artists still undertake, in a far from exhausted way, representational subversions. At the same time, they develop textually complex allegories based on the image. To this has been added a repertoire of monumentally styled iconography by younger sculptors. In recent years there is more recourse to masquerade, and there is the actual staging of art works in a theatric *mise en scène*. Art as *object*, and its status at the level of assembly and installation, and art works using found material and conceptually coded signs are beginning to be explored. The domain of reproduction has been extended within the gallery from the print to the photograph to the video, thus devalorising the uniqueness of the image/object. Armed with a battery of new signs, artists have taken the initiative to enter and designate the public sphere. One might even say that by undermining the image they seek a fresh mandate on historical motifs. But there is also, as *against* these public concerns, a manoeuvre towards counter-reification through the crafting of the unique fetish — where coded desire deflects both the alibi of objective representation and public forms of address.

I present here two versions of the representational project. Making a deliberate and somewhat provocative binary between the male/female exponents, I show them to be consciously attempting ironical counterpoints in current iconography. This is

followed by another deliberately posed (but not exclusively gendered) binary: of private fetish and public concerns.

Male representations

The interrogation of identity by Indian artists today coincides with the loss of a certain equation between history, sovereignty and the subject. The loss takes on a centrifugal force where the artist pulls out fragments of otherness and clads the self, but sparsely. Is this, then, a no-norm artist? Or is it a consciously masquerading subject who is more often than not a mock-surrealist with astonishing layers of interiority still immanent?

The legacy for this kind of figuration is most precisely attributable to Bhupen Khakhar (died 2003) who, as he grew older, developed a unique form of intransigence through not only the play of taste but by an intimate and deeply unsettling presentation of homoerotic and transvestite motifs. Pushing his art to the brink, he brought, ironically enough, a sustainable understanding about gendering in the spiritual protocols of Indian culture. He found a visual language through and beyond indigenism and built an iconography that privileged marginal lives. This included gender, caste and class identities but *also* a quizzing of the male/modernist representational style in its heroic self-stance.

The lineage of new figuration is carried on by younger painters and sculptors. Since the 1980s, two 'generations' of painters have worked in and around the narrative/allegorical axis: among them are Surendran Nair and Atul Dodiya. These two painters construct pictorial allegories based on recognisable (ancient and contemporary, private and public) icons. They have been working in tandem to recast figures in paintings, bringing to the representational project a precise form of critical annotation. As Indian artists they make a particular contribution to the relation between the icon and narration; and as contemporary artists of a progressive turn they translate the mythic into the allegorical, allegories into a contemporary secular encounter.

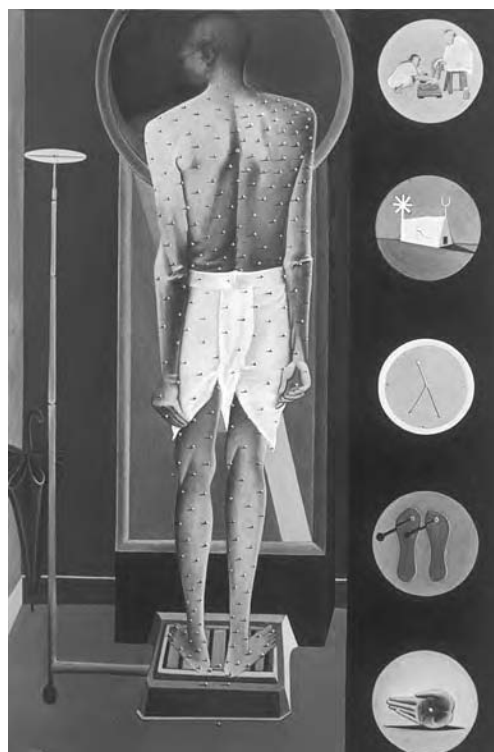
There is an aura of hidden meaning with Surendran Nair; there is a play of chance encounter with Atul Dodiya. What happens at the level of a hypostasis with Nair is, in the case of Dodiya, montaged in the form of contingency. Both, as we can see, are surrealist devices to enrich the image. They give the high modern vocabulary of images (from surrealism) a second level of

irony associated with postmodernism, and yet remain committed to the meaning of the picture puzzle.

The Gandhi project taken up by Dodiya and Nair is a way of coming to terms with the prime representative phenomenon of 20th century India. At the end of the century it involved a revision of a destined life. In order to do this, both painters in their own ways, not only paint Gandhi like a contemporary *icon*, they inscribe themselves in the tradition of dedicated image-makers and, adopting the popular mode, mediate the passage to the 'sacred' and beyond — where the calendar image may be seen to serve the purpose as well as a 'good' painting in dispersing the message. There is here a contrary semiotic charge: the reinstatement of the aura for the image dismantles the actual sign, exposes its vulnerability: Nair's Gandhi stands on what looks like a weighing machine, his body studded with little crystals of salt and sand that spangle his back but also pierce it like nails. He is a martyr. Nair weighs him with the salt of the earth and finds him floating — like an ascending avatar.

In their courage to re-present Gandhi, Nair and Dodiya's ongoing representational project grips the ethical over and beyond the merely semiotic game plan offered in postmodern art. The artists seem to position themselves as exemplary citizen-subjects: in the choice of their iconography they are both conscientious and critical, and they evaluate its worth through the twist and turn of meaning in the still available repertoire of cultural symbols within the social domain.

Both take up the Vishnu myth. Nair's recumbent figure, whose body line is also the horizon, sprouts a whole herbarium from the navel; flowers, fireworks, a forest of symbols shoot out and hang like luscious pendants, like instruments of torture in the night sky. Mimicking the myth of origins, he gains this *jouissance* spiralling from the male belly even as he screws down the pristine body with the unicorn's horn and, with perverse pleasure, fixes the godhead like a svelte dummy.



Surendran Nair
*The Unbearable Lightness
of Being (Corollary
Mythologies)*

1998
Oil on canvas
180 x 120 cm
Collection: Nitin Bhaya,
New Delhi.

Surendran Nair,
Auto Da Fe

1995–96
Oil on canvas
244 x 183 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy
Fukuoka Asian
Art Museum



Alongside this recumbent figure Surendran Nair has made a succession of erect torsos referencing occult iconography. Featured as the cosmic body, the torso becomes a framing device for secret signifiers: towering like a silhouetted mansion, the body is cut open by little windows in the tiered niches of which are placed objects of ritual, torture, propaganda, provocation. While the protocol of the icon is maintained (corresponding as it were to the flat picture-plane/fixed frame, held 'sacred' in modernist painting), the icon is punctured and its numinous body deflated. This kind of profane iconicity houses, literally, an arsenal of gratuitous devices and

itemised symbols; it spells out a vocabulary for a counter-narrative about art and religion alike. This is a kind of hermeneutic where an abstruse allegory is recoded without it being demonstrably decoded in the first place.

Atul Dodiya's Vishnu is surrounded by a zoological spectacle: the coiled serpent, *sheshnaag*, lifts its reptilian head and smiles along with a chorus of devotees, one of whom might be the redoubtable artist-creator — Brahma/Picasso/Dodiya himself, blooming at the end of Vishnu's abdominal gut. The myth of origins is here returned to the sporting ground of a bunch of benign denizens; but it is the sly fox in a vignette that gives the picture its title, *Grapes Are Sour*. The picture itself is a mockery of mythology in the spirit of an agnostic who, moreover, puts his origins at stake: he openly recognises himself to be the grandchild of modern art and is engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the masters to escape their aura and project his own.

Thus Dodiya pushes on: he takes the postmodern penchant for pastiche head on and tests the painting conventions of the high modern vis-a-vis the popular Indian. He inscribes the surface with lessons of art history — turning on a sharp irony to camouflage the full force of genuine pedagogy. In his actual practice he argues the case for painting with whoever will denigrate it as a sentimental relic of high modernism; it is as if he is ready, single-handed, to prolong the life of painting. And in India, where there is no fear of its disappearance anyway, he incorporates the object-nature of painting, objectivising the painted surface, making of it a tough support that receives the cryptic sign of disaffection. It softens to act out existential dilemmas and hardens again to display, as on a billboard, the political travesties enacted in the every day. As painted surface and as the provocative iconography of a motivated self, Dodiya's work is brilliantly polemical.

Sculptural icons

A host of new avatars descended quite suddenly on the sculptural ground, and ahead of their painting peers. The decade of the 1990s saw the rise of a new representational tendency towards the iconic among young sculptors. These sculptors — mostly from the art schools of Trivandrum and Baroda — made a dramatic rupture with modernist conventions and offered a retake on classical Indian traditions. With amazing figural skills, they began to



Atul Dodiya
Gabbar on Gamboge

1997
 Oil, acrylic and marble
 dust on canvas
 214 x 152 cm
 Collection: Fukuoka
 Asian Art Museum
 Image courtesy
 Japan Foundation and
 Fukuoka Asian Art
 Museum

redefine contemporary sculpture (in clay, plaster and fibreglass) as a theatric ensemble of modelled, cast, painted, and frontally posed figures in a somewhat kitsch and parodic mode.

The first retakes on the sculptural tradition came from Dhruva Mistry and Ravinder Reddy. Over the years, Reddy has found a way of further monumentalising the iconic form in classical Indian sculpture, making the gilded icon a voluptuous object of contemporary delight.

Reddy's sculpture is about seduction, ornament, gigantism, iconicity, repetition, fetish. Fixed with a burning gaze, such a code defines the erotic nature of nearly all Indian art. This has less to do with subjective mutualities, more with a dangerously bold encounter of the human and the divine that sanctions similarly permissive play by mortals. Reddy equates the eroticism in the divine and popular, high and low traditions and thereby puts into place a kitsch-sublime that goes beyond parody. The *yakshi*, to whom Reddy repeatedly refers, is not to be embraced; *she* touches what she will make fertile. Traversing tricky ground, she now appears in Reddy's work as the aboriginal woman, the tribal girl, the studio model from the rural neighbourhood who does not resort to ruse: he finds in her a sculptural version that mocks false advances. Thus Reddy sets up a generative cycle between life and myth; the construed pleasure derived from the female icon is at home in the popular and celebratory experience of the everyday. It is humorous, performative, readily accessible.

Once the repeatedly fashioned and benignly fetishist portrait-head and free-standing figures find a place in the vast resource of live faces/anointed idols, one can see that Reddy makes his way beyond the cruel reification of the sensuous in contemporary exchange. Reddy's great golden heads and life-size figures are mock subscribers to an anthropological pageant; they keep to a state of contemporary wakefulness, a little dazed by their own immortal beauty.

Another, different trail was blazed on the sculptural front in the 1980s: it was first configured in 1985 in the exhibition *Seven Young Sculptors*, and then between 1987 and 1989 it developed

into The Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association. This Kerala–Baroda group hammered out a militant agenda, arguing that Indian art required a radical interrogation of political and aesthetic issues. K. P. Krishnakumar adopted a heroic stance in his tragically brief career. He used the figural gesture, often profoundly comic, to taunt the viewer and also to signal faith in the sculptural presence itself. In an act of Brechtian double-take he hoped to reinscribe a lost humanism in the local liberationist politics of his home-state of Kerala, and thenceforth perhaps in (what he might have called) the betrayed map of the nation.

It needed a sculptor such as N. N. Rimzon to mediate the aforesaid stances with the choice of a reflexive language. Rimzon makes traditional icons a noble pretext for radical deviation. When conceiving the male body in the archaic– classical mode, his antecedents are quite apparently the heterodox traditions of Jainism and Buddhism. It is a body chastened by yogic austerities; it makes possible an apotheosis (as in *Inner Voice*, 1991, and *The Tools*, 1993). But as an atheist Rimzon creates a scriptural elision whereby other texts can appear in the discourse of the body.

He directs the image, anthropomorphic/symbolic, toward what one may call a materialised asceticism that reinstates the aura of the art work but challenges the processes of its reification: through the suppressed ritual of carnal love, the concealing of the sacred, the violence and purification of art. In a series that represents complete lovers, ideal labour, upright ascetic — the last, the ascetic, becomes a portal. If you step back, beyond its threshold, the ego reverts to the primordial. You can also step forward, as in *Speaking Stones* (1998), into the historical. This classically composed ensemble is of topical relevance. Rimzon encircles the seated figure with newspaper cuttings on communal violence in India. The news weighed down by stones is obscured yet the verdict is assimilated, and the seated man performs a profound act of mourning and expiation on behalf of the retracting citizen-subject.



Ravinder Reddy
*Woman Holding
Her Breasts*

1998
Paint and gilt on polyester-
resin fiberglass, wood
177 x 101 x 106 cm
Collection: The Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy
Fukuoka Asian Art
Museum
Photograph by
Fujimoto Kempachi

Formally, Rimzon's work is a considered retake on phenomenological encounter; it is a contribution to the minimalist aesthetic of appropriate bodily regard in the realm of the material/metaphysical objecthood. To the extent that it is the chastened body of sculpture that propels the viewer, this is a controlled encounter; and it is this level of precision in finding a formal analogue for the activity of circumambulation, for a meditative ambience, for spiritual protocol, that contemporary art gains a real iconographic charge and the aspect of an incarnation in secular space.

Further, the indigenous tradition of dissent and locally pitched politics takes Rimzon into the area of transgression, as in his work *Far Away from One Hundred and Eight Feet* (1995), referring to *dalit* discrimination and the punishing rituals of a caste society. At that juncture, cultural exile from within the surviving/stagnating communitarian structures is seen to be almost inevitable. The profane is structurally present in the sacred, and Rimzon's obsession with essence implies anxiety that is itself a productive possibility of the soul — its private precondition of praxis.

While both aspects in Rimzon's work, the absolute and the material, retract to a notion of the primordial that is in the process of shedding metaphorical fuzziness and mythical excess, he is in no way a primitivist. He is interested in taking the coded body of the archetype and turning it into a replete object of contemplation — and contention — in historical consciousness.

We have to find further ways of conceptualising this oddly symbolic, variously displaced art practice that manifests itself in the stark gestures of civilisational avatars *dismantled*. For it is here, in the structure of a seemingly sacred space, that there is also signalled the 'loss' of a monadic self that is conceptually male.

Women artists/ female bodies

What are the norms that need to be dismantled in Indian art? One of them is precisely a properly symbolic formation that is by and large male. And it may be that in a mocking contest with Duchamp's bachelors, it is being stripped bare by the brides, even!

We can track three directions taken by Indian women artists in the past decade. Artists who paint the female body and those who find other representational modes such as photography and video to work with the feminine as masquerade. Those who take

feminist concerns into issues of materials, female labour, ethnography and environment. And those that enter the domain of the fetish.

The oeuvre of the senior painter Arpita Singh *holds the ground* in order to sustain and survive socially generated traumas. During the 1990s, her image of the girl-child, traced through the successive phases of her life to motherhood, forms the core of an allegory that contains explicit images of subjective and social violence. This is often portrayed in the form of a direct combat of wrestling bodies, or as peremptory death. However, the frame that surrounds the painting holds this played-out terror in a balletic balance. The protagonist matures in the end with the naked grace of a saint and an apotheosis is revealed not least in the painterly manner itself. Arpita Singh marks the moment of female self-canonisation in Indian art. The body is represented to act out mortal pain and erotic self-absorption with an almost identical gesture of liberation.

Related in her poetics of affection to Arpita Singh, Nilima Sheikh offers the coded inflection of a carefully crafted visual language. With their medieval/oriental sensibility, her miniaturised paintings offer vulnerable representations of the female self converging on the body that bears and brings forth the child. Then, in her enormous tent-like hangings (*Shamiana*, 1996) she introduces a sweeping orbit, a mock-infinite spatialisation, thus establishing a *mise en scène* for the staging of the beloved's



N.N. Rimzon
*Far Away from One
Hundred and Eight Feet*
(installation view)
1995

Site-specific installation
with terracotta pots, straw
brooms and rope, at
Buddha Jayanti Park,
New Delhi, India
Approx. 2000 x
700 x 80 cm

performative body — from Akkamahadevi to Meerabai to Sohni. This levers her pictorial proposition into a kind of rhetoric: with a near-transcendent impulse she unfolds a calibrated structure of gendered feelings that move like lightning from the everyday to the erotic to the mystical — scattering signs on the exquisitely painted surface.

If the elliptical space opened by Nilima Sheikh swallows her ecstatic figures in its radiance, Jaishree Chakravarty, in her cascading paper scrolls, blanches the field to light up paths for invisible voyages. If Arpita Singh encodes her psychically notated good and bad objects in the closet proscenium of the picture, younger women artists such as Rekha Rodwittiya present frontal images of the woman engaged in a series of healing vocations secured with her use-objects. And Anju Dodiya, tipping out of her space like a giddy acrobat, wields her props in a daily masquerade and poses quizzical questions by openly doubling her identity. I am proposing the possibility in contemporary Indian art of the female self reconfiguring both existential and topographic elements to gain a situational identity.

As if to break the too-compact notion of female self, to mark and textualise it in a way that it does not get interpellated into an ethnographic notion of a situational identity, Nalini Malani goes against the grain and packs the art work with a disintegrating subjectivity. Refusing to concede a sane social space in which meaning can be reconstituted, she suggests that the tattered fabric of the world unfurling in the wake of the woman's willful descent will have to serve as the proverbial mantle of universal shame. She pitches the art work as a subversive agent that can turn around to designate the new historical forces at work in actual global space.

In her fudged and shadowy drawing series titled *Mutants* (1993–95), Malani demonstrates a devolution of subjectivity to the point of measured degeneracy. She gestures towards the world by filling up the vacuum with her own subjectivity, now worked through the body and soul of a painfully exposed androgynous figure. The mutant's body, serialised in drawings and paintings of changing scale, is evidence of the concealed modes of violent expropriation; the mutant's soul, planted with a stigmata, offers 'the truth of the victim'.

In the decade of the 1990s, Nalini Malani enlarges her engagement with the identity of the (female) victim into myriad



Nilima Sheikh
Songspace

1995
Installation at 'Africus',
First Johannesburg
Biennale, South Africa



Nilima Sheikh
Shamiana
(installation view)

1996
6 hanging scrolls
of casien tempera
on canvas, canopy of
synthetic polypaint
on canvas, steel frame,
customwood hexagonal
plinth with ramp
225 x 180 cm each,
canopy 540 x 585 cm
Collection: Queensland
Art Gallery
Purchased 1996
Queensland Art Gallery
Foundation
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery

phenomena under the somewhat ironical trope of nature. She invokes psychic horrors worked out in mythological structures and fuses these with biological and environmental degradation (as in her installation for the staging of Heiner Mueller's *Medea*, in 1993). In *Medea*projekt, Malani works with a new allegory for an ancient tale, investigating exploitation and violence as political categories. Through the Greek myth she tests the ground for an

argument — what happens when you go ‘against nature’. Further, she transfers the anguish of female othering into theatrical forms of catharsis and critical reflex (as in her installation/video for a staging of Brecht’s *The Job* in 1997). Most recently, she elaborates this proposition of othering in a video installation about ethnic violence and full-scale war.

Given that female personae are now up for persistent masquerade, the possibilities of photography, video, installation and performance open out. Besides Nalini Malani, these have been staged by Rummana Hussain and Pushpamala N. Turning to the medium of photography and performance, the sculptor Pushpamala has had herself shot (by photographer Meenal

Nalini Malani
Hamletmachine

1999–2000
Installation view
Installation of 4 DVD
projections, salt,
mirror and sound
Collection: the artist
Image courtesy the artist



Pushpamala N.
Phantom Lady or Kismet
(artist photographed
by Meenal Agarwal)

1996–98
Set of black and white
photographs in an edition
of 10, 41 x 51 cm each
Image courtesy the artist



Agarwal) in a photo-romance titled *Phantom Lady or Kismet*. Enacted here by Pushpamala herself — after the image of a 1930s stunt queen of Bombay films, ‘fearless Nadia’ — the mock-tragic twinned-heroine of B-grade film noir, plays out clichés of the desired subject/ discarded object. The narrative sequence of the separated sisters has a foreclosed quest: one sister is reified in the image of the dangerously pursued heroine; the other is cast as an empty enigma, and the feminine is signalled in the ironical dénouement of the romance as inevitable abandonment, and death. In her more recent work (cross-referenced to Cindy Sherman’s photo-project, *Film Stills*), Pushpamala enters another kind of melodrama and gets herself photographed as a middle-class heroine dreaming her existence through banal situations and mass-produced kitsch. In its give and take of dreams, a commercially hand-tinted photograph becomes a perfect artefact; it is a symbolic thing but it is also a simulacrum — the copy of a copy, the original for which does not exist. In initiating that empty enigma the person that is the openly masquerading artist refers to a kind of pristine self, a demonstrably false innocence, whereby she can conduct, as if from ground zero, a retake on the arts of representation.

Stripping bare

Besides the working of these symbolic alterities, there are specifically annotated relationships with materials and labour in the work of Indian women sculptors such as Meera Mukherjee. And now, a new phenomenology and function of the object that reworks a formalist aesthetic towards ethnographic readings.

The work of Navjot Altaf and Sheela Gowda makes the point of cultural deconstruction through ingenious relays of material signifiers in transposed contexts. Navjot Altaf’s project is about elaborating the context of art production from village community to metropolitan gallery. Sheela Gowda’s work is honed to a minimalist aesthetic that makes the message spare — like a life-sustaining parable.

An ethics based on collective creativity informs Navjot Altaf’s practice as she struggles with the received orthodoxy of Marxism and its definition of radical art. Having worked earlier with schoolchildren and women’s groups, she now attempts a much more ambitious project: of living and working with tribal

artisans and ritual image-makers in village communities of the Bastar region, sharing the experience with an art writer and a video cameraman who record the nature of the interaction.

Navjot Altaf's own sculptural style is openly 'primitivist'. She amalgamates in the truncated, totemic female figures elements of innocence and fertility. Other elements in the installation resist fetishist closure. She packs the nakedness of her sculptures with the rude resistance of archaic goddesses positioned within invented traditions of feminism that are notated with contemporary texts. She encodes little wrapped rolls (tied tight like tampons) of newspaper cuttings about the affairs of women. These are stacked and framed in acrylic. Thus her dwarf-marionettes are motivated by an inner/outer propelling towards contemporary concern.

The recent installation called *Modes of Parallel Practice* is more disparate in means, message, image. The first factor in the work produced in the process is an 'earthing' of the image through the use of materials — notably wood and brick and fabric — that are basic to tribal economies and cultures. The jointly/discretely made forms hug the ground and clutter the surface (added to organic materials are PVC pipes and plastic bags) and shoot up as totem poles, all the while declaring their material, magical, use-value. As productive bodies and linguistic signifiers of a material culture that is still partly based on barter (at any rate not completely reified by money exchange), they have a rough-and-ready existence. The artist enacts her belonging/unbelonging in the theatre of this environmental work.

Navjot Altaf
Modes of Parallel Practice:
Ways of World Making
(installation view)

1997–98
Room size, installation
with wood, paint,
PVC pipes, cloth,
feathers and brick
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum



This cross between an anthropological experiment and an art workshop has to be informed today with all the hazards and calumny that earlier primitivisms and newer, revisionist studies of interculturalisms have gone through. The premise is shaky, but what Navjot Altaf seems to suggest is that the primacy of metropolitan creativity is equally shaky and needs at least to be played out from different ends of the language network. She seems to say in this work and the texts wrapped around it in a semi-confessional mode of contemporary anthropology, that we live through an astonishing continuum of representational and symbolic attitudes and that it may be an affirming thing to try and inhabit this labyrinthine passage, whatever kind of charade this entails.

Sheela Gowda's commitment to material existence, environmental concerns and women's labour in rural India leads her to choosing materials such as cow dung (treated/combined with *neem* oil and *kumkum*). Besides being part of the everyday economy of the Indian woman who must recycle excreta as house-plaster and fuel, this gives her a malleable sculptural material that is replete with meaning and, indeed, properly signified in the realm of environmental and cultural ethics. Even as the woman's material existence is signified by the use of this one raw material, an anti-aesthetic is also benignly signified, accepting ridicule and recoil as part of the regenerative process.

The stuff is turned into cow dung pats, bricks and walls, plumped and strung like blood pouches or, as she calls them: 'gallant hearts'. This transposition of basic raw material, this reissue of 'primitivism' becomes also a way of anointing female labour. Formal discreteness references art history and leads to subtle allusions, even as the object itself remains deceptively simple.

Recently Sheela Gowda has turned to another kind of labour-intensive art work: she makes two sets of 350-foot-long ropes by passing 700-foot-long ordinary thread and doubling it through the eye of a needle. Then, gluing a handful of these threads and adding

Sheela Gowda
And Tell Him of My Pain
(installation view)

1998/2001
2 sets of ropes 10,500 cm
each, thread, needles,
glue and pigment.
Collection: Walker Art
Center Minneapolis,
United States
Julie and Babe Davis
Acquisition Fund, 2002



blood-red pigment to the fevicol, she makes them appear like great coils of disembowelled innards. The rope-end is tasselled with the clutch of needles that have performed their meticulous task and now droop and glisten like prickly ornaments, miniaturised objects of torture. The ropes are looped all across the white cube that can be up to 20 feet high. They thus dissolve the strict right-angle format: a little like Pollock's single-surface, high-tension drips, the strung-up drawing — deep red on white — seems to flatten out the wall and floor. In the next moment the dematerialised space refers (much like Eva Hesse) to the dominantly male aesthetic of minimalism so as to challenge it.

These ropes that are like umbilical cords and intestines and blood-trails become the body's extension/abstraction in longing. They 'tell him of her pain', as the title says, but make of this pain a strange ritual of self-perpetuation. This is a visceral work, but very far from being gory. The woman's body is erotically signified through its absence and the work involves you in a combined enticement: of her labour and her narcissism which together turn into the act of doing, nurturing, being.

When you return to the formal proposition the ropes, laid out as loosely knotted arabesques in the large white cube, challenging body-scale. Even as you walk through the festooned space the body disentangles itself and the linear pattern recedes into a spatial dimension set for a virtuoso performance that you prefer to behold rather than reenter. So the particular route which finally takes Sheela Gowda to her concern with the ethics of (female) creativity passes through a form of symbolic theatre, tantalising you by pulling out yards of her wound/womb and the very arterial system that pumps blood to her heart.

This kind of metonymy that never recoups the body to which it refers, what sort of a subject does it figure, what sort of an encounter is this? I would like to present Sheela Gowda's new work as a radical deframing of the exhibition space. Even as she feels at home in the white cube of the gallery she has adopted the logic of the parergon — the frame that disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away and leaves just space. And even as she entangles the spectator's body in imitation as it were of the artist's own body, it is to arrive at the experience of an unfolding structure — the temporality of what appears to be infinite unravelling yet clutched and terminated at certain points on a metaphor of pain.

Fetish

Knotted, moulded, bedecked with full-blown genitals, the monumental fibre sculptures of Mrinalini Mukherjee are, on the other hand, macabre and ornamental at the same time. They are metaphors for fecundity — nurturing/devouring mother-goddesses — but they are arrived at by the process of a fetishist suturing of the shredded body. Crafting a sexually prodigious form, she wrests male power to expose as it were the phallic nature of totemism. At the same time, she devises a voluptuous fetish that materialises the fear of the female grotesque. In a case of inverse affiliation, Anita Dube's miniaturised objects — textured and bejewelled — complete the picture of female craft/newborn fetish. Her assembly of delicate human bones sheathed in red velvet and trimmed with beads irradiate desire. The encapsulated 'skeleton' becomes a caressing, dissembling object meant for female possession, for ecstatic perversion.

A new generation of artists, both men and women, seem to be taking a sharp turn towards fetishism, incorporating sexual magic into the commodity nature of the art-object. Inclined to mock high culture, high art, high purpose, painter-sculptor Sudarshan Shetty produces images that are glossy, seductive, cunningly construed simulacra. He fabricates kitsch objects, mimicking the manipulative aesthetic of the market-place. In the process he resuscitates the lustful mystique of the object-riddle that is eminently surrealist and imbues current commodity fetishism with enigma.

Also in the surreal mode but at the other end of the spectrum of desire is the recent work of painter Ranbir Kaleka. Now working with video installation to create a form of meditative hypnosis, he offers a barely moving image of patient repetition, insistent attraction, that escapes being commodified by the fugitive nature of the video image itself, as of the dissolving nature of the fetish-presence he places before the spectator's scrutiny.

Claiming this to be their form of social alertness, younger artists in the cosmopolitan cities (especially Bombay [Mumbai]) work at the edge of the social matrix where they perceive the entropy created by the spin of industrial, mercantile, electronic expansion. Jitish Kallat's large paintings work with a shallow image-surface gestalt signalling indifference to interiority/exteriority, preparing a neutral compound of signs for metropolitan *self-imaging*.



Sudarshan Shetty
Home
 (installation view)

1998
 Installation with life-size
 cow, paint, wood,
 fibreglass, stainless steel
 and nylon rope.
 Collection: Fukuoka
 Asian Art Museum
 Image courtesy the Japan
 Foundation and Fukuoka
 Asian Art Museum

The paintings are not riddles but, rather, communicational codes such that media-savvy recipients use to access the flow of messages on new information highways. Except that Kallat makes the game of exchange ‘esoteric’: the conceptual gestalt that underlies the visual, and the cleverly programmed codes often reveal a canny portent of urban fear, a political shadow appearing like a ghost on the wall.

Kausik Mukhopadhyay, Sharmila Samant, Shilpa Gupta, initiate a form of social demolition and dismemberment that foregrounds greed — in the debris so to speak. The closure of the fetish, the accessibility of the net: the ideology of current work both re-tracks and opens out to include interactive and exchange strategies. In video/computer work the input ranges from the conceptual to the trivial and indicates precisely a menu that spells postmodernism. These artists convert the free realm of consumer culture into quasi-political games, recognising the farce played out between the masquerading subject and the seductive object.

Subodh Gupta from Bihar/Delhi uses indigenous materials to reverse the narrative of what I call the masquerading subject/ the seductive object. He introduces an ‘authentic’ self, ‘native’

experience and a 'local' aesthetic and converts them into objects of curiosity, of voyeurism and possible parody. Mock-ritual presentations of ethnographic material that resemble rustic 'life' and use-objects in the fast-changing rural-urban environment bring the question of cultural identity upfront like a badge for difference in global exchange, thus making the terms of that exchange open to critique. In contrast, there are attempts — by other young artists — at breaking open the fetish in art by a change of scale and site. Among a series of environment-oriented projects undertaken in Bangalore, M. S. Umesh attempts 'earthworks' on a monumental scale that are in a transient mode — traces of rituals, erased signs in the country-city continuum.

Historical markers

Following the utopian idea of an artists' collective lived through by the Kerala Radicals in the 1980s, there is, since the 1990s, a renewal of the idea of group projects, but in more informal and negotiable terms. I have already mentioned the unique project of Navjot Altaf working with local communities in Bastar. She brings the site-specific, installation mode of environmental exploration to the threshold of a utopian dream where the arts form the necessary residuum within a larger resource build-up for social regeneration. Activist formations like SAHMAT engage artists in a dialogue on political issues through public art interventions. With works surfacing on the cusp between the environmental and the historical, politically alert artists hope to build not only interactive languages but possible communities through a more participatory art practice. Artist-run workshops like Khoj International in Delhi and Open Circle in Bombay attempt to stage art activity outside the art market, de-commoditising art by privileging ephemeral manifestations and public projects.



Mrinalini Mukherjee
Woman on Peacock

1991
Hemp
214 x 130 x 77 cm
Collection: Public
Collection, France



M.S. Umesh
Earth-Work
 (installation view)

1996
 Time and site-specific
 installation with pigment,
 charcoal dust, bamboo
 shelter, live cows,
 lights, on one acre of
 uncultivated land at
 Kodigehalli near
 Bangalore, India.
 (Work destroyed
 after the show.)

There is now a transgressive spirit in the contemporary art scene that includes a welcome polemic on the ‘correct’ application of the modernist canon. More recently, there is a critical reckoning of global postmodernism through conceptual manoeuvres: I now go on to certain installations that set out materials, processes, situations and site in such a way as to embed these in a recognisable historical context. I am referring to projects undertaken in recent years by Vivan Sundaram, Rummana Hussain, Nalini Malani.

Vivan Sundaram in his work of the past decade installs the historical motif as a documentary/allegorical account of the contemporary. This is exemplified in his 1993 *Memorial* to the dead man on the street — victim of the carnage against Muslims in Bombay in 1992–93. His successive installations unpack art-objects to become metonymically linked signifiers in what may be read as a disintegrating Indian polity. In his most public installation, *Structures for Memory* (1998), the object-world is conscientiously reassembled to become a formal commemoration, and critique, of the national journey.

A site-specific installation in the Durbar Hall of the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta (a white marble monstrosity built by the British in the early 20th century), the project *Structures for Memory* is a workshop reconstruction of the modernising process in India. The installation disembowels the imperium by its contradictory trajectories from floor to dome — as for example the 80-foot narrow-gauge railway track that cuts through the middle and turns this ceremonial meeting-place into a railway platform. A great symbol of British India's modernising project, the Indian Railways (lauded by Marx, denounced by Gandhi) multiplies the meaning of the space: place for transport and transit, temporary home for migrant labour and refugees, burial ground for tragic journeys undertaken at the time of India's Partition in 1947. A mammoth steel container on wheels encloses spoken verse from the trauma of the Partition.



Subodh Gupta
Untitled
(performance view)

1999
Performance by the artist
at Khoj International
Workshop, Modi Nagar,
India

In the first perspectival view, the cathedral-like space becomes a platform or a lumber-yard; then the space becomes performative, with the sound input settling in on rough-hewn objects such as the wall of jute bags inscribed with a 100-year history of (Bengal's) peasant and labour movements. Then it becomes a museum within a museum for public pedagogy: 500 box files with names and photos of eminent Bengalis arranged like a bibliotheque. Each relayed element is notated and signified through empirical data, displayed texts, voice-over and video images. Thus physically montaged in space, the parts become telling signifiers, and the body navigates through the structures of memory even as it steps into and across the obstacles scattered in the project of recuperation.

Placed within a dome that is consecrated with verses by Rabindranath Tagore and Jibanananda Das about the immanent forms of history, Sundaram's installation is, by its very nature, overarching. In a transposed montage of many objects, the imagined whole is a phenomenological experience that temporarily suspends historical time. The interesting question is how the domed and perspectival (baroque) space of the Durbar Hall is also turned into a map, a flatbed design for receiving information, a crane-view of an urban ethnography, an archive, a fairground spectacle.

Vivan Sundaram
Structures of Memory
(installation view)

1998
Site-specific installation
with 1500 cm rail track in
the Durbar Hall at Victoria
Memorial, Calcutta, India
approx. size of hall
2000 x 3000 x 2000 cm
(Work destroyed
after the show)



Vivan Sundaram
Structures of Memory
(installation view)

1998
site-specific installation
with stacked gunny bags
500 cm high, jute coils,
velvet-covered objects in
vitrine, in the Durbar Hall
at Victoria Memorial,
Calcutta, India
approx. size of hall
2000 x 3000 x 2000 cm
(Work destroyed
after the show)



Inserted in the space is a consideration about the fragment: an installation in so many parts is a lesson about how unfinished objects in a construed workshop constitute meaning. How, through recitations of names and dates and events narrativised in time, they gain cumulative meaning. How, also, these objects reinforce

the contradictions, undo the need for condensation, refuse any closure of meaning. It is through hands-on practice, through insistent proof of making and manufacture, that Sundaram's more ambitious installations — exposing methods and relations of production — demonstrate a way of coming to grips with the material world, affirming that it is still amenable to praxiological motives, future utopias.

Through foregrounding material process, lessons from art history are specifically socialised in *Structures of Memory*. Formal devices are taken from minimalism and *arte povera*, but the lay viewers, walking here and there in a dispersed itinerary, make the fragments fall in place as post facto historical design. Though the installation functions seemingly without authorial presence, as a new kind of genre, the theatre of repeated encounters construes an active spectator who tracks the space carrying a belief in the normative designation of the citizen; a spectator who reconstitutes himself/herself through participatory presence at the sites of knowledge production privileged by the 'hidden' author. If the possibility of reconfiguring the world by a conceptual recoding of the fragmented parts requires utopian belief, a concrete form has to be devised to set apace, to motivate, the lay citizen to become an inquiring subject. Dealing in public history, Sundaram creates a *mise en scène* for discursive agency, 'nominates' himself as citizen-subject and stages a democratic encounter whereby the author *along* with the sometimes recalcitrant spectator reemerges as a political subject.

Rummana Hussain's installation *Home/Nation* (1996) works through a set of displacements where nothing adds up, neither the subject nor a place of belonging. But the very unbelonging is specifically sited — in Ayodhya (later in Lucknow). On offer are bits of body which make up in their configuration a lived life of pain, privation, longing and a strong compensatory faith. As for the nation, it is made implicit through a negative commitment or, in the romantic sense, a negative capability to build an imaginary sense of wholeness through loss. Hollows of doorways and mouth and fruit suggest the more wholesome convex forms that complete the metaphors for life — full bellies, complete domes, lit halos and hands cupped in prayer, not want. Rummana Hussain's work is as much about material fragments in lieu of historical evidence as about torn memory that is also emphatically historical.

Rummana Hussain
Living on the Margins
(performance view)

1995
Performance at Chauraha,
National Centre for
Performing Arts,
Bombay, India
(Video of performance
included in the
1996 installation
Home/Nation at Gallery
Chemould, Bombay, India)



Modes of self-inscription into the historical are worked out by the artist: she proposes an aspectual engagement with the female body and devises personae that fit each travail. After December 1992 she chooses an historically indexed masquerade about ‘the Muslim woman’. In *The Tomb of Begum Hazrat Mahal* (1997), the overlap of female body (personally afflicted, always subject to intrusion and violence), historical site (Ayodhya, Lucknow, Bombay), traditional fetishes, wish-fulfilling objects that help aestheticise valiant and pathetic prayer, produce a provocative montage.

This part-for-whole narrative about a Muslim woman’s identity in India adds up in the installation to a kind of transcendent meaning so that while she speaks of the fear of social rupture and marginalisation, she confirms the intricate patterns of a syncretic culture to which she contributes her own body — suturing the wound with an autobiographical skill that translates into an act of social reparation. In her performance piece *Is It What You Think?* (1998), her own body is presented in a state bordering on apotheosis. And hereby she not only pitches her identity for display, she constructs a public occasion to test the viewer’s gaze. She asks crucial questions, as if from an Islamic crucible, that return her to an immanent state of doubt about what is too easily theorised as religious identity, female subjectivity, and feminist protest. In 1999, just before she died from cancer, she celebrated a mortal reconciliation between the pain she carried in her body and in her heart, and consecrated the lost ground of her place in history, calling her funerary installation *A Space for Healing*.



Rummana Hussain
1952–1999
A Space for Healing

1999
Metal implements, PVC poles, cloth, plastic objects, gold paint, vermillion red paint and sound component
500 x 500 x 500cm (approx. installed)
Purchased 2000
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy Queensland Art Gallery and Ishaat Hussain

She was equipping herself to signify the public sphere which the citizen-subject inhabits; she had learnt to polemically position herself in the democratic space of a liberal society that consecrates the individual in the fullness of her individuality and then narrows her political rights. She deframed and then framed herself as icon, and as evidence, on secular ground.

Nalini Malani, in a recent video installation, transfers the theme of subjective masochism to systematically perpetrated ecological evil across the globe. She has tracked down victims of chemical poisoning who stand as metaphors of old and new imperialism including the vagaries of a globalised economy. I use the word telescoping for Malani's work. It is as though Malani, focusing and refocusing through a lens, spots the denaturing processes devolving earthly life into a continuous narrative of calamities. This worldview has inevitably enveloped the theme of violence and war: her end-of-the-century contribution to contemporary art is an elaborate video installation titled *Remembering Toba Tek Singh* (1998). It features 12 video monitors relaying scenes of religious terror/ethnic conflict, the undoing of national boundaries, the migration of refugees across continents, the explosion of bombs, the retraction into the womb of traumatised infants. The monitors are placed in tin trunks on the ground with quilts pulled out like traces of fugitive lives. On three

walls there are large video projections: on the largest wall in front a video montage shows simulated images of the US bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with an animation film by Malani where she draws, animates and bleeds humanoid figures into the terrain of a guilt-ravaged universe. On the flanking walls two young women act a charade whereby their iconic bodies unscroll themselves on the ground, gather themselves and press against the imaginary surface of the screen. Distorting themselves in the time span of the bombing sequence, they suck the gaseous diffusion and sublimate, as if, the lethal onslaught of bombs exploding on screen.

The room with the video installation is bathed in a cold blue light. The tin-encased monitors on a glassy (mylar-covered) floor reflect the flickering images. The installation carries the name *Remembering Toba Tek Singh*, after the famous story by Sadat Hasan Manto about the inmate of an obscure village of that name. Heard at the site of the installation in voice-over, the story is excerpted to focus on the death of the 'lunatic' Bishen Singh who refuses to make a choice between the new nations of India and Pakistan in 1947. In the no-man's land between the barbed borders of the two countries, he stands bewildered until he simply buckles and dies from fatigue. Nalini Malani's work is a response to the nuclearisation of India and Pakistan; the bombs make more

Nalini Malani
*Remembering
Toba Tek Singh*

1998–99
20 minute video
installation comprising
17 VCDs and one CD,
tin trunks, quilts, mylar
flooring. ed. 1/3
900 x 650 x 400 cm
(approx., installed)
Purchased 2000
Queensland Art Gallery
Foundation Grant
Collection: Queensland
Art Gallery
Image courtesy the artist



belligerent the communal call of ruling right-wing parties. The story and the installation, which includes archival footage on India, Pakistan, Palestine, Bosnia, works as an allegory of the war victims and refugees of the 20th century.

IN CONCLUSION

An avantgarde artist in India has to recognise that if the logic of modernism is both syncretic and secular, it must also be radical; that while postmodernism is semiotically diverse it must be pitched to the substantial message of history.

To that purpose, we have to work out our relationship with the Western notion of *alterity*, that is, to a form of absolute otherness as attributed to aliens, and of a radical singularity in ethical and political terms as attributed to the self. For this now produces a cynical, certainly bleak and abject construction of contemporary subjectivity; and encourages alienation that dissimulates radical projects. On the other hand, alternatives — *alternative* positions in society — are quite visible in the southern world. I believe that artists from the Third World, from Asia/India are in a position to still engage with historical options.

In the current conjuncture, then, there must be *art at the cutting edge* — of community, nation and market. This art will differ from Western neo-avantgardes in that it has as its referents a civil society in huge ferment, a political society whose constituencies are redefining the meaning of democracy, and a demographic scale that defies simple theories of hegemony. The national cannot, then, be so easily replaced by the neat new equation of the local/global (as in so many ASEAN and other East Asian countries), nor even perhaps by the exigencies of the State/market combine.

What we might look forward to, however, is not only emerging social themes but a renewed engagement with art language, a radical compound of *formalism* and *history*. A calibrated exposition of subjectivity through motifs from private mythologies, interstitial images will match the task of grasping the shape of social energies in their transformative intent. We know that it is in the moment of disjuncture that an avantgarde names itself. It recodes acts of utopian intransigence and forces of dissent into the very vocabulary and structures of art.

NOTES

The first, considerably shorter, published version of this essay appeared under the title 'Dismantling the Norm', in *Contemporary Art in Asia: traditions/tensions*, Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1996. The second, enlarged, version appeared as the last chapter in Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism: contemporary cultural practise in India*, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2000.

- 1 See Vivek Dhareshwar, 'Postcolonial in the Postmodern — Or, The Politics after Modernity', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXX, No. 30, 29 July, 1995.
- 2 See Tapati Guha-Thakurta's art-historical exegesis on the national/modern in her *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: artists, aesthetics, and nationalism in Bengal, 1850–1920*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992. Guha-Thakurta furthers this work in her essays 'Visualizing the Nation', *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 27–28, March 1995; and 'Locating Gandhi in Indian Art History', in *Addressing Gandhi*, SAHMAT, Delhi, 1995. The debate on art and nationalism has been further elaborated in a study by Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850–1922: Occidental orientations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994. For contemporary mappings of the national/modern in art practice, see Geeta Kapur, 'A Stake in Modernity', originally published in Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993 and pp. 146ff in this volume. The debate on the artist inhabiting a national space through an expanded local–regional ethics has been evaluated through the account of one art institution designed for pedagogy and practice in postcolonial India: see Gulammohammed Sheikh (ed.), *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, Tulika, Delhi, 1997.
- 3 For a critique of this phenomenon, see the selection of essays in Tejaswini Niranjana et al. (eds), *Interrogating Modernity: culture and colonialism in India*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1993; and *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, special issue: 'Careers of Modernity', edited by Tejaswini Niranjana, Nos. 25–26, December 1993.
- 4 For a recent account, see Michael Brand and Gulammohammed Sheikh, 'Contemporary Art in India: a multi-focal perspective', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors, Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999.
- 5 J. Swaminathan, *The Perceiving Fingers: Catalogue of Roopankar Collection of Folk and Adivasi Art from Madhya Pradesh, India*, Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, 1987.
- 6 K. G. Subramanyan, one of the most eminent artist-teachers in contemporary India, has elaborated on the uses of tradition in the making of art (especially as this was developed in Rabindranath Tagore's university at Santiniketan). He extends the idea of a living tradition through an ever-renewed eclecticism. See the three compilations of his essays: *The Moving Focus: essays on Indian art*, Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi, 1978; *The Living Tradition: perspectives on modern Indian art*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1987; and *The Creative Circuit*, Seagull, Calcutta, 1988. His teaching methodology has been elaborated in Nilima Sheikh, 'A Post-Independence Initiative in Art', in *Contemporary Art in Baroda*.

- 7 For a political historian's perspective on the problem of colonial culture and derivative discourse, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: a derivative discourse?*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988. I am also referring to the kind of mediation conducted by Gayatri Spivak (*In Other Worlds: essays in cultural politics*, Methuen, New York, 1987) and then Homi Bhabha (*Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994) over the past two decades on the question of the postcolonial consciousness. Reference should also be made to works of fiction from the diasporic sphere that mediate by finding fictive spaces for the dénouement of the postcolonial imaginary, as in the inimitable Salman Rushdie.
- 8 The generative formulation of the problematic comes from Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984. I am also indebted in the following argument to related positions found in Peter Wollen, 'The Two Avant-Gardes', in *Readings and Writings: semiotic counter strategies*, Verso, London, 1981; and in Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: modernism, mass culture, postmodernism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986. See also the Introduction in Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen (eds.), *Questions of Third Cinema*, BFI, London, 1994. Specific reference to the position of plurality and cultural politics in the postcolonial era is developed by Paul Willemsen in 'An Avant-Garde for the 90s', in *Looks and Frictions: essays in cultural studies and film theory*, BFI, London, 1994.
- 9 Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', *October*, No. 70, Fall 1994, p. 8.
- 10 Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', p. 10.
- 11 It will be instructive to place the American discourse on the avantgarde as conducted, for example, in the journal *October*, discussions of DIA Foundation and the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, vis-a-vis the discourse on the avantgarde in the wake of de-colonisation and the subsequent postcolonial/Third World cultures in the journal *Third Text* published from London.
- 12 There is growing literature on Asian art. For a comparative understanding of Asian art, see Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change*. Also John Clark (ed.), *Modernity in Asian Art*, The University of Sydney East Asian Studies, Number 7, Wild Peony, Sydney, 1993; and John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Craftsman House, G+B Arts International, Sydney, 1998. For a more popular review of Asian art, see issues of *Art AsiaPacific*, a magazine published from Sydney since 1993.
- 13 There is an extended polemic on these two shows. See, for example, Thomas McEvilley, 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief', *Artforum*, November 1984, reprinted along with related texts in Russell Ferguson et al (eds), *Discourses: conversations in postmodern art and culture*, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York and MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990. On *Magiciens de la Terre*, see Cesare Poppi, 'From the Suburbs to the Global Village: afterthoughts on "Magiciens de la terre"', *Third Text*, No. 14, Spring 1991.
- 14 Apinan Poshyananda, 'Roaring Tigers, Desperate Dragons in Transition', in *Contemporary Art of Asia: traditions/tensions*, Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1996, p. 28.
- 15 For discussions of popular culture, especially the cinema, see *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 23–24, January 1993; and *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, No. 29, January 1996. The discourse on minorities commands a vast body of

- literature in Indian historiography: for the interlayered question of caste and gender, see Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender', in *Subaltern Studies IX: writings on South Asian history and society*, edited by Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996.
- 16 For a polemic on the necessity of working with *contradiction* as part of the project of anti-colonialism, see Benita Parry, 'Signs of Our Times: a discussion of Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture*', *Third Text*, Nos. 28–29, Autumn–Winter 1994.
- 17 For a perspective on the issue of multiculturalism in the visual arts, see Jean Fisher (ed.), *Global Visions: towards a new internationalism in the visual arts*, Kala Press/inIVA, London, 1994.
- 18 Hal Foster complicates this issue to bring out its dialectic in 'The Artist as Ethnographer', in Fisher (ed.), *Global Visions*.
- 19 Marian Pastor Roces, 'Bodies of Fiction, Bodies of Desire', in *Contemporary Art of Asia*, p. 84.
- 20 I want to make a notational reference to two texts that can be seen to frame the question of culture at this historical juncture. See Vivek Dhareshwar, "'Our Time": History, Sovereignty and Politics', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXX, No. 6, 11 February, 1995. For a dialectical response to the recent tendencies in social theory to supersede the discourse of the nation, see Partha Chatterjee, 'Beyond the Nation? Or Within?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4–11 January, 1997.
- 21 See Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment: writing about Hindu–Muslim riots in India today', *Economic and Political Weekly*, annual number, March 1991. The concept of the fragment finds elaboration in Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: colonial and postcolonial histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.
- 22 I have developed this argument further in 'The Centre Periphery Model, or How Are We Placed? Contemporary Cultural Practice in India', *Third Text*, Nos. 16–17, Autumn–Winter 1991; 'When Was Modernism in Indian/Third World Art?', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 92, No. 3, Summer 1993; and 'Navigating the Void', in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (eds), *Cultures of Globalization*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1998. (Later versions of these essays are included in this volume.)

THE SPECTRE OF BEING HUMAN

Charles Merewether

From now on, I'm no longer human ... not an ordinary person.

Wang Shuo

AT THE BEGINNING of May 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Culture issued a public memorandum of concern about contemporary art. The statement singled out contemporary art that used animal parts, blood or human bodies, stating, 'Some people have made bloody, violent and erotic performances by abusing themselves or animals and exhibiting human corpses in public places in the name of art.' Artworks of this kind 'violate state laws, upset social order and damage people's mental and physical health. Performances broadcasting pornography, superstition and violence are prohibited.' Moreover, the memorandum drew attention to a series of Constitutional Articles pertaining to the 'rules of social morality', especially pornography and obscene or licentious behaviour. Of the many articles, Article 302 stated, 'Anyone who steals or violates a corpse will be sentenced to imprisonment for up to three years, or be put under public surveillance.' Article 22 reads as follows: 'The State forbids

the organisation and presentation of the following performances with the following content', including 'to present horror or cruel shows in which actors/actresses are compromised physically or mentally'. The organisers of such exhibitions were subject to jail sentences of up to three years for anyone organising 'erotic' performances and up to 10 years for 'more serious crimes'.

This governmental response came in the immediate wake of a series of recent exhibitions, from *Corruptionists* (Beijing, November 1998), *Post-Sense: sensibility, alien bodies and delusion* (Beijing, January 1999) and *Life and Culture* (Beijing, August 1999) to *Food as Art* (Beijing, February 2000), *Obsession with Harm* (Beijing, April 2000), *Man and Animals* (Beijing, Chengdu, Guilin, Nanjing, Changchun, 2000) and *Useful Life* (Hangzhou, 2000); and followed a number of 'unofficial' exhibitions, *Unusual and Usual*, *Fuck-off* and *Useful Life*, held simultaneously with the 2000 Shanghai Biennale.

Curated by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, the exhibition *Post-Sense* was held in one of Beijing's hundreds of apartment blocks in the Peony residential district, rather than in a downtown and foreign-owned gallery. Occupying a disused basement, the impoverished character of the space became integral to the subject of the work. *Pocket Theology* by Zhu Yu displayed a severed arm that hung from a grappling hook attached to the ceiling in one of the empty basement rooms. Extending down towards the floor, the hand grasps a long rope that hangs beside it. Sun Yuan's work *Honey* occupied another similarly disused room with a wrought-iron bed, on which lay the severed head of an old man and alongside which, as if whispering in his ear, lay the shrivelled corpse of a stillborn child on a slab of ice. In an interview, Sun Yuan remarked, 'I want to use real things because I want people to stop and not be numb anymore ...'¹

Other comparable installations or performances include that of Gu Dexin (one of the artists showing in the 'Usual' section of the exhibition *Unusual and Usual*), whose work entailed a video showing tables of raw pork soaked in blood. Correspondingly, we may point to Peng Yu's performance (in *Obsession with Harm*) of dropping oil extracted from human fat into the mouth of the medical specimen of a child's corpse, or her *Curtain* piece, composed of 1,000 live bullfrogs, grass snakes and lobsters, each pierced through the stomach with wire and then hung up.

Alternatively, Yang Zhichao planted seeds in self-induced cuts in his body, while Yang Zhenzhong produced a video entitled *I Will Die* (2000), in which people, speaking gently and with smiles on their faces, acknowledged that they would die. Installed within the sphere of housing estates where tens of thousands of Chinese live a life of relative anonymity in impoverished conditions, art becomes an arena for rehearsing endgame scenarios that shock people into confronting the realities of everyday life, and the threat to and instability of human life. More specifically, such work exposed the extreme discrepancy between the residual condition of a daily life of low wages and standard of living for the majority of people, and an over-inflated market economy of conspicuous consumption for a minority.

A CONTEMPORARY MALAISE

What is striking about the recent Chinese art is the appearance of what may be called the posthumous subject, whose death constitutes not simply the negation of subjectivity — i.e., alienation and anxiety — but its disappearance altogether into the post-human selfhood. This condition implies a subject drained, as it were, of emotion, of memory; an amnesiac subject whose *modus operandi* becomes one of survival and conformity. There is something so vehemently unconstrained about these tableaux, so violently confrontational as to the limits of human endurance or human life, that they demand to be rejected. Moreover, viewed within China, there is something profoundly nationalistic in the way such artwork confronts its own people and government. In provoking tremendous reaction from all quarters of the public sphere, it was as if this violent anti-aesthetic had broken the taboos governing the practice of art and the unspoken social conventions and mores governing the necessary civility culture needs to legitimate itself and be seen within the public sphere.

The governmental response was not simply to officially condemn but, in one case, to close down an exhibition as dangerously morbid, and therefore harmful to the Chinese public. The art was hence interpreted as foreign, impure, polluted in a way that would cause moral and spiritual harm. Only minutes before it was due to open, the exhibition *Life and Culture* was closed down by the Public Security Bureau, which suspected that a secret meeting of the Falun Gong religious sect was being held there.

Qiu Zhijie
All the Meat Here is Clean

2001
Image courtesy the artist
and *Yishu: journal of
contemporary Chinese art*



The reaction from within the art world has been no less concerned and swift to condemn this art as coming under the bad influence of recent contemporary art in the West.² In an article entitled ‘Contagious Desire’, the Beijing-based critic, Karen Smith, argued that the origin of recent artworks containing scenes of violence and concerning the subject of death was an offshoot of contemporary Western art, as distinct from works that ‘represent a truly original “Chineseness”’.³ Smith sees the work as closely paralleling Western performance art and artists, especially the work of Damien Hirst and recent exhibitions, notably *Sensation* and *Apocalypse*, both held at the Royal Academy in London in 1997 and 2000, respectively. The Chinese ‘reworking of clearly traceable sources of inspiration’ means ‘broader insights are conspicuously absent’.⁴ But then for Smith, this is understandable for, while the origin of Western contemporary art is based on religious taboo, there is a ‘lack of a spiritually constraining paradigm in China, of a godly morality that might deter acts of self-mutilation, the adulteration of flesh and natural forms, living and dead, and the use of human corpses’.⁵ Hence, she concludes that although there are social taboos governing contemporary China, which include ‘spiritual and ideological pollution, adverse political comment, pornography and superstitious faiths’, the ‘use of animals and the human body in art is not a moral issue’.⁶ It is a ‘chamber of horrors [rather] than a spiritual–intellectual exercise in art’, symptomatic of what she calls a ‘godless society’ that ‘swings like

a pendulum between superstition and moral anarchy'.⁷ For Smith, such anarchy is the result of 'socialist rule that in its early stages destroyed all cultural, social and individual ethics, integrity and principle on which several thousand years of civilisation rested'.⁸ Hence, although the author locates the work as symptomatic of Chinese Socialism (as distinct from Communism), the terms of her critique are the same as those of the Chinese Ministry of Culture, itself representative of the Government of which she is critical.⁹

Similarly, in an article, 'How to deal with rights ...', published online, the artist and writer Wang Nanming has suggested that the contemporary art world has 'decorated with the lipstick of performance art' the 'human rights disaster' of Mao's Cultural Revolution.¹⁰ Moreover, for Nanming, it is symptomatic of the exhaustion of Chinese contemporary art that, after pandering to the West, it turns to the 'tradition of Mao's ruffian politics: a type of politics characterised by its use of power to violate rights'.¹¹ This tradition continues to 'violate human rights in a society that has no human rights in the first place'. By citing the 'tradition of Mao's ruffian politics', signifying here especially the initial period of the Cultural Revolution dominated by the violence of the Red Guards, the author foregrounds also what became known as the '*liumang* culture', a phenomenon within the period of Deng's reform era. As Chinese scholar John Minford described it at the time, this generation — the '*liumang* generation' — is a 'lost generation ... the children of the Chinese holocaust', composed of 'rapist, whore, black-marketeer, unemployed youth, alienated intellectual, frustrated artist or poet'.¹²

For many of these commentators, while this generation represents the legacy of violence produced by the Cultural Revolution, it is for them the impact of Western values on China that has fostered a climate in which moral corruption thrives. The West as an overarching concept, in other words, is used as the foil against which something identifiably Chinese is made. Huang Du, in his catalogue introduction to the exhibition *Post Material* at Red Gate Gallery — an exhibition that included work of a similar nature to *Post-Sense* — observed that Chinese art of today could be understood better if viewed within a situation of global environmental pollution brought about by technological advancement.¹³ Likewise, Zhu Qi, in the catalogue essay of an exhibition entitled *Time of Reviving*, and held at the Upriver

Gallery in Chengdu, wrote that the artwork reflected a condition of 'post-subjectivity' resulting from an 'invasion of capitalist information and globalized experience'.¹⁴ Alternatively, gallery director Chen Jiagang seeks to establish a more mediated reading that, as reflected in the exhibition title, implicitly defends the work as a process of cultural consumption insofar as it functions to renew Chinese culture. He writes, 'The subject matters reflect the profound changes of a self-reviving Chinese social system during the transitional period during the 1990s in the fields of visual images, aesthetic orientation, and subjectivity. Through such changes, we could see the fundamental impact of the free market, globalised reality and the remaining of the political society in the 1990s'.¹⁵ Contemporary Chinese art is, in other words, seen as directly symptomatic of the West, either subject to pollution, invasion or unavoidable consumption.

Without doubt, since 1979, when Deng Xiaoping ushered in his open-door policy of economic reform, Western consumer culture has seized not only the popular imagination, but cultural values in general; to the degree that many feel that it has corrupted Chinese values. Moreover, as the free market economy of the Deng era delegitimised or deregulated high culture in favour of mass consumer culture, Chinese artists turned towards the West. Not only have Chinese artists begun to reproduce Western trends and earn their living from selling them back to an overseas audience, but the majority of contemporary art in China continues to be bought by foreigners either directly from the artists or through foreign-owned galleries in China.

As a result, this trend has been seen as a kind of export art that, emerging out of the reform era, properly belongs to the international marketplace rather than to a local Chinese context. What these authors have in common is the idea that a consumerist-oriented global culture has, in some manner, polluted or destroyed subjectivity, producing a post- or anti-humanist condition. Within this framework, their argument implies that contemporary culture becomes instead a shallow reflection of Western values and loses touch with something of an essence of what constitutes Chinese. There is, in other words, an appeal to something essential, incorruptible and authentic.

What is striking about these commentaries is the way in which they share the same language as that of the state, and reflect

the terms of an ideological debate that has subsumed intellectual thought in the past 20 years or more within China. This discussion and debate has focused on issues of morality and spirituality as a way of demarcating the difference between China and the West, that is, in other words, between ideologies of socialism and bourgeois capitalism, as well as the valuation accorded to human life both in real and ideological terms. And, while we can presume that the critique from within the domain of art criticism is intended to question the avantgarde values of contemporary art or its claims to oppositionality, it does so in terms that remain within the hegemonic discourse of the State. Notwithstanding this, these remarks are characteristic of a long tradition of debate within China as to the detrimental impact on China of what is conceived monolithically as the West. But more than that, this binary structure defines, in turn, a concept of China as somehow unified and homogeneous. At the same time, while these critics acknowledge the destructiveness unleashed by the Cultural Revolution, they diminish the issue of its legacy and the manner with which it is critically articulated or reappears at an imaginary and symbolic level within contemporary cultural practices.

Huang Yongping
*History of Chinese Painting
and Concise History of
Modern Painting Washed
in a Washing Machine
for Two Minutes*

1987
Installation
Image courtesy the artist
and *Yishu: journal of
contemporary Chinese art*



Contrary to response of the Chinese government and art critics, the artists involved have steadfastly argued that their work is for and about China. Comments by artists such as Zhu Yu and Sun Yuan or artist/curator Qiu Zhijie suggest that the basis of their performance-based art and participation in exhibitions such as, for example, *Post-Sense* or *Fuck-Off*, is to move away from the dominant model of a Western gallery system or foreign market. Zhu Yu, the artist of *Pocket Theology*, states that compared with Damien Hirst, who is working within a tradition, there is a desire in Chinese art 'to push the boundaries of current values and existence and to be destructive in order to provoke thought about the present situation of mankind. You can't negate the value of what is being done. This is a period of experimentation.'¹⁶ Similarly, Peng Yu views her work as being more challenging than that of Hirst because it uses live animals.¹⁷ For Wu Meichun, one of the organisers of *Post-Sense*, the aim of the exhibition was to reflect two distinct tendencies. On the one hand, it would reflect 'alien' bodies which are 'consequences of physical mutations, caused by either natural diseases or by artificial transformations', and, secondly, 'delusion', which means 'the mutation of the mind ... dramas related to syndromes such as voyeurism, exhibitionism, masochism and paranoia'. Delusion, she concludes, 'becomes artistic illusion, it also becomes a means of healing and ridding of evil'.¹⁸

For Qiu Zhijie, the other organiser of *Post-Sense*, contemporary Chinese art is 'post-sensationalist', and, unlike contemporary British art, overtly abhors the foreign market — and to this extent is committed to the idea that it cannot be sold to the West, that Western visitors will simply not wish to buy 'horrible' art.¹⁹ Hence, as Sun Yuan remarks about his work *Honey*: 'I want them to think for a second about themselves and not always about money.'²⁰ Alternatively, in another interview, the artist commented that the image of embrace between the two figures was appreciated by his audience as a 'tender moment ... not as something repulsive or brutal or ugly'. Elsewhere in the interview, he remarked, 'Modern life lets us accept that we are living, but we refuse to accept that we are dying', and, 'Yes, I'm disturbed in creating my work. But I have a responsibility. I'm like a surgeon. If I give in to a feeling of disgust, how can I cure the patient? I must be rational to help my audience confront mortality.' For the artist it was not an exploitation of the

dead but rather a responsibility and refusal to be constrained by 'simplistic morality'.²¹

If taken seriously, these remarks suggest that there is far more at stake than a comparison with contemporary art in Europe and North America or that it is symptomatic of a moral or spiritual malaise. And yet, what is true is that the interpretation and terms of this debate are very much a part of a history of modernism and its reception within China, stemming from the May Fourth movement; a history that, by the late 1980s, was entering a period of crisis and, ultimately, of radical transformation. What seems to be at issue (in a manner that has remained constant in more than 80 years) is the defining concept of Chinese identity; that is, of locating an essence that constitutes cultural difference as opposed to characteristics that are imported and that are therefore superficial or superfluous to that essence. How and by whom that identity is defined then becomes critical to what is seen as authentic, of value or otherwise. If there is anything that is collectively shared during this period, it is the question of what constitutes human nature or being human, and hence the relationship between animal and human bodies, and the threshold between human life and death. These issues hint at a concern with ethical and social questions that run deep in China's more recent cultural history. Moreover, while we may agree about the deeply troubling character of the work and the ethical issues it raises, I wish to suggest that the power of negation that characterises this trend within Chinese art stands in a definably conscious and critical tension with the social formation of contemporary China. From this perspective, I wish to explore the historical formation of this body of work and how its antecedents and its reception provide a way of identifying the terms by which the avantgarde is delegitimised and/or recuperated within the hegemonic public sphere and consumer culture.

PURIFYING THE PEOPLE

In 1979, Ye Jianying, one of five members of the Politburo Standing Committee, called for the building of a socialist 'spiritual civilisation' to combat what was perceived as a growing national crisis of faith and an emerging consumer-orientated culture. Taken up by Deng Xiaoping, the concept of a socialist 'spiritual

civilisation' became critical to validating his call for economic reform. Reform, he promised, would lead to a socialist *material* civilisation, but one that could be attained only after spiritual civilisation had been achieved.

What was under attack was bourgeois decadence, and those who 'worship things foreign or fawn on foreigners'. By 1983, the concept had broadened into a campaign to re-establish a national set of ethics based on hygiene, morality, decorum, manners and discipline. The idea was to purify both the Party and the nation of violent and non-violent crime, which had flourished during and after the Cultural Revolution. But the campaign against spiritual pollution far extended that of crime, reaching deep into the sphere of cultural production. Under the rule of the Communist Party, cultural production was not an autonomous sphere but rather was instrumental in articulating the ideological values of the Party. As Deng Xiaoping remarked in an article published in the *People's Daily* in July 1983, the responsibility of writers was to fulfil the spiritual needs of life in areas of thought, culture and morality and to create a new socialist human image.²²

At the Twelfth Party Congress in October 1983, Deng Xiaoping threw his support behind the campaign, remarking, 'The substance of spiritual pollution was disseminating all varieties of corrupt and decadent ideologies of the bourgeoisie and other exploiting classes and disseminating sentiments of distrust towards the socialist and communist cause and to the Communist Party leadership.' The result was the launching of the 'Anti-Spiritual Pollution' campaign.²³

Against this line of thought, eminent Chinese writers Wang Ruoshui, Zhou Yang, Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu viewed the emancipation of the self and the restoration of subjectivity as critically important to the revitalisation of Chinese culture and socialism. And to achieve this what was needed was the rehabilitation of humanism, which had been suppressed under Mao. The critical issue was not only that the question of the individual subject and subjectivity had been sacrificed in the name of the collective, or even that human nature had been reduced to that of class, but that the legacy of the Cultural Revolution had been the debasement of the human and humanity. In January of 1983, Wang Ruoshui, Deputy Editor of the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao*) and one of the most prominent writers and advocates of a

return to social humanism, published an essay called 'In Defence of Humanism', in which he argued for aligning rather than opposing humanism with Marxism. Otherwise, what remained in the wake of Mao's Cultural Revolution was what he called the 'spectre of the human', which, alienated from one's sense of worth as a human being and individual, would haunt contemporary China. Yet, restoring the idea of human worth to Marxism and therefore creating a form of socialist humanism implied 'resolutely abandoning the "total dictatorship" and merciless struggle of the ten years of chaos, abandoning the deification of one individual ... upholding the equality of all before truth and the law, and seeing that personal freedoms and human dignity of citizens are not infringed upon'.²⁴ In a manner that seems to uncannily evoke the work of recent art, Ruoshui wrote, 'Humanism is opposed to two things, one is "god-ism" (the deification of the leader), the other, "animalism" (the degradation of human beings into animals).'²⁵

Li Zehou argued for a discussion of humanity that would be an 'anthropology of human practice' or a 'philosophical anthropology'.²⁶ This had two basic implications: 'One is to place human beings as the practical subject within a historical movement ... the other is to draw the activity, self-autonomy, and creativity of the human spiritual realm.'²⁷ Moreover, in the book *Tradition and the Chinese Person* (1988), co-authored with critic Li Gang, the hallmark of Chinese modernity was identified as the emergence of individualist values and subjectivity.²⁸ By linking subjectivity together with Chinese modernity, the authors implicitly outlined a position contrary to the critique of humanism by the Communist Party. As Liu Zaifu had also proposed, a theory of subjectivity entails moving the ontological question from the subject 'Who am I?' to that of 'Who is Human?'. Human nature was at the core of subjectivity and, therefore, an appreciation of subjectivity was critical to an understanding of artistic or literary creation. And yet Li also warned that the embrace of humanism could lead to reinforcing a 'leftist' campaign for absolute moral values and moral purity, which would violently deny the interests, needs and rights of the individual.

It was precisely within these terms that the proponents of humanism, especially Wang Ruoshui, came under fierce attack during the 'Anti-Spiritual Pollution' campaign.²⁹ It was not only crime and pornography that undermined the tenets of socialism,

but the influence of what were perceived to be certain bourgeois theories, most notably socialist alienation, individualism and humanism.³⁰ On 28 October, Deng Lijun, the Minister of Propaganda, addressed journalists from the *Associated Press*, defining ‘spiritual pollution’ as:

Things that are obscene, barbarous or reactionary; vulgar taste in artistic performances; efforts to seek personal gain, and indulgence in individualism, anarchism, and liberalism; and writing articles or delivering speeches that run counter to the country’s social system.³¹

While the ‘worship of individualism’ was seen as most evident in the ‘hippy’ style of Western clothing, demeanor and music, the literary and art spheres were also identified as a negative influence on Chinese values. Xu Dehung, president of the Jiu San Society, argued that:

The influence of decadent bourgeois ideology and its corrosion have become more serious, and certain books, magazines, audio tapes and videotapes which spread pornographic, absurd and reactionary materials have become important causes of juvenile delinquency, and liberalisation concepts of the bourgeoisie, and all kinds of corrupt ideologies have invaded our society’s ideological, theoretical, literary and art spheres.³²



Wang Ziwei
Hopeless (in a Peapod Boat)

2002
Acrylic on canvas
110 x 130 cm
Image courtesy the artist
and *Yishu: journal of
contemporary Chinese art*

As Deng Xiaoping himself remarked, it was those artists and writers who favoured modernist schools that therefore 'blindly imitate and fanatically pursue foreign culture' at the expense of Chinese traditions. Foreign cultural products were commodifying the local, and were therefore contaminating the spiritual basis of Chinese traditions. Modernism, in other words, was swept into the Western stream of spiritual pollution because it appeared to reflect the worse traits of capitalism, i.e., commercialisation, individualism and social irresponsibility. At the Second Plenum of the Twelfth Party Congress, Deng condemned writers and artists who 'dwell eagerly on the gloomy and the pessimistic', those who are 'doing anything for money ... indiscriminately giving performances ... using low and vulgar form and content to turn an easy profit', and therefore 'pandering to the low tastes of a section of their audiences'. We can already see intimated in this kind of language what would return as the subject of taboo in 2001.

Yet, even before the Twelfth Congress, the effect of the emergent campaign against 'spiritual pollution' was being felt throughout literary and artistic circles. In early 1983, art critic Li Xianting (who would later curate the exhibition *Obsession with Harm* in 2000) was dismissed from his position as editor of the art monthly, *Meishu*,³³ by Deng Liqun on grounds of 'spiritual pollution'.³⁴ The immediate cause was the publication of a two-part article on Chinese abstract art and calligraphy written by Li Xianting and He Xin, a young academician at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In its pages, they had argued for a breaking free of realism, championing in particular the model of Western modernism. Li Xianting, who had graduated from the Department of Traditional Chinese Painting of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, supported a dialogue with the West and a level of experimentation on the grounds that it undermined the Government-endorsed aesthetic of realism and values for which it stood. Subsequent to his dismissal from *Meishu*, Li Xianting became the ideological foe of his previous collaborator, He Xin, and a key figure in the promotion and critical reception of experimental and avantgarde art in China.

He Xin, a former Red Guard, on the other hand, became in effect a party ideologue, fiercely attacking the kind of art and literature of the avantgarde experimentalists that had been singled out for condemnation by Deng Lijun. In the article, 'On

Superfluous People', published in 1985, He Xin drew on the 19th-century Russian literary tradition of the superfluous and the absurd in order to attack certain tendencies within contemporary art and literature. To be 'superfluous' (*duoyuren*) meant to be useless, unproductive, the product of a consumer-oriented culture based on excess. It was not that the aesthetic of the absurd was condemned by the Party. To the contrary, absurdity was sanctioned after 1984, when the Party called for artistic freedom. Rather, what He Xin perceived to be a dangerous trend of cynicism among contemporary Chinese authors was to be found in the message conveyed.³⁵ Creating antiheroes without illusion or hope, they sought to describe the state of ennui experienced by the youth of China. For He Xin, however, this was the work of cultural nihilism, founded on a tradition (especially Freudian and Nietzschean) that was both alien and foreign to China. What is superfluous is linked to anything that can be characterised as Western and therefore non-Chinese. From this perspective, the term superfluous begins to resonate with the Marxist concept of surplus, and specifically to the consumer-oriented culture that Deng's open-door policy had introduced. Moreover, the concept of surplus value resonated with alienation under capitalism. Reform, in other words, was transforming Chinese culture into a spectacle of degradation, undermining the Chinese conception of the human and the individual subject.

It is against this backdrop that John Minford defined the concept of a 'ruffian' or '*liumang* culture' in his article published in the same year as that of He Xin. Minford characterises *liumang* as a term for 'loafer, hoodlum, hobo, bum, punk'.³⁶ Rapists, whores, black-marketeers, alienated intellectuals and artists or poets are linked together in what he describes as a spectrum that 'has its dark satanic end, its long middle band of relentless grey and, shining at the other end, a patch of visionary light'.³⁷ Together, they constitute an 'embryonic alternative culture' or 'emergent countercultural scene', because in the void left in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, they were thrown back on their own resources, which gave them 'an authentic sense of identity and culture' and a 'radical perspective, not only on the present but also on their own traditional culture'.³⁸ Hence, one of the ironies of the Cultural Revolution is that its failure 'left behind a generation capable of reconciling tradition and a true feeling for modernity'.³⁹ For the writer, it is not

an imported but rather a 'new indigenous culture' that, in discovering that many Western sources are from the 'ancient Orient', will bring 'spiritual nourishment to the wasteland'.⁴⁰

From this perspective, Minford, like Wang Ruoshui and others, sees the effects of the reform movement in a positive light. The opening created by the reform movement helps to fill the void left by the Cultural Revolution. The question was how to build a theory of emancipation in which individual freedom and the recuperation of cultural identity could provide the means of overcoming alienation, but without invoking a position of idealist voluntarism. To do so required recognising that the condition of alienation was as much produced by internalised oppression within the private sphere as by external oppression functioning within the public sphere. One of the problems that remained unresolved throughout the work of these writers was the impact of economic reform and conspicuous consumption. Writers such as Wang Ruoshui and Li Zehou had welcomed the new openness and economic reform that surrounded them insofar as it generated a new wave of experimentation and collaborated with commercialisation and mass culture. Yet, in embracing this openness, they found themselves implicitly endorsing the kind of excesses that He Xin had so trenchantly attacked. The pivotal question remained as to how to foster modernity from within, but without closing the possibility of dialogue and exchange with non-Chinese cultures.

While Minford does not name names, it was Wang Shuo's satirical stories of crime and love that quickly became associated with the concept of '*liumang* culture'. By the time of his first novels, for example, *The Masters of Mischief* (1987), *What I Am Playing With is Your Heart Beat* (1988) and *No Man's Land* (1989), the protagonists are rogue characters driven by anti-authoritarianism, uniformity, emotional ennui and rogue humour. In *What I Am Playing With is Your Heart Beat*, one of the characters remarks: 'Standing in this yard immersed in the sunshine, I am seized with the strong feeling that I have lost something.'⁴¹ At the end of *No Man's Land* — a novel that appeared a few months after the Tiananmen Square massacre — the inhabitants of Tanzi Alley read out a 'letter of appreciation' to the Party Leadership: 'Praise be to you, Lord Clear Sky! We the inhabitants of Tanzi Alley thank you for rescuing us from the bitter sea, from the flaming pit, from hell itself.'⁴² Midway through the letter, they describe themselves as:

the little people knaves the black haired scum your children grandchildren tufts of grass little dogs and cats a gang of liumang the cretinous crowds the great masses the hundred surnames and we feel ohsolucky extremely moved exceedingly uneasy terribly embarrassed so pleased boundingly enthusiastic very very overwhelmed by our good fortune grateful as all get out tears o'fill our eyes our hearts swell like the seas and we're utterly and thoroughly lost for words.⁴³

While the ironic mimicry of a fawning, docile collective body is evident in this passage, what it also reveals is the emptiness of rhetorical language and the ensuing emptiness of the speaking subject. The punning of 'lost for words' suggests a sense of being overwhelmed, yet also of being vacant or empty-headed. It is this quality that is in part the object of He Xin's attack on 'superfluous people' and that characterises an emergent strand of *liumang* art, especially the work of such artists as Fang Lijun. In 1988, Fang Lijun began drawing and painting singular figures or groups of men,

Fang Lijun
Series No.3

1992

Oil on canvas
200 x 200 cm

Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Photograph: Fujimoto
Kampachi



staring out from the canvas, often with grimaces, small eyes and bald heads. It was not Minford's 'embryonic counterculture' that Lijun was depicting so much as the 'band of relentless grey'.

AN EMERGENT AVANTGARDE

By early 1984, there were signs that the extreme leftism that had championed the 'Anti-Spiritual Pollution' campaign would destroy the possibility of economic reform. The result was its demise and a return to a liberalisation of culture. Within this short period of four years, a new avantgarde flourished throughout the country, known as the 'New Wave' or '85 Movement'. This would include not only the early work of artists such as Wu Shan Zhuan, Wenda Gu, Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie, who were engaged in the strategic deconstruction and reconstruction of hegemonic language, but also that of the 'New Xiamen Dada'.⁴⁴ Based on a participatory aesthetic — hence the reference to Dada — it entailed radical iconoclastic gestures in which the work of art became a form through which to articulate a critique of the state and public culture.

The Fujian coastal city of Xiamen had been designated as one of the four 'Special Economic Zones' (SEZ) established as part of the reform movement in 1979 and reinforced in 1984–85.⁴⁵ In 1986, the members of the New Xiamen Dada burnt all of their own work after an exhibition they had organised themselves. This iconoclastic gesture was accompanied by the statement: 'Don't murder art. Life should not be tranquil.' In this apparent contradiction, art becomes a disruptive social practice that stands in dialectical tension with the acts of destruction against what were perceived as bourgeois cultural artefacts during the Cultural Revolution and in the immediately preceding period of the 'Anti-Spiritual Campaign'. On the one hand, these actions convey a sense of purging or censoring of the self and one's attachment to things viewed as bourgeois commodities. On the other, these actions disrupt the ideological complicity and complacency of those art practices celebrated by the Party. To say 'Don't murder art' is not then to re-sacralise art so much as to critique the way the Party endorsed its reification as an ideological commodity. As Huang Yongping noted in an interview a few years later:

In the social politics of China, art is part of the ideology. Doubting the nature of art and destroying art is to destroy the party system. If one thinks of art as a metaphor for reality, then to change the attitude towards art means planning to change the way of thinking.⁴⁶

The iconoclasm that was characteristic of the New Xiamen Dada also appeared in the work of some of its members, notably Huang Yongping, who, the next year, reduced to an indistinguishable pulp in a washing machine *A History of Chinese Painting* by Wang Bomin and Herbert Read's *A Concise History of Modern Painting*. Evelyne Jouanno has commented that the purpose of the artist's work is not to cleanse culture so much as to 'make it dirty', and therefore it does not reflect a modernist nihilism but rather forms 'the will to radically deconstruct and transcend the system and order of discourse that are founded on cultural difference'.⁴⁷ Seen also within the light of the 'Anti-Spiritual Pollution' campaign and the subsequent concern about the 'foreign', Huang Yongping's gesture reduces to a level of indifference both the foreign and the national while, at the same time, by means of a modern form of labour (the washing machine), it eradicates the artist's hand and authorial subjectivity. As with a number of other groups and artists during this brief period, the artist conceived of him or herself as a producer or engineer by strategically transferring discursive or industrial forms of production into the arena of art. The introduction of the 'ready-made' subjected to an iconoclastic and 'deconstructive' artistic practice properly characterises the beginnings of late modernism within China.

Other unofficial avantgarde artists and groups were formed during this period in Harbin, Guangzhou and Hangzhou and Beijing. They include the Northern Art Group in Harbin in 1985, the Pool Society (Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi) in Hangzhou (Zhejiang Province) at the end of 1985, and the Beijing-based New Measurement Group (Chen Shaoping, Gu Dexin and Wang Luyan) in 1988.⁴⁸ An intensely analytical engagement with what was called 'social reality' characterised much of the work of each of these groups. Recently, for instance, Wang Guangyi — a founding member of the Northern Art Group — remarked that his call in 1988 for the liquidation of humanist enthusiasm was necessary in order to re-establish a 'relationship with social reality'.⁴⁹ This commitment to address contemporary 'social reality' also charac-

terises the Pool Society and the New Measurement Group, whose art practice entailed a direct engagement within the public sphere, a dematerialisation of the object and a critique of authorship and individualism. In seeking to eliminate the art object and erase all signs of individuality, this strategy lays the groundwork for a materialist critique based on a rationalist analysis of human behaviour.⁵⁰ In the Pool Society's first exhibition, the artists described their practice as a 'brave sacrifice for the future'.⁵¹ One may well ask what the sacrifice is except that of the individual subject, and, in effect, the work of art and group. This notion of sacrifice will remain an underlying issue in the articulation of later avantgarde and radical practices, and is intimated in the work of Gu Dexin from 1987, in which he shows images of 'kneaded beef' in gilded frames or plexi-boxes. Animal (and, by implication, human) life is reduced to an object of display and manipulation.

Although the avantgarde flourished in the period from 1985 to 1989, the campaign against bourgeois liberalisation and the drive towards a market economy increasingly diminished the possibilities of it occupying ground within the public sphere. National meetings of artists, scholars and critics were held across the country, coming under attack from the Government and conservative forces within the official art world. In February of 1989, the exhibition *China/Avant-garde* was held at the National Gallery in Beijing. Curated by Li Xianting and critic/curator Gao Minglu, it was the first showing of the avantgarde from across the country as it emerged in the 1980s. It was swiftly closed, however, when the artist Xiao Lu fired a gun at the work of her collaborator Tang Song. The exhibition was subsequently reopened, but closed again after anonymous bomb threats. In the following months and after the Tiananmen Square massacre on 4 June, the '85 Movement disbanded as artists moved away.⁵²

By the end of the 1980s, Geremie R. Barmé, a historian and acute observer of trends within contemporary Chinese art, was already having doubts about the authenticity of a dissenting avantgarde, which Minford had described four years earlier. 'The end result of Reform,' Barmé wrote, 'may well be the creation of a new avantgarde art to order: dissent on tap ... The government's erratic and hedonistic policies tend to encourage a soul-destroying cynicism in artists of lesser genius.'⁵³ The 'patch of visionary light' that Minford had defined as belonging to a post-Mao 'embryonic

alternative culture' had been displaced, in other words, by a colourless light of cynicism produced by an era of reform.

It is in this grey band of light that we may imagine seeing the spectral appearance of the human and the appearance of Fang Lijun's paintings. Belonging to the third generation of post-Cultural Revolution artists, Lijun grew up in an intense transitional moment in which the New Era came to a close with the violence of Tiananmen Square and the closure of the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition. On finishing his first series of paintings, the artist remarked, 'We would rather be described as painters of loss, ennui and crisis or as rogues or as the bewildered, but we will never again be deceived.'⁵⁴

In gaining currency in the immediate post-1989 period, the social base and significance of '*liumang* culture' was transformed. It no longer represented a nascent or 'embryonic counterculture', but was redefined to refer to the Government and protesters alike, one describing the actions of the army, the other of the people. In the article 'My Perplexities and Concerns', He Xin associates the iconoclastic intellectuals with the Red Guard, an idea that repeats Deng Xiaoping's earlier view. For He Xin, 'The young agitators for political reform in China are rabble-rousers who are carrying on from where the Gang of Four left off, their real aim being to overthrow the Party and eliminate "capitalist roaders".'⁵⁵ On the other hand, Zuo Shula wrote of Wang Shuo: 'So and so's father was penalized for hooliganism and still they let him have a position in the leadership.'⁵⁶ It is to this that Wang Nanming was referring when remarking on the 'tradition of Mao's ruffian politics: a type of politics characterized by its use of power to violate rights'.⁵⁷ Wang Shuo's hooligan reveals itself as a product of the duplicity of the elite class and leadership. There is no moral authority and the oppressed and oppressors begin to mirror one another.

For critics, especially Li Xianting, the significance of 'cynical realism' (a phrase he coined at the time to describe the paintings of Fang Lijun and other artists like him), was somewhat different. It belonged to what he defined as a long radical literary and artistic tradition within China.⁵⁸ Placed within this historical context, the author argues for viewing the figure of the rogue as the enemy of authoritarianism, whose cynicism and humour constitute a form of 'spiritual self-liberation and not merely signs of the Post '89 period'.⁵⁹ With broad strokes, Li Xianting seeks to reclaim a

Chinese transgressive or avantgarde tradition that includes writers from the Wei-Jin period (220-420) and the Yuan and Ming Dynasties through to writers of the May Fourth Movement (1919), in particular, Zhou Zuoren and his brother Lu Xun.⁶⁰

Written in 1996, the author's allusion to the May Fourth Movement retrieves a key point of reference in the debates of the 1980s. Specifically, it recuperates the movement as part of a Chinese tradition — as distinct from being Eurocentric — and therefore defends the contemporary work as belonging to a Chinese tradition of modernity. Moreover, reference to Zhou Zuoren invokes an author committed to re-establishing the validity of individualism as the key to reinstating the humanist subject. In referring to Lu Xun's famous novel *Diary of a Madman* (1918), Li Xianting recalls a novel that was so strongly identified with the May Fourth Movement, but which also received extraordinary literary attention in the 1980s. As Xiaobing Tang notes, the novel dramatised 'the conflicts between conformity and individuality, between doctrine and interpretation', and as with other writers of Lu Xun's generation, it meant the 'difficult task of reclaiming a radical tradition of transgressive politics'.⁶¹ Such politics belonged to the modernist project of representing the struggle of lower classes to emancipate themselves from oppression. Similarly, Xianting's reference to the famous 14th-century epic novel, *The Water Margin*, invokes a text whose interpretation became a key site of ideological difference and struggle, especially during the Cultural Revolution and the time of the Gang of Four. The figure of the rebel and bandit hero as represented in the novel becomes identified with the ordinary citizen and literati respectively. In the context of the 20th century, from the republican revolution through to the Communist era and after, it was viewed as either a faithful rendering of peasant consciousness and rebellion or as a literary and reformist account of popular rebellion.⁶² In 1991, critic Mu Gong argued that 'hooligan literature is an aristocratic genre written within the mental configuration of plebian culture'.⁶³ To speak then of '*liumang* culture' was to refer to the fetishisation of the popular by intellectuals, writers and artists as a way of reclaiming an existing tradition of anti-authoritarian rebelliousness, as opposed to the state-sponsored ruffian or violent 'hooligan' culture. What was at issue was the levelling of privilege so that the elite was forced to

jostle alongside the plebian working class. In this sense, 'hooligan' culture's 'unproductive and totally consumptive' lifestyle strikes a sympathetic chord.⁶⁴

By 1992, the strengthening of China's commitment to market reform had had a radical impact on the way in which the *liumang* was being viewed. In an editorial note to a translation of a Wang Shuo story, Geremie Barmé wrote, 'Wang and his fellows have helped turn the rowdy youth culture of the Cultural Revolution into the ethos of the Reform age. Many of them have also made a lot of money out of China's further social and cultural degradation.'⁶⁵ They were, as Barmé incisively noted at the time, 'exploiting and commodifying images of their world allowing them to take part in the international process of display and consumption'.⁶⁶ And, following this line of interpretation, cultural historian, Jing Wang, has more recently observed that they had become the 'last proletarians in the new society' or, alternatively, the 'byproducts of China's market economy'.⁶⁷ Ironically, the critics who had identified cynicism as being a characteristic of the *liumang* underwent what might be called an effect of transference so that the authors themselves began to experience the very cynicism they had observed in others.

In a manner consonant with Marx's critique of the processes of reification and religious fetishism, the promise of '*liumang* culture' that Minford had identified as bringing 'spiritual nourishment to the wasteland' is achieved through the fetishisation of art as commodity. What is striking in this respect is how the artists associated with '*liumang* culture' became so marketable, as if the very energies that had characterised them as a rebellious alternative culture and as a 'superfluous' byproduct of Western values were harnessed and converted into cultural surplus by the State, and hence became a valuable export. Consequently, we find that the *liumang* aesthetic gains the support of the foreign experts and the international art market as a sign of the liberalisation of Chinese culture by the state. This view has been argued strongly by Hou Hanru, who writes that the 'cynical realism' of these *liumang* artists is a form of 'ideological centrism'. It is, in his words, a 'compromise between the avantgarde and the official ideology' insofar as their 'languages are popular or mannerist adaptations of the academic conventions' that 'mingle the popular discontentments of political and everyday life with the market

values'. This position represents a cultural pragmatism, whereby both camps consciously identify with the values of the market system. As Hou Hanru points out, 'On the one hand, identification with the market values and their promotion can become an ingenious means of preserving its own power and interests in the time of "opening doors and reforms" while, on the other hand, the market values seem to embody the possibility of freedom of expression and, especially, the guarantee of their commercial interests.'⁶⁸

Crucial to Hou Hanru's analysis is the suggestion of complicity between the State and the *liumang* generation vis-a-vis the market; i.e., that pragmatism itself is a form of cynical realism.⁶⁹ Moreover, his remarks serve to resignify what He Xin had referred to in 1985 as the 'superfluous man'. For, while concurring with the view that the spectacle of degradation has appeared in part as a consequence of a consumer-oriented culture, Hou Hanru turns it back to incorporate official Chinese ideology rather than simply the result of what is labelled as Western influence. What is, however, less remarked on but of equal importance is that the market values 'embody the possibility of personal freedom'.

The countercultural impulse of the '*liumang* culture' finds its liberation or autonomy in the marketplace of conspicuous consumption. It is within this framework that we may locate the sudden appearance and popularity of both 'Gaudy Art' and 'Political Pop', as stylistic phenomena that Li Xianting defined early on as belonging to the tendency of cynical realism as it emerged within the reform era: 'Intuitively responding to the "get-rich-quick" attitude of the dreams and realities of peasants, brought about [by] or emerging [from] the consequences of Western consumer culture in China.'⁷⁰ While the paintings of Wang Guangyi, Wang Ziwai and Qi Zhilong have been lumped together, it is important to distinguish them retrospectively as operating within very different critical modalities. Doubtless, some of the work does entail a parodic recycling of political icons, consumer logos and celluloid stars, as well as advertising commercial symbols. By virtue of their repetition and reification as art objects, they succeed in emptying out meaning and its seriality eradicates all signs of subjectivity for the glamorous sheen of mass-produced objects. The critique of the auratic status of art and authorship that characterised the

participatory aesthetic of the avantgarde groups in the second half of the 1980s has been appropriated in order to facilitate the entry of contemporary art into the nascent culture industry. In this sense, the work of these artists belongs to the tendency of 'Cynical Realism' because the public sphere is no longer a site of radical engagement, but one of the alienated subject. 'Gaudy Art' and 'Political Pop' offer the spectacle of consumption as an emancipatory antidote to the condition of alienation.

As a counterpart to this body of work, the paintings of Fang Lijun offer no such antidote. The sense of ennui and boredom that characterises the work produced in the early 1990s, offers little by way of comfort to the mundane reality of everyday life or alienation. The scene has been emptied, is devoid of mesmerising icons. Likewise, Gao Minglu, in his reassessment of this period, has suggested that the paintings present 'a neutralizing attitude and a new realistic technique that duplicated the referent, not to represent but rather to project it into a decontextualized frozen moment'. By this means, then 'the real, original referent becomes the unreal'.⁷¹ The empty skies and landscapes mean that there are no longer specific symbolic markers of the Cultural Revolution or of collective utopia. For Li Xianting, the shaved head in the paintings of Fang Lijun becomes a lexical signifier; 'a rogue's shaved head with a meaningless expression enabled a form of non-meaning to dissolve a system of meaning associated with rebellion and satire'. The images are without context, an emptying of history as if collective memory has been erased, a condition of amnesia that turns away from the past, but equally redefines symbolically the contemporary human as primarily having to do with the self, as distinct from the collective. There is now nothing to which to refer. It has disappeared, both in real terms and symbolically as a site of value. Yet neither is there an interiority — a rogue's life is vacuous, empty, detached. It becomes, at best, post-political, post-historical. The very idea of an emancipated subject is no longer possible, either by means of the social structure or of individual subjectivity.

As Xiaobing Tang notes in writing on experimental fiction of this period, the protagonist is 'without a privileged position, having no control over events, and even less control over the ceaseless movement of language itself'.⁷² Following Raymond Williams' description of the modernist novel as a 'narrative of unsettlement,

homelessness, solitude and impoverished independence', Tang argues that while this characterises the protagonist of both modernism and fiction today, there is now a 'foreclosure of anxiety' whereby the intensity of the narrative is 'circumscribed and understood'.⁷³ This foreclosure produces a sense of relief, but in so doing depoliticises the subject in a manner that aligns it with consumer capitalism and distinguishes it from the residual modernism of an earlier period. It is a 'postmodernist sensibility of residual modernism [in which] the unconscious of residual modernism strives for such "masochistic relief"'.⁷⁴ In other words, the kind of transgressive politics that characterised the May Fourth movement has been all but emptied of its oppositionality, reinscribed within the bounds of interiority rather than within a larger social domain.

DE/REGULATING THE BODY

Following the events surrounding Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Government strengthened its purge on what it called 'bourgeois liberalisation'. The humanism espoused by Wang Ruoshui, Li Zehou and Liu Zaifu, among others, in the 1980s, came under attack, and they were criticised for belonging to an elite which had been responsible for the turmoil of Tiananmen Square.⁷⁵

Commenting on the era of the 1980s and the work of Wang Ruoshui, Jing Wang has pointed out the ways in which the issue of alienation overshadowed the question of emancipatory subjectivity; i.e., subjectivity as a means of emancipation.⁷⁶ Jing Wang acknowledges the difficulty of thinking through these issues in a manner that is not couched within a broader cultural context of the nation and of China's relationship with the West. That is, de-alienation was not conceived of as a subjective practice within the private sphere, but rather as a means to identify areas for Party reform, and, more importantly, those elements that reflected the influence of alienating bourgeois values that needed eradicating. What was left out of the picture was the way in which emancipation had to begin with the effects of internalised oppression. Moreover, as Jing Wang points out, the 'Anti-Spiritual Pollution' campaign unleashed a 'haunting spectacle of the perpetuation of oppression by the oppressed themselves'.⁷⁷ The author continues: 'As long as the Chinese fail to acknowledge that "the patterns of thought and

action inculcated through the experience of oppression take on a substantiality and a life of their own”, alienation will be reproduced from within at any suggestive call for the return of the oppressed.⁷⁸

In the early 1990s, Liu Wei began his series *Pork* and *You like Pork?* with their images of semi-naked women grotesquely displaying themselves, surrounded by an overall field of images of slices of meat or rotting flesh. While the artist has commented that they are paintings of trash, it is the confrontational nature of the image that seems most startling to the viewer. It is no longer the iconic image of Mao who stares out from the canvas inviting worship, but the figure of a woman. Man is reduced to a voyeuristic plaything of the icon, woman to a fetish thing, and human nature to a chaotic libidinous frenzy.

From birth to death, we're all one person, with no variation in kind, except perhaps that of our sex, that's all. When he (or she) is born into this world, he's like a peeled egg, hot and steamy and very fresh, even so, like the rest of us, he still eats, drinks, pisses, shits and sleeps.⁷⁹

It is this kind of radical disturbance of the subject position and reduction of being human that will lead the artist to later produce a series of paintings — *Who am I?* (2000) — in which the male subject is defaced. Cultural consumption is turned into a vulgar spectacle of China debasing itself.

There is also a degree to which the ethos of consumerism and youth culture within China begins to produce a critical disengagement from its effects. In Yu Hong's painting *Models* (1992), the artist portrays a small girl amid a group of unclothed mannequins. With all the characteristics of Western stereotypes, the image suggests the imposition of foreign cultural values imported during the period of consumerism in China. Emancipation finds its place within the realm of consumption and women become part of an economy of the spectacle, of desire. Yu Hong's painting suggests the ways in which contemporary China was experiencing a powerful sense of dehumanisation, and a de-realisation of the everyday world in which citizens found themselves. This heightened sense of superfluosity becomes characteristic of the period and is found in the work of Yu Hong's contemporaries, sometimes associated with the *liumang*. In 1991, a young group of

artists, among them Yu Hong, held an exhibition called *New Generation*, which was one of the first major exhibitions to be held after 4 June. Shown at the Museum of Chinese History, it marked the emergence of a new realist style that therefore distinguished itself from the academic style favoured by the Government, as well as the avantgarde work shown in the cancelled show of 1989, *China/Avant-garde*. Wu Hung, writing on the work of Yu Hong and Liu Xiaodong, noted that their paintings were of ‘mundane scenes of daily life’ in which the ‘figures ... are always engaged in trivial matters and often seem at a loss’, a loss that expresses a certain attachment with and detachment from reality.⁸⁰

The sense of alienation and dislocation from the real becomes increasingly prominent in the art of the 1990s. Scenes of waste and disintegration, of abandonment and decay become powerful vectors for capturing a sense of powerlessness, a kind of ‘negative freedom’ in which the image of ‘total abandon’ is not easily filled by conspicuous consumption. The consequences are an economy of excess, corruption and unproductive expenditure which veil a society in which not everyone participates in the emergent leisure culture but which, to the contrary, leads to greater impoverishment and suffering by those unable to participate.

Within this broad social environment, two interrelated but distinct artistic tendencies emerge. The first of these represents a continuation of the pre-1989 avantgarde initiatives and is exemplified in the work of the New Analysts group and the work of artists who had been associated with the Pool Society, especially Zhang Peili (one of its founding members). His early work represents an exploration of relationships between pollution and control, especially his video piece *Hygiene No. 3* (1991), in which he is filmed repeatedly washing a chicken to the point that the animal is reduced to a condition of total passivity. The artist becomes the master to the slave as the chicken — whose image is likened by many to the shape of China — is reduced to little more than a docile object. The second tendency appears through performance-based work based on and around the body, a tendency that appears most forcibly in the early 1990s.

Both tendencies seek in different ways to address issues concerning social values and to implicitly critique the fetishisation of the material object and the condition of alienation.⁸¹ In a manner that marks their opposition to the ‘Gaudy Art’ and

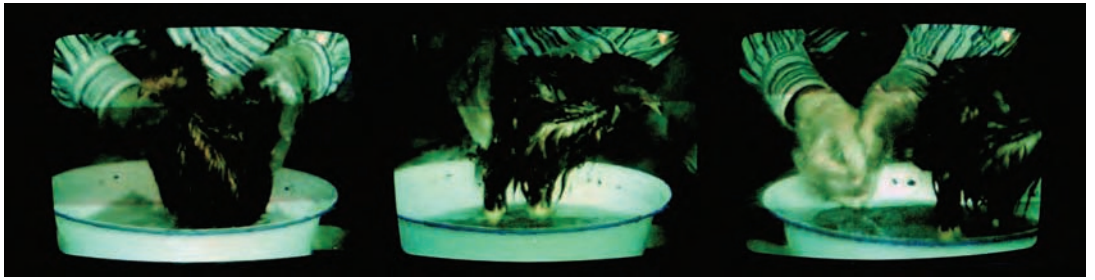


Yu Hong
Vanity Fair

1992
Oil on canvas
177.2 x 182.9 cm
Image courtesy the artist
and *Yishu: journal of
contemporary Chinese art*

'Political Pop' work of the same period, the artists of these two tendencies distance themselves from the fetishisation of the art as commodity, focusing instead on the regulation and deregulation of everyday life. As Hou Hanru writes, 'It is a strategy to expose the absurdity of the everyday under ideologically oriented regulations as the dominant force in social and private life.'⁸² In fact, this increasing state of deregulation contributes to an undermining of the attempt by certain avantgarde groups to base their work on a rationally based inquiry into the conditions governing everyday life.

The idea of regulation and deregulation of everyday life takes on a different valence within the second tendency. Questions



of taboo, perversion and violence begin to appear symptomatic of prohibition and over-regulated everyday life, but equally, the unprecedented appearance of deregulated desire within a consumer-oriented economy. For, while the slogan of reform — ‘To get rich is glorious’ — is the basis on which a fetishism of the commodity is founded, it is also the enabling factor of access to other forms of fetishistic behaviour or corruption, i.e., pornography, gambling, smuggling, prostitution, etc. It is precisely this domain that the State identifies as ‘spiritual pollution’ and seeks to regulate, even though by marking it as taboo its illicit character will become a greater object of fascination. It therefore functions to reinscribe the acceptable limits and values within which contemporary art must perform. Fetishism becomes the object of a driving desire to achieve change and the fulfilment of individual needs and social goals.

Within this context, the emergence of performance art in this era of reform is not coincidental, but rather functions to incorporate and corporalise the fetish power of the object. To act on the body directly, to turn it into a fetish object, represents a libidinal investment in the object as a form of emancipation of the subject from alienation and a sense of impotence over controlling their own actions. Under Mao, the Chinese people had been instilled with the belief that change and the prospect of a rosy future were possible only through an embrace of the collective values propagated by the Party. The writings of those who had engaged with issues of humanism and alienation in the 1980s had depoliticised the body, advocating an independent, autonomous and self-regulating human subject that could demand recognition of both dignity and rights. However, this detachment from society was for some no longer a viable option in a post-Tiananmen era. Moreover, it was also undermined by the appeal of a consumer culture in which individual subjectivity was now championed by

Zhang Peili
Video stills from
‘Hygiene No.3’

1991
Video
Image courtesy the artist
and *Yishu: journal of
contemporary Chinese art*

the Party. And yet, we should also observe here that this led not only to a continuing representation within experimental and avantgarde art of the disastrous effects of collectivisation, but also to the appropriation of an inherently problematic model of the cult of the individual body, albeit, in this case, the cult of Mao Zedong and sacralisation of the body of the leader.

I will mention in this context two works — *Weeping Angels* of 1993 by Zhang Huan and *Temptation* of 1994 by Zhan Wang — which, in distinct ways, capture the complexity of these issues and suggest how the humanist perspective that characterised the New Era period had been hollowed out of its utopian faith in the universal progress of humanity.

The work of Zhang Huan is a sculptural installation composed of a row of large upright cases and a string of hanging baby dolls. This followed his Masters thesis, for which he produced *Weeping Angel* — a suspended plastic child on a wall covered in black felt. Authorities at the Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, threatened to close the exhibition if he did not write a formal apology. He did so, but the exhibition was, nonetheless, closed.⁸³ With reference to that time, Zhang Huan later wrote that

Maybe it was because of the poor countryside in Henan where I grew up. I got hepatitis — because I had nothing to eat. There were many deaths and funerals. I can never forget the funerals of my grandmother and other relatives. Maybe it was also because of my personal life in Beijing. You could not keep your child when your girlfriend was pregnant ... Girls of my generation have to go through many abortions ... Many unborn babies died. This is the situation of the Nineties.⁸⁴

In 1994, Zhang Huan made his first public performance work, *12 Square Meters*, in which the artist sits on a public toilet, his body covered in honey and fish oil. Flies quickly swarm all over him. He then submerges himself in a polluted river close by. In the same year, he performed *65 Kilograms*, in which he suspended himself three metres above the ground, forcing blood from a wound in his neck to drip into a metal bowl placed directly below him on a stove.⁸⁵ It is no longer a scene of tough bravado, or inversely of apathy and inertia, in which subjectivity is able to construct for itself a dimension of interiority, however much it is filled with a sense of ennui and disillusion. Rather, an economy of

surplus produces a sacrificial economy in which heroism has been displaced by self-destruction and violence. In this regard, we should mention Yan Lei's exhibition, *Invasion*, held the next year. In *Invasion*, the artist showed videos and photographs of a sow waiting for slaughter and of himself as the object of violence.⁸⁶

These performances recall a passage from Wang Shuo's novel *No Man's Land* (translated as *Whatever You Do, Don't Treat Me As Human*) in which the antihero, Tang Yuanbao, remarks, 'From now on, I'm no longer human ... not an ordinary person.' The martial arts competition described in the novel requires competitors to display an 'art of endurance', to see who can tolerate the most painful and humiliating treatment. The test includes being bound and tied. Tang is compressed into a smaller shape than anyone else, he drinks the piss of someone who rides him like a horse, he submerges himself in water the temperature of which is lowered to freezing point, and performs his own trial of endurance by hitting his own face until it is swollen and purple. The other contestants put cats into their pants, use their teeth to pull a rope connected to a lorry and place their heads into a lion's gaping maw and tickle it.⁸⁷

Comparatively, Zhan Wang's sculptural installations confront more directly the process of dehumanisation, a process in which the image of death becomes the uncanny spectre of human life. *Temptation* (1994) is composed of a group of emptied-out Mao suits, molded to look like figures and placed on a mound of earth, or suspended from scaffolding. In an interview, he commented that it was an image of cicadas transforming themselves, discarding their skins in order to transcend the mortality of their body. Wung Hu has observed that this corresponds with the ancient Chinese notion of the cicada as a symbol of immortality, which can be found in carvings made for tombs. However, this correspondence may also function metaphorically, whereby the hollow shells allude to contemporary China. Against the classicism of the human figure expected by the Academy, the artist creates hollowed-out figures whose distorted postures suggest an external and internal wound. Hence, we may better understand the suggestiveness of the artist's words when he comments, 'The new body is nowhere to be seen. We have no idea what it has become — either dead or reborn, in heaven or hell.'⁸⁸ This reading is strengthened by Zhan Wang's dramatic elaboration of the work in the same year. Placing the hollowed-out figures in the ruins of an abandoned building in

Beijing, the artist retitles the work as *Temptation: An Outdoor Experiment*.⁸⁹ The shift between these two works provides an intensely telescoped view of, on the one hand, a failed collective enthusiasm for the Cultural Revolution (symbolised by the Red Guards), and, on the other, intimations of a future in which collective urbanisation offers a dismal alternative. Not only does the hollowed-out form capture the impoverishment of the spirit and body, but it also captures the utter superfluousness of its form and therefore existence.

From this perspective, the artistic experiments of both Zhang Huan and Zhan Wang, as they emerged in the early 1990s, should be seen as a critical engagement with what may be viewed as the superfluousness of human life in China. Moreover, a comparison between the two artists throws into sharp relief the subject of masculinity and, in turn, a much larger history of how masculinity was shaped by and articulated notions of liberation, emancipation, revolt or revolution. Reading back on this history, the image of the bandit or rebel in *The Water Margin*, the Red Guard, the *liumang* figure and the kind of performance work that dominates the Nineties through to recent times, are both informed by the subject of gender as critical to self-definition and cultural values.

The performances in which the human or animal is the subject of degradation or in which there is fascination with the corporality of the body cannot be understood as the consequence of Western values, or, more simply, as an imported stylistic influence that therefore delegitimise its local significance and value. In contradistinction, we might say that while American and European art has been held up as offering a model to Chinese culture, Chinese artists recognise and re-articulate that model within their own terms. In such terms, the artistic practice of these artists turns the tables on He Xin's attack on the 'superfluous' in contemporary Chinese literature as symptomatic of Western decadence and cultural nihilism. Rather, we might say that while their work resonates with performance art from outside China, it does so not to emulate but to find ways to create a critical practice that is contemporaneous to issues confronting those individuals and society.

It now becomes evident that the Reform era unleashed and led, in turn, to the kind of degradation of human life and perverse



Zhan Wang
Temptation

1994
Installation
Image courtesy
the artist and
*Yishu: journal of
contemporary Chinese art*



Zhan Wang
Temptation

1994
Installation
Image courtesy
the artist and
*Yishu: journal of
contemporary Chinese art*

obsession with mortality witnessed in contemporary Chinese art today.⁹⁰ This constitutes a belated response to recent Chinese history that surfaces as an effect of the non-synchronic development of China since the collapse of the New Era. Within this framework, the ‘pornographic’ constitutes not only the debasement and exploitation of others, but is as much a symbolic expression of a culture of conspicuous consumption and libidinal investment.

HOMOGENEOUS EMPTY TIME

To conclude, we may return to the events surrounding the Shanghai Biennale in 2000. For, while the exhibitions *Unusual and Usual* and *Fuck-Off* raised the increasingly problematic issue of the ethical within China, it was the parallel exhibition, *Useful Life* — held at the same time — that explored the transformation and depoliticisation of social life and leisure that was offered as an alternative model by the Reform Era.

Significantly, *Useful Life* featured three Shanghai and media-based artists: Yang Zhenzhong, Xu Zhen and Yang Fudong. The Reform Era had ushered in a new approach by the State towards the media, discovering its potential to maintain the status quo through the formation of a leisure industry that would also generate cultural capital. The engagement with new media in the mid-Nineties corresponds with this formative moment in which the economic function of cultural capital is mobilised by reproductive technologies. For artists, the access to new media offered a more immediate engagement with the mass media and the commodification of everyday life in which new needs, desires and values were being created daily as part of the ethos of a nascent capitalism driven by demands for investment and consumption.⁹¹ And, it is then, within this context, that the irony of the exhibition title, *Useful Life*, was fully exploited by the three Shanghai artists.

Yang Fudong exhibited a photo-based work entitled *The First Intellectual* (2000). It depicted a suited young man standing in the middle of a Shanghai street, with blood on his face and shirt, threatening to throw a brick. Like much of Yang Fudong’s work, there is an ambiguity as to what exactly is happening. What is nonetheless clear is that while being injured, the young man has

no clear object against which to retaliate. The street is empty and he is alone. From his expression and gesture, he appears to be frustrated by a growing sense of futility. Commenting on the work, Yang Fudong identifies his generation with the protagonist of *The First Intellectual* and 'the way we view life, society and surroundings'. He refers to the figure as 'rebellious against something even if it's not clear what or whom'. It is a feeling of 'frustration, helplessness when you first come to the realisation that you may not be able to do what it is you want to do and you don't know what to do ...'⁹² Hanru is less ambiguous about the situation. Shanghai is 'the most fervent city of consumerism' and 'you can get anything you want if you are ready to give up any intellectuality'.⁹³ He continues, 'Literature and art are being murdered in the complot between commercial language, media and political control. The murder is realized in the most exciting and sensational forms: the sleepless and shadowless Shanghai-by-night scene is the best context.'⁹⁴

For Yang Fudong, while the figure of the intellectual may symbolise his or her marginalisation and powerlessness in the face of a commodified culture, there remains a persistent quality of idealism in his subjects. His subjects are dreamers, moved by faith, belief and ideals. Yang Fudong also exhibited photo-based work such as *Don't Worry, It Will Be Better* (2000) and *Shenjia Alley — Fairies* (2000). They are *mise en scènes* that depict young men and women doing nothing other than passing the time together in what appears to be at best socially unproductive and self-obsessed. They mimic the glossy paradise of commercial advertising in which fiction and the real begin to fuse together. Slumbering in the dream factory of a consumer culture, the fulfilment of pleasure remains perpetually deferred.⁹⁵ Within these spaces of leisure, as in *Shenjia Alley — Fairies*, young women, either naked or half-dressed, sit around waiting for the next customer: leisure becomes the marketplace and the site of commodity exchange. And, as with the transformation of Chinese society more generally, the everyday becomes the product of consumption and an arena of pure surplus value and cultural expenditure without agency.

Alongside Yang Fudong, Xu Zhen exhibited a three-monitor video installation, *From Inside the Body* (1999), depicting a young man and woman smelling themselves and each other while seated on identical sofas. Each of the videos begins with the couch, then

introduces the figure and ends with an article of clothing left behind. The central monitor shows the two characters approach one another, smell one another then leave without leaving anything behind. Such videos as these are confessional, voyeuristic, violent, tender, pornographic, intimate, fetishistic, scrutinising the self and the other to the point of fixation. There are many other videos of a similar type that are about the individual not so much within the public sphere as in the private sphere. It reflects a generation discovering itself and the emergence of a culture that belongs to excess and expenditure rather than to productivity and constraint. It is as if this generation sought to discover through their bodies the experience of subjectivity and interiority, auto-affection and self-knowledge. The sense of reduction of the human being to a primary functioning body represents a desire to push against the boundaries of acceptability and taboos, conventions and value. Faced with a form of impotence, such videos create a space of friction in which the recognition of self and other is achieved through aesthetic and physical transgression. This is evident in Xu Zhen's four-minute video loop, *Rainbow* (1998), which displays the back of a naked man being slapped continuously. During the course of the performance, the imprint of the hand becomes more and more visible as the surrounding skin turns red. While the audience hears the sound of a whip striking the back, the image of a whip is never seen. One projects the inflicted pain and yet, at the same time, the artist diminishes the sense of violence by applying colour variation and hence heightening the aesthetic appeal of the image as an abstract surface.

The third artist to exhibit in Shanghai was Yang Zhenzhong, whose work included *Lucky Family* (1995) and *Fishbowl* (1996). The former was composed of a series of computer-processed images depicting roosters, hens and chickens grouped together in the manner of a Chinese family or group portrait, especially those of the Communist era, while the latter comprised three monitors — one on top of the other — each showing a fishbowl filled with water and a close-up image of a mouth repeating the words 'We are not fish'.⁹⁶ Together, the artist shows an animal world reduced to a docile and compliant body that may well end up on a platter or imprisoned in a claustrophobic space as an object on perpetual display. Reminiscent of Zhang Peili's earlier video, *Hygiene No. 3*,

Yang Zhenzhong's work alludes to the ethos of collectivity that shapes the conventions of Communist portraiture, while also suggesting an undifferentiated conformity. It is also about the status of the individual, which, for a contemporary artist in China, has become a pressing issue of self-definition and survival.

No longer tied to the old national or utopian discourses, there is nothing heroic about these works. Quite the opposite; they are banal. As Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie have noted, they contain 'terribly simple ideas of little significance'.⁹⁷ As if resistant to the long shadow of Chinese history, they present an atomistic world, seemingly detached from place. Critical to a reading of this work are the dimensions of duration and repetition. Over time, the immediacy of experience and the idea of presence that characterise a *cinéma-vérité* style are emptied out. Here, repetition serves only to defer the advent of corporeal plenitude promised by commodity culture. Rather, repetition reflects the routine character of everyday experience, the commodification that is mass culture. People find themselves caught within the 'empty homogeneous history' that Walter Benjamin characterised as a defining principle of modernity. Nothing changes except by way of consumption.

More than that, while the actions or performative gestures may appear straightforward and disarmingly crude in form, they are also violent in subject. Without the moral and ethical compass that had once so rigorously circumscribed individual life, the subject turns back, inward, in a perverse relation to the self and to notions of the real. This is not exactly an aesthetics of emancipation. Rather, we are witness to a radical disenchantment with the real. The actions taken or performed represent a profound disillusionment with the past and the enduring legacy of Communism, especially in the latter years of Mao during the Cultural Revolution, which involved extreme disciplinary power over bodies. Twenty years later, the individual is now subject to a different force involving the commodification of desire. In fact, what now becomes apparent is that this group of work displays an anaesthetised and amnesiac body. There is no effect so that inflicting pain or pleasure becomes a means of mobilising and registering the body in order to document an experience that has lost its power of agency and therefore any transformative potential. These artists form an inward-turning subcultural group whose marginality is re-signified within the international arena as

transgressive. Such gestures become acts of survival, especially for the artist faced with marginalisation in the face of a mass commodity culture.

NOTES

This is an expanded version of the essay published in *Yishu: journal of contemporary Chinese art* (Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 58–81). Portions of this essay were also given at the conference *Chinese Contemporary v. Contemporary Chinese*, held at the British Museum, London (April 2002), and at *Our Modernities: positioning Asian art now*, organised by the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (February 2004). I would like to thank Wu Hung, Robert Bernell, Sasa Su-Ling Welland and Britta Erickson for their reading of the essay and suggestions offered for its improvement.

- 1 Ian Johnson, 'New Chinese Art: revolting', *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 May, 1999, p. 20.
- 2 While the terms 'Western' and 'the West' were used by Chinese commentators to represent an ideological entity, they have persisted, as has the monolithic term 'China' within critical writing on Chinese culture and art. Recently, Hou Hanru has sought to identify certain forms of contemporary art in the Cantonese region as a distinguishable practice. See also endnote 91.
- 3 Karen Smith, 'Contagious desire.' *Art AsiaPacific*, No. 31, 2001, p. 56.
- 4 Smith, 'Contagious desire', p. 56.
- 5 Smith, 'Contagious desire', p. 54.
- 6 Smith, 'Contagious desire', p. 54.
- 7 Smith, 'Contagious desire', pp. 53, 56.
- 8 Smith, 'Contagious desire', p. 53.
- 9 That being said, I wish to acknowledge the importance of the author's article, in which there is much to agree with and which formed, in part, the impetus for my essay.
- 10 Wang Nanming, 'How to deal with rights — a criticism of the violent trend in Chinese contemporary art', *Chinese-Art.com*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2001, p. 2.
- 11 Wang Nanming, 'How to deal with rights — a criticism of the violent trend in Chinese contemporary art'.
- 12 John Minford, 'Picking up the pieces.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 8 August, 1985, p. 30.
- 13 Huang Du, *Post Material*, RedGate Gallery, Beijing, 2000, p. 14.
- 14 Zhu Qi, 'Reviving: the alienated image of Red Paradise.' *Time of Reviving*, Upriver Gallery, Chengdu, 2000, unpaginated.
- 15 Chen Jiagang, 'Preface', in Zhu Qi, *Time of Reviving*.
- 16 Karen Smith, 'Contagious desire', p. 57.
- 17 Cited in Gary Jones, 'Art: hard to swallow', *The Independent*, 27 February, 2000, p. 18.

- 18 Wu Meichun, 'Alien bodies and delusion', in Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, *Hou gan xing = Post-Sense Sensibility*, Beijing, 1999, p. 1. See also the excellent documentation by Wu Hung in *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, University of Chicago, Chicago, 2000.
- 19 See the citation of Chinese critic Pi Li, *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 May, 1999, p. 20.
- 20 Ian Johnson, 'New Chinese art', p. 20.
- 21 Sun Yuan, cited in Gary Jones, *The Independent*, 27 February, 2000, p. 19.
- 22 Deng Xiaoping, *People's Daily*, 19 July, 1983.
- 23 With the fear that foreign investment would suffer as a result of the anti-Western sentiments, the campaign subsided within five months.
- 24 Portions of Wang Ruoshui's text are translated in *Inside Mainland China* 5/6, June 1983, pp. 7–8. The 'Mao cult' — or cult of the leader — was satirised by painters and writers in the late 1980s.
- 25 Wang Ruoshui, 1986, 'In defense of humanism', cited in Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1996, p. 26.
- 26 Woei Lien Chong, 'Combining Marx with Kant: the philosophical anthropology of Li Zehou', *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 49, No. 2, April, 1999, p. 121.
- 27 Xiaobing Tang, 'The function of new theory in politics, ideology and literary discourse', in Liu Kang and Xiaobing Tang (eds), *Modern China*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, p. 284.
- 28 Liu Kang, 'Subjectivity, Marxism and culture theory in China', *Social Text*, 31/32, 1993, p. 133.
- 29 In early 1984, Wang Ruoshui was dismissed from his post at the *People's Daily*, then reinstated later that year, after the waning of the 'Anti-Spiritual Pollution' campaign.
- 30 See transcript of Deng Xiaoping's speech at the Second Plenum on 12 October, 1983, published in *Issues and Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4, April, pp. 99–111.
- 31 See Thomas B. Gold, 'Just in time! China battles spiritual pollution on the eve of 1984', *Asian Survey*, Vol. 34, No. 9, September, 1984, p. 957.
- 32 Thomas B. Gold, 'Just in time!' p. 965.
- 33 *Meishu*, No. 1, 1983, pp. 4–9, and No. 5, 1983, pp. 16–19. See also Geremie R. Barmé, 'Translator's introduction', in He Xin, 'A word of advice to the Politburo', *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 23, January, 1990, p. 51.
- 34 Karen Smith, 'Contagious desire', p. 53. By 1985, Li Xianting joined with the journal *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishubao*) supporting new emergent artists, such as the Stars group, which formed in 1979.
- 35 Among the authors who became the targets of his attack were Xu Xing and Liu Suola. See an extract translated in Geremie R. Barmé and Linda Jaivin (eds), *New Ghosts, Old Dreams*, Random House, New York, 1992, pp. 260–64. He Xin also published in the same year the article 'Absurdity and superfluous people in contemporary literature', *Dushu*, Vol. 11, 1985, pp. 3–13.
- 36 John Minford, 'Picking up the pieces', p. 30.
- 37 John Minford, 'Picking up the pieces', p. 30.
- 38 John Minford, 'Picking up the pieces', pp. 30–31.
- 39 John Minford, 'Picking up the pieces', p. 30.

- 40 John Minford, 'Picking up the pieces', pp. 31–32.
- 41 Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p. 272.
- 42 Wang Shuo, 'MaoSpeak', *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Fall, 1995, pp. 96–98.
- 43 Wang Shuo, 'MaoSpeak', pp. 96–98.
- 44 This body of work by Xu Bing, Wu Shan Zhuan, Wenda Gu (Gu Wenda) and Qiu Zhijie has been written about extensively, most importantly by Wu Hung, in 'Ruins, fragmentation and the Chinese modern/postmodern', and Norman Bryson, in 'The post-ideological avantgarde', in Ming-Lu Kao et al., *Inside Out: new Chinese art*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Asian Society Gallery, New York, and University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998. More specifically, see the marvellous piece of analysis on Xu Bing by Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: the art of Xu Bing*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2001. See also my essay 'Forgetting the memory of the word: writing lessons in contemporary Chinese art', in Jagjit Chuhan, Angela Dimitrakaki and Emma Thomas (eds), *Re/Trace: dialogues*, John Moores University, Liverpool, 2001, pp. 62–69.
- 45 Various leaders had toured Xiamen, and, while variously supporting the concept of the SEZ, had also voiced concern that cities, especially those such as Xiamen, situated directly across the straits from Taiwan, were vulnerable to being corrupted by foreign investment. The Party historian and theoretician Hu Qiaomu, who voiced similar concerns in his tour of Xiamen in 1985, was also at this time engaged in a theoretical debate about the concept of social humanism as advanced by Wang Ruoshui.
- 46 Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin, *Resistance*, Watari-um — the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1992
- 47 Evelyne Jouanno, 'According to the potential of the situation', *Huang Yong Ping*, De Appel, Amsterdam, 1998, p. 40.
- 48 The Pool Society ended in 1989 and the New Measurement Group (also known as the New Analysts group) dissolved in 1995.
- 49 See my 'Interview with Wang Guangyi on the Socialist Visual Experience', in *Wang Guangyi*, Timezone8, Hong Kong, pp. 27–28.
- 50 See especially Hou Hanru's excellent essay 'Somewhere between Utopia and Chaos', in Chris Driessen and Heidi van Mierlo (eds), *Another Long March*, Fundament Foundation, Breda, 1997, pp. 54–91. See also Gao Minglu, 'From Elite to Small Man', in *Inside Out*, p. 158 ff.
- 51 Gao Minglu, 'From Elite to Small Man', p. 165, footnote 5.
- 52 Huang Yong Ping moved to Europe in 1989. Wenda Gu left in 1988, while Xu Bing left in 1990.
- 53 Geremie R. Barmé, 'Arrière-pensée on an Avantgarde: the stars in retrospect', in *The Stars: 10 years*, Hanart2 Gallery, Hong Kong, 1989.
- 54 The source of these paintings has been linked to the work of Geng Jianyi and Zhang Peili, among others, and the Pool Society, which produced paintings under the rubric of 'grey humour' as opposed to 'red humour'. See Gao Minglu, 'From Elite to Small Man', p. 156.
- 55 Published in *Xuexi Yuekan*, Vol. 12, 1988, pp. 34–38. Cited in Geremie R. Barmé, 'Translator's Introduction', in He Xin, 'A Word of Advice to the Politburo', pp. 55–56.
- 56 Cited in Geremie R. Barmé, 'Wang Shuo and liumang ("hooligan") culture', *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, Vol. 28, July, 1992, p. 31.

- 57 Wang Nanming, *Chinese-art.com*.
- 58 Li Xianting, *Fang Lijun: human images in an uncertain age*, Japan Foundation Forum, Tokyo, 1996, unpaginated.
- 59 Li Xianting, *Fang Lijun: human images in an uncertain age*.
- 60 It should be noted here that the May Fourth movement became the subject of successive ideological claims, so that an artist such as Xu Bing could be accused of opposing its tradition on the grounds that he had succumbed to the 'spell of foreign thoughts'. See Britta Erickson, *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words*, p. 41.
- 61 Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2000, p. 63.
- 62 More recently, the writer and political prisoner Wei Jingsheng referred to the epic as a model for different kinds of popular rebellion in China's modern history — heroic tales that signify the historical continuity of the political struggle of Chinese people's desire for recognition. John Fitzgerald, 'Continuity within Discontinuity: the case of *Water Margin* mythology', *Modern China*, Vol. 12, No. 3, July, 1986, pp. 361–400. And John Fitzgerald, 'China and the Quest for Dignity', *National Interest*, No. 55, Spring, 1999, p. 58.
- 63 Mu Gong, 'Wang Shuo: Zhishi fenzi wenhua de bishizhe', *Zhongshan*, No. 1, p. 152, cited in Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p. 269.
- 64 This reading is dependent on Jing Wang's wonderful chapter of *High Culture Fever* entitled 'Wang Shuo: pop goes the culture', pp. 261–86.
- 65 Geremie R. Barmé, editorial note to Wang Shuo, 'MaoSpeak', p. 96.
- 66 Geremie R. Barmé, 'Exploit, Export, Expropriate: artful marketing from China, 1989–93', in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong, 1993, p. Li.
- 67 Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p. 269.
- 68 Hou Hanru, 'Somewhere between Utopia and Chaos', p. 67.
- 69 This kind of cynicism is not uncommon within Communist countries and manifested itself most clearly in Cuba during the second half of the 1980s, whereby cultural exports served to improve the image of Cuba and potentially attract tourism, and thus foreign currency and goodwill. However, it was abruptly ended when it appeared that the Government was not able to maintain control over its vested interests. Subsequently, those artists who had established an export market exported themselves into permanent exile, only to find, of course, that the marketplace had moved on, less interested because they no longer represented an 'exotic' import.
- 70 For an extended discussion of these tendencies, see Li Xianting, 'Some More Thoughts on the Raison d'Etre of Gaudy Art', on *China-art.com*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1999.
- 71 Gao Minglu, 'From Elite to Small Man', p. 156. This essay was published in the exhibition *Inside Out*, for which Gao Minglu was guest curator. It opened in the United States 10 years after the now landmark exhibition *China/Avant-garde* in 1989, which he co-curated with Li Xianting.
- 72 Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern*, p. 199.
- 73 Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern*, p. 199.
- 74 Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern*, p. 200. It is interesting to note the author's introduction of the word 'masochistic' into this text; the word 'masochistic' does not appear in the article version published in 1993.

- 75 In the months after June 1989, Li Zehou's writings all but disappeared from view and he was unable to lecture or publish. See Lin Min, 'The Search for Modernity: Chinese intellectual discourse and Li Zehou', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 132, December, 1993, p. 991. Liu Zaifu was dismissed as editor of the leading journal *Literary Review*, which had published articles critical of Mao's policy on cultural production.
- 76 Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p. 19 ff.
- 77 Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p. 19.
- 78 Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever*, p. 19. Here the author is also citing a passage from Erica Sherover-Marcuse, *Emancipation and Consciousness*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 126.
- 79 Cited by Li Xianting from 'A Painterly Gift', and reproduced in *Made by Chinese*, Galerie Enrrico Navarra, Paris, 2001, p. 82.
- 80 Wu Hung, *Transience*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999, pp. 144–47.
- 81 In briefly addressing the issue of the fetish, I am indebted to the work of William Pietz. See Emily Apter and William Pietz (eds), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Cornell, 1993.
- 82 Hou Hanru, 'Towards an "Un-official art"', *Third Text*, 34, Spring, 1996, p. 50.
- 83 Wu Hung, *Transience*, p. 199.
- 84 Wu Hung, *Transience*, p. 105.
- 85 For a longer discussion of Zhang Huan's early work, see my essay 'Becoming posthumous: performance art in China', Sarah Champion, Helen Glaister, Wing-Fai Leung and Emma Roberts (eds), *China Contemporary*, John Moores University/British Museum, Liverpool, forthcoming.
- 86 I owe this reference to Britta Erickson.
- 87 Barmé, 'Wang Shuo and *liumang* ("hooligan") culture', p. 52 ff.
- 88 Wu Hung, *Transience*, p. 109.
- 89 Wu Hung, *Transience*, pp. 110–12. This piece was then elaborated the next year with *Temptation: Classroom Exercise*, in which clay figures in differing poses were strewn over rubble inside one of the now abandoned classrooms of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Wu Hung explains how the Academy was forced to move out and a group of three artists, all teachers at the Academy, held the exhibition *Property Development* in the classrooms during the time they were being demolished for commercial redevelopment.
- 90 It was Zhan Wang who, as director of the Open Studio program in the Research Institute of Sculpture, invited Li Xianting to curate the exhibition *Obsession with Harm* in 2000.
- 91 For further discussion on this subject and other Shanghai-based artists, see my article 'The Long Striptease: desiring emancipation', in *Parachute*, 2004.
- 92 See my interview with Yang Fudong, 'Yang Fudong: doubt and hope', *Art Press*, Vol. 290, May, 2003, p. 33.
- 93 Hou Hanru, *On the Mid-Ground*, edited by Yu Hsiao-hwei, Timezone8, Hong Kong, 2002, p. 237.

- 94 Hou Hanru, *On the Mid-Ground*, p. 236.
- 95 A recent split-screen video, *Jasmine*, continues this exploration of the conventions and rhetoric of romance as played out between a young couple on a rooftop. For a discussion of the film, see my interview 'Yang Fudong: doubt and hope', and my essay 'Nostalgia for a cosmopolitan future', in *Camera*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, 2003, pp. 61–65.
- 96 This was shown in the landmark 1996 video exhibition *Image and Phenomena*, held at the Art Gallery of the China National Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, organised by Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie.
- 97 Wu Meichun and Qiu Zhijie, 'The rise and development of video art and the maturity of new media art', in Wu Hung with Wang Huangsheng and Feng Boyi (eds), *Reinterpretation: a decade of experimental art (1990–2000)*, Guangdong Museum of Art, Guangzhou, 2002, p. 53.

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

SOUTH ASIA

A STAKE IN MODERNITY: A Brief History of Modern Indian Art

Geeta Kapur

THERE ARE THREE generations of practising artists in India who constitute the contemporary art scene; they span more or less the half-century that coincides with Indian Independence in 1947. The problem of identity has been taken to be an axiomatic feature within the culture of a nation in the making; it is therefore inscribed in the very ethos and autobiography of these contemporaries. At least it had been so until the end of the century when the matter stood at the brink. Nationalist discourse has been usurped by (proto-fascist) forces of religious fundamentalism; and the viability of the nation-state has come into a crisis by the encouragement of ethnic conflict within global capitalism. The assumptions of sovereignty within modernist consciousness, as indeed of self-representation within Marxist utopias, are virtually mirrored upside down in the post-modern condition. Cultural schizophrenia is the more appropriate metaphor for designating the subject in relation with the world, as also in designating plural societies. In the face of that, the very purpose of defining national art scenes in Asia, such as this book

(*Art and Social Change*) undertakes, is an attempt to find a closely registered therefore composite profile for the multiple initiatives that constitute the cultures of these nations.

Between the 1850s, when the first art schools in the British sense of the term were opened (Calcutta 1854; Madras 1854; and Bombay 1857), and the 1950s, when independent India drafted its cultural policy in the first Five Year Plan (1951–56), and Nehru inaugurated a series of institutions to form an infrastructure for the promotion of the arts, one can synoptically spell out 100 years of modern Indian art preceding the contemporary.

The history of oil and easel painting began with the visits of European painters to India in search of work and adventure. By the end of the 18th century several important professional artists from Britain, such as Tilly Kettle (1735–86); William Hodges (1744–97); Francesco Renaldi (1755–c.99); John Zoffany (1733–1810); Thomas (1749–1840) and William Daniell (1769–1837) had come and painted in India. They laid the ground for the grand manner, the British version of neoclassicism, so that indeed the name of Sir Joshua Reynolds would evoke a requisite amount of awe in colonial India. George Chinnery (1774–1852) had studied at the Royal Academy before coming to India in the 19th century; many others coming and going between India and Britain had connections or aspirations in the same direction. John Griffiths, considered the greatest Victorian painter to visit India, arrived with Lockwood Kipling, Rudyard Kipling's painter father, in 1865 and while the former became the head of Sir J. J. School of Art, the latter headed the Mayo School of Arts started in Lahore in 1878. Collections of contemporary European paintings, mostly by English Royal Academy painters of a middling variety, were built up in the 19th century by the Indian aristocracy as well, and these were supplemented by albums of watercolours and prints. It was also possible to find copies in oils of Rubens, van Dyck, etc., in British and Indian collections.

The most remarkable, though self-taught, painter to emerge from this hybrid milieu was 'Raja' Ravi Varma (1848–1906) of Travancore. He came full circle on the colonial-national circuit by starting to paint portraits after the example of the Europeans and ended up as the major allegorist of indigenous subjects drawn from epic and mythological tales; an allegorist in more or less the neoclassical sense of the term, intending to bring to par native



'Raja' Ravi Varma
1846–1906
Victory of Indrajit

c. 1905
Oil on canvas
182.9 x 121.9 cm
Collection: Shri
Jayachamarajendra Art
Gallery, Mysore, India

Indian with Greek and Christian representations of its classical past. He saw himself ennobling the vision and taste of his compatriots, thus serving to form a civilisational identity within the terms of 19th century India. More politically, he can be seen as an artist dedicated to the emerging national cause of a pan-India culture (the Indian National Congress held its first session in Bombay in 1885). What is notable is that he proselytised his version of *classical* Indian culture as contemporary *high art* and that in turn as *genre* through popular printing technology. The aura of iconographic images was dismantled to serve popular ends through the publication of oleograph prints, mostly done after his own oil paintings, and these came to be enshrined in middle-class homes all over India for decades after Ravi Varma's death.

Concomitant with Ravi Varma's career, British art education was inaugurated in India with a very precise brief consistent with colonial economic and cultural policies: the preservation of serviceable crafts (in Madras the art institution was called the School of Industrial Arts) and the elevation of Indians to European values and taste. It is not possible to recapitulate here the vexed debates about indigenous skills and Western aesthetics; relevant to this narrative is the fact that there was established the infrastructure of pedagogy for oil and easel painting based on life drawing and that this formed the academic criteria for and against which subsequent movements in Indian art developed.

Ravi Varma, the first proclaimed 'genius' in the otherwise tradition-oriented or genre-based development of Indian art, came to be complemented in his self-taught salon style by the oil paintings, decades later, of a young virtuoso, Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–41). She was the first and last of what one may properly call an Academy-trained painter to make a national mark. Trained from 1930 to 1934 at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, she regarded British art education with predictable scorn. Her own Eurasian background (her mother was Hungarian) included the School of Paris in its post-impressionist and marginally modernist aspects. It also included the central European art milieu that

favoured, right through the interwar years when avantgarde movements had already gained ground, certain classicising tendencies within the realist-representational framework. For her part, Sher-Gil decided to privilege an Indian vision and to induct her knowledge of Western art to serve the aim of India's new destiny. This provided her with a typical native/orientalist project of adaptation and, more notably, of a moral reorientation where the representation of Indian women served as the cutting edge for a discreetly modernising aesthetic.

The large oeuvre of Ravi Varma with the small oeuvre of Sher-Gil (she died when she was not yet twenty-nine) gives us the measure of the dilemmas Indian representational art in its (quasi)realistic bearings tries to work out: the problem of subjectivity before the transcending gaze of such pioneering artists as the aristocratic Ravi Varma and Sher-Gil; and, conversely, the promise of materiality in the medium of oils, and in the reality-paradigm of the mirror/window format of easel painting.

In between there developed an alternative story within the colonial-national framework. The Bengal School emerged in the first decade of the 20th century from a collaboration between E.B. Havell, the English superintendent (from 1896 to 1906), at the Government School of Art, Calcutta and Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), an exceptionally sensitive prototype of the mandarin artist engaged via orientalism in a project that was designated since the 19th century as the Bengal 'renaissance'. This movement, conducted by social reformers, the cultural elite and the political vanguard of the time, combined a revival and invention of tradition; a hermeneutic exercise conducted on the materials of the past to make them compatible with the needs of the present. This was seen in a pragmatic way to require an engagement with the reality of European civilisation in general and the colonial legacy in particular, but it nevertheless stressed the value of knowledge and dedication to the past. From this amalgamated review of traditions would be

Amrita Sher-Gil
1913–1941
*South Indian Villagers
Going to the Market*

1937
Oil on canvas
144.8 x 86.4 cm
Collection: Vivan &
Navina Sundaram,
New Delhi, India



elicited a cultural ideology of nationalism which displaced Ravi Varma in outright battle by the offer of a purer version of 'Indian-style' painting.

The Bengal art scene debated the question of Indianness by rejecting Western but also, occasionally and more covertly, Muslim influences. It privileged aesthetic canons from Sanskrit sources, but, above all, the Buddhist image with the highest place given to the Ajanta frescoes (fifth and sixth centuries AD). The Buddhist reference carried pan-Asian resonances but that ideology was reinforced from other sources as well, such as the militant, pan-Asian ideology of the Japanese Kakuzo Okakura who made a great impact by his visit to India in 1902–03, and by sending artist emissaries who taught oriental techniques to Abanindranath and his circle. For all that, the Bengal School artists converged around medieval pictorial conventions, especially from the Mughal and Pahari schools of miniature painting. This had something to do with the Bengali artists' leaning towards the (European/19th-century-inspired) stylistics of romantic naturalism. It also had to do with the way the Indian medieval world could be seen to dangle, tantalisingly, like a postclassical and pre-modern pendant of time wherein India herself was almost as if artificially configured: an India drawn out of the melting pot of nomadic longing of travellers, conquerors, pilgrims and saints who might make of it a romance or indeed a transcendent idea. This was the India that was harked to by Abanindranath; how eclectic and indeed syncretic his work became can be seen in his witty appropriation of the Arabian Nights painted as a series in the 1930s.

That a synthetic medievalism of this kind should become part of the critical modernising tendency within the nationalist history of India was what gave the Bengal School its poignancy. It was reminiscent of the way the pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin, William Morris's art and craft movement and art nouveau were launched in succession to seek alternatives within the progressivist ideology of industrial England. Thus did the great (Sri Lankan) scholar and ideologue of the Indian cultural renaissance, Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877–1947), position himself. It was he who placed contemporary art and artisanal practice at the service of a great civilisation in distress even as it moved into its modernising destiny; and he placed it, significantly, within the self-determining project of a *people* invoked in the nationalist call for one's own

land, *Swadeshi*, during the first decade of the century. *Swadeshi* developed into Gandhi's call for total *Swaraj* and the irreversible national liberation movement spanning the first half of the 20th century.

The Bengal School of Calcutta was succeeded by neighbouring Santiniketan. In the second decade of the 20th century Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) began to set up a visionary institution of higher learning in which the art school, Kala Bhavan (formally founded in 1920–21), was to be a crucial component. Under the tutelage of Abanindranath's prize student, Nandalal Bose (1883–1966), Kala Bhavan established a hegemonic position within the cultural ideology of a now resurgent nationalism. Bose established at the ground level in Santiniketan a kind of pervasive Indian naturalism which was something of a cross between oriental and Western naturalism. The curriculum systematised the earlier oriental influences and included aesthetics and drawing techniques taught by visiting teachers from China and Japan and it nourished, besides this fraternity, certain taboos — as, for example, against the use of the Western medium of oil and easel painting — and preferences for work on paper in the form of ink drawing, wash, watercolour and tempera. There was also training in fresco painting, and these were executed in the various schools on the campus of what became in 1921 Tagore's unique Visva-Bharati University.

In this way Santiniketan inculcated a kind of environmental ethic, envisioned by Tagore, in which the 'original' inhabitants of the region, the country folk and Santal tribals, were also duly venerated. Bose moved further into nationalism from here. He was invited by Gandhi himself to associate with the sessions of the Indian National Congress and, with his celebrated posters for the Haripura session in 1938, became the exemplary nationalist artist, dealing at once with the naturalism of the everyday and with an iconography drawn from mythology and epics and from the stylistics of Bengali folk art. It was inspired, politically, by Gandhi's stress on the politics of Indian peasant culture.

Back in Calcutta, Jamini Roy (1887–1972), trained in oils in the Government College of Art, took a detour into the modern by his shorthand translations of the 'primitive', using *pat* painting of the eastern region of India to simulate some of the preoccupations of modernism, not least its comic/grotesque stylisations and its

two-dimensional structures. The oddly attractive artifice he devised, a decorative image within a tight-fitting frame, anticipated the reification of the living traditions. And even as he consciously institutionalised himself in and through the developing middle-class market, he broke once and for all the Tagore family's taboo against professionalism in art.

With Tagore himself, national or populist ideology worked through imaginative displacements: his small coloured-ink drawings and paintings, made mostly in the 1930s, in the last decade of his life, avoided overt Indian or for that matter oriental references. Used as he was to the lifelong habit of poetry, he dipped into the unconscious to elicit his ghosts and these happily stood in, as with the expressionists and through them the 'primitives' he admired, for a masquerade of the soul. (The reference to Nolde is remarkable; he had visited the Bauhaus School at Weimar in 1921 and, in part due to this visit, an exhibition was received in Calcutta which included Klee and Kandinsky.) Another member of the Tagore family, Gaganendranath Tagore, worked in Calcutta in a somewhat similar vein with motifs of mystery, romance and death, using a muffled cubist-expressionist vocabulary.

Meanwhile Nandalal Bose's two pupils, Ramkinkar Baij (1906–80) and Binodebehari Mukherjee (1904–80), stood halfway between him and Tagore on the matter of nationalism in art. Ramkinkar, an audacious village boy himself, valorised the Santal tribals as working people in watercolours, oil paintings and monumental sculptures. The larger than life *Santal Family* of 1938 in direct cement outside Kala Bhavan and its late sequel, *Mill Call* (1955–56), that saw the Santals as a new proletariat, remain India's major monuments to its people; as does his maquette for a monument to a striding Gandhi which, even in its incompleteness, is a little masterpiece of homage to India's liberator. Binodebehari Mukherjee's *Medieval Hindi Saints*, a hundred-feet (more than thirty metres) long mural in Santiniketan, depicting the compassionate and rigorous lives of the saints, could also be read as emblematic. Completed in 1947, the year of India's Independence, it provided a threshold where the quest for an Indian identity seemed to have found a historical mode of reflexivity. These two artists had to push hard to break through the codes at Santiniketan and to widen the pictorial vocabulary. In the process Mukherjee elicited a modernity from the civilisational matrix that was being



Benodebehari Mukherjee
1904–1980
Medieval Hindi Saints
(detail)

1946–47
Fresco buono at Hindi
Bhavan, Visva-Bharati,
Santiniketan, India
244 x 2307 cm

visualised in Santiniketan as an institution, whereas Ramkinkar became more nearly an avant-gardist; an artist not only questioning the institutional assumptions of his practice by personal, vocational and even stylistic transgressions, but marking quite precisely the *historical disjuncture* in favour of contemporaneity.

In the very conflict staged by these pre-Independence artists, India was getting set for what could henceforth be called a self-avowing modernism.

By the 1940s, the modernising impulse had acquired a left-wing orientation. The Communist movement in India dated back to the 1920s; artists' groups chose the term *progressive* for self-description beginning with the Progressive Writers' Association of 1936. It was followed by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), formed in 1943, with its strongest outfit in Bengal. The IPTA was active until the 1950s; it made history by building a Marxist heritage through cultural work that was to nurture major artists for decades to come. The left movement in the plastic arts was never strong, but there were a few committed artists in Bengal, such as Somnath Hore (b. 1921). And then there were artists' groups that considered themselves progressive (the Calcutta Group, 1943; Progressive Painters' Association, Madras, 1944; Progressive Artists' Group, Bombay, 1947), using that epithet to refer to their specifically modern and sometimes leftist sympathies.



Satish Gujral
b. 1926
Days of Glory

1952
Oil and pencil on paper
72 x 59 cm
Collection: The artist

By far the most important of these groups was the Bombay PAG, featuring artists such as F. N. Souza (1924–2002), M. F. Husain (b. 1915) and S. H. Raza (b. 1922). In Delhi no group called itself by the term progressive but there were artists like Ram Kumar (b. 1924), influenced by the leftist milieu of post-war Paris, and the Mexico-returned, Orozco-inspired Satish Gujral (b. 1926) who, like his peer, Husain, drew upon and gained his public-artist persona from what would be called the left-liberal culture of the Indian state in the Nehruvian period.

This generation of artists participated, by partial domicile abroad, in the internationalism of bourgeois Europe (specifically the School of Paris) and later on in the New York School which was an unintended mascot for the Cold War ideology of cultural freedom. Indian

modernism was therefore always short of a properly socialist art. On the other hand, influenced by a mediated notion of leftist aesthetics, the modernism adopted by these artists was also always short of — even wary of — formalism. The art produced by this very prolific, very influential, nationally honoured and still active post-Independence generation of artists was in fact, when the chips are down, never properly modernist in the Greenbergian definition, and it was not certainly avantgarde in the historical sense of that term. Indeed one might say that with all its antagonism to the overtly nationalist art of Bengal, this generation too was concerned, in its imaging mode, with a (national) need for self-representation. At times, as with Husain, indigenous iconographics were heralded almost in the form of posters to the world at large even as he extends himself now, through iconographies of comparable civilisations. Sometimes this appeared in a more anguished, existential way as with Souza, Akbar Padamsee (b. 1928), and Tyeb Mehta (b. 1925), who is perhaps the most modernist among the Indian artists. Thus Indian art extrapolated itself into the universalisms of modernity via these two routes rather than through any special contribution to modernist vocabulary. Although, it should be added, the aesthetic of Raza and Ram Kumar, V. S. Gaitonde (1922–2001) and Nasreen

Mohamedi (1937–90) was refined enough to enter the precincts of painterly and post-painterly abstraction so privileged in the world at the time.

The modernist impulse moved into its second and arguably final phase in 1963 with the exhibition of the Group 1890. Like the flamboyant Bombay Progressives the group was short-lived. Nevertheless its gleanings from more anarchic sources in modern art (Miró and Klee; Dubuffet and Tapiès) were henceforth inscribed into Indian modernism. The libertarian aesthetic of late, post-Breton surrealism, succeeding the ubiquitous influence of expressionism, fitted well with the liberationist rhetoric of post-colonial nations. These were soon to be referred to as the Third World, gaining in that very nomenclature a cultural ideology most apparent in Latin America in the form of an avantgarde Third Cinema, and in the magical realist literature made famous by Marquez. Tellingly, the then Mexican ambassador to India, Octavio Paz, an early exponent of the new surrealism of Spanish American literature as of the search for identity in these hybrid cultures, wrote the introduction to the Group 1890 catalogue as a complement to his (Communist-turned-painter) friend, J. Swaminathan (1928–94), who had written the manifesto for it. Other artists of the Group, like Jeram Patel (b. 1930) and Himmat Shah (b. 1933), worked with modernism's logic of formalistic subversions through materials and methods, and there can be said to have been a brief avantgarde moment. Though very brief, it posed, as artists and anarchists alike so often do, the paradoxical relation between artistic and social maneuvers.

In India, as elsewhere in Third World cultures, a liberationist aesthetic led back to the notion of origins — not in wanting to tap the roots of a traditional past this time, nor to posit a national identity, but to reach mystically in a sense some absolute ahistorical state of being. With this the 'primitive' or tribal condition of innocence or, rather, tribal consciousness based on cyclical time and metaphorical thought, was sought to be identified. In 1982, Swaminathan, the main exponent of this position, set up in Bhopal — one of India's provincial capitals



Maqbool Fida Husain
b. 1915
*Between the Spider
and the Lamp*

1956
Oil on board
243.8 x 121.9 cm
Collection: The artist



Tyeb Mehta
b. 1925
Kali-II

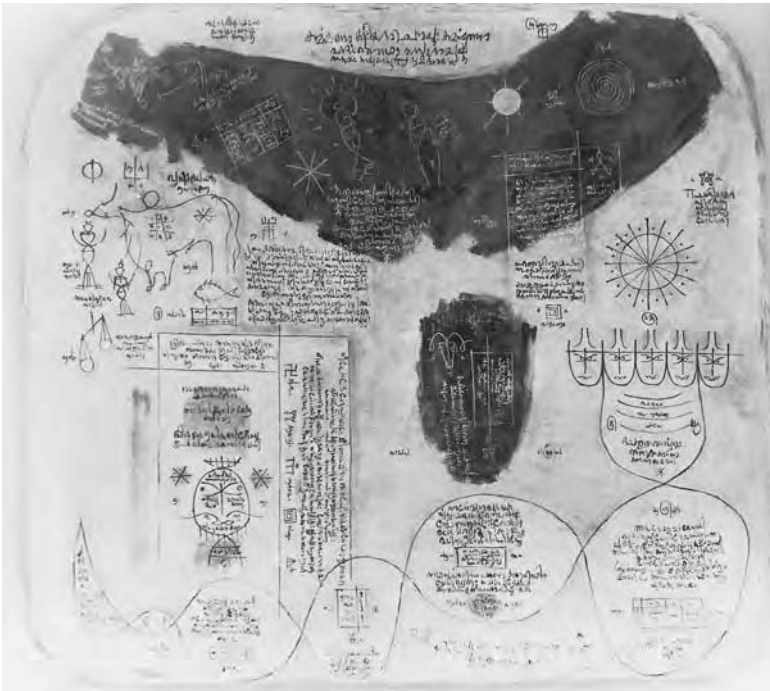
1988
Oil on canvas
170 x 150 cm
Collection: E Alkazi, New
Delhi, India

situated in the heart of tribal terrain — a museum of modern Indian art vis-à-vis a tribal art museum. He declared both to be equally contemporary. By neutralising the historical in the definition of contemporaneity, Swaminathan was foregrounding the cruel determinations (indeed, exterminations) in history, and, at the same time, arguing for a liberation of art from the cultural police force demanding progress. This was a polemical as much as a substantive art-historical move and it left its mark on the cultural discourse of the decade.

But like all projects based on notions of pristine form, there is the likelihood that other kinds of symbolism should leech onto its core. This second phase of Indian modernism yielded to an occultism which came to be known from the late 1960s as ‘neo-Tantric’ art (after the

medieval, esoteric-sexual practices of Buddhist and Shaivite mysticism). The visual simulation of occult motifs and their translation into a notion of metaphysical abstraction made ‘neo-Tantric’ art a suitable ‘high’ art for State agencies promoting modern Indian art while in truth it was a pseudoclassical and therefore kitsch revivalism to which Indian modernism is particularly prone. But that there continues to be good modernist art produced in the name of indigenism must also be stressed with the example of K. C. S. Paniker (1911–77) whose work from the 1960s introduced riddles composed of notations, symbols, and graffiti to parry the occult. A charismatic artist-teacher, he founded after retirement from the Madras art school, a residential artists’ colony on the Cholamandal coast near Madras. It has functioned since 1966 as a positive provincial alternative to any pan-Indian hegemonies that may develop in so big a country as India. A contemporary version of the Santiniketan idyll, it has however the pragmatics of the market and a negotiating international aesthetics built into its operation.

The strongest institutional framework developed after Santiniketan in M. S. University, Baroda, in the form of a Faculty of Fine Arts. Inaugurated in 1949, it was a project towards developing our own pedagogy of the modern and it inducted



KCS Paniker 1911–77
Words and Symbols

1965–66
oil on canvas
150 x 167 cm
Collection: KCS Paniker
Gallery, Trivandrum, India



KG Subramanyan b.1924
March 1971

1971
Terracotta relief laid
down on plyboard
62 x 62 cm
Collection: Museum of
Fine Art, Menton, France

through an art educationist, then teaching at the Barnes Foundation in the United States, a post-Bauhaus methodology. This was mediated by the pedagogical approach developed in Santiniketan but with the much-needed wit of K. G. Subramanyan (b. 1924). The holy cows of the Indian tradition, including the slowly developing modern Indian tradition, were ushered into an eclectic and not so holy alliance which Subramanyan calls, after the preference of his mentors at Santiniketan, the *living tradition*.

Although any discussion of postcolonial Asian art is bound to begin with a prologue on the loss of civilisational orientations, we are better off working with an artist such as Subramanyan, who invents just such a living tradition through eclectic practice and pedagogical discourse, and who, with practical good sense, puts together a contemporary vocabulary drawing on popular and high, urban and rural, national and international sources. Who, moreover, while putting it together so assiduously, turns the very project about-face so that in full irony the iconographies of the so-called Indian civilisation are interrogated.

Emanating from Baroda (and linking up with Bombay [Mumbai] and Delhi), there is a second and perhaps last phase of what one might call progressive art practice. A group of artists tries this time round to take on the predilection of nationalist artists towards the narrative (as with Binodebehari Mukherjee) in relation to the tableau in the oil and easel painting tradition (developed by Ravi Varma and Amrita Sher-Gil). They take this up, and the challenge of internationalism first introduced by the Bombay Progressives, with the kind of iconoclastic intent you see in Subramanyan towards that international. Further, they do this at a demonstrably social level which involves, first, urban life and popular art which Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003) introduces with perhaps a more definitive consequence than any other input since the late Sixties. And then, wrapping up Indian syncretic traditions in the pictorial arts, Gulammohammed Sheikh (b. 1937) develops a narrative idiom that cherishes cultural memory as a way of belonging in the contemporary world.

The progressivism of this generation can be read from the 1970s as a *politics of place*. This is at once in answer to the official Indian art of the period: the histrionics of the overweening post-Independence generation and the easy metaphysics of the second. It is also an answer to the narrow Greenbergian formalism of



Bhupen Khakhar
1934–2003
*Celebration of
Guru Jayanti*

1980
Oil on canvas
167 x 240 cm
Collection: Untraceable



Gulammohammed Sheikh
b. 1937
Story of Aziz and Aziza

1989
Oil on canvas
167 x 122 cm
Collection: Devinder
and Kanwaldeep
Sahney, Mumbai, India

international modernist art. As such, it is in tune with the intent of early pop artists (Rauschenberg, David Hockney, R. B. Kitaj, for example), which is to *let in the world* so that one may, after all, deal with it. As the years go by, this heavily imagist art develops some of the ramifications associated with postmodern art, especially in the way it foregrounds marginal or subaltern or culturally extinct identities. I am referring especially to Khakhar's compassionate presentation of an ageing, mock-tragic gay world; of struggling women by Nalini Malani (b. 1946); and of the withering Bengali middle class by Jogen Chowdhury (b. 1939). But with this depiction of marginality there is also recognised the importance, strategically speaking, of location in the centre-periphery model of global culture and therefore in the ground plan of the picture itself, which makes the mapping political.

These artists are tendentious in a more old-fashioned sense of the term than postmodernism most evidently prefers. For all their eclecticism they hark back less to art-historical sources for spectacle's sake — postmodern pastiche — and certainly very little to a gratuitous classicism. On the contrary, their exhibition, with its populist title, *Place for People* (1981), demonstrates a certain naïve pedagogy about figuration as such while attempting quite immensely ambitious representational schemas. These range from personal/sexual iconographies, to magical realist allegories, to Sudhir Patwardhan (b. 1949) with his realist commitment to a working-class ethic which sustains the socialist dimension conspicuously lost in the latter-day parodies of the postmodern. After their collective statement in the exhibition, however, most of the group members withdrew into culturally mediated possibilities of a late surrealism that can satisfy the needs of political responsibility and social subversion at once. And, as the postmodern turn on the story will bear out, it can answer the avantgarde need to break open the too-tight yoke bag of national identity. An artist such as Vivan Sundaram (b. 1943) now works to introduce sets of serial extensions, a chain of motifs that emphatically go beyond the local but disrupt nevertheless the global view. The gaze, the boat, the relic, the manufacture, the guns and fantasy of the First World still chart the journey; but by installing, along the way, monuments to the lost imaginary of the 'othered' self, the return is structured, and the future dialectically held out.



Vivan Sundaram b.1943
Boat (installation view
from *House/Boat*)

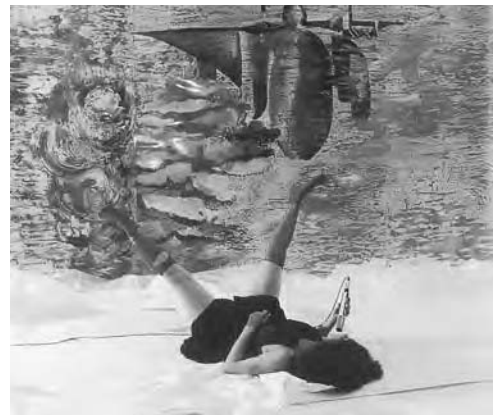
1994
Installation with
handmade paper, wood,
brass telescope, two video
monitors
approx. 750cm x 300cm,
Collection: The artist

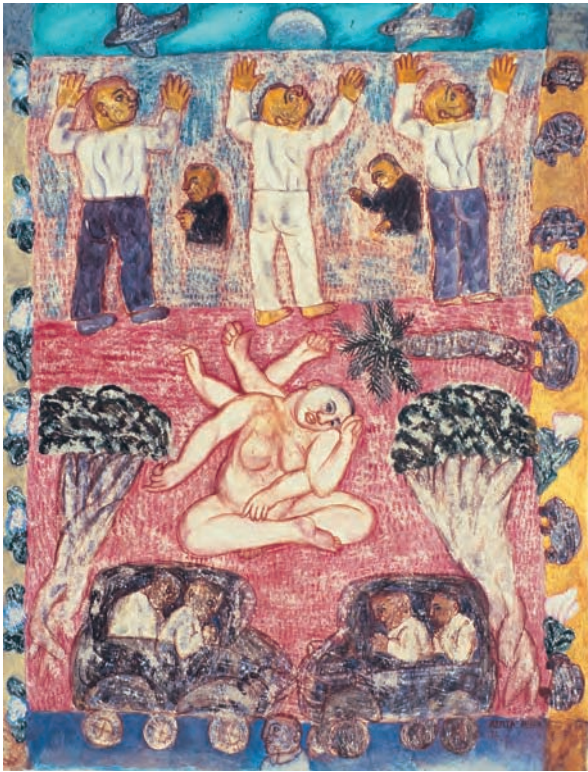
This is where women artists take over, at this point in the narrativising (and de-narrativising) process. Nalini Malani works now on the other side of the collective project. She too establishes the need for disjuncture; she gives agency to the body, making the body a gesture and attaching to this gesture an elaborate masquerade to gain new ground on female subjectivity. Arpita Singh (b. 1937), working in a kind of relay with Malani, re-establishes on the other hand the moments of conjunction. The figures are placed simultaneously in their private, familial cosmologies out there in the world which together make up an ornamental gestalt as good as any that modernism bequeathed through its heavily condensed motifs. The world where male agency is enacted in violence and female atrophy sets in. But this then is precisely where Indian women artists, including a whole flank of younger women such as Rekha Rodwitya (b. 1958), are positioned: holding out on the barricade of their bodies; affirming pain; acting out mourning. And with all urgency making iconographic renovations that break the male narratives, and rework collectivities.

In conclusion: the more alert among the younger contemporaries in India tend to detach themselves from extant 'symbols' of tradition as well as from the existential reckonings that work through a pantheon of archetypes nurtured by high modernism. They replace this iconography

Nalini Malani b.1946
Landscape with Argonauts

1993
Reverse painting on mylar
300 x 300 x 750 cm
Collection: The artist
From Medea projekt (after
the play by Heiner Mueller,
Alaknanda Samarth
performs as Medea). Theatre
installation at Max Mueller
Bhavan, Mumbai, India





Arpita Singh
b. 1937
*A Tired Woman and Men
Against the Wall*
1992
Watercolour and
acrylic on paper
Collection: Malay
and Meera Chatterjee,
New Delhi, India

1987, and named in 1989), a clearly adversarial position is set up towards what is considered to be a hegemonic centre, whether this be within or outside the nation. Before he takes his life, Krishnakumar (1958–89), leader of the group, introduces an avantgarde move: reverting the metropolitan modernist (and postmodernist) artist back into an exile-status so that what is figured is the early anarchist rebel-hero who thrives in bourgeois society on near-nihilist strategies of survival — through art, through politics.

The options within peripheral politics are severally positioned in the way they address the centre. Therefore, even by default, Indian artists such as Ravinder Reddy (b. 1956) are fully launched into the postmodern whether they recognise this to be the case or not. Of course only when they recognise it can they even attempt to rearticulate the imaginary (such as we identify with the legacy of Joseph Beuys). The symbolic in the form of icons of otherness require, as the sculptor N. N. Rimzon (b. 1957) shows, a ground for resistance. Starting with the material/archaic

through magical and political strategies to be found within private, sexual fantasies, local lore and the residual romance (and ethics) of labour. While one aspect reworks the tenets of surrealism into new forms of allegorical narration, the other aspect leads to regional and ethnographic autobiography. This can fit too well with globalism, unless transformed into a neo-Gramscian homing-in on class, place and community across a real and notional countryside. The jargon of authenticity is to be found even in this radical position through a paradox: grassroots ethics and regional chauvinism may merge to embark on a common path for some ‘imagined community’. Then, as with the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, an extreme left group of young Kerala artists (conceived in



NN Rimzon b.1957
Man with Tools
(installation view)

1993
Resin, fibreglass and iron
Height of figure approx.
183 cm, diameter of
objects in circle 300 cm.
Collection: Eggie Schoo,
Amsterdam,
The Netherlands

classicism of ancient civilisations, Rimzon alludes to the sublimity of the new through formal coding even as he attempts by a lean iconography to transcend the reification which is too often the defining attribute of international postmodern art.

The point for our purpose is that leading on from a politics of *place* (whether this be a fishing village, a regional capital, or a developing nation), we have to enlarge the methodology for evaluating art forms so as to put on the agenda potential breakthroughs in the deceptive monolith of contemporary art. The avantgarde has come from 'advanced' metropolitan cultures such as Paris, Berlin and New York, as it has come from so-called 'developing' countries such as Mexico, Cuba or Chile; it has come equally from an alienated and vanguard intelligentsia as from organic intellectuals and artists' cadres. It is, both, the cultural *situation* and the *categories* of art-historical discourse that must be seen to change when we start to plot the changes in contemporary art *practice* across the world.

NOTE

An earlier version of this essay was first published in 1993 in Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993.

TRACING THE IMAGE: Contemporary Art in Pakistan

Salima Hashmi

THE BROADER ISSUES in contemporary Pakistani art reassuringly echo those of other postcolonial Asian societies, but Pakistan's strategic geographical location and sociopolitical history dictate interesting divergences. The British intervention in the 19th century was not the first instance of a colonising force in the area. What became Pakistan in 1947 included the historically well-worn route into India for, among others, the Greeks, Persians, Arabs and Central Asian Moghuls.

The emergence of the Pakistani nation-state, carved out of the subcontinent on the basis of Muslim majority areas, posed many contradictions relevant to prevalent cultural norms and practices. This situation was further complicated by Pakistan's geographic territory being split into two parts — East Pakistan and West Pakistan — separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory with English as the only commonly understood language¹. The large-scale exodus of the Hindu and Sikh populations into India in 1947 was matched by a reciprocal flood of Muslim refugees into Pakistan amid widespread communal rioting, which disrupted ancient societies, traditional art and craft networks and systems of

patronage. Surprisingly, the newly established Islamic State did not move to define a cultural ideology, nor did it take steps to enforce a specific policy for the arts. The risk of generalisation notwithstanding, one may assert that the main cultural components in the newly established Pakistani State were the indigenous cultures of the various linguistic, agrarian and urban areas practising a regional Sufi version of Islam, alongside the British influences absorbed during 150 years of colonial rule. The prospect that identifiable Muslim elements would be injected into cultural practices distinguishable from the pluralistic, historic ones, was never an issue until 40 years later.

Islam was not a sudden phenomenon in the region; it was a presence assimilated into the variegated cultural fabric over 10 centuries. The art and craft traditions had already been sifted into the colonial categories of ‘major’ and ‘minor’ arts. These craft traditions had so far provided no apparent stimulus for the ‘fine artists’ of the time.

Art education from the 19th century onwards faithfully followed the British models introduced into the subcontinent, and replaced the customary master-apprentice relationship². Of the three ingredients that shaped the nascent contemporary art movement in Pakistan after the first decade of independence — the Muslim, the regional folk and the British colonial — the third dominated art education. In the eastern wing of the country, however, the influence of the Bengal school associated with the Tagores³ was dominant. There were also some eminent partisans of the Bengal school in the western half in the city of Lahore. Abdur Rehman Chughtai, Pakistan’s most celebrated artist of the time, consciously embraced Muslim courtly traditions in his imagery, rendered in the Bengali ‘wash’ technique,⁴ with emphasis on ornament and pattern expressed in a deeply hued palette of his own inclination. Himself a poet and short-story writer, Chughtai’s presence was central to the reigning literary coterie in Lahore, and he came to personify the traditionalist in the orientalist/modernist debate of the Fifties and Sixties. These debates and controversies



Aisha Khalid (Pakistan)
Silence with Pattern

2000
Watercolour on wasli
paper
36.0 x 25.9 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

arose in all the arts, especially literature, closely followed by painting. The ascendancy of the word being secure, the early 'modernists' in art, not surprisingly, were also vociferous members of the progressive literary movements.

Painters Anwer Jalal Shemza, Hanif Ramay, Raheel Akber Javed, Ahmed Parvez and Shakir Ali, all members of the ebullient Lahore Art Circle of the Fifties, were also writers and essayists. Unknowingly, they reinforced the historically anchored practice of text accompanying image, although in this case the two did not occur in one document as in the illustrated manuscripts of the past, but instead were expressions of parallel sensibilities. The artist's gaze, however, was frequently fixed on Europe. Poring over reproductions of Picasso, Braque and Dali, Pakistani artists took up their artistic cudgels in an increasingly unstable political environment. Successive civil governments were falling to make way for Martial Law in 1958.⁵

Artists returning from Europe eager to try out their internationalist credentials were faced with official suspicion alternating with tentative patronage from the fledgling Arts Councils, set up by private citizens with Government grants, in Lahore and Karachi. Shakir Ali later recounted the indifference which greeted him on his return from the Slade School of Fine Art in 1951. The neo-cubist works at his first exhibition in Lahore were scrutinised by plainclothes police who concluded that the work 'conveyed Communist messages to the public!'⁶

The Mayo School of Arts in Lahore was upgraded and became the National College of Arts (NCA), and the Department of Fine Arts at the Punjab University was expanded. Other departments were opened at the University of Peshawar and Dhaka. The Government undertook the funding of national exhibitions, national awards and the Writers Guild in the early Sixties, simultaneously reining in dissent from movements striving for political representation. By now, the International Style had assumed an 'enlightened' and 'progressive' mantle of the 'Free World'.

As the turbulence of Pakistan's social realities became more pressing, artists such as Sadeqain, Pakistan's Paris Biennale Laureate of 1961, were rethinking their artistic agendas. Bonding with political activists and intellectuals strengthened their need to comment. A large number of public commissions began coming the way of Sadeqain and Shakir Ali in the Sixties: works for

airports, banks, libraries, hotels (additionally, for Sadeqain, the power station at Mangala Dam, and the ceiling of the Lahore Museum; and, for Shakir Ali, the auditorium at the nuclear power plant at Islamabad in 1968). The works were large in scale and grappled ambitiously with issues of social narratives, text and tradition. Both artists sought to invest myth, poetry and social struggle with the resonance of visual elements gleaned from an uncertain genealogy of form and image. This was offset by a confident mastery of the calligraphic gestural mark. In a sense, both artists were straining to deal with the supremacy of the literal, while delving into the memory of traditional visual mores.

On the political front, after a protracted popular struggle followed by yet another period of Martial Law, and then general elections, political contradictions sharpened into bitter civil war. The eastern wing of Pakistan broke away to become Bangladesh in 1971, a territorial division affecting another cultural truncation. The violent upheaval ended the army's rule and swept the populist leader of the Pakistan People's Party, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, into power. This period of parliamentary democracy in Pakistan, coming as it did after a long interval, had a definite implication for the arts. A National Cultural Policy was framed, folk forms of expression in music and art were patronised, a network of arts councils was proposed and set up in all the provinces by an Act of Parliament, as was the National Institute of Folk Heritage. National Academies of Dance and Puppetry were established as well as a National Book Foundation and a Film Development Corporation, emulating neighbouring China, Pakistan's strategic ally. Yet no major dismantling of the dominant feudal and tribal structures had been achieved. Although art-making appeared to be publicly validated and recognised, the artist was trapped between rhetoric and the illusion of change.

A younger generation of artists, among them sculptor Shahid Sajjad and painter Zahoorul Akhlaq, rejected the traditionalist/modernist debate as being irrelevant. Akhlaq had investigated Moghul miniatures in the British Museum while a student at the Royal College in the Sixties. Sajjad had lived among the tribal people in the remote forest of the Chittagong hill tracts during the same decade. Both had returned to Pakistan and were in the process of entering the mainstream of what appeared to be a cultural resurgence. Concerned with unravelling complex

questions of meaning embedded in tradition and marginalisation of beliefs, practices and networks, they focused on materials and forms which offered up memories beyond the colonial. Inevitably, this was at the cost of deviating from the mainstream, which was preoccupied with a self-conscious search for what was 'Pakistani' in art. This mirror of the notion of self was important to Bhutto's Pakistan.

Smarting from the loss of half the country, cultural activity was the prescription to soften the trauma. North Korean experts tutored schoolchildren in grand gymnastic displays as teams of graphic designers worked on gigantic laudatory backdrops. The influence of electronic media, although State-owned, became significant in the Seventies. Barring criticism of the Government, the artist and designer's input was solicited and valued, as indeed was the presence of women. Women in the performing and visual arts were recognised and it became more usual for them to represent the country in international forums.

In the sphere of art education, women were already in positions of responsibility. Women educationists had laid the foundations for the teaching of art in schools, colleges and universities in the cities of Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi/Islamabad, Peshawar and Hyderabad from the 1950s onwards. Yet their contribution as studio practitioners was limited to the few. The unconventional lifestyles of male artists underlined the notion that artistic creation was inevitably linked with the bohemian, a problematic proposition for women in a patriarchal society.

One pioneer was painter Zubaida Agha, an early abstractionist who, aware of the pitfalls of patronisation, resisted the label 'woman artist' all her life. Known primarily as a colourist, Agha made her debut at the All-India Exhibition in Lahore in 1946. A regular studio painter, she set up Pakistan's first private art gallery in Rawalpindi in 1960, which nurtured younger artists from both wings of the country, as well as established names such as Chughtai, Shakir Ali and Zainul Abedin, among others — all personal friends of the artist. Agha later moved to Islamabad, Pakistan's custom-made capital in the vicinity of Rawalpindi, donating her collection to the National Gallery and becoming a recluse until her death in 1997.

The teaching of art had given women a niche in the art world, allowing them to be 'artistic'; their practice, however, had

remained dutiful and unchallenging. The military coup of Zia-ul-Haq in 1977, and its accompanying social and political dispensation, irrevocably altered the status quo.

The regime moved swiftly to define an identity for Pakistan. Taking on the mantle of an 'Islamic' reformer, Zia promulgated amendments to the Constitution, introducing 'Islamic' punishments for drinking, gambling, theft and adultery. This went alongside the curtailing of civil liberties, media censorship and decrees prescribing codes of dress, language and public behaviour. Most genres of music were discouraged and dance was eliminated entirely from public view. Literature, generally the usual vehicle for cultural communication, was carefully monitored, especially the oral tradition of poetry recitation. Music, film and theatre were scrutinised and 'cleansed' of 'un-Islamic' mores. Anything deemed to be 'obscene' in form or content was not to be tolerated in public or private life.

The approach to the fine arts was more ambiguous. Sculpture and figurative painting were not forbidden but patronage was withheld except for portraits of 'sanctioned' personages: the Father of the Nation, the President, the National Poet, the Chiefs of the Armed Forces, and the like. Calligraphy was deemed an appropriate genre for promoting cultural identity. Landscape painting was also acceptable; it celebrated the land — rural, placid and beautiful. Commissions were available for artists who were thought to be sympathetic to official policies. Some well-known names, such as Sadeqain, worked on Koranic calligraphy, as did others. Not a single woman artist took up calligraphy.

National exhibitions held in 1977, 1981, 1982 and 1985 witnessed a number of women winning awards, just as discriminatory laws were being enacted to restrict women's roles in the diplomatic service and many other fields. Artists such as Meher Afroze, Nahid Raza and Qudsia Nisar, all National Award winners, were moving in new artistic directions. Rejecting the 'oil-on-canvas' gallery norms, these artists turned to printmaking and water-based mixed-media works on paper. Evolving an abridged personal imagery and working on a diminutive scale, they challenged many hierarchies.

In 1983, 15 women artists signed the Women Artists Manifesto⁷ in Lahore, calling on all women in any creative field to come together for the cause of women's emancipation and freedom



*Women's demonstration
12 February 1983*

photograph
12 Feb 1983
Image courtesy the author

of expression for all. This was preceded by the infamous police attack on a women's demonstration against a proposed law of evidence on 12 February, 1983, in Lahore, which rallied public opinion and galvanised the women's movement.

The Government's insistence that women wear the chador in public forums was another contentious issue. Women artists used the chador in their work as a symbol of constraint

and suffocation. Tearing it apart metaphorically became an act of defiance, as in the work of printmaker Naazish Ataullah.

Male artists witnessing these and other happenings responded. Zahoorul Akhlaq's series of gestural drawings referred to a disturbing small-town incident in which women were paraded naked by local feudal leaders. Anwar Saeed, an upcoming artist at that time, recorded images of hangings, demonstrations and shadowy uniformed figures in mixed-media paper works. A. N. Nagori, a painter from the turbulent province of Sindh, was ironical and flamboyant in brilliantly coloured paintings, speaking of ethnic oppression and military might.

Akhlaq, killed in Lahore in 1999, was arguably Pakistan's most significant contemporary artist. His work, often termed 'cerebral', celebrated spatial relationships, the pluralism of tradition and the sensuousness of the mark. Painter, sculptor, printmaker, teacher and theoretician, Akhlaq's influence continues to be far reaching. As Fellow at the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale from 1988 to 1989, Akhlaq explained, 'For me, it is a necessity to excavate, unravel, and re-compose the contextual iconography of being.'⁸

Coming out from under the suffocating milieu of Zia-ul-Haq after his sudden death in 1988, the perspective in Pakistani art shifted. The oppression of the State had spawned a counter-movement, which embodied the ingenuity and exuberance of a younger generation of artists. Cutting their teeth in the charged and changed atmosphere, artists such as Quddus Mirza infused their work with narratives drawn from fresh and multiple readings of Moghul and post-Moghul miniatures, popular culture, parallel themes in literature and the oral tradition. The sensuous quality of

paint and the spontaneous 'naïve' mark, engaged artists such as Mirza, Jamal Shah and Akram Dost. The latter two were from the province of Balochistan, an area unrepresented so far.

With the 1990s came a mushrooming of art galleries in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad as well as in smaller places, together with a growing audience of buyers, individual and corporate. Larger numbers of arts graduates were entering the job market, finding places in graphic design, media, interiors, fashion, textiles and other fields. This, in turn, prompted the expansion of existing art institutions and the setting up of new ones in the private sector. Apart from the NCA and existing university departments, there were now the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, the Central School of Arts and Crafts in Karachi and the Karachi School of Art. Fine Arts departments were added to the University of Balochistan and Karachi University. Private and public schools began to offer art at the primary and secondary levels. Few among these, however, were offering art education relevant to Pakistan's cultural history. Most were emulative of the Eurocentric models that had arrived more than half a century before, with a nod to accommodating certain social pressures and imperatives.

Migration into the cities from rural areas, rapid population increase and ethnic and sectarian violence in the past decade influenced and engaged many artists and institutions. Mobility of labour and emigration to the Middle East, Europe and North America introduced a materiality into people's lives. Televisions, transistors, washing machines, kitchen gadgets and finally the computer arrived. Some of these were displayed in village homes yet to receive electricity.

The unprecedented scale of urbanisation and the influx of consumer goods has injected a new set of images into the visual vocabulary. The use of non-traditional materials — plastics, vinyl, steel and neon — to 'decorate' the urban domestic or public space has gone unnoticed by the intelligentsia, who look elsewhere for aesthetic authenticity in art and culture. Trucks, tractors, rickshaws, bicycles, donkey and camel carts, food stalls, cinema hoardings, posters, calendars and greeting cards all employ a profusion of motifs and processes which assemble themselves into a language popularly understood by the urban masses. Urban 'folk' craftspeople train and create in ways reminiscent of the ancient

'*Ustaad-Shaagird*' (master-apprentice) system. Surprisingly, despite catering to a largely illiterate public, text runs parallel to image on trucks, buses and in other locations. These may be invocations to Allah, to the Holy Prophet or a local patron saint, but may also be more trendy homilies on road safety, politics, love, money and the promised hereafter!

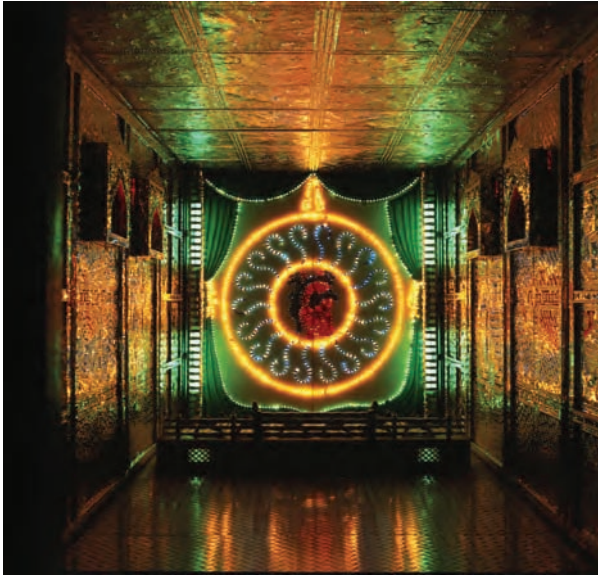
This visual subculture draws on a variety of decorative and pictorial sources, appropriating symbols, images and conventions in an apparently spontaneous manner. On closer examination, the text/image repertoire illustrates beliefs and needs which cut across a wide cross-section of the population. A telephone is painted alongside a lion; the Dome of the Rock is juxtaposed with an F-16 jet fighter; the Sufi Saint Baba Farid decorates a mobile phone; and Prime Minister Bhutto mounts a galloping white steed.

For the 'fine' artist struggling to address a modest gallery audience, the lure of the popular becomes a seductive proposition. Aware of the vast populace 'out there' and out of reach, artists have sought to engage with popular idioms and their materials. Artists Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, David Alesworth and Duriya Kazi, in collaboration with truck artists and decorators Yousaf, Mairaj Nickelwala, Bachoo and Shaukat Lala, worked on *Heart Mahal*, an installation first exhibited at *Container 96 — Art Across Oceans*, in Copenhagen. The work alluded to vehicles, shrines, billboards and family events. Entering a space with painted screens and panels, one moved to stainless-steel embossed drawings. The exaggerated embellishments of the container included a pulsating heart studded with coloured lights.

The container metamorphosed into *Heart Mahal* for the Fukuoka Triennale in 1996. The shrine-like space was radiant, celebratory, playfully embracing the hybrid nature of ritual and art and craft processes with postmodern ease.

Iftikhar Dadi has been involved in raising questions of collective beliefs and memory as signifiers in urban culture. He looks at paradoxes that are inherent in official discourses in culture and explores the unarticulated 'lived' experience of the people. He probes the ambiguities that form the historical weaves of public and private life with computer-generated inkjet images in light boxes.

Faiza Butt, Asma Mundrawala and Huma Mulji have scrutinised popular art and known stereotypes with irony and wit. Butt, who now lives in London, renders narratives which dwell on



Durriya Kazi, David Alesworth,
Iftikhar Dadi, Elizabeth Dadi
Heart Mahal

1996
Steel panel, truck bumper,
mirror, light, and others
Image courtesy of Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

cultural displacements in delicately nuanced, meticulously crafted works on mylar, in inks and watercolour.

Mundrawala and Mulji, both Karachi-based artists, work in the context of community needs, connotations of which appear as content. Mulji uses vinyl, plastics, coloured lights or other seemingly accessible materials to conjure up friendly gadgets for the Pakistani housewife. Mundrawala drafts painterly odes to unfulfilled sartorial desires of young females.

Irony is a major ingredient of art-making, together with an inclination towards 'low-tech' materials to serve as content of the work. Naiza Khan's *Henna Hands* are done directly on the walls of the city of Karachi. Stencilled figures in henna paste, they stemmed from a desire to move away from the pristine gallery space into the strife-ridden neighbourhoods of Karachi. Khan observed the reactions in different locales, both hostile and welcoming, depending on the district. The figure has always been central to Khan's work, and in *Henna Hands* the women walk in majestic procession. In a milieu in which depicting the nude, male or female, is generally unacceptable, Khan probes the way the body serves as a site for many contradictory messages of identity, submissiveness, desire, constraints and freedoms. To quote Khan, 'The figure is turned into a sign rather than an object [of desire], and stripped of its eroticism. It becomes a signifier of self-perception and self-deception in which silence and repression,

Naiza Khan
Henna Hands

March 2003
Henna paste on walls
in Karachi, Pakistan

Locations:

Site 1, Aslam Hairdresser –
Adam Road, Karachi Cantt,
approx 7.6 x 10.2 cm

Site 2, Banglow No.227,
Adam Road, Karachi Cantt,
approx. 20.3 x 15.2 cm

Site 3, Block No.456,
Rest Camp Road
Railway Colony, Cantt
Station Karachi,
approx 30.5 x 15.2 cm
Image courtesy the artist



domesticity and confinement, vulnerability and retreat, simultaneously resonate and contradict, as the eye is focused on the pattern and the body that surfaces out of it.¹⁹ Khan's investigations are not limited to the graphic mark; she has worked on light boxes where text and the 'muffling' of text underline some of the concepts that engage her.

The city at war with itself presents other problems.

Roohi Ahmed, teaching sculpture at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture in Karachi, found herself tracing safe routes to work and back in 1997. These became mixed-media 'maps' of daily journeys, imbued with a wry sense of humour and laced with the grim reality of Kalashnikov street battles and vicious kidnappings.

In the city of Lahore, 800 kilometres to the north, the struggle to locate itself in current history is matched by its pride in its heritage as an imperial Moghul city. The Walled City is still considered romantically to be the 'heart' of Lahore, ringed by British colonial architecture, university buildings and the Lahore Museum. The last, a 19th-century structure, houses a fine collection of Indo-Greek Gandhara sculpture, Islamic manuscripts, artefacts of the Indus Valley civilisation and Moghul, Pahari and Sikh period paintings. The teaching of miniature painting at the National College of Arts next door (once an art and craft school

headed by museum curator Lockwood Kipling, father of Rudyard) has encouraged a revival of the genre. Embraced as a tribute to a grand tradition, contemporary practice in this discipline presents certain dilemmas for the artist. The desire to experiment and subvert the rigidity of ritual goes alongside the deep awe in which the skills of the old masters are held. The tenacity of tradition and reverence for history inhibits a balanced critique. Audiences are also partial to the nostalgia evoked by repetitive imagery accompanying the impressive repertoire of authentic skills.

Ustaad Bashir Ahmed, disciple of Sheikh Shujaullah and Haji Mohammad Sharif, is insistent on an unquestioning regimen and has fostered a fertile rebellion, including Pakistan's internationally celebrated Shahzia Sikander, now living in New York.

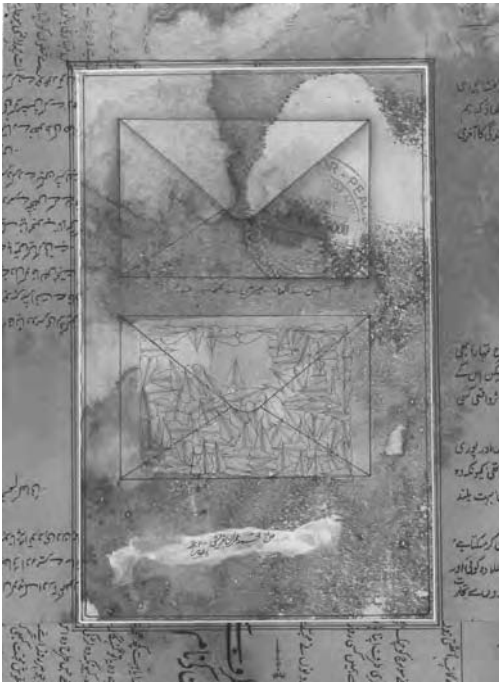
Breaking away from many a convention, Sikander explored issues of scale and imagery. Continuing her work as a student and artist in the United States, she embarked on a radical critique of the ritual and discipline she had emerged from. Suspended between cultures, she sifted through what was still relevant to her altered physical and intellectual location with a critical eye and intuition. Sikander's departure from Pakistan and subsequent meteoric career reinforced the validity of the debates germinating at home. A discernible shift occurred in the wake of Sikander's challenge. It became apparent that 'current practice [sought] to push the limits of miniature painting, literally and metaphorically, beyond the margins'.¹⁰

Imran Qureshi, satirical commentator of the socio-political prospect, has been both ruminative and daring in his approach to traditionally employed materials. He has punctured the *wasli* (surface), extruding it to create spatial disturbances. He has layered fragments from children's exercise books and old tailors' manuals into the handmade surface to construct allegories and comic-poignant narratives.



Shahzia Sikander
*Cholee Kay Pechay Kya?
Chunree Kay Nichay Kya?*
(*What is Under the
Blouse? What is
Under the Dress?*)

1997
vegetable colour, dry
pigment, watercolour,
and tea on hand-prepared
wasli paper
Image courtesy the artist



Imran Qureshi
Love Story

2000,
 Opaque watercolour
 on wasli paper
 12.7 x 17.8 cm,
 Collection:
 Hammad Nasar
 Image courtesy the artist

Aisha Khalid's miniatures are of dense interiors crowded with textile patterns, in which females wrapped in suffocating *burqahs* (veils) are silent spectators. Khalid's year at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, in 2001, facilitated the interjection of the tulip — an authentic Moghul motif — into the East-West dialogue in her painting. The experience of being in the West at the time of the 11 September terrorist attacks saw her engulfed by a sense of 'otherness'. Cultural cleavages sharpened into works speaking of irreconcilable views of conflict and difference. Prophetically, Khalid was already using camouflage fabric as a surface for embroidering red roses when the World Trade Center came down. Khalid has since alternated between the diminutive *wasli* and the lusciousness of velvet as painting surfaces. It seems that the

submissiveness of fabric can be fortified and 'armed' to confront brutality and suppression. Khalid's concerns now seem very distanced from the miniature project, but she finds it essential to work within the context of global tensions. Other artists, too, challenge the convention.

Nusra Latif Qureshi describes the label 'miniature' as an Eurocentric construct, assuming technical accomplishment devoid of sensory, emotional content. Retaining the format, she compounds visual references in layers enriched with gestural marks designed to intrigue and puzzle. The viewer is given the task of unravelling the labyrinth of meaning concealed in her works.

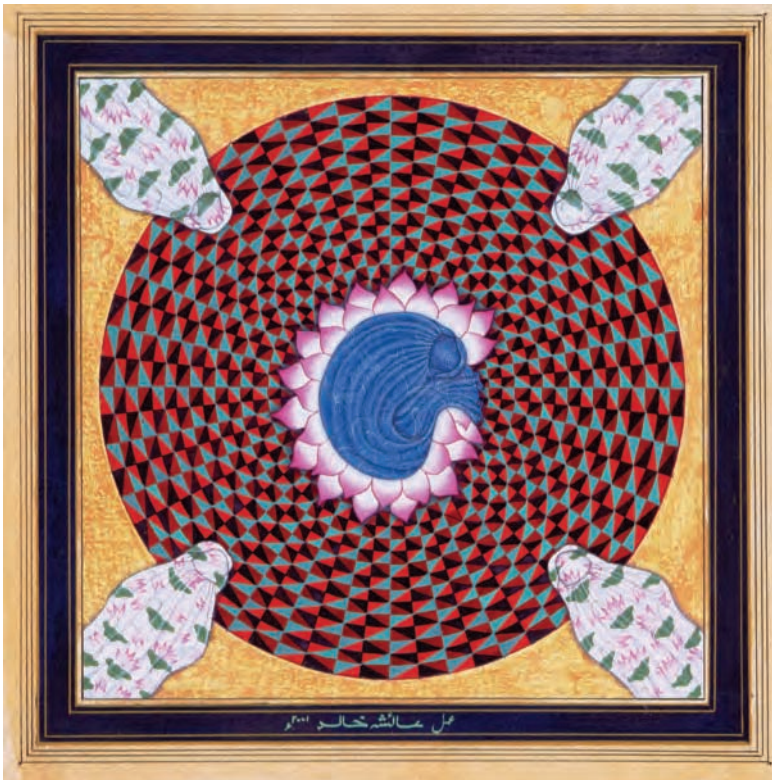
Saira Wasim, on the other hand, works within the formal rigour of the miniature, concentrating instead on appropriating classical images from a variety of sources, woven into new chronicles with satirical intent. Cherubs, political leaders and religious pundits romp through the painstakingly created 'stage-sets' in the dainty format of the Moghul picture.

The miniature 'movement' continues to grow as a number of meticulously trained artists in Lahore reinterpret, redefine, subvert and transform the faded testimonial to a reportedly illustrious past.



Imran Qureshi
He Said and Then She Said

2000,
Opaque watercolour
on wasli paper
17.8 x 22.9 cm,
Collection: Hammad Nasar



Aisha Khalid
Birth of Venus

2001
Watercolour on
wasli paper
28.9 x 28.8 cm
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum



Saira Wasim
Friendship after 9-11

2001
Gouache on
hand-made paper
17.8 x 28 cm
Collection:
Private collection
Image courtesy the artist

Masooma Syed and Ruby Chishti use familiar domestic crafts as the substance of their practices. Syed's work originates from the physicality of the body. Using human hair and nails, she leans on her experience of jewellery-making to construct delicate garlands, elegant crowns and necklaces edged with steel sewing needles. There is contrariness tinged with menace in Syed's pieces. Converging traditions of crafts are matched by a selective honing of materials employed to challenge predictable imagining. In an ostensibly simple work such as *Perfect World 2002*, a black pantie made of plastic strips and metal filings compresses physical yearning and intellectual mutinies into a single statement.

Chishti, by training a sculptor, moved into recycled fabrics in 2001 to produce figures of women, buffaloes and crows. Stuffed with straw, the fabric installations placed objects in groups suggesting temporary emotional alliances. In works such as *I Will be Born a Thousand Times, No Matter How You Celebrate It*, Chishti refers to the pall cast on the family on her appearance in the world, another unwanted girl-child. There is gentle humour as well as deep sadness in these not-quite-human-sized and not doll-sized works. Chishti relocates the domestic doll-making tradition remembered and practised in her childhood, and claims it for the contemporary sculptor as a powerful medium.

As the edges of visual practice blur, crafts and 'low-tech' options are the preference in Pakistani art. While artists such as Rana Rashid and Aisha Khalid have ventured into video, such explorations are, on the whole, sparse. The erratic power supply may be a practical reason, but the lure of addressing the community through familiar forms might be a more probable one. It can be argued that while Pakistani artists keep an eye on international 'trends' and idioms, they also hang on to the dream of being the interpreters of the 'people's voice', a role traditionally reserved for poetry and music.

NOTES

- 1 East Pakistan became the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971 after a civil war that involved the intervention of Indian forces on the side of the indigenous militant freedom movement.
- 2 Four art and craft schools were set up in the period 1867–80 in Lahore, Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, and were modelled after the South Kensington schools.
- 3 Abanindranath Tagore, nephew of poet Rabindranath, was vice-principal of the Government College of Art in Calcutta. In 1905, he walked out to set up Shantiniketan, the visionary University of the Arts in rural Bengal.
- 4 Unlike the conventional Western method of applying watercolour, the Bengal technique consists of layering the colour. Each layer is wiped down with a sponge to ensure that the colour is diffused and absorbed into the paper, leaving no 'white' highlight.
- 5 Major-General Mohammad Ayub Khan took over the country after a military coup in October 1958, and stayed in power for 10 years before being unseated by a populist revolt.
- 6 Unpublished interview by the author, 1974.
- 7 Full text of the Manifesto is reproduced in the author's book *Unveiling the Visible: lives and works of women artists of Pakistan*, Action Aid Pakistan, Islamabad, 2002, pp. 93–95.
- 8 Hassanudin Khan (ed.), *Modernities and Memories: recent works from the Islamic world*, Exhibition catalogue, Rockefeller Foundation, New York, 1997, p. 14.
- 9 Salima Hashmi, 'Threads, Dreams, Desires', *Art South Asia Catalogue*, Shisha Publications, Manchester, 2002, p. 39.
- 10 Virginia Whiles, *Manoeuvring Miniatures*, Exhibition catalogue, KHOJ International Artists' Workshop, New Delhi, 2001, p. 10.

CONTEMPORARY ART IN SRI LANKA

Jagath Weerasinghe

THE BEGINNING OF post-traditional art practice in Sri Lanka can be traced to the last decades of the 19th century. It was during this time that Sri Lankan art was profoundly influenced by various art forms and the approaches of European academies, such as academic realism, romanticism and orientalism. Ideas of European modernism in art began to appear only in the second decade of the 20th century.¹

The first most significant movement in modern art in Sri Lanka originated in the late 1920s and early 1930s in the works of photographer Lionel Wendt (1907–44), and in the paintings of George Keyt (1901–92), Justin Deraniyagala (1903–67) and Geoffrey Beiling (1907–92), who later formed the core of Sri Lanka's most important collective of modern artists, the '43 Group', along with several other dynamic artist personalities such as Ivan Peries (1921–88), George Claessen (1909–99) and Richard Gabriel (b. 1924), and a few others.

THE '43 GROUP'

It was the 43 Group that positioned the sign of Ecole de Paris as the mark of excellence in art taste in the art of mid-20th century

Sri Lanka against the academic realism and orientalism influenced by the Royal Academy and other British art schools.² As such, the formation of the 43 Group can be viewed as a project that constituted an anti-colonial stance within the larger picture of national struggles that gathered momentum in the mid-20th century in South Asia for regaining political independence from the British colonisers.³ What is considered the most significant achievement of the 43 Group is their successful attempt at rephrasing a selected number of modernist trends and artistic approaches that flourished in France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, giving rise to a distinctively Sri Lankan modernist art. Of the members of the 43 Group, George Keyt can be considered to be the best-known Sri Lankan modernist, whose work combined a modernist idiom rooted in a ‘cubism-like’ pictorial language with orientalist themes, motifs and moods. His works played a pivotal role in the popularisation of modern art in Sri Lanka. If Keyt is to be considered the ‘orientalist visionary’ in the 43 Group, then the works of Justin Deraniyagala and Ivan Peries represented the two extremes of the group’s expressionist trends. The intense and complex psychological dispositions portrayed in Deraniyagala’s works subtly explore and reveal the tragedy and irony of the human condition, while the symbolic and meditative landscapes of Ivan Peries suggest extreme tranquillity and compassion.

Parallel to the formation of the 43 Group there were other trends active in the art scene of mid-20th-century Sri Lanka. The ultra-nationalist discourse in art that demanded a ‘purely’ Sri Lankan/Asian art form untainted by Western influences was one of the two major artistic forces. The artistic trend influenced by the ‘Santiniketan’ school of art founded by Rabindranath Tagore, which expressed a much wider sense of the idea of ‘nationality’ and ‘modernity’, was the other important presence in the art scene.

The two decades from the late 1960s to the late 1980s experienced relatively less dynamism in art by comparison with the



Justin Deraniyagala
Blind Mother and Child

(date unknown)
Oil on canvas
Collection: Deraniyagala
Family Collection
Photo:
I. S. Madanayake
Image courtesy the artist

1940s and 1950s, except for an important development that had far-reaching consequences in terms of method and style in painting. Sri Lankan modern painting until the 1960s was mostly a figurative style that evolved with inspirations absorbed from such major European trends as post-impressionism, fauvism and cubism, except for an artist such as George Claessen (1909–99) of the 43 Group, who was both an abstractionist and a representational painter. This situation changed after the 1960s, when the non-figurative tradition of painting became firmly established in Sri Lankan modern art as a result of the works, ideas and teachings of the painter and art teacher, H. A. Karunaratne (b. 1929). In other words, it was H. A. Karunaratne who established the sign of the New York School as the mark of excellence in art-making in Sri Lankan painting.

Karunaratne, who had undertaken art training in New York and Tokyo in the 1960s, was a lecturer in painting at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies (IAS) at the University of Kelaniya. This is the sole art institution in Sri Lanka that offers a degree-level education. Being an established teacher at the IAS, Karunaratne was in a privileged position to persuade a whole generation of younger artists to work within the ideas of abstraction and abstract expressionism. Hence, it could be proposed that modernist art practice in Sri Lanka, from its inception in the early 20th century to the beginning of the 1990s, was defined largely by three major ideological and artistic visions of art and artists: (1) the approaches of the 43 Group, influenced by the art-making methods and aesthetics of the Ecole de Paris; (2) concepts and ideals promoted by Rabindranath Tagore and the 'Santiniketan' school of art, which were absorbed and rephrased with both explicit and implicit nationalism by Sri Lankan artists; and (3), the works and thoughts of Karunaratne, which derived from the ideals of the New York School and which he incorporated into an idea of 'religiousness', strongly linked to Buddhism. While these three main projects in art had certain disparities and conflicts at some levels, it can still be argued that they all shared a common approach to modernism in art. It is a fact that modernism in art was conceived by those practitioners in a fundamentally pastoral and bucolic attitude. These formulations of a pastoral and bucolic world in art were, of course, pitted against the colonial or the Western 'other'. The sensuous canvases of Keyt, the symbolic works of Ananada

Samarakoon (1911–62) and the meditative abstractions of Karunaratne can all be placed within this attitude of a pastoral and bucolic past/world and within the project of nation-building.

ART OF THE 1990S: PLURALISM AND 'PARA-MODERNISM'⁴

The last decade of the 20th century stands out as a period of extraordinary revitalisation of art in Sri Lanka, which paved the way for a diverse and multifaceted practice in the visual arts in the country. A whole new generation of artists equipped with a range of new ideas and concepts of art, themes for artistic investigation and, especially, with an understanding of the idea of the artist as a political individual, has come to dominate the art scene in Sri Lanka. What is obvious when looking at this outburst of artistic talent is that the artists of the new generation are making a major theoretical assault on almost all the established ideas of art-making in Sri Lanka. What is also important to note here is that most of the animators of this high-powered movement are a group of young men and women who were forced to spend their teenage years in a highly chaotic social and political environment in their rural villages and home towns. These radically new, yet artistically interesting young men and women are attacking the established ideas of excellence in art from a consciousness formed within the habitat of a rural periphery by positioning their bodies and lives as the crux of art-making! Put in other words, 'small-town' Sri Lanka is making its mark in Colombo's metropolitan art world.

In a way, most of the works of the artists who emerged in the 1990s seem to reveal them as a group of people living with memories of violence, dispossession and despair, on the one hand, and, on the other, as the casualties of the alluringly strange beauty and the evasive nature of urban culture. At the same time, the prime force that sustains their artistic activities, I would argue, is a struggle that these artists are engaged in converting the realisation of their oppressed and marginalised position in society



Ananda Samarakoon
1911–1962
Untitled

(date unknown)
Watercolour on paper



Jagath Weerasinghe
The Confused Narrative:
Fast Car

2003
Acrylic and
charcoal on canvas
Photo: I. S. Madanayake
Collection: Private
Collection, Colombo,
Sri Lanka
Image courtesy the artist

into a dynamism that allows them to surmount their despair and gain subsistence in the very society that rejected them in the recent past. In their artistic constructions, they have transformed the frustrations, despair and alienation ensuing from socio-political devastation and urban delusions and chimeras into methods to become accepted and acknowledged in society.

The key feature of Sri Lankan art of the 1990s is its conscious effort to define art as an expression of 'now' and 'right here' — art and art-making process as an expression of being contemporary. In other words, a majority of contemporary artists show a common conviction in their artistic efforts by necessarily placing themselves and their creative energies within the 'current cultural moment' and within its immediacy, and less frequently in the

distant past. This necessity to be in the current cultural moment voices an idea commonly held, consciously or unconsciously, by most of the contemporary artists: that is, the refusal of a metaphysical narrative that couches a wish to be universal in a theological and transcultural sense.⁵ In other words, this position negates the established conviction that a work of art is an enclosed entity with an objective self-existence.

This position has liberated them from two historical fetters: first, from a tradition which was signified as 'genuinely Sri Lankan' within the anti-colonial and nation-building projects of the early and mid-20th century; and, second, from the confusing belief of art as 'self' or the 'soul's' expression, where 'self' or 'soul' is defined as an apolitical existence. These ideological positions have formulated into a formal body of artistic approaches and strategies in which the sentiments and sensations of violence and frustration, the tensions and passions of the consumer society, and the material/carnal and visual situations of the urban and rural middle class could be brought into the domain of high art and the contemporary affluent society. The art of the 1990s is an issues-driven art and an engagement with issues that are directly concerned with the 'living reality' of society.

The disbelief in the possibility of making art that is capable of conveying the layers of cultural and social meanings embedded

in an art work to an indefinite audience implies neither a resistance to international modes nor a cultivation of a parochial sense of identity among the artists. This disbelief, in my opinion, reveals a rather complex and an extremely subtle attitude — a social attitude — towards the ‘art-consuming elite’, implicitly maintained by the artists who began to dominate the art scene since the 1990s. This disbelief in a way repudiates the basic sacrosanct premises of the system of beliefs that formed and nurtured the art-producing and art-consuming elite of Sri Lanka, specifically based in Colombo. This community, which entertained certain anti-establishment traits in the mid-20th century, to the extent of accepting the challenging works of the 43 Group, has, over time, become part of the establishment and, within its scheme of power politics, acquiesced to the ideologies that gave rise to countless social calamities since the country regained political independence in 1948. As such, this disbelief conveys a position (or a pose?) of non-alignment maintained by the artists towards a social class that allegedly has been an accessory to flawed ruling regimes. This disbelief also marks the formation of a collective identity of circumvallation and valorisation among the artists of the 1990s caught in a malevolent social context. As mentioned above, the artists who have come into prominence since the 1990s are from predominantly rural and urban middle classes, which represent relatively underprivileged social classes, and who were brutalised by the political bloodshed that devastated the southern regions of Sri Lanka during the 1970s, 1980s and the early 1990s. The formation of a collective group identity by way of art practice — a practice that could demand serious attention and respect from the art-consuming elite — provided a protective arena for this new generation of artists in which to be radical and vocal with their new-found art concepts, art forms and expressive interventions.

The social factors that contributed to the development of these major changes in Sri Lankan art in the 1990s are varied. On the one hand, the changes developed against a background disturbed and punctured by political violence and a 20-year-old war in the north of Sri Lanka, and, on the other, against rapid and mostly undisciplined economic development run amuck. Ironically, it is this economic growth that provided various remunerative opportunities to the younger artists to sustain themselves in the city during and after their art training in Colombo.

There are also several important 'internal factors' that have developed within the art and art-consuming field itself, which played a crucial role in the formation of the new artistic trends in the 1990s. There is general agreement among the artists of the 1990s and among the art writers⁶ that the 1992 exhibition titled *Anxiety* by Jagath Weerasinghe [the author], a Sri Lankan artist who had returned to Sri Lanka after his graduate studies in painting in the United States, presaged the art of the 1990s. Weerasinghe's exhibition, which opened with a performance by another Sri Lankan artist, Nimal Mendis, involving the breaking of coffins and the spreading of flowers, in many ways set the pace for future developments and energised the younger artists. Chandraguptha Thenuwara, another artist who returned to Sri Lanka at the same time after his graduate education in Fine Arts in Russia, and who initiated the Vibavi Academy of Fine Arts (VAFA) in 1993 with artists Kingsley Gunatillake and Weerasinghe, can be seen as the other important contributor to the formation of new trends in the art of the 1990s. Both Weerasinghe and Thenuwara began to teach art at the Institute of Aesthetic Studies (IAS) in 1994, which enabled them to influence a whole new generation of young artists to look at art in a different manner. While Thenuwara imparted a body of knowledge that had roots in the academic training he had received in Moscow, Weerasinghe intervened by introducing a new approach to art history as a critical practice in visual arts. The new ideas that the students received from Weerasinghe and Thenuwara were given space to mature within the new curriculum of the art department of the IAS, which was introduced in 1994 by artist and designer Sarath Surasena. By about 1995–97, several other artists, such as Muhanned Carder, G. R. Constantine, Anoli Perera,⁷ Gunatillake and many young graduates from the IAS, joined to sustain the momentum, spurred by Weerasinghe and Thenuwara. Anoli Perera's activities and her works as a woman artist within the group contributed a great deal in defining the role of a woman artist in a largely male-dominated art scene. Her art works and art-related activities since 1997 have opened up a substantial arena of possibilities for emerging artists, specifically women artists.

Commercial art galleries, art curators and art dealers are still a new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. Until the early 1990s, the only commercial art gallery in Colombo that showed serious art was the

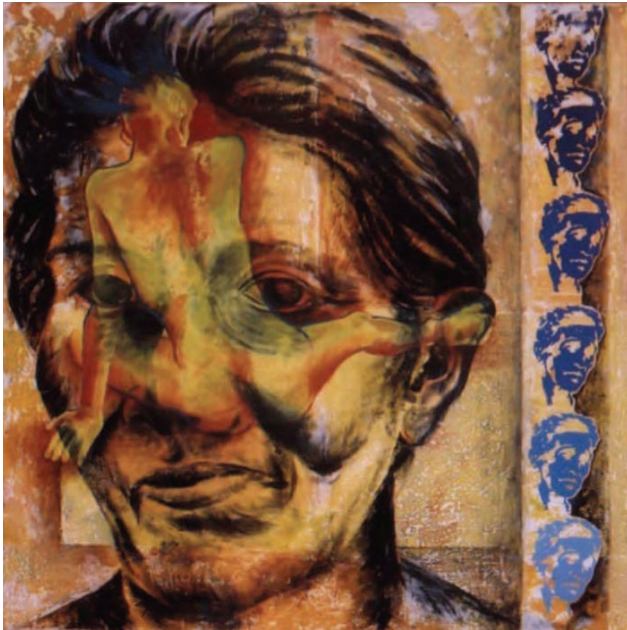
Gallery 706. By 1998, however, four commercial galleries had opened in the capital.⁸ These art galleries maintained a cautious and somewhat limited enthusiasm towards the new developments in art. Of these galleries, the Heritage Gallery, which existed for only a brief period from 1997 to 1999, sponsored by art collector Ajita de Costa and managed by Indian artist Balbir Bodh, made the most important initial contribution to the art of the 1990s. It exhibited many young artists and helped them gain acceptance in the art community.

By the early 1990s, within a few years of their emergence, the new art trends began to draw the attention of international art curators. The first important international attention came from the curators of the Fukuoka Art Museum, Japan (now called the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum), who featured Weerasinghe's work in their newsletter in 1993 and, in 1995, included an installation and several other works by Weerasinghe in the Fourth Asian Art Show. Since then, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum has been continuously featuring works of the 1990s trend in its Triennales. The next important curatorial intervention was the exhibition organised by Sharmini Pereira,⁹ titled *New Approaches in Contemporary Sri Lankan Art*, held at the National Gallery of Art, Colombo, in May 1994.¹⁰ By the end of the 1990s, art and artists of the new trend were receiving considerable attention from art curators from Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. This recognition received from 'outside' brought respect and seriousness to the art and artists of the 1990s in the eyes of the local art audience. This, in turn, strengthened and reinforced the art trends of the 1990s, giving rise to an enhanced sense of self-confidence in this new generation of artists. The other international phenomenon that contributed to the growth of the new artistic trends of the 1990s was the artist-led international art workshops in the South Asian region, such as 'KHOJ' in India, 'Vasl' in Pakistan and 'Theertha' in Sri Lanka.



Anoli Perera
Goddesses Descending

2003
Acrylic and collage
on paper
Photo: I. S. Madanayake
Collection: The artist
Image courtesy the artist



Manjula Priyadarshana
Untitled

2001
Oil on canvas
Photo: I. S. Madanayake
Collection: The artist
Image courtesy the artist

which announced clearly the basic tenets of the art of the 1990s. This period also saw the artists assuming the role of art curators and art historians. A number of group shows on historically and critically important themes were organised and curated by artists during this time.¹¹

The self-confidence thus gained gave rise to a new kind of artistic personality, which had not been seen before in the domain of Sri Lankan art: an artist who was conscious of his or her intellectual and political powers and possibilities. It was this radically new identity, which can be identified as an 'enlightenment' in its own right, that prompted Weerasinghe, Thenuwara, Perera, Constantine, Carder and Gunatillake, along with four junior artists, Sarath Kumarasiri, Pradeep Chandrasiri, Nilanti Weerasekara and Pushpakumara Koralegedara, to come out with a manifesto titled *No Order* in 1999,

THEMES OF THE 1990S ART

Art and artists of the 1990s can best be categorised in terms of their subject matter. Within this categorisation, one can see a broad diversity at work, which speaks for a range of complex and subtle psychological dispositions at work. Currently, the most prevalent subject matter among contemporary Sri Lankan artists is the investigation of the 'self' and the frustration of the individual in the face of organised political crimes. This investigation of 'self' is also carried out to other spheres where cultural taboos and traditional Victorian conventions on sex and sexuality, women's roles and ideals pertaining to 'youth' are challenged and confronted. One of the interesting things that happens here is the alignment of personal pain with that of society, and thus the artist portrays himself/herself as the suffering individual on behalf of others, implying a self-inflicted, vicarious punishment. Consequently, there



is a collection of art that shows subtle, but strong signs of autobiographical narratives. These autobiographical narratives usually tell us of a character who is desolate and melancholy, yet sanguine or of a character who is struggling with some sort of bondage; a captivity and a perplexity whose location and position are still being defined. This broad generalisation of the works of contemporary artists in relation to their subject matter can embrace most artists who had exhibitions during the past decade and a half in Colombo.

The works of Pradeep Chandrasiri, T. Shanaathanan,¹² Pushpakumara Koralegedara, Sujith Rathnayake, Sarath Kumarasiri, Anoli Perera, T. P. G. Amarajeewa and my own works show this trait of constructing biographies as an artistic expression in its most evident form. According to Chandrasiri, Shanaathanan, Koralegedara, Rathnayake, Kumarasiri and several others, making a work of art is the surest and most immediate way of registering the sentiments and sensations of an individual who is made frustrated and despairing in the face of political or personal adversities. The painting or the sculpture is the vehicle for this activity of 'chronicling' the pain and history before it is normalised and de-radicalised. Perhaps because of this, their works carry signs of immediacy and indeterminacy. One can propose that their works present themselves as visual representations of a carefully ordered chaos and perplexity. While the work of Pradeep, Pushpakumara and Anoli Perera are clear examples of chaos set into order, some of Sujith Rathnayake's works are excellent examples of perplexity presented as a rational consciousness. Shanaathanan presents chaos and perplexity within an almost surreal and mythical environment.

T.P.G. Amarajeewa
Don't Measure Me

Illuminated boxes with photographs
Large box: 180 x 120 cm;
small boxes: 90 x 60 cm each
Collection: The artist
Image courtesy the artist

Sarath Premasinghe
Artist and female model I

2003
Oil on canvas
photograph: I. S. Mandanayake
Collection the artist
Image courtesy the artist





Chandraguptha Thenuwara
Barrelism

2000
Painted Barrels
Each barrel measures
88 x 58 cm
Collection: The artist
Image courtesy the artist

We can also suggest that most of the works of this category are indicative of individuals living with memories of violence, dispossession and despair. As mentioned above, however, it is not merely remembering violence but a struggle to surmount it. It is probably to accommodate this desire that a need for an autobiographical approach to art has emerged. The important subtext of this observation is that most of the contemporary young artists portray themselves as if they were engaged in a narcissistic injury, a process of self-formation.¹³ While the works of Chandraguptha Thenuwara and Muhanned Carder can be placed within this category, they also stand apart from the rest, as their works do not betray autobiographical moods as much as the others do. Thenuwara's *Barrelism* and Carder's *Night Landscapes* are among the most poignant visual statements of frustration and despair that the contemporary visual arts have seen in the recent past.

THE CITY AS AN ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

The other most-investigated areas in the new art are the urban environment or the city and the consumer culture. Before the 1990s trend, the city and city life and behaviour related to urbanism were not valued as points of departure for artistic explorations: urbanism had been equated with the 'anti-aesthetical'. The city was seen as a barren landscape with no 'beauty' or 'real life', where an artificial hodgepodge of humans and buildings had developed. This, I would suggest, was a continuation of the early modernist discourse in art, which had positioned the ideas of 'beauty' outside the 'present', but within the pastoral and bucolic past, among the 'primitives'. Towards the end of the 1990s, an obvious shift in attitude towards the city began to appear in Sri Lankan visual arts.

A few artists can be seen working with the theme of the city and urban life. Some have been attracted to the residues of the urban and consumer culture, making art works that focus on the strange beauty and the evasive nature of urban culture. The works of Anuradha Henakaarachchi, Bandu Manamperi, Upul Chamila Bandara and a few others can be considered in this category.



Bandu Manamperi
Home Coming

2001
Performance at the
Theertha International
Artists Workshop at
Lunuganga, Sri Lanka
Photo: I. S. Madanayake
Image courtesy the artist

These two broad general categories are not discrete and distinct from each other; their borders seem to merge strangely in the works of many artists. This merging can be seen in Chandraguptha Thenuwara's *Barrelism*, or in Sarath Kumarasiri's terracotta *Trousers*. There are also other thematic trends that have developed within the 1990s, as can be seen in the works of Chandana Wasanta, Manjula Priyadharshana, Chaminda Gamage, Pala Potupitiya, Arjuna Gunatillake and Anura Baragamaarachchi. In general, however, what is clearly visible in the works of the 1990s is that they show an artistic personality that has evolved and matured with a commitment to the understanding of the social and political meanings of the works produced, and the relationship and the responsibility of the artist to those meanings. In short, the art of the 1990s marks the 'loss of innocence' in art-making in Sri Lanka. It has made it difficult to avoid reflection in the practice of art-making.



Bandu Manamperi
Instant Nirvana Private Ltd

Perspex box, plastic cloth
hanger and terracotta
60 x 60 x 60
Collection: The artist
Image courtesy the artist

CONCLUSION

As one can see from the foregoing discussion, the artistic trends that developed in the 1990s in Sri Lanka form a complex and wide-ranging repertoire. There are, however, a number of artists who work outside the categories I have indicated above. Their works receive considerable media attention and command high prices in the art market. It is difficult to place contemporary thinking in Sri Lankan art within an evolutionary frame. The theoretical basis, evolutionary history and implicit or explicit conceptualisation of current art practice defy description in terms of categories such as modernism or postmodernism. To say, simply, that it is 'post-traditional' gives one breathing space. Nevertheless, this characterisation is also misleading — one can often see underneath a yearning for tradition, for an ideal lost, for roots in the past. Its immediate stylistic qualities have something in common with Euro-American modernism. At the same time, the critical stance around which most current art works are constructed presents a postmodern aura. Just as the oxcart and the microchip jostle in the streets of Colombo — a postcolonial, a-historical space in which the history of technology is turned on its head — post-traditional, para-modern art practice addresses this confusing situation cheerfully, confidently, violently, with a sense of tragic irony.

NOTES

I am grateful to Anoli Perera whose constructive comments helped me rewrite and rephrase certain arguments and ideas in this essay. I am also grateful to Chandraguptha Thenuwara for checking and finding vital information required for the essay.

- 1 Senake Bandaranayake, *Sri Lankan Paintings in the 20th Century*, unpublished manuscript, n.d., pp. 2–5.
- 2 Bandaranayake, *Sri Lankan Paintings in the 20th Century*, pp. 3–5.
- 3 Jagath Weerasinghe, *Made in IAS: an exhibition of paintings, sculpture and installation works by 16 artists from the Institute of Aesthetic Studies of the University of Kelaniya*, Introduction to catalogue, Gallery 706, Colombo, 11–20 July, 2000, p. 5.
- 4 This section of the essay draws extensively on two of my previous essays on the same subject: Jagath Weerasinghe, 'The Moments of Impact: the art of '90s trend in Sri Lanka', in Pooja Sood (ed.), *KHOJ 2001 International Artists' Workshop*, KHOJ International Artists' Association, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 85–88; and 'Weerasinghe', in *Made in IAS*, pp. 3–5.
- 5 Jagath Weerasinghe, *No Glory*; Sarath Kumarasiri, *Recent Works at Heritage Gallery*, 18–30 April, 1998.
- 6 Senake Bandaranayake, *Anxiety: an exhibition of paintings by Jagath Weerasinghe*, Exhibition brochure, The National Gallery of Art, Colombo, 23–28 November, 1992. Anoli Perera, 'State of Sri Lankan Art', *Frontline*, 26 February, 1999, pp. 66–68.
- 7 Muhanned Carder and Anoli Perera are also part of the Vibavi Academy of Fine Arts. Carder returned from the United States in 1995 with a degree in Fine Arts from the Chicago Institute of Art. Anoli Perera returned from the United States in 1992 after a period of four years. She is a mostly self-taught artist who has worked for brief periods in several art workshops and art studios in the United States.
- 8 The four commercial galleries that were active in 1998 were Gallery 706, Heritage Gallery, Gallery Mount Castle and The Paradise Road Galleries. Another commercial gallery, The Bungalow, was opened in 2000.
- 9 Sharmini Pereira is an independent art curator based in London.
- 10 In this show, Sharmini Pereira put together eight artists, including Weerasinghe and Thenuwara. The others in the show were Kingsley Gunatillake, Tilak Samarawickrema, Bandula Peiris, Druvinka Madawela, Laki Senanayake and Tissa de Alwis.
- 11 Anoli Perera's show, titled *Reclaiming histories: a retrospective exhibition of women's art* and held in 2000 at Sapumal Foundation, and Jagath Weerasinghe's show, titled *Made in IAS* and also held in 2000 at Gallery 706, are good examples of this development.
- 12 Shanaathanan is an artist based in Jaffna.
- 13 Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self*, International Universities Press, New York, 1973, p. 551.

SOUTH-EAST ASIA

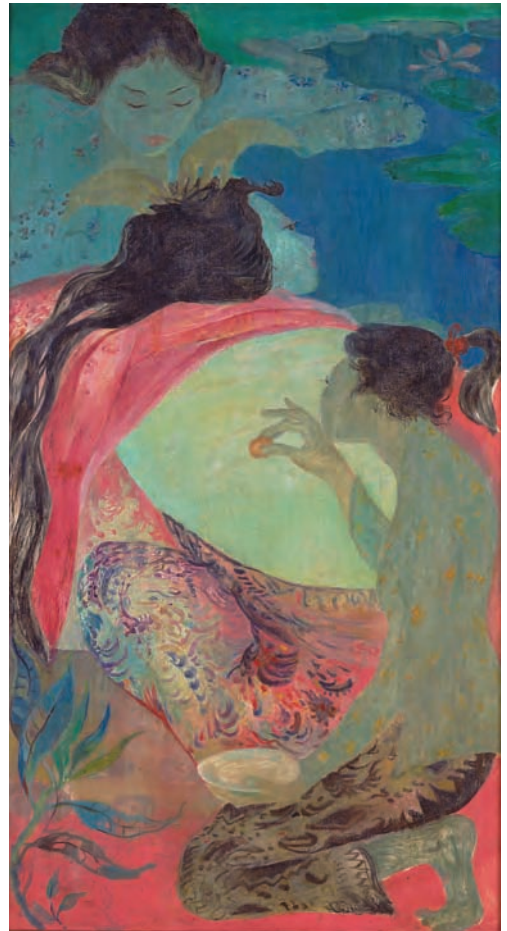
INDONESIA: Art, Freedom, Human Rights and Engagement with the West

Caroline Turner

MODERN INDONESIAN ART is framed by the struggle for an independent nation. Artists of the independence generation, especially Sudjojono, Affandi and Hendra Gunawan, seen as the father figures of modern Indonesian art, shaped Indonesian artistic identity during the war of independence against the Dutch and in the early national period. Their emphasis on an art depicting the lives of ordinary Indonesian people was to provide an important focus for an Indonesian art ideology, which embraced a vision of freedom encompassing all levels of society. That ideology and the struggles of the independence movement have informed Indonesian art for more than 50 years and remain as a continuing legacy. Anthony Reid wrote in 1998 of the Suharto Government that 'today's Indonesia is low on the league tables for the practice of political and civic freedoms.¹ Yet the concept of *merdeka* or

freedom (defined by Reid as ‘opposition to slavery, oppression and control’) as Reid shows, has a long and enduring history in Indonesia.² I will argue in this essay that this concept, combined with the ideal of transforming society for the better through artistic action, has been of great significance in Indonesian contemporary art.

In a series of important publications that have defined much of the thinking about Indonesian art in the past decade, artist and critic Jim Supangkat has pointed out that modern Indonesian art grew out of Western art, ‘adapted, sometimes over a very long period of time in the colonial period’.³ In explaining the development of Indonesian modern and contemporary art, Supangkat has developed the concept of ‘multimodernism’, articulating this as ‘modernism seen through pluralist principles’.⁴ The critical change came with independence when an anti-Western element also ran in parallel, drawing from cultural debates about Asian values and a search for identity as the new Indonesian nation defined itself.⁵ The Dutch were in Indonesia for 350 years, but, as Supangkat has also noted, their influence was limited to a small number of people — the elites (and, of course, Indonesian pre-colonial society had its own feudal divisions). A group of Dutch artists, some born in Indonesia, were influential from the late 19th century, but the only truly significant Indonesian artist to emerge in this era was a Javanese aristocrat, Raden Saleh (1807–80), who visited and exhibited in Europe. Raden Saleh’s work (alas, much of it lost) was influenced greatly by romanticism in Europe and exemplified such romantic (and indeed orientalist) themes as combat between exotic wild animals and humans. An example is his *The Deer Hunt* in which a tiger attacks men and horses.⁶ There is an argument to be made, however, that Saleh drew on his own Javanese worldview as well as European romantic conventions in



Hendra Gunawan
*Catching Lice and
Skin Scraping*

c.1950
Oil on canvas
119.5 x 64.8 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

art. *The Deer Hunt*, for example, seems to be set in South-East Asia — its protagonists are Asians, not Europeans. John Clark, in his seminal book *Modern Asian Art*, has a fascinating discussion of Saleh's depiction of the capture by a Dutch General of Prince Diponegoro, a Javanese leader resisting the Dutch. Clark notes that the picture, despite its ostensible acquiescence to colonial rule, can be interpreted in two ways in terms of Saleh's own view of Dutch control. Jim Supangkat goes further in saying that the artist took a stance in demonstrating his sympathy for Diponegoro in his capture and 'struggle'.⁷

In the early 20th century, a number of other Indonesian artists were trained in the Netherlands in European styles and, in particular, favoured a form of landscape that was later referred to as the *Mooi Indie*, the 'Beautiful Indies', an idealised view of life in the colony. The generally agreed moment for the emergence of modern art in Indonesia is the 1930s and 1940s. This fascinating period has been examined in an important series of exhibitions in Japan and Singapore analysing the 'birth of modern art' in South-East Asia.⁸ The foundations had emerged in the late 1930s when Sudjojono, the intellectual leader of a developing anti-colonial nationalist art movement, had demanded truth and morality in painting rather than depictions of Indonesia as a tropical paradise, asserting that the art of painting must have its genesis in the reality of 'our condition of life'.⁹ These arguments were directed particularly against the *Mooi Indie* school and one of its main exemplars, the Dutch-trained Basuki Abdullah (the son of another of the founders of the school, Abdullah Suriasubroto), whose oeuvre consisted of idealised paintings and portraits, often of beautiful women, and directed to elite patrons.¹⁰ Basuki Abdullah went on to have a highly successful career in the second half of the 20th century producing portraits of the elites of South-East Asia, including, for example, President Sukarno, the Thai royal family and Imelda Marcos.

The purpose of artist groups which emerged during the 1930s and 1940s, such as *Persagi* (founded by Sudjojono and others in Jakarta in 1937), was rejection of Dutch colonial models and elite conservatism within Indonesian society. During the Pacific war, the Japanese occupied much of the territory of the European colonial empires in East and South-East Asia, including Indonesia from early 1942. One of the defining components of this era was

what Indonesian writer Goenawan Mohamad calls the great illusion of the 1940s: the belief that Japan, as an Asian nation, could redefine relationships between Asia and the West. Indonesian artists worked under Japanese cultural organisations during the occupation but much of their work, as he argues, consists of eulogies to patriotism and incorporates a dream of independence.¹¹ The Japanese occupiers also encouraged anti-European colonial art. Yet it is apparent that most of the artists were focused on very different outcomes from those of the Japanese. This is a phenomenon in South-East Asia, and especially in Indonesia and the Philippines, which is yet to be fully documented. Such groups as *Poetera* (Centre of the People's Strength) were also important in this era and allowed artists to meet with independence leaders and intellectuals such as Sukarno. During the war and the independence struggle, these artists played an important role as frontline artists and in producing anti-Dutch posters and other propaganda work.¹² Of course, these debates were not confined to artists or to art and went to the heart of anti-colonial debates in the 1940s.



S. Sudjojono
Angklung Player

1956
Oil on canvas
98.2 x 34.2
Collection: Singapore Art Museum
Image courtesy Singapore Art Museum

Indonesian artist and academic Dolorosa Sinaga writes of the era of the 1930s and 1940s:

The role of the contemporary artist can be said to have been pioneered by Sudjojono. In 1947 he managed to implant the spirit of struggle and renewal in the group of artists who joined 'Pelukis Rakyat' [People's Painters] by rejecting the painting concepts of 'Mooi Indie' [The Beautiful Indies]. According to Sudjojono, the pictures of Indonesia created by the Mooi Indie artists were superficial impressions because they [the artists] painted only beautiful natural landscapes and implemented exotic ways of observing social life in villages in Indonesia. Based on his spirit of nationalism, Sudjojono and

his fellow artists changed the exotic image (which is a colonial inheritance) into an image of Indonesian painting that is based on the realities of life which they observed and experienced. At this point, it is important to note that the role of Sudjojono is seen as that of a leader in building national spirit and fighting for Indonesian freedom. Their commitment was not to focus on aesthetic value but rather, through painting, to convey the feeling and spirit of Indonesia, in order to call for national consciousness.¹³

The experience of the early 1940s was grim — war, occupation, the Allied invasion, the threat of the Dutch returning and the looming struggle for independence. Once the new Indonesia came into being in 1949, however, the nationalist artists were heroes of the new Republic. This new nation consisted of more than 17,000 islands (6,000 uninhabited) and many ethnic groups and was based on great kingdoms and cultures that had had immense significance in South-East Asia for centuries. It encompassed the religious traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam as well as local cosmologies, spiritualities and mysticism from many diverse sources. Indonesia is, in fact, the largest Islamic nation in the world, with a population by the late 1990s of more than 200 million people, 87 per cent of whom are Muslim.

Art depicting the lives of ordinary Indonesians and a post-war postcolonial nationalist art that condemned colonialist legacies and brought the idea of a united Indonesia to the fore was encouraged by Sukarno from 1945. The complex linking of art to postcolonial ‘nationalisms’ and to the aim of building a common Indonesian culture is yet to be fully explored. Jim Supangkat has pointed to the significance of the expressionist art which emerged from the independence generation.¹⁴ Affandi was one artist who participated in these movements and who became Indonesia’s best-known artist of his generation internationally. After the war he exhibited in Asia, Latin America, the United States, Europe and Australia, at a time when Indonesian modern artists were not well known overseas. His awards include a major prize at the Venice Biennale in 1964, Indonesian Government awards, an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Singapore in 1974, and the Dag Hammarskjold Peace Prize in 1976. Called by his contemporaries *sang empu* or venerable master, he developed a highly individual expressionist style characterised by rich skeins of paint spread on

canvas with his fingers rather than a brush. His oeuvre included portraits, genre and still life and he drew on the colours and traditions of Javanese and Balinese life, such as cock fights and fishing.¹⁵ His was also an art about the realities of life. An Australian diplomat, Richard Austin, posted to Jakarta from 1959, described diplomatic parties at the Italian Embassy in the early 1960s where guests were 'apt to be somewhat disconcerted' by a large painting by Affandi hanging in the dining room which depicted, 'with evocative realism', a starving beggar in a posture of supplication.¹⁶

Sudjojono also continued to paint social themes in the post-war era. Hendra Gunawan was another important independence artist who painted villagers engaged in folk practices such as the trance dance; and Sudjana Kerton, another of the independence generation, painted everyday Indonesian life in bold, lively and often humorous paintings.¹⁷ Their work and that of other post-war artists has been brilliantly documented by art historian Astri Wright in her seminal book on Indonesian art, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain: preoccupations of contemporary Indonesian painters*, and in other essays, and I am indebted to her insights and analysis.¹⁸ A number of influential Indonesian artists travelled or lived abroad from the 1950s, among them Mochtar Apin, Sudjana Kerton and Srihardi Sudarsono. Srihardi was influenced by social realism in the 1940s, then by action painting when he studied and taught in the United States in the 1960s.¹⁹ Srihardi's lyrical expressionism combines traditional motifs such as Balinese dancers or exquisite landscapes with contemporary themes and he remains a key artist of the post-independence generation. Supangkat referred to him in 1993 as 'the most acclaimed painter in present-day Indonesia'.²⁰ Another of this extraordinarily talented generation is A. D. Pirous, born in Aceh,



Affandi
Self Portrait

1975
Oil on canvas
126 x 97 cm
Collection:
Singapore Art Museum
Image courtesy
Singapore Art Museum

who utilised the art traditions of Aceh and his own knowledge of Islamic art and calligraphy — the latter rediscovered on a visit to the United States in the 1960s — combining them with a deep understanding of Western modernism and abstraction to produce an Islamic vision in Indonesian art.²¹ Nevertheless, Islamic art traditions of eschewing the subject in favour of calligraphy and abstract approaches are not a dominant school in Indonesian art, although we see the influence of calligraphy in batik painting, and other Indonesian artists have depicted subject matter such as the haj (the pilgrimage to Mecca), among them Widayat. Affandi was also a Haji. It is also important to note that Indonesia has had many artistic exchanges with countries in the Middle East as well as with Malaysia, with its strong Muslim traditions.

After the coup in 1965 which brought Suharto to power and in which it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of Communists, leftists and alleged sympathisers of the old order were killed, there was understandably something of a hiatus in political work in art in Indonesia. A number of artists were jailed for their alleged Communist involvement and membership of *Lekra* (an organisation of artists linked to the Communists), including the brilliant painter Hendra Gunawan, who spent 13 years in prison (although he was allowed to continue to paint).²² Djoko Pekik, another important painter, who depicted the lives of ordinary people as a grim and often bleak existence, had his work censored.

Contemporary Indonesian art is usually seen as beginning in 1975 with the Indonesian New Art Movement, which again brought social concerns to the forefront of art. These artists used installation, in particular, as well as performance, to make specific political comments on contemporary events, which challenged official orthodoxies, particularly concerning exploitative economic development and the destruction of traditional farming and ways of life. Japanese academic Akira Tatehata, writing in the catalogue of the exhibition *Asian Modernism: diverse developments in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand*, describes the emergence in the 1970s of a new direction in Indonesian art as ‘a movement of young artists from Yogyakarta and Bandung organised in protest against the judging of the Second Jakarta Painting Biennial of 1974 which awarded prizes to the decorative style of painting. The protesters published the ‘Black December Statement’ fiercely criticising the lack of social and political consciousness in

decorative art and declaring that it was symptomatic of the lack of creativity in Indonesian art'.²³ Jim Supangkat was one of the artists involved in founding the Indonesian New Art Movement which grew out of the protest in 1975. His own work in the exhibition, *Ken Dedes* (1975), had consisted of a plaster cast of the head of a famous classical Javanese sculpture on a pedestal on which he painted the outline of a young woman's body wearing jeans with the zip undone and, shockingly, as Astri Wright writes, showing pubic hair.²⁴ Supangkat notes that the judges viewed the rebellion as a Western influence. There was, however, a direct reaction by these protesting artists against 'the depolitization of Indonesian Art that had occurred in the late 1960s'.²⁵

In the 1980s and 1990s, artists continued an art of social comment. Among women artists, Kartika Affandi, the daughter of the famous painter, produced work with social themes. An art of social criticism emerged from a younger generation of artists using such approaches as hyper-realism (Dede Eri Supria) and surrealism (Ivan Sagito, Agus Kamal and Lucia Hartini, the latter focusing on women's issues). What we might call a postcolonial generation in Indonesian art continued the legacy of the independence generation by linking art to everyday life. FX Harsono, Dadang Christanto, Moelyono, Heri Dono, Arahmaiani and Semsar Siahaan, among others, went further and created a body of work sometimes utilising performance and installation as well as painting to create an art of protest against injustice, exploitation and human rights abuses.

In the past 15 years, a large number of Indonesian artists have produced art which directly addresses political issues and human rights concerns and has a strong community base, thus mirroring the focus of the artists of the independence era, even while their artistic approaches differ. While many of these artists have critiqued concepts of nationalism or national identity as a form of official art, much of their work also speaks for groups marginalised in the era of development and globalisation, as Jim Supangkat reveals in his essay in this book. In inspiration and content, these artists often also drew on Indonesian traditions and culture while promoting a concept of democracy in contrast with that of the ruling elite of Suharto's New Order. Most of these artists connected with transnational international art movements in various ways and many studied abroad. Some of this work,

however, was undoubtedly opposed to Western influences in Indonesia. Some of the art was communitarian in engaging with whole communities affected by social problems, such as land resumption, and in confronting trauma related to violence and repression. In the process, they put forward an alternative view of Indonesian society which is, however, also linked to freedom and community identity. Some drew strongly on traditional stories, dance, myths and performance such as *Wayang* shadow puppetry. Nindityo Adipurnomo and Heri Dono are two examples of artists who fuse traditional and contemporary imagery. Adipurnomo, for example, has used abstracted forms from Javanese dance in his painting and the symbol of the *konde*, a traditional Javanese woman's hairpiece, in a series of installations. Heri Dono's mixture of images is drawn from sources as diverse as *Wayang*, traditional performance, popular culture, comics and television. He combines humour with penetrating social and political comment. Supangkat cites such works as Heri Dono's *Looking at the Marginal People* in the 1980s as reflecting the tendency of artists to look again to the grassroots life of ordinary people.²⁶

It is important to note in this context the domination in contemporary art activities of urban Java. While art academies for traditional arts were situated outside Java, for example, in Bali, which remains an important centre for the arts and one visited and depicted by most Indonesian artists, the art schools for modern art are all situated in Java. Yogyakarta (ASRI-ISI) and Bandung (ITB) were dominant, although the art school in Jakarta (IKJ) and the Art Centre Taman Ismail Marzuki (TIM) established in 1968 under the patronage of the Governor of Jakarta also made important contributions, especially through exhibitions. Supangkat notes the freedom for artists to do the projects they wished at TIM, which he sees as the first time there was official financial support and real freedom.²⁷ The predominantly Hindu island of Bali always followed its own artistic directions and styles, with Ubud a major centre for artists and private galleries. Artists from elsewhere in Indonesia tended to study and work through the main outlets for art in Java. Three Sumatran-born examples are Dolorosa Sinaga, an important sculptor (one of the few women artists to achieve an influential position in the arts) and lecturer at the art school in Jakarta, IKJ; painter Semsar Siahaan; and Pirous, also a painter from Aceh (Sumatra), who taught at ITB in Bandung.

For a Western curator, such as myself, studying Indonesian art in the 1990s, the art schools in Java were the first point of contact. There was no national gallery for modern Indonesian art until the mid-1990s; the Balai Seni Rupa, a municipal gallery in Jakarta, not being a real equivalent. Arts support at Government level remains poor, except for traditional arts, although Sukarno had built up an important Presidential collection of works by independence-generation artists. Considering the significant private collections that exist for modern and contemporary art in Indonesia, this Government neglect seems strange, especially as Indonesian artists throughout the period were achieving successes abroad and governments elsewhere in South-East Asia, especially in Malaysia and Singapore, were developing national galleries in the 1980s and 1990s as a focal point for national contemporary art development in their respective countries. Perhaps the political nature of much contemporary art after the mid-1970s deterred the Suharto Government. Private galleries, such as Cemeti Art House in Yogyakarta, run by Dutch-born artist Mella Jaarsma and her Indonesian artist husband Nindityo Adipurnomo, were a beacon for foreign collectors wanting to see the work of contemporary Indonesian artists. Private patronage has continued to be important, as well as groups of artists, in providing a base for new exhibition models. However, there also developed some publicly funded projects such as the Jakarta Biennial and Yogyakarta Biennial.

Major exposure of modern Indonesian art abroad began about 1990 with the Festival of Indonesia in the United States, the Fukuoka Asian Art exhibitions in Japan from the 1980s, the Cuban Havana Biennales of Third World art in the 1980s and 1990s, exhibitions in Europe and especially in the Netherlands in the same period, the Asia–Pacific Triennials and Sydney Biennales in Australia in the 1990s and the Japan Foundation exhibitions and Asia Society (US) exhibitions in the 1990s. Indonesian artists began to be selected for prestigious international exhibitions and biennales in Asia and Europe in this era. Indonesia started to organise its own contemporary international exhibitions, such as the Government-supported *Art of the Non-Aligned Countries* exhibition in Jakarta in 1995.²⁸ The artists selected for these exhibitions were trained in contemporary Western art approaches but developed their own focus. Much Indonesian contemporary art

from the period of the Eighties to the present expresses the immediacy of a local political and social context, combined with an acute social conscience. It was an art that broke free from the decorative art tradition which fuelled a newly emerging wealthy middle-class art market, discussed by Jim Supangkat in his important essay in this volume. Yet the decorative tradition is also aesthetically significant, and Supangkat has argued elsewhere that these artists should not be overlooked as their work is linked to traditional art forms related to the many Indonesian ethnic groups, and that those traditions remain an important part of Indonesian art production — for example, in Balinese art and craft or in textile production throughout Indonesia.²⁹

Many artists from the 1980s produced art aimed at communities and which proved an effective means to confront group trauma as well as individual pain. This art took up the question of rights for many marginalised and voiceless individuals, including women, who are often subsumed and even lost in discussion of broader issues of community rights.³⁰ It has been suggested that Indonesian art adopted ideas such as installation and protest art from Western art, merely Indonesianising the content. But there were critical differences, which were brought into sharp relief by the reaction of audiences outside Indonesia. Much more than content and subject matter made this art essentially Indonesian. Of the many artists who have worked in this context, let me take three examples.



Arahmaiani
Coke Circle

1996
Installation
Image courtesy the artist

Arahmaiani, a young woman artist whose work was shown at the Second Asia–Pacific Triennial exhibition in 1996, produced for that exhibition an installation and performance called *Nation for Sale*. She had done a similar installation for the important *Art of the Non-Aligned Countries* exhibition in Jakarta in 1995, *Sacred Coke*, in which a condom was placed on a Coca-Cola bottle. Drawing on some of the features of the continuing decorative tradition in Indonesian art, including classical dance and Balinese costume, her 1996 work, featuring Coca-Cola bottles, condoms and Western pornography, as well as American toy soldiers wielding machine guns, was about cultural imperialism and gender exploitation, and was a confrontational piece, even by Western standards, given the problems attendant even in Western countries on the display of pornography in public galleries. Her message was that ordinary people in Indonesia were being seduced through popular culture and television while their sources of livelihood and culture were being destroyed by exploitative neo-colonialism linked to globalisation. But the artist has also criticised Indonesian compliance. Dr Dwi Marianto calls *Nation for Sale* a metaphor for the displacement of people from their lands for factories and where women have become commodities and elites profit so that the nation is in effect sold.³¹ Her conjunction of commodities such as Coca-Cola and a plastic Buddha in close proximity to the Holy Koran in one installation brought local criticism from groups in Indonesia.³² Recent work by this artist has dealt with the rapes that followed the riots of 1998, and these themes have also been tackled by other women artists such as Non Hendratmo and Lucia Hartini. Arahmaiani, whose work *Burning Body–Burning Country (II)* (1999) was shown in Manila, spoke in the Philippines of her role as a woman artist in Indonesia:

As a young woman artist, I realize it [is] a difficult way that I have chosen. The repressive government is operating on the basis of militarism in combination with Javanese Muslim feudalism and a patriarchal system, which I believe, breed a culture of violence — physically and psychologically. The system never gave enough room for women to express themselves freely apart from being a good mother, a good wife, a good daughter or sister, though she might also be a career woman at the same time.³³



Arahmaiani
Nation for Sale

1996
Performance Second
Asia-Pacific Triennial
Queensland Art Gallery
1996
Image courtesy the artist

Arahmaiani is part of a cultural movement in the late 1990s and early 20th century in Indonesia which has seen women since the end of the New Order producing important and radical new work in areas such as theatre and now film and tackling critical issues in Indonesian society related to gender issues.³⁴

Another example is the community-based work of Moelyono. Beginning in the 1980s, after finishing his education in Yogyakarta, Moelyono relocated to a small village in East Java, teaching children art and creating works responding to the dispossession of small farmers, including that caused by the building of the Wonorejo Dam in the village of Winong, where inhabitants were being relocated. To work through the trauma caused by this, he helped resurrect the trance dance known as the horse dance, once banned because it was associated with the Communist Party. His art, then, is in part about the self-

empowerment of victims. In 1985, with a group of scientists, he and other artists, including FX Harsono and Gendut Rianto, produced art works exposing mercury dumping and the subsequent potentially fatal and crippling Minamata disease among young children.³⁵ He has also worked to expose injustices such as the rape and murder of the woman trade unionist Marsinah. For the Third Asia–Pacific Triennial in Brisbane in 1999, he produced a work about the violent riots in which Chinese were targeted. The original concept for the work, unable to be realised at the time, also included references to heads of ancient Hindu statues sold to tourists and the archaeological treasures thus destroyed and, Adi Wickasono suggests, to deaths in more recent history, such as the coup in 1965, when the rivers were said to be filled with headless corpses, and more recent mysterious and potentially politically motivated deaths in 1999 near the artist's village.³⁶ His most recent work after the fall of Suharto has also been educational and community based. Moelyono's art is concerned particularly with



economically deprived communities in communal art projects confronting socio-political trauma, where art is a community as well as an individual experience. This type of art has been extremely important since the events of May 1998 in Indonesia. Dr Melanie Budianto, notes for example, that some women artists have banded together to use art to overcome the trauma of the rapes which occurred during the same extremely violent days in 1998.³⁷

Another artist who has devised ways of direct communication with audiences in the West, as well as in Indonesia, is Dadang Christanto. Born in Tegal in Java in 1957, he graduated from the Indonesian Art College, Yogyakarta, in 1978. Since then he has been involved in making art which relates to social issues in Indonesia. Early in his career, he became associated with an artists' group, founded by Indonesian poet W. S. Rendra, which crossed borders of literature, music and performance, and was concerned with political ideas. Christanto participated in a revival of the

Moelyono
*Sanggar bermain
 anak tani (SBAT)*
 (Farmers' children's
 play group exhibition
 'Exploring Vacuum I')

2003
 Image courtesy Cemeti
 Art House and the artist



Dadang Christanto
Api bulan Mei
 (Fire in May)

1999
 Installation and
 performance at Third
 Asia–Pacific Triennial
 Queensland Art Gallery
 Image courtesy
 Andrea Higgins

suffering, Who are oppressed, Who are voiceless, Who are powerless, Who are burdened, Who are victims of violence, Who are victims of a dupe, Who are victims of injustice. By the end of the exhibition, there were hundreds of flowers and poems left in front of the work. Most were not about Indonesia but, as the artist had suggested, commemorated suffering in every time and place. Many of the poems were about world issues and personal pain, but many were about Australia and, in particular, referred to a young Aboriginal dancer, Daniel Yok, who had died in Brisbane after an encounter with the police shortly before the exhibition opened. In 1996, Christanto presented *1001 Manusia tanah* ('1001 People of the Earth'), using cast fibreglass figures placed in the water at an amusement park at Marine Beach, Ancol, just outside Jakarta. The

Indonesian New Art Movement in 1987 for a large collaborative exhibition, *Fantasy World in Supermarket*, at Ismail Marzuki Cultural Centre Jakarta. The work he conceived, *Ballad for Suparkal*, was about a becak driver who had killed himself when becaks, a form of bicycle taxi, were banned in the West Java city of Bandung. Another important early work was *Golf*, purchased by the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, criticising the taking of farmland for golf courses — that is, for the pleasure of the wealthy and tourists. It showed a man hitting a golf ball which turns into a *Wayang* demon — a symbol of evil. Another highly political work was *Bureaucracy* (1991), in which heads on a stand like a row of puppets each lick the back of the head in front. The foremost head wears a soldier's helmet.

In 1993, at the First Asia–Pacific Triennial in Brisbane, Christanto undertook the installation *For those: Who are poor, Who are*

life-sized figures represented displaced human beings, male and female. The response to this work from amusement park visitors, families and fishermen, which I witnessed, again demonstrated the artist's ability to achieve his aim of communicating with people in a way that touches a special chord of humanity. For the Third Asia–Pacific Triennial, Christanto's performance entailed burning 47 life-size papier-mâché human figures, referencing the riots in May 1998 in Indonesia. Christanto has only since those events revealed that his own father was one of those killed in the 1965 coup. While his works have an intense personal experience of violence at their heart, they nevertheless strike a chord with audiences in many places. His new works again reach out to audiences with a universal message related to human suffering and human rights abuses capable of illuminating 'our sense of humanity'.³⁸

Indonesian artists of the past 20 years have created an extraordinary body of work in its impact on the region and beyond. Moreover, this work, together with that of artists from other parts of Asia of the same period relating to issues of human rights, has, since the 1980s, created a model for art and human rights expression which offers a way forward for a new kind of socially conscious art for the 21st century. Indonesian artists have been in the forefront of this movement. The artists clearly made a significant impact on home audiences as well as reaching international audiences, but we are yet to see, however, if they are to be the heroes of the post-Suharto era in Indonesia.

If this work engaged and communicated with Indonesian audiences, how was it seen overseas? This is a critical point because many of these artists had given up the possibility of obtaining wealthy patrons at home in order to focus on art which engaged with human rights issues. In many cases, exposure overseas was of great significance for them in legitimising their role within Indonesia, in enabling them to meet with like-minded artists and intellectuals internationally, and in allowing their work to reach a wider audience, as Jim Supangkat suggests. I would argue, however, that not all of this work was adequately understood overseas, some was treated superficially and sometimes foreign curators lacked sensitivity as to the repercussions the artists might face in Indonesia.

What has happened since the downfall of Suharto is hard for an outsider to judge. There was confusion after the anti-Suharto

revolution as art and life moved onto the streets in the face of economic and political change on a revolutionary scale. This was well described by Indonesian writer Dr M. Dwi Marianto, head of the Research Department at the Indonesian Institute of Yogyakarta. Writing in 1999, Dr Marianto pointed out:

In less than two years, the language of art and the language of everyday life in Indonesia have been blurred beyond easy recognition. A new language has emerged: that of the protest of daily survival. It takes the turbulent form of demonstrations and strikes, but it is also in the regular activities of ordinary people: T-shirts proclaiming bodily solidarity with change: stickers attached to motor-bikes, cars and lampposts, lampooning a now discredited way of life. The New Order has given way to the New Disorder. At the height of the regime's monopoly over public discourse, homogeneity was brutally enforced, often through the use of cultural and religious symbols. Alternative thoughts and voices were silenced or sterilised. Dissidence had to be expressed through euphemisms and metaphors, even when it addressed the most critical and urgent of issues. But now, people are able to speak boldly, openly and in the vernacular about violence, civil disturbance and the strangely simultaneous centrifugal and centripetal effects of socio-cultural change.³⁹

The violence of 1998 and of the New Order before that, particularly in 1965, is still a major theme in art. But there are new issues as well. In 2003, Indonesia returned to the 50th Venice Biennale after half a century with the theme 'Paradise Lost: Mourning the World', referring to the Bali bombings of 12 October, 2002, which killed over 200 people and destroyed the island's reputation for peace and tranquillity, its tourist industry and thus the economic basis of survival for many on the island. Further inspiration for the theme came from Nehru's reference to Bali — during his visit in the 1950s — as 'The Morning of the World'. Arahmaiani and Dadang Christanto, together with Tisna Sanjaya and Made Wianta, were included in the exhibition as Indonesian representatives. Their works responded to events in the world and especially in Indonesia since 11 September, 2001, in the United States, the Bali bombing of 12 October, 2002, and more recent violence such as the Marriott Hotel Jakarta bombing on

5 August, 2003, as well as continuing sectarian violence.⁴⁰ Christanto was to do a work entitled *Cannibalism*, about body parts (made from ceramic and threaded onto satay sticks) and originally created after the riots in 1998. Instead he created a work which related more explicitly to mourning violence. Made Wianta, a Balinese, created a harrowing installation specifically about the tragedy in Bali. Arahmaiani's work related to the treatment of those entering the United States since the terrorist attacks in 2001 who are thought — on the grounds of their race, nationality or religion — to have a connection with Islamic movements. One could describe it as a work about guilt by association — that is, Indonesians and all Muslims are thought to be potential terrorists. Arahmaiani herself, although brought up by a father who was a leader in the Islamic community, had Hindu and Buddhist elements in her background from her mother. Her critique of extreme Islam in the past must now take account of extreme beliefs that unfairly link all who believe in Islam to terror.⁴¹ As Amir Sidharta, the co-curator of the Pavilion suggested, Arahmaiani's response to the Bali bombing, the official theme of the Indonesian Pavilion, is to see the event as 'a result of prejudice and hatred that develops amidst the social, political and economic imbalance and injustice that is happening in the world today.'⁴² We have seen similar dilemmas for artists in Pakistan since the invasion of Afghanistan.

Violence and response to violence is clearly still a defining theme in Indonesian art. One has yet to discover whether the legacy of the turbulent last few years of the 1990s and early 21st century and the changes in the world since the terrorist bombings in the United States and since the United States declared war on terror, will have as a strong an influence on Indonesian politics and art as that of the nationalist and anti-colonial period or the New Order. At the time of writing (2004), Indonesia has just undergone a Presidential election with a peaceful transition to a new President. The future could well be more akin to the situation after 1945 and 1965, which set in train major forces of change that could not easily be expressed in art — certainly not at the time.

NOTES

This essay has been deeply informed by the writings of Jim Supangkat and Astri Wright as well as by interviews I have undertaken with many Indonesian artists, writers and teachers in the past decade. I have also, as a member of the Australian Government's Australia-Indonesia Institute in the 1990s, had the opportunity to meet with senior officials in Indonesia, including Presidents Suharto, Habibie and, prior to their Presidencies, Megawati and Wahid, and with officials and leaders in NGOs as well as academics and artists. I would also like to thank Christine Clark for her assistance in preparing this essay and checking factual material.

- 1 Anthony Reid, 'Merdeka: the concept of freedom in Indonesia', in David Kelly and Anthony Reid, *Asian Freedoms: the idea of freedom in East and Southeast Asia*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998 (1999), pp. 141–60. This quotation p. 141.
- 2 Reid, 'Merdeka', p. 155. During the Indonesian revolution of 1945–49, *merdeka* became, as Reid notes, a 'battle cry'.
- 3 See, for example, Jim Supangkat, 'A Brief History of Indonesian Modern Art', in Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1993, p. 47. The seminal monographic study on the emergence of modern art in Asia is John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998.
- 4 Jim Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, The Indonesian Fine Arts Foundation, Jakarta, 1997, p. 10.
- 5 Supangkat, 'A Brief History of Indonesian Modern Art', pp. 47–48.
- 6 Illustrated in *Visions and Enchantment: Southeast Asian paintings*, Exhibition catalogue, Singapore Art Museum in Association with Christie's Singapore, 2000, p. 70.
- 7 Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, p. 245. Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, p. 24. The Prince was captured by deception with the Dutch taking advantage of the fact it was the Muslim holy fasting month.
- 8 See, for example, *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: artists and movements*, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, 1997; *Asian Modernism: diverse developments in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand*, The Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 1995; and *Visions and Enchantment*, p. 70.
- 9 See the discussion of this critical movement in Astri Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain: preoccupations of contemporary Indonesian painters*, Oxford University Press, Kuala Lumpur, 1994.
- 10 See Jim Supangkat, 'The Emergence of Indonesian Art', in *The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia*, pp. 225–28.
- 11 Goenawan Mohamad, 'Indonesia's Asia', in *Asia in Transition: representation and identity*, The Japan Foundation 30th Anniversary International Symposium 2002, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 2002, p. 269.
- 12 See discussions of these issues in Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*; Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*; and Clark, *Modern Asian Art*.
- 13 Dolorosa Sinaga, 'The Role of the Contemporary Artist in Indonesia', in Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport (eds), *Present Encounters: papers from the conference of the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996, pp. 59–61. This quotation at p. 59.
- 14 Supangkat, 'The Emergence of Indonesian Art', pp. 225–28.
- 15 Caroline Turner, 'Affandi in Bali', in *Crossing Boundaries: Bali, a window to twentieth century Indonesian art*, Exhibition catalogue, Asia Society Austral/Asia Centre, Melbourne, 2002, pp. 41–42.

- 16 R. W. L. Austin, *The Shadow of the Durian: Indonesia observed*, 'Australians in Asia' series, Centre for the Study of Australia-Asia Relations, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1993, p. 25.
- 17 See the discussion of all these artists in Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*.
- 18 Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*. For a detailed discussion of Hendra Gunawan, Kerton and Djoko Pekik, see Wright's important essay 'Painting the People', in Joseph Fischer (ed.), *Modern Indonesian Art: three generations of tradition and change, 1945-90*, Panitia Pameran KIAS, Jakarta and New York, 1990, pp. 106-62.
- 19 Supangkat, 'A Brief History of Indonesian Modern Art', pp. 50-52.
- 20 Supangkat, 'A Brief History of Indonesian Modern Art', p. 50.
- 21 Islamic motifs had also been used by another Indonesian artist, Sadali, but Pirous became the main exponent of an Islamic Indonesian art. A fascinating account of his work was contained in a paper presented by Professor Kenneth George, 'Aceh and Ikhlas on Fifth Avenue: a story of Indonesian Islamic elsewhere', at the *Cultures, Nations, Identities and Migrations* conference held at the Humanities Research Centre in early 2004 and convened by Dr Kathryn Robinson. This paper will be published as part of the proceedings. George noted Pirous' new works showed representational elements and related to the violence in Aceh since the overthrow of Suharto. Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*, p. 163, also notes that an early semi-representational work by Pirous, *The Sun after 1965*, was one of the few works to make reference to the events of the coup in 1965.
- 22 Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*, p. 170.
- 23 Akira Tatehata, writing in the catalogue of the exhibition *Asian Modernism: diverse developments in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand*, p. 201.
- 24 See the discussion in Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*, p. 211-12, of the response to this blend of Javanese culture and Western 'vulgarity'.
- 25 Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, p. 71. The Suharto coup led to the dismantling of artist groups which were considered too political or Communist-influenced. Supangkat notes the new influence of multinational advertising and economic opening to the world in the 1970s. The shift was from the search for a 'national identity' to 'cultural identity' (p. 78).
- 26 Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, p. 80.
- 27 Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*, p. 66.
- 28 Speaking in 1996, Dolorosa Sinaga pointed out that the exhibition had legitimised much alternative art although continued Government censorship had its effects. Sinaga, 'The Role of the Contemporary Artist in Indonesia', p. 61.
- 29 Supangkat, 'A Brief History of Indonesian Modern Art', p. 53.
- 30 For a discussion of gender issues in Asia, see Anne-Marie Hilsdon, Martha Macintyre, Vera Mackie and Maila Stivens (eds), *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Asia-Pacific perspectives*, Routledge, London, 2000. For a general discussion of gender in Indonesia, see also Kathryn Robinson, 'Indonesian Women from *Orde Baru* to Reformasi', in Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (eds), *Women in Asia: tradition, modernity and globalisation*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pp. 141-65.
- 31 See Dwi Marianto in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996 p. 81.

- 32 See Barbara Pollack 'Feminism's New Look', http://www.artnews.com/currentarticle.cfm?type=feature&art_id+97, September 2001 (consulted 6 July, 2004).
- 33 Quoted in Claudette May V. Datuin, 'Passing through Fire: pain and transformation in the art of Arahmaiani', *Art AsiaPacific*, No. 26. pp. 66–71. For a discussion of Arahmaiani's work, see Dwi Marianto in *The Second Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, p. 81. Marianto claims she was alienated from the mainstream middle-class society into which she was born and lived in the streets for some years and was under house arrest in 1983 while an art student in Bandung. See also Carla Bianpoen, 'Arahmaiani's Homecoming' (originally published in *The Indonesian Observer*, 25 April, 1999), http://eamusic.dartmouth.edu/~gamelan/javafred/rd_cb10.htm (consulted 6 July, 2004). Bianpoen lucidly analyses the 20 charcoal drawings Arahmaiani did for an installation in 1999 at Galeri Milenium in Jakarta, which show nude female figures facing men who hold guns and appear to threaten violence, with the suggestion of rape in some and a metaphor for Indonesia in others.
- 34 For example, in papers delivered to the recent Asian Studies Association of Australia Conference (2004), Barbara Hatley discussed women exploring new gender roles for women in theatre and Krishna Sen discussed women directors in new Indonesian film. For a general discussion of gender in Indonesia, see also Robinson, 'Indonesian women from *Orde Baru* to Reformasi', who points out how active women had been in opposing the New Order and how the rapes of Chinese women proved a major spur to activism and the importance also of NGOs and women's groups in Reformasi.
- 35 Sinaga, 'The Role of the Contemporary Artist in Indonesia', pp. 59–61. See also the discussion of Moelyono's work in Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*, pp. 214–18.
- 36 Adi Wicaksono, 'Moelyono', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999, p. 64. See also Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*, and Supangkat, *Indonesian Modern Art and Beyond*.
- 37 Dr Melani Budianta, comments at the conference *Cultures, Nations, Identities and Migrations*, (unpublished). See also Astri Wright, 'Red and White Reconfigured: Indonesian activist art in progress', *Art AsiaPacific*, No. 26, 2000, pp. 60–65.
- 38 This section is based on a variety of sources including interviews with the artist. See also Jim Supangkat, 'Dadang Christanto', in *The First Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, Introduction and scholarly editor Caroline Turner) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1993, p. 12; Wright, *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain*, pp. 209–10; 'Dadang Christanto Interview with Christine Clark', in Turner, Devenport and Webb (eds), *Beyond the Future*, p. 200. For a discussion of the events in Indonesia important to Christanto's life history, see the work of historian Robert Cribb (ed.), *The Indonesian Killings 1965–1966: studies from Java and Bali*, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, 1990; and Christine Clark, 'Dadang Christanto: keeper of memories', in Caroline Turner and Nancy Sever (eds), *Witnessing to Silence: Art and Human Rights*, Exhibition catalogue, Humanities

- Research Centre and Drill Hall Gallery, The Australian National University, 2003.
- 39 Dwi Marianto, 'Art and the Vernacular: a collision of two languages', in *Beyond the Future*, p. 59.
- 40 <http://www.universe-in-universe.de/islam/eng>; Pat Binder and Gerhard Haupt, <http://www.universe-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/idn/e-arahmaiani.htm> (accessed 6 July, 2004).
- 41 Arahmaiani's work described how she was forced to spend the night with a guard in her room after not having the correct visa for transit en route to Canada.
- 42 Amir Sidharta, <http://www.artecommunications.com>, Press release commenting on the Pavilion (accessed 6 July, 2004). The description of Christanto's work was not changed on the website even though a different work was exhibited in Venice.

ART AND POLITICS IN INDONESIA

Jim Supangkat

ENTERING THE DECADE of the 1990s, the art world in Indonesia faced two contradictory developments: unprecedented internationalisation and commercialisation. These two developments reflected the socio-political conditions in the 1990s. Closely related to these were the practices of business and politics.

The commercialisation of art in Indonesia grew out of the influence of an international art boom which started in Japan in 1985 — the year the yen started its rapid climb against the US dollar, almost doubling its value in two years. The highlight of this international art boom has been the incredible increase in value of European paintings.¹ Due to ignorance, art collectors in Indonesia did not search for European paintings. Instead, they bought Indonesian paintings at incredibly high prices, without being aware there was a big difference between the commodification of European paintings in Europe and America and purchasing paintings in Indonesia. The sudden increase of prices saw the number of art galleries in Indonesia explode from only a few in the 1970s and 1980s to hundreds in the 1990s. International auction companies such as Christie's and Sotheby's opened branches in Singapore and actively sold Indonesian paintings which they called 'Indonesian masters'.²



Srihadi Sudarsono
Three Figures

1962
Oil on canvas
130.8 x 129.6 cm.
Collection: Singapore Art
Museum
Image courtesy Singapore
Art Museum

The growing interest in art and the growth of venues led to art exhibitions being held in several big cities in Java. Art, especially painting, received wide recognition. Art audiences became larger than ever. Nevertheless, not all of this represented real progress. The explosion of the art market did not lead to real achievement in art practice. Noted Indonesian art critic, the late Sanento Yuliman, saw the art boom in Indonesia as a commodification of the art of painting, which resulted in sterility. Considering that Indonesian art had made a leap forward in the 1970s — when installation and multimedia were introduced in 1975 — Sanento saw the new domination of the art of painting as a backward step.³

Within that kind of development, contemporary art that does not entertain and does not take the form of painting is seen as art that doesn't make sense because the works do not sell. Critics who adjust their views to the major trend that serves the art market are in agreement that art should express serenity, beauty and pleasure. Art should be communicative and saleable.⁴ These critics



Gregorius Sidharta S.
Weeping Goddess

1977
Acrylic on wood, leather
and others
233 x 77 x 41 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Photographed by
Fujimoto Kempachi

see contemporary art, which very often has a shocking impact, as a manifestation of anarchy.⁵

In fact, it was this contemporary art that made the international contact and not the mainstream which espouses the art of beautiful painting — the internationalisation happened shortly after the art boom became a ‘hot’ topic. The encounter — the consequence of a growing interest by the international art world in the contemporary art of the Third World, once marginalised — provided Indonesian contemporary artists with opportunities to present their works at international events.

That breakthrough was seen by all disputing factions as significant progress in view of the fact that Indonesian art had been ignored by international art circles for decades. If one reviews the record of international contact before 1990, only once in the 50 years from 1940 to 1990 did Indonesia participate in a major international event. It was when Affandi — the most widely recognised painter in Indonesia — presented his

paintings at the second Sao Paulo Biennale in 1953.⁶ In contrast, between 1990 and 2000, Indonesian contemporary art was shown in more than 100 international and regional art events, including prestigious international art events such as the Venice Biennale, the Sao Paulo Biennale, the Sydney Biennale, the Havana Biennale and the Osaka Triennale.

Due to its reputation in the international world, contemporary art in Indonesia survived, in the sense that the Indonesian art world made room for contemporary art to develop. Publications on Indonesian art — which became possible because of the rapid growth of the art market — included contemporary art developments. Several contemporary artists (painters) even entered the art market despite the fact that their works represent mostly social realities and are meant to have a social impact. Contemporary art work, in contrast with the pleasant, beautiful mainstream paintings, is critical and political.

Contemporary art arose in Indonesia from the 1970s and 1980s as a reaction against the search for national identity that in some way had an 'official' basis. The Government, controlled by the military and technocrats, who called themselves 'the New Order', pursued industrialisation with the help of multinational investment. The Suharto regime, on the one hand, was ultra-nationalistic, but, on the other, was submissive in terms of applying international economic policies. The regime used repressive measures in gaining land and changing traditions to safeguard the process of industrialisation. Political stability was perceived to be a requirement for investment and was utilised as a reason for the exercise of power.

Suharto's regime reflected a symbiosis of heroic nationalism and international capitalism, which aimed to bring the great dream of industrial capitalism (modernisation) into reality. This mutual reliance, which can also be found in many other Asian countries, reflects to a degree 'Asian modernism' — an idealistic ideology; a belief not only in absolutism, functional specialisation, calculability, exactness, metropolitanism, market mechanisms and

Heri Dono
Badman

1991
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum



social engineering, but also in violence in ‘fabricating’ progress. This is why the great dream of Western industrial capitalism resulted in nightmares in most Asian countries.

The business world, which has developed rapidly since the 1970s in Indonesia, displayed the glory of industrial capitalism in the early 1980s. This development gave rise to a ‘tradition’ of art collecting among wealthy business tycoons and corrupt, wealthy government officials — they were the ones behind the art boom. It is understandable if the art of ‘beautiful paintings’, which emerged in the 1980s and developed in the 1990s, continued the search for a national identity. This tendency was praised by government dignitaries who saw this kind of art as displaying nationalism. Due to this official support, exhibitions of ‘beautiful paintings’ were held mostly in the lobbies of luxury hotels, and became social gatherings of wealthy businessmen and corrupt government officials, which celebrated the ‘success’ of Suharto’s regime.

In contrast, much contemporary art work criticises the Government and erratic economic development. The tension between the development of contemporary art and the development of ‘official’ art provides an explanation why contemporary artists have been opposed to the search for national identity. The contemporary artists believed that the so-called nationalists have no right to determine Indonesia’s identity. In reality, they are a corrupt, dominant elite group. For these artists, then, it is not nationalism that should be taken as the basis of identifying national identity; it is the social identity of the majority that should be taken into account in seeking Indonesia’s identity. According to these artists, the majority of the people of Indonesia are the grassroots elements of society.⁷

In the early 1990s, the reaction to the search for national identity was related to a difference in viewing identity. The concept of national identity, and criticism of it, follows what I will term ‘logocentric’ thinking, in that it tends to look for absolute meaning. The concept of identity within both schools of thought displays heroic nationalism. In contemporary art, this kind of belief resulted in art works that worshipped democracy. Through a class-based approach, such works criticised the Government as an oppressive, corrupt and powerful group of people who deceived the poor. This is seen in the works of artists such as Moelyono, Tisna Sanjaya, Dadang Christanto and Semsar Siahaan.

In the mid-1990s, another tendency surfaced. These artists tended to avoid the trap of logocentric thinking. They abandoned the realm of idealism and embarked on a new exploration in the realm of realism. Representations in these works are attempting to find truth based on morality and not the truth in social reality. The representations are merely reflections accompanied by emotional intentions that manifest critical opinion. In that tendency, the meaning of the 'majority' is determined by intense focus on social realism. The 'majority' received a new interpretation; that is, the grassroots, who have limited contact with the modern world. This group of people is less educated (in the Western sense), still lives in a traditional manner and is marginalised. This is why they are predestined to become losers in the competitive modern world and also victims of mistreatment.

Based on that perception, artists such as Heri Dono, Hanura Hosea, Arahmaiani, Dyanto, Isa Perskasa, Agus Suwage, Anna Zuchriana and Bunga Jeruk explore social realities which they see as reflecting poverty, injustice and oppression. Their works expose corruption, mismanagement, power abuses and manipulation practised by the Government and the elite, which result in the majority being left behind in the progress of the nation.

Other artists, such as Dede Eri Supria, Ivan Sagito, Agus Kamal, Melodia, Chusin Setiadikara and Yuswantoro Adhi, use realistic paintings to express their criticism, and frequently use absurdity in their work. Social commentary in their paintings is conveyed by attention to the paradoxical impact of progress resulting from economic globalisation. These artists question why economic growth in Indonesia resulted in a condition where corruption and manipulation bloomed. The condition of society mirrored in their works is not that of a society in revolt, but of a society that is marginalised in the modernisation process.⁸

Meanwhile, artists such as Anusapati, Nindityo Adipurnomo, Hedi Haryanto, Nyoman Erawan, Mella Jaarsma, Rachmat Subani, Entang Wiharso and Nasirun explore tradition in the lives of the



Agus Suwage
The Final Journey
(detail)

2001
Pig skull, leather,
rollerskate, wood
Cemeti Art House
Image courtesy Cemeti Art
House and the artist

Anusapati
Diikat (Tied)

2002
Wood
140 x 60 x 140 cm,
Preparing for exhibition
'Conversation'
Cemeti Art House
Image courtesy Cemeti Art
House and the artist



Nindityo Adipurnomo
*Hiding Rituals of
my Own Hairpiece*

1997
Mixed media
60 x 50 x 20 cm
Image courtesy the artist
and Cemeti Art House



grassroots elements of society. These artists believe that the concept of traditional culture in the discourse of national identity does not reflect reality. In reaction they try to find the real traditional culture, which, in their opinion, has been marginalised. On a critical level, they call into question the whole concept of representation in official statements that does not provide for intervention on the part of those represented.⁹

Despite showing significant development, it is hard for contemporary art to have an impact in an infrastructure of art that is strongly influenced by the art market. It is difficult for contemporary art works to communicate socio-political ideas. Their impact was not in accordance with the objectives. Reactions and criticism, such as, 'The works show erosion of nationalism', or 'The works show a bad influence of Western thinking', do not address the social issues raised by the works.¹⁰ This reality became obvious in the mid-1990s.

Disillusioned by that reality, contemporary artists left art circles and entered political circles in the belief that art would have an impact within the political sphere. Artists such as Moelyono, Semsar Siahaan, Tisna Sanjaya and Dadang Christanto, joined non-government organisations (NGOs). Major activities of the NGOs included forming a support group to act as advocates for groups of poor people who did not know their rights. Moelyono, who had been working for years with communities in peripheral areas in East Java, declared that art, like political forces, should have the power to change an ailing society.¹¹

In the late 1990s, corruption within the Government had reached an intolerable level. At the end of 1997, when the monetary crisis convulsed Asia — the bankruptcy of 'Asian Modernism' — Indonesia was among the countries that suffered the most serious economic difficulties. The value of the rupiah continued to plunge to reach 17,000 against the US dollar in January 1998, compared with the pre-crisis level of 2,500. This failure gave birth to anti-Government protests which exploded in many cities in Indonesia in early 1998. Starting in March 1998, students, Government critics and scholars took to the streets demanding political reform. The rallies forced Suharto to resign in May 1998 after 32 years in power. Political change immediately followed.

The political upheaval no doubt has its influence on art. This influence, however, is quite strange. The fact that previous art



Mella Jaarsma
Shameless
c. 2002
Vegetable matter/
mixed fibre
Image courtesy
Cemeti Art House
and the artist

activity had become part of the lifestyle of elite groups disdained by the movement for reform has made nearly all Indonesian artists from all factions feel guilty. This reality shows that even contemporary artists acknowledge the dominant art discourse influenced by the market as 'the' Indonesian art discourse. These guilty feelings resulted in a lack of confidence among nearly all artists. It was reflected in discussions held in Jakarta, Bandung and Yogyakarta between June and July 1998. The conclusions of these discussions were simplistic. In general, art was seen as useless and therefore should be rejected. This rejection is not based on any anti-art concept; it is merely a conclusion that was determined by doctrinaire bias.¹²

Groups of artists who had already entered political circles endorsed the conclusion by declaring that art is nothing compared with politics. Believing this, the artists joined the rallies and political movement for reform. They did their art works — mainly in the form of propaganda — among the rallies or in public areas. The works could have become interesting if they had been based on bringing representation into actuality. What happened, however, was that artists were far from implementing any artistic agenda. In fact, it is difficult to judge whether the works had an impact or whether they simply became political. Politicians did not really care whether the protests were artistic or not; meanwhile, art critics did not see anything significant — politically or aesthetically — behind the political buzzwords.

The reality is understandable, as the works are far from mobilising art for political ends. The works show a rejection — not just a reduction — of artistic/aesthetic aspects. This is mainly because of a lack of confidence among the artists. The result is predictable. Even the Marxist thinker, Walter Benjamin, argued that it is impossible for a work to be politically correct unless it is also aesthetically correct.¹³ The works have become 'politically incorrect'. It is indeed a cause for regret that contemporary art could not really play a role in the historic socio-political upheaval, despite the fact that artists have taken part in the political movement, which made the historic change possible.

It is the artists who have done works that are less political who have brought contemporary art to further development in 2000. Their works show a dynamism that is critical of all dominant representation. The works tend to criticise newly emerging political power structures. They show a trend away from installation and towards what I will term 'symbolization'. Narrative drawings densely packed with metaphor have also been produced. All of these tendencies show the revitalisation of aesthetics in art.

In this kind of work, the reading of a 'political elite' attitude has become significant in the sense that the artists have started to understand that there is a distance between the widely publicised opinion of the people and the real demands of the people. There is doubt about the practice of democracy in Indonesia. This pessimism, which in some ways is related to cultural sensitivity, is probably a window to the heart and soul of the people of Indonesia.

NOTES

- 1 Eric Gibson, 'Responsibility for the Eighties', second part of a special report entitled 'Art is money', *The World & I*, October, 1990, p. 213.
- 2 See Lee Weng Choy and Ray Langenbach, 'Southeast Asian Art in Singapore', auction report, *Art AsiaPacific*, No. 16, 1997.
- 3 He stated this criticism in a seminar in Surabaya, 24 August 1990, where he presented the paper 'Ke mana seni lukis kita?' ('Quo vadis Indonesian painting?'). Afterwards, he continued writing this criticism in the mass media.
- 4 Critics who perceived art in this way are Agus Dermawan and Amir Sidharta. Their articles, written about the late 1980s and the 1990s, were published mostly in *Kompas Daily*, *Gatra Magazine* and *The Jakarta Post Daily*.
- 5 This statement appeared in an unsigned editorial of the influential *Kompas Daily*, 23 April 1994.
- 6 Mentioned in Affandi's personal letter to his best friend, M. Arsath Rois, dated 26 April 1953, in M. Arsath Rois and Mochtar Apin (eds), *Corat-Coret Affandi*, Angkasa, Bandung, 1986.
- 7 See Jim Supangkat, *Indonesia Modern Art and Beyond*, Indonesian Fine Art Foundation, Jakarta, 1996, pp. 78–80.
- 8 See catalogue of the exhibition *The Mutation, Painstaking Realism in Indonesian Contemporary Painting*, Curatorial Introduction, The Japan Foundation Forum, Tokyo, September 1997.

- 9 See Jim Supangkat, 'Multiculturalism/multimodernism', in *Contemporary Art in Asia: tradition/tensions*, exhibition catalogue, Asia Society, New York, 1996, p. 81.
- 10 This kind of criticism was expressed in nearly all prominent mass media such as *Kompas*, *Media Indonesia*, *Detik*, *Republika*, *Surabaya Post*, *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, etc., published between December 1993 and March 1994, as a reaction to the Jakarta Biennale IX, which exhibited contemporary art.
- 11 Written comprehensively in his book *Seni Rupa Penyadaran*, Bentang, Yogyakarta, 1997.
- 12 I attended most of the discussions.
- 13 Janet Wolff, *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1983, p. 63.

DIFFERENT VISIONS: Contemporary Malaysian Art and Exhibition in the 1990s and beyond

Michelle Antoinette

We know that very little of the writings on modern Malaysian art creates narratives on the meanings of art, its operations and social presence. On the contrary, the most epiphanous of the anecdotal writings on art have a propensity to evoke the mythic, in the sense that they tend to create and deify heroes and heroic moments in art. The mythic quest for a national identity following Independence inspired art critics to ferret [out] individuals and individual achievements in art empathetic with the purpose of creating a new nation. Furthermore, the overriding consciousness of traversing in a relentlessly 'developmental' phase in modern art since Independence has induced the birth of heroes poised to act as role-models for future generations of artists ... [However,] the mythifying phase in the history of Modern Malaysian art might be nearing exhaustion.

Krishen Jit, 'Introduction',
*Vision and Idea: ReLooking modern Malaysian art*¹

INTRODUCTION: RUPTURES IN MYTH-MAKING

In 1994, the National Art Gallery (NAG) (*Balai Seni Lukis Negara*) of Malaysia held a major exhibition marking not only 35 years of the gallery's existence, but the first large-scale survey show of modern Malaysian art. Entitled *Vision and Idea: ReLooking modern Malaysian art*,² the exhibition sought to consolidate and present a historical narrative for modern art in Malaysia.³ Significantly, the now seminal art historians of modern Malaysian art, Redza Piyadasa and T. K. Sabapathy, were key individuals driving this narrative. Ten years earlier, Piyadasa and Sabapathy produced the first scholarly publication investigating the modern artists of Malaysia.⁴ As Malaysian arts critic Eddin Khoo has remarked, 'Several decades on, the work resulting from ... [the Piyadasa-Sabapathy] partnership remains the only credible effort at creating a sustained meditation on the meaning of art movements in Malaysia while sowing the seeds for the beginnings of a systematic art history tradition for this country.'⁵ In this sense, Piyadasa and Sabapathy may be regarded as the pre-eminent 'myth-makers' of modern Malaysian art history.⁶

While the heroic figures⁷ and defining moments in modern Malaysian art were being further valorised and canonised through *Vision and Idea*, a multitude of changes were already taking place within Malaysia's broader artistic landscape in the 1990s, which would challenge that very history. Recalling Jit's predictions at the time of that exhibition,⁸ the production and exhibition of art in Malaysia during the 1990s and beyond has been marked by diverse investigations that have sought to demystify — or, in Jit's terms, 'demythify' — Malaysian art history and to reassess Malaysia's socio-historical and political fabric. In addition, Euro-American art historical agendas, along with their political, economic and cultural hegemonies, have continued to be scrutinised, especially through the localised lens of 'postmodernism'. Indeed in response to the processes of art-historical myth-making, a number of developments in art production and exhibition have heralded the 'demythifying' impulse of subsequent generations of artists.

In particular, the earlier hegemony of Modernism (which, from the mid-1940s onwards, was heavily influenced by Western cultural forms and theories) and the subsequent localised

preoccupation with a Malay-Islamic centred national art beginning in the 1970s, have since been intensely contested. Central to many artists' objectives are recent postmodern agendas, which seek to question and challenge dominant discourses and stylistic tendencies in modern Malaysian art and the 'grand narratives' of Malaysian social history. As artist Hasnul Saidon suggests, through these postmodern revaluations, 'the canons, monuments and meta-narratives of modern Malaysian art are consciously and unconsciously shackled or shifted'.⁹ As a result, a climate of relative openness and critique in art has emerged, in which constant flux and fragmentation is taken as a defining feature of Malaysian culture and society. This, in turn, is reflected in the contemporary works of Malaysian artists.¹⁰

Given the demystifying and critical orientations of recent art, it is not surprising that art as a form of social critique and commentary has flourished since the 1990s. This was particularly evident in art that addressed issues such as Malaysia's multiracial cultures and their histories, the social and environmental impact of rapid economic development and industrialisation on Malaysian society, and the role of local and international political agendas. Importantly, the emergence of socially committed art has led to a revival of figuration, which has replaced the historical dominance of abstract art tendencies, especially in relation to a Malay-Islamic centred art. Moreover, traditional forms and media, such as painting and sculpture, have increasingly been abandoned in favour of multi-disciplinary, mixed-media installations and 'new' media art (particularly video and web-based art). Underlying many of these new or revised art forms has been a drive towards conceptual art-making approaches, which seek to disrupt established ideologies and cultural norms, often in provocative and confronting ways. In addition, the proliferation of

Wong Hoy Cheong
In Search of Faraway Places
(from 'Migrants' series')

1996
Charcoal, photocopy
transfer and collage on
paper scroll
3 panels: 204.5 x 151 cm
(each); 204.5 x 453 cm
(overall)
The Kenneth and Yasuko
Myer Collection of
Contemporary Asian Art.
Purchased 1996 with funds
from Michael Simcha
Baevski through and with
the assistance of the
Queensland Art Gallery
Foundation. Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery
Image reproduced by
permission of the artist.



private and commercial galleries, along with an increase in the number of new art schools, have given rise to a growing local public interest in art. At the same time, Malaysian art has acquired an increasing prominence within the international art circuit.

In this essay, I wish to focus on these key developments in Malaysian art production and exhibition since the 1990s. In his historical overview of modern Malaysian art, Piyadasa highlighted various currents in the development of modern art in Malaysia from 1945 to the early 1990s.¹¹ By contrast, this essay will focus on the defining moments and seminal figures of contemporary Malaysian art from the 1990s to the present, by tracking the different and multiple trajectories along which recent art production has evolved.¹²

SPACES OF DIFFERENCE: BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND PATRONAGE

That the National Art Gallery has remained an important source of legitimation for the nation's contemporary art comes as no great surprise. As Jit once remarked, 'The history of the "hot centre" of modern Malaysian art very nearly corresponds with the history of the Gallery ... many of the seminal achievements legitimizing modern Malaysian art ... have occurred mainly during the lifetime of the Gallery'.¹³ Established in 1958, the gallery is the only non-profit government institution dedicated exclusively to developing the nation's art and to cultivating a national art culture. In 1998, the gallery finally moved to its new permanent premises — a momentous development in the life of the institution, which led to a renewed commitment to fostering Malaysian art, while simultaneously entrenching its history.¹⁴

It is against the backdrop of these key developments in the history of the nation's flagship art institution, that a number of alternative exhibition spaces emerged in Malaysia throughout the 1990s. This was borne out of a thriving art market and a desire by artists to exhibit in spaces other than the State-sponsored and sanctioned NAG. Yet, at the same time, the increased patronage and involvement of corporations in the arts gave rise to a reactive anti-commercialist art culture. Indeed, while some corporate patronage has led to greater levels of financial support and exposure for artists, the paucity of critical art production and the



*National Art Gallery
of Malaysia
(Kuala Lumpur)
Exterior view
Image courtesy National Art
Gallery of Malaysia*

risky liaison between art and commerce has encouraged another stream of sanctioned art practice in the form of highly commodified and corporate-endorsed art.

Notwithstanding their own political interests and agendas, galleries such as Petronas and Valentine Willie Fine Art have, arguably, provided significant and peculiar exceptions to the practices of most corporate-funded or commercial gallery spaces in Malaysia. The Petronas Corporation established Galeri Petronas in 1992 and, through its diverse exhibition and educational programs, it has since become a strong contender to the cultural status of the NAG.¹⁵ Valentine Willie Fine Art gallery, on the other hand, is a private commercial art space with a principal interest in the promotion and sale of Southeast Asian art. In this endeavour, the gallery has played a significant role in the development of contemporary Malaysian art and has had a formative influence on the careers of a number of major artists. Interestingly, the gallery has undertaken a number of curatorial collaborations with the NAG and other key cultural institutions in the Southeast Asian region and beyond.¹⁶

Aside from these mainstream government, corporate and commercial spaces, the 1990s also saw several independent artist-run initiatives and small collectives emerge in response to the increasing institutionalisation and commercialisation of art in Malaysia. While the existence of such groups has tended to be ephemeral, some have left their legacy and others continue to

survive, albeit in an uncertain art milieu. The loose collective of young artists who call themselves *Matahati* (*Eye of the heart*),¹⁷ for instance, forged a connection at the Fine Art Department, Faculty of Art and Design, in the MARA Institute of Technology (ITM or UiTM) in 1989.¹⁸ Established by the Government in the late 1960s, primarily to provide training to indigenous artists, the MARA Institute has a reputation for developing a Malay-centred consciousness among artists.

Compared with their MARA Institute predecessors, who had been at the forefront of Malay-Islamic revivalist propensities in art during the late 1970s and 1980s,¹⁹ the *Matahati* artists were less interested in privileging expressions of their Malay ethnicity through their art. Instead, these artists have developed individual styles that are attuned to a broader range of socio-cultural issues and problems. This was evident, for instance, in Ahmad Shukri Mohamed's sculptural installation *Insect Diskette Series II* (1997), which examined the impact of modernity on endangered insect species. The fact that the *Matahati* artists belong to one ethnic group is more a reflection of racial stratification in Malaysia's educational system than any specific ethnic affiliation.²⁰ In the words of the artists, 'We don't have any specific ideology or movement. It is more an initiative group, a motivational group, where we can help one another and have a place to get together.'²¹

Significantly, Bayu Utomo Radjikin and Ahmad Fuad Osman even turned to figurative forms in their art, which ran counter to the dominant abstract styles of the Malay-Islamic artists who preceded them. Radjikin's *Bujang Berani* (*Bujang the Brave*, 1991), for instance, is a mixed-media sculptural installation that references, through figuration, an Iban warrior's anguish in the face of cultural displacement. The warrior screams in torment at the rapid destruction of his rainforest habitat and the immense social dislocation that follows. In other works by the artist, such as the paintings entitled *The Abuse Victim* (1994) and *Between Malaysia & Somalia* (1995), social problems arising from economic development, such as the abuse of children in urban communities and the escalating state of poverty, are explored. Fellow *Matahati* artist Ahmad Fuad Osman expresses a more personalised anguish in his series of self-portraits from the late 1990s, which includes the painting, *Aaagghh ... Get Your Filthy Hand Out of My Face!!!* (1999). While the art of *Matahati* has often functioned as a vehicle

for social critique and commentary, the group has been generally accepting of the support of the establishment.²²

In contrast, art groups that have followed it have sought to detach themselves from the establishment.²³ *Rumah Air Panas* (RAP), for instance, was founded in 1997 by artist Liew Kungyu, photographer Phuah ChinKok and others. This independent, self-funded art space situated in Ayer Panas, Setapak, was conceived as an artists' collective with a firm belief in the importance of an alternative exhibition space, independent from the dictates of mainstream commercial and public institutional forces.²⁴ More specifically, RAP has 'position[ed] itself as an artists-run venue ... [and] an alternative space for showing works of experimentation in nature'.²⁵ In 2003, this multidisciplinary group presented a major exhibition entitled *SPACE[S] Dialogue and Exhibition*²⁶ exploring the theme of 'spatiality' and the significance of 'space' to contemporary artistic practice.²⁷ From its inception as a studio space, RAP has grown into a multipurpose site for artistic experimentation, critical discussion, public education and art exhibition.

The emergence of two other artist-run initiatives — *SpaceKraft* in 1999 and the Shiemaya-Art-tria show *Apa 'Gendai'?* in 2000²⁸ — were not only symptomatic of an increasing desire for alternative spaces of art production and exhibition, but encouraged an awareness of the need to transcend ethnically differentiated art practices. Led by artist Susyilawati Sulaiman, *Apa 'Gendai'?* explored the effect of art production in a specific spatial and temporal context and sought the participation of artists from various art collectives.²⁹ *SpaceKraft*, on the other hand, established itself as, among other things, 'a catalyst in the promotion of new/alternative media and interdisciplinary art/cultural practices',



Bayu Utomo Radjikin
Bujang Berani

1991
Construction comprising
welded iron, metal strips
and plaster of paris
100 x 97 x 55 cm
Collection: National Art
Gallery of Malaysia
Image courtesy National
Art Gallery of Malaysia

‘a vehicle to push and encourage young artists to exhibit/market their art works’ and a ‘nucleus for artists of diverse beliefs and artistic backgrounds’.³⁰ While *SpaceKraft* no longer occupies its original physical space at the Benteng River Walk, the group still operates in a more fluid capacity, exhibiting as individual artists and collaborating intermittently on various projects.³¹ *SpaceKraft* member Chang Yoong Chia, for instance, evokes memories of the past in his textile pieces and related performances for *Quilt of the Dead*.³² This work-in-progress involves performances in various public spaces during which the physiognomy of obituary portraits, taken from newspapers, are ‘embroidered’ onto small pieces of cotton cloth.

Clearly, the desire to create alternative art spaces for the development and exhibition of art has been of considerable importance to a younger generation of Malaysian artists. Yet, at the same time, the extent of the continuing ‘alternative’ viability of these spaces remains to be seen. As Sabapathy once remarked of the *Anak Alam* (Children of Nature) artists of the 1970s, the central dilemma confronting alternative art groups and spaces is often that ‘[e]ven as they ostensibly distance themselves from the establishment, and produce socially engaged, provocative works and are critical of the establishment, even as they situate themselves at the periphery, they also crave for recognition by the center.’³³ Indeed, the success of the burgeoning alternative art scene lies in the precarious business of being able to sustain collective motivation, financial support and continuing critical (re)vision against the prevailing trends of commercialisation and governmental control.

UPROOTING IDENTITY

Questions of ethnicity and identity have continued to play a significant role in shaping artistic development in Malaysia.³⁴ Partly in response to the earlier predominance of Malay-Islamic artists — and, in particular, the hegemony of the abstract styles they propounded — the 1990s saw a flourishing of art, particularly by Malaysians of Chinese ethnicity. A key concern of these artists was a need to open a space for Malaysian artists of non-indigenous backgrounds — as evinced, for instance, by the efforts of Wong Hoy Cheong, Tan Chin Kuan and J. Anurendra. Alongside this

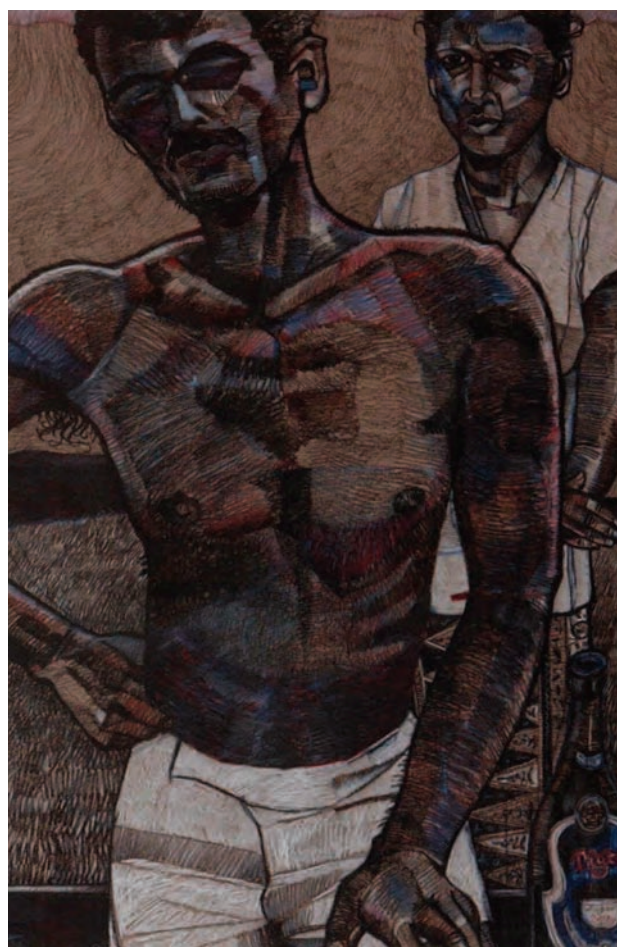
objective was a need to forge an aesthetic sensibility (taken up by indigenous and non-indigenous artists), which was different to the earlier Malay-Islamic styles and reflective of avantgarde, postmodern orientations.

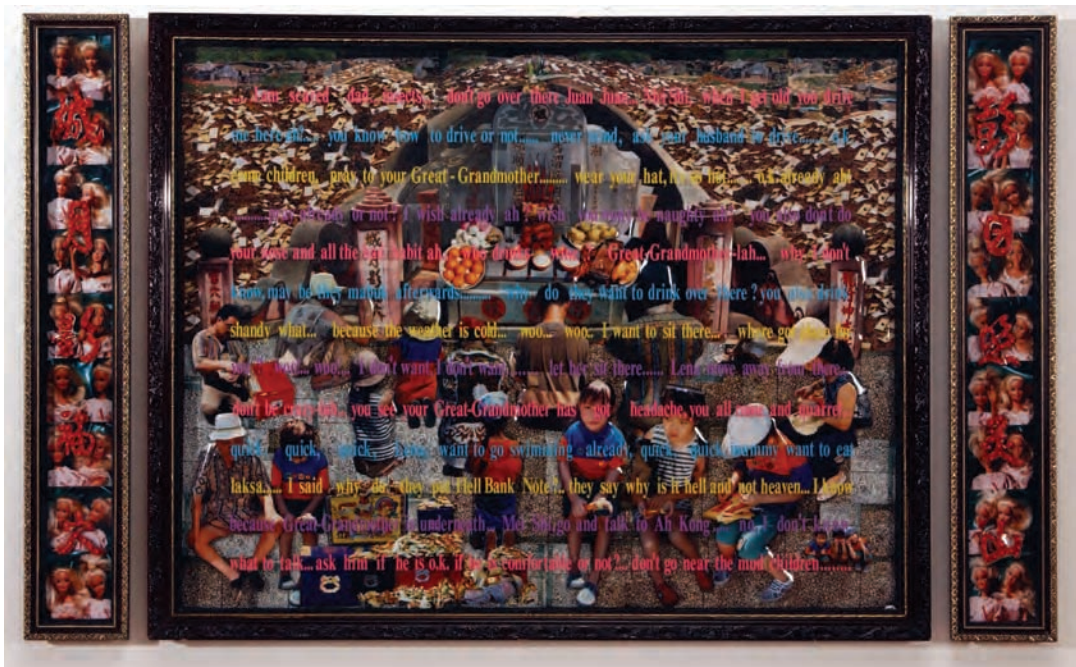
Wong Hoy Cheong's seminal *Migrants* series of 1994, for instance, presents the social history of his own family's migration to Malaysia, but also symbolises, more generally, the story of the Malaysian Chinese diaspora and their role in building the Malaysian nation. Replete with political commentary about social displacement, class conflict and colonial influence, the charcoal drawings of the *Migrants* series also illustrate Wong's forceful reassertion of the importance of figuration in producing socially relevant art. This is significant in view of the fact that until the 1990s Malaysian art was largely devoid of figurative forms, and was shaped by the abstract expressionist, conceptualist and Islamic-inspired art movements that had dominated art-making for the previous two to three decades.³⁵

Issues of identity in relation to ethnicity were key concerns in the works of other artists as well. In his photomontage works *Hungry Ghost Festival, Penang* (1995) and *Cheng Beng Festival, Kedah* (1996), Liew Kungyu appropriated images relating to Chinese tradition and customs and the impact of modernity, cleverly marrying humorous kitsch excess with cultural critique.³⁶ In contrast, Tan Chin Kuan's *Blue Night* mixed-media installations and paintings angrily communicated the artist's sense of cultural anxiety and alienation as a Chinese in Malaysia. Likewise, Anurendra Jegadeva, in paintings such as *Looking Forward* (1997), *Pound* (1997) and *Indian Couple* (2000), explored the social plight of working-class Indian

Anurendra Jegadeva
*Almost Holding Hand 1 -
Indian Couple*

2000
Pastel
74.5 x 50 cm
Collection: National Art
Gallery of Malaysia
Image courtesy National
Art Gallery of Malaysia





Liew Kung Yu
Cheng Beng Festival, Kedah

1996

Photomontage,
 wood and glass
 140cm x 216cm

Collection: National Art
 Gallery of Malaysia
 Image courtesy the National
 Gallery of Malaysia

communities in Malaysia. In varying ways, artists Eng Hwee Chu, Rajah Shariman Raja Azidin and Tengku Sabri bin Tengku Ibrahim also addressed the complexities of ethnicity, identity and tradition in their art.

While issues of identity have been addressed directly through various artists' subjective experiences of ethnicity, other artists have sought to grapple with the question of identity in more complex and nuanced ways. The sculptural installations, *Non-Indigenous Skins* (1998) and *Indigenous Skins* (1999–2000), by Wong Hoy Cheong, the photographic installations, *Malaysian Vintage Series* (1997) and *Through Rose-Coloured Glasses* (2002), by I-Lann Yee, and works by artist Simryn Gill, such as *A Small Town at the Turn of the Century* (1999–2000) and *Dalam* (2001), all point to the complexity of Malaysian identity, providing thought-provoking questions and visualisations concerning contemporary 'Malaysian' subjectivity.

POLITICS AND POWER IN ART

Since the 1990s, Malaysian art has been dominated by artistic expressions that have sought to grapple with various social and political issues. As a result, the formalist and stylistic sensibilities

that prevailed in earlier decades have been replaced by a heightened socio-political consciousness. This is not to suggest the total absence of politically and socially motivated art in earlier decades but only the paucity of such art.³⁷

Artist Zulkifli Yusoff, for instance, has consistently explored relationships of power and forms of authority in his multimedia installations. *The Power I* (1992), *Immunity I* (1993), and *Too Eager to Serve* (1994), are examples of works on this theme. In 1996, he produced *Dialogue 2: Don't Play During Maghrib*³⁸, which examined the religiously motivated restriction of children's play during Muslim prayer-time at dusk.

Also focusing on the issue of power, Liew Kungyu has pointed to the powerful presence in the national psyche of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, whose resignation in 2003 marked an end to a formative period in Malaysia's history. The nation's reverence and love for the former Malaysian leader was referenced in works by Liew, such as *Trophies* (1996), *Pasti Boleh* (*Sure can one*) (1997) and *Selamat Datang to Kuala Lumpur* (1998–99), in which paper cut-outs of key buildings and monuments built during Mahathir's program of industrialisation were turned into gift-wrapped trophies for dedicated capitalists. His installation *Wadah Untuk Pemimpin* (*Gifts for the Leader*)

Zulkifli Yusoff
*Dialogue 2: Don't Play
During Maghrib*

1996
Mixed Media Installation
221 x 1120 cm
Collection: National Art
Gallery of Malaysia
Image courtesy National
Art Gallery of Malaysia



(1999)³⁹ also appears to commemorate Mahathir's leadership by presenting glorified and garishly decorated portraits of Mahathir on separate mantelpieces, akin to altars of political worship.

Works from Chuah Chong Yong's *Pre-War Building* series offer insight into the artist's regret at the crumbling state of architectural heritage in Malaysia in the face of corporate power and the onslaught of capitalist development. In particular, his temporal installation and performance piece *Pre-War Building for Sale: Poh Tor* (1999) references the historical cycle of cultural loss and preservation, permanence and ephemerality, through the reconstruction of 'incense houses'. Once lit, the houses burn one at a time, gradually turning to ash while simultaneously evoking their memory through their fading scent. Here, cultural heritage disintegrates in the face of capitalist development, leaving behind only traces of the past.

While socially and politically charged themes inflect many of these artists' works, the nonpartisan collective *Artis Pro Activ* (APA) was established expressly in response to the volatile economic and socio-political conditions that erupted in Malaysia during 1998. APA's art is, in this sense, undeniably political. Central to the group's formation was a belief in the transformative potential of creative practice, one which is geared specifically towards social and political change. The group organised the exhibition, *Apa? Siapa? Kenapa?* (*What? Who? Why?*), which opened on 27 October, 1998. This date marked the 11th anniversary of 'Operation Lalang', the Government action that led to the arrest of 116 people and their detention without trial under the ISA.⁴⁰ APA also joined with University Bangsar Utama for the Gwangju Biennale in 2002. The groups' overtly political works expressed anger, frustration and dissatisfaction at the state of their society.⁴¹

A compelling work in the original show was Wong Hoy Cheong's *Tapestry of Justice* (1998), in which the artist began collecting thumb-prints in order to produce a visual petition for the abolishment of the ISA in Malaysia. Visitors to Wong's piece could demonstrate their individual support by adding their thumb-print to Wong's tapestry.⁴² Taken together, the fabric of thumb-prints evoked strength through communal resistance, yet the delicate quality of this work also brought to mind the fragile state of basic human rights. This concern with issues of social



Wong Hoy Cheong
Tapestry of Justice

1998
Medium (oil on canvas,
photograph etc.)
Collected thumbprints
joined by petals and leaves
Photograph courtesy of
the artist and Valentine
Willie Fine Art

justice and human rights is evident also in Wong's questioning of the doctrine of 'Asian values' in *Text Tiles* (2000) and his re-visioning of postcolonial histories in *RE: looking* (2002–03).

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STREAMS OF INFLUENCE

Malaysian art of the 1990s was marked deeply by a heightened awareness of various global processes, including developments in the sphere of international politics and art. Indeed, the international presence of Malaysian contemporary art strengthened significantly throughout the 1990s. The growing recognition of Malaysian art in the international art milieu is evident in the inclusion of Malaysian artists in major international exhibitions such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial, the Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale, the Gwangju Biennale and the Venice Biennale.

In the past decade, globally linked economic and technological transformations in Malaysia have resulted in profound changes, including the emergence of new modes of cultural production.⁴³ Significantly, the cultural dynamics of globalisation have made Malaysia more susceptible to global flows of mass and popular culture. The global repercussions of 'September 11' and the role of the media in providing spectacles of conflict has, for instance, influenced artists such as Nur Hanim

Mohamed Khairuddin. In her installation entitled *Laga-Laga* (2002), Khairuddin appropriated popular media images of various political figures (including Osama Bin Laden) in a form of wallpaper collage, in order to critique the mass consumption of globally mediated spectacles.

Global cultural flows are also evident in forms of new media art, particularly that employing electronic video and Internet presentations. The influence of the late Ismail Zain is pertinent in this regard, especially for his use of computer-generated prints, such as the work *And So It Happened* (1988), evoking an apparently seamless postmodern convergence of tradition and modernisation, the local and the global. Throughout the 1990s, seminal works which further developed the creative potential of video and Internet art forms included Wong Hoy Cheong's *Sook Ching (Purge)* (1991), Liew Kungyu's *Sing a Song for Ah Kong and Ah Ma* (1994), Hasnul Jamal Saidon's *Kdek, Kdek, Ong!* (1994), and Niranjana Rajah's *The Failure of Marcel Duchamp/Japanese Fetish Even!* (1996).

The importance of new media art was heralded in a major solo show called the *Digital Collage Exhibition* (1988), which featured the work of Ismail Zain. This was followed by other new media art shows such as *Jambori Rimba Multimedia (Borneo Rainforest)* in Kuching (1996), the *First Malaysian Video Art Festival and Awards* (1994), and *Pameran Seni Elektronik Pertama (First Exhibition of Electronic Art)* of 1997.⁴⁴ Moreover, Hasnul J. Saidon and Niranjana Rajah developed the website *E-Art ASEAN Online* (<http://www.freespeech.org/eartasean/index.html>) in 1999, with a view to developing a regional interest in and exchange for electronic art via the Internet. Likewise, *Upload: Download (U.D.)* (2003)⁴⁵ was conceived initially as a regional Internet-based art exchange project involving artists from the Sonneratia⁴⁶ art initiative in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and artists in Fukuoka, Japan.

Other regional art projects include the ASEAN⁴⁷ Art Awards which continue to provide an important annual forum for the recognition of Southeast Asian artists.⁴⁸ In addition, the travelling ASEAN-sponsored exhibition, *36 Ideas from Asia: Contemporary South-East Asian Art* (2002–03), sought to present individual Malaysian artists' concerns rather than positioning their art within national frameworks.⁴⁹ By contrast, art exhibition exchanges⁵⁰ such as *Project Pre Fx Pt* (1994) and *Wahana* (2003–04), were geared towards different forms of contemporary



intra-regional collaboration. In the case of these two shows, the question of Malay identity, within and across national borders, was explored.⁵¹ In *Wahana*, provocative works, such as Malaysian artist Susyilawati Sulaiman's installation piece *Siapa Saya? (Who am I?)* (2003), questioned the constitution of Malay identity while simultaneously foregrounding the experimental avantgarde forms of contemporary Malay artists. In Sulaiman's piece, a textual wall installation comprising the Bahasa Melayu words *Emak Saya Cina, Bapak Saya Melayu ... (My Mother is Chinese, my Father is Malay ...)*, complicates the issue of Malay/sian identity through an autobiographical form of address.

Hasnul Jamal Saidon
Kdek! Kdek! Ong

1994
Installation comprising
computer animation,
coconut shell, hat & cloth
on wooden platform
Collection: The artist
Image courtesy National
Art Gallery of Malaysia

CONCLUSION: (RE-)ENVISIONING MALAYSIAN ART HISTORY

Despite significant and diverse developments in the Malaysian art scene throughout the 1990s, the history of modern art in Malaysia continues to cast its shadow over contemporary art production and

exhibition. The process of myth-making (even post-modernist myth-making), moreover, continues to define the agenda of more recent art histories in Malaysia. In 2004, for instance, the National Art Gallery presented the exhibition *Continuities: Contemporary Art of Malaysia at the Turn of the 21st Century*, presenting developments in contemporary Malaysian art in terms of a historical continuum.⁵²

This apparently seamless version of history has been reinscribed in more complex and nuanced ways by a number of artists in recent times. Often providing critical reassessments of the histories which came before them, these artists offered moments of reflective pause and contemplation concerning the influence of artistic and social histories in contemporary art production. At the Young Contemporaries Competition and Exposition of 2002,⁵³ for instance, artist Yap Sau Bin dared to ask, ... *who gave birth to the Great White One ...?* (2002) — an installation that featured a white canvas which, when viewed only from a full-frontal perspective, was squarely mounted (or ‘framed’) by one’s eyes through an antiquated mobile frame.⁵⁴ On the floor, a red carpet beckoned, eventually climbing the gallery wall to form the canvas’s background, and cynically called the viewer to pay heed to ‘the Great White One’. At the same time, the installation asked metaphorically, ‘Who should be the producer of meanings? Who, in fact, should provide/has provided meaning to the piece of object? Who has conferred it as art?’⁵⁵

Serving almost as a response to the questions posed by Yap’s work was Nor Azizan Rahman Paiman and Suhaila Hashim’s installation *On Air* (2002), which dramatised and parodied institutional influence (in this instance, that of their host, the NAG). This installation comprised a mobile radio station, which at the same time served as the habitat for a willing artist-in-residence (AIR). While snippets of Western and Malaysian art historical writing were ‘aired’ (broadcast) to the audience, other plays on the semiotics of ‘air’ were apparent. For instance, one sign referenced three influential artists of Malaysian art history — Ponirin Amin, Ismail Zain and Redza Piyadasa — whose individual portraits were imprinted on vinyl records, framed and hung in the interior of the radio station cum (art history) recording studio. In addition, a small TV camera and microphone placed inside the room picked up any action and discussion ‘on the inside’, which

was then aired to those who surveyed voyeuristically from the outside via an externally positioned TV monitor and speakers. As Saidon suggests, *On Air* could reference many things, including the ‘nothingness, the empty petty talk and gossip that is sometimes taken seriously as “the story” of Malaysian art’ and even the ‘media’s editorial control and domination of discourses and dissemination of information’.⁵⁶



Evidently, the examination and critique of Malaysia’s art history — that is, art production and reception in the Malaysian context — has increasingly preoccupied many artists in recent times. In the process, localised discourses of art history and theory have been appropriated as tools for investigation by contemporary artists who seek to question existing artistic and social histories which nevertheless continue to inform their present-day art-making contexts. Interestingly, earlier discourses and practices of conceptual artists in the 1970s, such as Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa,⁵⁷ and the Malay-Islamic art movement of the late 1970s and 1980s — both concerned with critiquing Western discourses of art history and instilling a more localised story of art — now form the very focus of these postmodern investigations. Significantly, flagship institutions such as the National Art Gallery — which has sought to establish national art-historical mythologies — have also been challenged by a younger generation of artists seeking alternative spaces from which to articulate different narratives of Malaysian art. Given that critical research and documentation of Malaysian art remains limited in scope, these (re-)envisionings of history provide invaluable artistic testimony that bear witness to contemporary socio-political, economic and cultural developments in Malaysia.

Yap Sau Bin
 ‘... Who Gave Birth to the
 Great White One ...’
 (Frontal view)

2002
 Canvas 91.5 x 91.5 cm;
 White frame
 91.5 x 91.5 cm mounted
 on mobile unit;
 Red wall and ground.
 300 (h) x 300 (d) x
 200/250 cm (w)
 Image courtesy the artist

NOTES

I wish to thank all those who kindly assisted me in sourcing the accompanying images for this essay. I am especially indebted to Francis Maravillas and Yap Sau Bin for their close reading of earlier versions of this essay and for their invaluable suggestions, as well as for sharing in general conversations with me on contemporary art.

- 1 Krishen Jit, 'Introduction', in T. K. Sabapathy (ed.), *Vision and Idea: ReLooking modern Malaysian art*, National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, 1994, p. 6.
- 2 The exhibition *Vision and Idea: ReLooking modern Malaysian art* took place at the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from 12 October to 12 December, 1994.
- 3 *Vision and Idea* drew on the combined art scholarship and curatorial expertise of Malaysian arts practitioners Krishen Jit, Redza Piyadasa, T. K. Sabapathy and Zainol Shariff.
- 4 See T. K. Sabapathy and Redza Piyadasa, *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Ministry of Education Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1983. *Modern Artists of Malaysia* formed an important precursor to *Vision and Idea*. Other writings by Piyadasa on Malaysian art history include 'Modernist and Post-Modernist Developments in the Post-Independence Period', in John Clark (ed.), *Modernity in Asian Art*, Wild Peony Ltd, Broadway, NSW, 1993; *Rupa Malaysia: Meninjau Seni Lukis Modern Malaysia (Rupa Malaysia: relooking modern Malaysian art)*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur, 2000. Other writings by Sabapathy include 'Thematic Approaches to Malaysian Art History' in T. K. Sabapathy (ed.), *Modernity and Beyond: themes in Southeast Asian art*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, 1996.
- 5 Eddin Khoo, 'The Problem of Writing Malaysian Art', *Art Corridor*, Issue 11, 2003, pp. 11–12. Emphasising the significance of the Piyadasa-Sabapathy collaboration to modern Malaysian art history, Khoo comments that '[t]he writings by Piyadasa-Sabapathy, collected in the seminal *Modern Artists of Malaysia* and later in *Vision and Idea*, were formative attempts at initiating a tradition of art scholarship that would help inspire a method and perspective for the study and perception of Malaysian art'.
- 6 Krishen Jit, 'Introduction', in *Vision and Idea*, p. 6.
- 7 Among such heroic figures were seminal modern Malaysian artists since the time of World War II such as Tay Hoi Keat, Syed Ahmad Jamal, Yeoh Jin Leng, Ismail Zain, Khalil Ibrahim, Redza Piyadasa, Abdul Latiff Mohidin, Ibrahim Hussein, Cheong Lai Tong, Chew Teng Beng, Zakaria Ali, Sulaiman Esa, Ibrahim Hussein, Joseph Tan, Lai Foong Moi and Hoessein Enas.
- 8 Krishen Jit, 'Introduction', in *Vision and Idea*, p. 6.
- 9 Hasnul J. Saidon, 'Postmodern Encounters: young contemporaries 2002', in *Bakat Muda Sezaman 2002: the young contemporaries*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara (National Art Gallery), Kuala Lumpur, 2002, p. 3.12.
- 10 I use the term 'contemporary' to refer not only to the art of the present moment, but to a style or movement of art which follows a different course in the history of art, characterised by postmodern impulses.
- 11 Redza Piyadasa, 'Modern Malaysian Art, 1945–1991: a historical overview', in Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993.

- 12 It is not within the scope or intention of this essay to provide a detailed or comprehensive history of Malaysian art. Rather, I wish to focus on key developments and shifts that have taken place in Malaysian art since the 1990s. In doing so, I wish to foreground the various ways in which the history of modern Malaysian art has been increasingly challenged in recent times. In addition, by specifically focusing on recent art production and exhibition since the 1990s, this essay seeks to fill a void — if only partially — in contemporary Malaysian art historical writing concerning this period, which mainly takes the form of cursory and selective art reviews and reportage.
- 13 Krishen Jit, 'Introduction', in *Vision and Idea*, p. 5.
- 14 The exhibition *Rupa Malaysia: Meninjau Seni Lukis Moden Malaysia (Rupa Malaysia: relooking modern Malaysian art)* was held at the National Art Gallery from 15 September, 2000 to 30 September, 2001, to commemorate the opening of the gallery's new premises. The art exhibition exchange *Rupa Malaysia: a decade of art 1987–1997*, presented by the National Art Gallery of Malaysia at the Brunei Galleries (School of Oriental and Asian Studies), London in 1998, could be seen as a precursor to the later, more extensive show presented in Malaysia. Both exhibitions were curated by Redza Piyadasa.
- 15 Petronas Gallery started at Dayabumi Complex in 1992 and ran until 1997. In 1998, the gallery opened at its current prestigious space on the third floor of the world's tallest buildings — the Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur. Exhibitions by Petronas Gallery in the 1990s include *Figurative Approaches in Modern Malaysian Art* (1996), *'Oasis in a Storm': Islam and the balancing of the forces of materialism* (1997), *Rumba (Forest)* a solo exhibition of Latiff Mohidin (1998), *Aku: 99, Potret Diri* (1999), *Matahati PL* (1999), and *Insyirah: Lukisan Sulaiman Esa Dari 1980 Hingga 2000 (The Art of Sulaiman Esa: from 1980 to 2000)* (2001).
- 16 Curatorial collaborations with the National Art Gallery include *12 ASEAN Artists* (2000) and *Identiti: Inilah Kami (Identities: Who We Are)* (2002). Regionally, Valentine Willie gallery has collaborated with other art institutions for shows such as *Faith + The City: a survey of contemporary Filipino art* (2000–02).
- 17 The *Matahati* artists are principally Ahmad Fuad Osman, Ahmad Shukri Mohamed, Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Hamir Soib @ Mohamed and Masnooramli Ramli Mahmud.
- 18 Institut Teknologi MARA was later named Universiti Teknologi MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat Act).
- 19 *Matahati's* MARA Institute predecessors include Syed Ahmad Jamal, Ahmad Khalid Yusoff, Sulaiman Esa, Ismail Zain, Ruzaika Omar Basaree, Fatimah Chik and Mastura Abdul Rahman.
- 20 Mara Institute of Technology's School of Art and Design was established by the Malaysian Government in the late 1960s expressly and exclusively for the training of Malay (indigenous or *Bumiputera*) artists. It became a focal point for Malay revivalist tendencies in art during the late 1970s and 1980s.
- 21 As quoted in Ooi Kok Chuen, *A Comprehensive History of Malaysian Art*, The Art Gallery, Penang, 2002, p. 33. Moreover, as Laura Fan explains, '[t]he distinction *Matahati* bears is that ... the group hopes that each member can reach a level of prominence where he or she is recognised by name and can exhibit alone. In so doing, the group serves an intermediary step towards achieving individual artistic acclaim.' (See Laura Fan, 'The Eye of the Heart', *Art AsiaPacific*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1996, pp. 26–7).

- 22 The *Matahati* artists have held solo shows as well as annual group exhibitions in various mainstream galleries including Galeri Maybank (1993), Pelita Hati (1995) and Galeri Petronas (1999).
- 23 While I discuss in the essay proper a few key art groups which have adopted this objective, there are others which I can only mention in brief here. One such group was *Periphery*, comprised of Chinese art school graduates from the Malaysian Institute of Art (MIA). The group lasted only briefly, presenting their inaugural and only exhibition at *GaleriWan* in 1996. However, the group's impact in registering the marginalisation felt by many Chinese artists in Malaysia (in light of discriminatory educational policies and their felt lack of career opportunities) was significant. In their exhibition catalogue, artist Wong Hoy Cheong remarked of the group: 'What stirred me vaguely was the sense of tension and uncertainty simmering in them. They appeared to be trying to locate a voice within themselves, a voice closely linked to their "Chinese-ness" within the art and Malaysian contexts. They felt frustrated and constrained by the lack of opportunities ...' Other 'alternative' exhibition spaces that have emerged since the 1990s include *Yayasan Kesenian Perak* (Perak Arts Foundation) established in 1997 in Ipoh and *Reka Art Space*, established in Kelana Jaya, Selangor in 2003 by Chee Sek Thim. It should be noted that *Rimbun Dahan* was established in 1994 by architect Hijjas Kasturi and partner Angela Hijjas as an arts residency programme and exhibition space, outside Kuala Lumpur, but with its more elitist and mainstream orientations functions very differently to the aforementioned 'alternative' art spaces which are concerned to distance themselves from the establishment.
- 24 The current members of RAP are Chai Chang Hwang, Chan Thim Choy, Chong Cheong Mine, Chong Kim Chiew, Chuah Chong Yong, Hiew Wei Yong, Liew Kwai Fei, Liew Teck Leong, Lim Kok Teong, Low Yi Chin, Ng Swee Keat, Ooi Kooi Hin, Phuan Thai Meng, Wong Tay Sy, and Yap Sau Bin. RAP has organised many activities since its inception including *Ctrl-Alt-Del-works on paper*, the *e-monk in town-recent works by Anthonie Chong*, *3 Instalasi* and *3@rap art exhibition and open studio*.
- 25 http://www.kakiseni.com/companies/exhibtion_spaces/MDI4Mg.html (accessed March 21, 2004).
- 26 The exhibition was the culmination of a three-month project entitled *SPACE[S] Dialogue and Exhibition* and featured 26 participants in conversations on and experimentations with space, working across the mediums of sculpture, photography, painting, installation and conceptual art. For further discussion see Ming Chua, 'Space[s] Dialogue + Exhibition', *Art Corridor*, Issue 11, 2003, p. 36-43; and Tan Sei Hon, 'Autonomy in Setapak. Rumah Air Panas: an alternative space for artists trying to escape the conventions of market forces' at <http://www.kakiseni.com/print/articles/features/MDQ1NQ.html> (accessed March 21, 2004).
- 27 Stressing the recent importance of the notion of 'spatiality' to contemporary Malaysian artists, another exhibition on the theme entitled *Thinking Space: Installation Art Exhibition* took place at the influential *Soka Gakkai Malaysia* (SGM) cultural centre, at around the time of RAP's own exhibition and dialogue. *Thinking Space*, however, was also directly concerned to 'expose the public to *installation art* in Malaysia' (my emphasis). The five installation artists included in this exhibition were Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Chuah Chong Yong, Ramlan Abdullah, Susyilawati Sulaiman and Wong Chee Meng. *Thinking Space* took place from April 6 to April 20, 2003. (Interestingly, *Soka*

- Gakkai*, which means 'value-creation society', is a worldwide Buddhist association with its Malaysian branch established in 1984. Its mission is 'to realize the happiness of individuals, the prosperity of our country and peace among humankind ... based on the practice of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhist philosophy of humanism, compassion and respect for the sanctity of life.' (See <http://www.sgm.org.my/>, as accessed on May 6, 2004) SGM's President, Daisaku Ikeda, presented a solo photographic show *Dialogue with Nature* at the National Art Gallery, Malaysia, in 2003. For further information visit: http://www.artgallery.org.my/html/dialogue_with_nature_3a.html (accessed on May 6, 2004).
- 28 For a further comparative discussion on these two artist-run projects and of the significance of alternative art spaces in 1990s Malaysia see Yap Sau Bin, *Apa 'Space'?* in *tANPA tAJUK: Risalah Seni Rupa Malaysia*, Issue 2, 2001, p. 12.
- 29 *Apa 'Gendai'?* took place in May 2000 at Malacca old court house in Melaka, Malaysia.
- 30 See <http://www.spacekraft.net/objective/html/object.html> (accessed March 26, 2004). Presently *SpaceKraft* consists of 5 key members namely, Wong Tay Sy, Gan Siong King, Jerrica Lai, Tan Sei Hon, and Chang Yoong Chia. The *SpaceKraft* website address is www.spacekraft.net (accessed March 26, 2004).
- 31 *SpaceKraft* organised the community-based arts festival *Chow Kit Fest* in May 2002, held in Kuala Lumpur's Chow Kit district. The festival incorporated multi-disciplinary art activities such as underground rock music performances and visual art exhibitions including film screenings and performance art events.
- 32 Chang Yoong Chia's *Quilt of the Dead* is a work-in-progress, begun on May 1, 2002, and expected to be completed in 2006.
- 33 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Afterthoughts', in *Vision and Idea*, 1994, p. 113. Indeed, artist Wong Hoy Cheong echoed similar concerns in relation to the dilemma of present-day artists: 'You are critical of the power structures and yet you are dependent on these very powers to legitimate and evaluate the worthiness of your work.' (See 'Krishen Jit talks to Wong Hoy Cheong on "Contemporary Malaysian Art"' in *What About Converging Extremes?*, Galeri Wan, Kuala Lumpur, 1993, p. 8).
- 34 Stressing the continued importance of the issue of identity in Malaysian art, the exhibition *The Malaysianess of Malaysian Art: the question of identity*, for instance, was curated by Zakari Ali and held at the NAG in September 1991. Moreover, as recently as 2002, a major exhibition curated by Valentine Willie entitled *Identiti: Inilah Kami (Identities: Who We Are)* was also held at the NAG. The influence of historical precedents in Malaysian social history is pertinent in this regard. Although thirty or so years earlier, the repercussions of the National Cultural Congress of 1971 and the subsequent ethnic divisions created by the New Economic Policy have continued to influence contemporary social life in Malaysia, including art education and practice. Following the inter-ethnic riots of May 13, 1969, the National Cultural Congress was established so as to formulate an official national culture founded on Malay cultural values. The Government's subsequent implementation of its Islamicisation programme in the early 1980s, along with its New Economic Policy, further encouraged a dominant Malay culture. The consequent social and institutional separation of indigenous Malay (*Bumiputera*) and non-indigenous (non-*Bumiputera*) groups affected

- the art scene immensely. This was especially evident in the surge of socio-politically driven themes in art concerned with issues of ethnicity. For further discussion on these events see Chandra Muzaffar, 'Islamic Resurgence: A Global View', in Taufik Abdullah and Sharon Siddique (eds), *Islam and Society in Southeast Asia*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1986.
- 35 Wong's teaching period at the Malaysian Institute of Art proved enormously influential to another generation of Malaysian artists who were inspired not only by his turn to figuration in the face of dominant abstract tendencies in mainstream art, but also his commitment to socio-political art. Stressing the importance of figuration to his art, Wong himself once remarked, 'How does one represent injustice and violation of human rights through abstract art?'
- 36 Liew is also one of a few Malaysian artists to experiment in performance art on the theme, such as in his collaboration with dancer Marion D'Cruz in 1991 for the exhibition *2 Installations*. (The exhibition *2 Installations* (1991) was curated by Wong Hoy Cheong and took place at the Malaysian Institute of Art gallery. It presented the installation art of both Liew Kungyu and Raja Shahrman). Liew also collaborated with Lena Ang and Aida Redza for performances of *Puteri Oriental*.
- 37 Earlier precedents include Lee Boon Wang's depiction of Indian labourers in *Road Workers* (1955), Dzulkifli Buyung's *Tabung* (1961) recording the everyday social situation of a poor couple, Lai Foong Moi's portrait of an elderly Chinese woman construction worker in *The San Sui Worker* (1967), Chia Yu Chian's painting *Election Fever* (1978), showing a multi-racial group standing before a wall of political party advertisements, pondering their election choices, Nirmala Dutt Shanmughalingam's images of suffering caused by war such as *Vietnam* (1981) and Ismail Zain's painting *DOT: The De-Tribalisation of Tam binte Che Lat* (1983) depicting the cultural dislocation of an old Malay woman and her traditions in the face of urbanisation.
- 38 Also shown at the 47th Venice Biennale, 1997, as part of the exhibition *Modernities and Memories: recent works from the Islamic world*.
- 39 *Wadah Untuk Pemimpin* was shown at the 1st International Langkawi Arts Festival as a product of the inaugural Alami Science Inspired Art Camp of 1998.
- 40 APA was formed in a climate of escalating restrictions on freedom of expression and in protest against the fall and detention of the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim — detained without the right to trial under the notorious Internal Security Act (ISA). APA contested the government's use of the ISA to suppress dissent and freedom of expression and supported the calls for *reformasi*. Through its advocacy of freedom of expression as a fundamental human right, the group united in the belief that 'questions must always be asked ... without fear or favor' (quoted in Lee Weng Choy, 'Artis Pro Activ', *Art AsiaPacific*, Issue 24, 1999, p. 40). Significantly, 'apa?' is also Malay for the interrogative 'what?', which registers the group's critical stance in relation to the state of contemporary art and social life in Malaysia. See also the Media Statements by Artisproactiv on July 20 and 22, 2003, respectively entitled, 'Censorship of the Arts' and '81 Suara Menjawab Satu,' as reproduced in Eddin Khoo, Ramdas Tikamdas and Elizabeth Wong (eds), *Freedom of Expression in the Arts*, National Human Rights Society (HAKAM), Kuala Lumpur, 2003, pp. 107–08 and pp. 109–11.

- 41 Participating artists from Artis Pro Activ and University Bangsar Utama in the Gwangju Biennale exhibition 2002 included: Nadiyah Bamadhaj, Hashamuddin Rais, Zulkiflee Zainol Abidin, Samsuddin Lappo, Hasmi Hashim, Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Arifwaran Shaharudin, Joe Kidd, and Ray Langenbach.
- 42 Wong has since collected thumbprints from other parts of the world and the tapestry is now decorated with flower petals and leaves associated with the various countries in which the tapestry has been exhibited.
- 43 The intense industrialisation programme entitled *Vision 2020*, and initiated by former Prime Minister Dr Mahatir Mohamad, assisted Malaysia's leap into the 21st century international arena. This economic plan aims to bring Malaysia into fully industrialised nation status by 2020. Once an agricultural economy, Malaysia stands dramatically transformed, even today, as a locus for globalised capital investment and a focus for multi-national corporations dealing in electronics and information technology.
- 44 *Pameran Seni Elektronik Pertama (First Exhibition of Electronic Art)* of 1997 was curated by Hasnul J. Saidon and Niranjana Rajah. As well as being practising artists, Rajah and Saidon have written on the development of new media art in Malaysia, and in particular the internet and electronic art. See, for example, Rajah and Saidon, 'The Evolution of Electronic Art in Malaysia', *Art AsiaPacific*, Vol. 7, No. 27, 2000, pp. 64–69; Rajah, 'Crossing Over: the entry of Internet art and electronic art from Asia into the international mainstream', in Caroline Turner and Morris Low (eds), *Beyond the Future: papers from the conference of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art 1999*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999, pp. 155–56; and Rajah, 'Asian Art After the Internet: transcending the regional arenas of the late 20th century', *Prospects for the Future*, Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, 1999, pp. 168–70.
- 45 See <http://www.uploaddownload.org/> (accessed March 22, 2004).
- 46 Sponsored by the National Art Gallery, the 'Sonneratia Youth Art Camp is an annual Exhibition Programme aimed at guiding, challenging and nurturing the intellect, values and skills of Young Talents selected from various art institutions around Malaysia'. It was originally conceived by artist Hasnul J. Saidon and coordinated by artist Susyilawati Sulaiman. For more information on Sonneratia's activities see the article by Tan Sei Hon, 'A Survival Course for Creativity in a Hostile Environment: young artists get a taste of things to come at the Sonneratia Art Camp', at <http://kakiseni.com/pritrn/articles/features/MDQwNw.html> (accessed March 22, 2004) and visit their website at: <http://www.sonneratia.org/html/online/online.htm> (accessed March 22, 2004).
- 47 The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has, since 1967, maintained a cultural section (ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information), which, among other initiatives, has encouraged the aesthetic development and expression of a Southeast Asian regional identity, especially through ASEAN endorsed art expositions. Moreover, since 1994, the Philip Morris Group of Companies sponsored 'ASEAN Art Awards' have been shown annually, providing an instance of the role of art not only in assisting multinational business interests but also demonstrating how art may be used as a form of extra-national, regional cultural legitimation.
- 48 The exhibitions *Modernity and Beyond: themes in Southeast Asian art* (Singapore Art Museum, 1996) and *Art in Southeast Asia: glimpses into the*

- future (Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo and Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan, 1997) were another two important regional shows of the 1990s, which included Malaysian art.
- 49 The Malaysian artists represented in *36 Ideas from Asia: contemporary South-East Asian art* were Hayati Mokhtar, Kumbu Anak Katu and Nasir Baharuddin. *36 Ideas from Asia* travelled to select countries in Europe and then finally, to Japan, in a modified version entitled *15 Tracks*.
- 50 Another art exchange project was the *Off Walls Off Pedestals: installation exhibition* at the Akal diUlu exhibition space, Selangor, Malaysia. This project was a Langat-Noko Art Exchange featuring artists from Japan and Malaysia. The artists involved were Akira Inoue, Katsu Murakami, Masaki Kidera, Maya Shuto and Toyohiko Kanzaki from Japan as well as Malaysians Juhari Said, Tsabri Ibrahim and Mastura, Zulkifli Yusof and the New Bridge Artists.
- 51 In *Wahana*, contemporary artists from Singapore and Malaysia collaborated 'to explore questions of Malay cultural identity in the Nusantara region'. (See Shirleen Noordin, 'Be(com)ing Malay — The Process of Identity', in Irene Lim (ed.), *Wahana*, Balai Seni Lukis Negara, Kuala Lumpur, 2003, p. 5.)
- 52 *Continuities: contemporary art of Malaysia at the turn of the 21st century* was presented (by the National Art Gallery of Malaysia) at the Guangdong Museum of Art, China, from March 5, 2004 to April 15, 2004.
- 53 Established in 1974, the National Art Gallery's biennial competition has historically provided a central forum for the nurturing and exposition of emerging artistic talents and continues to be a determining influence in the development of the nation's art history. Its cultural significance was signalled especially in 1997 when the National Art Gallery held the major exhibition, *Young Contemporaries in Review: 1974–1997*.
- 54 The white canvas of Yap's piece is subtitled [*coated/coded/loaded*] *canvas on which many meanings have f(r)ailed* and references the earlier conceptual work by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa, *Empty Canvas on which many shadows have fallen* (1974), presented as part of their seminal show *Towards a Mystical Reality* (1974).
- 55 Yap Sau Bin, quoted in Saidon, *Bakat Muda Sezaman 2002*, p. 1.9.
- 56 Saidon, *Bakat Muda Sezaman 2002*, p. 3.13.
- 57 See especially *Towards a Mystical Reality: a documentation of jointly initiated experiences by Redza Piyadasa and Sulaiman Esa*, Kuala Lumpur, 1974.

BRIEF SURVEY OF PHILIPPINE ART

Alice G. Guillermo

THE EARLIEST ARTS in the Philippines had their origins in indigenous myths and rituals invoking the favour of the gods on the human project of survival and continuance. Pottery, textile weaving, woodcarving and metalwork, with their own aesthetic norms and conventions, count among the earliest artistic expressions, along with the more integral forms of domestic architecture and shipbuilding. These belong to the cultural traditions that the Philippines shares with other South-East Asian countries that long practised rice agriculture and maritime commerce. Indigenous woodcarving includes freestanding ancestral figures and rice deities that are endemic to the islands of the region. It was also applied to the ornamentation of houses, boats and various agricultural and domestic tools. The earliest example of *ikat* weave was excavated in Romblon in the central Philippines. Many of these traditions survive to the present despite centuries of colonial suppression and neglect. These indigenous arts constitute an important part of the country's cultural heritage and attest to the artistic vitality of the people.

In the 16th century, Spanish colonisation sought to replace the indigenous culture with one in the image and likeness of the West. In art, this was marked by the introduction of the classical



John Frank Sabado
(The Philippines)
Sound of Silence

2000

Pen and ink on paper
51 x 69 cm

Collection: Fukuoka Asian
Art Museum

Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

paradigm in figuration with the schema of linear perspective on a two-dimensional surface. Since the Church/State became the sole patrons of the arts, the practice of art, exclusively religious in the form of altarpieces and prayer book engravings, came under the strict supervision of the friars who ensured correct iconography and provided European models. But, in time, what resulted was not a unitary colonial culture, but one that operated on several levels: on the first level, the dominant colonial culture of the Church and State, marked by formality and orthodoxy as in ecclesiastical art; second, a unique cultural fusion of folk indigenous and Christian elements, as in public fiesta art produced by Christianised lowland groups; and third, the suppressed indigenous culture continued by groups which resisted

assimilation into the colonial system.

With the opening of Philippine ports to world trade in the mid-19th century and the inauguration of the Suez Canal, economic change came with cash-crop agriculture. These economic events had a momentous impact on art and culture. By royal fiat, art was secularised, released from its ecclesiastical moorings in the light of new social demands. A new elite class, the *ilustrados*, emerged and assumed the role of art patrons, opening secular perspectives in art. For their elegantly furnished mansions of wood and stone, they commissioned portraits that celebrated their social ascendance. These portraits, mostly of women, were executed in a style called '*miniaturismo*', derived from the limner's art which paid meticulous attention to details of costume and accessories indicative of their wealth and status.

In the first quarter of the 19th century, Damian Domingo — well known for his watercolour albums of *tipos del pais*, country types representing the entire range of the social hierarchy dressed in the typical costumes of their occupation and social class —



opened his Binondo studio as the first art school, the Academia de Dibujo y Pintura. After Domingo's death, the school was resumed under the supervision of the Sociedad Economica de Amigos del Pais, which brought in art professors from Spain. It was through this venue that the European classical academy formally exercised its influence.

The Madrid Exposition of 1884 was a significant event for two Filipino expatriate artists, Juan Luna and Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo. Luna won the first gold medal for *Spoliarium*, a large-scale work in the style of 19th-century salon painting, its subject drawn from classical antiquity, particularly Imperial Rome and its persecution of colonised peoples. The Filipino group of Propagandists in Spain, who campaigned for reforms within the colonial system, fully exploited this event to point out that Filipinos could be integrated into the 'mainstream' Western culture and that the inferior status of 'colony' could be upgraded to 'province'.

The clamour for reform fell on deaf ears and the revolutionary mass organisation, the Katipunan, under the

Brenda Fajardo
History Series: American Occupation (Philip sold Maria to Sam)

1989
 Mixed Media
 53 x 72 cm
 Collection:
 Singapore Art Museum
 Image courtesy
 Singapore Art Museum

leadership of Bonifacio, launched an armed struggle for independence. But the Philippine Revolution was foiled by the United States in the 1898 Treaty of Paris, in which Spain unilaterally ceded the Philippines to the new colonial power. After the brutal suppression of armed resistance in the Philippine–American War, an American colonial government was imposed on the indigenous population. The new colonial order defined its priorities in education and value formation according to the ‘American way of life’. It set up a public school system and created a demand for illustrations for textbooks and other publications. Likewise, with the new corporations set up in the Philippines, a need for advertising and commercial design arose, to which the School of Fine Arts responded by integrating commercial art courses into the curriculum. As with all historical conjunctures, a shift in art patronage again took place, this time with American officials, merchants and tourists as the patrons. With the stimulating commercial atmosphere, it was during this period that the art market began to take shape.

Landscapes, genre and still lifes were greatly favoured by the American patrons, who sought ‘exotic’, tropical scenes of their new colony. In portraiture, often commissioned by public officials, the detailed miniaturist style gave way to academic portraiture that strove to endow the subject with the appearance of benevolent authority. Fernando Amorsolo and his colleagues in the School of Fine Arts, a unit of the University of the Philippines, catered to the new patronage. Instituting an orientalist paradigm, Fernando Amorsolo enhanced the rural scenery with the golden tones of harvest and idealised the peasant folk into stalwart youths and ever-smiling maidens bearing overflowing baskets of fruits and flowers, a cornucopia of tropical abundance. Working in the same vein, but maintaining their distinct artistic personalities, were Irineo Miranda and Jorge Pineda. The Amorsolo School based in the School of Fine Arts assumed the role of local academy, dominating the art scene for decades. In sculpture, Amorsolo’s counterpart was Guillermo Tolentino, trained in the classical academy in Rome, whose major work was the Bonifacio Monument with its tableau of figures depicting revolutionary struggle against colonial rule.

The Amorsolo School showed its excellent draftsmanship skills in numerous illustrations, so much so that the 1930s were known as the Golden Age of Illustration. Editorial cartoons drawn

by Jorge Pineda and Jose V. Pereira made their mark with their witty, trenchant tirades in political commentary. Doubtless, their works in the graphic arts, close to the pulse of economic and political life, were no less significant artistically than the rural idylls untouched by the slightest shadow of the agrarian unrest of the 1930s.

The academic complacency of the Amorsolo School was jolted by the challenge of modernism raised by Victorio Edades' exhibit at the Philippine Columbian Club in 1928 on his return from a scholarship in the United States. To the images of Amorsolo, steeped in the classical values of ideal beauty and harmony, Edades counterpoised the modernist value of expressiveness, which made room for the terrible and disquieting. As a modernist, he also stressed the importance of a heightened sense of formal design. Discarding the traditional notion of art as mimesis, modernism brought to the fore the concept of painting as an artistic and ideological construct. It was also Edades who took up the theme of national identity in art.

Edades' lessons in modernism did not fall on barren ground. He soon formed a nucleus with Carlos Francisco and Galo B. Ocampo, the pioneering triumvirate of modern art in the country. In time, they expanded into the Thirteen Moderns, which included Diosdado Lorenzo, Vicente Manansala, Cesar Legaspi, Anita Magsaysay-Ho and Hernando R. Ocampo, among others. A later group, the neorealists, whose members included Manansala, Legaspi and Tabuena, developed the style of transparent cubism. With the new modernist idioms, a corresponding development was the shift from rural to urban subjects with the expansion of genre themes.

These changes, however, were interrupted by World War II and the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in 1941. The war slowed the movement of change in the arts, but, in the early

Carlos V. Francisco
Progress Through Education

1964
Oil on canvas
263.5 x 324.8 cm
Collection: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka Asian Art Museum



post-war years, the first art institutions that paved the way to a broad support system for the arts were founded. These were the Art Association of the Philippines (AAP), founded by Purita Kalaw-Ledesma, and the Philippine Art Gallery (PAG), founded by Lydia Villanueva Arguilla in 1951.

Five years after the granting of formal independence from the United States in 1946, the shadow of the war still fell on the paintings of the 1950s with their images of a country in ruin. Meanwhile, the debate between 'proletarian art' and 'art for art's sake' in literature and the visual arts, which had earlier been triggered by the Depression in the United States, also had its counterpart in the Philippines. Indeed, the dire post-war social and economic conditions were in themselves a potent argument for an art of social consciousness.

In 1955, the decades-long struggle between the conservatives and the modernists was resolved in the latter's favour at the AAP Annual Painting Competition. The conservatives of the Amorsolo School withdrew their works in protest when the modernists won all the major awards. From then on, with the help of writers, collectors and gallery owners sympathetic to their cause, the modernists enjoyed the wide support and recognition of the art public.

But even in the early 1950s, when the conservatives were the dominant force and the modernists were still busy laying the ground, the avantgarde had already announced its appearance. This was in the startling oeuvre of a precocious young man, David Cortez Medalla, poet turned kinetic and performance artist. Among his highly original productions that caused a stir in art circles was the *Bubble Machine*, a work of kinetic sculpture that emitted froth when activated. His other works showed affinities with art brut in its radical anti-classicism, its uninhibited figurative style and aggressive textures.

The early modernists continued to firm up their position as the ascendant artists. In the 1960s, Carlos Francisco, one of the pioneering modernists, produced paintings and murals inspired by indigenous aesthetics of line, form and colour. Eschewing linear perspective, he asserted an overall pictorial design, covering the entire field with dynamic figures and motifs. His mural of the *History of the Struggles of the Filipino People* for the Manila City Hall is the magnificent culmination of his art. The same period also saw the maturation of Legaspi's neo-realist style in paintings inspired

by rock formations in the theme of the interplay of nature and organic form, although this would be brought to fullest expression in his *Jeepney Series* two decades later. Manansala's style did not remain within classical cubism, but he instead used it as a structuring rather than fragmenting device and brought out effects of transparency in his genres and still lifes.

In the late 1950s, abstract art came out strongly in the works of Jose Joya and Constancio Bernardo. Joya, fresh from studies in the United States, caused a stir with his large abstract expressionist works impelled by a strong kinetic energy. Later, he moved to a more harmonious idiom in acrylic collages with rice paper that played on transparent and overlapping forms in space. Bernardo belonged to another school in his geometric abstraction, reflecting the influence of Albers and Mondrian. Also at this time, Hernando R. Ocampo, who began as a figurative painter, was developing his own personal style of abstraction based on interlocking shapes of varied colours and textures.

In sculpture, the modernist challenge was posed by Napoleon Abueva, a former student of Guillermo Tolentino. Except for a few conservative sculptors, Abueva was alone in the field for about a decade. Highly versatile, he has worked in a wide range of sculptural media and techniques and in a variety of approaches, often in a witty and playful vein. Abueva was eventually joined by younger modernists. Lamberto Hechanova combined metal, plastics and found objects while playing on their varying mediumistic qualities. Abdulmari Imao was inspired by indigenous designs and moved towards an idiom based on Islamic calligraphy. Virginia Ty-Navarro did works in brass, wood and jade using various approaches. Eduardo Castrillo expressed his many-sided artistic personality in large outdoor abstracts of welded metal, in mobiles and modular pieces in chrome and plexiglass, and metal relief sculptures of social themes. Solomon Sapid first won attention with his expressionistic works on native mythological creatures. Sculptor and architect Ramon Orlina developed the medium of studio glass in freestanding works or as elements of architectural design. Another glass artist is Imelda Pilapil, who contrasts engraved sheet glass with the rugged textures of stone.

The 1960s were halcyon years for modern art in the Philippines. A number of dynamic and vital artistic personalities experimented in all aspects of art in order to enrich the visual

language. These were also years of social and political ferment. For one, the period saw a rise in nationalist consciousness which reassessed the relationship of the Philippines with the United States. At the same time, there was a movement towards democratisation in art, marked by greater freedom of popular expression and a sensitivity to the interests of the people.

At the heels of the first generation of pioneers, there eagerly followed a younger and more audacious breed. Ang Kiukok, Jaime de Guzman, Onib Olmedo and Danilo Dalena painted in expressionist styles of high visual impact. Benedicto Cabrera, printmaker and painter, drew from antique photographs, which he combined with experimental devices for expanding the semantic potential of the work. Ang Kiukok crystallised in vivid, cubistic images the terror and desperation of the times. De Guzman painted powerful historical and expressionist murals, but later sought the mystery and spiritual power of indigenous faiths. Olmedo drew from the nightmarish figures of the lower depths. Danilo Dalena, acclaimed for his political cartoons, painted large bustling crowds of people in quest of instant luck or miracles.

Of the abstractionists, between Joya and Bernardo's generation and the younger painters were Roberto Chabet, Lee Aguinaldo and J. Elizalde Navarro. Chabet's contribution lay in initiating and maintaining an experimental and conceptual approach to art, with an emphasis on the semiotic potential of materials. Lee Aguinaldo showed varied influences, including Asian minimalist aesthetics. J. Elizalde Navarro, painter and sculptor, worked in a colourful abstract expressionist style with a strong sense of design. Meanwhile, younger artists such as Augusto Albor, Justin Nuyda, Lao Lianben, Glenn Bautista and Philip Victor developed their own idioms. Notable in many of their works is the collage of found objects and an enthusiastic experimentation in different media. Abstract art was also given a boost by Romulo Olazo, who created an art of subtlety in his works featuring diaphanous overlapping planes.

The decade of the 1970s was characterised by a diversity of styles and themes. The social realists made their appearance in response to martial law in 1972. Art of socio-political significance, as in the work of the first-generation social realists Baens Santos, Edgar Fernandez, Antipas Delotavo and Renato Habulan, remains an important trend among younger groups. It was also they who initiated art work in popular forms, such as comics, posters, street



murals and editorial cartoons. Related to social realism was the historical theme mingled with folk imagery, strikingly reconfigured in the work of Brenda Fajardo and Ofelia Gelvezon-Tequi. Younger artists have searched for innovative approaches in experimental media to social themes, such as poverty and militarisation.

Doubtless, genre painting will always be a mainstay in Philippine art. Traditional art communities thrive in a number of towns of the Rizal and Laguna provinces around Laguna de Bay. Regional genre painters such as Jose Blanco, Manuel Baldemor and Tam Austria dwell on rural life, folk legends and traditions. The genre tradition, folk urban, continuing from the post-war paintings of Manansala, is furthered in their own styles by artists such as Mario Parial, Angelito Antonio and Antonio Austria. But it is also notable that a number of fine-arts trained young artists from the town of Angono — known for its genre tradition — have signalled the desire to break away from the earlier mould and explore new subjects and approaches.

In the 1980s, a growing interest in the artistic expressions of the different cultural communities, as well as greater awareness

Brenda Fajardo
History Series: Japanese Occupation (The bow-legged took Maria away and Sam reclaimed Her)

1989
 Mixed Media
 53 x 72 cm
 Collection:
 Singapore Art Museum
 Image courtesy
 Singapore Art Museum



Santiago Bose
(The Philippines)
Ayos Ba

2000
Mixed media on canvas
63 x 100 cm

Collection: John Batten
Image courtesy John
Batten Gallery, Hong Kong

sional, has made use of materials such as bamboo, plaited rattan panels, hardwoods, coconut bark and husk, burlap, shells, forest vines, driftwood and seeds. With artistic insight, these materials have been integrated into paintings or fashioned into tapestries and installations.

Foremost among artists using indigenous materials are Junyee, Santiago Bose, Roberto Villanueva, Roberto Feleo and Imelda Cajipe-Endaya. Paz Abad Santos has fashioned large-scale tapestries of burlap richly encrusted with coconut bark, husks, seeds and various found objects. Junyee uses a wide array of organic materials in installations commenting on the state of the ecosystem, with recent works evoking a mystical air. Santiago Bose created makeshift structures of thatch and bamboo such as native altars with millenarist symbols of revolution or open-air market stalls that refer to regional cultural exchange. Roberto Villanueva has done large mandala-based installations using bamboo sidings to evoke holy grounds inhabited by nature and guardian deities. Roberto Feleo has put together a wide variety of folk artefacts in bricolage to evoke an indigenous cosmology. Imelda Cajipe-Endaya has used panels of thatch and bamboo with collages of domestic objects to evoke an entire folk culture. She has recently stitched and collaged mementos of travel on fabric and handmade paper.

Sculpture has also shown significant advances in the past decade. Agnes Arellano has done large plaster-of-Paris figures influenced by Indian mythology, while Julie Lluch has done a series

of environmental issues, were factors in the strong trend in the use of indigenous or vernacular materials. The trend first appeared with the discovery of the virtues of handmade paper for printmaking, and has since resulted in a keener sensitivity to the semantic properties of the indigenous media. Much recent art, both two- and three-dimen-

of terracotta life-size images of women devotees. Likewise, Florence-based Dudley Diaz has made important innovations in religious imagery in wood reliefs. Gabriel Barredo creates kinetic assemblages out of found objects in innovative constructions that evoke a mystical air. Arnel Borja's mobiles based on the principle of fulcrum balance in physics bring out a fascinating interplay of various materials and shapes. Lirio Salvador produces fantasy musical instruments in stainless steel, which are actually played in experimental rock bands.

Meanwhile, painting in the hands of young artists crosses over to the larger category of two-dimensional form. As such, the works open

out to a whole range of modifications, experimentations, even subversions of the original oil-on-canvas painting tradition, with much present work done in mixed media. Among the interventionist strategies are the incorporation of various materials, panelled sections, appropriation and modification of photographs, frottages, textural devices, computer-generated images and elements, as well as the innovative management of pictorial space. The geometric mandala paintings of John Frank Sabado, for instance, have a fine network of threads alluding to the Cordillera textile culture superimposed on the painting surface marked by precisionist op art effects. Leonardo Aguinaldo has developed an original technique of colour engraving on rubber sheets with which he sometimes incorporates mirrors to suggest the theme of identity. Another notable strategy in two-dimensional form can also be found in the paintings of Wire Tuazon, who superimposes a line of text on the image itself in the manner of a conundrum. Nona Garcia, whose works combine painting and installation, plays on



Agnes Arellano
*Myths of Creation
and Destruction I*

1987
Cold-cast marble,
unhulled rice, crushed
marble, wood
Image courtesy of Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum



Santiago Bose
Hanoi

Mixed media on carpet
190 x 234 cm
Estate of Bose family,
Manila.

Image courtesy John
Batten Gallery, Hong Kong

the notions of inside and outside in her device of wrapping objects and subjecting them to x-ray, thus creating a dual view. Artists who continue to work in oil on canvas in their own distinctive styles are Emmanuel Garibay, Elmer Borlongan, Federico and Grace Sievert, Ronald Ventura and the Bacolod artists, Nunelucio Alvarado and Charlie Co, among others.

While much important painting and sculpture continues to be done in the country, instal-

lation art is shaping itself into a potent form, developing from earlier hermetic constructs to striking multimedia expressions. Installation art, which is premised on the interplay of signifying elements and structures within a defined space, has recently examined the concepts of space, time and process, breaking down the parameters of the pictorial field and the sculptural mass to open up new semantic possibilities. These often include performative interactivity between the artist, viewer and public and the work itself. From ecological themes, recent installations have shifted to themes of identity and human interaction. Many installations and mixed-media works have a central aspect of discursiveness in which words are called into play to foreground the conceptual values of the work. Lani Maestro, as in the installation *I am you*, first printed the texts on billboards in Canada then transposed them to a small-scale venue in the Philippines. Claro Ramirez transformed a small room into a dark box of mirrors that bounced off the viewer's multiple reflections, while electrical units of light and sound were triggered into activity by the movements of the viewer. A string of text of Filipino and English words along the walls had to do with different forms of active relationship. Mideo Cruz created a pantheon-assemblage of gods, sacred and secular, before which he posed as a patient imploring for mercy.

The movements of migration that are so much a part of our time have resulted in an art of social and cultural exchange with the interaction of different communities in the region and in the

world as a whole. Imelda Cajipe-Endaya was one of the first to do installations of this theme in works that bring together the cultural artefacts that are part of the life of the overseas contract worker. Alwin Reamillo traced the routes of colonial incursions in the region and displayed a Last Supper image overlaid by cultural icons through time and social change. An installation by the artist-couple Juan and Isabel Aquilizan, from Los Banos in Laguna, consists of a temporal process which they initiated in the Filipino community in Queensland. This involved the gathering and exchanging of Filipino cultural artefacts followed by interviews which evoked associations and memories of their home country. In this case, the installation goes beyond a specific site to involve a process of group interaction over a period of time.



Another area of development comes from digital imaging with the use of computer technology, exploiting the interface between painting/sculpture and computer-generated images and drawing out all possibilities, as in the recent work of Jose Tence Ruiz. Likewise, current is the strong trend in video art which seeks enhanced levels of audiovisual experience in a vital interplay with installations and literary-discursive forms.

Providing the infrastructure of art, galleries and museums have, on the whole, welcomed the new developments apart from space constraints and have mounted installation shows that depart from the conventional formats. The Cultural Center of the Philippines, with its big and small galleries, has always been hospitable to innovative work. This is also true for commercial venues inside large malls which may have an artwalk. The Finale Art File and the West Gallery have held joint shows of Roberto Chabet's installations, as well as shows under his curatorship in the Art Center. The Ayala Museum has also hosted installation shows. Also promising in this respect are the Pinto Gallery in the outlying city of Antipolo and the Kulay Diwa in Paranaque. Other galleries which feature installations and other innovative work are the

Imelda Cajipe-Endaya
Our Terms

2003
Installation of textile, digital print, acrylic on canvas, coconuts
Installation view
Yankee Doodles exhibit held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Manila
Image courtesy the artist



Mark Justiniani
Dogma

2003
Enamel on
30.4 x 30.4 cm mirror
Image courtesy the artist

Green Papaya and the Hiraya Gallery. The Ateneo Art Gallery has also shown an increasing penchant for more experimental work. The Lopez Museum likewise has a dynamic approach to curatorship. A more recent development is in alternative exhibition spaces such as Surrounded by Water and Big Sky Mind, which have hosted conceptual art, installations, performance art and rock concerts. The big museums, such as the National Museum, the Museum of the Filipino People, the Metropolitan Museum of Manila and the GSIS Museum, have been venues for exhibiting large private collections, local and regional competitions such as the Art Association of the Philippines Annual Art Competition and the Philip Morris ASEAN Art Awards. At the same time, they have included exhibits of textiles and brassware using state-of-the-art exhibition technologies.

From the initial flourishing of modernism in the post-war years, Philippine art from the 1990s to the present has shown an increasing momentum in creative activity and production. In fact, it is possible to say that the last decade of the 20th century and the transition to the present has been particularly dynamic in terms of new concepts and values. These years have manifested a renewed energy in art-making with the vast new resources that the artists have accessed and explored. This, for one, proceeds from the internal dynamics of the art scene today, with a sustained, lively interaction between artists and public, and between Manila and the regions. Art competitions have provided encouragement and raised artistic standards. Likewise, the opening of regional and international fora such as biennials and triennials hosted by large cities, and the productive exchange generated by symposia bringing together artists and writers from all parts of the world, have contributed to the rich art production that we enjoy today.

SINGAPORE: A case study

Caroline Turner and Glen St John Barclay

THE ISLAND NATION of Singapore provides an interesting case study for the interconnections between government, culture and social change in the second half of the 20th century.

As Jen Webb points out in her essay in this volume, Singapore's Creative Industries Development Strategy of 2002 emphasises the important place of the arts in the nation's economy. A large amount of money is also being spent in schools and universities to encourage creative thinking. All this is highly impressive. But the strategy is not only internally directed: the aim is for Singapore to be the creative hub of South-East Asia.

Art historian T. K. Sabapathy has noted that the beginnings of modern art in Singapore were 'dismal',¹ basically because the education policies of the British were designed for a different workforce, one serving the economy and government. The end of colonial rule, after World War II, opened the way for a government role through the National Arts Council and other government bodies, which has greatly increased and emphasised in recent years the significance of Singapore as a cultural as well as economic hub.

Nevertheless, the positive arts infrastructure provided by the Singapore Government has to be seen in the context of national

policies that also circumscribe cultural activity through censorship. *The Far Eastern Economic Review* (27 May, 2004) provided an example of the contradictions in the Singapore Government's arts strategy, noting that, despite expenditure under a \$58 million Media Blueprint to finance and produce movies, including those by young creative artists, over the five years, there was significant censorship of several Singapore-produced films at the 2004 Singapore International Film Festival.²

Some of the liveliest examples of artistic practice in Singapore in the past decade have consequently come through the activities of independent groups of artists, writers and performers, who have worked across media and created an atmosphere of experimentation, which has sometimes tested the limits of tolerance within the Singapore community. An important beginning was a group of artists working from the Artists Village, established in 1987 by Tang Da Wu.³ Performances by this group and other artists brought some of these experimental art practices into the public arena. One of the most memorable public performances was Tang Da Wu's *The Tiger's Whip*, which was performed in the centre of Chinatown and questioned traditional Chinese practices such as the use of tiger penises as aphrodisiacs.⁴ There were also collaborations between the Artists Village and the National Arts Council. Among the artists associated with the Artists Village were Vincent Leow, Amanda Heng, Tang Mun Kit, Wong Shih Yaw, Jailani Kuning, Lim Poh Teck, Faizal Fadil, Koh N. H, Ho Soon Yeen

Tang Da Wu
*They Poach the Rhino,
Chop Off His Horn and
Make this Drink*

1991
Performance Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Photograph by
Fujimoto Kampachi





Vincent Leow
Blue Dog

2004
Oil on canvas
150 x 180 cm
Image courtesy the artist

and Ahmad Mashadi. But, as Sabapathy points out, some well-known artists pursued different directions outside the Village, such as S. Chandrasekaran, Goh Ee Choo and Salleh Japar, who collaborated in the seminal *Trimurti* exhibition in 1988.⁵

Many Singaporean artists were important teachers and mentors working in the main at the National University of Singapore and LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts. Although painting is, as in most places, the most dynamic area of art in general, sculpture has had a good following in Singapore. Practitioners include Ng Eng Teng, Chong Fah Cheong and Teo Eng Seng. Singaporean artists such as Chandrasekaran, who taught at LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts, became known for performance art. Matthew Ngui, an artist born in 1962 who studied with Ng Eng Teng, has had wide exposure internationally for his interactive installations, which include performance and video art, examining intercultural communication. His work has been seen at the Kassel Documenta X in 1997 (the only Singaporean and one of the few Asians ever exhibited there). He has also been in *Cities on the Move*, the Sao Paulo Biennale and the Venice Biennale.⁶ Among contemporary women artists, Suzann Victor and Amanda Heng are probably the best known.

Suzann Victor
*A Rolling Stone
Gathers No Moss*

1998
Wales, UK Cyfuniad
International Workshop.
(Artist's performance
intervention of Alan Dunn's
installation Strike)
Image courtesy the artist
Photo credit: Sue Leask



Victor began as a painter and was also artistic director (along with Susie Lingham, Henry Tang and Iris Tan) of '5th Passage Artists Ltd', an artists' collective which was the first corporate-sponsored art space in Singapore.⁷ She has exhibited widely internationally, most recently at the 49th Venice Biennale, concentrating now on performance and installation.⁸ Important spaces for contemporary art today include the Substation arts centre and the artist-run space *Plastique Kinetic Worms*. The Substation was the island's first multicultural and multidisciplinary arts centre, 'a powerhouse for the arts', founded by Kuo Pao Kun. It opened on 16 September, 1990, with a 120-seat theatre, an art gallery, a dance studio, two multipurpose rooms, a garden courtyard for performances and other arts events, an art shop and a box office. Influential art critic Lee Weng Choy is now Artistic Co-Director⁹. An important journal on art and society, *focas*, is produced under the auspices of the Substation.¹⁰ A source of archival information on artists is the online archive *Singapore Art*.¹¹

The story of Singapore is a story of considerable achievement. *Majulah Singapura (Onward Singapore)* is the anthem of this unique city-state. It is perhaps more appropriate than most national songs. Singapore's material progress was nothing less than astounding in the less than 40 years since gaining independence in 1965: it has acquired what is, at the time of writing, the fourth-highest per capita real income in the world; it has an airline and an airport customarily rated the world's best by travellers; it had

become the world's busiest port by the end of the 20th century; it could claim to be the high-tech leader of South-East Asia, the commercial entrepôt and the scientific centre; and it now has pretensions to become the cultural hub of the region as well. All this with a current population of 4.6 million, on a collection of islands covering only 683 sq km, only about 1.4 per cent of which is arable land, and with no natural resources except fish. Former Prime Minister and dominant political figure Lee Kuan Yew had no doubts as to the reason for this progress or its necessity. 'To survive', he wrote in his autobiography, 'we had to be better organised and more efficient and competitive than the rest of the region or there was no reason for our role as a nodal point between the advanced and the developing countries'.¹²

This record of success was frequently attributed by less observant commentators to the superiority of 'Asian values' over those of the West, overlooking the fact that the concept of 'Asian values' would have to embrace Confucian values, Buddhist values, Hindu values, Muslim values, Shinto values, Christian values, animist values and presumably Communist values, among others: 'if there is anything we can speak of as a general truth about Asia,' Inoue Tatsuo observes, 'it would be its religious and cultural diversity ... much greater than that of the West'.¹³ Lee himself preferred the term 'Confucian values', which he considered to 'prevail in the cultures of China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, countries that used the Chinese script and had been influenced by Confucian literature ... Singapore depends on the strength and influence of the family to keep society orderly and maintain a culture of thrift, hard work, filial piety, and respect for elders and for scholarship and learning. These values make for a productive people and help economic growth'.¹⁴ Amartya Sen comments that 'some relatively authoritarian States (such as South Korea, Lee's own Singapore, and recently China) have had faster rates of economic growth than some less authoritarian ones (such as India, Costa Rica, or Jamaica). But the overall picture is much more complex than these isolated observations might initially suggest'.¹⁵ That this was indeed the case was demonstrated convincingly by the prolonged Japanese economic stagnation, and even more convincingly by the economic meltdown in the region at the end of the century, which was weathered most successfully by China, where Lee apparently considers Confucian values still prevail, and

Amanda Heng
Another Woman No.2

1996
photograph
83.1 x 101.7 cm
Collection Fukuoka Asian
Art Museum
Image Courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
and the artist.

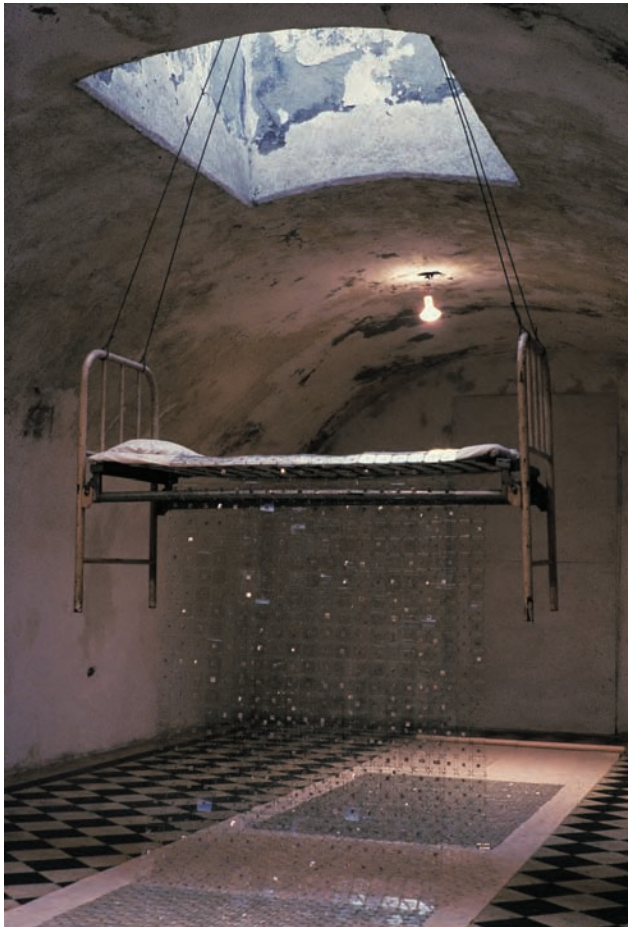


by non-Confucian Malaysia, where they presumably do not, and from which Confucian Singapore was one of the slowest to recover. It is also somewhat ironic that the country demonstrating the most impressive rate of economic growth in the world at the time of writing is traditionally non-authoritarian and totally non-Confucian India.

What is evident, at least, is that the Singaporean model of economic growth inevitably entailed a degree of social discipline and enforced conformity that is hardly conducive to a vigorous and innovative artistic scene such as is apparent in other regional countries, even ones with more overtly authoritarian regimes. Singapore, nonetheless, has ambitions to be a cultural centre in the region, as its pretensions to be the economic and scientific centre are challenged increasingly by the headlong advances of vastly larger and more resourceful Asian powers. Lee himself considered in 2000 that it would 'take another generation before our arts, culture and social standards can match the First World infrastructure that we have installed'.¹⁶ There is at least no doubt about the infrastructure. The Government began in the 1990s 'to

pursue more rigorously policies and strategies to harness the economic potential of the arts', as Lily Kong explains in a brilliant and penetrating article.¹⁷ The Singapore Art Museum opened its doors in the restored St Joseph's Institution building in January 1996, as one of the first art museums with international standard museum facilities and programs in South-East Asia, and with a mission statement to 'preserve and present the art histories and contemporary art practices of Singapore and the South-East Asian region so as to facilitate visual arts education, exchange, research and development'.¹⁸ Its first director, Kwok Kian Chow, has committed to developing a local, regional and international role for the Museum. Among the important exhibitions are several researching the origins of modern art in the region as a whole. These include *Themes in South-East Asian Art* and *A Century of Art in Singapore*, as well as specific exhibitions on art in Malaysia and Indonesia. The Museum's collections, the largest holdings in South-East Asia, stand at more than 6,000 works. The Museum has significant, powerful works from neighbouring countries with strong political and social themes, and has recently announced a focus on new media and new technology in art, in addition to its previous programs of emphasis.¹⁹ It also coordinated Singapore's appearance at the Venice Biennale since 2001. Lee Weng Choy, in a recent article for *Asia Art Archive*, noted that the National Arts Council and the National Heritage Board spent S\$700,000 on three artists for the 2003 event.²⁰

The Singapore Art Museum opening was followed on 24 April, 1997, by the inauguration of the Asian Civilisations Museum, represented as 'the first museum in the region to present a broad yet integrated perspective of pan-Asian cultures and civilisations'.²¹ It opened a new building recently. The Singapore History Museum, another national cultural institution, is also undergoing major renovations at the time of writing. But the supreme manifestation of the 'national effort to become a world capital of the arts' came on 12 October, 2002, with the grand opening of the Esplanade — Theatres on the Bay, after 'thirty years of planning, six years of construction and three months of testing and tuning in the making', with a mission to 'entertain, engage, educate, and inspire'. The new centre, captured in the popular imagination as 'The Durians' because of its resemblance to the strong-smelling but highly palatable tropical fruit, possessed,



Suzann Victor
Third World Extra
Virgin Dreams

1997
 Installation
 6th Havana Biennale
 Image courtesy the artist
 Photo: Alwin Reamillo

among other assets, acoustics matched by only five other concert halls in the world, and was represented as 'just one element of a growing movement to inspire creativity and innovation among Singapore's populace'.²² The Esplanade also has an ambitious contemporary art program showing contemporary artwork in its foyers and public areas, including, at the official opening, such international stars as Chinese artist Wenda Gu.

Lily Kong observes, however, that the artists themselves were not necessarily enthusiastic about a cultural policy conceived as 'part of the arsenal to shore up psychological and social defence ... Practitioners are critical of the state's interpretation of Singapore as a regional centre for the arts ... because they read into the state's strategy purely economic intents'.²³ 'Artistic space in Singapore,' she considers, 'is ... literally and meta-

phorically debated and negotiated between the state with its primarily cultural economic policy and practitioners with their socially and culturally driven agendas'.²⁴ Arts practitioners were particularly unenthusiastic about the Esplanade on the grounds that the enormous financial investment in the centre would require that it be used primarily to attract commercially profitable productions from outside Singapore, rather than providing a forum for local talent.

The Government is not alone in its endeavours to enhance Singapore's cultural reputation in the region: important commercial art fairs and auction houses are also part of the arts scene in Singapore. The National University of Singapore also presents an impressive research program, of which a recent example is the conference of the Asia Research Centre entitled



'Our Modernities: Positioning Asian Art Now', held at the Asian Civilisations Museum with support from the National Art Museum.²⁵

A critical issue for this tiny island nation is therefore Asian identity as well as what it means to be a Singaporean in this multicultural and multiracial society. One Singaporean artist whose work explores issues of identity in Asia is Lee Wen. His performance series of the 1990s, *Journey of a Yellow Man*, involved the artist undertaking walks in various cities of the world covered in yellow paint — literally a yellow man. As critic Lee Weng Choy tells us, Lee Wen, in a symposium at the Singapore Substation in 1997, 'advocated a multiculturalism that goes beyond the Singapore state's essentialist CMIO — Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other — multiracialism'. The 'yellow man' journeys raise fascinating issues because they have been interpreted in different ways in different cities. In Australia, Brisbane audiences assumed a connection with the White Australia Policy, but in Thailand there were different interpretations, which ranged from religion to diseases associated with the sex industry.²⁶ The use of performance

Lee Wen
Journey of a Yellow Man
no. 11 Multiculturalism.

September 1997
Performance at the
Substation Singapore
Image courtesy the artist.
Photo: Jeremy Hiah

by this artist is especially relevant as the Singapore State banned performance art from the mid-1990s until recently.

T. K. Sabapathy, one of the critical intellectual voices commenting on art in Singapore in the past decade, wrote in 1993: '... as an urban construct, Singapore is energised by rampant consumerism, feeding on a vast array of imported merchandise. Every-which-way one turns, one is confronted with images and messages, pitched at levels that ensure uniform, obsessive consumption. How do these circumstances determine notions of identity and self-determination? How do they impinge upon creativity, innovation and authenticity? These are questions which cannot be avoided; they are formidable and have to be met head-on. Therein are challenging agendas for artists in Singapore'.²⁷ These questions remain today as Singapore faces the 21st century.

NOTES

Our grateful thanks to Michelle Antoinette and Lily Kong for comments on this essay.

- 1 T. K. Sabapathy, 'Contemporary Art in Singapore', in Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1993, pp. 83–92.
- 2 *The Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 May, 2004. pp. 54–55.
- 3 T. K. Sabapathy, *The Space: an introduction*, Artists Village, Singapore, 1992.
- 4 Sabapathy, 'Contemporary Art in Singapore', p. 85.
- 5 Our thanks to Michelle Antoinette for this information. The second exhibition was *Trimurti and Ten Years After*, tracing the artists' development in those years.
- 6 See stiller@hkw.de, 'Matthew Ngui: the construction of intercultural meaning', <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?110> (consulted 11 June, 2004).
- 7 Lee Weng Choy, 'Chronology of a Controversy', <http://www.biotechnics.org/Chronology> (consulted 14 June, 2004), details the lead up to a controversy involving *5th Passage*, which led to media condemnation of certain artist performances, action against those artists and Government cuts in funding in 1994. The Ministries of Home Affairs and of Information and the Arts issued a statement on 22 January, 1994, which expressed concern that some performance art could 'pose a danger to public order, security and decency' and placed restrictions on performance art.
- 8 Suzann Victor and Susie Lingham, *An Equation of Vulnerability, a Certain Thereness, Being*, Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, LaSalle-SIA, Singapore, 2002.

- 9 <http://www.substation.org/facilities.html>
- 10 See *focus: Forum on Contemporary Art and Society*, a non-profit initiative edited by Lucy Davis under the auspices of the Substation, 'that engages issues of contemporary art, politics and social change' primarily in Singapore and South-East Asia.
- 11 For more information on Singapore artists, see www.SingaporeArt.org, an online archive on artists and organisations.
- 12 Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, HarperCollins, New York, 2000, p. 688.
- 13 Inoue Tatsuo, 'Liberal Democracy and Asian Orientalism', in Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (eds), *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1999, p. 42.
- 14 Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, p. 491.
- 15 Amartya Sen, 'Human Rights and Economic Achievements', in Bauer and Bell (eds), *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, p. 91.
- 16 Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First*, p. 691.
- 17 Lily Kong, 'Cultural Policy in Singapore: negotiating economic and socio-cultural agendas', *GEOFORUM* 31, 2000, pp. 409–24.
- 18 <http://www.museum.org.sg/SAM/profile> (consulted 29 May, 2004).
- 19 <http://www.museum.org.sg/SAM/profile> (consulted 29 May, 2004).
- 20 Asia Art Archive, *Newsletter*, 5 May, 2004, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/newsetter.html> (consulted 28 May, 2004).
- 21 http://www.museum.org.sg/ACM/about_overview.shtml (consulted 29 May, 2004).
- 22 'Singapore's Esplanade: showcasing the world's sights and sounds', *InternationalReports.net/The Washington Times 1994–2002*, <http://www.internationalreports.net/asiapacific/singapore/2002/singaporeseplanade.html> (consulted 27 May, 2004).
- 23 Kong, 'Cultural Policy in Singapore', p. 419.
- 24 Kong, 'Cultural Policy in Singapore', p. 422.
- 25 <http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/conf2004/asian art.htm> (consulted 20 May, 2004).
- 26 Lee Weng Choy, 'Lee Wen', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999, p. 130.

DEVELOPMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY THAI ART

Somporn Rodboon

THE ESSENTIAL TURNING point in Thai art came when Corrado Feroci, an Italian sculptor known as Silpa Bhirasri, ‘the father of Thai modern art’, entered the Royal Thai Government service in 1924. One of his major roles during his innovative time in Bangkok was to introduce Western art and aesthetics to Thai students when he was the Dean of the Faculty of Painting and Sculpture at Silpakorn University, founded in 1943. Bhirasri laid a strong foundation for Western academic training as well as encouraging his teaching staff and students to appreciate their own culture and to do more research on Thai traditional art. He successfully tutored them in assimilating Western and traditional styles in a way that has led Thai artists to create international art works without losing the essence of ‘Thainess’. Bhirasri devoted 38 years of his life to promoting art in Thailand. As a consequence, the country owes a great deal to his valuable contribution. The birth of modern Thai art resulted from his tireless devotion and effort. In 1949, Bhirasri successfully inaugurated the first annual National Exhibition of Art. The aims of this exhibition were to promote the advancements Thai artists had made since the

establishment of the Art Faculty and also to encourage public awareness and interest in modern art. Since then, the National Exhibition of Art has taken place annually and has been one of the most valuable sources for studying and researching the development of contemporary Thai art and artists.

Thai art in the past 50 years is of considerable significance. The 1940s witnessed the possibilities and alternative routes for the development of modern art. There were different ways of reflecting the influences of Western modernism in Thai art at the time. Impressionistic and realistic styles were important in the Thai visual arts scene from 1949, when the first National Exhibition of Art was held, to 1958. Among artists who created works in an impressionistic style were Misiem Yipintsoi, the first woman artist to receive gold medals at the National Art Exhibitions (1949, 1950, 1951), followed by Chamras Kietkong, who received a medal in 1950, Fua Haripitak (1950), Tawee Nanthakwang (1953), Sawasdi Tantisuk (1953), Banchop Palawongse (1953, 1954) and Prayura Uluchadha (1955). The aforementioned artists were influenced by Silpa Bhirasri's introduction to Western impressionist paintings, except Fua Haripitak, Sawasdi Tantisuk and Tawee Nanthakwang, who went to study in Italy on scholarships from the Italian Government in 1954, 1956 and 1960 respectively. They saw original works of the impressionist masters in Europe. Jitr Buabusaya was influenced by the French impressionists as a result of his stay in Japan, when he went to work on his postgraduate courses at the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts in 1941. At that time, French impressionism strongly influenced Japanese art and Japanese museums had some collections of French impressionist paintings.¹ At the same time, realist art approaches were evident in the work of prominent sculptors Sithidej Sanghiran, Pimarn Mulpramook, Sawaeng Songmangmee and Paitun Muangsomboon.

Although Western styles of art had a strong impact on Thai artists during the late Forties and Fifties, Khien Yimsiri was the first to revitalise traditional art by incorporating it within modern forms of art. His bronze sculpture *Musical Rhythm*, executed in 1949 and featuring a flutist playing his instrument in a graceful manner, clearly showed the influence of classical Thai Buddha images. The style of Khien Yimsiri was influential at the time and other painters and sculptors followed his idea of assimilating



Khien Yimsiri
Musical Rhythm

1949
bronze
53 x 39 x 36 cm
Collection Fukuoka Asian
Art Museum
Image courtesy of Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Photograph by
Shinomiya Yuji

traditional and modern forms of art. Furthermore, depictions of Thai life in paintings and prints were prominent in the Fifties. Damrong Wong-Uparaj was the first to focus on this subject matter.

Cubism in modern Thai art began in the 1950s when Fua Haripitak went to Italy. The artist acquired the style during his stay there. Among his famous paintings in this style are *Blue-Green*, painted in 1956, and *Nude*, painted in 1957. They clearly reflect the influence of Picasso's early cubist style (1907–08). The cubist style of painting had a strong impact on the Thai art scene at that time, and artists who were influenced by cubism included Sawasdi Tantisuk, Tawee Nanghakang, Chalood Nimsamer and Sompot Upa-In. It is noteworthy that some of the Thai artists did not go abroad but were introduced to cubism when they were

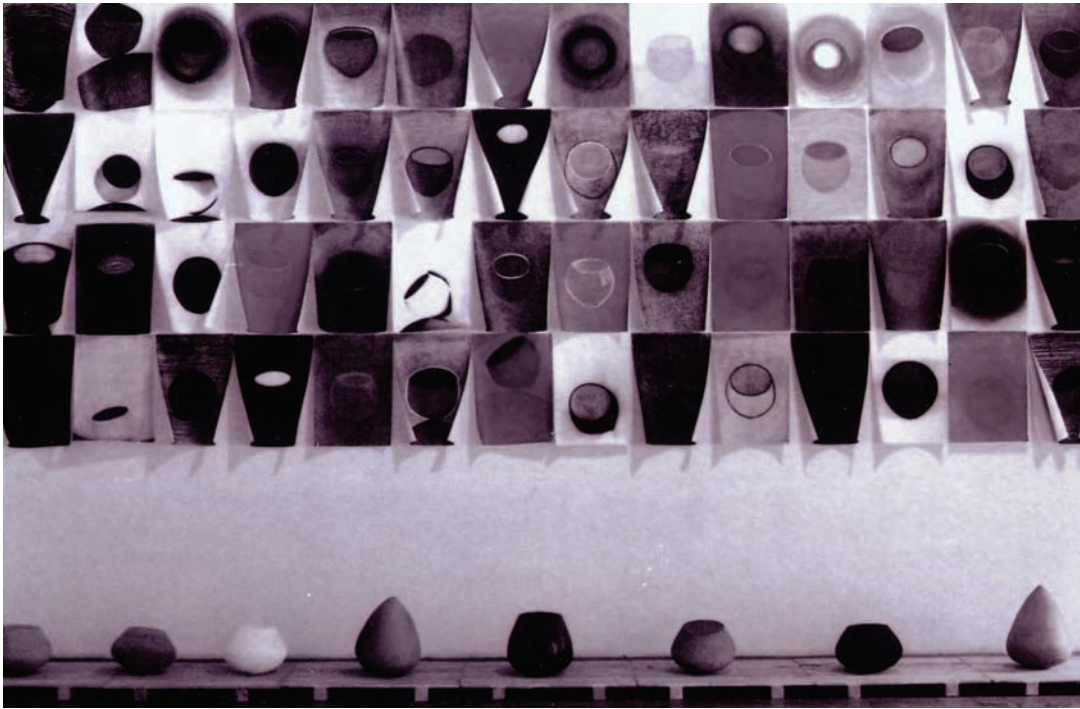
students of Bhirasri at Silpakorn University. Nevertheless, cubism was still a predominant mode in the early Sixties. Later, the artists who painted in the cubist style began to move toward abstraction. The early Sixties were the time for non-representative painting and abstract expressionism. In the Seventies, hard-edge abstraction was practised widely among the younger generation. Some artists, such as Prawat Laochareon and Preecha Arjunka, were inspired by the work of the New York School artists. It is important to note, however, that there was a unique case in terms of the development of abstract art in Thailand. Chang Tang, a self-taught artist, was the only one who did not follow the abstract art of the West. His abstract style in the Sixties and Seventies derived from his Chinese background and his paintings were influenced considerably by Chinese calligraphy, philosophy and poetry. Moreover, meditation practice was also essential for the artist before he started to paint.

In the Seventies, the changes in modern Thai art clearly reflected shifts in social awareness and political concerns. Political upheaval and the students' riot in 1973 had a strong impact on the emergence of socialistic and political themes in art. An exhibition

of large-scale paintings with such themes, to commemorate the fall of the military Government on 14 October the previous year, was shown on Ratchadamnern Avenue in 1974. Another exhibition with the same kind of themes was mounted around Pramane Ground in front of the Grand Palace in support of the students' protest against the United States. The group known as Dharma Group remained active until the military coup in 1976. Pratuang Emjareon was the founder of the group, whose work reflected strong social and political comment. Another interesting group of artists and art instructors from different art institutions, namely Chulalongkorn University, Silpakorn University, Srinakarinwirot, Prasarnmitre Campus, Technological Institutes and Teacher Training colleges, organised the First Art Exhibition of Thailand in 1979. The exhibition was open to all artists, regardless of age, status or level of education. The aim was to promote understanding between people. Some of this group's members were artists from the Dharma Group, who continued creating their art on behalf of society. Among the members were Kamchorn Soonpongsri, Pratuang Emjareon, Lawan Upa-In and Aree Suttipan. The exhibition was also opposed to the National Art Exhibitions, which focused mainly on competitions of art for art's sake.

This turbulent period also marked another shift in cultural and spiritual values in contemporary Thai art. Thawan Duchanee, Pichai Niran and Pratuang Emjareon used Buddhist themes and teaching as their means of expression. Religious symbols and traditional motifs, such as Buddha images and footprints and traditional ornaments, were used to underpin social commentary and spiritual values in their work, especially in Thawan and Pichai's paintings. These two artists played a significant role in reviving a traditional style of art. Since then, Thawan's work has greatly influenced the artists of the younger generation.

The Seventies were the prime time for the development of important art venues and art sponsorship. The Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art was opened in 1974. The National Art Gallery was founded in 1977. The Thai Investment and Securities Co. Ltd., known as TISCO, hosted a group show of 26 invited artists in 1974 and, in the same year, the Bangkok Bank organised the well-known 'Bua Luang' art competition, which has since been held annually. Other banking institutions have also supported contemporary art exhibitions and competitions.



Montien Boonma
Drawing of the Mind
Training and the
Bowls of Mind

1992

Crayon on paper, terracotta
 and wood bases
 Size variable
 Collection of Chongrux
 Chanthaworrasut
 Image courtesy the author

The Eighties constituted one of the most important decades in Thai contemporary art. A significant number of talented overseas-trained artists returned from Europe and America. Among them were Montien Boonma, Kamol Phaosavasdi and Chumpol Apisuk. These artists created work that was considered avantgarde at the time. Conceptual art, site-specific installation as well as performance art were introduced to Thai artists. Such influences were brought back to the country not only by the Thai artists who had lived and studied abroad, but also through the international art exchanges and networks.²

During the Eighties, there were groups of artists who searched for a new sense of identity by exploring and adapting traditional elements as well as using local materials as a means of expression. The two painters, Panya Vijnthanasarn and Chalermchai Kositpipat, were the key figures of the 'New Traditionalism'. The style of traditional mural paintings was evolved and introduced as a new form of art. Both artists expressed their views on the intensifying spread of consumerism and materialism, which was resulting in the decline of moral and cultural values in contemporary Thai society, through the

reinterpretation of tradition. Several artists used Buddhist philosophy and themes as a means of expression. Some institutions played major roles in supporting this kind of art at that time. Silpakorn University founded a department of Thai art, which produced graduates who specialised in this field of art in 1978. The curriculum is designed for students who have three years of solid grounding in traditional art and, although in the two final years they can reinterpret traditionalism and create their work freely, traditional roots and aesthetics remain the basis. The Bangkok Bank's Bua Luang art competition also supported this 'New Traditional Art'. The task of reaching out to the public was the responsibility not only of art institutions but also of private galleries. An example is the opening of Visual Dhamma Gallery in 1981 to promote Thai art dealing with Buddhist themes. The strong support of the gallery thus stimulated and encouraged the 'New Traditional' art movement.³ Moreover, the Thai Government also played a crucial role in preserving and promoting traditional art through art activities. They supported a group of volunteer artists led by Panya Vijnthanasarn and Chalermchai Kositpipat to paint murals for the temple 'Wat Buddhapadipa' in Wimbledon, London. The project was designed and carried out from 1983 to 1987, and marked the culmination of the 'New Traditional' direction in Thai contemporary art. Apart from the artists mentioned, the younger generation, namely Apichai Piromrak and Thongchai Srisukprasert, reinterpreted new traditionalism through experimentation with abstraction.⁴

In the early Nineties, the direction of contemporary Thai art was related closely to the art of the Eighties. Conceptual art, installation art and performance art were greatly developed and were practiced widely among young artists. New approaches, values and styles played significant roles in changes and development in the Thai art scene. The political upheaval in May 1992 also had a strong impact on the minds of Thai artists.

Apichai Piromrak
To the Earth

2001
Mixed Media Installation
Image courtesy of the artist



Many of them had given up the idea of creating art for art's sake and turned to producing art with socio-political themes. Some of the work carried strong messages criticising dictatorship, which can be seen in the painting *Animal Intercourse (Reflection on May Tragedy)*, painted in 1992 by Prasong Luemuang, and an installation piece, *The Four Elements*, produced in the same year by Prawat Laucharoen, a Thai artist based in New York. Vasan Sitthiket, an activist, executed a large-scale painting after the May massacre entitled *Buddha Returns to Bangkok '92*, which showed the Lord Buddha witnessing the deterioration of the city of Bangkok after the military crackdown that year. Meanwhile, some of the young artists gained more awareness of and concerns about social conflicts, ecological and political issues, while others searched for self-expression and identity. There were, however, groups of artists who further developed new traditional art as well as using indigenous materials as their means of expression.

During this decade, installation became one of the most important art movements in Thailand. Thai artists who lived and studied abroad brought this influence back to their home country. International art exchanges such as artists-in-residence programs and exhibitions also played significant roles in this development. Installation art in Thailand not only incorporated outside influences but developed directly from Thai culture, such as, for example, traditional festivals and ceremonies. The first generation of installation artists included Kamol Tassananchalee, who resided in Los Angeles, Prawat Laucharoen living in New York, and Chumpon Apisuk, Thammasak Booncherd, Kamol Phaosavasdi and the late Montien Boonma, who were based in Thailand.

Montien Boonma was one of the most important installation artists in Thailand and the international art world. Initially, he was the driving force successfully setting the new artistic pace for Thai contemporary art.⁵ His first conceptual installation exhibited in Thailand after he returned from France was *Story from the Farm* (1989), in which he used simple materials such as farm tools, straw, raw hide, water buffalo horn and rice sacks to portray the charm and vitality of indigenous country life. The artist creatively used materials ranging from natural objects, ready-made objects, found objects, clay and traditional herbs to high-tech objects to convey a socio-political and spiritual message, which is evident in his early work, the *Pagoda and Alm* series

(1991–93) and his conceptual installations, for example, *Sala of Mind* (1995), *House of Hope* (1996–97) and *Melting Void/Moulds for the Mind* (1998). The artist's works since 1994, however, are highly spiritual and can be categorised as a kind of interactive art that successfully involves the participation of viewers. During his brief and productive career, Montien Boonma was highly regarded as the pioneer of rediscovering indigenous materials and resources by utilising them as a means of expression. The artist's work reflects spirituality, Buddhism and Thai identity in a sophisticated manner.

Spirituality is also reflected in Phatyos Buddhacharoen's unique installation exhibition *From Limestone*, exhibited at the gallery of the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, Silpakorn University, Bangkok, in 1999. It is interesting to see the age-old art of lithography combined with installation.

The most characteristic installation piece, *Range of Mountains*, included glass jars of different sizes and heights which were filled with stones and placed on limestone print blocks, forming a range of mountains, which symbolically represented a *Mountain of Thoughts*. Evidently, Buddhist philosophy significantly inspired the artist's creation.

Since the Nineties, Thai women artists have become more active in showing their artistic talents. Pinaree Sanpitak and Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook were among a few who successfully gained an international reputation. Both have explored their roles as women in Thai society from their personal standpoints. Pinaree Sanpitak has been using the image of the breast to narrate the feelings, passion, thoughts and points of view which define her life experience at different periods. In the installation *Breast Stupas* (2000–01), images of breasts on silk fabrics take on a more sacred meaning. The stupa-like images vary in shape. The breast becomes translucent on the heavy pieces of silk from the process of unthreading strands of silk. The 27 pieces of silk in shades of grey and black with tinges of beige are suspended elegantly from ceiling to floor. Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook has recently focused on her



Kamol Phaosavasdi
River of the King:
Water Pollution Project

Artist installing work.
First Asia–Pacific Triennial,
Queensland Art Gallery
1993

Pinaree Sanpitak
Breast Stupa

2000–2001
Installation view
27 pieces of silk
500 x 122 cm

Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum



video work, using corpses as crucial elements of expression. Her intention is to create personal dialogues and communication with death. The video images are highly provocative and project strong psychological effects.

Women's art movements have flourished since 1995, when the exhibition *Tradisexion: Five Thai Women Artists* took place at Concrete House. The leader of the group was Phaptawan Suwannakudt. In 1997, the first *Womanifesto*, an international women's art exchange exhibition, was organised at Baan Chaopraya, Bangkok, and Concrete House in Nonthaburi. This ongoing project has become a major international women's art movement in Thailand. It has drawn considerable attention from the public and has been a great inspiration for young Thai women artists, such as the 'Hers' group and other individuals. Among prominent women artists is Phaptawan Suwannakudt, whose work focuses on her personal life and experience, poverty and the status of women in Thai society. Surojana Sethabutra creates large-scale installations by using ceramic as a means of expression. Sriwan Janehuttakarnkit searches for symbols to represent her thoughts and ideas as well as exploring techniques of using handmade paper to express her faith in Buddhism. Joining forces in managing and running art spaces to

promote contemporary Thai art are two prominent women, Klaomas Yipintsoi, of the About Studio/About Café, and Gridthiya Gaweewong, of Project 304. Both have initiated art activities to promote young artists and experimental work.

Performance art in Thailand began to attract the attention of Thai artists and the public when the pioneer of performance, conceptual artist Kamol Phaosavasdi, performed at the opening of his exhibition *Song for the Dead Art* at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art in September 1985, followed by a performance at the Vethee Samai art fair held at the institute in October of the same year by social activists and artists Surapol Phanyawatchira and Terdkiat Phromnok. Chumpon Apisuk, another pioneer of performance art, was quite active during 1987 and 1988.

One of the major performance art events was the Chiang Mai Social Installation project, which has taken place in the city of Chiang Mai since November 1991 and in which both local and foreign artists perform their work. The Concrete House, a non-profit art space in Nonthaburi, was founded in 1993 and has been an important centre for performance art activities and for all kinds of marginalised activist art events. It not only promotes the arts as part of social activities, but also promotes people living with HIV/AIDS as a way of understanding living together as a community and respect for human rights.⁶ It has also served as a centre for international art exchanges. Chumpon Apisuk has been the driving force for all activities at this art space. In July 1994, *Live Art*, the first performance art festival in Thailand was organised here.

Another significant event, *Asiatopia Performance Art Festival*, has been held annually in Bangkok and Chiang Mai since mid-October, 1998, in Bangkok, when leading Asian performance artists got together in Thailand for the first time. From the first event to the latest one in 2004, this international art exchange has brought more than 100 international performance artists to Thailand. One of the most interesting aspects of the project is that the performances take place in public spaces, which allows the audience to interact directly with performers. The artists are challenged to learn to negotiate the limitations in differences between contemporary art practices, cultural orientation and the local public. Remarkably, the event brings influential groups of performance artists from Europe to meet with Asian groups and individuals.⁷ Chumpon Apisuk has been the key figure behind this event.

Although performance art activities have been reasonably frequent in the contemporary Thai art scene in recent years, there are some questions about whether the significance of performance art has really been comprehended in this country. Evidently, some young artists are interested in it, but this kind of art has not successfully gained recognition from wider audiences. Most of the Thai performance artists are social activists and conceptualists; among them are Surapol Phanyawatchira, Vasan Sitthiket, Kamol Phaosavadi, Thawatchai Homthong, Michel Chaovanasai and Montri Teomsombat.

In the second half of the Nineties and the beginning of the new millennium, the contemporary art scene in Thailand can be said to encompass different aspects; namely, a socio-political aspect, spirituality and the re-emergence of cultural and traditional values, which include traditional crafts being used by artists in their artistic expression. A number of young artists did not regard any classification as significant; they worked as individuals and were more liberated in expressing their thoughts and emotions.

Because of the effects of globalisation on the Thai way of life and Thai art, especially in the city of Bangkok, many young artists have started to re-examine the social situation and ways of living. Problems with identity are also a major concern. This is why some artists have started to re-examine their history and traditional cultures, to reinvestigate localism and, finally, to re-create the works that truly reflect the way of life in the past and the way of life they are coping with in the real situation of the present. Furthermore, as a result of social and economic transformations, artists have learned to adapt to change and have used such experiences as inspiration for their art.

A vital development during this period is the maturing of art with social and political meaning, which has emerged since the Seventies. Chatchai Puipia is among the artists who have been reinvestigating the situation of contemporary Thai art. The development in his work, which differs from his previous paintings, is evident in the painting series *On Passage to Buddha, Encountered Gauguin Passing by, I Think Twice* (1999). The works convey numerous art historical references. Apart from the obvious flavour of Gauguin, there is acknowledgement of paintings by Western and Thai masters. The idea of using foreign elements in opposition to the Thai images conveys a message related to the evaluation of



Chatchai Puipia
*Dok Peep, Where does
one go after death?*

1997
oil on canvas
239 x 280.1 cm
Fukuoka Asian
Art Museum
Photograph by
Shinomiya Yuji

art works. The artist uses a large-scale self-portrait to represent his perspective on whether Thai art should be judged according to Western standards.

Manit Sriwanichpoom has used photography to portray his reaction to the economic crisis in his famous mobile exhibition *Bloodless War* (1997) and reaction against military dictatorship in one of his *Pink Man* series, *Horror in Pink (6 October 1976 Right Wing Fanatics' Massacre of Democracy Protesters)*, 2001. This series was part of the exhibition *History and Memory*, held at Chulalongkorn University Art Centre.

Among young artists who have expressed intense personal feelings about the situation in the country is Paritas Hutanggura. He used grotesque images representing the deterioration of Thai society confrontationally with the Buddha image in the painting series *Bringing Back Your Robe*, executed in 1999.⁸ The style of paintings is unique and expressive. On the surface, the work is humorous, yet it sarcastically criticises the economic problems of and the socio-political crisis in the country.

In recent years, culture and tradition have also been the keys to creative stimulation. New traditional art has developed greatly in terms of style and technique. Many young artists create works that

focus on the value of cultural heritage and traditional roots. The valuing of the traditional past, as demonstrated in these works, has nothing to do with nostalgia. On the contrary, it is about how the past exists in the present and the linkages between the past, the present and the future. There are two major groups of artists belonging to this category of art. Artists from the northern part of Thailand reflect on their unique cultural background and peaceful life, while artists from Bangkok use their art to demonstrate their awareness of social conditions and the environment, as well as to examine critically their concerns about the decline of Thai culture and values. Some of the Bangkok artists escape from the confusion of the world of the city to their inner world, which is the world of spirituality, imagination, dream and fantasy. The installation *Yellow Simple*, by Sakarin Krue-on, illustrates well the idea of spirituality. It consists of a sculpture of a large human head that has been coated with yellow turmeric powder and placed on the floor, and which the audience confronts in the confined space, creating a sense of psychological tension. The head is often mistaken as a Buddha's head. In fact, it is a human face taken from Thai traditional mural painting.⁹ Some artists, such as Apichai Piromrak and Panya Vijnthanasarn, have innovatively articulated the spirit of

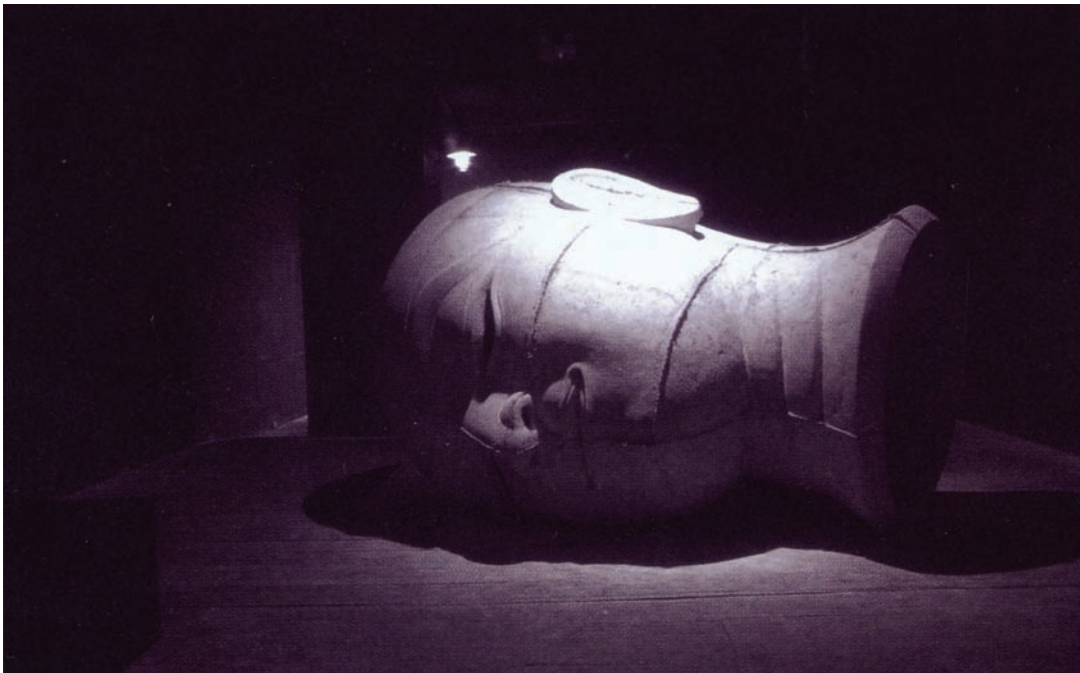
Sakarin Krue-on
Yellow Simple

2002

Yellow pigment, cellulose
fibre, turmeric powder and
white clay pigment

Size variable

Image courtesy the artist



Buddhism in popular culture, which can be seen in their mixed-media and installation pieces. Interestingly, the assimilation of international art styles into the Thai context is expressed effectively by the artists belonging to the new traditional groups.

Another aspect of contemporary Thai art since the Nineties has been the idea of bringing art to the public. Moreover, there are not enough spaces, such as art museums and galleries, to accommodate exhibitions. Alternative art spaces, namely deserted buildings, apartment buildings, streets, parks, cafés and other public spaces, have been venues for experimental works and community art projects. The most famous of Thai non-gallery art projects is the *Chiang Mai Social Installation*. The art works were dispersed throughout the city of Chiang Mai. They were placed primarily outdoors in public places, such as temples, streets, canals and shops. The art activities included performance art, installations, sculptures and paintings, which attracted a great deal of attention from local people as well as those from Bangkok and abroad. The event was organised by a group of local artists. The idea of taking art out of the galleries rejects the concept of art as a commodity. It is noteworthy that this period of change and transformation of the Thai art scene took place in the Nineties.

The ‘art-on-wheels’ project in Bangkok by Navin Rawanchaikul, entitled *Navin Gallery Bangkok*, has been on the road since 1995. The artist initiated the project in an effort to make art part of daily life. Similarly, in Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled 1996*, (*Traffic*), a taxi was used as a site for exchange between the



Navin Rawanchaikul
Taximan

2000
Installation
Image courtesy the author
Photograph by
Somporn Rodboon

video program (art work) and the passengers, as well as the taxi driver, while riding through traffic in Bangkok. Navin Rawanchaikul and Rirkrit Tiravanija collaborated on several projects, not only in Bangkok, but also in Chiang Mai. Both artists were among the pioneers who attempted to link creative activities to ordinary life in a local city. Consequently, the boundaries separating art and audiences no longer exist.

Among important communal art projects was the large-scale Huay Kwang Mega City Project, organised in 1996 by a group of leading artists. Art students were invited to join these open-air art activities. Since 1997, community-based art projects have played a crucial role in the contemporary Thai art scene.

The artistic highlight of 1998 was the Bangkok Art Project, in which artists from seven Asian countries collaborated with 78 Thai artists. The event was part of the celebrations for the 13th Asian Games. The objective was to bring art to the public and to explore further the interesting juxtaposition of Bangkok's ancient heritage with contemporary art.¹⁰

In recent years, interactive art has been practised widely among young artists. Art audiences have fresh, direct interaction with the art work and artists. Apart from famous artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Navin Rawanchaikul, Surasri Kusolwong and Kamol Paosavasdi, Sutee Kunavichayanont also focuses on this



Sutee Kunavichayanont
*The Myth from the Rice
Field (Breath Donation)*

1998
Rubber, air balloon, hose
110x160x250cm
Collection of the artist

kind of art form. In his installation series *Depletion–Inflation*, produced in 1997–98, inflatable animals, such as an elephant, a water buffalo and a tiger, were used as a satirical comment on modernisation and its effects on Thai people. The viewers were invited to donate their breath to extend the life of the life-size animals by blowing through hoses connecting to different parts of the animals.

Watchara Prayoonkam produced an innovative series of sculpture installations entitled *Return to the Oriental Life and Spirit*, exhibited at the National Gallery, Bangkok, in April and March 2004. The four European masters of modern art, namely Rodin, Van Gogh, Picasso and Dali, came alive in the form of super-realistic sculptures. The work drew considerable attention from the Thai audience. The appropriation worked effectively not only to show the artistic creativity of Prayoonkam but also to reflect the history of modern Thai art. Picasso was seen as a painter drawing an image of the most sacred Thai Buddha face on a glass panel. Van Gogh was concentrating on painting Thai pagodas on his *Starry Night*. Rodin was portrayed as a sculptor modelling a Thai classical Buddha image and Dali was sitting in front of an easel ready to paint a portrait of a Thai audience. The latter is different from the rest of the artists. The audience had to interact with the work by sitting in front of a mirror in front of Dali. The reflection in the mirror would automatically become the portrait that Dali painted.

Watchara Prayoonkam
*Picasso is Drawing a
Picture of a Thai Buddha*

2004
Photographs
Details of the installation
*Return to the Oriental
Life and Spirit*
Image courtesy the artist



Prayoonkam wanted to reflect the idea of Western influence in modern Thai art and, at the same time, optimistically compromised and balanced the Western style and classical Thai art. Although modern Thai art had its origins partly in the influence of Western modern art, the artist wanted his art to remind the audience to re-examine their cultural roots and to maintain the Thai spirit.

Intercultural contacts and exchanges have played a significant role in the development of contemporary Thai art. Apart from the international art events *Womanifesto* and *Asiatopia* mentioned earlier, large-scale art events have been organised in Bangkok. *Alter Ego* was organised in 1999 with the follow-up *Eurovisions* in 2000, and *Cities on the Move* in 1999. Silpakorn University successfully organised an International Prints and Drawings Competition for the first time in Thailand in 2003. Through international linkages, more and more Thai artists have gained international recognition. Many of them have participated in important international art events such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in Brisbane, the Fukuoka Triennale in Japan and the Venice Biennale in June 2003.

Although contemporary Thai art has developed greatly in recent years, funding for art is still a major problem. The international successes of outstanding Thai artists are supported mainly by foreign financial resources. It is difficult to get financial support from the Thai Government or from the private sector. The problem has much to do with the lack of a foundation of art appreciation in the country. Although art education has improved greatly and more art institutions have been created, art exhibitions are not as well attended and understood by the public as they should be. Art educational programs for audiences need to be developed further. The alternative art space About Studio/About Café has been focusing actively on educational and outreach programs on art exhibitions and other related art activities. In June 2002, this art space set up About TV, a non-profit, web-cast station. According to Kloamas Yipintsoi, the director of About Studio/About Café, About TV aims to function as an open platform for local people and communities to participate in the production and broadcasting of interactive Internet TV. The contents of About TV emphasise interrelated issues and various disciplines in the field of contemporary art and culture in Thailand

and reflect current issues and movements in both the local and international art scenes.

At present, the centres for contemporary art in Thailand are not only in Bangkok but also in Chiang Mai. Umong Sippadhamma, an independent art space run by Kamin Lertchaiprasert, has actively organised art movements. The first exhibition, entitled *Art Against War*, began in February 2002. The exhibition was curated by Kamin and involved 18 Thai and foreign artists. The activities were related to discussions on the topics of war and peace, and performance art, which took place simultaneously around Chiang Mai at the time. Talks, discussions and seminars on political, cultural and social issues at the local and global level have been organised regularly. Meditation practice is held here from time to time. In addition, this art space is open for experimental work by young artists and activists.

Another unique art project, entitled *The Land Project*, is taking place on farmland outside the city of Chiang Mai purchased by Kamin and New York-based artist Rirkrit Tiravanija. This rice paddy is cultivated as a retreat for artists and for social engagement. Small houses are designed and built by artists on the land for a modest life amid the natural environment. Cultivating the land here is an ongoing process. According to Kamin, the way of life on the farmland is based on self-sustainability and Buddhist beliefs. This idealistic project was initiated in 1998.

It is undeniable that Thailand lacks contemporary art spaces. Under the former Prime Minister, Chuan Leekmai (1997–2000), some budgetary allocation was made for building university art museums and galleries in different parts of the country, except Bangkok. The government policy was to promote contemporary art and culture throughout the country. A plan for a Bangkok Metropolitan Arts Centre was initiated in the late Nineties by the former Bangkok Governor, Bichit Rattakul. But in 2000 the new Governor, Samak Sudaravej, cancelled the plan. There were protests in August 2001 against this cancellation by the Artist Network for the planned Bangkok Contemporary Art Centre.

Bangkok art communities have been fighting and aspiring for a national contemporary art museum of international stature over the past years. It looked as though their hopes might be realised after the Ministry of Culture was founded in 2002. And, for the first time in Thai art history, an Office of Contemporary

Art and Culture was established the same year. Dr Apinan Poshyananda was appointed the first Director-General in 2003. Groups of artists and politicians were the driving forces behind the success of this establishment. From an optimistic point of view, it is expected that in the near future, contemporary Thai art will develop greatly in all aspects and the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture will strongly support artists and art activities at the national and international level. Finally, the plan for a National Contemporary Art Museum in Bangkok and more contemporary art spaces to sufficiently accommodate different kinds of art work could be realised in the near future.

NOTES

- 1 The Japan Foundation Asia Center, *Asian Modernism, Diverse Development in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand*, The Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, 1995, pp. 245–46.
- 2 Somporn Rodboon, 'Perspective: Thailand', *Asian Art Awards 1996*, The Philip Morris Group of Companies, 1996, p. 48.
- 3 Somporn Rodboon, 'Notes on the Revival of Traditional Art in Thai Contemporary Art', paper delivered at Symposium on Southeast Asian Art History and Regional Aesthetics, SPAFA/SEAMEO, March 1995, Singapore, p. 10.
- 4 Somporn Rodboon, 'Perspective: Thailand', p. 48.
- 5 The Japan Foundation Asia Center, *Asian Modernism*, p. 249.
- 6 Interview with Chumpol Apisuk on 26 May, 1999.
- 7 *Asiatopia 4/2002*, brochure for the International Performance Art Festivals, Bangkok and Chiang Mai, 2002.
- 8 See catalogue of the exhibition *The Miracle Days of Awakening* by Paretas Hutanggura, Tadu Contemporary Art, Bangkok, 1999.
- 9 Somporn Rodboon, 'Thai Spiritual Ties', catalogue for the exhibition of Thai contemporary art, *Thai Spiritual Ties*, by 13 artists from the north of Thailand and Bangkok, Chotana Print Co. Ltd., Chiang Mai, 2002.
- 10 Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, *The First Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale*, Fukuoka, 1999, p. 189.

THE EXTENDED MATRIX: New Dimensions in Thai Printmaking

Anne Kirker

The brilliant skill and technical virtuosity of many Thai art students found expression in printmaking. Its emphasis on draughtsmanship, precision, two-dimensional surface, and linear [qualities] and flat colours, all characteristics of Thai art ... particularly appealed to them.

Apinan Poshyananda, 1992¹

The official Thai art world has been geared towards political correctness: art institutions, competitions and exhibitions are all organized to cater to consensus art on the assumption that art must reflect characteristics that are uniquely Thai ...

Phatarawadee Phataranawik, 1998²

THESE TWO QUOTES are useful in commencing this chapter, which offers a speculative re-examination of printmaking in Thailand in the latter part of the 20th century and into the 2000s.

The first is by the leading authority on contemporary art in that country, the second by a younger generation critic. They acknowledge aspects of artistic identity and the context to which much Thai print activity conforms. It is the space between these two texts that I intend to address; between the relatively high status accrued to the print in Thailand, the characteristics of its perceived form and the vehicles of reception through which it is expected to adapt.

I will demonstrate how the print has the capacity to operate beyond the confines of established canons and to enter the local and global arena in a guise completely at odds with traditional expectations of printmaking (or graphic arts). This text starts with a brief historical overview of the field in Thailand and then takes a trajectory I call 'Print as Installation', which reinforces the iconoclastic process that printmaking in the hands of a number of artists has undergone. The two Thai practitioners I examine in detail have both trained and exhibited as print specialists and have independently broken the old rules to take printmaking into an expanded territory. Significantly, both artists — Prawat Laucharoen (b. 1941) and Phatyos Buddhacharoen (b. 1965) — graduated in graphic arts from Bangkok's prestigious Silpakorn University.³

BACKGROUND

According to printmaker and scholar Ithipol Thangchalok (b. 1946), the history of Thailand's creative print is divided into two eras. The first, from about 1953 to 1966, was when most of the imagery employed the woodcut technique. The second, after 1966, was when the print 'rapidly achieved the International standard, not only in content but also in the four major techniques used'.⁴ Unlike Japan, where a unique indigenous tradition was established (especially the *ukiyo-e* prints of the Edo period), or the Philippines (a previously colonised country which boasts a printmaking legacy spanning several centuries), in Thailand, cross-cultural contact was limited and did not spawn a distinctive print movement. Nor was there an obvious indigenous development.⁵ Therefore, it can be argued that without the weight of historical precedence, transformative acts can become more readily achievable. The opening up of Thailand to Euro-American impulses, which

brought with them the inspiration for artists to make woodcuts, etchings, lithographs, screenprints and allied processes, has been a constant only in the past three and a half decades. Silpakorn is the hub of this activity. It was the country's first institution to offer a program in printmaking and the artform was given a status comparable with painting and sculpture, a highly unusual situation anywhere.

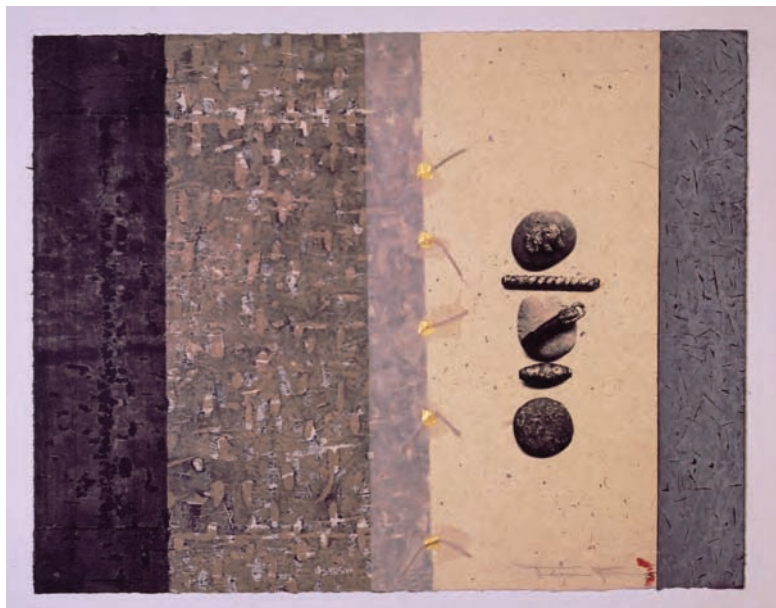
Under its director, the Italian-born sculptor, Corrado Feroci (Silpa Bhirasri), Thailand's oldest art school introduced not only European modernism into the curriculum but forms of neo-traditional imagery based on the skilful draughtsmanship of murals found in Buddhist temples (*wats*). These twin impulses were in existence by the early 1960s, a period that witnessed the international print revival in the West. During 1966, graphic arts became a separate faculty from painting and sculpture at Silpakorn, with all of the standard print techniques taught. In time, however, etching and lithography were to become the main staples — processes that are regarded historically as being at the apex of print media. It is these two processes — etching and lithography respectively — that have underscored the work of Prawat and Phatynos.

Instruction in printmaking was first provided by sculptor and woodcut artist Chalood Nimsamer (b. 1929). Bhirasri sent him to Italy to learn etching, followed by training in lithography at the Pratt Graphic Center in New York. He also sourced printing equipment for Silpakorn in Paris. While in the United States, the artist began to mail examples of his work to international print competitions, successfully gaining awards in 1963 at Ljubljana, and the next year, in Tokyo. Other Thai printmakers followed suit, such as Ithipol and Pishnu Supanimit (b. 1948) with imagery that emphasised formal properties in abstraction, largely denying any sense of local content. Their highly accomplished prints were in accordance with the codes for 'original' prints established at the time by the Print Council of America and similar bodies. Parallel to this activity were those works submitted to the National Art Exhibition, a high-profile event held annually at the Silpakorn University Art Gallery, which has awarded the top prizes to printmakers on many occasions since 1961.⁶ In fact, impressions from the same print edition served both local and international exposure, a practice continuing to the present. Thus a trend of

standardisation of the print has been established in Thailand, which makes it virtually indistinguishable in style and technique from its European, American and fellow Asian counterparts.⁷

There are certainly many Thai artists who have worked inventively within the international standards, notably Thavorn Ko-Udomvit (b. 1956), an assistant professor at Silpakorn. Since the mid-1980s, he has produced prints on the theme of rituals for the dead, in which the content is infused with references to Eastern spiritualism. More particularly, the artist's Chinese ancestry, his interest in Buddhism and animism and his long association with Japan (where he chiefly exhibits) have strongly informed the symbolism of his work. Simple forms such as stones or twigs are printed using the photo-screenprint process, while thread and gold leaf is bonded with sections of fine handmade paper to complete the mixed-media print. The distinctiveness of Thavorn's technique and concept, coupled with his entrepreneurialism, have justly won him a high measure of success on the international print circuit as well as in Thailand.

Nevertheless, while print competitions abroad and competitive group events on the home front (primarily the National Exhibition of Art) have supported and helped to promote printmaking in that country for some 50 years, they have by and large engendered conformity within a confined set of expectations. At the extreme end of this trend are those prints that serve



Thavorn Ko-Udomvit
Fetish

1995 / P 1
Woodblock print, photo-
screenprint, chine collé,
gold leaf and thread on sa
paper

75 x 80 cm

From an edition of 6.
Image courtesy the artist

nationalist sentiment and a middle-class market which prizes the decorative. Technical accomplishment is stressed here rather than liberation of content. The symbolic patterns of traditional craft (such as textiles) and the gloriously ornamental *wats* with their narrative murals have inspired numerous original artist's prints, which hang in hotel lobbies in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, in office blocks and condominiums.

In a gesture of radical reappraisal of what the print might mean, Apinan Poshyananda curated an exhibition at the National Gallery, Bangkok, in 1991 titled *Print Installation*. It was a somewhat maverick event in that only one artist (Prawat) came from a printmaking background. Nevertheless, it was significant in that independent voices that strike a discordant note within the art establishment in Thailand are rarely accorded a public presence.⁸

PRINT AS INSTALLATION

The emergence of installation art in Thailand is 'highly significant as a symptom of resistance to established forms of modern art ...'⁹ In terms of printmaking, it can be seen as a conscious displacement of the field which nevertheless retains recognisable properties of it. This includes use of one or several of the four standard techniques, replication of a single image, the separation of image from its matrix and the ability of both to be reworked. Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha writes, 'The borderline work of culture ... renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent "in-between" space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.'¹⁰ It is this process which describes the Thai initiatives in print installation as much as any simple explanation based on influence from the West.

It is of course true that the artists described here are chiefly 'global citizens'. Prawat, from his New York base, has been exposed to a plethora of artists and cultural events and he has travelled and exhibited relatively widely. Phatyos is of a generation of younger artists in Bangkok who have ready access to information via sophisticated communication networks. While they may have been nurtured by Silpakorn, both artists have quietly revolted against the strictures of the institution, even though the latter continues to teach there. They recognise that installation art is about space which must be experienced physically; it is about making

connections in a palpable sense. It is ‘very much a collage of meanings: the conjunction of objects, signs or ideas constructed by the artist provides a rich, synthetic field of relationships, generating allegory and metaphors’.¹¹ It may look back from a post-colonial perspective (despite the fact that Thailand has been immune from invasion), compressing past and contemporary narratives.

This is the case with Prawat’s print installation *The Four Elements*, which he made for the First Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT 1) in 1993. It was a double challenge to the artist’s country of birth. He deliberately ‘misused’ the disciplines of printmaking in this installation and furthermore tackled the issue of Thai national identity, doing so within the relative safety of a State institution in Australia. The installation was prompted by Bangkok’s military crackdown in May 1992, which caused Prawat, for the first time, to openly integrate politics into his visual language.

The four interconnected components of this work are related to the guiding pillars of Thai society, namely nationhood, religion, the monarchy and the Constitution. Among other

Prawat Lacharoen
The Four Elements

1993
Detail of print installation
at the First Asia-Pacific
Triennial of Contemporary
Art, Queensland
Art Gallery,
17 Sept.–5 Dec. 1993.
Photo: Ray Fulton



elements, projected documentary slides and a drawing of Buddha in gold leaf were integrated into the space with a mural-scale pastel rubbing of the royal family and hanging copper plates from which it had been taken. The plates had been etched with aquatint as though prepared for intaglio printing, although they were not inked up and run through a press as normally expected. Rather, aspects of a printmaker's materials and skill had been transformed and placed at the service of communicating the discordant strands of contemporary Thai society to 'outside' viewers. In the process of completing the installation in Brisbane, the artist 'performed the work' by taking rubbings of text (political slogans) from engraved tree stumps and fixing them to the wall.

Previous to this large-scale work, Prawat had developed installations which re-examined printmaking in terms of process and as a sequence of events. For example, with *Launching Station* (1981), he placed a series of large-scale copper plates approximately parallel with the wall which he then assailed with various chemicals and tools. These plates served as an equivalent to canvas where the act of etching and engraving resembled that of a highly charged expressionistic painting. At the conclusion of this 'performance', the plates were cleaned, inked and impressions made on paper in the usual manner. This work jolted printmaking out of being a passive, contemplative experience as well as running counter to the meticulous craftsmanship that Prawat had been trained in at Silpakorn.

After graduating from Silpakorn University in the late 1960s, he moved to New York, where he continues to reside, while regularly returning to Bangkok. In New York, he gained stature as a master printmaker for artists from the Pop generation, such as David Hockney, Larry Rivers and Alex Katz. Then, for a time, he established his own print workshop in New York's lower East Side before taking on employment as a printmaking instructor. In order to free himself from the moniker of 'skilled technician', Prawat transformed his print practice from the mid-1980s into a sculptural and time-based experience. When he held a solo exhibition at Chiang Mai University and then at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art, Bangkok, in 1987, it was regarded as 'a revelation as Laucharoen opened refreshing possibilities for printmaking'.¹² The artist's print installation, *Japanese Reverse*, shown at these venues is believed to be the first in Thailand.¹³ For Prawat, printmaking is as

much the *subject* of his installations as any other component. The sophistication of the woodblock tradition of Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints was here revised through the Japanese characters he engraved roughly on chunks of timber and hand-rubbed on paper. Earlier it had been the master of intaglio printing, Rembrandt, who inspired an installation and one Prawat called *Metamorphosis on the Theme of Morandi III* (1986), which built on his admiration for the Italian's still-life etchings.

As though deliberately reconnecting with his Thai cultural roots, Prawat called his 2001 solo exhibition at the Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, *The Proverbs My Brother Taught Me*. It illustrated an old Thai proverb which urges the use of wise judgment in one's life. Conceived as an installation, *The Proverbs* comprised roughly carved woodblock prints of crows and of human heads with bone necklaces, printed and nailed to the wall as huge murals. A mound of soil in one corner of the display space was juxtaposed with freshly hewn tree trunks and glass vitrines containing live cobras (temporarily installed). The wood-relief process matched the 'rural' origins of the work's concept.

Rather than use intaglio or relief printing as the basis of his work, Phatyos Buddhacharoen, until 2000, concentrated on lithography. Unlike earlier generations of printmakers from Silpakorn, which Prawat represented, Phatyos did not feel compelled to take his higher degree outside Thailand or necessarily to establish a career abroad. He has based himself firmly in Bangkok. By the 1980s, comprehensive studio facilities and trained staff were in place at Silpakorn and opportunities to exhibit in group shows in the capital and abroad were easily accessed. Like many Thai printmakers, Phatyos earned high recognition in these quarters.¹⁴

The imagery of Phatyos' lithographs and his later installations is grounded in Theravada Buddhism, which the majority of Thais follow. It is also linked with the physical, ecological world. Commencing with his single-sheet lithographs and followed in the late 1990s by his print installations, Phatyos integrated Buddhist philosophy with natural phenomena. In the artist's first solo exhibition of 1996, for instance, monochromatic lithographs showed a central vortex with radiating lines of energy surrounded by fixed stone-like forms. Sometimes, as in the lithograph *Spirit in Space*, the stones became part of the spiralling field. At the time, fellow-lithographer Kanya Chareonsupkul wrote



Prawat Laucharoen
*The Proverbs My Brother
 Taught Me*

2001
 Detail of print installation
 at The Art Center,
 Chulalongkorn University,
 Bangkok, 13 July–10 Aug.
 2001
 Image courtesy the artist



of how Phatyos chose ‘forms, derived from tangible objects such as the ground, stupa and chedi, together with intangible notions (strength, tranquillity, contentment)’ and combined them with ‘lines, as an important means of creating abstractions imbued with powerful generating force’.¹⁵

By 1998, the artist had shifted his focus from making editioned lithographs to move into print installation work of which planographic printing on paper was only one element. In that year, Phatyos’ exhibition, aptly called *From Limestone*, used the Gallery at Silpakorn for individually titled, yet interconnected



Phatynos Buddhacharoen
Range of Mountains

1998

Installation of lithographs
and limestone blocks with
glass jars and carborundum,
From Limestone exhibition,
Art Gallery, Silpakorn
University, Bangkok,
3–20 Nov. 1998
Image courtesy the artist

components. The floor piece, *Range of Mountains*, was arranged as a grid of lithographic stones (several drawn on with liquid tusche and inked up, while others were left blank). Some supported vertical glass containers lined with prints pulled from the limestones, and filled with smaller pieces of rock gathered from the landscape. On the wall, sheets of paper printed with loose gestural forms were butted together closely for *Images from the Mind*, while below them on the floor were the stones from which the images had been pulled. In a sense, they ‘grounded’ the elusive, abstract compositions above, while also demonstrating the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ technical basis of print production, where one surface is transferred to another.

In *Range of Stones*, a subtle interplay between illusionism and object occurred as the grid of earth-coloured lithographs on the wall converged at floor level with wrapped stone forms made from cut-up strips of these same prints. For Phatynos, the stone represents the mountain — the microcosm in the macrocosm, just as the circle motif in his lithographs from the *Space-Time* series of 1996, represented a stone and also the universe.¹⁶ The legacy of minimalism, through the reductive clarity of form and repetition of units in a given space, was immediately apparent in Phatynos’

installation. Apart from familiarity with such movements in the United States, Phatyos' generation is also keenly aware of ecological issues and it is no coincidence that in the early 1990s a series of exhibitions was mounted at Silpakorn and the National Gallery, Bangkok, called *Art and Environment*.¹⁷

Yet it is the practice of Buddhist dharma as an individual responsibility that has become increasingly entrenched in the work of Phatyos. In his comprehensive text for the publication accompanying the exhibition *Mindfulness* in 2003, the artist spoke of the bodies of work he exhibited in 1996 and 1998, stating, 'The similarities lie in the concept that links the two, concerning *abstract essences in nature*. It is the contemplation on meanings derived from inner feelings that demonstrate "energy" in connection with "time" which is the determining factor ... This is the phenomenon of truth in an analogy with Buddhist philosophy.'¹⁸

With *Mindfulness*, Phatyos departed largely from conventional printmaking, with only the circular structure of ... *Chapel amidst entertainment* ... having walls with screenprinted text. Nevertheless, conceptually this field continued to inform the artist's overall approach. For instance, the notion of 'seriality' was played out in the duplication of separate elements in this installation, such as the repetition of snake skins in the component titled ... *Shed the Shells* ...¹⁹ Phatyos asserted in his text that the earlier installation, *From Limestone* (1998), had employed lithography as a technique indelibly linked with nature as a symbol of spirituality. In his words, this was like 'setting the mind' on exploring the inside and outside based on a balanced interrelationship. The presentation in two dimensions became three-dimensional, mixed-media, site-specific installations, which were intended to mesmerise the viewers or make them move around and think about what they saw visually and felt psychologically.²⁰

Prawat and Phatyos are therefore two contemporary Thai artists who have re-energised the print and derived new meaning from the central precepts of this field. They have transformed it from a discipline with strict parameters, to one that has become 'deterritorialised' and able to embrace what is arguably the dominant international discourse in art since the 1990s, that of installation.

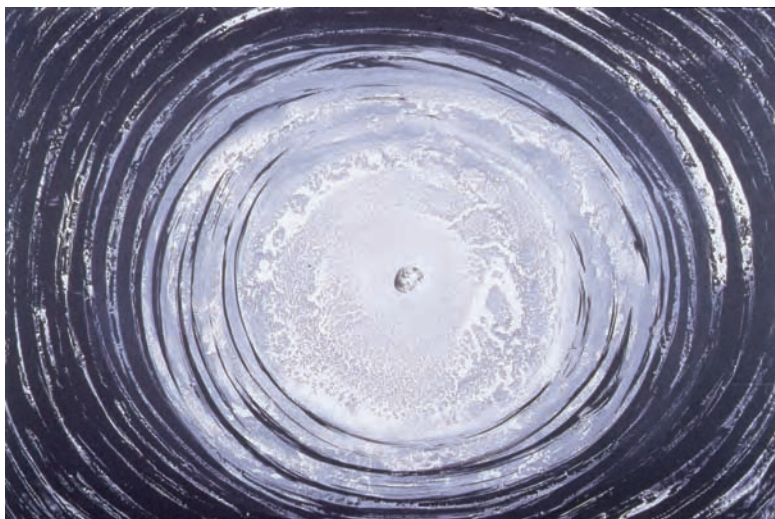


Phatyos Buddhacharoen
Images from the Mind

1998
Installation of lithographs on paper with limestone blocks
From Limestone exhibition,
Art Gallery, Silpakorn University, Bangkok,
3–20 Nov. 1998
Image courtesy the artist

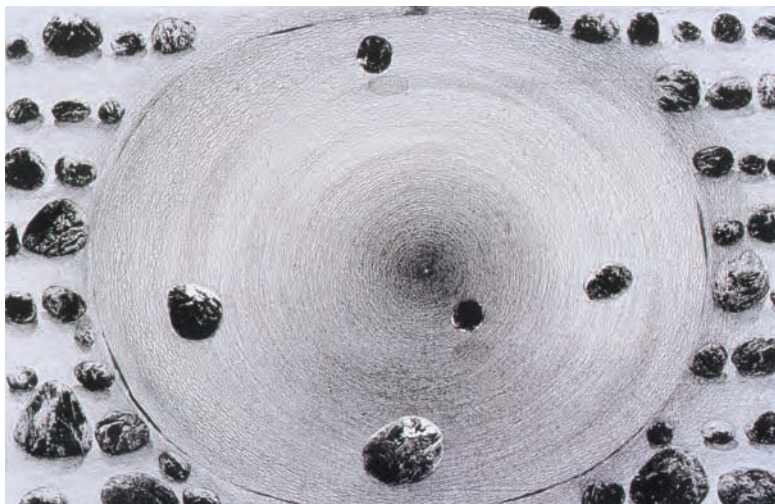
Phatynos Buddhacharoen
Space / Time No. 4

1996
Lithograph
79 x 109 cm
Image courtesy the artist



Phatynos Buddhacharoen,
Spirit in Space

1996
Lithograph
79 x 109 cm
Image courtesy the artist



NOTES

- 1 Apinan Poshyananda, *Modern Art in Thailand: nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 119.
- 2 Phatarawadee Phataranawik, 'When Two Become One', Exhibition catalogue, *Every Day: 11th Biennale of Sydney*, 1998, p. 36.
- 3 This essay recasts and expands aspects of Anne Kirker, 'The Performance of Printmaking: Prawat Laucharoen, Phatynos Buddhacharoen and Bundith Phunsombatler', *Art AsiaPacific*, Issue 24, 1999.
- 4 Ithipol Thangchalok, *A Decade of Printmaking: tendency and change 1982–1992*, CON-tempus: The Bangkok Fine Art Center, Bangkok, 1992, p. 70.

- 5 Printmaker Pishnu Supanimit links the engraved linear designs of 550 incarnations of Buddha on stone tablets during the Sukhothai era with intaglio prints in his essay 'Modern Thai Printmaking', in *The International Print and Drawing Exhibition* catalogue, Silpakorn University, 2003, p. 174. In addition, products of the growing local book publishing business from the mid-19th century sometimes sported decorative print borders with Thai text.
- 6 See John Clark, 'Fifty Years of National Art Exhibitions', *Asian Art News* (special issue on Thailand), Vol. 9, No. 6, 1999.
- 7 To demonstrate this point, see the comprehensive publication that documents *The International Print and Drawing Exhibition*, featuring works on paper by more than 200 artists from 52 countries (Silpakorn University, 2003).
- 8 *Print Installation* was held at the National Art Gallery, Bangkok, July 3–21, 1991. Among the six other artists were Montien Boonma, Vichoke Mukdamanee, Kamol Phaosavasdi and Vasan Sitthiket — all considered leading figures in the avantgarde Thai art context.
- 9 Julie Ewington, 'Installation in Southeast Asia in the 1990s: heritage in modernity', *TAASA Review, The Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia*, Vol. 11, No. 1, March 2002, p. 7.
- 10 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 7.
- 11 Kate Davidson and Michael Desmond, *Islands: contemporary installations from Australia, Asia, Europe and America*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1996, p. 6.
- 12 Apinan Poshyananda, 'A Proverb for Prawat Laucharoen', Exhibition catalogue, *The Proverbs My Brother Taught Me*, Dual language: Thai and English, The Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, July 13 – August 10, 2001.
- 13 See Somporn Rodboon, 'Thai Contemporary Installation', *Art Monthly Australia*, August 1994, p. 20.
- 14 For instance, at the 10th Norwegian International Print Triennale in Fredrikstad, Norway (1992), Phatynos won a silver medal. He received an Honourable Diploma at the 9th International Print Biennial at Varnia, Bulgaria in 1997.
- 15 Kanya Charoensupkul, *Pongsak Buddhacharoen: self-spirit of nature*, Silpakorn University Art Gallery, Bangkok, June 17 – July 8, 1996. (Pongsak subsequently changed his name to 'Phatynos'.)
- 16 *From Limestone: Phatynos Buddhacharoen* was held at Silpakorn University Art Gallery, November 3–20, 1998.
- 17 Australian artist Joan Grounds, who has held many residencies in Thailand, wrote the essay to the catalogue of *Art and Environment 2 (Ecological Balance)*, which was held at the National Gallery, Bangkok, September 8–26, 1993, with 13 participating artists, all Thai nationals.
- 18 Phatynos Buddhacharoen, *Mindfulness*, The National Gallery, Bangkok, February 28–March 29, 2003; June 13–28, 2003, Silpakorn University Art Gallery, p. 4.
- 19 The snake as specific cultural reference in Thailand as representing *Naga* — the 'god-spirit'.
- 20 Phatynos Buddhacharoen, *Mindfulness*, p. 4.

VIETNAMESE FINE ART FINDS ITSELF IN RESPECT OF AESTHETICS

Dang Thi Khue

BEING THE REFLECTION of the habitual spiritual life of human kind, art contains in itself human values, the national soul and historical memories. However, the manner in which fine art is passed on from one generation to the next depends to a large extent on the peculiar characteristics of the particular culture, the dynamics of the arts and the creative courage of the artists belonging to that generation.

The path of evolution of Vietnamese art from traditionalism to modernism is a fairly constant development. Before merging into the common stream of the modern world, Vietnamese art bore the deep marks of its native characteristics in its existence as part of the general stream of thought of Asian aestheticism. Spiritual life, traditional folklore, primitive beliefs and religions have been the constant sources for art to blossom. The process of cultural merging and evolution showed how Vietnamese fine art had selectively absorbed regional and Eastern traditional artistic achievements, thus acquiring its unique quality of being both



Nguyen Phan Chanh
To Play O An Quan

1931
65.3 x 87.5 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

typical and distinctive. The peaks of the cycles of creativity-forming artistic models were shaped through various periods — Dong Son (prehistory), the Ly Dynasty (the feudal era when Buddhism was the core of life) — and all have played their roles in the formation of the foundation criteria of Vietnamese aestheticism, the spiritual trait of an aesthetic school, and were the basis of an independent existence of Vietnamese fine art in historical circumstances where it had been challenged by various attempts at assimilation. Therefore, research efforts on this topic, if conducted in a subjective and shallow manner, might lead to the wrong perception that Vietnamese fine art was no more than a jumbled mixture of foreign influences. It might also lead one in the wrong direction when searching for the origin of Vietnamese art in the art of neighbouring countries.

During the 20th century, the inevitable contacts with Western cultures and European aestheticism through the French ushered in a new era for Vietnamese fine art: the new dynamic cycle for modern Vietnamese aestheticism. For the Vietnamese, it was also the beginning of the East-West dialogue on fine art.

Modern Vietnamese fine art has formed and evolved within the new cultural interactions, within the constraints imposed by historical and social conditions, and within its own dynamism and its process of perfection.

The period of opening for artistic cultural relationships: 1925–45

There is no evidence to assert that Vietnamese painting existed in the past. The elements that have shaped the tradition of Vietnamese aestheticism lie in religious sculpture and architecture, in the raw printing of sketches, in the decorative skills developed by craft villages and ethnic regions. It may be said that Vietnamese painting is a product of modern times, with its seeds having been sown since the beginning of East–West contacts. Le Van Mien (1873–1943) was the first Vietnamese art student to graduate from France. He was the only painter who pursued purely academic classicism. His oil painting *Literature Comment Session* (1904) is regarded as the work marking Vietnamese modern painting history. His contemporaries include a few lesser known painters and village artisans who did wood-engraving prints for the purpose of illustration required by research work on native culture conducted by European authors. Their prints show tremendous artistic skills combined with a profound popular aesthetic sense.

Modern Vietnamese fine art is connected closely with the coming into being of the Indochinese School of Fine Art, established by the French in Hanoi in 1925. This school was to formalise the education and training of native artists and was influenced by French methods and thoughts. The school, which remained open until 1945 when the August Revolution broke out, imparted academic skills along norms and conventions according to European standards.

The new art of painting had its foundation in cultural contrasts as well as in those of moral and psychological values. This came from an optimistic viewpoint with its traditional ways of viewing objects, typical of the search for artistic values in fine art itself. It then moved on to the new way of viewing objects under the intellectual norms prescribed by scientific vision. This involved the idea of three-dimensional space and the analysis of relativity. The traditional ways and these values present themselves as opposites in aesthetical reaction and behaviour. However, having overcome the enormous difficulties of the ‘heavy redirection’ (in the words of painter Tô Ngọc Vân), Vietnamese painting progressed into a changing trend, paving the way for the birth of pre-modern and modern fine art during the general movements of pre-war artistic waves.

It is also the by-product of the psychological evolution, the change in the way of life in the modernised society under the French Administration with its roots in both feudalism and colonialism. 'Colonial architecture' was formed in the new urban planning. The traditional style of sculpture gave way to realism, the academic classicism in artistic presentation and expression. The new style, however, stopped short at a research level. The importation of the classical painting style, with its realistic description of vision, easel painting art, new painting materials and new painting categories, contributed to the profound change during the period when painting was still in its embryonic form. The new style of painting, which is a direct demonstration of non-religious, everyday life, has given it the means to reach out to people's emotions and souls, thus creating a new public for the fine arts. A new generation of painters was trained for the newly colonised and newly established urban areas. Their individual painting styles emerged to replace the anonymous mass production of the general craft-workers of the past, thus bringing to an end the period of anonymity in Vietnamese fine art. These painters belonged to the new colonial intelligentsia; on the one hand, they enthusiastically embraced the new industrial civilisation, on the other, they remained the romantic petit-bourgeoisie who were burning with patriotism, with a deep passion for their country's past. They were influenced mainly by the realist and impressionist styles. The two French painters who exerted a profound influence on Vietnamese painting during this period were Victor Tardieu (1867–1937) and Inguimberty (1886–1971). Tardieu, as the founding director of the Indochinese School of Fine Arts, and Inguimberty encouraged their students to form their own individual styles and to explore further the possibilities of painting on traditional materials such as lacquer and silk. Their paintings show the classic models and standards for the new-classicism style containing the fairly distinctive features of tropical impressions.

The 1931 Exhibition in Hanoi and the subsequent Exhibition in Paris displayed the initial achievements of Vietnamese painting and its capacity to smoothly absorb new artistic measures and perspectives. This success was connected closely with the names of artists such as Nguyen Phan Chanh, To Ngoc Van, Vu Cao Dam, Le Pho, Mai Trung Thu, Cong Van Trung, etc. These artists laid the foundation of modern Vietnamese fine art and, at

the same time, created a new aesthetic era. Classicism, realism and romanticism are the salient features of the general trend of the fine arts during this period.

The discovery of the hidden potential of native paints (with their original source from Vietnam) has given artists new material for new artistic exploration. They have expanded the use of this material in their works with great enthusiasm. The breakthrough in the use of lacquer material for painting was a turning point in Vietnamese painting in the search for its aesthetic roots. This also revealed the soul-searching process of a whole generation of artists on the issues of the national arts, of their existence and development. The artists' aesthetic awareness, based on their dignity as artists and their traditional views, has come about as a matter of course in the context of the philosophy of the colonial school and the colonialists' attitude. Their awareness and views have also become a driving force to enable them to make their voluntary commitment to the subsequent national salvation war, which was fraught with sacrifices and hardship. This gave rise to the revolutionary arts for the sake of livelihood.

The period of development with several different characteristics: 1945–84

Until the middle of the 20th century, the struggle for national liberation bore an important significance in the progress and evolution of the fine arts. National independence has changed the citizens' outlook on the issue of public duty and has had an enormous impact on artists' creative approaches.

Independence was followed by a period of upheaval in the history of Vietnam, with prolonged and fierce warfare, changes in the foundations of thought and political forms, international contact and multidirectional influence, and differences in artistic thinking. These created an artistic period bearing several different characteristics.

The fusion of the fine arts and life in the resistance war has made the fine arts part and parcel of the new reality. Resistance war art during the period 1945–54 was, in every respect, the expression of social propaganda. Painting and drawing developed strongly, various kinds of materials, such as lithograph, wood-engraving and

zinc-engraving, were used. The art works bore traditional folk characteristics in form and dealt with direct social issues. In the resistance zones, where contact and communication with the outside world was out of the question, Vietnamese fine art went through a development period of self-sustained transition. At the same time, in the occupied urban areas, painting and drawing maintained their old forms within the context of the general trends of romanticism and formalism. The artistic inspirations drawn from the expression of human emotions and feelings and from the natural beauty of wildlife in the artists' zones of resistance were on display in a collection of their sketches and drawings. The Resistance School of Fine Arts formally opened in Viet Bac, with painter To Ngoc Van as its founding director. The school has trained a generation of resistance painters. Its training methods were similar to those used at the Indochinese School of Fine Arts. These resistance painters looked up to the first generation of artists and regarded them as their models of personal dignity and artistic idealism. These resistance artists have made a tremendous contribution to social activities and most of them subsequently worked as lecturers in fine art. Nevertheless, their artistic standing is modest in comparison with the generation of artists preceding

Nguyen Sang (1923–1988)
*Party Members Admission
in Dien Bien Phu Battle*

1963
Lacquer
112 x 180 cm
Collection: Fine Arts
Museum of Vietnam,
Hanoi



them as well as the ones succeeding them. It is mainly due to the fact that their works lacked personality and that their artistic activities were less professional as a result of the non-existence of an aesthetic benchmark for want of a distinctive language.

After the country was divided into two in 1954, the thoughts of dialectic materialism and the ideals of socialism had a great impact on the social views in one part of the country, while the other part was placed under a strong European–American influence. This gave rise to different paths of development in the arts through the different directions of cultural interaction. While the physical division of the country was an obvious reality, the national will for independence and unification was consistent and paramount, and patriotism was the main inspiration for all creativity.

In the North, the arts were under the influence of socialist realism, and its methods were thoroughly and completely applied for several decades. In the South, the initial period was marked by the continuation of the Paris school by the cohort of painters who had graduated from the Indochinese School of Fine Arts. The Gia Dinh College of Fine Arts was established in 1954 from the previous foundation of the 1913 Gia Dinh School of Fine Arts, with the painter Le Van De as the founding director. The stellar artists of this time include Nguyen Gia Tri, Le Van De, Pham Dang Tri and Ta Ty. The painter Ta Ty, with his experiments in oil painting in cubism, was an exception, while most of the artistic works of this period were silk and lacquer paintings, characterised by their nostalgia for tradition and native land and their styles drawn from impressionism and neo-classicism within the spectrum of romanticism. In 1957, a fine arts department was also created within the Hue National Education School.

In the same year, the Fine Arts Association of Vietnam came into being. The National Fine Arts Exhibition, which was held in Hanoi in 1958 and which subsequently travelled to Moscow, was a resounding success. The exhibition marked the first formal appearance of the art of socialist realism of Vietnam. It was the essence of resistance inspiration using painting materials on processed lacquer.

Artistic exchange with socialist countries had obvious impacts on the substance of the works and painting methods. The spirit of revolutionary optimism and collectivism formed the mainstream substance for their composition. Their subjects

expanded into the realities of social life showing the awakening of a sense of civic duty on the part of the artists. Furthermore, the poetic, lyrical, romantic and simple characteristics of the fine arts during this period always contained profound humanism despite their possible cursoriness and conventionality. Their forms, however, proved to be a continuation of the realistic and impressionist approach. Instead of being a transformation of the artistic language, socialist realism remained as just a functional change in the direction of the existing language and aesthetic system. This may have been seen as a paradox, but there was a profound reason for it: art for the sake of realism, based on the manipulation of similarity and aesthetically measured by its smart description, which had been imported since the beginning of the century, was then deeply rooted and became the norm for artists. It was, in turn, understood as a standard value for all composition methods. For the general public, it has become the new flavour for its easy recognition and appreciation through visual impressions. With respect to aesthetics, it was identical in one form because it shared the same origin with the Russian and the French academic drawings, which had developed from the same principles of Greek and Roman aesthetic foundation. Their general principles of plastic formulation for all periods of artistic development influenced European art for 25 centuries. The classic criteria and standards cannot be used to measure every aesthetic quality as perennial models for all creativity. The old forms could not hold the new substance. Thus, the 'mini-revolution in the forms' (in the words of Nguyen Quan) carried out by the painters, being the last generation of the Indochinese School of Fine Arts, has produced the most magnificent works of socialist realism art. During the 1970s, painters Nguyen Sang (1923–88), Bui Xuan Phai (1921–88) and Nguyen Tu Nghiem (b. 1927) all showed their unique individual styles, bringing about a new artistic environment combining pre-colonial traditions with the absorption of the influences of the Paris school and modern elements. They had an immense influence on their successors, not only by their more modern styles but by their unique individual personalities as artists.

While there were no specialised or eminent artists in the field of sculpture during these years, sculptors have courageously discarded a shallow descriptive method in order to learn directly from traditional temple and pagoda sculpture and ethnic statues,



Nguyen Tu Nghiem
Ancient Dance

1993
lacquer

combining them with modern European sculptural principles. This trend led to an apparent change in their language of expression, despite the fact that their achievements were confined either to preliminary ideas, to small-scale indoor experiments or to a few memorial statues.

The artistic research work, commentaries and theories finally came into place. Nguyen Do Cung (1912–77) was the founder of the Museum of Fine Arts and the Fine Arts Research Institute. He was also the first prominent art critic who made tremendous contributions in the formalisation of art research. Thai Ba Van is a most knowledgeable art historian, and his artistic views have exerted positive effects on appreciating and learning about creativity.

The decade of the 1970s in the North marked the presence of a new generation of artists, the third generation of Vietnamese artists, who trained during the war against the United States. They worked in several specialised areas and were active in all aspects of the arts. They were the main driving force in bringing about the subsequent revolution in artistic language and aesthetics 10 years later.

In the South, the decade from 1960 to 1970 also marked the appearance of a new generation of painters: Thai Tuan, Ngoc Dung, Duy Thanh and, later, the group called the Association of



Young artists of the 3rd generation at the residency in Dai Lai in 1987
B&W Photograph

Young Painters. They projected their creative explorations in further developing and expanding the influence on them of the modern arts of the world. By so doing, they no longer acted as a branch or a secondary centre of the antiquated Indochinese School of Fine Arts. Their efforts transformed the country's two main cities Hue and Saigon into two new art centres with their own trends. Painting in the South since the 1960s has taken a new form, which is different from many subjective and individual experiments. Several trends existed during this decade, from neo-classicism to expressionism, surrealism and abstractionism. Inevitably, these also gave rise to theoretical conflicts between contemporary and classical trends, even though they both found themselves on the same path, finding new ways for the development of the arts.

The generation of war artists is an indispensable part of art life during wartime. Their battlefield sketches, with their directness and straightforwardness of character, are the lively evidence of the historic and artistic reality of the time.

The symmetrical correlation between the arts and social reality can be seen. However, it also contained the internal needs of the arts during their development and evolution within the context of the advance of science and civilisation. The divergent lanes could be seen as the positive expression of such developing dynamics.

It is necessary to note the invaluable art collections of this period. The Duc Minh Collection was the first art collection

assembled in Vietnam by Bui Dinh Than. It included the most remarkable works of Vietnamese painting from the early and mid-20th century. The national art collection assembled by the Arts Gallery since 1966 also marked the gallery establishment at that time. This collection is very diverse, but systematic in terms of the formulation and development of Vietnamese fine art from the traditional to the modern eras. Nevertheless, due to different constraints, there is still a serious gap in a portion of the contemporary art in the gallery, a lack which keeps it out of tune with the dynamic life of the arts. The art collection by Nguyen Van Lam (Café Lam) is an exception; it has been assembled by chance due to visits to the café by the greatest talents in the arts at various times.

Since 1975, Vietnam has moved into a new era of national unification. The new peaceful life during the time of rebuilding and reconstruction opened up new conditions for artistic activities. The artistic achievements as well as the restrictions imposed on the arts during the past 50 years have placed the arts in a new position for change.

The great turning point in the arts in general, and the fine arts in particular, took place during the 1980s, and was started by the Fine Arts Exhibition in Hanoi in 1980. The exhibition was the most comprehensive collection of artistic faces from all parts of the country. This exhibition proved to be the moment for Vietnamese

Dang Xuan Hoa
Human's Objects

1995
Oil on canvas



fine art to find itself with respect to its aesthetics after a quarter of a century of geographical division in the country. The exhibition showed a panoramic picture of Vietnamese art, the artistic characteristics of each of its regions, and new trends and new explorations in the arts. It also revealed the reality in the arts, its restrictions and limits, its disproportion in relation to contemporary times. This reality placed before the arts choices for the direction of their development.

For the arts, it has been a period of expansive presentation of the complexities of the social life of human beings. It has also been a period of more meaningful and wider contacts with the outside world. It has been a time for soul searching in art on the question of its national identity and modernisation, issues of artistic characteristics and individual uniqueness, the further improvement of the visual effect, the urge for more diversity in the language of artistic forms, the requirement for greater specialisation within the context of concrete social arrangements and the voluntary commitment by artists in accordance with their artistic styles and talents.

For the artists, it has been an opportunity to show their desire and their passion to make their own artistic marks and to have their individual voices heard in the process of their explorations of their personal creativity, for their appreciation of the national culture and the changing times. As such, it is necessary to undo the



Vu Dan Tan
An Insect

1998
Recycled metal box
20 x 0.12 cm
Image courtesy Salon
Natasha, Hanoi

intangible ties inextricably connected to the system of artistic activities of the socialist era with its associated command economy and central planning mechanism. These typically manifest themselves in blinkered thinking, passiveness and a dependent nature on the part of composing artists and art critics. These factors once led to the shallowness and the similarity of massive numbers of works, which shared a uniformity with regard to topics and the same identity with regard to styles. The lack of information, the short supply of materials, and the insufficiency of working facilities became all the more acute in the post-war years.

The period of comprehensive, expansive and active development: from 1984 to the present time

In 1984, the Vietnamese Association of Fine Arts changed its name to the Vietnamese Association of Plastic Arts, with professionally specialist units in the new institution. Within the association, there is a Young Artists Committee, which has been committed to renovation. All artistic activities have been geared towards the professional circle, new experiments have been given support and the artists have been enjoying an interest in their creative works. Research work for native culture and the national fine arts has been institutionalised within the Hanoi University of Fine Arts. Art criticism has also become more practical, helpful and realistic towards the growth of the arts. It has been in the forefront of the artistic changes during this period. The decade of the 1980s is now considered to have been the springboard to bring about the subsequent renovation in the arts. This was due to the nature of the important events which took place during that time and their subsequent impact: the first personal exhibitions held in 1984 in Hanoi of three talented painters, Nguyen Sang, Nguyen Tu Nghiem and Bui Xuan Phai. Their exhibitions showed the full range of their artistic and creative careers and had resounding repercussions beyond the artistic sphere. The 1987 Dai Lai composition camp, which resulted in several successful experiments from 40 authors belonging to three different generations, caused a stir in art circles. This was followed by the self-funded exhibitions by 16 authors in the Art Gallery and a series of other activities held by the Vietnamese Association of

Plastic Arts. The Association played a key role during this period and its young painters were the pioneers of the renovation cause.

This revolution in artistic language and aesthetics was taking place at the same time as the formal policy of 'open door' was being brought into practice. The revolutionary artistic changes coincided with the profound transformation of the social and economic life of the country. The spirit of creative freedom was encouraged by a renovation in the arts. All these factors have given rise to the expansion of the arts (formerly restricted to the areas of painting and drawing) towards more diversity, with several different styles and the appearance of more artistic trends than in all other previous periods. This revolution has been a fairly prolonged process to overcome tremendous obstacles and it has proved to be the greatest and the most comprehensive change in artistic language and aesthetic views in the years since 1925. These changes have been launched by the artists themselves with support from the Party and the State. With respect to aesthetics, these changes are the denial in the arts of any kind of artistic formula, generalisation, over-Westernisation, and shallowness in the language and substance of the artistic works. These changes have been brought about by the efforts of the artists searching for new ways for its development. In the process, the individual artists have played decisive roles.

The appearance of independent artists has paved the way for Vietnamese art to join the international art market and for that market to include Vietnam. This has played a significant role in the discovery by the outside world of Vietnamese paintings, which are called 'the Renovation Paintings'. Nowadays, the Vietnamese arts have become an indispensable part of the fine arts of the region. Vietnamese fine art has also become the subject of comment and research by international art critics and researchers.

The boisterous art life inevitably led the arts to their healthy division, their new competition and their newly created professionalism and skills. Private galleries and collections gradually came into being, and with time they started making their own marks. So far, however, they have not been able to achieve a professional level and they are yet to become an integral part of the art society.

On the strength of the changes in substance, Vietnamese fine art now has a new appearance, which is different from that of the past. The old uniformity and conformity have been replaced by the new non-uniformity and non-conformity with various aspects



Truong Tan
Untitled
1996
Performance
Vietnam

of a new diversity in their style and a remarkable new language in their form. Vietnamese fine art also presents the artists' individual uniqueness in the nature of their creativity.

As time goes by, there appears to be an increasing number of differing artistic trends and even more diverse styles. This results in widely different opinions and appraisals in art criticisms and reviews, which at the same time have become more relevant and reliable.

The efforts of Vietnamese fine art in reaching out to merge with contemporary artistic mainstreams have gradually enabled it to become more international in nature. However, the artists' awareness of their individual uniqueness, the personal pathway to their souls and the consciousness of their cultural roots are the outstanding features of their works.

It is difficult to have a clear division for the identification of each artistic school or trend during this period along the dividing lines of modern art because it has come to the point where the criteria for such division are no longer distinguishable. Nevertheless, it is possible to recognise a closeness in the artistic views and artistic approaches:



- The emotionalism, the pure expressionism bearing the subconscious struggles and frustrations, as presented by the following painters: Le Quang Ha, Truong Tan, Nguyen Van Cuong, Le Quoc Viet, Pham Quang Vinh, Dinh Y Nhi. Although there is not a large number of painters in this group, their expressionism is very popular.
- The return to the 'village culture', to the post-colonial arts, leading to a kind of innocent language mixed with some elements of romance and spirituality, as presented by Ha Tri Hieu, Hoang Hong Cam, Le Thiet Cuong, Quach Dong Phuong and Nguyen Quoc Hoi.
- Some general aspects of surrealism, without a clear distinction of surrealism, relating to a large extent to spiritual expression, as presented by Vu Thang and Nghiem Xuan Hung.
- The trend of symbolism, the representation based on modular motives with expressive signals merging in the seemingly no-space without a visual scale, as presented by Dang Xuan Hoa, Nguyen Quan, Dao Minh Tri and Dinh Quan. Their intellectualism and their philosophic approaches are the more highly appreciated and well regarded because

Nguyen Van Cuong
Concerto

1999
Performance

of the fact that their works are completely different from those of the same trend from previous periods.

- Romanticism became quite common in the 1990s, and has proved to be a particular strength for the industrialised, urban centres, especially in Ho Chi Minh City, as presented by Nguyen Trung, Do Hoang Tuong, Ca Le Thang, Tran Van Thao and Vu Bich Thuy. Most of their works are inspired by their innermost emotions and sentiments, having their sources in Eastern philosophy.
- The reality-oriented forms with some surrealist touches, as presented by Do Quang Em, Le Huy Tiep, Huu Ngoc and others. Their works bear a classic expressive language along with native innocence, which brings about a sense of closeness and of strangeness.
- The realistic style, which has been connected closely with the formulation of the modern arts of Vietnam, has been an influence during several decades of artistic development. Now it has turned around to become an artistic style instead of being the monopolistic dominating trend as before, and it continues to exist alongside other artistic values, as presented by Hong Viet Dung, Phung Quoc Chi, Lai Anh Viet and Nguyen Thanh Binh. Among the young painters, this style bears the spirit of the new reality.

Sculpture and other artistic forms did not develop as strongly as painting and drawing. The cause of this is no doubt that these art forms, because of their direct relevance to the architectural and economic environment, required a magnitude of space that was not available to them. Nevertheless, there have been several experiments in the search for a modular language, space and materials. Such artists recorded positive movements during the early years of this decade.

The new art forms, such as installation, performance and video art, have appeared and have gradually shown signs of further development. This is especially true with respect to installation art because of its similarity to traditional aesthetic values and its acquaintance with traditional psychology in its symbolic expression and its conceptual and metaphoric presentation. The new artistic approaches have contributed to enriching Vietnamese art life and to enabling Vietnamese fine art to move closer to the contemporary trends of the fine arts in the region and in the rest of the world.

Art criticism has eased its previous general comments for reference purposes and has moved to the direct appraisal of artistic works and comments on individual authors. Art criticism has also become more objective, knowledgeable and reliable. However, in Vietnam at present there are no truly professional art critics. It is hoped that in the future, with proper training and natural screening, there will exist an art criticism with its own characteristics.



Vu Thang
Two people

1995
Lacquer and mixed media,
120 × 180 cm

Having made great efforts for evolutionary change with 'the incredible speed of integration into the regional and international fine arts' (in the words of Professor Ian Howard), Vietnamese contemporary art at the present time continues to develop in an artistic environment of stricter screening and selection with a higher level of professionalism and specialisation. The cultural challenges of the past and the wider contacts offered in the decades of renovation have also brought about new opportunities for new concepts to blossom. They include the concepts of traditional values, views about mankind and humanity, the appreciation of the nature and the everlasting values of traditional aesthetics, awareness about and interaction between differing values, and consciousness about individualism and uniqueness. These new concepts have become the springboard for artistic experiments and explorations conducted with new confidence and courage. These experiments and explorations go in all directions. The combination of the artists' efforts in acquiring traditional knowledge and learning from the world's painting experience, together with the artists' expression of their genuine emotions, have brought about a measure of success. History, social reality and contemporary concerns have been reflected through the artists' vision, their new awareness and passion. This is meaningful for the creative resources and the waves of renewal for the future development of the arts. Thus, Vietnamese artists have stepped outside their

previous boundaries with more confidence and with renewed awareness about themselves and an appreciation of their century-long history.

Efforts by various quarters will have to be made in order to enable Vietnamese art to achieve a magnitude of success on par with its potential: the artists themselves and the complex mechanism of society, which has a decisive influence on the use, appreciation and enjoyment of the arts. Only when art is allowed to function normally in the life of society will the talents and the personal responsibilities of the artists have the chance to express themselves fully and honestly. Art, with its realistic humanism and its unique diversity, will be screened and selected by the public and the era. The professional training methods in the art schools, the dissemination of artistic knowledge in high schools, and a healthy local art market are issues that require attention because they directly affect the inherent quality of the arts.

There are several different views on this period. Art, however, has its own dynamics in the relationship between the people, society and the era. Each generation of artists carries its own particular mission in the flow of art history.

One century of Vietnamese modern art has progressed in the cycle of creative development. In that cycle, each turning off and bend represents a stepping stone in the formulation, fulfilment and fine-tuning of the art itself. In that cycle, aesthetic awareness brings about change in the expressive language and perfection of artistic dignity. That is the measure of human achievement as a result of the arts and the landmark to divide art history into periods.

Art has always been part of civilisation, it always moves and changes according to the laws of creativity and elimination, it is always a presentation of the life of the community and representative of the community from which it comes.

NOTE

This essay was written in Vietnamese and has been translated for this volume.

EAST ASIA

CHINESE ART

Xu Hong

MODERN CHINESE ART TO 1993

In the early 18th century, Chinese painting began a process of formal transformation, from what may be termed a 'classical' or traditional style to a more 'modern' form. Artists such as Bada Shanren (1626–1705) and Shi Tao (1642–c.1707) employed bold, free and expressive brush strokes to create paintings that were distinctive in style. Their works were imbued with a rebellious spirit and a keen individualism that presaged a new phase in the development of Chinese brush and ink painting.

Most art historians, however, maintain that it was the impact of Western culture that initiated the fundamental transformation of traditional Chinese painting. During the 18th and early 19th centuries, knowledge of Western art was brought to China via missionary and trade activities and, later, by Chinese students returning from study overseas.

A number of the artists who studied oil painting in Europe and Japan in the early 20th century were influenced by impressionism. Lin Fengmian,¹ Liu Haisu² and Wu Dayu³ were among those who incorporated aspects of impressionist technique into their work and who became familiar with other modern art styles such as post-impressionism and fauvism. On their return, many artists took up teaching positions within art schools and

played a central role in the establishment and development of formal art education in China. By passing their knowledge on to their students, they laid a solid foundation for the development and appreciation of Western art in China.

Exhibitions and the establishment of artistic groups were also important in the dissemination of knowledge about modern Western art. The inaugural National Art Exhibition, organised by the Nationalist Government in 1929, featured oil paintings executed in a contemporary style. This exhibition stimulated a lively debate between the artist Xu Beihong⁴ and the poet, Xu Zhimo,⁵ concerning the appraisal of modern art.

During the 1930s, many artists who had returned from study overseas formed societies to introduce modern Western art to a broad audience. Groups such as the Storm Society (*Jue lanshe*) in Shanghai and the Chinese Independent Artists Association (*Zhonghua duli meishu xiehui*) in Guangdong worked to raise public awareness of the value of art and propagate their belief that the evolution of art was a manifestation of social and temporal change.

Despite the progress made by artists in establishing Western-influenced modern Chinese art practice in the early 20th century, the extent to which such art could influence Chinese social and cultural life was extremely limited. The appreciation of modern art was restricted to a small group of urban intellectuals. Traditional Chinese brush and ink painting and Western academic realist oil painting remained the dominant and popular modes of artistic expression. Throughout the 20th century, Western-influenced modern art was criticised by artists who maintained a traditional literati view of art and, in the post-1949 period in particular, by politicians who were wary of unorthodox cultural expression. Modern Western art was considered symptomatic of the 'cultural decadence of capitalism', a view that had wide currency from 1966 during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

The 'open door' economic policy introduced by the Government in 1978 created an atmosphere of reform that had a significant effect on the display and promotion of art. Exhibitions became more numerous and the art showed a greater variety of styles and approaches than ever before. In Shanghai, artists exhibiting in the *Twelve Person* exhibition (*Shi er ren huazhan*) in 1979 advocated 'exploration, innovation and debate', and, in Beijing, controversial exhibitions including oil paintings and wood-carvings laden with symbolic meaning and political satire



Fang Ganmin
White Dove

1934
Oil on canvas

were held by the Beijing Oil Painting Research Association (*Beijing youhua yanjiuyuan*) and the Stars Group (*Xingxing huahui*).⁶

The art produced by the Stars artists may be seen, in part, as their response to the Cultural Revolution. The Stars were not willing to hide during a time of social change and practise ‘pure’ art. For them, art was a means of social critique. It could give expression to the trauma that they had experienced and had been unable to communicate. In contrast, the artists who participated in the *Twelve Person* and Oil Painting Research Association exhibitions were, in the main, older, mid-career artists whose art was concerned primarily with the refinement of artistic language. Explorations into the formal and sociopolitical dimensions of art are two of the major trends of modern Chinese artistic practice.

It was not until the early 1980s that the Chinese art world experienced a significant and fundamental conceptual shift. The official repudiation of the Cultural Revolution by the Communist Party in 1981 created an environment in which artists and writers could react to the constraints imposed on their activity during a decade of despotic rule. The ensuing reassessment of contemporary history prompted many artists to rethink their own artistic practice. The ‘open door’ economic policy brought a variety of foreign art exhibitions and journals into China, providing young

Chinese artists with access to contemporary overseas developments. As part of the process of reorientation, many art theorists shifted their efforts from researching early 20th-century Chinese art to promoting modern Western art. Young artists, who were no longer content to be taught only Soviet-style realist oil paintings, experimented with a wide variety of imported styles. Interestingly, it was the Sixth National Art Exhibition held in 1984, an event that should have had little significance for the development of modern avantgarde Chinese art, that was a trigger for artistic change.

China's national art exhibitions are held once every five years. They are large-scale government-sponsored survey exhibitions. For the 30 years to 1984, these exhibitions provided the only opportunity for Chinese artists to exhibit their work and achieve an artistic profile. Only works that reflected the Chinese Communist Party's artistic policy had any hope of being selected. The 1984 exhibition was of an unprecedented scale, with more than 1000 works displayed. To young Chinese artists familiar with modern Western art, the exhibition confirmed the way in which the Government had dictated artistic policy and controlled artistic output for the previous 30 years. Many young and mid-career artists were appalled by what they saw. The uniformity of style was described as 'ten thousand horses trying to cross a single wooden bridge simultaneously'.

In response to the exhibition, many artists committed themselves to a course of radical artistic experimentation and change. Before long, numerous artistic groups were formed and exhibitions initiated by artists spread throughout the country. While the groups were all different, they were driven by the same motive — change. By 1985, more than 30 artist-initiated exhibitions had been staged. Art critics came to describe the phenomenon as '85 New Wave Art' ('85 *meishu xinchao*).



Zhang Peili
Bathers in Summer

1985
Oil on canvas
180 x 180 cm

The main forces behind this movement were art-school graduates who initiated exhibitions without bothering to obtain Government approval. Groups that were particularly influential included the Northern Art Group (*Beifang yishu qunti*), Hangzhou Youth Art Society (*Hangzhou qingnian chuanguoshe*), Beijing Youth Art Society (*Beijing qingnian huahui*), Jiangsu Surrealist Group (*Jiangsu Chaoxianshizhuyi tuanti*), Hunan 'O' Art Group (*Hunan O yishu jituan*), South-West Art Research Group (*Xinan yishu yanjiu qunti*), Mi Yang Studio (*Miyang huashi*), Xiamen Dada, Zhejiang Pond Group (*Zhejiang chishe*), Southern Artists Salon (*Nanfang yishujia shalong*) and the New Realists Art Exhibition (*Xinjuxiang huazhan*).

The Northern Art Group, established in 1984 in Harbin, north-east China, was an important artistic association, which was active during this period. Wang Guangyi (b. 1956), Shu Qun (b. 1953), Ren Jian (b. 1955) and Liu Yan (b. 1960) were among its members. In a manifesto they stated: 'We must remove ourselves from the clutches of Eastern traditionalism, distance ourselves from the influence of Western consciousness and establish a unique Northern ... cultural system.'⁷ They declared that through their art they would strive to express the sublime and the eternal with a solemn and quiet rational consciousness. As a result, their art was called 'rational painting' (*lixing huihua*). During this period, Wang Guangyi's works often depicted highly stylised rounded and heavy figures and animals set against a vast and icy landscape. In contrast, the paintings of Shu Qun represented three-dimensional geometric constructions composed of symmetrical cube, sphere and column constructions, which emphasised perspective and the play of light and shade. Through these works, he sought to give expression to the power of 'rational painting'. In describing their works, the members of the group stated: 'We do not consider our paintings as ART. They are merely one of the means that we use to communicate our thoughts.'⁸ The second phase of the Northern Art Group's activities began when its key members left the cold city of Harbin and moved south to the warmer province of Guangdong and later to the city of Wuhan.⁹ Their move southward, and the beginning of a 'post-cold culture' (*handai hou wenhua*), was more an expression of artistic energy and restlessness than of personal ideology.

Another influential artists' group was Hangzhou's Youth Art Society, which organised the 1985 *New Space* ('85 *xin kongjian*) exhibition at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in the winter of

1985. The majority of the participating artists were recent graduates of the academy. They included Zhang Peili (b. 1957), Geng Jianyi (b. 1962), Song Ling (b. 1961), Zha Li (b. 1956), Bao Jianfei (b. 1958) and Xu Jin (b. 1957). The works focused on the artists' immediate lives and surroundings. They observed and recorded urban living, painting subjects such as swimmers in a pool (Zhang Peili), a barber and his customers (Geng Jianyi) and industrial landscapes with figures (Song Ling). The work produced by members of this group is characterised by a lack of detail and a stylisation of form. Noisy, busy and disordered cities are transformed into lonely and desolate places where life has no meaning. Humour and self-derision are important elements of their art, as is the formal aspect of painting.

Individual artists were also influential during this period, notably Wenda Gu (known in China as Gu Wenda) (b. 1955) and Xu Bing (b. 1955). Wenda Gu was a lecturer at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou. He studied in the academy's department of traditional Chinese painting, but had developed a fresh approach to old materials: brush, ink and *xuan* paper, used for painting and calligraphy. He treated the elements of landscape painting and Chinese characters as signs or symbols, and combined them in new and challenging ways. He created massive works composed of Chinese words and word compounds, which he deliberately transposed or wrote incorrectly. Works such as *Right and Wrong Words* and *Totem and Taboo* analyse and attempt to reconstruct traditional Chinese culture. Wenda Gu once declared that he intended to demolish Eastern 'classicism' and Western modernism single-handedly. Ironically, Wenda Gu's individualism has its foundations in the Eastern and Western art that he seeks to overthrow.

Wenda Gu
Forest of Stone Steles - Retranslation & Rewriting of Tang Poetry

Created 1993–2004,
 Xian, China
 Installation with 15 stone steles, 162 ink rubbings (total stone steles: 50).
 National Gallery of Australia Oct. 2001–April 2002
 Dimensions of installation: 1140 cm (wide) x 1552 cm (long) x 600 cm (high)
 dimensions of each stone stele: 110 cm (wide) x 190 cm (long) x 20 cm (thick)
 weight of each stone stele: 1.3 tons
 Image courtesy the artist



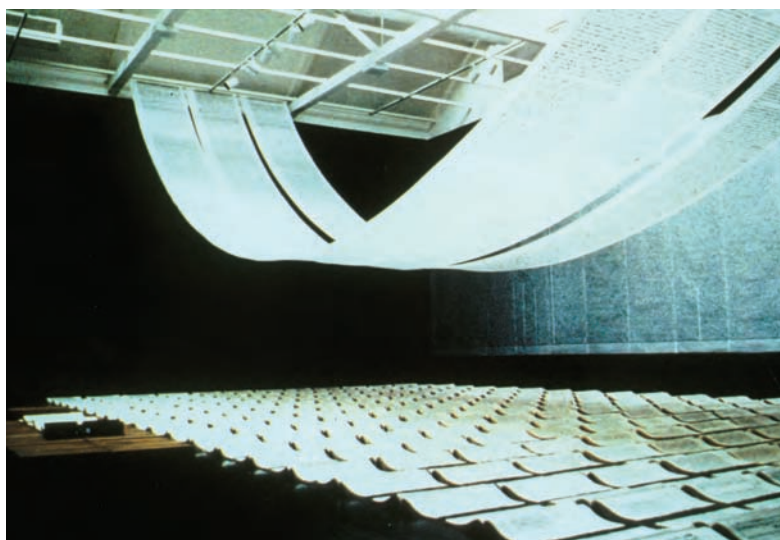
Xu Bing is a printmaker and former lecturer at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. In 1988, he exhibited *A Mirror to Analyse the World* (later renamed *A Book from the Sky*), a massive work for which he has won high praise from the artistic community. The work may be understood as a fantastic hand-printed book composed of Chinese words that have been carved in Song Dynasty-style script from a woodblock. It is a carefully executed and beautifully presented work. When displayed, the installation comprises volumes of traditionally bound, classical Chinese books and lengths of paper, also printed with text, which are attached to the gallery walls and hang from the ceiling in elegant arcs. The irony is that the words cannot be read because they do not exist: each has been invented by the artist. Standing before this massive and carefully ordered *Book from the Sky*, viewers sense a profound and disturbing spiritual presence.

By early 1989, some new factors began to influence the development of contemporary Chinese art. The most notable event was the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition, which opened in Beijing in February 1989.¹⁰ This exhibition documented artistic practice since 1985 and posed questions concerning the future development of modern Chinese art. A wide variety of art was displayed, including work by independent artists (*fei quanti*), experimental, individualistic and formalist art.

In the early 1980s, art produced by many artists from the Shanghai region was concerned with the exploration of artistic

Xu Bing
A Book From the Sky

1987–91
Woodblock print, wood,
leather, ivory
Four banners: 103 x 6 x
8.5 cm (each, folded); 19
boxes: 49.2 x 33.5 x 9.8 cm
(each, containing four books)
The Kenneth and Yasuko
Myer Collection of
Contemporary Asian Art.
Purchased 1994 with funds
from the International
Exhibitions Program and
with the assistance of
The Myer Foundation
and Michael Simcha Baevski
through the Queensland
Art Gallery Foundation.
Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery



language. Shanghainese artists were among the first to exhibit impressionist-style oil paintings in China in the 1979 *Twelve Person* exhibition. At that time, impressionism was still officially regarded as 'decadent and moribund'.

In general, it could be said that much of the art produced in the north of China in the mid-1980s, at the height of New Wave Art, maintained a strong link with the past. Many works carried a strong social or political message. Words and symbols featured prominently and, in some cases, became the subject of art. In contrast, artists from the Shanghai region tended to be more interested in exploring the relationship between art and some broad cultural and philosophical issues.

Yu Youhan (b. 1943) is an artist who lives and works in Shanghai. In *Ink Cross* (1986), he employs spontaneous daubs of ink in a play of spatial relations involving black and white and solid and void, through which he achieves an illusion of movement. The paintings have a distinctly Eastern quality and, when discussing his work, he often refers to the influence of *Laozi*.¹¹ Zhang Jianjun, also from Shanghai, was one of the first Chinese artists to experiment with mixed media. In 1984, he incorporated miscellaneous building materials into his works, which he then painted. Works such as the series *Have* are also concerned with expressing Eastern philosophical ideas.

A significant number of Shanghainese artists have also experimented with abstraction, a style that does not have many adherents in China. Zhou Changjiang (b. 1950) and Ding Yi (b. 1962) are two exponents of abstraction. Zhou Changjiang's style has been influenced by early abstract expressionism and cubism. His works are painterly and employ brilliant colour to give expression to symbols redolent of male and female, positive and negative. They are pleasing to the eye and have strong formal associations with Chinese philosophy, which in part accounts for their popularity.

In contrast with Zhou Changjiang, Ding Yi's work has an affinity with architecture. His paintings are composed of horizontal and vertical lines which form a gridlike structure. He has been constructing works in this manner since 1986, though in recent times his line-work has become more spontaneous. Precisely painted straight lines have been replaced by brush strokes that are full of movement and expression. Ding Yi is unusual in China,

where few artists have been content to pursue a single style for a sustained period without being distracted by transient art fads.

That Shanghainese artists focused on problems of artistic language during the turbulent 1980s, a time when a great range of artistic styles and concepts have had wide currency, is directly related to the history of Shanghai and its unique artistic environment. Shanghai is an urban cultural centre and a trading port and has therefore long been open to outside influence. Shanghai has been less restrained by traditional Chinese cultural concerns than other Chinese cities. Urbanism and cosmopolitanism have combined to create an environment in which people have developed an appreciation for things that are new, individualistic and progressive.

Shanghai is also an important industrial centre and trading port and plays a major role in China's economy. Cultural matters can therefore be treated with greater leniency than in other parts of the country. Shanghai can position itself differently in political debate and intrigue and its people have been keen to devote time and energy to developing their own lifestyle and to pursuing intellectual and artistic interests. In the period following the pro-democracy protests in 1989, the New Wave Art movement of the 1980s was criticised by the Government as a manifestation of bourgeois liberalism. In Shanghai, however, many artists and theoreticians were able to continue their artistic practice relatively undisturbed.

Post-June 1989, the artistic environment changed dramatically. Many articles appeared in newspapers and journals criticising contemporary Chinese art. No longer were there opportunities to engage in large-scale art activities. Instead, artists concentrated their efforts on strengthening and consolidating the conceptual and philosophical bases of their art.

Increasingly, artists have recognised that any modern Chinese art must maintain a dialogue with both the West and China's own cultural legacy. In recent times, two major artistic trends have emerged, which draw on both Western and Chinese traditions: cynical realism (*popi re*) and mixed-media works (*cailiao re*). In the series *Criticism (da pipan)*, Wang Guangyi combines Cultural Revolution propaganda images of workers, peasants and soldiers with household consumer brand names (now available and popular in China) such as Coca-Cola, Nescafe and Marlboro. By

conflating these potent cultural symbols, he reinterprets their meaning and, at the same time, promotes their importance as significant Chinese cultural icons, albeit from two different time zones.

Mixed-media works also contribute a significant trend in recent Chinese art. Xu Jiang (b. 1955) and Shi Hui (b. 1955), lecturers from the China National Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou, have worked with traditional Chinese materials such as bamboo and *xuan* paper, onto which Chinese characters have been written. These artists are concerned with transforming the use and meaning of materials and redefining aspects of traditional Chinese culture. This subject has preoccupied many southern Chinese artists, particularly those active in Nanjing, Changzhou, Zhejiang and Shanghai. Many of the works concerned with this theme featured in exhibitions such as *Paper Art*, held in Nanjing, the *Eight Person* exhibition in Changzhou and the *Art Today* exhibitions held in Shanghai, Beijing and Zhejiang.

In conclusion, having surveyed some of the background to the development of contemporary art in China, some general observations may be made. First, the level of artistic sophistication achieved by great masters of traditional Chinese ink painting, such as Bada Shanren, Shi Tao, Qi Baishi and Huang Binhong, is difficult for later artists to surpass. Yet, in China, modern Western art is well established and its various manifestations have become popular styles, which many artists emulate.

Second, while there is pressure on Chinese artists to continue to employ the theoretical tenets and traditional style of literati painting, many artists regard this 'tradition' as a burden that inhibits the development of creative practice. Many feel that decades of ideological constriction have controlled the minds and vision of both artists and their audience, leaving artists



Wang Guangyi
Great Criticism: Tang

1991
Oil on canvas
97 x 97 cm

Zhang Peili
Undefined Pleasure

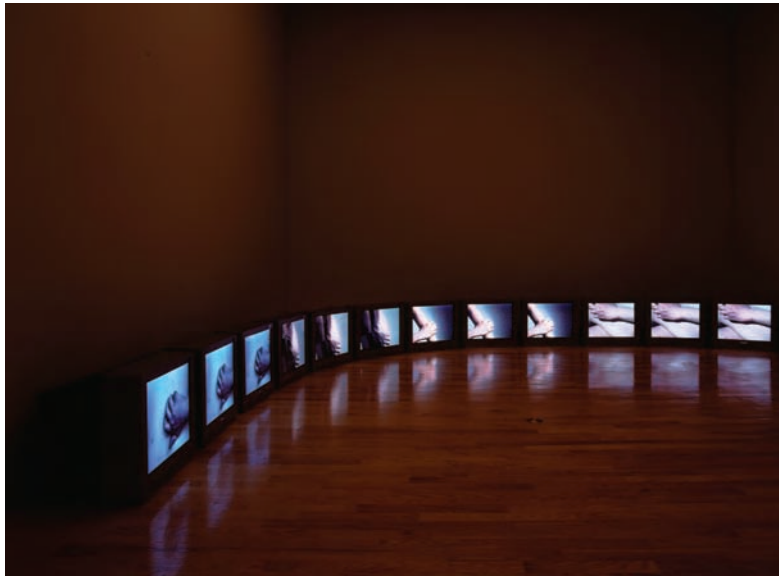
1999

Video tape (4 sets) and
29-inch (73 cm) monitor
(12 sets)

Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

Photograph: Shinomiya Yuji



despondent, anxious and frustrated. They feel that it is hard for them to achieve the freedom and independence that they imagine is enjoyed by many artists in the West. Much contemporary Chinese art exudes an air of oppression, and it is this stifled spirit that is perhaps its most fundamental characteristic.

ART GALLERIES AND CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ART

In mainland China, there is a clear distinction between art galleries and museums. Art galleries exhibit modern art and thus are strongly influenced by ideology, while museums exhibit ancient cultural artefacts or scientific and technical objects and so have only an indirect connection with ideology. This article explores some of the issues associated with China's art galleries.

There is a close and complex relationship between Chinese contemporary art and Chinese art galleries, shaped by the cultural environment and the cultural system. From the 1950s to the 1990s, Chinese art galleries usually acquired art works from State-sponsored exhibitions held in the galleries themselves, and gave — or did not give — only symbolic remuneration or reward to the artist. Artists saw this as an honour, and it would bring them practical benefits, too, such as improvements in employment, pay,

accommodation and the material goods allocated to them. Art galleries also put on exhibitions from their own collections now and then, but they did not usually have their collections on permanent display.

According to the principles of the planned economy, the Government allocated funds to art galleries according to their needs. The Chinese Communist Party and the Government had different demands of the art galleries at different periods. At certain times — during the Cultural Revolution, for example — the work of art galleries was not even to collect and exhibit works of art. For decades, all kinds of State treasures were in long-term storage. The paintings gallery of Beijing's Palace Museum showed its works only once a year — in the autumn — and that was basically to 'air' them, to give the paintings the chance to dry out after a long, hot, humid summer in storage. Some researchers who had worked at the museum for decades had seen only one-third of the works in the collection. Chinese art galleries' collections were not systematically organised and, as a result, it was difficult to present permanent exhibitions. This had nothing to do with financial constraints but was simply a result of the system and the historical situation.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, the principal duty of Chinese art galleries was to publicise the Chinese Communist Party's policies and to drum up political enthusiasm among the people. The Party's programs and policies were constantly changing and being adjusted, so the main function of art galleries was to hold short-term exhibitions of different kinds to fit in with the various celebrations and changing policies of the Party and the State. For example, on 1 July every year there was a commemorative exhibition to celebrate the founding of the Chinese Communist Party; on 1 August there was an exhibition of paintings to celebrate the founding of the People's Liberation Army; on 1 June there was an exhibition for Children's Day; and on 1 October there was an exhibition to celebrate Chinese National Day. As new political movements arose, exhibitions with corresponding themes were mounted. The resources of the art galleries were allocated to activities that were best able to reflect government policies. Exhibitions about art history and about the evolution of artistic styles obviously did not meet the need for art to reflect the present era and be oriented to the masses, and thus were seldom seen.

The aim of every art exhibition was perfectly explicit: the artists' works should satisfy the requirements of current government policy. This task was not simply left to the artist's own initiative but was highly organised. The various levels of artists' professional associations would select artists and organise them to work according to a 'three-in-one' philosophy: the leaders propose the subject, the workers discuss the method and the artists create the product. Within this collective structure there would be repeated discussion and revision before a final version was agreed on. After the work was finished it still had to be approved by several levels of leadership before it could finally be entered in an exhibition. This was especially true for exhibitions that were prepared as part of major political movements.

During this period, the art galleries also put on some individual and joint exhibitions of well-known artists. There were, for instance, exhibitions of paintings by Qi Baishi and Guan Liang, joint exhibitions from regional galleries and exhibitions of sketches from nature and 'creative works' by members of artists' associations. But these exhibitions were often put on as a kind of duty — to coincide with the celebration of a festival or some commemorative activity, or in order to demonstrate the flourishing growth of socialist art and to confirm that traditional painting was developing in line with Mao's policy to 'Let 100 flowers bloom, and weed through the old to bring forth the new'. These exhibitions were, nevertheless, still organised by the artists' associations (which were nominally non-government organisations but in fact took responsibility for organising, leading and supervising artists, and promoting art) and the art galleries mainly took the role of managing the exhibition spaces. At that time, most art galleries and artists' associations came under the same administrative system. Usually, the artists' association would direct the work of the art gallery. (This set-up is maintained today in some places within China, with the result that not all regional art galleries are part of the Government's cultural regime.)

The Party and State requirements of art were usually conveyed via the artists' associations to the artists, and art was used to educate the masses. In these circumstances, the relationship between the artists, the Party and the State was extremely close. The artists were given the title 'art workers', clearly differentiating them from the painters and artists of the old society (who were not under government control), spelling out their status and implying

that artists basically obtained their position in society through completing propaganda duties for the Party and State. In the minds of most ordinary people, the art galleries existed fundamentally for the artists, the artists existed for the Party and the State, and the art galleries enabled the artists to achieve the higher aim of serving politics and serving the people. The contemporary relevance of the art galleries was determined in this way.

From the 1980s onwards, the social environment and the cultural policy became more relaxed but, since the 1990s, economic reforms have led to funding problems for art galleries.

The funding of art galleries (including funding for the acquisition of art works) no longer depends completely on the State, as it did in the past, and artists no longer voluntarily donate their works to art galleries and regard it as an honour. The State art galleries often rent out their premises in order to guarantee that they can meet their day-to-day expenses. But, interestingly, this means that a real relationship between Chinese contemporary art and the art galleries may now be established, because the artists, simply by paying rent on the space, can now have their works exhibited in galleries. Artists hold joint and individual exhibitions and no longer have to obtain the approval of an official body such as an artists' association. A lot of non-government groups are also able to act as sponsors of exhibitions. Vetting of works to be exhibited is also not as strict as it was in the past. Compared with the situation prior to the 1980s, the restrictions are enormously reduced. As a result, most artists are able to organise to have exhibitions in art galleries. Along with the freer entry of all kinds of art into the art galleries, the connection between art and contemporary life has become closer and more real than it was in the past. Of course, the



Luo Brothers
I Love Tiananmen Square,
Beijing

1996–97
Photograph, computer
graphics, watercolour,
lacquer on board
64.8 x 55.1 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy
Fukuoka Art Museum
Photograph:
Fujimoto Kampachi

art galleries — which are charged with upholding ‘socialist spiritual civilisation’ — maintain their vigilance about works out of the ordinary, such as those that are particularly grotesque, violent or politically sensitive.

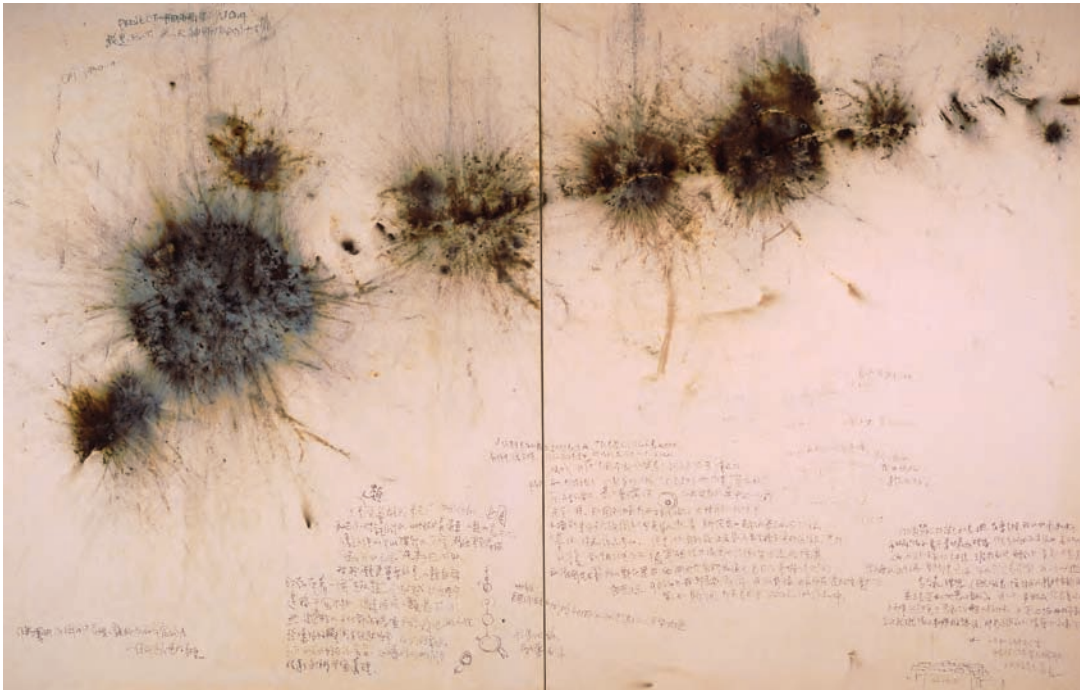
But the economic restrictions on art galleries have gradually increased. With the State placing so much emphasis on economic construction, there seems to be a lack of direction in the management of art galleries and a sense that they are left to find their own way. From the 1950s to the 1970s, State art galleries, for political reasons, were unable to obtain an independent intellectual status. Since the 1980s, economic factors have meant that art galleries still cannot achieve true independence. They have gone from being ruled by politics to being ruled by economics, so their staff continue to be restricted almost to a building-management role. In 1989, the *China/Avant-garde* exhibition was held at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. It was jointly sponsored by six work units, including the magazines *Fine Arts in China* (*Zhongguo meishu bao*) and *Fine Arts* (*Meishu*). The curators included the avantgarde art critics Gao Minglu, Li Xianting and Wang Mingxian. At that time, it was not possible to hold a public exhibition unless an officially approved work unit was registered as the main organiser. The National Art Museum of China was one of the main organisers, but it only received the site rental fee and managed the space, and it did not have anything to do with the planning of the exhibition or the fundraising. Despite this, when the exhibition was severely criticised, the National Art Museum of China took its share of the blame. Attempts to establish a relationship between art galleries and avantgarde art suffered a marked setback as a result of this incident.

New circumstances since the 1990s mean that art galleries may yet become important sites for Chinese contemporary art. This is not only because Chinese art galleries have an important position in the art world but because China’s other art infrastructure is still incomplete. Considering the population of China, private art galleries are very few in number. The art business is just getting going and cannot yet fully take on the task of promoting the development of art. Also, China does not have the established support structure of art foundations. There is a lack of sustainable, guaranteed private art patronage, so State art galleries are still the best sites for the public display and exchange

of art. And some private or corporate art galleries — because of their commercial nature — lack an academic base and are unable to take on a guiding and influencing role. Since the 1990s, a series of contemporary art exhibitions has been held by State art galleries in the process of reform and restructuring. These events have become an artistic phenomenon that has caught the attention of many people. In particular, the State galleries have hosted various kinds of biennales and have actively attempted to play a leading part in the development of contemporary art.

Some biennales, organised and put on by artists and non-government groups, using privately raised funds, were held only once and, because of a lack of money, did not continue. With their lack of academic support, these were biennales in name only, and, in fact, were often simply exhibitions by groups of friends. So far, the biennale with the widest continuing influence is the Shanghai Biennale, held by the Shanghai Art Gallery. Other biennales include one focused solely on brush and ink painting, which is put on by the Shenzhen Art Museum with the support of the Shenzhen Bureau of Culture; the Chengdu Biennale, held by the privately run Chengdu Modern Art Museum, with the support of the Chengdu city government; the Guangdong Art Museum's triennale, first held in 2002; and the Beijing International Art Biennale, organised by the Chinese Artists' Association and inaugurated in 2003.

From the beginning, the aim was for the Shanghai Biennale to be a major international exhibition. The Shanghai Art Museum anticipated that by the time two biennales had been held, it would have become an internationally significant event. Although one of the written objectives of the first biennale was 'to change how contemporary Chinese art is selected', this referred to the ways in which Chinese contemporary art was seen outside China. If we look at the situation since the 1990s, it is obvious that there are already a lot more opportunities for avantgarde and experimental artists to have their work seen. Firstly, they are represented regularly at major international exhibitions abroad. They have an audience and a market outside China. Secondly, there has been an increase in the number of private curators and galleries in China and this has given avantgarde artists more of a place in China, despite the fact that the private galleries are patronised mainly by foreigners and private collectors, and the State art galleries are



Cai Guo Qiang
Project for Extraterrestrials
 No. 4: *I'm an Extraterrestrial*
 – *Project for meeting with*
Tenjin (Heavenly Gods)

1990

Gunpowder, Japanese
 paper, ink on canvas
 227.4 x 182.0 cm
 Collection: Fukuoka
 Asian Art Museum
 Image courtesy of
 Fukuoka Asian Art Museum
 Photograph:
 Fujimoto Kampachi

basically not involved. The official art organisations and many people involved in the art world worry that, in their selections of Chinese artists, the organisers of major overseas exhibitions have exerted a strong influence on the development of Chinese modern art. The Shanghai Biennale's stated aim of becoming a major international exhibition indicates that art galleries want to be involved in the development of modern Chinese art. It shows that they are starting to value their influence and are not content merely to play a passive role. So the biennales are a positive example of State art galleries participating in the development of Chinese contemporary art. The institutions are themselves responsible for curating the exhibitions, fundraising and coordination, and they are already starting to be influential.

The Shanghai Art Museum organised its first Shanghai Biennale in 1996. The first two biennales, in 1996 and 1998, basically showed local artists only but included a few overseas Chinese artists. The exhibition themes and the associated conferences clearly revealed an interest in exploring the issues of Chinese contemporary art. Naturally, this sort of exploration is limited in nature. While the State art galleries are witnesses to art history, they maintain some distance from artistic movements as

they appear. This is not only because of the State galleries' academic status but also because they must adopt the official attitude on matters of ideology. After the opening of the 2000 Shanghai Biennale, fringe exhibitions featuring avantgarde artists were privately mounted. These fringe shows attracted the attention of foreign exhibition organisers and, in a way, this really was the international part of the third Shanghai Biennale. The fact that so many Chinese avantgarde artists gathered in Shanghai at the time indicates the importance they placed on the opportunities brought by the biennale. However, because there were some works in these fringe shows that were considered too extreme and violent, they met with strong official and popular criticism. As a result, before the opening of the 2002 biennale, the Shanghai Art Museum hired a legal consultant and solemnly declared that anyone using the 2002 Shanghai Biennale name without official approval from the Shanghai Art Gallery would face legal action.

The theme of the 2002 Shanghai Biennale — which was hailed in the press as 'the biggest, possibly the most expensive, and the most informed exhibition in China this year' (*Art World* [*Yishu shijie*] December 2002) — was 'urban construction'. This theme of cities (and the people who live in them) allowed the biennale to begin to show the close connection between art and contemporary life. State art galleries have grown and matured along with Chinese contemporary art, and now have more of a connection with that art.

Under the socialist system in China, the involvement of art galleries with contemporary art has had far-reaching effects on the art and on the galleries. The *Chinese/Avant-garde* exhibition in 1989 highlighted the differences between the old cultural regime and the so-called New wave art. Although the struggle between them was halted temporarily by fierce criticism of the New wave, it was nevertheless obvious that the conflict would emerge again in another form. The Shanghai Biennale legitimised the appearance of Western postmodernist art in China; the Guangzhou Triennale allowed new wave art, previously seen as heretical, to take its place in the nation's art galleries, and the Shenzhen Biennale of Ink Painting created a dialogue between traditional brush and ink painting and postmodern cultural practices. After all the criticism, new wave art was finally deemed acceptable. Although it was given no officially documented approval, this practical acceptance had more real value as far as Chinese artists were concerned.

But this does not mean that art galleries are unconditionally accepting of postmodern art. Apart from publicly declaring that they will not exhibit violent or sexual works, or works that are clearly hostile to political trends, art galleries also advocate a kind of refined and tempered artistic sensibility — the kind of artistic taste that conforms with Chinese cultural traditions and Confucian ideals of moderation.

This series of officially sanctioned contemporary art exhibitions has brought renewal of the operating methods and ideas of State art galleries onto the agenda and made the fight against and exclusion of new wave art a thing of the past. From abstract painting to mixed media, installation to video art, the tolerance of Chinese art galleries towards contemporary art has developed gradually but steadily. It is now only performance art that does not appear in State art galleries. International exchange is increasing constantly and the problem that Chinese culture must solve as it confronts globalisation has become this: bearing in mind China's unique national conditions and the historical development of its State art galleries, how can these galleries move away from their passive and peripheral status and assume their rightful role?

Zhang Xiaogang
*Bloodline (Two Comrades
with Red Baby)*

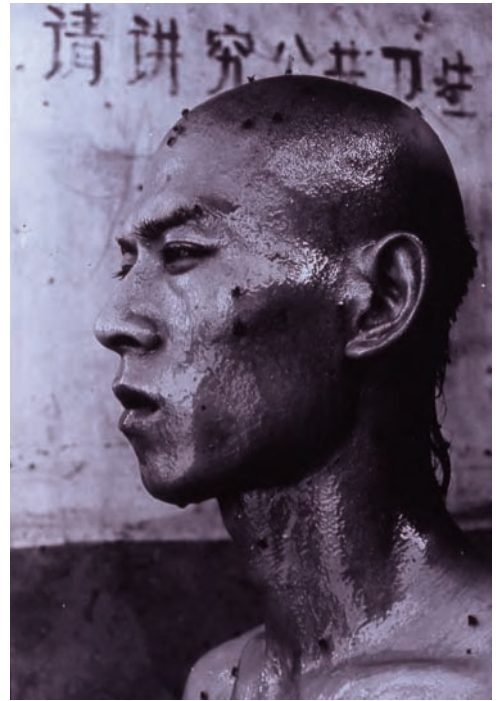
1995
Collection: National
Gallery of Australia
Image courtesy National
Gallery of Australia



CHINESE ART IN THE NINETIES

The emergence of political pop (*Zhengzhi popu*) and new literati painting (*Xin wenren hua*) in China in the period after 1989 was in response to '85 *New wave art* and signalled the arrival of a new cultural trend. The resurgence of interest in national and indigenous issues and the movement away from politics and towards commodification provided a context for the new art. The appearance of these new artistic styles was also related to the arrival of post-modern discourse. It could be said that it was the cultural influence of postmodernism that gave rise to these art forms. The level of interest that people outside mainland China expressed in these works was far greater than that from within and is indicative of the close connection they had with external trends. The emergence of these new styles was also, of course, related to the Chinese environment and to the political and economic actions of the Chinese Government post-1989, which placed stringent restrictions on thought and cultural activity, while at the same time continuing to open up the economy. These actions caused Chinese artists to adopt strategies that did not directly confront the political situation, but which instead revolved around the unburdening of their own emotions. Artists chose content that would be attractive to the international art market and media and which would not antagonise the Government. Political pop was an exceedingly good artistic strategy for it related to the political reality of China and yet cleverly avoided the most acute and sensitive of issues while accommodating the image and understanding of Chinese culture and ideology that existed in the Western imagination. The means artists used to express themselves may be described as postmodernism with Chinese characteristics, which international critics greeted with acclaim.

The sudden change that occurred within Chinese politics in the summer of 1989 marks the beginning of a return to nationalistic ideology. But, to a large extent, this cultural conservatism can also be traced to the dissemination in China of



Rong Rong
East Village,
Beijing, No. 19

1994
B&W Photographs
150 x 100 cm
Image courtesy
Singapore Art Museum

New Confucianism (*xin Ruxue*) by international scholars. An outcome of the reassessment by Chinese academics of the modernising trend of the previous 100 years was that some ultra-nationalists completely repudiated the need for China to learn from the experiences of the West. In fact, some regarded the introduction of Western culture as being responsible for the various social problems of the past 100 years. It is against this historical backdrop that new literati painting emerged and was encouraged to develop.

In the name of reviving Chinese art and in order to counter new wave art and innovative Chinese ink painting, those advocating new literati painting put forward the idea that Chinese painting had its own forms and internal laws of development. They negated previous innovations made in brush and ink painting in order to oppose all modernising influences. Xu Lele (b. 1955, from the Jiangsu Academy of Chinese Art), for example, depicted Ming and Qing Dynasty-style female figures with bound feet, in enclosed courtyards and accompanied by caged birds. Others painted elegant classical landscapes in which the artist yearned for a now lost spiritual garden as exemplified in the work of Chen Ping (b. 1960, from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts). The inaugural new literati painting exhibition was held at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing, in April 1989. Since then there have been some 60 exhibitions, each featuring approximately 50 artists. While the content of each exhibition, the participants and the location of the exhibition have not always been the same, the aim of the exhibitions has remained unchanged. While artists who form part of the new literati painting group do not all paint in the same style and some paintings do not accord entirely with the definition of new literati painting, their grouping under its banner has given them a cultural legitimacy. Some new literati painting panders to market tastes and looks out-moded. In formal terms, it lacks creativity, which has weakened its ability to counter other art forms.

Unlike new literati painting, the development of modern ink painting was closely related to the 1980s Chinese modern art movement, the aim of which was to break free from restrictive ideologies of the past. The particular mission of modern ink painting was to break from the constraints of traditional forms and move towards a modernisation of brush and ink painting. Many

artists emulated Western abstract art and abstract expressionism and attempted to use the traditional materials of brush and ink to give voice to Chinese cultural identity. So, while engaging in modernist-inspired experimentation, modern ink painting also embodied a counter-discourse that sought to highlight cultural differentiation. As a result, modern ink painting was often taken up and explored as a potent cultural subject rather than just as a mode of artistic practice. Within modern ink painting, there have been many different styles, which may be described as abstract ink painting, represented by artists such as Liu Zijian (b. 1956, from the Shenzhen Art Academy, Guangdong) and Li Huasheng (b. 1944, Chengdu, Sichuan); expressionist ink painting represented by Yan Binghui (b. 1956, from the Tianjin Academy of Fine Art), Li Xiaoxuan (b. 1959, from the Tianjin Academy of Fine Art) and Liu Qinghe (b. 1961, from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts); and experimental ink painting. Practitioners of abstract ink painting and expressionist ink painting use mainly the traditional media of brush and ink (they also occasionally use wide, Western-style brushes and spray techniques or substitute acrylic paints), whereas practitioners of experimental ink painting take ink painting to its extreme and combine it with conceptual art, installation art and performance. For example, in *Calligraphy*, Wang Tiande (b. 1960, from the Shanghai Fudan University) overlaid a piece of *xuan* paper inscribed with Chinese calligraphy with many layers of paper. Where traces of the original calligraphy could be seen through the layers of paper, the artist used a cigarette to burn holes in the paper. The crude and destructive marks, which have a close association with modern life, are, however, not without their elegance.

Other artistic styles that were also characteristic of Chinese culture in the Nineties were New generation art (*Xin sheng dai yishu*) and Gaudy art (*Yan su yishu*). New generation art derived its name from an exhibition of the same name held in July 1991. It was organised by a group of young artists, the majority of whom taught at art schools in Beijing. This common background was a moderating force in terms of the degree to which their works gave expression to a desire for change. They were given great encouragement by the teachers at the art academies, who were their immediate predecessors. In the final analysis, however, when compared with the rebellious nature of the participants of '85 *New*

wave art, art works by these artists had more in common with their teachers. Some of these artists declared that they depicted only people they knew and events that had meaning for them. Owing to the complete lack of correspondence between the aims of new generation artists and those of the revolutionary grand narrative on the one hand and modernists with a more radical agenda on the other, this artistic phenomenon faced difficulties from both sides, but also gained advantages from both camps. Representative new generation artists include Liu Xiaodong (b. 1963), the female artist Yu Hong (b. 1966) and the sculptor Zhan Wang (b. 1962), who are all from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.

Gaudy art was, by comparison, a more complex phenomenon. It cannot be entirely characterised as an artistic style, but rather as a cultural tendency. Influenced by mass culture and consumer culture, Gaudy art reflects changes in social values as embodied in art and taste. Many different types of practice claim an association with Gaudy art and artists co-opted materials from a variety of sources, including from history and everyday life. Some employed elements drawn from Chinese folk art and culture, such as symbols to attract good fortune or drive away evil spirits, scenes from Chinese plays and legends and familiar figures, which were then manipulated to create new forms. Some works were derived

directly from consumer advertising, and incorporated sexy women and logos of international brands such as Coca-Cola and McDonald's. Some artists made use of traditional Chinese art; for example, elite literati paintings of landscape, as well as plum blossom, orchid, bamboo and chrysanthemum flowers, which they reworked in a more earthy guise; or subjects from classical Western paintings that were transposed into a Chinese environment. Yet other artists adopted decades-old revolutionary symbols, flags and crests and combined them with furniture from the Ming and Qing Dynasties and images of contemporary oriental beauties, as in

Liu Xiaodong,
Burning Rat

1998
Oil on canvas
152 x 137 cm





the *Chair* series by Shao Yinong. This mode of working took on many different forms and encompassed two-dimensional work, sculpture, photography, installation and video. Some artists work concurrently in different styles. For example, Huang Yihan (b. 1958, from the Guangzhou Art Academy), who has created large installations using commercial toys, such as *Meixiaonu meets Bianxing Jingang*, in which serried ranks of a popular Chinese Barbie Doll equivalent meet an equal number of the local tough guy figures, as well as ink paintings such as *Cartoon generation*.

Gaudy art (*Yan su yishu*) comprises gaudy (*yan*) and popular (*su*) elements. The former tends toward commercial and consumer culture and includes fashionable brands, beautiful women and other symbols drawn from commercial advertising, whereas the latter places greater emphasis on national identity and makes use of symbols that originate in traditional folk culture. Gaudy art is significant as a cultural phenomenon. But while it forces us to focus on the current social situation, notably aspects of inner urban life, we must also acknowledge that what it delivers to its audience is

Shao Yinong
Made in China

1999
Reproduction
mahogany chair
575 x 460 x 960 cm



Huang Yihan
*A New Breed of Chinese -
 Cartoon Generation
 Number 2*

2000
 Ink on paper
 246 x 248 cm

very similar to that delivered by advertising. Gaudy art transmits fashionable information but does not engage in cultural reflection. From this perspective, Gaudy art has a much more direct commercial tendency than Political Pop. When this art is considered from the perspective of globalisation (*quanqiu hua*) and nativism (*bentu hua*) it is found to have more in common with postcolonial cultural discourse. Representing as it does a simple and clear symbol of national identity, it was well received on the international market, which helps to explain its success and the multi-layered reasons why it has flourished.

After Deng Xiaoping's now famous speeches delivered during a tour of southern China in 1992, China's market economy

developed with great rapidity and, as a result, the exhibiting, publishing and selling of works of art was diversified. Installation, performance art and new media, arts that were previously not admitted through official art channels, emerged in the major cities and attracted international attention. The inaugural Shanghai Biennale, held in 1996, was the first Government-sponsored exhibition to admit the work of experimental artists.

Liu Jianhua
Memory of Infatuation

1999
 Porcelain





Pan Yuechuan
Barbie

2001
Photograph



Liu Qinghe
Water, Water

2001
Ink on paper
180 x 180 cm

About this time, a number of Chinese artists (who had left China) exerted a great influence on the contemporary Chinese art scene. The most representative of these artists were Xu Bing and Cai Guo Qiang. Xu Bing (b. 1955, who moved from Beijing to New York) viewed traditional Chinese culture from the vantage point of modern art and extracted inspiration for the creation of his own works of art. He used rubbings taken from the Great Wall and Chinese characters, which he replicated and transformed and in the process created a cultural concept that conflated and extended notions of ancient and contemporary, Chinese and international art. Cai Guo Qiang (b. 1957, who moved from Shanghai to Tokyo and who now lives New York) has used gunpowder, one of the four great inventions of ancient China, as his creative material. He has staged many events using gunpowder and explosives that have dazzled and excited audiences within and outside China. A characteristic of Xu Bing and Cai Guo Qiang's works is their complexity of production and requirement for substantial capital investment. This style of working does not accord with the customary work practices of the majority of mainland practitioners. Invariably, Chinese avantgarde artists are resourceful and their work is rather abstruse. For example, a work may give expression to a philosophical principle through very simple means, or, through the arrangement of some unusual actions or events, the artist may encourage the audience to make particular associations. According to Chinese traditional art theory, this is described as less is more.

Beginning in the late 1990s, China's avantgarde artists began to be more provocative and to challenge people's moral and ethical sensibilities. Some artists used naked men and women as their subjects and others went so far as to use dead fetuses. While achieving a sensational effect, these works caused heated arguments in the public arena and among professional artists.

Another interesting aspect of Chinese art during the 1990s was the growth of feminist art. The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, marked a turning point. Through the efforts of women working in literature and the humanities, in particular, feminism in China found an environment in which it could be nurtured, and it is against this cultural backdrop that feminist art developed. Feminist art refers to works of art that reflect feminist perspectives and intellectual positions and that place emphasis on the identity of women.

The introduction of works by the American artist, Georgia O'Keefe, stimulated a group of Chinese women artists to adopt flowers as their painted subject. Wang Jihua (b. 1955, from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art) and Cai Jin (b. 1965, from Beijing) use subversive means to emphasise the feminine and reproductive significance of flowers and, in so doing, alter the way in which flowers have been viewed and admired within Chinese tradition. But the



primary characteristic of 1990s feminist art in China was the oblique reference to the body as vessel in order to express the situation of women and their emotions. For example, Chen Yanyin (b. 1958, from Shanghai) used roses and bottles of saline solution in her work *Discrepancy Between One Idea*; Lin Tianmiao (b. 1961, from Beijing) used a bed and fur in her work *Bed*; and Li Xiuqin (b. 1953, from the China National Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou) inserted iron rods into the fibre of cleaved wood in *The Opening of Memory*. All of these art works caused a physiological response in the viewer. While the artists' approaches were veiled or contained in each case, the impact on the audience was powerful. But the intensity of emotion and feelings of pain and suffering that the artists revealed through their works, coupled with the oblique references to the body, caused many viewers to feel confounded. If one does not begin by examining China's historical and cultural environment in any study of the problems experienced by women, then it is very easy to form the misconception that 'women's liberation has gone too far'. Within feminist art there are many works that 'probe the relationships between women, the family and the environment': for example, Liu Manwen's (b. 1962, from the Ha'erbin Teachers' University) series *Prosaic life*, Yan Ping's (b. 1956, from the Beijing Capital Teachers University) *Mother and Child*, Shen Ling's (b. 1965, from the Beijing Central Academy of Fine Arts) series *Men. Women*

Xu Xiaoyan
Cabbage

2000
Oil on canvas,
200 x 200 cm

and Yu Hong's series *Witness to Growing Up*. How to make use of traditional source materials in order to emphasise the strength of feminist creative practice was also a question addressed by female artists during the decade of the Nineties.



Yu Hong
Witness to Growing Up - Pregnant at 28

2002
Oil on canvas
100 x 100 cm



Liu Manwen
Alone in White

2000
Oil on canvas,
162 x 162 cm

NOTES

Sections I and III translated from the Chinese by Claire Roberts, Section II by Ben Donaldson.

The first section of this essay, 'Modern Chinese Art to 1993', was first published in Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993, and has been revised for this publication.

- 1 Lin Fengmian (1900–91) studied in France from 1918 to 1925, initially at the Dijon Art School and later at the Paris Ecole Supérieure des Beaux Arts.
- 2 Liu Haisu (b. 1896) travelled to Japan in 1919. He later studied in France, 1929–31, and in Germany and other European countries, 1933–35.
- 3 Wu Dayu (1903–88) studied in Paris, France, 1923–27.
- 4 Xu Beihong (1895–1953) visited Japan in 1917 and travelled to France in 1919. He spent the next six years in Europe, studying at various academies in Paris and Berlin. In 1926, he made another trip to Europe and returned to Shanghai in 1927. He was later dean of the Art Department at Nanguo College of Fine Arts and professor of art at the Nanjing Central University.
- 5 Xu Zhimo (1896–1931) studied in Europe and America and was a member of the New Moon school of poetry, which was concerned primarily with aesthetics and poetic form. Keats was a particularly influential figure.
- 6 The Stars were a group of 'dissident' artists. In 1979, they staged a spontaneous exhibition on the park fence adjacent to the China Art Gallery in Beijing. The artists did not obtain the necessary clearance from the Public Security Bureau and the exhibition was therefore declared illegal and was forced to close. In response, the Stars organised a demonstration on 1 October, China's National Day, demanding democracy and freedom from the Chinese Government. See Ching-shuen Hui (ed.), *The Stars: 10 years*, Hanart 2 Ltd, Hong Kong, 1989.
- 7 Shu Qun, 'Beifang yishu quanti de jingshen' (The spirit of the Northern Art Group), *Zhongguo meishu bae (Fine Arts in China)*, 18, 1985, p. 1.
- 8 Beifang yishu quanti (Northern Art Group). 'Beifang wenming de shexiang' (Planning for a Northern Asiatic Culture), in Zhang Qiang, *Huihua xinzhao (New Wave Art)*, Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 1988, p. 4.
- 9 Wang Guangyi left Harbin in 1985 and Shu Qun in 1988.
- 10 The *China/Avant-garde* exhibition (*Zhongguo xiandai yishu zhan*) was held at the China Art Gallery, Beijing. The works were grouped in the following manner: installation, action art, pop art, art with a religious or spiritual resonance, absurdist art, conceptual and expressionist art and ink painting or 'anti New Wave' art. The exhibition was forced to close when Xiao Lu, a female exhibitor, fired a gun at her installation in order to 'finish' the work. The artist was detained for questioning and released after three days.
- 11 The *Laozi* is regarded as the classic Daoist text. It is thought to have been written by a man called Laozi, who was an older contemporary of Confucius (551–479 BC).

TAIWAN: A Location of Construction and Synthesis

Yulin Lee

LAYERS OF COLONISATION have marked the culture of Taiwan: the Dutch and Portuguese invasions in the 16th century; Ming loyalist Koxinga's taking of the island in a military coup in the next century; the Ch'ing Chinese 'recuperation' of Taiwan, which lasted from the 17th century until the late 19th century; the Japanese occupation from 1895 to 1945; and the retreat to the island of the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) regime after World War II. It is against this disjunctive past that contemporary art evolves in Taiwan. The history of Taiwan was determined by the sequence of colonial powers that ruled there, and cultural identity and art practices were correspondingly a product of these horizontal transplantations reflecting the political changes on the island. The sense of rupture became particularly acute because of the frequent political shifts in the tumultuous 20th century. Japan's colonisation brought the 'dawn of modernisation' to Taiwan. This would lead to Western-oriented art education with a focus on oil painting and naturalism. The reintroduction of a Chinese regime in 1945 reaffirmed the superiority of traditionalist Chinese ink painting, authorised as 'national painting'. During the 1950s and

1960s, the period of close strategic partnership between the United States and the KMT Government, American culture, in particular the abstract art of the time, prevailed in Taiwan. In the 1970s, it became clear that the passive reception of different conceptions of art was problematic, and in the 1980s, resistance to introduced cultures became outspoken, as the idea of a Taiwanese identity became a heated political and cultural issue.

It was the end of martial law in 1987, after 40 years under the KMT regime, that instigated the most vehement debate over a native Taiwanese identity. Such questions as who were the 'authentic' Taiwanese, how to define current Taiwan, and how to determine its global image became urgent, engaging not only intellectuals, but the general population. The issue was investigated in many academic disciplines, including anthropology, archaeology, cultural studies, history and, of course, political science. The swift relaxation of media restrictions and the liberalisation of financial systems and economic policies energised the society tremendously, but also stirred long-suppressed existentialist concerns about the nature of the self. As one of the 'Four Little Dragons' of Asia during the optimistic decade from 1985 to 1995, Taiwan had plenty of money, unfettered political freedom and a will to make itself visible as broadly as possible. Inevitably, this ambition was satiated at severe cost; social morality and the natural environment quickly deteriorated. Some of the most obvious setbacks were escalating money politics, openly violent and sexist politics and sensational election campaigns and an extremely materialistic society.¹ This period, however, also marked a threshold in Taiwanese history as artists began to overtly define a distinctive cultural identity through their art works. This paper provides not a definitive picture of contemporary art in Taiwan, but rather an interpretive highlight on this cultural response to Taiwan's redefinition of itself during the post-1987 decade.



Hung Tong
Delivering Babies
from Mt. Tiantai

1970
Colour ink on paper
183 x 84 cm
Collection: Chow Yu
Image courtesy the artist
Photograph: Lin Tsung-hsing



Mei Dean-E
*Taiwan Loves Japan/
 Japan Loves Taiwan*

1998
 Installation in the Artium
 Gallery Fukuoka Japan
 Image courtesy Fukuoka
 Asian Art Museum and
 the artist

IDENTITY SHIFT

Taiwan Loves Japan/Japan Loves Taiwan is the title of an installation by Mei Dean-E (b. 1954, Taipei), conceived for an exhibition in Japan in 1998. In this work, Mei used computer-generated synthesis to achieve a Dadaist pastiche, reimagining a portrait photo of Lee Teng-hui, then Taiwan's president, with a Japanese wrestler's *mage*, or a topknot, extending from his Western coif. This was superimposed on an image of Mount Fuji, borrowed from Hiroshige's famous series of *The Fifty-three Posts of the Tokaido*.² A comment by Lee about his identity confusion was written in Japanese on his chest.³ Mei quoted Lee's comment to the renowned Japanese writer, Shiba Ryotaro, in which he discussed for the first time the identity issue: 'Because until the age of twenty-two, I was Japanese ...

the term China (for me) was ambiguous.' Mei's political sarcasm is obvious, yet the work's complexity allows for multiple interpretations.

While revealing various layers of political, cultural, historical and aesthetic meaning, this work succinctly described the poignant dispute over 'Taiwanese' identity. Aided by postmodernist and postcolonialist theories, which had become prevalent in Taiwan in the late 1980s, intellectuals for an independent identity redefined Taiwan's past. Historians and cultural scholars proposed to integrate colonial history and to acknowledge the pluralistic ethnic genealogies on the island in a challenge to the former ubiquity of Chinese 'orthodoxy'.⁴ The idea, still vital today, was to construct a Taiwanese history distinct from monolithic Chinese-ness, to invent an idiosyncratic Taiwanese-ness so that 'pasts are restored, fellowships imagined, and futures dreamed'.⁵ This strategy is hardly unique. Historical precedents can be found among the emerging nation-states of early

modern Europe.⁶ What remains unique to Taiwan is its prolonged ‘political temporality’,⁷ a result of the ambiguous relationship between the KMT regime and the People’s Republic of China since 1949. While the Taiwanese Government loosens its putative dominion over Mainland China, new tensions occur as the mainland monitors the island’s desire for independence and poses a constant threat to its security. The proliferation of political art in the post-martial law era attested to artists’ positive agenda for socio-political reformation via their art works. At the same time, art that explicitly critiqued socio-political issues and that dealt with Taiwanese regionalism was often institutionalised in international showcases⁸ as cultural visibility was used by the frustrated government to compensate for Taiwan’s diplomatic suffocation since its withdrawal from the United Nations in 1971.

AUGMENTING HISTORY/ RECONSTRUCTING GENEALOGY

Mei represents the so-called first generation of mainlanders, whose parents emigrated to Taiwan following the postwar Kuomintang regime.⁹ Graduating from the Chinese Culture University¹⁰ in 1978, Mei continued studies in the United States from 1983 to 1985 and worked there until his return to Taiwan in 1991, when the post-martial law freedoms were at their most heady. Brought up in the political atmosphere of an incontestably orthodox Chinese identity, Mei first experienced a sense of dislocation and cultural alienation from mainstream society in the United States. This triggered his reflections on identity as power, a national as well as a personal idea. After the events of Tiananmen Square in 1989, Mei visited, for the first time in his life, the ‘native country’ with which he had been educated to identify during his youth in Taiwan. Not long after the trip, he returned to Taiwan, where the turbulent political climate and shifting identity issues further disoriented him. Mei’s works engaged with these problems and through them he was able to relate himself to the rapidly transforming society. Inspired by Dadaism, Mei’s works dating from the 1990s, such as *Silk Road — Brocade China* (1993), *Identity* (1993–98), *Don’t Rush*, *Be Patient* (1998), *Give Hugs* (2000) and *A Decisive Battle Out of the Border* (2001), were all marked with a Duchampian witty cynicism. Playing with homonyms of the Chinese language in the titles of his

art works, Mei alluded freely to current political events, often at the risk of limiting the work to the level of temporary political illustration. By doing so, Mei coolly documented the absurdity of political ideology and historical incoherence on the island, the constant embarrassment of Taiwan's diplomatic setbacks, the burgeoning confrontations over the strait between Taiwan and China, and the increasing Taiwanese investment in China despite the official ban on direct communication across the strait.

Mei is not alone in his experience of repeated disruptions and reorientations of identity. This anxiety has been shared by all Taiwanese who have posed the questions of who we were, who we are and who we will be. Groups of locally educated artists had already actively participated since the late 1980s in political iconoclasm in the hope of exposing Taiwan's concealed historical realities. Not coincidentally, many of these artists belonged to the so-called native Taiwanese population — that is, those whose parents had resided in Taiwan prior to the postwar Chinese

immigration. These artists, using painting as a medium, took as their models such contemporary European art movements as German neo-expressionism and the Italian trans-avantgarde, and used these forms to investigate the past and critique present-day society. Wu Tien-chang and Yang Mao-lin are two such artists, who, in their early works, explored the expressive capacity of painting to deal with history.

In his *Portraits of the Emperors* series (1989–90), Wu Tien-Chang (b. 1956, Changhua), also a graduate of the Chinese Culture University, erected iconoclastic images of such powerful figures as Chiang Kai-shek,

Wu Tien-Chang
Dreams of Past Era IV

1997
Oil and objects on
canvas with light,
sound and others
207.5 x 167.5 x 12 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy
Fukuoka Asian Art
Museum



Mao Zedong, Chiang Ching-kuo and Deng Xiaoping on a mural painting scale.¹¹ The portraits have a sculptural monumentality reminiscent of the political monuments found frequently in countries under authoritarian rule. On each figure's flattened and mound-shaped torso is painted the history of his concealed atrocities, which are metaphorically reconstructed and then deconstructed. After this stage of explicit iconoclasm, Wu moved on to tackle more subtle layers of history. He directed his attention to the personal traumas inflicted by the juxtaposition of autocracy and the ineffable femininity inherent in Taiwanese identity, a trait common among colonised cultures. In serial works such as *Wounded Funeral I–IV* (1993), *On the Damage to Spring and Autumn Pavilion* (1993), and the *Dream of Past Era* series (1994–96), Wu experimented with mixed media, using video projection and music in combination with staged photographs. The frames of these photographs were decorated by the artist with garish, artificial flowers, velvet or rhinestones. Here Wu touches on such overlooked facets of the Taiwanese aesthetic as the superficial tawdriness that characterises a society afflicted with repeated cultural ruptures. Although widespread information about global art trends¹² and the return of many Taiwanese artists after studies in Europe and the United States stimulated the increase of kitsch, image-based works, however, Wu originated a form of regional kitsch by manipulating the photographic medium and undertaking transvestite performance. These works noticeably influenced artists who emerged in the post-1995 period.

Yang Mao-lin (b. 1953, Changhua)¹³ began with large-scale expressionist paintings. The size of the artist's canvases is related to



Yang Mao-Lin
Zealandia Memorandum
L9301

1993
Oil & acrylic on canvas
112 x 194 cm
Collection of
Taipei Fine Arts Museum
Image courtesy the artist

the emergence of spacious public modern art institutions, first among them the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, which opened in 1983. The museum's organisation of open-call competitions during the 1980s encouraged professional artists and art-school students to expand the dimensions of their works. Yang's early interest in the political violence that had repeatedly struck the island was echoed by his pictorial and stylistic violence, seen in works such as *The Behavior of Game Playing: Fighting Section* series (1987). Starting in the 1990s, he introduced a new direction for the quest for a cultural image of Taiwan. Dissatisfied with the fact that the label 'Made in Taiwan' is known worldwide to indicate inexpensive products of mediocre quality, Yang flung himself into the fabrication of a rich cultural image under those same words. Between 1992 and 1995,¹⁴ Yang gradually shifted roles from political activist to historical essayist, and his expressionist style gave way to a less painterly, print-like and meditative style, which gave his work a sense of historicity. Yang was among the earliest Taiwanese artists to include the Dutch colonisation in the 16th century as an integral part of Taiwanese history. In his efforts to create the island's own cultural icons, he also made reference to recent archaeological finds, indigenous plants, and animals and birds in danger of extinction.

Alongside Wu and Yang, there were also artists who represented historical memories through more personal means. Su Wong-sheng's (b. 1956, Chiayi) desolate landscapes of colonised sites from the neighbourhood in which he lived and Yang Cheng-yuan's (b. 1947, Hualien) topographical delineations of urban architecture from the colonial periods, juxtaposed with present-day buildings, were further elements in the enterprise of putting Taiwan's history and diverse genealogy in the foreground of contemporary art.

Post-1995, the phenomenal rise of much younger artists, such as Yao Jui-chung (b. 1969, Taipei), was characteristic of the art scene in Taiwan. The phenomenon was in part the consequence of political, economic and cultural effervescence in Taiwan and in part derived from the concurrent shift of international attention toward art from peripheral regions. Both developments encouraged younger artists by providing diverse stages for their works. Yao had been an absorbent reader of such postmodernist and deconstructionist theorists as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes during his studies at the National Institute of the Arts,¹⁵ a new art academy where most of the teaching faculty had

studied abroad. Although often categorised as part of the ‘new breed’¹⁶ generation, a term hatched in the popular culture of Taiwan, Yao took an interest in regional politics and history that was unusual for his generation. In contrast with the direct and provocative approach of the older artists mentioned above, Yao took up a stance that was ‘more universal and more alienated’.¹⁷ For Yao’s generation, which grew up during the tremendously swift transformations of 1980s Taiwan, any serious concern tended to be seen through the lens of distortion and absurdity.

Yao’s father, a government officer, came to Taiwan after 1945 and married a native Taiwanese. ‘Recovering Mainland China’ was a motto at home and in school during Yao’s childhood. In his initial art project, *Recovering Mainland China: Three Episodes. Part I: Do Military Service Revolutionary* (1994–96), Yao transformed his obligatory military service into a form of action performance. After fulfilling the service obligation, he presented the project in the form of documents — a set of drawings on covers of the issues of *Revolutionary* monthly spanning his military service. In these drawings, Yao created an idiosyncratic image of a slim, ghostly figure suspended in the air by helicopter blades. *Part II: Preface-SHISTORY* (a conflation of ‘shit’ and ‘history’) was realised in 1996 as an installation: in a blue-lit space, the same figure took three-dimensional form, swirling delicately over a nowhere land without any definite direction. Yao’s ridicule of the military training for the purpose of ‘recovering Mainland China’ was pathetically explicit. In *Part III: Action* (1997), Yao continued his project by ‘returning’ Mainland China as a symbolic ‘recovery’. During a trip to visit many historical and monumental sites in China, he took photographs of himself leaping high in the air, resembling the slim, floating, aimless figure present in his drawings and installations. Yao’s frozen image in space conveyed an air of absurdity — a state of ungrounded presence.

In the installation *Territory Taken Over — Manoeuvre Sequence I–VI*, Yao also explored Taiwanese history from the point of view of its various stages of colonisation. He emulated animals’ territorial marking behaviour and pissed on the sites where the former colonisers landed on the island, equating landings by the Dutch, the Spanish, the Ming loyalists, the Ch’ing officers, the Japanese and the ROC (‘Republic of China’) Government at different periods. Though it masqueraded as mocking performance,

Yao Jui-Chung
*Recover Mainland China:
Do Military Service –
Revolutionary Document*

August 1994–June 1996
Photograph
Image courtesy the artist



Yao Jui-Chung
*Recover Mainland China –
Action*

Photograph at Tiananmen,
Beijing, 1997
Image courtesy the artist



Yao's work was no less solemn than that of his predecessors in augmenting historical interpretations.

Explaining, in the case of Thailand, how the production of nationalistic art was directed under governmental imperative, Apinan Poshyananda has referred to 'historical amnesia' as a common tendency among colonised countries, particularly when confronted with harsh and humiliating recent histories.¹⁸ Consequently, when consciousness of an independent identity arises, the colonised tend to seek the 'nostalgic' ancient past in an effort to reconstruct the present, and then to invent the future with pride. This observation pertains to Taiwan in the post-martial

law epoch, when there appeared a new scholarly field called Taiwan Studies. Unprecedented passion was aroused to expand Taiwanese history by unearthing documentary materials and excavating archaeological antiquities.¹⁹

Historical amnesia, however, can also occur involuntarily, imposed on the colonised by the colonisers in order to forge a homogeneous identity for originally heterogeneous cultures. To realise this objective, violent mutilations, physical and psychological, are necessary. Chen Chieh-jen (b. 1960, Taoyuan) has taken a position of post-history, questioning the narrative of the official historiographies. Chen was already an active underground performance artist in the early 1980s when non-institutional art activities were highly censored. His site-specific performances²⁰, sometimes in the streets, in desolate buildings or on uninhabited stretches of seaside had him several times on the verge of being arrested. Chen's sensitivity in reckoning 'history' as a subjective construction and personal interpretation of the power structure budded at this early date. After his return to the art world in the mid-1990s, Chen's computer-generated photography series *Revolt in the Soul & Body* aimed to delineate reality and falsification in official history. Focusing on such a-historical fragments as erased memories, derangements or unconsciousness, he sought to question the legitimacy enshrined in 'history'.²¹

To visualise the psychological ruptures inflicted by forced amnesia and the obliteration of history,²² Chen selected appalling images from historical archives that document inhumane public executions across human history.²³ To make the viewer aware of the historical fabrication and to draw attention to the blurred boundary between 'the real' and 'the fake', Chen incorporated his found historic images into a fabricated 'history'. He carefully substituted his own image for every figure in the original document by 'over-painting' on the document indirectly via the digital touch

Chen Chieh-jen
*The Image of
Identical Twins*

1998
225 x 300 cm
B & W photograph
Image courtesy the artist



pad. As a result, the viewer finds in these atrocious scenes that the executor and the executed, the victimiser and the victimised, the spectator and the viewed are all, in fact, the same person. Further depth was given to these computer-painted photographs by blowing them up to more than 400 times the size of the original documents.²⁴ With the aid of Photoshop software, Chen was able realistically to re-patch and refill the lost details of aged documents that had suffered the ravages of time. Chen challenged the concept of photography as a medium of the real, which can be reliably quoted as evidence. 'Photography to me is like magic, disguised as technology, that appropriates the human soul ... a mode of death in itself via freezing "reality" on a photographic paper.'²⁵ By converting a particular historical image into an ambivalent, non-specific event, Chen's work successfully acquires universal meaning. Of strong visual and psychological impact, Chen's works induce the viewer to reflect on the mystification and violent power embodied in historical construction.

INVENTING INHERITANCE

From the [Grand] Hotel to the [Taipei Fine Arts] Museum ... there are complicatedly intertwined viaducts ... while part of the highway is not yet complete, yet the other end of it already starts collapsing. An indeed shocking traffic scene, yet, it reveals precisely this society's swift growth and transformation and its political pursuit.²⁶

This comment on the quasi-anarchic and frenzied state of the city-scape by Wolfgang Becker,²⁷ an important figure in helping to pave the way to the international stage for Taiwanese contemporary art in the early 1990s, vividly describes not only the transformation of the city-scapes but also the psychological agitation of the people living in such cities. Rapid urbanisation during the 'economic miracle' of the 1970s and 1980s in Taiwan, shortsighted city construction and overpopulation by urban immigrants make the city a place where the energetic drive of life and the putrescence of death reside concomitantly. It was against the background of this limbo state that many artists set off in their searches for new directions by rummaging through the available traditional inheritances.

As Alice Yang has pointed out, the concept of tradition is fundamental to the 'narrative of nationhood'.²⁸ How to identify a culturally valid inheritance in relation to which Taiwan's diverse identities can find a voice is problematic. Artist Huang Chin-ho (b. 1956) was born and raised in Chiayi, a city where the Chinese Nationalists were particularly oppressive towards the local people, in particular, towards intellectuals during the 28 February Event in 1947 and the subsequent White Terror. Huang consequently had a pronounced Taiwanese consciousness from his youth. A history major at university, he initially practised abstract expressionism and later neo-expressionism in the 1980s, but his one-year stay in New York (1989–90) helped him to recognise the limitations of such derivative practices. Determined to create a unique style to represent the distinct Taiwanese culture, he formulated a Taiwanese aesthetic with a vocabulary distinct from 'those of China and the Western world'.²⁹ According to Huang's observation, Taiwan is currently caught in a dilemma: it has a great will to progress, but a lack of the introspective to support such progress. His masterwork *Fire* (1991–92), a gigantic macabre pageant,³⁰ displays metaphorically the merging worlds of these two conflicting forces in present-day Taiwan. Hermaphrodites occupy the landscape of his canvas. While their corpulent bodies shine with glorious vitality, they also suggest a doomed rottenness that creeps beneath their metallic flesh and is ready to erupt at any minute. The surrealist-looking iconographies that crowd the painting were, in fact,

Huang Chin-Ho
Fire

1991–2
Oil on canvas
Image courtesy the artist



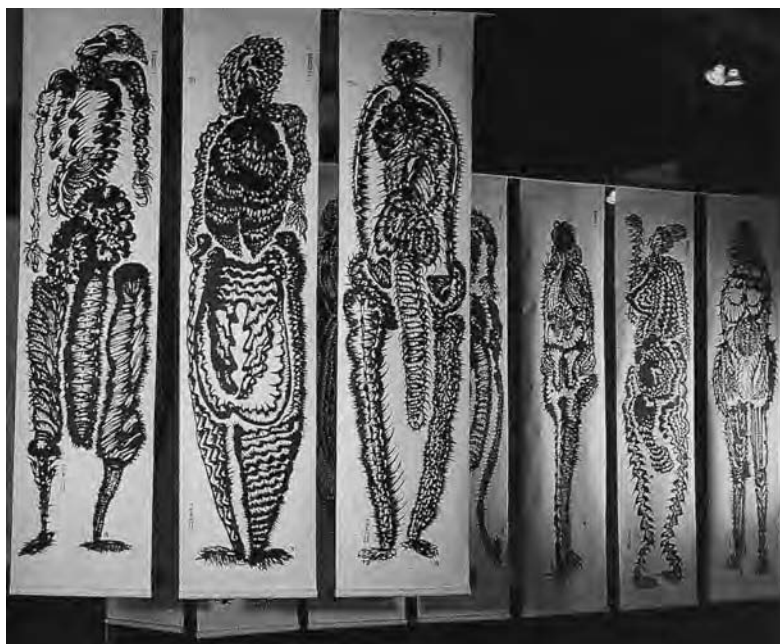
borrowed from daily life in Taiwan. Such details as the garishly ornamented façade of a karaoke club in the post-industrial city, Taichung, the lavish clumps of native flora, the concrete-mould lions on the green-tiled pedestals at local cemeteries, and the cheap-looking replicas of European-style plant basins are all rendered with painstaking realism. Yet the disproportioned and frenzied juxtaposition between human bodies, contemporary architecture, bamboo stalks and sugar cane suggests an illusory space, too materialist and too abhorrent to be real. By employing such raucous colours as voluptuous magenta, blinding yellow and orange and deadly indigo blue, Huang not only builds an idiosyncratic style but consciously resists the elegant tradition of Chinese culture. To him, the timeless Chinese literati aesthetic, which superseded the grassroots artistic experience of Taiwan for so long, was particularly repellent. It is irrelevant to the everyday reality of Taiwan, where the exigencies of materialism and excessive consumerism demand a different and immediate artistic response.

Younger, academically trained artists such as Hou Chun-ming (b. 1963, Chiayi) and Huang Chih-yang (b. 1965, Taipei) are akin to Huang Chin-ho in attempting to find creative energy by examining Taiwanese folk art, Taoist religious festivities and mass-cultural idioms. Although this approach recalls the 'nativist' movement in the 1970s, a reaction to Taiwan's forced withdrawal from the United Nations, these artists of the 1990s did not manifest the nostalgic and self-pitying attitude of the 1970s. Rather, dissatisfied with the narrowness of academic training, they confidently borrowed native Taiwanese elements to critique the institutional conservatism that had constrained people, physically and psychologically. At the same time, they consciously pursued an ambition to focus global interest and attention on Taiwan.

Admitting that the Chinese legacy was an undeniable component in the formation of modern Taiwan, Hou and Huang Chih-yang explored traditional Chinese art forms. Superficially emulating the format of Chinese woodblock picture textbooks (text below illustration), Hou transformed the scale and content of these classics. Disposing of the original Confucian didactic texts, Hou supplanted them with his own erotic prose. Hou's version of the picture textbook is a contemporary apocalyptic vision, which reveals the morbidly materialised and sexualised society that appeared when the political autocracy was suddenly removed.³¹ In

his early large-sized print series *Erotic Paradise* (1992), *Collecting Spirits* (1993) and the city installation *Crime and Punishment in HK* (1997), Hou combined distorted images from Chinese mythology with the tormented human images found in religious exhortation picture texts, still popularly used in Taiwanese temples. His textual admonition, itself a mixture of sexual fantasy and, often, self-derision, was accompanied by illustrations of exaggerated phalluses and breasts, provocative scenes of copulation and horrifying severances of body parts.

In contrast, Huang Chih-yang took Chinese ink painting as a point of departure. His early installation *Hsiao: Maternity Room* (1992) innovated by transforming the two-dimensional hanging scroll into a component of a spatial installation, and also by his deliberate negation of the aesthetics of brushwork, highly stressed in Chinese literati painting. Resisting the transcendentalism omnipresent in the literati tradition, the artist unreservedly devised a mundane altar, configured by phantom-like, heavily inked figures, each of which possessed an extravagant phallus. Moreover, on each of these scrolls, he carefully impressed his seal, reading shamelessly '*baigendang*', that is, 'party of phallicism'. Like Huang Chin-ho and Hou Chun-ming, Huang attempted to find a formal means to capture the urgency of contemporary Taiwan. The phallocratic obsession characteristic of the three artists' works was



Huang Chih-Yang
Maternity Room

Ink on paper
Installation
60 x 240 cm x 27
hanging scrolls
Image courtesy the artist

a generic phenomenon in the officially organised exhibitions of the decade after the repeal of martial law. It might be interpreted as the artists' psychological reaction to the release from political repression. But the energy generated by sudden liberation was soon challenged by social commotion and by the anxiety about locating a clear and positive heritage that would be recognised by all.

GENDER POLITICS: INTEGRATION OF MULTIPLE STORIES

'His/tory has been revised — the rioter may become the hero. How about her story?' This text was inscribed on one wall of Wu Mali's (b. 1957, Taipei) video installation *Epitaph* (1997). A German major in college, Wu became a conceptual artist during her studies in Germany. Returning to Taiwan in the late 1980s, Wu was stirred by the turbulence of political and social change and involved herself with a group, 'Taiwan Archive',³² a temporary coalition that challenged the ideological restrictions that had long confined the Taiwanese people. Wu's early work was neo-dadaist in approach. Her straightforward parodies of socio-political abnormalities did not always succeed in distinguishing her work from what she criticised. Nevertheless, Wu swiftly surpassed this stage of political bluntness and developed more subtle and more personal poetics by inquiring into universal issues, such as power structures. *Epitaph*, conceived for an exhibition commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 228 Event at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum,³³ manifested a crucial shift in Wu's artistic language. Instead of limiting her narration to a single political incident, she challenged the overall patriarchy, which had long existed in the political sphere in Taiwan and was present in all historical writings. One has necessarily to understand Wu's shift in her artistic focus against the social backdrop of continuous political liberations since the 1980s.

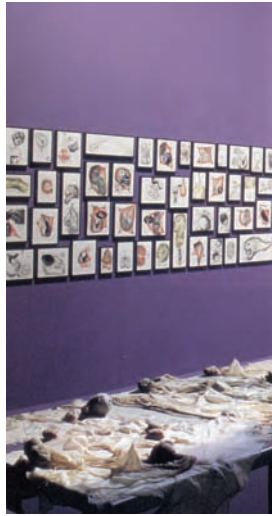
In 1986, the first native party opposed to the KMT was legally formed. This was the first step towards the eventual regime shift that would come about in 2000. With the entrance of the new party, the Democratic Progress Party, into the political scene, a new climate was created in which many former political taboos were challenged, initially at the regional level. Reassessments of former political indictments were undertaken, the most symbolically

significant among them being 'The February 28th Event'. 'The 228 Event' of 1947 started as a conflict between the newly arrived Mainlander soldiers and the local people in Taipei, and then expanded into a campaign of island-wide oppression and massacre of the native Taiwanese. The significance of an officially sanctioned, institutionalised commemoration of the event cannot be overstated. That it took place in the municipal Taipei Museum was obviously a consequence of the election of a DPP mayor in Taipei in 1994.³⁴ This highly symbolic initiative led to subsequent institutional revisions and reinterpretations of past political 'history'. One result was that the concerns of long-disregarded ethnic minorities were addressed and their positions in Taiwanese history were acknowledged. It is not a coincidence that post-modernist theories and their emphasis on dissolving 'master narratives' were popular in Taiwan from the mid-1990s on. A whole catalogue of new philosophical stances entered the vocabulary of Taiwanese artists: feminism and gender politics; body rights and gay rights; the self-realisation of personal memories and family histories.

The escalating prominence of gender consciousness in this society was studied and revealed in such works as those by Chen Hui-chiao (b. 1964, Tanshui). Using needles, dried roses and artificial furs, Chen wove a personal dreamscape of the endangered relationship between woman and man in modern society. On the other hand, Chien Fuyu (b. 1953, Taipei) and Lulu Shurtzy Hou (b. 1962, Chiayi), both using photojournalism, touched on women's issues in more public domains. Continuing her series *Outstanding Women in Taiwan* (1996), Chien expanded the project of writing women's history in *Unbounded Herstory*, a piece commissioned for the 1998 Taipei Biennial, 'Site of Desire'. In this series, Chien documented the social contributions of 13 women from Taiwan, Korea and Japan. While affirming their achievements, the series also shed light on the repressed desire of Asian women for social and family successes. Lulu Hou's community-based³⁵ project *Labors and Labors* (1997) recorded the labour of anonymous female workers in a spinning and weaving mill in Hsinchuan, a major industrial city on the rim of the Taipei Basin. Regardless of the fact that women were an active labour force in constructing Taiwan's economy, hardly any credit was granted to them. Works of this kind manifest a remedial wish to reconcile with the imperfect present and to negotiate with the patched past.

Liu Shih-Fen
*The Multiple Sophism of
Skin and Membranes*

1998
Mixed media/ installation
in the Taipei Fine Arts Museum.



The dramatic emergence of artists such as Liu Shih-fen (b. 1964, Taipei), evidenced the increasing consciousness of gender and power as related issues in Taiwanese society. A professional nurse, Liu had her international debut in the 1998 Taipei Biennial. Her works, such as *Murmurs — 119 Ways to Read Heart Sounds* (1996) and *Multiple Sophism of Membranes and Skins* (1998), play with medical jargon in literary and visual terms. Through a deconstructionist spectrum of human bones and blood, surgical tables and instruments, men's shaving knives, glued stockings emulating men's foreskins, together with the artist's nerve-racking drawings unfolded in the form of an unbounded book, Liu (a passionate reader of Roland Barthes) reconstructed a quasi-clinical site where sexual differences as well as human destiny were constantly questioned.

It should be noted that some male artists also contributed to the emergence of this feminine consciousness, among them Lee Ming-shen (b. 1952, Kaohsiung), with his provocative and at times hilarious performances, which antedated the mid-1980s, when art broke loose from socio-political constraints and artists raised awareness of the rights of individual bodies in public and private spheres. Another artist, Chen Shun-chu (b. 1963, the Pescadores), expanded feminine consciousness through his insistence on a quasi-Boltanskian narration of childhood, family and personal memories.³⁶

UTOPIA: A SITE OF CONSTRUCTION AND SYNTHESIS

Concomitant with continued reforms, the return of more and more artists from studies abroad further enriched the contemporary art scene in 1990s Taiwan. Such artists as Chu Chia-hua (b. 1960, Hsinchu), Ku Shih-yung (b. 1960, Changhua) and Michael Ming-hung Lin (b. 1964, Taipei) drew on various international modes to address local Taiwanese issues. Conversely, their appropriation of the vernacular materials and mass cultural phenomena of Taiwan ‘localised’ their otherwise international styles. Their influence can be seen in the loosening of medium-specific boundaries and the subsequent rise of an expanded range of artistic approaches, such as multimedia installation, video and projection-based installation, non-representational photography, the use of ready-mades, electronic and Net art, etc. These forms were welcomed by younger artists and also stimulated senior artists whose original medium was painting. With regard to socio-political changes, these artists took a more strategic position. Aware of the prevalent discourse of multiculturalism, they recognised local ‘Taiwanese-ness’ as a facet of the cultural difference much celebrated in such theories as the so-termed ‘New Internationalism’. The new interest in exploring a diversified spectrum of forms considerably mitigated the reformist enthusiasm and often harsh and provocative socio-political criticism found among the artists discussed earlier. Wang Jun-jieh (b. 1963, Taipei) and Yuan Guang-ming (b. 1965, Taipei), who both returned from Germany in the 1990s, represent this group of artists, dealing with new media and multidisciplinary installations.

In his highly complicated and accomplished projects, such as *Chinese Secret Place Dishes* (1994), *Neon Urlaub* (1997) and *A Microbiology Association: Clothing Project* (2000–01), Wang fabricated a virtual commercial space, where he designed desirable goods such as Chinese imperial delicacies, rejuvenation pills,



Wang Jun-jieh
Neon Urlaub —
Agency Version

1997
Pamphlet of neon urlaub
Venice Biennale
Image courtesy the artist
Photograph: Jui-Chung Yao

Wang Jun-Jieh
*Neon Urlaub —
Expo Version*

1997
Installation
Venice Biennale
Mixed media
Image courtesy the artist



adventurers' travelling courses, loneliness-reliever underpants, and so on. He cleverly takes over the commercial mechanism of consumerism and succeeds in stimulating desires from the viewers to consume the virtual products in his art project. The difference between the real commercial world and Wang's art may only be the fact that Wang's commodity is not designed for consuming in any real sense. By violating the primacy of capitalist supply-and-demand theory, he invalidates the act of consumption, thereby exposing the vain fetishism usually occasioned by capitalist consumerism.

Also inquiring into the changing modes of perception and cognition in our digital era, Yuan Guang-ming's video-based installations abstract, or rather distill, a single commonplace movement, such as a man running, a face screaming, a fish swimming or a caged bird flapping, from any recognisable daily context. Yuan transposes the banal movement into an alien context where it challenges the gap between how we perceive and what we think. While his earlier video pieces incorporated a strong and visible technical component, Yuan's latest photographic work, *City Disqualified — Ximen District in Day Time* (2002), displays a constructed visual simplicity. The photograph of Ximen District, seemingly taken in one shot, was actually attained by tirelessly repeating the functions of cutting and pasting on a computer. By cutting hundreds of photos taken from the same angle but at



Yuan Guang-ming
*City Disqualified —
Ximen District in Day-time*

2002
Digitally altered
photography
320 x 240 cm
Image courtesy the artist



Yuan Guang-ming
*City Disqualified —
Ximen District at Night*

2002
Digitally altered
photography
320 x 240 cm
Image courtesy the artist

different times and compressing these different moments into a single frame, Yuan constructed a 'utopia' from a familiar place. The busiest district in Taipei, always crowded with traffic, becomes a ghost town without signs of a car or a passer-by.

In their creation of a non-existent sphere, Wang Jun-jieh and Yuan Guang-ming can be said to construct states of utopia. I am emphasising the fictive quality of a utopia, rather than referencing its quality of being an ideal social status. While touching on issues such as the blurring of boundaries between physical and virtual worlds, both reconstruct a sense of alienation and beguilement from daily familiarity. Within the context of Taiwan, this sense of a virtual, unattainable and hence utopic space is particularly poignant. To define Taiwan, as an idea, a nation and a community of the global village, demands the greatest imagination and tireless effort.

At the launch of the first Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1993 at the Queensland Art Gallery, Apinan Poshyananda referred to 'Asia-Pacific' as an idea instead of a location. The concept is applicable to Taiwan, too, in that it also locates an idea in the making. The quintessential cultural 'core' of a Taiwanese-ness remains to be defined and syncretism and eclecticism evidently will be the keynotes in the process of making future Taiwanese culture. In this process, it is all the more important to note the resurgence of aboriginal art in Taiwan about the mid-1990s. While Taiwan's relationship with China remains a conundrum, the idea of Taiwan inevitably retains the colour of a 'utopia-ness', and, by this, I mean an imaginary site. On the other hand, now is also a time to reconsider those century-old notions of nation-state and ethnic nationalism. Globalism, for better or worse, has eroded the boundaries of many former paradigms.

In summary, I will return briefly to the title of this paper, which comes from the utopian modernist architect, Le Corbusier. In response to the advent of the explosive machine age, he claimed, 'A new epoch has begun. There is a spirit of construction and synthesis with a clear conception'. Le Corbusier voiced his perception of 'a brave new world' arriving at the beginning of the 20th century. Nearly a century later, the new epoch has arrived in Taiwan. Although its arrival was instigated by political struggles and although it began with confusion and difficulties, it still expresses an optimistic spirit similar to Le Corbusier's. Just as it

seemed true to him that the construction of a great future entailed the synthesis of different traditions, so I expect that a clear conception of Taiwan's future will be derived from synthesising histories and from bridging cultural breaches.

NOTES

- 1 The anxiety about positing 'who I am' was not merely a transcendental issue; rather, the angst that characterised the daily dramas of Taiwan was translated into the visual in the most bizarre forms. For example, a mobile striptease show could entertain its audience in diverse locations, from an election campaign to a real estate firm's ground-breaking ceremony, from people's weddings to their funerals. It could be said that Taiwan had not yet discovered its autonomous voice in the international symphony of modernity, but nonetheless had already rushed to participate in the postmodernist cacophony. The anguish of self-expression was omnipresent in all types of cultural activities, including visual art.
- 2 Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858) was an active Japanese woodblock (*ukiyo-e*) printer during the late Edo period. Tokaido in this series referred to the various countries between Edo (today's Tokyo) and Kyoto along the west coast of Honshu during the Edo period.
- 3 At the bottom of the image, one sees Taiwan's Presidential Office, a European work of architecture erected originally for the use of the General Governor during the Japanese occupation of the island. Other symbolic elements featured in the installation include a fictional national flag on the wall, combining the ROC ('Republic of China')'s national flag and Japan's *hinomaru*, or rising sun, and, on the ground, circular-shaped *tatami* mats with square holes, each filled with Taiwan's main agricultural products, rice and bananas.
- 4 This means that the attributes of various ethnic groups are institutionally encouraged. For example, the mother tones of the local Taiwanese dialects (largely similar to the dialects used around the south-eastern coastal provinces of China, including Fuchien dialect and Hakka) and those of the aboriginal tribes were incorporated into the elementary school curriculum. This matter of respecting nativist cultural diversities had distinct political ramifications for the various political parties. Unfortunately, cultural debates often ended in an unproductive politicisation of the issue. This situation is still an enormous obstacle for Taiwan.
- 5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso, London, 1983, p. 154. Anderson has insightfully examined the process of how the once-colonised undertook their 'nation-building' through political, historical and cultural imagination and invention.
- 6 For example, German neo-classicism in the mid-18th century. In order to construct a 'German-ness', Frederick the Great of Prussia resorted to the ancient histories of Greece and Rome as a 'point of departure' instead of a

'reference to return'. The ideal antiquity of the Graeco-Roman period was borrowed as a foundation for German cultural identity. Conspicuous current parallels are found in colonised Asia and Africa, where 'nation-building' policies are often linked to the reconstruction of past histories and the generation of a unique cultural present born of constructed ideal ancestries.

- 7 This term is borrowed from Jonathan Hay, 'Time Difference', in *Tracing Taiwan*, an exhibition curated by Alice Yang in 1997. In the article, Hay analysed the uncertain status quo of Taiwan and China and the influence that this provisionality exerted on Taiwanese contemporary artists, p. 15.
- 8 Starting in the early 1990s, a series of exhibitions featuring contemporary Taiwanese art was toured internationally, including to Australia and some European countries. Institutional participation in other international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale, has also taken place since 1995. For a more detailed discussion of the institutional role in promulgating contemporary Taiwanese art, see this author's 'Taiwan: an island of legacies', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999, p. 46.
- 9 'I'm a nihilist. My artistic intention is to critique metaphorically the contemporary political emergencies without an attempt to either reform or search for solutions for the emergency.' Interview with Mei Dean-E by the author, November 23, 2002.
- 10 Being one of the very few available academic institutions with a fine arts department before the 1980s in Taiwan, the Chinese Culture University was notorious for its academic conservatism and its emphasis on the training of Chinese ink painting, so-called *guohua*, that is, 'national painting'. Nevertheless, many outstanding present-day contemporary artists are graduates of this university.
- 11 Each of these portraits is more than 3.1 × 3.1 metres (Mao: 3.1 × 4m, Kiang: 3.1 × 3.4m; Kuo: 3.1 × 3.6m; Deng: 3.1 × 3.6m).
- 12 Information was quickly made available by the increasing circulation of all kinds of news media, magazines, Internet sites, international exhibition catalogues, and so on. International artists such as Yasumasa Morimura, Cindy Sherman and Mariko Mori became popular among local art students.
- 13 Yang also studied at the Chinese Culture University.
- 14 Serial works such as *Yun Mountain Memorandum XL9201* (1992), *Zealandia Memorandum L9301* (1993), *Lily Memorandum L9401* (1994), *Tayouan Memorandum: Tiger L9501* (1995), and so on.
- 15 In counterpoint to the former Governmental staleness in art education and cultural policies, the 1980s witnessed a robust development in 'cultural constructions', aimed partially at rescuing Taiwan's brand from the label of *nouveau-riche*. First of all, the national administration of cultural affairs was made independent from the Education Ministry in 1981, and thereafter was supervised by the newly founded Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA), which oversaw serial infrastructure constructions such as the establishment of art museums and national art academies, and so on. The CCA also promoted culture-related policies, such as the passing of the 1 per cent Public Art Bill (1993). Furthermore, the first National Institute of the Arts (in Guan Du, near Taipei) was opened in 1982 and the opening of the National Tainan Institute of the Arts followed in 1997.

- 16 The English translation for *hsin-hsin jen-lei* given by Paul Cox in his translation for Huang Hai-ming, 'Contemporary Art of Taiwan: virtual connections, criticism, returnings', in the exhibition catalogue *TaiwanTaiwan: facing faces*, for the participation of the 47th Venice Biennale in 1997, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, p. 19.
- 17 Huang Hai-ming, 'Contemporary Art of Taiwan', p. 20.
- 18 In a conversation with Okwui Enwezor and Vishakha Desai, organised by the Asia Society for the event 'Asian Contemporary Art Week' in New York, on November 8, 2002.
- 19 Such historians and cultural workers as Li Xiao-feng and Liu Feng-song in *Taiwan lishih yuehlan (Reading a History of Taiwan)* (Taipei: *tsuli/Independent Evening News* Press, 1994), attempt to retrace Taiwanese history by incorporating the archaeological evidence excavated along the south-western coast of Taiwan in the 1960s. However, theories of the origins of today's aboriginal tribes in Taiwan diversified. In general, scholars agreed that today's aborigines might have migrated gradually from the west (from the Huanan region in China, although there are no longer similar lingual traits nor cultural practices existent in the same region today); from the south (from today's South-East Asia); and from the north-east Ryukyu Archipelago, starting as early as 2000–4000 years ago, about the Neolithic period. The pluralistic lingual and cultural characteristics of Taiwan's aborigines support this theory of diversified origins as well as different migration times.
- The immigration of Han Chinese might have started only after the 12th and 13th centuries and the scale was small and random without governmental administration. In the late 16th-century *Official History of the Ming (Ming shi)*, Taiwan, referred to as Mt Gilong, was listed in the 'Accounts of Foreign Countries' (*Waiguo liezhuan*) together with Japan, Korea, Annam (in present-day Vietnam), Lusong and the Ryukyu Archipelago.
- 20 At the time, Chen was a member of the 'Hsi-Rang Group', a multimedia underground group that experimented in arts of all forms.
- 21 To explain his work, Chen said, his interest is in the 'aphasiac history concealed in dusks ... belonging to the site of forgetfulness'. The quotes are from Chen's statement on 'The Magic of Appropriating People's Souls', edited and translated from Chinese by the author.
- 22 The complexities among memories, consciousness, unconscious memories and forgotten or suppressed memories buried in the subconscious realm, and so on. See, for example, Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Also, Sigmund Freud, 'Repression' (essay, 1915).
- 23 The initial image Chen selected was shot in 1905 by a Frenchman, George Dumas, and was edited in Georges Bataille's *Les Larmes d'Eros*. This series so far consists of 13 computer-generated photographs, nine of which are historical documents, such as the castration on the street of Shanghai, the decapitation of Communists in Canton, the Japanese massacre of the aborigines in Taiwan, and so on.
- 24 'I scanned the image, which was already unclear, into my computer, and then blew it up so that the image appeared to have a topographic texture, like historical relics revealed in the mist ...' Quote from the artist's statement.
- 25 Chen's statement on 'The Magic of Appropriating Human Soul', edited and translated from Chinese by the author.

- 26 Wolfgang Becker, 'Taiwan: Kunst Heute', in *Taiwan: Kunst Heute*, catalogue essay for the exhibition, organised by Taipei Fine Arts Museum and Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, 1996, p. 9.
- 27 At the time, he was the director of Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst at Aachen. Taiwan's successful participation in the Venice Biennale since 1995 was accomplished in part through his assistance.
- 28 Alice Yang, 'High and Low: the cultural space of contemporary Taiwanese art', catalogue essay in *Tracing Taiwan: Contemporary Works on Paper*, the Drawing Center, New York, 1997, p. 13.
- 29 Artist's statement, exhibition catalogue, *Taiwan: Kunst Heute*, p. 194.
- 30 *Fire* spans 815 x 400cm.
- 31 'The beheaded Xintien after his defeat by Ti ... transformed his nipples to eyes, his navel to mouth and continued swirling his weapon. This image of visceral metamorphosis and alienation undertaken to continue struggling shocked me. What I found most alarming was not merely the supernatural metamorphosis, but rather the insurmountable regret and hatred enshrined in all mythologies'. Artist's statement, exhibition catalogue, *Taiwan: Kunst Heute*, p. 194.
- 32 Membership of 'Taiwan Archives' included such local artists as Lee Ming-sheng and Hou Chun-ming, as well as several artists studying abroad, Chang Cheng-ren, Lien Te-ch'eng and Wu Mali. It is interesting to note the group's percentage of male members.
- 33 The first direct mayoral election in the de facto capital Taipei in 1994 marked a historical turning point with the election of Chen Shui-bian, candidate of the Democratic Progress Party. The change of regime at the metropolitan level foreshadowed the eventual replacement of the KMT at the national level, with Chen becoming the first Taiwanese president from the so-termed opposition party. During Chen's mayorship in Taipei, many important cultural projects were undertaken, including the release of formerly unutilised national properties for cultural uses, the founding of the Memorial Museum of the February 28th Event, as well as the onset of the annual exhibition commemorating the 228 Event at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum in 1995.
- 34 Belonging to the special political district, the Mayor of Taipei was, at one time, appointed directly by the President. The direct ballots for the Taipei mayor took place for the first time in 1994 and resulted in the election of the candidate from the Democratic Progress Party.
- 35 Organised by the Municipal Cultural Center in Hsinchuan, an industrial satellite city of Taipei.
- 36 In his corpus of photography installations from the 1990s, *Conference: family parades series*, Chen persistently photographed his family or used old family photos. His works, examining personal memories and history, contributed to the development of sites of intimacy and femininity, and also stood apart from the nationalistic statements prevalent during the fervent decade of 1985–95.

THE ENIGMA OF JAPANESE CONTEMPORARY ART

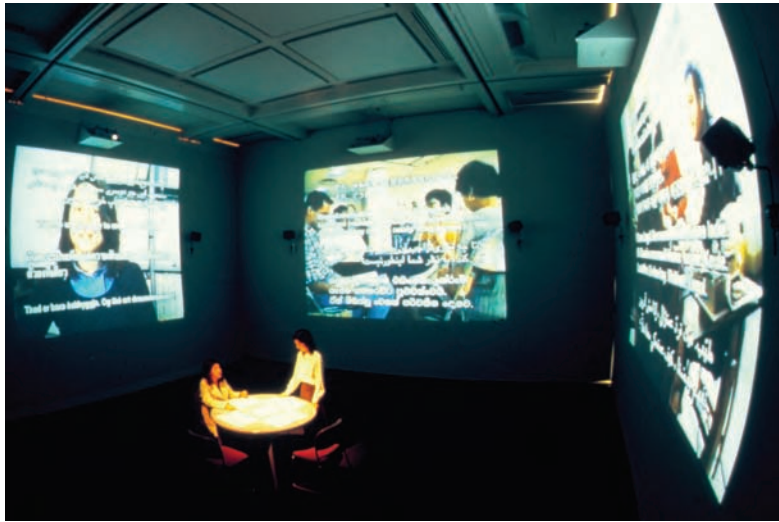
Caroline Turner

JAPANESE CULTURE AT the beginning of the 21st century is undoubtedly at an intersection of past and future. At the heart of this intersection are centuries of cultural traditions, deep spiritual beliefs embedded in Shinto and Buddhist religions, a view of the world profoundly influenced by respect for nature, as well as the societal pressures caused by Japan's amazingly rapid reconstruction after World War II to become one of the world's most advanced industrial technological societies. This short introduction to Japanese art cannot hope to cover all the important artists and movements in 20th century Japanese art and, as it is written from the perspective of an 'outsider', it can hardly be definitive. I will concentrate for the most part on linking developments in art to social change in Japan in the postwar era and on movements and artists with whom I have worked in exhibitions that I have organised or curated in the past 20 years.

The title of this essay is drawn from Karel van Wolferen's book *The Enigma of Japanese Power* published in 1989. Its provocative theme was that Japan was the economic titan of the 1980s and a major world power, 'yet [it] does not behave the way

Shigeaki Iwai
Dialogue

1996–99
Installation at
The 1st Fukuoka Asian Art
Triennale 1999, comprising
video projections, table,
chairs, sound
114 x 1006 x 1310 cm
(approx.)
Collection: the artist
Image courtesy the artist



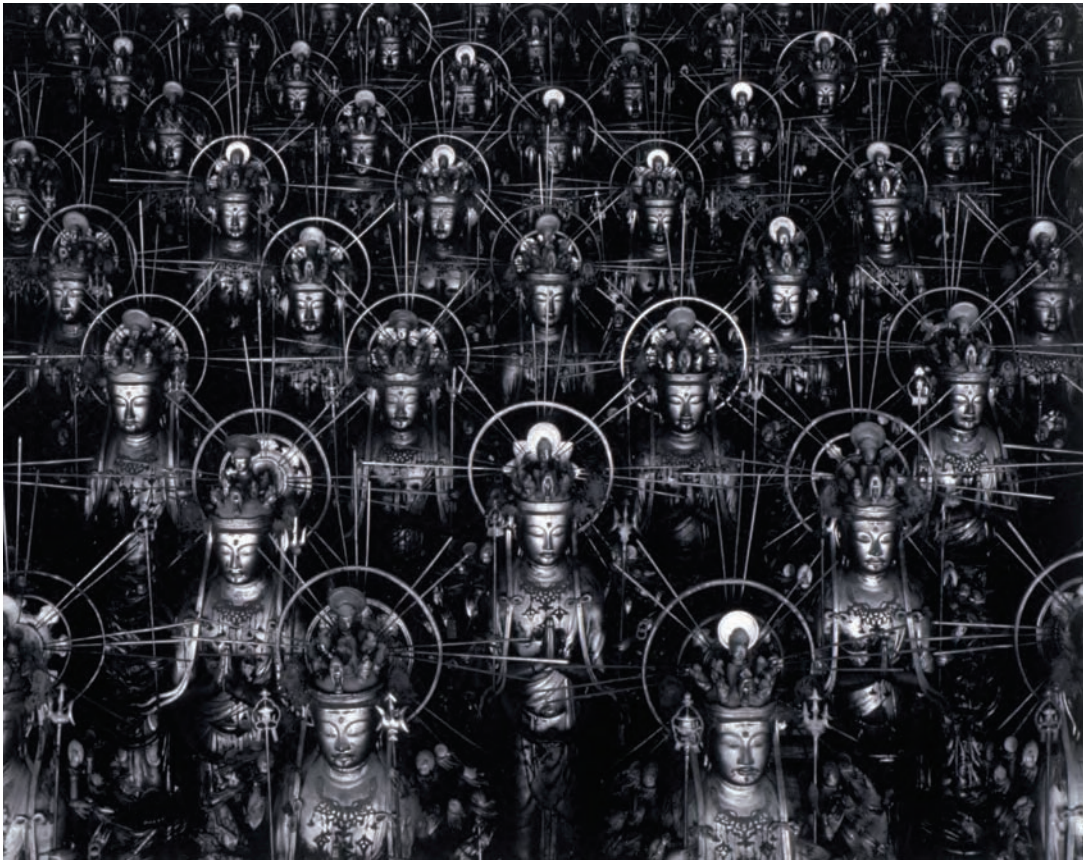
most of the world expects a world power to behave' and 'sometimes gives the impression of not wanting to belong to the world at all.'¹ Van Wolferen went on to stress that it is 'almost an article of faith among Japanese that their culture is unique ... ultimately different from all others ...'² Other works by Japanese and foreign authors at the same time forecast pre-eminent Japanese power and influence in the 21st century. Fifteen years later, especially since the bursting of the 'bubble economy' in 1990, it is a very different picture that is presented. Notwithstanding recent evidence of recovery, serious economic and financial dislocations still persist. Public confidence has been shaken since the early 1990s by economic problems and political scandals, as well as by what has been perceived as poor management by the authorities of incidents affecting public safety and notably two events in 1995: the natural disaster of the Kobe earthquake and the sarin gas poisoning attack in the Tokyo subway by the Aum millenarian cult. There have also emerged increasing generational divides. In the past few years, the economic challenge of the growing power of China has also had an impact.³ To understand how 14 years of recession and uncertainty have affected artistic and cultural life, it is necessary to look first briefly at the development of modern and contemporary society and art in Japan.

Japanese society has had a dynamic commitment to a national ideology of modernisation and engagement with the West since the Meiji restoration of 1868 when the nation's leaders decided to open Japan to the world. The focus then was on

building a rich country and a strong military and on gaining technological knowledge to meet the West on its own terms. And, in the 20th century, Japan more than any other country has forced the West to come to terms with Asia. This was true militarily in Japan's stunning defeat of Russia, a great European power, in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–05), and, 37 years later, during the Pacific War, when, in 1941 and 1942, Japan inflicted crushing blows on the United States and on the British and Dutch colonial regimes in Asia and the Pacific. It was true again in the post-World War II period when Japan rapidly threw off the despair of defeat and the trauma of events such as the fire bombing of Tokyo and the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to emerge as the world's second-largest economy in the second half of the 20th century. Japan was an ally of the United States in the same period, although as Glen St. John Barclay suggests, having professed to have renounced war, Japan was virtually absent from the world scene diplomatically:

Japan has twice attempted to find its identity in attempting the impossible. It has twice failed in these attempts, despite efforts which approached the superhuman. Reactions to the trauma of double failure have more or less naturally been characterised by a resolve to ignore or evade the reality of failure. The perduring response to the catastrophe of the Pacific War was for example to adopt what can only be termed a negation of national policy: the world witnessed for decades the schizophrenic spectacle of the world's second largest economy and second most technologically advanced nation playing virtually an absent role in world diplomacy, professing to have renounced war as a national option while maintaining the world's third largest defence budgets and still refusing to commit its military even to UN peacekeeping operations except in what might be termed purely civilian roles. It was doubtless convenient for Japan to forget that it ever had imperial military ambitions.⁴

Japan has, on the one hand, been seen as a society with a dominant ideology of conformity to rules and to national interest yet, on the other hand, and at the same time, as having a negative concept of leadership and power.⁵ Despite the lack of involvement in the international field of war and politics, culturally, Japan has,



Hiroshi Sugimoto
Hall of Thirty-Three Bays

1995
Black-and-white gelatin
silver prints
50.8 x 61 cm (each)
Image courtesy
Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo

particularly since the 1970s, significantly, indeed profoundly, influenced world culture. Japanese contemporary architecture, art, cinema, animation, photography, consumer electronics, food, film, fashion, music and popular culture all have a high penetration in Western and globalised societies, especially among young people. But the paradox continues. Masatoshi Nakajima and Reiko Tomii point out: 'Another criticism Japanese artists have suffered involves their lack of focus on and active *engagement* with socio-political issues, which probably resulted from the traditional and academic attitude that regarded artists solely as aesthetic'.⁶ There has also been considerable institutionalised conservatism in the arts and, I would argue, a stifling of much radical activism in art through this means.

Despite Japan's cultural influence, in intellectual and artistic terms, its at once eclectic and yet unequivocally distinctive culture has been open to misunderstanding. Japan has, as Midori Matsui notes, a twin image in the outside world:

The repeated deployment in international discussions of two images of Japan — as inheritor of an exquisite courtly culture and as high tech superpower — has testified to the ineradicable Western constitution of Japan as an ‘empire of signs’, in which formalism has replaced philosophy as the central guiding principle. Presenting manifestations of such a formalism, the two stereotypes also embody the two sides of the same prejudice. In fact, however, ... many Japanese individuals possess critical rationality, i.e. the ability to detach oneself from the constraints of a dominant ideology and use reason consistently in response to the specific demands of local disputes. The critical attitude, which is similar to what Karatani [a Japanese literary critic] once defined as the consciousness ‘exterior’ to Japan’s ambiguous power structure, exists most strongly among those who accept the modernization (Westernization) of Japanese culture as an opportunity for enrichment: those with the hybrid consciousness that can accept the decenteredness of contemporary society, in which legitimation has become more provisional than ever due to the co existence of diverse viewpoints.⁷

Beneath the surface there are undoubtedly ambiguities even in Japan’s own interior image of itself. For example, the myth of a monocultural Japanese nation, which was perpetuated until the 1990s, ignored significant minority elements in the population such as the Ainu indigenous people of Hokkaido; the Okinawans; the resident Korean population; the Burakumin, a minority of about three million people (ethnic Japanese belonging to the now outlawed caste system but who still face social discrimination); and the immigrant guest workers who now may be needed in greater numbers to reinforce an ageing population.⁸

Fumio Nanjo notes some of the contradictions in the Japanese self-image:

Japan was forced to abandon a large part of its heritage because of defeat in war, but it also gave up much, of its own free will. Since then, the Japanese have alternatively shown a lack of, and an excess of confidence in their own culture. There have been recurring cycles of rejection and acceptance of foreign cultures, and conflicting cultural elements have existed simultaneously.⁹

Influential architect Arata Isozaki goes further, first emphasising ‘a posture by which the Japanese community has consistently sought out its own identity — its belief in a self-sameness, nurtured for more than ten centuries’ in opposition to the Western intrusion of the modern and in seeing a negation of national policy as consistent with the ‘decay of the [Japanese] nation-state’ beginning in the 1970s: ‘Economic activities gradually took over the initiative once conducted by the nation-state.’ Japanese cultural history, Isozaki argues, reveals a clear pattern: ‘... after periods of large-scale social unrest caused by threats from the exterior, there is a reactionary importation of new cultural artifacts from abroad, and then a period of their “Japanesque-ization” ... the twenty-first century, which supposedly marks the end of the present Japanesque-ization, should also mark the onset of another cycle, beginning with civil unrest.’¹⁰

Japanese art mirrored the changes in Japanese society even earlier through cycles of opening and closing to the world. Masayoshi Homma, in discussing Japanese art, has applied the concept of a sequential pattern of ‘adoption and adaptation’, whereby Japan has since ancient times looked to its own west — the Asian mainland — in particular to China (but also Korea), periodically to open and close its doors to new ideas.¹¹ Homma noted the way in which Chinese art since the Tang Dynasty had influenced and then was adapted within Japan to form a distinctive Japanese art. By the Meiji era, Japan looked to a different source of ideas — Europe and the United States: ‘In 1876 the government established the Kōbu School of Art and, by inviting a number of prominent Italian artists to Japan, actively introduced the art of the West.’¹² New art forms (especially oil painting) were introduced and the former traditional style became known as *nihon-ga* (Japanese traditional painting) to distinguish it from the *seiyo-ga* (Western style painting). These styles remained separate, the former being usually described as becoming inward looking and the focus of the desire to preserve Japanese tradition. But we should note that there are contradictions in this story as well and other voices, such as those of Tenshin Okakura (known also as Kakuzo Okakura), the author of *The Book of Tea*, who founded the Tokyo School of Fine Arts in 1889, was director of the Imperial Museum and a major influence on art history studies in Japan and who pursued traditional approaches (*The Ideals of the East* linking

Japan with the great traditions of Asian art), but with some synthesis with new ideas, including those drawn from the West.¹³

In Japan today, as Junichi Shioda argues, 'contemporary' art, which is experimental and globally directed, is still distinct from 'traditional' art, which is shown in different museums and is hugely popular.¹⁴ There are, however, contradictions, such as radical expressions in new calligraphy which are contemporary expressions of traditional art forms. Traditional art forms are still very important in Japan and include textiles, ceramics, lacquer, sculpture, flower arrangement, garden design as well as painting and calligraphy. These traditional arts or crafts of Japan have also been enormously admired and collected in the West. As Emiko Yamanashi points out, from the time of the Paris Exposition in 1867 onwards, 'Japan participated in virtually every important exhibition' including Chicago 1893 and Paris 1900 and the high quality of Japanese art and craft had a major impact on Western audiences.¹⁵ It is important then to bear in mind that Japanese art had exposure and admiration in the West from the 19th century and Japanese aesthetic approaches, especially *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, were influential in Western art in the late 19th century when the term *Japonisme* was current. In the 20th century, Japanese design was again immensely influential in Europe, the United States and Australia.¹⁶

Western art was also enthusiastically received in Japan from the late 19th century. Today Japanese art collections are full of impressionist and post-impressionist works. Many Japanese artists in the late 19th and early 20th century went to Paris and engaged with new art movements such as impressionism and post-impressionism and, later, fauvism, futurism, dada and particularly surrealism, which had a strong impact in Japan. John Clark draws attention to the specific and distinctive modernity in Japan in the interwar years and the development of a new type of personal identity in this era, before the ascendancy of militarist ideology in the 1930s. Clark notes as well several artists who were active participants in European art, not just as followers or imitators.¹⁷ A Japanese avantgarde could and did engage with European art in this period and helped create a space for the reception of modern art in Japan as Clark demonstrates, but he also points to the complexities in understanding developments in art in that era.¹⁸ As Masayoshi Homma and others have argued, the avantgarde died in the conservative ultra-nationalistic atmosphere

of the 1930s. And most historians of Japanese art see a break between the art of the interwar years and the contemporary art that developed after the war. The war era was a time of patriotic production, but defeat and occupation brought dramatic change and the powerful influence of the United States.¹⁹

After the war there was a natural reaction to the war ideology and the styles and sentiment of much wartime art. Postwar art reflected anti-war themes: Chimei Hamada's frequently reproduced 1954 etching, *Elegy for a New Conscript*, shows a young soldier, thin, dressed in rags, a tear running down his cheek with his rifle in his mouth using his toe to press the trigger to kill himself. This work summarised the feelings of an artist who was himself conscripted straight from art school into the army and sent to fight in China.²⁰ Yasuo Kazuki, a teacher, also mobilised and sent to China, depicted his capture by the Russian army and privations as a prisoner in Siberia.²¹ Similarly, in 1949 Masao Tsuruoka, later an abstract painter, in an early psychologically penetrating painting *Heavy Hands*, showed a surrealistic depiction of a man clutching at himself with huge hands, a work linked to

Masao Tsuruoka
Heavy Hands

1949
Collection: Museum of
Contemporary Art Tokyo
Image courtesy Museum of
Contemporary Art Tokyo



the depression and deprivation of the immediate postwar world, in which food shortages led to malnutrition and people were forced to live in homeless poverty in underground tunnels near railway stations.²² A 1955 painting by Hiroshi Nakamura depicts violent protests by Japanese farmers against the resumption of their land to expand the American airbase at Tachikawa. In the painting, police battle with emotional protestors.²³ In the same period, Kikuji Yamashita painted works such as *The Tale of Akebono Village* (1953) about exploitations of a cruel landowner in a realist style. The artist also depicted subjects such as the scars of atomic bomb victims and produced works critical of the behaviour of American occupation troops.²⁴ The late 1940s and 1950s had brought forth a number

of powerful art works, many in a social realist style inherited from pre-war movements including Soviet styles and fused with modern movements such as surrealism, which positioned art and artists on the side of social justice.²⁵ Although some such works are hung in the permanent galleries of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, they are rarely seen in international exhibitions.²⁶

Traditional values in Japan were challenged by the defeat in the war but the art system was rapidly reorganised with official exhibitions resuming from 1946. International exhibitions in Tokyo developed into the Tokyo Biennale in the early Fifties. The Japanese had been making their own films since 1899, and the revival of film-making was another indicator of cultural resurgence. Akira Kurosawa's *Rashōmon*, a powerful story of a rape set in 9th-century Kyoto and told from four different perspectives, won the Golden Lion at the Venice International Film Festival in 1951. In the following year the Japanese began exhibiting at the Venice Biennale, thus signalling their return to the international contemporary art world.

The Fifties were an important period in Japanese art in many ways, witnessing the emergence of a new postwar avantgarde with artist groups such as the Osaka-based *Gutai*, which sought to incite new intellectual debates about Japanese culture. The significance of this postwar avantgarde has been superbly documented in Alexandra Munroe's magisterial exhibition and book *Japanese Art After 1945: scream against the sky*, which toured the United States and Japan in 1994–95 and introduced *Gutai* artists and avantgarde Japanese culture to a new generation of American audiences. This brief description of *Gutai* and the postwar Japanese avantgarde is indebted to Munroe and the other authors of that exhibition catalogue.²⁷ There had been exhibitions of *Gutai* in New York and Europe from the 1960s after French critic Michel Tapié's visit to Japan in 1957. Tapié had helped bring the work of some of the *Gutai* artists to international attention. It is arguable, however, that the subsequent identification of *Gutai* with *Art Informel* (and in the United States with Action Painting) did not do the movement justice. They were also 'mythologized' by Allan Kaprow as 'a forerunner of Happenings' but, as Munroe points out, such identifications with contemporaneous international art movements have led to *Gutai*'s originality and broad range of sources (Eastern and Western) being largely disregarded.²⁸ Munroe

observes that painting remained critical to the *Gutai* group, but the artists avoided political content. However, performances, and works made or 'performed' in ways that challenged orthodox art approaches, became perhaps what *Gutai* is best remembered for. An example was the series of pieces by Atsuko Tanaka, such as her electric dress made from hundreds of flashing light bulbs and electrical elements worn by the artist in performance. The movement remained important in Japan until the 1970s, until the death of its leader Jiro Yoshihara, whose most famous works are his circle series of paintings, inspired by Zen and calligraphy. Munroe writes: 'In the tradition of Zen monk-artists, Yoshihara repeatedly practised his circle paintings as a form of spiritual discipline while pursuing the realisation of a perfect form of modern abstract painting.'²⁹ Kazuo Shiraga, another critical member of *Gutai* who also drew on Zen Buddhism, was an acclaimed *nihon-ga* artist, who began working in oils with a palette knife, then with his hands, then with his feet, in memorable performance spectacles in which he used a rope to let him slide over the canvas. Shiraga was included in an exhibition I organised in 1989 in Australia where, in his artist's statement, he wrote that unless he could create a sense of life and movement his work would not be in his opinion a painting.³⁰ Munroe notes that performances such as those of Shiraga drew on Japanese sources, appropriating traditional content from sources such as Japanese festivals and theatre: 'Whereas the Euro-American Happenings aimed to fuse art *and* life as a critique on the commodification of culture, *Gutai*'s proto-Happenings were an affirmation of art *in* life after the near annihilation of culture'.³¹

New groups emerged in the 1960s, including the artists associated with the *Yomiuri Indépendant* exhibitions, whose aim was to critique society. *Hi Red Center*, founded in 1962 by Natsuyuki Nakanishi, Genpei Akasegawa and Jiro Takamatsu, challenged authority through absurdity. The trial of Akasegawa for allegedly forging a 1000 yen note (a one-sided print copy) for use in an art work was an unintended outcome for a group that was part of the movement that tried to break down boundaries between art and ordinary life by staging public events and street performances. Charles Merewether's forthcoming exhibition on art in the period of the 1950s underlines the experimental nature of this era, the interconnections between the arts and the link between visual art,

music and theatre such as *butoh* ('dance of utter darkness'), which also emerged at this time.³²

It is important to establish, because this is often forgotten, that there was resistance to the influence of the United States both politically and in art. Photographer Shomei Tomatsu documented the American presence and its effects on Japan, including the physical scars of the atomic blasts on the bodies of survivors. The social realist artists of the 1950s were joined by others, among them left-wing political activists who, as well as being concerned with social injustice, were opposed to American cultural influence in Japan and were part of the political opposition to the renewal of the United States–Japan treaty (Anpo), which culminated in major protests in 1960. The neo-Dada artists organised rebellious protests, both physical demonstrations and art happenings against Anpo. Some of the protagonists in left-wing politics on the other hand were drawn back to tradition, in art as well as in politics.³³ The desire to revive Eastern art practice as well as to engage with Western art led to a variety of movements in the 1960s and 1970s. While the United States had undoubtedly been a strong influence on Japan (an influence analysed in several films, such as *MacArthur's Children* in 1984),³⁴ there was a corresponding Japanese influence in the United States, as seen for example, in the enthusiastic and sometimes simplistic interest in Zen by many American artists in the 1950s.³⁵ One artist who is seen as part of both worlds is Japanese-American Isamu Noguchi. But Noguchi's 1952 proposal for a memorial at Hiroshima's Peace Park was



Yayoi Kusama
Narcissus Garden

1966/2002
Stainless steel balls
2000 balls (approx.):
17 cm (diam., each);
installed size variable
Gift of the artist through
the Queensland Art
Gallery Foundation 2002
Collection: Queensland
Art Gallery
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery

rejected because he was an American citizen.³⁶ Other Japanese artists left Japan to live and work in Europe or the United States and became important innovators and participants in international art developments.

Among the best known are two Japanese artists who went to New York in the 1960s and became significant figures in the development of conceptual art: Shusaku Arakawa, whose deeply philosophical works explore language and perception, and On Kawara, another leading figure in conceptual art, best known for his works related to time, such as his famous series of date paintings, each completed on the day designated. Yayoi Kusama went to the United States even earlier, in 1958. Her position in Japanese art is especially intriguing as she is being recognised more and more as an extraordinarily imaginative and original artist and is perhaps only now being fully appreciated in Japan for her groundbreaking work in international movements. She represented Japan at the Venice Biennale in 1993, the first woman chosen to do so; but she made her reputation in New York much earlier as a pioneering figure in minimalism with her monochrome white dot covered paintings known as 'infinity nets', then with objects covered with dots, mirrored rooms and sculptural objects covered with penis shapes made from fabric. She also was involved in 'Happenings' in the 1960s, including anti-war protests, flag burnings and events featuring naked protestors, as with the protest on the Brooklyn Bridge and other famous sites in the revolutionary year of 1968. One of her most famous works is the series *Narcissus Garden*, first shown in Venice in 1966, and consisting of hundreds of reflecting spheres.³⁷ A new version was shown in the Fourth Asia–Pacific Triennial in 2002. Kusama's art is part of her stated intention to overcome personal neurosis and she has based herself since the 1970s in a Tokyo psychiatric hospital. However, her utilisation of 'obsessional' sexual imagery has been linked to her upbringing in Japan's male-dominated society with its highly restricted realm for women and where women artists and curators are still a minority.³⁸

Yoko Ono was another Japanese woman artist whose career was made largely in the West. A recent exhibition on Ono at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo claims to be the first major exhibition of her work in that city and also claims her art as Japanese, inspired by and reflecting 'Japanese aesthetics':

The use of Asian art and thought to inspire new forms of artistic expression is one of the greatest forces in [the] history of modern art. Ono, whose work draws from Zen Buddhism as well as from the minimalist poetics of haiku and Noh theater, communicates certain Japanese aesthetics that have transformed the course of contemporary art. Presenting works that express a kind of metaphysical intelligence and poetic beauty, this exhibition explores the artist as a key transmitter of those non-Western ideas to the international avant-garde.³⁹

We should also note the feminist ideas contained in the work of Kusama, Yoko Ono and Shigeko Kubota in the 1970s. Kubota's famous *Vagina Painting* (seen by some as a parody or at least a counterpoint to the more macho action painting) and Ono's performance *Cut Piece* (the artist sitting in the traditional position of a Japanese woman and having her clothes cut off by the audience while maintaining a blank expression) provide examples cited by Munroe in her discussion of these artists and feminist ideas, drawing also on Kristine Stiles' work on Ono.⁴⁰ It was by leaving Japan that they could break free of what was a male-dominated and hierarchical society.

Japanese artists were indeed now a major presence in the international avantgarde art and especially in the Fluxus movement. About 23 Japanese artists were participants, many as originators in Fluxus and not merely imitators, and Munroe argues that 'Japanese artists helped originate' Fluxus and conceptual art internationally.⁴¹ A critical factor in these years was undoubtedly the Cold War. There was significant radicalism in the arts in Japan in the 1960s, which mirrored the radicalism within Japanese society, as exhibited in events such as the student and other protests of the late Sixties. A symbol of this radicalism was opposition to Expo '70. Reiko Tomii has lucidly described the unease about consumerism, the alliance with the United States and about urban development in this era in Tokyo, a city which, as she notes, by 1962 was home to 10 million people.⁴² The Tokyo Biennale of 1970 was a signifier of Japanese art as now being a part of 'international contemporaneity', when Japanese artists were shown along with 'Euro-American examples of Minimal, Post-Minimal Conceptual art and Arte Povera'.⁴³ An example of the radicalism of the era was the work of Kikuji Yamashita, a war veteran, who was both an activist and an artist dealing with

controversial issues such as American bases and the legacy of the war. In his *Anti-Emperor* series of the 1970s he used contemporary photographs of the then Emperor, Hirohito, juxtaposed in paintings with photographs of war victims, including Asian victims in areas invaded by Japan.⁴⁴ Despite the redefinition and reduction of the Emperor's authority in the new constitution imposed on Japan after the war, respect for the Emperor remained and still remains a cornerstone of Japanese life, and criticisms of the Imperial system take on a much more radical note than would be the case in Europe.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, this has also made the Emperor an obvious symbol for the left in Japan as Vera Mackie has noted.⁴⁶ Criticism of the Emperor or the war is still a difficult subject in Japan.⁴⁷ Such art works thus reveal some of the deep and hidden divisions in Japanese society. The 1970s were something of a watershed for radicalism, but extreme radical groups, such as the tiny Japanese Red Army Faction, carried out attacks around the world, including the 1972 Lod Airport massacre in Israel and two Japanese airliner hijackings in association with other terrorist organisations. There were also some terrorist acts in Japan.⁴⁸

The most significant art movement to emerge in Japan in the 20th century was *Mono-ha* or 'School of Things'. As Alexandra Munroe argues, *Mono-ha* changed the course of Japanese contemporary art 'by positing Asia as central rather than peripheral to contemporary artistic practice and discourse. In contrast to *Gutai's* explosive experiments which became more myth than catalyst, *Mono-ha's* theoretical and formal innovations continued to evolve and be debated well beyond the group's short duration from 1968 through the early seventies'.⁴⁹ I would argue that *Mono-ha*, an intellectual movement of extraordinary depth and breadth, influenced the development of subsequent Japanese art profoundly and its potent philosophical formulations in counterpoint to the Western modernist paradigm have yet to be fully understood. This is especially true in terms of influence in other Asian countries, an influence yet to be fully researched and documented.

The main protagonist, Lee U-Fan, a Korean living in Japan, was a brilliant theorist and a critic of Japan's lack of identity in art. He became a major influence not only in Japan but also in Korea and Taiwan. For Lee U-Fan, 'the world exists as something that transcends myself and something that is impenetrable. I have chosen, in facing this impenetrable Other, to make the Self turn

into the Other constantly. A work represents a relation emerging from an encounter with the Other, and is the space where this takes place.⁵⁰ He also wrote: 'Man will have to learn to see everything as it is, the world as it is, without objectifying the world through man-imposed representation'.⁵¹ Lee, in his writings, also spoke of the interactive contact between objects and the world and of *Mono-ha* 'as an attempt to bring action and things together in such a way that a non subjective world could be brought into being through revelations of space, conditions, relations, situations and time'.⁵² *Mono-ha* artists were concerned with the relationships of objects in space and to the world. They did not use only natural materials such as stone, wood and water but also the products of industrial society such as glass and metal, often in Lee's works in combination with rocks as natural irregular material providing a counterpoint to the industrial materials such as sheets of iron. Lee is also an extremely important painter and here his philosophy was developed, as Reiko Tomii demonstrates, from ink paintings which he began in Korea, following a strict Confucian upbringing, to an engagement with Japanese *nihon-ga* painting after he came to Japan in 1956. In a painting such as *With Winds* (1990), Lee reveals a mastery of brush strokes, where each brush stroke seems to be charged with energy and to inhabit its own world and is, as he once put it, 'breathing the space and awarded "life"'.⁵³ Kishio Suga, another important theorist of *Mono-ha* whose work today remains committed to its principles, wrote of seeking to release objects to 'chance',⁵⁴ such as in his work from 1971, *The Laws of Situation*, in which stones were placed on a sheet of plastic floated on water.⁵⁵ Such works defined a whole movement. Ephemeral and outdoor works were central to *Mono-ha*. The influence of *Mono-ha* continues and is particularly seen in sculpture, installation and outdoor projects, in Japanese art today.

The surge of creative experimentation in Japanese art in the postwar world led to the growth of museums, competitions, exhibitions, festivals and

Kishio Suga
Untitled
(Laying Out the Infinite)

1996
 Metal, plywood boards,
 oil paint.
 Image courtesy Tokyo
 Gallery, Tokyo



symposia. The proliferation of museums and galleries, including commercial galleries, was a feature of the huge economic growth in Japan and did not taper off until the bursting of the 'bubble economy' in the early 1990s. It is true, however, that there was a small circle of elite art institutions for training artists and many young artists had to get their start through the rental galleries, which they had to hire to exhibit their work as there were fewer commercial galleries than in the West. Department stores also had galleries and were popular places for the public to see art, but usually they did not show contemporary art. The new provincial, city and private museums collected internationally from the United States and Europe, as Japan chose to identify with the West as a means of reinforcing its status as a First World power. Private museums played a major part in this process. The Hara Museum of Art and its director, Toshio Hara, an enthusiast for contemporary art, were particularly influential; and Westerners such as myself who wanted to know about contemporary Japanese art all went there. Intellectual art debates and discourse fuelled by journals and art publications such as *bijutsu techō* maintained the level of interest in contemporary art. Despite the fact that art criticism in Japan is often condemned as being limited as a discourse this is not the full story and Lee's writing as both an artist and a critic is an example of the new intellectual shift.⁵⁶ A number of exhibitions of Japanese art were sent abroad from the 1980s on.⁵⁷ But Japanese art retained a hidden or enigmatic aspect for foreigners, as Midori Matsui suggested in the essay quoted earlier.⁵⁸ This is seen in the titles of many exhibitions sent abroad, such as *Cabinet of Signs* or *Zones of Love*. The metaphysical quality of Japanese culture has been the aspect most appreciated by Westerners. Since the late 1980s, however, a change has taken place in the presentation of Japanese contemporary art in the West, with a greater focus on urban society and new technology but more rarely on political or social commentary.⁵⁹

Within Japan itself there have been several important art surveys in recent years. One such exhibition covering the decade 1985–95 was *Art in Japan Today*, assembled for the opening in 1995 of the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo (MOT), a large purpose-built facility situated in Kiba Park, which had grown out of the older Tokyo Metropolitan Museum at Ueno. The then Museum Director, Yasuo Kamon, declared in the catalogue: 'It is

no exaggeration to say that developments of the decade since 1985 are unprecedented in the history of Japanese art.⁶⁰ The MOT exhibition undoubtedly marked a watershed. There were 18 artists in this exhibition. The group 'Dumb Type' and another artist, Kodai Nakahara, were invited but could not participate. The highly influential Kyoto-based group 'Dumb Type' in its emphasis on experimental performance was a symbol of the changes then underway. Its founder, Teiji Furuhashi, created a challenging philosophy for the group, the members of which Yuko Hasegawa sees as the inheritors of *butoh*'s legacy, although differing in method.⁶¹

The 18 artists who were included in the MOT exhibition provide an interesting case study as a slice of contemporary art in the mid-1990s.⁶² Five of the 18 were women, indicating that the Museum was sensitive to the lack of representation of women artists in many shows travelling abroad. Of these, three were painters: Miran Fukuda, Toeko Tatsuno, and Miwa Yoshizawa. They were joined by Chie Matsui, an installation artist, and Emiko Kasahara, who uses a variety of sculptural media, photography, and more recently performance. There were also expatriate artists in the exhibition, including Cai Guo Qiang, a Chinese artist then living in Japan who has since moved to New York and who has made an immense impact internationally. His selection for the MOT exhibition was thus particularly revealing of the greater inclusiveness of Japanese society and the appeal of Cai's artistic philosophy in Japan. His work, *The Orient San-jo Tower*, made from driftwood with seismographs at its base, drew on ancient belief systems from China (and Japan). The catalogue argued that the tower embodied fundamental principles of 'heaven and earth, eternity and the moment', claiming that his art transcended 'the categories of east and west' even though it was based on 'fundamental eastern ways of thinking.'⁶³ Another expatriate was Hidetoshi Nagasawa — a sculptor using a mixture of older and modern materials, such as marble combined with bees waxed steel and brass — who had lived and worked in Milan since 1967, representing Italy in the Venice Biennale.⁶⁴ Tadashi Kawamata was another artist who had undertaken much of his work overseas. He embodies yet another tradition in Japanese art: that of bringing together architecture and art through huge assemblages, usually wooden structures but occasionally prefabricated, grafted on to

existing buildings in many cities in the world as temporary interventions.

Shigeo Toya
Woods III

1991–92

Wood, ashes and synthetic
polymer paint

Thirty pieces: 220 x 30 x
30 cm (each, irreg., approx.);
220 x 530 x 430 (approx.,
installed)

The Kenneth and Yasuko
Myer Collection of
Contemporary Asian Art.
Purchased 1994 with funds
from The Myer Foundation
and Michael Simcha Baeviski
through the Queensland Art
Gallery Foundation and with
the assistance of the
International Exhibitions
Program

Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery

Installation and sculpture were dominant in the selections. Katsura Funakoshi is also a sculptor, producing extraordinary painted wooden portrait carvings of individual people. These sculptured creations link to Western, and especially, Catholic religious sculpture, but above all to a long tradition of figurative wood carving in Japanese art, for more than a thousand years linked to Buddhism and to nature. Nature has remained an enduring theme for many sculptors influenced by the seminal *Mono-ha* movement; but when sculptors Shigeo Toya, Toshikatsu Endo and Kimio Tsuchiya, also in the MOT exhibition, reference nature, they do so in ways which confront the realities of a changing Japanese cultural landscape. Toya and Endo are considered post-*Mono-ha* artists, but they draw on its world view and philosophy. Endo's works, often using charred or burned surfaces combined with water, have an underlying sense of potential destruction inherent in their creation. Toya creates monumental wooden sculptures which draw references from Japanese animist religion and spirituality (and to animist



conceptions of spirits in trees), as well as the long tradition of wood carving in Shinto and Buddhist sculpture. An example is his *Woods* series, an eerie forest of large wooden blocks carved with a chainsaw to resemble trees and painted a ghostly grey to evoke a sense of death and of a petrified forest. Toya's sculpture has its intellectual roots in Japanese traditional arts, religion and philosophy. He explores the spirit or essence of matter on many complex levels.

Kimio Tsuchiya's *Landscape in Silence* is made from the ash of burned wooden houses, demolished in the process of urban development. Tsuchiya, like Toya, has much in common with *Mono-ha* with its respect for the nature of things, and in his earlier work he used stone and driftwood in their natural states to create his sculptures. In these later works, as shown at MOT, he is more concerned with the human element in the destruction of old wooden houses and the loss of the history of the people who lived in those houses. The changes in Tsuchiya's approach since the 1980s have involved a greater focus on urban materials, and the linking of the history of the natural and urban environments with universal human concerns, as well as to specific changes in Japanese life.

Top of picture:
Kimio Tsuchiya
Moon

1996
Wood (Oak, Maku, Japanese Cedar and Japanese Pine)
150 x 450 x 10 cm
(installed)

Bottom of picture:
Landscape in Silence

1996
Ash, steel, glass and tree roots
50 x 500 x 600 cm
(installed)

Both purchased 1996.
Queensland Art Gallery Foundation
Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery



Painting was given a significant place in the MOT selections. Of the painters — Miran Fukuda, Toeko Tatsuno, Kazumi Nakamura and Miwa Yoshizawa — most were less well known outside Japan, although there was a revival of painting in the 1990s. Tatsuno is a significant abstract painter, active since the mid-1970s and was involved in resurrecting painting in the 1980s. Miran Fukuda could be said to represent the younger generation of ‘new wave’ painting: she uses images drawn from popular culture and advertising as well as appropriating European ‘masterpieces’. She had attained a major reputation in Japan by the mid-Nineties as the youngest-ever recipient of the Yasui Prize in 1989 at the age of 26.⁶⁵

Photography in Japan mirrors the high-tech industrial production of cameras, videos, televisions and other means of reproductive imagery. Japanese photography has undoubtedly made a considerable impact abroad. Hiroshi Sugimoto, who has lived in the United States for long periods since the 1970s, is one of the most acclaimed artists of his generation, seen in international exhibitions on every continent. His seascapes shown at MOT are breathtakingly beautiful in their stillness and sameness. Although of many different oceans they are almost identical — he himself described them as ‘images in my memory’.⁶⁶ Sugimoto’s series done in the same year as the work shown at MOT, but not included in the MOT exhibition, *Hall of Thirty-Three Bays*, is equally mesmerising. It consists of 48 black and white photographic prints. Sugimoto’s subject was the 1001 sculptured and gilded Kannon, the *bodhisattva* of compassion, regarded as one of the great historical treasures of Japanese culture and sited at the Sanjūsangendō Temple in Kyoto. This temple, founded in the 12th century, was built, as Sugimoto himself notes, in anticipation of a Buddhist millennium and in fear of the end of the world. In this temple, an archery contest was traditionally held. Archery, or *kyūdō*, as practised in the context of Zen Buddhism, is not an athletic performance but a spiritual exercise undertaken, as with so many other aspects of Japanese culture, to induce a state of selflessness, which releases the protagonist from the division of subject and object. Similarly, Sugimoto’s series at Sanjūsangendō combines a highly technical 20th century medium, photography, with a spiritual exercise related to the creation of the series of photographs, to both record and transcend history and time, fusing past and future, to become perhaps the most portentous artistic work of the end of our millennium.⁶⁷

Nobuyoshi Araki and Yasumasa Morimura are also photographers, but are completely different in their approaches. Araki's images, often in diary format, are also extremely beautiful in aesthetic composition and execution. His oeuvre is as varied as flowers, streetscapes and even a record of the death of his wife, but the subject matter is often disturbing, especially photographs depicting bound naked women and beaten school girls. Yasumasa Morimura's work has been seen in most major Japanese survey art shows since the 1980s. His astounding photographs are computer manipulated to create tableaux, often drawn from Western art history, always with himself in the main role, in which he enacts a variety of parts, masquerades of identity, that cross gender, ethnicity, geography and time. These roles have ranged from the Mona Lisa to Van Gogh and Marilyn Monroe. His *Blinded by the Light* (based on a 16th century painting by Brueghel), seen in the MOT exhibition, showing figures deluded by superficial allures such as designer labels blindly following each other to fall in a ditch, is a telling comment on the rampant consumerism and



Yasumasa Morimura
Portrait (Van Gogh)

1985
Photograph
framed 123 x 102.8 x 3 cm
Type C print
Image courtesy
Shugoarts, Tokyo

designer fashion symbols of the 'bubble economy' of Japan in the 1980s. The MOT catalogue also connected this work to a more baroque world that followed the end of the Cold War — a fascinating concept.⁶⁸ As has been pointed out by a number of commentators in Japan, Morimura's art can be seen to critique the eager and often indiscriminate Japanese embrace of foreign objects and fashions. Morimura emerges as one of the most brilliant artists of the era in his ability to engage with his own society and in his insights into the psyches of Western viewers, returning the gaze of the latter in a series of images that are a disconcerting conjunction of the artist's own ego and Western 'orientalism'.

These last three artists all use the new materials of an industrialised high-tech society to create art. The high-tech present and the ancient traditions of Japanese Buddhism are also found in the work of Tatsuo Miyajima. Miyajima's installations, with the inexorable repetition of digits using LEDs (light-emitting diodes), examines the meaning of time itself with endlessly changing digits relentlessly recording time. The digits are calculated to flash on and off, often in darkness, in grids, circles or randomly. Miyajima views his art in the context of Japan's technological present as well as contemporary Buddhist philosophy from which he draws the concept 'Keep Changing, Connect with Everything, Continue Forever'.⁶⁹

Emiko Kasahara, one of the best-known woman artists in the MOT show, has spent time living in the United States and employs subtle sexual imagery in her work, which includes sculpture, photography and performance. Her incredibly seductive and beautiful sculptures have extended from flower imagery created in marble, to marble urinals and vagina-shaped objects, also seen in MOT. Her work in the mid-Nineties received mixed reviews. Although she was feted as a 'Super Girl' in an article in *bijutsu techō* and other Japanese magazines,⁷⁰ some Japanese critics argued that she has become too 'American' because of the more overt feminist perspective they perceived in her work. An example is her contribution to the 2004 Sydney Biennale consisting of medical photographs of greatly enlarged images of the female cervix, coloured pink. Reiko Tomii in writing about this work for the Biennale catalogue points out the significance of the colour pink in Japan from the 'pink' (sex) industry to the cherry blossom and suggests the work should also be read in the context of the

advances in women's studies made in Japan in recent years.⁷¹ Yet Kasahara also challenges gender characterisations. Her case highlights a dilemma for Japanese women artists and often it is other Japanese women curators and dealers who encourage their work. But the problem, as already mentioned, is that there is also a paucity of women curators and critics in Japan.⁷²

The last artist of the 18 in the MOT show was an illuminating and potentially controversial choice. Yukinori Yanagi has produced a series of extraordinarily compelling works related to the issues of World War II and Japan's troubled history with militarism and conformity. In the MOT show, he exhibited a work exploring cultural crossings through the creation of a living ant farm where the ants moved between perspex boxes filled with coloured sand depicting the flags of the world, redistributing and destroying the designs of the flags in the process. It can be seen as a work about globalisation, but the destruction of the flags is a potent and disturbing concept in most countries, especially in Japan, which suffered defeat within the memory of the current older generation. Yanagi, who has studied in the United States, has done a series of these ant farms all over the world, most notably in Aperto in Venice in 1993, but his treatment of history is more controversial in Japan. His *Hinomaru* series, such as *Hinomaru container* (1992) for example, included an ancient imperial tomb and an illuminated yen sign and the wartime rising sun flag with rays.⁷³ The illuminated neon sign could be seen as a symbol of global commercialism but its combination with the wartime flag transformed this work into a commentary on the identity of the Japanese nation in the 20th century.⁷⁴ Another controversial (and extremely ornamental) work is *Chrysanthemum Carpet* using the Imperial crest but with the petals scattered across a red carpet especially woven for the installation. The carpet also had texts in languages of countries from the 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' (and, Michael Desmond states, the texts also include Shuri, the Okinawan dialect, and the Ainu language.)⁷⁵ On the underside of the carpet are written Articles 19, 20 and 21 of the 1947 Japanese Constitution, which guarantee various freedoms, including freedom of thought and conscience. The concept that the Imperial symbol could be walked on was, to some Japanese, anathema. The artist is concerned with raising questions about national and individual identity in Japan and in

Yukinori Yanagi
Chrysanthemum Carpet

1994
Collection: National
Gallery of Australia
Image courtesy National
Gallery of Australia



so doing opens up questions of identity for human beings in general in the 21st century. In 2002, Yanagi used banknotes representing an imaginary united Asian currency that were folded into origami cranes by his audience, who had their own faces photographed and transferred by computer to the banknotes. The idea of ‘united Asia’ connects to World War II by evoking the ‘Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.’ It also references the way money transforms relationships between nations, and the domination of rich countries over poor.⁷⁶ Cranes may also be intended as well to evoke memories of the folded paper cranes that form a symbol for Hiroshima and the effects of the American nuclear attack.

The selection of artists for the MOT show opened up new issues in Japanese art that challenged previous stereotypes. This was a decade of profound change. Some factors remained the same, including the small number of elite art schools and universities producing artists, critics and curators, and the close-knit network of art authors; however, new museums emerged in the 1990s, including MOT. One of the leading curators in Japan today, Eriko Osaka, has pointed out that much of the talk about the construction of these new museums from the 1980s was about economic activity, dining, shopping, and bringing in more visitors (as indeed was the case with Western museums at the same time): ‘As long as this expectation — or reliance on consumer society —

underlies museum construction,' she states, 'the value of the museum is likely to be measured by the number of visitors.'⁷⁷ Indeed, many Japanese museums, as in the West, have been inclined to focus on 'brand-name' exhibitions, such as 'impressionist paintings' and 'internationally-renowned museums' collections.' As Osaka also notes, however, there were new commercial galleries emerging and more young curators who in turn opened opportunities for contemporary art. High-tech companies came in to support their own galleries, such as Canon Art Lab and Fuji television studios. Companies such as Sony supported new technology in art. Photography, as previously noted, was a particularly strong element in Japanese art from the 1980s. New outdoor sculpture projects were conceived as part of urban design developments. This has in fact been a very important development, linking architecture with art and more recently urban and community planning.⁷⁸

The recession at the beginning in the early 1990s, so brilliantly presaged and portrayed in Morimura's *Blinded by the Light*, saw a major financial withdrawal from museums which continues today. MOT itself is suffering financial problems, as a recent statement to that effect on the Museum's web site reveals.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the Yokohama Triennale, which began in 2001, aimed to open up a new space for international contemporary art in the 21st century. But its full influence is yet to be evaluated. A major new museum is the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo, opened in 2004 in the 53-storey Mori Tower in Roppongi. It is an art museum privately funded by a major Japanese company with internationally renowned art historian, David Elliott, an Englishman, as its first director, assisted by Fumio Nanjo, one of the pre-eminent critics and independent curators in Japan.⁸⁰ In an interview in *Studio International* Elliott stressed the need for education and for art to be connected with life. He stated that the museum (which attracted 750,000 people to its opening exhibition *Happiness: a survival guide for art and life*) would fill a gap: 'The Japanese public are intellectual and do have an interest and mind for contemporary art but the art institutions in Japan

Yasumasa Morimura
Blinded by the Light

1991
Type C photograph with surface varnish on paper on plywood in gold frame ed. 3/3
Triptych: 200 x 383 cm (overall, framed); 200 x 121 cm (each panel)
Purchased 1996 with proceeds from the Brisbane BMW Renaissance Ball through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation. Celebrating the Queensland Art Gallery's Centenary 1895-1995
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy Queensland Art Gallery



seemed not to have been able to provide an appropriate way to introduce contemporary art to them.⁸¹

A critical issue for Japan for the whole of the period discussed here was the need for increased engagement with the Asian region. MOT showed some contemporary Asian art in the 1990s; however, the pioneer in showing contemporary art from the region had been the Fukuoka Museum, which from 1979 developed its Asian Art exhibitions, later to be the Fukuoka Triennale, specifically to educate Japanese audiences about their closest neighbours.⁸² The Japan Foundation was also a significant player and did much important cultural work to connect artists in Asia. The Asia Center, established in Tokyo for this purpose a decade ago (but now closed), initiated for example a number of contemporary Asian exhibitions throughout the 1990s. Interchanges with Asia have been difficult in Japan because of Japan's earlier record of military incursions in the region. Yasuko Furuichi of the Japan Foundation's Asia Center noted that this is changing, but wrote in 2003:

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 variant 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.⁸³

Looking to Asia is an especially radical departure since Japan has never in the past considered itself part of Asia. At the same time, some Japanese artists have begun to examine issues such as globalisation and multiculturalism, equally challenging factors in a country which has always regarded itself as a totally unique and homogeneous society. One such artist is Masato Nakamura, who is married to a Korean and who studied in Korea.

Examining the different meanings, created by context, of the symbols of 'signs' of globalisation, he selected the brilliant yellow arches of the McDonald's logo as his focus for several installations, creating an illuminated shrine filled with golden light.⁸⁴ This famous symbol was used by the artist in his important Venice Biennale project.

The acutely sensitive subject of the Pacific War has begun to be analysed by Japanese artists, especially by Yukinori Yanagi and Yoshiko Shimada, a female artist who has presented moving installations on the Korean 'comfort women' who served the Japanese army.⁸⁵ Shimada has also done work on the American occupation of Japan and on prostitution. She has also dealt with discrimination against resident Koreans in Japan. In the Gwangju Biennale in 2002 she produced a work in collaboration with Korean women living in Japan, the centrepiece of which was a portrait of a Japanese man in military uniform with the old pre-war and wartime flag of the rising sun with rays. The immediate thought of the viewer was that this was the depiction of a brutal military figure, but the text revealed that this was Shimada's grandfather, who after being forced to take part in the imprisonment and subsequent killing of Koreans in Tokyo after the great Kanto earthquake of 1923 had suffered a breakdown. Thus, the artist focused on a terrible family secret to reveal the conscience of Japanese in relation to such actions.⁸⁶ The artist has had some difficulty, however, showing such works in Japan.

Katsushige Nakahashi's work also explores painful psychological issues of the past, for example the Imperial system and the Pacific War. Invited to show his work in Brisbane, the location of General MacArthur's headquarters during the Pacific War, and in Darwin, which was bombed by the Imperial Japanese forces, Nakahashi re-created life-size replicas of a crashed Japanese Zero fighter made from 13,000 photographs of a model plane. The artist requested that the plane be burned at the end of the exhibitions in Australia, 'returned to zero', a gesture perhaps to the young pilots who wrote Buddhist prayers on the planes when they flew to fight heroically and sacrifice themselves for their country. Nakahashi has recalled his own childhood enthusiasm for a model aircraft and his message is that his children know nothing of the war.⁸⁷ The association of a child's enthusiasm for the toy version and the tragic idealism of the young pilots thus combine movingly

Katsushige Nakahashi
Zero



1998
Installation comprising
photographs, cellophane
tape, air-filled bags,
sound component
114 x 1006 x 1310 cm
Image courtesy Osaka
Contemporary Art Center,
Japan and the artist
Photograph:
Kazuo Fukunaga

Katsushige Nakahashi
Zero # BII



124 Volunteers carry Zero to
Cowra's POW camp for the
burning performance.
(29th Sep. 2002)
Image courtesy the artist

The Cowra performance
followed works created for
Brisbane and Darwin.
Cowra was the site of an
internment camp for
Japanese POWs in Australia
during World War II.

in his Zero work to unravel many layers of meaning, not the least being the unreality of the war for the younger generation. Yet the war has a special significance for that generation: Fumio Nanjo has pointed out that through World War II Japanese lost 'the confidence to trust in the spiritual or invisible values of things and, perhaps, of life'.⁸⁸

Japanese art retains its own in-built contradictions. Those contradictions have always been part of Japanese art, with the philosophical binary concept of beauty and ugliness often utilised

in this context. Masayoshi Homma among others has argued that Japanese art still reflects a duality that goes back to the time of the ancient Jomon and Yayoi peoples, one represented by a style of rich decoration, the other by a style of great simplicity and refinement.⁸⁹ The art produced by contemporary Japanese does, to an extent, manifest a contradiction in the contrasting approaches adopted by artists in the past 10 years.

For example, the art of Kenji Yanobe who creates robots and survival suits (such as his *Chernobyl* series — the artist visited the site to talk with survivors) that thrust us into the world of potential nuclear holocaust, or the work of Rei Naito, a woman artist who represented Japan at the Venice Biennale in 1997, whose delicate tent-like creations contained exquisitely constructed and refined objects of wire, thread, paper textiles and natural materials such as flowers, shells and plants. These tent creations and her fastidious watercolour drawings invoke the female body as well as nature. An earlier, similar work by Naito was described by a Japanese critic as 'returning to the womb'.⁹⁰ Interestingly Yanobe has also produced a survival tank described as a womb-like environment.⁹¹ Yoshihiro Suda is known for meticulously made tiny wooden sculptures of flowers and plants set often in cavernous concrete buildings and possessing an elegance that refers poetically to nature in the modern industrialised world. Shigeaki Iwai, another of the new younger generation of artists in Japan, by contrast, uses technology and video projection to create a supposedly idealised utopian environment (and one, by definition, essentially impossible) in



Rei Naito
*Wait for the Beautiful
Cleanness to Visit You*

1995
Installation
Image courtesy Gallery
Koyanagi, Tokyo
Photograph:
Naoya Hatakeyama



Yoshihiro Suda
Woods

2002
Wood

Photograph: Tadasu
Yamamoto
Courtesy Gallery Koyanagi,
Tokyo

which people of different cultures appear to understand and communicate with one another over a cacophony of sounds in different languages, while in fact remaining mutually incomprehensible.⁹²

Naito, Suda, Iwai, Nakamura and Nakahashi are representative of many younger Japanese artists, exploring not only issues of Japanese society today and in the globalised future but also, in Nakahashi's case, the difficult issue of coexistence with the past. Japanese today have begun to speak of a future which may involve new relations with their Asian neighbours and may not be based on an homogeneous society, which has been the central tenet of Japanese culture. Of course, many Japanese artists today are global travellers and many younger artists, such as Kasahara, also live and work overseas. Arata Isozaki observes that the domain of production and exhibition of art is shifting from the regional to the global, but he also believes that vernacular themes will continue to resurface in Japanese art 'as long as the artists persist in their speculations with and within Japanese, a vernacular language'.⁹³

More women artists have emerged in the past 10 years. Mariko Mori is one who has gained a huge international reputation in the 1990s with her fantasy photographs starring herself. As Ken Johnson points out, she has appeared as 'shaman, mermaid, cyber geisha and visitor from the future' in her computer-manipulated photographs and installations, which connect Japanese traditions with science fiction fantasy. The works also relate to the highly polished commercial face of Japanese culture presented in the West, and one cannot help but see a humorous critique of that culture as part of the artist's intent.⁹⁴ They also, as Midori Matsui suggests, relate to an ironic commentary on the Japanese sexual stereotype and she: 'deconstructs this stereotype of Japanese women by seemingly inviting but then frustrating (her own gaze never crosses with that of anyone else's on the same pictorial plane, designating her otherness within the Japanese space) the Occidental gaze so readily turned on them.'⁹⁵ Miwa Yanagi has done a fascinating series of photographs (which the artist sees as performances), equally as highly polished but reflecting a different form of fantasy. Her elevator girls are positioned in elaborate settings which are computer manipulated. The girls, immaculately dressed in similar uniforms wearing hats and gloves, used to stand in every department store and the offices

of many city businesses to usher clients in and out of elevators. They can be seen to represent, as Gunhild Borggreen notes, ‘idealised standards of feminine beauty’ as well as an ‘anonymous conformity’ in Japan’s consumer society (and, we might add, a subservience akin to the Western concept of liveried servants).⁹⁶ In interviews, Miwa Yanagi discusses the girls as being like store mannequins and expresses her concern about a ‘standardised society’ promoting a ‘sameness’ within.⁹⁷ Yanagi is now turning to depict, through her photographs, other new roles for women in Japan. Her recent compelling *Grandmothers* series has young women in their twenties and thirties imagining their own future and being made up and photographed in settings to represent that future. One, *Yuka*, sees herself with flaming red hair streaming in the wind riding free in the carrier seat of a fast motorbike. Clearly no elevator girl, she may well represent the fantasy ideal of some Japanese women of their future.

A new development in Japanese art since the mid-1990s is the emergence of what has been called ‘neo pop’ and an art related to comics, computers and the subculture known as ‘anime’ built around animation films and cartoons — all immensely popular in Japan. These artists are powerfully influenced by the often extremely violent Japanese comics known as *manga* and the associated subculture.⁹⁸ Artists who draw on both subcultures and popular youth culture include Taro Chiezo, Takeshi Murakami and Yoshitomo Nara. Chiezo has created an artificial world of robots, Murakami fantasy cartoon creations and Nara sinister angry and sad children in an imaginary world, which, like ancient fairy tales, threatens evil and suggests a social malaise born of despair and disillusionment. All are unquestionably disturbing. Midori Matsui has written insightfully on these artists and notes the key role of critic Noi Sawaragi, who defined this new movement in the early 1990s.⁹⁹ While praising these artists for their ambiguous use (and thus implied critique) of Japanese ‘cuteness’, Sawaragi pointed to the fact that Japan now also has seen new violent social developments, such as teenagers who commit bizarre murders.¹⁰⁰ (And contemporary Japan also has a number of those youth who refuse to communicate with the world, loners, and teen suicides as well as teenage prostitutes). Sawaragi writes:



Yoshihiro Suda
Refrain Pain

2002
Wood
Courtesy Gallery
Koyanagi, Tokyo
Photograph:
Nao Tsuda

Japanese art is now changing in a strange direction, retaining [sic] the loss of its ground caused by the reality of Japanese society. In this field of transformation, such causes as interiority, beauty, faith, despair, history and criticism that maintained contemporary art in the twentieth century have evaporated, replaced by the thin, flat, shallow reality.¹⁰¹

At the Second Asia–Pacific Triennial conference, ‘Present Encounters’, in 1996, Takashi Murakami, one of the leaders of this movement and now an international star, whose ‘super flat’ manifesto would later provide a coherent text for this movement and whose painted image of *Mr DOB*, a superficially Disney-related Mickey Mouse image, adorned the posters for the Brisbane Triennial, revealed the social underpinning of his cartoon creation. Murakami was trained as a traditional *nihon-ga* painter, but at university he became involved with animation (the ‘Anime boom’) and the computer subculture of mostly young people known as *otaku*. He studied the dislocations in Japanese society caused by the economic downturn of the early 1990s, political disenchantment with government, and the shock of such events as the Aum Supreme Truth sarin gas attack. He also described the negativity in Japan towards popular culture subgroups but the huge popularity nevertheless of those groups. *Mr DOB* with its huge eyes and slightly sinister expression, emerged as a reaction to a shallow demand for surface attractiveness and as a symbol of disillusionment among young people.¹⁰²

Given these circumstances of disillusionment and the recent uncertainties of the 1990s, it would be consistent if the response of Japanese young people to the new trauma of economic and other issues described in the opening pages of this essay were to banalise its impact by turning their attention to trivialities, or to evade it altogether by concentrating on fantasy. We do see that happening to an extent and art is reflecting such responses. But Japanese art today is predominantly a product of the peculiar circumstances that shaped postwar Japan and took the nation from defeat and despair to its present position in the world. The artists described above provide insight into the real social changes of their society. As well as disillusionment there is idealism and commitment. An example of social concern is the long-running series of art exhibitions associated with Hiroshima city which brought artists from around the world together to create works on the subject of

world peace as part of that city's long involvement with programs of healing to overcome the trauma of the dropping of the atomic bomb.¹⁰³ There has also been in postwar Japanese art exploration of difficult subjects such as the war, the Imperial system and 'comfort women', as well as social issues usually not discussed, such as homelessness in the 2002 series *Cardboard Houses* by photographer Ryuji Miyamoto. Many younger Japanese artists continue the deep concern with the destruction of the environment which has informed much Japanese art for decades, in art works and outdoor projects on many continents dedicated to protecting the natural environment. A recent example is the Echigo-Tsumari Triennale in 2003, known as an 'Arts Festival of the Earth', which included works that reflected on ecological and social issues and connect with communities — for example, Kazunari Nitta created a work dedicated to peace with elderly residents of the Tsumari region consisting of 8,000 hand-stitched handkerchiefs hanging on a local hillside.¹⁰⁴ The 2002 Japan Foundation Asia Center exhibition *Under Construction* included the work of Yoshihi Futana, who has been described as an 'outdoor activist'. His contribution was ten 4-ton truckloads of bamboo creating massive structures in an outdoor garden, a comment the catalogue suggested both on the denuding of forests and new networks of communication.¹⁰⁵ In an exhibition exchange between Australia and Japan organised by Asialink for 2004, *Living Together is Easy*, we see the rationale for the exhibition explicitly focus on the environment, among other societal problems, exemplified by a young Japanese artist such as Kaoru Motomiya reflecting on global environmental issues including the destruction of the Tasmanian rainforest with a work showing an extinct Tasmanian tiger on top of a heap of paper pulp.¹⁰⁶

Japan's representatives at the 2003 Venice Biennale provide a further fascinating commentary on possible change. Commissioner Yuko Hasegawa explained her concept 'Heterotopias' as being 'sites of resistance' and the two representatives, Yutaka Sone and Motohiko Odani, as artists creating 'a space of deviance' in their works.¹⁰⁷ In a previous installation, *Her 19th Foot*, in which 19 monocycles are ridden by 19 people speaking different languages, Sone had been seen to satirise Japan's ideal of social unity.¹⁰⁸ Odani had created mutations which Hasegawa links to geographical isolation and thus both these artists seem to have been chosen to



Kaoru Motomiya
Melancholic Benjamin

2002

Shredded paper, recycled
 paper, Tasmanian wood
 pulp from Metropolitan
 Government.
 Government photo by
 Keizo Kioku
 Exhibition,
Living Together is Easy
 (Asialink Touring exhibition)
 Art Tower Mito 2004
 Image courtesy Art Tower
 Mito, Asialink and the artist

challenge past orthodoxies, thus perhaps signalling a new direction in Japanese art or in Japan's presentation of its own image in art.

There has been a great reluctance from the 1970s to the 1990s to identify Japanese art with social and political content or with issues of controversy, despite the fact that there is also a great deal of Japanese art that can be connected to social issues, as I have argued throughout this essay. The paradox is still there. 'No one knows yet,' as Sawaragi had suggested, 'what will emerge from this field in the twenty-first century.'¹⁰⁹ Enigma is still the essence of Japanese art.

NOTES

This essay is based in part on interviews with Japanese artists whose works I have shown over the years in exhibitions or whose works I selected and recommended for the Queensland Art Gallery Collection as Deputy Director of that institution. Among those were works by Toya, Tsuchiya, Morimura, Lee U-Fan, Sugimoto and others I selected for purchase for the Gallery's Collection between 1990 and 1999. I thank all the artists for insights into their work. I would also like to thank my Japanese curatorial and university colleagues and Australian colleagues, in particular Bill Wise, Vera Mackie and Charles Merewether for their insights.

In Japan the family name appears first. However, many of the artists discussed here are well known internationally by their names in the Western order, i.e., family name last. In this essay, artists' names have generally been put in the Western way with family name last, but in the case of quotations or writings by Japanese critics who are known by their names in the Japanese order this has not been changed. Some names are thus left as in the original text in the Japanese manner with family name first.

- 1 Karel van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, Macmillan, London, 1989, pp. 1–4.
- 2 Van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, p. 14.
- 3 Some commentators argue Japan is still the number two economy in the world; others, number three (using the PPP) after the United States and China. However, there seems no doubt China either is or will be number two on any basis of calculation. Nor will Japan be the third nation to put one of its people in space (since China has already done so); nor perhaps even the third to explore another planet, given the repeated failures which have led the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency to suspend all new launches pending investigation (Martin Fackler and Ichiko Fuyono, 'Mission Impossible for Japan', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 167, 18, May 6, 2004, pp. 32–33). As noted by Yukio Okamoto, former Chairman of Prime Minister Koizumi's Task Force on Foreign Relations, 'there were five or six Japans in China' (Florence Chong, 'Trendlines', *Asia Today International*, 21, 5, October/November 2003, pp. 9–13). In the 1980s, ANU Professor Gavan McCormack cynically critiqued the projects floated in that decade by the Japanese construction industry to colonise space, after having greened the Sahara and Sahel Deserts, dammed the Congo River, constructed a second Panama Canal and dug a new one across the Kra Isthmus (Gavan McCormack, 'And shall Jerusalem yet be built?', *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review*, 12, 3, April 1989, pp. 1–6). Reaction to the growing power of China may be reflected and is strikingly illustrated in the pre-release scenario of one of the newest popular fantasy movies to come out of Japan in the early 21st century, *Godzilla*, the latest sequel to the 1954 film. We will apparently see the monster, created originally by mutation from nuclear tests, go on a rampage after its offspring is killed by humans, wreaking destruction in the United States, Western Europe and Australia, but killed off itself in a combat with the Chinese fire dragon near the futuristic Pearl of the Orient Television Tower in contemporary Shanghai. *Godzilla* plot from *China View* <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english> (accessed May 25, 2004).
- 4 Glen St John Barclay, unpublished manuscript, 2004.

- 5 Numerous books and articles explained that the leader or *oyabun* in Japanese thinking 'does not try to win; does not explain things; does not solve problems; does not manage; and above all does not dance on stage, but remains invisible in the wings while waiting for circumstances to develop so that those on stage will in fact be dancing to his tune'. (Michihiro Matsumoto, *The Unspoken Way — Haragei: silence in Japanese business and society*, Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1988; Glen St John Barclay, 'The *Oyabun* Does Not Dance on Stage: the Queensland Government and the Multi-Function Polis', *Meanjin*, 49, 4, 1990, pp. 689–703.)
- 6 Masatoshi Nakajima and Reiko Tomii, 'Readings in Japanese Art after 1945', in Alexandra Munroe (ed.), *Japanese Art after 1945: scream against the sky*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, 1994, pp. 369–91. They suggest this is changing.
- 7 Midori Matsui, 'The Horizon of Criticism — Fields of Fantasy: the (post) Modernity of Japanese art', in *Gendai: Japanese contemporary art — between body and space*, Centre for Contemporary Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Poland and the Japan Foundation, 2000, pp. 167–72. This quotation at p. 169. Kojin Karatani, author of *The Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (1980), resisted the idea that the West was arbitrator of the modern. See Alexandra Munroe, 'Hinomaru Illumination: Japanese art of the 1990s', in *Japanese Art after 1945*. Munroe argues that Karatani's writing articulated the emerging postmodern in Japan and influenced Japanese cultural studies abroad (p. 343).
- 8 Until the early 1990s, the official position was that Japan was a monocultural country. The Ainu were the original inhabitants of Hokkaido, colonised in the 19th century. Ainu activism gained them recognition in the 1990s. The Koreans have been in Japan for much of the 20th century but lack political rights. The *burakamin* are ethnic Japanese who belonged to the lowest caste dealing with death and butchering in ancient Japan and so were shunned as outcasts. These castes were abolished in the Meiji restoration but their descendants still face discrimination although it is illegal today.
- 9 Fumio Nanjo, 'The Present Situation of Japanese Art', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, pp. 36–37 (p. 37).
- 10 Arata Isozaki, 'As Witness to Post-war Japanese Art', in Munroe (ed.), *Japanese Art after 1945*, pp. 27–32.
- 11 Masayoshi Homma, 'Japanese Expressions', in Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1993. Masayoshi Homma writes (pp. 137–38): 'From ancient times until the modern period Japanese art evolved largely as the result of adaption of Chinese artistic traditions. For example, in painting the linear *kara-e* (Chinese painting) was adopted from Tang China (AD 618–906). In the eighth century, when Japan decided to send no more envoys to the Tang court and close its ports, this form of painting was adapted within Japan, the colourful *yamato-e* (Japanese painting) was born. Later in the twelfth century, contact was renewed with China, then under the Sung dynasty, and continued through the Yuan dynasty (c. 1280–1368). During that time, following

- the introduction of Zen Buddhism to Japan, *suibokuga* or *sumi-e* (Indian ink painting) was also introduced. When Japan again cut itself off in the seventeenth century, this style of painting was in turn adapted by Japan. As a result, the Kano school of painting, a blend of *yamato-e* and *sumi-e*, emerged. Adoption and adaption of art occurred in sequential pattern.’ Despite frequent statements in the West that Japan has a ‘copying’ culture I would argue this does less than justice to the way Japanese society has brilliantly fused ideas over the centuries to create its unique culture.
- 12 Homma, ‘Japanese Expressions’, p. 138. Other critics have noted that a catchcry for Japan in art in the second half of the 20th century was ‘Japanese spirit and Western knowledge’.
- 13 Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, p. 125, briefly mentions this example. For a more detailed analysis see Shinya Koizumi, ‘Tenshin (Okakura Kakuzo)’s View of Asia and the Position of “The Ideals of the East”’, in *Asia in Transition: representation and identity*, Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 2002, pp. 89–92.
- 14 Junichi Shioda, ‘Gendai: a view from Japan’, in *Gendai*, p. 162. Homma, in ‘Japanese Expressions’, p. 138, writes: ‘*nihon-ga*, with its long tradition has resisted the influence of Western painting becoming increasingly introverted and creating its own unique inner world. While still a very important aspect of Japanese art, it does not have a significant role internationally.’ Japanese art has been influenced by Korea as well as China in ancient times, while Japanese culture has also been influential elsewhere in Asia, especially in the 20th century, for example in Korea, which Japan occupied for 36 years, and in Taiwan, also occupied by Japan.
- 15 Emiko Yamanashi, ‘Painting in the Time of Heavy Hands’, in Mark Sandler, *The Confusion Era: art and culture of Japan during the Allied Occupation, 1945–1952*, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution and University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1997, pp. 22–37 (p. 23). See also Shioda, ‘Gendai’, p. 162.
- 16 While Japanese Ukiyo-e prints as well as Japanese design were a primary influence in the 19th century, Japanese ceramics and design was also highly influential in the 20th century.
- 17 John Clark in his seminal study, *Modern Asian Art*, and in the catalogue of the important exhibition *Modern Boy, Modern Girl: modernity in Japanese art, 1910–1935*, put together by Jackie Menzies, head of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of NSW, with Clark as advisor and held at the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, in 1998 (Jackie Menzies (ed.), *Modern Boy, Modern Girl: modernity in Japanese art, 1910–1935*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 1998, pp. 15–24 (p. 21)). I am indebted to Clark in this section on Japanese art between the wars. For a discussion of issues in society see also Vera Mackie, ‘Picturing Political Space in 1920s and 1930s Japan’, in Sandra Wilson (ed.), *Nation and Nationalism in Japan*, RoutledgeCurzon, London, 2002, pp. 39–54.
- 18 Clark points out that artists such as Umehara ‘were to become leading figures of the establishment with a fertile and powerful re-situation of “Japaneseness” within a modernist art’ or in the surrealist work of an artist such as Harue Koga, ‘whose complex thought it must not be forgotten was influenced simultaneously by Zen Buddhism, the work of Chagall, and anarchist socialism’ (Clark, *Modern Boy, Modern Girl*, p. 24). Clark and Tsutomu Mizusawa write: ‘the avantgarde also developed from the

- positioning of the intellectual class by their certification at prestigious and narrowly recruited tertiary educational institutions such as the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, and by their role as mediators of new and mainly European knowledge and styles to which they had a restricted access' (Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, p. 81).
- 19 Homma, 'Japanese Expressions', in *Tradition and Change*. The Japanese people faced the trauma of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (events which have preoccupied much anti-war feeling in Japan since) and the fire bombing of Tokyo as well as military occupation and the occupation years of the war's immediate aftermath. Not much art from these two eras is shown in museums, although some works have begun to emerge in exhibitions since the late 1990s. This is a very sensitive subject. For example, the Japanese Museum of History has for decades had to end its displays in the 1920s and still is only now moving to deal with the war. It has consulted experts in Germany on how to do so.
- 20 Isako Kumagai, *Selected Works from the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT Selected Works)*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1995, p. 9.
- 21 Like many others it took years for him to be able to come to terms with that period in his life (Emiko Yamanashi, in Sandler, *The Confusion Era*, pp. 23–35).
- 22 Hiroko Kato, in *MOT Selected Works*, p. 11. The artist endured years of poverty himself. He had formed the group *Shinjinga-kai* to oppose control of artists in wartime.
- 23 Illustrated, *MOT Selected Works*, p. 14; Yusuke Minami, *MOT Selected Works*, p.15. The event known as the Sunagawa incident, September 13, 1955, had an estimated 5,000 protesters and workers from Trade Unions opposing police (although the protests went on for a much longer period) and was the subject of much media coverage and several documentary films such as *The People of Sunagawa, Wheat Will Never Fall and Record of Blood: Sunagawa*. In the end the base was relocated in the 1970s (www.city.yamagata.yamagata.jp (consulted May 19, 2004)).
- 24 Alexandra Munroe, 'Morphology of Revenge: the Yomiuri Indépendant Artists and social protest tendencies in the 1960s', in *Japanese Art after 1945*, pp. 149–63 (pp. 151 and 152, where this work is illustrated).
- 25 Yusuke Minami, *MOT Selected Works*, p. 15, suggests the importance of social criticism in this era's reportage paintings, such as Nakamura's *Sunagawa*, and an avantgarde approach based on surrealism that gave way in the 1960s to more 'indirect means of expression', linked to the failure of the movement against the 1960 United States–Japan security treaty.
- 26 Exceptions are David Elliott's important examination of postwar Japanese art at the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, UK, in the 1980s (David Elliott and Kaido Kazu (eds), *Reconstruction: avantgarde art in Japan, 1945–1965*, Rizzoli International Publications, New York, 1987) and Sandler, *The Confusion Era*. An important figure in the Arts and Monuments Division of The Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers was Sherman Lee, a highly influential art historian and museum director whose work focussed on historical art. Lee wrote about his experiences in the essay 'My Work in Japan: arts and monuments, 1946–1948', in Sandler's catalogue, pp. 91–102.

- 27 Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945: scream against the sky*, Yokohama Museum of Art, February 5 – March 30, 1994; Guggenheim Museum SoHo, September 14 1994 – January 8, 1995; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, May 31, 1995 – August 27, 1995, pp. 90–91. For example: *Avantgarde Japan, 1910–1970*, Paris, 1986; *Gutai and Action Painting*, Madrid, 1986.
- 28 Alexandra Munroe, 'To Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun: the Gutai Group', in *Japanese Art after 1945*, pp. 83–99. It should also be noted that *Gutai* artists were shown by some commercial galleries and dealers in the United States and Europe and great enthusiasm was shown for the work by French critic Michel Tapié, who visited Japan in 1957 and later helped have the *Gutai* artists' work shown in Europe (Paris and Turin) and New York. *Gutai* artists were also included in an exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1965, but Munroe points out that the identification with *Art Informel* led to them being seen only as part of a wider movement and not in their own context (Munroe, 'To Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun', pp. 94–97). They were also, Munroe states, 'mythologized' by Allan Kaprow as a 'forerunner of Happenings' (p. 97). Munroe writes: '... by exaggerating those aspects of *Gutai* experimentation that are most similar to *Art Informel* and Happenings, Western and Japanese critics alike have tended to disregard its most original sources — stylistic, cultural, and historical' (p. 97).
- 29 Munroe, 'To Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun', p. 94. Yoshihara is famous for the statement: 'Create what has never existed before' (quoted in Munroe, p. 83). Monroe points out that *Gutai* avoided political content (p. 84). Tanaka's dress is shown illustrated (Monroe (ed.), *Japanese Art after 1945*, p. 107) and in performance (p. 121). The artist is still working and exhibiting today. See her paintings with images of electricity in *Facts of Life: contemporary Japanese art*, Hayward Gallery London and Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 2001. Yayoi Kusama and Genpei Akasegawa also showed in this exhibition.
- 30 *Japanese Ways, Western Means*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1989, p. 60. Shiraga also talked of being drawn to the teachings of a Buddhist saint, Kaiso of the Tang period.
- 31 Munroe, 'To Challenge the Mid-Summer Sun', p. 97.
- 32 Munroe, 'Morphology of Revenge'. Charles Merewether's important new exhibition at the Getty in 2005 will link art, architecture, theatre and performance. See also Alexandra Munroe, 'Revolt of the Flesh: Ankoku Butoh and Obsessional Art', in *Japanese Art after 1945*, pp. 180–201.
- 33 Alexandra Munroe, 'Circle: Modernism and Tradition', in *Japanese Art after 1945*, p. 127, where Munroe quotes Bert Winther [Tamaki] on conservative political moves in Japan in the 1950s that angered many intellectuals and artists.
- 34 The Japanese people reconstructed the nation politically and economically into a major First World power in an extraordinary effort, but this was not without its effects — for example, the female school teacher Komako in Masahiro Shinoda's film *MacArthur's Children* (1984) states: 'our souls are not under occupation' (quoted in Sandler, *The Confusion Era*, p. 50).
- 35 Bert Winther [Tamaki] 'Japanese Thematics in Post-war American Art: from *Soi-Disant* Zen to the assertion of Asian-American identity', in

- Japanese Art after 1945*, pp. 55–67. Winther points to significant Japanese influence on the United States from the mid-1940s to the 1960s. Winther writes: '[David Clarke] delineates a very different kind of influence than the *Japonisme* of the late nineteenth century which was driven primarily by European artists' fascination for the formal properties of the *Ukiyo-e* prints. The Oriental Thought generation, on the other hand, sought to pump meaning and profundity into abstract art by drawing on ideals which they associated with East Asian culture such as detachment, passivity to nature, spontaneity, the void, transiency, chance, and the rejection of rationalism.' Among the artists influenced, Winther notes (p. 57), were Mark Tobey, John Cage, Franz Kline, Carl Andre, William Bazotes, Philip Guston, Jackson Pollock and Ad Reinhardt. Many American artists took elements of Japanese culture and appropriated them as Winther demonstrates.
- 36 Isamu Noguchi was the son of a Japanese poet and an American editor and teacher. For a more recent account, see Bert Winther-Tamaki, *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American artists in the early post-war years*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2001.
- 37 See *Japanese Ways, Western Means: art of the 1980s in Japan*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1989, which I helped organise and where Kusama's sofa and chairs covered with penis-shaped fabric were a highlight. See also Rhana Devenport, 'Yayoi Kusama — It Started from Hallucination', in Lynne Seear (ed.), *APT 2002: Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, pp. 58–61. Devenport points out (p. 61) that this was an uninvited performance where Kusama wearing a kimono handed out leaflets with statements praising her work by Herbert Read and attempted to sell some of the 1500 balls. See also Laura Hoptman, Akira Tatehata and Lynn Zelevansky, *Love Forever: Yayoi Kusama, 1958–1968*, Los Angeles County Museum, Los Angeles, Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Japan Foundation, 1998. Kusama is undoubtedly one of the most significant artists in postwar Japan.
- 38 Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, p. 195–97. See also Akira Tatehata, *Yayoi Kusama*, Phaidon, London, 2000. Issues of gender in Japan are complex. For a recent discussion see Elise K. Tipton, 'Being Woman in Japan 1970–2000', in Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (eds), *Women in Asia: tradition, modernity and globalisation*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2000, pp. 208–26. She examines the model of 'good wife, wise mother' dominant for so long and second wave feminism and women's organisations as well as the changing sociological and economic contexts from the 1970s which have opened up new choices for women. For an earlier period, see Vera Mackie, *Creating Socialist Women in Japan: gender, labour and activism, 1900–1937*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, and Vera Mackie, 'Dialogue, Distance and Difference: feminism in contemporary Japan', *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol. 21, No. 6, 1998, pp. 599–615.
- 39 See the MOT website, http://www.mot-art-museum.jp/eng/ex/plan_h16-01.htm, for the exhibition *Yes Yoko Ono* (consulted April 28, 2004): 'This is the first opportunity to show the art of Yoko Ono (born in Tokyo, 1933) in full scale exhibition in Tokyo. This exhibition will feature approximately 130 of her works, including art objects and films created in the '60s, which were never introduced in Japan on this scale, and large

- installations made in the recent years ... This exhibition is based on the “Yes Yoko Ono” exhibition — a compendium of her lifetime work — organized by the Japan Society, and held in art museums around the U.S., starting in New York (from November 2000 to January 2003). We have added Ex-it (wooden coffin installation) and Morning Beams (rope installation) to the items from the U.S. exhibition.’ This reclaiming of Ono has been going on for a number of years. Ono composed the theme song for the feminist group Chupiren (which was concerned with such issues as abortion and access to contraceptive pills) — see Reiko Tomii, ‘Tokyo 1967–1973’, in Iwona Blazwick (ed.), *Century City: art and culture in the modern metropolis*, Tate Gallery, London, 2001, pp. 198–221 (p. 217).
- 40 Munroe, ‘A Box of Smile: Tokyo Fluxus, Conceptual Art, and the School of Metaphysics’, in *Japanese Art after 1945*, pp. 215–55.
- 41 Munroe, ‘A Box of Smile’. Munroe quotes Jon Hendricks’ catalogue of Fluxus works in arriving at the figure of 23 Japanese who participated in person or by mail from 1961 to 1978 (p. 218) and were associated with Maciunas and Fluxus. Hendricks points out the strong influence of the Japanese on the development of Fluxus ideas and performances.
- 42 Tomii, ‘Tokyo 1967–1973’. A new city was emerging with new architecture to replace older neighbourhoods as a result of both war-time destruction and the new urbanising economy. Traffic pollution was a problem and there were protests against these urban developments. Tomii brilliantly analyses these phenomena.
- 43 Tomii, ‘Tokyo 1967–1973’, p. 210.
- 44 Tomii, ‘Tokyo 1967–1973’, p. 216. The artist was sent to China and after the war made those experiences his main focus, participating also in demonstrations against American bases — see <http://www.legacy-project.org/arts/display.html> (consulted July 6, 2004). He also was shown in the 3rd Kwangju (sic Gwangju) Biennale on human rights 2000.
- 45 Arata Isozaki, ‘As Witness to Post-war Japanese Art’, p. 30, calls attention to the 1986 incident when at the Toyama Museum of Modern Art an art work (by an artist he does not name) using a portrait of Emperor Hirohito was attacked because it was believed to defame the Emperor. The museum was forced to burn the catalogues.
- 46 Vera Mackie points out that the left in Japan have been involved in a critique of the Emperor system in her essay ‘Sexual Violence, Silence, and Human Rights Discourse: the emergence of the military prostitution issue’, in Anne-Marie Hilsdon, Martha Macintyre, Vera Mackie and Maila Stevens (eds), *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Asia-Pacific perspectives*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, pp. 37–59 (p. 47).
- 47 For another important discussion of the troubled response in Japan to history and the war see Tessa Morris-Suzuki, ‘Truth, Postmodernism and Historical Revisionism in Japan’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2001, pp. 297–305.
- 48 <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/jra.htm> (consulted April 27, 2004). The Red Guards were a tiny group but became symbolic of violent extreme terrorism in the era. Arata Isozaki, ‘As Witness to Post-war Japanese Art’, notes that Yukio Mishima’s suicide by *harakiri* and the Red Army’s self-destruction in the 1970s is considered to be the end of right and left ideologies in Japan (p. 29).

- 49 Munroe, 'The Laws of Situation', pp. 257–83.
- 50 Lee, quoted by Yasuke Minami in *MOT Selected Works*, p. 131. John Clark documents Lee as saying his work was recognised in Japan after first gaining recognition in Europe (Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, pp. 164, 265).
- 51 Quoted in Tomii, 'Tokyo 1967–1973', p. 211.
- 52 Quoted in Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, p. 265. For an analysis of Lee's painting in the context of Japanese painting in the era see Reiko Tomii, 'Infinity Nets: aspects of contemporary Japanese painting', in *Japanese Art after 1945*, pp. 307–37. Tomii describes Lee learning ink painting in Korea and how his painting in the 1970s fused his past with Western modernist painting (pp. 314–25). Abstraction was, of course, a very significant force in Japanese painting in the second half of the 20th century and remains so today.
- 53 Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, p. 377. *Mono-ha* is said to have originated in October 1968 with a work by Sekine Nobuo, *Phase-Earth*, a huge outdoor cylinder filled with soil that was created out of a similar void beside it. Lee U-Fan's commentaries then helped define the movement. Outdoor ephemeral installations of natural materials become very important in Japanese art by the 1980s, growing out of *Mono-ha* (Munroe p. 348).
- 54 See also Yoko Watanabe, *MOT Selected Works*, p. 133.
- 55 Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, p. 265, illustrated p. 256.
- 56 See the important section by Masatoshi Nakajima and Reiko Tomii 'Readings in Japanese Art after 1945', in *Japanese Art after 1945*, pp. 369–91, which provides major texts by Japanese artists and critics translated into English. They point out lack of access to texts has resulted in misconceptions such as that there has been 'no viable art-critical discourse' in Japan (p. 380). Nakajima and Tomii also note the 'articulation of the issue of Japanese-ness in the context of Westernized *gendai bijutsu* [contemporary art]' (p. 370).
- 57 Among the most important exhibitions seen abroad have been: *Reconstruction: Avantgarde art in Japan 1945–1965*, Oxford, 1985; *Japan: Des Avantgardes 1910–1970*, 1986–87, Pompidou; *Gutai and Action Painting*, Madrid, 1986; *Against Nature: Japanese art in the Eighties*, which toured the United States in 1989; *Primal Spirit*, which went to the United States in 1990; *A Cabinet of Signs: contemporary art from Post-Modern Japan*, Tate Gallery Liverpool, Whitechapel Gallery and Malmö Konsthall, 1991; *Japanese Art after 1945: scream against the sky*, Yokohama and the United States 1994–95; and *Facts of Life: contemporary Japanese art*, Hayward Gallery, London, and Japan Foundation, 2001. Charles Merewether in a paper presented at the Asian Traffic conference, College of Fine Arts, University of NSW, Sydney, 25–26 June 2004 pointed out an earlier exhibition in the late 1960s curated by William Lieberman which, however, did not include the most avantgarde Japanese art then emerging. Important exhibitions held in Australia include: *Japanese Ways, Western Means*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1989, featuring 40 artists, which I organised with then Director of the Saitama Museum of Modern Art, Masayoshi Homma, and which was curated by Homma, M. Sourgnès and H. Izui; and *Zones of Love*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1991–92. *Japanese Ways, Western Means* included many of the most significant artists in Japan and was the largest of these exhibitions.

- 58 Midori Matsui, 'The Horizon of Criticism', in *Gendai*, p. 169.
- 59 Examples are *Against Nature: Japanese art in the Eighties* and the 1996 and 1999 selections for the Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibition which I curated with Fumio Nanjo and Eriko Osaka respectively.
- 60 Yasuo Kamon, *Art in Japan Today, 1985–1995*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1995 (Foreword). Kamon notes that the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum at Ueno, the forerunner of the new facility, had been collecting art after 1945 but had never been a facility to adequately represent and document and present contemporary art.
- 61 For an excellent analysis of 'Dumb Type' see Yuko Hasegawa, 'The Ritual and the Sense', in *Gendai*, pp. 178–81.
- 62 Nobuyoshi Araki, Cai Guo Qiang, Toshikatsu Endo, Miran Fukuda (f), Katsura Funakoshi, Emiko Kasahara (f), Tadashi Kawamata, Chie Matsui (f), Tatsuo Miyajima, Yasumasa Morimura, Hidetoshi Nagasawa, Kazumi Nakamura, Hiroshi Sugimoto, Toeko Tatsuno (f), Kimio Tsuchiya, Shigeo Toya, Yukinori Yanagi, Miwa Yoshizawa (f).
- 63 Hiroko Kato, 'Cai Guo Qiang', *Art in Japan Today*, p. 48.
- 64 Masato Satsuma, 'Nagasawa Hidetoshi', *Art in Japan Today*, p. 102.
- 65 Yusuki Minami, 'Fukuda Miran', *Art in Japan Today*, p. 60. See also Takeshi Kanazawa, 'Miran Fukuda', in *The First Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, Introduction and scholarly editor Caroline Turner) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1993, p. 73.
- 66 Sugimoto quoted in the catalogue *Art in Japan Today*, p. 114.
- 67 I selected part of this series for the Queensland Art Gallery Collection in 1999. For a discussion of this artist's work see also Alexandra Munroe, 'Hiroshi Sugimoto: Ritual Reality', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999, pp. 224–5.
- 68 Yoko Hayashi, 'Yasumasa Morimura', *Art in Japan Today*, p. 96.
- 69 Tatsuo Miyajima, quoted in Munroe, *Japanese Art after 1945*, p. 223. See also the catalogue *Tatsuo Miyajima: Big Time*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1997.
- 70 Gunhild Borggreen, 'Gender in Contemporary Japanese Art', in Joshua S. Mostow, Norman Bryson and Maribeth Graybill (eds), *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2003, p. 179–200. See also Reiko Tomii, 'Colour of Women: Pink and other works by Emiko Kasahara', in Isabel Carlos (ed.), *On Reason and Emotion: Biennale of Sydney 2004*, Catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales and Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2004.
- 71 Tomii, 'Colour of Women', p. 122.
- 72 An important pioneer gallery was Lunami run by woman director Emiko Namikawa who also organised an important exchange between Australian and Japanese artists in Melbourne and Japan in the 1980s. Many women artists have had difficulty producing and showing political art work. For example work related to the war or 'comfort women such as Yoshiko Shimada. See also *Silenced by History: Tomiyama Taeko's work*, Gendaikokushitsu, Tokyo, 1995 and Horoko Hagiwara, 'Off the Comprador Ladder: Tomiyama Taeko's work', in Sunil Gupta (ed.), *Disrupted Borders: an intervention in definitions of boundaries*, Rivers Oram Press, London, 1993, pp. 55–68. (With thanks to Vera Mackie for bringing this to my attention.)

- 73 Tsutomu Mizusawa, 'Shattered Sea', in *Yukinori Yanagi Pacific*, Fuji Television Gallery, Tokyo, 1997, unpaginated. Elements of this discussion are drawn from my conversations with the artist 1995 in preparation for the 1996 Asia–Pacific Triennial in which Yanagi presented *Pacific Art Farm*, showing the flags of the Pacific.
- 74 Conversations with the artist, 1995, and artist statement.
- 75 Michael Desmond, 'Yukinori Yanagi, *Chrysanthemum Carpet*', in Kate Davidson and Michael Desmond (eds), *Islands: contemporary installations*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1996. This insightful essay provided important facts for my commentary.
- 76 It may also reference, as Morimura also did in one of his works, the trial of Genpei Akasegawa for forging money, as mentioned above.
- 77 Eriko Osaka, 'Japan', in *Beyond the Future*, p. 70.
- 78 An example is the Faret Tachikawa development in 1994 in Tokyo, the emphasis on public sculpture and the large number of exhibitions using site-specific outdoor installation.
- 79 The MOT website, http://www.mot-art-museum.jp/eng/info/s_mes.htm, stated in 2004: 'This museum opened in March, 1995 and has presented many fine exhibitions made up of art selected from the 3800 works in the permanent collection and special temporary exhibitions ... however, the serious plight of the national and regional economy has made the operation of public art museums extremely difficult. In order to deal with this situation, it has become necessary to manage the museum as an independent entity, using a managerial approach that gives priority to the consumer, anticipating and meeting the needs of the citizens of Tokyo'.
- 80 Mori Art Museum (Tokyo): <http://www.mori.art.museum>. Other important museums are: Art Tower Mito (Mito Japan): <http://www.arttowermito.or.jp>; Hara Museum of Contemporary Art (Tokyo): www.haramuseum.or.jp; MOT Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo: <http://www.mot-art-museum.jp/eng/>; Saitama Museum of Modern Art (Saitama, Japan); Setagaya Art Museum (Tokyo): http://www.setagayaartmuseum.or.jp/main_e.htm.
- 81 Kanae Hasegawa, 'Interview with David Elliott, Director of Mori Art Museum, Tokyo', *Studio International*, http://www.studio-international.co.uk/museology/david_elliott.htm (consulted July 2, 2004). Elliott went on to state that while the art was of high quality in Japan there was not enough discussion about contemporary art. His latest exhibition will be undoubtedly an extremely important survey of 57 Japanese artists in *Roppongi Crossing: New Visions of Contemporary Japanese Art 2004*, but the catalogue was unavailable at the time of writing.
- 82 Caroline Turner, 'Cultural Transformations in the Asia–Pacific', paper comparing the Asia–Pacific Triennial and the Fukuoka Triennale delivered at the *Our Modernities: Positioning Asian Art Now* conference, Singapore, February 2004.
- 83 Yasuko Furuichi, 'Introduction', in *Under Construction: new dimensions of Asian art*, Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, 2003, p. 13.
- 84 The author's interview with the artist in preparation for showing his work in the 1999 Asia–Pacific Triennial.
- 85 Interviews with the author, 1998 and 2000.
- 86 Interview by author with the artist at exhibition.

- 87 The author in interviews with the artist when showing his work at the 1999 Asia-Pacific Triennial. The Darwin and Cowra exhibitions took place after that date.
- 88 Fumio Nanjo, in Eriko Osaka and Katy Kline (eds), *Against Nature: Japanese art in the Eighties*, Grey Street Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1989, p. 17.
- 89 Masayoshi Homma, 'Japanese Expressions', in *Tradition and Change*, p. 136.
- 90 Art critic Matsuoka Kazuko, quoted in Borggreen, 'Gender in Contemporary Japanese Art', p. 187. See Chino Kaori, 'Gender in Japanese Art', pp. 17–34, in the same volume for a larger discussion on gender. I am grateful to Vera Mackie for bringing these references to my attention.
- 91 Fumihiko Sujimoto, 'Kenji Yenobe at the National Museum of Art [Osaka]', *Art AsiaPacific*, No. 39, Winter 2004, p. 85. The artist creates an atmosphere for children with survival suits not only for himself but for his dog; however, behind this lies a very serious message.
- 92 The speakers in the videos appear to hold conversations in different languages and be able to understand one another, but this is only so because the artist has scripted the 'Dialogue'. For a discussion of this artist's work and his own description of the project see Eriko Osaka, 'Shigeaki Iwai', in *Beyond the Future*, p. 72.
- 93 Arata Isozaki, 'As Witness to Post-war Japanese Art', p. 30.
- 94 Ken Johnson, 'Mariko Mori's Wave UFO at IBM Atrium', *Art AsiaPacific*, No. 39, Winter 2004, pp. 55–56.
- 95 Matsui, 'The Horizon of Criticism — Fields of Fantasy', p. 169.
- 96 Borggreen, 'Gender in Contemporary Japanese Art', p. 195. Borggreen points out that the backgrounds do not exist in reality but are created from computer software, which creates a surreal element (p. 194).
- 97 Miwa Yanagi, <http://www.jca-online.com/yanagi.html> (consulted May 30, 2004).
- 98 For an insightful discussion of this phenomenon see Midori Matsui, 'The Horizon of Criticism — Fields of Fantasy', in *Gendai*, pp. 167–72.
- 99 Midori Matsui, 'The Horizon of Criticism — Fields of Fantasy', pp. 168–69. One critic to deal with this neo pop movement is Noi Sawaragi, who coined the term 'Lolli(lolita)Pop' in articles such as 'Lolli-Pop is Smallest Form of Life', published in art journals like *Random Egg*, *Studio Voice*, *Bijutsu Techō* and *Flash Art* (Midori Matsui, p. 168). She also notes an important early roundtable discussion about Japanese postmodernity between Japanese critics such as Kojin Karatani and Akira Asada with Derrida in 1984, which set some parameters for an analysis of postmodernism in Japan (p. 168).
- 100 Noi Sawaragi 'Japan as the Contemporary of Fine Art', in *Gendai*, pp. 165–67 (p. 166).
- 101 Sawaragi, 'Japan as the Contemporary of Fine Art', p. 167.

- 102 Takashi Murakami, 'Discussion of the Artist's Work', in Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport (eds), *Present Encounters: Papers from the Conference of the Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art 1996*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane 1997, pp. 118–19. Midori Matsui, 'Takeshi Murakami', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport), Queensland Art Gallery, 1996, p. 69, has described the work entitled 'The hellish madness of the game', a baseball shaped balloon looking at its own face in a mirror and based on a computer game Puyopuyo which cannot be resolved, as like a 'revelation of nothingness' and 'constant arousal without reaching a climax'.
- 103 See for example the 50th anniversary exhibition *After Hiroshima*, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995.
- 104 Described and illustrated in Reiko Tomii, 'Who Needs Globalism? Exploring the Local in Contemporary Art in Japan', *Art AsiaPacific*, No. 39, Winter 2004, pp. 37–42.
- 105 *Under Construction: new dimensions of Asian art*, The Japan Foundation Asia Center, Tokyo, 2002, p. 53.
- 106 *Living Together is Easy*, National Gallery of Victoria and Art Tower Mito, 2004.
- 107 Yuko Hasegawa, 'Heterotopias (Other Spaces)', <http://universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/jpn/e-press.htm> (consulted July 4, 2004).
- 108 Collette Chattopadhyay, 'Yutaka Sone at the Museum of Contemporary Art', *Art AsiaPacific*, No. 39, Winter 2004, p. 90.
- 109 Sawaragi, 'Japan as the Contemporary of Fine Art', p. 167.

KOREAN CONTEMPORARY ART OPENS TOWARDS POLYPHONIC VOICES AS CULTURAL CRITICISM

Soyeon Ahn



Ha Chong-hyun
Conjunction 75-1

1975
Oil on hemp cloth
170 x 245 cm
Collection: Leeum
Samsung Museum of Art

BY ALL OUTWARD appearances Korean contemporary art since the end of the 1980s has been experiencing an era of unprecedented freedom and copious visual expression. Foreign artistic currents, via dozens of tributaries, seeped into the fertile soil of the Korean artistic world, where the effects were found in forms of hybridity. Artists of the previous generations had been tied to the few general principles of the groups they represented. The new generation freed themselves from such restraints and spoke with their own voices. If one was to look for the overriding psychological dimension shared by artists who emerged in the Nineties, it would have to be this liberation from group consciousness and freedom in formative expression.

In such circumstances, comparisons with the previous generations of artists begin with the formal and ideological currents they formulated. That generation who couldn't experience normal sociological, political and economic processes after the liberation from colonisation were interested only in quickly acclimatising themselves to Western modernism while, at the same time, having to endure the suppressions of living under a military government. In addition, in light of both a lack of freedom of expression and the theoretical basis to back that up, the only way for artists before the 1990s to conceive a methodology was through forming such groups.

Liberated from the 36 years of Japanese occupation at the end of World War II, Korea seemed finally to have a chance for

Park Seo-bo
Ecriture No. 41-78

1978
Oil and pencil on hemp
cloth
194 x 300 cm
Collection: Leeum
Samsung Museum of Art



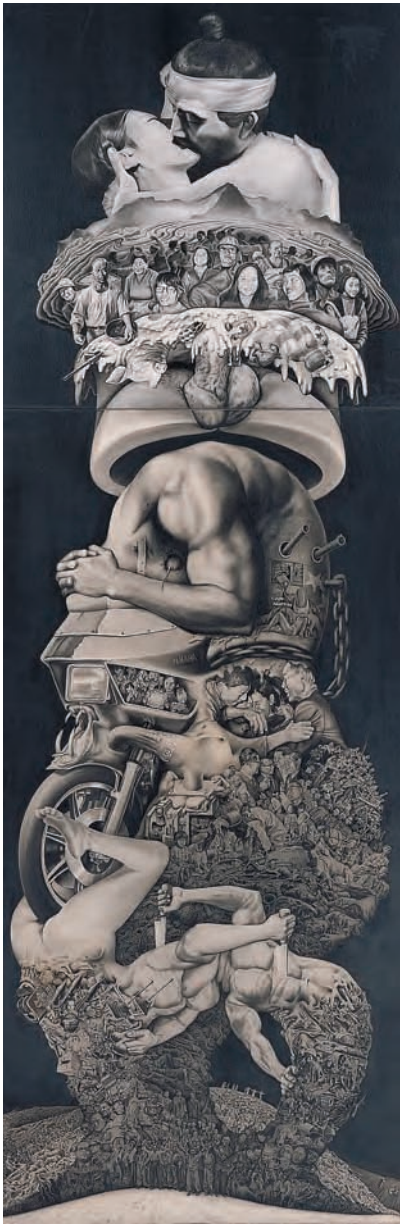
self-determined development. The peninsula was, however, soon divided into North and South Korea due to the Western powers' geopolitical interests and ideological differences. And, in 1950, the Korean War broke out. The war continued for three years, but the economic and cultural destruction it caused required reconstruction in the following decades. As another tragic consequence of the war, many families were torn asunder, and, even to this day, have not been reunited with their lost relations.

The starting point of Korean modern art was in 1957, when an abstract art movement began to take shape with the establishment of the Modern Art Association. Attacking the authority of the established art world as well as long-outdated representational art, the artists in the movement found in the style of *Informel* an apposite outlet for free expression of their suppressed inner energy. Although Korean *Informel* was about a decade behind European *Informel* and American abstract expressionism, they all share the historical condition of being 'post-war'. In addition, the style could readily become the focal point to which the artists could gravitate partly because artists found certain parallels between the abstract expressionist method of expressing existentialist angst via bodily gestures and the notion of *ilpil hwiji* (dashing off with one stroke of the brush) in East Asian calligraphy. Their canvases, notable for intense palettes and dramatic compositions, turned gradually monochromatic through the 1960s. It seems that this change reflects, on the one hand, an



Yun Hyong-keun
Umber Blue 78-79

1978-79
Oil on linen
150 x 210 cm
Collection: Leeum
Samsung Museum of Art



Shin Hak-chul
*Modern History of
 Korea – Synthesis*

1983
 Oil on canvas
 390 x 130 cm
 Collection: Leeum
 Samsung Museum of Art

artistic desire to contain both the material and the spiritual in one unified space of expression, and, on the other, the social atmosphere of the time, which may be described as either stable or repressed.

In the 1970s, monochromism as a conduit for the highest ideals in truth, beauty and goodness in a well-modulated art form, was as influential in Korea as any school of art. As abstract art tendencies in the United States during the Cold-War era and under McCarthyism did, the ‘unpainted painting’ of monochromism in Korea offered a safe passage away from the conditions in the country, where human rights were second to economic development, and a profoundly Korean type of aesthetic was estranged from reality. Thus, while the monochrome painting was critically successful for its portrayal of a unique ‘Korean-ness’, it was also disparaged as formalism that rejected reality.

In response to the monochrome aesthetic, *Minjung* art (literally, ‘people’s art’) entered the scene in the Eighties, emphasising the role of the artist as a witness of society. Despite the deepening oppression by Korea’s military government, it was also a time when theories of Western postmodernism were introduced. *Minjung* art, which one could take as the prime example of collective artistic action in Korean modern art history, completely renounced the formalism of the avantgarde and revived the value of form. The movement should be highly evaluated for expanding art’s role to include that of critical conscience with regard to all intellectual activities and for helping to attain the dream of social transformation so important to that generation. Nevertheless, the very nature of *Minjung* art — it

finds its basis in participatory goal-oriented consciousness — alienated the notion of art that is inspired by individual creativity.

In the late 1980s, with the easing of tension and concern about issues in Korean society, politics, economics and culture, *Minjung* art lost its relevance as a group movement. Once the political situation in Korea gained a measure of stability, *Minjung* art could no longer continue to play the role it had in the early



Lim Ok-sang
Black Bird

1983
Acrylic on paper relief
215 x 269 cm
Collection: Leeum Samsung
Museum of Art

1980s — the socio-historically specific style, which was a lively reflection of reality, albeit disapproved of institutionally. The massive student demonstrations in 1987 forced the military dictatorship to end its repressive rule and to introduce ‘official’ democracy. In 1992, the first democratically elected administration was launched and, with it, the military regime finally exited from the political stage. In the process, *Minjung* art moved from being a resistant, underground culture to an institutionalised culture, thus losing its *raison d’être* as a collective art movement. This changeover was epitomised by the exhibition *The Fifteen Years of Minjung Art*, organised by and opened at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in 1994. The works that criticised the government, which had been presented only at alternative spaces and sites of demonstration, and which, at times, had even been torn down by the authorities, were the object of retrospection and praise at the representative national institution. In this way, *Minjung* art has become recognised officially as a movement and has been incorporated into the annals of art history. And, going one step further, it has now been absorbed into the market economy of art as a collectible commodity or into public art projects. One may interpret this phenomenon as a rejection of ideology, but more likely, it resonates with the worldwide change in cultural studies that emphasised aesthetic popularism or productivity of consumption.



Chung Chang-sup
Tak No. 86022

1986
Mulberry paper on canvas
240 x 140 cm
Collection: Leeum Samsung
Museum of Art

Ideology had been banished by the advocates of post-genre art. And they were in undirected pursuit of a variety of visual languages. From traditional painting and sculpture to the latest media technology and web art, and including everything from popular culture to hidden personal histories in content, the medium of expression and spectrum of interests expanded enormously. Koreans, known for their strong sense of communal identity and ethnicity, began to demonstrate very individualistic attitudes in the 1990s, marking this as a truly significant time. External factors in this process were major international events, such as the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics and the rapid economic growth that followed, as well as various newly available cultural influences. Furthermore, increased opportunities for overseas travel and study enabled almost unrestricted cultural exchange. Thanks to the lifting of restrictions on the press, magazines and daily papers increased their pages in the Nineties. Mass media also

rapidly expanded through a host of new changes, such as the introduction of cable television. Popular culture — including pop music, animation and computer games — was distributed with great speed.

The bonds of poverty and repression had been loosened, and popular interests became more specialised and internalised. The appearance of the Internet diluted the Korean self-conception of a homogeneous race that adhered to a feudal system of order. One specific example of this started a few years ago with a ‘Global Etiquette’ campaign directed at the country’s citizens. Although this was a minor social effort designed to help people develop manners they needed as members of a global community, the underlying reasons included the idea that individual rights and character should be respected.

Because the Nineties was a decade in which the art community could find no one obvious movement, some critics

described it as a generation without direction. There were also critics who called it the individual-centered generation or the 'neo-sensualist' generation. What spurred art in the Nineties, however, was criticism and lampooning of Korea's entire cultural situation and modern civilisation. In contrast with the previous generation, which examined obvious codes such as politics and economic inequality, these artists were interested in minute psychological codes, i.e., power imbalances between people and the irrationalities of everyday life. Moreover, they offered disquieting imaginative takes on existing symbolic codes or created simulated realities in order to ridicule the existing ones. In addition, using varieties of formal expression rejected by the earlier generation, they maximised interactivity with the public and found a method of expression that stressed the personality of the artist. For example, Kim Myung-hye used her own handmade objects to satirise contradictions in modern society. In *Driving up to the Limits* (1995), using a pole-vault appliance and a limbo bar, she ridicules the ever-higher Government goals for growth and the lowering standards of living.

One of the most notable characteristics of art in the Nineties was artists' sensitivity to popular culture, or even low culture, exemplified by kitsch. Leading artists in the Korean art world in the Nineties were born in the Sixties and Seventies, by which time Korea's economic modernisation was well under way. As the so-called TV generation, they had experienced directly the enormous change in the visual environment. This generation has a completely different set of sensibilities from previous generations; they use visual influences such as TV, video and advertising, which they grew up watching, very naturally in their work. At the end of the 1980s, they were consumers of new cultural forms such as rock cafés and cult films. Seemingly effortlessly, they channel their everyday experiences into their work. Bringing policeman mannequins produced for public safety campaigns into an exhibition space, or maintaining that artificial flowers are fresher and more natural than real flowers, Choi Jeong-hwa, when encountering objects on the roadside, often blurts out, 'Hey, that's my work of art'. What that statement implies is that there really is no difference between academism, the art of the previous generation that imitated the West, and the kitschy works of the younger generation of artists.

Another artist who wholeheartedly embraces low culture is Kim Jun. Kim creates stuffed body parts with lifelike skin and tattoos. Although there are some people who may find their own kind of formal beauty in tattooing, in general, it is associated with a certain group consciousness that includes violence, disease, sex and the lower class. Furthermore, in order to emphasise a tattoo, only a certain portion of the body is put on display, suggesting the violence of the harm done to the body and the pain of tattooing itself. The culture of this generation may appear to be foreign, disrespectful and even defiant to the establishment. Not only does its art contain aspects damaging to the formative language, it also offers an innate criticism of society. In contrast with the generation before, this is a type of satire. This generation looks at things by turning them inside out, it deliberately challenges the hierarchy and it picks fights with the dominant authority. The reason why the artists borrow from popular culture to challenge the existing authority may be found in the irrational modernisation that so rapidly rendered Korea an economically wealthy and consumer-oriented society. For this reason, they use kitsch imagery in an attempt to caricature the speed and violence of Korea's modernisation and to illustrate the shallow-minded nature of Korean capitalism and corollary social inequalities. Defining themselves as cultural guerillas, these artists attack the boundaries of art and introduce an unlimited amount of reality into their work, bringing viewers to the dangerous point of questioning even the existence of art itself.

Interest in non-mainstream cultures extends to address not only marginalised classes in capitalist societies, but women and sexual minorities. Certain artists began to show works in which they investigated their own sexual identities, and drew levels of approval and acceptance that were unimaginable in the past. There have been specific rewards, such as the establishment of a non-governmental organisation, Feminist Artist Network, and a biennial Women Artist Festival. In 2001, the Ministry of Gender Equality was established as an independent institutional body in the Government. In addition, large-scale events, such as the International Feminist Film Festival and the International Queer Film Festival, played the important role of turning the younger generation of viewers, who are acutely interested in film, to the issues of social minorities and their civil rights. Once such a social

atmosphere has been created, art works that deal with the same issues can communicate with the same audience.

Being a woman artist in Korea, with its male-based Confucian social order, has involved double layers of hardship. First, because she cannot be a full-time housekeeper, she must endure social criticism. Second, it is the reality that she must always play second fiddle in a male-dominated art world. The awakening of feminism in the art world began in the mid-1980s, but it was only in the 1990s, with the emergence of a large number of female artists with outstanding perceptiveness, that the emphasis on their work increased. Yun Suk-nam, who entered the art world in her forties after only independent studies, has been active enough to be described as the godmother of women's art in Korea. She usually takes discarded items from everyday life, such as old pieces of wooden board, and turns them, with her unsophisticated painting technique, into works that speak for all mothers who, despite the hardships of their lives, are the spiritual centres of their families. Her work *Pink Sofa*, which symbolically portrays the psychological anxiety of middle-class middle-aged women toward life, ambitions and housework, has received a good response.

Lee Bul, who started her career as a performance artist, has selected non-traditional materials, such as fish, food, clothing, balloons, silicon sculpture and film, to exemplify her aggressive investigations into femininity. Works such as *Hwa-Um*, which includes rotting fish decorated with beads and the smell of the fish, and her physical formulation of the quick-witted and strong heroine of fantasy comic books, *Cyborg*, show Lee's interest in depicting the almost violent demands that society makes on women. Kim Soo-ja, also known as

Yun Suk-nam
Genealogy

1993
Acrylic on wood,
xeroxed paper
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Photograph:
Shinomiya Yuji





Lee Bul
Monster

2002

Hand cut polyurethane
panels on aluminium
armature, polyurethane
coating.

300 x 230 x 120

Collection: Leeum
Samsung Museum of Art
Image courtesy
Rodin Gallery

into the fragrance of incense, which symbolises religious ritualism, the work expresses a wish for particularised sexual identities to transcend the boundaries of social biases. The clarity of the work, and its exceptional appeal to the viewer's sense of sympathy, obliges the viewer to feel even a certain solemnity in front of the provocative words.

In the 1990s, however, there was also strong antipathy to the frivolity, excessive sensualism and cultism of popular culture. While the axiom of doing away with the boundaries between life and art was shared by contemporary Korean artists at the end of century, it proved to be impossible to abandon the search for one's essence through grafting on the external reality of industrial society. Some Korean artists warned that contemporary society was an inhumane and mechanised civilisation. With their approach on a comparatively humanistic level to the problems of existence, life and ego, they attempted the grafting of life and art. Because their work apparently involved mostly investigations into personal

the 'bottari' artist, works with fabric, a typical female medium, which, at the same time, being in contact with our skin from the moment of birth to the time we die, is a medium with which to mediate themes of life and death, moving and settling, and confrontation and embrace.

Returning to Korea after his studies in New York, Oh In-hwan presented works that directly expose his homosexuality to the shock of the art world. In his best-known work, *Where a Man Meets Man*, he meticulously writes with ground incense powder the names of gay bars in the area in which he stays. He lights the work, and traces of the incense slowly burning throughout the exhibition period are left for the audience's viewing. By metatthesising the notion of secretive, negatively perceived gay identity

consciousness, they were criticised for not being able to maintain actively the function of mutual interaction with present society. Yet their philosophical approach, especially an Eastern way of thinking which permeated the end of the century, did in fact formulate an alternative of universal sympathy.

A simple installation involving winding and unwinding cotton thread, in Han Myung-ok's abstract take on life and death, included innate elements of ritual performance in the creation of her work. This was a kind of automatic drawing with thread to take the boredom out of everyday life, while the act of taking down and burning objects referred to the ephemeral in life. On other fronts, while technology was one of the main themes of contemporary art, there were artists who held anti-civilisational or naturalist viewpoints towards using technology. Choi Jae-eun buried paper for a long time in the ground and dug it up to look at the microscopic organisms flourishing in it and to show them through a video mechanism. Although this project was possible only through the use of electronic media, what made Choi's work extraordinary was its point that all beings on the planet are subject to recycling, the process akin to that of the Buddhist notion of reincarnation, or *samsara*. Kim Young-jin stuck to low-tech (slide projector) rather than high-tech (video) in his work. This was motivated by his negative reaction to taking chemical reactions and turning them into images. In his work, he introduced drops of water or the participation of visitors into a material presence thereby making his alternative plan to our machine-centered society.

On the other hand, with the beginning of the 21st century, many are anticipating the future of art in Internet-based Web art. The effort to overcome a variety of problems, such as the problem of the original and the copy, and of temporal-spatial limitations in



Oh In-hwan
Process of Where a Man Meets Man in New York

2000
Powdered incense
Dimensions variable

communication, has been debated widely with regard to photography and video art. Art that uses the Internet as its medium is creating much anticipation in Korea, a nation which prides itself as having one of the highest percentages of Internet distribution and one of the largest computer game industries in the world.

Perhaps the most notable artist in this field is YOUNG-HAE CHANG HEAVY INDUSTRIES, who won the 2000 Webby Prize, the so-called Oscars of Web art. Y-H-C-H-I turned their hand to Web art only in 1999, when they participated in Multimedia Art Asia Pacific (MAAP), held in Australia, but, in a short period, they have accomplished a great deal. While most Web-based art works are often plagued with technical problems or stop at the level of producing only visual effects without surpassing conventional Web designs, their entertaining and stimulating works convey the artist's 'conceptual takes'. The viewer sees textual fragments — with frequent sexual connotations — going by rapidly to the jiving rhythms of jazz music. If the characteristic of Web art lies in delivery of information via multimedia, their work, one may say, uses the Web-art system to effectively convey the artist's intention to untangle social contradictions through certain mechanisms of desire.

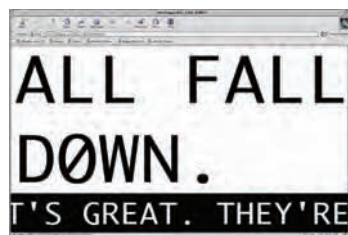
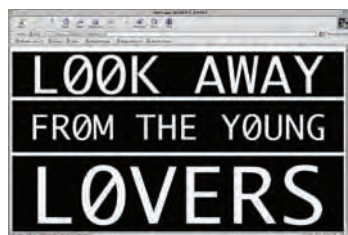
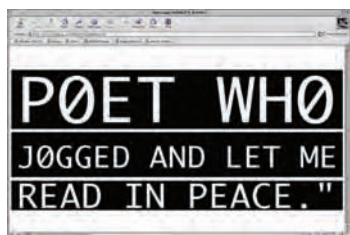
Another factor behind contemporary Korean art's transition from earlier uniform, repetitive styles to the current diversity of individual voices that address reality is a great increase in the number of venues where artists can show their works. In the past,

Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries
Becket's Bounce

2002

Commissioned by <http://www.computerfinearts.com>
http://www.computerfinearts.com/collection/YOUNG_HAE_CHANG_HEAVY_INDUSTRIES/

FROM_SEOUL_LAND/
index.html



it was accepted that the select group of art schools would produce a certain number of artists, and these artists would have their debut shows at rental galleries, which no one really paid attention to. Unless artists aligned themselves with the senior classes above them and conformed to the latter's styles, there was no way for them to exhibit at major galleries or museums. But, since the mid-1990s, a group of new public and private art institutions opened their doors and began to introduce new artists. This illustrious roster includes Artsonje Center, Rodin Gallery, Sungkok Museum, Ilmin Museum of Art, Young-Eun Museum of Art and others. Private museums, founded with funding from large corporations or newspaper companies, have built up new exhibition spaces and are pursuing active exhibition programs and policies. Alternative spaces, such as Insa Art Center, Ssamzie Space, Project Space Sarubia, Pool and In the Loop, are also important launching grounds for young artists. The museums that previously represented contemporary art in Korea — the National Museum of Modern Art, Ho-Am Art Gallery — have been also enthusiastically embracing current changes in contemporary art. Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, especially, opened in October 2004 its new museum complex, designed by Mario Botta, Jean Nouvel and Rem Koolhaas. This phenomenon of diversification of art institutions has had the positive effect of broadening the artistic base.

Recently, contemporary Korean art has also had many opportunities for presentation in the international arena. This is in part thanks to increased cultural exchanges, which have led to frequent visits by foreign exhibition organisers to Korean artists' studios. One must also consider other external factors, such as the opening of the Korean Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1995 and the establishment of three international art biennials in Korea. The Korean Pavilion holds the unprecedented record of its artists



Yun Suk-nam
Gash

1993
Sculpture
Acrylic on wood
15 x 32 x 7 cm
Collection: Leeum Samsung
Museum of Art

winning the Special Prize three times in a row. The three biennials held in Korea — the Gwangju Biennale, the Busan Biennale and Media City Seoul — are also serving as information outlets through which contemporary Korean art is known in the wider world.

Despite such outwardly lavish appearances, the basis of contemporary Korean art is still not firm, and is susceptible to economic ups and downs. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that individual artists are maintaining an acute critical consciousness, regardless of external conditions and changes. One can indeed affirm that the future of contemporary art in Korea is promising.

AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC

ART IN MOVEMENT ACROSS THE PACIFIC

Susan Cochrane

ART IN MOVEMENT

Art is constantly reinventing itself throughout the islands of Oceania, as elsewhere. In the 1990s, a number of authors, including myself, attempted to encapsulate the emergence of 'contemporary art' in Pacific Island nations within paradigms of 'art movements', the creation of national identity in the post-colonial era and 'tradition and change'.¹ Are these paradigms still valid or useful, and to whom? Their appropriateness, or lack of it, are reconsidered in the second part of this essay.

David Bosun
(Australia/
Torres Strait Islands)
Apukaz

2004

Lino print
(colour reduction)

Apukaz is a *muluigal* (Near Western Islanders) dialect for mother and baby dugong. *Apukaz* usually swims in the middle of their *Ulakal* (herds) for protection. The mother would spend a long period of time in shallow waters, training her calf to swim and survive out in the deep open sea.



But first, some reflections on how the flow of ideas and concepts, techniques and processes and their realisation reaches a point of exchange between creative people, stimulating new art. The challenge for the creators is to find audiences for their art, as well as appropriate ways of displaying and explaining it. While they are engaged in this exchange, another artist or group of artists could be stimulated to generate their own response. In the contemporary Pacific, as in the past, such exchanges could result from artists' voyages, when they carry their creative baggage with them.

Perhaps we can trace recent trajectories to see how they interconnect. Our first guide is Epeli Hau'ofa, Director of the Centre for Oceanic Arts and Cultures at the University of the South Pacific. Addressing the opening of the Fijian Red Wave Collective's exhibition in Sydney, he said:

The arts of our ancestors grace the great museums of the world. We have not yet matched our ancestors, but pay tribute to them for the inspiration they give us. The standard we set is their standard. Instead of looking to the standards of international art, we go back to our ancestors whose work is extremely good and we try to measure up to them.

We are not interested in imitating [Western art] and asking our artists to perform dances for tourists. It is time to create things for ourselves, create to established standards of excellence which match those of our ancestors.

There is no such thing as the 'art of Oceania'. 'Oceania' does not exist, except as a geographical fiction, and 'Oceania' is a term that is not ours. But we [prefer to] use the term 'Oceania' instead of 'the Pacific' because we are not a tame and peaceful people.²

At the Centre for Oceanic Arts and Cultures at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, we are trying to create art forms — visual, dance, music — that transcend our individual culture. The ocean is our sea of islands. One thing we all have in common is the ocean, the same sea washes the shores of all islands and also the coastline of Australia and New Zealand. The only time when the whole of the Pacific unites is when we unite to protect our ocean.

Instead of concentrating on our diversity, what we are trying to do is to create things that people from all over Oceania can

see and say 'it's ours'. [We seek] ways of creating new regional forms and movements, and encourage people to share and celebrate these with us.³

A geographical fiction ... a world in perpetual motion ... How can one make a case for 'contemporary Pacific art' — grasp a defining moment? Locate an anchoring proposition? Find an artist exemplar? Perhaps by following a few artists for a few moments of their continuous voyage, finding nodes in time and place where paths have crossed, some small conceptual islands may appear.

Follow our guide, Epeli Hau'ofa. A genial scholar of Tongan origin, he studied for his doctorate at the Australian National University and taught anthropology at the University of Papua New Guinea in the early 1970s. There his path crossed with Ulli and Georgina Beier, whose creative writing course and encouragement of untrained artists stimulated a creative surge of Papua New Guinean writing in English and supported the emergence of Papua New Guinea's first contemporary artists to gain international renown, Akis, Kauage and Ruki Fame. Epeli wrote fiction himself, as well as contributing to knowledge of Pacific literature.

In the 1990s, as founding director of the Centre for Oceanic Arts and Cultures in Fiji, Epeli emulated Georgina Beier's model, making the centre accessible to students and others interested in any creative process. The second artist-in-residence invited to the centre was the polyvalent visual artist, novelist and poet John Pule, originally from the tiny Polynesian island of Niue, but now based in New Zealand. John's motley group of students, drawn from all walks of life, reflect on ancestral stories, motifs and images, traditional materials, their own life experience and daily events to find their own source of inspiration and creativity. John's immense output in 1998–99 included his novel, *The Shark That Ate the Sun*, as well as new bodies of conceptual visual works for the opening exhibition of the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia and the Queensland Art Gallery's Third Asia-Pacific Triennial.

Akis (Papua New Guinea)
Unsuccessful Hunter
(*No Food*)
1981

Coloured fibre-tipped pens
on paper
63.9 x 51.1 cm
Hugh Stevenson
Collection, Michael
Somare Library, University
of Papua New Guinea
Image courtesy
Hugh Stevenson



Back in Fiji, the coup d'état led by George Speight galvanised the loose group of indigenous Fijian artists at the Centre for Oceanic Arts and Cultures into forming the Red Wave Collective. The political crisis posed fundamental questions about human rights and racism in politics and caused grief, anxiety and division in multiracial Fijian society. It also shocked the artists into a higher state of consciousness and perception, so that the body of intense works from that period acts as a potent manifesto of their beliefs.

But shock waves in the Pacific cause barely a ripple of interest elsewhere. Although contemporary art movements have been emerging steadily throughout the Pacific region since the 1970s, these developments have gone largely unnoticed in the international art world. This can be explained partly by the remoteness of these islands from metropolitan centres and partly by a lack of resources and opportunities for artists from the Pacific region to promote their art effectively overseas.

MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

It is an impossible ambition to cover all of the Pacific and all types of art. The comments in this essay are limited to the countries of Melanesia and may also be appropriate to the small Polynesian island nations.

In geographic terms, the grand arch of Melanesia stretches from the great island of New Guinea to the Torres Strait Islands, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia and across to Fiji. In political terms, the region known as Melanesia consists of New Guinea, which is divided into West Papua, a province of Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea, an independent state; the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji, all independent states; and the Torres Strait Islands, part of Australia. New Caledonia was an overseas territory of France, but is presently renegotiating its political status towards autonomy. All

Artist unknown
(New Caledonia)
Machoro, victime de l'ordre colonial

circa 1984
Mural painted on bus shelter
Graphic images of leaders of the Kanak liberation movement, like this one of Aloï Machoro, were painted on bus shelters in the 1980s.





Vanya Taule'alo
(Samoa/Australia)
Uluolefa

2001
acrylic on canvas
240 x 150 cm
Series, Va Tapuia Series
Collection of the artist
Image courtesy the artist.

The work is about
the sacred covenant
between the people
and the physical, cultural
and social environment.

of the Melanesian countries have a history of colonialism, but under different colonial regimes, whether Dutch, German, English, French, Australian or a combination. There is great diversity in the physical environments of Melanesia and variation in the cultural, social, economic and political circumstances of the indigenous people, reflected in the artistic traditions of the region.

To some extent, the small, independent Polynesian island nations of Samoa, Tonga, Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau and Niue have symbiotic economic and cultural relationships with New Zealand, yet they proudly maintain customs and practices aloof from the mainstream. Other small countries of the south Pacific came under different spheres of influence dating from the colonial period, in particular, the French Pacific zone, which encompassed the island groups of French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Vanuatu and Wallis and Futuna. Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati were confetti of the British Empire. The American outliers include Hawaii and American Samoa as well as the Micronesian island nations of Guam, Saipan, Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Marianas.

Rather than redefining terms and setting art works in a number of categories, the intention is to locate Pacific artists in the diversity of their environments: what are the stimuli for creativity and the circumstances of artists where they have chosen to live and work?

Melanesian countries and other small island states do not have the resources of developed nations. Developed nations' aid funds are focused on health, education and economic development; resources for cultural projects are minimal. As well, in these countries there are very few private galleries exhibiting and selling the work of local artists, and the market for their work has not been developed. Despite these problems, art goes on being part of life.

Artists who remain in their tribal homelands, often in remote villages, still have opportunities to encompass change and add to the vitality of their local culture. Artists with a thirst for contemporary self-expression and individuality tend to be drawn to metropolitan centres, such as Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea



Vanya Taule'alo
(Samoa/Australia)
Uluolefa and Alice

2004
124cm X 164 cm
vinyl digitally enhanced
photographic images on
hardboard, with wooden
installation box.
Series Fataia'i i Gafa Series
Collection of the artist
Image courtesy of the artist

Vanya Taule'alo's work deals with issues of constructing memory, identity, family history and fusion. *Uluolefa* was the Taupou (High Chief's) daughter in the artist's family. *Alice* is the great grandmother of the artist and keeper of family stories. The artist celebrates two women of different cultures connected by marriage many generations later.

or Port Vila in Vanuatu. Here they find like-spirited artists and more opportunities for training, showing and gaining an audience for their work. Exposure to the international contemporary arts scene, cross-cultural influences, longing for home or wondering about identity, introspection and experimentation, all are fertile grounds for Pacific contemporary artists.

Today, as always, artists around the Pacific region create their own frameworks in tune with their forms of cultural expression, such as the major multi-arts showcase, the Festival of Pacific Arts, which is held at a different venue once every four years. Artists and curators working in the international arena, at events such as the Queensland Art Gallery's Asia-Pacific Triennials, seek to make contemporary art more visible and to identify it as a distinctive part of the cultural life and aesthetic wealth of the region.

To be in control of their own artistic resources is an important step for indigenous people. For example, the *Fonds d'art contemporain Kanak et Océanien* (the Collection of Contemporary Kanak and Oceanic Art), established by the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in Nouméa, New Caledonia, is the first museum collection dedicated to contemporary Pacific art.⁴ Since 1998, the Tjibaou Cultural Centre hosted a number of major events bringing artists of many Pacific nations together, such as *Waké Nâima* (Creating Together) for its inaugural festivities and the Biennale of Nouméa as part of the 2000 Festival of Pacific Arts. At this venue, artists appreciate the opportunity and challenges of working on site and

knowing where their art work is destined, as well as developing relationships with other artists and a greater intimacy with the audiences for their art. Papua New Guinean artist and curator Michael Mel advocates the importance of witnessing and participating in Indigenous processes of making art, enabling people from all backgrounds and walks of life to be enriched by the experience.⁵

Considerable discussion has taken place as to the meaning and utility of the term 'contemporary': what application does it have to art within the Pacific region? This section discusses the problems surrounding definitions of 'contemporary' in relation to the art of the region, and if there is an elusive quality of 'Pacifinness'.

Each language contains precise words and explanations for its material and expressive culture. As there are more than 1000 language/culture groups in the Pacific region, the task of learning even a few is daunting. On the other hand, the terminology of Western art history used to describe the recent, innovative art of the Pacific region is inadequate. Many are questioning the polarisation between the terms 'traditional' and 'contemporary' and the tendency to place all art objects somewhere along an imaginary line between them. Sophisticated artists working in fibres and with textiles, such as Wendi Choulai, often feel mistreated by the designation of even their finest work as 'craft' and need to negotiate a space that includes their creative expression. The art of body decoration, including tattooing, plays a spectacular role in Pacific societies, but Western observers are far from understanding its complexity.⁶

Are there any identifiable features of contemporary art in the Pacific region? In brief, when applied to the arts of the Pacific, the term 'contemporary art' should be appropriate to the forms of creative expression currently practised within the region. This art is often the expression of significant change within society. Change may be manifested in art objects by way of the technology used for its production, the use of imported materials, experiments with style. Contemporary art also approaches new subjects, whether social, political, religious or secular, and expresses ideas in non-traditional ways. Contemporary art also recognises new roles for artists in Pacific societies.

It is generally agreed that the emergence of contemporary art movements in Pacific societies is a recent phenomenon, taking place from the late 1960s onwards. In Papua New Guinea, as in

other Melanesian countries, some precursors of change are identifiable from the 1940s to the 1960s. But the surge towards new types of creative expression — in literature, theatre and music, as well as the visual arts — was strongly motivated by movements towards political independence and the recognition of the distinctive cultural identities of the indigenous people of the country.⁷ The Melanesia 2000 Festival,

organised by Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 1975, was a decisive moment in recent New Caledonian history, providing the impetus for the emergence of contemporary Kanak culture.

‘Contemporary art’ is now a term widely used to describe the outcome of innovative developments in the visual arts of indigenous cultures in the Pacific region. As this term has only recently become associated with some movements and individual artists in Pacific countries, there are few references to it in the literature on the art of Oceania. In art historical terms, ‘contemporary art’ emerged in the region circa the 1970s and is much more widely accepted in the late 1990s. It refers to all that is radical and innovative in the current practice of visual artists with a Pacific heritage. Contemporary art is not restricted to any particular style, media or technology. It may be produced in any national or international context and may be concerned with either global or local issues, or both — for example, Simon Gende’s response to the events of 9/11, rendering New York’s Twin Towers in a uniquely Papua New Guinean style. Formal art education is not a prerequisite for becoming or succeeding as a contemporary artist.

The first definitions of contemporary Pacific art sought to define it in terms of the employment of new media by indigenous artists, obviously one of its distinguishing elements. A second element of these definitions was that contemporary artists were ‘outside tradition’ in the subject and context of their art and that they preferred to work in urban centres. As Jim Specht wrote of the first contemporary Papua New Guinean artists:



Simon Gende
(Papua New Guinea)
Twin Towers

detail
2002
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection
Simon Gende depicts events of both global and local importance in his narrative paintings, but imbues them with a Simbu character by using clan motifs and patterning on the featured objects, as in this image of 9/11.

they are exploring media that do not derive from tradition. Uninhibited by convention, they use approaches more familiar to Western artists than to their fellow villagers ... Their access to contemporary art was through urban environments, which presented possibilities beyond those of their villages.⁸

These two factors are undeniably true for a number of artists and the contemporary art movements they pioneered in urban centres, including Akis, Kauage, Jakupa and other artists who formed their careers in Port Moresby from the early 1970s. Other examples of indigenous artists identifying themselves as 'contemporary artists' and forming associations to promote their art include the Nawita Group in Port Vila, Vanuatu, and a number of Kanak artists based in Nouméa who formed the association Djiru Owa.⁹ People living in cities and towns have greater access to Western art materials, they may take instruction in painting in acrylics or oils, printmaking, metal sculpture, textile design or photography, and generally have better opportunities for the marketing and promotion of their art.

But a definition of contemporary art limited to the use of non-traditional materials and art-making in an urban environment is insufficient for artists who may live in urban environments but who prefer to use traditional materials while they explore new areas of creativity. Recent installations of two of the most radical Kanak artists, Denise Tiavouane and Micheline Neporon, immediately spring to mind, as do the innovative images painted on tapa by Fijian artist Nelson Salesi and Vanuatuan Moise Jobo.¹⁰ For ceremonial occasions in many Polynesian societies, lengths of tapa are wrapped around the body. Valelia Likuvalu has taken the novel step of cutting and sewing tapa into the 'mission dress' style favoured by women of Wallis and Futuna.

Some artists find their home environment more sustaining for their art. An outstanding example of this is the return of a number of Niuean artists to their island, where they have formed the active Tahiono Arts Collective. Except for Mark Cross, a New Zealand painter married to Niuean-born weaver Ahitaumata Makea Cross, all of the artists in this group were either part of the immigrant Niue community in New Zealand or had been born and educated there before returning to Niue. The Cross's run the Tahiono Gallery in the town centre of Alofi and a number of artists have installed sculptures

and mixed-media works in the Hikurangi Eco-Park. Although they prefer to find an active role for art on Niue, Tahiono's artists have not cut their ties with New Zealand and still exhibit their works regularly in Auckland's leading galleries.

Artists living in remote villages throughout the Pacific also have opportunities to encompass change and vitality in expressing developments in their local culture and community. Artists act as the interpreters of change in any society and assist with the acceptance of new ideas and ways of doing things into their community. For example, on the island of Tabar, in the New Ireland Province of Papua New Guinea, cultural leaders who are practitioners of the Malanggan religion and rituals can work with museums to commission Malanggan masks or poles from renowned sculptors such as Edward Sale. The sculptors and custodians can accompany the masterpieces to oversee their installation in a museum setting or to participate in arts festivals and seminars in an international context. But they prefer not to remain in urban centres as they have many commitments to their communities as senior members of their clans and ceremonial leaders. It is their profound spiritual attachment to their own place, the source of their knowledge and the belief that constantly renews and inspires their art.

Today many Pacific artists are, by choice, professional artists. This means that making art is their primary commitment and they seek to make their living from it. Such artists knowingly participate in the exhibition of their art work and the promotion of their careers as artists. The concept of being a professional artist is recognised and accepted in many Pacific communities, and words such as 'art' and 'artist' have entered the vernacular languages. Kauage, acknowledged as one of Papua New Guinea's first and most eminent artists, signs his paintings with the phrase in Tok Pisin, '*Kauage Mathias, artis bilong PNG, 1969–2003*'. '*Artis bilong tude* [artist of today]' is the Tok Pisin and Bislama phrase commonly used to distinguish contemporary artists and their creations from carvers and others using traditional skills to make objects specific to the needs of their local community.

Some may argue that 'contemporary art', in fact, describes new kinds of paintings and objects produced by individual artists, generally destined for art museums or private collections and positioned for international audiences by astute curators of contemporary art. Certainly, many Pacific artists merit international attention, but it is doubtful that celebrity is their primary motivation.

A significant number of Pacific artists are consciously engaged activists, and create series of works to raise awareness. Let's return to Fiji and Peni (Ben) Fong's appraisal of the coup led by George Speight:

Half the people who supported George Speight did not really know what they were supporting. I have expressed this ambivalence in the small figure 'My God, my dog'; the Christianised, Westernised half of the man is dressed in sulu and shirt and carries a bible, the other half is a Fijian warrior with a cannibalistic instinct to kill and hurt people. When the crisis happened, many Fijians found themselves in a dilemma, whether to support Speight or not, and found themselves going in both directions.

I have portrayed Speight as an animal, he resembles a rooster. He has his trademark bald head, copied by a lot of Suva's thugs. His animal legs are standing on a grenade made of crushed peace signs, showing that he had blown up everything that was happening previously in Fiji. The shiny yellow brass on his bald head and large mouth show his big-headed character, but capable of convincing many people. The yellow streak down his back is a mark of his cowardice. Under his regime Indo-Fijians were forced to flee like animals, no one should be treated like that. I have done this work because someone has to come out and say that the Chaudhry government had done a lot of good. The democratically elected government should be reinstated, and we should not have an interim government forced on the people.¹¹

Throughout the Pacific there are overlapping issues and underlying problems of ethnic, social and linguistic commonalities and differences. For many, immigration and/or intermarriage mean that there are several cultures to which they belong. In north Queensland, South Sea Islanders are descendants of indentured labourers transported from Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia in the 19th century to provide a cheap labour force on the sugar plantations: many South Sea Islanders intermarried with Aboriginal and Torres Strait people. Artists such as Jenuarrie and her sister Heather Walker, the film-maker Bob Mazza and writer Faith Bandler are among those reinterpreting their mixed heritage and creating a contemporary South Sea Islander culture.

The Kanak poet Patricia Boi comments on the reality of *métissage* (mixed ancestry) in New Caledonia:

Un autre peuple est en train de naître. Un peuple que l'on ne peut ignorer, ni rejeter [Another kind of people is being born. A people we cannot ignore, nor reject].¹²

The *métis* sculptor Yann Gael Conny has resolved the question of mixed heritage for himself, realising that:

within each artist there is a code that he/she must locate. Some of this artistic code is inherited, some of it learnt, some of it comes from experience and experimentation. But when the code is found it gives form to a vision and expression which can be shared with others.¹³

Was Western art ever dominant in the Pacific region? European settlers brought their inherited art and culture to the Pacific. Artists came with their skills and materials and, in New Zealand for example, the 'fine arts' became implanted, grew and developed their own character. Until quite recently, *pakeha* art generally remained the preserve of Europeans and part of the dominant culture. People rarely took notice of the infiltration of ideas and images from one culture to another which had been taking place all the time.

From the late 1960s to the present, there has been a dialogue developing between European and indigenous artists and intellectuals; even if the dialogue is tense and accusatory, it is also exploratory and productive. Every medium, technique, technology, style and subject of Western art has been mastered by indigenous artists with access to, and interest in, the study of Western art forms and art history. These sources have enriched the visual language of the art of Pacific people.

A number of artists of European, Chinese, Indian or other ethnic backgrounds, whether recent immigrants or

Michael and Anna Mel
(Papua New Guinea)
'ples Namel' (*Our Place*)

performance
Second Asia-Pacific
Triennial, Queensland
Art Gallery
1996





Daniel Waswas
(Papua New Guinea)
The essence of unity

1999
Synthetic polymer
paint mixed with binder
medium and finishing
varnish on canvas
Collection: The artist
Image courtesy the artist

descendants of settler societies, are conscious of themselves as Pacific people, making a valid contribution to the intellectual life and creative resources of their country and region.

In New Caledonia, as in other Pacific countries, some non-indigenous artists may feel marginalised or aggrieved by the present circumstances, which tend to privilege indigenous artists. They have commented that there has been a disparity in opportunities for indigenous and non-indigenous artists in recent years, for example, in the selection of artists participating in major exhibitions and events.¹⁴ Some artists of European or Asian descent, born in New

Caledonia, who desire to contribute to contemporary Pacific culture, believe that they are undeniably an integral part of this country's society. The acceptance of 'white Pacific artists' is still very tentative, partially because of the fear that they will once again dominate the cultural space that indigenous Pacific artists feel they have just gained for themselves.

So what have we learnt on this tentative voyage? The artist is conscious of the foundations of his or her oeuvre. Their art could respect and reinterpret inherited cultural knowledge and include an indigenous philosophy of art, skills, techniques and materials. It could draw from these sources but create a new visual language incorporating personalised metaphors, symbols and motifs. The artist's new form of expression could incorporate elements of spirituality, orality, performance, self-adornment and other beliefs and customs of their people. Equally, it could draw on Western sources, influences, products and attitudes learned and experienced at school, perhaps at art school, and in daily life. It will continue to grow from encounters with the known and respected, as well as the unknown and unexpected.

NOTES

- 1 Susan Cochrane, *Contemporary Art in Papua New Guinea*, Craftsman House Press, Sydney, 1997. Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995. Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1993.
- 2 This author regards 'Pacific' and 'Oceanic' as interchangeable. However, because much of the literature on Oceanic art refers only to traditional forms, I tend to use Pacific to describe recent and contemporary art.
- 3 Epeli Hau'ofa, Opening address at *Red Wave Collective* exhibition, James Harvey Gallery, Sydney, 27 September, 2000. Dr Epeli Hau'ofa is the Director of the Centre for Oceanic Arts and Cultures at the University of the South Pacific, Fiji. The Red Wave Collective is a group of indigenous Fijian artists. Address recorded by Susan Cochrane for ABC On-Line *Artok*. Further details of the exhibition can be viewed at <<http://arts.abc.net.au/artok>>
- 4 In the initial stages of forming the collection for Tjibaou Cultural Centre, it was decided to concentrate on Melanesia, starting at home with Kanak artists. Since its inception, one of the primary roles of the cultural centre has been to champion Kanak culture and encourage the development of all forms of contemporary expression by Kanak people.
- 5 Views expressed by artists participating in *Waké Nāima*, recorded in the *Ngan Jila Tjibaou: House of Riches* video documentary, directed by Renata Schuman.
- 6 Invited to participate in the 1996 Asia–Pacific Triennial, it took Wendi a year to negotiate the complex arrangements necessary with leaders of her Motu Koita clan.
- 7 Cochrane, *Contemporary Art in Papua New Guinea*.
- 8 Jim Specht, 'Pieces of Paradise', exhibition catalogue, supplement to *Australian Natural History*. Australian Museum, Sydney, 1988. See also Georgina Beier, 'Outsider Art in the Third World', Discussion Paper No. 23, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, Port Moresby, 1977; and Ulli Beier, 'The Artist in Society', Discussion Paper No. 15, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, Port Moresby, 1976.
- 9 Described more fully in Susan Cochrane, *Bérétara: Contemporary Pacific Art*, Halstead Press and Agence de Développement de la Culture Kanak (A.D.C.K.), Sydney, 2001.
- 10 Cochrane, *Bérétara*.
- 11 *Red Wave Collective* exhibition, James Harvey Gallery, Sydney, September 27, 2000. Artist Saimone Peni (Ben) Fong interviewed by Susan Cochrane. This sculpture of George Speight has also been exhibited in Fiji and appeared in the *Fiji Sun*. Ben Fong's first contact with the Centre for Oceanic Arts and Cultures was through a workshop led by Georgina Beier that encouraged welders to experiment with making sculptures using scrap metal and found objects.
- 12 Patricia Boi, 'Doche-Naky', *Mwà Véé*, No. 23, January–March 1999, p. 54.
- 13 Yann Gale Conny, comments during an interview on RFO television during the Nouméa Biennale of Contemporary Art, November 1998.
- 14 Colette Aluze, 'Arts plastiques, la nouvelle génération', *Memorial Caledonian*, Tome 10, Planete Memo, Nouméa, 1998.

AUSTRALIAN ART: Examining its Past, Re-imagining its Future (A Partial Itinerary, 1970–2000)

Bernice Murphy

WHERE TO BEGIN speaking of Australian art, especially when such different historical narratives and voices are juxtaposed, as in this volume? In approaching the more formalised stories of art development in Australia in the late 20th century, a wider horizon of social and historical change, the ‘worlding’ of cultural events and fluctuating vantage points, jostles the issue of narrative. At times, that wider horizon presses in on this account.

HISTORICAL ISSUES

Australia’s formation as a country and accession into ‘modern history’ was founded in Aboriginal conquest (from 1788¹), dispersed British penal settlements (Sydney and Hobart the earliest) and colonialism (formally continuing throughout the 19th century until federation of six states as a Commonwealth in 1901).



There were doubly deforming dynamics within the operations of colonialism in Australia, as elsewhere, and they were foundationally intertwined. First was the conquest and displacement of Indigenous society by colonisers preoccupied above all by material survival in an alien land. Second was an enduring process of self-colonisation by authorities shaping a settler society, anxiously divorced from its authorising models in a distant hemisphere.

In such circumstances, 'culture' was an awkward construct in Australian social history. Culture was conceived involuntarily in narrow terms, separating 'high' from 'low', and was assumed to be distributed vertically rather than mutually produced or shared. Meanwhile, its principal markers could be grasped only as offshoots of maternal forms in Britain, and no successful replication of those forms was fully achievable in a distant province (growing from 'inferior stock'). Accordingly, culture was a subject to be touched only glancingly or evaded in public life. In such circumstances, 'art' made its way precariously in many, often contradictory guises. It could not be more than an ancillary ornament to priorities in the

Geoff Parr
The National Picture, 1985

1985
Nekko print on canvas
and framed photograph
Museum of Contemporary
Art, Sydney, JW Power
Bequest, purchased 1985
Image courtesy the artist

This work is presented as a contemporary photographic 'tableau', critically engaging the genre of history painting. Through allegorical shifts based on its famous nineteenth-century model (Benjamin Duterreau, *The Conciliation*, 1840, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart), the work reviews the clash of cultural systems mobilised by British colonialism in Tasmania. It probes the irreversible effects on Tasmanian Aboriginal people, the land and eco-systems, and the moral dystopia haunting colonial imposition of a univocal history.

political, social and economic spheres. Greater social confidence was to be drawn from demonstrable signs of material progress.

By the late 19th century, however, art societies or small art 'academies' were formed, some short-lived. Government officials were lobbied to help authorise the forming of public art collections. Indigenous materials were presumed to belong to natural history museums. Scientistic anxiety to document what political reality was presumed to destroy — the 'rescue mentality' that attends colonial usurpation² — produced the earliest collections and records of Aboriginal (and Torres Strait Islander) people and their culture.

Eventually, the first public 'galleries' in capital cities were founded in the separate colonies under British administration. Modest government funds were provided to begin collections, with lay boards (prominent lawyers and others of social distinction) acting in lieu of any professionally trained staff.

THE 1950s

The 1950s were marked by steady population expansion and economic growth as Australia accelerated in acquiring all the material markers of modernity. National leaders of the time affirmed that British heritage was the mirror in which not only Australia's past, but also its future, would be decisively reflected.

From the vantage point of younger artists, however, the 1950s were recalled by many as stamped by an oppressive conformity, mainstream suburbanisation and a frustrating lack of intellectual daring or diversity. It is against this early post-war period of expansive material progress, matched by cultural orthodoxy and constraining institutions of social authority (state galleries were a notorious target of artists' frustration), that the most significant innovations in Australian art of the last three decades of the 20th century have often been measured.

BREAKING THE SOCIAL CRUST: RECONCEIVING HERITAGE

Things were slowly changing beneath the surface of public life; things that would open up gaps and inevitable contradictions, with an eventual seepage into social awareness. An unprecedented

labour force of immigrants, initially from Italy and Greece, was being brought by ship from Europe, and began altering the sub-streams of Australian society permanently. Others left Europe for political reasons. (It would remain for the sons and daughters of some to make their own interventions later as artists. The cross-cultural interests of artists such as Aleks Danko, Imants Tillers, Domenico de Clario and Elizabeth Gertzakis, for example, were formed by this immigrant background.)

Meanwhile, the White Australia Policy had historically defined a national immigration position on racial diversity — and had been supported by all political parties. A bizarrely bleached inscription of social polity, ‘White Australia monoculturalism’ not only distanced the country from its chromatically diverse neighbours in the region, it left ‘unassimilated’, ‘traditional’ Aboriginal people disenfranchised of basic citizenship (until 1967).

The full measure of the White Australia Policy fell not at the nation’s borders, but tragically and enduringly close to the ‘whispering heart’³ of the nation’s dissociated historical consciousness about the facts of colonial dispossession of its Indigenous people.

A slow taking stock of this situation eventually had profound effects on public life and debate after the Aboriginal ‘freedom ride’-inspired activism of the 1970s. This reorientation caused the gradual movement of Indigenous affairs from the periphery to the centre of national media reportage and debate in political affairs, where they remain today. The gradual process of change, together with stirrings from within Aboriginal culture in the deserts and the far north, which eventually disclosed an ‘Indigenous art movement’ (joined by the emergence of urban Indigenous artists and formations such as the Boomalli artists’ collective in Sydney), were to transform the entire landscape of visual art in Australia during the 1980s and 1990s.

MODERNISM CODIFIED AND CHALLENGED: MINIMALISM AND CONCEPTUAL ART OF THE LATE 1960s

It would require a different context from the present volume to incorporate a historical view of abstract painting in Australia (and that would have to begin much earlier, in the period between the two world wars, and deal particularly with Sydney). It is important,

however, to acknowledge the presence of minimalist concepts within Australian abstract art of the 1960s, especially shaping 'colour-field' painting at a particular moment. That 'moment' congealed in a brief-lived convergence of various tendencies, derived initially from British art, later from American. The convergence was framed in a single exhibition, *The Field*, specially presented to distinguish the reopening of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Melbourne, in 1968.

The Field marked a celebration, a summary, and a kind of ending of a movement and period. No exhibition of Australian art presented by a state gallery had managed to focus a view of art as so strongly 'of the moment', in terms by which the local/international divide seemed dissolved. In retrospect, however, it was not minimalism so much as its development partner, conceptual art, that was to prove decisively enabling for a younger generation in Australia. A progressive aspiration for more heterodox possibilities of cultural development strengthened. This was fuelled by mounting critical resistance to internationally composed norms that precluded authentic construction of experience locally. Such interests shaped the formation of artists who re-mapped the territory for subsequent development of Australian art for the remainder of the century.

Ian Burn (1939–93), an Australian artist who had moved abroad in the 1960s for a period (first to London, later New York), had a strange work in *The Field* exhibition that was out of company with many of the works surrounding it. *Two Glass/Mirror Piece* (1967–68, National Gallery of Victoria) was an almost unassimilable work at the time. It was a mirrors-and-text piece that stated the banishment of any content or meaning directed solely by its author. This work had already 'lost the faith' of modernist art, and theoretically had departed company from the works with which it was shown.

As time would show, Burn had abandoned painting and was involved with other artists formulating new language-based and propositionally oriented works. He was part of an inter-productive enterprise that would become known as conceptual art, seeking new theoretical foundations for art practice.⁴ This position demanded a more reasoned basis on which an approach to art could be solidly constructed — and, for Burn, this meant an insistence on art's social dimension.⁵

Most importantly, Burn was not a receiver but a formulator of and direct contributor to this reorientation in contemporary art internationally, as had been possible only rarely for an Australian artist historically. His later contribution to Australian art's history and critical reinterpretation, when he lived and worked in Sydney until his tragic death in 1993, was to yield an enduring legacy.

THE RISE AND DIVERSIFICATION OF EXHIBITIONS AND PROACTIVE STATE PATRONAGE OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Before leaving *The Field*, the memory of its importance merits a short excursion into the accompanying development of *exhibitions* and *state patronage* for the visual arts in the remaining decades of the century. Recognising the parallel path of exhibitions and state-instigated support structures is vital to understanding the changes that occurred in art itself.

The Field exhibition at the end of the 1960s provided a precedent for public galleries in all states eventually to become more actively involved in contemporary art (even commissioning new works). This signalled a shift in the role of the art museum: creating occasions for art to be experienced *before* it had stood the test of historical sifting.

The rise of exhibitions of contemporary art provided a stimulus in increasing opportunities for new work to be shown, promoting a sharper critical engagement that accompanied and debated the results. Contemporary art was brought out of a ghetto position from the late 1970s onwards, eventually gaining broader social recognition of its developmental energies.

The huge growth in *state patronage support structures* (especially through the national Australia Council, followed by subsequent state ministry programs that extended federal initiatives and took more account of regions) was an integral part of the upsurge in activity created after the Whitlam Labor Government's election in 1972. Federal assistance to the arts in the early 1970s, once transformed into a proactive national agency, was further consolidated by all sectors and persuasions of government thereafter.

These new state patronage structures — resourcing artist-run spaces, providing grants to artists, assisting forums, stimulating

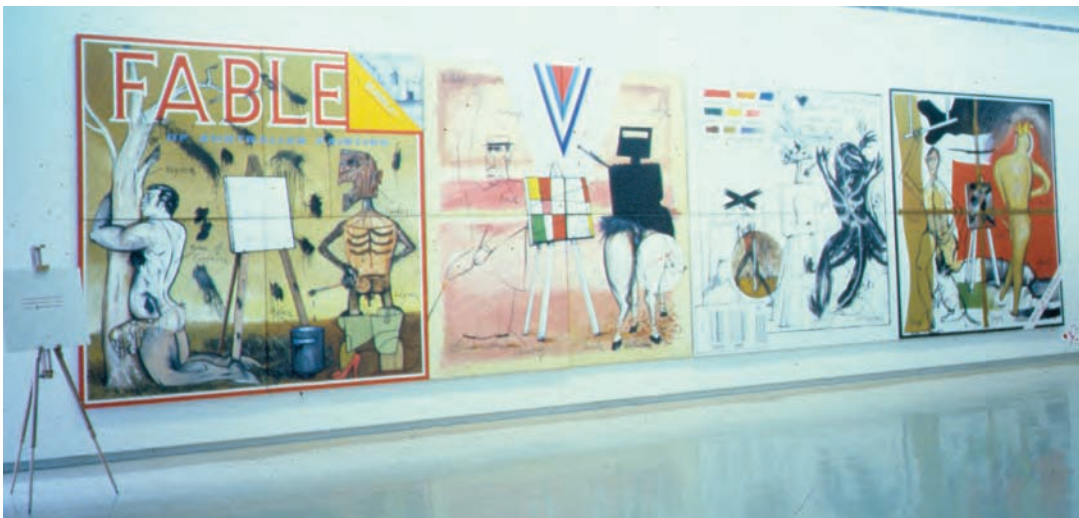
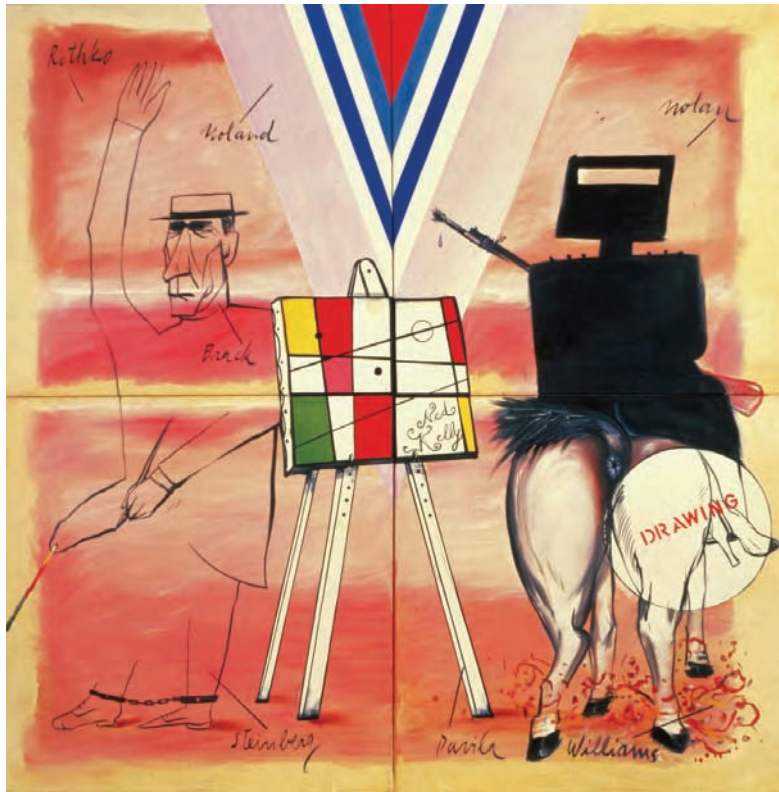
Juan Davila
Fable of Australian Painting

1982–83

Oil on linen canvas,
synthetic polymer film and
synthetic polymer paint on
canvas board, wooden easel
Museum of Contemporary
Art, Sydney, JW Power
Bequest, purchased 1985

© Juan Davila,
Licensed to Kalli Rolfe
Contemporary Art,
Melbourne
Installation view,
opening of MCA,
Nov. 1991

Image courtesy Museum
of Contemporary Art;
detail: Juan Davila
Fable of Australian Painting



program development, and supporting an efflorescence of magazines and journals nationally — provided huge new resources that were inseparable adjuncts to the rise of exhibitions and increasing public interest in art. Meanwhile, the critiques of these processes were no less important, and deserve comparable historical review of cultural change.⁶

A navigation of the institutional history of exhibitions would encompass the following, starting in the 1970s: inauguration of the one-person *Project* exhibitions begun in Sydney (1975, Art Gallery of New South Wales [AGNSW]); the rise of the Biennale of Sydney, focusing on international art (begun in 1973); the instigation of a recurrent counterpoint in the *Australian Perspecta* series of interleaved exhibitions in Sydney (begun in 1981, AGNSW); the growth of other smaller series (the *Link* shows in Adelaide, begun in 1974, Art Gallery of South Australia [AGSA]); the *Survey* exhibitions in Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, in the late-1970s and occasional, polemical shows by guest curators (for example, Paul Taylor's *Popism*, NGV, Melbourne, 1982). Further recurrent events such as the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (begun in 1990, AGSA) and regular visual arts programs associated with festivals and programs outside major institutions (notably the ARX/Artists' Regional Exchange events begun in Perth in 1987) increasingly diversified the experience of contemporary art in public awareness.

The ramifying course of exhibitions was marked finally by a committed embrace of Asia and the Pacific in the large manifestations, performances and associated conferences occasioned by the Asia–Pacific Triennial (APT) exhibitions begun in Brisbane (1993, Queensland Art Gallery [QAG]). The number of artists, critics, curators and organisers from a great number of neighbouring countries participating in these events — as had occurred more broadly through the various Biennale of Sydney manifestations since the 1970s — was to prove one of the most enduring legacies of the APT exhibitions. In addition, the purchase of contemporary Asian and Pacific works for Australian public collections, especially by the Queensland Art Gallery, changed historical patterns of collection development.

The Asia–Pacific Triennials can be seen to mark a far-reaching cultural reorientation that had occurred in Australia over a half-century. They significantly renounced wider representation of Euro-American art, while also excluding Latin America and

Africa. Through their regional focus, however, these exhibitions demonstrated a redirection of attention generally by the 1990s,⁷ and an active address to the numerous societies and cultures of the Asia–Pacific region.⁸ Accompanying this influx of works sourced from outside the country was a rising presence of artists of Asian origin within Australian art itself (whether as recent immigrants, such as Guan Wei, Ah-Xian or Liu Xiao-xien from China; or Asian-Australian artists of diverse backgrounds, such as John Young, Lindy Lee, William Yang; or artists from other contexts further afield, such as Hossein Valamanesh, or Simryn Gill).

Finally, the potency of Indigenous art’s emergence as ‘contemporary’ cultural expression in exhibitions and evolving collections in art museums should be emphasised. It would be foolish to forget how easily people still disconnect Aboriginal art from its political agency. Nevertheless, the increasing public presentation of Indigenous art (in Sydney Biennales, *Australian Perspectives* exhibitions and virtually all other national events in the 1980s and 1990s), together with its international exposure in curated exhibitions in major centres of world art, constitutes one of the most remarkable developments in Australia’s cultural history. Meanwhile, the critiques of the evolving processes of Indigenous representation that accompanied this development also merit serious review.



THE LEGACY OF THE WOMEN'S ART MOVEMENT:

From 1970s feminist critique to the upsurge
of a host of subcultural identities by the 1980s

No account of Australian art in recent decades could ignore the crises that erupted around representation, and its complex social and psychological configuring of identity, when feminism emerged as a force in the early 1970s.

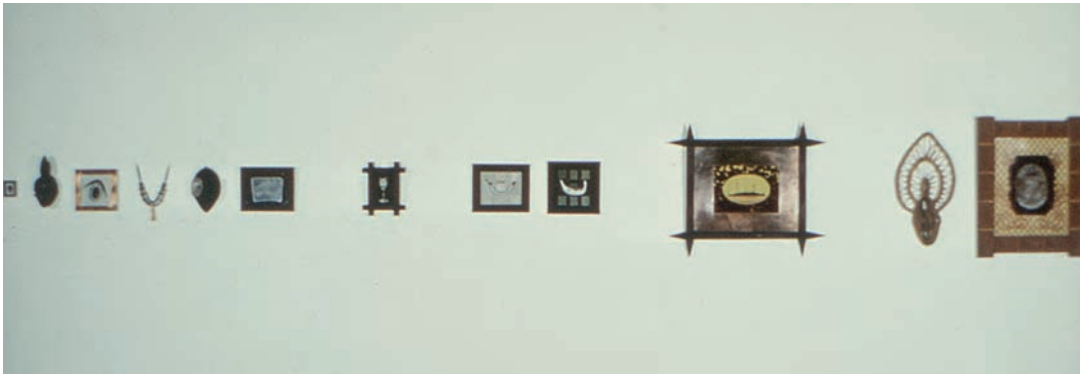
In fact, Sydney Women's Liberation was in operation by the end of 1969. Meanwhile, in art — and in the dominant medium of painting — the early career of Vivienne Binns signalled a committed critique of (patriarchal) modernist rectitude in her Sydney exhibition of paintings featuring vaginal imagery (famously, her *Vag Dens*, 1966, National Gallery of Australia [NGA]). Vivienne Binns abandoned painting to establish other possibilities of working, on women's inter-generational memory and the collective experience of communities, and in a variety of media.

Feminist coalitions formed groups in film and theatre, and the visual arts followed. 1975 was a high-water mark. The emergence of the (national) Women's Art Register that year was stimulated directly by the visit of American Lucy Lippard to Australia in July⁹ and the impact of her public lectures and discussion in various cities she visited. Meanwhile, the first significant historical survey exhibition, *Australian Women Artists:*



Guan Wei
Dow - 島 - Island

2002
Acrylic on canvas
(48 panels)
317 x 913 cm
Image courtesy Sherman
Galleries, Sydney



Narelle Jubelin
Trade Delivers People

1990
Installation, 'Aperto'
Venice Biennale, 1990
Photograph: Tim Marshall
Image courtesy the artist

In this small but powerful installation, Narelle Jubelin combined her refined needlepoint work with reworking/representation of various objects marked by cross-cultural colonial exchange and global circulation of goods: Venetian lace and glass beads, Australian coins, a Papua New Guinea bride price armlette, and Ivory Coast masks (a number of objects themselves bearing historical contents of earlier cultural exchange with the West).

100 Years, 1840–1940, was already being organised by Janine Burke (in Melbourne). Towards the end of 1976, the various feminist art groups in Melbourne coalesced into the Lip Collective, which by the end of the year had published the first of its many annual journals, under the title *Lip* (its slang association of cheeky defiance joining two important motifs: body and speech).

It is not surprising that photography and the moving image (including the emergent medium of portable video through the government-funded Video Access Centres in the early 1970s) provided more productive operational areas for critical work. Many women artists turned to photography and film because the constituent operations of producing an image (sequenced temporally and spatially) were more richly able to be dissected, reworked and reformed in these media. The photographic or filmic image was unmasked as linguistic text, as social narrative, as role-enforcing agency. Such critical approaches favoured new uses of editing and montage in much feminist art work of the period.

The discourse (and behaviour) of feminism was often severely reductive when it locked down on the critique of patriarchy along the trench-lines of heterosexual division alone. Feminism, however, was most imaginative and intellectually generous when it recognised the claims for liberation of many other and more multiple identities: its support for gay activism, and for movements to combat racial, ethnic and other forms of subcultural oppression. As many new formations emerged, visibly contesting their stake in contemporary society, feminism provided invaluable resources, intellectual tools and solidarity.

The rich critical discourses of multiple and overlapping identities since the 1970s, and the full development of postcolonial critique in the 1980s and 1990s, were crucially built on the ground

secured by feminist critique that preceded them. In art, the legacy has enabled a great range of critically enriched practices by a host of artists of varying socio-cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, histories and identities.

THE OPENING PROVIDED BY CONCEPTUAL ART FOR A REDEFINITION OF CULTURAL FUTURES IN AUSTRALIA

The issue of cultural responsibility had been delayed a long time in Australia. Federation of the states and inauguration of an Australian nation in 1901 had produced little change in cultural life at a structural level. When the challenge of a more intellectually rigorous examination of art arose in the 1970s, fanned also by that decade's widespread political activism, conceptualism provided new tools.

While many debated global structures of capitalism, the world oil crisis, environmental degradation and the ominous architecture of the military-industrial complex, others were pressing issues hard in the sphere of the internationalist¹⁰ networks that controlled art's values. For whole communities who had felt their position hitherto limited to the status of province, deemed as distant peripheries to centres of creativity elsewhere, the political potential of theoretical questions arising through conceptualism offered a reorientation for practice.

Conceptual art in an Australian context opened up multiple possibilities of transformation. Its mentality of radical reappraisal first stripped away any nostalgia. It authorised a critical dissection of docile elements within a local culture that bolstered a conservative vision of art — as merely reflecting the world, 'picturing' life, or seeking change at the purely formal level of stylistic novelty.

Conceptual art argued a position of contextual engagement, an approach not of depicting aspects of the world, but of analytically apprehending its operational structures. Artists who discerned the liberating possibilities of conceptualism in a provincialised national context began to evolve a critical framework that could sustain a coherent and long-term productivity, no longer diverted by the merry-go-round of style. They also sought a continuing dialogue between evolving theoretical interests and the circumstances of their own lives.

NEW COLLECTIVITIES OF PRODUCTION/ALTERNATIVE AND ARTIST-RUN SPACES

In 1970–72, Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy were the crucial personalities in founding and operating a ground-breaking artists' collective in Sydney, called Inhibodress. This was the first, and most cogently critiquing in its activities, of a series of artist-run initiatives and alternative art spaces that would appear in Australia in the 1970s. Their impulsive emergence was spurred by constraint.

Inhibodress's spontaneous reaching out (especially through the new and fluid medium of mail art) to make contact with critically engaged artists elsewhere, had this loosely linked group of artists drawing responses from figures such as Lucy Lippard, Lawrence Weiner and others in New York, along with exchanges with experimental groups in London and Europe. Most importantly, they were also engaged with other artists locally at the beginning of the 1970s in realising some startling new works. *Trans-Art 1: Idea Demonstrations*, involving Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy, and presented at Inhibodress in 1972–73, traversed some of the most volatile territory in experimental art in Australia of that period. In terms of work mapped on the human body, only Greek-Australian Stelarc's remarkable *Suspension Events* of the 1970s (his body perforated with fishhooks and suspended in space) provided an equivalent challenge, traversing comparably difficult territory about relationships with an audience.

Such new initiatives in Australia, as elsewhere, challenged existing definitions and presentation of art. They renounced the institutional setting of the museum and sought informal, often site-specific locations for work to be realised. Art works produced in these contexts also delineated new subjects and social spaces of creativity, and sought alternative ways of fostering a 'creative community' around them.

SUSTAINABLE COMMITMENT:

The emergence of cumulative bodies of work
and continuing works of art

The continually evolving, cumulative work of art (including makeshift, ready-made or contingency elements) emerged as a new

type of productivity in Australian art in the 1970s. It became an important and distinguishing substructure, for example, in the work of Mike Parr, and also in the performance work of Lyndal Jones (her evolving series of *Prediction Pieces*, for example, developed out of performances into static, elaborated works that were exhibited and endured afterwards).

A sustained preoccupation with certain subjects dialectically can be seen in Mike Parr's repeated recourse to his own life, social history, and indeed body (as the material and agency of a remarkable corpus of performance works, directly connected to his installational, photographic, graphic and later sculptural works). Parr's long, itinerant 'self-portrait' enterprise can be seen as providing an armature linking disparate works over more than 30 years. This remains, however, an enduring project pitted against any delusory naturalism of either portraiture or autobiographical narrative. The works begin to make sense only at the point of rupture of their representational contents, through a grasp of semantic frameworks and insistently interrogative structures.

In overview, the gradual construction of similarly cumulative, continuous bodies of work has proved to be one of the most important features of other artists who emerged in the 1970s through the critical aperture of conceptualism. Notable examples are John Nixon, Imants Tillers and, somewhat differently (via gestural painting, then a crucially redirecting appraisal of his first works), Peter Tyndall.

John Nixon's emergence in Melbourne in the 1970s also quickly revealed a sustained intellectual inquiry. His adherence to a language of signs, structures and experimental attitudes, derived from artists such as Malevich and Tatlin, was to keep open and extend their utopian social vision of a non-objective art. He also sought to extend their commitment to a social productivity grounded in a revolutionary address to modernity.

John Nixon later worked with or established his own artist collectives and 'ready-made exhibition spaces' under various guises and selectively named identities. In validating a more dispersed and collectivised social authorship, Nixon later codified his own work's unifying vision under a continuing title: *Self-Portrait: Non-Objective Composition*. In the 1990s, a further redirection occurred. His works were exhibited under the title, *Experimental Painting Workshop*, again positing a continuity of production beyond any specific exhibition or installation.

Imants Tillers is an exemplary figure for further study of the modes of conversion within peripheral contexts. Remarkably, his work has been based almost entirely on received, reproduced or found imagery, without authoring images personally. His entire output forms a kind of interlocutory rebuttal of the discourse of internationalism. Recognition of the synthesised and cross-pollinated nature of all intercultural transmission, and of the dialectical enterprise of authorship, has provided a comprehensive framework for the evolving project of Imants Tillers' art for three decades. These interests have made Tillers a favourite subject for discussing *appropriation* in Australian art, and the onset of *post-modernist* discourse in the 1980s. It is important to stress, however, that Tillers' work formulated his theoretical interests prior to the presence of either terms in Australian debates or their currency internationally.

Since the early 1980s, Imants Tillers has pursued the practice of using mass-produced canvas boards, or the modest materials manufactured for the 'amateur' artist. Through insistent use of these components, he has evolved a huge body of unfolding works, eventually subsumed by the inter-textual concept of a *Book of Power*. Each canvas board is cumulatively numbered, part by part. Single units are built into larger wholes when installed. Whole groups of boards are realised as a related structure or series then broken down again, or they may be re-used as new components of further works. Readings in all directions, and re-readings, are embedded within this open, inter-discursive network into which all new elements are absorbed.

Imants Tillers
Heart of the Wood

1985

Oil stick, oil, synthetic
polymer paint on 338
canvas boards

Collection: Museum of
Contemporary Art, Sydney
JW Power Bequest,
Purchased 1985

Image courtesy Museum of
Contemporary Art, Sydney



Peter Tyndall's notion of persistent enterprise has also produced an inclusive naming. Since the mid-1970s, his reworking of the diagrammatic format of a modernist painting hanging from two vertical 'wires' has yielded a large body of work *in continuum*: an ever-developing series of paintings, with semiologically shifting signs and reforming social contents from his personal experience. These works have evolved under the overarching title *detail/A Person Looks At a Work of Art/someone looks at something* — often with particularising subtitles. Such a consistent attitude has placed all of Tyndall's work (continuing through the 1980s and 1990s) on a permanently propositional trajectory. His work situates painting as involving a particular kind of cultural 'looking' at things in the world.

The narrative of John Nixon's and Peter Tyndall's development in Melbourne (joined in Nixon's Art Projects alternative space by Jenny Watson, Peter Cripps, Richard Dunn and other artists), provides a parallel to their peers who emerged in the early 1970s in Sydney (Mike Parr, Peter Kennedy, Tim Johnson and Imants Tillers, for example). Some of these artists came into closer association, including collaboration, through projects and exhibitions that brought their parallel interests into sharp juxtaposition. Nixon's move to Brisbane to direct the Institute of Modern Art in the 1980s brought about an important relationship and friendship with the older, unusually independent figure of Robert MacPherson, also indebted to conceptualism. MacPherson remains today one of the most consistently interesting artists practising in Brisbane.

The preceding sketch of important 'ground-shifting' artists inevitably favours Sydney and Melbourne, though other capitals and regional centres were to challenge this situation later. Aleks Danko's early-1970s work in Adelaide, for example, signalled enduring conceptual commitments, and his subsequent development would be important to any thorough history of this period, as would that of Peter Cripps, Peter Kennedy, Susan Norrie, Juan Davila, Richard Dunn and others.

The sense of an evolving activity of self-consciously 'located' and continuous production has become strong in many artists' work in Australia. At the same time, such work has constantly addressed and appraised international developments, and has been informed by dialogues with artists of similar interests, wherever they are located in the world. It is a way of working that also facilitates a rich

entexturing of work produced, distinguishing it from internationally aspiring (and often alienated) contents in mainstream cultural validation worldwide. Such commitments have provided an *affirmative counterproductivity* over decades, composing traditions that have successfully resisted the etiolating effects of globalisation.

THE 1990s

Moving to the end of the period, and taking a snapshot of what had been disclosed by the end of the 1990s, it is clear that some of the early developments surveyed have provided the basis of the diversity and particularity of Australian art by the end of the century. The last decade of the 20th century was marked by the complex presence of Indigenous artists of many different backgrounds, producing diverse bodies of work that collapsed any pre-existing divisions in the public sphere between mainstream (European-derived) art as 'urban', and Indigenous art as rural or 'traditional'. This period was also distinctive for the ways in which artists of all backgrounds in Australia undertook intensive rework-

ings of history. Not surprisingly, a strong interest in primary sources — especially archival sources — was evident in their manifold reopening and reinterpretation of Australian history.

Many artists had begun to make use of archives to reinterpret colonial histories, at first locally, later incorporating an international scale of reference. Narelle Jubelin accomplished one of the most brilliant of such probing, cross-culturally inquiring works in her variations of *Trade Delivers People*, the first of which was shown in the Aperto-curved section of the Venice Biennale in 1990. Susan Norrie was also to evolve many important works (in film and still photography) dealing with the conceptual structure and contents of archives. Anne Ferran and Fiona Hall were among others who disclosed a remarkable imagi-

Fiona Foley
Modern Nomad

1994
Hand-coloured black and
white photograph
72 x 61 cm
Image courtesy Roslyn
Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
Photograph:
Sandy Edwards



native richness in reworking raw materials from social or natural history collections. The history of European painting in Australia could also be approached as an archive of socio-cultural projections available for radical reworking — as in Geoff Parr’s Cibachrome work, *The National Picture*, 1985 (1995, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney) based on a famous 19th century (mis)representation of the historical encounter between Europeans and the Aboriginal people of Van Dieman’s Land in the 19th century.

Meanwhile, Indigenous artists such as Fiona Foley, Destiny Deacon, Leah King-Smith, Brenda Croft and others made revisionary use of archives with a very particular political potency. For example, a three-part photographic work by Foley, *Badtjala woman* (1994), was based on records of her forebears traced in the John Oxley Library in Queensland. The artist had herself photographed bare-breasted in the same poses, and with similar accompanying objects, echoing those worn by her nameless ancestor in a photographic record framed by the classificatory gaze of anthropology. In Fiona Foley’s reinterpretation, however, these objects are personalised as intimate and known possessions, unfreezing their character as signifying details of ‘the exotic’. Foley reformulates history, exacting a transaction between her own naked self as subject and the controlled lens as an accomplice. She

Destiny Deacon
Venus Half-Caste, Series 1

1990
Polaroid
42 x 54.5 cm
Image courtesy
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery



depicts herself as a contemporary Badtjala woman, self-conscious and determining.

Destiny Deacon's collecting of objects and images from the past, meanwhile, has formed her own personal archive, held and used at home. In the byways and back alleys of public culture (second-hand stores rather than public libraries), Deacon has assiduously accumulated black baby dolls, cartoons, toys, book illustrations and a range of stereotypical 'native' bric-a-brac. These provide abundant materials for her continuing work of reuse and makeover, in Polaroid snapshots that provide the basis for printed larger-format works

Deacon's frequent recourse to situations with dolls and masquerade ambushes the repetition of power relations that edges around childhood play. She seems to enact fun, at the same moment unmasking innocence and ushering in the violent socialisation of subjects that begins in the nursery. Destiny's mordant humour (even about her name) pays homage to a survivalist Koori (Aboriginal) history by relishing speech and writing that is 'Kriolised', defiantly retorting from 'the wrong side of the tracks'. Fixing expressions that mock the rectitude of formal English, her titles ripple with irony, mistakes, puns and inversion.

Much urban Aboriginal cultural expression politicises an attitude of solidarity with reduced means, a disposition of making the best out of what is simply available and plain-speaking. Urban art often energetically embraces makeshift forms (of imagery, of speech, of narrative and social location). It may also, however, utilise all the conventions of high-finish, glamour and mass-cultural conjugation of desire. The most experimental Indigenous artists demand a right to utilise a huge range of materials and genres, as contemporary artists of all backgrounds may use — without, at the same time, abandoning their particular vantage points on race, history and social memory.

This latter, open-field demand has always distinguished Tracey Moffatt's position as an artist. Her constant recourse to the histories of popular, mass-cultural film and television from the 1950s onwards has provided an endless range of sources for the works she has made. Apart from the fame of her photo series, one of Moffatt's finest works remains her allegorical film, *Night Cries: a rural tragedy* (1990). It is grossly inadequate to speak of artists of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin within frameworks

of Indigenous art exclusively. Their works can be located within many different contexts of Australian art as a whole. Gordon Bennett's work, for example, is striking not only for its sustained political critique, but for the cross-cultural complexity of sources he draws on historically, and the network of references he incorporates to contemporary art's concerns internationally. The photographic works of artists Brook Andrew and Michael Riley, while clearly from an Indigenous perspective, similarly incorporate rich cross-cultural sources.

One highly significant artist, and some deeply important themes in any historically inflected overview, have scarcely been mentioned here. They may at least be noted before closing: the artist is Juan Davila; and the themes — though not by any means tied to Davila's work — are those of semiology, appropriation¹¹ and the complex figuring of gender, sociality and history through transgressively reordered repertoires of desire.

Suffice it to mention merely one aspect of Juan Davila's complex work — his incendiary reinterpretation of Australian art's history — and just one work — the *Fable of Australian Painting* (1983) — as an example of his importance in any larger history. Beginning with a *Time*-format opening and magazine-style reportage, Davila's *Fable* adopts the deliberately crude summary of a comic-strip layout to create a sensationably irreverent billboard of 'national' achievements in Australian art. Painting (signified by the recurrent appearance of an easel) is the symptomatically projected mode. The work speeds through a disordering replay of Australian art history's iconic scenes, imagery, heroic figures and contents, perforated by a series of international models favoured by public institutions. An actual easel that sits in front of the work holds a white canvas that tersely enunciates the failure of Australian painting as homologous to the political failure to create an independent nation. This is made particularly acerbic by Davila's conflation of 'heroic' masculinised (hetero-) sexual repression with the repression of Aboriginal identity — the banished 'other' of Australian colonialism's (continuing) history.¹² The work remains a potent assault on the fictive coherence of an 'Australian art history' more than two decades after its completion.

There are many fine artists left out of the present account, which has focused on exposition of some of the larger issues in Australian cultural history that have shaped struggle over varying

developmental possibilities within the bounds of a 'nation'. The artists covered here would reject entirely the idea of a unifying 'national culture' as an objective worthy of their effort. In contrast, they have sought a more independent and locally shaped art. They have maintained an open, dialectical engagement with international influences and peer networks from any part of the world where artists nourish similar, focused interests in a socially grounded and critically reflexive art practice.

NOTES

- 1 The date, 26 January, 1788 — marking the transfer of the First Fleet of six British ships from shallow moorings in Botany Bay to Port Jackson, and the raising of the British flag over the first settlement at Sydney Cove — is the emblematic date for this 'episode' in Australia's history. The complicated process of colonial conquest is well understood to have been prepared first in the intellectual and symbolic spheres of Western history, preceding actual encounter with distant territory and peoples. Indeed, philosophical speculation about an 'Antipodes' of world-completing, distant location, stretches back to classical Greek thought, long in advance of maritime exploration of the Pacific with long-haul masted ships in the 18th century. Meanwhile, the effects of colonisation — or, more subtly, the invisible apparatus of colonialism — are well understood theoretically to persist long after colonial power has been formally withdrawn. All of these phenomena affecting Australia, and their reinterpretation by later generations, have had the strongest impact in terms of themes and influences on Australia's contemporary art in the last three decades of the 20th century. Topics and sources have ranged across the most imaginative, speculative projections of a great southern land or *Terra Australis*, the Antipodes of the classical world of Graeco-Roman antiquity. They have probed the scientific and historical records of British colonisation in the 18th and 19th centuries, revisiting archival records and transforming these sources into new interpretations. Even more insistently, there have been varied investigations of the continuing structures of self-colonisation within a society ever-restless to understand its paradoxical relations with the rest of the world (closest to those far away/ distant from those nearby); to resolve contradictory aspects of internal composition and identification; and come to terms with the historical usurpation of a continuing, evolving Indigenous culture and society.
- 2 Destruction of living cultural systems has long occurred under the rubric of rescue, by the very agencies seeking to extend their economic and political influence across national borders. 'Paradoxically, remembering is a prelude to forgetting', and '[d]ocumentation and exhibition are implicated in the disappearance of what they show'. Historically, there has therefore been a clear pattern of such recording at the very moment of eradication. (See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*:

tourism, museums, and heritage, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998; esp. pp. 159, 161, 162. Essays written between 1988 and 1995.)

- 3 The phrase echoes the *whispering in our hearts* metaphor of revisionist historian Henry Reynolds, and acknowledges his prolonged study of frontier history and European-Aboriginal relations for more than a quarter-century (Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1982; *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998). With many other historians contributing, this is now a widely expanded field of Australian history.
- 4 Together with Roger Cutforth and Mel Ramsden, Ian Burn was involved in forming the Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses in New York in 1969, and two years later their separate collaboration was merged with Art & Language (with which Burn exhibited collectively from 1971–77).
- 5 Ian Burn wrote powerfully in the 1970s (when resident in New York) of the social dislocation entailed in internationalised readings of art's history and values: '[T]he expression of modern art has become the rejection of society and of our social beings ... Whatever we are able to accomplish now, my point is that transforming our reality is no longer a question of just making more art — it is a matter of realising the enormous social vectoring of the problem and opportunistically taking advantage of what social tools we have. Of one thing I am certain: anything we might call radical theory in the arts will have to be solidly constructed in all its social dimensions.' (Ian Burn, 'The Art Market: Affluence and Degradation'. Originally published in *Artforum*, USA, April 1975; reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory, 1900–1990*, Blackwell, UK, 1992, pp. 909–10.)
- 6 Some of the strongest critiques were formulated by artists. For example, the Progressive Art Movement, Adelaide, reacted virulently to the tour of *Some Recent American Art*, a codifying exhibition from the Museum of Modern Art, New York, which arrived in Adelaide in 1974. American art also provided a flash-point in the same year when the new National Gallery's acquisition of Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles* at a record purchase price was marked by a tour of this single work to state galleries. The Progressive Art Movement, together with another emergent body in Adelaide, the Experimental Art Foundation, fielded voices that shaped some of the fiercest debate about 'national cultural independence' at this time. Continuing polemical reactions to state-instigated programs and internationalist values were occasioned by other events, such as the (still young) Biennale of Sydney in 1979. The second *Australian Perspecta* exhibition (AGNSW, Sydney, 1983) was also targeted (like the 1979 Sydney Biennale) by a protest action demanding a 50 per cent representation of women artists. Further developed critiques by artists continued to emerge in writings by Ian Burn, Juan Davila and others throughout the 1980s. Meanwhile, polemical critique was also discursively elaborated in the fabric and contents of the latter's art works.
- 7 Australia at a national governmental level has promulgated 'multi-culturalism' as official policy since the 1970s. Meanwhile, Australia Council policy has turned towards Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, with proactive program emphasis on support for cultural exchange with China, Japan, Korea and neighbouring countries in South-East Asia, since the 1980s.

- 8 Australia's interests in engagement with the Asia-Pacific region were not without complications, as was brought out extensively in the many exchanges on social and cultural difference during the symposium and fora accompanying the first Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1993. It would take the subsequent years and further Asia-Pacific Triennials to work through a number of complicated questions, which remain subjects of debate. These may be indicated here simply by the following: (1) the difficulties of interconnecting such culturally different regions as the Pacific and Asia; (2) Australia's idea of 'multiculturalism' has been very different from the many ways in which cultural diversity is understood in the different countries of the region — there could be no universal extension theoretically; (3) the gaps that exist between highly developed theoretical communities in included countries and the realities of practice for artists in those countries, with often very restricted support structures; (4) the phenomenon of an artificially supported cultural space of 'neo-internationalist' exhibition activity — stimulating installations, large-scale, high-tech and multimedia works that are internationally referenced and possibly disconnected from exhibition activities in artists' cultures of origin. In fact, these topics were arising worldwide throughout the 1990s, and the Asia-Pacific Triennials provided a laboratory for some of the most intense workshopping of such issues, through which much finer distinctions were well understood by the end of the decade. Similar questions arose through the ARX regional exchange programs in Perth in the late 1980s and 1990s.
- 9 Lucy Lippard was invited as Power Lecturer in 1975, organised by the Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, to present lectures in various capital cities.
- 10 The term 'globalism' did not gain its insistent, mantric presence in cultural debates until the electronic communications revolution accelerated through computerisation and the rise of the Internet in the 1980s.
- 11 Discussions of *appropriation* as an organising theme often face the danger of producing banal commentaries on art, for they so often empty out the subtlety of multi-layered contents, histories and dynamics within art works and reduce interest to an instrumental level of referential *strategies* employed. As such, 'appropriation analysis' often leads to the same narrow space of superficial, indexical commentary as formal, stylistic analysis did previously.
- 12 Sexuality appears in Davila's *Fable* in its most repressed social guise: the genre of pornography. 'Tom of Finland' enters as the sensationalised author of salacious homoerotic scenes from international porn-culture magazines. His coded appearance in the *Fable* represents the idea of pornography in a new social context — shifted to the cultural scene. A poorly printed loincloth with Aboriginal design scarcely conceals the gigantic phallus approaching a totemic, fleshy eucalypt tree to the far left (equivocal emblem of the German-born painter of the eucalypt, Hans Heysen, and the tragically treated Arrernte elder, Albert Namatjira). The suggested pornography here is not sexual but cultural. The fate of Aboriginal culture is reduced to tourist motifs, its revoked history and embodied sociality replaced by a secularised, materialist culture of rape and conquest of the land, repossessed in the optical domain as mere 'landscape'.

THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY: How Indigenous Australian Art found its way into Art Galleries

Margo Neale

AS A CURATOR at the Yiribana Gallery at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) in 1994, I noticed an American visitor darting about in search of something. Eventually, she approached me to say she couldn't find any ancient Aboriginal art. I directed her to the bark paintings, to which she retorted, 'But they were only done in the 1950s.' I explained that the images and the meanings are as ancient as the rock art she sought and that the material is immaterial. It matters not whether it was painted now or a thousand years ago — the artists in this scenario are the mediums for their ancestral stories. Theirs is a custodial role in which they have the responsibility to paint, perform and orally transmit this knowledge to the next generation. These works are our library and archive. This idea, when combined with the cyclical nature of Aboriginal time embodied in the Ngunnawal saying, 'When you look behind you, you see the future in your footprints', shows how bark paintings are simultaneously ancient and contemporary.

Bark paintings of the non-secular variety are not the personal creation of an individual, they are the collective statements of a group. This is not to say that their appearance over time shows no change at all. Just as individuals have different signatures, artists have unique mark-making styles. Changing audiences and access to new materials and other artists obviously cause visual change. But it took until the mid-1980s before the Western art world could make the perceptual shift that enabled them to view artefact as art.

Ramingining Artists
The Aboriginal Memorial
1987–88
Natural pigments on wood
Installation of
200 hollow log coffins
Purchased with the
assistance of funds from
National Gallery
admission charges and
commissioned in 1987
National Gallery
of Australia
Image courtesy
National Gallery of
Australia and Viscopy

Prior to the 1970s, bark painting was synonymous with Aboriginal art and was believed to be the only ‘authentic’ form. These works were not, however, viewed as fine art or high art, but rather as objects of material culture. Collecting was often motivated by a salvage mentality predicated on a belief that the culture was dying out. Consequently, a number of large commissioning expeditions was mounted. The most notable of these was the 1948 American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land (AASEAL), more commonly known as the Mountford Collection in terms of Aboriginal art collectors,



followed by other expeditions a decade later by private collector Dr S. Scougall and Deputy Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Tony Tuckson, during which they commissioned a series of epic narrative barks now held at the AGNSW.¹

The reasons for not collecting bark paintings and similar artefacts as art until the 1980s are manifold. Probably the most fundamental of these is related to the nature of colonisation. To accept these images as fine art, the dominant culture would first have to acknowledge that the people who produced them had a culture equal to its own in order to share that rarefied category, high art. High art equalled high culture in Western terms. For the colonisers to accept that these so-called primitive people had an aesthetic and culture equal to their own was at best incomprehensible and at worst in total contradiction to the twin pillars of the foundational myths and the grand narratives of progress.

The political and cultural advances made in the 1970s had to occur before the cultural production of a so-called 'colonised' people could be admitted to this inner sanctum. Concurrently, the advent of the Whitlam era in 1972 advanced the cause of Indigenous people and culture, acknowledging the inextricable links to land. Supported by increased funding, marketing and exhibition opportunities for Aboriginal art led to greater exposure in southern cities, which in turn led to exhibitions at major public art galleries curated by art curators instead of anthropologists. Ground-breaking exhibitions such as *Kunwinjku Bim*, *Western Arnhem Land Paintings* at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in 1984, *Continuing Traditions* at the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) in 1989 and solo exhibitions of master bark painters such as George Milpururr in 1993, publicly pronounced bark painting and accompanying sculptural forms and fibre work as contemporary art. This acceptance, however, was much patchier overseas.

The 1980s saw the emergence of the desert canvases. While there were some tentative and isolated inclusions in the Sydney Biennale and *Perspecta* in the late 1980s, they did not enjoy full acceptance in the institutional art world until the early to mid-1990s. If bark paintings were snubbed because they were too ethnographic, desert canvases were snubbed because they were not ethnographic enough. So, too, were the Papunya boards of the 1970s. In other words, these desert works were not considered authentic because they did not conform visually to what 'ethnography' looked like to anthropologists of the time. Only the

ground paintings and body markings qualified. What was not understood at the time was that the designs were cultural narratives transferred from ceremonial ground and body painting onto portable boards and, later, to canvases. The use of Western materials such as paint brushes and acrylic paints in non-earth colours was viewed as a corruption of traditional practice. Yet these same critics would probably not apply the same criticism to the Renaissance artists who transferred their 'creation myths' from oxides on wood panels to oils on canvas. What the arbiters of good taste from the fine art world failed to do was to recognise in Aboriginal cultural production the notion that authenticity lies not in the nature of the media used but in the nature of the message conveyed.

Uta uta jangala
Umari

1981
Collection: National
Museum of Australia
Image courtesy National
Museum of Australia and
Aboriginal Artists Agency

Works on canvas, like works on bark, were based on ancestral designs handed down for generations, which spoke of kinship, totemic landscapes and ritual. The first of these, which appeared in the mid- to late 1970s, were intended to be Land Deeds, and their production was modelled on ceremonial processes. Custodians of

stories related to specific tracts of country worked with other participants organised along ceremonial lines of responsibility to negotiate large and important canvases into existence. A set of these now held at the National Museum of Australia was collected by the Aboriginal Arts Board in the mid- to late 1970s. The canvases were produced as evidence to demonstrate connection to Country about the time of the Northern Territory Land Rights Act of 1976. It was nearly 30 years later that the role of art in articulating this connection between country and visual culture was better understood by non-Indigenous people. The ten by eight metre *Ngurrara* canvas was submitted by the Wangkajunga and related clans to the Native Title Tribunal near Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia in 1997. This monumental work, undertaken by 40 artists, represented 70 traditional owners and their families who stood on various parts of the painting and spoke of



their relationship to specific tracts of Country represented. Related large canvases are now held in contemporary art collections in the National Gallery of Australia, the National Museum and in other major collections. These examples demonstrate clearly how Aboriginal art today cannot be confined to one discipline or one time period. It defies the boundaries the Western systems attempt to apply. It is both ancient and new, contemporary and traditional, visual and performative, art and artifact.

A number of desert artists have deviated from the more familiar classic dot and circle style to develop signature styles of their own. For instance, Warlpiri artist Michael Jagamara Nelson, renowned for his design of the mural in the forecourt of Parliament House in Canberra, continues to draw on his Dreamings in a style that resonates with abstract expressionism. Emily Kame Kngwarreye, from the Eastern Desert, caught the attention of the high art world with her stunning, highly gestural field canvases. But for her, every painting, regardless of stylistic variations — fields of dumpy dots, elegant black lines, or a profusion of fine dots veiling secret marks — was about her Country and her Dreaming. Every painting in essence was the same painting on the same subject. Reception of her work, however, was tangential to this source. As art scholar Roger Benjamin argues, ‘Several aspects of Kngwarreye’s work and career feed directly into the most cherished Euro-American concepts of the artist as genius.’² Her work was appreciated largely for its apparent visual likeness to modernist Western art traditions such as abstract expressionism, fauvism and minimalism, ensuring instant acceptance.

Rover Thomas’s work was similarly received. From the remote East Kimberly region of WA, Thomas’s work narrates a combination of contemporary and ancient events including massacres and new ceremonies stimulated by contemporary events such as the Darwin Cyclone Tracy. It was, however, the aesthetic appeal that was his greatest passport into the contemporary fine art world. His paintings are spare, minimal and monochromatic.

By the 1980s, a new generation of Aboriginal artists emerged in the urbanised parts of Australia. They were young, articulate and angry, fuelled by decades of dispossession and displacement. United, they set about challenging the repressive structures that denied them artistic access to their own culture and to institutional acceptance as Aboriginal artists. The majority of this new generation were seen

as ‘the-poor-cousins-in-the-south-no-language-no-culture-blacks’. Even as recently as October 1999, Aboriginal Senator Aden Ridgeway referred to ‘the northern bias southern-suspicion syndrome’ as a reality all urban Aboriginal people still confront.

The landmark exhibition, *Koori Art 84*, in Sydney heralded a new chapter in Australian art history. It breached a new cultural space in an art mainstream dense with white, middle-class artists, predominantly male, well educated and with a strong preference for the field or minimalist internationalist style of the period. *Koori Art 84*, conversely, featured Aboriginal artists such as Fiona Foley, Bronwyn Bancroft, Lin Onus and Michael Riley, who were mostly self taught or still students, young, black and one-third of them were women. Their work was of a social realist mode, employing mostly figurative and sometimes heroic and confrontational imagery. It was ‘colourful’, illustrative and described by some observers disparagingly as hybrid, amateurish and ‘well, not really authentic Aboriginal art, looking more like second-rate European art’. These adventurous young artists, however, embarked on a mission that was beyond the aesthetic to the cultural and political concerns reflected in the visual language used. Firmly grounded in this country, the land of our ancestors, and the Aboriginal Land Rights movement, they had little interest in the international art styles fashionable in the countries of the colonisers.

Koori Art 84 introduced the word *koori* into a wider public domain, entering the art history dialogues as a collective term for not only Aboriginal people from the south-east, but as a term that

Lin Onus
*A Stronger Spring
for David: toas for
a modern age*

1994
Synthetic polymer paint
on electrical conduit and
PVC tubing with wooden
bases, a spring, a ball,
feathers, string, found
objects and sand
Ten pieces 150 x
162 x 150cm (oval,
installed, variable)
Collection:
Queensland Art Gallery
Purchased 1996.
Queensland Art Gallery
Foundation
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery
and Viscopy



defined a new political position of unity, of struggle and of reclamation. It defined a self — assigned space separate from that allocated by the dominant culture as Aboriginal — a space that comes with its own definitions of what constitutes art, an insistence that it be defined and judged within its own social and political context. It became a banner that branded a parade of exhibitions such as *Urban Koories* (1986), *Koorie Perspectives* (1989) and *A Koori Perspective Tour* (1990).

There was, however, a hidden history. These artists, and others like them, did not come from nowhere. Aboriginal people throughout the country had been mobilising for recognition for decades. During the 1950s, Australia was reassessing its position in the post-war era. The handling of race was high on the agenda with the appointment of Paul Hasluck, as Minister of Territories, to a new position in Aboriginal Affairs. Proof of the success of the Government's assimilationist policies was put on full public view. Artist Albert Namatjira, opera singer Harold Blair and, in the 1970s, the first black Governor in Australia, Pastor Doug Nicholls, were shining examples of how black men could become like white men with the 'right training'. By the late 1960s, established canons were being challenged and terms such as assimilation, citizenship and human rights were being bandied around, attracting the attention of the United Nations. By the 1970s, Aboriginal studies was introduced into universities, and international calls for the promotion of 'understanding between peoples' created a climate in which the field for 'looking at' Aboriginal people and culture started to move outside anthropology.

The gaze, however, was still turned northward. While those from the south remained outside the ethnographic gaze, invisibility was assured.³ There was no economic or cultural imperative to buy from city artists even if they could be located.

FINDING A PLACE

Most city-based and rural artists continued to work in isolation and unseen as they had for decades. Some received their training in the tourist souvenir industry or other similar community based collectives and others in prisons or on the streets. Tourist souvenir art had been the only outlet available to artists of the south-east and central Australia who wanted to engage in visual cultural production with some measure of economic independence.

Vincent Serico and Robin O'Chin from Cherbourg developed distinctive composite styles employing the figuration of Mornington Island, the crosshatching of Arnhem Land and perspective devices from Western realism. Others, such as Cairns-based artist Joe Rootsey (Alamanhthin), working in a landscape genre during the 1950s and 1960s, were influenced by the water-colours of Arrente artist Albert Namatjira from Hermannsburg and Lindsay and Dick Roughsey (Goobalathaldin) from Mornington Island. Others, such as Koori artists Lin Onus, who worked in Victoria, and Harold Thomas, working in Darwin, painted landscapes in the Western realism mode with a deceptive political edge. While there is an appearance of the Westernised in these Aboriginal landscapes, the essence, spirit and often the subjects were of an Aboriginal space and place. At the same time as Thomas was painting romantic, meditative and superbly crafted landscapes of waterlily covered billabongs, he designed the powerfully political graphic image that became the Aboriginal flag.

A number of prominent artists whose works are now exhibited in major galleries did their training in their fathers' workshops (or in other community-based collectives). Among these are Lin Onus, Robert Campbell Jnr, and Badger Bates. Onus, a Yorta Yorta artist from Melbourne, is a classic example of a Koori who made the three-decade journey from the tourist trade to the galleries, which parallels the journey of the urban art movement itself. He worked with his father Bill Onus in his business, Aboriginal Enterprises, in the 1960s producing trade artefacts.⁴ By the 1980s, in the wake of considerable political gains, Onus established himself as a major national figure exhibiting in Australia and overseas alongside artists who had travelled the art-school circuit.

Prison was a training ground for many artists for whom gaining visibility was doubly significant. Prison was a place for introspection, for reflection on the inequities of the justice system which then, as now, saw Aboriginal people incarcerated at a greater rate than non-Indigenous people. In these circumstances, art was a form of release. In NSW, poet, activist and artist Kevin Gilbert started his art-making in prison in the 1960s, becoming a pivotal figure in the political struggles of the 1970s and 1980s.⁵

Western Australian artist Jimmy Pike used his art to remain connected with his culture and country in the Great Sandy Desert. Others, such as Northern Territory artist John Johnson, now living



in Canberra, learned his trade in Fannie Bay Prison, Darwin, an experience evident in his wide use of barbed wire, corrugated iron and commentary on the entrapment of Indigenous people. Sydney artist Gordon Syron started painting in Long Bay Prison during the '70s. He was renowned for his prophetic work, *Judgment by His Peers*, first exhibited at Murraveen, Redfern, while he was still interned. Graduating from 'Her Majesty's Royal School of Art with honours' is how Syron describes his prison art training.

However, the acceptance of these artists into the world of fine art, controlled by the dominant culture, was elusive. Viewed through the old assimilationist lens as illustrative, aping the Western pictorial systems, artists such as Onus, Rootsey and Roughsey were called the 'new Namatjiras'. And, like him, they were simultaneously applauded and denigrated.

Coming at least a decade after most of these artists started art-making, the staging of *Koori Art 84* was more than an art exhibition. It became a symbolic space with far-reaching effects, a contested site of historic moment drawing into its ambit all the political, socio-cultural and artistic issues of the day, directly and indirectly.⁶

Although Sydney was the major arena for this infiltration of the mainstream, the politics of recognition being enacted was part of an assertion of regional and national identity occurring around

Robert Campbell Jr
Let's be Friends (Learning From Each Other's Culture)

1988
Acrylic on canvas
122 x 227 cm
The Australian National University Collection.
Acquired 2000
Image courtesy
The Australian National University and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery Sydney

the country in different ways. Trevor Nickolls, an Adelaide-based artist included in *Koori Art 84*, explored issues he described as ‘a marriage of Aboriginal culture and Western Culture to form a style called *Traditional Contemporary — From Dreamtime to Machinetime*’. It was a prophetic thesis that continued to engage artists of the late 1990s, who attempted to deal with issues of reconciliation or with issues of finding a personal space in a contemporary art world outside the now contested margins of Aboriginality. Nickolls spoke of finding his own private Dreaming and, through his art training and experience as an art teacher, he drew on sources such as Picasso’s *Guernica*, Arthur Boyd’s *Bride Series* and Munch’s *The Scream*.

Despite the relative prominence of *Koori Art 84* and the first major exhibition by Indigenous photographers during Nadoc 1986, exhibition opportunities were not available to urban black artists. The ‘literal Westernised and politicised’ art styles of the 1980s epitomised by the work of Syron were summarily dismissed by the ‘art intelligentsia’, who ‘wasted no time in insinuating the futility of such partisan gestures in the institutionalised and heavily symbolic spaces of the art world’.⁷ A committed band of young artists, some associated with *Koori Art 84*, formed Boomalli, an Aboriginal artists collective, in 1987. Tellingly, the name means to strike or make a mark in several of the Indigenous languages of NSW. Boomalli provided a meeting place, support systems and exhibition opportunities, creating what was probably the single most influential factor in the rapid ascendancy of city-based art. Above all else, it was about Indigenous agency and the right to define one’s own Aboriginality as a fluid and multiple identity, severing it from the anthropological domain as something fixed and singular.

Many city-based artists exposed to Western art history felt a need to round out their art education with exposure to a more holistic Aboriginal art education. Lin Onus, one among many, made the first of 16 ‘spiritual pilgrimages’, as he described them, to Arnhem Land in 1986. A reverse flow also occurred with artists such as Banduk Marika from Yirrkala taking up art programs ‘down south’. Exchanges sometimes took

Ken Thaiday (Snr)
Mask

Date not given
Mixed media
Collection: National
Museum of Australia
Image courtesy National
Museum of Australia
and the artist





the form of collaborative exhibitions: *Bullawirri/Bugaja — A Special Place*, at the NGV in 1988 between Melbourne and Maningrida artists, and, in Sydney, the exhibition *Continuity* (1993), a collaboration between Boomalli (NSW), Association of Northern and Central Australian Aboriginal Artists (Darwin) and Desert (Alice Springs). It set out to show the continuity of cultural traditions that unite Indigenous artists across time, media and regions throughout the continent. Similarly, the Yiribana Gallery, which opened in 1994 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, dedicated its space to Indigenous art, dismantling the cultural apartheid between Aboriginal people of the north and those of the south by challenging divisive colonising definitions through the use of multiple themes and non-chronological juxtapositions. Meanwhile, the landmark exhibition, *Balance 1990 Views, Visions, Influences*, in Brisbane expanded the definition of inclusiveness to incorporate the acceptance of all groups of artists, black and white, steered by Indigenous themes and practices.⁸

By the 1990s, Indigenous art had moved from the relative obscurity of the 1970s through the increasing visibility of the 1980s to an international arena. The 1990s saw a proliferation of exhibitions, funding opportunities and forays into the interna-

Richard Bell
*Scientia E metaphysica
(Bell's Theorem),
or Aboriginal Art
it's a White Thing*

2003
Synthetic polymer
paint on canvas
240 x 60 cm x 6 panels,
240 x 360 cm
Purchased 2003
Winner Telstra First Prize,
20th Telstra National
Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Art Award
2003
Photograph:
Gilbert Herrada
[http://www.kooriweb.org/
foley/news/bell.html](http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/news/bell.html)
Image courtesy The
Museum and Gallery of
the Northern Territory,
Peter Bellas Gallery,
Brisbane and the artist

tional arena. *Tagari Lia: My Family. Art from Australia*, held in Glasgow in 1990, was described as the first international exhibition fully managed by the Indigenous people whose culture was being represented.⁹ Boomalli now had the collective confidence to make serious inroads into the international arena through exchanges with Native American artists such as Edgar Heap of Birds and black British artist Eddie Chambers, while the Campfire group initiated cultural exchanges with Sami artists in Finland and Norway in 1993 and 1994. A growing number of artists were taking up residencies in locations as varied as New Caledonia, Western Samoa, Hong Kong, China, Canada, France, India, Italy, Britain and the United States. Public art institutions supported major international exhibition events with a significant urban Indigenous presence.¹⁰ Also during the 1990s Australia was represented by five Indigenous artists at two separate Venice Biennales and at the Havana Biennale, Johannesburg Biennale and the Cologne Art Fair (from 1993 onwards) and was included in exhibitions in Beijing, Paris, Buenos Aires, Japan and New York.

While some artists, such as Bronwyn Bancroft and Sally Morgan, continued to keep issues about connection to traditional Country to the fore in the 1990s, other artists, such as Elaine Russell, Harry J. Wedge and Jodie Broun, documented stories about growing up on missions. South Australian artist Ian Abdulla recorded life off the mission on the banks of the Murray River, with a combination of image and text. The work of Julie Dowling from Western Australia is distinctive in that she connects with her heritage by exploring family history through portraiture. While a number of artists, such as Leah King Smith and Michael Aird, do this through photography, Dowling appears to be the only artist to deal exclusively with portrait painting. She explores topical subjects including child abuse, the stolen generations and her own identity dilemma of looking white and being black.

Issues of self-representation in the 1990s were brandished like a dual-edged sword that not only set out to counter negative stereotyping but also to project new future images. Richard Bell waged war on what he called the sanitisation and sterilisation of our history and exposed the belief 'that, if you tell a lie often it becomes the truth'.¹¹ He won the 2003 Telstra Aboriginal Art Award with the provocative work *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's Theorum)*, or *Aboriginal Art it's a White Thing*.

Many artists in the 1990s pioneered new conceptual spaces and exploited new technologies to critique historical representations of Aboriginal people. They seek 'to enmesh non-Aboriginal viewers in a space of competing social, cultural and historical representations as a metaphor for the unequal power structures marking the relations between Australians'.¹²

Indigenous artists are now addressing global and abstract themes, in the light of localised experience. Melbourne-based artist Ellen Jose draws on her Torres Strait Islander heritage and concerns for the global environmental by combining a bamboo construction based on the Torres Strait Island *nath*, or dugong trap, computer-generated imagery and paintings in her pivotal work *In the Balance* (1994). Tasmanian artist Karen Casey, working from Melbourne, departed from her previous focus on printmaking and painting to explore the more universal, spiritual aspects of water, light, sound and movement across cultures, time zones and place.¹³ In a re-creation of her lounge room in Brunswick Street, Melbourne, in the second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in 1996 in Brisbane, Destiny Deacon makes a statement of self-representation which reverses the museological representation of the 'primitive habitat'. Allied to this issue, Tasmanian artist Julie Gough critiques the scientific aspect of containment with which Indigenous people have been represented historically and defined using display cases, specimen containers and instruments for classification and categorisation.

The Aboriginal Memorial (1987–88), an installation of 200 hollow log coffins from Arnhem Land, now in the collection of the NGA, inspired a number of urban artists to create memorial sites outdoors. A multimedia installation of used telegraph poles entitled *Edge of the Trees*, by Fiona Foley and Janet Lawrance, marks a significant Eora site outside the Museum of Sydney, while Foley's engraved stone memorials, entitled *Lie of the Land*, mark a site at the Museum of Melbourne. Brisbane-based Ron Hurley's *Geerabaugh Midden* (1995), comprising six nine-metre-high carved ironbark poles placed beside the Brisbane River, echoes the serpentine motions of the rainbow serpent and represents the six clan groups — from South Australia to Coolool in Queensland — who hold parts of the story.

In the new millennium, the voices of Indigenous artists are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, pervasive, sophisticated and self-defining. Something which started in the politicised public

spaces of the streets and the remote regions of the bush and desert has now penetrated the interior white spaces of the establishment art world in Australia and overseas. The multiple zones of production for Indigenous art reveal a mobile space of fluid identities which overlay and disrupt the Western concept of a postcolonial space. Perhaps this postcolonial space from an Indigenous perspective refers to a process of indigenising the other, a process whereby Indigenous artists have colonised spaces once denied them. Just as Lin Onus's installation *Fruit Bats*, occupying pride of place in the institutionalised spaces at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, symbolises an act of de-colonisation, it appropriates the Hills Hoist, icon of the great Australian backyard, and indigenises it — and, by extension, the 'sacred place' of suburban white Australia. Similarly, on an international scale, two Qantas jets, flagships of the national airline, wing their way around the world bearing designs by the Aboriginal company, Balarinji. Indigenising the jumbo jet, a powerful symbol of the highly industrialised Western capitalist world, is very telling. On the approach to Sydney, the chief steward may be heard to announce proudly, 'You are travelling in the world's largest modern art work.' The marketing of Australia, now a lucrative and high-profile industry, rides on the back of contemporary Indigenous art and culture. Is Australian high culture now indigenised?

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay appeared in Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale (eds) *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

- 1 Charles P. Mountford collected some 500 bark paintings on the AASEAL expedition and convinced the Commonwealth Government in 1956 to distribute 23 of them to each of the public art galleries as well as to museums. He collected them with a view to their aesthetic value marking a significant departure from a view of bark paintings as being only of anthropological value. However, it was decades before art galleries exhibited them as contemporary art.
- 2 Roger Benjamin, 'A New Modernist Hero', in Margo Neale (ed.), *Emily Kame Ngwarreye. Alhalkere, paintings from Utopia*, McMillan Publishers Australia Pty Ltd and Queensland Art Gallery, 1998, p. 47.
- 3 Networks of newly established government-funded art centres for remote communities through central and northern Australia emerged in the 1970s and the Australia Council funded the establishment of Aboriginal Artist Galleries in Melbourne and Sydney in 1978 and 1979 for the exhibition and marketing of 'traditional' art, while in Perth, the Native Welfare administration set up shop.

- 4 In the 1970s, following in the footsteps of Victorian artists Revel Cooper and Ronald Bull, Onus and others moved to the only other 'saleable' area of work for Aboriginal artists, that of landscapes in the European tradition.
- 5 During the 1970s, Kevin Gilbert was making and selling artefacts at his art gallery cum service station on the Pacific Highway, where he also unsuccessfully attempted to raise a National School of Aboriginal Arts in 1971.
- 6 Aboriginal art had previously been shown at department stores such as David Jones since the 1920s, town halls such as the Sydney Town Hall, where Namatjira had been shown in the 1950s and 1960s, community halls such as the Bondi Pavilion, where Koori exhibitions were shown, and in art society rooms run by benevolent societies.
- 7 Vivien Johnson, *Art Monthly*, No. 30, 1990.
- 8 In this exhibition, cultural and artistic equality was accorded to all forms of expression, from a painted Nissan truck by John Brown Kumanjarrah and Lin Onus to painted trays by Nungar artist Donny Smith, and a painting by Colleen Williams (now Wall) called *A Foot in Both Camps*, echoing the theme of dual existence evident in works of the 1980s. These works reasserted their status as cultural texts in which the irreconcilable presence of two cultural art traditions confirm a duality that does not need to be reconciled. They resisted definition as low or high art.
- 9 There had been representation in international exhibitions in the 1980s, including *Aratjara*, an exclusively Australian Indigenous exhibition, but one that still had an anthropological and northern bias.
- 10 These include exhibitions such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane in 1993, 1996, 1999; at the Art Gallery of New South Wales with the Sydney Biennale and *Perspecta* from 1989; at the Adelaide Biennale; and, from 1987, the Artist Regional Exchanges in Perth.
- 11 In *Dreaming/Nightmare* (1993), he posed Aboriginal kids as future prime ministers and ministers with himself in various roles as Minister of Armed Forces, Police and White Affairs, offering new fictions that — if portrayed often enough — could become true.
- 12 Benjamin Genocchio, 'Activism and Audience in Urban Aboriginal Art', *Eyeline* 35, Summer 1997–1998, p. 35. The observer becomes the observed in the work of multimedia artist Rea, who dealt with issues of invisibility and gender. In telling ethnographic reversals, she turned the camera on the voyeur in *Highly Coloured My Life is Coloured By My Colour* (1993). She expanded this concept in the installation *Eye/I'mma Blak Piece* (1996–97) in which grids of mirrors capture the images of viewers mirroring non-Aboriginal viewers' prejudices in relation to the kitsch representations of Aboriginal garden gnomes. Other artists, such as Brook Andrew, Gordon Hookey, Clinton Nain and Bianca Beetson, use common objects such as tea towels, garbage bags and plastic toys to reappropriate images constructed by the coloniser. In recontextualising these images, they return the gaze in a process of redefinition. Encased in the ironies of black humour, a new and surreptitious form of activism is unleashed.
- 13 These elements are combined in her recent experiential installation, *Dreaming Chamber*, which employs extensive state-of-the-art computerised systems and the haunting sounds from wind instruments such as the ainu harp, didgeridoo and highland flutes from Papua New Guinea.

HE KAHUI WHETU HOU CONTEMPORARY MAORI ARTISTS: A New Constellation

Jonathan Mane-Wheoki

DURING THE PAST twenty years the customary art of the Maori people of Aotearoa New Zealand has emerged as a significant presence on the international art scene. In September 1984 two

The Waka Collective
Installation view of Pacific
art from Aotearoa
New Zealand at Second
Asia-Pacific Triennial
Queensland Art Gallery
1996 with works
by Brett Graham,
Chris Booth,
Bronwynne Cornish,
Lisa Reihana,
Ani O'Neill, Marie
Shannon, John Pule,
Yuk King Tan and
Judy Millar
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery



related exhibitions opened within days of each other in New York. *Te Maori: Maori art from New Zealand collections*, a critically acclaimed survey of historical carving and sculpture, began its American tour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art while the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) hosted *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: affinity of the tribal and the modern*. The latter exhibition positioned the French post-impressionist artist Paul Gauguin as the 'father of "primitivism"' and included examples of paintings in which were depicted interpretations of Maori *taonga* (treasures) he had studied in the Auckland Museum, in August 1895, during a brief stopover in New Zealand en route to French Polynesia. The original of one of these *taonga*, an impressive carving of the Ngati Whakaue ancestor *Pukaki*, interpreted by Gauguin in *The Idol* (c. 1897), a painting included in the MOMA exhibition, could be seen at the Metropolitan Museum.

Te Maori was not, however, the first time that customary Maori art had been exhibited in New York nor an affinity between Maori and modern art argued, as it was in *'Primitivism'*. In 1946, *taonga* — drawn mainly from American museum collections — featured in *The Arts of the South Seas* at MOMA. Had that event registered in the New Zealand art consciousness of the time, its significance would not have been grasped. For traditional Maori art was regarded as ethnographic museum material and was assumed to be the legacy of a dead or dying race. Pakeha (New Zealanders of European origin or descent) artists were preoccupied with creating, particularly by means of the landscape genre, a nationalist image of New Zealand that might legitimate the presence of the European newcomers in a colonised land that had originally been the exclusive preserve of indigenous Maori.

In 1940, the centenary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi between representatives of the indigenous tribes and the Crown was commemorated. Maori and Pakeha artists marked the anniversary with separate events. The centenary was launched at Waitangi in the Bay of Islands, where the original treaty had been signed 100 years before, with the opening of a spectacular, fully carved and decorated *whare runanga* (meeting house). In the capital, Wellington, the first ever survey exhibition of New Zealand art ended its national Centennial tour in 1941. No Maori art was included. Pakeha and European art was displayed in the new National Art Gallery, in a building shared with the Dominion Museum, to whose ethnographic sections *taonga* Maori were relegated.

In 1943, R. O. Ross, the President of the Auckland Society of Arts, demanded of the Society's members, 'Is a renaissance, a new flowering of the Polynesian genius for painting and sculpture, so unlikely that we need do nothing about it, or is our outlook so insular, so parochial that we cannot find interest or duty outside the narrower outlook of the European arts?' Few Maori artists had engaged with the forms of Western art. Ramai Te Miha studied art in Wellington in the late 1930s, married Rudall Hayward, pioneer film producer of the 1940 movie, *Rewi's Last Stand*, in which she starred and, under her Pakeha name, Patricia Miller, set up in business in Auckland as a professional photographer. In 1946, Te Puoho Katene was a student at the Canterbury University College School of Art and demobilised serviceman John Scott, who was to become one of the foremost architects of his generation, enrolled at the Auckland University College's School of Architecture. These isolated moments indicated the direction in which Maori creative energy would move.

It is now more than 50 years since Maori first began to engage seriously with the styles, materials and techniques of modern European art, especially as they were manifested in the work of Rouault, Picasso, Brancusi, Arp, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and post-war School of Paris *tachistes*. In the intervening years the contemporary Maori art movement has gathered momentum, thanks to the perseverance of luminaries of the Tovey era. Gordon Tovey, who served from 1946 as the National Supervisor of Art and Craft in the New Zealand Department of Education, established a program that targeted a generation of Maori artists for specialist training and appointment as itinerant primary school teachers of arts and crafts. The artists for whom Tovey was a mentor include Fred Graham and John Bevan Ford who were appointed in 1951, Ralph Hotere (1952), Katerina Mataira and Cath Brown (1953), Mere Kururangi (1954), Muru Walters (1955), Paratene Matchitt (1957), Marilyn Webb and Cliff Whiting (1958), Clive Arlidge (1959) and Sandy Adsett (1961). They were among the pioneers of the contemporary Maori art movement, which, by the time Tovey retired in 1966, had achieved a life of its own.¹

The first Maori artists to graduate with a university qualification were Selwyn Wilson with a Diploma in Fine Arts in Painting in 1952 and Arnold Wilson (no relation) in 1954 with a Diploma in Fine Arts with Honours in Sculpture. Both were to

teach in secondary schools in Northland where they were associated with Mataira, Walters and Hotere who were members of the team of art advisors participating in Tovey's experimental Northern Maori Project. In June, 1958, the five art teachers joined forces to mount, at the Adult Education Centre, 'the first Maori art exhibition seen in Auckland.'² This was in fact the first group exhibition of contemporary Maori art anywhere in the world.

In December, 1963, an exhibition of work by contemporary Maori artists conceived on a national scale was presented at the first Maori Festival of the Arts held at Turangawaewae, Ngaruawahia.³ The artists represented included Matchitt, Selwyn Muru and Arnold Wilson, now numbered as being 'among the most promising younger artists working in New Zealand today.'⁴

A more comprehensive exhibition, held as part of the Festival of Maori Arts in Hamilton in August, 1966, demonstrated that contemporary Maori art was rapidly moving forward in its development. In November that year, the exhibition *New Zealand Maori Culture and the Contemporary Scene: an exhibition of painting and sculpture derived from Maori culture*, curated by Buck Nin and Baden Pere, opened in the Canterbury Museum.⁵ 'While the artists work in the contemporary European tradition,' the museum's Director, Dr Roger Duff, explained, 'there is more than a little influence of traditional Maori art in their approach and to illustrate the contrasts and similarities a collection of traditional Maori artifacts was shown simultaneously'.⁶ In 1978, austere abstract paintings by Ralph Hotere were exhibited in Wellington in the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts. These paintings were exhibited alongside *taonga* from the National Museum in order to gauge whether the *taonga* could be accepted as art and on the assumption that a sense of continuity between the ancient and the modern could be discerned.

Many of the artists of the Tovey era, apart from Hotere, found themselves largely marginalised and unsupported by New Zealand's Pakeha-dominated art establishment and denied access to 'mainstream' exhibition venues. It is also the case, however, that many of these same artists felt a certain apprehension — arising from a concern to respect the integrity, and to ensure the continuity, of Maori culture and tradition — about engaging with local manifestations of the international art world's processes of commodifying and marketing artworks.

The dynamic of the art produced in the Tovey period attempts to straddle two traditions and, more particularly, to engage with Western art traditions on Maori terms. This dynamic was informed by a burgeoning context of dislocation, disruption and alienation brought about by a mass migration — driven by economic necessity — of Maori from their *rohe* (customary tribal lands) to the towns and cities. In 1936, most Maori lived within their traditional *rohe*; only three per cent were recorded in urban areas. By 1971, 65 per cent of the Maori population was urbanised. The contemporary Maori art movement is a consequence of, and documents, this massive social and cultural upheaval.

Artists are torn both ways. On the one hand there are those who wish to maintain their strong sense of community, collectivity and *whanaungatanga* (family connectedness) by bridging gaps in ability and experience by mounting exhibitions ‘by Maori for Maori’. On the other hand, the new urban context and the opportunities it affords to engage with the art market, encourages individualism, independence, competition and — as some Maori would see it — selfishness.

On Hotere’s return from study in England and France, a sharp divergence from Maori norms was already apparent in his art. Of his highly abstract work shown in the Maori Arts Festival exhibition in Hamilton in 1966, Harry Dansey remarked that it revealed ‘no influence whatsoever of a Maori background, either in theme or execution.’⁷ Two years later, Ron O’Reilly wrote: ‘Not yet categorised for easy reference are artists who are Maoris and who do not want to be considered as Maori artists but simply as artists; Ralph Hotere is one ...’⁸ In 1976, Hotere — in a rare outburst — explained: ‘I am a Maori by birth and upbringing. As far as my work is concerned this is coincidental.’⁹ Otherwise, he has maintained an enigmatic silence while resisting being pigeonholed or ghettoised. In recent years his reluctance to be stereotyped as a Maori artist has come to be shared by Matchitt and Selwyn Muru. All three declined to be included in the lavishly produced book *Mataora: the living face: contemporary Maori art*, published in 1996. In contrast, artists such as Robert Jahnke are clear that their art emanates from the experience of being, first and foremost, Maori. Between the two extremities, the phenomenon of contemporary Maori art broadly unfurls. Thus, anything is possible.

Many of the Tovey era artists — including Hotere, Matchitt and Muru — were present at the inaugural *hui* (gathering, meeting) of the New Zealand Maori Artists and Writers Association (now known as Nga Puna Waihanga) at Te Kaha in 1973. Most of them were to figure in the resurgence of Maori nationalism and culture that has been a feature of New Zealand political life since the enactment of Treaty of Waitangi legislation in 1975. Today, it is almost impossible to consider

the contemporary Maori art movement as a separate entity from the political context to which it so clearly relates.

The generational span of the movement now encompasses successive waves of artists. These include Robin White and Kura Te Waru-Rewiri who were among the youngest artists to attend the 1973 *hui*. With the artists who emerged during the '70s and '80s — Darcy Nicholas, Ross Hemera, Riki Manuel, Robert Jahnke, Jacqueline Fraser, John Walsh, Robyn Kahukiwa, Emily Karaka, Albert McCarthy, and the late vocations of Shona Rapira Davies and Maureen Lander — they constitute a middle generation relative to the original grouping.¹⁰

Artistic dynasties are a familiar occurrence in customary Maori art and help to ensure continuity of practice. It is not unusual to find successive generations of weavers in the same family, for example, the legendary Rangimarie Hetet, her daughter Diggeress Te Kanawa, granddaughter Kahu Te Kanawa and great-granddaughter Rongopamamao Bell. Contemporary Maori art lineages have also become apparent, as was acknowledged by the inclusion of Fred and Brett Graham and Wi and Ngataiharuru Taepa in *Fathers and Sons*, an exhibition at Pataka, the Porirua Museum of Arts and Cultures in 2000. (At the City Gallery's *Parihaka* Maori artists' panel discussion later that year, Fred Graham joked that he had become better known for being the



Robyn Kahukiwa
The mauri ora (I am here)

1990
Oil on unstretched canvas
2.10 x 3.58 cm
Collection: The artist
Image courtesy the artist



Jacqueline Fraser
The Demure Artist is Spying You (With Gleam) Now Chew This Foul Kawakawa Leaf Nineteen Times Clearly. Spit it and Clench.

2001
 From the series *A Demure Portrait of the Artist Strip Searched «with 11 details of bi polar disorder» (under close scrutiny)*
 Black ribbon, laminated tracing paper, wire, French brocade, black ribbon lace, sequin taffeta
 265 – 90 cm
 Provenance: Venice Biennale 2001
 Image courtesy the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

father of Brett!) Buck Nin's sons assisted him on his later projects. The metaphorical concept of artistic parenthood, in the spirit of *whanaungatanga* (family connectedness), is also apposite. Sandy Adsett once described Arnold Wilson as the godfather of contemporary Maori art, but Adsett himself is deeply revered as almost a father figure by his former students and associates at the *tikanga*-focused art school, Toihoukura, at Tairawhiti Polytechnic in Gisborne, and at Toimairangi (the contemporary Maori art school in Hastings) where he now teaches. Some degree of 'cloning' from Maori role models is apparent in the endlessly recycled modernist 'primitive' forms and technical procedures adopted by a number of younger artists throughout Aotearoa New Zealand. In this respect, the artistic progeny of the Tovey era are legion.

In survey exhibitions curated by Maori artists of the Tovey era are customarily positioned as *kaumatua* (tribal elder) figures, as Hotere was in *Korurangi: new Maori art*, the exhibition of twelve artists with which the Auckland Art Gallery's New Gallery opened in 1995. The justification for this, as curator George Hubbard explained, was that 'Ralph [Hotere] is an anchor-stone, an inspiration. He really did open the way for a lot of younger artists to explore mediums not traditionally associated with contemporary Maori art. Whatever that is.'¹¹ In the groundbreaking *Nga Korero Aoteatea: living our stories*, curated by Julie Paama-Pengelly for the Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, in 1999, *kaumatua*-artist Arnold Wilson presided over an exhibition featuring the work of 50 artists representing three overlapping generations — from very senior artists to very recent fine arts graduates as well as self-taught practitioners. The generational span of Maori artists featured in the Wellington City Gallery's blockbuster exhibition *Parihaka: the art of passive resistance* encompassed Tovey era artists John Bevan Ford, Hotere, Fred Graham and Matchitt; middle generation artists, John Hovell, Darcy Nicholas and Robert Jahnke; and artists who had emerged during the '80s and '90s, John Walsh, Shane



Shane Cotton
White Tail

2003
Acrylic on two panels
140 x 280 cm
Collection: Private
Collection, Wellington
Image: City Gallery Te
Whare Toi, Wellington

Cotton, Brett Graham, Chris Heaphy, Tame Iti, Rangi Kipa, Lily Laita, Natalie Robertson and Hariata Ropata Tangihoe.

Surveys of contemporary Maori art are intriguing in terms of who is selected and who is not. Exclusions violate a fundamental principle of inclusiveness but where selection is obviously necessary it has to be on the basis of some principle. Hotere, Matchitt and Muru choose to be absent from many Maori art enterprises. But the inclusion or exclusion of others seems to occur on the basis not only of the curator's personal taste but of a subjective notion of 'Maoriness' against which artists are measured. (Darcy Nicholas speaks of 'in-house' and 'outhouse' artists.) There were certainly notable absences from the *Mataora* publication and the Dowse Art Museum's *Nga Korero Aoteatea*. The latter, however, also introduced some remarkable new talent. Chris Bryant, Ngahiraka Mason, Natalie Robertson, Saffronn Te Ratana and Wayne Youle are names which recur with increasing frequency in the rising constellation of new Maori artists. Following her appointment in 1999 as indigenous Curator (Maori Art) at the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, Mason's selection of artists for representation at the Noumea Biennale included mid-career artist, Emily Karaka (born in 1952, the year in which Hotere entered the art and craft advisory service) and Karaka's exact contemporary Tame Iti (a late starter). Also included in the exhibition were Parekowhai and Reihana, as well as artists whose exhibition histories in New Zealand date back only to the mid-to-late 1990s: Huhana Smith, Natalie Robertson, Nigel Borell, Dion Hitchens, Reuben Paterson, Saffronn Te Ratana, Hemi MacGregor, Melaina Karaitiana-Newport, Rona Ngahuia Osborne and Isiaha Barlow. At the time, Smith and Robertson were in their late 30s while the others were in their 20s.



Michael Parekowhai
Ten Guitars

1999

Customised guitars
 comprising a variety of
 woods, paua inlay, steel,
 strings, chrome hardware,
 speakers, video, ten pieces

110 x 40 x 20 cm

(each) approx

Collection: the artist
 Image courtesy the artist

In *Purangiaho: seeing clearly*, the exhibition Mason curated for the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki in 2001, a selection of established and emerging artists (including Dion Hitchens, also represented at the Noumea Biennale) was featured with the intention of casting light on the legacy of tradition in contemporary practice. In 1984, an apprehensive Hirini Mead wrote:

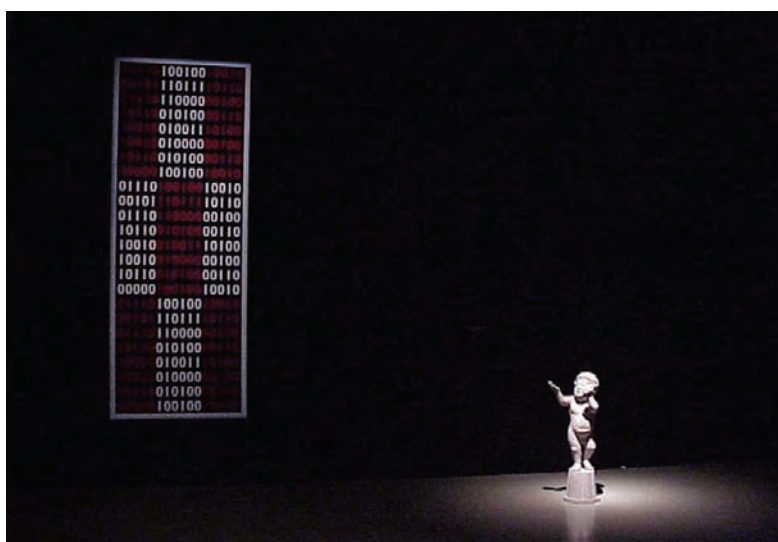
New forms of art, borrowed from the traditions of the West, have been introduced into the Maori world. Maori artists trained in the art schools of the Pakeha are spearheading a movement to change the face of Maori art more radically than ever before. One does not know whether they innovate with love and understanding, or whether they are about to ignite new fires of destruction.¹²

The newer Maori artists tend to be graduates of the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland and the School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury. It is, however, from the more recently introduced Bachelors and Masters degree programs in Maori Visual Arts at Massey University — taught by Jahnke, Cotton and Te Waru-Rewiri — that some of the more promising younger names in the new constellation of contemporary Maori art have emerged.

Of Rouault, Matisse, Picasso and Braque it has been written that to later generations they stood out at a distance and the effect

was to reveal their true dimensions, the dimensions of giants, so majestic and so authentic that nothing could ever again cast doubt upon their contribution. Likewise, the artists of the Tovey era now loom as legendary and historical figures in much the same way that distinguished practitioners of the customary arts such as the brilliant fibre artist, Dame Rangimarie Hetet, and the master carver, Pine Taiapa, provided touchstones for the first generation of contemporary Maori artists. Isiaha Barlow paints icon portraits (somewhat reminiscent of Rita Angus's 'goddess' paintings) of Tovey era artists as though they had passed into sainthood: St Fred, St Para, St Ralph, St Sandy and so on. In the generational shift that is occurring at the present time, the group comprising Cotton, Graham, Parekowhai, Reihana and Robinson are now the artists to whom younger contemporary Maori artists increasingly look as models of Maori success in the national and international art worlds.

In the ever-expanding firmament of Maori artists very distinct categories have become apparent — *iwi* (tribal), *mana wahine* (female) and *mana Tiriti* (Treaty conscious) are obvious groupings. But affinities of media, practice and style discernable in the work of young and emerging urban Maori artists are pointing in new directions. For example, Peter Robinson's 'bad boy' strategies link him with Pakeha counterparts such as Andrew McLeod, the new 'bad boy' of New Zealand art, whose *camouwhaiwhai* (*kowhaiwhai* [painted rafter patterns] + camouflage) paintings in



Techno Maori

Installation image showing Michael Parekowhai and Peter Robinson
Wellington City Art Gallery
2001
Image courtesy City Gallery Te Whare Toi, Wellington

Peter Robinson
Fag Time 1

2003
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and
Anna Bibby Gallery,
Auckland



1999 introduced a new talent, and pointed the way for younger Maori artists such as Wayne Youle, whose 1999 exhibition at Wellington's City Gallery tested 'the limits of acceptable visual culture'.¹³

Ka takiwa noatu te kahui whetu o Matariki (The constellation of the Pleiades has risen in the heavens). The seasonal new year in Aotearoa New Zealand begins in June with the rising of Matariki — the Pleiades. In 2001, this signalled the beginning of an *annus mirabilis* for contemporary Maori art. In Wellington, the City Gallery's first Biennale, *Prospect 2001: new New Zealand art*, was already profiling, alongside their Pakeha, Pacific and Asian–New Zealand counterparts, Ralph Hotere (arguably New Zealand's greatest living artist), established sculptors Brett Graham and the ubiquitous Michael Parekowhai, photographic image-maker, Fiona Pardington and younger Maori artists, Kirsty Gregg and Natalie Robertson. Gregg's witty installation of fifteen mini rugby league balls, signed or marked by her 'picks' as contenders for selection for representation in the Biennale, correctly identifies Cotton, Parekowhai and Fiona Pardington as 'prospects' for the eponymous exhibition but no Hotere, Graham and Robertson. What would her art 'picks'/pix have been for a Maori 'All Blacks' first fifteen, one wonders?

Several other major exhibitions and a raft of publications, authored by Maori art historians, artists, and curators, and devoted to aspects of contemporary Maori art, were also in progress by



Peter Robinson
Installation Venice Biennale,

2001
Images courtesy Creative
New Zealand and the artist

2001. But it was an event launched in far-off Venice, in Aotearoa's antipodes, that marked an auspicious beginning to the Maori new year: New Zealand's first official participation at the Venice Biennale.

In Venice on 7 June, 2001, a dawn ceremony was performed by the *kapa haka* group Pounamu Kai Tahu in the Piazza San Marco. This ceremony radiated the South Island tribe's pride in the fact that two artists of Ngai Tahu affiliation, Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robinson, had been selected to represent New Zealand at this prestigious international showcase of contemporary art. Their striking installations were housed in galleries overlooking the cloistered medieval precincts of the Museo di Sant' Apollonia, immediately east of the Basilica di San Marco, near the Bridge of Sighs.

The Venice Biennale was still running in September, when *Techno Maori: Maori art in the digital age*, opened jointly at Wellington's City Gallery and Pataka Porirua Museum of Arts and Cultures, shortly after *Purangiaho* in Auckland and it seemed appropriate to acknowledge Fraser and Robinson in the exhibition. *Techno Maori* built on a concept first trialled in *HIKO! new energies in Maori art* at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery Annex in Christchurch in 1999 which featured seven younger artists — Darryn George, Kirsty Gregg, Olivia Haddon, Eugene Hansen, Lonnie Hutchinson, Keri Whitiri and Grace Voller — whose work investigated new modes, technologies and media such as installation, performance (body), video and computer art.

Techno Maori

2001
Installation
Wellington City Art Gallery
Te Whare Toi
Image courtesy Wellington
City Art Gallery
Te Whare Toi



The exhibition expressed the diverse ways in which Maori artists have utilised, or have been inspired by, digital technology and it reflected the ease with which young Maori relate to the fact that Maori and non-Maori alike now live in an electronic and global age. As with *Purangiaho*, *Techno Maori* considered how new ideas in Maori art relate to, extend or originate in, or deny custom and tradition.

In April, 2002, still within the *annus mirabilis*, *Taiawhio: continuity and change* opened at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. This impressive project emphasised the ongoing exchange between customary and contemporary practice and the

Darryn George
Hoani Kaiiriiri –
(John the Baptist)

2004
Wall painting
1162.5 x 282 cm
Courtesy the artist and
Peter McLeavey Gallery,
Wellington
Photograph: Guy Robinson





persistence of innovation — a strategy that has an honourable pedigree. The exhibition was intended to be a first installment in a long-term commitment to research to be undertaken on a scale that only an institution with the resources of the national museum could begin to contemplate.

All of the aforementioned projects were pan-Maori and pan-tribal in their span. A more recent development has seen a focus on regional or tribal connectivity. For example, *Te Ata: Maori art from the East Coast* (2002), a collection of essays edited by Witi Ihimaera and Ngarino Ellis covered aspects of customary and contemporary art from the East Coast region of Aotearoa New Zealand. Following on from the success of Jacqueline Fraser and Peter Robson at the Venice Biennale, the new Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu opened in 2003 with *Te Puawai o Ngai Tahu*, an exhibition of new work by twelve established and emerging Ngai Tahu artists. This came to be regarded as the highlight amongst the new gallery's first exhibitions.

Fifty years on, the contemporary Maori art movement has come to full maturity. Shane Cotton and Ralph Hotere are among the artists whose works fetch the highest prices for living New Zealand artists. In their wake, gifted young Maori graduates are pouring out of the more conventional university and polytechnic art programs and also the *tikanga*-based *wananga* (culture specific, esoteric schools of learning). Exhibitions of contemporary Maori art are popular. In his late 30s, Shane Cotton was accorded the accolade of a mid-career exhibition, first at Wellington's City

Lonnie Hutchinson
Sista7

2003
Black building paper
Collection: Christchurch Art
Gallery Te Puna o
Waiwhetu, Purchased 2003
Image courtesy collection of
the Christchurch Art Gallery
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

Gallery, then at the Auckland Art Gallery. Following a series of successful exhibitions initiated by *Te Waka Toi* (the Maori Arts Board) and *Toi Maori* (national Maori arts organisation) and held in the United States and Europe, more ambitious international exhibitions of contemporary Maori art, together with books and catalogues, are in the planning stages. The field is the subject of critical investigation and study at home and abroad. New Zealand's national museum receives more enquiries about contemporary Maori art than any other art tradition. Te Papa is still the only museum in the country whose collections cover both the historical and contemporary, European/Pakeha and Maori art traditions.

Past, present and future were gathered together in a visual moment as the first light of the new millennium dawned on the summit of Hikurangi, the mountain sacred to Ngati Porou on the North Island's East Coast. Images of this moving traditional ceremony of welcome were relayed to a vast international television audience via satellite. Dominating the scene was a group of gigantic posts, carved and decorated by teachers and students from Toihoukura, the local, regional school of Maori art, and made specially for the occasion. The first works of art to greet the new dawn, they stand as an appropriate metaphor for contemporary Maori art — conscious of the past and the ancestors, proud and confident in the present, and hopeful and unafraid of the future.

NOTES

Another version of this essay was first published in *Art New Zealand*, Issue 100, Spring, 2001, pp. 101–105, 126.

- 1 Carol Henderson, *A Blaze of Colour: Gordon Tovey, artist, educator*, Christchurch, 1998. Jonathan Mane-Wheoki and Luit Beiringa, *Tovey and the Tovey Generation*, Porirua, 1999.
- 2 H. M. 'Maori fullback goes for abstract painting', *Auckland Star*, 10 June 1958, p. 1.
- 3 *Te Ao Hou* 46, March 1964, pp. 4, 28–9.
- 4 *Te Ao Hou* 46, March 1964, p. 29.
- 5 *Christchurch Star*, 10 November 1966, p. 4; *The Press*, 11 November, 1966, p. 10. The artists represented were Cath Brown, Fred Graham, Mere Harrison, Norman Lemon [Te Whata], Jonathan Mane [Wheoki], Katerina Mataira, Selwyn Muru, Buck Nin, Arnold Wilson and Pauline Yearbury.

- 6 *Canterbury Museum Annual Report 1966–1967*, Christchurch, 1967, p. 9.
- 7 Newspaper clipping, unsourced, dated 3 September, 1966 (Collection of Arnold Wilson).
- 8 *Ascent* 1: 2, July 1968, p. 61.
- 9 Quoted from Frank Davis, 'Maori Art and Artists', *Education*, No. 9, Wellington, 1976, p. 29. I am grateful to Robert Jahnke for drawing this reference to my attention.
- 10 Clayworkers Manos Nathan, Baye Riddell, Colleen Waata-Urlich, Paerau Corneal and others also comprise a significant group of artists.
- 11 'Brownie Points: an interview with George Hubbard', *Korurangi: new Maori art*, Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1995, p. 337.
- 12 Hirini Mead, *Te Maori: Maori art from New Zealand collections*, Auckland, 1984, p. 75.
- 13 William McAloon, *Sunday Star Times*, 26 September, 1999, p. F4.

PARTNERSHIPS

A NEW TIDE TURNING: Australia in the Region, 1993–2003

Pat Hoffie

TEN BRIEF YEARS IN A CROSS-CULTURAL IDENTITY

For me, the key idea, and the most radical proposition in Benedict Anderson's Introduction to his book *The Spectre of Comparisons: nationalism, Southeast Asia and the world*, lies in the following passage:

The long years of student life, with their shared studies, cross-national friendships, love affairs and sometimes marriages, began already in the 1950s to create young people who could imagine themselves as Southeast Asians, as well as Indonesians or Filipinos or Siamese.¹

The remarkable nature of this passage lies in Anderson's suggestion that the fruitful amalgamation of all the heterogeneous cultures of South-East Asia was, in the end, most successfully won through forging relationships. Through desire and through working together.

Not through administration, and not through bureaucratisation. The imagined community of South-East Asia, the re-imagining

that opened the way for individuals, cultures and countries to perceive themselves as part of a greater whole, was established through opportunities to work together towards forging the counterpoints that held the relationships in place — through history, through an understanding of the present and through a shared imagining for the future.

When I read his passage now, I want to extend the sentence to add the words ‘or Australian’ on the end. And I can imagine, perhaps romantically (but why not? Anderson would not have a problem with this particular approach to scholarship), changing the terms slightly to ‘who could imagine themselves as part of the Asia–Pacific region’. And to change the time to the decade of the 1990s.

For there was a brief moment — somewhere between, perhaps, 1993 and 2003 — when it was possible for some Australian artists to imagine themselves as part of the Asia–Pacific region; as part of a scattered community that was regularly in touch, working together on projects and exhibitions. Trading intellectual currency. Brokering new ideas.

Unlike the generation Anderson describes, this group did not share their research solely within the controlled laboratories of universities. Rather, they worked together in a range of destinations on a range of projects, sometimes collaboratively, sometimes side by side. Sometimes they worked within the auspices of internationally funded, internationally focused group exhibitions and, at other times, they worked in small communities, on projects no less ambitious in nature, but strapped to Third World economies.

This was not only a time for Australians to get to know other artists in the region, it was a time in which artists from across the region started to realise the commonalities and differences of the cultural development within their own particular communities. In 1993, Filipino artist Santiago Bose said,

Asia has still to be united in the way Europe has been recently. We do not know enough about each other. I am not talking about Australians not knowing Asians but about Filipinos not knowing Malaysians, and artists from Thailand not knowing their Japanese counterparts ...

Until recently, artists in the Philippines knew virtually nothing about artists in Indonesia or Vietnam. Now we are beginning to learn the names and through exhibitions like this, to put faces to the names and build friendships.²



Santiago Bose
(the Philippines)
Diary of a Cultural Drifter

1994

42 separate steel panels,
mixed media each panel
38 x 30 x 2cms

Collection: John Batten
Image courtesy John Batten
Gallery, Hong Kong, China

Towards the end of that decade, the possibility of being part of an Asia-Pacific community seemed to gradually and slowly unravel. Tiger economies crashed, old fears and phantoms seeped out of the temporarily shut doors of Australia's not-so-old closets, and One Nation fanned one thousand tragic little bonfires of jingoism into a blaze. Politics changed back to a blanketing conservatism and vision became associated with a Pollyanna-like optimism. In place of ideas that entertained new relationships within the region, the bolstering of borders and boundary lines became paramount. Fostered

by a press eager for sensationalism and a government dedicated to currying a culture of fear, more and more Australians came to associate refugees and asylum-seekers with the daily doses of the national media. The bombing of two Balinese nightclubs became the final straw for a nation all too ready to shift its alliance back into step with Euro-American perspectives.

Other things had been happening, too. The passing of a number of key individuals — Roberto Villanueva, Montien Boonma, Lin Onus, Santiago Bose — left vacuums that could not be filled. For they were of a generation that had not only been active internationally, but had continued to work extensively in local communities. Their experience gave each of them a certain cachet of disregard for tenets and boundaries kept in place by the internationalised art world. They were individuals who made choices to often work outside those hierarchies. And, as a consequence, much of their practice challenged the contexts in



Montien Boonma
*Temple of the Mind:
Sala of the Mind*

1995
Collection: National Gallery
of Australia
Image courtesy National
Gallery of Australia

which contemporary art in the region had been assessed. Speaking of Roberto Villanueva's practice, T. K. Sabapathy writes,

In the presence of such a presentation, so many of the cherished conceptions and hierarchies which uphold the art world appear to have been bypassed and rendered irrelevant; yet, it would be a great mistake to construe Villanueva's aims in terms of strategies of negation. On the contrary, his practice is

impelled by an expansive dynamic, whereby the practice of art reaches out to embrace and actively implicate entire communities and their beliefs.³

By 2003, the energy, the level of debate and the depth of challenge that had characterised much of the engagement in the Asia–Pacific cultural community seemed to have subsided, along with opportunities and encouragement to continue that engagement. The grounds had shifted again, and the old impetus to see Australian cultural production in terms of developments in the United States or Europe gradually ossified into place once more. The evidence lay in government support for the arts during the mid-Eighties:

98% of Australia Council funding for overseas projects went to artists travelling to Europe or America, [now] half the \$4-million budget is for work in the Asia–Pacific.⁴

In fact, these figures were never achieved, with the highest support given in 1993–94 about 35 per cent, and most recent figures slipping back to about 10 per cent. By 2003, the pendulum of artistic interest and public support had swung back once more into a realignment with Euro-American interests. A rough estimate of the Visual Arts and Crafts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts' funding is as follows: from the period that included 1997–99, it can reasonably be said that funding for

Roberto Villanueva
(the Philippines)
Performance in association
with *Ego's Grave*

1993
First Asia-Pacific
Triennial 1993,
Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy
Queensland Art Gallery



Europe/America was five times that for Asia; for 1999–2000, 10 times; for 2000–2001, six times; and, for the period 2001–02, 10 times.⁵

WHAT IS AND WHERE LIES THE ASIA–PACIFIC?

South-East Asia

If South-East Asia had become established as an identifiable region in terms of global collective consciousness — an imagined community — during the 1950s, then what exactly was this Asia–Pacific region that emerged as the title of a region in an art event in Brisbane in 1993? From the launch of the very first Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in 1993, it became apparent to audiences involved in contemporary art that the hyphen linking Asia to the Pacific had been charged with an enormous, perhaps an impossible, task. For to either side of this tiny raft stretched vast, unfathomable regions; two immense cultural territories that, throughout history, had launched inexhaustible imaginings. At the time, however, much of the contemporary art of those regions remained uncharted, and the possibilities of mapping relationships, parallels and contingencies across the terrain remained largely untried.

From an Australian point of view, the cultural geographer's understanding of the 'Asia' side of the hyphen had already been partially, although contestably, defined into three sub-realms: the Sinitic or East Asian, the Indic or South Asian, and the South-East Asian.⁶ And, although the immense and deep historical legacies of India and China to the entire region were fundamental to a basis of understanding influences, less work had been done in unearthing the equally strong influences of local cultures and places on the old traditions of the past.

The third category on the 'Asia' side of the hyphen — South-East Asia — proved more problematic to define. Its origins were more elusive, and mutable, depending on the perspective of the interpretation. At times it, too, was hyphenated — in this case, the hyphen serving to separate the influences of Indian and Chinese traditions on local practices, despite the fact that the residues of such influences were inevitably morphed and conjoined in the cultures throughout the region.



Roberto Villanueva, Pat HOFFIE and Santiago Bose, Baguio City, Baguio The Philippines, Still from the video *Showman, Shaman*

1993

Directed by Edgardo Navarro and Rica Concepcion, produced by National Commission for Culture and the Arts and Asia's Productions, 2004

There were those, such as Benedict Anderson, who tied the region's identity to an American invention, one born in its postwar attempts to keep Communism from spreading down from China. And there were others, such as T. K. Sabapathy, who linked the identification of the region to much earlier authorities. Through referencing work by the Indian art historian and philosopher, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, first published in 1927, Sabapathy traces the origins of the region's identity to the first half of the 20th century. Sabapathy wrote,

scholars in the first half of this century enfolded South-East Asia as part of pax Indica; South-East Asia was sucked into a hegemonic cultural construction in which India was the nuclear, legitimising centre.⁷

Sabapathy describes how the notion of South-East Asian culture was pinned to, and framed by, the cultural and artistic legacy of India, and traces how this extension was in turn particularly appealing to a Europe fascinated by the 'mystic oneness' of exotic India. This propensity for universalist notions obscured the disparateness and diversity of cultural production in the region.

On the other hand, Benedict Anderson's interpretation of the emergence of the 'Southeast' (no hyphen) Asian region as an identifiable identity offered no such comforting continuities. Rather, from an American perspective, after the Pacific War, the region offered an 'alarming profile' of heterogeneous countries linked only by the dark possibility that they too could fall in step with the Communism that threatened to spread down from China.

Led by the political insurgency against the Spanish in the Philippines in 1896, a process of resistance had continued unabated throughout Indonesia, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, until one by one a legion of colonial powers eventually collapsed. In terms of world history, this preparedness to fight back to regain independence had few precedents, as Anderson describes.⁸

Australia and South-East Asia

The Japanese presence in South-East Asia during World War II had magnified Australia's fear of the 'Yellow Peril', and an acute awareness of how far-flung the continent was from the rest of the diminished Commonwealth. Historians such as Richard White have suggested that the Australian 'imagined community' had been formed largely on the basis of the racist and social Darwinist ideas that provided the intellectual underpinning for British imperial expansion in the late 19th century. He argues that this fear of outsiders has become an ingrained aspect of Australians in general, and that it is an important factor to take into consideration when exploring ideas about continuing changes in Australian identity.⁹

Yet, surprisingly, the immediate postwar period was not without its tentative official cultural forays into the region; Neil Manton traces the cultural exchanges of non-Indigenous Australian artists into 'Other' regions:

from at least 1948 when Australia sent an exhibition of works by leading contemporary artists to Pakistan. It later travelled to India, Ceylon [Sri Lanka] and 'the Malay States'. Two major Australian exhibitions toured the region in 1962 and 1969. In return, Malaysia sent a large collection of works to Australia in 1969.¹⁰

If Australia, however, to this point had restricted its cultural experiences or comparisons to countries that lay north of the Equator, then things were about to change. By the late 1960s, a new spirit of challenge, which had begun to define an international 'youth culture', crept into pockets of dissidence in Australia. Student movements, counter-culture and a general scepticism of old orders and status quo assumptions were brought to political focus in Australia through the country's participation in the Vietnam War. It was not until the 1970s, under the Whitlam Labor Government, that the idea of Australia as a 'multicultural' society was officially endorsed. This dedication to recognising Australian identity as being composed of a more heterogeneous, ethnically diverse group of people went

Noelene Lucas,
Montien Boonma and
S. Chandrasekaran at the
First Asia-Pacific Triennial
exhibition 1993,
Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy
David Williams



hand in hand with a commitment to contemporary art as a means of visualising that change in attitude. In his statement for the Australia Council for the Arts *Annual Report* in 1973, Whitlam declared his commitment to the belief that the promotion of Australian identity would be served best through support of the arts. He described the role of the Australia Council as serving to

help develop a national identity through artistic expression and to project Australia's national identity through artistic expression and to project Australia's image in other countries by means of the arts.¹¹

Increasingly, icons and images of Australian culture were being used to promote identity. Urban imagery and an insistence on representing Australia as an urbanised, sophisticated country came to supplant what were hastily dismissed as old clichés of gum trees and the outback. Amid these new icons of metropolitan life, the Sydney Opera House stood supreme. And, to coincide with its opening festival season in 1973, the first Biennale of Sydney was launched. It is perhaps surprising that, for this inaugural event, Australia chose to make

a virtue of its remoteness by confining its choice of countries to Australia's regional neighbours and to the countries with well-established international exhibitions of contemporary art.¹²

This exhibition featured the works of representatives from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, Korea and Bangladesh alongside those from Germany, Italy, Britain, Spain, the United States and New Zealand, as well as a strong selection of contemporary Australian artists. There was, however, little if any critical work done in assessing the possible presence of cultural counterpoints within the exhibition and, after this initial focus of interest on the region, attention was turned to dialogue with European and American cultural counterpoints.

Although a reassessment of Australia's role in the region had not been given serious consideration on the cultural front, there was a growing grassroots interest in Australia's South-East Asian neighbours that had stemmed from the urge of so many Australians to travel. In the past, the route had been slow and direct: the shipping channel to Europe was a necessity for anyone interested

in 'real culture'. During the late 1960s, however, and throughout the 1970s, an increasing number of cash-strapped but adventure-hungry young Australians embarked on the 'overland trail' to Europe as a long, slow way to eventually return to the motherland. Many never made it. Instead, they found along the way — in Bali, in other parts of Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India or even in Afghanistan — nirvanas and imaginings that far exceeded what they thought they had gone in search of.

Back home in Australia, as in many other parts of the old 'Commonwealth', there was a growing interest among literary studies in the new writing that was being produced by authors living in colonial destinations, who had been taught to express their experiences in such places by writing in English. The demands made by local contexts and cadences transformed and transcended the old literary genres and codes, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that what had been spawned was a completely new literary genre. The interest in this rich, imaginative writing increasingly focused on its critical aspects, on what was later collectivised and labelled as 'postcolonial' writing, and which eventually provided a framework for understanding and interpreting visual, as well as literary, cultural production from countries that had been dominated by imperial governments.

The late Seventies and early Eighties were a period of enormous upheaval in Asia and the Middle East. When the borders of Afghanistan closed in 1979 with the Daoud coup (Daoud was overthrown by Mohammed Taraki in April 1978), followed by the deposition of the Shah of Iran, access to Europe via the overland route became much more difficult. The old trail of cheap travel through South-East Asia, across India and Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey and across the Bosphorus into Europe no longer was an option. Australian travellers were increasingly of a new breed: those who took quick package tours to well-appointed and sequestered exotic locations.

However, many of those who returned to Australia after years on the 'hippie trail' maintained a keen interest in the region and a habit of returning to regions that were becoming increasingly accessible through cheap airfares. Australians gradually came to see South-East Asia as an affordable holiday destination. Gradually, the bric-à-brac and fabric and preference for certain foods found their way into the suburbs of Australia.

Australia and the Pacific

In terms of the Asia–Pacific region, that other side of the hyphen, the cultures of the Pacific, seemed, to an Australian way of thinking, more easily accessed through New Zealand, even though Australia's national borders shared international waters with the shoreline of Papua New Guinea. Australia had granted Papua New Guinea limited home rule in 1951, and the country achieved full independence in 1975. Australia, however, did not see, and still does not recognise, her nearest neighbour as offering a direct way of engaging in the Pacific region.

To the north and east of the shoreline, and included within the territory of New Guinea, lie the islands of Manus, New Britain, New Ireland and Bougainville. To the west lies the Indonesian province of West Papua, a mere imaginary border away from South-East Asia.¹³ Australia's long engagement with New Guinea could have provided a strong platform for engaging with South-East Asia and the Pacific — if there is one country that most epitomises that role of the hyphen in joining the two areas, then it surely would lie here, for the history of New Guinea settlement is linked to migrations from South-East Asia via Indonesia some 50,000 years ago, and includes Papuan, Melanesian, Micronesian, Polynesian and Negrito in its ethnic make up.

Nevertheless, when Britain elected to join the European Economic Community in 1973, Australia and New Zealand were left feeling more cast adrift than ever before. Like orphans marooned below the Equator, they turned to each other for solace, while at the same time they sought new trading partners within their own region. New Zealand, however, moved much more quickly to deliver legislation and recognition of its Indigenous people. The treaty that had been entered into in 1840 between Maori tribes and various representatives of the British Crown was officially endorsed in 1975 as the Treaty of Waitangi, after a series of Maori protest marches. This legislative recognition opened up the doors to Maori self-determination and a resurgence of proudly Indigenous nationalism and culture, and established a policy of bi-culturalism as the cornerstone of New Zealand identity. Recognition of its original people provided a firm base for New Zealand's proud claims of not only belonging to, but being a centre of, the Pacific region, as Jonathan Mane-Wheoki has argued.¹⁴

In terms of the most successful of Australia's contemporary cultural ventures into the Pacific region, ANZART (a regional exchange between visual artists in New Zealand and Australia) was the first to consciously use visual arts production as a means of establishing points of cultural connection. ANZART was brought into being through the drive of New Zealand artist Ian Hunter in 1981. It was conceived as a collaborative project between Australia and New Zealand, one that would provide a platform of experience from which to generate 'ideas and dialogue'. In 1982, the event crossed the Tasman Sea to Hobart in Tasmania, and the third event reinvented itself as a combined exhibition of Australian and New Zealand art held as part of the Edinburgh Festival. Whereas the first two events had emphasised site specific and collaborative practices, the exhibition in Edinburgh was organised around curatorial proposals from each country.¹⁵

Despite the success of the ANZART events in establishing networks of practice between Australia and New Zealand, they did little to establish critical inquiry into cultural developments or practices, or histories that may have proved alternative to mainstream accounts.

Enshrining an official profile in the region

In January 1989, the Australian Government made its own bid for organisational cohesion in the region. The formation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation group (APEC) was initiated under the leadership of Prime Minister Bob Hawke, ostensibly in response to increasing calls for regional interdependence. The objectives were essentially tied to economics, trade and infrastructure, although the initial focus lay on exchanges of ideas and projects.¹⁶

In 1990, the visual arts program for Asialink was set up by Alison Carroll. Her first exhibition committed to the interface of contemporary art in the region was *East and West (The Meeting of Asian and European Art)*, curated in 1985. The Asialink Arts Program encourages Australians to engage with the Asian region — but not with the Pacific.

In that same year, as she took on the role of Director of the Asialink arts program, Alison Carroll curated the first exhibition of contemporary art to explore 'the responses of Australian artists to the images, atmosphere and concepts of Asia'. Titled *Out of*



IKJ, Jakarta
 Left to right: Dolorosa
 Sinaga, David Williams,
 Sanento Yuliman, Jim
 Supangkat, and Wagiono
 Sunarto discussing
 exchanges between
 School of Art, the
 Australian National
 University and art schools
 in Indonesia 1992.
 Image courtesy
 David Williams

Asia, it was launched in Canberra by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans. In his opening address, Senator Evans linked the importance of contemporary art and artists to national security and economic wellbeing in the region, and underscored the role of art in promulgating bases for mutual understanding across cultures in the region. He stated:

In a major parliamentary statement I made last December on the subject of Australia's Regional Security, I made the fairly obvious point that security prospects are improved where familiarity and an acceptance of differences exist ...

So it is not just out of a philosophical commitment to the arts, but from a keen perception of national interest that this Government wants to reduce the sense of cultural 'otherness' that has existed between Australia and our regional neighbours.¹⁷

The endorsement of 'international cultural exchange as the lubricant for economic intercourse' (a slogan on a banner for installation titled *Gimme Fiction* in the Australia Centre, Manila, Philippines, at the end of a four-month Asialink residency undertaken by the author in 1997) did not go uncriticised by artists, curators and writers, within and outside Australia. In their defence of the boost of Australian Federal funding for art projects interacting with the Asia-Pacific region, the responses of Max Bourke, general manager of the Australia Council for the Arts, and Carrillo Gantner of the Australia Abroad Council were remarkable for their brevity and baldness:

Gantner calls artists 'shock troopers for the business troops that follow' and says they can lay the path for increased investment in Australia. Adds Bourke: 'art-works are ETMs [elaborately transformed manufactures] par excellence'.¹⁸

Yet the Federal Government's involvement in cultural support for programs into the region had been slower than the commitments of artists to the region. In 1987, ANZART moved to Perth and metamorphosed into ARX, a broad acronym for Artists'

Regional Exchange and one that included, for the first time, artists from the South-East Asian region. From its beginning, ARX was committed to the idea that building cultural bridges between countries was crucial to the development of the region. More than 40 artists participated in the first event, with 50 artists part of the second event in 1989. Unlike its ancestor ANZART, ARX declared its politics:

ARX tends to be politicised against mainstream themes, creating cross-cultural futures with Australia, New Zealand and South-East Asia. The history of ARX has been dependent on the successes and problematics of the cultural exchanges between these regions.¹⁹

In spite of its remote (remote, at least, to the metropolitan centres in eastern states) location in Perth, ARX was an event that had big ambitions. It declared its position as an international event alongside 'the Biennale, Perspecta and the Sculpture Triennial'. The success of the event drew the attention of the federal funding body, and the summary of recommendations for the *1988 Report of Visual Arts/Craft. Survey Team Visit to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines*, included the recommendation 'that the successful initiative of Asian artist involvement in ARX '87 be adopted by other festival organisers'.

On of the institutional front, the Canberra School of Art under the direction of David Williams led the way in terms of programs of interaction with South-East Asia. Since 1986, residencies and exchanges extended into Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, China, the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Singapore and New Zealand. 'At the time we started,' David Williams said in 2000, 'this was not a particularly fashionable thing to do. But in these matters you have to prove your credibility and commitment before people will respond'.²⁰

Programs such as these were, like ARX, embedded in a commitment of reciprocity, and the understanding that Australia would have to develop a framework of support for some of the



Staff Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia with Professor David Williams, 1992. Artists Srihardi Sudarsono and Gregorious Sidharta at right. Image courtesy David Williams

communities within which it intended to work collaboratively. Criticisms of the Australian Government's 'push' into the region had never been far away — from both at home and abroad.²¹

THE ASIA–PACIFIC TRIENNIALS

From their beginning in 1993, the Asia–Pacific Triennials exhibited acute awareness of the not-unwarranted scepticism about any decision Australia might make to involve itself as part of the region through a large-scale cultural event. As has been suggested, as a geographical imaginary, the linking of the term Asia to the Pacific had its origins as the 'Pacific Basin' or the 'Pacific Rim', or as 'the theatre of the Pacific'. But it was not a term that carried any currency outside Australia.²²

It's fair to suggest that the adoption of the hyphen to link Asia to the Pacific recreated the cultural arena in a way that permitted Australia a point of access. From the beginning, however, it seemed unwieldy. To some extent, the inclusion of the Pacific was almost something of an addendum in the first Triennial. By the second Triennial, however, all that had changed, when the Pacific representation was moved into centre focus, as Susan Cochrane describes,

We 'staked a claim' to the Watermall and grassy spaces inside and immediately outside the main gallery ... We superimposed an imaginary triangle around the Watermall, mimicking 'the triangle of Polynesia', a name invented by Western scholars to describe the 'culture regions' of Oceania.²³

As has been mentioned, to Australia, the easiest point of entry to the Asia–Pacific seemed to be through New Zealand. New Zealand's commitment to bi-culturalism had, to some critics, to preclude a deeper engagement with other Pacific cultures that were part of New Zealand demographics. New Zealand's commitment to bi-culturalism tended to privilege Polynesian cultural groups. A more thorough analysis of Micronesia and Melanesia had not yet been established in inclusive survey exhibitions of the region. To some extent, this was a result of the lack of infrastructure in many of these tiny nations, and in another sense it was because of the way Western frameworks for understanding the term 'contemporary art' tended to exclude certain cultural productions.

Nicholas Thomas drew attention to the difficulties and exclusions of using the Western taxonomies and terms. He wrote,

‘Traditional’ and ‘contemporary’ seem, however, to have become words that we are stuck with. The dichotomy remains a problem, not because all dichotomies are necessarily bad, but because it suggests a linear progression from the traditional to the contemporary.²⁴

The limitations and oversights of Western curatorial practices were very much a primary focus of the Asia–Pacific Triennial exhibitions, as was stated by Caroline Turner:

In the catalogue to the first Triennial exhibition I noted the inadequacies of judging the art of this region in terms of its integration of Western ideas, and that Euro-Americentric perspectives were not a valid formula for evaluating the art of this region. In the course of the project we have come to recognise the past orientalising of the arts of Asia and exoticising of the arts of the Pacific as a Western intellectual posture developed in the eighteenth century.²⁵

The critique of predominantly Western frameworks for assessing the art of the region was shared by a high number of critics, curators and writers from across the region. For the second Triennial, Indonesian writer, curator and critic Jim Supangkat outlined a concern shared by many South-East Asian cultural commentators when he wrote:

In the international art world, the Third World has never really had the opportunity to find (or understand) its own artistic development, whether within modern art, or now, within contemporary art.²⁶



Cities on the move
Curated by Hou Hanru and Hans-Ulrich Obrist showing works by Heri Dono (Indonesia) and Liew Kungyu (Malaysia) was an example of the new international interest in Asian art.

Any assumptions, however, that the region as a whole shared any consensus about the future of art were ill conceived. The stated aims of Hou Hanru and Fumio Nanjo in the catalogue for the Third Triennial, for example, seemed contradictory to the Triennials' general aims of celebrating and fostering cultural diversity and difference across the region. Paris-based Chinese critic, curator and writer Hou Hanru expressed a somewhat surprising desire for the development of 'truly global art':

But a real global world is yet to be invented. We are currently on the midground of such an endless invention, and a truly global art is a step forward in the long march.²⁷

And Japanese curator Fumio Nanjo seemed to share a similar ideal. He wrote,

Art will be able to set a kind of common base of knowledge — a new global standard. One effect might be that Asian artists will become widely known as, for example, Picasso is now.²⁸

Such desires seemed to be in direct contrast with the Triennials' commitment to cultural diversity, which was outlined by the Project Director for the three Asia–Pacific Triennials for the 1990s, Dr Caroline Turner, when she wrote,

In no sense did this focus imply any perceived homogeneity with this culturally diverse region, and nor was Australia to attempt to dominate the discourse.²⁹

The questions, inconsistencies and dilemmas that erupted when Western frameworks and terms were applied as a means of understanding the development in the region had provided the focus for *Modernity in Asian Art*, a collection of essays edited and published in 1993 by John Clark. The papers had been prepared initially for the first international conference on these issues, which he had organised at the Humanities Research Centre of The Australian National University in 1991. In a published interview he gave responding to the second Triennial, he too drew attention to the tension between the developed and the developing world.³⁰

However, the Triennials' long-term commitment to engagement with the region went a long way towards overcoming any persisting fears that the focus was yet another Western cultural engagement with exotica and the 'Other'. One of the strongest

frameworks for overcoming such fears lay in the high level of resources committed to processes of consultation and co-curating.

Disillusions and disappointments

The decade between 1993 and 2003 witnessed a surge of interest in exhibitions, residencies, programs, projects and publications dealing with the Asia–Pacific region within Australia and across the region.³¹ That period witnessed a profound shift in Australian consciousness.

Any revision, however, of the frameworks that held together accounts of how modernism and postmodernism had developed in the region proved much less open to new challenges and changes.

If the decade generated a number of new ways of engaging and interacting with the region, then there was also, for that time, a parallel longing to create new possibilities for Australia's future, and the title of the Third Triennial, *Beyond the Future*, suggested this.

The Third Triennial was opened in September 1999, and was focused on the millennium, despite the fact that the term itself, as Director of the Queensland Art Gallery Doug Hall pointed out, was a concept of time constructed by the West. He wrote,

The fact that the western understanding of 'millennium' fails to correspond with the beliefs held by the majority of the world's population is seldom considered. It does serve to remind us, however, of the immense and sustained global influence of western constructs. An increment in time has become a critical moment for reflection and anticipation, where physical and symbolic structures will be recognised, and where ideas and public gestures will be debated and celebrated.³²

The bombing of the twin towers in New York on September 11, 2001 temporarily shook some members of the developed world into a realisation that old hierarchies and domination would not go unchallenged. But, arguably, it was not until October 2002, with the bombing of two Balinese nightclubs, that Australia felt the full impact of what was being termed 'international terrorism' in a region that was all too close to home.



Textile project involving Australian artist Megan Kirwan-Ward and a community of women textile artists in Padang, West Sumatra. Project made possible through Asialink's Australia-Indonesia Arts and Community Program Image courtesy Asialink and the artist Photographer: Simon Cowling



Left: Margo Neale,
Professor Kubo,
Glen Barclay and
Caroline Turner
at National Museum of
Ethnology, Osaka,
Japan, 2001



Right: Christine Clark,
Bundith Phunsombatert,
Robyn Ziebell
in Thailand 1999

If we take that point as an imaginary close to a decade, it is possible to find traces of the many failures sprinkled through a period marked by many more high points of success. In short, although there is now a plethora of new galleries featuring contemporary Asia–Pacific art, and there have been many exhibitions dedicated to such work, tertiary courses looking at Asia–Pacific art are few and far between.

It's easy to feel that a great deal has been lost in terms of Australia's will to re-imagine itself as part of the Asia–Pacific region: a great deal of adventure, optimism, goodwill, openness to review and exchange has been bypassed in this age of 'international terror'. But it is a wonder, all things (including history) considered, that it happened at all, this affair with an identity in a self-invented region.³³

So it may also be pardonable to recall that, for a decade, balanced precariously on that little raft floating between those two vast oceans of cultural imaginings, a peculiarly Brisbane idea of what Australian identity might have been, rocked and bobbed to the tides of change.

POSTSCRIPT

Writing this from the perspective of 2004, however, one can take some refuge from despair in evidence that 'the strelitzia factor' remains as a residue to infect our everyday lives. (Strelitzias, more commonly known as bird of paradise, have become a popular garden favourite along with ginger plants, frangipani and bromeliads — all tropical species used in suburban attempts to create Balinese-inspired gardens, even though these plants are not

native to the region.) With a nation glued to home improvement and lifestyle reality TV, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that there are more attempts to Asia–Pacific-ise our everyday lives than ever before. The Australian backyard of David Meredith’s brother has changed forever.³⁴

NOTES

Pat HOFFIE acknowledges the generous assistance of Robyn Ziebell.

- 1 Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: nationalism, Southeast Asia and the world*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 11
- 2 Santiago Bose, interview in *Asian Art News*, November/December 1993, p. 71.
- 3 T. K. Sabapathy, ‘Developing Regionalist Perspectives in South-East Asian Historiography’, in *The Second Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1995.
- 4 James Button, quoting Max Bourke, general manager of the Australia Council in ‘Big Picture Diplomacy’, in *Time*, April 5, 1993, p. 46.
- 5 See Australia Council for the Arts, *1993–94 Annual Report*, pp. 20–21.
- 6 Noel G. de Souza, ‘Introduction’, *The Asia–Pacific Cultural Framework: a geographical perspective*, RIAP Occasional Paper No. 16, The University of Sydney, 1992, p. 1.
- 7 T. K. Sabapathy, ‘Developing Regionalist Perspectives’, p. 14.
- 8 ‘Nothing like this happened anywhere else in the colonized zones of Asia and Africa. It also meant that South-East Asia was the one colonized region — after Spanish America 140 or so years earlier — where armed struggle for independence — and more — was commonplace.’ (Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*, p. 6) As far as America was concerned, the solution was to re-map the region into a collective, inclusive and controllable entity. Anderson argues that formation of a range of organisations, from SEATO in 1954 to ASEAN in 1996, accomplished little to bind the region in any imaginary way. Rather, he argues, it was the creation of programs of South-East Asian studies in American universities that brought together scholars and students from across the region in a shared understanding of region that had not existed before. Yet Australia did not figure as an inclusion in these imaginings of the region of South-East Asia. Even despite the evidence that trade between Aboriginal people and Indonesian Macassars had existed for at least 30,000 years, the Australian Governments’ continuing failure to adequately and formally recognise a relationship with the original inhabitants of the country has prevented non-Indigenous Australians from claiming this history as a progenitor to their own tentative engagements in the region. As has been mentioned, after World War II the sun of European imperialism in South-East Asia had finally set, and any myths of European

superiority had been put to earth. And, even though Japan had lost the war, there was a sense in which it had won the peace in South-East Asia, with a steadily increasing respect for Japan's achievements in industrialisation, economic development and diplomacy during the postwar years throughout the region. According to Dr Arlene Neher, there had also been a corresponding shift of consciousness with regard to the status of Chinese in the region. During the war, the vehement opposition of the regional Chinese to the occupation of Japan consolidated their assimilation as Chinese nationals, especially in Malaysia. At the same time, the rise of nationalistic independence movements was further strengthened as the new nations seized the opportunity to advance their causes and demonstrated their leadership competencies. All these shifts of axis were mediated by the keen focus of the United States, which was now able to dispense with the British middlemen who had impeded its direct trade with South-East Asia. (Dr Arlene Neher, 'Southeast Asia During World War II', http://www.seasite.niu.edu/crossroads/aneher/warinsea_slbs.htm (accessed 27 April, 2004)).

- 9 To the minds of those who remained as devotees of the British Empire, the distance from the motherland was a hindrance in more ways than one, and there were doubts about how long Australians could manage to survive as a pure and superior race without the continuing input of British blood. But when such doubts were expressed about the ability of maintaining a healthy, strong stock of Australians in the years leading up to Federation, most Australians 'were confident that Australia had maintained the purity of the old stock by active discrimination against Aborigines and Chinese immigrants: indeed it was the fact that Australia was '98 per cent British' that many saw as the most 'distinctive' thing about the place ... As long as racial purity was maintained, as long as only the noblest racial strain was permitted to flourish in Australian soil, then the future of the Australian branch of the British race was secure.' (Richard White, *Inventing Australia: images and identity 1688–1980*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p. 71.) If the idea that the white races, and especially the British race, were ethnically superior, provided one of the most important ideological cornerstones for Australian Federation, then another was the need for Australia to be defensive and protective. White points out that the White Australia Policy was the first real issue to be dealt with by the newly formed Australian Parliament and argues that the very idea of nationhood in Australia was founded on terms of 'what it was being defended against rather than what it stood for'. During the 1920s, the White Australia Policy was more of an attitude than a policy enshrined in a single document, but it was no less effective for keeping out 'undesirable' migrants. The commitment to preserving an indefinable, but nationalistic and chauvinistic 'Australian way of life' was also used as a means of screening, controlling and assimilating postwar government-assisted migrants into Australia in the years between 1949 and 1964.
- 10 Neil Manton, 'Australia and Asia — Uncommon Canvas?' in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, p. 31.
- 11 Gough Whitlam, Australia Council for the Arts, Annual Report, 1973, p. 9, quoted in Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p. 169.

- 12 Daniel Thomas (Senior Curator and Curator of Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney), 'Following in the Footsteps', in *The Biennale of Sydney*, Opera House catalogue, November 23, 1973.
- 13 In 1963, Indonesia took control of Dutch New Guinea and incorporated it into the Indonesian State as Irian Jaya (West Papua).
- 14 'Although Honolulu is geographically well-placed to be the East-West crossroads for Pacific cultures, and the Centre Culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou near Noumea in New Caledonia has considerable potential to redraw the cultural map of the region, Auckland, as the world's most populous Polynesian city, must rank as a major centre for Pacific art and the hub for art of the South Pacific.' (Jonathan Mane-Wheoki, 'A Recentred World: post-European/pro-indigenous art from Aotearoa /New Zealand and Te Moananui-a-Kiwa/the South Pacific', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, pp. 28–30.)
- 15 The catalogue to the exhibition reveals little attempt to draw new connections that might extend across the region. Rather, the New Zealand curator, Wystan Curnow, took more pains to establish serendipitous links between New Zealand and Edinburgh than to unearth cultural counterpoints between the countries of the Pacific Basin, while the essay of Australian curator Denise Robinson belies her vehement commitment to gathering works together that would 'break with the solipsistic traps habitually aligned with identity ... These works are not concerned with ... establishing an identity confined to geography'. (Denise Robinson, 'Meaning and Excellence,' ANZART, *Australian & New Zealand Artists in Edinburgh*, catalogue, 1984, p. 14.)
- 16 The 12 member countries were Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and the United States.
- 17 Senator Gareth Evans, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, opening address to the *Out of Asia* art exhibition at the Nolan Gallery, Canberra, on July 3, *Australian Foreign Affairs and Trade*, Vol. 61, No. 7, July 1990, pp. 433–44.
- 18 James Button, 'Big Picture Economy', p. 46.
- 19 Lorraine Fitzpatrick, 'Demystifying ARX', *Fremantle Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1991, pp. 7–8.
- 20 Robert Macklin, 'Canberra's Asian connection', *Canberra Sunday Times*, 29 August, 1993, pp. 29–30.
- 21 It was becoming increasingly clear that Australia's track record in the region had left memorable stains, and that it was going to require a solid effort if it was ever to clean up its tarnished image. In his comments on the Australia Indonesia 94 program, a month-long trade, business and cultural promotion in Indonesia in which the Australian government had invested \$20 million, journalist for *The Australian* Jeremy Eccles wrote, 'From the other side, an Australian survey has found at least 23 per cent of the Indonesian elite is "unfavourably predisposed" toward us, and 64 per cent think we still operate a White Australia policy. Even the young, educated members of this elite see us as isolated, snobby to Asians and technologically backward. They'd rather be friendly with Malaysians and Singaporeans.' (Jeremy Eccles, 1994, in 'Viewpoint', *The Australian*, March 25, 1994, p. 9.) Such scepticism had also formed the basis of Malaysian artist, writer and curator Wong Hoy Cheong's question, 'I keep

- asking why Australia is so interested in us now?' (Quoted in 'Why Now? ARX and the New Regionalism', in *Photofile*, No. 36, 1992, pp. 14–20.)
- 22 To South-East Asians, deeper cultural affiliations lay with the motherhood cultures of India and China, and any possibility of including Pacific cultural production within a consideration of contemporary art in the region was almost unthinkable. The only possible vantage point from which to include Asia with the Pacific was New Zealand, where the travel routes of age-old ancestors from Asia were being followed again in contemporary immigration. (Jonathan Mane-Wheoki wrote, 'A search for origins ultimately draws Pacific peoples back to the ancient world of what the West has named "Asia", from whence their ancestors came many thousands of years ago, migrating slowly, island-hopping eastwards across Te Moananui-a-Kiwa. Today, another, more direct migration from Asian countries to Aotearoa/New Zealand is in progress, facilitated by the waka of the late twentieth century — the waka rererangi (airplane).') In *A Re-Centered World*, p. 29.)
- 23 Susan Cochrane, 'Pacific Peoples: Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Torres Strait, Indigenous Australia', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, p. 55.
- 24 Nicholas Thomas, 'Contemporary Art and The Limits of Globalisation', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, pp 17–18.
- 25 Caroline Turner, 'Introduction', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, p. 22.
- 26 Jim Supangkat, 'Contemporary Art: what / when / where', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, pp. 26–28.
- 27 Hou Hanru, 'On the Midground: Chinese artists, diaspora and global art', in *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner, Rhana Devenport and Jen Webb) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1999, p. 191.
- 28 Fumio Nanjo, 'Crossing Borders', in *Beyond the Future*, p. 190.
- 29 Caroline Turner, 'Journey without Maps: The Asia-Pacific Triennial', in *Beyond the Future*, p. 21.
- 30 In Pamela Gutman, 'APT: a conversation: The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art', *Eyeline*, No. 32, Summer, 1996, pp. 22–23. (In 1997, John Clark also published the influential *Modern Asian Art*, Fine Arts Press, Sydney.)
- 31 The following list is not exhaustive, but offers an indication of the range of contemporary Asian exhibitions in Australia from 1987 that focus on Asia-Pacific connections. These were in addition to the four Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibitions featuring more than 300 artists and the inclusion of a growing number of Asian and to some extent Pacific artists in the Sydney Biennales in the decade as well as the short lived Melbourne Biennale in 1999. There have also been a large number of Australian exhibitions in Asia and many have been organised by Asialink (discussed above).
- A critical earlier exchange was the Queensland Art Gallery *Painters and Sculptors* exhibition of Australian artists in Saitama, Japan, in 1987 organised by Caroline Turner from the Queensland Art Gallery with Masayoshi Homma from the Museum of Contemporary Art Saitama, (Curators: Michel Sourgnès and Hideaki Izui), and the return exhibition of contemporary Japanese artists, *Japanese Ways, Western Means*, in 1989.

The latter was the first museum-based exhibition of contemporary Asian art seen in Australia and there were over 30 artists in each exhibition.

Zones of Love, 1991, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Exhibition toured Australia and New Zealand. Curator: Judy Annear. Artists: Atsuko Ara, Plastico Complesso, Jiro Hirano, Hiroyuki Matsukage, Dumb Type, Toshikatsu Endo, Kaoru Hirabayashi, Emiko Kasahara, Mitsuko Miwa, Tatsuo Miyajima, Yasumasa Morimura and Kohdai Nakahara.

Headlands: thinking through New Zealand art, 1992, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Curators: Robert Leonard and Bernice Murphy. Artists: Laurence Aberhart, Richard Killeen, Paratene Matchitt, Colin McCahon and Milan Mrkusich.

India Songs: multiple streams in contemporary Indian art, 1993, Art Gallery of New South Wales. Curators: Victoria Lynn with Indian Commissioners Manjit Bawa and Haku Shah. Artists: Amitava Das, Bhupen Khakhar, Nalini Malani, Ravinder Reddy, N. N. Rimzon, Arpita Singh and J. Swaminathan.

New Art From China: post Mao product, AGNSW Exhibition touring Australia September 1992 – June 1993. Curator: Claire Roberts. Artists: He Jianguo, Chen Haiyen, Xu Hong, Xu Bing, Ni Haifeng, Fang Lijun and Lu Shengzhong.

Confess and Conceal: mengakui dan menutupi, 1993, Art Gallery of Western Australia. Curators: Margaret Moore, Michael O'Ferrall and Apinan Poshyananda. Artists: Gordon Bennett, Lucia Hartini, Japar Salleh, Mary Moore, Jan Nelson, Fauzan Omar, Lin Onus, Pinaree Sanpitak, Jenny Watson, Mark Webb and John Young.

Identities: art from Australia: contemporary Australian art to Taiwan, 1993. Toured to Wollongong City Gallery, mid 1994; Taipei Fine Arts Museum, end 1993 – early 1994. Curator: Deborah Hart. Artists: Nyukana Baker, Gordon Bennett, Joan Brassil, Peter Callas, Peter Cole, Fiona Foley, Michael Gadjwala, Rosalie Gascoigne, Ian Gentle, George Gittoes, Ian Howard, Tim Johnson, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Jack Larangai, Kay Lawrence, Robyn Mckinnon, Mandy Martin, Nicholas Nedelkopoulos, Terry Ngamandarra, Mike Parr, Tom Risley, William Robinson, Victor Rubin, Jan Senbergs, Rover Thomas, Imants Tillers, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, Hollein Valamanesh, Ruth Waller, Guy Warren, Judy Watson, Alec Wurrmala and David Yrindilly.

Mao Goes Pop: China post-1989, 1993, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Curators: Lee Xianting and Nicholas Jose. Artists: Ah Xian, Cai Jin, Ding Fang, Ding Yi, Feng Mengbo, Fu Zhongwang, Gu Wenda, Guan Wei, He Sen, Li Shan, Liu Dahong, Liu Ming, Liu Wei, Pan Dehai, Song Yonghong, Sui Jianguo, Tang Song, Xiao Lu, Wang Guang Yi, Wang Jian Wei, Wang Jingsong, Wang Ziwei, Wei Guangqing, Xia Xiaowan, Xu Bing, Yu Youhan, Zhang Peili and Zhang Xiaogang.

Adelaide Installations, incorporating the 1994 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 1994. Artists: Santiago Bose, Montien Boonma, Heri Dono, Toshikatsu Endo, Lu Shengzhong, Kim Soun-gui, Shim Moon-Seup, Roberto Villanueva, Gordon Bennett, Terri Bird, Paddy Carlton, Eamon d'Arcy, Aleks Danko, Dennis Del Favero, Fiona Foley, Simryn Gill, Fiona Hall, Paul Hewson, Pat HOFFIE, Lyndal Jones, Matthew Jones, Shaun Kirby, Dora Napurrula Martin, Derek Nicholson, Mike Parr, George Popperwell, Linda Marie Walker and Geoffrey Weary.

Rice Paper Exhibition: artists from Hanoi, 1994, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth. Artists: Do Minh Tam, Dao Thanh Dzuby and Le Tuan Anh. On PICA's archive site <http://www.pica.org.au/archive/94exhibit.html>.

ARTTAIWAN, 1995, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taiwan and University of Wollongong. Project Committee: Janet Parfenovics, Nicholas Jose, Deborah Hart, Yang Wen-I, Pan Tai-fang, Lin Ping, Peter Shepherd, David Chen, Dinah Dysart and Harry Ho. Artists: Kuo Jen-Chang, Margaret Shiu Tan, Tsong Pu, Chen Hsin-Wan, Cheng Tsai-tung, Lai Jun-Jun, Yang Mao-Lin, Mei Dean-E, Fan Chiang Ming-Tao, Yu Peng, Huang Chin-Ho, Huang Hung-Teh, Wu Tien-Chang, Yan Min-Huy, Chang Yung-Tsun, Lee Ming-Tse, Lien Teh-Cheng, Wu Mali, Hou Yi-Ren, Lu Hsien-Ming, Chu Chia-Hua, Ku Shih-Yung, Yen Ding-Sheng, Chiu Tse-Yan, Lin Horng-Wen, Lu Mi, Lien Chien-Hsing, Hou Chun-Ming, Chen Hui-Chiao and Huang Chih-Yang. *Fire and Life* (part 1 and 2) 1996–1997, exhibition travelling in India October–November 1996 to: Sakshi Gallery, Bangalore; Faculty of Fine Arts Gallery, Baroda; Gallery 88, Calcutta; Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi; Gallery Chemould, Mumbai; then travelling in Australia April–June 1997 to: Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Monash University Gallery, Melbourne; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; Canberra School of Art Gallery; Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. Curators: Alison Carroll, Chaitanya Sambrani, Julie Ewington, Victoria Lynn, Suhanya Raffel and Shireen Ghandy. Artists: Jon Cattapan, Jayashree Chakravarty, Joan Grounds, N. S. Harsha, David Jenz, Derek Kreckler, Pushpamala, Surendran Nair, N. N. Rimzon and Judith Wright. *Linkage/Leakage*, 1996, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane and Kick Arts Collective, Cairns. Artists: Rene Boutin, Jill Chism, Dadang Christanto, Pamela Lofts, Navin Rawanchaikul, Zane Saunders and Ken Thaiday. *Rapport: 8 Artists from Singapore and Australia*, 1996, Singapore Art Museum, Monash University Gallery, Canberra School of Art Gallery and Institute of Modern Art (IMA), Brisbane. Curators: Lin Tay Swee and Natalie King. Artists: Hany Armanious, Carolyn Eskdale, Amanda Heng, Salleh Japar, Baet Yeok Kwan, Christopher Langton, Nicola Loder and Matthew Ngui.

East Timor: land of crosses, 1996, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art. Artist: Maria Madeira.

Above and Beyond: Austral/Asian interactions, 1996–97, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne, 2 August–15 September, 1996; Institute of Modern Art (IMA), Brisbane, 26 September–2 November, 1996; 24HR ART, Darwin, April 1997; Canberra Contemporary Art Space, July–August 1997. Curators: Clare Williamson and Michael Snelling. Artists: Ah Xian, Kate Beynon, Neil Emmerson, Simryn Gill, Emil Goh, Joan Grounds, Guan Wei, Pat HOFFIE, Lindy Lee, Alwin Reamillo, Kevin Todd, Judy Watson and John Young.

The Japanese Inspiration: influence in crafts & design, 1997, Art Gallery of Western Australia. Curators: Eugenie Bell and Robert Bell. Artists: Jane Barrow, Mark Edgoose, Emile Galle, Edward Godwin, Shoji Hamada, Bill Samuels, Kataro Shirayamadani, Louis Comfort Tiffany and Edwin White.

Self: contemporary Indian video art, 2002, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Curator: Johan Pijnappel. Artists: Shilpa Gupta, Suboth Gupta, Subba Ghosh, Sonia Khurana, Umesh Maddanahalli, Tejal Shah and Surekha.

Shanghai Star, 2002, Wollongong City Gallery, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art and other venues, Perth. Artists: Yu Youhan, Li Shan and Fan Dongwang.

Living Together is Easy, 2004, Art Tower Mito and National Gallery of Victoria. The exhibition has been organised as a form of cultural exchange with Asialink, with curators from both countries having worked together on its preparation. Curators: Eriko Osaka and Jason Smith. Artists: Fiona Hall, Rosemary Lang, Susan Norrie, Samuel Namunjaja, David Rosetsky, Ricky Swallow, Kaoru Motomiya, Tetsuya Nakamura, Taro Shinoda, Tabaimo, Tadasu Takamine and Akira Yamaguchi.

32 Doug Hall, 'Foreword', in *Beyond the Future*.

33 By the second Triennial, others from much more metropolitan perspectives were already saying as much: 'Despite wars within and wars from outside, there remained a sense that the real place was somewhere else and power remained on the other side of the world. Which is why it is appropriate that middling-size Brisbane in questioning Australia is the venue for an exhibition where many cultures can examine their past and their present.' (Joanna Mendelssohn, 'Center for Art', *Asian Art News*, January–February 1997, pp. 33–36.)

34 David Meredith was the first-person voice in George Johnston's iconic Australian novel, *My Brother Jack*. In that novel the author describes Jack's own backyard in terms of an Australian Dream that had metamorphosed into a bland suburban nightmare. (George Johnstone, *My Brother Jack*, HarperCollins Publishers, Australia Pty. Ltd, 1964.)

CHOPPY WATERS: Arts Infrastructure and Networks in Asia

Alison Carroll

BEFORE 1900, ART in Asia was controlled by those who ruled: the kings, the emperors and the sultans, followed by colonial masters, with some sway from priests and scholars. This has changed in the past 100 years, with institutions, communities and the middle classes increasingly involved.

The most important change, collapsed into a much shorter time frame than in Europe, has been the growth of teaching institutions, and their central role in the art life of most countries of the region. Previously, in most Asian countries, younger artists were taught either individually or in ateliers by master artists, akin to the European apprentice system. The new schools, based on European models, had groups of students gaining entry in a much more open manner, and taught by professional teachers employed for this purpose, teaching specified curricula. They were established first in the Philippines, India, Japan and Australia, and, in turn, gave those societies the longest experience of the potential power and influence of the arts community. The histories of these art schools, with their particular dominating individuals, factions and interest groups, as well as their focus on specific trends and ideas,

have been very important throughout the region. By their nature, their intention to open avenues of art practice more widely was revolutionary. They further opened doors to the study of other cultures through the books and magazines they imported and made available. In turn, this encouraged the study of Western art itself. And because they were often the only focus for artists and younger artists in particular, their support became even more important in each society. It can be said that the community nature of an art school, with a cohort of students moving through their studies, identifying with

and supporting each other, was conducive to ‘community’ sympathies in many Asian societies — where, at one end, a government system is not trusted and, at the other, individual hubris is frowned on — and this helped their success.

The founding of the schools, however, reflected the interests and focus of each country. The countries of East Asia that were not colonised by Europeans opened their schools as part of their strategy to learn European technologies and therefore remain competitive with the new powers. The Technical School of Art was founded in Tokyo in 1876 to train Japanese artists in utilitarian skills equal to the West. Among other techniques, it introduced the capacity of oil paint to create atmospheric perspective and an illusion of light and space. The Chinese followed when they realised this was one of the secrets of Japan’s economic and military success. Uncolonised Thailand also took the initiative and introduced Western art ideas via its School of Fine Arts, now at



Art Tower Mito
Mito Japan
Image courtesy
Art Tower Mito
Architect: Arata Isozaki

Silpakorn University, from 1933. In contrast, the schools of South Asia, such as the Mayo School of Arts (now the National College of Arts) established in Lahore in 1875 as part of British cultural colonialism, had a curriculum, writes Pakistani academic Salima Hashmi, that ‘reflected the contradictions between the local art tradition and the dominant British aesthetic. The continuity and richness of the varied local painting tradition was taken over by the Victorian predilection for the academic and sentimental in art.’¹

The early decades of the 20th century saw many important political challenges to the status quo, often involving young artists grouped with and around the schools, an example being the young artists who protested about French colonial attitudes in Hanoi in the 1930s. Evariste Jonchère, who in 1937 became the head of the College of Fine Arts — still the most important art school in Indochina — said the Vietnamese could be trained only as artisans. This led to action by students challenging him to compare his own work with that of the pagodas and communal houses of Vietnam for ‘vigour, meaning and spirituality’.² These students were part of the movement that eventually led to the overturning of French rule.

Today, more than in other parts of the world, these same schools continue to hold crucial roles within their cultures. Their teachers hold positions more esteemed than in the West. In part, this is related to the respect in Confucian societies for learned elders, but it also relates to the strength and importance of the infrastructures. Look around Asia now, and we see, taking a random selection, the Tokyo University of Art, Hong-Ik University in Seoul, LaSalle and Nanyang in Singapore, the University of the Philippines in Manila, the Central School of Art in Beijing, the Baroda School of Art in India, Silpakorn and Chulalongkorn in Bangkok — all key institutions in the region, all employing influential artists, writers and cultural leaders. Increasingly, the staff of each institution speak to each other, attend meetings and publish articles and books that are read across the region; and the introduction of new technologies makes contact by staff and students increasingly easier. A quick glance at who is asked to curate and write about artists of their own countries, especially outside East Asia, will show more teachers at these schools involved than curatorial staff of the museums.

For the most part, these schools are infrastructures supported by the relevant government. In contrast, the other institutional

support for the arts community in Asia, the museum, has had a much more complex and varying history. It can be said that the museums supported by governments are, with some notable exceptions, not working very successfully for artists, while those supported by the private sector are much more dynamic and rewarding, especially in the past few years.

Again, the museums, including art museums of Asia, by and large, were established in a Western guise. Collections of works of art owned by local rulers, such as the rajas and sultans of India, were for private delectation. The reasons for the establishment of museums in the Western mode, by colonial governments for the most part, are various. On one level it was a mechanism to educate the populace, where, in principle at least, all people could enter and learn. It was also a place to collect, preserve and display the various treasures of each country, though obviously colonial powers removed many key pieces to their own museums in Europe. For others, these institutions would preserve examples of what the founders saw as disappearing cultures, as was the case in Australia. These were all reasons leading to the building and staffing of major institutions and physical structures throughout the region. Some museums of Asia, such as the National Museum of Indonesia, have long histories, it being founded in 1778, with its own impressive specific-purpose Greek-pillared building opened in 1867. Its site, overlooking the central square of Jakarta, speaks for its symbolic importance, at least at its founding.

This first wave of building mighty Græco-Italianate buildings occurred throughout Asia in the 19th century. The second wave of museum building occurred after World War II, when newly independent countries saw the possibilities for establishing their new visual symbols through such establishments. In India, the cultural institutions moved from colonial Calcutta to the new capital of Delhi. In the Philippines in the 1960s, first lady Imelda Marcos set up the Cultural Center of the Philippines as part of the desired internationalisation of the country, modelled on the Rockefeller Center in New York. The National History Museum of Laos has photos of the heroic Pathet Lao and the dastardly Americans. The South Korean Government quickly opened the new Museum of Contemporary Art on the outskirts of Seoul in time for the Olympic Games in 1988, a symbol of the emerging and internationally competitive country. New art museums have been

built throughout Japan and China in the past 10 years as symbols of the prosperity and cultural focus of these booming economies. Singapore also has spent a lot of money building museums in the past decade, seeing these institutions as giving weight to its desire to become a centre for cultural life in South-East Asia especially.

Ahmad Mashadi, Deputy Director of the Singapore Art Museum, acknowledged this in 1999 in Fukuoka:

The discourse [on Asian values] clues the shifts taking place in the way we create representations of ourselves. In manifesting such representations, the museum as a public institution is strategic apparatus.³

Yet, unlike the art schools, the majority of the museums have struggled to gain relevance, to find audiences and to establish themselves as key parts of local cultural life. For some, such as the prestigious National Museum of Indonesia, their situation has even deteriorated. In 2002, there were only 8059 foreign visitors compared with 29,169 in 1997, an important figure as foreign visitors are the main adult patrons of the institution.⁴

The issue is, of course, recognised in the region. Chief curator of the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, Chung Joonmo, said in 1999:

Asia's art museums are not created because the general public earnestly feels that they are a really necessary part of their lives, they are created when a country reaches a certain wealth ... Consequently I feel that Asia's art museums are still at an elementary level. While this is the case, they must be on a par with art museums that have systems of a certain standard developed by Europe and so I think Asia's art museums are in a terribly harsh situation.⁵

Singapore Art Museum, Singapore. The museum is located in the old St Josephs Institution, a heritage building restored as the art museum. Original architect Father Charles Benedict Nain. Image courtesy Singapore Art Museum



Certainly, many of these new museums are engaging with their audiences and initiating innovative programs and exhibitions. Art Tower Mito in a small town in Japan has been a leading institution, recognised internationally, in the past 10 years, though it has been struggling more recently with reduced budgets. This is a fate also encountered today by major museums in central Tokyo, such as the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography.

This reduction in government funding for many of the innovative museums has left an overt gap for the private museums. In Tokyo again, the privately run Hara Museum has been a leader for many years, but the newly opened Mori Art Museum, founded by a wealthy property developer and placed in his newest complex in Roppongi as part of its amenity, is recognised as the leading art museum in Japan at the moment. Other art curators are looking to it for leadership.

The recent reduction of funds for the government-owned museums in Japan has led to a situation long understood in less wealthy countries of the region. And it has led to a similar building of privately run museums and art spaces, either by individual, often wealthy families or by groups of younger artists along NGO lines. In 2002, the Japan Foundation's Asia Center published a guide called *Alternatives: Contemporary Art Spaces in Asia*, listing 78 organisations throughout East and South-East Asia. It does include some major government-supported museums, such as the Singapore Art Museum, but the majority are private museums and NGOs. It has a qualitative side, which is not articulated, for, while the Singapore Art Museum is included, the National Gallery of Thailand is not, though two university galleries in Bangkok are, along with About Studio, Project 304, Tadu Contemporary Art



Mori Art Museum
Tokyo, Japan
2004
Image courtesy
Mori Art Museum
Architect:
Richard Gluckman

Space, and Si-Am art space. Many of these smaller galleries will no doubt have short life spans, but while the individuals running them are keen and committed they will add immeasurably to the vibrant art scene in Thailand. The same situation occurs in India where private commercial galleries can often be the main centres for dynamic activity, along with a small number of foundations, such as Sanskriti Kendra.

When Asialink was established in Australia in 1990, it was thought that our natural partners in Asia for hosting and sending art exhibitions would be the government-sector museums, which are the main partners here in Australia. But it has become increasingly apparent that the most effective partners to work with are those that are energised to think and act internationally, and while some are indeed from the government sector, increasingly, it is the private and NGO spaces to which we turn. Asialink's key partners in India are Sanskriti Kendra, a private foundation, and Khoj Workshops, an artist-run space; in Korea, we have happily worked with Art Sonje, a beautiful private museum in central Seoul with an active, internationalised program, and Ssamzie Art Space, a privately run organisation that houses artists' studios and a small gallery situated in one of the liveliest parts of the city. Throughout the region individuals are increasingly creating organisations that quickly gain recognition because they so clearly fill gaps left by other sectors. Everywhere individuals are the key to creating dynamic organisations, but it seems this is even more important in Asia.

In Hong Kong, Claire Hsu has established the Asia Art Archive to record the art activities that are so quickly flaring up around her and that, without other supportive infrastructure, can die leaving no trace.

There is a universal friction between the edifices built by governments, with a focus in recent years notably in Japan, China and Australia on new art museums, and the political will to provide enough funds and 'space' to make them work to their highest potential — whether it is time to train new staff, or to enable new major institutions to work through their priorities, or time to encourage audiences to try these new experiences. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne is a good example of this. An innovative idea, opened before it had time to settle into its rhythm, it has experienced staff and publicly aired planning problems ever since. But in Asia, with the special

pressure noted by Chung Joonmo, these frictions are even more extreme. As he says, the expectation of museums quickly becoming important to their communities is unrealistic, and when this expectation is not met larger government support falls away. Unrealistic time limits and lack of experience of how long it takes to really make an institution gather speed and weather the various storms that will occur are very damaging.

The fast changes of economic circumstance in many countries of the region — the sheer rate of change — have made inherently conservative bureaucracies seem even slower to respond to the needs of an increasingly globalised arts fraternity. This applies to individual artists' support as well as to institutions. Artists in many countries do not even expect their governments to support them directly, again, in many cases because a trusted democratic process where politicians may be swayed by a critical and/or powerful arts lobby is either a very new concept or is just not envisaged in the foreseeable future. They do not express anger or surprise or vexation, as artists in Australia do, when the Government is seen to not support a good arts venture in the way they expect. The Australia Council for the Arts, the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body, is well used to all sorts of criticism from the arts fraternity, but the Council only gets this because so much is expected of it. Its success is seen in how relevant everyone thinks it is. This is not the case, yet, in Asia, and maybe never will be, with the parallel track of private and individual support gaining more and more strength.⁶

I have written about three pillars of arts support in Asia: the art schools, the museums/galleries/art spaces and direct support — or lack of it — for artists. This is not the case where governments — national, prefectural, state and local — see the arts as providing international credibility and image building (leading to increased tourism, regional vitality, revenue — all reasonable outcomes, of course) through support of special events. And the queen of arts special events is a biennale or triennale, a multinational, branded and marketed product equal to the multinational, branded and marketed products of global capitalism. Governments around the world, including in the Asia-Pacific, have taken these events to their hearts, with India, Bangladesh and Sydney long established, and newer events now in Brisbane, Gwangju, Fukuoka, Taipei, Yokohama and Shanghai. Singapore, Hong Kong, Adelaide, Perth



11th Asian Art Biennale,
Dhaka, Bangladesh 2004,
Australian component
curated by Alasdair Foster,
organised by Asialink and
the Australian Centre for
Photography, Sydney.
Image courtesy Asialink
Photograph: Alasdair Foster

and Melbourne have included visual arts activities, usually as second-tier activities, within larger arts festivals. Interestingly, almost all of these events have been created separately from the main visual arts institutions — the state or national art museums — in each city, which can be seen variously as either a vote for independence or a vote to keep control.

The tri- or biennales even have their trans-national executive, travelling easily between brand outlets, pressured, well recognised and owing only scant allegiance to a home country — the internationalised curator.⁷ I have written before about this person.⁸ Very often from America or Europe — though Nigerian-born Okwui Enwezor's of the 2002 Kassel *Documenta*, and Japanese Yuko Hasegawa's directorship of the 2001 Istanbul Biennale overtly challenged this — these individuals initiate ideas, invite representation and offer opportunities that artists worldwide are happy to accept.

For artists in Asia, these events (and their directors) are viewed with muted enthusiasm. Certainly, such spending on the arts is positive; seeing work from elsewhere is positive; seeing one's

own work in these contexts, by and large, is positive. There is recognition that this money is unlikely to be used more directly for artists, so if this is one option, it is better than nothing. Again, these are universal discussions for artists.

Artists have been dealing with the desire to be part of the international art scene for years through such major events, with various success. From the 19th century, artists such as Filipino Juan Luna have been successful in Europe (he, for example, winning the Gold Prize at the 1884 Salon in Madrid). In recent decades the Chinese have made a major impact in America and Europe, including at the Venice Biennale, in spite of the lack of support of their government. They have been very focused and strategic, and very confident about their capacity. But, for the broader constituency in Asia, this biennale network has special challenges. It challenges central tenets of 'Asian' culture. It does not respect tradition, it challenges the status quo and accepted hierarchies (rarely, for example, selecting older established artists, who are given great respect at home), and the selections are usually without clear cultural context. Artists are placed next to others with no cultural connection, making individuals vie for their moment of — not even glory, just being remembered 10 minutes after the viewer has passed by. This can work better for Western artists in the West because most of the audience understands the context, but for artists from Asia, how much background and need for understanding is just ignored? For viewers in Asia less used to seeing contemporary art because the practice of visiting museums is less established, and also not knowing so much about the art of even their neighbours, this context-less, often unexplained, often very sophisticated and complex work also remains impenetrable. And, unless the Asia-Pacific events lead to clearly acknowledged new trends or show work not seen elsewhere, they will become pale imitations of what goes on elsewhere. (And the governments that pay for them will again turn away not having provided enough 'space' for them to find their own strengths, in the same way as has happened in many museums.)

The arts scene in Asia today is more complex, vibrant, energised and cross-cultural than ever before. The networks across Asia are growing palpably; networks between Asia and Europe are growing. The question is in which direction will support for this activity go, following this energy with a longer-term, sophisticated understanding of the current situation globally — or not?



The Leeum Samsung Museum of Art is the newest art museum. Opening October 2004
Architects: Mario Botta (museum 1), Jean Nouvel (museum 2) and Rem Koohaus (Child education and Culture Center 3)
Image shows 3, 1 and 2 (left to right)

A final comment on circumstance. In the past 10 years, the rest of the world has been on a roller-coaster ride of interest and disinterest in the arts of Asia. In the early 1990s, with the booming ‘tiger’ economies, the strength of Japan, and the growth of wealth in China, the rest of the world, including the United States, Europe and Australia, refocused its gaze on this region. Arts bureaucracies followed, and increasing support was offered for curatorial, artistic, exhibition, teaching, publishing and other events that engaged more closely with Asia. All was looking positive for increased engagement on most fronts. Then the 1997 economic crash occurred, and almost everything stopped, affecting not only commerce, but also the surge of interest in Asia more broadly. And, as the economic situation improved, other calamities happened, including SARS and global terrorism, which dampened general confidence in exploring unknown cultures. We are still in choppy waters for engagement. The natural surge of energy of artists and many organisations pushes ahead, but cautiously, and new problems will only further damage confidence. We all plan for the future, but aware of a more difficult environment than we have encountered previously.



Artsonje Centre,
Seoul, 2004
Architect: Jong-Sung Kim
Photograph:
Artsonje Centre

NOTES

- 1 Salima Hashmi, 'Framing the present', in *50 Years of Visual Arts in Pakistan*, Lahore, 1997, p. 10.
- 2 Jeffrey Hantover, 'Contemporary Vietnamese painting', in *Uncorked Soul: contemporary art from Vietnam*, Plum Blossoms (International), Hong Kong, 1991.
- 3 Ahmad Mashadi, 'Report', in *Asian Art — Towards the 21st Century*, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, 1999, p. 83.
- 4 Sari P. Setiogi, 'Museum visitors display penchant for "breasts"', *The Jakarta Post*, 19 March, 2003.
- 5 Chung Joonmo, 'Question and answer', In *Asian Art — Towards the 21st Century*, 1999, p. 87.
- 6 Some governments, including those in Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan and Singapore, do provide grants to individual artists, but artists from these countries talk of the difficulties of accessing them.
- 7 John Wiseman, in *Global Nation? Australia and the politics of globalization*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 34–35, notes the distinction between transnational companies where headquarters are incidental, and multinational companies that are global in outlook but still regard the home market as crucial. The tri- and biennales are examples of the latter, but perhaps the executive (the curator/artistic director) is an example of the former.
- 8 Alison Carroll, 'Networks', in *The Second Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*, (Catalogue, scholarly editors Caroline Turner and Rhana Devenport), Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1996, pp. 30–31.

DISTINCTIVE VOICES: Artist-initiated Spaces and Projects

Christine Clark

NOT MERELY FILLING GAPS

Since the early 1990s, artist-initiated spaces and projects have increasingly performed integral roles in shaping local, regional and global contemporary art narratives. Though fundamentally a worldwide phenomenon,¹ the recent proliferation of ‘alternative’ spaces and initiatives has occurred predominantly in countries that lack a functioning national arts infrastructure. This has taken place to such an extent in the Asia–Pacific region that artist-run spaces and projects in a number of regional countries are now being seen as major agencies to ‘fill the gaps’ — fulfilling roles usually accepted as responsibilities of First World state institutions and state-endorsed ‘alternative’ spaces.

Yet, numerous artist initiatives in the region are looking beyond replicating the pre-existing Western structures of institution, catalogue, festival and exhibition. There is a growing realisation among artists and arts workers that while aspects of First World institutionalised frameworks are worth appropriating, the structure in entirety is neither attainable nor desirable. Increasingly,

artist initiatives in the region are focusing on their immediate locales: everyday life contexts. Through this approach, they are establishing operations that function effectively within the existing conditions, formulating programs matched to their particular localities. As such, it would be inaccurate to view these developments merely as mechanisms that ‘fill the gaps’; although this is certainly one effect, these developments are building unique locale-specific systems that are assisting the formation of diverse trajectories in the Asia–Pacific.

This increased concentration on local contexts is premised on a growing understanding of strategic positioning within local and global contexts on part of these initiatives. The search by individuals and collectives in the region for local responses and the development of alternative strategies clearly cannot be viewed in isolation from other historical and economic processes that have dominated this period. The increased growth in, and global awareness of, artist-initiated spaces and events in the region are part of the larger process of globalisation and, paradoxically, of the consequent reification of the local. Concurrently, with increased global acknowledgement and appreciation of contemporary art practices in the Asia–Pacific, these artist initiatives can be seen as responses to the stimulation and pressure of global culture.

As the very nature of the programs and projects of these artist-run spaces relies on specific localities — a collection of diverse and often dissimilar operations — it would be a complex and lengthy undertaking to consider all initiatives in the region. This essay focuses on the Indonesian context, while drawing on comparisons and some particular case studies from countries in South and South-East Asia. This approach admittedly precludes other country-particular nuances and specificities from being examined. Nevertheless, it is the essay’s aim to explore through these contexts the principal ways in which artist initiatives are operating in their environments, projecting locally distinctive voices that are being recognised as significant players in the global arena.

Working from scratchy foundations

In the past 15 years, globalisation coupled with rapid economic growth in the Asian region has seen the rise of a generation of young artists and arts workers equipped with expertise and practice



Ade Darmawan
(Indonesia)
Deodorant Display of Power

1997
Mural
Cemeti Gallery, Yogyakarta
Image courtesy Cemeti Art
House and the artist

in Western art systems. In Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and other countries lacking established arts infrastructure, the initiatives activated by this generation of arts professionals were largely novel to the local framework. These initiatives presented a different perspective and a new approach: offering platforms for contemporary art discourses, the instigation of artist networks and the creation of public access to art.²

In the case of Indonesia, the arts environment in the late 1980s consisted mostly of commercial galleries for painting, considerable state funding support for commissions, particularly public sculpture, and various ad hoc art activities. Domestic biennales were part of the system during this time but did not provide a permanent platform and lacked strategic positioning and curatorial direction. Within this setting, the first artist-run space in Indonesia, Cemeti Gallery, provided a much needed platform, presenting a permanent venue for artists to show their work, express ideas and create a network of exchanges. Indonesian artist Ninidityo Adipurnomo and Dutch-born artist Mella Jaarsma opened Cemeti Gallery in Yogyakarta in 1988. (Notably, this initiative followed Adipurnomo's and Jaarsma's studies at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam in the mid-1980s.³) Although

Cemeti Gallery was originally set up as an informal space, it quickly established a unique position through a strong exhibition program built on curatorial policies aligned with local and international contexts and attentiveness to sound organisational practice. Cemeti Gallery continued to focus on promoting and discovering artists until 1999, when it moved to a new custom-built gallery, changed its name to Cemeti Art House and revised its curatorial policies to align with its shifting directions.

As a consequence of Cemeti Gallery/Cemeti Art House's longevity and assumed responsibilities in the Indonesian system, many local players have come to regard Cemeti as *the* institution. Indonesian critic and artist Asmudjo Jono Irianto interprets this as Cemeti institutionalising 'the production and consumption of contemporary visual arts through its agency'.⁴ That such positioning has not been an objective of Cemeti exemplifies what can occur when a system lacks a leading state-run institution or suitable alternatives: the 'alternative' becoming mainstream. In most other countries in the region this has occurred to a lesser degree. Specific spaces performed roles within the system but there has been a greater diffusion of roles accompanying a relative absence of institutional stability.

Increasing mobility

In the past decade, Indonesia — and the region generally — has experienced a rise in the number of alternative voices.⁵ The growth in the number of artist-run spaces, collectives, exchanges and events has occurred through increased networks, opportunities, knowledge and experience, greatly facilitated through Internet communication. Notwithstanding the precariousness and difficulty of working without state-driven infrastructure, many artists and art workers in the Asia-Pacific are recognising the artistic benefits of working outside a structured system. Systems without established infrastructure allow a certain freedom and rapidity and are congruent to innovative and experimental approaches. These systems are not contained by the agendas of the multiple agents within a structured system: government policy and support, museums, curators and the media.⁶

Artist-run spaces and collectives developed out of such environments are, by their very nature, not bound by apprehensions regarding their longevity or 'measures' of success.

These groups use their flexibility strategically to continuously evolve and change to meet their individual and collective agendas. In Indonesia, and predominantly in Yogyakarta, there is a plethora of small groups that emerge, dissipate and then re-emerge in altered forms. As Mella Jaarsma has observed, 'These small groups are unique also in their relatively consistent ability to survive. The strategy they adopt allows them to rapidly disperse, only to re-emerge with a new strategy.'⁷ This ability to transform quickly and effortlessly has been used extensively by artist initiatives in the region to meet changing objectives and environments. Independent art space Big Sky Mind in Manila, is an example of an independent art space that clearly recognises and utilises this capacity. Explaining their recent organisational change from mounting exhibitions to providing a centre for artist residencies, Filipino artist Ringo Bunoan states, 'Admittedly, an independent art space such as Big Sky Mind can never remain the same year after year. Driven by the evolving concerns of contemporary art and society, we need to continually take risks, experiment, and not be afraid to make changes.'⁸

Although this ability to modify structures and objectives has benefits, the continuous transformations and changes among some artist collectives in the region also speak of systemic inadequacies. This raises the question of support mechanisms and the channels through which local players can achieve greater direction and stability. Since the mid-1990s a growing number of conferences, events and programs have provided bases for individuals and collectives in the region to begin discussions, form trans-regional and global networks, and instigate collaborative undertakings, as I shall argue below.

It is important to highlight that it has primarily been only in the past five years that intra-regional discourses have been given regional platforms. Before this, the majority of regional artistic interactions were routed through powerful 'host' countries, including Australia and Japan. This situation is slowly changing, but intra-regional platforms remain minimal.⁹ Internet collaborations are a clear exception and, in the past decade, the Internet has increasingly been used to develop direct relationships between various individuals and collectives in the region. Initiatives such as Multimedia Art Asia Pacific (MAAP) — 'established to bring focus to "unmapped" new media cultural content emerging from

the Asia-Pacific Regions¹⁰ — and various online art directories have assisted greatly in facilitating these connections.¹¹

This increase in activity has been advanced by and corresponds with the growing proclivity of support agencies to fund projects focused on artist initiatives. The willingness to support initiatives in the region can be read in terms of global economies, as the agencies facilitating these artistic connections are largely from past colonial powers, current power bases or countries with country-specific bilateral economic relations. An alternative reading is the current fascination with newness and difference, which fetishises ‘alternatives’ to the established forms of structures. Notwithstanding these mechanisms, artists and art workers are key instigators, pushing the envelope of the possible for locale-specific artistic activity within and outside the region as well as endeavouring to devise their own support mechanisms to match their environs.

EMERGING PLATFORMS

A number of ‘mainstream’ projects have, however, provided platforms for ‘alternatives’. One prominent project, the 2002 Gwangju Biennale, *Pause*, provided an important platform for interface, promotion and documentation through the inclusion of 26 alternative art groups and independent organisations from Asia and Europe. The construction of this platform was an objective of the biennale, with the curatorial premise to ‘make tangible’ the huge contribution of regional artist initiatives.¹² Co-curator of the biennale, Paris-based Chinese critic Hou Hanru, perceived the project as ‘a first step towards a global network of independent, self-organisational and resistant structures’.¹³ While the claim of ‘first step’ is debatable, the project did in many cases provide inaugural meetings between artist collectives; it gave international recognition to these collectives and prompted the continuation of the constructed network. To encourage discussions among the artist collectives, the biennale program included an associated workshop, organised by Seoul-based artist initiative Forum A. The workshop focused on the artist collectives’ local contexts to investigate differences in the varying localities, exploring local-to-local exchange on the global level.

Several artist-driven events have resulted from this Biennale, including the December 2003 *Fixing the Bridge* project hosted by Cemeti Foundation in Yogyakarta. This three-prong initiative — artist collectives' meeting, exhibition and a series of satellite projects — built on the outcomes of the initial workshop and endeavoured to establish a more sustainable and intensive network and create a new form of international collaboration. *Fixing the Bridge* also investigated processes that expand interaction with other sectors in the community — an increasingly fundamental factor for many artist initiatives given the importance of community life in many countries in the region. The objectives of these subsequent workshops, and those of comparable initiatives, illustrate the intention of a large number of artist collectives in the region to develop their own agendas and specific support mechanisms. These activities are initiating an alternative voice — 'an alternative form of globalism'¹⁴ — one that speaks of peripheral localities strengthened and fed through collective operations and articulations.

Aside from the stimuli of major activities and their subsequent networking opportunities, artists in the region have achieved increased direction and distinctive voices through artist-to-artist initiatives. RAIN is an example of an international artist network that has assisted collectives in the region to position their activities through links with other initiatives. Founded by Rijksakademie alumni artists, RAIN aims to stimulate 'pluriform internationalism' through strengthening the 'exchange of art, ideas, techniques, cultural heritage and knowledge between artists' initiatives in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and Europe'.¹⁵ Interestingly, RAIN does not operate on the basis of similarity in context. It aims to encourage diversity and locale-specific approaches. The common element for RAIN partnership is the creation of alternatives: creating methods and projects that do not exist in the specific localities.

Jakarta-based artist-run space *ruangrupa* has been a RAIN partner since 2000 and its localised objectives and programming clearly demonstrate benefits from associations with RAIN: 'The RAIN network has been very important for *ruangrupa* to endorse and facilitate the art and cultural exchange, [on both south-south level, and south-north level] and the research/documentation program.'¹⁶ As a consequence, *ruangrupa* is now endeavouring to



work with more local networks to implement its programs. This is evidenced in the realisation of its ambitious and successful month-long ‘Ok. Video: Jakarta Video Arts Festival’ in 2003, where it used this mechanism to create more national and intra-regional exchange. ‘Other priorities of ruangrupa are to build a better network between the different cities and islands in Indonesia ... Furthermore we are building on a net of relations with other countries in Asia.’¹⁷

It was previously stated in this paper that structured systems are bound by a number of agents’ agendas, including government funding bodies. In line with this outlook, Singapore is an interesting case in point. Similar to other economic-progressive countries in the region, Singapore has recently invested substantial state funds in new arts infrastructure, but seemingly to the detriment of community arts initiatives and artist funding.¹⁸ The State arts budget allocations have been interpreted by the contemporary Singaporean arts community as a disproportionate investment in ‘hardware’, and not people and project ‘software.’¹⁹ These cutbacks in government funding for artists and art initiatives, coupled with a younger generation of artists with

ruangrupa
(Indonesia)
Lekker Eten Zonder Betalen

2003
Party & installation
Image courtesy Cemeti Art
House, Yogyakarta and the
artist

increased skills, and knowledge of initiatives implemented by neighbouring regional artists who have minimal state support, have stimulated more artists individually and collectively to act for themselves and seek alternatives to the given system. One corollary is the increase in fringe, artist-led communities, which include p-103, Studio 19 and Kill You Television (KYTV). As Audrey Wong, Artistic Co-director of Substation, stresses, 'Artists are making the decision not to rely on directives or handouts from the state but to be stubbornly independent and finding a certain freedom that way.'²⁰

Another instance of Singapore art workers and artists formulating alternative processes to government dependency is illustrated in the contemporary art space Substation's current project program. Substation is financed chiefly by government, but, as a consequence of budget cutbacks, it has formulated alternative processes. One of these is the invention of the Associate Artist Scheme. This initiative relies on forming financial partnerships with artists to produce exhibitions of new work: Substation offers space and professional expertise while the artist raises funds for material and production costs. Through this scheme, significant exhibitions showcasing new works by local and regional artists are being realised.

TRANSCENDING INSTITUTIONAL BOUNDARIES

Artists and arts workers in the region are increasingly inventing work processes and pushing their artistic potential in ways that cannot be paralleled in First World art institutions. The varying ways these artists are responding to their nuanced local situations are testing the boundaries of what, in First World contexts, are the 'determined' confines of the institution. Increasingly, artists in the region are breaking down these confines as they are creating initiatives that fall outside First World institutions' purviews as well as the physical capabilities of existing structures in their own contexts.

The ability of artist initiatives in the region to reinvent work practices and processes, and push artistic potential, is exemplified in the Indonesian context by Cemeti Gallery/ Cemeti Art House. In 1998, after 10 years of operation, Cemeti began to question its role within the local system. It sought to redefine its policies to

align with changing objectives generated by shifts in local political, social and artistic contexts. This effort resulted in a focus on projects that involved a participatory and active sense of community.²¹ As Cemeti co-director and artist Mella Jaarsma observed, 'Artists are no longer only studio workers but are looking for ways to empower themselves and some work relative to specific communities ... Non-artists are also using "art tools" for bridging social activities from different perspectives.'²²

Recent Cemeti programs involving community and cross-disciplinary interaction have attempted to push the envelope of the possible by devising innovative, experimental, locale-specific approaches. This was evident in Cemeti's 15th anniversary exhibitions *Exploring Vacuum 1 & 2* in 2003. The exhibitions focused on process, exchange and community participation, involving 20 multi-profession artists teamed with various local professionals, organisations and community groups. *Exploring Vacuum* can be understood as snapshots of contemporary life in Yogyakarta. These snapshots show a selection of diverse and specialised projects as a means to celebrate localised daily events.²³ A number of the projects, through the grouping of professionals, explored various artistic and social potentials: one project involved artist Syagini Ratnawulan working in collaboration with a foundation for blind people making signs in Braille to facilitate interaction between blind and sighted gallery visitors. Another project saw local architect Eko Prawato working with ceramist Koni Herawat and lecturer in architecture Mahatmanto to explore an array of surfaces and textures to develop 'a treasury of architectural elements'.²⁴ Other projects were based on community activities, some of which illustrated snapshots of continuing artistic and educational initiatives: Moelyono, a leading Indonesian artist who has had a long artistic engagement with his local community in East Java, worked with local children and farmers to continue the development of their local SBAT (*Sanggat Bermain Anak Tani/Farmers' Children's Play Group*) program, an informal children's education program managed by the village's residents.²⁵ Moelyono's installation offered 'a practical presentation', a snapshot of daily activities, as it consisted of pieces made by children and farmers as part of the SBAT program.

Cemeti has also begun to question the appropriateness of its existing space, particularly when programs are focused on



Moelyono (Indonesia)
Sanggar bermain anak tani
 (SBAT) Preparing for
 Farmers' children's play
 group preparing exhibition
 'Exploring Vacuum I'
 2003 Cemeti Art House
 Image courtesy Cemeti Art
 House, Yogyakarta
 and the artist

community interaction. 'Is it still relevant to expect the audience/public to take the initiative to come to an exhibition place, or does the artist have to create their own space and projects on the spot where the audience is?'²⁶ Bandung artist Tisna Sanjaya's 2000 exhibition *Etching Space and Soccer* shows one endeavour to incorporate outside public space with gallery space. In addition to his work in the gallery, Sanjaya's project included a game of soccer between local artists and a local soccer team. After the game, members of the soccer team were brought to the gallery as a continuation of the project's process. Sanjaya then undertook a performance, which included the active participation of the team members, combining the exhibition's core themes and his two obsessions: soccer and printmaking.

In the Thai context, artists are also questioning the adequacy of art institutions and finding alternative means to bridge the gap between their art works and local audiences. Thai art critic Gridthiya Gawewong observes, 'Previous "hit and run" type projects like mainstream exhibitions are being restructured and replaced by both independent and [local] governmental projects.'²⁷

The project *The Land*, initiated by Rirkrit Tiravanja and Kamin Lertchaiprasert in 1998, is one project that is establishing a continuing connection with a community, aiming to develop a space for social engagement and interaction. Navin Rawanchaikul in the past five years has principally worked outside the structure of art institutions, exploring how art relates to local conditions and endeavouring to increase his art's relevance to its local community. His 2004 project *Fly with Me to Another World* spoke of this commitment. A component of the project involved a series of workshops at selected sites in Lamphun, in rural Thailand, involving a cross-section of the community to discuss current environmental and social concerns. The goal of the workshops was to 'encourage exploration of how art can be used as an expression of identity in everyday life and how it can strengthen the cultural heritage of communities'.²⁸ Rawanchaikul is attentive to the fact that his work represents a unique, alternative localised approach that may have some effect on global discourse. 'I don't know how this project will affect the mainstream art world, but I hope it will act as a catalyst encouraging everyone to ask how art should be evolving.'²⁹



The majority of the experimental, community-orientated projects mentioned above are by their very nature outside the purview of most institutions' mandates. Working outside these restrictions, artist initiatives are increasingly undertaking projects that are confrontational, and politically and socially sensitive. Especially in the context of globalization and the prevalence of media-controlled culture, such projects are being recognised as a powerful means of individual thought and expression. Significant instances of such artist initiatives can be seen in India, through the work of Open Circle, Aar-Paar and other endeavours. Open

Tisna Sanjaya (Indonesia)
Art and Soccer for Peace

2000
Football competition for the Perkutut Cup at Cemeti and Harjo Krapyak field, Yogyakarta.
Image courtesy Cemeti Art House and the artist

Navin Rawanchaikul
(Thailand)
*Fly with Me to
Another World*

2004
Installation
Lamphun, Thailand
Image courtesy the artist



Circle, comprising a group of young artists from Mumbai, has initiated numerous community-focused projects that deal with local political and social injustices. Open Circle was particularly active after the 2002 Gujarat Riots, in which several hundred Muslims lost their lives during two months of sectarian violence throughout the west Indian state of Gujarat. Through various projects, including a series of stickers, T-shirts and public performances, Open Circle made 'significant contributions to the fight against fundamentalism and the attrition of secular values in India.'³⁰

Shilpa Gupta (India)
Blame
2000
Aar-Paar project 2000
Image courtesy the artist



Another example is the Aar-Paar project, which used the medium of print to undertake public projects and activities between the Indian port city of Mumbai and the neighbouring Pakistani port city of Karachi. One of its initiatives involved artists in both cities electronically exchanging a series of posters that comment on the India-Pakistan political relationship. The posters were cheaply mass-produced and distributed as well as posted in public places, inviting members of the public to question the meaning and content of the posters.

Through these various artist initiatives we are seeing new possibilities. These mechanisms are increasingly carrying influence at local, regional and global levels. Without the backing of supportive state infrastructure, the

active development of countries' contemporary art discourse will always be problematic. These various activities, however, are reinventing processes and possibly offering alternative global contemporary art directions.

NOTES

- 1 Artist-run spaces have played important roles in First World countries' art discourses from the 1960s, however, as a worldwide phenomenon this has occurred since the 1990s.
- 2 Gridthiya Gaweewong, 'Scratchy Art Scene', in *Alternatives: contemporary art spaces in Asia*, The Japan Foundation Asia Center. Tokyo, 2002, p. 151.
- 3 In the past 20 years, the Rijksakademie's artist programs have played very important roles in introducing artists to other artists from around the world, and to a diverse range of artistic practices and structures. These programs, particularly since the early 1990s, have played significant roles in facilitating networks and projects that involve artists from developing countries. See the RAIN network addressed later in this essay.
- 4 Asmudjo Jono Irianto, 'Cemeti Art House in the Indonesian Art World', in *Exploring Vacuum: 15 years Cemeti Art House*, Yogyakarta, 2003, p. 25.
- 5 It is important to note that this use of the word alternative signifies alternative to what already exists in their own specific systems and should not be confused with alternatives in the Western system, which implies alternative to state institutions.
- 6 Mella Jaarsma, '15 Years of Cemeti Art House, Time for Chewing the Cud', 2003, p. 11.
- 7 Mella Jaarsma and Nindityo Adipurnomo, '15 Years of Cemeti Art House, Time for Chewing the Cud', in *The 2nd In-between International Conference: globalism and alternative spaces*, conference papers, Korea, May 2004.
- 8 Ringo Bunoan, 'Big Sky Mind: the other side of the sky', in *The 2nd In-between International Conference*.
- 9 This is illustrated by many of the mid-career curators from various countries in Asia involved in The Japan Foundation's *Under Construction: new dimensions of Asian art, 2001–2002*, noting that, prior to this project, they had few opportunities to travel within their region.
- 10 MAAP is a not-for-profit Australia-based organisation. Its emphasis is now on developing new-media festivals in Asia and providing web site resources. <http://www.maap.biz/>
- 11 Important recent directories include Asia Art Archives, <http://www.aaa.org.hk/index.html> and Universes in Universes: Worlds of Art, <http://www.universe-in-universe.de/car/english.htm>
- 12 Wan-kyung Sung, Charles Esche and Hou Hanru, '2002, Gwangju, Pause', in *Project 1: pause, conception*, Gwangju Biennale, 2002, p. 25.
- 13 Hou Hanru, 'Event City, Pandora's Box', in Hanru, *Project 1*, p. 31.

- 14 *Fixing the Bridge*, Cemeti Foundation, <http://www.cemetiartfoundation.org/english/impermanent/fixing2.html>
- 15 Rain, www.r-a-i-n.net
- 16 ruangrupa, <http://www.ruangrupa.org/>
- 17 ruangrupa, <http://www.ruangrupa.org/>
- 18 For details of recent Singapore Government arts funding policies, see Lee Weng Choy, 'Claiming Cultural Capital', in *Links, Platforms, Network*, Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, 2004, pp. 9–11.
- 19 Audrey Wong, 'Substation. Bread & Circuses: alternative art spaces and recent developments in Singapore's cultural policy', in *The 2nd In-between International Conference*.
- 20 Wong, 'Substation. Bread & Circuses: alternative art spaces and recent developments in Singapore's cultural policy'.
- 21 Nindityo Adipurnomo, 'Exploring Vacuum 2003: Cemeti's 15th anniversary', in *Exploring Vacuum*, 2003, p. 202.
- 22 Mella Jaarsma, '15 Years of Cemeti Art House, Time for Chewing the Cud', in *Exploring Vacuum*, p. 11.
- 23 Nindityo Adipurnomo, 'Exploring Vacuum 2003', p. 202.
- 24 Eko Prawato, 'Eko Prawato', in *Exploring Vacuum*, 2003, p. 210.
- 25 SBAT (*Sangat Bermain Anak Tani* /Farmers' Children's Play Group) is an effort by farmers, especially women, to communally and autonomously organise free education to guarantee the fulfilment of their children's right to education. See Moelyono, in *Exploring Vacuum*, 2003, p. 204.
- 26 Mella Jaarsma, '15 years of Cemeti Art House, Time for Chewing the Cud', p. 11.
- 27 Gridthiya Gaweewong, in *Fly with me to another world*, <http://www.flywithmeproject.org/sys/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=47>
- 28 Navin Rawanchaikul, *Fly with me to another world*, <http://www.flywithmeproject.org/sys/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=47>
- 29 Navin Rawanchaikul, *Fly with me to another world*.
- 30 Chaitanya Sambrani, 'Potentialities of Asian Art and Fiction of Alternative Spaces in the 21st Century', in *The 2nd In-between International Conference*.

CHALLENGES
FOR A NEW
MILLENNIUM

KRISHNA'S DILEMMA:

Art Museums in Human Development

Amareswar Galla

When we write about the experience of a group to which we don't belong, we should think about the ethics of our actions, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce or perpetuate domination.

— bell hooks

CHALLENGES OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The decades leading up to the turn of the last millennium witnessed considerable interrogation of the role of art in cultural democracy and human rights. Intense discussions, dissent, protests and transformations of art museums and arts-funding bodies led to new discursive encounters that have now become symptomatic of any dialogue on art and representation. Art history as a discipline is increasingly becoming interdisciplinary, with many new pedagogical challenges presenting themselves as a result, and art museums are

endeavouring to become relevant beyond the coteries of their élite clientele. In fact, the liminality of the borders between art museums and other museums and cultural institutions is becoming increasingly apparent. Art museums are struggling to become community-centred and relevant within the framework of cultural democracy. However, learning to open the door is only the first step. Keeping an open house as institutions in the service of society is the long road to emancipation from cloisters of élite discourse. The challenge is to establish a seamless dialogue among creativity, creators, innovators, interpreters and multiple stakeholder publics. The shift from consultation and representation to relevance and engagement requires a participatory process for shifting the paradigm of the notion of the art museum itself through appropriate interrogation.

In the past, the context for change has been provided by community cultural action, self-conscious professional endeavours and social justice agendas. However, the renegotiation of borders of cultural heritage practice has been sporadic and rarely systematic. The post-apartheid convention in Johannesburg in 1994, entitled *Bringing Cinderella to the Ball: arts and culture in the new South Africa*, challenged the cultural sector to become relevant and engage with reconstruction and development. In many ways South African cultural heritage discourse evolved in the context of an unprecedented disengagement with the immediate past. Developments in South Africa enriched art and cultural practice and professional frameworks across the world. This is evident from the final report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, entitled *Our Creative Diversity* (1996), and the subsequent Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Development, which resulted in the *Stockholm Action Plan* (1998).

More recently, the Stockholm+5 meeting in 2003 and the various activities of Forum Barcelona in 2004 have, for the first time, provided a framework for cultural indicators in development.



John Frank Sabado
(the Philippines)
*Six Cardinal Points
of the Universe*

2000
Pen and ink on paper
51 x 69 cm
Collection: Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum
Image courtesy Fukuoka
Asian Art Museum

The Annual Human Development Report and Index of the UNDP will use these cultural indicators. Art museums, arts governance and arts funding will be evaluated and their outcomes measured using these indicators. But two fundamental questions must be asked. First, do art museums have the capacity to become agencies of human development? And, second, how can the rhetoric of art and cultural democracy be translated into the reality of human development?

The process leading to Forum Barcelona has parallels. The final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, entitled *Our Common Future* (1987), led to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, resulting in Local Agenda 21, which provided the framework for ecologically sustainable development. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg (2002), popularly known as Rio+10, brought about new synergies and a convergence of global agendas. The parallel lines of the nature and culture agendas were brought together into the framework of sustainable cultural diversity using the framework of the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. Arjun Appadurai, in his seminal paper in Johannesburg, argued for sustainable development, cultural diversity and cultural heritage — both tangible and intangible — to be brought together in an integrated paradigm. It is this paradigm that informs the Sustainable Heritage Development Programme and the Pacific Asia Observatory for Cultural Diversity and Development currently being established at

Durriya Kazi and
David Alesworth
(Pakistan/UK)
Arz-e-Mauood
(The Promised Land)

1997
Installation:
Karachi, Pakistan
Image courtesy the artists



The Australian National University. These initiatives are strategic activities with local, national international partners, including intergovernmental bodies such as UNESCO and ICCROM. The course entitled Art Museums in Development is an integral part of these new developments, addressing the challenges posed by the need to locate art museums in human development.

The concept of art museums in development is seminal and most timely. The dialogue on cultural diversity is at the heart of the Asia-Pacific region, home to more than half the world's population. Interrogating the epistemological basis of art museums in postcolonial societies of the region and their location in sustainable development has become critical, as well as symptomatic of a reflective heritage profession that is concerned about the relevance of its endeavours. The struggle has been to move beyond the dichotomy of hegemonic occidental and subaltern oriental discourses into a new era of shared heritage language for meaningful debates and global outcomes owned by humanity in general and the respective heritage communities in particular. Cultural conservation is not only about the preservation, continuation and management of cultural heritage resources but also the processes of evolution and continuation of community cultural contexts. The recognition of cultural diversity in several countries poses a direct challenge to the development of appropriate processes for cultural representation. Cultural democracy also means redressing the erosion of cultural heritage self-esteem leading to the breakdown of well-being and alienation. In many ways, cultural heritage has become the focus for the exploration and articulation of the sense of shared and contested meanings of cultural borders and subaltern histories across the world.

The way forward requires us to ask certain fundamental questions. One of these relates to the embedded nature of binary oppositions, such as the occidental and oriental dichotomy mentioned above. I will explore this question through a personal illustration. Krishna is a dark-skinned cowherd, loved as an indigenous personality. He is symbolic of the reconciliation of the so-called great tradition informed by Sanskritic elements and the small traditions of local communities in India. Sanskritisation as the agency of the former is the globalising element while indigenous traditions are the localising centripetal forces. In this process of acculturation and integration, Krishna is the reconciliatory

personality that transcends all barriers of caste, class, race, ethnicity, language and regionalism.

Representations of Krishna abound with all the sensuousness and playfulness that have come to be seen as characteristic of him as both god and human. Krishna's discourse on duty to Arjuna in the classic text the *Bhagavat Gita* has become celebrated among people in many different places and at many different times, from the followers of Einstein to Amartya Sen. However, it was the counter-culture movements of the 1960s that provided the theatre for Krishna to dance across from conventional museum collections to the world of the art museum. Krishna has transcended the confinement of material culture collections and crossed over to the popular displays of galleries, now enjoying the same sort of popularity he has historically always been accustomed to in India. Krishna is personified in sculptures, Kangra works of art on silk and miniatures from Rajasthan that abound in the public museums and private collections of the world. His role in the Mahabharata in its dozens of recensions and local adaptations in South and South-East Asia is well known. Wayang, the Indonesian art form, exemplifies his continuation as an integral part of local cultural systems beyond India.

For those of us brought up in rural India and introduced to art museums and galleries through formal education and professional practice, the context of Krishna remains a benchmark for locating culture in development. Confronting the out-of-cultural-context museum displays on India in North America and Europe for the first time in the 1980s appealed to my childhood memories of playing in a museum. Statues of gods and goddesses, including Krishna, provided cross-cultural comfort in alien environments. Often categorised as works of art, they were shown with minimal captions within a Western aesthetic discourse that often left me wondering how the visitors could ever understand anything at all about the spiritual significance of Krishna. Where was the performance and ritual, the story and significance, the intangible heritage without which the tangible was only stone or metal? It was playing hide-and-seek behind comparable sculptures set in lime and concrete in the local site museums in Andhra Pradesh that formed my earliest impressions of the heritage field as a child. Neither my friends nor I could have dreamt that Krishna would travel all over the world, except in the local temples where

expositions on Krishna gave him credence for flying all over the world on his mythical *vahana*, or vehicles.

I remember a seminar at which a British historian of Africa, keen to shift his research focus to India, upon returning from a field trip to India expressed amusement at the fact that South Indians spelt the word 'unique' 'Unike'. Little did he realise that 'Unike' is one of the many popular names of Krishna. Obviously, his edition of the Hobson Jobson Dictionary failed to illuminate him in this respect.

More recently, the missionaries of Krishna consciousness, or Hare Krishna devotees, have become the un-intended interpreters of Krishna from London to New York and even Mathura, the place of origin of Krishna. The different stories of Krishna are not simply mythologies. Visitor responses show that in the face of minimal text, visitors go away amused by Krishna's playfulness, his 18,000 maidens, his devotees distributing the *Bhagavat Gita* and other Krishna consciousness literature and offering free pure vegetarian meals. Only the minority that purchase museum catalogues or have a genuine research interest tend to see beyond the object or art work to the realm of embedded meanings and histories. Deep research into Krishna representation, audiences and appropriate interpretative tools could lead to a sufficient understanding of the context to provide a meaningful experience to visitors. Krishna could become an educator about India and its impact beyond its borders, a cross-cultural mediator in multicultural societies, a community actor in development. But the challenge lies in reconciling Krishna's presence in the intangible heritage of Mathura and its highly impoverished hinterland and neighbourhoods with his image as it exists in the imaginations of the affluent art museums of New York.

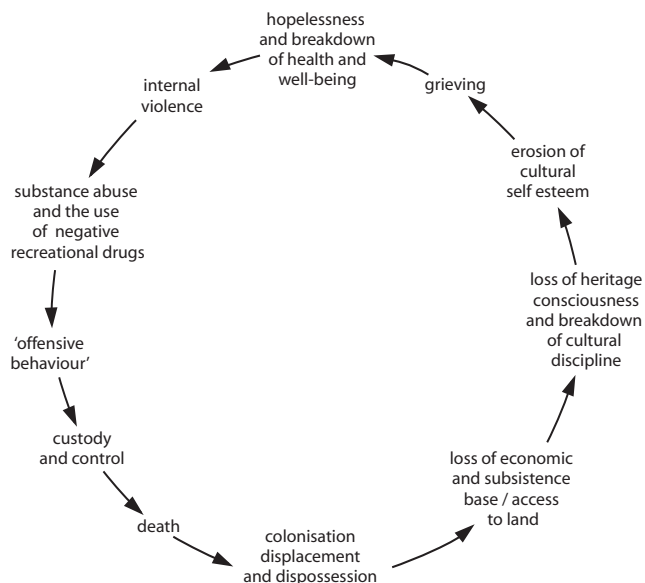
The question, however, is this: Even with all the interrogations of the two decades since the publication of Edward Said's seminal work, is Orientalism as discourse really a thing of the past in art museums? Addressing the dichotomies embedded in art museum discourse and what I have referred to as Krishna's dilemma challenges art museums to locate their signification in the community context from which their past and present collections originate. In addressing authenticity and significance in heritage management, David Lowenthal has referred to dichotomies of true and false, real and fake, sacred and profane. Many other dichotomies,

such as primitive and civilised, literate and illiterate, traditional and contemporary, occidental and oriental, dynamic and static, have dominated art and heritage discourse until very recently. It is critical to confront the tyranny of binary oppositions, if we are to recognise creativity in the emerging cultural heritage values of contemporary societies. After all, where does one delineate traditional and contemporary heritage value systems and their manifestations in complex societies? The old English adage, 'once a practice, twice a tradition', is the reality in community cultural development.

The conventional place, site, art work, sculpture and object-centred approaches pose another dichotomy of tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources. In September 1991, an unprecedented number of Aboriginal people from 200 communities across the Kimberley met at the Crocodile Hole near Turkey Creek in Western Australia. The gathering included famous Aboriginal artists. The first day of the meeting was led by Aboriginal elders of great traditional standing and custodianship, the cumulative repositories of thousands of years of cultural heritage values. Such intangible world heritage has been under continuous threat through displacement, dispossession and colonisation in several parts of the world. An old African proverb says, 'When an old person dies a library burns down.' As the seeds of a universal cultural heritage system, indigenous cultures are 'of outstanding universal value'. In considering sustainable heritage development, it is critical to consider the interrelationship of intangible and tangible cultural heritage values.

Another construct is the nature and culture binary, which is based on universalised 19th-century knowledge. In many parts of the world the non-duality of nature and culture informs cosmological and worldview systems. In response to this dichotomy, the Aboriginal elders at the Crocodile Hole meeting stated 'Culture is a map. It is written in the land.' The dichotomy of nature and culture was dismissed as superfluous. Perhaps the most significant outcome of the meeting was the advocacy for the location of museums in human development. At the same time as the Crocodile Hole meeting, the Western Australian Government was conducting a review of museums and galleries in the state. I was brought in as the resource person for the taskforce to work with the Aboriginal Interests Committee chaired by Peter Yu.

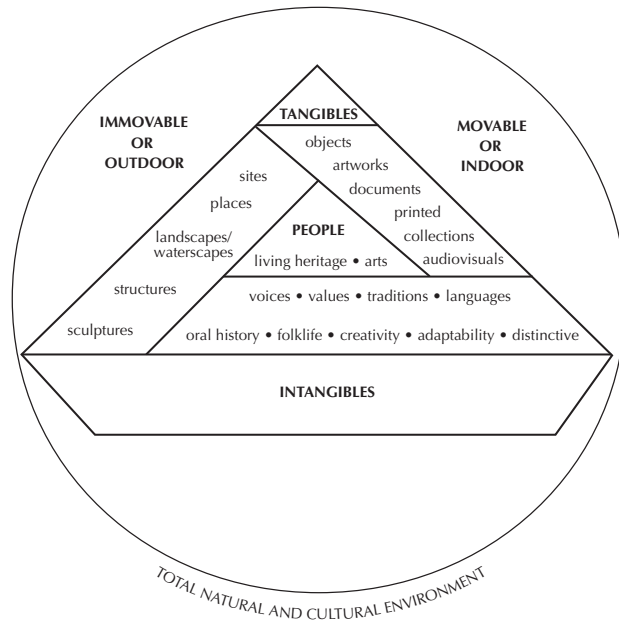
It was also the time of the deliberations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. We asked members attending the meeting about their view of the role of cultural institutions such as museums, galleries and site management agencies. A diagram drawn in the sand is reproduced below.



A dimension of the relationship between heritage and the breakdown of well-being

©A.Galla & P.Yu

It was pointed out that the role of museums and galleries in human development was to address the erosion of cultural self-esteem. I have argued in several forums that all heritage is intangible and that so-called natural heritage is culturally perceived. It is an integral part of our evolving collective consciousness. It is often perceived through disciplinary-based tangible constructs such as sites, monuments, objects, art or 'things'. The holistic framework for understanding cultural heritage should consider integrated approaches to movable and immovable, tangible and intangible cultural heritage resources, and place the people in all their diversity, with all the creativity, adaptability and hybridity of their arts, culture and heritage, at the centre (see figure below).



Holistic Representation of Cultural and Heritage Resources¹

©A.Galla & P.Yu

Another challenge for art museums in dealing with the art and heritage dichotomy is to address their location in discussions of heritage diversity and cultural diversity. Cultural heritage should be regarded as dynamic, living value systems of layered significance, central to individual, community, national and global senses of cultural esteem and identities. A holistic approach should be advocated, and the usefulness of systematic cultural mapping and planning must be recognised. These approaches enable balanced developments that take into consideration a range of economic, historical and social impacts. In essence, cultural mapping allows communities to explore the special meanings of the places in which they live. Partnerships between planners, architects, community historians, heritage practitioners, artists and community agencies are crucial if communities are to take control of the spaces in which they live. Art museums could play a pivotal facilitating role in working with artists and communities to establish the diverse significance and unique qualities of cultural spaces, and thus promote the recognition that culture, health and well-being are inseparable. Cultural mapping also contributes to

community awareness of local history and cultural achievement, and promotes preventive conservation. The articulation of subaltern cultural ideologies, facilitated through cultural mapping and planning in postcolonial and transitional societies, offers exciting opportunities for the democratisation of hegemonic cultural and heritage constructs and contributes significantly towards rethinking the cultural borderlands in pluralistic societies.

The proliferation of commercially constructed art and heritage discourse is increasingly becoming the new ‘cold war’, eroding heritage value systems and challenging notions of integrity, authenticity and heritage diversity. The inevitability of adaptation of heritage spaces, the impact of market forces or mass tourism and the realities of cultural economics must move us to become more proactive. The unique Melanesian, Polynesian and Micronesian cultural heritage values and hence their creativity are under threat due to the pressures of tourism on local economies. For art museums, there are three ways of addressing this concern:

- the refinement of art museum discourse itself through a balance of inclusive recognition of heritage diversity and cultural diversity, with appropriate negotiation through participatory democracy and professional practice;
- the development of frameworks that distinguish heritage tourism from the broader notions of cultural tourism. Heritage tourism should be developed within a best-possible practice framework that does not compromise the cultural integrity of non-renewable resources; and

Centre Culturel Tjibaou
(Noumea, New Caledonia)

Exterior view
Image courtesy of the
Centre Culturel Tjibaou.
Architect: Renzo Piano
Building Workshop



- the strategic promotion of art museum literacy in diverse community contexts and the recognition of community literacy in art museums.

The context of art museums could be *synchronic*, referring to creativity at a given period of time in history or the present, or *diachronic*, referring to a historical and continuing process over a period of time. The validity of any 'postcolonial approach to representation' informing art museums in pluralistic societies will depend on three different levels of approach that should be considered holistically.

The first approach is grounded in community cultural development discourse that is informed by the many voices that articulate cultural heritage values. In several subaltern cultural groups, the cultural centre or community heritage networks at once bring together movable and immovable heritage resources, tangible and intangible cultural elements. The cultural centre is a keeping place, a place of creativity, a community museum, a living heritage centre, an interpretation centre and an educational centre where different generations and heritage value systems converge or diverge. It is an integral part of the cultural fabric of the society that it represents and promotes. The cultural centre is a mechanism for cultural heritage preservation and concentrated community cultural activity. It is also an important vehicle for reclaiming cultural values and advocating the postcolonial position of accepting non-Western notions of cultural development. Frameworks for establishing partnerships should be open to being informed by community cultural heritage mechanisms.

The second approach is driven by access and equity principles, which could apply across all public sector portfolios. These principles

Haryo Yose Suyoto
(Indonesia)
Noise Community

1999
Volunteers from the local metal company in Yogyakarta participating in sound performance project in Yogyakarta. The project involved participation from a number of local communities
Image courtesy Cemeti Art House and the artist





Fieldworker network at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. These indigenous volunteers, and their female counterparts, represent the VCC and undertook research projects in their local areas. Image courtesy Stephen Zagala

embody a systematic way of dealing with cross-cultural issues. Access can be defined as the process of ensuring equality of opportunity to apply for cultural services (including advice), entitlements and benefits that are appropriate to the diversity in nature and presentation of community needs. Equity is the process of allocating public resources fairly, both in the disbursement of legal entitlements under a service or program without discrimination and in redressing an identified inequitable balance. The greatest challenges are to bridge the gulf between the rhetoric and reality of access and equity, and to ensure transformation strategies driven by workplace cultural diversity planning. The commitment of art museums to cultural diversity planning will be an indicator of their engagement with human development.

The third and most important approach is the diversification of mainstream practice. It is often mentioned that the so-called mainstream is a culture of public practice informed by the elite politics and practices of a dominant minority. Previously, change here was often driven by cultural action imperatives and the effective advocacy of the disenfranchised. Cultural equity issues inevitably give rise to tensions and divisions in cultural heritage endeavours. These are often due to the reluctance of the mainstream to change or of those in control to share. But the simple truth is that the push for cultural democracy in pluralistic societies cannot be swept under the carpet. The sustainable future is a global community that no longer focuses on cultural differences but reflects the diverse origins of different peoples and their varied cultural inheritances. In short, the structures and



Navin Rawanchaikul
(Thailand)
*Fly with Me
to Another World*

2004
Children's shadow
puppet activities
Lamphun, Thailand
Image courtesy the artist

basis for the consideration of the art museum world need to be diversified to reflect a pluralistic corporate culture of operations.

In conclusion, I would argue that in today's world of transitional cultural democracies and accelerated economic, cultural and digital globalisation, the relevance of art museums will be a negotiated balance between their community groundedness and the imperatives of market forces, given, however, that their fundamental commitment to the creative integrity and cultural heritage practices of different communities is non-negotiable. The future of the art museum as an agent for human development is interdisciplinary. In order to place the art museum at the centre of human development approaches should reflect the histories of the relevant cultural contexts and communities of interest to establish the synchronic and/or diachronic layering of validity. These

approaches to human development must reveal current practices of cultural construction and representation and the meaning of creativity in diverse cultural and heritage contexts. The processes of making connections and communicating across borders of heritage diversity and cultural diversity will be critical for the preservation, presentation, continuation and management of pluralistic world heritage.

NOTES

Amareswar Galla was elected as the Vice-President of ICOM, Paris, in October 2004.

- 1 Amareswar Galla, 'Authenticity: rethinking heritage diversity in a pluralistic framework', *Nara Convention on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention*, World Heritage Bureau, UNESCO, Paris, 1995, pp. 315–22; *Heritage Curricula and Cultural Diversity*, National Guidelines for Museum Training, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Prime Minister and Cabinet, Canberra, 1993; *Culture in Development*, UN Discussion Paper, UNDP, Hanoi, 2003. (Papers available for free downloading on <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/heritage>.)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

EDITOR

Caroline Turner

Dr Caroline Turner is Deputy Director of the Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University. As Deputy Director of the Queensland Art Gallery from 1982–1999 she organised and curated over 60 international exhibitions, including *Matisse*, which toured Australia in 1995. In the mid-1980s Turner also began working in the area of contemporary Asian and Pacific art, organising the first exhibition of contemporary Asian art (from Japan) for an Australian museum in 1989. She was co-founder and Project Director for nearly 10 years for the Asia–Pacific Triennial Project, heading the curatorial and publications teams for the exhibitions in 1993, 1996 and 1999, and convening the three major conferences in the 1990s. She has written and lectured extensively on contemporary Asian art and was appointed by the Australian Government to the Australia–China Council in the 1980s and the Australia–Indonesia Institute in the 1990s.

CONTRIBUTORS

Soyeon Ahn

Soyeon Ahn is Senior Curator at the Leeum Samsung Museum of Modern Art in Seoul, South Korea. She has a BA and an MA (History of Art) from Ewha Womans University. She was a trainee at L'Ecole Nationale du Patrimoine, Paris. She has been a curator at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul, a co-curator of the Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art for South Korea and has published on and curated a number of major exhibitions on Korean art.

Michelle Antoinette

Michelle Antoinette is presently undertaking the Doctor of Philosophy Program in Interdisciplinary Cross-Cultural Research at the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University. Her dissertation is entitled *Shifting Visual Cultures in 'Southeast Asian' Contemporary Art*. She has written for a number of art journals on a range of topics and presented papers at various international art conferences. More generally, her research interests combine modern and contemporary visual cultures, Asian studies, political and social theory and cultural studies.

Glen St.J. Barclay

Dr Glen St.J. Barclay was Reader in International Relations at the University of Queensland, 1965–1995, specializing in international power rivalries and latterly Islam and West Asia. He is now a Visiting Fellow at the Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University. He has published 10 monographs, including *Commonwealth or Europe? Friends in High Places* and *A Very Small Insurance Policy*, as well as 150-plus articles on diplomatic and military issues in Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and South Africa. He has published widely on international affairs and is a regular commentator on radio and television in Australia and Singapore.

Alison Carroll

Alison Carroll has been an academic, critic, writer, curator and administrator of art exhibitions and artist exchanges with Asia for over 20 years. She curated the first major exhibition to address Australian art in an Asian context: *East and West; the Meeting of Asian and European Art* at the Art Gallery of South Australia in 1985; and the first exhibition to include Australian artists' attitudes to Asia, *Out of Asia* in 1989. She established and is Director of the Arts Program at Asialink, now the main program for arts exchange between Asia and Australia for visual arts, performing arts, literature and arts management practice.

Christine Clark

Christine Clark is a writer, curator and art administrator with many years experience in Asia–Pacific contemporary art projects. She was extensively involved in the first three Asia–Pacific

Triennial exhibitions and has conducted art management workshops throughout Indonesia through an Asialink Arts Management Residency.

Susan Cochrane

Dr Susan Cochrane is a freelance curator and author specialising in contemporary Indigenous art. As Director of Pacificlink Arts Consultants since 1990, she has curated major arts events in Australia and overseas, including for the Asia–Pacific Triennial exhibitions in 1996 and 1999. She was employed by the Centre Culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou in New Caledonia to establish the Department of Contemporary Pacific Art. Her major publications include *Contemporary Art from Papua New Guinea* and *Bérétera: Contemporary Pacific Art*.

Dang Thi Khue

Dang Thi Khue is an artist (working in the fields of painting, graphic art and installation), art researcher (at the Fine Arts Institute-Vietnam Fine Arts University) and writer in Vietnam. She has also been involved in arts management as Commissioner of the Secretariat of the Vietnamese Fine Arts Association (1978–1989). She has exhibited in the United States, Australia, Russia, Germany, Hong Kong, Thailand, the Philippines, and Japan as well as extensively in Vietnam.

Amareswar Galla

Professor Amareswar Galla is Director of the Studies of Sustainable Heritage Development Program, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University. He was the first Australian to be elected as President of the Asia Pacific Executive Board and founding chairperson of the Cross Cultural Taskforce of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). In 2004 he was elected as Vice-President of ICOM, Paris. He has served as founder, director and technical advisor for cultural development programs in Australia, South Africa and Vietnam and is currently working with UNESCO in the establishment of World Heritage Areas and in poverty alleviation projects.

Alice G. Guillermo

Dr Alice G. Guillermo teaches at the Art Studies Department of the University of the Philippines. She has written widely on

Philippine art and is the author of the books *Image to Meaning* and *Protest/Revolutionary Art in the Philippines 1970–1990*.

Salima Hashmi

Professor Salima Hashmi is an artist who has exhibited widely in Pakistan and internationally, a curator and a writer who has published extensively on art in Pakistan. Among her major publications is *Unveiling the Visible: Lives and Works of Women Artists in Pakistan*. Professor Hashmi was co-founder of the Rohtas Gallery in Islamabad, founder of Rohtas 2 in Lahore and a founding member of the Women's Action Forum in Pakistan. She retired from the National College of Arts in Lahore, Pakistan, as Professor of Fine Art in 2000. She is currently Dean of the School of Visual Arts at the Beaconhouse National University in Lahore.

Pat HOFFIE

Dr Pat Hoffie is an artist based in Brisbane and is an Associate Professor at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. She exhibits regularly in Australia and internationally, and her art is represented in leading public and private collections. She has received numerous national awards and is a regular contributor to national arts journals and to contemporary art debate and development. She has been exploring issues concerning social justice in her art practice for many years and participated as a curator in the Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibitions.

Geeta Kapur

Dr Geeta Kapur is an independent art critic and curator. She has written and lectured extensively on contemporary Indian art and is the author of *Contemporary Indian Artists* and *When was Modernism: essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. Her recent work extends to cinema and issues in cultural studies. She is a founder-editor of *Journal of Arts and Ideas* and advisory editor to *Third Text* and *Marg*. She has held fellowships at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, and the Nehru Museum and Library, New Delhi

Anne Kirker

Anne Kirker is a curator with many years experience in New Zealand and Australia. She has published widely on art, especially in the area of prints and drawings and including Asian art and art

in New Zealand. She is also currently a PhD candidate at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales

Yulin Lee

Yulin Lee is a curator and writer based in Taiwan and New York. Among the exhibitions she has curated are Taiwan's participation in the Venice Biennale (1997, 1999 Taiwan Pavilion, Venice); and *A Dialogue of Contemporary Sculpture in Asia* (1995, Taipei Fine Arts Museum). She was co-curator for Taiwan's participation in the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial 1999, and in 2002 she was a Member of the International Selection Committee for the 2nd Fukuoka Asian Fine Arts Triennale and an international judge of the ASEAN Art Awards (Indonesia) sponsored by Philip Morris. She has published widely on contemporary Asian and especially Taiwanese art.

Jonathan Mane-Wheoki

Dr Jonathan Mane-Wheoki is Director of Art and Visual Culture at Te Papa Tongarewa, the National Museum of New Zealand. He was formerly Dean of Music and Fine Arts and Senior Lecturer in Art History at the University of Canterbury. He has published and lectured extensively in the fields of European and New Zealand art and architectural history, and on cultural heritage and museum issues. Of Ngapuhi descent, he has long been active in advancing the cause of Maori education and as a curator of contemporary Maori art. He has served on the Arts Council and Te Waka Toi (the Maori Arts Board) of Creative New Zealand.

Charles Merewether

Dr Charles Merewether is Curator for the 2006 Sydney Biennale and a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, The Australian National University. An art historian, he was Collections Curator at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles between 1994–2004. He has taught at the University of Sydney, Universidad Autonoma in Barcelona, the Ibero-Americana in Mexico City and the University of Southern California. His extensive writings have been widely anthologized and appeared in Europe, the Americas, Australia, China and Japan. He is the Advisory Editor of *Grand Street* journal as well as being on the editorial board of *Art AsiaPacific* and *Yishu*.

Bernice Murphy

Bernice Murphy was Curator of Contemporary Art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1979–1983; then Curator, Chief Curator, and finally Director, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, developing that institution over a 14-year period to become Australia's first museum of contemporary art (including Indigenous art). She has continued to write and curate exhibitions of contemporary art, and pursue projects with museums of various disciplines, often working outside Australia. She has served six years as Vice-President (1998–2004) of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). She was awarded the Australia Council's *Visual Arts/Craft Emeritus Medal 1999*, for service to curatorship and contemporary visual arts in Australia; and a Doctor of Letters (*Hon. causa*) from the University of New South Wales in 2004.

Margo Neale

Margo Neale is an Indigenous Australian who has worked across art galleries, museums and universities and has held positions as art curator, author and editor. She was co-editor of the Oxford Companion to *Aboriginal Art and Culture*. Over the past 10 years she has curated several major Indigenous exhibitions and was chair of the Pacific Panel for the Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibitions and a member of the National Advisory Board in 1996 and 1999. She is currently Director of Indigenous Programs: Gallery of the First Australians at the National Museum of Australia.

Somporn Rodboon

Somporn Rodboon is a Professor of Art History at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Chiang Mai University. She has published art books on the Thai masters and has written many exhibition catalogue essays on contemporary Thai art and artists. She has curated several exhibitions locally and abroad. She is currently writing a text on Concepts of Contemporary Art for Thai students.

Jim Supangkat

Jim Supangkat was born in South Sulawesi. He studied at The Faculty of Fine Art and Design, Bandung Institute of Technology, a major centre of modern Indonesian art development. In 1975, he organized a movement later known as the Indonesian New Art Movement, which pioneered the use of contemporary idioms. In

1980 he and a colleague, Sanento Yuliman, introduced a new theory of Indonesian modern art history. He is an independent curator and writer and works as a consultant on Indonesian art.

Xu Hong

Xu Hong is a graduate of the Art Department, Shanghai Normal University and the Art History Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing. From 1985 to 2000 she worked in the Research Department of the Shanghai Art Museum where she undertook editorial work, theoretical and art historical research, the curating of exhibitions and her own artistic practice. She is currently Deputy Director of the Research Department at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing. Her art works have been included in important exhibitions in China and overseas and she has written widely on twentieth century and contemporary Chinese art and Feminist art.

Jennifer Webb

Dr Jennifer Webb teaches at the University of Canberra. Her work as a cultural theorist has focused on individual and national identity, particularly the representational and axiological aspects of being. Her research publications include the 2001 project *Resistance and Reconciliation: Writing in the Commonwealth* and a major analysis and critique of globalisation from a neomarxist theoretical perspective. She was part of a team which produced the Third Asia–Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art. Her research interests include the field of creative production, and the ethical questions that confront individuals and organisations in the contemporary world, including questions of cultural ‘marking’ (gender, race, sexuality, heritage) and politico-economic action. She is also a creative writer.

Jagath Weerasinghe

Jagath Weerasinghe is a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the Postgraduate Institute of Archaeology, Colombo. He is also an artist and an art writer. His work was included in the Third Asia–Pacific Triennial in Australia in 1999.

FURTHER READING

For a more extensive country-specific and artist-specific bibliography on Asia–Pacific contemporary art, visit the following link:

www.anu.edu.au/hrc/research/Bibliography.pdf

An excellent online bibliography on Asian Art has been constructed by John Clark, see: <http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/arthistory/Courses%202002/pdf/Bibliography.pdf>

See also:

Catalogues of the *Asia–Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1993, 1996, 1999, 2002.

Catalogues of the *Fukuoka Asian Art Triennales*, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, 1999, 2002.

Catalogues of the Shanghai, Sydney, Sao Paulo, Havana, Gwangju and Bangladesh Biennales and Indian and Yokohama Triennales.

Web site of the Third Asia-Pacific Triennial, www.apt3.net

ART AsiaPacific, journal published from 1993.

Artlink 'The Long Stare: seeing contemporary Asian art now', Special Issue, Vol. 20 No. 2, July 2000.

ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information & Singapore Art Museum (eds.), *36 Ideas from Asia: contemporary South-East Asian art*, Singapore Art Museum, Singapore, 2002.

Asian Modernism: diverse developments in Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, Japan Foundation Asia Centre, Tokyo, 1995.

The Birth of Modern Art in Southeast Asia: artists and movements, Fukuoka Art Museum, 1997.

Binghui Huangfu (ed.), *Text and Subtext: contemporary art and Asian woman*, Earl Lu gallery, Singapore, 2000.

John Clark, *Modern Asian Art*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1998.

John Clark (ed.), *Modernity in Asian Art*, The University of Sydney East Asian Studies Number 7, Wild Peony, Sydney, 1993.

Dynah Dysart and Hannah Fink (eds.), *Asian Women Artists*, Craftsman House, 1996.

Apinan Poshyananda, *Contemporary Art in Asia: traditions/tensions*, Asia Society Galleries, New York, 1996.

Caroline Turner (ed.), *Tradition and Change: contemporary art of Asia and the Pacific*, University of Queensland Press, 1993.

CREDITS

Institutions

Aboriginal Artists Agency Ltd, Sydney, Australia; Anna Bibby Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; The Australian National University Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra, Australia; Artsonje Centre, Seoul, South Korea; Art Tower Mito, Mito, Japan; Asia-Australia Arts Centre, Gallery 4A, Sydney; Asialink, University of Melbourne, Australia; The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia; Australian War Memorial, Canberra, Australia; Bodhi Art, Delhi, India and Singapore; Campfire Group, Brisbane, Australia; Cemeti Art House, Yogyakarta, Indonesia; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Waiwhetu, Aotearoa New Zealand; City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, Aotearoa New Zealand; Creative New Zealand, Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, Aoteroa New Zealand; Centre Culturel Jean-Marie Tjibaou, New Caledonia; Fine Arts Museum of Vietnam, Hanoi, Vietnam; The Fine Art Resource, Mumbai, India and Berlin, Germany; Fireworks Gallery, Brisbane, Australia; Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, Japan; Gallery Chemould, Bombay, India; Gallery Koyanagi, Tokyo, Japan; Glenbarra Art Museum, Himeji-City, Japan; Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong; Helen Maxwell Gallery, Canberra, Australia; Hiraya Gallery, Manila, The Philippines; Hugh Stevenson Collection, Michael Somare Library, University of Papua New Guinea; Humanities Research Centre, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia; Japan Foundation, Tokyo, Japan; John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong, China; Kalli Rolf Contemporary Art, Melbourne, Australia; KCS Paniker Gallery, Trivandrum, India; Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, South Korea, Linguaset, Canberra, Australia; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan; Museum and Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, Australia; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, Japan; National Art Gallery of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia; National Museum of Australia, Canberra, Australia; Osaka Contemporary Art Centre, Osaka, Japan; Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo, Japan; Pacificlink Australia; Peter Bellas Gallery, Brisbane, Australia; Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand; Pundole Art Gallery, Bombay, India; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia;

Rodin Gallery, Seoul, South Korea; Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney, Australia; Salon Natasha, Hanoi, Vietnam; Sherman Galleries, Sydney, Australia; Shugo Arts, Tokyo, Japan; Silpakorn University, Bangkok, Thailand; Singapore Art Museum, Singapore; Tadu Contemporary Art, Bangkok, Thailand; Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, Taiwan; Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, Japan; Tulika Books, Delhi, India; Valentine Willie Fine Art, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; Viscopy, Australia; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA and *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vancouver, Canada.

Individuals

E Alkazi; Michelle Antoinette; Glen Barclay; Richard Bell; Peter Bellas; Gordon Bennett; Nitin Bhayana; Anna Bibby; Desley Bischoff; David Boon; The Family of the late Montien Boonma; Judy Buchanan; Alison Carroll; Dawn Casey; Lisa Cargill; Indira Chandrasekhar; Johnson Chang; Malay and Meera Chatterjee; Chow Yu; Dadang Christanto; Susan Cochrane; Didi Dee; Ben Donaldson; Michael Eather; David Elliott; Naomi Evans; Masanori Fukuoka; Yasuko Furuichi; Shireen Gandhi; Judy Gunning; Leanne Handreck; Kaori Hashiguchi; Salima Hashmi; Gilbert Herrada; Andrea Higgins; Oscar Ho; Pat Hoffie; Lisa Horikawa; Hou Hanru for Chen Zhen; Binghui Huangfu; Ishaat Hussain for Rummana Hussain; Mio Iwakiri; Mella Jaarsma; Courtney Johnston; Tim Jones; Penny Joy; Amit Judge; Emmanuel Kasarherou; The Trustees of the Estate of the late Bhupen Khakar; Dang Thi Khue; Ms Koyanagi; Yvonne Lee; Tiw Lee Peng; Neil Manton; Undine Marshfield; Helen Maxwell; Michelle McGinness; Anna Mel; Leena Messina; Usha Mirchandani; Noor Mahnun Mohamed; Fumio Nanjo; Margo Neale; Mihoko Nishikawa; Tony Oates; Eriko Osaka; Hidenori Ota; Roslyn Oxley; Jean Pipite; Dadiba Pundole; Claire Roberts; Devinder and Kanwaldeep Sahney; Chaitanya Sambrani; Shugo Satani; Heather Scanlan; Eggie Schoo; Glenn Schultz; Adrian Sever; Nancy Sever; Gulammohammad Sheikh; Gene Sherman; Jon Sigurdson; Damien Sims; Jeremy Smith; Ranjana Steinruecke; Hugh Stevenson; Navina Sundaram; Vivan Sundaram; Mizuki Takahashi; Vanya Taule'alo; Kylie Timmins; Keith Wallace; Anthony Wallis; C.J.W.L. Wee; Jagath Weerasinghe; Guan Wei; Margie West; Lola Wilkins; David Williams; Mark Wright; Soroku Yamamoto; Stephen Zagala; Zhan Wang; Jen Webb and Robyn Ziebell.

PANDANUS BOOKS

Pandanus Books was established in 2001 within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPAS) at The Australian National University. Concentrating on Asia and the Pacific, Pandanus Books embraces a variety of genres and has particular strength in the areas of biography, memoir, fiction and poetry. As a result of Pandanus' position within the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, the list includes high-quality scholarly texts, several of which are aimed at a general readership. Since its inception, Pandanus Books has developed into an editorially independent publishing enterprise with an imaginative list of titles and high-quality production values.

THE SULLIVAN'S CREEK SERIES

The Sullivan's Creek Series is a developing initiative of Pandanus Books. Extending the boundaries of the Pandanus Books' list, the Sullivan's Creek Series seeks to explore Australia through the work of new writers, with particular encouragement to authors from Canberra and the region. Publishing history, biography, memoir, scholarly texts, fiction and poetry, the imprint complements the Asia and Pacific focus of Pandanus Books and aims to make a lively contribution to scholarship and cultural knowledge.